

# Uriel

YULE LADS BOOK TWO

MACY BLAKE

URIEL

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BOOK 2

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## **Uriel**

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# WELCOME TO THE CHOSEN UNIVERSE

The Chosen Universe is a group of interconnected series set in one universe. There is some overlap to the series, so it's recommended to read the books in order. You can download a FREE reading order guide by clicking [here](#).

[Sweet Nothings: The Chosen One Prequel](#) – When Sam Baker discovers a small child at his backdoor, he learns that a world of magic and shifters exists all around him—including the alpha werewolf he had a one night stand with years before.

[The Chosen One Series](#) – The mythical Chosen One is set to return with his eight guardians and correct the magical wrongs done centuries before.

[Hellhound Champions Series](#) – As the champions of the fire goddess, the hellhounds have one task: keep the secret of the supernatural world safe.

[Magical Mates Series](#) – After the Chosen One returns, magic is in the air, and shifters are finally finding their fated mates... with a little help on the side.

[Chosen Champions Series](#) – With the magical realm in chaos, a new set of champions emerges to keep the human world secure.

[Cosmo and the King](#) – Cosmo never told any of his friends in the human realm that he ran away on his wedding day, leaving his king at the altar. Now Silenus has to track down Cosmo and convince him that they are meant for each other, even though his stubborn fiancé seems determined to challenge him at every turn.

[Christmas Sprites Series](#) – With magic in the human realm on the fritz, four Christmas Sprites find themselves trying to keep the Christmas spirit alive in Mistletoe Falls...and finding love along the way.

[Yule Lads Series](#) – You better watch out...the Yule Lads are coming to Mistletoe Falls this holiday season! A follow up to the pun-filled Christmas Sprites series, prepare for mischief, mayhem, and maybe a little love in time for Yule.

If you prefer to read in chronological order, check out the [Chosen Universe Box Sets](#).

# SYNOPSIS

## *His holiday is about to go off-book...*

Uriel Lad is single all the way. He enjoys his quiet life in the small town of Mistletoe Falls, running Ornamentary Books and More. This holiday, though, Uriel's Yule Lad magic is back, which means making mischief throughout the season. It should be a perfect Christmas, until his new friend Joe begs for help with a problem.

Joe Watson loves his new life in the quaint little holiday town he's come to call home. His happiness is threatened when his ex-boyfriend shows up unexpectedly. In a panic, Joe claims that his closest friend in Mistletoe Falls is his boyfriend—his fake boyfriend who has snow interest in love or romance.

Uriel's magic is causing havoc in his life, and his pretend relationship with Joe is complicating matters even further. He'll have to use every trick in the book to save his heart and make sure Joe gets the happily ever after he's always wanted.

*If you love fake boyfriends, magical mischief, and friends to lovers, you'll want lots **myrrh** of this sweet holiday romance.*





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## URIEL

**D**ing dong.

Uriel blinked awake. Surely that hadn't been his doorbell ringing at—he glanced at the clock on his bedside table—four in the morning? Before he could decide if he'd imagined it or not, his least favorite song blasted through his house.

*You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch.*

“Edgar, I will *end* you.”

His cousin had recently installed a new video doorbell apparatus and had apparently added his own unique twist to the system. With his annoyance nearing a boiling point, Uriel flipped back his down comforter, sat up, and slid his feet into his faux fur slippers.

He grabbed his thick fleece robe from the back of his bedroom door as he stormed toward the front of the house. Answering it better make the song stop before his ears began to bleed.

Uriel flung open the door, ready to bellow at one of his cousins, only to find Joe Watson standing on his porch. “Uriel, something's happened downtown. Eldon told me to get over there, fast.”

Uriel squinted, half asleep and completely confused. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. Come on.”

“I'm hardly dressed for—”

Joe grabbed his arm and tugged. “You’re wearing more layers than I am. I’m not going down there by myself. You know I get nervous when Eldon gets cranky.”

Somehow, Uriel found himself being dragged toward town square in Mistletoe Falls, the town he’d called home for as long as he could remember. In all that time, no one had ever woken him from his bed in the middle of the night, much less forced him to involve himself in some sort of local drama. They all knew better.

Joe, however, had become the exception to many of Uriel’s rules. Their shared love of books would only get the man so far, though. The entire situation had become untenable. Uriel stopped moving. Unfortunately, he jerked Joe to a stop as Joe still had his arm firmly hooked through Uriel’s.

“I forgot how cranky you are in the mornings,” Joe said. “How late did you stay up reading? We’ve talked about this, Uriel.”

“I’m a grown man,” Uriel huffed. “I can stay up as late as I choose.”

He might have sounded petulant, but he couldn’t exactly confess to Joe that he’d been out late with his cousins, performing their first official Yule Lads prank of the season. By the time he’d arrived home, he’d been buzzed with the success of their magical endeavor and hadn’t been able to sleep for quite some time.

Joe rolled his eyes so dramatically they may as well have fallen out of his head. And that was entirely too gruesome of an image for this ridiculous hour of the morning.

“I’ll get you coffee. Come on. Eldon will scowl if I take too much longer.”

Uriel growled but let Joe drag him forward once more. “I don’t know why you’re so concerned about Eldon,” Uriel complained. “What’s he going to do, fire you?”

“Yes, Uriel. He’s my boss. That’s exactly what he could do. You know how I feel about this job.”

Uriel smothered a yawn. “Your vision of a dream job is disconcerting to me. Have I mentioned that to you before?”

“Only a dozen times.”

“There are sticky children in the Snowda Shoppe,” Uriel continued. “And I don’t care for sticky children.”

“Oh, don’t be such a *rude*-olph.”

Uriel growled again. “Which one of my cousins taught you that? I will—”

“None of them. Linus has been helping me. I swear, so many of my customers get a kick out of the holiday puns. It’s so much fun having one for every occasion. You should try it sometime.”

He stopped again and glanced down at Joe with a frown. “You *sleigh* me.”

Joe snickered before releasing a jaw-cracking yawn. “See? It’s fun.”

Uriel huffed before looking around town square to see what the dire emergency could be. A gaggle of sprites stood in front of the bakery, along with his cousin York and one of the vendors from the craft fair. Wasn’t that interesting?

“What are you thinking about?” Joe whispered. “You’re giving grinch vibes again. Oh, and speaking of the big green guy, I’ll fix your doorbell later so you don’t have to do something awful to Edgar.”

Joe understood him too well for someone who’d only known him for a few months.

“I’m trying to determine what to call the group of cousins whose appearance always seems to bring me some sort of misadventure. I’d thought gaggle, but that doesn’t seem quite right.”

“*That’s* what you were thinking?” Joe asked.

Uriel shrugged. “I see no emergency. No flashing lights. No fire trucks. Only the flock of cousins.”

“Flock?” Joe curled up his lips in distaste. “You can do better than that. How about pack?”

“As in wolves? I think not. They’re hardly ferocious shapeshifters. More like meddlesome creatures who torment those of us who prefer not to become enmeshed in the town’s holiday traditions.”

“Hmm. Well, let’s go see what they’re up to. I’m so tired I think I left my brain on your front porch.” Joe pulled his knitted scarf up over his nose, drawing the strangest urge from Uriel. He considered offering Joe his robe since he appeared to be cold. He resisted the ridiculous idea.

However, speaking of cold....

“Why did you wake me? I was warm and cozy and—”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Joe asked. “Of course, I’m going to get you. You don’t think clearly this early in the morning, do you?”

Uriel huffed as Joe dragged him over to the others who appeared to be listening to the crafty one. What was his name again?

“It had to be more than one person. Probably quite a few. Don’t you think, York?” Crafty one said.

Uriel couldn’t think of the man’s name, proving Joe’s point that he wasn’t thinking clearly. He couldn’t allow Joe to be correct too often, or it would go to his head. Uriel scowled, searching his memory until the name came to him. *Gabriel*.

It was entirely too early for this nonsense of remembering a stranger’s name.

“Definitely more than one,” York agreed.

“Why am I in town square at this goddess-forsaken hour?” Uriel grumped as Joe finally stopped pulling him forward.

York pointed up.

Uriel scowled, then looked at the streetlamp. His eyes widened and he turned to stare at Joe. “*This* is the emergency?”

He’d been dragged out of his cozy, comfortable bed to deal with the prank he and his cousins had performed on the streetlamps. There was no justice in the world. The entire

point of the pranks was for the herd of sprites to deal with the problems.

Uriel's frown deepened. Nope, herd wasn't right either. He'd figure it out sooner or later. Maybe at a reasonable hour once the sun had come up. He shot another quick glare toward Joe.

"Be nice, Uriel," York said. "I have a ladder at the shop. Why don't you go get it? And Joe, grab him a cup of coffee from Carol and have him drink it on the way. He's a lump of coal until he's caffeinated."

"Morning doesn't *soot* him," Joe teased. "And yes, Uriel, the streetlamps wearing fishnet stockings definitely qualifies as an emergency."

"Keep it up, funny guys. I have no problem going back to bed and letting everyone else sort out this...this—"

"Fra-gee-lay mess?" York smirked and glanced at Gabriel who let out a little shiver before smiling in return.

Well wasn't that an interesting exchange? He'd have to speak to his cousin about his connection with Gabriel later.

Joe cackled and pulled on Uriel's arm again. He followed, but only because he didn't want to be around his chipper cousin. What a disgusting amount of energy in the middle of the night. It should be outlawed.

"Here, drink this while we get the ladder." Joe shoved a cup of coffee from Carol's cart into his hand. "I can't believe someone did that to the streetlamps. York's joke was funny, though."

"It was?" Uriel took a long sip of the coffee. He managed to swallow before coughing. The jolt of caffeine hitting his stomach did super-charge him, though, even if the drink itself left much to be desired.

"Haven't you seen the movie?"

Uriel scoffed. "What's the rule, Joe?"

Joe's groan of disdain echoed through the empty street. "If the question starts with *have you seen*, the answer is no. I can't believe you don't watch television or movies."

“I read.” Uriel braved another sip of coffee before handing it over to Joe.

“I’m well aware. Well, if you’d seen it, you’d know that the guy in the movie gets a lamp that looks like the streetlamps. The box says fragile, but he says it’s fra-GEE-leh and must be Italian.”

Uriel opened the door to Peppermint Condition Mechanics, his cousin’s shop, before looking down at Joe. “And that’s funny?”

“This is why we watch the movies, Uriel. It’s funny when you *see* it, not when I *tell* you about it.”

“Show not tell. Got it,” Uriel said.

He found the ladder in York’s storage closet and pulled it out as Joe snuck a sip of his coffee. He choked and held it out with a betrayed look on his face. “What is *that*?”

“Strong coffee. Not a peppermint mocha latte with extra peppermint, chocolate sauce, and whip.”

“Aww,” Joe said, batting his eyes and looking ridiculous, “you remember my coffee order. My hero.”

“You’ve forced it upon me. I’m not sure it qualifies as heroics when you held my book hostage until I memorized it.”

“True,” Joe said, braving another sip. “This is going to make a man out of me.”

Uriel grinned and took the cup back. “Pretty sure the manliest thing you’ve done today is ring my doorbell at four in the morning. Very brave. Not even my cousins would have dared such a travesty.”

Joe shrugged. “That was panic mode. Did you notice that Eldon didn’t even speak to me?”

“I didn’t notice.”

Joe sighed as they reached town square again. “Well, at least I’m here. That’s something, right?”

“It’s more than enough. This isn’t your responsibility, and it isn’t mine either.”

“But we’re members of the community. We run businesses here. That means we should pitch in when something like this happens.”

“I don’t jump at the *gumdrop* of a hat, especially not for that brace of cousins. Oh, that’s better. I like that one.”

“Brace, as in a brace of ducks? Honestly, Uriel, I’m disappointed in you right now. Why don’t you like them, anyway? They’re nice. Nyall is always helping me develop new recipes for Snowda Cones, and Eldon gave me a job when I didn’t have the experience. Linus teaches me about Mistletoe Falls, and Oberon let me move in to the carriage house when he moved out, even though it’s still his.”

“They’re clearly on Santa’s nice list this year. And I like them perfectly fine. Just not when I’d rather be in bed or when community service is required.”

“Well, we can’t let visitors see the streetlamps looking so wildly inappropriate. It would be bad for both of our businesses.”

“I suppose you have a point.” Uriel opened the ladder beneath one of the streetlamps. “I’d hate for you to disappoint all the sticky fingers.”

Joe rolled his eyes again. “You are not climbing up there in your pajamas.”

“Yes, I am. Hold on to the ladder.”

“Fine, then we’re taking turns and I’ll go up for the next lamp.”

Uriel managed to get the lampshade off without doing too much damage to his ego. Detaching the garters holding up the fishnet stockings, on the other hand, nearly defeated him.

“Your laughing is not helping,” Uriel griped.

“Just unsnap the thing.”

“The *thing*. Oh so helpful, Joe.” Uriel finally figured out the clasp, and the stockings slid down the lamppost.”

“A round of *Santa-plause* for the conquering hero,” Joe said.



And then he proceeded to slow clap as Uriel climbed down the ladder.

“You’re lucky I like you.”

“I know,” Joe said. “*You like so very few people.*”

Uriel scowled at Joe’s obvious, but poor, attempt to mimic his voice.

Joe grabbed the ladder with a laugh before Uriel could form a retort and carried it to the next corner. Before Uriel could argue, he’d climbed up and started detaching the decorations. Then Joe tossed the lampshade at him, missing his head by less than an inch.

Joe had to hold on to the lamppost as he laughed.

And he still managed to detach the garter with one hand while his entire body shook.

“If you fall, we really will have an emergency on our hands. And exactly how much experience do you have with garters?” Uriel did not like the uncomfortable shift in his stomach at the thought of Joe knowing such things.

Joe climbed down the ladder and shot a sexy smile Uriel’s way. “Let’s just say I’m not on Santa’s nice list, Uriel.”

“Hey, Joe!” Oberon’s poorly timed interruption prevented Uriel from responding. He was becoming extremely tired of being cut off before he could form appropriate responses. “We’re going to put up the decorations for next week while we’re at it. You two up for helping? Breakfast at the inn for your time.”

“Sure, Oberon,” Joe agreed. “We’re happy to help.”

Oberon grinned and put a bin down beside the ladder. “We appreciate it.”

Uriel scowled as the sprite practically skipped away. “For goodness *flakes*, Joe. Say it ain’t *snow*.”

“Aww,” Joe said. “Betrayed by the holiday spirit. And those were horrible puns. You can do better. Oh, and what about a troop of cousins?”

“A troop?”

“Yeah, like kangaroos. They’re always hopping all over town.”

As far as naming conventions went, it wasn’t the worst. Uriel had come up with those himself. “A troop. I’ll consider it.”

“Why thank you, oh wise one. Hey, when are you ordering more cozy mysteries? I’m gonna have to order online if you don’t get me my fix.”

Joe scrambled back up the ladder and began attaching the garland to the streetlamp.

“The order came in yesterday. Although I’m currently reconsidering the special treatment I give you. You seem to be fond of torturing me. It seems only fair for me to return the favor.”

Joe gasped and flung a loose piece of mistletoe at him. “You wouldn’t hold my books hostage, would you?”

“I’m thinking about it. It’s freezing, I need coffee that didn’t derive from the La Brea Tar Pits, and you’re throwing decorations at my head.”

Joe finished decorating the streetlamp and climbed down the ladder. “Fine, I just wanted you to grace us with your *presents*. Ha. Get it? Presents?”

“Show, don’t tell, Joe.”

Joe picked up the bin, then jerked his head toward the ladder. “Come on. Let’s get another one done. And don’t even think about abandoning me for breakfast. The entire *troop* will be there. You know how dangerous kangaroos can be. You wouldn’t leave me on my own, would you?”

Uriel picked up the bin and followed Joe to the next light. “I’ve lost the thread of this conversation. And I’ve read *War and Peace*. Twelve times.”

“That explains *soooo* much,” Joe said. “Isn’t that thing over a thousand pages long?”

“Twelve-hundred. It’s a classic.”

“You’re a classic. Now get your *icehole* up the ladder.”

Uriel smirked and did as he was told. He honestly wasn’t very fond of people in general, but Joe had managed to argue his way to the top of his list.



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## JOE

Everyone *trooped* back to the Tinseled Inn after six in the morning. Joe chuckled at his use of the word and glanced at Uriel. His friend still looked quite annoyed at being in the presence of Eldon and his cousins. Then again, Uriel looked annoyed around most people, so it wasn't like they were particularly special.

"Troop makes them sound like Boy Scouts," Uriel muttered under his breath. "We need to keep thinking."

"Shh," Joe hissed, trying not to laugh that Uriel was still stuck on the naming of the cousins "Don't let them hear you. I want to be on their good side."

"Oh for garland's sake, Joe. You're already on their good side. Not only did you take the job, but you've also increased profits and revitalized the Snowda Shoppe. Tate would be an idiot to let you go."

"Yeah, but Tate didn't hire me, even though he owns the business. Eldon did," Joe whispered.

Uriel pinched the bridge of his nose. "Will you please, just this once, not argue with me?"

Joe leaned his head to the side. "Hmm. Just this once? Okay, deal."

Uriel sighed. "I walked right into that one."

"Come on in, Joe. Uriel! You came. How...unexpected." Linus, the manager of Tinseled Inn, beamed a smile at Uriel. A jaunty Santa hat accompanied his cheerful holiday sweater.

“I couldn’t pass up the chance to have breakfast at your charming inn,” Uriel said, beaming a smile in return.

Linus looked stunned and turned to bustle around the room getting everyone settled.

“So much attitude,” Joe grumbled. “Remember, you’re here to keep me on their good side.”

“You don’t need my help to do that.”

“Yes, I do. Eldon makes me nervous. Why do I have to keep repeating myself?”

“Perhaps because your fear is irrational, and as a person whom I find to be a generally thoughtful person—your sticky children job being the obvious exception—your concern over Eldon makes absolutely no sense.”

Joe tapped his foot and stared at Uriel. “You’re too logical. Cut it out.”

It wasn’t like Joe didn’t know his concerns about Eldon were unfounded. But feelings were feelings and that’s how he felt.

“Will you please get me some food before I begin to vent my frustrations?”

“Big baby. Come on.” Joe dragged Uriel by the arm once more, this time leading him to the large table Linus had set up at the far end of the inn’s sizable dining room.

He was lucky he’d discovered Ornamentary Books and More on his first day in Mistletoe Falls. It had taken him a while to wear Uriel down, but he’d finally broken through his hard chocolate shell to the gooey caramel center.

Ugh, talk about an analogy that didn’t work. Comparing Uriel to candy was about as accurate as describing Linus’s wardrobe as neutral. The flamboyant sprite’s collection of holiday sweaters was impressive, to say the least. A couple of them had nearly blinded Joe with the sheer quantity of sequins.

After pushing Uriel into a seat toward the end of the table where his back would be to the wall, Joe sat down beside him. Since Linus had stayed behind at the inn while the rest of them

undid the prankster's work on the streetlamps, he'd had plenty of time to cook up a giant feast for breakfast.

As everyone took their seats, Joe's leg began to bounce. He tried to force it to stop, but his nerves always got the better of him when he was around Eldon and his cousins.

Uriel's big hand landed on his knee. Joe stopped bouncing his leg.

"Eldon," Uriel said as everyone began passing dishes and filling their plates, "how were sales at Deck the Walls this weekend? I must admit, this year's craft fair brought in more customers than usual to the bookstore."

Joe had never wanted to hug a person more in his life. Eldon began talking about his flourishing holiday decor store, which led to Uriel squeezing Joe's knee. *Hint taken.*

"We were swamped at the Snowda Shoppe yesterday," Joe said. "The new flavors were a big hit."

Eldon smiled. "Excellent news. I knew the Shoppe was in good hands."

"Yes," Tate said. "I never doubted you for a minute, Joe."

Joe bumped his leg against Uriel's as the others began talking about the final day of the craft fair. The big lug had given him a chance to shine. Joe would have to find a way to repay him.

"I'd like to know who was behind this morning's little prank," Aaron said.

Joe liked Aaron. He was a reporter and Nyall's boyfriend. They'd both been kind to Joe since he arrived in town.

Next to him, Uriel's leg tightened. Joe glanced at him, but nothing seemed to be wrong. Maybe he was uncomfortable with Joe pressing their legs together? That didn't make sense, though, because Uriel's hand was still on Joe's knee. He'd have moved it if he didn't want them touching, right?

"I've suggested to Eldon that we need to install security cameras around the square," Tate said.

The silence that followed his statement stretched to the point that Joe's leg started bouncing again. Joe opened his mouth, ready to agree with Tate's statement, but Uriel squeezed his knee.

What was so bad about having security cameras?

Apparently, everyone hated the idea because Jack Frost seemed to have grabbed the balls of everyone at the table—and not in a good way. In a frostbite to the balls kinda way, which, now that Joe thought about it, was there a good way to have your balls frozen? No, no there was not.

“How about those craft vendors? So much talent, am I right?” Joe's voice might have squeaked a bit as if his balls were tight in Jack Frost's grip.

Alas, his balls hadn't been gripped in a long time. And was it possible for him to stop thinking about balls while he sat at a table with his peers? Well, not exactly peers. They all owned their businesses, and he was a manager. But still, he had dreams, and they counted.

And even though he sometimes doubted it, Uriel believed in him, which made it seem like one day he could sit at this table, owning a business in Mistletoe Falls. Wouldn't that be incredible?

Uriel elbowed him in the ribs. “I'm out of bacon.”

Joe slow panned to look at him. “Why, yes, it appears that you are.”

Uriel scowled. “You're closer.”

“You have longer arms.”

“You're...dammit. It's rude to reach across someone at the table.”

Joe smirked. “Fine, you win with that one. But don't think you can boss me around, mister. You're not the boss of me.”

“That's right,” Uriel teased, a rare glint coming into his eyes. “Eldon is.”



Joe froze with the platter of bacon in his hand. “Oh no you didn’t.”

Uriel laughed.

Joe plopped the platter down, snatched a piece of bacon, and shoved it into his mouth. “Mmm. Tasty bacon,” Joe mumbled as half the bacon dangled from his lips.

Uriel, the weirdo, tore off the dangling bacon and put it in his mouth.

“Gross, Uriel. You don’t know where my mouth has been. Do you know how many germs I collect on a daily basis?”

From the sudden silence around the table, Joe realized his volume may have gotten a wee bit louder than he intended.

“That sounded much more graphic than I intended, didn’t it?”

“It sure did,” Linus said, his hearty laugh echoing through the dining room. “So tell us, Joe, just where *is* your mouth on a daily basis? Curious minds want to know.”

Joe kicked Uriel under the table. “Your *presents* is requested to get me out of this.”

“Was that supposed to be a pun? If it was, you’re on your own. That was dreadful, Joe. Your witty banter is a key element to your charm. For you to sink so low....” Uriel shook his head and reached across Joe for the platter of bacon.

Joe pushed it out of reach. “You think I’m witty?”

“I think this conversation is fascinating,” Eldon said.

“Agreed,” Linus said. “I’ve never heard Uriel say two sentences in a row before. Who knew?”

Joe’s mouth fell open, and he turned to look at his boss and the other guys at the table. “*Sleigh*, what?”

Linus chuckled again. Every time Joe heard the man laugh, he swore he must be, like, Santa’s son or something. And one day, he’d take on the mantle of the family tradition. The other cousins just hadn’t quite cut it. But Linus could *ho, ho, ho* like a champ.

And don't even get Joe started on Linus's ability to decorate for the holidays. Eldon may have the elegant multi-story shop on town square, but Linus's decorations at the inn were top of the line as far as Joe was concerned. The exterior decor alone would win over any of those houses that appeared on social media.

"Whoa, I'm really on the *snowball*, today. Conversation killed, not once, but twice." Joe kicked Uriel again. "Say something. You normally have *zero* problems making conversation. Why are you acting like a socially awkward elf who doesn't know how to break the ice?"

Uriel grunted. "First, please stop kicking me. Second, your puns are absolutely horrifying this morning. And third, if you don't give me the bacon, I'm going to *Claus* a scene."

"Ha!" Joe handed over the bacon. "That was a good one."

"Fascinating," Nyall said. "The banter is real."

Oberon seemed most confused by the conversation. "Uriel talks all the time. What are you three going on about?"

Nyall, Eldon, and Linus all seemed stunned. And wait a second....

"Holy ghosts of Christmas past," Joe said. "Your names spell Noel. That's so sweet. Did your parents plan it? Wait, who's the oldest? Wait again, you don't have to answer that. But come on, cousins whose names spell out Noel who live in a holiday-themed town? It had to be planned. How awesome is that?"

Joe turned to Uriel, who'd dropped his head into his hands.

"What?"

Then he realized Uriel's shoulders were shaking a bit. The *elf*-face was laughing at him. Joe kicked him under the table again.

"That's it. No cozy mysteries for you today."

Joe gasped. "Uriel!"

“Nope. Not only did you wake me up at a miserable hour, but you continue to kick me under the table after I asked you to stop. My limit has been reached.”

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh really. Your limit, huh?”

“Uh-oh,” Linus said, “that’s his serious voice. Make it *rein*, Joe.”

Joe grinned. “Did you all know there was a sale on children’s books at the bookstore today? Be sure to send all the kids over there. It’s a great deal!”

Uriel groaned. “You wouldn’t.”

“All the sticky fingers touching your store. All the parents letting said sticky fingers put books back in the wrong places.”

“Hey, Joe,” Eldon said.

“Yes?”

“Did you know the Christmas alphabet has Noel?”

Joe blinked for a second then laughed. “No-el. Ha! Good one. Linus, I feel like you should have taught me that one already. It’s such an easy one to remember.”

Footsteps from the foyer distracted Linus from answering. “Saved by the jingle bell. That’ll be one of my guests. Excuse me for a minute.”

The cousins began chatting with their partners, allowing Joe to return his attention to Uriel. “You aren’t really going to hold my books hostage, are you?”

“No.”

Joe let out a sigh of relief. “And you’re still going to read one with me, right?”

Uriel sighed. “I promised, didn’t I? Although I’m still uncertain why we couldn’t choose a classic.”

“Because our holiday book club was my idea, so it was only fair for me to pick. You can pick next year.”

Uriel's eyes sparkled with a strange red light. Joe looked around to see where the reflection could be coming from. All the lights in the dining room were a warm golden color. Honestly, Joe preferred bright, colorful lights. He wanted a tree in the carriage house that twinkled with green, red, blue, and yellow lights.

"What are you looking at?" Uriel asked.

"Trying to see where the red sparkle is coming from."

Uriel tensed again. Joe began to regret his decision to wake up Uriel in the middle of the night. He'd obviously underestimated Uriel's need for sleep. He'd never seen his friend so tense and jumpy. Well, not jumpy. Tightly-wound? No, that wasn't the right description either.

Hmm. Maybe neither one of them did well without enough sleep.

"Anyway, I was also thinking about how I like colored lights better than clear ones. I think it's funny how people draw such clear lines about their holiday light choices, don't you?"

Uriel gave him another one of his strange looks.

"And you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"There are lines drawn over lights?"

"Yeah. You should see the opinions about blue only. Whoa. Intense. I mean, it's not for me, but as a solid member of Team Colored Lights, I see the appeal. I just like tons of color."

"I'm well aware."

"Yeah, you know me—"

"Joseph!"

Joe froze. His heart sank into his stomach. It couldn't be. Nope. It was his lack of sleep. He was hallucinating.

He turned his head, and there he stood.

Javier McLeod.

A million emotions flooded Joe's senses. He lost his mind, because the only thing he could think to do to save himself

was to turn to Uriel and kiss him like his life depended on it.



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## URIEL

“What are you looking at?” Uriel asked.

Joe tended to ramble in his conversations on the best of days, but he rarely stopped talking about books. This time he did and began looking around the room.

“Trying to see where the red sparkle is coming from.”

*Red sparkle.*

Uriel tensed and glanced down at his hands, only to find them displaying a telltale glow. He concentrated on containing his magic. The last thing he needed was to cause havoc inside the home of one of the sprites. His cousins would never let him live it down.

“Anyway,” Joe continued, “I was also thinking about how I like colored lights better than clear ones. I think it’s funny how people draw such clear lines about their holiday light choices, don’t you?”

What in the North Pole was he going on about now?

“And you have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“There are lines drawn over lights?”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “You should see the opinions about blue only. Whoa. Intense. I mean, it’s not for me, but as a solid member of Team Colored Lights, I see the appeal. I just like tons of color.”

Considering Uriel had been the one to help him string colored lights throughout the Snowda Shoppe the previous weekend,

Joe's love of them was not a surprise. "I'm well aware."

"Yeah, you know me—"

"Joseph!"

Uriel had never seen such a horrified look on Joe's face. It was immediately followed by a flood of negative energy coming from Joe. Uriel turned to look at the man standing in the entrance of the dining room beside Linus.

He seemed normal. Average, even.

So what had drawn such a strong reaction from Joe?

Uriel turned back to Joe in time to see even more emotions flying across Joe's face. Although none of them were good, Joe didn't seem afraid of the stranger. More frustrated and embarrassed. Still, Uriel readied himself to fight, the urge strong to protect Joe from whatever ill this man may cause.

Then, after one last panicked expression to Uriel, Joe flung himself into Uriel's arms and planted a kiss on him that sent Uriel's magic deep into the earth. It pulled at his gut, building to an intensity Uriel had never experienced.

He needed to ground himself, quickly, before he lost control. He grabbed Joe, planning to push him away, but instead, pulled him closer. He deepened the kiss and poured the excess energy inside him into Joe.

A connection snapped into place.

Joe pulled away, looking more beautiful than anyone Uriel had ever seen in his life. His lips had plumped and reddened, and Uriel's beard had left red marks on Joe's cheeks.

Uriel reached up and touched him, running his thumb over one of those red marks, only to hear an uncomfortable throat-clearing from the other side of the room.

He turned to glare, only to find Linus staring wide-eyed at him. The stranger, on the other hand, looked livid. Uriel narrowed his gaze, his mind coming up with a multitude of clever ways to handle this interloper.



“Whoa,” Joe said, his voice so soft Uriel doubted anyone else in the room heard him.

“I agree,” Uriel replied.

Joe looked up at him and Uriel smiled. The real smile he reserved for people like Joe, people he actually cared for. Any remaining worry melted from Joe’s face, and he smiled back.

“AHEM!”

Joe looked over his shoulder. “Javier? This is an un...uh...pleasant surprise.”

Uriel could smite the man where he stood. With one flick of his fingers, he could have him strung up onto the top of the tree in town square, naked as the day he was born and ready to freeze when the temperatures dropped.

“Who in the Ecclefechan is this man?” Uriel asked through his gritted teeth.

“Eccle-what? Was that Scottish? Can you speak Scottish? Oh, I’m doomed if you can, Uriel. I’ve never confessed this to you, but I have a thing for Scotsmen. Well, clearly, because look at you with your red beard and blue eyes and...wait...what was I saying?”

“Ecclefechan is a town in Scotland, but also the name of a delicious tart. I’ll make it for you this week.”

“You will? I’d like that. You’re the second-best cook in town. Sorry, but I have to say Carol’s the best, and you know very well why.”

Uriel nodded. “In this instance, I’m happy to settle for second best.”

“AHEM!”

Uriel turned back toward the entrance of the dining room. “Linus, your guest appears to be choking. Perhaps you should take him into the kitchen for some tea.”

“Joseph, who is this...person...who has their hands all over you?”

Joe tensed and Uriel draped his arm firmly around Joe's shoulders. He brushed his lips against Joe's ear. "Shall I smite him?"

"Smite?" Joe snickered. "No, I can handle this."

Joe pushed back his chair before standing and placing a hand on Uriel's shoulder. Only Uriel would know that his hand shook. "Javier, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here for you," Javier said.

"Oh gingersnaps," Nyall said. "I have some baking to do. Aaron, Oberon, Eldon, Tate, with me."

Eldon glanced at Joe, appraising the situation with a glance. Then he turned his attention to Uriel. With a wicked smile that seemed to have read every idea floating through Uriel's mind, Eldon rose. "Of course, Nyall. We all have to get to work this morning. I'll expect you on time, Joe."

"I'll be there," Joe said.

Eldon nodded, then followed the others out of the room. He grabbed Linus by the sweater and dragged his cousin along with them.

"To work," Javier said. "You *work* for him? In what capacity?"

"That's none of your business," Joe snapped.

He'd stiffened again, almost as if the words carried more weight than Uriel understood. He rose, placing his hand on the small of Joe's back.

"Sweetheart, I believe an introduction is in order."

*Sweetheart?* Had he honestly used such a commonplace endearment? Joe would never let him hear the end of it.

Joe shot him a look—definitely going to get an earful about his choice of words later—then turned back to Javier with the fakest smile Uriel had ever seen on his face.

"Uriel Lad, this is Javier McLeod. My ex who shouldn't be anywhere near me."

Javier smiled and Uriel didn't like the look of it one bit. "But darling, the restraining order expired. I decided to give you one more chance to come to your senses."

Restraining order?

Did he just say *restraining order*?

Why would Joe have needed a restraining order against this giant piece of—

"Uriel!" Leif ran into the room, out of breath and red-faced. It took him a second to take in the situation and realize there were not one but two humans in the room. "Oh, sorry. I... um...was...worried the bookstore wasn't open so I...came to check on you."

"We're fine, aren't we, sweetheart?" Uriel said, pecking a kiss onto Joe's head. Leif's eyes widened but he took the hint.

"Perfectly fine," Joe added. "Thanks for checking on us, Leif. But we really should be getting to work. Javier, I'm sure you can find your way out of town without the sheriff's assistance."

Uriel took Joe's hand and led him across the room. Leif stepped between them and Javier, blocking the man's path. Uriel would have to make sure to thank Leif later for his quick thinking. Leif followed them out of the room.

Linus waited in the lobby, wringing his hands. "I'm so sorry, Joe. I didn't know...."

"You had no way of knowing, Linus. Don't worry about it."

"He's booked the room for a week," Linus hissed. "I can—"

"No need," Joe said. "Treat him as you would any other guest."

Uriel and Linus shared a quick look before he and Joe walked out the door. If Javier thought he'd get within a mile of Joe, he'd never seen what the true power of a town like Mistletoe Falls could do.

The final day of the craft fair was in full swing by the time they made it to the Snowda Shoppe. Joe unlocked the door but

didn't follow his normal routine of flipping on the neon "Open" sign or turning on all the lights in the place.

Instead, he pulled Uriel inside and shut the door.

"Nope," Uriel said.

"Nope? What do you mean, nope? You can't nope me right now."

"I just did," Uriel countered. "Also, why is it breakfast? I've been up for hours. It should be the most *wine*-derful time of the year by now."

Joe sputtered but Uriel refused to let him act out some guilt-fueled apology. He didn't require an apology from Joe.

"But since I know full well you don't stock any decent wine in this place, I'm going to require a vanilla gingerbread latte, easy on the gingerbread, heavy on the espresso."

"You want coffee? Now?"

"I always come here for coffee. Although, I'm usually not dressed in my pajamas. Joe, why didn't you remind me that I'm not dressed for town? We walked right past my house. You could have suggested a change of clothing."

Joe's mouth fell open. "I...uh...well..."

"When I get back, I expect my coffee to be ready. You owe me that much after a four o'clock in the morning wake-up call. It's the least you can do."

"But Uriel, I—"

"I know. However, now is not the time or the place for the length or depth of conversation we need to have. If we discuss this morning's events now, you'll worry the entire day anyway. I suggest a moratorium on thinking until this evening. I'll make dinner, and we can hash this out. Oh, and wine will absolutely be on the menu."

Joe stared into his eyes, then let out a long breath. "Actually, I've been experimenting with a new whiskey recipe. If ever I needed a drink stronger than wine, it'll be tonight."

“I can work with that. Now, get moving on my coffee. I’ll be back once I’m appropriately attired.”

“Sounds good.”

Uriel opened the door, but Joe’s voice stopped him.

“Hey, Uriel?”

He looked over his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

Uriel nodded and walked out. As he’d expected, Leif stood at the corner waiting for him.

“I wondered how long it would take you to realize you were in your pajamas,” Leif teased.

“If only you knew, cousin. My morning has been quite the adventure, to say the least.”

“No doubt.”

“I do find myself curious as to why you ran into Linus’s as if Santa himself chased you.”

Leif shook his head as they walked down the block to Uriel’s house. “I swear, cousin. I *felt* your magic rising. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

Uriel considered the sensation he’d felt earlier, of how his magic had reached deep into the earth and his sudden connection with Joe. “I have a lot to think about.”

“Apparently.”

Edgar’s annoying song began to play the moment Uriel opened his front door. The song certainly suited Uriel’s mood, even though it reminded him of his need to think of an exceptional plan for retribution.

Leif groaned and waved Uriel away. “I’ll fix it. Go get dressed.”

Uriel escaped to his bedroom, took a moment to straighten his bed, then made his way to his closet. He’d developed a uniform of sorts for his daily life that included comfortable

jeans, a cozy sweater, and a blazer that added to his bookstore-owner style.

By the time he made it back to the living room, Leif had completed his work on the doorbell system.

“No more Grinch,” Leif said.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Uriel replied.

Leif grinned. “I know that tone. Someone is planning something epic. Let me know if I can help.”

“I will.”

“I’m going to head out to West’s to check on a couple trees. I’ll be around if you need me though.”

“Thanks, cousin. And I appreciate you running to my rescue earlier.”

Uriel and Leif went their separate ways as Uriel made his way back to the Snowda Shoppe. He wasn’t the least bit surprised to find Tate sitting in one of the colorful booths with one of Joe’s gourmet coffees in front of him.

“That was fast,” Joe said.

His nervous smile sparked more magic deep inside Uriel. “I need coffee.”

Joe laughed. “Extra espresso, light on the gingerbread, as requested. Now get the bookstore open. You’re losing customers by the second.”

Uriel huffed but did as Joe said. On the way, he paused at a few of the craft fair booths. He even managed to pick up a small gift for Joe from one of the vendors who used old books to make their wares. After receiving reassurance that the books they’d used had been too damaged to read, Uriel took the gift and one of their business cards. Then he made his way around the corner to the bookstore.

Luckily, the morning passed quickly. Uriel sold several of the children’s books from the window display—he absolutely would not tell Joe he’d been right about the informal look being more inviting to customers—and even managed to find a

customer worthy of one of the antique volumes he kept under lock and key.

All in all, a pleasant day.

As for his thoughts, well, those were an entirely different matter. He made a pot of tea and sat down with one of his oldest tomes on Yule traditions. Much of the lore concerning sprites and lads was hidden within its pages. He found nothing that would explain what happened to him that morning, though.

When York entered the shop, Uriel had to take a moment to clear his thoughts. One look at York, however, cleared away the rest of the fog.

“Cousin?” Uriel said, setting his book aside. “You seem troubled.”

“I am,” York confessed.

“Let me pour you—” Uriel lifted the teapot and froze. “I’m afraid the tea has gone cold. I’ll brew some fresh.”

Uriel didn’t miss the shock on York’s face. Yes, it was highly unusual for Uriel to allow his tea to grow cold. He tended to be meticulous about such things. Too meticulous, one might say.

After making a fresh pot, Uriel returned to find York staring wide-eyed at the bright pastel decor in his front window. Although he didn’t resist decorating completely like his cousin, Uriel preferred a less is more approach.

“Not one word,” Uriel threatened.

Of course, that didn’t deter York for a second. With several minutes of inane banter passing between them, York finally got to the heart of the matter and confessed his feelings for Gabriel. It didn’t surprise Uriel as much as it should have.

York’s confusion, though, echoed the turmoil in his own thoughts. His research had given him some idea of where he needed to direct his energy. After reminding his cousin of the significance of Winter Solstice, York’s magic proceeded to react by transforming one of Uriel’s precious china teacups

into a chunky Santa head mug, similar to the ones that were so beloved this time of year.

He much preferred drinking from a slim rimmed cup. It wasn't that he was snobbish about his choice of vessel, he simply had a preference.

York wiggled his fingers and sparks of red magic shot out. Then a look of absolute horror crossed his face. Seconds later, he bolted from the bookstore. Uriel stared after him for a moment, then glanced down to see what damage York's magic had done to his mug.

It remained unchanged. His sweater, however, did not survive the encounter unscathed.

“York!”

Uriel growled at the glittering, ornament covered monstrosity on his body and swore to get revenge on another of his cousins before the season ended.





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## JOE

Visitors from the town's craft fair kept the Snowda Shoppe hopping all day. Joe thanked his lucky stars because it meant he couldn't wallow in his thoughts. He made more White Clauses in one day than he had in the past month since debuting his newest flavor.

The Snowda Shoppe blended a few different café type businesses. With Carols and Crepes serving as the town's diner and the Mistletoe Bakery providing all the dessert needs for the town, the Snowda Shoppe had its own little niche with its specialty drinks.

Basically, it was an old-fashioned soda shop combined with a coffeehouse. Sort of.

Joe chuckled as he scooped some vanilla ice cream into the mixer and added the flavored creamer that made up a White Claus. The little girl waiting for her special drink bounced in excitement as the blender whirled.

After pouring it into one of their themed mugs, Joe topped the creamy treat with a sprinkle of peppermint crumbles and handed it over. Her parents each ordered a gingerbread chai latte, so he made those next.

"Thanks for stopping in!" Joe grinned as they made their way to one of the booths and sat down to enjoy their drinks.

His grin slipped when he noticed a shadow in the window.

*Javier.*

Before he could even brace himself for a confrontation, a group of ladies swarmed around Javier and somehow managed to get him away from the shop. From the corner booth, Tate chuckled.

“What did you do?” Joe asked.

He dragged a chair over to the booth and plopped down into it. They’d reached the afternoon lull, so Joe should have at least a couple minutes of downtime.

“Me? Not a thing,” Tate said, his eyes never leaving his laptop.

“Sure. But you know who did?”

“Nope.”

Joe sighed. “Yes, you do.”

“I have my suspicions, but I don’t *know*,” Tate clarified. “Also, Colby asked me to speak to you about the restraining order. If you’d like him to see what he can do, just let me know.”

“That’s very nice of him.”

Tate stopped typing and turned to stare at him. “I think it’s time you and I had a little talk.”

Joe gulped. “O-okay.”

“When I decided to sign the lease for this building, I had no intention of keeping the Snowda Shoppe open. My mate, however, had other ideas. Eldon insisted that it be restored to its former glory, and the more time I spent in Mistletoe Falls, the more I came to agree with him.”

Joe nodded. “Makes sense. Eldon is very dedicated to the town.”

“Yes, he is. Which is why he handled hiring you. He knew what it took to not only be a member of this community, but also what it takes to successfully run a shop in this town.”

Joe nodded again.

“You have exceeded our wildest expectations, Joe. I know you worry about Eldon, but you have nothing to be concerned

about. I thought we'd made it clear, but I'm not sure we have. We want you to stay, and more than that, we want you to *want* to stay. We want you to be happy here. So when some jackass shows up, I have no problem intervening to make sure you stay happy."

Joe didn't know what to say.

"Joe, can you imagine me running the Snowda Shoppe?"

An unexpected laugh burst out of him at the thought. Eyes wide, Joe smacked his hand over his mouth.

"Exactly," Tate said. "So I'm going to continue sitting here to make sure that soap opera villain of an ex of yours doesn't step one foot in my building. And Eldon has enlisted an army of elves to assist as well."

Joe's shoulders relaxed for the first time since the morning encounter with Javier. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say. That's my point. You're a member of our community and you're our friend."

The bell above the door jingled as Eldon burst in. "Joe, I need one of your miracle creations. Make it so sweet it'll dilute my sour mood."

Eldon slid dramatically into the booth beside Tate and dropped his head onto Tate's shoulder.

"Meeting with the mayor," Tate said, grinning over at Joe. "He wants the fiends who desecrated the streetlamps brought to justice."

Eldon had dragged Joe along to a couple of the mayor's meetings leading up to the holiday season. He'd need Joe's secret weapon to get his fa-la-la up and running again.

While Tate comforted his distraught mate—Joe would have to puzzle over that word later, after he'd whipped up his newest recipe—Joe got to work making the cocktail. Technically, it couldn't be served in the Snowda Shoppe—no alcohol license—but Eldon hadn't minded a toddy or two in the past.

Luckily, the ingredients for this one meant he could whip it up quickly. He gave the cocktail a swirl, then added a dollop of

whipped cream and a drizzle of caramel to the top.

“One iced salted caramel bourbon latte, enough to defeat any mayor-induced trauma.”

Eldon took a big swig of the drink, then licked the whipped cream from his lips. “Now *that* is what I’m talking about. Whew, the bourbon adds such a nice flavor and the salt perfectly balances all the sweetness.”

Tate swiped the glass mug from Eldon and took a drink. “Mmm. That is wonderful, although if I have much more of it, I won’t get through the three thousand reports Colby sent me that have to be done by the end of the year.”

“Which means he wants them yesterday,” Eldon said. “No booze for you.”

Joe grinned at them before slipping away to clean up. The vendors surrounding town square were packing up their wares, which meant they’d likely be slow until closing.

“Joe, go on and close up for the night,” Eldon said, as if he’d read Joe’s mind. “I know you’ve been swamped all weekend.”

“We were. It was wonderful.” Joe laughed at himself. “You told me the holiday rush would make me feel like I’d been run over by a herd of reindeer, but it was magical.”

Eldon and Tate shared a look Joe couldn’t quite read before returning their attention to him. “How so?” Tate asked.

“Everyone was in such a good mood. I love working here on a normal day, but when everyone was so excited to be here for the craft fair, it just made it more special. I know, I’m weird.”

“No,” Eldon said, “you’re one of us. And speaking of....”

Eldon shot Tate a significant look.

“Oh, right!” Tate reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an envelope. “Happy Holidays, Joe. We don’t know what we would do without you.”

Joe’s hand shook as he accepted the envelope. “Thank you.”

“Now get out of here,” Eldon said. “I have a sneaking suspicion there’s a certain bookworm you’re hoping to see.”

Joe beamed. “Yeah. I mean, the thing earlier...but also, he has my books. I’m going to go get them and head to the carriage house. Then it’s reading until my eyeballs fall out.”

“Sounds like a good night. And hey, if you run out of reading material, I have a few reports—”

“No way,” Joe said. “I’ve heard Colby going over notes with you, if you recall. I’d rather clean the stalls at the petting zoo than have to deal with him.”

Eldon burst out laughing and shooed him out the door. “We’ll lock up.”

Joe grabbed his messenger bag and made his way down the block to Ornamentary Books and More. Uriel had a couple customers, so Joe skipped over to the mystery section to see if anything caught his eye. He’d been on a small town cozy mystery kick of late, probably a result of moving to Mistletoe Falls.

Luckily, he hadn’t turned into the town’s Snowda Shoppe manager who solved murders on the side. He’d pass out if he ever saw a dead body. Then he’d wake up, see it again, and pass out again. However, reading about them...well, that was just plain fun. And they had the funniest themes and names, just like Mistletoe Falls.

Oh, now Uriel would make an excellent crime solver. Bookstore owner turned amateur sleuth. He could totally see it. And why was he suddenly imagining Uriel in a trench coat?

Joe gulped.

In nothing but a trench coat.

“Stop that right now,” Joe grumbled to himself.

Maybe a thick historical biography was in order.

Joe swallowed hard again. “And strike the word thick from your vocabulary.”

“What was that?” Uriel asked.

Joe grabbed the closest book and spun around. “I was...um... just looking at....” He glanced down and his eyes widened.

“Uh, *Groping the Grinch*.”

Uriel frowned and pulled the book from his hands. He glared at the title.

Joe laughed nervously. “Well that certainly sounds tantalizing. Add it to my order.”

“I most certainly will not,” Uriel said.

“Uh, yeah you will. The customer is always right, and I’m the customer. So there.”

Uriel glared at the book again. He seemed to be inspecting the cover. Joe leaned over to look at it himself. He’d only caught a glimpse of....

“Oh wow.” Joe plucked the book out of Uriel’s hands. “That’s a very cleverly placed G. I mean, a millimeter to the left and \_\_\_”

“Kudos to the cover artist,” Uriel deadpanned. “I’m sure they were paid handsomely for their creative use of fonts.”

Joe smirked. “I can’t wait to read it. On the bright side, I’m pretty sure I’ll never say you’re a grinch again after reading it. That should help, right?”

Uriel narrowed his eyes. Joe swore he saw more of those mysterious red sparks.

Of course, since his imagination was already running overtime, his brain immediately pictured Uriel as the grinch of the cover, and well....

“On that note, I’d like to pick up my books, please. I have the rest of the day off.”

Uriel plucked the grinch book out of Joe’s hand. “You haven’t forgotten our plans this evening, have you?”

“Well...I...wasn’t sure.” Joe sucked in a breath. “I honestly didn’t know if you still wanted to have dinner with me or read with me or anything with me after what I did this morning. I’m sorry, Uriel. I never should have kissed you like that. It was inappropriate at the very least, and I hope it didn’t ruin our friendship. You’re the best—”

“Enough,” Uriel said.

He put his hand on Joe’s neck, and *whew* did Joe wish he had a few snowballs to shove down his pants. Where was good ole Jack Frost when you needed him?

He’d never been this way around Uriel before. Well, he’d *thought* of Uriel this way before, but never in his presence. Okay, maybe once or twice in his presence, but their friendship meant the world to him. Nothing was worth risking it.

“I’m closing the store,” Uriel said. “We’re going to my place and having that dinner we discussed. Do we need to go by the carriage house to pick up ingredients for the beverage you’ve created?”

“You’re being very bossy,” Joe said, trying his best not to lean into the hold Uriel had on his neck.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is straightforward.”

Joe shook his head. “Nope, pretty sure I got it right the first time.”

“You’re up to *snow* good, aren’t you?”

Joe ducked his head to hide his smile. “Nicely punned. So, are you closing or not? We’ve got plans.”

“For curiosity’s sake, what color is the sky?” Uriel asked.

Joe shrugged. “Kind of a slate gray. Maybe a little smoky. We have some weather headed our way this week. Why?”

“I found myself wondering if you’d argue whether or not the sky is blue. I’m happy to have my answer.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not blue today. Hey, look at me being all argumentative. I’m a rebel without a Claus. Ha. Get it? *Claus!*”

Uriel grabbed a large linen tote from behind the counter, then began turning off lights as he walked to the door.

“Oh, come on. That was a good one.”

Uriel grunted. “You’re making me all *Santa*-mental.”



Joe followed Uriel out the door and waited until he'd locked it. "Wait, Santa-mental as in sentimental? Or am I legit making you mental? Honestly, it could go either way, so I'd appreciate some clarification."

Uriel put his hand back on Joe's neck and began walking. "Both."

Joe bumped his hip against Uriel's as they walked. "Not the first time I've made you question all your life choices. You should *snow* the drill by now."

"You've been spending entirely too much time with Linus."

"Possibly. But also, I'm feeling freakily festive. Even though a certain guest at the inn did give me a little *tinselitis*."

Joe snuck a peek at Uriel to see his epic eye roll. It didn't disappoint. He put a moratorium on the puns before Uriel decided to keep the large linen bag in his hands. Joe needed his books.

"Hey, would you go with me to pick out a tree from Weston's Tree Farm this week? I kind of want one for the carriage house."

They passed Uriel's house before making the turn onto the street where the Tinselled Inn was located.

Joe groaned when he saw Javier sitting on the front porch. "Honesty, can't I catch a break?"

"Don't worry about him," Uriel said. "*Tree's* a crowd, and we've got plans tonight."

Joe ignored Javier waving a hand in an attempt to gain his attention. Oh no, he couldn't take his eyes off the pun-master extraordinaire walking beside him. And the moratorium was over. He couldn't let Uriel win.

"You like to have the final *sleigh*, don't you?"

"Now you're catching on."

Joe had no doubt at all that he'd been caught. He glanced toward the inn again, only to find Linus bolting out the front door toward them.

“Joe, Uriel. Come quick. There’s been a *carrot-tastrophe* downtown. All hands on deck.”



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## URIEL

“Carrot cake muffin?” Nyall asked, not bothering to hide his smirk as Uriel walked into the Mistletoe Bakery two days later.

Which reminded Uriel that he hadn’t done anything to torture York for his disastrous misuse of magic. Not only had he spent entirely too long cleaning up carrots from town square, but he’d learned his cousin’s magic was at fault.

As a result, Uriel should not have been forced to clean up the mess. A Lad should not correct mischief caused by another Lad. What was Uriel supposed to say, though? It wasn’t as if he could refuse to help Joe.

Of course, that had led to Joe canceling their plans for the evening. Eldon had dragged Joe to an emergency meeting with the mayor which Uriel had outright refused to attend.

The next morning, he’d had to be at the bookstore early for the arrival of a large shipment that had taken him two days to sort. In the meantime, Eldon had whisked Joe away for some sort of *urgent* buying trip he apparently couldn’t handle on his own.

*Right.* The shopping king of Mistletoe Falls couldn’t handle a buying trip without assistance. And Uriel was none other than Santa Claus himself.

He forced a smile as Nyall handed over his weekly order of pastries, then made his way toward the bookstore. Adding to his ire was the fact that Javier continued to lurk around town, ignoring all of the less-than-subtle hints he received to vacate the premises.

Until he spoke with Joe, Uriel wouldn't act on the matter. However, his patience with the situation wouldn't last much longer. Out of habit, he glanced into the Snowda Shoppe as he passed.

Joe turned at the same moment and their eyes met. A breathtaking smile spread across Joe's face, and he rushed for the door. "Uriel!"

"You're back," Uriel said.

His voice was not breathy at all. It was the chill in the air. They were expecting snow that evening.

"Yeah, we took the red-eye. And now I know why it's called the red-eye because I am going to fall over any second now. It's your lucky day, though. I happen to be making some excellent espresso, and since I see a familiar box in your hands...breakfast?"

Uriel nodded.

Joe smiled again, and Uriel's magic flooded through him. In the blink of an eye, the Snowda Shoppe decor transformed from the delightful, old-fashioned scenes he'd helped Joe create to....

"What the sugar cookie?" Joe's bellowed question shook the windows of the shop.

It absolutely was not Uriel's lucky day. On the other hand, the Snowda Shoppe's decor definitely had the luck of the Irish on its side. The sheer number of shamrocks alone would put any St. Patrick's Day parade to shame.

Joe closed his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut. "You're just tired," he muttered. "Lack of sleep."

Uriel pushed hard with his magic, and the Snowda Shoppe returned to its previous glory. Joe opened his eyes, then turned to Uriel. "Did I just...never mind. I need coffee."

After taking a seat at one of the counter stools, Uriel opened the box of pastries while Joe prepared their coffee. Joe kept looking around the room, then shaking his head.

“You got back at just the right time,” Uriel said. “We can make a trip out to the tree farm today before the snow hits. I’m going to assume Eldon doesn’t plan on you working today since you got back so late.”

“No, we have today covered. I wanted to come in and check on things before I went home to crash. It’s been a weird few days, you know?”

“I know.”

Joe pushed one of the mugs across the counter to him. “And the business trip was bogus, in case you hadn’t already figured that out. Eldon thought Javier might leave if I was gone. I could have told him it was a waste of time.”

“Why’s that?”

Joe paused for a moment, then grabbed a cheese danish from the box. Uriel never ate them, but they happened to be Joe’s favorite. “He thinks we’re meant to be together, even though I ended things over a year ago.”

“Should we be worried for your safety? You mentioned a restraining order.”

Joe sighed. “There might have been a slight stalking issue. I don’t think he’d hurt me, to be honest. Our relationship wasn’t like that. We wanted different things, and for a while, I tried to be some sort of Stepford version of myself because I thought the life he offered was what I should want.”

Uriel took a sip of coffee, closing his eyes for a moment to savor the flavor and to get his magic under control. He’d never had control issues in his life. The sudden return of their magic was the only explanation.

Except York had found his mate.

And Uriel’s magic hadn’t misfired until Joe kissed him.

They were just friends, though.

“Nothing to say to my deep, dark confession?” Joe asked.

“Shh. I’m savoring my coffee. You abandoned me for days and expect conversation?”

Joe cackled. “Understood.”

Uriel licked his lips and put the mug down. “You chose sticky fingers over him,” Uriel said. “That says all I need to know.”

“You’re such an Ecclefechan!”

Uriel laughed harder than he ever had before in his life. Joe looked obnoxiously triumphant, but considering it made him even more delectable, Uriel didn’t mind. “You looked it up,” Uriel teased.

“I did. And let me tell you how hard it was to figure out how to spell what you’d said. But now I know you didn’t make up Ecclefechan. It is a real town in Scotland and also an actual type of pastry that sounds absolutely delicious. Who knew? I was going to ask Nyaal to make some of the tarts for me, but then I decided as payback, I’d make you help me make them instead.”

“Payback, huh? I’m pretty sure I told you I’d make some for you.”

“Quiet. I’m winning an argument with you. Also, we need to talk about *Groping the Grinch*.”

“Uh, no. We absolutely don’t.”

Joe took another bite of his danish, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “I didn’t know you carried books like that at the bookstore. I’m impressed. Five stars from me, and I hope you have the sequel in stock.”

Uriel groaned. “The sequel?”

“*Riding Rudolph*. Sounds amazing, doesn’t it?”

“Amazing? Is that what we’re going to call it?” Uriel asked.

Joe leaned forward, and Uriel couldn’t resist moving closer.

“I had to stop reading it in front of Eldon,” Joe whispered. “It was hot enough to melt my snowman, if you catch my drift.”

Uriel swallowed hard. “Good to know.”

“And on that note, I’ve decided we’re going to read the series for our book club. The cozy mysteries are good, but I think we

should shake things up a bit. And lemme tell you, these will shake it like a *pole*-aroid picture.”

“Veto,” Uriel said. “Especially after that pun. I keep telling you to stop spending so much time with the spr...uh, the cousins.”

“Ohhh, now I want to know what you were going to call them. Tell me. Tell me! I was thinking coalition of cousins, as in coalition of cheetahs. Coalition fits because, let me tell you, when those guys decide you’re doing something, you somehow find yourself with a bag packed and on your way to the airport. They ganged up on me, Uriel. Even Linus. Wait, where was I? Right. Your word. What did you come up with?”

“A murder,” Uriel said.

“As in crows? No, that doesn’t work. Besides,” Joe said, “we’ve already decided to pause on the cozy mysteries for a while. Murder isn’t the reason for the season and all that.”

“I’m not going to win this fight, am I?”

“Do you ever win?” Joe asked. “Okay, well, you do win, but not when I really want to win. And whew, that espresso kicked in. Let’s go pick out a tree. And bring the pastries. I’m starving. Airplane food in the middle of the night is the worst.”

“Airplane food is the worst period. The air pressure messes with your taste buds, so they flavor the food atrociously in an attempt to appease the masses.”

Joe paused with his danish halfway to his mouth. “Really? Is that *fact* fact or internet fact?”

Uriel ignored the question and drank the rest of his coffee.

Joe yawned. “Remind me to look it up later. I need to see if you made that up. I never know with you.”

Uriel grinned and closed the box of pastries. He led Joe to the door, then took the shop’s keys from his hands when Joe couldn’t stop yawning long enough to get them into the lock. They walked down the block to Uriel’s house, and Uriel guided Joe into the passenger seat of his car.



Joe generously took the box of pastries and sat it on his lap. With an eye roll he knew would get a laugh out of Joe, Uriel walked around the front of the car and slid into the driver's seat.

"Have you thought about what size tree you want?" Uriel asked. "Leif's working this morning. He'll have very specific questions for you."

"Not really." Joe shrugged. "I've never had a real tree before. And don't make fun of artificial trees. They're wonderful."

"I agree. Both have their merits."

"See? That's what I think. I want to try a real tree, though. The Tinselled Inn always smells so good when Linus puts his up. You know he uses some real and some artificial? His decorating skills are pro-level. I swear, he could open a business doing nothing but decorating for the holidays and make a mint. Ha! *A mint.*"

"Exactly how much espresso did you have before I arrived?"

"Hey, how about those gorgeous lights? It's nice to see everyone getting their houses decorated before the parade this weekend. And how cool is it that we have a walking parade that raises money for charity? This town is the best."

"All the espresso," Uriel said. "Got it."

"What? I'm just...happy to see...uh...be home." Joe leaned his head onto the headrest, then rolled his neck so he could look at Uriel.

It took all of Uriel's willpower not to stare into Joe's eyes. "I missed you, too," Uriel said.

"You're making me all *Santa*-mental," Joe sighed.

"That's my pun. You can't steal it."

"Dang," Joe grumbled. "I forgot I heard that one from you. Hey, we're here already. And who are those guys talking to West? They look all...businessy."

West didn't look happy with his visitors. Uriel understood the situation all too well. He had a certain visitor in town he'd like

to get rid of too. Uriel made a mental note to ask Leif about the men before parking in the tree farm's lot.

Joe bounced out of the car, then dove back in to grab a muffin from the pastry box. "Sustenance," Joe said. "This is going to be hard work."

"Morning, West," Uriel called. "Is Leif around?"

"He's out checking the younger trees. I'll give him a call."

"Thanks."

The guys in suits climbed into what was obviously a rental car and drove away. West watched them go, then pasted on a smile as he joined Uriel and Joe. "Anything I can do to help until Leif gets here? I do know a thing or two about trees."

Joe looked around the lot with wide eyes. "I want my first real tree. But I don't know what I want. Or what size. Uriel says size is important. I happen to agree."

Uriel coughed as West's eyes widened. It took Joe a second to realize what he'd said.

"Get your mind out of the South Pole, you two. I meant the size of the tree. Although, other sizes are important as well. Not that I'm a size queen or anything. And oh sweet Santa on a shingle, will someone please shut me up?"

"Why would we do that?" Uriel asked. "This is the most fun I've had in days."

"Note to self, four espressos is three too many."

"Four?"

"Red-eye," Joe replied, pointing at his bloodshot eyes.

"That's what bed is for."

"No, bed is where size queens...and I'm stopping right now." Joe shoved half the muffin into his mouth.

"I'm going to give you two a minute," West said. "Excuse me while I go behind that row of trees and laugh hysterically."

Uriel shook his head at Joe as West walked away. "You're going to give me the look later. I'd like to state for the record

that there is nothing I can do to stop you.”

“I can think of twelve things. I only read about nine of them in the grinch book. Oh, I said that out loud. Saved by the Leif!”

Uriel turned to see his cousin approaching. When Joe explained the reason for their trip, Leif didn’t waste a single second. He led Joe to a selection of trees, then pointed to one he highly recommended.

Joe nodded, paid him, and then blinked at Uriel until he sighed and helped Leif load the tree onto the top of his car. Joe, meanwhile, sat in the passenger seat with the pastry box firmly in his grip.

“Why is West laughing so hard he’s crying?” Leif whispered.

“Joe might have had a lot of espresso. Don’t ask any more questions. I’m in big enough trouble as it is.”

Leif grinned. “Understood. Also, Javier’s underwear might have accidentally been coated in itching powder. He figured it out before anything dire happened, but still, efforts were made.”

Uriel chuckled. “I appreciate the help.”

After waving goodbye to his cousin, Uriel glanced at the darkening sky before climbing into the car. Joe yawned the entire drive to the carriage house, but he managed to help Uriel get the tree upstairs. Leif had given them a stand and a list of instructions, so they managed to get it into the stand without any mishaps. Uriel went to the kitchen to get water for the base, and by the time he returned, Joe had fallen asleep on the couch.

Uriel itched to curl up with him. His magic sparked. Uriel glanced at the bare tree and closed his eyes, picturing what Joe would most likely want to see when he opened his eyes. Something fun and whimsical, for sure. It had to make him smile, maybe even laugh. It had to be warm and colorful at the same time.

His magic flowed for the briefest of moments. When Uriel opened his eyes, the tree was covered in decorations. Warm white lights glowed from the center while colored lights

twinkled on the outer limbs. A jaunty black top hat served as the topper, while the rest of the tree was covered in snowman-themed ornaments.

Uriel smiled and closed his eyes again, this time to thank his magic. Joe would love the tree, and that...meant more to Uriel than it probably should have. He quietly snagged the grinch book from the stack of paperbacks on Joe's coffee table, then made his way home.

Snowflakes began slowly falling, leaving the lightest dusting on the grass. Uriel couldn't help but smile as he saw how charming all the houses on the block looked. The parade would certainly impress, especially when he and his cousins worked their magic over the weekend.

“There's *snow* place like home for the holidays.”



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## JOE

*S noorrrrrkkkkk.*

Joe jerked, the sound of his own snore shockingly loud, even to his sleeping mind. He blinked a few times, then rubbed his aching neck. “Oww.”

After smacking his lips a couple times and lamenting his dry mouth, Joe sat up and tried to return to reality. Considering the fading light outside the window, he must have slept for hours. It took him another second to realize the warm glow coming from the side of the room wasn't from the sun.

His breath caught and the world stopped turning for a moment.

At the very least, he'd been asleep long enough for Uriel to create the most magical, beautiful tree in the history of... history.

“How did he know?” Joe said, laughing as he stood and hurried to inspect the decorations more closely. It was absolutely *perfect*. “*Do you wanna build a snowman?*” Joe sang, touching a few of the glittering white snowball ornaments.

He couldn't wipe the smile off his face, even if he wanted to. His cheeks would hurt at the rate he was going.

“Uriel?”

Joe didn't really need the silence to confirm Uriel had already left. He could *feel* his absence. He'd never thought of the carriage house as empty before. How odd. But if Uriel wasn't still at Joe's place, Joe knew exactly where to find him.

Joe laughed again, then ran for the door. He slid to a stop, realizing the snow Uriel had warned him about earlier had indeed arrived.

Who cared about a little snow?

Not Joe. He went down the steps, thankful he'd fallen asleep in the broken-in boots he always wore in the fall, then ran down the street toward Uriel's house. He shivered as snow landed on his face, then threw his head back and stuck out his tongue to let a few flakes land in his mouth.

He laughed again, then spun around. Any of the neighbors watching—and Joe knew there would be at least one—would tell the entire town he'd lost his cranberry-loving mind. And he didn't care at all.

By the time he made it to Uriel's, he regretted not grabbing a jacket. The wind had a sharp bite to it, and his sweater wasn't anywhere near warm enough. Of course, spinning around might also have had something to do with that.

Joe flung open the door, then closed it quickly behind him so he didn't let out the heat. "Uriel! It's me!"

"In the kitchen."

Joe kicked his snow-covered boots off on the rug and played slip and slide in his socks on the hardwood floors through Uriel's living room.

"Something smells amazing," Joe said, breathing in deeply. He opened his mouth to wax poetic over the tree when he realized exactly what Uriel was doing in the kitchen.

He wasn't cooking. He was reading.

"Oh no," Joe gasped. "Nope. Absolutely not."

Uriel's lips twitched as he nonchalantly turned a page in the grinch book. "Pardon?"

"You are not reading...."

Uriel arched a brow.

"You are." Joe paused.

Uriel was at least halfway through the book. And Uriel did not fake reading. It was against his religion or something. Which meant....

“Hot, am I right?? Unlike me who ran over here in nothing but my sweater because you decorated my tree. It’s perfect and amazing and how can I ever thank you even though I might freeze to death where I stand?”

“Joe!” Uriel put down the book before hurrying over to him. He ran his hands up and down Joe’s arms, then herded him into the living room. “You’re soaked!”

Uriel whipped Joe’s sweater up and over his head. Earlier, he’d sworn the world had stopped spinning. Now, as he stood there in his threadbare T-shirt, Joe felt every one of the thousand miles an hour the Earth spun, a fact he only knew because Uriel had told it to him.

“Sit,” Uriel demanded.

“Bossy,” Joe muttered through chattering teeth as he sat and let Uriel wrap the snuggliest blanket in existence around him.

“I’d rather be bossy than Jack Frost. Or what was that snowman’s name? The one you went on and on about.” Uriel knelt and struck a match before lighting the tinder already set up in the fireplace.

The man had a thing for fires and always had logs ready to go if he didn’t have one lit. And Joe had a thing for the man.

And fires.

And the man when there was a fire.

And oh, man, he needed to make like Jack Frost and chill the snowflake out before this thing went totally sideways and then where would he be?

Joe sighed.

Flames crackled in the fireplace, and Uriel turned to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

Joe stared into Uriel’s eyes before sighing again. “Not one single thing in the entire world. I’m exactly where I want to



be. Except my toes are cold. But other than that....” Joe swallowed hard. “When did I fall for you, Uriel? Could you let me know? Because I don’t remember doing it. Oh, maybe I’m still asleep. That would explain a lot. Except for the cold toes.”

Uriel turned to face Joe and picked up his foot. He massaged Joe’s toes until the warmth of his hands transferred to them and the chill dissipated. Joe shivered again, for entirely different reasons this time. Uriel had his thinking face on, which meant he wasn’t ignoring Joe’s questions.

Joe wiggled his toes and Uriel looked up at him. He smiled. The fire sparkled in his eyes, making them glow with the same reddish orange as the flames.

How elfing romantic was that?

He leaned forward, checking Uriel’s gaze for any sign that he and Uriel weren’t on the same page. Joe was so focused on watching Uriel’s face he sort of forgot that Uriel held his feet and that he was wrapped up in the fluffiest blanket in existence.

Instead of the soft, fleeting kiss Joe hoped for, he ended up face-planting onto Uriel’s chest and toppling them both over onto the hardwood floor. Joe’s head thumped the planks, and somehow Uriel ended up on top of him with the blanket tangled around their heads.

“Oops?” Joe whispered.

The mysterious sparkle reappeared in Uriel’s eyes, which was weird since they were under the blanket, but whatever. “Now I’ve got you right where I want you,” Uriel said, his voice sounding oddly sinister.

At least until Joe realized he’d totally quoted a line from the grinch book. “Oh no, Mr. Grinch! Whatever would I do if you ravaged me right here in front of the fire? How could I ever show my face in WhoCaresVille again?” Joe completed his impersonation of the grinch’s love interest by batting his eyes flirtatiously.

“Who says I plan on ever letting you go?”

And huh, the low rumble of Uriel's voice didn't sound like the grinch that time. And Joe was pretty sure the line had something to do with what the grinch planned on doing with his face instead, which had been...*ohhhhhh*.

"You don't?" Joe asked. "Want to let me go? Wait, or you don't want to ravage my...face. No, that wasn't it."

"No, Joe," Uriel said, slowly lowering his head until his lips *almost* touched Joe's. "I don't want to let you go."

And holy mistletoe madness, Uriel's lips were on his and Joe forgot how to breathe. How had he gone his entire life without experiencing a kiss like this? He moaned into Uriel's mouth and made a vain attempt to free his arms so he could get his hands on Uriel.

Uriel, however, didn't cooperate. He obviously had his own plan in mind because the next thing Joe knew, his hands were pinned over his head. Had the blanket tied itself into knots around him?

Well, he had been clutching it kind of tightly before his little tumble, so maybe....

"Oh gingersnap," Joe said, his voice huskier than it had been a moment before.

Uriel's plan worked. He settled between Joe's thighs like he belonged there. "You good?"

"G-good?" Joe said. "Good does not describe how excellent I'm feeling. I need a better word. Gimme one."

"Superb. Outstanding. Magnificent." With each word, Uriel moved his body, sliding over Joe in a way that brought a dirty librarian to mind. What? He'd met a lot of librarians over the years because he read so much. Librarians *knew things*.

"That was three," Joe gasped. "You're a walking thesaurus."

"I'm not walking, Joe."

Joe groaned again. "Nope. Pretty sure that's thrusting, and oh holy night, Uriel. This was not what I expected when I ran here in the snow. I thought maybe some soup. Hot cocoa."

“I can,” Uriel rolled his hips against Joe’s again, “arrange that.”

Joe managed to untangle one of his hands. He grabbed Uriel’s neck and tugged him closer. “I will...do something...horrible...oh sweet sugar cookie, do that again.”

Uriel chuckled. It sent a tremble through Joe’s entire body. How had he not known sooner?

“Neither one of us was looking,” Uriel replied.

He tucked his face into Joe’s neck and began nipping his way up Joe’s throat.

“I looked,” Joe protested as he arched his head a bit further to give Uriel more access. He took the opportunity to slide his hand from Uriel’s neck down his back.

And yep, the man hauled books for a living. Joe had known some muscles were hiding under all that tweed and cable knit. He also liked good food, which made him even hotter in Joe’s book.

“And did you like what you saw?” Uriel asked.

Joe pushed his hips up instead of answering.

Uriel sucked in a breath and shuddered.

“Yeah, Uriel. I like what I see. And what I hear. And smell. And I really liked what I tasted. How about you gimme some more of that sugar?”

Uriel chuckled into Joe’s neck. He raised his head and stared into Joe’s eyes before giving in to Joe’s demand. Joe only thought the first kiss was the hottest he’d ever had.

This one topped it with all the toppings, plus whipped cream, sprinkles, *and* a cherry. When Uriel lifted his head again, Joe could barely breathe. And his face itched.

“Beard conditioner,” he grumbled as he ran his hands over every inch of Uriel he could reach.

And hey, he’d somehow managed to get his other hand untangled. He didn’t remember doing that. Of course, the kiss had run his rational mind through a blender stronger than the

ones at the Snowda Shoppe. One giant Snowda Cone brain... order up!

“What are you thinking now?” Uriel asked.

“About how that kiss put my brain cells through a blender, and I’m wondering what flavor I should call it. Oh, how about Sugar and Spice, and Uriel is nice?”

“Veto.”

Joe huffed. “You’re no fun.”

“Considering I have you on your back in the middle of my living room floor with kiss swollen lips and a Snowda Cone for a brain, I would say I’m plenty of fun.”

“Oh, what about Blitzed by Uriel? No, that’s too obvious. I’ll shorten it to The Blitzen. Yeah, that’s so happening.”

Uriel ran his fingers through Joe’s hair, and his brain blender turned to the pulse speed. Okay, that one needed work, but honestly, he could feel his pulse from his lips to his toes. It made sense when he thought it, but now...wait, what was he thinking again?

“I’m not sure whether to continue the scene in the book, or—”

“Scene in the book. I vote scene in the book.”

Uriel laughed at Joe’s quick reply. “Fine, I’ll keep you captive on top of grinch mountain and ravage you until you come to your senses and realize I’m the grinch of your dreams.”

“Too late. Already realized you’re my dream grinch. I guess you’ll have to go the old-fashioned route. Start with a little wining and dining, then ravage me.”

“Deal.” Uriel leaned in for another kiss just as his front door flew open, startling the snowflakes out of both of them.

“Cousins meeting—oh my goddess! My eyes,” Edgar shrieked.

Uriel’s eyes flashed that sparkly red again as Joe swiveled his neck around to see Leif, Edgar, and York standing at the front door. A cold breeze rushed through the room.

Joe shivered. “You’re letting the heat out! Get in here before I freeze to death..”

Uriel’s eyes flashed red again. Joe glanced at the fire to see how bright the flames were, but they didn’t seem overly intense. So weird.

“Remind me to start locking my front door,” Uriel grumbled as he pushed to his feet.

He reached out a hand and pulled Joe up after him, then wrapped his arms around Joe before putting his chin on the top of Joe’s head.

Joe had to admit, it was kinda cute. Except he kind of wanted to see the cousins’ reactions. As far as Joe knew, they were Uriel’s only family, so it would probably be important that they were okay with their...relationship? Romance? Love affair?

“Stop thinking,” Uriel grumbled.

“Sure, and while I’m at it, I’ll make sure Mistletoe Falls loses all its holly jolly. You know, since you’re asking the impossible and all.”

Uriel moved his head so he could stare down at Joe. “Always gotta argue.”

“Well yeah. It’s part of my charm. Also, can I borrow a sweater? Maybe that soft cream one you wear all the time—not that I pay attention or anything, but that one?”

“It’s in the top drawer of my dresser. And put on my slippers while you’re in there. They’re by the bed. Your feet are like icicles again. We’re getting you some warmer socks.”

Joe beamed and waved at the cousins before skipping down the hall to Uriel’s bedroom. He found the sweater exactly where Uriel said it would be and pulled it on. It was as soft as he’d hoped. And cuddly. And it smelled like Uriel.

He pulled the neck over his nose and breathed in. Oh, he had it so bad. After shoving his feet into the fluffy slippers by the bed, Joe went back to the living room.

The cousins all had big smiles on their faces, and Uriel's normal cranky face had returned. Not that Joe blamed him. They had been getting to the good part. Well, the better part. Or the next good part? Hmm.

"Get over here," Uriel said.

"Bossy." But Joe went over to him anyway and plopped right down onto Uriel's lap. "This sweater is my new favorite."

"Yeah?"

Joe nodded. "Is there enough food to feed them? Because wining and dining was on the table, and I'm gonna hold you to your promises."

Especially since ravaging would follow. Joe wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Uriel smirked. "Yes. And I intend to keep my promise. Multiple times."

"Okay, I've gotta know," York said. "Since when are you two...you two. I had no idea."

"Since Uriel decorated my tree for me. Well, probably a long time before that, but we'll call the snowman tree the inciting incident."

"Inciting..." York frowned, then looked at Edgar and Leif. "I don't know what that means."

Edgar sighed. "You remember, less than a week ago when you looked at Gabriel and got the whammy? That was your inciting incident."

"Ohhh," York said. "So you honestly only figured it out today? I thought you two were having some secret thing for months, and Uriel wanted to keep it quiet because he's private or whatever."

Joe turned to glare at Uriel. "You are not keeping us a secret. I forbid it. I will make you sleep on the sofa, I swear!"

"Thanks, York. Your help here is greatly appreciated. Anything else you wanna say to put me in the doghouse?"

"'Tis the season to be furry," York suggested.

“Heh. Furry. I don’t think that means what you think it means,” Joe said. “Uriel, you know what that means, right?”

“What’s a furry?” Leif asked.

“Absolutely not. We’re not having this discussion.”

“Good,” Edgar said. “Because I’m starving.”

He went into the kitchen, then burst out laughing.

“Oh no,” Joe said.

He winced as Edgar entered the room with *Groping the Grinch* in his hand. Uriel didn’t get a chance to bellow at his cousin.

Joe kissed him instead.





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## URIEL

Uriel shut the door behind his cousins and locked it. Then he used the deadbolt, which he never did. No one else was coming in his house tonight.

Well, someone would be coming in his house. Uriel narrowed his gaze on Joe.

Joe shivered.

Goddess, how had he not realized sooner? He'd always known Joe was special, but this...Uriel had never expected Joe to be his mate.

*Mate.*

Even though Uriel had witnessed the sprites get their mates the previous December, and York finding his mate, Gabriel, over the course of the past weekend, finding his own hadn't seemed likely.

Uriel couldn't believe Joe had been beside him for so many months. His magic hadn't given him any clues at all. Or had it? Their friendship had changed him, and now Uriel would have his best friend beside him for the rest of his life. The goddess worked in mysterious ways and in her own time.

But she had sent Joe to him, and now Uriel wanted nothing more than—

“Okay, I’m not imagining it. Your eyes are sparkling, and I don’t mean in the Santa twinkle kind of way. I thought it was a trick of the light, but it’s not, is it?”

“Nope.” Uriel stalked closer.

Joe licked his lips. “That’s all I get? Nope.”

“Nope. I’ve got something else to give you.”

Joe glanced down, then back up. “Wow, you sure do. And totally sparkling again. Still? Sorry, I got distracted by...um, things. And stuff. Oh, speaking of stuff, are you a dragon? I read a book with this dragon...wait, I’m pretty sure there were meggs involved. I don’t want dragon babies, Uriel.”

“I’m not a dragon.”

“Oh yeah? You hoard books, you’re very cranky, and you’re... scaly? No. Wait.”

Uriel stopped in front of Joe, then slid his hands around Joe’s waist. “I’m waiting.”

“Oh. Um. You didn’t even ask what meggs were. Proof. Wait, why are you waiting? Don’t wait. Wait. I’m confused. You promise you aren’t a dragon?”

“Promise.”

“Okay, don’t wait then.”

“You sure? We can’t go back after we—”

“Oh, we’re not going back. You’re *so* stuck with me. I don’t care if you are a dragon. Not going back. We’d just have to have a very serious discussion about birth control, because I am not cut out to be a dad. Not on the wish list. Um, not that there’s anything wrong with kids if you—”

“I don’t want kids,” Uriel said. “But I’m going to try my best to knock you up.”

“*Annnd* the sparkle again. Let’s make like Santa and hit the sack.” Joe groaned and dropped his forehead to Uriel’s chest. “Oh that was bad. Linus would be so disappointed in my pun skills.”

Uriel thought the pun had merit. He lifted Joe’s chin with one finger and stared into his mate’s eyes. He definitely wanted to hit the sa—

“Um, Uriel, why is there a disco ball where your chandelier was a second ago?”

Uriel groaned as Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get It On* began blasting through the speakers of his sound system. He may not like watching television—didn't own one in fact—but he did enjoy music.

Joe bit his lip. "Um...that's...."

Uriel gave up. He scooped Joe into his arms and carried him toward the bedroom. "Enough talk."

"Oh, there will never be enough talk. However—"

Uriel lowered Joe onto the bed. He flopped back and made a snow angel on the blankets.

"—I'm ready to talk about other things now. Like why you aren't taking off that really nice sweater that I plan on borrowing."

Uriel took off the sweater. "You already borrowed a sweater."

"Yeah, it's going to be a thing that I do."

Uriel reached down and took one of his slippers off Joe's foot. Then he removed the other before sitting them on the floor by the bed.

"I need slippers by the bed, Uriel."

Joe sat up and tugged his shirt over his head. He tossed it at Uriel's chest. Then he reached for the button of his jeans and shimmied out of them.

"You can have anything you want."

Uriel's stereo began blasting a new song.

*"Oooh, baby, baby. Baby, baby. Get up on this!"*

"Uriel, if you don't get naked, I'm going to start asking questions."

Uriel stripped, then climbed onto the bed. He covered Joe's body with his own and stared down at him. "Goddess, you're —*mmph*."

Joe lunged up and covered Uriel's mouth with his own. The kiss said it better than Uriel could have. He gave Joe all the

bottled-up joy he'd kept inside for the past few hours. *His mate.*

He wasn't expecting Joe to tremble in his arms seconds later. Joe groaned and pulled away as his body tightened and then released. Uriel only thought Joe was beautiful before. Coming apart in his arms? Perfection.

Joe groaned and opened his eyes. "All your fault," Joe huffed.

"How so?" Uriel said, lowering himself to the side but still covering Joe with most of his body. He ran a hand over Joe's ribs, earning another shiver out of his mate.

"You edged me for hours. What did you expect?"

"Edged?" Uriel frowned. "How so?"

"*Mmm, stew.*"

"Are you trying to imperson—"

"Joe, isn't this wine *mmm mmm* delicious. Here, Joe, taste this *sweet buttery* bread I made with my own *manly* hands. *Yummy.*" Joe ended his rant by poking Uriel in the chest. "You act like that and think I won't be hot and bothered?"

"Don't worry," Uriel replied in his best impersonation of the grinch voice. "I'll ravage you, my pretty, and then you'll be mine forever."

Joe grinned and poked him again. "I already am."

It wasn't the grinch's heart that grew three sizes that day....



"Exactly how many sets of matching pajamas do you own?" Joe asked as he pattered around Uriel's kitchen the next morning wearing a pair of said pajamas.

"Seven." Uriel glanced at Joe from his position at the coffee pot, wearing a set of pajamas himself.

They hadn't needed them all night, but after they showered the next morning, Joe shivered. Then gave him a look. Somehow

they ended up pajama-clad in the kitchen instead of back in bed where Uriel wanted them.

Joe also called dibs on Uriel's robe and slippers. At this rate, Uriel would need an entirely new wardrobe by the weekend.

"One for each day of the week. Smart," Joe said, popping a piece of danish in his mouth while they waited for the coffee to brew.

"I thought so."

"I'm ignoring the past tense of that statement because I know you're not implying you mind sharing your pajamas with me. In other news, I can't believe we have a two-hour delay. Our mayor is so weird."

"That he is."

"You know he's got Oberon or somebody down there shoveling snow by hand or something so town square looks pristine. No dirty slush piles for Mistletoe Falls."

"Not during the town's annual street parades. What would our visitors think?"

Joe smirked and ate more of his pastry. Then he frowned. "You don't even like cheese danishes."

"You do," Uriel said, filling both their mugs before adding a ridiculous amount of creamer to Joe's.

"Exactly how long have you been keeping baked goods at your house for me?"

"No comment."

Uriel never ordered the pastries. Nyall gave him a box on his designated day, and this week he'd added danishes for Joe. *Pesky sprites*. Nyall likely didn't even realize what he'd done. His magic took care of the issue for him.

"*Hmph.*" Joe mumbled through his danish.

Uriel pushed the mug of coffee in front of him and waited for the onslaught of questions to begin. They hadn't exactly talked during the night. On the upside, Uriel's magic had fully

decorated the interior of his house for the holidays, saving him hours of work. Mating magic was a thing of beauty.

He'd followed the town's by-laws, of course, and had completed the outside decorations in time to be approved by the parade committee. His house was near the start of the route which made participation mandatory.

Joe hadn't said a word when they walked out of the bedroom into the living room. He'd blinked at the lights, given Uriel a look, then continued into the kitchen.

"Would you ask me already?" Uriel said.

"Ask you what."

Uriel sat down on one of the barstools and scowled.

"Oh, you mean *ask you*, ask you. No, I'm going to figure this out. I have it narrowed down to a few options."

"A few...Joe...."

"Hey, asking for no particular reason, but do you happen to know exactly what type of creature the grinch is? Inquiring minds and all that."

"I'm not the grinch, Joe."

"Oh, I know. You're not green, obviously."

"Obviously," Uriel said.

Joe passed him a cinnamon crunch muffin before taking a slurp of his coffee. He gave Uriel *the look* again.

"So?"

"So what?" Uriel had gotten a bit distracted by Joe licking his lips.

Joe poked him. "What kind of creature is the grinch?"

"The not-real kind."

The annoyed huff didn't help.

"I'm thinking you're something along the lines of the Smurfs."

"The what?"

Joe shook his head sadly and took another sip of his coffee. “Why does my coffee taste so much better when you make it? Do you swirl your magical finger in it or something? That would explain a lot.”

“*What?*”

Okay, this had gone on long enough. He’d tell Joe everything and—

“Eat your muffin, Uriel.”

“But I need to—”

“I’m going to figure it out. Since you seem to have forgotten, I’ve been reading cozy mysteries for months. I am now on the case. I need a catchy title for it, though. *Groping the Grinch* is taken.” Joe snickered and looked over at Uriel. “Although pretty sure we checked off most of the plot points in that one already.”

That they had.

Uriel reached across the counter and grabbed his phone from the charging station. After a quick internet search, he shot a glare at his mate. “I am not Grouchy Smurf.”

“Sure you are,” Joe said. “And York is Handy Smurf.”

“You’re Clueless Smurf.”

“There’s no such—”

Uriel passed over his phone, showing Joe the description of the Smurf in question.

“Absolutely not. I’m Brainy Smurf.”

Uriel snorted. “Also, how did you watch a cartoon from 1981?”

“Oh sweet summer child, there was a movie a few years ago. Plus there’s this little thing called reruns.”

Uriel scrolled on and confirmed Joe’s statement. “Huh. Never heard of Smurfs in my life.”

“Color me surprised. Are you sure you aren’t a dragon?”

“Positive. Dragons are moody and clingy with their mates. They get all *mate mine food eat*. It’s ridiculous.”

Joe spun on the stool and grabbed Uriel’s arm. “Say what now?”

“What?”

“You said that like dragons exist.”

Uriel drank his coffee.

“Dragons. Exist.” Joe blinked about twelve times, then stared suspiciously at his coffee cup.

“What was it you called me?” Uriel asked. “Oh, right. Sweet summer child.”

Joe scoffed. “You’re making it up. No way.”

“Way. Dragons are so much better than hellhounds, though. Those guys are giant pains in the—”

*Ding. Ding ding. Ding.*

The rapid-fire messages arriving on Joe’s phone couldn’t be good. Joe looked around the room with a frown, trying to locate the sound.

“It’s on the charger.”

Uriel nodded his head toward the charging station. Joe spun around and looked at it before scowling over his shoulder at Uriel.

“Exactly when did you put my phone on the charger?” Joe’s tone matched the frown on his face.

“What? Why are you mad?”

*Ding. Ding.*

Joe poked him. “That means you were out of bed and I didn’t know it, because I distinctly remember my phone being in my pants when I took them off last night.”

“Oh, you remember that, do you?”

“Very clearly.”

*Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.*



“Would you please see who is messaging you?”

“Why? Is it bugging you? Want me to show you how many notifications I have? How about how many unread emails? Huh? Huh?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I changed your settings last night when I plugged in your phone. Those glaring red numbers aren’t there anymore.”

Joe gasped and grabbed his phone.

Uriel chuckled into his coffee. Mission accomplished.

“You’re a lying liar who *lies*,” Joe complained. He opened his messages and gasped. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

Joe sighed. “Javier is serenading me.”

“Pretty sure he isn’t,” Uriel said.

“Well, he’s serenading the carriage house.”

“Then it’s convenient you aren’t there.”

Joe elbowed Uriel in the side. “Linus wants me to come make it stop. The guests at the inn are complaining.”

“You mean he can’t sing? I figured with that name—”

“Are you judging him based on his *name*? Really, *Uriel*?”

“Oh come on. He should be on one of those nighttime soaps everyone used to love. *Javier McLeod*.” Uriel did his best impression from one of the cliffhanger pre-commercial scenes, including the dramatic gasp and head tilt. “Besides, I’m named after an angel.”

“Uriel’s always the bad guy.”

Uriel gasped. “That’s not true.”

Joe shrugged. “If you’d watched television any time in the last decade or two, you’d know whether or not I was telling the truth.” Joe scoffed. “Dragons are real. I’m such a sucker.”

Uriel snickered and got another elbow in the side.

“If you say one thing about me sucking—”

“I would never,” Uriel said.

*Ding.*

“We have to go. He’s singing *I Will Always Love You*.”

“Oh, I am not going if I have to hear that,” Uriel said. “That song belongs to Dolly and Whitney, and no one else. Period.”

“Why does you knowing that turn me on?” Joe asked. “And honestly, I have no problem going over there all by myself, wading through the snow, all on my lonesome, to face off with a man so in love with me he’s—”

“Wellies are by the front door.”

Joe hopped off the bar stool. “Did you just say wellies? What are we, British?”

“Find me a better boot for wet snow, and I’ll buy them. For now, it’s wellies.”

“You are the strangest man I have ever met.”

Uriel scoffed. “That’s because you’ve never met a dragon.”

“Sure. Let me guess, his name is probably Draconis or something original like that, right?”

“Well, the current clan leader does have a son named Draco, now that you mention it.”

“Sure. Clan leader. Keep trying, Oh, and after we deal with Javier, we should go pick up *Riding Rudolph*.”

“Uh...” Uriel slipped his feet into his boots, wondering how long it would take Joe to notice that two pairs sat by the door. His magic had worked overtime during the night. Maybe Joe had his own pajamas in Uriel’s dresser now so he could quit stealing Uriel’s.

“Why are you smiling like that? It’s creepy.”

“No reason. Do you want a sweater?”

Joe’s eyebrows furrowed. “You like me wearing your sweaters but not your pajamas? I’m on to you, mister.”

“I never said—”

“You say it all with your eyes, *Draconis*.”

And from the look Joe shot him, apparently, Uriel wasn't the only one. He turned around and went to the bedroom, returning a moment later with one of his fluffiest sweaters.

Joe beamed. “You're forgiven. Hmmm, cozy sweater.”

Then he pulled it on over his pajamas and robe.

“Let's go handle the interloper. Should I blowtorch him with my dragon breath?” Uriel asked as he opened the door.

An extra lock had been added to the ones he already had in place. Uriel patted the lock and thanked his magic before following Joe outside.

“How does he do it?” Joe grumbled as he walked down the steps to the sidewalk.

“Do what?”

“Get the sidewalks perfectly clean without me ever seeing him doing it.”

“Oh sweet summer child,” Uriel teased.

“I'm regretting ever saying that to you.”

“As you should. Also, heated sidewalks.”

“What?”

“Yep. Geothermal.”

“You're making that up.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Fine, ask Oberon. Or go to town hall and look at the archives from... actually, I can't remember what year it was now. Ask Edgar. He'll know.”

“You're really trying to tell me that the entire town has geothermal heated sidewalks.”

“No, I never said the entire town.”

Joe flung his hands in the air about the time they heard the horrifyingly bad singing coming from down the block.

“*And Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii....*”

“Oh no,” Joe groaned.

Miles and Oberon stood on their front porch with their daughter, Holly, and their dogs, Ivy and Jolly. They all looked horrified. Then Ivy, the giant Saint Bernard, threw back her head and began to howl.

In fact, most of their neighbors stood on their porches, looking toward the carriage house. None of them looked happy. It was no wonder Linus sent out an SOS.

“Eldon is *so* going to fire me.”

“Doubtful,” Uriel said. “Although considering...yep, there he comes.”

Joe froze, grabbing Uriel’s arm. “Don’t let him fire me!”

“He’s not going to fire you. He might murder *Javier*, though. He hates being woken up early on two-hour delay days. *Javier’s* a dead man.”

“Will you quit saying his name like he’s Inigo Montoya or something?”

“My name is Inigo Montoya. You broke my eardrums. Prepare to die,” Uriel mocked.

“Oh, that reference you know.”

Uriel scoffed. “I’m not a total heathen. Besides, it’s Leif’s favorite movie.”

“So movie nights are a possibility? Good to know.”

“I never said—”

“Better go save Javier from certain death,” Joe said.

He grabbed Uriel’s hand and dragged him down the street.

“Or we could let Eldon handle it. That’d be fun.”

Joe sighed. “Or I could be an adult and handle him myself. I’ve ignored him for almost a week already.”



Javier whipped around and stared at them with his mouth hanging open.

The crowd began to whisper.

“What are you doing with that...that....”

“Dragon?” Joe offered.

Uriel groaned. “Joe....”

What could he say? Until Joe allowed him to explain, Uriel couldn't make the expectations for secrecy clear. Then again, at the rate they were going, a dragon would be a welcome distraction, perhaps by making a bonfire out of *Javier* and putting Uriel out of his misery.



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## JOE

Joe rolled his eyes at Uriel's dramatics. What, like the so-called hellhounds were going to show up and scold him for revealing some big secret? He'd figure out what Uriel's deal was later, once he'd stopped what was quickly becoming a neighborhood spectacle.

"Dragon!" Javier's screaming wasn't helping matters at all.

Joe turned to his ex, then waved his hand in front of Uriel's face and chest. "My fiery redhead. You know, like a dragon."

Javier sputtered. "W-what do you mean *your*?"

"Mine, Javier. As in my boyfriend, my partner-in-crime, my other half, the love of my life. *Mine*."

A spark of gold shot from Javier's phone. He yelped and dropped it.

Joe turned to glare at Uriel, but he looked as confused as Joe. He glanced around at the others and realized Eldon seemed particularly pleased with himself. He had a bit of an evil streak, so he'd probably enjoyed watching Javier get shocked. Joe would have to speak to him about it later.

"Huh," Joe mumbled. "When did that happen?"

"What?" Uriel asked.

"I'm not scared of Eldon anymore. This is turning into a fantastic day."

Uriel scowled. "It wasn't fantastic already?"



Joe poked him in the chest, then realized Eldon and his cousins hovered off to the side enjoying the scene. “I’ve got it,” Joe said.

Uriel’s frown deepened. “Got what?”

“A cloud of cousins. Sort of like a cloud of locusts. A nosy cloud of locust cousins who are enjoying this entirely too much.” Joe scowled at them before running his hand over Uriel’s sweater. He needed some extra comfort. Honestly, he liked the feel of Uriel’s soft clothes. Even the man’s pajamas were cuddle-worthy.

“A cloud. It could work. Don’t you think we could talk about this later, though?”

Joe poked Uriel. Stroking would be better than poking, but Joe needed to regain control of the situation. If he kept petting Uriel, he wouldn’t stop.

Uriel scowled at him before trapping Joe’s pokey finger against his chest with his big warm hand.

“Don’t pout. Santa doesn’t like it.” Joe thought about his words for a second. He leaned closer to Uriel before whispering, “Is he real too?”

“Would you focus on Javier, please?”

With a huff, Joe freed his hand, poked Uriel again, and added a stroke for good measure. Joe returned his attention to his ex-boyfriend. Javier’s expression had changed since being shocked by his phone. Maybe that’s what he’d needed all along? A little jolt to get him thinking clearly.

“You really love him,” Javier said.

“Whoa, whoa,” Joe said. “We haven’t said the L-word to each other yet, and I don’t plan on having that moment in front of half the town. But you’re not wrong.”

Uriel’s smug chuff almost earned him another elbow to the ribs. Then Uriel pulled Joe back against his chest and wrapped his arms around Joe. His chin rested on Joe’s head.

Their neighbors cooed. Someone must have sent a neighborhood watch text because while Joe was dealing with

Javier, another dozen or so people had arrived. They'd be the talk of the town for days.

But hey, maybe he'd get even more business in the Snowda Shoppe as a result. Considering the ridiculous bonus check Tate had slipped him the other day, the least Joe could do was drum up some extra business.

Javier looked completely flummoxed by the situation.

Joe chuckled. "Flummoxed is a good word. Highly recommend."

"Focus," Uriel said. "But yeah, he's totally flummoxed."

"It's one of those weird words, though. The more you say it, the stranger it gets. Flummoxed. Fluh-muuxxed."

"Are we letting him stand there until Yule or are you going to get this over with?"

"If you want me to ride your Rudolph later, you'd better behave."

Multiple gasps and several chuckles came from their neighbors.

Joe had accidentally said that much louder than he'd intended. "It's from a book."

"Does Uriel have it in stock?" Eldon asked. "Sounds fascinating."

"Eldon," Joe gasped. "What...what...uh...."

"Joe bought the only copy," Uriel said.

That deserved an elbow. "You're turning away business here. This is a golden opportunity for sales."

"Is it, though?"

Joe huffed. "Okay, this needs to be done. Focus, Joe. Show's over, everyone. Shoo. Go on. No more nosy neighbors or I'll put you on my No-da cone list. That's like the naughty list, but with no Snowda Cones."

Everyone looked around but no one moved.

"You know I'll do it. Eldon trained me."

There were several grumbles, but everyone turned to leave.

Joe tapped Uriel's arm, and he moved it aside. Once the area had cleared, Joe walked over to Javier. "I don't want to be cruel here, but the restraining order should have been enough. We're done, Javier. I don't want to see you ever again. I'm happy, okay? Go home."

Joe didn't wait for a reply. Instead, he turned and walked back to Uriel. He held out his hand and Uriel took it.

"That felt really good," Joe said.

"I'm glad."

"I really should stand up for myself more often."

Uriel snorted. "You don't seem to have that problem with me."

Joe grinned. "That's cause you're my mate."

"That you are."

Uriel stopped him in the middle of the street and kissed him senseless. Then they walked back to Uriel's house...where Uriel's cousins stood on his porch. *Riding Rudolph* would have to wait.

Uriel made a weird noise. It sounded very much like one of his satisfied grunts from the night before. Joe liked those sounds, but this one wasn't directed toward him.

"Do I want to know?"

Uriel's smug grin was answer enough. "Don't be scared. York deserves this."

"Deserves—"

Uriel's eyes sparked red, and Joe swore he could feel something swell up from the ground and through his body. Then the biggest freaking terrifying black dog flew out of a flaming hole in the air and ran straight toward the porch.

York screeched and shoved Gabriel behind him. The black dog snarled before shifting into a big, freaking terrifying man with flaming eyes. "York Lad, you revealed our secret and betrayed our kind. Prepare to die."

Joe almost panicked. *Almost*. “You’re totally Inigo Montoya-ing him, aren’t you? How are you doing that? That’s evil, Uriel. He looks like he’s going to crap himself.”

Uriel chuckled as the red sparks disappeared from his eyes. The scary dog man vanished. “Magic,” Uriel said. “And now that you’re my mate, I can tell you all about it.”

“Is this another one of those dragon baby things, Uriel? Because we’ve discussed—”

Uriel grabbed Joe and planted another kiss on him that would have really gotten the neighbors talking if they’d still been around to see it.

“Yoo-hoo! Joe!” Linus dashed from the inn and crossed the street to meet them. “I forgot to give you your costume for tomorrow night. Uriel, I brought yours as well. It’s so sweet that you didn’t want Joe on his own for his very first street parade.”

“There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell I’m wearing—”

“What kind of costume?” Joe asked.

“Elves, what else?”

Joe gasped and turned to Uriel. “*Elves*.”

“No,” Uriel said.

“Absolutely.” Joe took the costumes from Linus who beamed and ran back to the inn.

“I’m not—”

“Oh yes, you are. It’s my turn to win, so you might as well give up now.”

Uriel sputtered. “Your turn? *Your turn?*”

“Ha. Finally managed to make you speechless. Well, almost speechless. Unable to talk. Oh wait, that’s not right either. You weren’t able to talk much last night, were ya?”

Joe looped his arm through Uriel’s and pulled him down the block until they reached Uriel’s house. York crossed his arms over his chest as red sparks danced in his eyes.

“He can do the sparkly eyes, too. *Ohhhhh*, you’re all elves. Cousins, I mean. Of course, you’d have to live in a Christmas town. Makes so much sense.”

“We are not elves,” Uriel bellowed.

Joe patted his arm. “That’s right, honey. You’re not an elf. You’re a grinch, and don’t you forget it.”

Uriel flopped down on the porch and groaned. He dropped a hand over his face dramatically, then removed it to glare at Joe. “Honey? Really? Veto.”

“Fine. It was your turn anyway. Now it’s mine again.”

Uriel stomped his foot on the porch step. “I cannot win.”

“You just did, you big baby. Now get up and let’s go inside. We’ve already made a scene for half the town. No need to cause another one. Unless—”

Joe looked around to see if any of their neighbors were running away from the big scary dog in terror.

“No one else saw it,” Leif said. “I’d forgotten our cousin’s ability to create illusions. Nicely done, Uriel.”

“He deserved it after that carrot stunt.”

Joe spun to look at York. “That was you! Why did you throw carrots all over town? And why carrots?”

“I...uh...well....”

“He wanted the proverbial carrot in Gabriel’s pants,” Edgar said. “His magic went haywire when he got it.”

“No way. Did your magic go wacky when you got my carrot?”

Uriel whimpered.

“And why are you still lying there? Inside. Let’s go.”

Everyone *finally* moved. Joe followed them into Uriel’s house. Once they all sat down, Joe looked them over, making sure they all knew he was onto them. Well, not really, considering he had absolutely no idea what was going on, but still, the look got him three sheepish grins and one confused new boyfriend. Poor Gabriel. He was the only one who deserved any

sympathy. He'd not even been in town a week. York totally deserved the scary dog-man.

"Why are you glaring at my cousins?" Uriel asked.

"Because I want them to know I'm *serious*."

"It'd be easier to take you seriously if you weren't dressed like that," Edgar grumbled.

"Don't you make fun of Uriel's clothes. You'll never get a triple-shot iced mocha again, young man. Wait, young man? What's wrong with me? Maybe I should sit down."

Luckily, Uriel had taken the seat near the fireplace, so Joe plopped down on his lap.

"And finally, we broke him," Uriel said.

He wrapped his arms around Joe, which was very nice of him.

"I'm very confused," Joe confessed.

Uriel rubbed his hip. Also nice.

"We're supposed to be working on tomorrow's project," Edgar said. "Can we please get on with it?"

"Will you please get that snow cone out of your behind? I'm in shock here, Edgar. Have some sympathy."

Edgar sputtered but didn't argue. Joe nodded his approval, then leaned back against Uriel.

"Just tell me already." He quickly sat up and turned to stare at Uriel. "Wait. That was a *hellhound*. Hellhounds are real too?"

"I told you."

"You told him about hellhounds?" Leif asked. "Uriel! Why would you do that?"

"Oh, don't be mad at him. I didn't believe anything he was saying, anyway. I'm always having to look up stuff he says."

"Why?" Leif asked.

"He's sneaky, that's why."

"It's what we do," York said. "Kinda part of the job description."

“Oh really?” Joe said. “And what exactly *is* the job.”

“Uh...no comment,” York said.

Gabriel sighed. “They’re called Yule Lads and the other cousins, including your boss, are called Sprites. You know the whole naughty and nice thing?”

Joe nodded.

“Well, these guys are naughty, and Nyall, Oberon, Eldon, and Linus are nice. Magic requires balance. I don’t know. None of it makes sense because all of you seem perfectly nice to me.”

“No, that totally makes sense. I mean, can you picture Nyall throwing carrots all over town? I think not.”

“Linus kidnapped a goat last year,” Uriel said.

“Nice try, hot stuff.” Joe turned back to the cousins. “Now, exactly how naughty is naughty, because there are levels. If I need to talk to the three of you about what’s acceptable behavior—”

“The *three* of us,” Edgar protested. “There are *four* of us!”

“Well, yeah,” Joe said, “but I obviously know exactly how naughty Uriel is. Come on, Edgar. Catch up. You can do it. Leif, you tell me.”

Leif looked at his cousins, then shrugged. “We’re more pranksters than anything else,” Leif said. “The, um, streetlamp incident? That was us.”

Uriel groaned.

Joe gasped “And you complained about me waking you up when you were the reason I had to get up? Uriel Lad!” Joe poked him in the chest, then petted his sweater for good measure. “You owe me another sweater.”

“I’ll get you as many sweaters as you want.”

“Smart man. Now, where was I? Oh right. The streetlamps. So, who came up with that one, because Uriel doesn’t watch movies.”

Edgar let out a groan almost equal to Uriel’s.

“I should have known,” Joe said, shaking his head. “Although, it was funny.”

Leif snickered. “Did you see the mayor’s face when he saw the garters?”

Joe turned to Leif and glared. “I didn’t. And I also didn’t see you out there helping take everything down.”

“Uh...”

“Naughty, got it. Which reminds me, there were some super weird guys at the tree farm the other day. I didn’t like the looks of them. They looked...well, worse than naughty.”

“Guys?” Leif asked.

“Business suits,” Uriel added. “It looked serious. I meant to tell you, but things have been a little intense here.”

“I *knew* something was going on,” Leif said.

For the first time, Leif didn’t look like the sweet, innocent cousin.

“*Ohhhhh*,” Joe said. “West is your mate. I didn’t know.”

Leif sucked in a breath so loud it made Joe worry.

“Leif? Buddy? You okay?”

“We don’t throw the word mate around lightly,” Uriel muttered. “Probably best not to use it unless you’re talking about me.”

“That makes no sense.”

“West isn’t my mate,” Leif said, his face bright red.

“Not your mate. Got it. Where were we? I swear, I can’t keep up with you three.”

“Four,” Uriel grunted.

“I can keep up with you just fine. It’s these guys who are throwing me off. So, we have to figure out who the guys were. Edgar, get on it. You have resources.”

“I...what? Why me?”



“Re-source-s.” Joe enunciated the word more clearly so maybe Edgar would understand the second time.

“We need to focus on tomorrow night,” Edgar said.

“I’m with Joe,” Leif said. “We need to find out who those guys were. I’ve been saying something’s wrong with West. We need to help him.”

“Agreed,” Uriel said.

Joe leaned back and kissed Uriel on the cheek. “So we’re pranking the town on the first night of the street parade? Is that nice?”

“No,” Uriel said. “And that’s kind of the point. Also, *we*?”

“Well, yeah. I’m your mate. Where you go, I go. And where I wear an elf costume, you wear one.”

Edgar snorted.

“Oh, you want one too?” Joe asked sweetly. “Done. I’ll text Linus right now.”

“Don’t!”

Joe huffed. “That’s what I thought.”

“Is he always this bossy?” Edgar said. “I thought he was nice.”

“Hey! I’m nice.”

“Yes,” Uriel said. “Always.”

Joe would have glared but Uriel cuddled him closer. “It’s true,” Joe confessed. “I’m bossy.”

“But also nice,” Uriel added.

“Aww, you do love me.” Joe paused then turned to look at Uriel. “Don’t you?”

“You’re my mate.”

“Is that as epic and mystical as it sounds?”

“Pretty much the most epic and mystical thing in existence.”

Joe leaned in for a kiss, forgetting their company for a moment until Edgar rudely cleared his throat. “I don’t like him,” Joe

mumbled against Uriel's lips. "We should prank him."

"I heard you," Edgar said.

"Just think of what we could come up with together," Joe continued. "Your brains and my...me."

"You're the perfect amount of devious for a Yule Lad's mate," Uriel said. "Plus the bossy factor. It's turning me on, not going to lie."

Joe grinned.

"And on that note, we're leaving," Edgar said. "We'll deal with tomorrow's prank tomorrow."

"We sure will," Joe said. "I have plenty to deal with today."

He didn't even wait for the door to close before he began to create his own version of *Riding Rudolph*. It wasn't every day a guy found his mate, after all. Uriel deserved something extra special for the occasion.



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## URIEL

Uriel glared at the green tights in his hand. Why?

“Just put them on already. They don’t bite.”

“Are you sure?”

Joe did a little wiggle around the bedroom, moving his legs in a disturbing way. Uriel admired Joe’s flexibility, but he refused to put the tights anywhere on his body until Joe stopped jerking his knees up to his chest.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I’m pretty sure the tights are biting you. It’s the only explanation for your gyrations.”

“Gyrations? Really, Uriel? I’m stretching them out.”

Uriel dropped the tights on the bed. “Absolutely not.”

“If you don’t put on the tights, we can’t reenact *Edging the Elf*.”

“What?”

“Book three. I might have put in a tiny request to your magic to have it appear this morning. And guess what was on my nightstand when I woke up?”

Joe lifted the book and did another little shimmy.

“What is....” Uriel leaned a little to the left to get a better look at the cover. “Oh. Wow. Yeah.”

“Put on the tights, Uriel.”

“Yeah, okay. How long do we have to stay at the parade again?”

“Not that long. We only have to do one shift at the fundraising booth. One measly shift and then—” Joe opened the book to a random page. “—I can...oh, I’m not actually sure I’m that bendy. Whoa. That’s graphic. And totally unrealistic.”

Joe’s disbelieving scoff only made Uriel more curious. He yanked on the tight tights before scurrying around the bed to get a look at the book. Luckily, Joe had gotten absorbed in the story, so Uriel was able to read over his shoulder.

“Really?” Uriel said. “Do you know how big my balls would have to be to produce that much...really? It made his belly... that’s a lot, Joe.”

“Tell me about it. And you with your megg kink.”

“I don’t have a megg kink!”

“Sure you don’t, big guy. That’s why you immediately denied their existence when I brought them up.”

“That is the most illogical argument you’ve made to date, and that’s saying something.”

“Truth hurts, doesn’t it?”

Uriel took the book out of Joe’s hand and dropped it onto the bed. “You’re trying to edge me already. I’m onto you.”

“I can’t help how hot you are when you get riled up. Fiery hot. Dragon hot.”

“If you say—”

Joe batted his lashes. “Get dressed, sugar plum.”

“Veto. Snowballs! I walked right into another one of your traps.”

“Yep. You win. It’s my turn again.”

“I rescind my veto.”

“No takebacks. Oh, this undershirt thing is like butter.”

Uriel scowled. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Soft, like one of your sweaters. Oh, I wonder if I can layer. I bet I can. I want to wear a sweater.”

“They’re not dry yet.”

Joe gasped. “What?”

“What? I did laundry yesterday while you were working.”

“It’s called a dryer, Uriel.”

Uriel’s heart stopped. He had to sit down on the bed.

Joe ran over to him. “What? What’s wrong? Are you having a heart attack?”

“You...you...it’s not funny to edge me about this, Joe.”

“Edge you about what? I’m not edging anything.”

Uriel couldn’t breathe. He leaned over and put his head between his knees.

“Oh magical Yule Lad magic of yore, please show me what I’ve done to break my mate of yester...more. Or something else that rhymes.”

Uriel raised his head. “What are you doing?”

“Communicating with the spirit of your magic. Obviously.”

“One, that’s not how it works.”

Joe’s snort of disbelief was less than attractive. He seemed to agree considering the look of disgust that crossed his face. He’d probably sucked something up into his brain. At least that would explain....

No, Uriel couldn’t even think about it.

“I’m a little stuffy,” Joe said. “I hope I’m not allergic to you. Also, how do you think *Edging the Elf* magically appeared? I thought my spell poem was pretty spectacular, and since it worked, the proof is in the book. Oh, and *Seducing Santa* is on preorder. In case you were wondering. Wait, you said one. What’s two?”

Uriel patted the bed beside him. “We need to talk.”

“You can’t break up with me.”

“There is only one thing that will possibly cause our relationship to end, Joe. One teeny tiny thing. If you ever put my sweaters in a dryer—”

“Wait, did you just have a nervous breakdown over laundry?”

“No, I had a nervous breakdown at the idea of you putting my gloriously curated collection of cashmere and cable knit in the dryer.”

“Curated collection of cashmere and cable knit? You did that on purpose.”

“I did.”

“Wow, you’re serious about the sweaters. Then again, you have the most perfect sweaters in existence, so it makes sense. Deal. In fact, I agree to never partake in the laundry in our relationship, so you’ll never have to worry about this again.”

“You’re trying to trick me into using my veto, but it’s not my turn. I kindly accept your offer, and in return I’ll happily let you clean the kitchen and bathroom. A fair exchange.”

“Ve...oh no. You...I....”

Uriel couldn’t stop grinning. He shimmied into the soft undershirt and stared down at himself. Neon green tights and matching long-sleeved thermal thing that was probably supposed to keep him warm or sweat-free or some other ridiculous claim. “I look like the grinch.”

Joe snorted. “You kind of do.”

“Let’s finish this. If we’re late, Linus will guilt trip you into another shift at the parade. I promise you, Joe, this will be my only shift.”

“Oh sweet summer child,” Joe said.

He laughed and left the room with the remainder of his costume.

“Wait...what? Joe. Come back here.”

Uriel quickly pulled on the rest of the costume and followed his mate into the living room. Joe stood at the front door, holding it open for Uriel’s cousins.

“Frosted gingersnaps. Joe, I’m not doing another shift.”

York burst out laughing the moment he looked at Uriel. Gabriel, on the other hand, looked horrified. He turned to Joe, his face paler than could possibly be healthy.

“Um, Joe...are...those...does everyone have to wear...”

“Yep,” Joe said. He patted York on the shoulder. “Laugh it up, hot stuff. Gabriel signed the two of you up for shifts next weekend.”

York began to choke.

Joe smirked and crossed the room to Uriel. He fussed with the collar of Uriel’s elf shirt, then smiled up at him. “So *edgy*.”

“You signed us up for multiple shifts, didn’t you?”

“We will be working multiple shifts, yes.”

Uriel growled. “Eldon! I should have known he was to blame. I’m going to—”

“Prank him so bad over the next few weeks that he’ll receive retribution at your hands. No need to get your tights in a twist.”

“Not funny.”

“Oh come on,” Joe said. “It was pretty funny.”

“These things absolutely bite.”

“That’s because you didn’t stretch them out. Rookie mistake.”

“Wait, when have you worn—”

“Gotta go! Don’t want to be late, do we?”

Joe grabbed Uriel’s arm and dragged him to the door. His cousins jumped out of his way. At least someone around here still respected his death glare. His mate was immune to it.

“So when is the...*you know*...gonna go down?”

Uriel’s frown turned upside down. “Oh sweet summer child...”

“Uriel! You’re not going to keep this a secret from me.”



“Pretty sure I am.”

“Mates don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“Oh really? Exactly how many shifts are we signed up to work, Joe?”

“Uh...no comment. Wow, isn’t the weather lovely this evening?”

“That’s what I thought.”

Joe huffed. “Should be right of mate-age...mate-dom...oh, mating! Simple and effective. It should be a rite of mating to know the plan.”

“But it’s not. You know, this edging the elf game is fun. I’m getting the hang of it.”

Joe growled. “I’ll show you—Eldon! Hi! Hello! How *are* you? You look amazing in your elf costume. Wait, why isn’t Tate wearing one? I know I saw his name on the sign-up sheet.”

“Tate doesn’t wear the costume. Only Santa’s Helpers, the official parade staff, wear them.”

“Uh-oh.”

Eldon grinned at Uriel. “Although the fact that Uriel was willing to wear a costume with you is very sweet.”

Tate snorted.

“So much edging,” Uriel grumbled. “So much. All of it.”

“I’m not sure that’s the threat you think it is.” Joe leaned back against Uriel.

It really was impressive how they fit together. Uriel put his chin on Joe’s head and wrapped his arms around Joe’s waist.

“We should all get to our stations,” Eldon said. “We’re ten minutes from go-time.”

Uriel glanced at his cousins, who’d all spread out. He and Joe were working one of the first drink stalls along the parade route. Large carafes of hot cocoa sat at the back of the booth. Custom thermal mugs were neatly stacked beside dispensers

of fresh whipped cream and jars of tiny handmade marshmallows.

As dusk fell, the lights on all the houses went out. Uriel glanced toward the inn, where Oberon stood with the controller that would illuminate the route on the mayor's command.

With a low cackle, Uriel poured a steaming cup of cocoa, added a couple spoons of marshmallows, then topped the concoction with a tower of whipped cream. He handed it over to Joe. "Enjoy the show, Joe."

"I will. This is going to be amazing. Oberon explained to me how it all worked. I can't believe how much coordination goes into it all. Question, though. What happens if someone can't go all out? I mean, I know it's in the deed or homeowners thing or whatever, but—"

"We take care of each other," Uriel said. "That's what the fundraiser portion of the parade is for. Worthy causes. Plus, the town has a trust fund set up by the founders to make sure the traditions are maintained."

Uriel leaned closer and whispered into Joe's ear. "The griffins are the wealth managers for magical beings. How do you think I'm able to keep the bookstore running?"

Joe's eyes widened. Then he licked the whipped cream. "Are you stupid rich, Uriel? Because if you are, that'll be the biggest edge of all. Come on. Show me the money."

Uriel laughed. "That's from a movie, isn't it?"

"You're learning. So, tell me...."

"I mean, I'm no Tatum William Bixby the third, but I'm close."

"Oh my goddess," Joe gasped.

He shoved the cocoa into Uriel's hand and bent over. Then he whipped out a paper bag Uriel hadn't even realized they had in the stall and began breathing into it.

"Really? Money is what does it for you? I'm surprised."

Joe gasped. “N-not,” he sucked in a breath again. “M-money.”  
“I’m lost.”

“Book budget,” Joe wheezed. “Unlimited. Book. Budget.”

Uriel laughed and pulled Joe into his arms. He leaned in and whispered in Joe’s ear, “Baby, I’ll buy you so many books, you’ll never run out of things to read.”

Joe shuddered in his arms, then looked up with a horrified glare. “You pushed me over the edge.”

Uriel pretended not to think it was the hottest thing Joe’d done to date.

Joe poked him in the chest. “Don’t be smug. Wet tights, Uriel.”

“It’s hot. You’re going to have to pretend you didn’t lose control while half the town walks past us. You’ll know what happened as you’re serving hot cocoa to the mayor.”

From around the corner, the mayor’s voice came over a loudspeaker, welcoming everyone to the town’s opening parade. Joe squirmed and contort. Uriel did his best not to laugh. “Don’t worry. The outer shirt covers the wet spot. It’s as good as an apron.”

“Not helping,” Joe whimpered as the crowd moved to the end of the street.

“Better sanitize those hands and get your gloves on. Wouldn’t want any contamination happening.”

Joe glared and did exactly that as the mayor began the countdown and *Deck the Halls* began playing through carefully positioned speakers.

“Three...two...one....”

Uriel engaged his magic the moment Oberon flipped the switch. Instead of the entire street lighting up, giant inflatable Santas began emerging from every front lawn on the street.

The mayor fainted. Luckily, some fast-moving members of town council caught him before he hit the ground.

“Fa-la-la-la-la,” Uriel sang as the Santas grew to their full size and began to glow.

“My lights,” Linus screeched. “My beautiful lights!”

“You’re evil,” Joe said.

“I know.”

“Really, truly, the epitome of naughty.”

“Thanks.”

Joe snorted. “Linus is hyperventilating.”

“His mate will resuscitate him. Just enjoy the moment, Joe.”

“I love inflatable Santas,” Joe confessed.

“Linus banned all inflatables two years ago.”

“Well, that wasn’t very nice of him.”

Uriel nodded. “Exactly what I thought.”

“He banned inflatables because of you, didn’t he?”

Uriel shrugged. “There might have been a giant snow globe incident. In my defense, it had fake snow that blew around inside it. And a snowman.”

“He banned a snowman snow globe? How could he?”

Uriel shrugged.

“Well, this is what he gets then.”

“I love it when you talk naughty.”

“Oh, you really like it. I’m guessing that’s not a candy cane in your pocket.”

“Nope. And I plan on being totally *elfish* later when I fill you with my holiday spirit.”

Joe shuddered and wiggled a little closer. “I like the sound of that.”

“How long do we have to work the booth?”

“Not long. You think maybe you should go help Oberon or something? I mean, technically our shift doesn’t start until the

parade does.”

“Well, in that case—”

Uriel gave a push of magic to the electrical system, unlocking the barrier he’d put in place which kept the house lights from turning on. The street lit up, even though the giant Santas remained bouncing around in all their glory.

Someone cut the peppermint ribbon blocking the street and visitors began streaming down the street. Uriel happily filled cups with cocoa and left the dealing with customers portion of the evening to Joe.

The donation jar filled as Joe’s festive spirit spread to everyone who met him. His cousins joined them around the booth, even pitching in to help when their line got long. They shared a few naughty grins, enjoying the results of their most well-planned and executed prank ever.

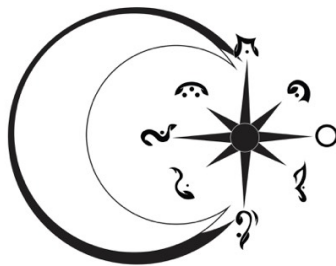
Uriel couldn’t help smiling at Joe. He’d found his mate and was having the most wonderful time of the year. With their remaining pranks lined up, the Lads were ready to make a fa-la-lasting impression on the rest of the season.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Macy Blake believes in unicorns and fairies, in moonbeams and stardust, and that happily ever after comes in all colors of the rainbow. She loves to lose herself in paranormal romance, living vicariously through her favorite sexy fictional heroes.

These days you can often find her lost in her imagination, trying to capture the magic of her own worlds. When she's not writing, she's busy arguing with her feisty German Shepherd, Minerva, and attempting to train her adorable pound puppies, Pomona and Severus.

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