



Charity Starts at Home

Zahra Owens

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QUINN closed the heavy door behind him and turned the lock. His hands were encased in heavy mittens, but he couldn't feel his fingers any more. Maybe he should have invested in a new coat this year? Camille had been telling him for years now that his threads were going to fall off his back soon, but he wouldn't hear of it. The last few years, the winters had been mild—one of the perks of global warming, he always joked—but this year, winter came early and would probably stay around for longer than the years before. Quinn couldn't wait for spring. Or at the very least, winter sales.

Below-freezing temperatures also meant a guaranteed full house. Not that there were ever any free beds when it was summer either, but Quinn hated turning people away, especially since this year, for some reason, he saw a lot more single dads with young children. Although he'd grown up in homeless shelters and was now working in one, the worst part of the day was when he had to close the door at night and tell all the people still in line where the other shelters were, knowing they'd probably be too late there as well. He knew all too well what it was like to sleep on cold concrete when it was snowing.

Luckily, the heater inside the small front office was roaring and Quinn slowly felt sensation return to his fingers as he held them over the furnace.

"Quinn, darling, your skinny ass is going to crack one day. You're

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still wearing the coat I gave you five years ago? I hope you're not waiting for another father of mine to die?"

Camille managed the shelter's kitchen, among other things, and was deliciously irreverent of everything and everyone. You always knew where you stood with her, though.

"You know me, Cammie. There are always other people who need it more."

Camille shook her head, motherly concern in her eyes. "As long as you don't get sick, darling. Nobody takes care of these people as well as you."

They both looked up when the clanging chime of the front door bell echoed through the small office.

"I'll get it," Camille said. "You warm up first." A few moments later, she returned. "Damn, it's cold out!"

"What did they want?" Quinn asked absentmindedly, finally taking his mittens and coat off.

"There's a man at the door who wants to see you. Handsome," she remarked teasingly. "Sort of a distinguished older gentleman."

Quinn's eyebrows flew up toward his hairline. "Distinguished older gentleman? Don't think I know any of those. Did he give a name?"

Camille nodded. "Haden Wincott."

Quinn chuckled. "He's not old. Don't you remember him? He worked here for a week during the summer. Did community service for a DUI."

Camille shook her head. "Must have been during my summer vacation. I would have remembered him." She flashed a knowing

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smile. "I better go get dinner ready. He's waiting for you in the hallway."

As soon as Camille left, Quinn's smile disappeared. Why was Haden here? He'd been one of many "volunteers" who had passed through the shelter in the last year. One of their benefactors was a judge who liked to send people convicted of drunk driving to work in the shelter as part of their sentence. He figured that working with the homeless and seeing what alcohol could do to a person was a good way of assuring they wouldn't do it again. Most of the people were white collar, privileged professionals who came in for a week, did the absolute minimum necessary and disappeared again. Since most of them barely interacted with the shelter's regulars, Quinn seriously doubted if that week was enough to bring them to their senses. Haden had been no different. He'd swept floors and poured coffee, but Quinn had never seen him sit down with any of the homeless. Like most people, he'd been reluctant to even make eye contact, let alone touch one of the homeless men. Not that most of their patrons wanted that sort of contact either.

Quinn knew their regulars well, but he didn't know all the particulars of their lives. The men, women and children who didn't have a roof over their heads were too closed off for that. There was, after all, a reason why they'd ended up on the streets. For some, it was alcohol or drug abuse; others were socially inadequate, unable to function in a group well enough to hold a steady job. A not-so-small percentage simply didn't have the mental skills to drag themselves out of a slump, and those people would need help for the rest of their lives. Quinn had found peace a long time ago in knowing he could only do so much. Now that he thought about it, he remembered a conversation he'd had with Haden about this. At the time, Haden had found it hard to understand that these people couldn't be saved and

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that some didn't even want to be saved. Quinn wondered if this visit had something to do with that.

Although the only people in the shelter that afternoon were those working to get everything ready for that evening's residents, Quinn locked the office behind him out of habit before walking towards the hallway, which was also sealed off from the rest of the shelter by a trellis and a lock. Through the fine maze of the separating wall, Quinn could see Haden standing near the entrance door. He was wearing an expensive looking, long woolen coat and leather gloves, his collar turned up. His short, dark hair looked damp and his cheeks were rosy from the change of temperature between the outside air and the hallway.

Quinn unlocked the inside door. "Hi, Haden. What can I do for you?"

Haden looked up and Quinn was pinned into place by the man's ice blue eyes. "I didn't think you'd recognize me," Haden answered with a soft smile.

"Camille told me your name. Of course, I remembered you." There was no need for Quinn to elaborate that Haden was his ideal physical type and that for a short while, he'd entertained a few carefully chosen sexual fantasies about the man. The daydreams had disappeared almost as soon as Haden had, so Quinn preferred to keep them to himself.

Holding the heavy metal door open, Quinn held out his hand and as Haden shook it, the firm handshake brought back all those unrequited feelings. Quinn gripped Haden's hand just as firmly and mentally willed himself to push the lust to the back of his mind.

"I'll cut to the chase," Haden continued confidently. "I have a proposal for you. Can I take you out for coffee or something so we can

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discuss it?"

His mind racing all over the place, Quinn didn't know what to think. A proposal? At least his curiosity was sparked. "We open in less than two hours and there's still a lot of work to do. I can spare a few minutes for coffee if we can take it here," Quinn suggested, pointing behind him toward the shelter.

"Works for me," Haden answered. "Don't suppose your coffee is any better than it used to be?"

"No," Quinn admitted. "Still the same, I'm afraid, but you can add as much sugar as you like and it's hot enough to burn your tongue. Just what you need with this blasting cold weather." He turned around and almost immediately Haden followed close behind him. His hand still against the door, Quinn hesitated opening it farther, savoring the feel of Haden's hot breath ghosting his neck until he couldn't stand it anymore and he pushed the door all the way open. With swift steps, he walked inside and to the back of the dining hall without checking whether Haden was following him. He didn't need to look back. The door locked shut behind them and he could hear the sound of Haden's expensive leather shoes on the tiles of the dining hall.

"Stealing two cups of coffee from you, Cammie," Quinn called into the kitchen as he rounded the corner and filled two paper cups. He handed one to Haden, who had entered just behind him, and added three scoops of sugar to his. "Let's go to the office," Quinn suggested. "It's warmer there." As Quinn circled around Haden, purposely not looking at the other man, he realized he was running away from him. This was ridiculous. Why couldn't he just look the man in the eye? Haden was just a guy who'd been caught driving while he'd had a bit much to drink. Yes, he was good-looking and had a certain charm, but maybe his gaydar was wrong and this guy was straight. Wouldn't be

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the first time Quinn had gotten his knickers in a twist and then found out his wires were crossed. So the guy had a proposition? Maybe he wanted to donate some money, which he obviously had plenty of, judging by his clothes and shoes.

"So what are you proposing?" Quinn asked, forcing himself to look Haden in the eye as he flopped himself down on the beat up couch in his office.

Haden took a deep breath. "I was wondering if you needed an extra pair of hands around for the holidays."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "Got caught again?"

Haden looked a little puzzled for a moment, then seemed to recover. "Oh, you mean...?" He made a drinking gesture. "No, I'm going to meetings twice a week and I haven't even touched as much as a glass of wine in seven months now. I suppose I'm officially a recovering alcoholic."

"Good," Quinn replied encouragingly. It was more than he needed to know, but he wanted Haden to come to the point before Camille realized that all the work for tonight still needed to be done.

"Anyway," Haden continued. "I'm bettering my life and since I owe a great deal to this place, I thought I could give something back and volunteer a little of my time." Haden's confidence waned when Quinn didn't reply. "I could organize some sort of Christmas party, get some decorations going, spruce the place up a bit...."

Quinn stopped him by raising his hands. "Haden, we can barely stay afloat as it is. There's no budget for anything extra, I'm afraid. The Salvation Army usually gets us some turkeys and a tree and we can swing some cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes, but that's about as festive as it gets around here."

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Despite Haden's apparent insecurity, Quinn's words didn't stop him. "I'll donate... I can find people to donate other things. I'll make some calls. For Christmas decorations and maybe some... other stuff. I want to try to make a difference, Quinn."

Quinn looked at Haden, this time unafraid to let their gazes lock. The passion he saw in the other man was something he had lost a long time ago. Maybe Haden was right? Maybe it didn't take all that much to make it a little more special this year? And an extra pair of hands was always welcome.

"I can stay and help tonight as well, if you like," Haden offered. "Since I can tell I haven't persuaded you yet."

Haden was looking at his half empty coffee cup, allowing Quinn to smile without feeling like he was mocking the older man. All sorts of questions ran through his mind, most of them boiling down to the same thing. Was Haden really so lonely that he was willing to spend not just a Friday night in a homeless shelter but Christmas as well? Quinn realized he didn't know anything about Haden's family or home life. Maybe there was more to Haden's DUI than just a spoiled rich guy getting caught too deep after a night on the town. What if it was just a culmination of years of living hard, and the conviction had been enough for Haden's family and maybe even his partner to turn their backs on him? Maybe the only difference between Haden and all the out-of-luck guys who came into the shelter every night was that Haden had money?

Quinn shook his head.

"No," Haden stated resignedly. "You're turning me down?"

Quinn recovered quickly. "Oh! No! I'd be a fool to turn down any offer of help!" He sat up straight. "We can always use an extra pair of hands around here. Thank you. It's a very generous offer."

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Haden's face cleared up, albeit a bit hesitantly.

"I'm sorry," Quinn apologized. "Sometimes I think too much and forget that there are people in the room who find me a bit strange." He contorted his face to stress the point. "It's just... I'm not used to getting generous offers like this. Especially not around Christmas time. Most people generally stay as far away from this place as possible, including Santa Claus. Guess I can't blame them for wanting to spend it with their families."

Haden smiled shyly. "I realize I sound pathetic, but I drank myself unconscious last Christmas. I promised my sponsor I'd find a way not to do that this year."

"Sounds like a plan," Quinn replied. He got up from the beat up sofa. "You remember the afternoon routine? Let's get started then."

It didn't take long for Haden to find his way. It wasn't like anything much changed in the shelter, so after a bit of looking around, he quickly found his bearings again. Quinn was quite used to having inexperienced helpers—volunteers or otherwise—working with him, so he had no qualms about dividing the tasks that needed to be done between them. They finished with time to spare for another cup of coffee.

"So what really brought you here?" Quinn asked, leaning against the counter sipping his coffee.

"Like I said, I want to give these people a good Christmas." Haden wasn't looking at Quinn; instead his eyes were cast over the long white tables he'd just wiped down.

Quinn knew better than to push the issue, although he was certainly curious. He hoped all would reveal itself in due time, and if it didn't, maybe it was none of his business. He pushed himself away

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from the counter and dropped his cup on the kitchen side of it before turning to Haden. "Let's open the doors and let in the freezing masses, hey?"

After putting on their coats, they met a few people in the hallway who came in to provide security. Quinn would never get used to the men who looked like nightclub bouncers, but the past few years, they'd needed them almost every night. When he was young there were sometimes protests from the people who found they were too far down the line to secure a warm bed for the night, but those protests were rarely violent. These days, every man, woman and child who entered the shelter was searched, and knives and sometimes guns were confiscated and returned to their owners in the morning when they left. That was one reason why they needed the bouncers. Another was the fact that adults with children got precedence over single men or women and especially when it was freezing outside, this was often met with more than verbal abuse. The board that clearly outlined the rules was posted near the door and smudged by graffiti, but Quinn refused to even comment on that particular part of the shelter's policy. There was only one thing harder than closing the door on a freezing homeless person, and that was when he was accompanied by a dull-eyed five-year-old. Quinn had grown hard over the course of the years, but the children still broke his heart every time.

Quinn gave Haden an encouraging nod before unlocking the heavy front gate. The first man to enter was Karl with his two children. He was a regular, an ex-druggie who'd lost his wife to an overdose and then found the courage to sober up so he could take care of his kids. The kids were in school now and Karl was working odd jobs, but they had yet to find affordable housing. For the last year, Karl had helped out by making sure the families with kids got in first,

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organizing the line accordingly. He was a big guy, with surprisingly good people skills, and his preparation made for an orderly and swift entrance of the neediest families.

An hour after opening the doors, everyone was eating, the dinner hall packed with people surrounded by all their worldly belongings.

Haden was smiling brightly.

"You're happy," Quinn remarked as he handed Haden a bowl of hot soup after sitting down next to him.

"These people are safe for the night," Haden stated, taking a sip and burning his mouth.

Quinn smiled. "Yeah, they are."

"As the weather grew worse, I kept reading about the cops finding people frozen in alleyways and such." Haden sighed, defeated. "When I was walking to work after the first frosty night, people were walking past a young woman on a bench covered in newspapers. She looked all grey and I called an ambulance, but it was too late. She was dead and everyone was just walking past her as if they didn't even notice."

"Would you have noticed if you hadn't worked here this summer?" Quinn asked.

Haden shrugged. "Probably not, although I'd like to think I would."

"Well, you've taken a big step toward helping these people."

Haden looked at Quinn, doubt in his face. "Tomorrow we let them out again and it's a lottery whether they'll have a place to sleep tomorrow night. Nothing ever changes. We're a drop in the ocean."

Quinn was surprised at Haden's defeatist attitude. "We help

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those we can. For tonight. And tomorrow's another day. Don't they teach you that at AA? Take it one step at a time, one day at a time. You never know about tomorrow."

Haden nodded.

"It's the same with these people. And things do change. You saw Karl with his kids, right? He's been sober for over a year now. He's a good guy. If I had more money, I'd give him a job and a permanent place to stay at the shelter, but I don't. He knows my hands are tied, but he keeps fighting. He'll make it one day. In the meantime, Cammie and I are on the lookout for a small apartment for him and his kids."

Haden stayed around for the cleanup and when all the residents were settled in for the night, he came into the office to say goodbye to Quinn. Quinn couldn't help thinking Haden looked like a shy schoolboy, but he attributed that to his libido taking over.

"I better go," Haden announced, playing with his leather gloves as he was about to walk out. "Can I come back again one evening?"

"Sure," Quinn answered. "We have to discuss your plans for Christmas, after all."

Haden nodded shyly. "I'll make some calls and let you know what I come up with."

* * *

QUINN didn't hold his breath, especially not after the first week of not hearing anything from Haden. Life went on in never changing circles; morning routine, afternoons off, then evening routine and falling asleep in his small room at the back of the shelter to a soundtrack of the coughs and snores of a large group of people sleeping in a small space.

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Two weeks before Christmas, Quinn was in the city after a meeting with the Salvation Army when his cell phone rang. He smiled when he saw Haden's number pop up.

"Hey! What's up?" he answered.

"Haden here."

"Yeah, I know. I have your number," Quinn answered happily, dashing into the subway and waiting on the bottom step out of the cold wind, hoping he wouldn't lose his connection.

"Can I come by this evening?"

Quinn was surprised how Haden's question made his heartbeat quicken. "Of course!" he answered, sounding quite a bit more eager than he wanted to. "You're always welcome."

"I have a meeting to go to first, but it's not far from the shelter so I'll come around after that. Same time as last week okay for you?"

"Just ring the doorbell," Quinn replied before he clicked his phone shut. Haden's words kept ringing through his mind. He was going to a meeting. Would that be an AA meeting? Although Quinn hadn't gone to one in ages, he knew there was one every day about two blocks away from the shelter. For a long time, he would go there just before returning to the shelter, back when he needed those meetings to make it through the evening. He took in a deep breath and started walking toward his train home. It dawned on him how much stronger he was compared to a year ago, and it made him think about what Haden was going through right now.

* * *

BY THE time he walked up the stairs from the subway, it was snowing.

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He had a fair way to walk and his old coat was soaking up the moisture of the melting snow, making him shiver. Since he passed the old church where the AA meeting was going on, he decided to walk inside. They'd just gotten started and Quinn quickly scanned the faces of the men and women in the group before quietly taking a cup of coffee and sitting down at the back. He couldn't see everyone in the group, but it felt good to be among like-minded people anyway and it didn't take more than hearing the stories to remind Quinn about the power of these sorts of meetings.

An older woman was talking about her children, how she'd been afraid to call them, but how she was now talking to her son again. When she was finished, someone else got up and Quinn immediately realized the voice sounded familiar.

"Hi, my name is Haden and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Haden."

"I've been sober for seven months and three days."

Applause.

Haden sighed deeply as if he was trying to muster the courage. Quinn tried to crane his neck to look at him, but when he realized Haden was facing him, he ducked down again, hoping Haden hadn't noticed him sitting there.

"I was never the most sociable person. I started drinking in high school when I realized that after a few drinks, I wasn't so afraid to approach girls anymore." The crowd chuckled in recognition. "It wasn't until much later that I discovered I liked guys more than girls." A few people laughed and Quinn could hear in Haden's voice he was smiling too. "Then I found out I had an even harder time coming on to guys, so I drank even more. Now that I'm sober, all my anxieties are

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back with a vengeance.”

Haden paused and Quinn had a hard time keeping a low profile. He wanted to see Haden’s face so badly.

“Just after I stopped drinking, I met a guy I really liked. His world is so different from mine, yet when we talk, we seem to have a lot in common. Back then, I didn’t have the nerve to say anything, let alone make a move toward him. I’m pretty sure he’s gay, so that isn’t the problem. Anyway, we lost touch, but last week I met up with him again at the place where he works.”

Quinn smiled, realizing that Haden was talking about him. About them. He took a large drink of coffee to quell his nerves.

“We can still talk really well, but I don’t know how to proceed from here.”

“So what did you used to do when this happened?” a woman in the center asked.

“I used to have a few drinks and then make myself bump into him. Can’t do that now.”

“You can still bump into him,” she continued.

“The coming face to face with him part isn’t that hard. He’s really open and approachable, but I think he just sees me as a friend. I don’t have the nerve to tell him my feelings go further than that. What do you say?” Haden asked rhetorically. “Hi, I’m Haden; will you come home with me?”

Some people chuckled.

“How would you want him to approach you?” A man’s voice asked.

“I don’t know,” Haden admitted. “If he did, I’d probably run

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away.”

“So what will you do then?” the first woman asked.

“I don’t know,” Haden repeated. “I know drinking isn’t going to solve my problems, but sometimes I think that if I just have a few drinks, just once, I could find the courage to tell him how I feel. On the other hand, not drinking is more important to me than dating.”

“You’d just fall off the wagon again, dude,” another familiar voice said.

Quinn dared to look up again. He noticed Karl sitting closer to him, elbows resting on his knees and eyes turned toward Haden. His face was caring and understanding and Quinn was kind of happy that Karl and Haden seemed to know each other, at least from meetings like this.

After hearing another story, the gathering broke up after linking hands to say a prayer together. Quinn stayed near the back, leaning against a pillar of the old church when Haden emerged. Unease crept over Haden’s face when he noticed Quinn standing there.

“Quinn,” Haden nodded. “How long have you been here?”

Quinn didn’t need to read Haden’s mind to understand what Haden was afraid of, so he used a little white lie. “Not long. It was snowing pretty badly so I ducked in here to get warm again.”

“You’ve been to a meeting before?” Haden fished.

“Not for at least a year.” Quinn nodded. “I’ve been sober for....” he couldn’t believe he had to think about it, “just over five years now. So I know it isn’t easy.”

Haden nodded shyly and walked to the side to get his coat. “I was coming to see you tonight. I figured you could use some help at the

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shelter.”

Quinn put his hand on the back of Haden’s shoulder, but drew back when he felt Haden pull away. “I like it when you come in to help me,” Quinn said instead.

A shy smile spread across Haden’s face and all Quinn could think about was how hard it was going to be to show Haden their feelings were mutual.

“Let’s make a run for it,” Quinn suggested. “The sooner we’re home the quicker we can warm up.”

When they walked outside, the snowfall had turned to rain, but it didn’t feel any warmer than before. Quinn raised the collar on his already wet coat and looked at Haden before gesturing he follow him. It was a brisk, two block walk and they were both soaked when they arrived at the heavy gate barring the entrance to the shelter. Quinn rang the bell and tiptoed to stay warm.

“You should really find yourself a warmer coat, Quinn,” Haden said with genuine concern in his voice.

Before Quinn could answer, they heard the bolts and locks being opened and Camille peered out. “Hey Quinny! Haden, nice to see you again.”

Quinn didn’t miss the teasing look on Camille’s face. He just hoped Haden didn’t know her well enough to understand it. “You boys look like you need a good long communal shower to warm up again. Water’s at its hottest right now, you know.” She winked and Quinn shot her a look hoping to stop her teasing.

She winked at him again as she turned on her heels and walked out of the hallway.

“She’s right, you know,” Quinn told Haden. “This is about the only

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time you can take a nice hot shower. There isn't a lot of privacy though, so if you want, you can go first and I'll wait until you're done.

Haden shrugged. "I'm good. I'm not that wet. You go ahead."

"Well, if you change your mind, you know where the clean towels are."

Quinn, used to taking quick showers in between getting home and getting the shelter ready, was nicely lathered up in the farthest cubicle when he heard some unfamiliar sounds. He stuck his head out of the spray of the shower and smiled. Someone was inside the shower area and he was trying to be as quiet as possible. To Quinn's amusement, he was failing miserably.

At any other moment of the day, Quinn wouldn't be so at ease, but at this time of the afternoon, Camille was getting ready to start cooking and all the doors were locked. There was nobody else here yet other than her and him, so the other person could only be Haden. Quinn let his hands run over his body to wipe off the suds. The adrenalin was making him hard and he fisted himself a few times to scratch his itch. Underneath the partial partition, Quinn could see the reflection of two manly bare feet in the shiny wet tiles and he decided to ham it up a bit.

"Fuck yeah, mmm," he murmured. "Feels good, Haden. Touch me right there."

Standing half under the spray, he could hear Haden move closer. Quinn bit into his hand to stop himself from chuckling too loudly, but he wasn't sure Haden had heard him say his name. He was going to have to make sure of it. "Oh Haden," he sighed, rolling his eyes at his own bad acting skills. "Feels so good."

Haden shifted from one leg to the other on the other side of the

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partition and Quinn couldn't hold back any longer. His hands were aching to touch the other man. He didn't bother turning off the spray and simply rounded the partition, coming face to face with his object of affection. Like he'd expected, Haden was stark naked and to his delight, not only well hung but rock hard too. Haden looked self-conscious and was trying to hide his erection with his hands, but the real surprise came when Quinn's eyes travelled up and he saw the elaborate dragon tattoos all over Haden's chest and arms, which had been carefully hidden under long sleeved shirts. The look of utter terror on Haden's face prevented Quinn from making a comment about them. Instead, he launched himself at Haden's sinewy body and attacked his mouth with a passionate kiss. Quinn felt Haden melt slowly under his embrace, Haden's hands hesitantly moving to Quinn's hips. This was enough incentive for Quinn to grind his erection against Haden's and he felt more than heard the older man moan into the kiss. This gave Quinn the confidence to grab hold of both of their erections, rubbing them together until Haden was rolling his hips against Quinn's hot, wet body. His eyes closed, Quinn gave in to the needs of his body until he was so close to coming he didn't think he could stop it anymore. Just at that point, Haden broke the kiss and threw his head back, bumping it against the thin metal partition. He didn't flinch, totally giving in to the convulsions wracking his body. Feeling Haden's hot release stream over his hand was enough to push Quinn over as well and after thrusting hard into his hand a few times more, he clung to Haden, panting hard.

Quinn let his hands ghost over the intricate designs on Haden's biceps while they caught their breath. When Quinn gazed up, Haden was looking lost, so Quinn took the lead. "If we're quick, the water will still be hot."

Haden didn't move so Quinn once more rounded the partition

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and got under the shower to rinse off the semen of their combined release. To his grave disappointment, Haden didn't join him and when he exited the shower, Haden crossed his path without making eye contact. Quinn dried off and got dressed on his own while Haden remained in the shower. He mentally kicked himself for being so forward, but hoped that, in time, Haden would see it for what it was: an admission that Quinn was attracted to Haden as well.

* * *

ABOUT ten minutes later, Haden, his hair still wet, joined Quinn as he was setting up the plates and cutlery for dinner. He didn't say anything, but Quinn couldn't leave it this way.

"I'm sorry if I came on too strong," Quinn said as he moved behind Haden to pick up the paper napkins.

Haden shrugged. "'s okay."

"It's not okay if you didn't want what was happening, Haden."

Again, Haden shrugged. "I was okay with it."

Quinn sighed loudly. It wasn't like he expected a declaration of love from Haden, but Quinn hated not knowing where he stood. Had he read too much into Haden's words at the AA meeting? Had Haden been talking about someone else he'd met and Quinn simply assumed—wrongly—that he'd meant him?

"Haden?" Quinn pleaded. He needed Haden to at least assure him he hadn't ruined the precarious friendship they had cultivated so far.

"What?" Haden answered innocently, the expression on his face soft.

"Never mind," Quinn replied gruffly, shoving the napkins into the

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oversized napkin holder before hurrying into the kitchen. On the way over there he mentally kicked himself for expecting too much, but he knew he couldn't invest in a hopeless relationship. He was too old to lose himself in something that didn't have a future, so he knew he had to let it lay, for his own sanity more than anything else.

They worked together in silence the rest of the evening, exchanging only the most necessary conversation. Quinn hated the tension in the air, but there was nothing he could do as long as Haden refused to have a civil conversation. At night in his bed, Quinn couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. Had he really pushed Haden to do something he didn't want? It was Haden who had walked into the showers naked, knowing Quinn was in there. Had he really misread the signs?

Quinn tried to quiet down his brain, but even his dreams were filled with the dragons he'd seen on Haden's body.



TO QUINN'S surprise, Haden was back the following evening. Part of him didn't want Haden there. Without his help, he had a lot more work to do, but at least it was tension free. Now the almost silent presence of the other man made Quinn uneasy.

After their residents were settled in for the night, Quinn caught Haden at the back of the shelter, in the designated smoking area. It was less cold tonight, although you could still see your breath. There were a few other men smoking a short distance away so they didn't have a lot of privacy, but Quinn needed to talk to Haden.

"I didn't know you smoked," Quinn said hesitantly, trying not to sound too negative.

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Haden looked at his half-smoked cigarette and flicked the ashes into the large ashtray. "Bad habit. One of many."

"Oh?" Quinn asked playfully, hoping to lift the tension a bit.

"You don't want to know," Haden answered, a wry smile on his face.

"We all have bad habits," Quinn agreed, gesturing for Haden's cigarette. Haden handed it to him and he took a drag before handing it back with an understanding smile. They stood in silence for a while, until Haden had finished his cigarette and pushed his hands into the pockets of his pants. Quinn had hoped sharing the cigarette would have broken the ice, but Haden clearly needed more to persuade him to open up. For a moment, Quinn didn't know where to begin, but then he remembered there was one more thing he was hiding from Haden. "I heard your confession at the meeting."

"Good," Haden answered evenly.

"Good?" Quinn asked. Haden's answer was the last thing he'd expected.

"I was wondering why you did what you did yesterday and I was starting to believe you took liberties with everyone who came in for a shower. The fact you heard me say what I said, means you're a bit more discriminating."

"Was it me you were talking about?" Quinn asked a little apprehensively.

"Yes," Haden answered. He was still staring out at the graffiti on the back wall, which was the only vista available to the smokers, but his voice sounded calm and in control, as if he wasn't in the least ashamed of his confession.

"So why did you refuse to talk to me about it?" As soon as the

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words left his mouth, Quinn realized he had raised his voice and the other two men in the smoker's area had turned to look at them. It didn't seem to faze Haden.

"What happened happened, Quinn. It felt good and I didn't mind what you did, but I'm not ready for more. I can't deal with more right now."

Quinn nodded. He could accept that for now. Haden had all but admitted he had feelings for him, so maybe if he was patient, Haden would open up to him again. He smiled when he realized Haden was still standing next to him, hands in pockets, his warm sweater hiding the elaborate body-art underneath the sleeves.

"You have gorgeous tattoos," Quinn said quietly.

"Another bad habit," Haden admitted.

"Oh, I don't know," Quinn said. "I have a few small ones, but I don't have the money to have anything big done. I wouldn't mind taking a closer look at yours."

Haden looked at him sideways.

"You know, one day, when you're ready to let me."

Haden smiled, which made Quinn's heart skip a beat.

"One day," Haden agreed.

* * *

HADEN came to the shelter every night to help out and Quinn slowly got used to treating him as a friend rather than someone he had the hots for. Nights were another thing altogether. Haden went home as soon as the work was done, leaving Quinn to go to his room all by himself to dream of Haden. Quinn kept telling himself to stop hoping

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for more, but as soon as the Sandman took him, his subconscious had other ideas.

During one such hot and bothersome dream, Quinn was rudely awakened by loud banging on his door, a desperate man's voice calling his name. He got up out of bed, acutely aware of the fact his erection was tenting his pajama bottoms. As soon as he heard the frantic voice cry "Fire!" Quinn was wide awake. He grabbed his clothes and put them on over his night clothes, then grabbed his cell phone. As soon as he opened the door, he could smell that it wasn't a false alarm. He dialed 911, asked the man who'd woken him to get Karl up, and knocked on the door of the security guys' bedroom, all at once. After giving the emergency dispatcher the address, Quinn walked toward the front door to open the entrance gate so they could start evacuating. Karl arrived with several kids in tow, including his own.

"Don't think anyone's hurt, but we'll need to take roll call outside," Karl told Quinn after dropping the kids off in the entrance hall.

"I'll get tonight's list," Quinn agreed. "Can you get the people together here? Make sure they don't leave before we can check them?"

Karl nodded and Quinn returned from the front office with the resident's list and a pen. "Here." He gave the list to Karl. "I trust you to check everyone off. I need to make sure everyone makes it out." Quinn missed the panic in Karl's face as he turned around to walk to the back.

Crossing the hall where most of the residents were gathered, Quinn dialed Haden's number from speed dial. Haden's voice mail picked up.

"Haden? I'm sorry to call you in the middle of the night, but there's a fire at the shelter. The fire department is on its way and

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we're evacuating. I would appreciate anything you can do to help. If not, no worries. I'm fine," Quinn added just before he clicked his phone shut. He wasn't panicking, but he knew he'd feel better once he knew everyone was accounted for. Somewhere in the hall he found the time to mentally kick himself for letting the emergency procedures slack. He was surprised to see his security guys had done a pretty thorough job so far. After all, they weren't professionals, but mostly ordinary guys who'd bettered their lives after years of living on the street. Soon after the fire department arrived, all the residents were accounted for. Quinn stood outside, hugging his worn coat around his shoulders, when he felt strong hands grabbing him.

"You're freezing!"

Quinn turned around and stared straight into Haden's shiny blue eyes. "Thank God you're here."

"Everything okay?" Haden asked.

"I just worry about all my people. They're going to have to sleep rough and it's just a week before Christmas."

Haden rubbed Quinn's arms to keep him warm. "I took care of that. It's not perfect at such short notice, but my company has an empty warehouse just around the corner. It will take me some time to organize blankets and beds, but for tonight, at least they'll be dry."

Quinn swallowed hard. He wasn't sure what Haden did for a living, but his clothes betrayed that it wasn't exactly a minimum wage job and Haden was a lot more take-charge than he ever gave him credit for.

They waited for the fire department to give the all clear but the fire chief forbade them to enter the shelter once they were sure the fire was contained. He told them there was a lot of water damage and

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since it was an old building that meant there could be structural damage.

"We'll come back in the morning, Quinn," Haden said. "Let's get you to a warm bed."

Quinn was torn. Of course, he didn't want to turn Haden's offer down, although he didn't know whether Haden was offering his own bed to share or whether he was just being altruistic. On the other hand, he wanted to check on his residents, so Haden took him to the warehouse. The heating was only just enough to keep the pipes from freezing, but it was clean and dry and by the time they arrived, Karl and the security guys had helped everyone settle in. They assured him that they would manage for the night and make sure they left everything the way they found it in the morning. Karl showed him some of the bread and cheese they'd saved from the kitchen, so Quinn knew they'd have at least some sort of breakfast before leaving.

By the time Quinn was sure everything would work out, Haden had called them a cab. "You're coming home with me," he stated and Quinn didn't argue. He was cold and tired and let himself be driven to the other side of the city.

The cab stopped in front of a three-story brownstone in a posh looking neighborhood. Haden let them in and he was hanging up their coats when a young man dressed in a bathrobe entered the hallway.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Wincott? Shall I make you some coffee?"

Haden waved him off. "That's okay, Wilson. We're fine; we'll manage. Go back to sleep."

Quinn didn't know what he was seeing. Not only did Haden live in a big house that probably cost a fortune, he had round-the-clock

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staff as well. At least he hoped that “Wilson” was his servant, rather than his... boyfriend? Although Quinn didn’t know if he was all that comfortable thinking about Haden having a staff either.

Haden spotted Quinn’s confused expression.

“Wilson’s my housekeeper. He takes care of me, does my shopping, cleans my house, sorts my laundry, that sort of stuff.”

Quinn was too tired to argue, so he let Haden lead him upstairs to the bedroom, which had a little lounge next to it. He pushed Quinn into the bathroom, which was about the size of Quinn’s room at the shelter, and left him in privacy to take a warm shower. When Quinn stepped out of the glass enclosed shower cubicle, he found a plush maroon bathrobe and assorted towels. If he wasn’t so exhausted, he’d probably have more questions about all this, but right now, he took what he could get and was happy to be warm again.

In the lounge, he found Haden sitting on the couch. “I made the bed for you. I’ll sleep here on the sofa.”

“Sofa’s fine for me,” Quinn argued weakly. “You don’t have to give your bed up for me.”

Haden simply gave him a “let’s not argue about this” look and pushed him toward the bedroom. Quinn had to admit the bed looked inviting and after taking a few steps toward it, he heard the door shut behind him. After fifteen minutes of lying awake, he got up again.

“Haden? Are you still awake?” he asked quietly after walking back into the lounge.

“Yes,” Haden answered equally softly.

Quinn’s eyes were used to the dark now and he saw Haden sit up on the couch.

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"Come and sleep in the bed."

"I don't want to...."

"I know," Quinn interrupted. "But it's a big bed. We can share. I promise I'll stay on my side. Like friends."

Haden hesitated, but he got up eventually.

They settled together on the bed, each on their own side.

"Thank you," Quinn said, turning to face Haden, who mimicked his posture.

"For what?"

"For taking care of me and of the residents. I didn't know what to do. It's not snowing anymore, but it's still really cold outside and we shelter a lot of children. I always think of the children."

"The children are fine," Haden assured him. He wiped a stray curl from Quinn's forehead, a gesture that felt very intimate to Quinn.

"I'm homeless too, now."

Haden smiled. "No, you're not. You can stay here anytime."

Quinn shook his head. "No, I can't. I can't live in a house like this and run a homeless shelter. I don't know how you do it. Are you an heir to some fortune or something?"

"Yes," Haden answered plainly.

"You're kidding, right?"

Haden shook his head. "When I was sixteen, I dropped out of school, and trust me, a lot of posh, expensive schools had been trying to educate me. And then my parents died, both of them within three month of each other. I became the sole heir to their fortune, which was old money, industrial-age money. So all I do now is sit on the

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board of trustees for half a dozen companies. Until seven months ago, I was an alcoholic without even a high school diploma, and all I did was live off my inheritance. You changed that, so I should thank you. This," he gestured at the room, "is the least I could do for you."

Quinn let himself drop to his back. He'd never realized how far apart his world was from Haden's. What had possessed him to fall in love with this guy?

"My mother died when I was eight," Quinn heard himself say. "When I was twelve my father abandoned me. I haven't seen him since."

Haden took Quinn's hand. "You've been on your own since you were twelve?"

"Sort of. My father left me with a group of people who lived in a squat. That was the closest thing to a house I ever had."

"Here in the city?"

Quinn nodded. "Pretty close to the shelter, actually. One of the men in that group was an accountant in a former life, and he taught me to read and write and pretty much everything I need to know for running the shelter. I got a GED when I was eighteen, and after we got evicted from the squat, we would sleep at the shelter from time to time. I'd make myself useful there, and one day they suggested I help run the place. They must have thought I did a good job, so when the manager retired, they offered the position to me."

"Regular success story."

"Don't mock me," Quinn said quietly.

"I'm not mocking you. You've done something not a lot of people can copy."

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Quinn shrugged. "I see it every day. My security guys, Karl, some of the women. There are always a few that make it, Haden."

"Karl sees your example as something worth following, I think."

Quinn turned back to face Haden. "You think so?"

Haden nodded.

"I found out something tonight, though. I think he can't read."

"Oh?"

"I gave him the resident list, to check off that everyone made it out? And when I returned from checking the back rooms, he was helping everyone with their stuff and asking them their names, but his daughter was checking off the list."

"Well, it's possible, I suppose."

"Until Danny taught me how to read, I had a hundred and one ways of hiding the fact that I couldn't."

"No wonder he's so adamant his kids go to school," Haden agreed. He pulled on Quinn's hand to make him come closer.

"Are you sure?" Quinn asked.

"Just sleeping. Maybe a little cuddle. Can't promise anything else," Haden said softly.

Quinn crawled closer, snuggling into Haden's embrace. It had been a long time since he'd slept in anyone's arms.

"It's late," Haden said, kissing Quinn's dark, curly hair. "We should get some sleep."

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QUINN woke up alone, the room still dark. He got up and found Haden sitting in the lounge, drinking a cup of coffee and reading his newspaper. He couldn't look at Haden, so he pretended to rush to the bathroom.

Once inside, he had time to think. Wouldn't it be easier to just cut his losses? Their talk the night before made it all too clear they really didn't know each other. They were miles apart. The Prince and the Pauper. Haden had a fortune in the bank, while he barely had a checking account. Quinn didn't even make enough money to rent a small, one room apartment and Haden lived in a turn-of-the-century house with live-in staff. They'd invariably stumble over the money issue somewhere along the way. But wasn't he getting ahead of himself? A quick orgasm in a communal shower barely constituted a relationship, and Haden had made it all too clear that he didn't want to have sex with him. Maybe Haden simply wanted to be friends? Maybe he should just play it by ear and enjoy the unusual luxury for a little while. Not like it was anything he would let himself get used to.

After a quick pee, Quinn walked back out.

"I'll call Wilson and ask him to make us breakfast," Haden said softly, looking up from his newspaper.

Quinn nodded.

"Your clothes are washed and should be ready in about," Haden checked his watch, "half an hour."

"Sounds good," Quinn replied. "Thank you."

* * *

QUINN didn't get the chance to get used to the luxury of Haden's house. The day after the fire, the fire chief declared the building sound

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and after a good scrub down, Quinn's room was habitable again. The rest of the shelter took some more work, but Haden, Camille, and some of the regulars helped out. After three nights of sleeping at Haden's warehouse, the shelter was almost back to full capacity, with the exception of the small back room where an illicit cigarette had caused a mattress to catch fire.

As promised, Haden brought Christmas decorations and before long the shelter felt like home again. Haden and Quinn were back to being just friends, sleeping in different beds and separate buildings in entirely different parts of town.

Quinn's dreams were still filled with Haden, though, and he kept waking up remembering how he'd slept in Haden's arms that night after the fire.

* * *

THE morning of Christmas Eve, a truck stopped in front of the shelter. All the residents had left already and Quinn was about to leave as well, since he'd arranged with Camille to go pick up some of the food for the big Christmas party that evening.

When they walked outside, Haden was standing in front of the truck.

"I think I need a hand here," Haden said smugly.

"We were just about to...."

"I think we should help him, Quinn," Camille interrupted.

The back of the truck opened and three men in uniform jumped out.

"We just need a place to hide all this until we can put it under the

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tree after everyone's asleep tonight," Haden continued.

Quinn could tell Haden had a hard time hiding his amusement. "What do you have in there?"

"Christmas presents," Haden answered, clearly pleased with himself.

Quinn shook his head and turned on his heels, leaving Haden, Camille and the three lackeys outside on the curb.

After a little hesitation, Haden followed him inside. "What's wrong?"

Quinn was still shaking his head. "It's so easy for you, right? Throw some money at it. Fork out a small fortune and give them something for Christmas. Does that make you feel good? Playing Santa Claus?" Quinn walked away from Haden toward the back room that still stood empty.

The three men walked past them, arms full of identical looking, brightly wrapped packages. They put them down in the far corner and walked out again as if they didn't notice the arguing men. A moment later Camille did pretty much the same.

Haden waited to answer until Camille had left. "Yes, it makes me feel good. This shelter and its inhabitants saved my life. I was drinking myself to death and not having a lot of fun doing it, but that week here this summer changed my perspective on life."

"News flash. Life isn't a lot of fun, generally," Quinn spat at Haden. "It's damn hard if you don't have any money. And no fancy Christmas gift is ever going to change that. Tomorrow after breakfast, they're going to have to go back out there and face the real world, which is cruel and cold and wet. And doesn't have servants making breakfast."

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Haden grabbed Quinn to make him look at him again. He also picked up one of the presents, shaking it in front of Quinn's face. "I got everyone blankets. Warm, lightweight, camping blankets in a weatherproof bag. The kids get backpacks with books and pens and writing paper. Things they can use for school. There's a few vouchers in there to pick up more free stuff for school as well. I didn't just buy this stuff foolishly, Quinn, and I don't expect a thank you. Yes, some of this stuff comes from the companies I own, and there's more surplus material where that came from, but I talked to the people who stay here at night, and this is the stuff they said they needed most. They're still just people like you and me, Quinn. They just need some basics in life. And a little kindness, just one day in the year."

Quinn didn't know what to say. He stood there, swaying on his feet, grateful for the fact that Haden's hand still had a firm grip on his elbow; otherwise, he was sure he wouldn't be able to stay upright. He loved the passion in Haden's eyes, in his voice and felt he was being so stupid, he couldn't even put it into words. He was the ass, not Haden. He was the one who'd let his personal feelings of frustration and jealousy make him lash out at the one man who was the cause of those feelings; a man who didn't deserve this.

"Now let's get everything ready for tonight. Let's give these people a dinner to remember and a good night's sleep and then they can wake up to a present for everyone. That's Christmas, Quinn. A little kindness for everyone." With that, Haden pulled Quinn into his arms and Quinn let him. They stood like that for a while, not even letting go when Camille dared to come inside with another box, slowly followed by the three men with more of the wrapped blankets. Eventually the small room became so full they had to move to allow for the last presents to be stowed away.

"I'll go get the food, Quinny," Camille said, softly putting her hand

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on Quinn's shoulder. "You stay here with Haden and hold the fort."

"Take my truck, Camille," Haden offered without letting go of Quinn. "Just tell the driver where to go, and my men will help you load it. The truck and the men are ours for the day."

"Oooh," Camille quipped teasingly. "You shouldn't have told me that." She winked as she left.

Quinn let his head rest against Haden's. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I feel like such a fool."

"Why?" Haden asked, moving his head back so he could look Quinn in the eye. "You do this work with such passion, Quinn. I should have checked it with you first, but I wanted to surprise you as well. I'm the one who should apologize."

Quinn shook his head. He was still feeling dizzy and couldn't fathom why. When Haden let go of him, he shivered violently and almost fell.

"Wow! Are you okay?" Haden asked, voice full of concern. "Come on." Haden put his arm around Quinn's shoulder again and led him to his room.

"I'm fine," Quinn protested weakly.

"It's going to be a long day and we'll need to help Camille with the food this afternoon," Haden said softly but firmly.

Quinn wasn't used to giving up control, but he let Haden tuck him into bed, under the covers no less. He was still fully clothed, and he felt a bit ridiculous, but he had to admit that Haden was good at fussing over him.

Haden crouched down next to the bed and caressed Quinn's cheek. "You went all white, Quinn. You don't have a fever. Are you sure

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you're okay?"

"I'll be okay if you crawl in here," Quinn heard himself say. He hated himself when he was this needy and had never voiced it to any lover before, but with Haden, it seemed to be all right. "Keep me warm?" he added with a hesitant smile.

Haden smiled back and snuggled under the covers with Quinn. It was a little strange to lie in bed, in the middle of the morning, both of them fully clothed.

"Let me take care of you, Quinn," Haden asked softly, pulling Quinn closer into his embrace. "I know you're the one always taking care of everyone, but you need someone to take care of you as well and I think I can do that."

His head tucked under Haden's chin, Quinn pulled Haden's sweater down so he could kiss his collar bone, then his neck and his jaw. "I want to let you, but I don't see how it can work out. We come from different worlds, Haden. You live in luxury, and I work twelve hours a day, seven days a week for a wage that doesn't even allow me to rent my own apartment."

"One day at a time, Quinn. We'll see how it works out. One step at a time, one day at a time."

Quinn had his misgivings, but he had to admit it felt good to lie here in Haden's arms, languidly kissing. He wanted to feel Haden's skin, wanted to take it further, but Haden didn't seem to want that. Despite the fact they'd never really made love—if you didn't count their rushed encounter in the showers—Quinn had to admit that taking it slow had its perks. A little voice in the back of his head told him to be wary, wondering why Haden kept holding off, but he pushed it away, enjoying for the first time in his life a lover who saw him as more than a piece of ass.

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Quinn didn't know how long they'd stayed there together, warm and cozy under the thick winter blankets. He might even have dozed off for a minute, but woke with a start when he heard Camille's voice outside his door directing where the food needed to go.

"We better go help her," Haden said, caressing Quinn's hair.

"She'll think we made love while she was gone," Quinn replied as he raised himself up. He turned to sit on the side of the bed.

"Let's keep it between us?" Haden asked.

Quinn nodded. Camille had eyes on the back of her head and since the door to Quinn's room was right opposite the kitchen, she would no doubt see them emerge together. There was no doubt in Quinn's mind that Camille would tease them about it no matter what they divulged to her. Quinn almost welcomed it. He just hoped Haden could take it.

To Quinn's surprise, Camille simply sported her knowing smile. She waited until Haden was in the dining room, folding their green and red paper napkins, before she came up to Quinn in the kitchen.

"And was it everything you hoped for?"

Quinn tried not to smile too widely. He had promised Haden he wouldn't say too much, but Camille was his closest friend and he trusted her beyond reproach. "Not much happened, Cammie. We didn't even need to get dressed again."

Her face turned sad. "It didn't work out?"

Quinn smiled wider to reassure her. "We're working things out. Taking it slow."

"Slow is good, right?"

He nodded.

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"At least if he has all the right bits."

Quinn raised a questioning eyebrow. "You're a perv, Camille."

She raised her hands and shoulders and rolled her eyes, giggling. "Don't you just want to nail him to the bed and fuck him into the mattress?"

"Camille!" Quinn called out, giving her a look of mock indignation. He couldn't help laughing along with her, though.

"Well, I would," she said, her arm around Quinn's shoulders. "That tight frame of his, those fine shoulders and narrow hips. That tight little ass...."

"Those gorgeous dragon tattoos," Quinn added.

"He's got dragons on his skin?" Her eyes were wide. "Oooh, he's hiding treasure. If you see a chance to persuade him to show them to me, I'd be eternally grateful."

Quinn smiled enigmatically. He looked at Haden over the kitchen counter and felt butterflies in his stomach. Would it be enough for them? Could they overcome their vast differences to meet in the middle and make their relationship work?

One day at a time.

The voice inside his head was both Haden's and his old sponsor's. Tonight was Christmas Eve and Quinn resolved to enjoy tonight, whatever it would bring.

By the time they let their residents in that night, the lights of the Christmas tree were lit and the long dinner tables were decorated with paper tablecloths depicting Christmas scenery. Christmas dinner was a bit more elaborate than previous years as well, thanks to combined gifts from the Salvation Army and Haden's corporations.

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Quinn was happy seeing all the content looks on the faces of his people and he was sure they went to bed with more than just full stomachs. He'd also enjoyed Haden seeking him out rather more than he usually did, stealing touches along the way. Of course Camille had spotted every one of them and was winking at him every time their eyes met.

* * *

AFTER most of the residents had gone to bed and all the tables were cleared, Camille said her goodbyes and left Haden and Quinn in front of the Christmas tree.

"I noticed you didn't sample the wine?" Quinn said quietly after Haden had come up behind him and put his arms around his waist.

"Nope. I prefer staying on the wagon. Besides, I want to remember tonight."

Quinn let his head fall back. "You will."

"This is the best Christmas I ever had."

"It's not over yet." Quinn chuckled nervously. He wanted to turn around and kiss Haden, but he wasn't entirely sure that Haden was ready and the last thing Quinn wanted was to break the spell.

"We need to get up early tomorrow. Put the presents out. Or we could put them under the tree now?"

"No, we can't. Too many people wander around here at night. We can't sleep in anyway." Quinn paused for a moment, gathering the courage he needed to go on. "You *are* staying here tonight?"

"I think we've proven that we can share a bed."

Quinn tried hard not to be disappointed. "I was hoping for a little

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more than brotherly sharing.”

“Me too.”

Quinn could hear the fear in Haden’s barely audible words. He couldn’t hold back and turned around this time. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve never....” Haden sighed and closed his eyes. He was waving his hand to fill in the words he couldn’t speak out loud. “sober. Without having a drink, or two, or ten to ease the way.”

“But you want to now?”

Haden nodded determinedly, but without looking at Quinn. “I’m both very eager and immensely terrified.”

“Why?” Quinn asked and then realized it didn’t really matter. Whatever the cause, they were going to have to work through it together. “Would it help if I told you that I really want this too, but I won’t think any less of you if we don’t make it all the way to home plate by tomorrow morning?”

Haden smiled the way Quinn adored, as if he was mulling things over, but was happy about his thoughts.

“I have condoms and lube in my room just in case we do, though,” Quinn added. He leaned in to let his lips brush over Haden’s. Haden kissed him back, chastely at first, with the smallest stroke of tongue after a little while. “Now, will you take me to a room with a bit more privacy?”

Haden nodded and took Quinn’s hand to lead him to the room they were going to share. Once inside, Quinn set his alarm clock half an hour earlier than usual and walked to the small window to close the drapes.

“It’s snowing again.”

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"Which reminds me," Haden replied. "How's your policy on opening Christmas presents on Christmas Eve?"

"I don't care. Why?"

"Because I have a present for you as well."

Quinn took a sharp breath in as Haden turned around and fished a large package wrapped in plain brown wrapping paper from under Quinn's bed.

"Paper isn't very festive, but it was a bit of a last minute thing." Haden watched Quinn unwrap his present and shake out the neatly folded winter coat.

"I had it cleaned. It belonged to my father. He didn't like all the fancy trimmings, so it's a bit plain but it's very warm. I know you wouldn't be comfortable if I bought you a new one, but I thought you needed something warmer than your old coat so—"

Quinn cut off Haden's rambling with a kiss. Then he moved back to put on the dark woolen coat and immediately felt how much warmer this was going to be compared to his threadbare one. He smiled when he spotted Haden's slightly apprehensive look. "It's perfect, Haden. Thank you." After taking the coat off he carefully folded it and placed it on the chair. "I just wish I had something to give you too."

Haden smiled nervously as he stepped a little closer. "You've given me more than I could ever repay."

This time when Haden put his hands on Quinn's waist, he buried them underneath Quinn's sweater and Quinn shivered at the intimate contact. He pulled Haden closer to mask the sensation. "You're going to have to keep me warm now I'm out of that coat."

"It's already nice and toasty in this room," Haden teased.

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They kissed languidly, slowly letting the heat rise between them. Haden's hands on him made Quinn's skin tingle and he dragged himself away from Haden just long enough to pull his sweater and the T-shirt underneath over his head in one quick movement. "Want to see you too," Quinn murmured against Haden's mouth as soon as he'd lined up his body with Haden's again. Haden obliged, then quickly kissed Quinn's neck as if Quinn's eyes burned on his skin.

"Let's get under the covers," Haden suggested.

Quinn felt like he was losing his virginity all over again, Haden's words transporting him back to his first time with a boy his age. They were both underage, sharing a sleeping bag in one of the squats they lived in with the sole purpose of popping each other's cherry. It was over in minutes. Quinn hoped they'd last a little longer this time. He had a real man under his hands now, albeit one with a few issues regarding intimacy that Quinn hoped they'd be able to overcome.

"Let me see those dragons up close," Quinn demanded, turning on his bedside lamp to light up the room. Haden acted shy, but let Quinn admire his body art anyway. "They're gorgeous. Are you planning to get more?"

Haden shook his head. "These are a few years old. I really wanted them then."

"And you don't anymore?"

Haden shrugged.

Quinn kissed Haden's tattooed shoulder where a serpent's tail was wrapped around an anchor. "They're beautiful. You're beautiful."

Haden shook his head.

"Don't do that."

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"Don't do what?" Haden asked, looking puzzled.

"Put yourself down and deny my feelings toward you. You're beautiful to me. It's not an objective thing, beauty. It's something you see with your eyes, but also something to see with your heart." He put his hand over Haden's heart. "I didn't want to fall for you, especially not after I found out just how rich you were, but I did. Despite everything."

"You have no idea how rich I am," Haden added softly.

"No, and I don't want to know either. I like *you*. Sober, humble, caring and giving. That's all that matters. Now will you please make love to me because we're in bed together for the second time today and I've been so turned on since this morning, I have no idea how we pulled tonight off without a hitch."

Haden chuckled. "I've been turned on by you since this summer." He lined up his body with Quinn's, pushing his entire length against the younger man's frame.

Quinn could feel Haden's erection even through their winter trousers. "Are you ready to shed some more clothes?"

Haden nodded, reluctantly letting go of Quinn to unzip his pants. Quinn stopped him half way by swatting away his hand. "Let me do it. Please?" It resembled the fumbling of early youth, both of them a little insecure, hesitant, but without the urgency. Quinn pulled the zipper on Haden's fancy woolen pants down lower and let his hands trace along the belt so he could push them down to cup Haden's ass and pull him closer. After a fair bit of kneading, he pushed Haden's boxers down along with them and helped to slide them down Haden's long legs.

"Your turn," Haden said with a smile on his face. Haden's shyness

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disappeared as he teasingly took his time unbuttoning Quinn's jeans, cupping the growing bulge underneath as he kissed Quinn's mouth. After the last button was opened, Haden stuck his hand inside and made Quinn moan by taking Quinn's engorged cock in his hand. Quinn wanted to get rid of the rest of his clothes, but Haden wouldn't let him. Instead, Haden started kissing his way down Quinn's torso, only to stop at his belly button.

"Ah, here is where you're hiding your tattoos."

Quinn laughed. "One of them at least."

Haden licked the shining sun that looked more like a child's drawing than an artist's work, encircling Quinn's belly button and making him laugh even more. Quinn's laughter changed into another moan when Haden fished Quinn's erection out of his jeans and sucked it into his mouth. Soon Quinn was rolling his hips trying to direct Haden's movements and at the same time, trying to get out of his clothes. He didn't succeed and was almost glad when Haden stopped his ministrations to lie next to him again.

"Fuck, that felt so good," Quinn said, by now panting.

Haden looked at him, his hand caressing Quinn's nearly hairless chest.

"Will you fuck me?"

"No," Haden said firmly.

"Oh," Quinn replied, unable to hide his disappointment.

Haden covered Quinn's body with his and kissed him passionately. "But I'll make love to you."

Quinn smiled into the kiss. "Now can I get out of my jeans?"

Haden nodded and Quinn turned around, pushing the tight pants

down to expose his ass.

“Stop,” Haden said. There was urgency in his voice and Quinn stopped mid-movement, on his knees and elbows, while Haden moved around him. He gripped Quinn’s hips, spreading Quinn’s ass cheeks with his thumbs and diving in, his tongue circling Quinn’s hole.

“Fucking hell!” Quinn cried out. “Give a guy some... *warning*.” The last word came out more as a moan than an actual word, but the sentiment was clear. Haden had let his tongue run over the sensitive muscle of his entrance and Quinn was seeing stars. On the one hand, the jeans around his thighs were impeding his movements, but on the other hand Quinn was glad of the extra stability it gave him. He didn’t resist when Haden pulled them down even more, though. Their uncoordinated movements were a little awkward, but Quinn didn’t care. His skin was on fire, because Haden’s hands and fingers and tongue seemed to be everywhere at once. His knees were slipping and he pulled them up, first one, then the other. When he felt Haden’s tongue rim him again, his knees slipped apart and Quinn realized he was totally naked and utterly exposed. He managed to push his hand between his legs and wasn’t surprised to feel he was rock hard, his cock clinging to his belly.

“Fuck, want you inside me,” Quinn moaned. He pushed his cock back between his legs, presenting it to Haden, but when Haden didn’t take the bait Quinn let it spring back. “Need more, please,” he begged.

Haden let his hand caress the length of Quinn’s back, coming up along side of him. “You’re a demanding fella, but I like it,” he whispered in Quinn’s ear.

Quinn looked at Haden and saw him smile lovingly. He was at a loss for words, feeling he’d done enough begging for one evening already. Haden’s fingers were between his ass cheeks, teasingly

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rubbing his entrance and he pushed back against them, hoping Haden would stop teasing him. They kissed again, more for the intimate contact than out of passion, their breathing strained. When Haden moved away, Quinn reached out for him.

"Tease," Quinn spat out, sounding harsher than he'd intended. When his hand grabbed only thin air, he let his head fall into his hands, hiding the sheer desperation in his face. When he opened his eyes, he saw Haden's head appear between his legs and he spread them farther until Haden could take him in his mouth. His movements beyond his own control, Quinn slowly thrust into Haden's mouth, giving into the heated sensation. He was getting close to coming and was about to ask Haden to stop when he felt a finger breach him. Quinn couldn't look at what Haden was doing to him anymore. The feeling of Haden opening him up while he was fucking Haden's mouth was enough to make his balls pull up and before he could give his lover any warning he felt his orgasm hit him like a speeding train.

Feeling infinitely guilty for ruining their first time, Quinn rolled over, away from Haden.

"Hey," Haden said tenderly. "You okay?" He placed his hand on Quinn's biceps and squeezed gently.

Quinn didn't want to turn around and face Haden, but the tenderness and caring in Haden's voice left him with no choice, so he rolled to his back.

"I'm sorry," he said, not making eye contact with Haden.

Haden moved his hand to caress Quinn's chest, letting his fingers dip on the far side of Quinn's ribcage as he moved closer. "There's nothing to apologize for. I'm flattered actually. It was pretty amazing to feel you come apart."

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Quinn shrugged. "I could have given you warning. I came like a teenager who's never had an orgasm before."

Haden laughed and then gave Quinn a compassionate look, which Quinn only registered because he looked at Haden from the corner of his eye. "We're not done yet. At least I hope we're not."

Quinn smiled hesitantly before Haden leaned over him and kissed him gently.

"I'll give you a little time to recuperate first and then.... Well, if I'd known sober sex would be this great, I would have done it years ago."

Quinn chuckled. He didn't know what to say, so he coaxed Haden to kiss him again. Haden was grinding against Quinn's hip and Quinn inserted his hand between their bodies to touch Haden's erection. As soon as he enveloped it with his hand, he remembered the feeling of the heavy cock in his hand from their rushed encounter in the shower.

Haden pulled away from him, clearly affected by Quinn's ministrations. His breathing was growing heavy and the cock in Quinn's hand even heavier, making Quinn suddenly glad he'd already had an orgasm and was pleasantly relaxed. He wanted to return the favor Haden had bestowed on him first, though, so he pushed Haden to his back and moved so he could lick the oversized column.

"No," Haden said not too forcibly. "If you do that, I'll come too, and then it will really be over."

Quinn smiled. "We can't have that, now, can we?" He reached over to the nightstand to grab a condom. When he started rolling it on, Haden hissed.

"Even this is a bit much. Fuck, Quinn," Haden cursed.

A teasing smile on his face, Quinn got up to look for the lube. Haden almost beat him to it, reaching for the bottle as Quinn sat on all

fours.

"Stay like this," Haden suggested, uncapping the bottle of lube and squirting a bit on his fingers so he could warm it. He coated his condom and then wiped his fingers on Quinn's entrance, making Quinn moan.

Quinn was surprised how sensitive he still was. He blamed the lust he saw in Haden's eyes and the fact that Haden's naked body so close to him turned him on to no end. It also helped that it was finally going to happen. They were finally going to go all the way. He rolled his hips, pushing back against Haden's fingers until the pressure went away and it was replaced by something colder and wetter.

With a small grunt, Haden pushed inside him and Quinn moaned in response. Despite the feeling of relaxation, it still burned. Luckily Haden had some semblance of self-control and he didn't push in farther until Quinn reached back to tell him it was okay. Rocking back and forth, Quinn felt Haden slip deeper into him until Haden was buried to the hilt. It felt good to be filled like that, but Quinn didn't think he'd ever had a cock that size inside him. It took some adjusting.

To Quinn's despair, Haden noticed. "Relax," he soothed. Haden moved back and forth with short, slow movements until Quinn's breathing eased and his knees started sliding apart again. This made the angle of Haden's movements change and Quinn couldn't help whimpering.

"Am I hurting you?" Haden asked, full of concern.

"Fuck, no," Quinn answered. "You're going to make me come again if you keep doing it like that." Quinn was almost on his stomach, legs spread as wide as they'd go, engorged cock rubbing over the bed sheet with every tiny movement Haden made. It wasn't Quinn's favorite position, but right now it felt so good, he didn't want to move.

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"Let's take it a bit easier then," Haden suggested. He pushed Quinn to roll to his side until they were spooning, never ceasing the small slow movements. In this position, he wrapped an arm around Quinn's torso and Quinn stretched his neck back so he could kiss Haden. Without really trying, Quinn ended up on his back, the leg nearest to Haden pulled up so Haden could continue moving in and out of him. Haden caressed Quinn's chest, brushing carelessly over Quinn's nipples and ribs, then back to his nipples and neck. Quinn's skin started tingling again and their kisses became more heated, more passionate. From time to time, Haden gave Quinn's cock a little tug, just enough to keep it rigid, and this kept Quinn right at the edge.

"Want to feel your weight on me," Quinn asked, his voice strained.

"Missionary?" Haden asked.

"Yes, my master," Quinn joked, surprised at his own presence of mind.

Somehow, they managed to get Quinn's leg to the other side without Haden slipping out of him and when Haden thrust in from above—still gentle and caring, but now a bit more urgent—Quinn's moan seemed to come from deep inside his belly.

Their lovemaking so far had been gentle and slow, but now Haden clearly wanted to move things along. He pulled out almost to the point where Quinn wanted to protest and then plunged in deep, eliciting an appreciative groan from Quinn. They were kissing whenever their breathing allowed it and in between Haden hovered over Quinn, suspended by his outstretched arm, his other hand fisting Quinn's cock between their bellies.

"Closer," Quinn demanded. "Want to feel your weight."

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"But...", Haden protested.

Quinn pulled Haden's head closer to exchange a searing kiss. When Haden finally gave in to bear his full weight on Quinn's slighter frame, Quinn grabbed Haden's ass cheeks with both hands, dictating his rhythm.

"You're so tight, feels so good," Haden murmured.

"Don't stop," Quinn replied, trying to make Haden speed up. "Gonna make me... come again."

Haden's movements were becoming erratic, but Quinn could tell he was trying to last as long as possible. Despite the fact this was Quinn's second orgasm in a short period, somehow he knew Haden was trying to make sure he came first.

It didn't take much more than that thought and Haden's urgent thrusting to send Quinn over, the friction of his cock trapped between their bodies providing enough physical stimulation. Feeling the spasms ripple through his body while Haden continued pistoning in and out made it one of his most memorable orgasms to date. When Haden finally cried out, filling his condom with his release and collapsing on top of his lover, Quinn knew he'd reached heaven.

Quinn held Haden close, cradling his head on his shoulder. Haden's eyes were closed, his breathing slowly relaxing. They were still joined and Quinn was afraid to move. All he could do was gaze at the blissful face of his lover, illuminated by the reflection of the moonlight on the snow outside. This felt so right, he was overwhelmed by emotions.

Finally Haden stirred. His eyes remained closed, but he snuck his hand between their bodies to hold on to the condom as his softening cock slipped out of Quinn.

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"Mmm, I miss you already," Quinn murmured.

Haden smiled and finally opened his eyes. Quinn thought Haden's eyes looked as blue as he'd ever seen them. When Haden tried to get up, Quinn stopped him.

"I'll go."

Returning with a damp cloth, Quinn cleaned himself off and then gently wiped it over Haden's belly. He held up the waste paper basket to let Haden drop the condom he was holding.

Seeing Haden hold the blankets open so he could crawl in again, made Quinn love Haden even more than before, if that was possible.

They snuggled close together, Haden on his back, Quinn resting his head on his hand, one knee draped over Haden.

"I really like those tattoos, you know," Quinn admitted while he was drawing over the dark lines with his finger.

Haden shrugged. "They've been a part of me for so long, I don't even notice them anymore."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "Well, they're new to me."

"Please tell me this won't be our last time together?" Haden asked barely audibly, his gaze directed at the dark ceiling.

Quinn put his head on Haden's shoulder. "Why do you think that?"

"You feel we're too different."

"Money's always going to be a point of discord between us," Quinn said with a deep sigh of regret.

"Even if I promise I won't let it?" Haden tried.

"You don't even think about it, do you? You've always had

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money. You come from money, so you have no idea what it's like to live without it."

"So teach me?"

Quinn felt this was going nowhere, so he didn't reply. This wasn't the sort of thing you could teach anyone. On the other hand, Haden was telling him that he wanted them to stay together and right now, it was all Quinn wanted too.

"We'll take it one day at a time, okay?" Quinn eventually said. When this didn't clear up the deep thought lines in Haden's forehead, he added, "I don't want tonight to be our only night. I want more nights like this."

Finally, a shy smile spread across Haden's face. "I don't mind sleeping here, as long as I'm with you. I don't need the mansion and staff, you know."

"I know," Quinn answered, not really sure where this was going, but happy they were talking about it.

"I can help out here every night and maybe you can take one night a week off. Come back to my place and sleep without constantly worrying about your residents?"

"I might worry about them even more when I'm not here," Quinn replied.

"Not if you have someone here to keep an eye on things for you. How about asking Karl? You know he's responsible enough and I'm sure he'll welcome the money."

Quinn nodded.

"You deserve one night off, Quinn."

Quinn knew Haden was right. "It's not just being away from here

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that makes me feel guilty. It's being away from here to bathe in the luxury of your house with Wilson making us breakfast and washing my clothes."

"I can give Wilson the night off when you come over," Haden offered.

Quinn smiled, but he wasn't entirely convinced.

"I want to make this work, Quinn. God knows, it's taken me long enough to get here, but I've never felt for anyone what I feel for you. You've been so patient with me, never pushed me, always gave me plenty of space to get here in my own good time."

"Thought you'd never make it," Quinn said quietly.

"I didn't think I would either, but now that I'm here, I don't want to give you up."

Quinn smiled, knowing he felt the same way. "We could give it a try; letting Karl take care of the shelter for one night a week. Maybe at first let him do it while we sleep here anyway, so if anything goes wrong, he can still call us."

"There is such a thing as a phone, you know."

Quinn nodded.

"Mother hen," Haden added teasingly.

Quinn poked him, knowing full well Haden was right.

Haden didn't say anything, just pulled Quinn closer to him, caressing his hair until they both became sleepy.

"What time is it?" Haden asked eventually, yawning.

Quinn reached for the small alarm clock on the nightstand. "Damn."

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Haden gave him a questioning look.

"We only have about thirty minutes before we need to get up again."

Haden groaned. "We haven't even slept!"

Quinn giggled. "No, we had better things to do with our time."

By the time the alarm went off, they were both sound asleep. They needed to get up though. They had presents to give out and sleep would have to wait.

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THEY were still putting the packages under the tree when Camille came in. She looked at Haden, then at Quinn and Quinn braced himself for a brutally honest comment from her, but to his surprise she simply smiled and walked into the kitchen. Leaving Haden to get the last boxes out, he followed her.

"Need some help?"

"Nope, I'm fine. Did most of the work yesterday evening," she replied, waltzing around the kitchen with her usual flair as she put on her apron and took food out of the large refrigerators.

Quinn hung around, not really knowing what to do when she didn't react the way he expected.

Eventually she gave in. "So how was your night?"

"Fine," Quinn answered, unable to hide a wide smile.

"Doesn't look like 'fine' to me," she answered, leaving a long pause. "You look like you haven't slept at all."

"That's because I haven't. Not really."

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She pinched his cheek when she passed him, but didn't say anything. Quinn was dying to tell her, tell someone, but on the other hand he didn't know exactly *what* he should tell her. It wasn't like he could just blurt out that he and Haden had made love for the first time.

"Haden looks happy," she said as she returned to where Quinn was standing. "And the presents under the tree? Very impressive. They'll love it when they wake up."

Keeping his lips pursed, Quinn nodded.

She moved a little closer and whispered: "And you're positively shining. I almost didn't have to turn on the lights when I came in."

Quinn nodded again, still feeling incredibly self-conscious.

"You're not going to tell me about it, are you?"

Quinn didn't get to answer, because she put her arms around him and squeezed him so tight he ended up between her ample bosoms. She then held him at arm's length to give him the once over.

"You don't need to tell me the details, honey. I hope you liked his present, though?"

Quinn realized she looked like an overjoyed mother. "He got me a new coat. Well, a semi-new one. But it's nice and toasty." At least the fact that Camille knew about the present explained how Haden managed to sneak it into his room.

"About time we turned your old one into rags. So how do you feel?"

Quinn swallowed away his emotions. "I think he loves me."

"You think?" She snorted. "Honey. I know. Have you talked at all?"

Chuckling, Quinn nodded again. It seemed all he was really

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capable of. "We talked," he admitted. "He has lots of plans, apparently."

"And you?"

"I can see myself in those plans."

Now it was Camille's turn to beam. "Meaning you see a future for the two of you?"

"We'll take it one day at a time."

At that moment, Haden walked in and Quinn saw his stunned expression as Camille pulled him into one of her tight hugs as well. After releasing him, she put one hand on Haden's arm and another on Quinn's and looked at both of them in turn. She didn't speak, just squeezed them and then walked out toward the dining room.

"Was that Camille at a loss for words?" Haden asked.

"I think it was," Quinn agreed. "She said I was beaming."

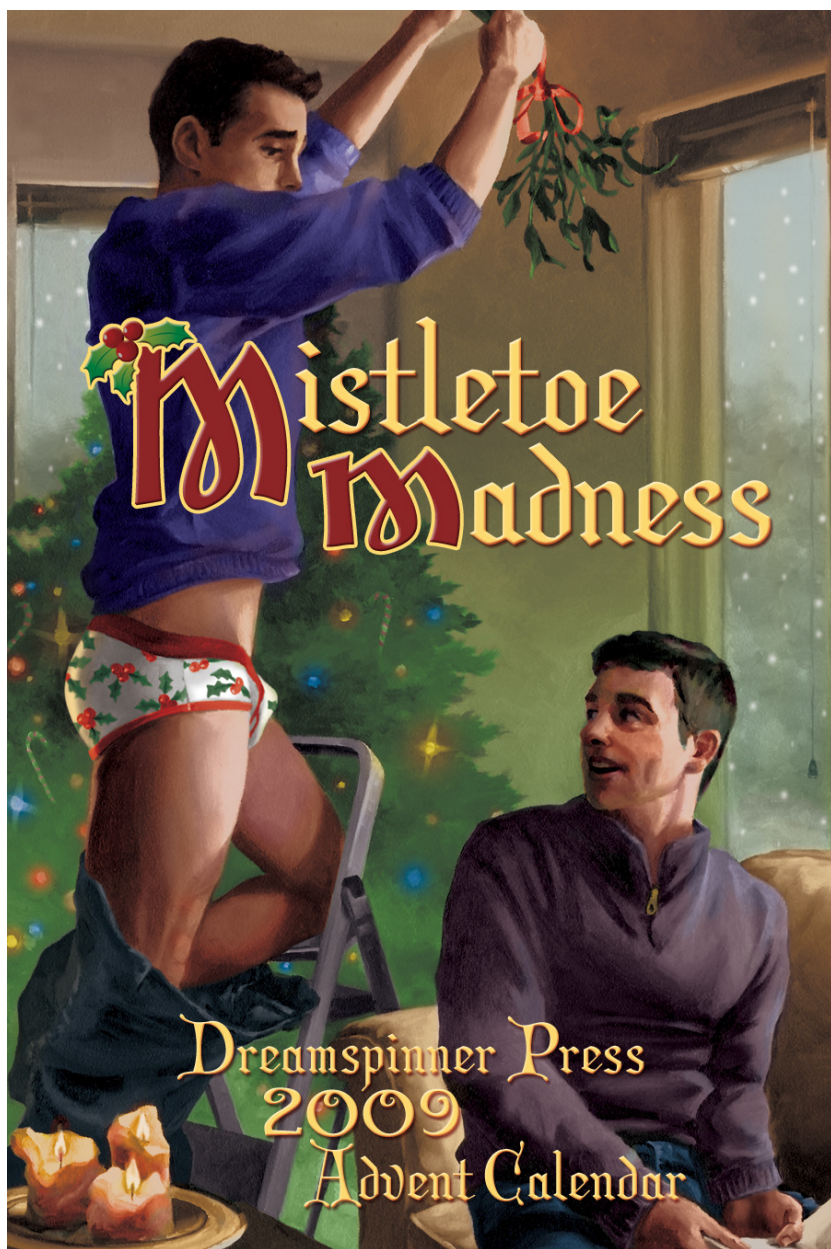
Haden pulled him closer and gave him a lingering kiss. "You are."

The noise outside the kitchen started to pick up as more residents woke up and they heard excited sounds coming from the children.

"Time to play Santa Claus, you think?"

Quinn kissed Haden back. One day at a time, and Christmas wasn't over yet.

Got Mistletoe Madness?



The Dreamspinner Press 2009 Advent Calendar is available at
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>.

ZAHRA OWENS was born in Europe just before Woodstock and the moon landing and was given a much less pronounceable name by her non-English-speaking parents. Being an Aquarian meant she would never quite conform, and people learned to expect the unexpected.

She started writing fairy tales in first grade; the same year she came into contact with her first group of English-speaking friends, a group which would eventually grow to include people from all over the world. On the outside she was a typical only child, accustomed to being with adults most of the time. On the inside, she sought ways to channel her wild imagination.

During the daytime she earns a living as a computer specialist, but it's her former career as an intensive care nurse that tends to seep into her fiction. Maybe this has to do with her weak spot for flawed characters and imperfect bodies, or maybe it's just her sadistic streak coming through. You be the judge.

Visit her web site at <http://www.zahraowens.com/> and blog at <http://zahra-owens.livejournal.com/>.

A black and white advertisement featuring a romantic silhouette of two men about to kiss. In the top left corner, there is a diamond-shaped logo containing a spiral. The text 'dreamspinner Press' is written in a cursive font next to the logo. At the bottom, the text 'For more of the best M/M romance, visit Dreamspinner Press' is displayed, followed by the website address 'www.dreamspinnerpress.com'.

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