



SPAM!
IT'S WHAT'S
FOR CHRISTMAS

Lenore Black

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BEN RICHMOND'S kitchenette looked like a newspaper had exploded all over it. Sheets of smudgy black-and-white type covered the chipped linoleum-topped table, while others lay littered on the ground. A few had even ended up on top of the refrigerator where he'd flung them in a fit of exasperation. Ben's job search was going slowly, to put it mildly. The whole enterprise made him want to throw up his hands in defeat, crawl back into bed, and stay there for the next few decades.

"Accountant, actuary, advertising manager," he read out loud from the classifieds between sips of coffee.

He sighed heavily. He had none of these skills and wasn't even entirely sure what an actuary did. Probably, he shouldn't have called his boss at Speedy's Custom Siding a neurotic dickless wonder. That had gotten him fired but good, the latest in a long line of drive-by encounters with employment.

Ben couldn't honestly say he regretted not working at Speedy's anymore, with its sterile white walls and mud-colored carpet. He'd spent eight very long hours a day in a gray-walled cubicle, tethered to his desk by a headset, answering questions about vinyl siding. The company operated like an iron-fisted third grade classroom, everything strictly regimented. An actual bell rang to announce time for a fifteen-minute break, half an hour's lunch, time to go home, time to breathe. Ben didn't care much for regimentation, and he and the

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neurotic dickless wonder had clashed early and often. At least, he'd learned by now not to bring personal bric-a-brac to the office. When security had come to escort him from the building, all he'd had to take was himself.

He scanned further down the help-wanted column. "Data processing, doorman, elevator repair."

The voice of Ben's tenth-grade English teacher floated through his head: *I realize you think you have better things to do than actually pay attention in class, Mr. Richmond, but one of these days you just might need something to fall back on and then you're really going to wish you'd bothered to learn something about anything at all.* How much did it suck that old Mrs. Greenawald had turned out to be right?

This wasn't how his life was supposed to go: twenty-eight years old and jobless, totally broke, living in what had to be L.A.'s crappiest apartment. He was Ben Richmond, big-time jock, the great shortstop hope of Westland High School, voted most likely to take the big leagues by storm, drafted number one by the Cleveland Indians. He'd been blazing a path through the minors until one random Wednesday when his knee went one way and he went the other on a hot shot up the middle.

There had been surgeries and rehab and then more surgeries. In the end, the doctors had shaken their heads at him: nothing left to try. So much for his baseball career. Ben had cycled through the predictable anger and disappointment and then just seemed to get stuck on confusion. Three years later, he still had no clue what to do with himself now that he couldn't play baseball.

Hotel manager, human resources assistant, lathe operator. He wondered if he'd be any good with a lathe.

"Kai—" he started to call out, because his boyfriend was always

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willing to offer a blunt assessment of his abilities.

He stopped with a pang. He kept forgetting that he'd lost more than his job when the neurotic dickless wonder had fired him.

It had been almost two years since Ben met Kai at the juice bar of his gym. He'd noticed him right away, slight and boyish, with spiky dark hair and a tattoo of a peony on his biceps. They both ordered the Fountain of Vigor and had gotten to talking. Ben asked what Kai did for a living, and it turned out he was a student at UCLA studying physical therapy. This gave Ben the perfect opening to confide the tragic tale of his untimely injury and sadly foreshortened baseball career. Kai made sympathetic eyes at him, leaning closer, the spark of interest in his expression a little sharper. Pro sports had not stopped being a babe magnet just because Ben had washed out at it.

He'd taken Kai to bed that afternoon, and they went out every night that week. By the end of the month, Ben was living with Kai for all intents and purposes. He would have given up his crappy apartment a long time ago if that hadn't raised the specter of some big "what do we mean to each other" discussion. He liked being in relationships; he just hated having to talk about them. Now he had to wonder if things might have worked out differently if he'd gone ahead and gotten rid of the place, since that was how the getting-kicked-to-the-curb conversation had begun.

"So, you still have the lease on your apartment, right?" Kai said out of the blue at the breakfast table two days after the firing.

Looking back now, Ben couldn't believe what an idiot he'd been. He honestly hadn't guessed where that little gambit was leading.

"I think it's time for you to move out," Kai had said very firmly.

"I'll get another job," Ben had insisted, open-mouthed with

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shock.

"It's not just that," Kai told him. "Look, I know things have been a struggle for you the last few years, but I'm not doing you any favors letting you sandbag your way through life. This really is the best thing for both of us. You'll see."

"But- but-" he kept sputtering long after Kai had walked away.

That had been three weeks ago—three weeks of unemployment and no sex and bouncing off the walls in this crappy little apartment. He let out a heavy sigh and glanced longingly at his phone. He and Kai had talked once or twice since the breakup. It would have been more often if Ben had his way about it, but usually his calls went straight to voice mail.

He stared at the phone until he couldn't fight the impulse anymore. Kai was still number one on speed dial, and he waited while the phone rang, expecting to leave yet another message.

He wasn't at all prepared when Kai's voice pulsed in his ear. "Hello, Ben."

"Oh, um, hey," he scrambled to say. "How's it going?"

"Fine. You?"

"Pretty good."

A heavy silence fell, and Ben scrounged around for something else to say. If he'd known Kai would pick up, he would have rehearsed a speech.

"Well, I guess I should probably—" Kai began.

Ben blurted out, "I'm looking for a job. In fact, I'm *this* close to a big opportunity. Things are really starting to come together." He tried to sound positive, expansive, *I'm the king of the world*, the kind of

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attitude people paid good money to motivational speakers to inspire in them. Sadly, he suspected he just sounded shifty and desperate.

There was a pause. "That's great, Ben. But you know this thing with us.... It wasn't just because you lost your job." *Again*, Ben could hear silently tacked on to the end of the sentence. "It hadn't been working for a while. We just—we want different things."

"That's not true! We totally want the same things. Like, um... success and a house with accent walls to paint and," he fumbled around, trying to come up with some more glamorous ambition, but finally settled for a weak, "and stuff."

He took a big breath.

"Look, the holidays are coming up," he continued, "and I was hoping—"

"Ben." Kai adopted his *please don't say something that will just embarrass us both* voice.

"It's the season of forgiveness and, and... stuff. And I'm totally going to make it up to you. I have it all planned out and everything. So if you could just give me another chance."

"I really don't think—"

Ben jumped in quickly, heading off the *no* that was coming. "At least we could get together, you know, for like an early holiday thing. For old times' sake."

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Great!" Ben breathed out in relief. "That's all I want. Just to see you."

He hung up feeling more hopeful than he had since that ill-fated breakfast three weeks ago. This lasted until he went over the

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conversation in his head and realized he'd promised Kai some big olive branch of a gesture, something that was supposedly already in the works.

"Shit!" His voice echoed off the walls of his tiny kitchenette.

He put his hands up to his temples, pressing, as if that might jumpstart his brain. Against all odds, he had an actual flash of inspiration. He sat up straighter and snapped his fingers. "That ugly porcelain stuff he loves so much!"

Kai avidly collected nineteenth-century French something-something that Ben could never remember the name of. It was hideous as all hell if you asked him, with painted flowers and gaudy flourishes of gold. Kai was forever dragging him to musty antique shops in search of the stuff. Ben would stand around like a lump, arms tucked in carefully at his sides so he wouldn't accidentally knock into anything, all the while thinking longingly of beer and television.

The last trip had been just a few days before Ben got fired. There had been a piece that made Kai's eyes go big and bright with anticipation—a "compote," the hoity-toity man who owned the store had informed them.

"It was so lovely," Kai said regretfully once they'd gotten back in the car, "but I don't feel like I have five hundred dollars to spend on it right now."

Ben couldn't imagine spending five hundred dollars on something like that *ever*—unless you were trying to win back the boyfriend who'd unceremoniously dumped you, in which case it was the best investment you could possibly make.

He hunkered down over the help wanted ads with more determination. About halfway down the third column, his gaze

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fastened on: *Nude Male Models Wanted!* Here at least was a skill set he possessed; he definitely knew how to be naked and a man.

"Cast a wider net," Kai used to tell him before he'd given up hope that Ben might one day amount to something.

Ben took a moment to consider if it was beneath his dignity to cast his net quite this wide. But nope. No dignity left to speak of. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Yeah?" a woman answered gruffly. It was the kind of voice that had been wrecked by cigarettes and sarcasm.

Just great, Ben thought.

"Um, hey, yeah, I'm calling about your ad for, uh—" He hesitated a moment and then blurted out the rest of the sentence in an unintelligible blur, "Nudemalemodels."

"Size?" the woman asked in a bored monotone.

"About six foot two," Ben answered.

The woman broke into a cough, or possibly a laugh. "Not that kind of size."

Ben frowned. "Then what—" His face went hot with realization, and his gaze automatically dropped down to his crotch. "Well, um, it's big? I've never had any complaints?" He wasn't sure why talking about his equipment made his voice lilt up uncertainly. If there was one thing a man should be sure about, it was his dick.

"Uh huh," the woman said, not sounding convinced.

"Well, it's not like I've ever taken out a ruler and measured it!" Ben huffed.

The ensuing silence felt either dubious or amused. Ben couldn't

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quite decide.

At last the woman said, reluctantly, as if it was against her better judgment, "All right, come in tomorrow morning at ten, and we'll see what you've got." She gave him the address, and he scrambled to find a pen and scribbled the information in the margin of the help wanted ads.

He hung up feeling strangely breathless.

* * *

THE next day, he got up early, spent a good hour trying to decide what to wear, trying on at least a half dozen different outfits before he finally came to his senses and realized his clothing choice probably wouldn't matter much when it came to landing a job as a *nude male model*. He went overboard on the hair gel and barely had time to gulp down a cup of coffee before sprinting out of the apartment. He'd been car-less since his ancient Datsun had given up the ghost and he couldn't come up with the money to replace it. When he'd lived with Kai, they'd shared his car, but now that Ben was on his own, he'd become a not-so-proud member of the bus-riding public.

On the way to the bus stop, Ben passed the same unlikely Santa Claus who had been staked out there all week. The guy sweltered beneath his red fur-trimmed suit in the unseasonably hot December weather, slouching beside a kettle, desultorily ringing a bell for charity. He didn't bother with a wig or a fake beard, and looked more like a bedraggled surf bum than Kris Kringle. His dirty blond hair fell lankly to his shoulders. He sported about three days' worth of unshaved scruff. Ben was pretty sure that was a tattoo of a cobra he'd glimpsed on "Santa's" neck. He lowered his eyes and hurried past.

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"What's your problem? You got no Christmas spirit or what?" Santa called after him.

Just pretend he's not talking to you, Ben thought.

"Hey, I'm talking to you."

Ben could have ignored him anyway, but for whatever reason, he stopped and turned around. "What?"

"You know what." Santa glanced meaningfully down at the kettle.

Ben sighed. "Look, I'd love to help you out, but I just got fired, my boyfriend dumped me, I'm down to my last few bucks, and if I don't get a job soon, I'm going to lose my crappy apartment that I don't even like."

Santa rolled his eyes. "You think you got problems? There's a recession on, donations are down, and kids today, are they satisfied with a simple board game? No. They all want a Wii, and they whine if they don't get it. Plus, it's not even Christmas yet, and already I have bunions." He narrowed his eyes at Ben. "And then I've got people like you thinking I'm some kind of bum or a mental case, because you've got these preconceived notions about what Santa Claus is supposed to look like. It's a mission, buddy, not a fashion statement!"

Ben held up his hands. "Okay, okay!" Geez, was Santa supposed to have an attitude problem? "Here." He fished out his wallet and dropped a couple of dollars into the kettle. The sum total of his worldly assets now consisted of his bus pass.

Santa raised a pierced eyebrow at him. "Two bucks? That's it?"

"Yeah, well, they're my last two bucks," Ben told him dryly, "so enjoy it."

"All right, all right," Santa said, mollified. "Go ahead and wish for

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something. I know you want to.”

On the one hand, this was ridiculous, because Ben was twenty years too old for Santa Claus. On the other hand, his luck hadn't been too great lately, and if making a wish would bring Kai back then, hey, no problem. He'd already established he had no personal dignity worth mentioning.

Santa rolled his eyes. “This is why I don't deal in grownups. You don't know a damned thing about making wishes.”

“I didn't even say anything yet!” Ben protested.

“Yeah, but you were going to get it wrong.” Santa waved his hand dismissively. “Forget it. I don't care what you want. You're getting what you *need*. And you're welcome, by the way.” He glowered.

“Okay, um, thanks. I guess.” Ben backed away before Santa could go postal on him. He hoped this wasn't some sign of how the rest of his day was going to turn out.

The bus picked him up and took him from his seedy part of town to another part that was almost as depressing. He got off, avoiding the newspapers and other bits of litter that were blowing down the sidewalk like tumbleweed, and looked around for the address the woman had given him on the phone. Not surprisingly, it was the most rundown building on the block. He hitched up his optimism, what there was of it, and headed inside.

He got off the elevator on the fourth floor and pressed the buzzer outside the door marked “All Occasions Casting.” A perky brunette at the receptionist's desk greeted him with a bright smile. She was fresh-faced and eager to be helpful, the kind of girl who used to wait outside the gates of the ballpark to ask for an autograph back when Ben was something more than an unemployed vinyl siding customer service

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representative.

"I, uh, I'm here to—" He trailed off.

He couldn't bring himself to say the words "nude male model" to this girl with her peaches-and-cream cheeks and her neatly buttoned cardigan the color of daisies. It would be like discussing porn with Bambi.

His speechlessness seemed to do the trick, however. "Oh," the girl said, the word round and pronounced on her lips, realization lighting her face. "You want to see Marge. Down the hall, last door on the left. Have a seat on the bench outside, and she'll call you in when she's ready." The girl smiled, without the slightest hint she might be embarrassed for him. Ben had to admire her professionalism. He would not have been able to keep a straight face if he were in her place.

It took barely ten minutes before he was called in for his audition. The room was small and bare, cinderblock walls and a concrete floor. The only furniture was a metal table behind which sat a supremely bored-looking woman in her fifties, presumably Marge.

She gave him a look over the tops of her glasses, the kind of blunt assessment that would have made a streetwalker blush. "Not bad, although you practically scream 'I'm a rookie'. I guess it wouldn't do any good to ask if you have a resume or a head shot?"

"Um, I didn't realize, was I supposed to—" Ben stuttered.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Marge said. "Okay, go ahead. Show me what you've got."

He stood there, feet stuck to the floor, no idea what to do. Should he, like, act or something? Strike a pose? He stared stupidly back at Marge.

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She let out a tired sigh, as if to say *do I have to spell out everything?* “Drop your drawers.”

He stared harder.

Marge shrugged. “What can I say? I need to see your talent before I can book you for a gig.”

Ben took a breath, unbuckled his belt, and felt his face turning hot as he pushed his jeans and underwear down his legs. Marge craned her neck, giving him a dispassionate once-over, and then nodded that he could pull his pants back up.

“What do you know,” she said, with an ironic quirk of her mouth. “Your talent actually is as big as you think.” She scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to him. “Show up where and when it says here. Tell McNally you’re a virgin, so he won’t be a jerk. He doesn’t mind working with new models, but he needs to know up front.”

Ben’s brain lagged a step or two behind. “You mean I actually got the job?”

Marge shrugged. “What can I say? I know desperation when I see it. And your talent really is quite impressive. Besides, we need someone right away. The guy scheduled for this gig tripped getting out of bed this morning and has a cast on his arm.” She sighed. “Not a brain surgeon, that one.”

Ben fiddled with the piece of paper. “So this job, is it—”

“Not porn *per se*,” Marge told him, “but it does involve graphic nudity. So if you don’t think you’re up to it—” She reached out, as if to take back the scrap of paper.

Ben imagined Kai on Christmas morning, the way his face would light up when he unwrapped that God-awful ugly compute. “No, no!

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I'm good." He forced a smile and turned to go before Marge could change her mind.

"Knock 'em dead, hot stuff," floated after him into the hall.

* * *

ACCORDING to the slip of paper, the job was for later that day, which was good, because if Ben had had any more time to think about it he probably would have freaked out and gone home and pretended the words "nude male model" didn't exist in the English language.

Instead, he showed up promptly at the studio, another dingy building in another unpromising neighborhood. He rang the buzzer, told the scratchy voice on the other end of the intercom why he was there, and took the rickety elevator up to the eighth floor, his palms sweating.

A tiny little woman with purple-red dyed hair waited to meet him. "You the talent?"

"Ben."

"Rona." She gestured with her head toward a door at the end of the hall.

They walked into an enormous, mostly empty loft space. A man at the far end of it adjusted a camera on a tripod. Rona led Ben into a closet-sized dressing room.

"You need to fill out these forms." She handed over a clipboard, briskly efficient. "'One's a model release and one's for taxes. When you're done, here's your wardrobe." She thrust a plastic bag at him with something red inside. Actual clothes. He hadn't been expecting that, and it came as a relief. "You can change behind the screen."

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Ben scribbled out his personal information. He'd never thought anything about taxes would make him happy, but the prospect of actually have something *to* tax put a smile on his face. He went behind the screen to don his costume, opened the bag and found that Rona had given him a pair of red velvet pants, sewed to look as if the fly had been peeled open, along with a Santa hat. He pulled on the clothes. His dick hung out of the pants, which he supposed was the point, graphic nudity and all. He wondered if possibly this was more humiliating than having no clothes on at all.

"You about done in there?" Rona called to him.

"Um." He imagined Kai with that look he got when he was really pleased, mouth soft and round, eyelashes fluttering. He imagined the stack of bills sitting on the kitchen table waiting to be paid. He walked out from behind the screen, chin up and back straight even though his dick and balls were dangling out in front of him.

Rona tilted her head. "Good. Those pants fit you perfectly." Ben didn't think she was making fun of him, but he couldn't really be sure.

"Where's my model?" An impatient voice shouted from the other room. "Are you drinking on the job again, Rona?"

"Go fuck yourself, McNally!" she hollered back and then plastered on a smile for Ben's benefit. "Don't worry. He's a lot nicer to the talent." She picked up a brush. "Okay, makeup."

She made rather perfunctory work of his face and then turned her attention to his cock. Ben raised an eyebrow at her, and she said with a smirk, "Hey, it is the star of the shoot."

When that was finally done, Ben made a move toward the door, thinking he was ready to get to work at last.

Rona shook her head. "Call sheet says you need to have an

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erection in the shot. We're on a tight budget. So sorry, you don't get your choice of fluffer. If you like boys, close your eyes and pretend." A pump bottle of lube sat on the makeup table, Ben noticed belatedly. Rona squirted out a liberal handful.

"Um," he stuttered as she reached for him.

"Problem?"

He went over his other options and came up with none. "Uh... no. No problem."

Ben had never had any trouble getting it up, not once in his entire life. Mostly, he got it up for boys, but his days as a ballplayer had given him an appreciation for enthusiastic girls, as well. The bottom line was: he just liked sex. So he truly had no explanation why his dick chose this moment of all times to turn prima donna on him. *Come on, come on*, he thought coaxingly at it. But it stayed stubbornly uninterested despite Rona's best efforts.

"More like this?" She twisted her wrist on the down stroke, something that never failed to get Ben going.

Until now.

"Maybe I just—" Ben struggled for some way to say *I'm not usually this inadequate, I swear* without sounding entirely pathetic.

"*What* is taking so long?"

The door to the dressing room flung open, and the photographer loomed there. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with short brown hair that was starting to recede just a bit, a mobile mouth that seemed equally capable of sarcasm as kindness, and bright blue eyes hot with intelligence. He wore black pants and a tight-fitting black shirt. Ben's type tended more toward slight young pretty boys, but that didn't keep him from noticing the body beneath those black clothes, not

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gym-rat perfect, but nice, very nice.

"Oh. So that's the problem." The man's sharp blue eyes fastened on Ben.

Ben's dick instantly twitched in Rona's hand. This was lost on no one, and the man lingered, watching, until Ben was fully erect.

"Good," the man said. "Give him a robe and get him in front of the backdrop." He disappeared.

"I guess you do better when you keep your eyes open and pretend, huh?" Rona said, handing him the robe. "Leave this on until McNally tells you to take it off. He'll need to adjust the camera and lights before he starts shooting."

It was a relief to cover up, and even though standing around doing nothing usually drove Ben half insane, today he wasn't complaining. The man finally got the lights set and the camera focused, and he nodded at Ben. "Ready for you now."

Rona came and took the robe. Ben's salute had lost a little of its enthusiasm, so Rona went to work on him again. Now that Ben stood under the hot glare of lights, his heart started to beat too fast, and his chest felt tight. Even admiring how the photographer's black pants cupped his incredibly gorgeous ass did nothing to get him going.

The photographer nodded to Rona, who hesitated a moment and then headed back to the dressing room. The man approached, and Ben looked down at the floor. Damn it, he really needed this job.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to molest you." The man sounded amused.

"I'm more concerned about getting fired."

"Relax. What's your name again?"

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"Ben."

"Gavin. So, Ben, luckily for you, Marge called this morning to tell me you're new to modeling, in case you forgot to mention it. I built some time into the schedule for reassuring the anxious virgin."

"You're a sport," Ben said dryly.

Gavin grinned. "Not something I hear every day. So, look, it's normal to be nervous the first time out. I can help you with that if you'll let me." His gaze met Ben's. "Is it all right if I touch your penis?"

The words alone were enough to make Ben suck in his breath, his dick suddenly a hell of a lot more willing. Apparently, he needed to reconsider what his type was, because this guy definitely had an effect on him.

Gavin's mouth twisted into a self-satisfied little smirk. "I'm going to take that to mean: yes, please touch me." He curled his fingers around Ben's shaft and stroked lightly. "Did anyone tell you what this picture is for?"

Ben shook his head, not quite trusting that his voice wouldn't crack.

"Penis enlargement."

"What's with the costume?" Ben asked, honestly puzzled.

"Apparently, for some people nothing says happy holidays quite like a big, hard one. You have what so many men can only wish for." Gavin started to move his hand on Ben's dick. "Just imagine all those men looking at this picture of you, admiring, envying. You like to be looked at, don't you, Ben? A hot guy like you." He circled his thumb around the cockhead. "Like to be touched. You know that old phrase 'making love to the camera'? Well, the truth is that the camera makes love to you. Every click of the shutter, every time the flash goes off, it's

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like hands, the most sensitive, most appreciative hands, all over your skin.”

Ben was not only hard by the end of this motivational speech, but he was panting.

Gavin gave him a look of appraisal. “I think we’re ready to get started.” He returned to the camera. “Just stand naturally.” He began snapping pictures.

Being natural was easier said than done when Ben was so pornographically displayed. His back went ramrod straight, and his shoulders tensed so much they were practically brushing his ears.

“Talk to me,” he said desperately.

Gavin didn’t hesitate. “People are going to get this ad in their email, and they’re going to open it, and their mouths are going to drop open at the sight of your luscious cock.”

Gavin’s voice felt like a caress, and Ben’s body started to relax.

“That’s good, that’s good,” Gavin encouraged him, the camera clicking away. “Can you thrust your hips forward? Like you’re offering me that big, gorgeous cock of yours.”

Ben rested his hands on his waist and canted his hips, his skin buzzing.

Gavin murmured, “Beautiful.”

That was pretty much it for Ben’s self-consciousness. Rona returned, and they took the occasional break so she could reapply makeup or fix his hair or blot the sweat from his forehead. Ben hardly noticed. Maybe he’d finally found the skill he could fall back on. Possibly it should have bothered him that this skill involved waving his dick around for the world to see, but hey, washed-up ex-shortstops

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couldn't be choosers.

At last Gavin declared, "Okay. Robe."

Rona hurried over with it and told Ben, "We're probably good, but don't get dressed until McNally gives you the word. There are chairs in the lounge where you can wait."

Ben took a seat and flipped through an old issue of *Photography*. When he heard the main door open, he glanced up and saw Rona leaving. She waved, a bemused smile curving her mouth.

Before Ben could ask where she was going, Gavin was standing in front of him. "So, we're done with the job. I sent everyone else home, but I thought if you were interested in making some more money we could take some more pictures. They'd just be for me. I'd be the only one who ever saw them."

"What would I have to do?" Ben asked warily.

Gavin met his gaze unapologetically. "Get yourself off."

Ben wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on the terrycloth and didn't look away. He nodded before there had been any kind of actual thought process on the subject. He needed the money. For Kai's gift. That was what he told himself.

Gavin's eyes turned an even darker shade of blue. "Give me five minutes. I'll set up the shot."

It took more like twenty, and then Gavin called him over. A fluffy white comforter lay across some pillows, creating a cloud-like nest.

"Lie on your back," Gavin told him. "I'd like to start with some shots of you in the costume."

Ben's lips quirked.

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Gavin shrugged. "What can I say? I'm full of the holiday spirit."

Ben got comfortable, and Gavin fiddled with the camera, and then it was show time.

"You want to start by touching your chest?" Gavin suggested.

Ben laid his hand between his nipples, just resting it there for a moment, and then he began to explore. Gavin had the camera in his hands, snapping pictures, from farther away and then closer up, circling around, taking shots from all angles.

Ben started to ease his hand down his belly, and Gavin encouraged him, "Yeah, yeah, give that gorgeous dick some attention."

He trailed his fingertips along his shaft, light and teasing, because Gavin staring at him was the biggest turn-on ever and if he didn't take this slow, he wasn't going to last.

Gavin held the camera away from his face. "Can I get you without the costume?"

Completely nude was different than mostly unclothed, and if the way Ben's dick reacted was any indication, a hell of a lot hotter.

He started to slip the pants down his hips, but Gavin called out urgently, "Wait! Do that slower." He knelt down, and the camera whirled away as Ben undressed as deliberately as possible.

"You are so fucking hot," Gavin muttered.

Ben wrapped his palm around his dick and thrust, seriously getting into it.

"Yeah, yeah, like that. Do you want to open your legs for me?"

Not surprisingly, Ben found that he did. Gavin stayed on his knees, sliding closer, camera pointed at Ben's face. "I can't wait to see

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what you look like when you come," Gavin said, sounding so very, very dirty.

Ben arched his back and pushed up into his fist. He *really* liked a dirty-talking Gavin.

"Do you finger yourself when you get off?"

Ben nodded, and Gavin passed him a tube of lube. Ben soon had two fingers in his ass and an even tighter grip on his cock. He felt totally exposed, not that he minded particularly. Oh, hell, who was he kidding? Nothing had ever been a bigger turn-on. Still, he'd always been a two-way street kind of guy, and he figured Gavin owed him a little reciprocity.

"You should tell me something," he said breathlessly. "About yourself."

Gavin raised an eyebrow. "That's what you think, huh?"

Ben nodded, grinding down onto his fingers. "Mm-hmm."

Gavin stared for a moment, spots of color burning high in his cheeks, and then he went back to snapping pictures. "What do you want to know?"

Ben shrugged. "Something. Anything."

Gavin's mouth lifted at the corners. "Oh, I see. A little quid pro quo." He crouched down, to take some shots from a low angle. "Well, let's see. I have a rotten temper and an anti-social personality. At least, that's what most of my exes will tell you. I drink Scotch and eat red meat, and if you're a vegan, please, God, just keep it to yourself. I came to L.A. to photograph a rare lotus, go figure, and ended up the photog to the flesh industry." His voice dropped into a gravelly octave. "And you're the hottest fucking thing I've seen in forever. A little shy and totally shameless. I like that in a guy."

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Gavin's blunt appreciation put Ben in the mood to be even more shameless. He spread his legs wider, fucked his hand harder. "Do you do this a lot?"

Gavin shook his head. "Being a walking cliché hurts my pride. So I don't fuck my models. Don't get personal with them. But there you were, so damned pretty, your dick standing up just because I looked at you. And I couldn't resist. I'm going to jerk off to these pictures until I go blind."

"You have a dirty mouth," Ben told him.

Gavin smiled broadly. "That's actually one of my good points."

He knelt right next to Ben's shoulder, and Ben could see the erection pressed against the tight black fabric of his pants.

"Being a cliché isn't the worse thing in the world." The words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to consider them.

Mixing business and pleasure in this situation probably wasn't the smart way to go. It was unprofessional, and the whole point of embarking on the nude male model phase of his life was to *win Kai back*.

Then again... Ben never had been what you'd call a smart decision-maker.

He reached out to cup Gavin's dick through his pants. "Are you going to put that camera down or what?"

Gavin went still, a strained expression on his face: temptation and lust and rapidly diminishing self-control. Ben reached for the camera and put it down himself. The entire afternoon had been foreplay, and Ben preferred cutting right to the chase. He was all over Gavin in an instant, pulling at his clothes, kissing like he had no intention of ever coming up for air. He tossed Gavin's pants and shirt

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and underwear into a heap beside the discarded costume.

He kissed across Gavin's chest and worried his nipples, again and again because Gavin gasped so prettily. He glanced up, grinning. "Do you like getting your cock sucked?"

"Fuck," Gavin said, teeth clenched, his cock jerking as Ben took it in hand.

Ben grinned even wider. "I'm going to take that as a yes."

He'd been fourteen the first time he'd gone down on a guy: Lester Biggs, the number one starter on the Westland High baseball team, an adrenaline-fueled impulse in the showers after a 3-2 win over their arch rival. Lester had looked kind of skittish when it was done. Ben, on the other hand, had experienced perhaps the most important epiphany of his life; he fucking *loved* sucking cock.

There was a flutter of excitement in his stomach as he darted out his tongue, swirled it experimentally around the head of Gavin's dick.

"God," Gavin moaned.

Ben smiled. This was always the best part, the desperate little noises that came streaming out of a guy when he had an eager mouth on his cock. He gave Gavin's dick a squeeze, wrapped his lips around it, and set to work to see how many more sounds he could pull out of Gavin. He got a throaty murmur of encouragement when he started to suck, a high-pitched gasp when he traced patterns along the shaft with his tongue, a desperate "oh fuck, oh fuck" when he used the delicate edge of teeth on the scar where Gavin had been cut as a baby.

"Ben." Gavin's chest heaved with his labored breath. His thighs trembled. "If you keep doing that, I'm going to come."

Ben laughed around his cock, and this earned him something that could reasonably be called a wail.

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Gavin sunk his fingers into Ben's hair, pulling him off. "I'm serious." He hooked his leg behind Ben's knee and flipped him over onto his back, climbing on top. "If I come, I can't fuck you."

"Shit!" Ben banged his head against the floor.

Gavin took the opportunity to bite him on the neck. "That's a yes, right?"

"Yes," Ben panted. "Yes! Just—" He spread his legs wider.

"Bossy." Gavin licked at Ben's nipple. "I like that in a guy."

"Yeah?" Ben pushed at his shoulders. "How do you feel about impatience?"

Gavin laughed. "I completely relate to it." He ran a hand down Ben's side, his fingers tracing muscles. "You have the most beautiful obliques I've ever seen."

"Years of playing shortstop."

Gavin's forehead scrunched up. "That's... football?"

Ben rolled his eyes. "Baseball. Wait." He frowned. "So, you don't give a shit about sports?"

Gavin shrugged. "Not unless it's hockey. What can I say? I'm Canadian." He licked a hot stripe across Ben's belly. "Is that going to be a problem?" He glanced up.

Ben shivered, shaking his head emphatically. He couldn't remember the last person who'd wanted him just for him, not because he was a jock. He grabbed at Gavin's shoulders. "Talking when you're supposed to be fucking me, now *that's* a problem."

Gavin's mouth twisted into a smile. It wasn't a very nice smile. Ben's cock jerked against his belly. This didn't escape Gavin's notice,

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and smugness sparked in his eyes as he reached for the lube. Condoms materialized from somewhere, as if Gavin were a porn-minded Boy Scout, always prepared to fuck. He rolled one on, slicked himself, lifted Ben's hips and entered him in one stroke.

"Fuck!" It had been... Ben didn't know how long since he'd had sex like this, rough and desperate and so very necessary. He wrapped his legs around Gavin's waist, gripping tightly.

Gavin pulled out and thrust back in. "I want to do things to you." He sucked on Ben's neck, right at the place where Ben's pulse pounded, and then he started to whisper into Ben's ear, going into some detail about what he had planned.

He really did have one hell of a dirty mouth.

* * *

ALMOST four hours later they finally peeled themselves up from the floor and got dressed. Ben was boneless and fucked out, but sadly, still susceptible to guilt.

"I have a boyfriend," he blurted out. "Or at least I did. I'm trying to get him back. That's why I took this job. Um. Not that you would have guessed that from what just happened." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what I'm saying here."

There was just a moment's pause before Gavin shrugged. "Hey, it was just some harmless fun, right?"

"Yeah," Ben agreed half-heartedly. Images flashed back to him: Gavin's legs draped over his shoulders, Gavin's hands clenched in the comforter, his every response telegraphed on his expressive face. "It was really, really—" He made himself stop talking.

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He couldn't stop himself from trying to remember the last time he and Kai had had sex that made him feel like he'd lost brain cells in the process. Not recently, that was for sure.

"So let me give you this." Gavin walked over to a battered old desk pushed up against the wall and came back with an envelope.

Ben held up his hands. "No, no. I couldn't." He'd arrived at the nude-male-model stage of desperate career options, not the man-whore stage. It was a subtle but important distinction.

"It's for the pictures, the standard fee I pay all my models," Gavin said firmly. "Not for the—will you just take it?"

If Ben hadn't needed the money quite so badly, he would have drawn a line, taken a stand. Sadly, he was penniless. "Thanks." He looked down at his feet, feeling incredibly awkward. "So, um, see you around?"

Not that he probably would. Or *should*, if he was at all serious about getting Kai back. It was just one of those things people said, right?

Gavin's mouth twisted ironically. "Sure. See you around."

Ben headed for the door, but he couldn't help a glance back. Gavin watched him intently. Ben swallowed the lump in his throat that had no business being there. He got on the elevator and went down to the dingy lobby, climbed back on the bus and rode home.

For something that had been just a little harmless fun, he felt strangely at a loss.

☆ ☆ ☆

IN THE days that followed, Ben was forced to accept that he seemed to

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be pining for Gavin, as ridiculous as that was considering the man was practically a stranger. Ben would take a mental vacation in the middle of whatever he was doing—making toast, vacuuming the crappy carpet in his crappy apartment, confabulating a resume for his new career as a nude male model—and a home movie would start playing in his head, a highlight reel of their sexual escapades from that day in the studio. It was distracting, but at least it took his mind off the fact that his cock would soon be on display in a million strangers' inboxes.

"They'll blur your face," Gavin had promised him. "They want all the focus on your cock, trust me."

Ben hadn't found that especially reassuring.

To fend off the mounting panic that he was going to boot up his computer one day and find the pornographic spam in his own inbox, he tried to concentrate on Operation Get Kai Back. Although to be honest, he didn't feel quite the same urgency about it that he once had. Still, it was a plan, and in his current rudderless condition, he needed something to cling to. He gathered up the cash he'd made from Gavin and headed off to the bus stop. The vintage shop with the ugly French whatever-whatever was on the other side of town.

Santa was back on his corner. He flicked a disdainful look at Ben as he passed. "Grown-ups," he huffed. "You wouldn't recognize a present if you fell over it. Or, hey, spent a whole afternoon rolling around on the floor with it."

Ben stopped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Santa rolled his eyes. "Seriously. I'm sticking to kids from now on. I get them a new toy, they know what the hell to do with it."

Ben boarded the bus, thinking maybe Santa had skipped his medication today.

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It took an hour and a half to go what was probably five miles to reach the shop. The snooty owner gave Ben a disapproving look up and down, making a pained face at his cut-off shorts and ratty sneakers. *Oh, yeah? Well, us nude male models don't care what we wear,* Ben considered saying, just for the shock value.

"Can I help you?" the snooty owner asked stiffly.

"I'm here to buy that commode." He pointed.

"*Compote,*" the man corrected with a grimace.

Ben smiled brightly. "That's what I said."

Sadly, his triumph didn't last long. There was no way to feel pleased with himself when he was handing over actual money for something that butt-ugly and useless. The store owner boxed it up and wrapped it in red foil paper.

"I'm sure he'll enjoy it," the man said.

He'd better, Ben thought, trudging out of the store.

The ride back to his apartment dragged on just as endlessly, and Ben felt oddly self-conscious sitting there on the bus with a frilly piece of porcelain on his lap, although only someone with x-ray vision would have known what it was. He shrugged off his ridiculous sense of embarrassment. It didn't matter what he thought of the French whatever-whatever. The important thing was that Kai loved it, and Ben loved Kai. Or at least, he was very fond of him. Kai was familiar, like a favorite pair of sweat socks you wore every day for thirty-six days in a row during a hitting streak, or... something like that.

By the time Ben got back to his building, Santa had taken his kettle and gone home, which was a relief. He jogged up the stairs to his apartment, looked around for somewhere to put the gift box, and finally dumped it on the kitchen table. All he had to do now was call

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Kai. He picked up the phone, got voice mail, and left a message. *Kai's probably just busy*, he told himself.

* * *

TWO weeks, and about three dozen phone calls later, Kai still couldn't be bothered to give Ben the time of day. The holiday get-together Kai had (kind of, sort of) agreed to had yet to be planned. The box with the compote still sat on the table, silently mocking Ben, coming as close to calling him a pathetic loser as an inanimate object could.

Ben drew a line at making a thirty-seventh phone call—even a man with his pride in tatters had a breaking point—so he sat down at the computer to send an email instead. He was blindsided by the message lurking in his inbox: *Have yourself a merry BIG Christmas!*

"Oh, God," he groaned out loud.

A sensible person would have just deleted it without looking, but no one had ever accused Ben of having sense. He double-clicked.

There it was, the XXX ad for penis enlargement with the pornographic Santa costume... only the picture was of somebody else, somebody blond and square-bodied, decidedly Scandinavian. He sat there blinking at the screen, his mouth gaping open. Of course, it should have been a relief. He'd been paid for the job, and yet his cock wasn't the star of a million inboxes. This was totally win-win by any sane accounting of the situation.

Possibly, Ben wasn't as sane as he'd once been.

He fished Gavin's card out of the pile of papers on the kitchen table, where he'd been trying to ignore it. He dialed the number, drumming his fingers restlessly, his nude male model's pride seriously affronted.

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"McNally," said the terse voice on the other end of the line.

"Was my dick just not big enough for you?" he blurted out, without any sort of preamble, or even so much as "hello."

There was a beat of silence. "Ben?"

"Yes!" Ben said, exasperated. "How many guys call you with concerns about the size of their dicks? Actually, don't answer that. I just want to know why there's some Swedish guy playing porno Santa and not me."

"I, uh—the film got ruined," Gavin said in a funny voice. "My mistake."

"Seriously?"

"Yes!" Gavin said, sounding a tad defensive. "It could happen to anyone, okay?"

"Um, okay?" Ben said. "I just—I wanted to make sure it wasn't me. You know, that I didn't screw up the shoot or something."

"No, no," Gavin said quickly. "You were great. Amazing, actually."

Ben fidgeted, a familiar warmth settling in his stomach. "Um, so, are you working on anything interesting right now?"

Gavin snorted. "Big hairy guys wearing nothing but strappy sandals. I'm the photographer of choice to the fetish community." He let out a breath. "Whatever. It's a living, right?"

"At least you have a marketable skill."

"Hey, I've seen your cock. You definitely have assets of your own." The leer in Gavin's voice sent a tingle all down Ben's spine. Gavin cleared his throat. "I wasn't supposed to say that, was I?"

Ben had a guilty thought of Kai. He should hang up now. He

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really should. Instead, he changed the subject. "So, um, you must do other kinds of photography?"

"Oh, yeah. I do," Gavin said. "Male nudes are my specialty. Not like... not porn. Pictures that show what an honest-to-God marvel the human body is. I could show you sometime."

"Yeah. Sure. I'd like that."

They could have coffee, look at the pictures. It didn't have to be a big deal. It didn't have to involve cheating. Ben just... he liked Gavin. The idea of never seeing him again sucked.

"Of course, I'd love for you to keep modeling for me," Gavin continued.

Ben sucked in a breath, so loudly Gavin probably heard it.

"But I think we both know how that would go," Gavin said, his voice low and throaty.

A part of Ben—a loud, insistent part—wanted to say fuck it and ask Gavin what he was doing right now. And, because he couldn't help being just a teensy tiny bit of a cliché, what he was wearing. *Kai did break up with me*. He spent a happy two seconds imagining studio shenanigans with Gavin before the tenacious, never-say-die part of him kicked back in, the part that had gone through seven surgeries on his knee before finally, grudgingly accepting that his days playing baseball were over. *You were with Kai for two years*, that part of him insisted. *You owe it to yourself and him to see if there's any way you can get back together*.

He let out his breath. "Yeah, we do know how that would go. So, um, I guess I'll see you around?"

He hung up feeling dissatisfied. The gift still sat there on the kitchen table, a silent indictment in red foil.

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The phone rang again, startling him. It had to be Gavin calling back, and Ben's heart started to race. *Fuck it*, flashed through his head. He snatched up the phone and babbled, "Okay, okay, I changed my mind!"

"Good to know," a sardonic voice said in his ear.

He frowned. "Marge?"

"I was calling to book you for another job, but you sound like a mess." Her voice sharpened with suspicion. "Are you high?"

He sighed. "No. I'm not high. What's the job?"

Marge went silent a moment, probably calculating the odds that he was telling the truth, and then she said, "So you've heard of edible underwear, right?"

* * *

THE job went okay, Ben guessed. It was no more humiliating than the Santa gig anyway. The important thing was: he had money coming in. His crappy apartment had started to look almost good when he was contemplating the possibility of living on the street. Fortunately, that wasn't going to happen. Marge was on a roll lining up gigs for him.

"There's always a feeding frenzy for fresh meat," she told him, leaving Ben feeling like the star of a tragically bad prison film.

He called Kai when he remembered to, although he never actually managed to speak with him. Taking off his clothes for a living proved surprisingly time-consuming, and he lost track of the days. Before he knew it, weeks had gone by, and Christmas was the very next damned day. He thought about waiting until after the holidays to give Kai his gift, less pressure maybe, but then he began to picture it,

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the way that big red-foil-wrapped box would start to look pathetic come January, like little more than an after-thought.

"Fuck that shit," Ben said out loud. He hadn't spent five hundred dollars on some ugly-ass piece of junk to let it gather dust in his kitchen. He dug his bus pass out of the jeans he'd worn the day before, hefted the box, and set off. Christmas Eve morning wasn't really Christmas yet, he told himself. He could drop by without it being totally awkward.

Well, hopefully.

* * *

AT THE condo, Ben jogged up the stairs to the second floor, knocked on Kai's door and waited. It opened, and Kai stood there, also with a box in his arms, apparently on his way out. For a moment, they both froze, and then Kai took a step back.

"Ben," he said, sadly not in a *wow, it's so great to see you* way.

Ben jiggled his leg nervously, feeling like an idiot holding that big red box. "Um, hey, I just wanted to stop by and say, you know, happy holidays and, and... stuff."

Kai eyed the gift suspiciously. "Is that—" His eyebrows drew together, and that was not his pleased look.

"Oh, no," Ben said quickly. "It's just—hey, let me help you with that."

He shunted the compote aside, sitting it down on a side table, and reached for the box in Kai's arms.

"You don't have to do that," Kai protested.

"I don't mind."

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"No, seriously," Kai said firmly.

Ben persisted. *Just let me fucking help you.* At last, he managed to wrest the box from Kai. He plastered on a smile and hoped it looked friendly. "Where do you want this?" The box was full of books. "You giving this stuff away? Should I take it down to your car?"

Kai hesitated a moment and then confessed, "I've got a new place, Ben. The movers are coming in a few days. I'm just getting a jump on some of the little stuff."

Ben stared at him. "But—why? Where are you going?"

"I told you when you moved out you could have the apartment if you wanted it," Kai said, not answering the question.

Ben didn't bother to mention he couldn't have afforded the rent. They both knew that. "So where are you going?" he asked again.

Kai's gaze dropped down to the rug. "I—it's—"

"Hey babe, you ready?" a voice said from behind Ben.

He whirled around. A man stood in the open doorway. He was tow-headed with aggressively white teeth, wearing the kind of beachy casual attire that cost more than Ben made in a month at the vinyl siding company. He gave Ben a polite nod. His gaze moved to Kai, and he broke into a fond smile.

Babe. That's what he'd called Kai.

"David, this is my..." Kai paused awkwardly, "um, friend? Ben. He came by to help me pack."

"Oh, hey. That's nice of you. It's always great to meet friends of Kai's." He held out his hand to shake.

Ben pushed the box at him. "I think this is going with you."

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David's forehead creased with confusion. "Uh, thanks." He looked to Kai. "I guess I'll... take this down to the car?"

Kai nodded.

David leaned in for a kiss. "Be right back."

Ben waited until he heard the scuff of David's loafers heading down the stairs. "So... You—he—"

"David's an orthopedist. We met at the hospital." Kai met Ben's eye, as if challenging him to disapprove. "He's a good person. I think you'd like him."

The guy looked like someone who'd never need a fallback plan in his life. Ben was pretty sure he hated him.

"I thought it was because I lost my job," he said stupidly.

"I told you it had been over for a while." Kai sounded exasperated. "You just wouldn't listen."

"I didn't realize that was code for 'I'm fucking someone else'."

Hell, he almost wanted to laugh. He was such a freakin' idiot for feeling so guilty for sleeping with Gavin *while they were broken up* when Kai had been fucking around on him for... who knew how long?

Kai crossed his arms over his chest. "It was over before I even met David. Pity was only going to take us so far."

Just like that, the urge to laugh vanished completely. "Yeah. Well." Ben hoisted the stupid red box. "Merry-fucking-Christmas."

He turned on his heel and thumped down the stairs. Of course, it was just his luck he'd run into David, who was shutting the door of his car. The guy drove a black Porsche with a license plate that read: Bone Doc.

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"Oh, hey, Ben." David smiled. "Is that one of Kai's?" He reached for the compote.

"Uh, no," Ben said quickly, because he definitely didn't need Kai finding out he'd spent a stupid amount of money on a gift for him. Today had already been humiliating enough. "That's just—I'm on my way to a holiday party."

"Oh. Well, then. Merry Christmas," David said.

"Yeah, yeah." Ben trudged off in the direction of the bus stop.

It was almost noon by the time he made it back to his neighborhood. Santa had taken up his usual spot, and Ben stopped on the way to his apartment.

"Do you think you can use this?" He held out the box,

Santa rattled it, his expression thoughtful. "I've got a few forty-five-year-old *Antiques Road Show* nuts in the bodies of nine year olds on the been-nice list. So, yeah. Thanks."

Ben nodded and walked on.

Santa called out, "Christmas isn't over yet, you know!"

"Yeah, yeah," Ben grumbled under his breath.

* * *

THE apartment seemed quieter and more forlorn than when he'd left a few hours earlier. He sighed heavily and made a beeline for the refrigerator. *At least, you have beer*, he consoled himself. *Not white cans with big black letters on them which was all you could afford last week, but actual green bottles with labels and everything.* Hell, he was coming up in the world.

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He plunked down at the kitchen table to drink himself silly. From this vantage point, he had a perfect view of the peeling paint on the living room walls, the hideous autumn leaf border yellowed with age, becoming not more ghostly, but somehow more jarringly garish, because that was just the way his luck rolled.

Ben sighed again and tried to think of something, anything that might make him feel better. *Call Gavin* sprang instantly to mind. No big surprise there. But it was Christmas Eve, and Gavin probably had things to do. Calling him now would just be too pathetic. Ben slumped at the table, head on his hand, settling in for a morose, Heineken-fueled holiday.

The knock at the door nearly startled him off his chair. He got up to answer it, although with the day he was having it was probably Jehovah's Witnesses.

Instead, he found Gavin standing there. "Hey. I hope I'm not bothering you?"

For a moment, Ben just stared, because he wasn't used to having what he wanted magically materialize on his doorstep. Then his brain caught up to him, and he quickly said, "Oh, no. Not at all." He moved back out of the way. "Come in."

Gavin glanced around as he stepped inside, his quick eyes taking in the sagging couch, the ancient carpet, the general Salvation Army whiff of despair hanging over the place. In the true spirit of the season, he didn't comment on it.

"You want to—" Ben motioned at the couch.

Gavin took a seat. "I brought you something." He waved a manila envelope at Ben. "Copies of the pictures I took of you. I thought you might want them for your portfolio."

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Ben nodded, slipping the prints out of the envelope. "That's really cool of you." Then he stopped talking, his breath literally taken away.

He didn't know too much about photography, and he'd assumed the pictures would simply record how he'd looked that day, the things he'd done. He hadn't expected them to say so much about Gavin. They were a veritable chronicle of what Gavin felt when he looked at Ben: not just lust, but humor, understanding, something that might even have been the beginnings of fondness. That was just—fuck. Ben swallowed hard, a flutter of anticipation in his belly.

"You like them?" Gavin asked softly. He sat so close Ben could feel the heat coming off his body.

"It's too bad there aren't any of the two of us together." Ben's voice didn't even sound like it belonged to him.

"Your boyfriend wouldn't appreciate that," Gavin said, an edge to his voice.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't care at all."

Gavin's gaze darted to him hopefully, but he kept his tone cautious. "So you mean you and he—"

"It's over. Apparently has been for a while. I just didn't get the memo."

"Oh," Gavin said, but made no move to do anything about it.

"I think this is where you're supposed to console me," Ben prompted.

"Yes, because I'm so warm and cuddly and good at things like that," Gavin said, his eyes flashing with sarcasm.

Ben laughed, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. Possibly in

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years. "Just stick with what you know then." He hooked a hand behind Gavin's neck and drew him in for a kiss.

"Ah," Gavin said against his lips. "You mean *consoling*."

Ben leaned back against the cushions, pulling Gavin with him, tightening his arms around Gavin's shoulders. "So," he asked in between kisses. "Did that film of me doing the Santa porn really get ruined? 'Cause that seems kind of careless of you."

Gavin took in a big, haughty breath to defend himself. "I'll have you know—" He sighed. "Okay, okay, so I'm a greedy, jealous bastard, happy? I don't want every guy in America with a tiny dick drooling all over you. I don't want anyone drooling over you but me. Is that scary and stalkerish enough for you?"

Ben considered. "I think it would be more convincing if we were both naked and in bed and you said it while you were holding me down and fucking me."

Gavin jumped to his feet. "I can totally work with that." He grabbed Ben's hand and dragged him toward the bedroom.

Just inside the doorway, an unhappy possibility occurred to Ben, and he stopped in his tracks. "This isn't a pity fuck, right?"

Gavin shot him an impatient look. "You tell me."

Ben frowned, confused. "But you're—and I—nothing worked out the way I thought it would."

Gavin snorted. "Yeah, well, that describes about ninety percent of the people who live in L.A."

"So you don't feel sorry for me?" Ben said hopefully.

"I feel sorry for anyone who's not me and doesn't get to have sex with you."

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Ben broke into a smile. "Well, good, then." He bowled Gavin over, sending him flopping back onto the bed. "Just thought I should check first."

He bent his head to kiss Gavin's neck, licking at a little trickle of sweat in the hollow of his collarbone. He was interrupted by a sudden clatter up on the roof, a thud-thud-thud that sounded oddly enough like... hooves.

He lifted his head. "Is that—"

Gavin frowned at him. "What?"

The thud-thud-thud was accompanied by the jingle of bells.

"Don't you hear that?" Ben asked.

"What?"

"Merry-damned-Christmas," boomed a voice suspiciously like surf-bum Santa's. "And you're welcome."

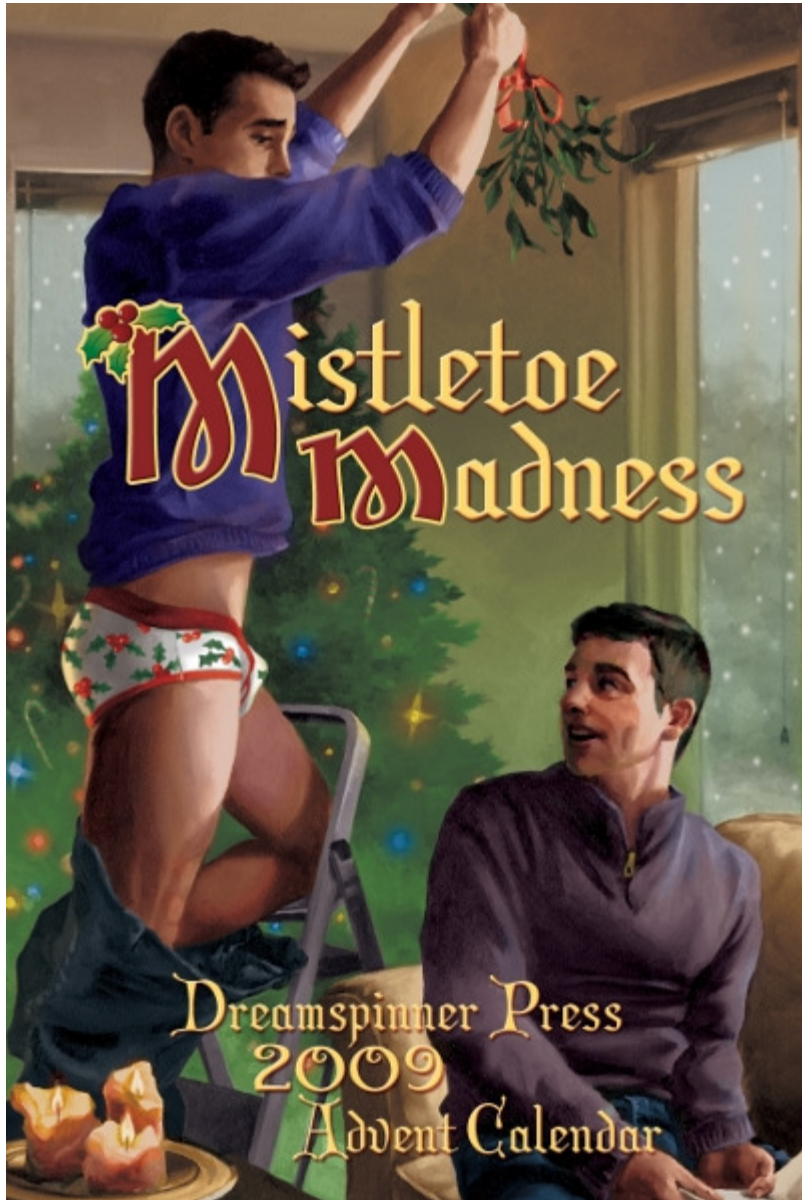
Gavin looked at Ben, puzzled.

Ben grinned. "I think you're my present."

Gavin flipped Ben over onto his back. There was a not-entirely-wholesome gleam in his eyes. "So, are you going to unwrap me or what?"

Ben laughed. "As many times as humanly possible."


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"I want to work with words!" That's been LENORE BLACK's ambition pretty much since she learned how to read. After trying out publishing and public relations, she took up a career as an advertising copy writer. Now, she's happy to add "fiction writer" to the resume. Lenore lives in Brooklyn, New York, and spends the time commuting on the subway daydreaming about men who love each other... and sometimes about the Yankees winning the World Series.

Visit Lenore's web site at <http://lenorejblack.livejournal.com>.

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

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