

A RELUCTANT SANTA

A SMALL HOLIDAY ROMANCE

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CHARLIE PARKINGHAM TRUDGED down the hallway, his apartment door offering sanctuary after a day filled with the tortures of the damned that accompanied customer service before the holidays. Charlie worked as a security guard at Macy's, which meant he was on the front lines of observing and mediating holiday disputes. The furor of the quest for gifts loomed larger as the holidays drew nearer, and it had been the kind of shift that reminded Charlie why he was glad *he* didn't have to deal with the mess of it all—didn't have to deal with the time or the expense of buying gifts, didn't have to deal with making a holiday meal or juggling social engagements, didn't have to deal with the inevitable awkwardness of asymmetrical expectations from a date around the holidays.

He pulled out his keys and, in a blur of exhaustion and fluorescent lights, nearly tripped over a package that sat outside his door. Charlie couldn't remember ordering anything online, and there certainly wasn't anyone who'd be sending him a gift.

He fumbled the plastic Wawa bag that held his dinner onto his wrist and grabbed the box. It was addressed to Thomas Blake, #13-B. Charlie peered at it. *He* lived in 13-B, so it had to be a mistake. His first instinct was to pitch it down the garbage shoot and to hell with whoever this Thomas Blake was. But a twinge of

sadness in his belly at the thought of the gift going astray wouldn't allow it.

Sighing, Charlie put his dinner inside and took the box downstairs, intending to leave it in the lobby to be claimed by its rightful recipient. But the many feet tracking in dirty snow had left the lobby a wreck of winter, and he didn't want the package to get wet and dirty. He sighed again and peered at the initials above the mail slots. There was a T.B. over the slot labeled #14-B.

At the fourteenth floor the elevator dinged and Charlie headed for the apartment that stood directly above his. He put the package on the mat outside the door, which announced, *Welcome!*. Charlie shook his head and went back down to the quiet of his own apartment, where his Wawa turkey sub with extra cheese had surely gone gummy.

The next day, Charlie saw the boxes as soon as he turned the corner from the elevator. Three packages in a neat pile in front of his door.

"Are you kidding me?" Charlie muttered. The packages were addressed to Thomas Blake, #13-B again. "For the love of ..." Charlie sighed.

That afternoon at work, a divorced couple had gotten into a fight over the last electric hoverboard, both of them planning to give it to their daughter for Chanukah. They snarled at each other, recriminations and spiteful promises flew, and the hoverboard snapped in half, sending the couple sprawling, and Charlie questioning its safety for children. Six stitches, half a roll of gauze, and multiple legal threats later, Charlie sat in the break room nursing a splitting headache and a general loathing for humanity, both of which still clung to him hours later. All he wanted to do was make a box of macaroni and cheese, put on some music, and zone out. But he took the boxes, boarded the elevator, and once again placed them on the welcome mat of #14-B.

One floor down, he made his macaroni and cheese, he put on his music, and he stared at the empty spot on the couch beside him for a long time.



THREE DAYS LATER, Charlie lost his cool. He'd seen a child slap his mother when she refused to buy him a second toy, stepped on what he thought was snow but turned out to be a puddle of slush on his lunch break, worked the rest of his shift with feet wet to the ankles, and just before closing slid in vomit on the floor in the corner of the jewelry department and nearly gutted himself on the edge of a glass case filled with watches he'd never afford if he worked for two lifetimes.

These boxes—reminders that whoever this Thomas Blake was he had people to exchange gifts with over the holidays—that or a wicked internet shopping addiction—were the final straw. The last thing Thomas needed was to be playing Santa Claus to some rude asshole who couldn't even be bothered to properly fill out his own address.

Lit with the fire of his terrible day, Thomas snatched the boxes and stalked upstairs. Unlike the previous five times he'd re-delivered the packages, though, this time he knocked on the door, ready to let his neighbor have it. There was no answer, so he rapped again, and this time a muffled voice called, "Coming," and he heard clumsy footsteps approach.

The door was thrown open and Charlie only had a moment to register the wide eyes and gasp of the man in the doorway before he was hit full-force with a tumbleweed of brown fur. The dog—if it was a dog; Charlie couldn't quite be sure—jumped straight into him, paws on his chest, and knocked him backward. The packages hit the ground and Charlie hit it a moment later. When he did, the animal nuzzled his neck and wagged its tail in a frenzy that suggested it was in fact a dog.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," a voice said. Charlie didn't dare open his eyes for fear of having his eyeballs licked. He grunted, and went limp on the floor beneath the dog creature, the last of his energy, anger included, sapped.

This, here, was the fitting end to the day he'd had. The week. Hell, the year, if he was being honest. Sprawled on the thin

hallway carpet, on top of someone else's gifts and under someone else's pet. Yeah, that seemed about right. Charlie sighed for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

"Your packages keep coming to my apartment," he said, lifting an arm listlessly to gesture at the boxes. The dog creature jumped onto his arm when it moved, and began tugging at his coat with his teeth.

"Mr. Pimm, off!" The voice ordered. Charlie assumed that this was Thomas Blake. The dog jumped off of Charlie, but vibrated in place with excitement, its eyes shining like only a happy dog's can.

A warm presence crouched beside Charlie and he realized he'd closed his eyes.

"Are you okay?"

Charlie opened his eyes and found himself looking up at beautiful blue eyes, floppy light brown hair that waved into the man's face, and a smattering of freckles that dotted his nose and cheeks.

"Fuck," Charlie muttered. He pushed himself into a sitting position and the dog, thrilled to have more of a target, launched itself at him again. This time, the man caught the dog by its collar and pet it absently, making soothing sounds as he kept staring at Charlie.

He wore an oversized blue sweater almost the same color as his eyes, and was chewing on his lower lip in concern.

"I'm really sorry about Mr. Pimm," the man said. "She isn't usually like this. Well ... okay, she kind of is, but not usually this bad. Well, kind of this bad. But we're working on it, aren't we, Mr. Pimm?"

He turned to the dog with such faith and hope in his eyes that Charlie wished he and the dog could trade places.

"Um. Thomas Blake?"

The man smiled and something warm and uncharacteristic stirred in Charlie's stomach.

"Yup. Hi."

They looked at each other for a moment, Mr. Pimm scratching

the carpet between them. Thomas blinked slowly and recovered faster than Charlie did.

"Oh, hmm. Sorry," he said, looking at the boxes on the floor. "I don't know why they would ... Ohhh, oops."

"You must've put the wrong floor," Charlie managed to get out, dragging himself to his feet.

Thomas Blake stood too, and Charlie looked down at him. Thomas was half a foot shorter, and slight, his baggy sweater catching sharp elbows and collarbones. Charlie felt huge all of a sudden, like the hallway was closing in around him.

"Do you want—oh," Thomas began as Charlie spun around and hustled to the elevator. He felt strange. Overly hot, with an empty ache in his chest. He had to get away from this man and the dog who had tried to cuddle him to death. He had to get back to his own apartment where things were quiet and peaceful and there was no one to look at him and make him think about everything that he'd lost.

"Okay, bye," Thomas called after him. "Sorry! And happy holidays!"



THAT NIGHT, Charlie dreamed that he got home from work and unlocked his apartment to find Thomas Blake cooking dinner. Thomas was bright and happy and was stirring something in a pot on the stove with one hand and making some kind of dough with the other. There might have been a third hand that was petting Mr. Pimm, who lay curled up on the counter like a cat, but that was dream logic for you. In the dream, Charlie wound his arms around Thomas Blake's waist and rested his chin on the smaller man's head. Thomas leaned into him and let out a happy sigh.

Charlie awoke from this dream of domestic bliss with a snarl. He ate a bowl of cold cereal and got dressed in the dark winter morning. All day at work he couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was off. He couldn't pinpoint what it was, but he'd felt

at loose ends since he woke up. His mood worsened as the day went on and he found himself thinking about things he didn't usually allow himself to dwell on.

How long it had been since there'd been anyone in his life who he could wrap his arms around. How nice it might be to unlock his door and find the warmth of another's presence waiting for him. How pleasant it seemed to share a meal with someone you cared about instead of always eating alone.

Charlie braced himself when he got off the elevator on the thirteenth floor, reminded himself that it had just been a dream and that this day would end the same as any other: him, alone in the apartment he'd inherited from his grandmother, watching TV or listening to music until he drifted off to sleep.

He tried not to think about it, but the dream had ruined his usual resignation, and he swallowed hard. For just a moment he couldn't help but hope. Hope that the dream was real and his life as he knew it was just a nightmare he would wake up from at any moment.

But there was nobody waiting for him. Instead, there was a pile of packages that reached nearly to his doorknob.

"God. Damn. It."

Charlie slammed into his apartment and grabbed a black garbage bag from under the sink. He stuffed the packages into the bag and stormed upstairs to 14-B.

"Thomas!" he called as he knocked hard on the door of 14-B, glaring at the *Welcome!* beneath his feet.

The door opened a crack and a wet nose snuffled through.

"Down, Mr. Pimm!" Thomas commanded, but he just scooped up the dog into his arms and kned open the door.

"Hi," he said, smiling. "You never told me your name." Thomas looked him up and down and then grinned. "Or should I just call you Santa?"

Charlie glared and swung the large bag off his shoulder, holding it out to Thomas.

"More of your packages," Charlie bit out. "Do you not know your own address or what?"

“Oh, er. So sorry about this. It’s just, uh ... Want to come in for a minute?” He looked at Mr. Pimm whose wriggling had turned to writhing and was about to slide out of Thomas’ arms.

Charlie started to say no. He started to dump the bag of boxes on the threshold and retreat. But as he stood there, Thomas turned around to place Mr. Pimm gently on the ground and with his back to Charlie, sharp shoulder blades nudging at the knit of another overlarge sweater, this one a rusty orange, Charlie’s dream slammed back into him. This was the same vantage point he’d approached Thomas from in the dream. He had wrapped his arms around his waist, held Thomas’ warmth close to his. They had fit together perfectly.

“I— Yeah, okay,” Charlie muttered, grinding his molars.

“Great!” Thomas grinned over his shoulder. “Mr. Pimm is having a very needy day. Come on in.” And with that, Thomas disappeared into what Charlie knew to be the living room, since their apartments were twins. Charlie closed the door behind him and placed the bag of packages to the left of the door out of the way. Then he followed Thomas into the living room.

Only it wasn’t a living room. Or, rather, if it was a living room it was so covered in brown cardboard boxes, sheets of wrapping paper, spools of ribbon, rolls of colored stickers, and vials of glitter that any distinguishing features were obscured. Near the window stood a Christmas tree, half of which looked as if it had been chopped off so it would fit in the corner and the other half of which was positively dripping with decorations and ornaments.

“Uhhhm,” Charlie said. Then he saw the presents.

Dozens of gifts for all ages and types of kids were stacked on the couch and piled on the floor in front of it. Dolls, art kits, toy cars, various pieces of technology Charlie recognized but couldn’t name, outfits, musical instruments, stuffed animals, and every other conceivable gift for children took up at least a third of the room.

“Looks like *you’re* the one who should be called Santa Claus,” Charlie said in astonishment. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

Thomas smiled sheepishly and kicked at a stray bit of ribbon with a toe clad in a brightly-colored knit sock. Mr. Pimm pounced on the paper with a feline spring.

"Um, I was gonna ask you to sit down but ... Oh, here, come into the kitchen."

Charlie followed, eyes glued to Thomas' shoulder blades shifting under the worn sweater. If Charlie imagined his own kitchen superimposed over Thomas', he could see that they were the same, but that was hard to remember that while looking at it. Where Charlie's was bare and clean, just a box to hold a few plates and bowls and cups, Thomas' kitchen was an explosion of color.

The walls were covered in art, the shelves packed with cookbooks in various states of food-flecked use, and the cabinets overflowing with mismatched crockery, coffee mugs that announced places their owner had been or gifts he'd received. Boxes of cookies and cereal were crowded on one countertop and the other had what appeared to be a baking project half frosted in garish reds and greens. The potholders had faces on them and the refrigerator was plastered with cards, invitations, pictures, and ticket stubs.

"Want some tea? Or wine? Or, uh ..." Thomas opened the refrigerator in a flutter of papers and peered inside. "Apple cider?"

The offer of apple cider felt somehow absurd, like it belonged in a life so different from Charlie's that it took him a moment to even understand what apple cider was.

"Sure, okay."

Thomas leaned against the fridge and pressed the bottom of one foot into the calf of the other leg like a brightly colored stork. "Which? Cider?"

"Okay."

Thomas poured the cider into a glass with green hearts and shamrocks on it and handed it to Charlie. He poured one for himself and sat down at the table, a rickety wooden affair with each leg painted a different color and mismatched chairs.

Everywhere, color, texture, sweet smells. It was overwhelming. Charlie sank gingerly into the chair, afraid the spindly legs wouldn't support the muscular bulk that he threw around without concern on his own wide leather couch.

"So," Thomas said. "The thing is that I *might* have accidentally hit the three when I meant to hit the four when I was filling out my address."

"I think we've established that, yeah."

Charlie took a sip of the cider and the cinnamon flicker of childhood autumns full of leaves tipped with orange, pumpkins smiling from porches, and that first whisper of the coming snow burst on his tongue.

"Yes, well," Thomas said, narrowing his eyes. "It's just that the place I put my address was on a form for gift donations from all around the Philly metro area. And, um, they'll be coming until Christmas. To you, apparently."

Charlie blinked. "Those packages, they're gifts for other people," he said slowly.

"Yeah. People send their donations to me, then I wrap them and bring them all over the city. To shelters, queer youth centers, foster centers, that kind of thing. Only ... yeah, I put your apartment number by mistake. And there's no changing it now. I'm really sorry."

He bit his lip and looked up at Charlie with sincere eyes.

"Maybe I could talk to someone in the building. Let them know about the mix-up?" Thomas ventured.

But any irritation had fled Charlie long ago.

"No. No, it's fine. I can just keep bringing them up, not a problem."

"Yeah?" Thomas' smile was brilliant. "That's amazing! Thank you, kind stranger who won't tell me his name." He winked.

"Charlie," said Charlie. "Charlie Parkingham."

"Thomas Blake," Thomas said, pointing to himself.

"I know," Charlie said, but he couldn't help the slight smile that animated the corner of his mouth when Thomas held out his hand to shake. Thomas' hand was warm, and Charlie flashed back

to that dream again, and how warm Thomas had been in his arms. How good he'd smelled.

Mr. Pimm chose that moment to leap onto Charlie's lap and look up at him with adoring eyes.

"Hi, little guy," Charlie said, patting the dog's floppy ears. "What ... is it?"

"Oh, she's a mutt," Thomas said. "I found her in Old City begging for hot dogs next to that cart by the Jewish history museum. The people at the vet didn't know what she was. I think she must be half muppet."

Mr. Pimm jumped from Charlie's lap to Thomas' and put her paws on Thomas' shoulders.

"Aww, baby," Thomas cooed. "You ready for a walk?"

At the word *walk*, Mr. Pimm spun in circles on Thomas' lap, ended up on the floor, and scabbled up to run to the door.

"Guess that was a yes," Thomas said. "Wanna come with us?"

Charlie stood. Of course he didn't want to go on a walk with a stranger and a manic dog creature when he could be relaxing in his own apartment. But when Thomas pushed a strand of unruly light brown hair behind his ear, Charlie heard himself say, "Okay."

Thomas seemed as surprised as Charlie was.

"Really? Great! Let's go. Oh, do you wanna borrow a scarf? Pretty cold out." And before he knew it, Charlie found himself wrapped in a hand-knitted scarf a color between blue and purple. "Looks good on you," Thomas said, and leaned their shoulders together in a brief, warm press.

Back in the cold not even an hour after he'd left it, Charlie watched as Mr. Pimm took off down the block, tugging Thomas along with her. Thomas' wavy hair was blowing everywhere and he was bundled up in a yellow wool coat and red boots, looking like a cross between a Romantic poet and the Morton salt girl. Charlie found himself inexpressibly charmed, even as he didn't know what the hell he was doing here.

When he caught up to them, they walked companionably for a few blocks, Mr. Pimm stopping every twenty feet or so to mark

her territory or sniff at an errant smell. Thomas kept up a steady, pleasant stream of conversation, most of which was to Mr. Pimm. In fact, Charlie almost didn't notice when Thomas had shifted to addressing him.

"Charlie?" Thomas put a hand on his arm.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I asked if you had any pets."

"Oh. No."

They walked another block.

"I used to," Charlie said finally. "I had a cat. Well, he was my grandma's cat. When she died, she left me her apartment. But he died last year. The cat, I mean."

"That's horrible," Thomas said, voice rough with anguish. "I'm so sorry. What was his name?"

Charlie snorted. "Muffin."

"That's nice your grandma let you name him," Thomas said sincerely, then bumped Charlie's arm with his shoulder and smiled.

"Haha," Charlie said. "He was old." He shrugged. Then he shrugged again, the reappearance of a nervous habit he thought he'd gotten rid of.

Thomas slid his free hand into Charlie's.

"I'm sorry about your grandma too," he said.

Thomas squeezed Charlie's hand. When he would've let go, Charlie squeezed back.

"She was old," Charlie said, but his voice wasn't as steady as it had been.

His grandma had raised him when his parents couldn't. She'd been a steady, benevolent presence in his life, even if they hadn't shared a great deal in common. Often, they'd simply sat together quietly, reading or watching whatever she wanted on television. Charlie supposed maybe this was why everyone he'd ever dated had found him frustratingly silent and self-contained. He shrugged again.

Thomas came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the sidewalk and tugged on the leash to bring Mr. Pimm close. Then Charlie

felt arms wrap around him. He felt the closeness of the first body he'd felt pressed to his in three years, since Grandma Bessie died.

He found himself being undeniably, unmistakably hugged.

First he froze, then he let himself relax into the slim, strong arms. Thomas pressed his face into Charlie's neck and squeezed him tight. Charlie's breath stuttered in, cold air and the sweet, pine-y scent of Thomas' hair, then shuddered out. He closed his eyes and let himself be held.



THE NEXT WEEK, Charlie felt lighter. Work was the same, but now he watched the children begging for toys and imagined they were Mr. Pimm, seeking comfort, love, excitement. He watched the tired parents bickering and thought about how he felt at the end of the day, and how hard it must be to feel responsible for someone else's happiness. He watched the gift wrappers and pictured Thomas, nimble fingers moving over paper and ribbon, wrapping the donated gifts and readying them for the children who would open them with glee.

He thought about Thomas a lot.

Every day now he walked home quickly, eager to find the packages at his door and deliver them to Thomas. Every day, Thomas answered the door with a warm smile and a hug, and invited him inside.

One day, he'd just baked bread and he offered Charlie a thick slice spread with butter and honey. Another day, he'd stepped inside the unlocked door only to be dragged into the living room by Mr. Pimm. When he'd made sense of the scene before him, he'd realized that Thomas was playing hide-and-seek with her, waiting to jump out and grab her. Mr. Pimm had rolled over onto her back in an ecstasy of tail wagging and writhing. Thomas had jumped up with a grin, and Charlie's heart had pounded at the trail of glitter on his cheek, silver freckles to accompany the gold.

They talked long into the evenings, Mr. Pimm flopping on one of them and then the other. Charlie told Thomas about how he

hated the holidays because they seemed to bring out the worst in people. Thomas told Charlie about his parents and his two sisters and brother who he talked to all the time. Charlie told Thomas about his love for music and quiet, even while the quiet he remembered was an internal quiet. Not silence, but a calm that came from being yourself in the presence of another person being themselves. Thomas smiled and nodded like he understood. Thomas had told Charlie about how he wished he could take home every animal he saw on the street but that their apartment complex only allowed one cat or small dog.

Thomas' gaze lingered on him when they stood close together. Their hands brushed and their shoulders bumped. Thomas' welcome hugs and goodbye hugs stretched longer and longer with each passing day. And still Charlie couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure what would happen if he leaned in and captured the lips that smiled so easily whenever he arrived. He couldn't be sure it wouldn't destroy this new, tender thing he looked forward to every day now. He could be sure it wouldn't destroy *him* to hope that much.

After another long day, Charlie dropped his coat inside, then gathered the pile of packages to take upstairs. When he knocked, though, there was no answer at 14-B; not even the sound of excited dog feet clicking on the wood. Disappointment hit Charlie harder than he'd thought possible. The night stretched before him, quiet and alone. He stood outside the door, staring at it for minutes, not quite able to leave. Just as he sighed and gave up, placing the sack of gifts outside the door, the elevator dinged and a ball of fluff rocketed toward him, nipping at his legs.

Thomas swept down the hallway, somehow regal in his mismatched knitted clothing. His cheeks were flushed with cold and his eyes were bright. He smiled like he couldn't think of anything better to see at his front door than Charlie. And Charlie could breathe again.

When Thomas drew near, he started to explain about the sudden need for a walk, mittened hands gesturing broadly.

Charlie looked at him—*really* looked. He saw the silver that

shot through his blue eyes, the expressive eyebrows that feathered over them. The cheeks sprinkled with freckles and the dip of his upper lip. The chin he wanted to cup in his hand.

"Thomas," Charlie murmured. He stepped close, closer, until they were a breath apart. Thomas' eyelashes fluttered and his eyes darted to Charlie's mouth. "Thomas," he breathed.

Then they were kissing, mouths hot and lightning bright. Charlie slid a hand along Thomas' cheek, cold from the winter air, and then to his chin. He deepened the kiss, pressing Thomas against his door and tasting him. In his arms, Thomas melted, twining around Charlie and tipping his chin up, every inch of him begging to be kissed.

Thomas groaned and pulled Charlie tighter, and just as Charlie was bracing himself to lift Thomas and hold him against the wall, a whimpering sound came from their feet. Mr. Pimm was looking up at them and scratching the carpet anxiously.

Thomas huffed out a laugh and dropped his forehead to Charlie's neck for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and got out his keys.

"You'll come in, won't you?" he asked, voice uncharacteristically shaky.

Charlie nodded, and followed them inside, his hand on Thomas' shoulder. Charlie stood, heart beating a tattoo behind his ribs, as he watched Thomas get Mr. Pimm settled in. Thomas' cheeks and throat were slightly flushed, his hair mussed, and Charlie thought he was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

When Mr. Pimm was snuggled in her dog bed next to the couch, Thomas turned to Charlie and held out a hand.

"Do you want ... I mean ... I want you. Do you ...?" His flush deepened.

"Of course," Charlie said. "Of course I do."

He had never wanted anything more.

Their mouths met sweetly and Charlie pulled Thomas close. Still kissing, they made their way to the bedroom, which Charlie had never seen. Unlike the rest of the apartment it was plain,

nearly spartan. A bed with a thick white duvet, a dresser, a side table, and little else.

"I don't—" Thomas said, then closed the door behind them. "I don't let people in here really."

Something bright and sparkling bloomed in Charlie's chest.

"Just me?"

Thomas nodded and Charlie kissed him until he couldn't breathe. The duvet was as soft as it looked when they fell onto it in a tangle of arms and legs. Once freed of the burden of remaining upright, Thomas was a wild thing, hands and mouth everywhere. Charlie felt lightheaded with sudden lust and overwhelmed by the speed. He rolled Thomas beneath him and pressed their foreheads together.

"You okay?" Thomas said.

"Yeah. This is a lot." He opened his eyes and looked at Thomas. "It's perfect," he said. "Just a lot."

Thomas smiled softly and closed his eyes.

"Kiss me," he said. "Kiss me however you like it."

Charlie's racing heart slowed as his eyes traced the lines of Thomas' face. He leaned in slowly and took Thomas' lips in a kiss, letting himself feel everything. It had been so, so long. The sweetness of his tongue burst through Charlie and he felt unmoored, lost in the perfection of the moment.

He kissed Thomas' mouth again and again until the smaller man was moaning beneath him, then he trailed kisses to the tender skin of his throat and nipped at his ear. Thomas gasped and wrapped his arms and legs around Charlie, pressing up into him.

"Charlie," he moaned. "Charlie I've wanted you forever."

Charlie could feel his smile, broader than any he could remember before meeting Thomas.

"You just met me," he said gently.

Thomas shook his head, eyes serious, pupils blown, and blinked up at him.

"Charlie," he breathed, and closed his eyes.

Charlie was shaken. He'd been holding himself back, waiting

to be sure that Thomas' desire was sincere. Now it seemed more than sincere. It seemed desperate.

"Can I see you?" Charlie asked, slipping a hand beneath Thomas' sweater and shirt. At Thomas' nod, he pulled the garments off, revealing soft creamy skin and the lines of ribs and collarbone. He was trembling and when Charlie kissed from his belly up to his nipples, Thomas moaned and clutched him close.

"You too?" he asked, tugging at Charlie's shirt. Charlie stripped it off and tossed it aside, and when he lowered himself back down the feel of warm skin on skin satisfied something deep inside him. He stayed motionless long enough to reorient himself, then wrapped his arms around Thomas and fell to kissing him again.

Soon, Thomas threw his head back and caught Charlie's hips in his hands, dragging them tight together. A bolt of lust shot through Thomas as their erections came into contact, and Thomas gasped.

"Okay?" Thomas asked, breathing hard.

Charlie nodded and stripped them of the rest of their clothes. Thomas was a liquid thing, twining every inch of them together until he had them in the configuration he wanted: Charlie on his back on the bed, naked, and Thomas straddling him, grinding them together. Charlie steadied Thomas at the hips and watched him move, sinuous and sweet. The grind got harder and wetter and Thomas began to moan. He grabbed Charlie's hand and brought it to where their cocks strained together, hot and pulsing.

Charlie shuddered in pleasure as their flesh pressed together, his hips working too now, muscles clenching and balls tightening. His every breath was Thomas—Thomas' hair, Thomas' skin, Thomas' mouth. The smell of Thomas' arousal set him on fire. Thomas' flushed cheeks and wet, swollen lips were a trophy he'd never known he desired.

He stroked them, tight and slow, and watched Thomas' expression dissolve into pure, desperate pleasure. Nothing had ever been so satisfying as watching him fall into his lust.

Charlie followed him down, pleasure building and building

until Thomas reached out and swiped a finger over the tips of their leaking cocks and brought it to his lips to taste. He made a sound of wonder and Charlie tumbled into orgasm at the sight, pleasure tightening every muscle and then pouring through him like quicksilver. He stroked and stroked and erupted over his hand and Thomas' cock, and just as he wrung the last shivers of pleasure from his own body, Thomas stiffened and cried out, head thrown back, and convulsed, dick shooting hard across Charlie's hand and stomach.

"Oh god," Thomas gasped as he came, then his mouth fell open and his eyes squeezed shut.

He collapsed on Charlie's chest in a puddle of exhausted satisfaction, wrapped his arms around Charlie, and fell almost immediately asleep.

Charlie lay there for longer, committing each detail to memory in case this was the only time he got to have it.



CHARLIE'S SHIFT ended at four on Christmas Eve and he trudged home as the snow fell, blanketing Philadelphia with quiet. He turned his face to the sky and watched the flakes fall in a vortex of white on black.

Thomas was going to spend the day with his family, and Charlie figured he was probably already gone. He sighed, the dark emptiness of his life before Thomas creeping in behind his ribs. He shrugged, shoulders snug in his heavy coat, and turned up his collar against the snow. After all, what could he have done? He couldn't have asked Thomas not to spend Christmas with his family.

He hadn't asked Thomas for anything. They'd woken up together three mornings before, flesh still sticky, mouths still rich with the taste of each other, and Charlie had seen the moment when he could ask for more. Ask for ... a date or a promise or ... something. But all of the things he could think to ask for felt like less than what they already had, with their close proximity and

their easy evening coexistence. Their dog walks and conversation. Their bread and butter and apple cider and smiles. So he'd just kissed Thomas softly and smiled, and Thomas had let him go.

The next night he was back, packages in hand, hopeful that they might continue in the same vein as the night before, but ready for things to return to the way they had been if that was what Thomas wanted.

Thomas had mauled him the second he opened the door, kissing him senseless in such an echo of the way that Mr. Pimm had jumped on him at their first meeting that Charlie wondered if the dog's behavior was less nature and more nurture. He'd held Thomas close and given as good as he got in the kiss department, then tugged him inside.

But despite how well things were going, how wonderful he felt in Thomas' company, and how easily they fit together, differences be damned, Charlie still hadn't been able to bring himself to say anything when Thomas had said he was spending Christmas with his family. He'd just nodded and smiled and said *Of course*. Thomas had opened his mouth, no doubt to invite Charlie along, or something equally kind, but Charlie hadn't wanted the reminder that, yet again, he had no one—not even when it seemed like he might *have* someone.

Charlie sighed as the elevator let him off at thirteen. Thomas would be gone for days, most likely, and he'd be back to spending all his time alone again. Worse, now, because he knew what he was missing.

Then a horrible thought occurred to him: what if Thomas wouldn't want to spend time with him anymore, now that the pretense of delivering the packages was over?

No. Charlie shook his head. No, Thomas cared for him. Thomas liked him. He'd told him so.

When he got to his door and saw the package a pang of sadness lanced through him. Not only would a child not get this gift, since it was late in coming, but now he'd have to take it up to Thomas' door and leave it there, knowing his apartment was

empty. He sighed again, and put his keys back in his pocket. He grabbed the errant package and set off upstairs.

The elevator doors opened on fourteen and Charlie's feet carried him to Thomas' door automatically. He stood on *Welcome!* and somehow he did feel welcomed by the place, even without Thomas there.

Leaning against the door, he hesitated. He didn't want this to be the last excuse he ever had to come to Thomas' door. But before he could go too far down that avenue of thought, the door opened and he nearly fell inside.

"Finally!" said Thomas, catching him.

"What are you ... I thought you were ... Wait, what?"

"Did you open it?" Thomas asked, practically bouncing on his toes.

"Open it? No. I thought you'd left. I thought this kid wouldn't get a present."

Charlie held out the package but Thomas waved it away. He tapped a finger on the delivery label.

Only then did Charlie see that the package wasn't addressed to Thomas Blake. It was addressed to Charlie Parkingham.

"What?"

"Open it," Thomas said. His voice was soft and his eyes were locked on Charlie's. "It's for you."

Charlie looked from the box to Thomas, then back.

"I ... okay."

Charlie took a pen from the table and slit the tape. The box fell open. A note inside said, *I'm upstairs. Come have Christmas with me. Love, Thomas.*

Charlie looked up.

"You want to have Christmas ... with me?"

"I really do."

Charlie was overwhelmed. Words stuck in his throat.

"Open it," Thomas said softly.

Charlie pulled out a small box wrapped in now familiar paper and tore it off. Inside was a mug with a cat on it that looked very

much like his grandmother's cat Muffin. Underneath it the mug said *Charlie*.

Charlie cradled it to his chest. Thomas looked down shyly for a moment, then took Charlie's hand in his.

"I thought it could be yours, for when you're here. Maybe ... maybe you'll be here kind of a lot now? If you want..."

Happiness cracked Charlie open like a hammer to a window. Desire long tamped down and unacknowledged rushed through the cracks and filled him to overflowing.

"Here?" he choked out. "With you."

"Yeah," Thomas said, voice hopeful and fond. "I want you, Charlie. I've always wanted you."

Charlie's heart was a tender, yearning thing. He leaned down and kissed Thomas so softly, so gently, so sweetly on the lips.

"You just met me," he murmured, fingers in Thomas' hair.

"No," Thomas said, shaking his head. His eyes were fathomless and so tender that Charlie wanted to cry. "No, Charlie. Always."



ABOUT ROAN PARRISH

Roan Parrish lives in Philadelphia where she is gradually attempting to write love stories in every genre.

When not writing, she can usually be found cutting her friends' hair, meandering through whatever city she's in while listening to torch songs and melodic death metal, or cooking overly elaborate meals. She loves bonfires, winter beaches, minor chord harmonies, and self-tattooing. One time she may or may not have baked a six-layer chocolate cake and then thrown it out the window in a fit of pique.



Come join my FB group **PARRISH OR PERISH** for book chat, giveaways, exclusive excerpts of works in progress, and, of course pictures of my cat!

And you can find me online in all the usual places:

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