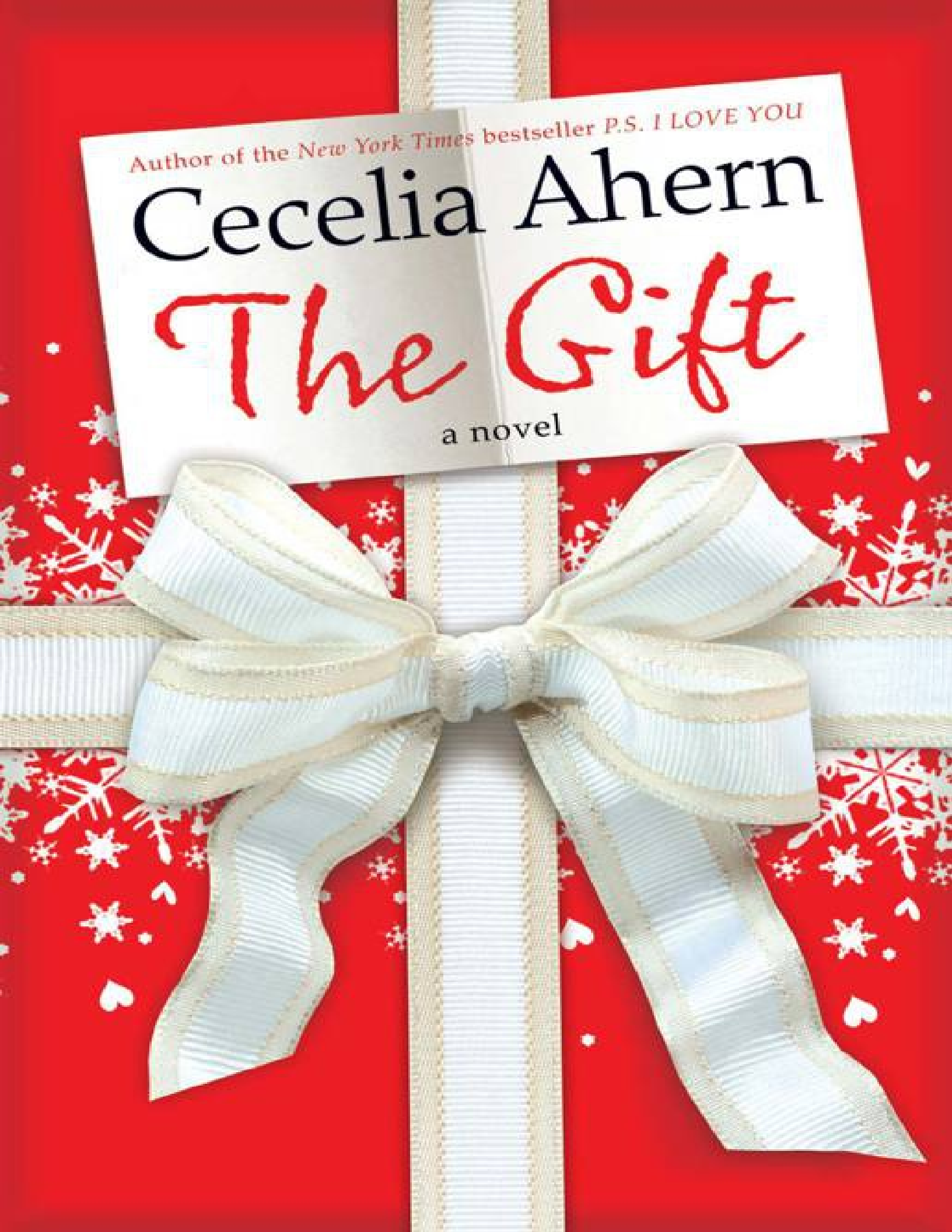


Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *P.S. I LOVE YOU*

Cecelia Ahern

*The Gift*

a novel



**Cecelia Ahern**

**The Gift**

A Novel

 HarperCollins e-books

*Rocco and Jay—  
The greatest gifts,  
Both, at the same time*

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## CHAPTER 1

### *An Army of Secrets*

**I**F YOU WERE TO STROLL down the candy-cane facade of a suburban neighborhood early on Christmas morning, you couldn't help but observe how the houses in all their decorated, tinsel-glory are akin to the presents that lie beneath the Christmas trees within. For each holds its secrets inside. Peeping through a crack in the curtains to get a glimpse of a family in Christmas-morning action is to poke and prod at the present's wrapping; it's a captured moment that's kept away from all prying eyes. In the calming yet eerie silence that exists only on this morning every year, these homes stand shoulder to shoulder like painted toy soldiers: chests pushed out, stomachs tucked in, proud and protective of all within, like an Army of Secrets.

And houses on Christmas morning are indeed treasure chests of hidden truths. A wreath on a door like a finger upon a lip; blinds down like closed eyelids. Then, at some unspecified time, a warm glow will appear beyond the drawn curtains, the smallest hint of something happening inside. Like stars in the night sky gradually appearing to the naked eye, lights go on behind the blinds and curtains in the half-light of dawn. One at a time, like tiny pieces of gold being revealed as they're sieved from a stream, room by room, house by house, the street begins to awaken.

The Christmas-morning calm makes it seem as though a strange happening in the world has caused everybody to scutter to their hiding places. The emptiness on the streets doesn't instill fear, though; in fact, it has the opposite effect. It presents a picture postcard of safety, and, despite the seasonal chill, there's warmth. And while outside is somber, inside each household is a world of bright frenzied color, a hysteria of ripping wrapping paper and flying colored ribbons. Christmas music and gastric delights fill the air with fragrances of cinnamon and spice and all things nice. Exclamations of glee, of hugs and thanks, explode like party streamers. These Christmas days are indoor days, not even a sinner lingering outside. Only those in transit

from one home to another dot the streets. Cars pull up and presents are unloaded. Sounds of greetings and invitation from open doorways, which waft out to the cold air, are only teasers as to the festivities occurring inside. Then, just as you're soaking it up and sharing the invitation—ready to stroll over the threshold a common stranger but feeling a welcomed guest—the front door closes and traps everything back inside, as a reminder that it's not your moment to take.

In this particular neighborhood of toy houses, one soul wanders the streets. This soul doesn't quite see the beauty in the secretive calm. This soul is intent on a war, wants to unravel the bow and rip open the paper to reveal what's inside door number twenty-four.

It is not of any importance to us what the occupants of door number twenty-four are doing, though, if you must know, a ten-month-old, captivated by the large green flashing prickly object in the corner of the room, is beginning to reach for the shiny red bauble that reflects a pudgy hand and gummy mouth. This, while a two-year-old nearby rolls around in wrapping paper, bathing herself in glitter like a hippo in muck. Beside them, *He* wraps a new necklace of diamonds around *Her* neck as she gasps, hand flying to her chest, and shakes her head in disbelief, just as she's seen women in the black-and-white movies do.

None of this is important to *our* story, though it means a great deal to the soul who stands in the front garden of house number twenty-four, trying to look through the living room's drawn curtains. Fourteen years old and with a dagger through his heart, he can't see what's going on, but his imagination has been well nurtured by his mother's bedtime stories and now by her daytime weeping, and so he can guess.

Ready now, he raises his arms above his head, pulls back, and with all his strength pushes forward and releases the object in his hands. Then he stands back to watch with bitter joy as a fifteen-pound frozen turkey smashes through the window of the living room of number twenty-four. The drawn curtains act once again as a barrier between him and them, slowing the bird's flight through the air. And with no life left to stop itself now, it—and its giblets—descend rapidly to the timber floor inside, where it's sent spinning and skidding along to its final resting place beneath the Christmas tree. His gift to them.

People, like houses, hold their secrets. Sometimes the secrets inhabit them, and sometimes people inhabit their secrets. They wrap their arms tight

to hug them close, twist their lying tongues around the truth. But, like gravy left overnight, the truth is a thin layer of film that forms and covers the surface. The truth prevails, rises above all else. It squirms and wriggles inside, grows until the swollen tongue can't wrap itself around the lie any longer, until the time comes when it needs to spit the words out and send truth flying through the air and crashing into the world like...well, like a frozen dead bird through a living room window. Truth and time always work alongside each other.

This story is about people, secrets, and time. About people who, not unlike wrapped parcels, cover themselves with layers and layers until they present themselves to the right ones who can unwrap them and see inside. Until that happens they lie under a tree, being poked and prodded by unwelcome hands. Sometimes you have to give yourself to somebody in order to see who you are. Sometimes you have to let that person unravel things to get to the core.

This is a story about people who find out who they are. About people who are unraveled and whose cores are revealed to all who count. And those who count are finally revealed to them. Just in time.

## CHAPTER 2

### *A Morning of Half Smiles*

**P**OLICE SERGEANT RAPHAEL O'REILLY MOVED slowly and methodically about the cramped staff kitchen of Howth Police Station, his mind going over and over the revelations of the morning. Known to others as Raphie, pronounced *Ray-fee*, he was fifty-nine years old and had one more year to go until his retirement. He'd never thought he'd be looking forward to that day until the events of this morning had grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him upside down like a snow globe, forcing him to watch all his preconceptions sprinkle away. With every step he took he heard the crackle of his once-airtight beliefs under his boots. Of all the events and moments he had experienced in his forty-year career, what a morning this one had been.

He spooned two heaps of instant coffee into his mug. The mug, shaped like an NYPD squad car, had been brought back from New York by one of the boys at the station as his Christmas gift this year. He pretended the sight of it offended him, but secretly he found it comforting. Gripping it in his hands during the morning's Kris Kringle reveal, he'd time-traveled back to a Christmas fifty years ago when he'd received a toy police car from his parents. It was a gift he'd cherished until he'd abandoned it outside overnight and the rain had done enough rust damage to force his toy men into early retirement. He held the mug in his hands now, almost tempted to run it along the countertop making siren noises before crashing it into the bag of sugar, which would, incidentally, cascade into his mug.

Instead, he checked around the kitchen to ensure he was alone and added half a teaspoon of sugar to his mug. Then, a little more confident, he coughed to disguise the crinkling sound of the sugar bag as he pushed his spoon down once again and quickly fired a heaping teaspoon into the mug. Having now gotten away with two spoons, he became cocky and reached into the bag one more time.

"Drop your weapon, sir," a female voice from the doorway called with

authority.

Startled by the sudden presence, Raphie jumped, the sugar from his spoon spilling all over the counter. It was a mug-on-sugar-bag pileup. Time to call for backup.

“Caught in the act, Raphie.” His colleague Jessica joined him at the counter and whipped the spoon from his hand.

She took a mug from the cupboard—a Jessica Rabbit novelty mug, another comical Christmas gift—and slid her namesake across the counter to him. Porcelain Jessica’s voluptuous breasts brushed against his car, and the boy in Raphie thought about how happy his men inside would be.

“I’ll have one, too.”

“Please,” Raphie corrected her.

“Please,” she imitated him, rolling her eyes.

Jessica was a new recruit. She’d joined the station just six months ago, and already Raphie had grown more than fond of her. He had a soft spot for the twenty-six-year-old, five-foot-four athletic blonde who always seemed willing and able, no matter what her task was. He also felt she brought a much-needed feminine energy to the all-male team at the station. Many of the other men agreed, but not quite for the same reasons as Raphie. He saw her as the daughter he’d never had. Or the daughter he’d had, but lost. He shook that thought out of his head as he watched Jessica cleaning the spilled sugar from the counter.

Despite her strong energy, her almond-shaped eyes—such a dark brown they were almost black—buried something below. As though a top layer of soil had been freshly added, and pretty soon the weeds or whatever was decaying beneath would begin to show through. Her eyes held a mystery that he didn’t much want to explore, but he knew that whatever it was, it drove her forward during those challenging times when most sensible people would go the opposite way.

“Half a spoon is hardly going to kill me,” he added grumpily, after tasting his coffee, knowing that just one more spoonful would have made it perfect.

“Are you actually *trying* to give yourself another heart attack?”

Raphie reddened. “It was a heart *murmur*, Jessica, nothing more, and keep your voice down,” he hissed.

“You should be resting,” she said more quietly.

“The doctor said I was perfectly normal.”

“Then the doctor needs his head checked. You’ve never been perfectly