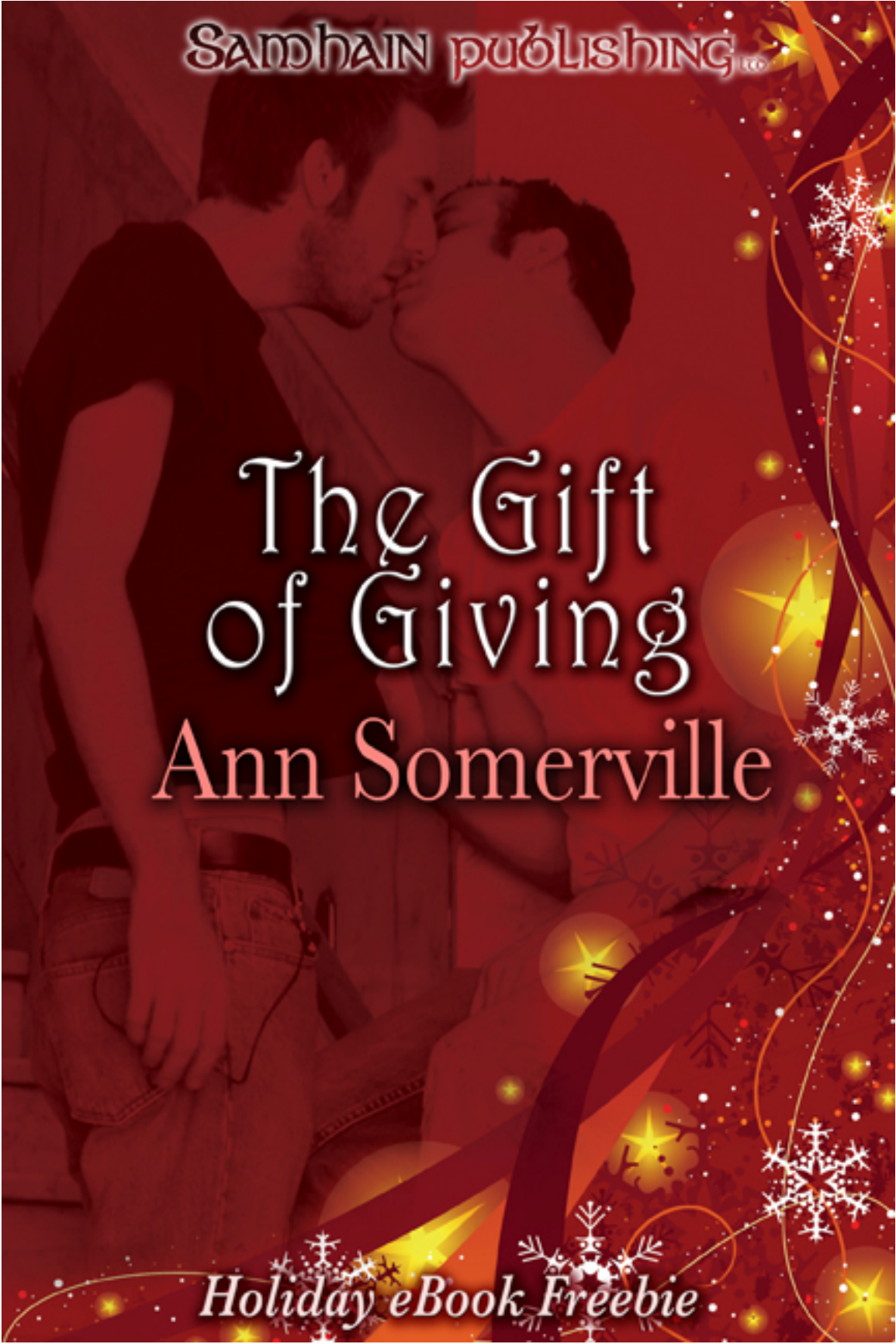




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The Gift
of Giving
Ann Somerville

Holiday eBook Freebie

The Gift of Giving

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Jamie long ago decided he hated Christmas.

Actually, he didn't hate *Christmas*. He wasn't Scrooge. He quite liked the lights, and the carol singing, when it was done well. He loved the food. He even liked the weather, so long as it was properly cold.

But he hated all the *stuff* about Christmas. The ads on TV. The muzak. The relentless consumerism. Christmas cards. [That bloody Slade song](#).

He despised the forced cheer. The forced gift giving. The forced solitude while all his friends headed off out of London to their families. The fact his architectural firm closed down for two weeks over the holiday period, leaving him without any useful occupation at the most expensive time of the year to travel, or anyone to have a drink with, visit, or shag.

He hadn't always felt this way. He distinctly remembered being excited about Christmas mornings, and presents, and Mum and Dad being nice, at least until Dad had a few drinks and Mum got sour about the mess and all the cooking. Those had been better than the ones after his parents had stopped talking altogether, and definitely not as miserable as those after she'd left to shack up with a carpenter in Poland. He'd enjoyed the first Christmas with Justin, but the second one was the day they'd broken up and he'd spent all day locked out of the flat, in the cold and without his wallet. That was nearly as bad as the one he'd spent in hospital having his appendix out, or the Christmas when he'd been mugged by a bastard in a Santa hat and had endured hours in A&E, as well as talking to resentful cops who wanted to be home eating turkey and not taking his details.

He'd had the flu three times over Christmas, food poisoning and an overflowing toilet, the adult equivalent of coal in your Christmas stocking. If he hadn't been an atheist, he'd have been sure someone up there had been sending him some kind of message.

For years he'd clung to the *idea* of Christmas, until he realised waiting for that mythical Christmas spirit like a little kid actually made it all so horrible. So now he planned his survival a month ahead. He stocked up on DVDs, books, and booze, did a mammoth shop at least a week early, and the day the office closed down for those two weeks was when Project 'Ignore Jinglebells' began. There would be no television until the day after Boxing Day, and no shops either. He couldn't avoid all the Kris Kringling, but he'd damn well miss as much as he could manage.

Being so perfectly prepared, one of the little pleasures he derived from this irritating time of year was touring around with not a care in the world—no presents to buy, no special meals to cook, no travel arrangements to be screwed up by what he persisted in calling [British Rail](#)—and visiting a few places that held only nice memories for him. Have Oyster Card, will travel. Last year, it had been three of his favourite Wren churches—wells of beauty and solitude among the bustling madness of London at Christmas—and this year, he'd promised himself the British Museum.

As any Londoner knew, the trick to surviving a visit to the BM at high tourist time—or just about any other—was to leave the backpacks at home, avoid anything to do with mummies or the Rosetta stone, and eat somewhere else. The food was great, the waiting and noise were not, and he didn't intend to spend his day of pleasure being deafened by foreigners.

He ducked into the [Reading Room](#) because he simply could not miss it, and stood in respectful wonder as he gazed up at the magnificent ceiling. It evoked in him the feelings that had led him into architecture in the first place—the magic of beautiful places that worked, enriching the spirit while doing the job they were designed for. Even gutted of most of its collection and standing only as a reminder of what it had been, this room still spoke of learning and the desire for humane enlightenment.

With a sigh, he turned and aimed for the oriental galleries at the rear of the museum. It meant passing through the gallery on living and dying, a place he usually rushed through, the wooden figures too crude and creepy to linger over, and the theme just a little too weird for him. He rarely saw more than a handful of people in there, so maybe everyone else felt the same.

But this time, someone was taking more than a slight interest in...what the hell was that thing?

"It's a [hentakoi](#). From the Nicobar Islands."

The speaker gave him a sweet smile, looking up at him from his low stool and his sketchpad. Jamie hadn't realised he'd spoken out loud. "That's the single most hideous object I've ever seen."

The hentakoi thing, not the guy. The guy was...bloody hell. Hot. Short dark hair, green eyes, *amazing* cheekbones—and a discreet ear stud of linked Mars symbols.

Jamie realised he was staring. He made himself smile back. "Why are you drawing it?"

"Because it's so ugly, it's fascinating."

The guy didn't seem to mind his curiosity, so Jamie looked over his sketch. "That's very nice work."

Another wide, open smile. "Thank you. It's only for reference. I find it better than photos."

"You draw for a living?"

"Paint, draw, whatever they need. I'm a graphic artist."

If this was an example of a reference piece, then this guy had serious talent to go with those looks. "Architect," he said, pointing at himself. "You're good."

"I'm not bad. For some things."

"You come here a lot?"

Jamie winced inwardly at the cheesy line, but the guy didn't seem to notice. "On and off. The firm's on Christmas break now, so I'm catching up."

"That's why I'm here. Christmas sucks."

The guy just shrugged and added a careful bit of shading to his drawing. Feeling increasingly foolish, but desperate to recover some credibility, Jamie tried again.

"I'm Jamie."

"Ciarán."

"Isn't that Irish? You don't sound Irish."

"I'm not."

Jamie bit his lip. This wasn't getting him anywhere. But Ciarán was hot, gay and artistic. Hopefully single, if he was in the BM drawing and not off visiting family or friends. And Jamie hadn't got laid in months. "Um, fancy lunch later? Or a drink? I know a pub—"

"Sorry, I don't drink."

"Coffee, then."

At least Ciarán was looking at him, still smiling. "I'd like to, but I'm working in a soup kitchen at St Ethelred's in Southwark. I've only got an hour and then I have to leave."

"After, maybe?"

The smile turned rueful. "Helping in a winter shelter at St Faith's in Kennington."

"Oh. Okay. Uh...good."

"They're always looking for volunteers at the shelter, if you're interested."

"Um, not really my kind of thing. But it's, uh...great. Really great you're helping out."

"Thank you. Nice talking to you, Jamie."

"Yeah. Uh. You too. See you."

Jamie made a dash for it. Oh, that had been brilliant. Turned down by a god-botherer. A hot god-botherer, but still...

A hot god-botherer with a gay earring. Didn't fit, really.

It pecked at his thoughts as he tried to concentrate on the Japanese paintings, the Chinese bronzes, until he gave up in disgust. As he walked towards Charing Cross Road, dodging grumpy shoppers overburdened with bags and sullen children, the whiff of burnt coffee beans and coal smoke made him wonder exactly what a soup kitchen was like. So he didn't head for the Tube entrance, but to the internet café near it, logged in, and googled St Ethelred and St Faith's, winter shelters and soup runs. All very worthy and earnest and Christian, and as appealing as sucking on a dirty dishcloth. Ciarán was welcome to it, if that was how he wanted to spend his holidays.

He walked down Charing Cross Road towards Trafalgar Square. The day had become dull and wintry, light drizzle adding to the general grime and misery of this least lovely of the West End streets. Here and there, he saw the homeless men, nursing tea in Styrofoam cups or eating bread rolls, their matted, oily beards brushing filthy coats. Funny how they wore just as many clothes in summer as in winter. Some had dogs, curled up beside them, in far better condition than their owners.

Jamie hurried past them as he always did, unwilling to meet their eyes or be drawn into a conversation that might end in being asked for money. But the men sitting on their dirty rolled up sleeping bags weren't interested in the passers-by. They talked to each other, or their dogs, clutching their meagre supply of food and hot drink to them, and Jamie, thinking of his leather couch, the fridge full of food, and the soft bed he took for granted, was suddenly ashamed. Not for his good fortune, or even his lack of generosity, but for his resentment of the existence of these people, reminding him poverty could be a couple of months' pay away even for someone like him.

The prospect of stuffing his face while watching a DVD didn't seem all that attractive now. He still had Christmas Eve and the evil day itself to kill that way. Maybe he could...

He made a decision, caught the Tube to Waterloo, and the train back to Clapham. Entering his warm, snug flat nearly undid his resolution—the temperature was dropping like a stone and the forecast was for snow tomorrow—but he changed clothes anyway, locked up and left before his good intentions disappeared like the fast-fading winter daylight.

Homeless men hung around the run-down church hall, waiting for the doors to open at four. Jamie went around the back, where the kitchen would be. A dozen people worked busily, preparing food, and turned to look at him as he stood in the doorway. "Um, Ciarán said you need volunteers?"

"We certainly do." A older woman came over, smiling warmly. "Come in, it's too cold to keep that open. I'm Ellen. Ciarán's not here yet."

"No, he said he was doing a soup run."

The others went back to work, now that he'd made it clear he wasn't trying to sneak in early.

"I'm Jamie."

"Hello, Jamie. Do you know what we do here?"

"Uh, food and shelter for the homeless?"

"That's right. There's a lot of work, and it's not very glamorous, but we'd love to have you if you'd like to help."

Jamie fought the urge to make a run for it. "Tell me what to do."

Ellen was right. It wasn't glamorous, and he felt distinctly out of place among the middle-aged, friendly women bustling about. Some were black, some were white, but all were female, and all were Christian. Jamie kept quiet about his atheism. He was here under enough false pretences as it was, since he doubted Ellen and the others would appreciate his being motivated solely by curiosity and a chance of being laid.

Washing up was the main job that needed doing, and after being given an apron, Jamie was set to work at the sink. Ellen, and another woman called Wendy, explained that they provided supper, company, shower facilities, and bed for the night for up to thirty-five men a night, feeding up to another twenty for which they couldn't provide beds. "No women?" Jamie asked, as he scrubbed yet another saucepan.

"Occasionally, but it's single men who are in most need in this area. Ex-military, ex-prison, a lot of them."

"Do you feel safe?"

Ellen was a bright, capable woman but Jamie, no giant, could knock her down without any effort.

"Of course," she said with a smile.

This wasn't so bad, he thought, settling in to the task. No one had preached at him, and washing up wasn't hard. Not something he'd want to do permanently, but that wasn't the plan.

Ciarán arrived just before four, and kissed Wendy's cheek, waving to the others. "Sorry I'm late...Jamie?" He blinked in surprise.

"Hi." Jamie wiped his hands and did his best to look nonchalant. "Thought I'd take up your suggestion."

"And he's been doing a sterling job," Ellen said. "Thanks for sending him along."

Ciarán opened his mouth, clearly about to explain just how brief their acquaintance was. Jamie forestalled him. "I wasn't doing anything else today, and it's better than sitting in a pub, right?"

Ciarán took the hint. "Yeah. Thanks for coming."

He shed his coat, and even under the thick jumper, his long legs and cute arse only added to the initial impression of hotness. Wearing a pinny was definitely worth it for the pleased look Ciarán sent Jamie's way. But there wasn't a chance to talk since the shelter's doors were now open, and Ciarán and Wendy went out to deal with the new arrivals.

For an hour or so, Jamie hid in the kitchen, unwilling to deal with the clients out in the main hall. No one pressed him to do more, and he felt a fraud for receiving their gratitude for doing so little. Ciarán came in and out, always seeking him out and smiling as if Jamie's presence was pure delight for him. That only made Jamie feel more like a fake, and as the washing up slowed with the end of the food distribution, he thought he should slink out quietly, forget about Ciarán and trying to make the world a better place for gay men to have sex in.

But Wendy came over just as he was about to hand in his apron. "If you're not in a rush, Jamie, you could go out and talk to our visitors. They appreciate the company."

"I, uh..."

Ciarán had come in, and heard the conversation. "Yeah, Jamie, you should."

Another warm look from under those eyelashes, so how could he refuse? He trailed after Ciarán out into the main hall, now thick with the smell of unwashed clothes and bodies, and the stew served for supper. Some of the volunteers were setting up the

cots for the night accommodation, while others chatted to the guests, either at tables, or on chairs, or even on the floor.

"Ned, this is Jamie," Ciarán said, urging him to sit next to a tiny old man. "Jamie's an architect, Ned."

"My old man built houses, you know. During the war." Ned coughed chestily, but politely, behind a gnarled hand. "Sorry. Had this cold for ages. Can't shift it. I don't even smoke."

"They say London air is like smoking ten cigarettes a day," Jamie said, definitely not wanting to get into a discussion about smoking and poverty.

"Sounds about right. Ciarán, do you think I could have some more tea? Might help the cough."

"Sure. Jamie?"

Jamie couldn't refuse that either, though eating or drinking was the last thing he wanted to do. Ned was quite extraordinarily grubby, though his face and hands were clean, probably thanks to the shelter. Ciarán went off to fetch their cups, leaving Jamie alone with his elf-like companion. "Er...so how long have you been...?"

Was there a polite way to say 'homeless' to a homeless person? "Coming here?" he ended up with.

"Shelter only opened up again this month. You mean on the street? A while. A few years, on and off."

Years? "How can you stand it?"

"You just do. Worse things happen at sea."

Despite himself, Jamie found himself drawn into Ned's unsentimental description of a life gone wrong. Years in the Navy, coming home to a wife who'd left him. A second marriage lasted until his wife's death, but when he took up with another woman and the relationship broke down, Ned found himself on the streets at the age of seventy-one. He was seventy-six now.

"That's what happened to me," Ciarán said, nodding.

Jamie stared in astonishment, but it was no surprise to Ned. "Women, gays, they're all trouble. Present company excepted," Ned added graciously, without missing a beat. "You got a home of your own, Jamie?"

"Yes. On a mortgage, but it's not rented."

"Don't think I could cope owing all that money. It'd prey on my mind," Ned said.

"You like living rough?"

"Well, no. But I don't like owing people, see. People live on them credit cards and I don't know how they do it. Asking for trouble, that is."

Ned had the chance for a shower shortly after that, but Ciarán didn't give Jamie time to ask him about the extraordinary fact he'd let slip before whisking him off to talk to another of the shelter's guests. Before eight o'clock, Jamie'd had a dozen conversations, all odd yet interesting, full of sadness and not a little desperation, but by the end of it, he knew he'd never look at a homeless person again and only see the dirt. Now he'd wonder which of them had lost a good job and been unable to pay their mortgage, or who had left abusive relationships, or tried and failed to beat addiction. Who'd fought for their country, only to return and find civvy street impossible to cope with, or who'd paid the penalty for a crime, only to find there was no way back to a decent life after prison.

Ciarán and he finished the last of the washing up while the women put away food or helped the guests settle down for the night. Jamie had to wait until they were briefly alone in the kitchen before he could ask, "How do you do this? Being a Christian can't be enough."

"I never said I was a Christian."

Shocked, Jamie fumbled the cup he was rinsing. Ciarán reached over and saved it from falling. "Then why?"

Ciarán took the cup and dried it. "Because I've been there myself, and I want to help."

"To be honest, I only came here to talk to you."

Ciarán shrugged. "I know."

"Are you sure you don't drink? There's a couple of quiet pubs around here."

"Any do coffee?"

So that was how he ended up in a Brixton pub with the sexiest guy he'd seen at least six months, drinking really horrible coffee. "Maybe I should have had the fruit juice," Ciarán said, pulling a face. Jamie had put three sugars into his and he could still taste it.

"Too cold for that. You don't like beer?"

"I like it but I'm an alcoholic, so I can't drink."

Jamie could have kicked himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't know or I wouldn't have...do you mind being here?"

"No. Alcohol's everywhere. I'm okay."

"You just don't look like an alcoholic. Or homeless."

"I did when I was on the streets. I've been sober for three years."

When he'd gone out on an impulse looking to hook up with a good-looking guy, Jamie hadn't bargained for any of this. Maybe this was where he should cut Ciarán loose, he thought. But instead he asked, "I don't understand. You're talented, smart...hot..." Ciarán gave him a shy smile. "I can't imagine you ending up like those guys."

"Anyone could be 'those guys'. Even you, if things went wrong enough. I've seen businessmen, doctors, people with PhDs, men who used to be officers in the army, on the streets. Nice people, bad luck."

"And you?"

Ciarán sipped his coffee, not answering. Jamie belatedly remembered his manners. "Listen, if you don't want to talk about it..."

"It's not that, but...you came out tonight for something else, didn't you? I mean, you weren't expecting my life story."

"No, but...now I'm here. And I want to know."

"Okay."

It was as bad as most of the stories he'd heard that night, worse than he could have imagined Ciarán's fey features hiding. A horrendous childhood, alcoholic parents and being thrown out of home for being gay. Struggling to pay for a degree and get a job, only to fall in love with his boss, and end up in a dominating, corrosive relationship. When that fell apart, a severely depressed Ciarán was left with no job, no home, and no self-respect. "Booze made it bearable, and in a way I thought I deserved what happened to me."

"No one deserves that."

"No. But I wasn't exactly on top of things."

He looked so calm, so at peace. Jamie struggled to imagine him dirty, desperate and forgotten. "So how did you get back?"

"Homeless charity. They found me a place to live, helped me dry out, and a chance to rebuild a portfolio while I sold the *Big Issue*. I made some contacts through the magazine, and with my work history, I landed a job. I was lucky and was offered a flat, which helped a lot. I changed jobs last year, and I'm doing okay now."

"So you're repaying a debt?"

"Sort of. I want to help because I know it makes a difference. It's not like dropping a pound coin into a collection box. This way, I know the people and see them moving on up. Sometimes," he corrected, his mouth turned down sadly.

"But why a church group?"

"Why not?"

Jamie had no answer to that. "So this is how you spend your spare time?"

"Not all of it. Since I'm not doing anything else over Christmas, I thought I'd give them some help. I move around, depending on who needs what. Only a couple of nights a week, money when I've got some spare. It's not a lot, considering."

"You make me feel selfish. I've never done anything like this before."

"Now you have. How do you feel?"

"Depressed. Angry that people like Ned can end up like that. Or you can."

"Will you do it again?"

Jamie found it hard to be enthusiastic about the idea. "Are you working there all over Christmas?"

"Yes. I said I'd help them serve Christmas lunch."

"Maybe... Would you like to come back with me tonight?"

Ciarán stiffened, a shocking flash of raw fear in his eyes. "No, I...I can't...I—"

"Take it easy. It's fine."

Ciarán looked down, his hands knotted in front of him. "I'm sorry. I...have a problem with trusting guys. Some things happened."

"I understand." He didn't, and he wasn't sure he could cope with hearing the details, not now. But Ciarán couldn't help his reaction and Jamie wasn't enough of a bastard to blame him for it. It only meant the disappointment at being turned down didn't bite as hard as it usually did.

He changed the subject, but Ciarán's subdued mood and the awful coffee didn't invite a lengthy conversation, so finally he pushed his cup away. Ciarán did the same with undisguised relief. "Ready to go home? I can walk from here," he said.

"Bus for me. Walk me to the stop?"

They had a little way to go, and the roads being quiet, Jamie took a risk, giving Ciarán a peck on the cheek. "I'll be there tomorrow."

Ciarán's sad eyes brightened. "I'd like that. Jamie...would you like to come over for Christmas Eve dinner? I bought a chicken. It won't be much but...you don't have plans, do you?"

"I never have plans, and I'd love to," he said, his heart suddenly lifting from his boots. "But the buses home will be a pain."

Ciarán scuffed his feet. "Would you mind the couch?"

"That'd be fine. I won't try anything, I promise." It figured Ciarán would feel safer in his own place, than in a strange one.

"You think I'm being pathetic?"

"No." He gently tugged Ciarán over to the shadows of a lane, and leaned forward to place a kiss on that inviting mouth. Ciarán pressed into his touch, and what started out as cautious, turned less so. Lousy coffee tasted better on Ciarán's lips.

But Jamie pushed him back when it became a little too intense. "Any more and it counts as trying something."

Ciarán's eyes sparkled in the streetlight. "I like you, Jamie."

"I think you're pretty damn fine too. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Ciarán squeezed his hand, and set off. Jamie was stuck waiting for the bus. He didn't really mind. The taste of that Christmas kiss warmed him all the way home.

The ladies at the church appreciated the blocks of Lindt chocolate Jamie brought from his Christmas stash, and Ned was grateful for the throat lozenges. An hour in Sainsbury's had supplied Jamie with a lot of small treats and necessities that he left to Ellen, Wendy, and the others to distribute. It was barely anything, and not the slightest dent on the problem, but maybe it would make the misery a tiny bit more bearable.

Ellen shooed them out early since they were coming back at lunchtime the following day. They decided to walk to Ciarán's place, since the buses were likely to be few and far between, and waiting more miserable than going by foot. The promised snow hadn't materialised, but it was cold enough for ice in the puddles, and a witch of a wind cut through all his layers. But he only had to look at Ciarán and the wind felt like feathers.

Ciarán glanced at him, and his mouth twisted with amusement. "You keep smiling."

"Why shouldn't I? This is already the best Christmas I've had in thirty years."

"Mine weren't all bad. When I was on the streets, people tended to be more generous at this time of year."

Jamie wished he could take Ciarán's hand but the roads were full of passing traffic. "It shouldn't be like this. Why can't we fix it?"

"Like they say, that's the big issue, isn't it? My flat's down here."

Jamie was no fan of the Brutalist style of architecture, and Ciarán's estate was a poem to concrete that should never have been written, but after these last two days, Jamie had a better appreciation of how even something this ugly could seem like paradise. Inside, it was tidy and bare, except for the drawings taped neatly to the walls. The talent Jamie had only glimpsed in the museum sketch was displayed in full here, as was the breadth of Ciarán's artistic eye.

"You should be making a fortune from your art," he said, looking at a pencil sketch of a man at least as old as Ned, and probably in the same situation. The lines, the dirt, hadn't been glossed over, but there was a quiet dignity, a vitality there that drew the eye, made the subject speak.

"I'm doing all right now. I can draw now, that's the main thing."

Jamie set his backpack down. "You can't let that happen to you again."

Ciarán grinned. "I'm trying not to. Now, let me put the food on."

Jamie had filled his backpack with goodies to supplement the chicken, and other treats like olives, snacks, and chocolate. He tipped it all out and spread it on the counter for Ciarán to decide what to do with. Ciarán's eyes widened with delight.

"This is lovely, Jamie, but you didn't have to do all this."

"I didn't, but you could thank me if you like." Jamie pointed at his mouth.

Ciarán smiled and came into his arms, kissing him with the same gentle passion as the night before. "Thank you for coming over."

"You're welcome." He stroked Ciarán's face to keep his hands away from that very tempting arse. "So what do you want to cook?"

His contribution to making the meal consisted of holding Ciarán around the waist and leaning his chin on his shoulder while Ciarán stuffed the chicken with the spices and nuts and some of the dried fruit, then put it in the oven.

He washed his hands. "Now. Coffee, tea, juice?"

"You," Jamie said, turning him around, and seizing his mouth.

Ciarán grinned under his lips. "You're cracked."

"Yeah." *And hard as hell.* Tonight was going to test his control, but he was determined to prove he could be trusted. "Coffee and a movie while it cooks?"

Ciarán only owned a small TV with built in DVD—"for the news," he explained.

"I avoid TV over Christmas anyway. Makes me sick."

"Don't you have any good memories of Christmas?"

Nothing in Jamie's past was as awful as Ciarán's and he didn't want to talk about it tonight anyway. "This will make a good one." He brushed another kiss on Ciarán's willing lips, then fetched his second bag. "I brought some DVDs over."

"You're like my personal Santa Claus."

It could have been sarcasm, but nothing in Ciarán's delighted eyes said that, and knowing his history, Jamie guessed it was simply the truth. He spilled the DVDs into Ciarán's lap. "Santa's little helper, maybe. You pick."

Artistic and selfless he might be, but Ciarán liked high-concept as much as the next bloke, and they watched *X-Men 3*, drinking coffee and eating chocolates without the slightest intellectual conscience.

"Good movie. Bit of a miserable ending, though," Ciarán said, reaching for the remote.

"Then you won't want to watch *Casino Royale*."

"It's okay. Life doesn't always end happily, and it's not real, is it?"

He stared into Jamie's eyes, and for tuppence, Jamie would have pushed him down and had his way with him, he looked so fuckably adorable. But he didn't. He put his arm around Ciarán's shoulders and gave him a hug, remembering how nice it used to be with Justin, and how quickly they'd stopped cuddling. Should have been a sign, thinking back. "No. But you don't have to sit through fictional misery for my sake."

"*Casino Royale* any good?"

"Best Bond ever," he admitted.

"Then I want to see it."

"Ciarán, why have you got a flat but Ned hasn't? You'd think someone his age..."

The change of subject didn't throw him. Perhaps his thoughts, like Jamie's, had turned to reality, and unhappy lives.

"He wasn't living in this borough when I was offered this. He's had places in hostels, and I believe he had an offer of a flat, but he drinks, goes on benders, and either leaves where he's staying, or drops out of the system. The church is trying to get him a place again. It's not straightforward for a lot of us."

How long before Ciarán no longer saw himself as formerly homeless? "Does it make a difference? Christmas lunch, that stuff I bought? If there's no permanent solution?"

"It helps. When you have so little, and life's that hard, you learn to appreciate the small things. You live from day to day, moment to moment. I don't think about tomorrow, or next week, or next year. All that matters is that right here and now, I'm safe, and happy. Ned will be the same. He won't not enjoy the meal tomorrow because there won't be one like it the next day. You can't cope at all, if you think like that."

"I just want to help all of them."

Ciarán shook his head. "Think like that and you'll do nothing, because it's impossible. Do what you can, when you can, and don't fret about what you can't. Concentrate on one task, one person. Do that well. Don't live in the future."

"Learn that on the streets?"

"No, in rehab." Ciarán took his hand. "Right now, with you, I have all I want for now. Right now, with me, you're doing a good thing. Tomorrow, you can make Ned and the others a little happier. But it's not tomorrow."

Jamie squeezed his fingers. "I've always planned ahead."

"Me too. Didn't work out too well."

Jamie stared into his eyes, absurdly wishing he could rewrite some of Ciarán's history. Some of Ned's. Stupid, when he couldn't even rewrite his own.

"Don't be sad, Jamie."

"I feel guilty being happy."

"No need to be. Supper's cooked. Let's eat."

Ciarán was right, of course, and to spoil tonight because of things he couldn't change would be stupid. Wouldn't stop him wanting to change them, though.

The chicken was mouth-wateringly savoury, the stuffing of dried fruit, bread and nuts rich and moist, but Jamie couldn't really pay much attention to his food. Watching Ciarán eat—watching Ciarán doing anything—was too distracting.

"You keep staring at me," Ciarán pointed out as he topped up their mineral water.

"I like beautiful things."

"And when they stop being beautiful? People get old and fat and sick. Only the young can be perfect."

"I guess I do come across a bit shallow," Jamie admitted.

Ciarán looked away. "No, you don't." He turned to Jamie. "But...some people do."

"There's more to like about you than looks."

"You too. But I like your looks. Maybe you'd let me sketch you one day?"

The implied promise of meeting again sent a little popping bubble of happiness through him. "Anytime." Even nude, he wanted to say. *Be good*, he told himself.

Ciarán picked up the last olive. "Want it?"

"Okay."

Ciarán held it to Jamie's lips, and as Jamie delicately plucked it from his fingers, he kissed them, licking the salty juice off until Ciarán, laughing, pulled his hand away.

"I knew you were a strawberry feeder at heart."

"Grapes too." The shyness in Ciarán's grin didn't entirely mask the evil.

"You're determined to make this difficult for me, aren't you?"

"Not...deliberately. You're attractive, Jamie. But it's been a long time, and things...things were bad."

"Then there's no hurry."

If someone had told Jamie he could be patient, when he was this horny and with this much temptation in front of him, he'd have told them they were daft. But Ciarán wasn't one night stand material, and Jamie wanted more. A quick shag was fine for de-stressing, but left him empty and unsatisfied later. A few hours in Ciarán's company had left him relaxed—well, most of him—and happier than he'd been in months. He could wait.

Dessert was supermarket treacle pudding and vanilla custard, comfort food that left them lazy, bloated and inclined to do nothing but slob out. Jamie made tea, Ciarán fetched blankets and pillows, and they made a nest on the floor with the couch cushions, cuddling up together through the Bond film, and *The Last King of Scotland*. Somewhere during the second movie, Ciarán fell soundly asleep in Jamie's arms, head resting on Jamie's chest. Ciarán's thigh was pressed hard against Jamie's erection, he would undoubtedly end up with a dead arm and a full bladder, and he wouldn't have moved for a million pounds.

He woke up some time later, because Ciarán was wriggling, trying unsuccessfully to extricate himself without waking Jamie up. Jamie let him go.

"Sorry," Ciarán said.

"Don't be."

"Need the loo, and I guess I should go to bed."

Jamie manfully hid his disappointment. "Okay."

When Ciarán returned, Jamie paid his own visit. Ciarán was still in their nest of pillows and blankets when he came back, and stared up at him in the dim light, eyes hopeful. "Um...it's so comfortable here."

"Very." Jamie sank down and cupped Ciarán's chin. "Stay? I'll be good."

"You already have been. Yes." Ciarán leaned up and kissed him, his arms going around Jamie's waist and his hands lightly brushing his arse. "Happy Christmas."

"Already?" He squinted at his watch. "I guess it is."

"I didn't get you a present."

"Oh you did. The best present anyone's given me." When he kissed Ciarán this time, Ciarán's tongue slipped inside, and the soft groans of need and frustration as they pressed against each other, weren't Jamie's alone. He sank down and pulled Ciarán on top of him, but that slowed neither of them down at all. Ciarán's weight against him was a delicious, maddening agony, Jamie's balls tight with want and his chest tight with happiness.

"I'm going to come in my jeans if you keep this up."

"I'm sorry. It's been such a long time since I...since I felt safe with someone."

"I don't want to do anything to make you distrust me." He held Ciarán, deliberately not kissing or teasing or touching suggestively. Just a firm, comforting hold. It felt...right. He would deserve the faith he'd been shown.

Ciarán's finger traced gently over his left cheekbone, then his right, as if he was committing Jamie to memory. "Why me? Why wait?"

Jamie grinned in the dark. "You make altruism sexy." He kissed Ciarán's forehead. "Let's go to sleep."

"We can lie in. I'll make breakfast. Plenty of time before we're needed at the shelter."

"You're hot, you're a wonderful artist, and you can cook. What other talents do you have?"

"Maybe I'll show you later."

Jamie could *hear* him wagging his eyebrows. "You are so doing this deliberately."

Ciarán chuckled. "One of my other talents, I guess." He snuggled in closer. "Good night, Jamie."

Jamie tugged the blanket tight around them both. "Merry Christmas, Ciarán."

For now, Ciarán was happy, and so was he. Tomorrow, he'd do what he could to make a few desperate people's lives a little brighter. And maybe he couldn't stop living in the future entirely, but Ciarán had already taught him to enjoy this moment, shown him that hoping for happiness to come didn't always mean disappointment. Now all he had to do was teach Ciarán that too.

He kissed Ciarán's hair, and Ciarán made a contented sound. *Merry Christmas, Ciarán. And may this new year be safe, and happy for you too.*

The end

Please note—the churches and people mentioned here are fictional. There are real winter and homeless shelters in London doing wonderful work, especially over Christmas and winter, and I've taken the liberty of compositing their details for this story.

Author Biography

Ann Somerville is a native of Queensland, Australia and after many years living in London, has returned home and now writes full time. She holds multiple degrees in science, history and literature, has written scholarly articles on several Victorian natural historians, and her partner is a zoologist, so her head is full of occasionally useful knowledge about amazingly useless things. She is a qualified, experienced web and database programmer, and offers her skills to charities and other authors for free. She doesn't want to ever get to the point where writing becomes work, because she's having way too much fun with it.

She has had two novellas published with [Samhain Publishing](#). A third will come out in January, 2009 and a full-length novel will appear in March, 2009.

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