



# Tattoos & Tinsel

by Anna Martin

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Tattoos & Tinsel

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Firstly I'd like to thank Dreamspinner Press for their support of my releasing another story with my characters from Tattoos & Teacups. That novel was, and still is, very close to my heart and it was a joy and an honor to write more of Rob and Chris's story.

Thank you to Christine, who edited, and the ever fabulous Bob for creating yet another stunning cover. Thank you, too, to all the readers who supported Tattoos & Teacups and made the telling of this story possible.

# Tattoos & Tinsel

by Anna Martin

*“Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree, fa-la-la-la-la branches!”*

I shut the front door quietly behind myself and kicked off my shoes before creeping through to the kitchen. Chris caught sight of me anyway, but didn't stop his loud, out of key wailing.

“I don't think those are the actual words, darling,” I told him as I leaned in for a kiss, delivered it to the tip of his nose, and held up my canvas bag triumphantly. “Ham joint, fresh from the butcher.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I've just made room for it in the fridge.”

There wasn't much room at all – considering it was going to be only the two of us for Christmas, we had a huge amount of food. I stuffed the ham on to a shelf and pulled out a bottle of water and turned back to Chris.

There was a delicious smell of cinnamon coming from the oven and he was busy assembling something else on the counter. Despite my best efforts to hide or burn his hideous jumper, he was still wearing

the baggy, misshapen thing he'd found in a charity shop. Apparently lopsided reindeer were this season's latest thing.

My nose was cold and I rubbed it with the palm of my hand to warm it up before I stepped up close behind Chris and took his waist in my hands, leaning my chin on his shoulder to watch what he was doing.

“What are you making?”

“Your nose is cold, Rob,” he complained as I nuzzled it into the side of his neck. “There are sugar cookies in the oven and I'm trying to make mince pies. I found a recipe online and thought I'd give it a go.”

“They look good so far,” I said, reaching around him and poking my finger into the mix of dried fruit, suet, sugar and alcohol he was carefully stirring. I licked my finger, hummed in approval and gave him another kiss.

This Christmas was going to be our first together and we were both determined to make it special. There had been invitations from family and friends to spend the holiday with them, and after careful consideration, I'd politely declined them all in favor of locking myself away with Chris and spending the day alone with him.

We made a trip down to Florida for Thanksgiving, my first chance to meet in person Chris's mother, a woman whom I spoke with nearly every week on the phone. With five children and five grandchildren (so far), she and Chris's father didn't have many opportunities to travel up to Boston to see us. I'd been wary at first, aware of how my own parents were uncomfortable around any discussion of my sexuality. But Betty-Sue Ford had treated me as family from the beginning; apparently she was not at all bothered that her son had a male partner rather than a female one, or that I was nine years older than him.

After all, none of that mattered to us.

Chris's family were completely opposite to my own; a big, tumbling, noisy, messy group of people who talked over each other, argued good-naturedly and laughed so much. It took much less time than I'd expected for me to fit right in.

Being Scottish, my own family didn't celebrate Thanksgiving and made more of a fuss around the big Christian holidays. For that reason I could see the trips to Florida in November becoming a regular thing.

In the past six weeks I had learned that Chris was someone who didn't just get into the holiday spirit, he flung himself face first into it and dragged along with him anyone who might be looking slightly less than cheerful. I had managed to reign him in with most of the decorating in our apartment, coming to an agreement that downstairs, the decorations would be limited to a tasteful display of glittering lights on the hallway table. Upstairs, he turned into a sparkling, tinsel fairy grotto.

The whole of our living room area, which was on the top floor of the building, was covered in lights and assorted Christmas décor. The tree (that we'd had to drag up two flights of stairs to get in place) was covered in fairy lights, decorations hung from the ceiling, tinsel was draped on any surface that could support tinsel-drapery, baubles and candy canes and twinkly lights and fake snow on the windows. It was gaudy. It was horrific.

It was Chris.

So I loved it.

While he continued to bake and sing along to the radio, I grabbed my new laptop and fired it up to answer some emails while sat at the breakfast bar, away from his floury hands. Despite the fact that Christmas break was well underway, I still had the occasional student sending me an email asking for advice or help with assignments. If I

didn't have any messages to answer I liked to stay on top of the news websites.

I wasn't paying much attention to what Chris was doing, although I couldn't help but notice when he switched the trays around in the oven and his cookies were set out to cool. He seemed to be done, for today at least.

It didn't take long for him to do the few dishes and put the kettle on to boil, making a pot of the Christmas coffee I'd picked up that week when doing our grocery shopping.

"Thanks," I said as he handed me a mug, hot and strong, as I liked it.

I'd always thought there was something special about being able to spend time with someone without the need to fill each moment with conversation. Being with Chris was just easy.

I'd already finished wrapping up most of our gifts, but apparently Chris had done some last minute shopping without me. After dinner he spread himself out on the floor in the living room with paper, bows and confetti to wrap into the layers.

I left him to it, occasionally providing a finger to hold a bit of paper in place before he taped it, and watched the TV while sprawled out on the sofa. The gift-exchanging celebration with our family and friends would happen on Boxing Day, a tradition I'd brought with me from Scotland which Americans did not seem to share. It originated from the times when people still had servants; on the day after Christmas they'd be given a box of gifts – usually food or clothes – from the master of the house. The day was a public holiday in Britain and we were going to celebrate by inviting almost everyone we knew to spend the day with us.

For me, the most important part of the holiday would be spending it with Chloe. In the past year my daughter and I had continued to grow closer, mostly due to Chris's intervention. She had turned fifteen over the summer and was beginning to mellow and mature, something I was intensely relieved at.

She was going to be coming over with her mother, Luisa, who was one of my oldest friends (she had long ago graciously forgiven me for accidentally knocking her up when we were eighteen), her step-father, Mike and her younger siblings with whom Chris was hopelessly in love (an emotion that was reciprocated by the children in question). Also joining the fray were two of Chris's former band mates, John and Lexi, who'd just welcomed baby Ruby into their family and my sister Jilly. My friends Adam and Marlene were also coming along, with their children. Needless to say, with the number of people we were expecting, we had bought in extra food for the occasion.

When the last of the gifts was wrapped and pushed under the tree I pulled Chris up onto the sofa and into my arms, where he settled back against my chest. The only lights in the room came from the glow of the TV, the twinkling of the tree in the corner, and the soft warmth of the fire across the room. I hadn't pulled the heavy curtains over the windows to stop the head escaping even though I knew I should. There was something about these long winter nights that I absolutely loved; being warm inside while looking out into beautifully clear nights, when all the stars were visible, or the sky dark, heavy and close with snow.

Chris sighed and turned his head against my chest, tilting his head up so he could kiss my chin. Even after the year or more that we'd been together, he still had a way of making my stomach flutter with lust, excitement, and love.

"Need to go to bed soon," he said, pointing to the clock which read eleven thirty, "or Santa won't come."

I laughed and wrapped my arms around him, pressing a kiss to the crown of his head.

“Come on, then,” I said. “Help me turn all of this off.”

We made short work of the task; the decorations had been up for weeks and I had started to remember which plug sockets to go to when switching the lights off. Chris bolted the front door and I checked that my grumpy cat, Flea, was inside before falling into bed.

Even though I had the heat on it was still colder in our bedroom than in the living room. Chris snuggled into my chest, tangling our legs together with the comforter pulled up high on our shoulders. For a few minutes all I could hear was his deep breathing, he then hummed low in his chest and turned to seek out my kisses.

I wasn't surprised that he wanted this – to be fair, he always wanted this. Chris used sex as a way to connect, to share something beautiful and intimate that belonged to only us. Before I'd met him I wasn't a particularly sexual person, but he'd drawn that out of me to a point where I was confident enough to be myself and enjoy my sexuality.

He was a sensual person and I'd fallen in love with the way he touched me.

For tonight, he positioned his body on top of mine, aligning our chests and wanting cocks and held himself there as we exchanged soft, delicate kisses. Our lips rubbed together and his tongue gently flicked out to tease my bottom lip before he redirected his attention down the side of my neck.

I kept my arms wrapped loosely around his waist as he pressed his lips to my skin, over and over. His hair still faintly smelled of the cinnamon he'd been cooking with earlier and, compared to his cold feet, his lips were deliciously hot.

“I love you,” I whispered, wanting him to know this above anything else.

Chris lifted his head from where he’d been kissing my shoulder and smiled at me in the dark.

“I love you too,” he said and returned his mouth to mine.

With my arms holding his body close I rolled Chris on to his back, taking over his previous position to take my turn to lavish attention on his body. He pushed his hips up to meet mine, effectively telling me to pay attention to his cock. Laughing softly, I pinned his hands to the bed and pressed our foreheads together, grinding my hips into his and sliding our erections together through two layers of fabric.

“Rob, please,” he said.

“Please what, sweetheart?” I asked. “What do you want?”

It was a fair question; even though I mostly topped, I was willing to switch if that’s what he wanted. His mood was no indication of his sexual desire, either... sometimes when he appeared most demanding and aggressive he wanted me inside him and would take himself inside my body with a heat and passion I’d come to recognize as uniquely his.

“I want you,” he said, wrapping his hand around the back of my neck and drawing me down in to another achingly soft kiss.

We both kicked off our underwear and abandoned it somewhere under the sheets. I wanted everything from him, all at once. Chris’s hands stroked reassuringly up and down my sides as we groaned into the kisses, tongues and lips and teeth clashing as my erection poked underneath his balls.

He lifted his legs and wrapped them around my waist, his feet digging into my ass as he encouraged me to push further back between his

cheeks. I indulged him for a moment then pulled away to find the tub of his favorite lube that he kept in his nightstand.

I kissed the inked lines and rich color of his tattoos that covered his chest as my fingers searched for his puckered hole, running my lubed fingers over it as I switched my attention to his nipple. Chris laughed breathlessly as I teased him, his body playing into mine as he ran his fingers through my hair and pinched at his own nipple – the one that my teeth weren't clamped around.

We'd learned so much about each other over the past year, both as people and as sexual partners. I knew his body, how to make him twitch and squirm and groan with pleasure when I finally gave him what he wanted and pushed my fingers up inside him.

Chris threw his leg over my waist to give me better access to his body and I obligingly slipped a second finger in next to the first, stretching him gently and pressing against his prostate. He gasped beautifully, just as I knew he would, and reached for his cock. Unlike me, Chris could hold off stroking himself for ages, drawing pleasure from other parts of his body first.

When I was satisfied that I wasn't going to hurt him I smeared some extra lube on my cock and moved between his legs. We kissed hard for a moment, reassuring each other, then I pushed hard into him. His back arched sharply off the bed as he hissed.

“Okay?” I asked.

Chris grunted softly as he melted back, then took a deep breath.

“Good pain,” he said.

I understood. Only being half-way in, I rocked forward again, more gently this time, until my cock was buried all the way and I was more than a little lost in him. Chris clung to me, all arms and legs and his lips on my neck.

We moved together seamlessly. His cock was trapped between our stomachs and I purposefully rubbed against it as I thrust into him, touching as many points of pleasure on his body as I could. This was to be one of our patented slow, easy fucks, with neither of us having the energy or inclination to make it fast and wild.

There was time for fast and wild later.

I always liked having his face close to mine when we made love, when he would rest his cheek on my shoulder was even better. I liked to hear all the little noises he would make and those could be lost when we were trying something more acrobatic. Chris would gasp or grunt or whimper with nearly every one of my thrusts; he moaned my name and sighed deeply when we paused to catch our breath.

With one of my arms tucked under his neck the other was free to touch him; I ran my fingers over his cheek and he turned his face against my touch, then kissed my fingertips.

I took that as my permission to speed up a little, dragging out the pleasure for us both, encouraging his hand to his cock for him to tug at it desperately. He liked it when I came inside him, which is why we so often did it bare, and we were both safe. I sobbed and cried out as my orgasm tore through my body. Chris kissed up and down my neck, murmuring soft, quiet words against my skin.

While I was still inside him, riding the aftershocks, he shuddered underneath me and came too. It would have been too easy for me to fall asleep like this, with my half-hard cock still inside him. As my breathing evened out I think he figured out that this was a serious possibility and pushed at my shoulder, laughing, to get me to roll off him.

We cleaned up and I found our Christmas pajama pants out of the drawer. Mine were green with candy canes, and his were red with

white snowflakes. They were cheesy, but surprisingly warm, so I reasoned with myself that I was wearing them for their practicality.

Clean and clothed, Chris wrapped his body around mine, spooning me neatly. I was so nearly asleep, it wouldn't take much for me to be dragged into unconsciousness.

"Happy Christmas, Rob," Chris whispered from behind me.

"Merry Christmas, baby."

"Rob. Rob. It's Christmas. Wake up."

His lips kissed up my chest and I wanted to smother him with a pillow and send him back to sleep. Just for a few more hours.

"Oh, really?" I groaned.

"Yes, really. Are you awake? I want my presents."

I laughed and pulled him on to my chest where he sprawled, knowing that I loved him more when he was here than anywhere else. With my fingers running through his hair, down over his back and up again, a soothing, circular pattern, I forced myself into wakefulness and checked the clock on my nightstand. It was a little after eight in the morning. Not so bad after all.

"Okay. You can have your presents," I said, then yawned widely.

"I'm going to go and make a cup of tea."

"For me, too," Chris said, immediately relocating to the warm space my body had left and snuggling there. I tried to mind, but found I couldn't.

The apartment was cold as I quickly made my way to the kitchen, turning the heat up on the panel in the wall when I passed it. I found the Christmas teacups Chris had bought, they were red with white reindeer on them and I liked them so much I was sure it was going to be hard to pack them away until next year.

It didn't take long for the kettle to boil and for me to make two cups of tea. I grabbed a packet of nice shortbread cookies too, deciding that today, it was allowed.

Chris was sitting up in bed and the cat was sleeping on his feet when I returned to our room. He accepted his cup of tea with a smile and a kiss and when I climbed back into bed he silently, and carefully, snuggled back into my side.

We sipped our tea in silence for a few minutes then, without moving, Chris whispered "Presents," again.

I laughed and set my tea aside and reached under my side of the bed to pull out a little pile of carefully wrapped gifts. He grinned at me impishly and I couldn't help but kiss him again.

Chris pulled away first, laughing, and pushed my hair back out of my eyes.

"Stop trying to distract me."

"I'm trying to distract myself," I told him. His eyes were warm and full of laughter as he gave me a quick, hard kiss before pushing me back.

We both started unwrapping things at the same time; he'd bought me a pair of new shirts, the style that rolled up at the sleeves that I'd started to favor, new socks, and chocolate. For him, I'd chosen a cable knit sweater I'd seen him looking at when we were at the mall, a few new jockstraps, since he liked showing his ass off in them, and his newly discovered favorite candy – Turkish Delight.

These were all the little things, as we'd agreed. His big present though, was under the tree.

Before showering and getting dressed I headed to the kitchen to get dinner started. Traditionally, my mother had always cooked a big turkey at Christmas, but it seemed like a lot of effort to go to for the two of us. The ham was a compromise – every few weeks I cooked a joint for dinner because it was Chris's favorite, and there was enough left over to put in sandwiches or salads the next day for lunch.

Since it was Christmas I had found a recipe that used oranges and cloves and honey and brown sugar, it smelled delicious as I prepped everything and stuck it in the oven to slowly roast. I was making accompaniments of honey parsnips and carrots, mashed potatoes, beans and peas with mint. All my favorite things.

Chris had taken it upon himself to be in charge of dessert. While I busied myself with the main course he worked on the other side of the kitchen preparing something huge, chocolatey and gooey that had homemade honeycomb in it. Desserts were his thing, so I left him to it.

Every now and then our paths would cross on the way to the fridge or the sink and he'd give me a hopelessly sappy look before leaning in for a kiss. Since this was the first year Chris had spent the holiday away from his family I wanted it to be special for him, for him to not feel like he was missing out on anything.

"How close to being done are you?" I asked as I finished loading up the dishwasher with the few things that I'd used.

"Two minutes," he said.

"Wanna share a shower?"

This was usually code for *wanna go get naked and wet and jerk off?*

Chris smirked at me. “Sure.”

“I’ll go get the water warmed up.”

Since we moved in together I’d completely renovated the bathroom, keeping the large bath and walk in shower unit, but changing the tiles from white to shades of blue and installing a wooden floor. The result was a room that felt warmer than it had done before, less clinical.

The shower and the bath were comfortably big enough for two and when we had time, it was a luxury to share with him. With the water running, I stripped off my Christmas pajama pants and the t-shirt I’d worn while preparing dinner and quickly brushed my teeth before stepping in to the hot water.

It didn’t take long for Chris to join me, wrapping his arms around me from behind and kissing across my back from one shoulder to the other. I turned and found his lips with mine, sharing wet kisses as the water poured down between us.

Naked, Chris was even more beautiful than he was clothed. When we first met his tattoos had intimidated me, I wasn’t sure how to react to someone who was brave enough to literally wear his emotions on his arms. Over time, I’d started to appreciate the artistic beauty of the images he’d chosen to imprint on himself. Each one of the brightly colored designs had been carefully selected; not all of them had a particular meaning, but they were all in the same style, making him look like an old sailor.

With a cheeky grin, Chris stretched his left arm up to rest his forearm on top of his head, then turned to me. I wasn’t particularly surprised to see a new design on his body – he seemed to want a new tattoo every six months or so – but this particular one made me smile.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked him.

“It depends, what do you think it is?”

I knew, as did he, that it was a thistle – an emblem of Scotland, my homeland. The tattoo was about the size of my palm, located on his ribs...

“Next to my heart,” he said, finishing the thought for me.

The ink was raw, new, telling me he’d probably had it done while out doing his ‘last minute shopping’ the day before. Suddenly his desire to make love once the lights had gone out the previous night made sense.

“You’re mad,” I told him. “And I love you.”

He shook water back from his face and smiled. “I’m glad you like it.”

Short of tattooing my name on his body, this was the closest he could come to a permanent symbol of our relationship on his skin. There was no way for me to know that years in the future he’d add a banner underneath the thistle with ‘McKinnon’ written on it – my name. There was no way for me to know that by the time the tattoo came along, it would be his name too.

We spent the day being truly lazy: watching TV, eating, drinking a bottle of wine, then another, then cracking open a bottle of whiskey. Dinner was delicious, dessert more so, and by the time evening set in we were both sprawled on the sofa with a box of chocolates on the floor between us and my personal favorite Christmas movie showing – *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*.

The sprawling, and the sofa, weren’t anything particularly new for us.

The Christmas pj’s, that we’d changed back into after dinner – they were a seasonal thing.

Chris sighed heavily in deep contentment and I ran my hand over the back of his head, down his neck and tucked it around his waist. I thought, for a while, that he might be sleeping, until he stretched and sat up.

“Today was awesome,” he said as he rocked his head from side to side, stretching out the aches in his neck.

“For me, too.”

“I want something else to eat,” he mumbled and I laughed as he hauled himself up off the sofa and staggered down to the kitchen, returning ten minutes later with an enormous sandwich layered with ham, salad and coleslaw.

And a bag of chips.

I had to admire how much food he could manage to put away, and his youthful metabolism that allowed him to burn it all off again. To be fair, he did go to the gym a few times a week. I did not.

When he was done I dragged him close and kissed his cheek. I had a confession to make.

“I got you something else,” I admitted, my lips hovering over his skin.

Chris laughed. “I got you something else, too.”

“I want to go first,” I said, sliding to the floor and reaching under the tree for the box that I’d hidden at the back. He joined me next to the tree, sitting cross legged with a big grin. I handed him the box, exchanging it for a long, slow kiss where his tongue explored mine before he pulled away.

Chris pulled the paper from the box and looked up at me with a mixed expression of shock and awe. The watch wasn’t the most expensive, but it was a lot nicer than the cheap plastic thing he wore most days.

I'd chosen one made of dark metal and a black face, expecting it to look good on his pale skin next to his bright tattoos.

"Wow..." he said. "Thank you. It's amazing."

I smiled as he pulled the watch out of the box and fixed it to his wrist; since we were a similar size, I'd had them adjust it to fit me and it fit him perfectly. Once it was secured he launched himself into my lap, peppering my face with kisses.

"Okay, okay, I get it, you like it," I said, laughing. I rubbed my hands up and down his sides and caught his mouth in another, slower kiss.

"My turn," he said as we broke apart again and found another, much smaller box from the pile of gifts.

I turned the box over in my hands before looking at him, trying to figure out if I should be nervous. His face just showed excitement, so I pulled off the paper and opened the box.

Nestled inside the black velvet were two rings.

One of them I recognized – I'd given it to him a little under a year ago, after he'd come back to Boston. It was never meant to be an engagement ring, more of a promise of my commitment to him. Since he wore it every day I wasn't sure when he'd taken it off to wrap up with the other one... thinking back, I was sure he was wearing it at dinner...

The second ring was smooth silver, like Chris's, but decorated with a Celtic knot pattern.

I pulled both from the box and rolled them around in my hand.

"Chris..." I started, but he shook his head to stop me and scooted forward, throwing his legs over my thighs so we were pretty much as close as we could get. He reached out and caught my free hand in both of his.

“I’d ask you myself,” he said. “But I’d probably do it wrong. And you’re so much more romantic than I am.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You seem to be doing well so far.”

He smiled, his eyes so warm and full of love it made my stomach flip over. “I’m going to say yes,” he murmured. “I just want you to ask.”

“Okay,” I said, conceding. I shifted a bit, closing the small gap until we were sitting practically nose to nose. He hadn’t given me any time to think about how I wanted to do this but maybe that was for the best. I was the sort of person who would probably obsess over getting it right, and he hadn’t given me chance to do that.

The white lights on the tree were twinkling softly, casting shadows over his face and I thought I might always associate the scent of pine needles with this moment.

“I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy, one day at a time,” I said, twisting my hand until our fingers tangled together. “Starting with today. I love you so fucking much, Chris,” I added, laughing a little as he squeezed my hand. The cursing was definitely a side effect of living with him for this long. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” he said immediately. His eyes were bright with excitement and I laughed softly, breathless with emotion, then kissed him.

We fumbled with the rings, me returning his to the fourth finger on his left hand and him slipping the new ring on to mine. The metal was already warm, from where it had been clutched in my palm while I’d worked out my clumsy proposal.

The desperation to be close to each other, as close as possible, meant we ended up making love on the floor, right under the tree. I knew he was probably sore from the night before and took my time with his body, teasing him up and over the edge before losing myself inside him.

After, we laid back in front of the fire, his head on my belly and my hand stroking his hair. He was quiet, but I knew he was still awake by the sound of his breathing.

“I thought you didn’t want to get married,” I said, breaking the silence.

“When did I say that?” he said.

I tried to think back. “I don’t know,” I said lamely.

“I didn’t want to get married before I met you. Things change, I suppose.” He shifted around and crossed his arms on my chest, resting his chin on the back of his hands. I was treated to one of his slow, lazy smiles that warmed me up from the inside.

“I never thought I’d get married before I met you either,” I said. “My whole life changed when we got together.”

“For the better?”

“So much better it’s barely worth thinking about,” I told him. It was the absolute truth.

Chris ducked his head, scratched his nose, then looked back at me. “I can’t wait to be married to you,” he said softly.

“Me too, baby.”

Any ideas I may have had about locking myself away with Chris and spending the rest of our lives in some kind of naked, gay, hippy utopia were dashed with the arrival of the next morning. We had planned to make food – a lot of food – and my alarm went off early, reminding me that I needed to get up and start cooking.

A few things were easy; the chili was already made, it just needed reheating and I was making a nice, warming curry, too. The leftover ham from the day before was going to be cut up cold, Chris agreed to make a salad and some pasta with pine nuts and pesto and I made a large bowl of rice to serve with anything.

We weren't expecting our guests until lunchtime; that did not mean, however, that we weren't rushed and slightly crazy all morning. I found myself diving into the shower only thirty minutes before I was expecting people. When the doorbell rang for the first time I was just buttoning up one of the shirts Chris had given me.

I reached the door before he did, opening it to Luisa and all her children.

"Hey, Chlo," I said to my daughter and found myself on the receiving end of one of her rare hugs.

"Happy Christmas, Dad."

I squeezed her a little tighter than normal. "Happy Christmas, darling."

The one thing guaranteed to make me feel like an old man was having a fifteen year old daughter. Chloe was, against all of my best attempts, turning into a young woman; she was petite, like her mother, and she had obviously gone to some effort to make her hair shiny and curly. Unlike most fathers with teenage daughters I didn't mind her wearing makeup, not when Lu seemed to have taught her how to apply it with a lighter touch.

She was wearing a red dress and black tights and diamond earrings, beautiful, and sophisticated. Until she opened her mouth, of course.

I could distinctly remember my own father telling me when I was younger that I would only realize that my parents were right when my

own children started telling me I was wrong. There was no way I'd ever admit it, but he was right.

As I was mid-hug with Chloe, Chris appeared and immediately scooped up Luisa's youngest daughter, Cassie, who thought that Chris was quite possibly the most wonderful person on the planet. The two of them had a lovely relationship that I admired – I attributed his ease with children to being part of a large family himself.

Over the next half hour our home filled with friends, family, and those people who fell into both categories at once. The strange layout of our house – the kitchen on the lower floor and living room upstairs – didn't really cater to having guests move between the spaces very well. It had been a concern until everyone arrived.

People seemed content to move, or stay in one space, or even sit on the stairs to chat and catch up. As the afternoon moved on, and people started eating, I began to relax.

When our guests seemed settled Chris and I pulled Chloe aside. I didn't want to do it in my office, but there were people everywhere and we didn't want an audience, and it was a better location than our bedroom.

“Chloe, there's something we wanted to talk to you about,” I said, leaning back against my desk. To sit down would make me feel like her teacher, which would just be weird.

Chris hoisted himself up to sit on the windowsill and smirked at me.

“Okay,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and looking between him and me with growing suspicion. “What?”

“Chris and I have been talking, and we've decided to get married,” I said calmly.

It took a few seconds for her to absorb the information, and then she broke into a big grin. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” I said, matching her smile.

“Oh my god!” she squealed and launched herself into my arms, laughing. “That’s so cool!”

Chris slid to the floor and joined us in a three way hug; Chloe immediately opened her arms and pulled him in close too.

“When is the wedding going to be?” she demanded as she pulled away. “Did you get rings? Can I be a bridesmaid?”

“Can you be a bridesmaid if there’s not going to be a bride?” I countered.

“Dad,” she said, giving me a *look*.

“Leave her alone,” Chris said, elbowing me in the side. “Of course you can. Your dad gave me a ring a long time ago, remember? But I got him one for Christmas.”

Feeling like a big fucking girl, I held out my hand for her inspection.

“We’ll probably leave it for a while yet,” I said as she ran her thumb over the pattern on the ring. “We’re not in any rush.”

“I’m really happy for you,” she said. Chris hugged her again and I felt a choked up, something stuck in my throat. They were the two most important people in my world.

“We’re going to tell people later,” I said as they broke apart. “I wanted you to know first, though.”

“You haven’t told anyone yet?” Chloe asked.

“No,” Chris said. “Rob wanted you to know before anyone else.”

“Thanks,” she said with a little smile.

If we were gone for too much longer people would notice us missing; Chloe slipped out of the office first, leaving me alone with Chris. His face brightened into the sort of smile that filled me up inside.

“She took that well.”

I nodded. “I thought she might.”

We held hands as we rejoined the crowd.

After a while, I found the confidence to sit back and just enjoy having so many people around who I actually enjoyed spending time with, instead of fussing and worrying if everyone was happy. I managed to hold a proper conversation with Luisa for the first time in ages; her husband was taking care of their baby son and Chris seemed to have Cassie permanently attached to his side.

“Congratulations,” Lu said, nodding toward the ring on my finger. I blushed and nodded.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“When are you going to make an honest man out of him, then?” she asked as she stretched her legs out in front of herself and balanced a glass of spiced rum on her stomach. It was an impressive feat.

“Sometime next year, I expect,” I said. “I wanted to talk to you about taking Chloe to Scotland.”

Lu raised an eyebrow at me, her expression clearly conveying a message that could only be *are you high?*

“When?”

“I’m thinking in the spring,” I said. “When I have time off. Chris and I were talking, and I want to take her to Edinburgh and maybe London, too.”

“She’ll shit a brick, Robert,” she said and sipped at her drink. “If you want to do it I don’t have a problem.”

I nodded, pleased that she approved of the plan. I hadn’t mentioned Paris, but Chris wanted to go there too and I was thinking of adding the third city to the trip, drawing it out over two weeks. Lu was right – Chloe would freak out (one of her expressions, not mine) if I mentioned taking her to Europe, for that reason I was keeping the idea close to my chest for the time being.

We chatted for a while longer until Lexi joined us and dumped her sleeping daughter on my lap and Luisa decided it was time to check in on the location of her own children. Lexi was one of Chris’s oldest friends and I had grown to adore her too. Their band had disintegrated after Chris had left, although they did meet up to jam a few times a month. Since the baby had come along those music dates had become fewer and further between.

I had never been a natural around children. It had taken time for me to bond with my own daughter, and even as she grew it took effort on my part to stay close to her. It was easy to love Ruby, though. She was adorable, a little pink thing in a red velvet dress who fit perfectly in the crook of my arm. Best of all, she’d just been fed and needed little more than a comfortable place to sleep while her Mama had something to eat.

I was content to sit back and people watch for a while, until Chris came upstairs to find me and situated himself on the other side of my lap, tucking his feet up into the chair and transferring Ruby to his own arms. I wrapped both of my own around him and laid my head on his shoulder.

“How are you doing?” I asked him.

“Good,” he said. “People like my food, so I’m happy.”

“Of course they do. You’re a great cook.”

He beamed. “Thanks.” Looking down at the baby in his arms, Chris gave her a little bounce.

I debated how wise asking him about children was – we’d had the conversation before, and while we were both cuddling Ruby it probably wasn’t the right time to bring it up again. Still.

“Do you want a family?” I asked, throwing caution to the wind.

He looked at me carefully and leaned in to place a soft kiss on my cheek. “I already have a family, Rob,” he murmured against my neck, his lips curving into a smile. And I knew he didn’t mean the one he was born into. “And by this time next year I’ll have a step-daughter.”

I kissed him then, not caring about the baby and claiming him with my lips. He laughed and caught my cheek in his hand and flicked his tongue into my mouth, deepening the kiss. It was slow and easy and perfect, confirming every reason why I’d agreed to ask him to marry me.

If he decided later that he wanted children of his own, I would never be the one to take that opportunity away from him. It would be a big adjustment for us, we both enjoyed our freedom, but things could change. I certainly had, from being a stoic bachelor only eighteen months ago, to having a young, tattooed boyfriend and, by next Christmas, a husband. All of those changes should have left my nerves in tatters but I was strangely calm.

Thanks to Chris, I already knew how our story would end.