

This Christmas

by J. M. Snyder



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IT'S DECEMBER 24TH. Christmas Eve.

Ned Matthews stands in the frozen foods aisle of Wal-Mart, the only place still open despite the fact that it's barely five o'clock in the evening. *Afternoon* really, no matter what the gathering darkness outside has to say. Tinny music blares through the store's speaker system, some rock mess that's bothered Ned from the moment he entered the store. Then it was George Michael, bitching about giving his heart away last Christmas; now Britney sings, going on and on about Santa sending her someone to love. *Good luck with that*, Ned thinks bitterly. It didn't work for him but hey, maybe the jolly old elf has a soft spot for pop princesses, who knows?

He stares at the ice cream display through the freezer door as if anyone else will really give a shit if he settles for Neapolitan instead of Rocky Road. Neapolitan is his favorite—he'll eat it stripe by stripe, starting with strawberry then moving onto the chocolate, and finishing with the vanilla when that's the only flavor left. But Rocky Road has more crunch to it, more substance, and if he's going to make a meal out of it, he should get something he can sink his teeth into. In the frosted glass case, his pale face stares back at him, a skinny ghost in baggy clothes that haunts the ice cream aisle. Disheveled mousy brown hair, dark rimmed glasses, a red bow of a mouth where his lips draw together in consternation. Decisions, decisions...

A bright laugh washes over him and then he hears his full first name shouted out in greeting. “Kennedy!”

Annoyed, he starts, “It’s Ned.” But when he turns to find Bobby Cratchett heading his way, the words dry up and he has to clear his throat to speak around them. “Bobby. Hey.”

Bobby comes up to him so quickly, Ned’s sure the guy will breeze through him, just keep on walking, but no. Stopping at the door beside the ice cream, Bobby leans against the freezer and gives Ned the same lopsided grin he used to dream about back in high school. In college now, it surprises Ned that his stomach still flops over at that smile. “So you’re staying through the break?” Bobby asks without preamble. Before Ned can answer, he adds, “Me too. My parents gave each other a Caribbean cruise for Christmas. They won’t be back before New Year’s. No use going use going home to an empty house, you know?”

For a moment longer, Ned stares at that crooked grin. Then he turns back to the ice cream case as if dismissing Bobby. “Hmm. Sounds like fun.”

An arm nudges his—if he weren’t dressed like the Michelin Man in his bulky winter coat, he might have felt Bobby’s hand in that touch. As it is, all he hears is the sound of nylon rubbing together. “What about you?” Bobby asks. “You going home for the holiday?”

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Ned reminds him. “A little late for that, don’t you think?”

If his response is chilly, Bobby doesn’t notice. In the reflection off the freezer case, Bobby looks like a black hole beside Ned—his dark hair, tan skin, and dark eyes seem to suck in all the light until he shines with an almost ethereal glow. In high school that hair was worn long, all one length to his chin, a curtain of hair that Ned dreamed of running his fingers through or nuzzling his face against. So thick and strong—on the soccer field, Bobby wore it tied back in a ponytail like a girl’s, but it made him even sexier in Ned’s eyes.

When Ned came to State five semesters ago and found Bobby already a year ahead of him, the first thing he noticed was the hair—it’s now cropped short, a few black inches that stand up as if shocked Bobby had the audacity to cut it down. With the length gone, Ned can now see Bobby’s eyes, a deep, clear blue that look like contacts but aren’t. And his grin, the way one corner of his mouth rises just a fraction of an inch higher than the other, the twisted eyetooth in an otherwise perfect smile.

With considerable effort, Ned forces himself to open the freezer door, if only so he won’t have to stare at Bobby’s reflection. It’s been seven weeks since he broke things off with Jake and he won’t let himself look at another man, not yet. *Not ever.* Even if that man is his old high school crush, who lives across the commons from him in the student townhouses and is probably the only person

left on campus besides himself this time of the year, who's always been nice to him but never flirtatious, never *interested*. *If only he'd go away*, Ned thinks as he reaches for the Neapolitan. He grabs the Rocky Road instead. *Just go away and let me wallow in all this goddamn Christmas cheer*. Was that asking too much?

Overhead, Britney fizzes out and some boyband tells him he doesn't have to be alone this Christmas. As Ned lets the freezer door slap shut, he tucks the ice cream in his hand basket and turns his back to Bobby. But when he takes a step away, Bobby falls in beside him. "You heading back to the dorm?"

Ned shrugs. The answer is yes, of course he is...where the hell else would he go? And why don't they play traditional holiday songs any more? Rudolph and Frosty and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," shit like that. Nothing sappy, nothing about unwrapping true love or kissing under the mistletoe. *Get real*, Ned thinks, staring at his shoes and Bobby's keeping stride with them.

You want true love? Sing about calling up the guy back home you've been dating forever and having another dude answer the phone. Sing about stumbling upon your boyfriend's weblog and finding links to amateur porn sites where he's posted pictures of himself fucking someone else. Sing about confronting him only to be cussed out for snooping. Sing about sitting in an empty dorm room on Christmas Eve, eating ice cream by the gallon and trying not to cry because men suck and life's so damn unfair. Sing about that in your Christmas carol. That's my grown-up Christmas wish.

At the end of the aisle Ned turns, hoping to shake Bobby. But a hand on his arm stops him. "It's really too cold to wait for the bus," Bobby starts. He watches Ned with those blue blue eyes, waiting. When Ned doesn't respond, he tries a different tactic. "You have a car, right?"

Ned shakes off Bobby's hand. So *that's* why the guy's talking to him. Of course. "You want a ride."

"Only if you don't mind." Bobby gives him that crooked grin again, as if he knows exactly what it does to Ned inside. "Look, I really appreciate it, man."

Ned sighs. "I was just leaving."

That smile brightens. "Great!"

As Bobby follows him to the checkout, Ned wonders what exactly he said that sounded like *yes*.



IN THE PARKING lot, the temperature has dropped. Ned's car is freezing and a scrim of thin ice covers the windows as if he didn't just scrape them off before he drove to the store. Without being asked, Bobby snags the scraper from where it sits on the floor in front of the passenger seat and attacks the windshield while Ned starts the car. It's colder inside the vehicle than out, but Ned sits hunkered into himself in front of the steering wheel, hands shoved between his knees,

heater blasting high even though it's not putting out any heat yet. Every now and then he glances up at Bobby—that dark skin is ruddy from the weather, those full pouting lips pinked as if chapped. He shouldn't have lingered over the ice cream. Then he'd already be home and Bobby would be waiting for the next bus to campus.

Where's your Christmas spirit? a voice inside him wants to know.

Ned shivers in the cold darkness. *Ask Jake.* The fucker.

Frigid air blasts into the car as Bobby opens the door to slip inside. "Woo!" he laughs, clapping his gloved fingers together. "Feels like snow out there."

Ned puts the car into reverse and the vehicle shudders beneath him as he backs out of the parking space. "It's too cold to snow."

Slowly the car begins to warm up. The inside of the windshield fogs but Ned squints out anyway, ignoring Bobby. Just drop the guy off, his good deed done, and then get to work on the ice cream that's solid as a rock in the back seat—that's the extent of Ned's plans for this evening. What a holiday. Why don't they sing songs about *that*? Tell it like it is...

"So what are you doing tonight?" Bobby asks.

Ned gives him a sharp look, unnerved. "Nothing."

If Bobby's waiting to be asked the same question, he's got a long wait coming. Ned stares at the road ahead and hums tunelessly beneath his breath to fill the silence that presses them together. Another few miles to campus, two stop-lights and one left turn, then he can go back to drowning in self-pity. *Alone.* But at the turn, Bobby speaks again, his voice easily interrupting Ned's thoughts. "What about tomorrow?"

"What?" It comes out harsher than Ned intends.

"Tomorrow," Bobby says again. "Got anything planned for tomorrow? It's Christmas."

No shit. Ned shrugs but doesn't answer. Feeling his way around the words, Bobby says, "My parents felt bad about ditching me for the holiday. I mean, it's not like I'm a little kid any more, you know? But still. My mom sent me a fully cooked dinner—spiral ham, homemade mac and cheese, cranberries, the whole nine yards. Just needs to be heated up and it's good to go. Easily enough for two."

"Dinner?" Ned asks, as if he's never heard of the word. Was he getting asked out here? Did it count as a date if he only went next door?

He's just being nice, Ned reasons. *It IS Christmas—this must be his act of charity for the year. Ask the loner to dinner, God bless us every one.* Aloud, he mutters, "No thanks."

Bobby's smile slips. "Come on, man. There's a ton of food, honest."

"I've got stuff to eat," Ned tells him. "Thanks anyway."

Bobby falls silent. When Ned glances over, he finds Bobby staring at him. “What? I’m sorry.”

“Well,” Bobby sighs, “the invitation’s open. You’re welcome to come if you want.”

They reached the campus. Most of the buildings stand dark and closed against the night, and halogen lights flicker above empty sidewalks. The place is deserted. Ned has no trouble finding a spot close to the townhouses where the upperclassmen live—his car is the only one in the lot.

As they climb out of the warm vehicle, the night air envelops them in a bitter, icy embrace. Grabbing his ice cream from the back seat, Ned starts up the sidewalk that leads to their dorms, Bobby just a few steps behind.

They come to Bobby’s place first. Ned doesn’t look up, doesn’t even bother to slow his steps, but a hand catches the back of his coat and stops him. He turns to find that crooked smile in place again, those blue eyes watching him closely. “What?” he snaps. Then, misreading the look in those eyes, he adds, “You’re welcome.”

Bobby nods. “Thanks for the ride. And think about that dinner, will you? If you don’t have other plans, I’d love to have you.” Ned frowns and almost reluctantly Bobby adds, “Over. For dinner. Tomorrow night?”

“So you said.”

As Ned trudges up the walk to his own townhouse, Bobby calls out, “Think about it. My offer still stands.”

I’d love to have you. What the hell was *that* shit? *I’d love to have a lot of things in life,* Ned thinks, digging in his coat pocket for his keys. *Just because it’s Christmastime doesn’t mean you get what you want. Hell, I’ve been a good boy all year long and what did that get me? A cheating boyfriend and a broken heart. So your mom sent you a home-cooked meal, so the fuck what? I hope you choke on it.*

Only, if Bobby had asked earlier? *Seven weeks ago, maybe.* Before this crap with Jake, if Bobby had shown the slightest interest in him? Ned thinks maybe Jake wouldn’t have been the only one to stray in their relationship. But he can’t trust another again, not yet. Can’t trust *himself*, and that’s not fair to either of them.

At the door to his townhouse Ned stops to fumble through the keys. From the corner of his vision he sees movement that makes him look up quickly. For one brief second he thinks he sees a face drawn in the shadows draped across his door. *Jake.* An ache rises in him, so palpable it chokes his throat and he has to bite back a sudden sob.

Jake. Not for the first time, Ned wishes he never found his boyfriend’s blog, never saw those pictures. Then he could’ve believed whatever lie Jake made up to explain the guy who answered the phone, and maybe things wouldn’t be great between them but at least he wouldn’t be alone. Tonight, on Christmas Eve, of

all nights.

He blinks back tears that threaten to freeze his eyes shut. When he looks again, the shadows have shifted and the face is gone. As he guides his key into the lock, the phone in the kitchen starts to ring.



NED REACHES THE phone just as the answering machine picks up. With the receiver to his ear, he listens to his own voice rattle off, “Sorry we missed you”...nothing sorry about it. He should change the message, if only while his roommate is out on semester break. “I don’t feel like talking to you right now, and don’t bother leaving a message because I’m not calling you back. You still there? Hang up already, will you? Jesus, go away.”

He hadn’t always been this bad.

The machine beeps in his ear, then cuts off because he’s answered the phone. For a long moment he listens to steady breath on the other end of the line, dread curling into the pit of his stomach. He knows who this is. *Hang up*, that voice inside him whispers, but his fingers have forgotten how to work and Jake would just call back again anyway. *So? Let him call. You don’t have to talk to him. Hang up—*“Ned? You there?”

The sound of his ex-boyfriend’s voice is enough to melt those threatening tears. Ned wipes at his cheek, surprised at how hot the damp little drop feels against his cold skin. Keeping his voice low so Jake can’t hear the tremor in it, Ned whispers, “What do you want?”

Jake’s smile is evident in the tone of his voice. “Ned, hey. I saw your mom the other day at the post office and she told me you weren’t coming home for the break. Everything all right?”

Just peachy. Ned sighs, too weary to go through this charade. “Jake,” he starts, and then says again, “What do you want?”

“Just called to talk,” Jake murmurs. Then softly, he adds, “I miss you.”

Bullshit. But Ned’s wanted to hear those words for so long now, he can’t speak when they’re finally out in the open. As if afraid Ned will hang up at any moment, Jake hurries on. “Look Ned, I’m sorry things got this way between us. We used to be so good together. What happened to that?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” Ned finds that hard to believe.

Jake’s voice murmurs through him. “I never meant to hurt you.”

Ned is fully aware that this isn’t an apology for fucking around—just for getting caught. “I have to go.”

“Wait.”

Ned listens to Jake breathe into the phone and tells himself to hang up but he can’t. Finally, when it’s clear Jake is waiting him out, Ned asks, “What?”

"I miss you," Jake says again, in that damnably soft voice of his. "I miss *us*. Don't you?"

You're playing with me here, Ned thinks, hating the fact that he's too weak to put an end to this conversation. *Like a cat with a mouse, Jake. You want both sides of the coin, a steady relationship and a piece of ass on the side.* "I miss trusting people," Ned tells him. "I miss believing a guy can like me, *only* me, and not need to fuck someone else when I'm not around. I miss *that*, Jake. And you know, that's not something you can just kiss away and make better."

Jake has no reply for that. Ned didn't think he would. His ice cream is melting, damn it. "I really should go."

"Wait," Jake says again. "Ned, look, I'm sorry, okay? I don't know how else to say it to make you hear it."

Try believing it first—Ned isn't buying this impromptu phone call. Jake's lonely and wants someone to cuddle, and apparently his latest fling isn't available so he's trying to fall back on Ol' Reliable here. Well Ned's not going for it, not this time, not ever again. "It feels so funny not being with you on Christmas," Jake's saying. "Last year I came up there and stayed the weekend with you on campus. The first time we ever hooked up was this time of the year. Remember?"

Ned closes his eyes against the images that flood his head—the two of them entwined on the sofa, naked beneath a heavy afghan. Jake's hand trailing through Ned's hair, rubbing patterns into his skin, massaging his scalp. Ned's arms around Jake, hugging him close, their thick lengths pressed together and slowly growing hard between them. The kisses that kept them warm, their bodies tight against each other, the damp sheen of sweat along Ned's back when they made love. It *had* been love, to him. *Remember that?* he wants to ask Jake, but doesn't.

At his silence, Jake's voice falters. "You're alone, Ned. Right?" Receiving no answer, he asks again, "You *are* alone?"

Thanks for pointing that out, Ned thinks. Into the phone, he announces, "I'm hanging up."

"I can be there in two hours," Jake reminds him. "Or you can come over here. I'd like to see you again, Ned. If only to clear things up between us, you know? We can't leave it like this."

Why not? Ned is quite content to cut Jake out of his life. "I don't—" he tries, but his voice breaks and he resists the urge to slam the phone against the kitchen counter in his frustration and pain. "No, Jake. It's not—just no. Goodbye."

"Ned!" Jake calls out, frantic. "Listen—"

But Ned's heard enough. He hangs up the phone, putting a little muscle into it to get a really satisfying sound as the receiver slams into the cradle. He's not buying Jake's crap, not tonight, not ever again. So he's lonely. So what? *Join the club.*

Almost immediately, the phone rings again. Ned thumbs the cord out of the cradle, cutting it off in mid-ring. “Fuck you,” he says to an empty kitchen.

His voice seems to hang in the air and he wishes he hadn’t said anything out loud so he makes a lot of noise to chase the words away—taking off his coat, getting out a spoon for the ice cream, slamming drawers and rattling the plastic bag from the store. He imagines he can feel the phone waiting with breathless anticipation for the next ring that will never come. If he plugs the cord back in, he’s sure Jake will be there on the other end of the line. It takes all the strength he has to resist the temptation of lifting the receiver to find out.

Instead he takes his gallon of ice cream and large spoon into the living room. Kicks off his shoes, plops down on the couch, clicks on the TV. Flips through the channels until he finds something that isn’t a holiday special, something boring, one of those educational shows about medical practices in ancient Egypt or yet another look at the *Titanic*. Dives into the ice cream then, and stares at the TV with a mindless, unseeing glare to numb the pain coursing through him.

Merry fucking Christmas to me.



NED WAS SEVENTEEN when he met Jake. He was a stock associate at Roses, a local discount department store where Ned worked as a cashier part-time after school. On Ned’s first day at work, Jake came through his line pushing a loaded hand truck for a customer, and he stared at Ned silently with those pale green eyes of his as if trying to figure him out. Freckles dotted his body, so heavy in places that they made the skin look dark. Smattered across his nose and cheeks, up and down both arms, across his back...he had freckles between his ass cheeks even, and in the tender skin below his balls, as Ned discovered. A fine dusting of light red hair covered his body like peach fuzz. The hair on his head was kept short, an auburn Brillo pad, while the bush at his crotch grew like wild-fire. The first time Ned saw that fiery patch of kinked hair, he couldn’t keep his fingers from plunging into it.

On his way back from the parking lot, Jake rattled the now-empty hand truck as he came up the checkout aisle behind Ned’s counter. At the register he stopped and leaned against Ned, his chest fitting easily alongside Ned’s back. One sneaky hand curved between Ned’s buttocks, goosing him. In a low, sexy voice, he murmured, “Page me when you go on break.”

Ned can still feel the heat from Jake’s mouth on his ear. It burns like the kisses he remembers, the touches that have seared themselves into his skin. That first night in the break room, Jake stretched out across the folding chairs to lay his head in Ned’s lap. A playful poke at Ned’s crotch, a sexy leer at the hardness he found there, a quick kiss when their time was up. Next thing Ned knew, Jake

was driving him home after work, one hand on the steering wheel and the other easing up Ned's thigh. Before the week was through, they were inseparable.

Jake was Ned's age but went to a different school—they only saw each other at work. Every two weeks when a new schedule was posted, Ned checked his hours against Jake's to make sure they were both down for the same shifts. On those rare occasions when Jake had off, Ned languished at his register, counting down the minutes until he could clock out and meet Jake in the parking lot for a ride home.

Things grew serious between them way too fast. Ned realizes that now but at the time, he was so wrapped up in Jake, he could see nothing else. There *was* nothing else.

Just Jake.

That year, Christmas Eve fell two months to the day after they first met. Jake wasn't scheduled to work, but he showed up a half hour before Roses closed and hung around Ned's register until the end of his shift. "I have something for you," he purred between customers. "Have you been a good boy this year?"

With a laugh, Ned teased, "I'll show you how good."

On the ride home to Ned's house, Jake pulled into a deserted parking lot, empty except for a few last dying Christmas trees propped up in one lonely corner. As the engine died with a noisy rattle in the quiet evening, Ned turned to find Jake staring at him hungrily. "What's this?" Ned wanted to know.

"This," Jake said, slowly unzipping Ned's jacket, "is your Christmas gift. *Our* gift, to each other. If you know what I mean."

Ned's stomach clenched in anticipation and in the front of his jeans, his dick grew two sizes, straining to be unwrapped. A silly grin split his face. For all their flirtatious banter, Ned was nervous. Jake was his first, in every way, and tonight Jake's slight smile and steady gaze promised something more than quick blow-jobs or hands thrust beneath clothing to pet along soft skin. Jake clambered into the back seat and in his eagerness to follow, Ned tripped over the parking brake. With a laugh, he fell back against the seat while Jake hurried to stop the car from rolling. Sheepishly, Ned started, "Sorry..."

The rest of his words dried up at the lustful sheen in Jake's eyes. There was no further discussion—no further *thought*, on Ned's part at least, his mind stopped working the moment Jake's mouth covered his. The rest of the evening was lost in a blur of cold air and warm hands, wet fingers slipping into tight places, and finally a sharp sting that pierced through Ned's mind with a sweet pain to fill him up inside. Jake's arms around him, holding him close. In him, finally, *finally*. His voice a whisper in Ned's ear, his lips damp, his breath hot. "Please," over and over again, punctuated by guttural grunts with each hard thrust. "Ned," he sighed, and "God," and again, "Ned, *yes*, oh yes, please yes."

But the sense of fullness, of being *whole*, ended the moment Jake slid free.

Later Jake kissed away the discomfort that furrowed Ned's brow, and he kissed him again in the driveway to Ned's house. "I think we just started our own holiday tradition," he joked, running a hand through Ned's crazed hair to smooth it down. "Merry Christmas, babe. Call me tomorrow?"

No words of love, but Ned always assumed they were implied. In the kisses, the sex, Jake's eyes, his smile. Ned thought he didn't need to hear them spoken out loud.



THESE MEMORIES OF Christmases long, long ago come to Ned in dreams. Each year rolls over him like the incoming tide, washing away a little more of his resolve, until his soul is bared to the elements. Wind whistles through him, cutting across his skin as it buffets his storm-torn heart. Fighting against the tide of memories, he drifts towards wakefulness but a lingering chill follows him back to reality.

He wakes with a start, surprised to find that he's fallen asleep on the sofa. The half-empty carton once full of ice cream now leaks a brown, soupy mess into his lap. Quickly he sits up, sets the ice cream aside, and starts to brush ineffectively at the damp spots staining the front of his jeans. With detached amusement, he realizes that it looks like he's come in his sleep. There's a hollow ache deep in his groin, sympathy pains, a lingering Ghost from Christmas Past that tugs at his balls and almost makes him wish he'd let Jake visit. At least then he wouldn't be dozing in front of the TV—

But the television is off, and the clock on the VCR blinks 12:00 with a stupid stutter. Now Ned notices the wind outside—what he'd thought was a dream is real, shrieking around the edges of the house like a banshee seeking entry. He takes the melting ice cream into the kitchen and leaves it in the sink as he peers out the window. The still night is filled with a souging, almost metallic sound that Ned doesn't recognize.

Then in the glow of a distant streetlight, he sees icy rain falling like straight pins to the ground. Rain that would slice through coats and skin to needle its way inside, each drop stinging as it hit. With a faint smugness, Ned's pleased he was right—it *is* too cold to snow. *So we get rain on Christmas. Lovely.* Why don't any of those damn holiday songs sing about that? "*I'm Dreaming of a Soggy Christmas.*" Ned thinks he should sell this stuff. He can't be the only Scrooge out there.

The power must have gone out or flickered. Maybe that's what woke him up. Glaring out the window, Ned hopes the storm or whatever it is passes quickly, and the power stays on. He won't think about sitting in the dark without electricity, without *beat*...it's too depressing.

His gaze shifts to the darkened window of Bobby's townhouse. What's he up to by himself on this rainy Christmas night? Already asleep? Or maybe also standing in the kitchen with the lights out, looking out into the night? Looking *this* way? At Ned?

Despite the darkness, Ned suddenly feels exposed and he takes a step back, away from the window. Bobby's a nice guy who needed a ride home, that's all there is between them. So Ned used to crush on him years ago. So he invited Ned to dinner. So what? Bobby has food he doesn't want to waste and they're the only two people left on campus. There's nothing up his sleeve, no hidden agenda here, nothing to get *hopeful* about.

And after Jake? Ned is *not* getting his hopes up about another man again.



RETREATING TO THE living room, Ned turns the lights down low and stretches out on the couch, remote in hand. There's still nothing good on the TV—it's as if all the stations programmed a night's worth of cheesy Christmas films and sent their employees home to spend the holiday with their families. Briefly Ned thinks of his mother, visiting her sister in New York. She asked Ned to join her, but he heard the relief in her voice when he said no. Their relationship is strained at best, thanks to Jake. She never liked that boy, she told Ned often enough, thought he was a bad influence because he swore and smoked. Once she learned they were having sex, she refused to let him in her house. Ned hasn't yet told her they broke up just because he doesn't want to hear her gloat.

In the semi-darkness, Ned flips through the channels and finally settles for an old rerun of *M*A*S*H*. Something humorous that won't make him think. He covers himself with the afghan off the back of the couch, trying not to remember this time last year when he and Jake cuddled beneath this very same blanket for warmth. Naked...Jake has a gorgeous body, freckled and firm. Ned used to draw imaginary lines with his finger, connecting the dots, creating intricate designs along Jake's arms and legs and belly.

Last year, he never imagined he'd find himself alone this Christmas.

Stop thinking about him. Ned snuggles under the blanket, one hand straying to the throbbing ache between his legs. *No. Don't. You're not that pitiful yet, don't do it.* But his fingers find his zipper, ease it out of the way, slip into the fly of his jeans and stroke his slight erection. His eyes close against the shudder of desire that washes over him, and for the briefest second he can almost believe he isn't by himself here, it's not his hand strumming his own dick, it's *not*. He pops the button on his jeans as his hand eases into his briefs, fingers encircling his thick length.

A few quick thrusts is all it takes.

He continues to massage his balls, his cock, the tender spot between his legs that trembles at his own touch. But each time he blinks, his eyes take longer and longer to open. His hand fists around his cock once, twice, then his fingers unclench and fall away. Despite the noise from the television, the light overhead, the storm raging outside, Ned nestles into his makeshift bed and drops back to sleep.

His dreaming mind conjures up an image of a townhouse similar to his—cinder block walls blatant proof of campus housing, utilitarian furniture in unattractive shades of green, an overall worn out look that speaks to dozens of different students throughout the years. But the living room he finds himself in is not his own, and the little differences in such a familiar setting disorient him. There are no dirty clothes strewn about the floor, no leftover food containers stacked on the coffee table.

Instead, a row of holiday cards parade across the top of the television, and in one corner a short, four foot tall Christmas tree blinks contentedly to itself, lights winking like promises. A handful of presents lie scattered under the tree. Just seeing them fills Ned with the same excitement he felt as a little boy, eight years old and eager to open his gifts. In his dream, he drifts towards the tree without moving, zooming in on the presents and their little festive tags, looking for his own name...

Behind him someone coughs, a startling sound, so close. He whirls around to see Bobby coming in from the kitchen, a steaming mug of something warm in one hand. *So this is his place*, Ned thinks. The thought flickers across his dream state like a scrolling marquee and is gone. It makes sense, really. Bobby's the last person Ned spoke with, other than Jake. Why not dream of whatever kind of Christmas he's celebrating? It has to be better than Ned's lonely evening.

Only...it isn't, is it? Bobby's alone, too.

Carefully he sets the mug down on the table as he sinks to the sofa. Ned catches a glimpse of some dark swirling liquid—hot chocolate? Coffee? Bobby stretches his legs out to prop his feet beside the mug, then reaches for a paperback lying open on the seat beside him. With one hand on the book, he leans against the cushions, not yet ready to read. Instead he stares at Ned, right *at* him, looking through him as if he isn't even there. *Which I'm not*, Ned reminds himself, *this is just a dream*...but it's still unnerving. He opens his mouth to say something, just to see if Bobby responds, but nothing comes out. He can feel the words stuck in his throat, silencing him. He can't speak.

Bobby's gaze doesn't waver. He stares at a spot in the middle of Ned's chest, where his heart beats, and there's a look of such longing on his face, such *loneliness*, that Ned wants to reach out for him but he can't. He wants to say something to comfort the guy, tell him it's not as bad as he thinks—

Isn't it? Why tell Bobby that shit when it's nothing more than a lie to make him feel better? Ned shakes his head. No one's bothered to comfort *him*.

But he wants to see those eyes light up with laughter, see that crooked grin again, feel... *Oh God, no, don't go there, you don't need another guy, you don't need anyone else, not after the shit Jake pulled—do you want to go through that all over again? Feel your heart crushed in your chest? Feel your love rooted out and plucked from your soul like nothing more than a common weed?*

Feel strong arms around his body again, feel another's kisses on his brow, hands in his hair and along his skin. Feel Bobby above him, on him, in him, so deep inside that he doesn't know where he ends and Bobby begins.

Does he want to feel *that*? Yes. Oh God yes. *Santa, if you're listening and it's not too late, strike out my previous wish. Give me him instead, what do you say? Help a guy out.*

Then he remembers that he's not here. This isn't real. It doesn't exist outside his mind, a scene brought to life by his own pitiful desire. Nothing more than a vivid dream after humping the couch. Bobby's probably on the phone right now, laughing with friends or family. He's not sitting on the sofa like an abandoned doll, staring at Ned, *through* Ned at his Christmas tree, dark thoughts swirling behind his black-hole eyes. Just to prove it to himself, Ned steps aside, out of Bobby's line of vision.

Those eyes shift, following him.

Only for a moment, nothing more, then Bobby blinks and focuses back on the tree again, a look of consternation crossing his face as if he's not sure why he ever looked away. *Me*, Ned thinks. *You were looking at me. You know I'm here, wherever here is, and somehow you see me.* Maybe because he wants to? Maybe he's—the thought is staggering, but maybe Bobby's dreamed *him* into being and not the other way around?



WHEN NED WAKES again, it is to a darkness so complete, so black, that he has to blink to assure himself his eyes are open. Even the numbers on the VCR's clock have gone out, extinguished like a candle in the wind. There is nothing to see and nothing to hear except the distant storm. Ice strikes the windows like sand. Common everyday sounds that Ned normally never notices—the whirr of the fridge, the heat when it clicks on, the almost subconscious hum of electricity—they've all disappeared. When Ned shifts on the couch, he feels cold air seep into the warm pockets of body heat trapped beneath the blanket. No power, no heat... *a silent night*.

A sudden, heavy knock at the kitchen door kicks his heart into a rapid beat. Ned throws back the blanket, trips over the coffee table when he stands, and falls flat on his face before he can take a step. "Shit!" he curses, pushing himself

up off the floor. The knock comes again, a pounding really, someone laying into the door like a gossip full of bad news. Raising his voice, he calls out, "Hold up!" As he stumbles through the kitchen, heading for the door, he realizes it has to be Bobby.

It is.

"What the hell are you doing out in this mess?" Ned asks when he opens the door and finds Bobby on his stoop, stomping his feet to keep warm. Behind him, icy rain falls in sheets Ned hears but can't see—the world out there has ceased to exist. No street lights on now to light the sidewalks, no stars above to shine down, no moon even. Ned can't stare into that endless night for too long. It's like going blind.

Bobby shoulders his way into the kitchen to announce, "The power's out."

"No shit," Ned grumbles as he slams the door on the storm. "It's nasty out there."

They stand so close together, Ned can feel the chill from being outside radiate off Bobby's coat. Remembering his dream, he wants to wrap his arms around Bobby's shoulders, hold him tight, warm him up, but he doesn't know how to do that without it becoming awkward so he just stands there, hands fisted at his sides, and stares into the darkness in front of him. Bobby's ragged breath fills the world, each puff faint and cool on Ned's cheek. Hoping to put some distance between them, Ned takes a step back and knocks into the kitchen table. His coat falls to the floor with a solid *thump*. His voice sounds gruff when he asks, "What are you doing here? My power's out, too."

"Do you have candles?" Bobby wants to know.

Ned shakes his head. Then, remembering Bobby can't see him, he adds, "No. There's a flashlight maybe, somewhere. I think."

The rustle of material tells him Bobby's digging through the jackets of his coat, then a small, thin cone of light illuminates the space between them. They're close again, Bobby must've moved towards him in the dark, and there's that lopsided grin that makes Ned's heart hurt to see. "I just have this one," Bobby tells him, "but I have a ton of candles over at my place. Four in the advent wreath, some scented ones on top of the TV, a box of tea lights my mom sent me to burn potpourri."

And you're telling me this because...? Flippant, Ned jokes, "You didn't happen to bring over any to share, did you?"

"I wanted to see if you'd come back with me."

Ned watches the way the flashlight's beam flickers in Bobby's eyes and doesn't quite believe he's heard correctly. "You came to get me? In this?"

When Bobby shrugs, light dances around the kitchen. "I tried calling you," he admits. "I guess you have a cordless phone that doesn't work when the power's

out? Because it just rings and rings.”

“It’s unplugged,” Ned murmurs. Bobby came out in this weather for him. *Him*. He doesn’t know what to think about that.

Suddenly the flashlight dims. “Whoa,” Bobby says, hitting the bottom of the flashlight against his palm. “The batteries must be low. So are you going to come over?”

Ned wants to say no. What happened to not getting close to anyone else? Taking a perverse pleasure in his loneliness, blaming Jake for ruining his holiday? Picking at whatever scabs have formed over his heart just to poke at the wounds and watch them bleed?

That was before the power went out. Sitting alone in the dark feeling sorry for himself is one thing; not being able to turn the lights on when he wants to push back the darkness and freezing his ass off is entirely different, and not the least bit appealing. The flashlight dims again, the light browning down to a faint glow. When Bobby shakes it to get another few minutes out of the batteries, Ned surprises them both by saying, “Let me get some stuff together.”

Bobby’s grin outshines the flashlight. “I was so sure you’d say forget it,” he admits.

For the first time all evening, all *season* even, Ned laughs. “Me too.”



WITH HIS PILLOW under his coat to keep it dry and his toothbrush in his back pocket, Ned follows Bobby out into the storm. Wind whips through the buildings in their complex, sheering across the sidewalks, flinging ice into Ned’s eyes. Pulling his hood close around his face, he struggles to get his key into the lock on his door, his bare fingers frigid with the wind and ice. Just as he’s about to say fuck it—who’s going to steal anything in weather like *this*? There’s no one else on campus anyway—the key turns and he hears the lock click. “Damn,” he mutters. The word is ripped from his throat and tossed away by the wind.

Bobby waits a little ways off. As Ned approaches, stepping cautiously on the thin sheet of ice that’s formed over the sidewalk, Bobby shouts to be heard over the storm. “Be careful. It’s slick.”

“I know—” Ned’s foot skids over the ice, slipping out from under him, and he feels a sickening lurch in his stomach as he starts to fall.

A strong hand catches his arm. “Careful,” Bobby says again, helping him stand.

In his chest, Ned’s heart beats like a machine gun, rapid fire, adrenaline like bullets ricocheting through him. Bobby holds onto his elbow, then his hand takes Ned’s, the glove Bobby wears coarse against his palm. Ned’s body warms as if his blood has been ignited, liquid trails of kerosene running up his arms and

legs to create a fiery blaze that burns in his groin. *He's just being nice*, he tries to tell himself, but coming out in this storm and holding his hand as they cross the commons is more than being neighborly. Ned's been so wrapped up in Jake for so long, he doesn't remember what it's like to flirt or tease or come onto someone. But he's fairly sure Bobby's pass the point of just *being nice*. The thought is intoxicating. Ned has to keep his gaze on the icy sidewalk to make sure his feet stay on the ground.

When they reach Bobby's door, Ned stands closer to him than he should. He wishes he didn't have the pillow beneath his coat so he could feel Bobby against him, but maybe that's a good thing. With each minute, he changes his mind about this whole situation. Bobby's helping him out; Bobby's hitting on him. Ned wants this attention, he craves it, but he doesn't want to be wrong again. Better to keep Bobby at bay, stay locked inside himself. But it feels so good to hold another's hand, and he wants to see that smile again. He wonders what that crooked eyetooth would feel like if they kissed.

Inside, the kitchen's as dark as Ned's own. Bobby lets go of his hand to lock the door behind them, then strips off his gloves and jacket. Ned follows suit, dropping his coat in a wet heap on the floor. "Jesus," Ned mutters, running his cold hands through his hair. His fingertips feel like icicles. "I need to get some gloves."

"Here." In the darkness Bobby touches Ned's chest, then feels his way out to Ned's shoulders, down his arms, until he finds Ned's hands. Taking them between his own, he rubs at them briskly, raises them to his mouth, blows hot breath over the frozen skin. When he does it a second time, Ned dares to brush the tip of his middle finger across Bobby's soft lips. They close over his finger with a damp kiss.

Ned pulls away. "I'm sorry," Bobby says, reaching for him again. But Ned crosses his arms and fists his hands, shoving them beneath his arms for warmth. Bobby sighs. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's cool." Ned takes a step away from Bobby and ignores the ghost of those lips on his skin.

Bobby tries again. "Look Ned, I wasn't—"

Ned doesn't want to hear it. "You said you had candles?" he asks sharply.

"Stay here."

Ned hears Bobby's tentative footsteps as he crosses the kitchen. They disappear when he steps onto the living room carpet. Staring around him at the darkness, Ned tries not to think of that little peck and fails miserably. Where did that come from? Why? And, more importantly, what now?

Ned has no clue.

What happens next? What's he *want* to happen? Maybe he's been going about

this shit with Jake all wrong—maybe he should revel in his newfound freedom instead of mope around like he'll never find another guy again. Or have one find him.

A faint spark in the living room pushes back the night and spills into the kitchen. There's just enough light for Ned to see his way into the other room, which he recognizes from his dream—the cards above the TV, the tree hiding in one shadowy corner, the now-empty mug still on the coffee table amid a dozen flickering candles. Bobby's already seated on the couch, wearing the same clothes Ned remembers—

That can't be possible. It can't.

Yeah, he saw Bobby earlier but at the store it was just in his coat and jeans. Without the coat, Ned recognizes the shirt he wears—a white T-shirt with long black sleeves, *STATE* written across the front in collegiate block lettering—Ned dreamed about it, and this room, that mug, all of this. *And Bobby, too, sitting on the couch alone. So I'm not the only one.*

When he raises his gaze to look at Bobby's dark eyes, Ned sees in them a familiar longing, a *hunger*, something he hasn't dared believe in since Jake. Softly Bobby says, "I know he hurt you, and I'm so sorry, Ned."

His words are a brand on Ned's skin. They burn and sear his flesh, bringing tears to his eyes. "Who told you?"

"Your roommate." Before Ned can speak, Bobby adds, "I asked. You've always been so nice to me. Always saying hi, smiling at me, stopping to talk when you had a chance. I thought it was just because we went to high school together, you know? I didn't think anything of it. Then a few weeks ago, you stopped looking at me. Stopped talking to me, stopped...I don't know, stopped *flirting* with me."

"I never—"

Bobby laughs. "Maybe you don't think so, but that's the way I took it. And suddenly that was gone. I never realized how much I looked forward to seeing you every day until it seemed like you were going out of your way to avoid me."

Wiping a cold hand across his cheek, Ned mutters, "It wasn't you."

"I know." Bobby pats the cushion beside him, an invitation to sit. "So what happened exactly? Unless you don't want to talk about it—"

Ned stares at the sofa and can't bring himself to cross the room to sit down. "I don't."

Suddenly it becomes too much. Jake, and his betrayal. This evening, those dreams he had, the memories of Christmases he shared with someone he used to trust, used to love. Now, this moment, Bobby looking at him with such sympathy and feeling that Ned wants to just disappear. He can't hold this all in anymore, it's tearing him up inside, eating him alive. Covering his face with his

hands, he gives into the frenzy of emotions swirling around in his heart and sinks to his knees with a half-choked sob.

Warm arms wrap around him—Bobby. “Shh,” he murmurs, smoothing down Ned’s bedraggled hair. Ned finds himself in a strong embrace, hands petting his back and arms to calm him down. Cool lips touch his fevered skin, kissing his forehead, his eyes, his cheeks, kissing away the pain and the ache and the hurt. When they find his mouth, Ned opens to Bobby like a battered rose. He lets those soft lips and firm hands remind him what it’s like to be with another, to be held by another.

To be loved.

Outside the storm lets up, and the icy rain turns to snow.

THE END