



Christmas Spirits

THE GIFT

KIM DARE



The Gift
by Kim Dare

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The Gift

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-melting*.

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Christmas Spirits:

Ghost of Christmas Past

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Dedication

To everyone who celebrates Christmas as a gift they can give
their loved ones, and not a time to get what they want for
themselves.

And to my parents, who taught me that's what Christmas is
all about.

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Chapter One

Flickering firelight lent an enchanting glow to Nicky's naked body. Charles Wilson stroked his lover's hair, pushing the thick blond strands back out of his eyes. Nicky swirled his tongue around the tip of Charles's cock, taking a little more of the hard shaft into his mouth each time he bobbed his head a fraction lower.

A touch to Nicky's cheek immediately brought his gaze up. Charles studied the sleepy pleasure in his pet's eyes. He always liked to see him happy, especially now—when it somehow seemed to be a rarer sight than it had been in previous years.

He smiled down at his pet. "That's right, Nicky ... exactly like that. Perfect." The words were hoarse with arousal, forced through a throat that barely relaxed enough to let him breathe let alone speak properly, but his pet thrived on praise and Charles wouldn't deny him what he craved so much.

The fire crackled in the hearth. A shower of sparks raced up the chimney. Warmth glowed over Nicky's body. Only the black leather collar around his neck hid a small strip of skin from his master's appreciation.

Charles shifted his posture, sinking more comfortably into the high backed chair by the fireplace. Nicky began to work him in earnest, dipping his head low in his master's lap and taking the topmost part of his shaft into his throat.

With a hand settled snugly on the back of his head, Charles let his pet do what he wished. In the five years they'd

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been together, he'd learnt exactly what would please his master best. He needed no further instruction on the matter.

Moments later, Charles's grip on his pet's hair tightened a fraction. Nicky looked up and held his gaze as his master spilled into his mouth. He swallowed him down with every sign of enjoyment of the salty taste, murmuring around his shaft until he was finished. Only then let did Nicky let his master's cock slip delicately from between his lips.

Tidying Charles away and doing up his fly, Nicky didn't rush away from his place at his feet. He rested his head in his master's lap. Charles went back to stroking his hair, winding his fingers through the long strands.

The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed half past ten. "You'd best go up now if you want to finish off your traditions," Charles said.

Nicky looked up at him and hesitated. While he seemed reluctant to leave his master's side, Charles was under no illusions. His pet would go—he never failed to carry out every one of his Christmas traditions right down to the final detail. There was no reason why that should change this year.

Eventually, the younger man nodded and stood up. He really was incredibly beautiful, all lean muscle and fair skin. Charles let his eyes travel over his body. He never got tired of looking at his pet.

"It won't take long," Nicky said softly, as if he needed to apologise—as if his master wasn't used to all of his traditions by now.

Charles merely nodded.

Nicky glanced at the fireplace. "Shall I?"

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Charles shook his head. "I'll see to it."

"Yes, master." His pet nodded his understanding, but Charles wasn't taken in by the submission in his response.

Nicky would far rather complete the task himself. In spite of viewing a great deal of evidence to the contrary over the last few years, he was still quietly convinced his master was incapable of completing any task he saw as a submissive's responsibility. Nevertheless, he left the room without actually voicing a protest to Charles damping down the fire himself.

As the door closed behind Nicky, Charles dropped his head back against the high chair back and stared up at the brightly coloured decorations festooning the ceiling. His pet had outdone himself this year. Everything that didn't run away fast enough was wrapped in tinsel and sparkles.

He closed his eyes against the garish display of Christmas cheer.

Although he'd never been present for his pet's final Christmas Eve tradition—the packing of the last present right before he went to bed—Charles could well imagine him kneeling on the floor in their bedroom, biting his bottom lip, concentrating on getting the brightly coloured paper just right. It was a far better sight to rest his eyes upon than yard upon yard of garlands criss-crossing the ceiling.

"Charles Wilson."

Charles didn't recognise the voice, but he knew it wasn't Nicky. It was all he needed to know. No one else had a place in their house on Christmas Eve. Charles snapped his eyes open. He sat up straight in his chair, all sign of sleepy contentment vanishing.

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A tall, well built young man stood in front of the fire. A short, white toga barely scraped the top of his thighs. The material fluttered as the heat from the fire swirled the air currents. Charles glanced across to the door. It was still closed. He should have heard anyone come in.

The man looked around the room.

Charles launched himself to his feet. "Who the hell are you?"

"You are Charles Wilson?" the stranger asked again. His voice betrayed sudden uncertainty.

Charles automatically weighed himself up against the potential threat. The man was shorter than him and more lightly muscled. If he wasn't armed, Charles was confident he'd end up on top.

The same fact seemed to register with the man facing him across the hearth rug. He looked nervous now—or the sudden sight of Nicky's excessive Christmas cheer had thrown him off balance. Charles felt anyone walking unexpectedly into the Santa's grotto of their living room was entitled to lose their bearings for a few moments.

"Who are you, and what you are doing in my house?" Charles demanded. He strained his hearing. Was there anyone else in the house? If there was, were they aware of Nicky's presence upstairs?

The man looked around him again. "I am the Spirit of Christmas Past," he said slowly, taking in each bit of holly and mistletoe adorning the fireplace.

The tension drained out of Charles. He sat on the arm of the chair and looked the "spirit" over from a different

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perspective. He was quite cute, with light brown curls trailing over his ears and his ridiculous toga barely covering a fantastic physique.

One thing Charles would say about Nicky and his Christmas obsession, it did make for a very interesting December sex life. However, on this occasion, the spirit of Christmas Past, or whatever the hell his real name was, was a gift too far.

Charles gave the man one last glance and pushed the idea aside. Nicky could pretend all he liked, but Charles knew when his pet was trying to kid them both. Nicky had never been as interested in threesomes as his master.

"I'm sorry we've wasted your time," Charles began.

The man cleared his throat. "I am the Spirit of Christmas Past, sent by the fates to show you the true meaning of Christmas."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "You're a very pretty Christmas present, and I'm sure Nicky meant it for the best, but I'm really not interested in adding a third to the party tonight."

The spirit faltered in his obviously well-rehearsed speech. "Pardon?"

Charles stood up and walked across to the door leading off into the hallway. Surely Nicky should have made an appearance by now?

The man stepped into his way. "Where are you going?"

Charles looked him up and down. So Nicky hadn't brought a second submissive to the party. Neutral, Charles decided, neither truly dominant nor submissive. To be fair to his pet, it probably was the wisest choice for them both if they did ever

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go down the threesome route—even if it meant the guy thought he could demand answers to questions he had no right to ask.

Charles forced himself to be polite. The guy wasn't going to get laid, no point making the rejection any more unpleasant than it had to be. "I'm going to explain to Nicky we're not having a threesome with you."

"Nicky?"

"You can drop the act, *spirit*." Charles was well aware gentle politeness was not one of his strengths with anyone but his pet.

The man playing the role of the spirit stared at him as if he was the one acting like an idiot. "You can't go," he objected.

Charles looked him up and down. "I wouldn't guess Nicky would be so sloppy in a briefing. Even if you aren't a submissive, I assume he mentioned I won't be ordered around."

The guy looked him up and down. He sighed. "You're going to be one of those, aren't you?"

"One of what?"

The man grabbed Charles's arm.

Charles tried to shake him off. The room flickered around them. Charles put his hand out to steady himself on the back of the chair. His fingers grasped at empty air. The floor shifted under him. He stumbled, only staying upright with the aid of the spirit's firm grip on his arm.

The moment the floor steadied underneath him, Charles snatched his arm away. "What the hell is going on?"

"We have travelled back in time to—"

"Where's Nicky?"

The man ... the man who actually seemed to be more of a spirit than Charles would have believed possible while he remained snugly settled in his home, seemed to lose his thread.

"He was upstairs," Charles said. He looked at the ceiling—the plain white expanse contained none of Nicky's Christmas colour. He looked across to where the hallway door should be. The space was taken up by the service side of a large old fashioned bar. Brass and mahogany gleamed in the light of dozens of candles. Past the bar he could see men drinking.

The spirit hesitated. "We have travelled back in time to another Christmas—"

"I've never been here before—at Christmas or any other time of year. I don't know what you are playing at, but you can take me right back to—"

"This is not your Christmas past," the spirit cut in.

"What?"

"You are in the Christmas past of Nicholas Lewis. This is the year 2003—the Christmas you first met him."

"Nicky's here?" Charles looked around the room. He could remember that particular Christmas very well. He might not have visited the service area behind the bar before, but one more glance into the seating area opposite them and Charles realised they were exactly where the spirit said they were—in the club where he first met Nicky. As most of his mind fought to make sense of what was happening, instinct took over. If he couldn't find the Nicky from his timeline then he would seek out the one that was here. "Where is he?"

The door at the far end of the bar swung open. Nicky walked through it backwards, balancing two trays of empty glasses.

"Nicky!"

Nicky didn't answer his master's summons. Charles strode across the room. He put his hand on Nicky's shoulder. It went straight through. His hand tingled. Charles jerked his hand back, staring horrified at the phantom version of his lover.

"Where's the real Nicky?" he demanded as the spirit reached his side, the one he'd found obviously wasn't an effective substitute.

"Everyone is back in your real time, just as you left them. They are fine."

Charles stared at this new insubstantial Nicky. "What am I doing here?"

"Learning the real meaning of Christmas." The spirit's voice dropped until the next words were barely muttered under his breath. "At least that's what you would learn if you shut up and let me get a word in edgeways."

Charles raised an eyebrow at the spirit. "Is there something you wish to say?"

The spirit's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. He returned to his script, but there was no force behind the order. "Watch. Listen. See another man's Christmas."

"Are you just going to stare at him all night?"

Nicky tore his gaze away from the sight of Charles Wilson sitting on the far side of the room. He looked over his shoulder. Gavin Thomas walked around him to lean on the bar.

"Probably," Nicky said, placing a few more glasses on the tray. "I'm getting really good at staring at him."

"You could go and introduce yourself," Gavin suggested.

"Submissives don't do that," Nicky replied. "If he wants to talk to me, he'll talk to me." He straightened the glasses so they formed nice neat rows on the tray.

"There's nothing wrong with bringing yourself to his attention," Gavin pointed out.

Nicky stared across the room again. Charles stood up and went to speak to someone on the left side of the room. Nicky tracked his progress. He'd gone to speak to another dominant. Nicky breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't have any right to feel jealous of whatever submissive caught Charles's interest, but knowing that didn't help him push the jealousy aside at all.

"Look!" Gavin said, squeezing Nicky's arm.

Nicky caught hold of the toppling tray before the drinks spilled to the floor. "What?"

"He's standing right there by the mistletoe. He's just begging to be kissed!"

"Charles Wilson does not beg," Nicky said firmly, "and I can't just go and kiss him."

"You could do it on your knees."

The tray wobbled again. "What?"

"You go up to him, drop to your knees and kiss his fly. Can't get more submissive than that," Gavin coaxed.

"Are you going to help or just stand there making stupid suggestions?" Nicky asked his friend.

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Gavin pushed himself up onto the counter to sit next to the drinks. "I'm not a service sub, darling. I'm just here to meet a kinky guy and get laid. You're the one who gets off on fetching and carrying for the dominants."

Nicky sighed. Gavin was right in his way. Nicky knew only one of them was searching for a real master.

"If he wasn't so much of a scrooge, I'd say give yourself to him as a Christmas present."

"Scrooge?"

"Charles Wilson doesn't do Christmas, darling." Gavin took a glass off the tray and knocked back the punch in one gulp.

Nicky took another clean glass from the shelf below the bar, filled it, and placed it in the empty spot on the tray. "Maybe no one has ever given him a good Christmas—shown him the way the holiday should be celebrated."

"Oh, so that's what you want to do with him. They're calling it celebrating now, are they?"

Nicky cast a long suffering look at his friend out of the corner of his eye. "I'm just saying everyone loves Christmas if they are given the chance."

"No, Nicky—you love Christmas. Everyone else loves Christmas presents and a few extra days off work."

Nicky frowned. He was aware he got a bit more carried away by the holiday spirit than most, but maybe that was what Charles needed—someone to give him a good Christmas. Nicky could do that.

Reluctantly, Nicky pushed the matter aside. Straightening his shoulders, he squared the tray and walked out into the bar. The allowance his previous master left him was already

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long gone and he wasn't going to find a new master in the kitchens.

Stepping out into the main seating area of the bar, Nicky scanned the room. Spotting someone who needed a refill, he made his way across the room and knelt at their side. He knew the dominant by reputation, his name was Miles Harvey and he certainly wasn't the type of master Nicky wanted, but his glass was empty and Nicky was there to serve.

Miles knew he was there, Nicky noted the change in his posture the moment he realised someone was offering him a submissive's service, but he left him waiting there on his knees for several minutes before he leisurely took a glass from the tray. He said nothing.

Nicky waited there for exactly one minute in case Miles wished to ask for anything else. No command came. Nicky silently rose to his feet and stepped away from Miles's side. He turned his attention back to the room. Spotting another dominant with an empty glass, he went to their side and repeated the process.

Half way to the third unsupplied drinker he hesitated. Charles had finished his drink. Nicky was there to serve the drinks. There was nothing wrong with giving the man a drink. That wasn't demanding—it was submissive. It was his job. His feet stuck firmly to the dark oak floorboards.

Nicky took a deep breath. "Come on, Nicky. You can do this. Don't screw this up. Don't screw this up." One time, just this one time he would bring himself to Charles's attention in an entirely appropriate way. At least he would know then.

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If Charles wasn't interested, he would just have to find a way to put him out of his mind. Nicky's hands trembled. The tray shook. "Don't screw this up," he whispered to himself again.

Nicky reached Charles's chair. He knelt in silence, making no effort to let Charles know he was there.

Finally it happened. Charles turned to Nicky. He took a glass off the tray. "Thank you," he said absentmindedly.

"You're welcome, sir." The words were barely louder than a whisper, but they seemed to catch Charles's attention as if he'd yelled them at the top of his lungs.

Charles studied him for several long moments. Nicky felt his gaze traverse his face, but he kept his own eyes lowered. Charles reached out and touched the length of black cord hanging loosely around his neck, marking him out as an uncollared submissive.

"You don't have a master?"

"No, sir." A double dose of relief shot through Nicky. Charles seemed to have at least a momentary interest in him, and he'd managed not to betray how much he hated being without a master in his tone of voice—two hurdles cleared. Nicky took a slow breath, steadying his nerves for those obstacles left to come.

"Have you ever had a master?"

"Yes, sir." Nicky kept himself very still, feeling like any movement would break the spell.

"You were emancipated from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"What happened?" Charles asked.

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"I was with Mr Hastings, my previous master, for eight months. I lived in his house as a twenty-four/seven submissive. Two weeks ago he was transferred to the Sydney branch of the advertising company he works for. He was unable to take me with him."

"You parted on good terms?"

"Yes, sir. Mr Hastings instructed me to find another master and left me an allowance so I may provide for myself until then. He also left a letter of reference for me to pass on to my next master." It seemed best not to mention that the money Mr Hastings left for him had run out well over a week ago.

Charles twirled the black cord between his finger tips.

Nicky held his breath.

Charles dropped the cord.

Nicky closed his eyes for a brief moment. So that was it. At least he knew for sure now.

Charles reached into his pocket. Extracting a business card and a pen he scribbled something on the back. "On January first, at eight pm, you will present yourself at this address. You will go to the back entrance of the property, remove all clothing and kneel by the door until you are called upon to enter. You will bring three pieces of paper."

"One—the reference from your previous master. Two—a doctor's letter certifying you are free of sexually transmitted diseases. On the third piece of paper you will make a list of all your limits. On the top of the page you will write your safe word in block capitals in red pen. On the back of the paper you will list all other information any man dominating you

needs—allergies, phobias, etc. You will present all three pieces of paper the instant the door is opened to admit you."

"Yes, sir," Nicky whispered.

Charles held out the card. Nicky took it from his fingers. His hand was shaking. He put the card into his pocket. Charles reached out and tucked a knuckle under Nicky's chin. "Until then you will submit to no one. You have sex with no one. Do you have any questions?"

Nicky bit his lip, daring to hope. "May I know if you intend this to be a short scene or something longer?"

Charles made Nicky wait for his response. He stroked his finger tip along his cheek. "And if I only want you for a few hours, what then?"

"I won't give notice to my landlord," Nicky said with very forced calm.

Charles lips twitched into a smile. "If I decide to keep you I'll see your affairs are sorted out satisfactorily."

Nicky met his eyes for a moment. "Yes, sir."

Charles drained the punch from his glass and put his empty glass on Nicky's tray. He took another one. "Don't be late."

"I won't be, sir."

Nicky began to rise and then hesitated. "Merry Christmas, sir."

Charles silently nodded his dismissal.

Charles frowned as he watched Nicky walk away. He turned his attention back to the younger version of himself. His frown deepened. "Should have taken him home right then," he muttered under his breath.

"To celebrate Christmas with you?" the spirit asked from behind him.

"What's Christmas got to do with anything? Nicky belongs to me—I should have made that clear to him right then."

Although he wouldn't say the words out loud, Charles knew looking back he should never have left Nicky without a master for a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. Nicky needed to belong to someone.

"You don't celebrate Christmas?" the spirit asked.

"I didn't before I met Nicky. But you can't share a house with him and ignore the holiday," Charles said. He shrugged. "It makes him happy and I see no harm in letting him have the holiday the way he wants it. If this show and tell is over, I take it I can return to my own time now?"

The spirit took hold of his arm.

The image of Charles's younger self sitting in front of the fire in the bar faded away. Another fire place crackled into existence. Flames flickered in and out of the either until they settled into the blaze in the hearth of his familiar living room.

Charles stood very still until his stomach stopped turning loops. He didn't know if this nonsense was time travel or a hallucination or something even more bizarre, but it made him as queasy as hell, which did little to improve his temper.

He pulled his arm out of the spirit's grasp the moment he was sure of his balance. Charles turned towards the door going through into the hallway leading up to the bedroom. Before he took a step he realised something was different—something was missing. There were no decorations.

"Where's Nicky?"

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"There are many Christmases you need to visit before you can return to your Christmas present."

"And when is this, which year?" It had to be before Nicky. If Nicky was in the house at Christmas time there would be decorations following along not far behind.

"This is four years ago," the spirit said.

Charles frowned. "Christmas Day?"

"No. This is the first day of December in the year 2004."

Charles relaxed. Nicky never started spreading Christmas through the house until December. He started for the door, wondering where Nicky would be.

Charles almost collided with himself coming in the opposite direction. Nicky followed a few steps behind, still only wearing his collar. As a slightly younger version of Charles sat in his chair by the fire place, the spirit took Charles by the arm again and encouraged him to step back out of the scene and observe it from a different angle.

Nicky walked across to the small bar tucked away in a corner of the living room. He carefully filled a glass with a single measure of brandy. Keeping his back to his master, he judged the moment appropriate to raise the issue which had increasingly occupied his mind as December got nearer.

"Master?"

Charles shook out his newspaper. "Yes, pet?"

Nicky stared into the brandy glass. He took a deep breath and pitched his voice very carefully. "May I know how you wish me to decorate?"

"Decorate?" Charles rustled through the crisp printed pages until he found something he wanted to read.

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"For Christmas," Nicky hinted. He took great care in putting the stopper back in the brandy decanter. Keeping his back to Charles, he willed his master to say 'yes'. There was only so much he could do to give his master a wonderful Christmas if Charles wouldn't cooperate.

"You want to decorate?" Charles asked. He still sounded unfamiliar with the concept.

"If you have no objection, master," Nicky mitigated.

There were a few moments of silence. Nicky couldn't bring himself to turn around and see the expression on his master's face, just in case it wasn't one that looked favourably on his idea.

"If it pleases you, you may do so."

Nicky closed his eyes for several brief moments. He smiled at the wall over the decanters. "Thank you, master."

Nicky took the brandy glass across to his master. Kneeling at his feet, he offered the glass to him, just as he'd offered another drink to him almost a year before. Charles took it. "Thank you, pet. You don't want anything for yourself?"

"No, thank you, master." Nicky settled himself comfortably on the cushion at Charles's feet. Charles reached out and stroked his fingers through Nicky's hair, encouraging him to rest his head on his knee.

Half of the task he'd assigned himself for the evening completed, Nicky allowed himself to relax and enjoy the quiet contentment filling the room. He closed his eyes and let his master's gentle petting soothe him. Finally, he built up his courage and broke the silence.

"Master?"

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Charles turned over another page in his paper. "Yes?"

"About the decorations?" He cast a quick glance up, trying to gauge his master's reaction.

Charles raised an eyebrow at the reintroduction of a topic he'd evidently considered closed, but he looked down at Nicky rather than the paper, giving his pet his full attention.

Nicky took a deep breath. "I still have a little money put by from before I came under your protection. Perhaps it would be appropriate if I use that money for the decorations." The last thing he wanted was for his master to think he was asking for a present when he actually wanted to do something special for his master.

Charles put the paper aside with a smile. "Is this your way of telling me you've reached your limit on your credit card, pet?"

Nicky quickly shook his head. "I wouldn't—"

"Hush," Charles chided him. "I'm not accusing you of anything. The money is there to be spent." Charles stroked his hair back. It was longer than it had been when Charles took possession of him. It kept falling in his eyes. It was annoying as hell when he was on his own, but the way his master ran his fingers through his hair when they were together made the inconvenience more than worth it. Nicky leaned into his touch.

"But the card is for household expenses and—"

Charles put a finger tip to his lips. "Is that what I told you when I gave you the card?"

Nicky shook his head.

Charles raised an eyebrow.

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"You said I should spend it on whatever I wanted, but..." he trailed off when he saw Charles's expression. Nicky looked down. He still found it hard to accept Charles's casual generosity towards him. "I'm sorry, master."

"I am not the man who used to call himself your master," Charles told him softly. "If you hit the limit on your card, let me know and we will discuss raising the limit, otherwise you don't have to worry about such things."

"I'm sorry, master," Nicky repeated.

Charles tapped his knee. Nicky quickly rose and sat up on his master's lap. He curled himself into Charles's body and settled immediately without any wriggling or squirming into position. Charles stroked his back. "You still find it hard, pet?"

Nicky shrugged, shifting slightly in his master's arms. "I just don't want you to think I'm wasting your money."

Charles tapped him smartly on his bottom.

"Our money," Nicky corrected automatically.

"You belong to me, pet. What we have belongs to both of us."

Nicky could practically mouth the words along with him. During the months he'd spent with Charles he'd heard them often but they were still felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

With his old master, he'd known where he stood. He might not have stood there with a penny to his name, but Hastings's limitations and rules about money were simple and made sense. Charles's generosity and a credit card limit he would never need to spend more than a third of made it far easier for him to make mistakes.

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His master was still waiting for his response to the reminder. Nicky nodded. "I belong to my master," he repeated obediently.

Charles smiled. It was always easy to have his pet repeat the things he liked to hear. It was only the things Nicky didn't like which stuck in his throat and only ever escaped in reluctant whispers.

He watched his younger self press a kiss to the top of Nicky's head in praise.

The picture before him flickered.

Charles looked over his shoulder, searching for the Christmas spirit. "The conversation wasn't finished."

"We must move quickly. There is very little time for you to visit all the Christmases you need to remember. We have not travelled far forward. Less than a day."

"Not to mention the fact you only seem to like the bits of my past that make me look like a complete bastard," Charles muttered.

The last of the image faded away. Charles continued to stare at the empty space.

Music began to play. A new picture solidified around them. Boxes of decorations appeared on every flat surface. Nicky reappeared, still minus his clothes. Charles glanced across at the spirit. He didn't like other men seeing his pet so exposed. The spirit had no place in their private memories.

Nicky put a box of baubles on the coffee table next to the huge tree that appeared in the bay window. Charles stepped between him and the spirit, blocking the spirit's view.

"Bloody hell!"

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Nicky winced. Keeping his back to doorway, he closed his eyes. For several long seconds he stood stock still. Then he turned and knelt. Putting his hands behind his back and lowering his eyes, he waited to be recognised by his master.

From his position, he could see Charles standing in the living room doorway. He stayed there for a long time. Nicky longed to raise his eyes and see just how displeased his master was with his efforts, but he couldn't bring himself to break out of one of the few serious protocols Charles maintained.

When his master came home he was to kneel, just as he was, and wait to be recognised. Nicky loved the feeling of being welcomed back under his master's protection too much to risk losing the protocol by failing to obey it consistently.

Finally Charles walked across to him. He ran his hand through Nicky's hair and trailed a finger tip along the collar in a familiar greeting. Sliding a knuckle under Nicky's chin, he lifted his face and his gaze from the floor. He didn't look impressed.

"I could take some of it down," Nicky offered quickly.

Charles ran his fingers through his hair again, but Nicky knew it was only an absentminded gesture. Charles's attention was still firmly on the decorations he'd put up.

He looked around the room again. "Leave them as they are. You must have worked very hard to put all these up today?" he asked.

"Do you like them?" Nicky asked, cautiously hopeful his master was only surprised rather than displeased.

"If they please you, I am glad you put them up."

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His master couldn't see his expression from where he stood on the other side of the room. It was safe to react honestly. Nicky's expression fell. He looked back to the floor.

Charles walked across to inspect the tree.

Nicky pulled himself together. He rose to his feet and followed a few paces behind Charles. "I could take some of them back if you think it's too much," he suggested. "I kept all the receipts, and I haven't even unpacked some of them yet, so..."

Charles ran his hand through a box of baubles. "That's not necessary."

Nicky's lower lip suffered as his teeth nibbled the sensitive flesh. "I—"

Charles shook his head. "It's fine, pet." He undid his tie and looked at the holly on the fireplace. A few minutes later, he walked from the room to get changed.

Nicky looked around the room. "Stupid." He shook his head at himself, knowing he should have broken Charles into the idea more slowly. Nicky wandered back across to the tree. He picked up a bauble from the box and hung it on the end of a branch. He frowned at the gleaming ball of glass.

"Beautiful," Charles said.

Nicky turned to see his master once more standing in the doorway, now dressed in jeans and a long sleeved T-shirt and looking infinitely more pleased with the world. Nicky's face lit up with a beaming smile. He offered Charles one of the fancy purple baubles.

Charles laughed. "Not the tree, pet, you."

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Nicky blushed, half at the compliment and half at the mistake.

Charles took the decoration anyway. He twirled the bauble around his finger, watching it catch the light from the dozens of fairy lights already on the tree. He hung it on a branch.

Nicky offered him another one from the box.

Charles took that one too.

He stepped closer to Nicky, pressing his clothed body against his bare back. Charles barely looked at the bauble before he hooked it onto an empty branch.

Nicky gave him another. Charles leaned against Nicky's body to reach a higher branch. His free hand settled on Nicky's waist. As he straightened, pulling Nicky back to lean against his chest, his hand slid around his pet's body.

He was already half hard, responding as rapidly as he always did to the change in his master's mood. Charles wrapped his hand around Nicky's cock and took up a slow, stroking rhythm. Nicky gasped. A bauble dropped from his fingertips, bouncing on the thick carpet. Charles turned him around. Trapping his erection between them, he pulled Nicky in close for a deep kiss.

Their lips moulded together until Nicky whimpered and pressed against his master, desperate for more than a kiss. As Charles trailed his lips along his jaw line to his ear, Nicky trembled in his arms. Charles slid his hands over Nicky's bottom, massaging the tight muscles in his grip. Nicky felt his master's cock rapidly stiffening against him.

Charles might not be over enamoured with his decorating, but there were some things Charles always liked. Sliding his

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fingers along his cleft, Charles smiled against Nicky's ear when he found he was all lubed up and ready for him.

"Expecting company, pet?"

"I always like to be ready for my master," Nicky whispered.

Charles nudged him across the room, towards the table. Pushing back boxes of decorations, he cleared a Nicky-sized space where he could bend over the polished mahogany surface. In seconds Charles's fly was unzipped and he buried himself in Nicky's body.

Nicky grasped at the table edge. For a few moments, Charles stilled inside him and gave him time to adjust to the wonderfully full, stretched sensation.

Charles obviously wasn't in the mood for anything fancy. He set up a fast, punishing rhythm. Nicky whimpered as his hips connected painfully with the hard edge of the table. Charles slid his hands between Nicky's hip bones and the table, protecting him against the harsh contact. He thrust into him again and again.

Nicky whimpered again. This time the sound was filled with pleasure. "Master?"

"Not yet, pet. You may come with me, not before."

Nicky knew his master held back, making them both wait to increase their pleasure. Somehow, Nicky held back until Charles finally came, deep inside him. Nicky groaned. Jerking, he followed his master's orders and came at the same time as Charles. The last hard thrust pushed him over the edge as much as the command, but that wasn't the point. Nicky still

knew it still gave Charles some special pleasure every time Nicky came when he was told to.

As they parted and Charles tidied himself up, Nicky straightened, arching his back to work out the kinks table sex always put in his spine.

Opening a drawer in the cabinet alongside the table, he took out a wipe and cleaned up his stomach where his semen was turning uncomfortably sticky. A glance at the table and he gave that a wipe over too.

Charles smiled and stroked his hand through Nicky's hair, pushing it out of his eyes. "I've got some paperwork to do. You finish off what you want to do here. Come in and sit with me when you're done."

Nicky nodded.

When Charles reached the door, Nicky had to say something. He cleared his throat. "Master?"

Charles turned back to him. "Yes?"

"Thank you."

Charles's lips twitched. "You're very welcome."

Nicky blushed bright red. "I didn't mean, I meant," he waved a hand away from the table and towards the tree.

Charles followed the gesture to the few baubles he'd hung on the branches. "I put up a couple of decorations, pet. Hardly a taxing undertaking. Certainly nothing you need to be grateful for."

Nicky nodded again, because Charles was his master and he should agree with him. "But thank you anyway."

Charles smiled and shook his head at him as he went off to his paperwork.

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Charles looked across the room and watched his pet. Nicky went to the tree. Running his finger along one of the balls Charles hung in place, he smiled to himself in obvious satisfaction. With one last glance at the baubles he turned his attention to putting up the remaining Christmas decorations.

Charles went to his side and whispered in his ear. "It looks, beautiful, pet. You did very well and your master is very pleased with you."

Nicky turned to the box of baubles and looked straight through him.

"He can't hear you," the spirit reminded him.

As if that wasn't bloody obvious. "I know."

"Then why speak to him?"

"Because it should have been said then," Charles said simply.

Nicky began to flicker out of existence.

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Chapter Two

"Can't you leave us in one damn place for more than five minutes at a time?" Charles demanded. The whole room wavered into and out of existence once more and Charles suddenly found himself in the bedroom he and Nicky shared for the last five years.

Charles looked around the room, trying to place himself in a timeline.

"This is another Christmas you shared with Nicholas Lewis."

"Three years ago, 2005," Charles cut in, feeling quite smug that he'd worked it out before the spirit could tell him. The guy in the toga was really starting to get on his nerves.

Charles turned his back on the spirit and approached the bed. Nicky lay awake. His lips moved. Charles studied them, trying to read the silent words. Nicky was counting. Charles forced himself not to reach out to his pet. The way his hand went through his lover last time, made him determined not to make the same mistake again. Instead, he sat on the bed, as close as he could get to Nicky without making contact.

Nicky stared at the ceiling, listening to his master's breathing slow into a sleeping rhythm. He lay very still and quiet, trying to give the impression he was asleep too. Finally, Nicky felt sure Charles was fast asleep. Wary of any movement that could make any noise, he sat up.

Charles didn't stir. Nicky took a deep breath. If he could make it out of the room, he would be fine. He just needed to

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be very quiet. One foot on the floor, Nicky slid out from under the blanket. He held the covers down behind him, trying not to let a draft slip under to rouse Charles.

Out from the warm cocoon under the blanket, he stood by the side of the bed for a moment and watched his master sleep. His hair was too short to fall over his eyes, but the black strands stood up at odd angles against the pillow. Nicky smiled and resisted the temptation to reach out and smooth them down.

The room was cold this early in the morning. A shiver ran through Nicky. He slipped from the bedroom, closing the door softly behind him. Down the stairs, skipping the fourth creaky one, Nicky made his way into the living room. It was even colder down here.

Ignoring the overhead lights he put the lights on the tree on instead. It was hard not to smile at the sight. Christmas was a time for smiles. He opened the cabinet next to the fireplace and took out the small stash of supplies he'd hidden there.

Charles was going to learn to love Christmas one way or another. If decorating the tree didn't bring a smile to his face, Nicky would just have to leave a present under the tree that would.

Nicky sat on the floor by the base of the Christmas tree. The more traditional presents he'd bought for Charles were already under there, neatly wrapped with brightly coloured papers. Next to them lay Charles's purchases, similarly wrapped. He'd come a long way over the last two years. Nicky was quietly pleased with his progress.

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Charles might not love Christmas, but he was learning to sing along to the score sheet whenever Nicky nudged him in the right direction. While Charles had always been very generous, he just bought things when he saw them and gave them when he felt like it.

It had taken a long time to convince Charles he might want to save his presents up for special occasions. Even though Nicky knew his master only did so because it kept his pet happy, it was still progress.

Nicky unrolled a length of bright red ribbon from a cardboard spool and laid it neatly on the floor in front of him.

He placed the others items from his stash next to it. Lube first and then a bright red butt plug—complete with a pattern of little snow flakes and Christmas bells printed over the smooth surface. He tied one end of the ribbon to the flat end of the plug and considered the effect. He formed the end of the ribbon into a bow and nodded his satisfaction to the empty room. It would do nicely.

Nicky deftly coated it with lube and worked the rounded end of the plug inside his hole. It rubbed right against his prostate. Nicky wriggled against the intrusion. The lube was warm from its hiding place so close to the blaze that filled the fireplace all day. If felt amazing inside him.

He wriggled again as he sat back on his heels. The ribbon bow tickled his buttocks. He took a calming breath. A certain amount of frustration was to be expected. Taking up the roll of ribbon he began to wind it around his body.

Up over his shoulder to follow the line of his leather collar, where he attached a little gift tag, then down to crisscross

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over his chest. The bright red ribbon rested neatly against his pale body, the contrast making his skin look snowy white.

The room progressed from not very warm to bloody freezing as the last of the day's warmth faded into the old stone building. Nicky shivered.

As he wound the ribbon around and around his body, it became increasingly difficult to hold onto it. With his arms half held down against his body he could barely reach back to swap it from one hand to the other.

His hand slipped, the roll of ribbon sprang out of his grip. Losing its tension, the neat curves of ribbon embracing his body drooped. Nicky sighed and began winding the ribbon back onto the roll, around and around until he was almost back where he started.

He tried again. And again. And again. The roll had a mind of its own. Each time he came close to completing the wrapping, it jumped from his grip.

Nicky bit back a curse. "Knew I should have bought a bloody box..."

He wound the ribbon again and tried for the sixth time to make the pattern he wanted. Around his thigh, in a bow around his now flourishing erection, up and around his body.

Bondage always got him worked up quickly—even self bondage. The ache in his crotch didn't make it easier to concentrate on what he was doing, or to coordinate his hand movements.

Finally he did it. Finishing the ribbon off with a pretty bow around his wrists and tightening it with his teeth, Nicky smiled his satisfaction. A lock of hair fell down over his eyes.

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Nicky glared at the blond strands, going cross-eyed in the attempt. He tried to lift his hand to push it back, but couldn't quite manage it in his ribbon restraints. He sighed and put his hands back on his lap.

As and when his master got up in the morning, he would probably push the lock of hair back out of his way.

A noise in the doorway made him look up.

Charles blinked sleepily at him. It was still completely dark outside, only the lights from the tree broke the gloom. He should be in bed for a few hours yet, but as Nicky watched, the sleepiness faded away from Charles's eyes to be replaced with amusement and desire.

"I wondered where you'd got to," Charles observed, walking over to him. He spotted the gift tag. "For me?" he teased.

As if Nicky would ever offer himself to anyone else that way.

Charles turned the tag over. "To my master, with love, Nicky." His lips lifted into a smile. He crouched down and stroked Nicky's cheek with the back of his knuckles. "And do you come with instructions or may I do whatever I want with you?"

"Whatever my master wants," Nicky whispered.

He tried to read his master's expression, wondering what Charles really thought of his present.

"In that case, I'll take you back to our bed and open you there," Charles announced. He picked him up easily. Trapped in the roll of ribbon, Nicky couldn't even hold on, he could only trust his master not to drop him. He leaned his head on

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his master's shoulder and smiled contentedly into the curve of his neck. Charles seemed pleased with his present.

The bedroom was wonderfully warm after the chill of the living room.

However, as Charles put him down in the middle of the bed and ran a hand down his back, his pleasure in his gift seemed to fade. "Some warm wrapping paper would have been very appropriate," Charles said.

Tilting Nicky's face back, he made him meet his eye.

Nicky nodded. "Yes, master." Charles was always reminding him to take better care of himself.

When Charles allowed it, Nicky looked down.

Charles stretched out on the bed next to him. For a long time he just looked at him. Then he began to trace the lines of ribbon. "If you leave yourself out in the cold again, I will warm you very thoroughly," Charles told him. "Starting here." He tapped Nicky sharply on the bottom.

Nicky gasped. He offered Charles a small smile, sure now his master wasn't really angry with him. Charles only ever spanked him in play, never as a real punishment.

Charles tapped him again on the other buttock, evening out the heat spreading through his body. Nicky wriggled in his bondage, wondering if the ribbon was loose enough for Charles to turn him over his knee without taking it off first.

Too late, Nicky realised he should have tied the bow around his cock more loosely. It acted like a cock ring, trapping the blood in his shaft and making him swell more than ever. Charles trailed his finger tips over the length of his erection.

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Nicky looked up and met his eyes. Charles knew.

For a moment Nicky thought he would slacken the bow and relieve the pressure, but he merely checked it was not tight enough to do any permanent damage and left it there.

Nicky squirmed. "Master?"

"Yes?" Charles ran his fingers down the length of ribbon leading down his back between his buttocks. The ribbon rustled between his cheeks. The plug moved inside him.

Nicky couldn't manage anything more than whimper in response.

Tugging at the bow, Charles worked the plug out of him. "Very festive," he noted when he saw the pattern, and slipped it back inside him.

Nicky whimpered again.

Charles pressed it deeper inside him only to pull it out again.

Nicky tried to be patient. He tried to stay still and let his master play with him however he wanted. It just wasn't possible. "Please, master?" he whispered. Nicky tried to look over his shoulder, but he couldn't see Charles. He could only feel the movements of the plug. Charles thrust it back into him.

"I think I shall enjoy playing with my new toy," Charles mused. "Is that what you are, Nicky? My new toy?"

"Yes, master."

Charles sat up and touched his cheek. "No."

Nicky, blinked. He looked away. This wasn't what his master wanted after all. It was a bloody stupid idea from the start. He began to work his hands out of the bow.

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"A pet," Charles declared. "Isn't it traditional for people to be given pets at Christmas?"

Nicky nodded, offering his master a hopeful smile.

"Yes, I think you make a far better pet than a toy."

Nicky bit his lip, not sure what to make of that pronouncement, only knowing he wanted to be whichever his master thought was best.

"Small, affectionate, infinitely pettable," Charles ran his fingers through Nicky's hair. Nicky leaned into the touch. "But with some special features making you far more interesting than a puppy or kitten."

Charles wrapped his hand around Nicky's erection. Nicky thrust into the contact.

"How long were you out there under the tree?"

"I don't know, master," Nicky whispered. "Not long, I don't think."

Charles took the plug out of him and began to unwind the ribbon. "Sore?" he asked, nudging Nicky out of his restrained position.

"Only a little," Nicky whispered.

When Charles reached the bow around his cock, he left it in place and started unwinding from the other end. Nicky's erection throbbed, pleading for release or attention. When he was done untangling, Charles began to rewind the ribbon around him.

"Master?"

"You are not the only one who enjoys wrapping presents, Nicky."

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Nicky watched him carefully, trying to work out what his master wanted from him.

Charles frowned as he trailed the ribbon around and around, giving his whole attention to the job in hand. He wound the ribbon around Nicky's shoulders and his arms, trapping them down against his sides. He worked the ribbon down over his chest. Looping it around Nicky's hands he took them behind his back, tying them firmly behind him.

A noise from his left broke Charles's concentration.

He looked across to the spirit. Christmas Past was obviously enjoying the view of Nicky, naked and bound. The line of his toga was severely disrupted by a very obvious erection tenting the thin fabric.

The spirit's jaw hung slack, his breaths coming in shallow pants. He was obviously unaware Charles was watching him rather than history repeating itself on the bed.

"Enjoying the show?" Charles asked.

The spirit tore his eyes away from Nicky for a few moments. He at least had the grace to look embarrassed by his voyeurism. "Nicholas Lewis is very beautiful."

"True, but he's not your personal porn star," Charles snapped. "Is watching Nicky get laid part of your job description or just a perk?"

The spirit blushed bright red. "The Christmases I visit are not usually so ... um..."

Charles let him struggle for the words.

"So, active," the spirit finally trailed off. He turned his gaze away from the scene on the bed.

Charles wasn't fooled. He knew the spirit would go back to staring at Nicky the moment Charles turned his attention away from him to do the same. Still, he felt a lot better just by making it clear that, while the spirit might be able to move them through time and watch whatever happened between them in private, Nicky was his.

Charles turned his attention back to bed.

Nicky tested the ribbon holding his wrists.

Picking him up like he weighed nothing, Charles settled him to sit astride his lap.

"Let us see what my pet can do for his master," Charles said.

Nicky lifted himself, putting his weight on his knees so he could lower himself onto his master's erection. Charles rested a hand on his hip, guiding him, while his other hand held his shaft steady. Nicky gasped, dropping his head back. He slowly slid down his master's hard cock. It filled him perfectly.

Charles took his hands away, leaving Nicky to set his own rhythm. Nicky knew Charles liked to be ridden hard and fast. He set out to oblige him. Charles lay back watching Nicky do all the work.

Breaking out into a sweat, Nicky moved faster and faster, raising and lowering himself until his legs burnt with lactic acid and his breaths came in shallow gasps.

Charles only set his hands on Nicky to keep him still when he finally came. Nicky's head dropped forward. The bow still trailed around his cock. He whimpered when Charles recovered from his orgasm and teased the tip of his cock with a finger tip.

"Master?" Nicky asked.

"No."

Nicky risked a glance at him.

"Next time you will plan better how to take care of yourself. Then, perhaps, I will let you enjoy your plans when they come to fruition."

Nicky swallowed down the protest that rose instinctively to his lips.

Charles left him sitting there while he softened inside him. Nicky tried not to squirm. He tried not to make any movement to jostle the ribbon around his erection.

Charles finally lifted him off his lap. He immediately slipped the butt plug back into place, bow and all, and Nicky realised he would stay like that until morning.

"Uncomfortable or painful?" his master asked.

It was tempting to lie. The word painful would secure his immediate release from the ribbon. It wouldn't mitigate the need Charles saw for a punishment to teach him to take care of himself better, but it would alter the punishment.

"Just a bit uncomfortable, master," he admitted.

Charles made him meet his gaze. He read the truth there and made no adjustments to Nicky's bondage before he turned off the bedside light and pulled the blanket up over them both.

Nicky rested his head against his master's chest when Charles allowed him to cuddle close to his side.

It was after midnight. A present had been given. No matter the definition, he was allowed to say it. Nicky still

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waited until he was sure Charles was asleep before he whispered the words.

"Merry Christmas, master."

Charles knew the sight of his pet sleeping contentedly, if a little frustrated, in his arms wouldn't last. In moments it flickered and disappeared.

He turned to the spirit still lurking behind him, wondering what he would have to say about it all.

"He really loves Christmas, doesn't he?" the spirit asked, obviously trying to get back to his job and ignore how his erection bobbed in front of him with his every movement.

"Yes," Charles agreed. "He loves Christmas."

"But you do not?" the spirit asked.

"I have never stopped Nicky from celebrating the holiday any way he chooses," Charles said sharply.

"And that is enough?"

Charles frowned at the space where Nicky had lain. He hated watching him fade away. Knowing the real Nicky was still in their bedroom packing presents didn't help. He owned Nicky—all of Nicky, not just the particular bit of him existing in the present, all of him.

Another picture came into existence around them. Charles closed his eyes. He waited until everything had time to settle into place before he opened his eyes in hopes it would help the motion sickness.

"What year is this?" he asked, walking across his dining room to where Nicky sat on the floor front of the fire place. All around him were boxes of cards and envelopes.

"Two years ago," the spirit said. "At which time Nicholas Lewis had been under your influence for three Christmases."

Charles glared at the implication in the statement.

He looked up when the door opened.

Gavin, Nicky's friend, walked in and sat down next to Nicky on the floor.

"How many Christmas cards do you write?" Gavin grumbled, putting a glass of water on the hearth. "My tongue's getting tired."

Nicky picked the glass up and put it back down on a coaster. "You're almost finished."

Gavin opened one of the cards and glanced at the message Nicky diligently inscribed. "Do you sign all of your cards off Charles too?" He slipped the card into the appropriate envelope and licked the flap.

"Most of them." Nicky flicked onto the next page of his address book and selected another card from an assortment separated out in neat little piles from where he sat all the way across to the fireplace.

"Does he mind?"

Nicky shook his head. "I wouldn't sign my master's name to them without asking him first."

"Did you warn him just how many cards he'd be sending each year?"

Nicky addressed the envelope and held it out to Gavin. "Put your tongue to better use," he said with a smile.

Gavin was quiet for all of two minutes. "What are you getting for him this year anyway?"

"Lots of little things," Nicky said.

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Gavin got bored. He started to wonder around the room.
"What's this?"

Nicky glanced up from his selection of cards. "An advent calendar."

"Yours?"

Nicky shook his head. "My master's. I made it for him."

Gavin looked at the twenty four little parcels hanging from a mini Christmas tree set on the side cabinet. "What does he think of it?" He didn't sound too sure of its reception.

Nicky wasn't sure yet either. "I'm going to give it to him tonight."

Gavin wandered back to the hearth rug. "You're really going all out trying to convince him to like Christmas, aren't you?"

Nicky shrugged. Gavin had no idea how hard he worked to make Charles enjoy the winter holidays.

A sudden click followed by a whirling sound indicated Charles had pressed the button that opened the garage doors.

Gavin stood up. "I guess that's my cue to make myself scarce. Good luck getting *him* to lick the rest of your letters for you."

Nicky smiled at Gavin's retreating back.

A few moments later Charles stepped into the room looking far from pleased. "I appear destined to spend half my life passing the same boy in the drive way."

Nicky uncurled himself from his position sitting on the hearth rug and knelt, waiting for his master to formally

recognise him. Charles slipped a finger tip under his chin and tilted his head back.

His master studied him for what felt like a long time but he turned away without touching Nicky's collar and giving him permission to rise. Nicky stayed where he was, able to lift his gaze from the floor, but otherwise trapped there until Charles returned to him.

"Who is he, and what is your relationship to him?"

Nicky's eyes opened very wide. "Gavin?" he asked.

Charles raised an eyebrow.

Nicky tried to keep up with the conversation. "His name is Gavin Thomas, we went to school together."

"He's gay?" Charles asked, sitting on the dining room chair furthest away from Nicky.

Nicky nodded. "Yes, master."

"Does he live the lifestyle?"

Nicky hesitated before he nodded. "In his own way, master."

"If he has pretensions to call himself a dominant, he should have more balls than to run away every time I walk into the house."

Nicky shook his head. "He's submissive."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "Which leads me to wonder why he thinks I would have any objection to him visiting you in our home?"

Nicky bit his lip. "You, um..."

Charles stood up and walked across until he stood in front of Nicky. "I?" he prompted.

"You make him nervous," Nicky blurted out.

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"I do not believe I have ever exchanged more than two words with the man."

"He's used to dominants who are more..." Nicky trailed off again.

"More?"

"Submissive?" Nicky suggested.

Charles's lips twitched into a smile. He touched Nicky's collar. Nicky stood up.

"Come," Charles said, stepping back to let Nicky precede him from the room, "you can tell me all about his submissive dominants while I have a drink."

Nicky hesitated. Charles seemed to be in a good mood and comparisons between himself and the type of dominants Gavin dated could only improve his humour. "May I bring something with me?"

Charles nodded his permission.

Nicky retrieved the advent tree from the side table. Charles picked up the last card he'd written.

"Do I know a Douglas Fairbank?" he asked.

Nicky steadied his grip on the little tree. "I went to school with him too."

"Have I ever met him?" Charles asked, setting the card aside.

Nicky shook his head.

"So when you said you wanted to sign the cards to our mutual acquaintances with my name, you meant all the cards you send?"

"I didn't think you would mind—" Nicky looked down. It was pointless to make excuses. "I'm sorry, master."

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Charles called him to his side. Nicky went, tree and all.

Charles touched his cheek. "I am not mad at you, pet. But I do wonder what strangers will think when they receive a card from a man they have never met."

Nicky opened his mouth, thought better of it and closed his mouth again. He re-thought his answer. "None of the cards have been posted yet. I'll correct them before they go out."

"And your first answer?"

Nicky flashed a glance up to his master, then quickly dropped his eyes. "Would have been spoken without due thought or respect," he said softly.

"I want the answer, Nicky. What would he think?"

"He would think I found someone," Nicky whispered.

Charles was silent for a few moments. He ran his finger tips over the piles of cards all sealed up and ready to be sent. "Don't write any replacements."

Nicky stared regretfully at all the Christmas greetings that would never reach their destinations. He nodded. "May I know what my master wishes me to do with the cards?" An image popped into his head of the fire in the living room. It was all laid out ready for the match. The cards wouldn't last long on the blaze.

Setting down the tree, Nicky waited for the order, ready to gather up the cards to their fate.

"I'll defer to you regarding the traditions of the holiday, but I've always thought they were posted?"

Nicky hesitated. "I'm sorry, master. I put your name on nearly all of them."

"All apart from?"

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Nicky closed his eyes, wondering how much worse this conversation could get. "Those I sent to people you don't like."

Charles was quiet for what felt like a very a long time. Nicky kept his gaze on the carpet.

"Separate out those you did not sign my name to. I'll see those before they are sent. The rest may go as they are."

"You don't mind—" Nicky trailed off. He didn't question his master's orders.

"You have found someone, Nicky. You are right to let people know you belong to someone now."

Nicky smiled. "Thank you, master."

Charles ruffled his hair. On the way out of the room, he stopped. "Are all of the cards signed in one of those two ways?"

Nicky shook his head. "There are variations."

"How many?"

Nicky rolled the cards he'd made out through his mind's eye. "Four, master."

"Bring an example of each signature with you when you come into the living room."

Charles closed the door behind him on the way out. Nicky breathed out. First putting the advent tree back on the side cabinet, he looked through the cards he hadn't written yet and made out an example of the four different ways he signed the cards.

Putting each one neatly with its envelope so he didn't lose track of which went with which card, Nicky went to the living room.

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Charles had changed out of his suit into jeans and a blue shirt and put a match to the fire. Nicky went to the cushion at his feet.

He still needed to steady his nerves before he went there without a specific invitation, especially when his master had no reason to be pleased with him. Charles stroked his hair. Somehow he always knew when Nicky found it difficult to remember what Charles told him. "You are always welcome at my side, Nicky," Charles told him again.

Nicky nodded his understanding and offered his master the cards.

Charles took them. He read through each one in turn. "And by what criteria are people sent each one?"

Nicky craned his neck and pointed out each one. "If it goes to someone who understands our lifestyle, I sign you as my master. If it goes to anyone else, I sign your name first but make no mention of our specific relationship. If it goes to someone in my family, I sign myself as Nick without the y, because that's what they call me. If it goes to someone who I do not think you would wish to give a Merry Christmas to I just sign my own name."

Charles smiled at him and stroked his hair. "These are fine, but I'll see the list of those I don't like."

Nicky nodded.

"Now," Charles clarified when Nicky didn't move. "Take these back and bring me the list."

Nicky had already filled out the rest of those cards. He brought back the envelopes. Charles went through them,

asking for more information when he couldn't place who the person was from their name and address. He set one aside.

"These are all acceptable," he handed the rest back to Nicky.

Nicky glanced at the one Charles took out of the pile.

Charles tapped the envelope on the arm of his chair, thinking about it very carefully. "Have you sent a card to this person before?"

Nicky glanced at the address. He shook his head.

"Tell me what you know about him?"

"He was at the business dinner you took me to last month."

"And?"

"You were caught in traffic. I arrived before you." Nicky looked down. "I don't always do well in such settings when I don't know anyone. Mr Parker saw I was uncomfortable. He spent far longer than he should have talking to me rather than the other businessmen. He was very kind to me."

Charles nodded decisively. "You will not send the card. If you meet Parker again you will excuse yourself immediately. You will take every precaution to ensure you're never in a room alone with him. If you speak to him again you will inform me immediately."

Nicky quickly nodded. "Yes, master." The submissive's stillness deserted him. He fidgeted with the seam on his jeans, unsure exactly what he did wrong. He could sense the anger bubbling inside Charles. Nicky forced his breaths to stay slow and even. He pushed the panic down inside him.

Charles made him look up. "Tell me what you are thinking."

"I..." Nicky didn't even know how to explain it. "I didn't mean anything by the card. It was just a thank you for being kind to me. But I know the deal you were working on with Mr Parker fell through. I thought if I put your name on the card it might look like you were trying to open some sort of line of communication and..." he trailed off. He had no business interfering in his master's business relationships. He shouldn't have interfered full stop.

Charles stroked Nicky's cheek with his thumb. "Nicky—the deal fell through because he wanted you to be part of it."

Nicky stared into his master's eyes for several seconds as what Charles meant sank in. He looked down, closing his eyes against the implications of his own actions.

Charles tucked his fingers under Nicky's chin, telling him to lift his head. Nicky tried to keep his face down. Charles persisted and Nicky couldn't bring himself to disobey his master for more than a few moments. He looked up.

Charles leaned back in his chair and tapped his knee.

Nicky hesitated, unsure he deserved to be welcomed into his master's arms. But the chance of reassurance was too much to resist. Nicky slipped up onto his master's knee. Charles let him curl in close so he was wrapped completely in his master's strong embrace.

Nicky hid his face in his master's shoulder. Charles stroked his hair back and kissed his temple. "Hush now, there's no harm done, is there?"

Nicky wished he was so sure. "Master?"

"Yes?"

"If I made out a list of the other cards, would you..." If Charles checked them over he'd be able to send them out without worrying.

"Of course."

Nicky was silent for a long time. There was one more issue to deal with. "Am I allowed to know what the punishment will be?" He couldn't make the words more than a whisper.

Charles seemed to think for a long time. The seconds passed by with him stroking Nicky's hair. "Tell me what he would have done to punish you."

Nicky froze, even his breaths stalling. He wasn't supposed to think about how his former master exercised his dominance over him. He belonged to Charles now. Nicky glanced up at his master, wondering how Charles knew what he'd been thinking about. "He would have reopened negotiations for the deal," Nicky whispered.

"And that is what you think I will do?"

Nicky shook his head. "My master wouldn't make me do that."

Charles looked into his eyes, judging the truth in his expression. Finally he found it and nodded his acceptance. "What punishment do you think I would choose?"

Nicky thought about what caused all the problems to start with. "I would understand if my master thought the holiday was a bad influence on me and wished me to stop celebrating it."

"A little drastic, don't you think?" Charles stroked his hair back again.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Nicky glanced up at him. "I screwed up," he said with a shrug, knowing Charles could punish him however he saw fit.

"You'll make the list out and I'll check through it. Each year from now on you will make a new list from scratch and I'll check it. If I find any name on the list I don't want you to send a card to, I'll cross it off and you'll write the list out from scratch again. Likewise if I decide to add a name in. You'll make out the list again and again until I am satisfied with it. Only then will you have permission to begin writing your cards."

Nicky nodded, most of his attention caught by the bit about Charles adding names to the list. Charles hadn't told him to send a card to anyone before. Maybe he was getting more into the spirit of it than Nicky guessed. He offered Charles a small smile. Then he bit his lip.

"You don't approve of the punishment, pet?"

Nicky blushed. "If I like the idea it's not much of a punishment."

Charles chuckled. "If you still think so when you have written out the list a dozen or so times we will discuss the matter further."

Nicky leaned his head against his master's shoulder. "Thank you, master."

Charles ran his fingers through his hair again.

Nicky glanced up, Charles frowned. "You left your tree behind."

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Chapter Three

"I gave you permission to bring it with you," Charles reminded him.

Nicky shook his head. "It's not important." This was the important thing, his master holding him close and everything being well between them, everything else, Christmas and all, could disappear and everything important would still remain.

Charles stopped stroking his hair.

Nicky looked up at him.

"Fetch it."

Nicky knew the tone of voice. He went and fetched it.

Taking the tree back to his master's side he put it on the floor and knelt next to it. Charles tapped his knee. "Back up here. Bring your tree with you."

Nicky sat on his master's knee with the advent tree on his lap.

"A portable version to take with you if you visit a house that isn't decorated to your satisfaction?" Charles guessed.

Nicky smiled at the gentle teasing and shook his head. He adjusted one of the branches. "It's an advent tree."

"Like an advent calendar?"

Nicky nodded again.

"And you open one of the little packages each day?"

Another nod.

"You should have told me you wanted one, pet. It sounds more like an appropriate present from your master than something you should have to buy for yourself."

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"I um..." he offered the tree to his master.

Charles raised an eyebrow.

"I made it for you," Nicky rushed out. "I know it is silly, master, you don't have to do it or anything, I just thought..."

Charles seemed amused by the idea. He turned the tree around, examining it from each angle. Finding the little parcel with a tag reading 1st December, he unhooked it from the tree.

Nicky bit his lip, wondering if his master would think it all stupid.

Charles unwrapped the parcel. Nicky had decided it was best to start with a safe content and work his way up.

Inside the bright red paper was one of Charles's favourite chocolates. Charles's lips twitched into a smile. He broke the chocolate cream in half. Offering one up to Nicky's lips, he slipped it into his mouth before eating the other half himself.

Charles began to crumple the wrapper in his hand. Nicky put his hand on Charles's wrist. His mouth was full of the sticky cream and chocolate. He couldn't speak. Charles smiled at his predicament and looked at the content of his fist. Unfolding the paper he found what was written on the inside.

Nicky finally managed to swallow down the chocolate. "It's all different things we haven't done but which I thought you might want to do at some point," he explained nervously.

"A massage," Charles said, separating the main idea from the several lines flowing script.

"I took a course a few years ago," Nicky explained.

Charles didn't say anything.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"I passed," Nicky added, just in case that would make a difference.

"And is this voucher valid for just the first day of December?"

Nicky shook his head. "It's just sort of a way of saying if you want to at some point I can, or I don't mind or..."

Charles studied him carefully. "One a day?"

Nicky nodded.

"And if I were to open them all now?"

Nicky glanced at him. "It is not my place to tell my master what he may or may not do."

Charles tapped the little slip of paper on the arm of his chair. Nicky sat on his knee, trying not to look worried by the prospect. As the days of the month went on he'd added a lot of things he wasn't quite so sure he would enjoy. If Charles opened them all now then he could reasonably expect Nicky to do all those things. Not that Nicky wouldn't have done whatever his master suggested regardless of the tree but ... he bit his lip.

"Come on, pet."

Charles set the tree down on the little table next to his chair and led Nicky out of the room and up the stairs. Nicky followed, not sure what Charles intended them to do but very glad Charles hadn't opened the others yet.

"Fetch what you bought for the occasion."

Nicky hesitated.

"You wouldn't offer what you were not willing and able to provide. I assume there will some sort of massage oil involved in the process." Charles began to slip out of his

clothes. Nicky went quickly into the en-suite and retrieved the massage oil he'd bought when he'd compiled the final advent list.

Charles held out his hand. Nicky handed him the oil for his approval. Charles looked him up and down. Nicky got the message. His master was naked and he was still dressed. That was the wrong way around. He slipped quickly out of his clothes, folding them and putting them neatly on a chair.

Charles made his way to the bed. Nicky stopped in the middle of the room to pick up Charles's clothes.

"If they bothered me on the floor, I wouldn't drop them there."

Nicky glanced up at his master. He knew there was a limit to how far Charles would indulge his desire to serve and be useful. Charles would rarely let him clean up after him, but right then, off balance, Nicky needed to feel useful so badly. Nicky caught Charles's eye. He put his shirt back on the floor, where his master dropped it.

Charles hadn't got into the bed yet, Nicky knelt next to the bed to wait until he was ready for him.

"Up in the middle."

Nicky hesitated. "Maybe if you lie down then..."

"You should have been more specific, pet." Charles got onto the bed and knelt on the far side. He raised an eyebrow. "You didn't say who would give the massage and who would receive it."

Nicky shook his head. "You don't have to. I wasn't asking for anything."

"Up in the middle," Charles repeated.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Nicky looked from Charles to the bed like he'd never seen it before. "I..."

"Come to your master, pet."

It was an easy order to follow. Nicky crawled up on the bed to his master's side. Charles guided him to lie face down in the middle of the bed.

"My master wouldn't prefer me to..."

"No, pet, your master wouldn't prefer at all."

Nicky heard Charles move about for a few moments. He jumped when Charles put his hands on his shoulders.

"Relax, pet," Charles chided.

Nicky tried, he really tried, but just lying there while his master did all the work was inherently dominant and he didn't like it at all. He could feel himself getting more and more tense under his master's touch.

Charles's hands left Nicky's body. Charles left the bed. He didn't give Nicky permission to move, so he stayed where he was, wondering why Charles left and if he was coming back. He heard his master walk across to the wardrobe.

He returned a moment later. Charles took hold of Nicky's right wrist and wrapped a leather cuff around it. Looping a chain through the rails on the head board, he put the other cuff around Nicky's left wrist.

Nicky pulled against the restraints. He felt the strength of the leather and metal. He felt the reassurance of his master's strength surround him.

The mattress dipped when Charles got back on the bed. "I am your master, Nicky. I have the right to touch you any way I want, don't I?"

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"Yes, master," Nicky said automatically. He arched his back, pushing his body against the bed sheet as the restraints did their work and caused him to harden against the bed.

"Tonight it pleases me it run my hands all over your skin. I'm going to play with your entire body until I've worked every ounce of tension out of you and you are slick and sleepy all over. You are going to lie very still and let your master do as he pleases, aren't you?"

"Yes, master." Nicky relaxed. The difference between what his master wanted to do and a massage should be obvious to anyone. He was tied up and doing what pleased his master, it was as submissive as anyone could get.

Charles was true to his word. His hands went everywhere. They strayed over every muscle in his back, time and time again. Charles paid special attention to his buttocks, working the firm muscles for what felt like forever. His fingers slipped between Nicky's cheeks, across his hole.

Nicky arched his back further. Spreading his knees, he blatantly offered himself to his master. Charles slipped one, then two fingers past the tight ring of muscle. Nicky pushed eagerly back against them.

Charles took his fingers away. Nicky whimpered his disapproval at the loss. Then Charles leaned over him, lining his body up against Nicky's back.

Nicky understood why he'd lost Charles's fingers. He murmured his apology for the earlier protest.

"You're not allowed to come, pet. Understand?"

Nicky nodded.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Charles slid inside him in one smooth motion. Holding half his weight off Nicky's body, he still presented a solid mass pressing down against him. His body slid marvellously against Nicky's oil slicked skin.

Nicky tried to think about nothing but the fact he couldn't come. It was too important to please his master, especially after everything they'd talked about that evening. He couldn't bear to fail at the one simple task Charles set for him.

He waited Charles out, unable to ignore the pleasure building inside him but trying anyway. When Charles finally came, collapsing against him, Nicky felt all the tension rush out of his own body. He hardly ever managed to outlast Charles, no matter how hard he tried. Nicky smiled as he dropped his head on to the pillow.

"Turn over pet."

Nicky rolled onto his back. The cuffs pulled tighter as the twist in the chain tugged him an inch or two closer to the head board. His erection pointed straight up to the ceiling, begging for stimulation.

He turned his head and looked at his master. Charles sprawled out on the bed next to him, just looking at him for a while when he recovered. He seemed content and quite pleased with his pet. Gradually pushing himself back into motion, Charles poured some massage oil onto his palms and rubbed his hands together.

Nicky frowned.

"I haven't done your front yet, have I, pet?" Charles began to set the omission right. He ran his hands over Nicky's chest. Catching his nipples between slick fingers he pinched firmly

as the nubs slipped from his fingers. He ran his hands over Nicky's arms, up to the cuffs and through his hands, then back down over his ribs and the dip of his abs.

Each leg received separate attention. Nicky let his legs fall apart in invitation, although Charles's fingers stroked across the tightly puckered muscle, he didn't linger there.

He was shaved clean the way Charles always preferred him to be. Charles's oil covered hands slid over his smooth sacs, rolling them between his fingers while they pulled up closer to Nicky's body. Nicky held his breath. There was only one part of his body Charles hadn't explored. He tried to be patient. Without his consent, his hips lifted off the bed. His cock bobbed in the empty air, waving at Charles to get his attention.

Charles wrapped his hand around Nicky's erection. "Is this what you want?"

Nicky bit his lip, trying not to thrust into the loose grip. "Whatever my master wants," he whispered, his voice rough with desire. He gasped for breath.

Charles stroked his cock very slowly, jacking him with the lightest touch.

"Do you have any idea how much I love this, pet? Knowing you are completely under my control? Knowing you can't do anything, you can't even come without your master's permission? I could touch you like this all night and you wouldn't come until I say the word, would you, pet?"

"I would try not to..." Nicky whispered, sure he would fail in the attempt no matter how hard he tried.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"Good boy," his master said. "But since you have been so good, I will allow you to come tonight."

Nicky looked up at him.

Charles held his gaze for a long time before he finally nodded his permission. Nicky immediately came over his hand in a series of long spurts. Charles stroked him through it and kept stroking as Nicky softened in his grip.

He left Nicky there, the oil and semen cooling on his skin, when he went and washed his hands. When he came back, Charles undid the cuffs and allowed Nicky to go and clean himself up.

When Nicky came to the bed, he saw the slip of paper on the bed side table. Smoothing out the creases, he slipped it into the drawer.

"It's a good present, pet."

Nicky blushed at the gentle compliment. "Thank you."

"That's my line."

Nicky looked at the bedside cabinet. "I know you don't ... I understand you are just humouring me but," he ran his finger tips along the handle of the drawer while he framed the rest of the thought in his head. "It means a lot to me that you do—that you let me try to make the holidays good for you."

Charles smiled and turned the blankets back on Nicky's side of the bed so he could join him. He kissed him very softly on the lips before spooning tight behind him to fall asleep.

The scene faded out.

"Where are we going now?"

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"There are many presents left for you to open in the advent. We are moving forward a few weeks to the Christmas Eve."

Charles nodded. He remembered the tree very well. Nicky had been very inventive in his suggestions for the different activities they could add to their sex life. And the Christmas Eve ticket was the only one Charles hadn't cashed in yet.

Nicky forced himself to sit still and not fidget.

His master had taken to the advent tree far better than Nicky ever hoped. It was now an established part of their routine. Just before bed, Charles would sit by the fire and open the little parcel.

Charles offered half the chocolate treat up to his lips, just as he always did.

Nicky took it from his master's hand. His throat was dry. He could hardly swallow the toffee down. Charles turned his attention to the offering written on the wrapper.

"A threesome?" Charles asked.

Nicky nodded. He kept his eyes on the fireplace. If he looked up his master would read too much in his eyes.

"Nicky?"

"Yes, master."

"Look at me."

Nicky reluctantly lifted his gaze.

"Do you want this?" Charles asked, with a nod to the slip of paper.

Nicky nodded.

"You like the idea of another man visiting our bed?" Charles pushed.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

No. Nicky hated the idea. But that wasn't the point. Nicky was well aware Charles loved threesomes—he always had. All his previous lovers seemed to have enjoyed them too. Nicky was the only one who Charles hadn't had that experience with.

As much as he wanted to please his master, he couldn't resist adjusting his plan just a tiny bit. "We could use the guest room?" he suggested tentatively. It would make it easier if their bed was still just theirs.

Charles stroked his hair. He looked at the slip of paper again.

Nicky studied his face, wondering if his master was already picking who should be the first man they added to their sex life. Nicky looked down and closed his eyes. Charles would find it easy to call someone in, half his exes still jumped whenever Charles clicked his fingers. Nicky had already resigned himself to the idea someone might be invited to the house that very night.

Charles handed him the slip of paper. "You can put this in the drawer with the other gifts," he said, "but it won't be cashed in any time soon."

Nicky took it, but hesitated before putting it away as his master said. "You don't like the gift?"

"Your faith in your ability to act is wonderful. But I'm not a fool Nicky—I know you're not interested in this."

Nicky shook his head. "I do want to do this, I just..."

Charles shook his head. "No, you don't. Tell me why you'd offer me a gift you don't want to take part in."

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"A good pet should always do what will please his master. This gift, a third man, it would please you and..."

"I'm very happy with just the two of us. You are a good pet, Nicky. You don't have to do this, or anything else, to prove that to me."

Nicky looked up at his master, hoping to see the truth on his face. Charles looked sincere. All worry of a third man fading from his expression, he smiled up at his master.

Charles watched his pet smile at the younger version of himself like the sun rose and set with him. "He is a very good pet," he agreed.

"A pet who wishes to give his master a Merry Christmas," the spirit said behind him.

Charles looked over his shoulder as the view before him faded away. "He is a good pet, a good man, for twelve months of the year—no better or worse through the holidays than he is in the summer or the autumn or any other time."

"Perhaps he sees the matter differently to you," the spirit suggested.

"If you are waiting for me to say I appreciate his submission or anything else about him more when it comes with an extra dose of tinsel you will be waiting a long time. Real dominance, real anything, does not vary according to messages on greetings cards. Nicky is mine, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week."

He closed his eyes the moment the world around him started to flicker.

"On this day too?" the spirit asked.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

"Yes," Charles said without any doubt, even though his eyes were still closed. He cautiously opened them and looked at the new scene around them. It hadn't changed a great deal. They were still in the bedroom but it was now light outside.

It was still Christmas time though. There was mistletoe hanging over the bed and little red bows decorating everything else. A little stuffed reindeer sat on the dressing table.

Nicky came out of the en-suite dressed to go out. He crossed to the dresser and dug around in the back of the top drawer.

He finally found an old battered wallet. Nicky laid it on the top of the dresser and looked at it for several long minutes. Seeming to reach a decision, he slipped it into his back pocket.

Charles frowned. He stepped closer, wondering what Nicky wanted that old thing for. "Which Christmas is this, spirit?"

"It is last Christmas Eve. You do not permit Nicholas to carry money?" the spirit asked.

"What?" Charles barely looked away from Nicky for a moment. "Of course he has money. He has this money. This is his wallet."

As Charles pointed to it, Nicky picked up the new wallet too, the black leather one with his initials gold embossed on the corner.

"Last year?" Charles thought back to last Christmas. Nicky hadn't mentioned anything to him about wanting anything—although that didn't mean a great deal. Nicky never asked for

anything and when he did, it was inevitably a silly little thing rather than something expensive.

Nicky walked out, fading with each step. "Where is he going?"

"Here."

The room faded away until it morphed into an image of Nicky looking in a shop window. Charles forced his eyes to stay open so he didn't risk missing a single clue that might help him decipher what the hell was going on.

Nicky gave the selection in the window one last look and pushed open the door. A bell rang above his head alerting whoever worked in the jewellery shop to his presence.

A woman stepped out from behind a display cabinet at the back of the shop.

"Good afternoon, sir, how may I help you?"

Nicky forced a smile. The honorific did nothing to settle his nerves. He pushed his hands deep into his pocket. She wasn't being sarcastic. Charles always insisted he have the best of everything. Nicky knew he looked like he belonged in a high end place like this now.

"I'm looking for a ring," he managed to say.

"Excellent, sir. Do you have anything particular in mind?"

"Gold. A plain band."

The woman smiled. "A wedding ring?" she asked.

"A commitment ring." Nicky nodded.

"May I ask the lady's name?"

Nicky offered her a nervous half smile, knowing his answer could make this a very uncomfortable shopping trip but still unwilling to lie. "His name."

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Her smile didn't falter. "Of course, sir. We have a special selection of commitment rings in this case."

Nicky followed her across the room to the display she pointed out to him.

"If I may draw sir's attention to—"

"Nicky," he blurted out.

She looked questioningly at him.

"I'm sorry, I really don't like being called sir. My name's Nicky."

She nodded and pointed out several of the rings. "Do you have any price range in mind, Nicky?"

"Five hundred and seventy six pounds and forty three pence," Nicky said. He'd checked several times over the last few weeks, counting the money in his old wallet while he built up his courage to visit the shop.

She gave him a slightly strange look.

"That's what I've got," he said simply.

She nodded and took a tray out of the cabinet.

Nicky looked from one to the other. "Which one is the best one I can afford?" he asked.

The sales assistant selected one. "This one is part of our Eternal Band range—exclusive to our stores. Eighteen carat gold, the finest craftsmanship."

Eric examined the smooth, polished surface. It felt heavy—solid and substantial. He looked at the box, saw the price tag—five hundred and ninety nine pounds. He handed the ring back to her. "I can't afford this."

The Gift
by Kim Dare

The woman looked from the ring to Nicky and back again. "We do have several payment options where you can spread the cost..." she trailed off when she saw his expression.

"I have five hundred and seventy six pounds and forty three pence," Nicky repeated. "That's not going to change." He was not going to buy Charles's ring with money Charles gave him—just this one time he would give his master something he bought himself from money he had before he came under Charles's protection.

She studied him for several long moments. Nicky refused to look down as if he was ashamed of doing what he knew was right.

"One moment," she said. "I'll speak to my manager."

Nicky nodded.

A moment later she came back.

"Five hundred and seventy six pounds," she beamed at him.

Nicky hesitated. He wanted the ring so badly. It would be the perfect gift to give to his master for Christmas, but still ... "I don't mean to make things difficult for you."

She shook her head. She looked at the ring in his hand. "Yes?"

Nicky bit his lip. He was doing the right thing. He nodded.

"Gift wrapped?"

"No, I'll pack it myself, thank you." He took out his old wallet and emptied it onto the counter.

"Perfect," she announced.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Nicky placed the last few copper coins on the top of the pile. "It feels right. It should go down to the last penny. Do you mind?"

She took the last few coins with the same sort of smile an adult gave a child when they thought the kid was sweet.

Nicky picked up the bag. Folding it up small he put it in his pocket, wrapping his hand tight around the little parcel to keep it safe on the walk home. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Nicky."

Charles paced back and forth across the shop. The spirit stood to one side watching him.

"I want to see who opens the present."

"That is not possible."

"It's a Christmas present. You're supposed to be the ghost of Christmas past. You have to know who he gave the ring to."

"You assume the gift was given?"

"Well, he didn't buy it for himself and he didn't give it to me. Someone else has it."

The spirit took hold of his shoulder.

The scene transformed once more into the familiar sight of their living room back at home. Nicky sat on the floor at his master's feet in front of the fire.

"This is not where I told you to go."

"This is the next stop on our journey."

"If he's screwing around behind my back, I really don't give a damn about the spirit of Christmas or whatever the hell it is you're supposed to be teaching me. I want to know who

The Gift
by Kim Dare

he gave the ring to and if you can't tell me, take me back to the present so I can ask him."

The spirit pointedly turned his back and listened to the hushed conversation by the fire place.

"Do you ever think about things like that, master?" he asked softly. It had taken him all evening to turn the conversation to weddings and commitment ceremonies, but he was finally there.

Charles ran his fingers through his hair. "Like what?"

Nicky rolled his eyes, safe out of master's line of sight. He'd worked bloody hard to get the conversation this far.

"Weddings?" Charles asked, finally catching up. "Hardly, pet."

Nicky looked up at his master for a moment. "I remember you saying when we went to Grant and Michael's ceremony it was a very fine day. You thought the exchanging of rings was very well done." Those were his exact words. Nicky remembered them precisely, they'd been turning over in his mind ever since.

"Did I?" Charles asked, sleepily. "I suppose it was very suitable for them, it certainly made them happy to make a big fuss over everything."

"But you wouldn't like something similar?" Nicky asked.

"That is something you don't have to worry about, pet. The only jewellery I want to see on you is this." His master ran his finger tip over the collar as he spoke.

The touch didn't offer the same reassurance it usually provided. Nicky ran his hand over the leather too. He loved

his collar. He loved it from the moment Charles put it around his neck almost four years ago.

"I am not Grant, pet, and you are not Michael. This collar is more than enough to show what we mean to each other."

Nicky nodded automatically, because he always agreed with what his master said. Charles wasn't Grant. That was true. Grant was a nice guy, but he wasn't half the man his master was. As for Michael, Nicky stared at the floor by his master's feet. Maybe the comparison between him and Michael was wrong for the opposite reason. Maybe in his master's eyes, Nicky wasn't half the man Michael was.

Nicky rested his head on his master's knee.

"Tired, pet?"

Nicky shook his head. Suddenly needing to do more than sit at his master's feet, he put his hand on the inside of Charles's knee in supplication. "Could we?"

"Tell me what you want, pet?" Charles said with a teasing smile.

Nicky shook his head again, he wasn't asking for his own pleasure. He put his finger tips to his lips in silent offering of words he couldn't find while his mind reeled.

Charles looked at him strangely for a moment, as if he could read whatever went on in Nicky's head. Nicky didn't even know what he was thinking himself. All he knew was he had to prove to himself he had something, anything, to offer his master.

Charles stroked his finger tips over Nicky's lips.

"Please?" Nicky whispered, naked need flowed along every word.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Charles nodded. He sat back in the armchair, letting Nicky move his clothing out of the way. Nicky immediately leant in. He knew he should do better. He should take the time and use the tricks and techniques he knew his master liked. But right then his own need was too strong.

He needed to feel his master swelling in his mouth. He had to know his master still wanted him for something, even if only for something as basic as this. He wrapped his lips around his master's shaft, working him feverishly until Charles was hard and leaking pre-cum into his mouth.

Nicky took a deep breath around his master's erection. Some tiny bit of the panic eased inside him. Nothing was wrong. He was still right there with his master. Charles hadn't said he didn't want him to belong to him. His collar was safe. Charles just didn't want anything to change. That wasn't just good, that was essential. Things had to stay exactly as they were forever.

Charles stroked his hair. Nicky slowed his movements and began to pay more attention to what he was doing. Bobbing his head slowly over his master's lap he took him, inch by inch, into his mouth, into his throat. Keeping up a steady rhythm, he let his tongue trace the veins and swirl around the head.

He always loved the way his master felt in his mouth. He loved knowing what he did gave his master pleasure. And in his way, he liked knowing he was good at what he was doing, he could please his master as well as anyone could.

Nicky made it last from there on in.

The Gift
by Kim Dare

Charles made no comment until afterwards. When Nicky finished straightening his master's clothing, Charles tapped his knee, calling him to sit up on his lap. Nicky went willingly, eager to feel wanted.

"And what was that all about, pet?" Charles asked, brushing their lips together.

Nicky blushed. He shrugged. "I just ... what we have, me belonging to you, it is what you want?"

"Of course," Charles said with a frown.

Nicky looked away. He nodded quickly. He shouldn't ask his master that sort of question, a submissive should never fish for compliments or reassurance from his master. If he wanted Charles to say he was pleased with him, it was Nicky's place to please him and hope, not to straight out ask him to say so.

Charles made him look back up. "I don't say that often enough, do I?"

Nicky shook his head. "I didn't mean to..."

"Hush," Charles told him. "Your master is very pleased with his pet." He stroked Nicky's cheek.

"Thank you, master," Nicky said. He offered his master a smile, not wanting to spoil the moment if it were true.

"Go on, up you go. Pack your last present. I will be up in a few minutes."

Nicky slipped off his master's knee and went up the stairs. He took the ring box out of its hiding place in his coat pocket. He looked at it for a long time.

Suddenly he rushed across to the dressing table. He buried the ring in the back of the drawer under clothes neither of

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them ever wore. He slammed the draw shut and leaned against it with his eyes closed while he caught his breath.

Charles did not know about the ring, there was no reason for him to ever know about the ring. Nothing was in danger, his master didn't know about his foolishness, he'd used his own money so there wasn't even a chance Charles would spot it when the credit card statements came through.

Everything was safe. He sat on the floor in front of chest of drawers and took a deep breath. His master still wanted him. He was safe. Everything was fine.

Charles spun around. "Take me back to this Christmas, my Christmas, now!"

The spirit nodded his agreement.

Charles looked back to Nicky, sitting on the floor with his arms wrapped tight around his body like they were the only things keeping his world together in those moments.

He shook his head, unable to understand his own stupidity. How could he have not noticed what Nicky was telling him?

The living room came back into being around him. Charles turned to the door leading to the hallway.

Music began to play. Charles stopped. He looked over his shoulder. Nicky was decorating the tree again.

"Where are we?" He shook his head. "When are we? You said you were taking me back to this Christmas."

"It is this Christmas. It is earlier on this day of your Christmas present."

Charles hesitated. He turned back to Nicky. Nicky was always happy when he decorated the tree. Right then it was important he see his pet happy. He would deal with Nicky

better when he returned to the present if he had a picture of Nicky happy in his head.

Nicky hung one of the baubles on the tree.

"You've outdone yourself this year," Gavin walked in carrying another box of decorations. "Your tree is amazing."

"When I take it down in the New Year, I'll box it up for you," Nicky offered.

"Are you getting a new one for next year?"

Nicky shook his head.

Gavin put the box down next to Nicky. "So what are you going to do instead?"

"Nothing," Nicky whispered.

Gavin laughed. "Yeah, right!"

Nicky forced a smile.

"Bloody hell, you're serious, aren't you?"

Nicky nodded. "It's time I stopped making so much fuss over a children's holiday."

He could feel Gavin watching him very carefully. "Did something happen between you and Charles?"

Nicky looked at the bright red bit of painted glass in his hand. "You mean, did my master tell me I wasn't allowed to decorate next year?" He shook his head. "He has always been very tolerant of all this. It is my decision to stop."

"Why?"

Nicky turned his back on his friend. He looked down into the box of decorations. He'd added some new ones every year, but he'd never actually thrown any out. He picked up a purple ball with white glitter snowflakes scattered across its

surface—one of the ones Charles hung with him a few years ago.

"Because..." he tried to pull his own thoughts together on the matter. He knew how he felt, but he'd never put it into words out loud. "I..." Nicky sighed and set the glass ball down.

Gavin took a seat on the table next to the box of baubles.

"I had this stupid idea in my head," he said softly. "I know it's not the same for you—you don't get attached to the men you screw around with, but since my master brought me to live under his protection—I feel like I've come home—all wrapped up in how safe and happy he makes me feel. You think I'm soppy, don't you?"

Gavin smiled. "I've always thought you were soppy. You've always thought I was a slut—it all probably balances out in the end."

Nicky smiled. The smile turned sad. "I thought I could make my master feel the same. Not all year—I didn't aim that high. But I thought perhaps I could give him nice Christmases, show him what it's really supposed to be about."

"You do!" Gavin protested.

"No," Nicky whispered, hanging a bauble on the tree. "It doesn't mean anything to him. He lets me do it. He's always very tolerant of my little projects, but it doesn't make him happy. It was a stupid idea."

He put another decoration on the tree.

"I get it now. The reason I can't make him feel the way I do is because I'm not him. I'm not my master. It's not in me to make anyone feel that good. I should just be a good pet

and be content he thinks my behaviour is satisfactory enough to keep me around." He offered Gavin a small smile. "I've been very selfish since I came to live with him. All this—it was always all about me and not him. What sort of submissive does all this for themselves without a thought to what his master really wants?"

"So you're going to what?"

"I'm going to start being the sort of pet he deserves—the kind of pet who will put what his master wants first."

Charles spun around. He grabbed the spirit by the neck. "My time. Now. I don't know if you are immortal, but if you don't take me back to the exact second you took me from right now, you are about to find out!"

The world shifted. Charles stumbled back into the present. He looked around the room. It was definitely the right time. He let the spirit go. The spirit collapsed, coughing and rubbing his neck. Charles strode to the bottom of the stairs.

"Nicky!"

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Chapter Four

Nicky jumped as his master's voice bellowed up the stairs. The last bit of sticky tape on his last present went wonky. He frowned at it. He thought he could give Charles some sort of perfect Christmas—he couldn't even pack one damn present right.

"Nicky!"

Putting the present quickly to one side he hurried out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Stepping into the living room, he looked immediately to his master.

A movement on the other side of the room caught his attention. He turned towards it, thinking some part of his decorations was falling apart and Charles called him down to fix something that collapsed on his head.

A man in a short white toga stood on the far side of the room.

Nicky took a step back towards the door. He clamped his hands over his exposed privates. "I'm sorry, master. I didn't realise we have company. I'll..." he took another step back, attempting to retreat from the room without turning and showing his bare backside to the stranger.

He didn't recognise him as one of Charles's friends, or even an acquaintance. Even as he retreated, the uncomfortable idea that he was more than either of those things to his master presented itself for his consideration.

Charles grabbed his arm, pulling him back into the room.

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The threesome slip still lay uncashed in the drawer of the bed side cabinet. Nicky knew the day would come when Charles wanted them to add a third, he just hadn't expected it to be today—not when his world already felt like it was falling apart.

Nicky looked up at Charles, ready to apologise for not realising why the other man was there as soon as he walked in. Then he saw the anger in his master's face—a far more fierce reaction than his confusion should have caused.

"Master?"

"There is a jewellery box in the back of the third drawer on the dresser. Fetch it."

Charles let go of his arm.

Nicky took a step back. Charles didn't know about the ring, he couldn't know about it. "I..."

"Go. Now!" Charles commanded.

Nicky looked from him back to the other man. "May I dress while I-?"

"What?" Charles frowned. "No. That's not important. Come straight back."

Nicky backed out of the room and raced up the stairs. He went straight to the dresser and opened the third drawer. He studied the content carefully. The clothes weren't disturbed. He pushed past them until he found the ring.

He closed his eyes for a moment, wrapping his fingers tight around the box. How had Charles known it was there?

Nicky forced his eyes open. As much as he longed for a few moments to think, Charles wasn't in any mood to wait. He looked across at his clothes folded neatly on the chair,

then at the robe hanging on the back of the door. No, Charles wasn't in any mood for disobedience either.

He made his way back down stairs. On his way in, he cast another look at the man on the other side of the room.

Nicky forced himself to walk into the room as if he was comfortable being naked in the room with a stranger. Charles didn't usually show off his dominance over him in front of other people. Nicky hadn't really thought about how everything would work with a third. He didn't even know if his master would expect him to submit to the other man as if he were a second master. The thought did nothing to settle his nerves.

Nicky stood before Charles, his grip white knuckled on the ring box.

His master held out his hand, palm up.

Nicky stared at it. He knew what his training demanded he do. He should kneel before his master and present the item he'd been sent to retrieve. His knees wouldn't bend. He couldn't do it.

Charles beckoned to him, demanding the ring be placed in his hand.

Nicky looked over his shoulder, as if looking at him hard enough would make the man disappear. "Master?" he whispered.

"Give me the box."

Nicky looked down. If he could just speak to his master in private for a few moments ... If this mess didn't have to happen in front of a stranger...

"Nicky!"

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Charles hardly ever raised his voice to him.

Nicky put the box in his hand.

Charles temper seemed to even out. He inspected the ring box quite calmly, but Nicky's emotions only went more and more haywire by the moment. He closed his eyes.

"I didn't mean anything by it, master," he whispered.

"And what did you mean by not giving it to me?" Charles asked.

Nicky looked down, but Charles slipped his knuckle under his chin and made him look up. Nicky tried not to meet his eyes, but in the end he had no choice.

His master looked sad. That was even worse than angry.

"I'm sorry," Nicky said, as if an apology could make any difference.

"You should be."

Nicky tried to look away.

Charles suddenly pulled him in close, burying his hands in Nicky's hair and holding him tight. Nicky tucked his face into Charles's neck, still not understanding what was going on, but desperate to be held anyway. Charles's arms wrapped strong and tight around him. He could barely breathe. It felt amazing.

"You have three weeks to arrange everything."

Nicky frowned into his master's shoulder. "I don't understand, master." But there was only one thing Charles could possibly mean, Nicky bit back a weak little noise in the back of his throat. He pulled away, unable to fully accept his master's comfort now he was so sure it was going to be denied to him so soon.

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What else could Charles mean but that he only had three weeks to find a new master? Nicky forced himself to nod his understanding. Tears sprang to his eyes. He turned his face away so his master wouldn't see them. Charles had been very kind to him, kinder than he deserved. To react badly now would only show how ungrateful he was for that kindness.

He closed his eyes. He'd left it one Christmas too late to change the way he behaved over the holiday. He'd tried his master's patience too far and the ring was the final straw.

Taking a step back, Nicky tried to retreat from the room. His master held onto his wrist.

"Is there some way I can serve you, master?" Nicky flinched, unsure if he had any right to use that title any more.

He wasn't even sure if Charles intended to keep him in the house any longer. Three weeks to arrange everything might mean Charles would provide him with enough money to keep himself for three weeks after he had to leave, the way his last master did not so many Christmases ago.

Charles dropped his wrist. Before Nicky could pull away, Charles put his hand either side of his face and tilted his head back to look him in the eyes. Nicky couldn't avoid his gaze.

Charles stared into his expression for a long time, never letting him look away. "Tell me what you are thinking, pet."

"Nothing..." Nicky whispered. The thoughts swirling in his head made no sense. He couldn't babble that nonsense to his master.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Charles asked.

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Nicky frowned. The question made no sense. "If it makes my master happy, it is what I want." It was always a safe answer.

"No! If I ask you what you want, you tell me what you want. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. You don't know what I want. Tell me is this what you want."

Nicky pulled away as if Charles slapped him. He always tried—even when he got it all wrong, he always tried. If nothing else, he thought his master knew that. "All I have ever wanted is to please my master. If it pleases you to send me away then..."

"What!" Charles's grip tightened on Nicky's arm. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Nicky stared at his master in confusion. "You said I had three weeks to find a new master."

"I have never spoken of any other man as your master," Charles said.

Nicky saw the anger bubbling inside him again but he didn't know how to fix it. He looked hopelessly up at Charles. "You said..."

"You have three weeks to arrange this!" Charles held the ring box up.

Nicky tried to follow. "I ... You mean you want to ... You're asking me to..."

"No," Charles said. "I'm not asking you anything—I am telling you. In three weeks I expect you to have made all the arrangements."

"I don't understand," Nicky complained.

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Charles stroked his hair back so gently. "A whole year, pet. How could you hide this for a whole year and not tell your master you were hurting?"

Nicky's eyes flashed back up to his master's for a moment, not understanding. He shuffled his bare feet on the carpet as he considered what to say. "I shouldn't have bought it in the first place. It's just—you said about the ceremony we went to and I got carried away. I didn't think about if it was appropriate for a submissive until afterwards, and then it was too late."

"When I told you this was all we needed to show what we have?" Charles said, stroking his fingers along Nicky's collar.

Nicky looked down. "I should have thought about it properly. I know masters do not marry their submissives. Men do not marry their pets. You let me belong to you and that's more than enough. I don't need anything else." He glanced at the ring.

"That's too bad, because you will be married to me, Nicky. And we're going to have a formal collaring ceremony too."

"What?" Nicky blinked at his master, trying to follow.

"A formal collaring. What we should have had years ago."

"You said you didn't want one," Nicky reminded him, hopelessly trying to keep up with his changing master.

Charles smiled down at him. "Not while you came within an inch of hyperventilating at the thought of being the centre of attention and everyone staring at you. But if you can stand up and take your vows in a marriage ceremony, you can kneel and take them in a kink club as well."

"I..."

"Just nod and say 'yes master'," Charles told him.

Nicky nodded, hopelessly grateful for a clear order to follow. "Yes, master."

"And then you will forget this foolishness about only being a pet. When have I ever said you were *only* anything?"

Charles pulled him close. "You are everything, Nicky," he whispered in his ear. "Do not ever doubt how much I want you in my life—just the way you are, with Christmas and everything else."

Nicky leaned into his master's shoulder, wrapping his arms around Charles's waist in turn. Past his master he saw the reflection of all the tiny lights. "We don't have to do all this. It's not important." Only being here like this with his master was important.

"You wouldn't be you without Christmas," Charles corrected. "And while you are right that I feel no differently about you when you come with an extra dose of holly, it is only because I love you every day of the year. You do know I love you, pet?"

Nicky bit his lip. Charles wouldn't say those words if they weren't really true. "Would it be appropriate for a pet to say such a thing to his master?" he asked softly.

Charles nodded his permission.

"I do love you," Nicky whispered into his shoulder.

"I know you do, pet." Charles kissed his temple. "I know you do."

Nicky closed his eyes and rested against his master. Charles's hand stroked his back, soothing him down from his panic.

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"Are you mad at me?" Nicky finally asked.

"Yes. Furious. I can't look after you properly if you hide things from me, pet. It's not to happen again."

Nicky nodded. He could stay. He snuggled closer into his master's hold and felt his master's smile against his hair.

"Good pet," Charles whispered.

That little bit of praise gave Nicky the courage to approach a rather delicate matter. "Master?"

"Yes?"

"Who is the man standing by the sofa?"

"You can see him?"

Nicky hesitated. Why wouldn't he be able to ... "Um ... Yes?"

"He answers to the name of Spirit of Christmas Past," Charles said.

Nicky tried to pull away. Charles teased him about some of his Christmas traditions, but he was never cruel about it. He wouldn't pick this moment to make a joke out of him. Nicky met his master's eye. Charles looked serious.

"How else could I know about the ring? I saw you hide it. Just like I saw you tell that appalling brat about cancelling your Christmas next year. And while we are on the subject—how the hell did you think you would explain that to me?"

Nicky shrugged. "I thought you would be pleased I stopped making so much fuss."

"I'd have been terrified you were ill."

He held Nicky even closer.

Nicky smiled and sneaked a glimpse of the spirit over his shoulder. The spirit was looking distinctly uncomfortable, but

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it didn't change the fact he was quite pretty and exactly his master's type. "I thought he was your choice for the last voucher," he confessed to his master.

Charles showed him the ring box. "And the bit about forsaking all others doesn't appeal to you?"

Nicky bit his lip. It appealed a hell of a lot, but, "It's something you enjoy—three men all pleasing each other."

"If you say one word about my being your master giving me the right to force you to—"

Nicky shook his head. He knew Charles wouldn't force him into anything. That was why Charles hadn't introduced the idea before. Nicky worried his lip between his teeth. "Perhaps it is something it would be best to do now, so it is done?"

"It doesn't have to be done at all."

Nicky snuck another look at the man over Charles's shoulder. "I would like to know what my master enjoyed doing so much," he thought about the statement and added carefully, "when he was a bachelor."

Charles chuckled at the not so subtle hint he had the next three weeks to get threesomes out of his system. "Perhaps your master doesn't want to share someone he loves with a third man."

Nicky loved that Charles said it. He loved the idea that he meant more to his master than any of his previous lovers—that he was special to Charles. At the same time, he knew he wouldn't rest easy until he at least tried it. And what made all the difference, to him at least ... "He is not a man, he is a spirit."

He could almost read the thoughts rushing through his master's mind. The spirit was not a real man, he would not last, and he would never see either of them again. He was the perfect choice for a threesome.

"You want this? Don't lie to me, pet."

Nicky took a deep breath, making sure he was completely committed to the idea in his own mind before he gave Charles his answer. Nicky nodded. "I want this."

"For me or for you?"

"For both of us," Nicky said. "And for him. If he brought me back to my master, it is right I should thank him."

Charles stroked his hair back. "This one time and never again."

Nicky nodded.

Now it was decided, he had no idea what he was supposed to do first, no idea what would be expected of him. He realised that while it would be the obvious way to equal his master's previous lovers, it was also a damn good way to make a fool of himself. Nicky started to doubt himself.

Charles made him look up. "You may offer him your mouth. You may not offer him more. You may not swallow. Your safe word is 'sir'—if you say 'sir' I will see everything stops."

Nicky smiled up at his master, feeling so much safer now he knew what Charles expected of him.

"If you want this, you have to go to him," Charles said. "It has to be your choice."

Nicky took a deep breath. He turned to the Spirit of Christmas Past.

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The spirit caught his eye. He shifted nervously on the other side of the room. "He cut short the journey through Christmas Pasts. I won't be called back to the spirit world for another half an hour," the spirit explained, casting an accusing glare at Charles.

Nicky walked across the room until he stood directly in front of the spirit. Standing on tip toe, he pressed a kiss to the spirit's cheek. "Thank you for bringing us back together."

The spirit swallowed rapidly. "I ... you are welcome."

"I would like to thank you properly," Nicky said softly. "Will you let me do that, spirit?"

The spirit tried to take a step back. The sofa was behind him, he half turned, but the moment of surprise was enough to set him off balance. Nicky leaned up against him and very gently brushed his lips against the spirit's mouth.

It wasn't his master. The thought flashed across his mind in huge red letters. He was kissing someone who wasn't his master. That was wrong. He took half a step back. The spirit stayed very still, his eyes closed. Nicky watched him for a long time before his eyes blinked open.

"Has anyone ever kissed you before, spirit?" Nicky asked.

The spirit shook his head. He blushed. Clearing his throat he took another step back. "You are welcome."

Nicky smiled up at him. "That was barely the start of the thank you."

The spirit hesitated.

Moving slowly, giving the spirit plenty of time to back away, he trailed his hand along the spirit's side. He felt very

solid, very human. "Are you like a man in all ways?" Nicky asked.

The spirit's blush deepened, but he didn't need to answer out loud.

The folds of his toga were already tenting over his erection. Nicky smiled. "Have you ever been kissed here?" he asked, trailing his fingers over the fabric covering the spirit's shaft.

The spirit made no objection to the action. Nicky carefully wrapped his hand around the length of this shaft, leaving the thin material still separating them.

He pushed forward into Nicky's hand. Nicky was about to kneel when he stalled. He couldn't kneel to a man who wasn't his master. He kissed the spirit again, bidding for time while he tried to work out what to do.

The spirit's eyes drifted closed, but Nicky kept his open. He saw Charles step close behind the spirit, into the small space between the spirit and the back of the sofa. The spirit jerked under Nicky's hands as Charles lined his body up behind his. His eyes flashed open in sudden panic.

Charles kissed the spirit's neck. "Have you ever taken another man inside your body?" he asked softly.

The spirit rapidly shook his head.

"That's what will happen if you say 'yes'. I will lodge myself here." Charles stroked his hand up under the spirit's short toga. "Nicky will put his mouth here." His hand trailed around under the white fabric and wrapped his fist around the spirit's erection with none of the gentle approach Nicky adopted. "What is your answer, spirit, do you want this?"

The spirit dropped his head back onto Charles's shoulder. "I'm going to get into so much trouble over this."

Charles smiled at Nicky over the spirit's shoulder. "Sounds like a 'yes' to me."

Charles led the way to the guest room. He caught Nicky's hand on the way up the wide staircase and squeezed his fingers in silent reassurance as he pushed open the door into the guest room. Nicky forced himself not to hesitate on the threshold. He wanted this. Still, trying to make the mental leap from never even thinking about having sex with anyone but Charles to falling into bed with someone he wouldn't have believed existed a few hours ago, made him nervous.

Nicky glanced at the spirit. He looked even more nervous than him. Nicky offered the spirit a reassuring smile as they joined him to stand at the edge of the bed.

Charles wasted no time with preliminaries. The toga was barely held together by a few clips and pins. They were gone in moments. A gentle nudge backwards and the spirit lay sprawled naked on the bed.

Nicky crawled across the mattress to him. While his master hadn't shared him with another man before, Nicky was well aware Charles loved the sight of two men enjoying each other's bodies. He kissed the spirit, guiding him to lie back comfortably on the mattress.

If the spirit did not have the strength and muscular bulk of his master, then he was still well-built, with a fine torso of sculpted lines. It was strange to explore another man's body, but it got easier as Nicky got used to it. He ran his hands over

the spirit's skin, enjoying the way his touch affected the spirit.

He was so innocent and untried, so responsive to every finger tip trailing over his body. Both Charles and the spirit followed his every movement over the spirit's skin. Nicky bit his lip, realising Charles took more pleasure in watching him with the spirit than he would probably gain from topping the spirit when the time came.

He looked to his master. Charles smiled at him. Leaning over, he brushed their lips together. It looked like a gentle touch, beneath the surface his tongue thrust hungrily into Nicky's mouth. The spirit could not see that, it was theirs, their private moment in a shared bed.

Nicky smiled when Charles broke the kiss. The spirit watched them, slack jawed. Nicky turned back to him and kissed him. Nicky had rarely taken the lead with any lover—certainly not with his master. It felt awkward at first to feel in charge of everything, to be the man guiding the novice rather than the novice himself.

The spirit gradually relaxed and began to return Nicky's caresses with tentative touches of his own. He didn't have Charles's way about him. His hands felt pleasant on Nicky's skin, but there was nothing special about his touch.

A finger tip trailing along his spine sent a shockwave straight through him. Nicky looked over his shoulder at his master. Charles's touch always felt different. Nicky tried to hold back a shiver as he kissed his way down the spirit's body.

When he reached the spirit's erection, Nicky carefully wrapped his lips around the tip. He'd always liked going down on men, even before he came to his master. There was something about it that always made his own arousal peak, but the spirit wasn't used to the sensations as Charles was. His hips bucked wildly, Nicky only just managed to ride out the motion.

The spirit put his hand on the back of Nicky's head.

Nicky forced himself to stay still and not panic. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"He doesn't like anyone's hand on the back of his head," Charles said for him.

Nicky opened his eyes and looked up at them both.

The spirit took his hand away. "I'm sorry, I..."

Charles took the spirit's hand and softened the correction by leading it back to Nicky's neck. "He likes you to touch him here."

He guided the spirit's fingers to trail along his neck, underneath his ear, to touch the sensitive little spot which made a shiver run down Nicky's spine. He gasped, sucking firmly around the spirit's cock.

The spirit groaned his pleasure.

A few moments later, Nicky felt another hand on the back of his head, a more familiar touch that didn't make him feel panicked. He looked up at his master.

"You said..." the spirit whispered to Charles.

"I am not just anyone," Charles said simply, "I am his master."

Nicky blushed at the truth in the statement.

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As much as he wanted to please the spirit, he couldn't quite make the stranger his first priority. He couldn't help but tilt his head at a certain angle to give his master the best view of his mouth sliding over the spirit's cock.

He knew Charles didn't miss a moment of it. His eyes absorbed every detail of it and Nicky knew in that moment Charles meant it when he said this would be the first and the last time. Charles wouldn't share him again. Because as much as he could see the enjoyment in Charles's expression, he could also see the possessiveness in his eyes, and feel the possessiveness in the hand on the back of his head.

Nicky slid his mouth up until he could slip his tongue out and flicker over the spirit's foreskin. Nicky looked up at him. The spirit was watching him just as intently as his master, but with far more confused arousal on his face.

Charles's grip tightened on his hair, tugging slightly to get his attention. Nicky looked up to his master. Charles put a hand on the spirit's waist. Nicky saw his intention.

If he didn't do something soon, he would go insane watching Nicky go down on another man. Paranormal or not, the spirit was in his place and he didn't like it at all. The memory of the other times he'd shared his bed with two or more partners began to fade in his memory.

If the spirit was a real man, Charles knew he wouldn't be able to take it any longer, he would have to call it off. He would have to pull Nicky away from the third man and mark his territory.

For now, for the half an hour the spirit would exist in this world, he could just about convince himself to share. The

marking could come later. He trailed his fingers over Nicky's collar, bringing both their attentions to the strip of leather, reminding Nicky who he belonged to.

When Nicky moved, to take a new position which would allow Charles room behind the spirit, the spirit didn't need coaxing. He turned quickly onto his side, eager to keep his cock enveloped in Nicky's hot wet mouth. Charles slid close behind him, letting his erection settle snugly between the spirit's buttocks.

The spirit tensed for a moment. Nicky dipped his head lower, until the top of the spirit's shaft must have slipped into his throat. The spirit clearly forgot about anything else.

Charles grabbed the lube off the bed side table. He held it in his hand for a few long moments, forcing himself to let it warm in his hand so it would feel more pleasant against the spirit's skin.

Leaning back, he slipped his hand between his cock and the spirit's buttocks. He was as tight as any inexperienced human, but he relaxed very quickly around his fingers when Charles slipped slid one and then two fingers into the tightly puckered hole.

The spirit pushed himself forward into Nicky's mouth. Without a hand on the back of his head, Nicky could ride the movements out easily enough. It wasn't really the spirit moving now anyway—it was his fingers pushing the spirit into Nicky's mouth.

Eventually, Charles judged the spirit ready and lined himself up against the spirit's back.

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"Say yes." He whispered in the spirit's ear, but it was Nicky's eyes he met, over his shoulder. Nicky let the spirit slip from between his lips.

"Yes," the spirit moaned, trying to push back against Charles's erection and forward into Nicky's mouth at the same time.

Nicky met his master's eyes and whispered, "Yes."

Charles thrust forward, burying himself inside the spirit in one easy motion. The spirit froze. Charles and Nicky did the same, waiting him out. Gradually he started to breathe again, to move again. He wriggled between them, trying to get more stimulation without knowing how to.

Charles didn't waste any time setting his rhythm. He put his hand back on Nicky's head, guiding him into a complimentary motion. Nicky murmured his approval of his master's touch, deep in the back of his throat. The vibrations would be wonderful. Charles thrust harder into the spirit.

The spirit pushed back, enjoying the roughness. He wasn't Nicky, Charles was willing to be a little bit rough if the spirit thought he could take it, but he wasn't going to trust the spirit's control too far. Charles tugged at Nicky's hair until he got the message and kissed his way back up the spirit's body, replacing his mouth with his hand. He didn't want the spirit in Nicky's mouth when he came.

Freed from any obligation to hold back, Charles pushed the spirit hard and fast into Nicky's receptive hand. In moments, the spirit's muscles tightened around him. His grip on Nicky's shoulder turned white knuckled too. The idea he could hurt

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Nicky, by accident or design, was enough to kill any chance Charles had of coming right then.

The spirit climaxed into Nicky's hand. Almost at the same instant, he began to fade away. Everywhere he touched Charles's skin tingled. He reached past the spirit and took a firm grip on Nicky's arm, just in case he should get caught up in whatever was calling their third man away from them.

Nicky looked enchanted. Charles turned his attention to the spirit. He sparkled all over with dozens of little points of light as he became more and more translucent.

"Merry Christmas, spirit," Nicky said with a smile.

Whatever the spirit would have said in return was lost. The spirit vanished.

"Wasn't he supposed to say something about remembering the spirit of Christmas and keeping it all through the year?" Charles asked.

"I think he was a little bit distracted," Nicky said with a shy smile. His eyes dropped in submission as he came completely back to his master. Then his expression dropped too. "You didn't come."

"Neither did you," Charles pointed out.

"I know but..."

Charles stroked his cheek. "I could have if I wanted to, but I'm not inclined to wait out my recovery time before I remind you who you belong to."

He rolled over Nicky, pushing his pet onto his back and looming over him. He thrust his tongue into Nicky's mouth, reclaiming the space the spirit occupied until so recently. His

tongue swirled in his mouth, wiping away any trace of the spirit's touch. Nicky was his.

Nicky clutched at his shoulders, ran his hands over Charles's back, pulling his weight down on top of him. Charles let a little more of his muscle mass press down against his lover, but he wasn't quite willing to suffocate Nicky to prove his point.

When Charles pulled away, Nicky gasped from breath and grasped for his body, reaching out to Charles. Charles grabbed his wrist and pulled him up off the bed. "I want you in our bed."

Nicky hurried to keep up, tumbling off the bed and barely keeping his feet as Charles dragged him back to their bedroom. Slamming the door behind him, Charles pinned Nicky to the door.

"Never again," he whispered against Nicky's lips.

Nicky returned the kiss, never denying his master entry into his mouth. When Charles broke the kiss, Nicky bit his lip, looking up at his master. "I wouldn't mind."

Charles frowned at him. His grip on Nicky's tightened, until he knew it would leave a mark, maybe just so it would leave a little mark and stake his claim to Nicky. He studied Nicky's eyes. There was a light in there he hadn't seen there for a long time.

Someone else put the light there. That was not acceptable. Charles didn't give a damn if the spirit no longer existed in the real world, Nicky wasn't supposed to want him...

Charles pushed down his jealousy and really looked at Nicky. "You just like me feeling jealous. You're getting off on

me hating the thought of anyone else ever touching you. You little..."

Nicky cast a nervous look up at him.

Charles shook his head, grinning down at him. He pulled Nicky back close and whispered in his ear, "If you had any idea how many guys I've warned away from you over the years, you'd come in your pants."

Nicky smiled against his shoulder. "I'm not wearing any."

That was certainly true, Nicky pressed against him, bare from tip to toe. Their erections brushed against each other, trapped between their bodies, curving up towards their stomachs.

Charles brushed their lips together. "I want you, now."

Nicky nodded. Smiling an invitation, he took Charles's hand and walked backwards towards the bed. Charles followed him, wondering what his pet had in mind.

Without hesitation, Nicky crawled onto the mattress and lay down, with his back to Charles, inviting him to spoon behind him. Nicky rarely asked for anything specific, but the look he cast over his shoulder was a clear hope Charles wouldn't decide on something different.

Charles lay down behind him. Nicky immediately put his hand back behind him, pulling him closer. He guided Charles's arm around him, not down to jack him off, but just around him. Charles got the idea, he held his pet close. He pressed a kiss to Nicky's neck. A few lube slick moments later he slid inside him.

The position forced them to go slow, barely rocking together a few inches at a time. Charles trailed his lips over

Nicky's neck. "Do you have any idea how amazing you are?" he whispered.

Even at this angle, he could see the blush stain Nicky's cheek at the simple compliment. Nicky closed his eyes, his lashes fanned down over his cheeks. He threaded their fingers together, pulling Charles closer still.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," Nicky whispered softly.

"Forever," Charles agreed.

On edge as they both were after their time with the spirit, it didn't take much longer before they came, Nicky first and Charles a moment later. Charles didn't rush away. He held Nicky closer than ever, feeling every moment of his heart rate returning to normal and his breathing even out.

They didn't spend enough time doing that, just savouring each other's bodies. Even after Charles let Nicky go and turned him around in his arms. He couldn't stop touching Nicky, running his hands over Nicky's body, not to tease or excite, just to enjoy touching the man he loved.

He didn't say it often enough either. It always seemed like such a stupid thing to say, as if he were stating the obvious for no other reason than form demanded he do so. He frowned as he realised just how rarely he said anything like that.

"What you said earlier, master, we really don't have to," Nicky offered.

"Have to what?"

"The ring and everything," Nicky said.

"We will do everything." Charles said firmly. "Although you will have to pick out a different ring."

Nicky nodded. He looked down, but a moment later he snuck another glance at his master. "Maybe you should choose them both, you know best what you would like and..."

"You will choose."

Nicky bit his lip. "Maybe if I knew what you didn't like about the last one?" he suggested.

Charles stroked his hair back. "Your choice was not the problem, your method of payment was."

Nicky frowned. He nodded, but it was an automatic nod, which said Charles was the master and Nicky would agree even when Charles was wrong.

"I can't accept something this important being bought with another man's money, pet," Charles said as gently as he could.

"I didn't mean to take control or..."

"Hastings's money has no place in our relationship," he said more firmly. No one else had any place in their relationship.

Nicky hesitated, watching his fingers draw patterns on his master's skin. "It wasn't his money," he blurted out suddenly. "I know I should have been more careful and made the money he gave me last, but ... well, when I agreed to belong to him, I forgot to tell him about an old savings account I opened before I had a master."

The colour on Nicky's cheek told its own story. He'd forgotten because he hadn't really trusted Hastings to provide for him.

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Nicky took a deep breath. "After he moved away I ran out of the money he left me. I remembered about the old account and I cashed it in and the wallet was what I had left from that..."

Charles stroked Nicky's hair, the long blond strands trailing through his fingers. Nicky hadn't kept anything hidden in back up when he came under his protection. He'd even used the last of the money Charles insisted remain entirely his to buy the ring for him. Nicky really did trust him in a way Hastings had never seen sight of.

Nicky was his.

"The ring is perfect," he decided.

Nicky offered him a small smile. It was obvious he didn't really understand why Charles changed his mind, but he was certainly glad his master was willing to accept his gift.

The faint sound of the grandfather clock in the hall striking twelve and welcoming the new day, drifted into the bedroom.

Charles listened to the chimes ring one by one. It wasn't the most important thing, it wasn't a day when he loved Nicky more than any other. But if it made Nicky happy to think this day was somehow more important than all the others in the calendar, Charles wasn't going to make his pet unhappy by disagreeing.

It was important to Nicky. That made it important.

He brushed their lips together and said something he'd never got around to saying to Nicky before.

"Merry Christmas, pet."

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About the Author

Kim is 25 years old, from a small town in South Wales.

After writing for years, Kim is finally editing some of the stories to share with the rest of the world. Kim writes both male/male and male/female stories that range from the dark and paranormal right through to the lighter, funnier side of life.

The only thing every story contains is a happy ever after for the two (or more!) characters that deserve it most. Oh, and kinky sex—there's always plenty of that too—but Kim takes no responsibility for any of that. It's all the characters' fault. Honest...

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