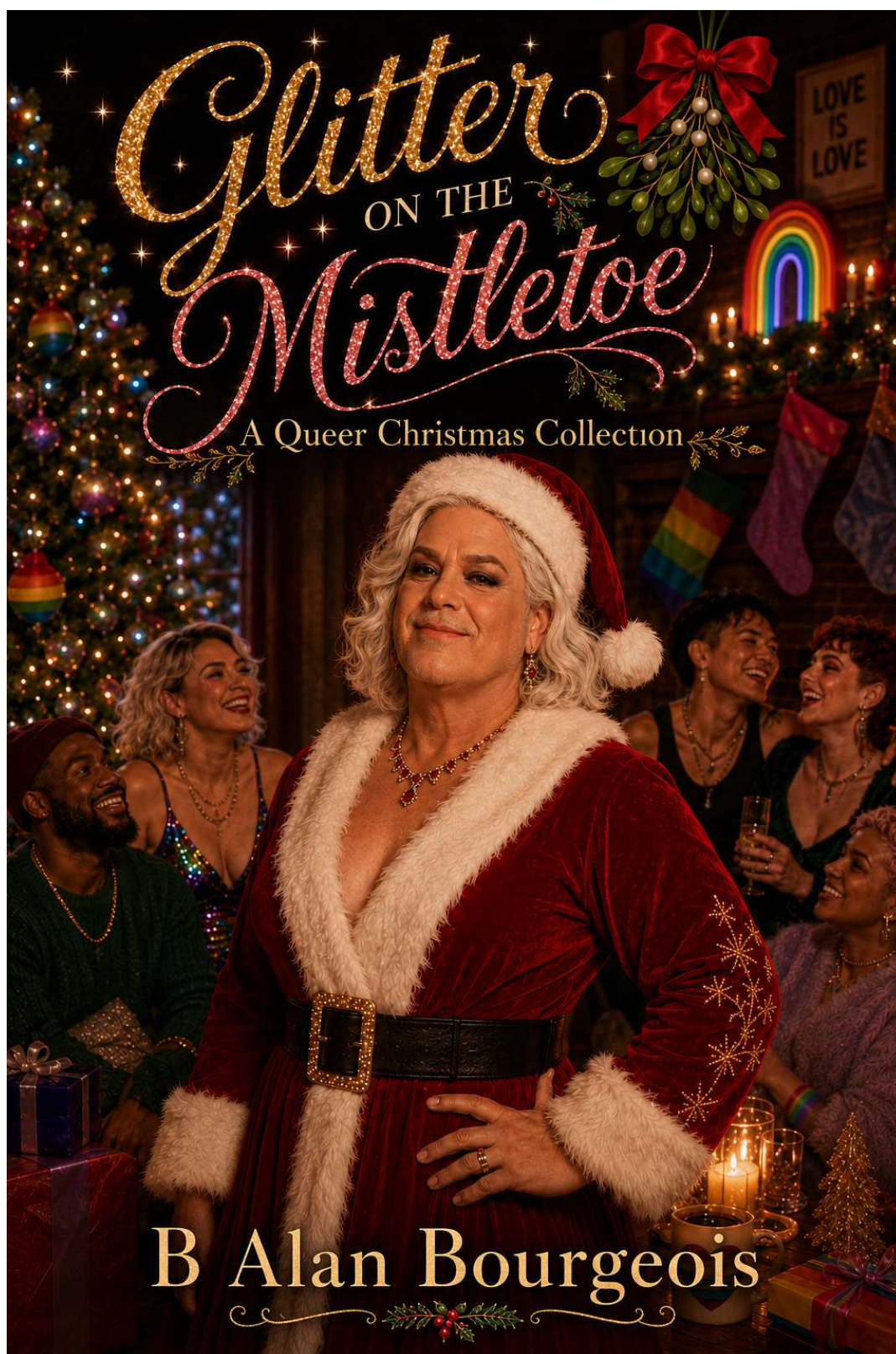




Glitter on the Mistletoe

A Queer Christmas Collection



B. Alan Bourgeois

Glitter on the Mistletoe: A Queer Christmas Collection

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*For the ones who made December survivable,
and for the ones who turned it into a dance floor.*



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Part One

Merry & Messy



Where the parties start, the exes arrive, the drinks get stronger, and Christmas learns to behave less politely.





1

Glitter on the Mistletoe

A queer house party. Three exes. One new crush. A mistletoe problem with witnesses.



By seven-thirty, the mistletoe had already caused two misunderstandings, one rekindled situationship, and a minor frosting injury.

Elliot blamed the glitter.

He had not wanted glitter. He had specifically told his best friend, Marco, “No glitter this year. I want tasteful. I want calm. I want the apartment to say grown adult holiday gathering, not drag brunch exploded inside a Michaels.”

Marco had nodded with the seriousness of a man receiving medical instructions, then arrived carrying three bags of gold tinsel, rainbow garland, a wreath shaped like a reindeer with lashes, and a mistletoe ball dipped so thoroughly in glitter it looked like it had been rolled across a Vegas showgirl.

“It’s Christmas,” Marco had said. “Tasteful is for funerals and straight people with beige couches.”

Elliot had a beige couch.

He had also, unfortunately, invited thirty-two people to his annual Christmas party in a one-bedroom apartment that technically had space for eleven people and a very forgiving dog. Elliot did not own a dog. He owned anxiety, a half-dead poinsettia, and a playlist called “Holiday But Make It Gay,” which had been assembled with the precision of a military operation.

The party had started well enough. Candles glowed in the windows. Paper snowflakes hung from the ceiling. A silver disco ball dangled above the Christmas tree because Elliot believed in honoring multiple faith traditions, including Studio 54. The snack table featured gingerbread men decorated with tiny leather harnesses, a vegan cheese board no one trusted, and a bowl of punch that Marco had labeled, “Naughty, Nice, or Court Ordered.”

Then the exes arrived.

First came Ben.

Ben was Elliot's most recent ex and, therefore, the one whose face still had the power to turn Elliot's spine into uncooked spaghetti. Ben arrived in a navy peacoat, carrying store-bought cookies and the expression of someone who had been practicing casual maturity in the Uber.

"Hey," Ben said.

"Hey," Elliot answered, with the emotional depth of a mailbox.

Ben lifted the cookies. "I brought these."

"Great. Put them by the gingerbread subs."

"The what?"

"Never mind."

Ben moved toward the snack table, and Elliot immediately turned to Marco, who was arranging candy canes in a vase like they were emergency weapons.

"You told me Ben wasn't coming."

"I said Ben hadn't responded."

"That is not the same thing."

"It is in gay invitation law."

Before Elliot could respond, the front door opened again.

In walked Julian.

Julian was not an ex in the official sense, because they had only gone on four dates, made out in a museum stairwell, and spent three months pretending not to watch each other's Instagram stories. Still, the energy between them was legally ex-adjacent.

Julian arrived wearing a black turtleneck, silver earrings, and the smug confidence of a man who knew exactly how good he looked in winter lighting.

"Elliot," Julian said, kissing him on both cheeks.

Both cheeks. Cruel.

"Julian," Elliot said. "You came."

"You invited me."

"I did do that."

"I brought wine."

"You always do."

"I'm consistent."

"You're something."

Marco slid by with a tray of mini quiches and whispered, "That was sexual tension wearing a cardigan."

"It was not."

"It had buttons."

Then, as if summoned by the great gay gods of unresolved emotional inconvenience, the door opened a third time.

Dante.

Elliot actually turned in a small circle, as if looking for the hidden camera.

Dante had been his first serious boyfriend. Not first crush. Not first kiss. First boyfriend. First matching Halloween costume. First shared toothbrush by accident. First person Elliot had ever pictured a future with, and first person to break his heart so thoroughly that he still could not hear “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” without wanting to throw something ornamental.

Dante stood in the doorway wearing a red scarf and a guilty smile.

“Surprise?” Dante said.

“That is one word,” Elliot replied.

Dante held up a bottle of bourbon. “Marco invited me.”

Elliot turned slowly.

Marco was suddenly very busy fluffing the Christmas tree.

“Marco.”

“What?” Marco said, not looking over. “It’s a party. People come.”

“You invited all three of my exes?”

Marco placed a pink ornament on a branch. “Technically, Julian was never confirmed as a relationship.”

“You are about to be confirmed as missing.”

Marco finally turned, placing a hand dramatically on his chest. “This is what I get for building community?”

“This is not community. This is a gay ghost tour.”

“Your past needs closure.”

“My past needs a coat check.”

Dante stepped inside, kissed Elliot briefly on the cheek, and said, “Merry Christmas.”

Elliot’s cheek remembered things without permission.

“Bourbon goes on the counter,” Elliot said.

The party thickened after that, as parties do when everyone pretends not to notice that the host is one emotional inconvenience away from eating an entire cheese log in the bathroom.

In the kitchen, Uncle Sal from down the hall was explaining pansexuality to two lesbians using pasta shapes. In the living room, a drag king named Rex Garland was leading a debate over whether “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” could be saved with better consent language. Someone had brought tamales. Someone else had brought a harp, which felt aggressive. A nonbinary couple from the third floor were trying to assemble Elliot’s emergency folding chairs while arguing about astrology and Allen wrenches.

And under the mistletoe, trouble bloomed.

The mistletoe hung in the narrow arch between the living room and kitchen, exactly where people had to pass if they wanted food, drinks, the bathroom, or gossip. Marco had tied it with a red velvet ribbon and placed a small sign beneath it that read:

KISS RESPONSIBLY. CONSENT IS FESTIVE.

Elliot had approved of the message.

He had underestimated the glitter.

Every time someone brushed beneath it, gold dust fell like a blessing or an environmental hazard. By eight o'clock, half the guests looked mildly enchanted and one looked like he had been tackled by a craft store.

The first incident involved Ben and Julian.

They reached the archway at the same time, both carrying empty glasses. Both stopped. Both looked up. Both looked at Elliot, who happened to be standing ten feet away holding a tray of stuffed mushrooms.

"No," Elliot said.

"We didn't say anything," Ben said.

Julian smiled. "You said it with your mushrooms."

"You are both adults," Elliot said. "You can pass under greenery without making it weird."

"Define weird," Julian said.

Ben glanced at Julian. "A cheek kiss?"

"A European cheek kiss?" Julian asked.

"You're from Ohio," Elliot said.

Julian leaned toward Ben and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

The room cheered.

Elliot dropped a mushroom.

Marco appeared at his side. "Growth."

"That mushroom had brie in it."

"Not the mushroom, babe. You."

"I am going to grow into a person who moves to Vermont and lives alone with a snow shovel."

Then the second incident happened.

Dante and Elliot ended up under the mistletoe at the same time because the universe is rude and enjoys staging.

Dante had been reaching for the bourbon. Elliot had been reaching for emotional distance. They collided gently beneath the glittering menace.

The room went quiet in the way rooms go quiet when everyone absolutely intends to discuss it later.

Dante looked up.

Elliot did not need to look up. He could feel the mistletoe above him, dropping glitter into his hair like a festive curse.

"We don't have to," Dante said softly.

That was the first decent thing anyone had said all night, which annoyed Elliot because it made Dante look emotionally evolved.

"I know," Elliot said.

Dante smiled, not smugly. Worse. Kindly.

"How have you been?" Dante asked.

"That is a large question for an archway."

"Fair."

They stepped aside together, breaking the spell, or at least postponing it.

In the corner, Marco mouthed, "Closure."

Elliot mouthed back something less printable.

At eight-thirty, the new crush arrived.

His name was Noel, which Elliot had decided was either charming or an act of holiday fraud.

Noel worked at the queer bookstore two blocks over, the one with the excellent banned-books display and the terrible espresso. Elliot had been flirting with him for six weeks under the cover of supporting independent literature. So far, he had purchased three novels, one poetry collection, a biography of James Baldwin he already owned, and a tote bag that said READ BANNED BOOKS IN PUBLIC.

Noel arrived wearing a green velvet jacket and carrying a wrapped box.

"I wasn't sure if I should bring something," Noel said.

"You came," Elliot said, then immediately wanted to walk into the wall. "I mean, yes. That is good. You are the something. Not like an object. Like a guest. A human guest. Welcome."

Noel grinned. "Merry Christmas to you too."

Marco slid by behind Noel and gave Elliot two thumbs up so aggressively it looked like a medical emergency.

Noel handed Elliot the box. "It's for the party."

Elliot opened it. Inside was a small disco-ball ornament wearing a Santa hat.

"Oh," Elliot said, softer than he meant to.

"I saw it and thought of your tree," Noel said. "You said your theme was 'Christmas, but emotionally available.'"

"I said that?"

"You were holding a latte and yelling at a book display."

"Then yes, that sounds like me."

Noel looked toward the living room, where Rex Garland was now teaching a group of accountants how to properly snap a fan open.

"This is a lot," Noel said.

"It was supposed to be calm."

"I can tell."

"The harness gingerbread was a last-minute escalation."

"I respect it."

Elliot smiled. For the first time that night, his shoulders lowered.

Then Ben walked up.

"Hey," Ben said, looking at Noel, then Elliot, then the gift box. "Cute ornament."

"Yes," Elliot said. "This is Noel."

"Like Christmas?" Ben asked.

"Exactly like Christmas," Noel said. "Except I answer emails faster."

Ben laughed a little too hard.

Then Julian appeared.

"Who's this?" Julian asked.

Elliot stared at him. "Do you have some kind of proximity alarm?"

Julian smiled at Noel. "I'm Julian."

"Noel," Noel said.

"Charming."

"Thank you."

Dante joined them last, because apparently the ghosts of Christmas past had unionized.

"Dante," he said, offering Noel a hand.

"Noel."

There they stood: three exes, one crush, and Elliot, who had begun to wonder if throwing himself into the punch bowl might count as self-care.

Marco appeared with a tray of deviled eggs.

"Well," he said. "This is cozy."

"Marco," Elliot warned.

"What? I'm just admiring the emotional architecture."

Before anyone could say anything worse, the doorbell rang.

Everyone froze.

Elliot looked at Marco.

Marco lifted both hands. "I swear on Mariah Carey, I did not invite anyone else you slept with."

Elliot opened the door.

Standing in the hallway was Santa Claus.

Not mall Santa. Not frat-party Santa. Not office-party Santa in a felt beard that smelled like beer.

This Santa stood tall and elegant in a deep red velvet coat trimmed with white fur, black boots polished to a shine, silver curls tucked beneath a tilted hat, and gold earrings shaped

like tiny stars. Her makeup was immaculate, her presence regal, and her smile warm enough to thaw a decade of family resentment.

She held a clipboard.

“Good evening,” she said. “I’m looking for apartment 4B.”

“This is 4B,” Elliot said.

“Wonderful. I am Gloria Garland. Trans Santa for hire, though the website says Holiday Affirmation Specialist because my niece got a marketing degree.”

Behind Elliot, Marco gasped like he had seen the face of God.

“I did not order a Santa,” Elliot said.

Gloria checked her clipboard. “Party package. One hour. Photos, affirmations, dramatic entrance, optional reading of the naughty list. Paid in advance by...” She squinted. “Dante Moreno.”

Everyone turned.

Dante raised his hand slightly. “That was me.”

Elliot blinked. “You hired a trans Santa for my Christmas party?”

“I thought it would be fun.”

“You thought bringing a surprise Santa to an apartment already over capacity with unresolved queer history would be fun?”

Dante looked around. “In my defense, it seems on-brand.”

Gloria leaned in. “Sweetheart, should I leave? I can still make an entrance at a lesbian cookie exchange in fifteen minutes.”

“No,” Elliot said quickly. “No, please come in. I’m just processing.”

“I charge extra for processing.”

“I’ll add bourbon.”

Gloria smiled. “Now we’re caroling.”

She stepped inside and immediately owned the room.

Within five minutes, Gloria had complimented Rex Garland’s mustache, corrected a drunk accountant’s posture, told Uncle Sal his pasta explanation of pansexuality was “brave but carb-heavy,” and seated herself in Elliot’s armchair like a queen receiving villagers.

People lined up for photos. Not because she demanded it, but because Gloria had the gravitational pull of someone who had spent a lifetime becoming herself and now had no patience for bad lighting.

Noel stood beside Elliot, watching her tell a young trans guy from downstairs that his name sounded “like someone who survives the sequel.”

“She’s incredible,” Noel said.

“She is,” Elliot said.

“You okay?”

Elliot looked at him. “Why?”

Noel tilted his head toward Ben, Julian, and Dante, who were now standing together by the punch bowl in what looked like the world's most emotionally dangerous barbershop quartet.

"Because your past is drinking in a cluster," Noel said.

Elliot sighed. "That's not even all of it. My past also brought bourbon and hired Santa."

"Thoughtful past."

"Annoyingly."

Noel leaned closer. "For what it's worth, I'm rooting for the present."

Elliot's heart did a stupid little cartwheel.

Before he could respond, Gloria clapped her hands.

"Gather round, glitter goblins," she called. "Santa has an announcement."

The room obeyed.

Gloria stood beneath the mistletoe.

Gold glitter fell onto her hat.

She looked up. "Oh, she sheds."

"That thing has been terrorizing the party all night," Elliot said.

Gloria inspected the archway. "Mistletoe is not the problem. Expectations are the problem. People hang a plant and suddenly think romance should resolve itself before dessert."

"Hear, hear," said someone from the kitchen.

Gloria pointed to Elliot. "You. Host with the haunted eyebrows. Come here."

The room made the kind of noise people make when drama becomes scheduled programming.

Elliot walked over cautiously.

"I do not enjoy being perceived," he said.

"You invited thirty-two people to a one-bedroom apartment," Gloria said. "You enjoy being perceived. You just want control over the lighting."

"That is painfully accurate."

Gloria turned to the room. "Who here is an ex?"

Ben, Dante, and, after a pause, Julian raised their hands.

Julian said, "Again, technically—"

Gloria cut him off with one raised eyebrow. Julian lowered his hand a little but kept it up.

"Good," Gloria said. "Who here is a new crush?"

Noel did not raise his hand.

Marco raised Noel's hand for him.

"Marco!" Noel said, laughing.

"Democracy," Marco replied.

Gloria smiled. "Excellent. Now we have ingredients."

"No," Elliot said. "We are not making me into a casserole."

"Relax. I am not here to force kisses. Consent is the only thing keeping Christmas from becoming a lawsuit." Gloria looked around. "But I am here to say this: mistletoe is not magic because it makes people kiss. It's magic because it makes people decide."

The room quieted.

Even the harpist stopped tuning, which Elliot appreciated since no one had asked for harp.

Gloria turned to Ben. "You first. Do you owe him anything?"

Ben swallowed. "Probably an apology."

Elliot looked at him.

Ben stepped closer, carefully staying out from under the mistletoe. "I was careless after we broke up. I acted like being friendly meant I didn't have to be accountable."

The room had gone so silent that Elliot could hear the ice settling in the punch bowl.

"I'm sorry," Ben said. "You deserved better."

Elliot nodded. "Thank you."

Gloria pointed to Julian. "You. Beautiful turtleneck. What are you carrying?"

Julian sighed. "Ambiguity."

"Put it down."

Julian looked at Elliot. "I liked you. I acted like I didn't because I like being wanted more than I like being honest."

Marco whispered, "Drag him, self-awareness."

Julian gave a small smile. "I'm sorry too."

Elliot exhaled. "Thank you."

Gloria turned to Dante.

Dante looked suddenly younger.

"I don't know if this was a bad idea," he said.

"The Santa?"

"Coming."

Elliot's chest tightened.

Dante continued, "I wanted to see you happy and thought maybe if I showed up with a grand gesture, I could be part of it. That was selfish."

Elliot studied him. The red scarf. The bourbon. The face that had once been home and then weather.

"You hurt me," Elliot said.

"I know."

"And I loved you."

"I know that too."

"I'm not mad you came," Elliot said, surprising himself. "I'm mad that a part of me still checks to see if I'm okay in relation to you."

Dante's expression softened. "Are you?"

Elliot looked around the room.

At Marco, holding deviled eggs like emotional support poultry.

At Ben, who finally looked less curated.

At Julian, whose turtleneck deserved both admiration and suspicion.

At Gloria, sparkling under the mistletoe like queer Christmas justice.

At Noel, watching him with warmth and no demand.

"Yes," Elliot said. "I think I am."

Gloria nodded. "Good. Now, crush."

Noel's eyes widened. "Me?"

"Yes, bookstore Christmas. Your turn."

Noel stepped closer, cheeks pink. "I don't think I owe anyone an apology."

"Bold opening," Gloria said.

"I just..." Noel looked at Elliot. "I would like to kiss him. If he wants. Not because of the mistletoe. Because I've wanted to since he spent twenty minutes pretending to browse cookbooks while asking if I liked men with complicated holiday playlists."

"I was researching," Elliot said.

"You bought a vegan soup book."

"I contain multitudes."

Noel smiled. "Do you want to kiss me?"

Elliot looked up.

The mistletoe glittered overhead.

The room waited.

But this time it did not feel like pressure. It felt like possibility.

"Yes," Elliot said.

Noel stepped beneath the mistletoe.

Elliot met him there.

The kiss was not dramatic. No orchestra swelled. No one fainted into the cheese board. It was soft and warm and a little awkward because Elliot smiled too soon and Noel laughed against his mouth.

Then the room exploded.

Marco screamed. Rex Garland snapped open a fan. Uncle Sal shouted, "That's the good pasta!" which no one understood but everyone accepted.

Glitter fell everywhere.

On Elliot's hair. On Noel's jacket. On Ben's cookies. On Dante's scarf. On Julian's suspiciously perfect cheekbones.

Gloria watched with satisfaction.

"See?" she said. "The plant works when the people do."

The party shifted after that. Not into perfection. Into something better.

Ben helped clean spilled punch from the counter. Julian flirted with the harpist and was immediately outmatched. Dante found himself in a surprisingly intense conversation with Gloria about second chances, gender, and the difference between regret and repair. Marco led a conga line through the kitchen, which ended when the line collided with the vegan cheese board and someone declared it an act of mercy.

Noel stayed close to Elliot, but not possessively. Just enough for their shoulders to touch. Just enough for Elliot to feel the newness of him, bright and steady.

Near midnight, the apartment had become a wreck.

There was glitter in the rug, glitter in the sink, glitter on the bathroom mirror, and somehow glitter inside the closed refrigerator. The gingerbread harnesses had been eaten. The punch bowl was empty except for one floating cranberry and someone's earring. The mistletoe still hung above the archway, shedding lightly, smug as a cat.

Gloria stood by the door, fastening her coat.

"You saved the party," Elliot said.

"I did no such thing," Gloria replied. "I merely arrived overdressed and asked appropriate questions."

"That counts."

Dante approached then, hands in his pockets. "Can I walk you downstairs, Gloria?"

Gloria looked him up and down. "Only if you carry my bag and don't make it weird."

"I can do one of those."

"Aim high."

Dante turned to Elliot. "Merry Christmas."

Elliot smiled. "Merry Christmas."

There was no ache in it this time. Only memory, folded and placed somewhere gentler.

Ben and Julian left next, somehow together but not together, which felt correct.

Marco remained, of course. Marco always remained, usually because he had lost one shoe.

He stood beside Elliot and surveyed the apartment.

"Well," Marco said. "Your beige couch has seen things."

"My beige couch is filing a complaint."

"It was a good party."

"It was a disaster."

"Those are not opposites."

Noel came from the kitchen carrying a trash bag. "I found six candy canes in the microwave."

Elliot closed his eyes. "Why?"

"No answer will satisfy you."

Marco took the trash bag from him. "I'll take this downstairs. You two stand under the hazardous plant and pretend I'm not a genius."

"You are a menace," Elliot said.

"A genius menace."

Marco left.

For the first time all night, the apartment was almost quiet.

Elliot and Noel stood in the archway beneath the mistletoe. The tree lights blinked softly behind them. Outside the window, the city shimmered cold and distant, but inside, the air was warm with candles, sugar, sweat, and something like hope.

Noel touched a fleck of glitter on Elliot's cheek. "You know this will never come out."

"The glitter?"

"Any of it."

Elliot looked around his wrecked apartment. At the empty glasses, the crooked snowflakes, the glittering floor, the couch that would never be innocent again.

Then he looked at Noel.

"Good," Elliot said.

Noel smiled. "Good?"

"Yeah." Elliot stepped closer. "I think maybe some things should stick."

Above them, the mistletoe released one final golden shimmer.

This time, nobody cheered.

Nobody needed to.

They kissed beneath the glittering little menace, soft and laughing, while somewhere downstairs Marco yelled, "I found my shoe!" and Gloria's voice floated up through the stairwell:

"Congratulations, baby. So did Christmas."

