



THE
BEST GIFT
SHAWN LANE

THE BEST GIFT

...Dusty had taken the artificial tree from the box and set it up. He'd set the four-and-a-half-foot tree on a small square table in front of the window. He was now preparing to string lights over it. As he bent this way and that working on the tree, his jeans tightened across his ass. Oh, God, Malcolm needed to get a serious grip.

"Need some help?" Malcolm forced himself to ask.

"Yeah, why not start opening the ornament packages?" Dustin didn't turn around.

Malcolm bit his lip. He hated the awkwardness between them. And damn it, he wasn't the only one who'd gotten hard when they hugged. "Dustin, can I talk to you?"

Dusty stiffened. "Um, okay, but can it wait until after the tree is decorated?"

"No. I—look, I'm sorry I freaked you out earlier."

"I didn't freak out."

"Dusty, will you stop that for a minute and look at me?"

Dusty finally let go of the string of lights and turned to face him. His cheeks were stained red and his baby blue eyes were suspiciously watery. Malcolm's stomach dropped.

"Dusty, what is it?" He took the several steps to his friend and couldn't stop himself from resting his hand on Dustin's chest. The man shook.

"Malcolm, please." Dusty sounded pained, tortured.

"What's wrong?"

"I-I just want you, okay, I want you and—"

Malcolm stopped Dusty's words with his lips, standing on tiptoe to crush his mouth to the other man's...

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THE BEST GIFT

BY

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THE BEST GIFT
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Shayne, the hair is for you, my BFF.

CHAPTER 1

Malcolm Rowland pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant where he was to meet his boyfriend, Jordan Castillo, for lunch. In the passenger seat next to him sat his best friend since forever, Dustin Jones.

At the moment, as Malcolm searched for a parking space not a billion miles from their destination, Dusty pretended to play the drums to the loud pounding rock music blaring from the radio.

“Yo, how about that one?” Dusty pointed, pausing only briefly in his performance.

Malcolm sped down the aisle, making sure to reach the precious space before some old lady snagged it who was taking her dog to be groomed at the groomer’s shop next store. He pulled in with a squeal of his tires and shut off the engine.

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“Easy, dude, we’re not late or anything.” Dusty unsnapped his seat belt, opened the door and unfurled his six foot something-or-other body out of Malcolm’s Mini Cooper.

Malcolm often thought the two of them looked ridiculous together. They’d been friends since they’d met in junior high school, and when Dustin had sprung up like a giant, well, Malcolm hadn’t. Malcolm was five-foot-five and maybe a half-inch. He always added that half-inch anyway.

“Jordan’s car is already here.”

Malcolm glanced at his watch. Despite what Dusty had said, they were ten minutes late. Which for them, probably, wasn’t late. Jordan would feel differently.

He rose up on the seat a little to check himself out in the rearview mirror, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

“Come on, you’re gorgeous,” Dusty said, leaning into the car to peer at him.

Malcolm rolled his eyes and got out. He clicked the locks and hurried to follow the much quicker pace of his long-legged friend.

Besides being tall, Dustin was built pretty thin with just a hint of defined muscle. He had soft-looking curly strawberry-blond hair, baby blue eyes, and what women would call peaches-and-cream skin. He had sort of a pretty-boy look with a touch of country added in, laid back and good-natured. If you didn’t know him you’d think that was exactly what he was, but Malcolm knew he was much more of a badass than most people thought. Once or twice when they’d been confronted by some homophobes coming out of a bar or whatever, Dustin made short work of the punks.

Malcolm searched in the front pocket of his pants for the rubber band he’d slipped in there earlier. He pulled it out and wrapped it around his own mid-back length brown hair. They

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dashed through the double doors of the restaurant held open by a worker.

The restaurant, like most places in December, was heavily decked out with Christmas decorations. Green and red tinsel and garland abounded. Not too far from where the hostess stood waiting to seat guests hung a sprig of mistletoe.

A quick glance told him Jordan wasn't waiting in the lobby area. He looked to the right. Dustin touched his arm.

"Over there."

Malcolm glanced to the left and saw Jordan sitting at a table for four holding his phone. Seated next to him was his partner, Frank. Malcolm forgot his last name. Jordan only ever called him Frank. The two of them were homicide detectives.

They headed for the table and he sat on Jordan's other side.

Jordan, who appeared to be typing an email message, looked up. "You're late."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"Only a little late," Dusty spoke up.

"Late is late." Jordan hit a button on his phone and then set it down. "Hello, Dustin. You remember meeting Frank? From the last time we had lunch?"

Dustin, who could turn almost painfully shy around strangers, turned a light shade of pink and ducked his head in the menu. "Sure. Hi."

Frank, a good looking Asian man, smiled. "Hello. Hi, Malcolm."

He opened his mouth to greet Frank.

"We already ordered," Jordan announced, interrupting Malcolm. He folded his muscular arms across his chest, glowering at Malcolm. Jordan was twelve years older than Malcolm's twenty-

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five. And for Malcolm it was his first serious relationship. Their year anniversary as a couple was only a week after Christmas. They'd become an official couple last year on New Year's Eve.

Malcolm bit his lip. "You did?"

"Yeah, we have to get back to work, Malcolm."

He looked away, his stomach twisting in embarrassment. He'd tried to make it on time, he really had. He raised his menu, unable to look at the others at the table. He was tempted to say, "maybe we shouldn't have come at all," but Jordan was already pissed at him.

A big, warm hand covered his. "Hey."

He lowered his menu and stared into the ebony colored eyes of his lover. They were one of his favorite features. Jordan, a classically handsome Latino, had dark brown hair just a little longer than his ears, whiskey-brown eyes, a straight aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and full kissable lips.

"I'm sorry, *querido*," Jordan said. "I've had a bad morning. I'm a bit grouchy."

Malcolm smiled. "It's okay. What did you order?"

"A Caesar salad with chicken. You want the same?"

"Yeah, except shrimp instead of the chicken."

Jordan waved down the passing waitress. Besides his salad, Dusty ordered a burger and fries. They both ordered iced teas.

"So, is a case not going well?" he asked, sipping his tropical iced tea.

"You could say that," Frank said. "A promising lead turned out to not be so promising."

Jordan grimaced. "The case might go cold."

Malcolm made what he hoped was a sympathetic face. Jordan never told him any details of his cases. Usually it was just vague

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talk like this. Which was fine with him. He didn't want to hear about gruesome murders. There were times Jordan came home clearly affected by something going on in his job and Malcolm didn't want to remind him of whatever it was anyway. He wanted Jordan to come home to relax and be with him and forget all the other stuff.

"How's the writing going, Malcolm?" Frank asked, changing the subject.

"Good. Really good. My first book comes out in a couple of months and I'm almost ready to submit the next one." One of the greatest things about moving in with Jordan had been being able to quit his evil day job at a boring medical office so he could write full-time. He got various reactions when he admitted he was writing gay erotic romance, but he knew Jordan had already told Frank.

"That's really cool, congratulations."

"Yeah, thanks, when we're done here I'm going to drop Dustin off for his job and then I'm going to go get some more work done." He glanced at Jordan. "Oh, and do some cleaning."

Jordan smirked. "I didn't say a word."

"I know, but you were going to."

"Nope."

Malcolm sighed. "I know I keep promising to clean the house. I will."

"How about you, Dustin? What's new with you?"

* * *

Malcolm walked Jordan to his sedan after lunch. He'd given Dusty his keys to get into the car if he wanted. He noticed Frank

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stayed back, allowing the two of them to have a little privacy.

Not that they'd need it really. Jordan didn't kiss him or hold his hand in public. He supposed he had an image to uphold as a detective and a macho Latino man. Malcolm didn't necessarily want to openly make out in front of everyone anyway. He didn't need homophobes hassling him.

"Do you forgive me for snapping at you before?" Jordan asked him.

Malcolm leaned back against the car, his arms crossed. He held his ponytail in his hand, tugging at it. He'd always had a tendency to mess with his hair. "Sure. I know you get stressed on the job. I really didn't mean to be late."

Jordan smiled a little. "You never mean it, but you always are. So you are going home after this?"

"I promised to take Dustin to work first. He's having work done on his bike. Then, yeah, I'm hoping to get a few hours of work done. When will you be home?"

His lover shrugged. "Between six and seven unless something comes up."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll try to have dinner ready then. You want to get the Christmas tree tonight after dinner or something?"

Jordan's eyes twinkled. "Definitely the something."

He felt himself blush. "Um, I think we're getting low on lube."

"I guess you'd better stop at the store then, hmm?" Jordan's thumb traced lightly over Malcolm's top lip. Jordan's other hand slipped a few strands of Malcolm's hair through his fingers. He was both shocked and thrilled by the unexpected intimate gestures.

All he could do was nod like a bobble-head.

"All right, *querido*. See you later. And don't get into any trouble."

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Malcolm straightened from the sedan and waved at Frank. "I won't."

He made his way back to his car. Dustin already sat in the passenger seat, his head resting on the seat, his eyes closed. His friend's cheeks were slightly pink as though dusted with blush. He couldn't help smiling at the sight. Dusty really was adorable. Whenever they went out, men flocked to his friend within seconds of arriving. The man never had to buy his own drinks.

He opened the driver door. Dustin opened one blue eye.

"You okay? You look really tired," Malcolm asked.

Dustin shrugged, opened both eyes and straightened in his seat. "Just up later than I should have been."

Malcolm started the car. "You seeing Bobby still?"

"Nah." Dusty looked out the window. "I wasn't out with a guy."

"Then?"

"Well, I'm sort of taking some classes."

"Really? Cool. What are you taking?"

"Malcolm." Dustin sighed.

"What?"

"I'm taking like cooking classes, okay?"

He laughed. "That's awesome. Why are you embarrassed? Are you talking like chef school or something?"

Dustin bit his lip. "Maybe. Eventually. Right now I'm just taking some classes at the community college. If I don't do really badly there, then, yeah, maybe."

Malcolm smiled. "That's super cool, Dusty. You'll have to cook for me."

Dusty smiled back, just showing a hint of his straight white teeth. "Yeah? I'd like to."

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“And Jordan, of course. He’d love to have someone cook for him other than me.”

“Uh, of course.” Dustin looked out the window again.

* * *

“You need me to come and get you after your shift?” Malcolm asked him as he stopped in front of the seafood restaurant where Dustin worked as a waiter.

Dusty wished he could skip working today. He just didn’t feel like it. “You don’t have to. I’ll find a way home. Someone from here or the bus, maybe.”

“Don’t even think about that. I’m not going to just leave you stranded. Call me when you’re close to being ready.”

“Okay.” He nodded and opened the car door and got out. “Have a good night with Jordan.”

Malcolm waved. “I will. See you later.”

Dusty watched him drive away and then turned to go into work. He ignored the gold and silver Christmas bells hanging in the doorway and walked straight to the back and punched in his time card.

“Why haven’t you told him how you feel?”

With a grimace, Dustin turned to face his friend and co-worker, Mark. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He grabbed his black apron and tied it around his waist. Being Christmas, the restaurant manager made them pin stupid looking candy cane pins on one side of their aprons and a cheesy Santa Claus that had the words *Ho Ho Ho* written across it on the other side.

Mark, a good looking African American man who’d become his friend instantly when they started waiting at the restaurant on

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the same day, folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall.

"You know. It's obvious to everyone but Malcolm that you're in love with him."

"I am not. And anyway, he has a boyfriend. For like a year."

"That's because you waited too long. You've been hung up on him for what?" Mark straightened from the wall. "When did you say you guys met?"

"Junior high."

"You've had the hots for him since then, haven't you?" Mark blocked the way into the main part of the restaurant.

Dustin pushed Mark out of his way. "Get real. We're just friends."

But Mark followed him. "You're letting opportunity pass you by."

"Dude, there is no opportunity. Malcolm has a boyfriend. A cop. They *live* together. I don't cheat and I don't break up anyone's happy home."

"Okay, then what about you?"

Dusty stopped by the main cash register and turned to stare at him. "What about me?"

"You're no longer seeing Bobby right?" Mark persisted.

"Right. I had an issue with him snorting all his money up his nose. Your point?"

"Let Vanessa set you up with her friend from work like she's been wanting."

Vanessa was Mark's wife. He'd been to their house a few times and Vanessa insisted she had the perfect guy for Dustin. He'd always changed the subject when she brought the guy up.

Mark put a hand on his shoulder. "Look, if there really can be

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nothing between you and Malcolm, isn't it time to move on?"

Even as the word formed on his tongue, he knew he would regret it. "Okay."

Mark grinned. "Cool. Ness will be thrilled."

Dustin rolled his eyes and went to wait on his first table.

On his break, he called Malcolm. He'd had a message on his cell phone since they weren't allowed to take calls while working.

"Hey, you called?"

"Oh, hi," Malcolm said. "Yeah. What time do you get off?"

"You don't have to come. I can probably get Mark to take me home."

"Well, as it happens, Jordan called earlier and said he wouldn't be home for dinner after all, so I thought I might come down there before your shift ends and hang for a bit."

"Okay. The restaurant closes at ten so depending on my last customers, sometime after that."

"Great. I'll come down there in a few. I'm kind of hungry anyway. I didn't bother to cook for just me. See you later."

Dustin hit the off button on his phone and returned his cell to his back pocket. When he got back on the floor, his boss told him two customers had just been seated at one of his assigned tables. He grabbed his pad and walked down the aisle.

He stopped, staring. At the table was Jordan Castillo and across from him was a strange man. For a moment, Dustin told himself it could be business. Cops still had to eat. But while he stood there, Jordan very clearly rubbed his thumb along the back of the other man's hand before picking up his menu.

"Oh, hell," Dustin muttered.

CHAPTER 2

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” he muttered.

“Ask them for their order,” Mark said, coming up behind him. He frowned. “What’s the matter?”

Dustin grabbed Mark’s arm and pulled him around the corner out of the sight of Jordan and the man sitting with him. “You have to take table twenty.”

“Why?”

“Because the guy sitting there is Jordan, Malcolm’s boyfriend.”

“So? I know you don’t like him, but is he such an ass you can’t wait on him?”

“He’s here with a guy, Mark.”

Mark shrugged. “Yeah?”

Dustin ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “As in a

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guy, Mark.”

“Oh, wait, you mean he’s cheating on Malcolm?”

“Yes.”

Mark peeked around the corner at the table. “Well, shit, but someone has to go and take their order. They’re looking around.”

“You do it,” Dustin insisted. “I’ll take number seven from you.”

“Fine.” Mark sighed and walked toward the table, order pad in hand.

He let out a relieved breath, but then he remembered Malcolm would be showing up at the restaurant anytime. He didn’t live that far.

“Ah shit, shit, shit.”

The problem was he didn’t care about Jordan being found out as the cheating bastard he clearly was; in fact, he’d probably have to tell Malcolm what he saw anyway. He’d want to know if it were him, but he hated Malcolm being hurt. And before Christmas for pity’s sake.

Dusty guessed there was no good time to find out your boyfriend was a dirty cheat.

His gaze on the entrance doors, he went to table seven and took the order from the woman and the two teenagers with her. His boss gave him a funny look, but didn’t question the switch for which Dusty was grateful. The restaurant manager wasn’t a bad sort at all. A middle-aged balding man, he usually told the staff as long as the customers were happy so was he.

“Blue Christmas” played over the speakers, which depressed Dusty all the more. He kept hoping Jordan and his man would leave before Malcolm arrived. He figured the sight of his boyfriend playing around would hurt badly.

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He debated whether he ought to approach Jordan and tell him Malcolm was on his way over. Dusty guessed Jordan had no clue this was the restaurant he worked in. Not surprising, really. The man never had paid much attention to Dusty.

Dusty told himself if he were in Malcolm's shoes he'd want to know. He just couldn't figure out if his friend would really feel the same. Malcolm had been so excited to finally have a steady boyfriend, and he went practically over the moon when Jordan wanted him to move in.

For all Dusty knew, maybe deep down Malcolm did know, but didn't want to know, right? He guessed there were people like that. Who could pretend.

But while he still contemplated the right thing to do as he set the meals in front of the family at table seven, Malcolm came through the double doors of the restaurant. His heart leaped into his throat and he felt a little bit light-headed. Like it was going to happen to *him* instead of Malcolm.

"Can-can I get you anything else?" he asked the family. Dusty barely heard one of the teenagers ask for more butter. He nodded absently and moved away from their table toward the door.

"Hey, Dusty." Malcolm smiled.

"Hi. Um. I think there's a table in my section for you back there." Dustin indicated the opposite direction of Jordan.

"Okay, I'll just—" Malcolm stared down the restaurant aisle toward the booth where Jordan and his date sat. Jordan happened to be facing their direction, so there was no way Malcolm wouldn't recognize him. "Jordan's here?"

"Malcolm..." Dusty put his hand out to stop him, but his friend had already started down the aisle toward Jordan's table. He couldn't help noticing Jordan's hand covered the other man's.

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Clearly Jordan had not yet noticed Malcolm.

Should he follow? He didn't think his boss would thank him if Malcolm made a scene. He wasn't sure he would, of course. Dustin swallowed, his throat feeling bone dry and his heart hammering hard in his chest it nearly stole his breath.

"Excuse me," the lady from table seven called to him.

Dustin ignored her and moved down the aisle toward disaster. The Christmas song now playing overhead was the way-too-cheerful "It's Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas."

It occurred to him this was sort of like having to look at an accident on the freeway, but this wasn't a car accident. This was his best friend's life. *Malcolm*. Whom he had loved forever.

"Who is this?" Malcolm's voice went up just a bit and sounded more than a little shaky.

"Nobody," Jordan said.

"Nobody? You were holding his hand."

Jordan's hard gaze went from his boyfriend to Dustin as he stood by the table. "Dustin? Is this where you work?"

"Yes."

"Oh, so you called Malcolm and told him to come down here, didn't you?" Jordan's grimace had turned into a snarl.

Dustin noticed the man with him, a young Hispanic man, shifted uncomfortably in the booth. "Jordan, maybe—"

"No, he didn't call me to tell me my boyfriend is cheating." Malcolm closed his eyes briefly, then opened them and took a step back. "I can't believe this."

Dustin's manager appeared at his elbow and said, "Folks, can you take whatever this is outside?"

Jordan tossed down his cloth napkin. "Good idea." He slid out of the booth, but held up a hand to stop the man he was with from

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doing the same. “Stay here. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Malcolm and Jordan walked down the aisle and out the front doors. Dustin bit his lip, desperately wanting to follow them.

“Dusty,” his manager said, obviously a mind reader. He gestured to table seven. “They need you. Remember, this is your job?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry.” He felt his cheeks heat.

“It’s okay, just go help them.”

He hurried back to the table with the woman and the teenagers, his stomach twisted in knots.

* * *

Malcolm couldn’t catch his breath. He stood outside the restaurant feeling his life crumbling around him. This couldn’t be happening. He stared at Jordan, unable to even form words.

“There’s no reason to get all dramatic about this, Malcolm,” Jordan said. His expression was calm, cool. He could have been telling Malcolm not to get upset over the weather forecast.

His throat raw, he managed to get out one word. “No?”

“Tony is just a friend.” Jordan shrugged.

“A...friend? Are you fucking him?”

Jordan glanced around the parking lot. “Keep your voice down. Not everyone needs to know our business.”

“Are you?”

“It’s just sex, *querido*. It has nothing to do with the way I feel about you.”

Malcolm’s eyes blurred with burning tears. He turned away, unable to meet Jordan’s dark eyes. He wished he could so easily block out the hateful words.

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“Don’t make a big deal out of this,” Jordan said softly. “It just happened, you know? I met him while on a case.”

“How long has it been going on?” he whispered. He clutched his stomach. The coffee he’d drunk earlier at home turned sour and made him feel queasy.

Jordan looked away and blew out a breath. When he looked back at Malcolm his expression was only slightly more apologetic. “Four months.”

Malcolm didn’t know what he expected Jordan to say, but knew damn well *four months* wasn’t it. He really thought he might vomit. A tear slipped down his left cheek and all he could do was stare at the man he’d thought loved him.

Jordan stared back, silent and watchful.

“Were...are there others?” Not that it really mattered. One was enough to end it for Malcolm. But some perverse part of him had to know.

Before Jordan even answered, Malcolm knew by the way his gaze slid away from Malcolm’s. Sleazy and sneaky like a snake. God, he’d been so stupid.

“I told you, none of that matters. That’s just sex. I don’t care about them the way I do you, *querido*.” Jordan took a step toward him, like maybe he was going to grab him or something.

Malcolm held up his hands. “Stay away.”

His lover grimaced. “Look, I’ll end it with Tony. We’ll take a trip after the holidays, just you and me. I’ll make it all up to you.”

“You can’t.” Malcolm swallowed. His throat felt like it was coated with sawdust. “I’m not doing this, Jordan. It’s over.”

“You don’t mean that. You’re just upset, talking crazy.”

“I do mean it. Infidelity is a deal breaker for me.”

“You love me. You won’t go anywhere.” Jordan smirked

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triumphantly.

Malcolm shook his head and wiped at the tears settling on his cheeks. "You're wrong."

He wasn't sure where he would go, how he would make it. He'd given up his boring day job when he moved in with Jordan. Selling his books definitely didn't give him enough income to live. Not even close.

As though his lover could read his mind, he said, "You won't leave me, Malcolm. You need me. You don't even have a place to live without me. Now, calm down, and let me go inside and tell Tony it's over between us, and then I will take you home."

"No, Jordan. I'm coming to get my things and I'm leaving."

"Your things?" Jordan snarled, turning a dark shade of red. "You have no things. Everything you have is from me."

"I had stuff I brought with me." Malcolm backed up when Jordan took a menacing step toward him. Jordan's fingers dug into his arm. "Ouch. Let go."

"You little bastard," Jordan said, yanking his arm. "You think you can just break up with me over an insignificant piece of ass! You will learn your place." He grabbed Malcolm's ponytail and pulled hard.

"Hey, get your hands off him," Dustin shouted from the doorway of the restaurant. He rushed forward and shoved Jordan away. "Asshole! Who do you think you are?"

Dustin put himself between Malcolm and Jordan, anger radiated off both men.

"This doesn't concern you, Dustin."

"The hell it doesn't. Stay away, *detective*, or your bosses are going to hear about this."

Malcolm eyed Jordan uneasily, seeing his temples throbbing.

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He grabbed Dustin's arm. "It's okay, Dustin. Jordan and I are done. Completely."

Jordan stared at them, fuming. He ran a hand through his midnight dark hair. "Fine. Fine. You'll come around and beg me to take you back."

The man walked past them, throwing Dustin an evil look, but he re-entered the restaurant. Dustin relaxed and studied Malcolm. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, thanks." Malcolm glanced back at the restaurant. "I'm not getting you in trouble, am I?"

"Nah, I asked the boss if I could leave and he said yes. He's cool. I finished my tables. I'm sorry, Malcolm."

The lump in his throat grew, choking him with emotion. He nodded and looked away. "I...what am I going to do now, Dusty? I have no place to go."

"Sure you do. You can come stay with me. It's not the Ritz or anything but it's some place, right?" Dusty smiled. "Want me to help you get your stuff from Jordan's house?"

Malcolm hugged Dustin. "You're the best. You know that?"

CHAPTER 3

The big house Jordan owned struck Dusty as pretentious. But he admitted, to himself anyway, it might be because he couldn't stand the prick. Never could really, even before he found out he was a lying cheat.

The earth could open underneath Jordan's feet and swallow him up and Dusty would applaud with glee. Not a nice thought, he guessed, but a sincere one.

Malcolm parked in the driveway and stared at the large mission-style house. The houses in the neighborhood glimmered with Christmas lights. Jordan's house did not.

"He's right, though. Most of the stuff he did pay for. He even bought me this car."

"He doesn't need it. Come on, let's get your stuff." Dusty

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opened the passenger door and waited for Malcolm to get out.

“What do I do about the laptop?” Malcolm asked as they approached the front door. “He bought it, but it’s got all of my books on it.”

“Take it.” He followed Malcolm inside. He’d been there a few times when Jordan hadn’t been home. He never wanted to be there when Jordan was home. He couldn’t deal with the smoochy-smoochy act Jordan and Malcolm did in front of him.

Malcolm had been mostly quiet since the confrontation outside the restaurant. Dusty wanted to ask him how he felt or what he thought or something...anything. But he didn’t. He knew Malcolm had to be crushed. He’d really loved Jordan.

His friend disappeared down the hall to the master bedroom and Dusty wondered if he should go help him, but decided Malcolm might want to be alone. He’d ask for his help if he needed it.

Dusty had never had a lover cheat on him before. Well, he’d only had one *serious* boyfriend anyway. They’d broken up over his lover moving out of state and Dusty not wanting to go with him. He supposed if he had really loved the guy he would have gone to Ohio with him.

He sat on a nearby bar stool and fidgeted. He wanted to be done and on their way before Jordan ever got home. He had a feeling Jordan would try to stop Malcolm from leaving again.

“You...ah, all right?”

“Yeah,” Malcolm called from the bedroom. “I’m almost done.”

Dusty blew out a breath and jumped up from the barstool. A noise from outside drew him to the window. Jordan’s sedan parked at the curb and the driver’s door slammed.

“Um, Jordan’s home.”

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Malcolm came into the living room holding a duffel bag. “Okay. It’s all right, Dusty. I can handle it.” He set the duffel bag down next to the front door and then moved to where the laptop sat on the kitchen table.

Without giving it much thought, Dusty put himself between the front door and the table, waiting for Jordan’s appearance. He clenched his fists.

The door flung open, banging against the wall. Dusty flinched.

“You two are still here?” Jordan growled.

“We were just leaving.” Malcolm came to stand next to Dusty. He stuffed the laptop and cords into a laptop case.

“I didn’t give you permission to take that.”

“You don’t need it. It was a birthday present.”

Dusty was proud of Malcolm for standing up to Jordan even a little bit. He took a step forward, once more putting himself between the two men. He could see Jordan intended to argue the point. Saw the way the muscle jumped in the man’s rigid jaw.

“Just let him take it. All of his books are on it. Nothing of yours.”

Jordan’s dark gaze narrowed on Dustin. “Fine, take the damn thing. Take whatever and get the fuck out of my house.”

“I’ll-I’ll pay you for it if you want,” Malcolm offered. He had walked around both him and Jordan to go pick up the duffel bag. His skin was flushed red. “And the car.”

Dusty ached to pull his friend into his arms and tell him everything would be all right. But they were only friends. He couldn’t make the pain of Jordan’s betrayal any less.

“Whatever. You will be back, *querido*. You cannot make it out there by yourself. Or with *him*.” The man’s lips turned into a sort of Elvis snarl and for a moment Dusty thought Jordan might spit

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on him. “He is nothing. A waiter? Bah! We both know you need me to take care of you. But go and pretend if you must. You will be here be back before New Year’s Day begging me to take you.”

Malcolm’s shoulders sagged, but he said nothing, didn’t even turn around. He turned the knob of the front door and stepped outside.

Dustin moved to follow him, but Jordan’s hand on his arm stopped him. “Get your hand off me.”

“You haven’t won, you know.”

“I’m not trying to win,” Dusty insisted. “I’m just trying to help my friend get away from his cheating, abusive boyfriend.”

“I’ve seen the way you look at him, Dustin. You want him.” Jordan shook his head. “But you are a fool. You don’t even register with him. You will see. I said New Year’s. He might even be back by Christmas. And when he comes back, I will make sure he ends his friendship with you for good.”

Dusty opened his mouth to say something to the asshole, but then closed it. He just wasn’t worth it. He shrugged off the man’s hold on his arm and followed Malcolm outside. His friend was already putting his stuff in the car.

“Are you okay? What did he say to you?” Malcolm asked, biting his lip.

“Nothing, Don’t worry about it. Let’s just get out of here.”

* * *

Dustin lived in a small one bedroom apartment on the second floor of a nondescript brown apartment building. He’d lived there for a couple of years and, in spite of the fact it was filled with hand-me-down furniture, it had an incredibly comforting feel to it.

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One Malcolm definitely needed just then.

Malcolm set his duffel bag and the laptop case down just inside the front door and smiled. “Thanks, Dusty. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Dusty blushed and ran his long fingers through his strawberry-blond curls. “Um, what are friends for? You can have the bedroom. I can sleep out here.”

“No way,” Malcolm protested. “Isn’t that a couch bed? I can use that. No reason for you to give up your bed.”

He nodded. “Are you hungry? I could make you some eggs and toast. I need to go to the store, so I don’t really have anything else right now.”

Malcolm loved how sweet Dusty was. “That’d be great.”

Dusty disappeared into the little kitchenette and Malcolm let the smile fade from his lips. He sank down on the couch, tired and sad.

How could he have been so damn stupid anyway? And what the fuck was he going to do now? He didn’t even have a job.

Malcolm buried his head in his hands and the tears he’d been trying to suppress leaked from his eyes. He tried to stop them, ashamed, but his throat clogged and his chest hurt.

“Malcolm.”

He looked up through blurred vision. Dusty stood in the doorway of the kitchen, devastation on his face.

“I’m sorry. I can’t seem to stop,” Malcolm croaked out.

Dusty hurried forward and knelt between Malcolm’s legs and wrapped his arms around him. “It’s going to be okay.”

“What am I going to do? I don’t have a job or a place to live.”

“You’ll stay here for as long as you want. And...well, you’ll have to get a job, that’s true. But you will. It will work out,

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Malcolm, I promise.”

“I’m such a fool.”

“What? Why?”

“How could I not know he...he was cheating on me? And I gave up my job and my apartment and everything and just let him control everything. Why didn’t I see?”

Dusty’s arms tightened around him. “Because you loved him.”

Malcolm’s heart constricted and he nodded, unable to speak for a second. When he could get the words to come out without choking on them, he said, “Stupid, huh?”

“No,” Dusty whispered into his hair. “It’s never stupid to love. You aren’t the fool, he is. He’s not worthy of you. But you’ll find someone who is. Who will love you back with all his heart like you deserve.”

Malcolm pushed back a little and looked at Dusty. “Yeah?”

Dusty smiled and wiped a tear. “Yeah. Come on, your eggs and toast are ready. Probably cold by now.”

“You’re the best. I know I keep saying that, but it’s true.”

Dusty kissed his forehead and stood, pulling Malcolm up from the couch. “Just remember I get the bathroom first in the morning and we’ll get along great.”

CHAPTER 4

A loud thud at Dustin's apartment door three days later stopped Malcolm just as he was about to have his heroes share their first kiss. He frowned and got up from the kitchen table where he'd been working on his laptop for several hours. He glanced at the clock on Dusty's wall. Almost four.

Malcolm unlooked the door and opened it.

"Merry Christmas!" Dusty stood on the doorstep grinning from ear to ear. In his arms he held a cardboard box and several filled plastic bags. He brushed past Malcolm and into the apartment.

"What the hell?" he asked bemused.

"I got us a Christmas tree and decorations on my way home from school." Dustin set the packages down on the couch. "I got a fake tree because I hate the idea of trees dying for Christmas. I'm off tonight, so I thought we could decorate."

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Malcolm could not keep the smile from his face. He suddenly felt lighter than he'd felt all day. And looking at Dusty standing there, his cheeks pinked with excitement, his eyes glowing with warmth, it chipped at the hurt, the pain. He couldn't help it, he threw his arms around Dustin. "You're so cool. Thank you."

Dusty laughed. "No problem. I went to a discount store so it was cheap. There's food to put away, too."

Malcolm knew he should pull away, should pick up the grocery bags and take care of putting them away in the kitchen, but Dusty was so warm and smelled so good he couldn't move. Like vanilla and spice or maybe Christmas cookies. Instead, he stepped closer still. He sighed and closed his eyes when Dusty's arms wrapped tightly around him. It felt unbelievably right to be in those arms.

"You smell awesome," he murmured against his friend's chest.

"We, ah, were making desserts in class today." Dusty trembled.

Malcolm frowned and buried himself even further into the other man's arms. "Are you cold?"

"No, I...we should get those groceries put away so we can decorate." Dustin tried to push him away then, just a gentle pressure of his hands pressing on Malcolm's shoulders.

He opened his mouth to protest and then felt the hard ridge of Dusty's erection against him. He stilled, his own cock reacting immediately, swelling against his jeans. He swallowed and eased back to look up at Dusty. His friend looked down at him, his eyes unreadable, but his cheeks a dark red.

"Dustin, I—" His heart thumped hard and fast in his chest.

"Don't." Dusty shook his head.

Malcolm frowned. "Don't what?"

"Make a big deal out of it. Please." Dustin stepped away and turned his back on Malcolm.

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Malcolm's heart twisted and his throat clogged. He felt the sting of tears so suddenly his chest ached. To have something to do he went to the sofa and looked into the bags. Two of the plastic bags had groceries in them. He picked those up and went into the kitchen, not looking at Dusty.

Shit.

What was that? He wanted Dusty to take him to bed so bad he could barely breathe. He rested his forehead against the fridge. He'd thought he'd gotten over those thoughts long ago. Thought he had gotten past his feelings for his best friend when they were still teens. They were *friends*. Nothing else, no matter how, back then, he wanted them to be so much more.

Those dreams ended even before he met Jordan. The day was ingrained in his memory like a scar from a burn. Not long after graduation, one hot summer day, he'd gone to Dustin's house wanting to ask his friend to go to Malibu beach with him.

He'd rounded the corner and gone to Dustin's family's backyard where his mom said he was and there Dustin sat on a lawn chair kissing Ivan Kurtz, another friend from school. The pain of seeing Ivan's hands on Dusty had pierced him so badly he hadn't contacted his friend for four days. Dusty and Ivan had been a couple until Ivan moved out of state, and to Malcolm's relief, Dusty had not gone with him.

But long before Dusty's relationship ended with Ivan, Malcolm had already given up on ever being anything but Dusty's friend. He really thought he was done with it.

He was merely vulnerable because of his breakup with Jordan. He turned from the refrigerator and quickly put away the food Dusty had bought, barely registering what he shoved in the drawers. He did notice the chestnuts and couldn't help smiling a

THE BEST GIFT

little.

After making sure his stupid cock had gone back down, he left the kitchen and returned to the living room.

Dusty had taken the artificial tree from the box and set it up. He'd set the four-and-a-half-foot tree on a small square table in front of the window. He was now preparing to string lights over it. As he bent this way and that working on the tree, his jeans tightened across his ass. Oh, God, Malcolm needed to get a serious grip.

"Need some help?" Malcolm forced himself to ask.

"Yeah, why not start opening the ornament packages?" Dustin didn't turn around.

Malcolm bit his lip. He hated the awkwardness between them. And damn it, he wasn't the only one who'd gotten hard when they hugged. "Dustin, can I talk to you?"

Dusty stiffened. "Um, okay, but can it wait until after the tree is decorated?"

"No. I—look, I'm sorry I freaked you out earlier."

"I didn't freak out."

"Dusty, will you stop that for a minute and look at me?"

Dusty finally let go of the string of lights and turned to face him. His cheeks were stained red and his baby blue eyes were suspiciously watery. Malcolm's stomach dropped.

"Dusty, what is it?" He took the several steps to his friend and couldn't stop himself from resting his hand on Dustin's chest. The man shook.

"Malcolm, please." Dusty sounded pained, tortured.

"What's wrong?"

"I-I just want you, okay, I want you and—"

Malcolm stopped Dusty's words with his lips, standing on

THE BEST GIFT

tiptoe to crush his mouth to the other man's.

Dusty tore away his lips and stared down at him, his jaw slack. "Malcolm?"

"I want you, too. Kiss me." He fisted Dusty's shirt, urging his friend to dip his head down to kissing distance.

Dusty moaned low and cupped Malcolm's ass, lifting him up so their lips crashed together. Malcolm's feet came up off the floor.

"The bed," he gasped, even as Dusty devoured his mouth.

In the few seconds it took Malcolm to get them into his bedroom, Dusty didn't tear his lips away. He slammed Malcolm and himself onto the double bed, their teeth clacking together.

Barely able to catch his breath, Malcolm pushed his hands under Dusty's shirt, touching hot silken skin. He dug in his fingertips, wanting to brand Dusty in some small way as his.

Dusty flipped them over so Malcolm was now on top and he ripped out the band Malcolm used to bind his hair. His hair fanned out over Dusty's fingers.

"Clothes off," Dusty whispered.

Malcolm needed no further urging and he shoved Dustin's shirt up to his armpits. His soon-to-be lover slipped it off the rest of the way. His own shirt was practically torn from his body and discarded.

He took a moment to admire his friend's beautiful ivory skin and rosy nipples. He grazed Dusty's muscular arms with the tips of his fingers, smiling at the goose bumps developing in their wake.

"Malcolm?"

Reluctantly, he tore his gaze from the perfect chest and met Dusty's stare. His breath caught in his throat at the bare love and lust he detected in the man's eyes.

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“Take me, Dusty. Make me yours.”

Dusty groaned and grabbed strands of Malcolm’s hair, melding their mouths together.

Malcolm slipped his tongue inside Dusty’s warm mouth and then reached between them to undo the snap and zipper of his jeans. He was desperate to feel Dustin’s big hands on his bare ass. He wriggled against the other man.

Laughter rumbled in Dusty’s chest. He broke their kiss. “Anxious, babe?”

“Yes, God, yes, Dusty, please, let’s get naked.”

Dusty gently pushed Malcolm off and onto the mattress again. He stood and shucked off his own pants and boxers in a swift move. Then he pulled off Malcolm’s, too.

“Hold on.”

“What?” Malcolm asked, rising on his elbows.

“Gotta get the lube and condom from the bathroom.” Dusty left the bedroom for the hallway bathroom.

Malcolm suddenly felt nervous. He’d never felt particularly nervous with Jordan and he wondered what that meant. He guessed he wanted this to be perfect, special. Well, it was *Dusty*, not just anyone.

When Dusty returned holding the lube and a strip of condoms, he was smiling. A beautiful, breathtaking smile that sent a jolt of excitement to Malcolm’s hard cock and a jump to his already racing heart.

He held up his hand for the supplies and Dustin tossed them to him.

“Hurry,” Malcolm urged, stroking his own erection.

Dusty knelt on the bed and then covered Malcolm with his body. His lips just inches above Malcolm’s, he whispered, “I want

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you to lay on top of me and drape that hair all over.”

“Okay,” Malcolm said hoarsely. Their erections rubbed against each other and Malcolm bit his lip. He pushed Dusty on his back and straddled him.

“Oh, yeah, the hair, babe.”

He laughed and leaned forward, letting his hair fall on Dusty’s nipples. He guessed he did it right because Dusty groaned and trembled beneath him.

Dusty’s hands cupped his ass cheeks. “Can you hand me the lube?”

He reached back for the lube and put it in one of his lover’s hands. As he lay across Dusty’s chest, his hair framed the man’s face when he leaned down to press a kiss on his lover’s lips.

Malcolm felt his cheeks being parted and then a cold, slicked finger pushed inside. He gasped and pushed back on it. “Dustin.”

“Mmm, more maybe?”

“Yes, yes.”

Another finger, no, two at once, searching, seeking and—*oh God!*—finding that spot. “Oh. My. God.”

Malcolm straightened and struggled off Dusty, the man’s fingers sliding out of his ass, and grabbed up the strip of condoms. He tore one off and ripped it open with his teeth.

“Put that on and fuck me,” he said, tossing the opened foil packet at his friend.

“Okay, okay, you got bossy all of a sudden.” Dusty grinned and rolled the rubber over his long, thick cock.

He licked his lips and looped his arms under his legs, lifting up his ass. “Please.”

Dusty’s grin faded to be replaced by rapt desire. “Fuck, I want you now.” Scooting up the bed, he poised his cock at Malcolm’s

THE BEST GIFT

entrance. Their gazes met and held for a few seconds. Malcolm hoped he showed Dusty just how he felt.

Slowly, Dusty pushed the head of his dick inside. He paused, waiting until Malcolm wriggled and asked him for more. He slipped in balls-deep.

“Ah,” Malcolm moaned, closing his eyes. His ass clenched around his lover’s shaft, his muscles strained to accommodate the thickness.

“Okay?”

Malcolm smiled and opened his eyes, anxious to reassure the other man. “More than okay. Fucking fabulous. You feel great.”

“*You* feel great. So tight and hot holding my cock.”

“Move. Fuck me.” Malcolm fisted his own cock and stroked it hard and fast to the rhythm of Dusty’s thrusts. A fine sheen of sweat appeared on Dusty’s upper lip and it looked unbelievably sexy.

Dusty pumped into him with quick, powerful thrusts, his fingers gripping Malcolm’s thighs.

He fought the urge to close his eyes, wanting to see Dusty’s face when he found his release. He rubbed the drop of pre-cum into his cock and sped up his strokes. His balls tightened and he knew he wouldn’t be able to hold back much longer. He wanted Dusty to come first, though.

“D-Dusty?”

“Yeah, I’m close, babe.” Dusty wrapped one hand around Malcolm’s cock and worked it with him.

His eyes closed against his will and the jolts of a powerful orgasm shot up his spine. “Oh, God, I can’t—”

“Malcolm!” Dusty yelled, jerking and thrusting hard inside him.

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* * *

Dusty didn't know how many minutes later he stirred. After he'd withdrawn from Malcolm, they'd collapsed side by side and wrapped their arms around each other.

He smiled looking down at Malcolm's silky brown hair. He brought several strands to his lips and kissed them.

"Dusty?" Malcolm stirred, and yawned.

"I'm here. I love your hair you know."

"Yeah, I know. You want to brush it later?"

Dusty hugged him close. "I'd love it."

Malcolm hid his face against Dusty's chest as though suddenly shy. Hard to believe considering what they'd just done.

He could hardly believe he'd just had sex with Malcolm. His best friend and the man he'd loved since...forever. Was Malcolm on the rebound? Trying to get some sort of revenge on Jordan? He had to know.

"Malcolm, why? Well, why me all of a sudden? We've known each other for years and now...was it because—"

Malcolm pushed away and looked at him. "No, Dustin. This isn't about Jordan. Is that what you are asking?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's not. It's about us."

Dusty nodded. "Okay, but why?" He held up his hand and sat up, leaning against the headboard. "I mean, I'm glad. It was great. Better than great. It was—the best."

Malcolm grabbed his hands and held them. "I think so, too. Dusty, the truth is, I've wanted you for a long time. Before I got together with Jordan and before you hooked up with Ivan."

That did surprise him. "You did?"

THE BEST GIFT

“Yes, only I was too stupid and too chicken to tell you until it was too late. The day I was gonna tell you I saw you with Ivan.”

Dusty shook his head, trying to clear the sudden fog from his brain. Malcolm had wanted him? All this time and he didn’t know.

“God, Malcolm, I wish I’d known. It’s you I’ve always loved.”

Malcolm smiled and kissed Dusty’s knuckles. “I did care about Jordan and I thought maybe he was the one, but I was wrong. He was an ass and he never loved me. I feel like I wasted a year of my life.”

“I’m sorry about Jordan. I can’t say I’m sorry he’s out of your life though. I’d like you to take a chance on me.” Dusty turned his head, feeling his ears burn. “I know I don’t have a lot to offer.”

“You have yourself to offer, which is more than enough for me.” Malcolm flung himself at Dusty and held him. “I love you, Dusty.”

Dusty kissed the top of Malcolm’s head and then said, “Boy, we’re a couple of saps, huh?”

Malcolm laughed. “Yeah.”

He grinned. “We still have a Christmas tree to decorate. I bought stuff to make gingerbread men, too.”

“That sounds kind of cool. Although I’d rather you made them and I ate them.”

Dusty chuckled, feeling such happiness he could hardly contain it. He got out of bed and tugged Malcolm up with him. “Come on, get dressed. I want to decorate.”

“Okay, okay.” Malcolm scooped up his jeans off the floor. “Why so eager?”

“Well, suddenly I’m actually looking forward to Christmas.”

“Yeah?” Malcolm came over to him and looped his arms around Dusty’s neck. “What are you going to ask Santa for?”

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“Oh, Santa’s already given me my gift.” He kissed the man he loved. “You.”

SHAWN LANE

Shawn Lane believes love and passion know no boundaries. Shawn writes both erotic love stories involving men in historical or contemporary settings and interracial romances between men and women. Shawn is always looking for new stories and new characters to create while holding down life in California.

* * *

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