

York

YULE LADS BOOK ONE

MACY BLAKE

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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 alter. 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

Naughty but nice...

York Lad is stunned when his magic unexpectedly returns, but he's ready to bring a little mischief to the small town of Mistletoe Falls. Along with his cousins, the other Yule Lads, York has spent the last year planning pranks to add their version of holiday cheer to the season.

Gabriel Baum needs to succeed at Mistletoe Falls annual craft fair. He doesn't expect for the town's quirky residents to embrace him with open arms, especially York, the town's mechanic. When his beloved vehicle breaks down, Gabriel is stranded unless York can save him from certain doom.

York may not have been expecting to lose his heart over the holidays, but with his magic sparkling in the air and the man of his dreams at his side, he has a few new reasons to love the season...if his Yule Lad magic doesn't get up to snow good.

If you love small towns, mischief makers, and holiday magic, your heart will melt over this feel-good Christmas romance.

YORK

ONE YEAR AGO

“Chirping, my ass,” York grumbled.

Not one single thing in Mrs. Crowley’s ancient Cadillac was capable of *chirping*. Then again, considering how infrequently she drove the beast, a bird had probably made a nest somewhere under the car’s massive hood.

Glancing at the clock, York decided to postpone his inspection until the following morning. He’d spent most of the evening trying to locate the mystery noise. Considering it was almost midnight and he’d not even found a bird’s nest, much less a mechanical reason for the sound, York smacked his hand against the top of the grill and decided to tackle the problem once he’d had some sleep.

The car gave him almost as many headaches as its owner. York sighed. Mrs. Crowley didn’t have any family in Mistletoe Falls. Sometimes York wondered if she brought the car in more for his company than to fix any possible problems. Before he could head upstairs to his apartment over the shop, a strange sensation washed over him, one that surprised the ever-loving snowflake out of him.

Magic.

York straightened so fast his head hit the hood of the car. “Fudgesicles, that hurt.”

He rubbed his greasy palm over his aching head, then grumbled again, both at the grease he'd smeared into his hair and the egg-sized knot he'd managed to create.

Then his entire body tingled, and a shiver rushed down his spine.

He remembered that feeling.

But it couldn't be.

Could it?

York looked around to see if one of his cousins had managed to pull off a prank on him, but the shop remained silent. He wasn't surprised. As the only night owl of the cousins, York liked working when the rest of the town's residents were tucked up fast asleep in their beds, unable to stop by for quick, meaningless chats that annoyed the figgy pudding out of him.

He liked the silent nights, but maybe he was more tired than he realized if he was imagining magic. Magic had been waning in the human realm for decades, and the odds of it returning were as dim as the magic he had left. His body shook and a pull from deep in the earth surged through him, a direct challenge to his thoughts.

“What in the frosted chestnuts was that?”

The answer came seconds later when sparks began shooting out of his fingers.

Bright. Red. Sparks.

York dropped the wrench in his hand, ignoring the catastrophic clanging as it disappeared into the depths of the Cadillac's innards. He dashed to the back of his shop before taking the stairs two at a time, passing the second-floor entrance to his apartment, until he reached the door to the third-story roof.

The moment he stepped outside, his past and present collided.

Magic was back in Mistletoe Falls.

He watched the glowing tree in the center of town square and cackled as his own magic flooded back into him, the red sparks from his hands shooting

wildly around him.

Magic was back in Mistletoe Falls... which meant the Yule Lads could once again get up to snow good.



PRESENT DAY

“Frosted snickerdoodle antlers!”

York raised an eyebrow at the curse from his normally calm and collected cousin, Leif. He wiped his greasy hands on a shop cloth and walked through the open bay door toward the familiar voice outside. He found Leif struggling to maneuver a tightly bound tree from the roof of the little pickup York had spent the last several years keeping out of the junkyard. It was one pothole away from falling into a thousand pieces, no matter how hard York worked to keep it running. Leif would be better off driving a sleigh at this point. It would be more reliable.

“What are you doing?” York asked, not able to hide his smile as Leif fought the tree and lost.

Leif paused and glanced over his shoulder. The tree had somehow gotten tangled under the strap of Leif’s jean overalls, part of his Weston’s Tree Farm uniform. “Quit laughing at me and get over here.”

York tucked the dirty rag into his pocket but didn’t move. They’d had this conversation year after year. York always lost the fight, but he held on to the hope that one day his cousin would listen to him. “I don’t want a tree.”

“Yes.” Leif growled and tugged the tree harder. “*You.*” It slipped out of Leif’s hands, landed on the ground, and rolled until it reached York’s feet. “*Do!*”

Leif threw his hands up in a victory pose. “Ha! The universe has spoken, and it agrees with me.”

“We’ve discussed this,” York said, staring down at the evergreen brushing his booted toes. “I don’t do trees. I don’t do decorations. My talents lie in... other areas.”

Leif snorted. “As do mine, cousin. But we have also discussed the fact that we need to fit in around here, which means decorating. So shut your pie hole and help me get this absolutely perfect specimen of a tree into your apartment. We’ll put it in the front window so the entire town will think you’re as festive as everyone else.”

“Just because I loathe gaudy baubles and lights bright enough to illuminate the town doesn’t mean I’m not festive.”

Leif simply glared. There was no arguing with his stubborn cousin when it came to his love for Yuletide trees. The obsession had led to Leif taking a job at Weston’s Tree Farm, which gave him daily contact with the one and only Michael Weston, Jr, whom everyone called West. Every time Leif mentioned the man, elfing *hearts* formed in his eyes.

“West picked it out for you.”

And done.

Leif should have led with that argument in the first place. Instead, his cousin looped his thumbs through the straps of his overalls which made him appear even smaller than he already was. The red and black checked buffalo plaid didn’t help. Leif looked barely legal.

Of course, York valued his life and wouldn’t comment on West’s choices for his employees’ uniforms. No one argued with Leif when it came to West. His cousin dug in his heels like a Yule goat, and goddess help anyone who refused to back down. York wasn’t sure whether he more closely resembled a screaming goat or the more common head-butting version. Was there a combination of both? Because that was Leif where West was concerned.

With a grumble of discontent, York hefted the tree over his shoulder and carried it inside. “You’d think the name of my shop was festive enough for everyone,” York complained.

If he didn’t, Leif might think something was wrong with him. Better to keep up appearances.

“And you’ve spent the last *forever* years whining about it. I think Peppermint Condition Mechanics is the perfect name for your shop. Goddess, you’re such a grinch this year. Aren’t you the least bit excited about having our magic back? Think of all the fun we’re going to have tormenting the Sprites.”

Now that did bring a small smile to York’s face. He wondered if the Sprites even remembered the lore. Wherever there were Sprites, there were Yule Lads. The yin to their yang. The mischief makers to their merry makers.

It had been so long since they’d had their magic, though, it was hard to remember the good old days when they’d pranked the sprites while the sprites created their merriment. Besides, even though they all lived in the small town of Mistletoe Falls, the Lad cousins tended to stick to themselves. It wouldn’t surprise York one bit if the sprites had completely forgotten they existed.

Oh, they were all respectable members of the community and whatnot, but it wasn’t like York went to all the town’s events...or any of them unless Edgar forced him to be there. Even then, he always snuck out at the first opportunity.

He’d rather fix cars and ignore all the rest of the nonsense that came with living in the small Christmas-themed town they called home.

“Hey, York.” Leif’s voice had the oddest tone, not sounding nearly as sure of himself as he normally did.

York leaned the tree against the wall in his living room and turned to Leif. “What?”

“What do you call a penis wearing a Santa hat?”

York blinked. He couldn’t have heard that correctly. “What?”

“Jolly Old Saint Dick!” Leif doubled over with laughter before sinking down onto York’s leather sofa.

“Did you just...*why*...you know what, never mind.”

“It was funny, right?” Leif’s forehead creased with worry lines. “I’ve been trying to learn some jokes to make West laugh. He’s been so serious lately,

and he won't tell me what's got him stressed out."

"And you thought a dirty Santa joke was your best course of action?"

Leif shrugged. "I figured it was worth a shot. Nothing else is working."

"Well, it was funny as hell, so go for it. At the very least, you'll shock a smile out of him."

Leif grinned. "You still have the tree stand in the storage closet?"

"Yes."

"I'll go get it. Oh, and Uriel and Edgar are coming over. They wanted to make sure we're ready for the prank war to begin. I mean, we've been planning for a year, but you know Edgar."

York rubbed his forehead as his cousin left the room in search of the tree stand. He had no idea why the goddess had chosen to make Edgar a hyper-focused-on-details party planner on top of being a Yule Lad, but she had. York fondly remembered the days when they could prank spontaneously.

Those days were long past. Edgar wanted everything *planned*.

What was wrong with some old-fashioned coal in the stockings? No muss, no fuss. Just the way York liked it.

Then again....

York couldn't help but grin when he thought about their plans for the coming month. "You better watch out," York sang under his breath with a laugh.

"I heard that!" Leif held up the tree stand triumphantly and carried it over to the prime position in front of York's living room window.

York pretended he didn't know what his cousin meant. He lifted the tree once more so Leif could position the stand beneath it, and then adjusted it until Leif was satisfied with its straightness.

"Perfect. Now we need lights and decorations. Where did you put them? They weren't in the storage closet."

York pretended not to hear the question. "I think I hear Uriel and Edgar."

Leif gasped. “You got rid of your decorations? AGAIN? York!”

“It’s fine. I’ll throw some lights on the thing, and no one will know the difference from the street. Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

“Oh, I won’t. I’ll just tell Edgar and let him handle it.”

York huffed and went into his small kitchen to find a snack. He’d skipped dinner again, and if Edgar wanted to have *another* planning talk, it would probably last for hours.

His cousin always got wound up before one of his events. The parades the town hosted every weekend from Thanksgiving to Yule were starting in a couple days, and that meant their first round of mischief was afoot.

After selecting one of the muffins he’d picked up from Mistedough Bakery and adding it to the plate of leftover takeout he’d warmed up, York returned to the living room to find Leif looking out the window toward town square. York joined him, staring at the huge spruce that stood in recognition of the magic infused into Mistletoe Falls. Many years of magic from Sprites and Lads alike added fuel to the town, driving its holiday spirit. York hadn’t realized just how much their magic had dimmed until the sudden influx of it from the sprites the year before.

“It doesn’t feel real,” Leif said. “I keep thinking I’m imagining it all, and we’ll go back to the way it’s been for years.”

“You aren’t the only one. But we’ve spent the past year watching the Sprites glow with magic. We aren’t imagining that.”

Leif shot York a look. “And mates.”

“What?”

“Magic and mates. They’re all madly in love.”

York grunted. “Don’t confuse correlation and causation.”

“Excellent use of the terms, cousin,” Uriel said from the door of York’s apartment. “However, I believe there’s more of a connection than you’d care to admit. All four of the cousins found love over the course of a month. That reads as a connection to me.”

York grunted as Edgar came into the room behind their cousin, typing furiously into his phone. “Why am I in charge of wrangling this...this *heathen*?”

With a cackle, York left the window and sank down onto the couch. “Because you let the mayor rope you into planning the big charity thingy. Paint your head red and call you a sucker.”

“I’m not a sucker,” Edgar said, shooting a glare toward York. Then he snarled at the naked Yule tree in the window. “Where are your decorations?”

Leif’s evil laughter made York drop his head onto the back of the couch. The tattletale didn’t waste a second before betraying York. “He threw them away.”

And there it was.

The gasp of horror he’d been expecting, followed by a shriek of annoyance. “How *could* you?”

If York owned any fine crystal, it would have shattered. As it was, his eardrums might not recover and his already pounding head ached even more.

“I don’t like all that overly commercialized nonsense,” York said. “You know this.”

“You will go to Deck the Walls this weekend and pick out new ornaments, York Lad, or else *I* will decorate this entire apartment myself.”

York jerked his head up. “You wouldn’t.”

“Do not challenge me on this, cousin.”

York could only imagine what Edgar would do to his space. It would end up looking like one of the rooms at the Tinselled Inn. York shivered in horror at the thought. “I’ll get new decorations. I promise.”

Edgar huffed.

“And you,” Edgar spun and turned his glare to Uriel. “If you don’t get the front window of the bookstore decorated, I will also have to take matters into my own hands.”

Uriel held up his hands and slowly backed away. “I’ll have it done by the weekend. I was waiting for my order of holiday books to arrive. Which they did. This afternoon.”

“Last minute planning is not acceptable at this time of year,” Edgar said. “Now, onto our first order of business.”

York tuned out the planning phase and ate his food. He already dreaded going into the holiday extravaganza that was Deck the Walls to get new decor. He’d prefer to order some stuff online, but nothing would arrive in time to help him avoid Edgar’s wrath. At least this way, he had a smidgen of control over what would contaminate his space.

A spitball pegged him in the forehead. York looked up to find Leif doubled over with laughter as Edgar tucked his weapon of choice—a stainless steel straw—back into his coat pocket.

York grabbed the damp paper wad and glared. “I will end you.”

“If you’d been paying attention, you wouldn’t have fallen victim to my attack.”

“He did warn you,” Uriel said. “Out loud.”

York grumbled, flicked the spitball back at Edgar, wiped his hand on his jeans, then peeled the top off his muffin. The top was the best part anyway. Especially on the cinnamon crunch ones Nyall had at the bakery this week. “So, phase one is to change the decorations on the streetlights. Has anything changed in the few moments I took to eat my food?”

Edgar narrowed his gaze. “You’re trying my patience.”

“Pot, kettle.”

“Okay, Lads,” Leif said. “I know we’re all a little on the tense side while we wait to see if our magic really has returned, but now that we’re past Samhain and speeding toward Yule, I believe we’ll know soon enough.”

York rubbed the back of his neck, not wanting to admit that Leif was right. They’d been a little on edge all year, but now that the time for their magic to be at its height had come, York couldn’t help but worry.

Had their magic really returned, or was the prank really on them?

GABRIEL

Gabriel Baum stretched and let out a low groan. A grown man was not meant to spend weeks sleeping in a pop-up camper with something not at all mattress-like serving as his bedding. If the flatness of the cushion had anything to do with its age, it had to be older than Gabriel's quickly approaching thirtieth birthday. He should have bought one of those foam-toppers, but he'd had more important things to spend his limited money on at the time.

Then again, he hadn't intended on spending so long staying in the glorified tent. Gabriel ran his hand over his face. Who knew taking a risk and following your dreams would lead to your entire life falling apart?

Add to that the falling temperatures, and Gabriel wasn't a happy camper. Fortunately, it shouldn't be too cold to stay in the camper for the remainder of the weekend. After that, he'd have to come up with something else.

He shivered and pulled back the layers of blankets he'd piled on top of himself. A wriggle beneath the blankets let him know he wasn't the only one awake. "Bogie, is it time to wake up?"

Gabriel's corgi emerged from his nest near Gabriel's knees and flopped down beside Gabriel for his morning scratches. That lasted only a few seconds before it was time for a potty break. Gabriel put the kettle on the camper's small stove and lit the burner while his goofy dog stretched, groaned, and rolled around on the blankets, making sure to leave lots of tan and white fur everywhere.

“You do realize that I would buy you more treats if I didn’t have to buy so many fur removers. Half my life is spent lint rolling myself,”

After Bogie finished spreading his canine glitter all over the blankets, he waddled down the stairs by the bed Gabriel had built for his dog’s stubby yet adorable little legs. He went to the camper door to wait patiently for Gabriel to follow along. They spent a few minutes outside while Bogie found the perfect spot to do his business, then hurried back inside for breakfast.

Gabriel added some kibble to Bogie’s bowl before pouring hot water into his French press. He had few luxuries left, but he could still make a mean cup of coffee.

“Morning boys!”

Bogie’s butt wriggled out of control as he heard the voice of their host, Felicity Pine. Since Mistletoe Falls didn’t have a campground, Gabriel had used one of the many camping apps to find a location to camp off-grid. He was extremely lucky that Felicity and her husband had welcomed both him and Bogie for the whole of Thanksgiving weekend, even though they had family in town for the holiday. She’d even invited them to her family dinner the day before, which Gabriel had gratefully accepted.

It had been a while since Gabriel had been around a normal family at the holidays. He’d have to find a way to thank her one day when he wasn’t so underwater with everything in his life. The last time he’d seen eaten such a huge Thanksgiving dinner had been years before when his family still went to his grandmother’s house for the holiday. He’d not realized how much he missed the tradition until he’d experienced it again.

“Morning, Mrs. Felicity,” Gabriel said, opening the camper door once more. He forced a smile onto his face, refusing to fall into the case of holiday blues that continued to hang threateningly over his head. Bogie bounded out and wriggled his way through her legs until she finally put the tray in her hands onto the wooden picnic table at the camping spot and gave in to his demands.

“Brought you some breakfast and a leftovers lunch for the craft fair today. I have no doubt you’ll be too busy to take time for much of a break. And yes, you cute little muffin,” Felicity said, continuing to scratch Bogie’s favorite spot beneath his ears, “I even packed a little something for you.”

If he didn't know better, Gabriel would think she'd gone into his camper and noticed how empty his cabinets were. They wouldn't be that way for long, though. From what he'd been told, his hand-crafted ornaments would sell like hotcakes at the Mistletoe Falls Craft Fair. He'd used the last of his savings to buy enough supplies to get him fully stocked for the event.

"Don't look so worried, Gabriel. You'll do well. I'm looking forward to seeing your booth. My sisters and I will be in town around lunchtime."

"Thanks, Felicity. And thanks for bringing us food. I hadn't thought about it, to be honest."

"You boys never do," Felicity teased. "Now get yourselves fed and get into town. I made sure you got a good spot right in front of the bakery."

"You did?"

A spot right on town square would put him front and center. He'd never wanted to hug someone so badly in his life.

Felicity smiled. "I do have a few connections."

"And you aren't afraid to use them," Gabriel said as he gave into the urge and gave her a giant hug.

"Now you're catching on. You better get on into town. You can park behind Mistletoe Bakery."

"Another connection?"

"Yep. Plus the promise of one of my turkey casseroles. The boy can bake, but Nyall's still got a lot to learn in the kitchen."

Considering the amazing meal Felicity had served the day before, Gabriel could believe it. He hurried back into the camper and changed clothes, then wrangled Bogie into a holiday sweater. After grabbing their breakfasts and the lunch bag from Felicity, Gabriel loaded Bogie into the ancient Jeep Wagoneer he'd been driving since his teenage years.

"Hold on, Bertha." Gabriel patted the Jeep's dashboard gently. "We've gotta get through another couple months, then you're getting a glorious tune up."

The Jeep sputtered to life. Gabriel thanked his lucky stars as he made the short trip into town. He parked behind the bakery, as instructed, before going to town hall to get his booth's location. Felicity hadn't been kidding. She'd managed to get him one of the best booths, right on town square. Hope filled him for the first time in months.

If everything sold....

But no, he wouldn't put the cart before the horse. Or the reindeer before the sleigh in this case. Other people bustled around, gathering their maps, and filling out any last-minute paperwork required to be a vendor. The town had surprisingly strict policies as to what could be sold at the event. Luckily, handcrafted ornaments and decor fit their standards.

With Bogie at his side, Gabriel hurried back to the jeep and began carrying the dozens of bins he'd carefully packed to his designated location. The smells coming from the bakery made his stomach growl, but Gabriel resisted temptation and got to work getting everything set up.

By the time he'd finished, Gabriel's stomach flipped with nerves instead of hunger. He had so much riding on this event. The booth looked good though, even if it was a lot simpler than those around his.

"What is this?"

The surly voice behind him scared Gabriel so badly he grabbed a decorated evergreen branch and swung around, wielding it as a weapon.

"En garde?" A ridiculously handsome man stood behind him, sunlight reflected artfully off his shiny dark hair.

Gabriel laughed. "Sorry. You startled me."

Gabriel swallowed hard as the guy lifted the corner of his mouth in a smirk that caused his stomach to flip for a much different reason. He tore his gaze away from the guy's mouth, then wished he hadn't.

Twinkly eyes were a weakness of his, and this guy had them.

Oh boy, did he.

He also had a black mark on his face. Gabriel forgot his words but reached

out to remove the spot before jerking his hand away. He'd almost brushed his fingers over a stranger's cheek. *What was wrong with him?*

"Grease?"

"Is the word?" Gabriel replied without thinking.

Twinkle eyes laughed. "On my face. I'm York, by the way. And you're Gabriel?"

Gabriel took a step back. "How did you—"

"Uh, the sign has your name on it?"

Gabriel turned around and glanced at the booth. Sure enough, the sign with Gabriel's name hung right where he'd put it on the front of the booth. *Gabriel's Handmade Ornaments*. It wasn't fancy or particularly clever, but then again, neither was Gabriel.

"Right. Yes, it does."

York chuckled. "Did you make all this stuff?"

Gabriel shot a quick glance toward York to see if the odd tone meant he didn't like Gabriel's work. But he seemed intrigued, not put off. "I did. Everything's handmade."

"It's nice. Uh, yeah. I'm going to get a muffin and get back to work. Good luck today."

Gabriel nodded as York walked into Mistletoe Bakery. "What just happened?"

Bogie waddled out from under the table and stood at Gabriel's side. He didn't seem to have an answer either. Luckily, Gabriel didn't have any more time to think about it. The clock on top of town hall chimed the hour and visitors began to swarm the square.

He was officially open for business.

Hours later, Gabriel collapsed onto the ground next to Bogie. His once perfectly organized booth looked like it had been run over by a stampeding herd of holiday goats.

Most of the display stands were empty. Gabriel had completely underestimated how much demand there would be for his pieces. *Vastly underestimated.*

“At least clean-up will be quick?” Gabriel said.

Bogie woofed his agreement.

“Need a hand?”

Gabriel recognized the voice. He’d only imagined it a hundred times that day. York of the sexy smirk and twinkling eyes leaned over the front of the booth and smiled down at him.

“I think I need a brain.”

York grinned. “If I had one, I’d give it to you. I should have grabbed some ornaments this morning. I’m bummed I missed out.”

“Oh, I have more for tomorrow,” Gabriel said, finally managing to stand. “Not as many as I had today, but I did hold a few things back.”

“Then I’ll have to make sure to be here early tomorrow.”

Gabriel’s stomach did the flips again. It was probably hunger. It wasn’t like he’d eaten much. The lunch Felicity packed had been nibbled on in short bursts when he could grab a bite between checking out customers.

Yeah, hunger pangs. That explained it. “I’ll, um, save you whatever you want.”

York’s lip curled up again. That *smirk*, and yep, the eye twinkle followed. “You’d do that for me?”

“Uh, yes. Sure. I can. I mean, I will. Yes.”

“And what about my other question?”

Gabriel blinked. “Other question?”

“Want some help packing up?”

“Oh...um....” *Yes, please, don’t leave. Stay here and keep smiling at me.*

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. Where are your bins and stuff?”

Gabriel pulled his carefully labeled bins from beneath the tables. “There isn’t much to pack up.”

“We established that already. You hungry?”

Gabriel paused with one of his handmade birch branch display stands in his hands. “Uh....”

“Yeah, I figured. You’re kinda out of it. Probably oughta bring some lunch tomorrow so you don’t get low blood sugar. Let’s get packed up, and I’ll take you for food.”

“Uh....” Bogie yipped and snapped Gabriel out of his daze. “Right. Hungry. But what about Bogie?”

“Bogie, huh? Like golf?”

“What? Oh, golf. No. Bogie as in Humphrey Bogart.”

“Ah, *Casablanca*. Or are you more of a *Maltese Falcon* kind of guy?”

“*African Queen*,” Gabriel said. He couldn’t help but grin as he put his handmade birch display stand in its designated bin.

“I like old movies,” York said.

Gabriel did too. He swallowed hard and blinked as York folded up the banner from the front of the booth and handed it to Gabriel who tucked it away. At least he finally moved, instead of staring at York and making a fool out of himself.

Fortunately, it only took them a few minutes to have the remaining items packed up, and then York lifted several bins like it was the easiest thing in the world. “Where’d you park?”

Smirk, twinkly eyes, *and* bulging biceps.

Gabriel was doomed. “Oh, um, behind the bakery.”

York paused. “Prime booth position *and* a close parking spot. You have connections.”

“Well, *I* don’t. I’m camping out at Felicity Pine’s. She apparently made a few calls.”

“Yeah, she does that. Good lady. Takes good care of her vehicles. Oil changes and tune-ups like clockwork. Makes a hell of a turkey casserole, too.”

It was an odd statement, but with his hands full of bins and Bogie’s leash, Gabriel didn’t comment. He led the way to the Wagoneer, then sat his bins on the ground so he could fish out his keys.

York let out a low whistle. “An antique.”

“Hey, don’t talk about Bertha that way. She’s sensitive.”

“Bertha?” York ran his hand over the wood paneling on Bertha’s side before shooting a glare toward Gabriel. “This beauty deserves a much more glamorous name. They don’t make ’em like this anymore.”

“She came with the name. It stuck.”

“Hmm.”

Gabriel wasn’t sure what York meant by the sound. He used his key to open the back and began loading bins into it. York helped, and when the last bin was loaded, they ended up standing nearly nose to nose.

“You’re interesting,” York mumbled.

“That’s....” Gabriel couldn’t finish the thought.

Interesting? Was that good or bad? Sexy he understood, not that anyone had ever described him that way. But interesting? Was that another way of saying weird? Because weird might as well be tattooed across Gabriel’s ass. He waved his weird flag high, or whatever.

York smirked. “You definitely need food. Come on, Bogie.” York shut the back of the Jeep, then grabbed Gabriel’s keys from the lock. He turned to Gabriel with that smirk again. “You coming?”

“Yeah.”

Gabriel followed along, watching as his dog pranced beside York. Why did Bogie walk with York and not him? Why was Gabriel following a stranger at all? Maybe he really was having a blood sugar issue because he wasn't acting rationally. Was he?

Then again, it wasn't like York led them toward some dark alley. No, they were walking back to town square which was well-lit and still bustled with people.

York paused at the corner and waited for Gabriel to catch up. Then they walked across the street and around the square toward a diner on the corner. Carols and Crepes had been busy all day. From the view at his booth, Gabriel had noticed the flow of people in and out of the restaurant.

And he'd caught whiffs of something delicious in between the amazing smells coming from the bakery. A lady bearing a striking resemblance to Mrs. Claus met them at the front of the diner. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw York.

“Evening, Ms. Carol,” York said. “Table for two and a furry friend.”

She glanced down, and like everyone who caught a glance of Bogie's cuteness, bent to coo over him. He commenced with the butt wiggles, much to her delight. She stood up with a beaming smile.

“Right this way.”

After directing them to a corner booth and providing a little mat for Bogie to lay on, she wandered away again.

Gabriel looked around the place and couldn't help but comment on the over-the-top decor. “Someone likes Santa.”

York shrugged. “This is mild.”

Mild?

Every inch of wall space had some item of Santa-themed decor on it. There were Santas of every age, shape, size, and color. Gabriel let out a sigh of relief, then noticed York's puzzled frown.

“What was that sigh for?” York asked.

“Oh,” Gabriel said and laughed. “I’m relieved I didn’t see this before I came to the Mistletoe Falls Craft Fair. I’d never have believed my ornaments would sell.”

“But they did. You shouldn’t doubt yourself.”

Gabriel scowled at the all-knowing tone in York’s voice. Before he could reply, Carol appeared with two glasses of water and a tea set.

“Give it three more minutes to brew. York, set a timer. This poor thing has been outside all day. We need to warm him up.”

“Yes, Ms. Carol.”

“You think you’re charming me, young man, but I’ve not fallen for it in the years I’ve known you and I’m not fallin’ for it now.”

“Aww, come on. After all I did for Rudolph?”

Carol cackled. “Okay, I’ll give you that one. Order will be up in a minute. Get some tea in this boy.”

“On it.”

Carol wandered away again, and Gabriel blinked in confusion. “Did I miss the part where we ordered?”

“Nope. You don’t order from Carols and Crepes after the craft fair. It’s a thing.”

“But—”

“You’ll like it. Wait, you aren’t vegetarian or something?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll like it.”

“But what if I have food allergies?”

“Do you?”

Gabriel shook his head.

“There you go then.”

Gabriel looked down at Bogie who appeared to be gnawing happily on a bone that hadn't been there a moment before. “When did...oh forget it. This town is bizarre.”

York grinned as his watch beeped. He removed the tea bag from the pot, then poured tea into two ceramic mugs sitting on the table. He pushed over a little pot of honey before he leaned back in his seat. “Mistletoe Falls is charming, or so I'm told.”

“You think it's weird, too,” Gabriel said, also not fooled by York for one second. Huh. He wasn't normally good at reading people, but he could see the sweet mischief in York's expression.

“Oh, absolutely,” York said. “But charming too. I guess the weird is part of its charm? Hmm. I don't know. All I know is here comes the after-Thanksgiving special. I've been waiting a whole year for this meal.”

Carol placed two heaping plates in front of them with a beaming smile. “My famous cranberry chicken with homemade mashed potatoes and roasted veggies. Leave room for dessert, though. Nyall's white chocolate cranberry cheesecake is not something you want to miss.”

She scurried away again, then returned with a bowl of something that looked suspiciously like...dog food?

“For the handsomest boy in the room,” Carol said gesturing to Bogie. “He doesn't have any food allergies, does he?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Why didn't you ask me about my food allergies?”

“You don't have any, do you?”

“Well, no, but how did you—”

“Silly boy. Eat your food before it gets cold. And drink that tea. You look like you need a little pep in your step.”

Carol sped away again after leaving a bowl of plain chicken, carrots, and

green beans next to Bogie. He'd be spoiled rotten at this rate, not that he wasn't already.

Gabriel returned his attention to the table and found York already eating. He didn't look at all apologetic, especially considering the filthy moan he let out after taking a bite.

"Really, York." Gabriel pretended to be scandalized instead of thoroughly enjoying the sound and hoping to hear it again.

"So good," York said, his voice muffled by the food in his mouth.

"It'd be better if you, I don't know, chewed."

York didn't bother responding. He simply waved his fork over Gabriel's plate in a *start eating* gesture, then shoveled in another forkful.

Gabriel sliced a piece of chicken, dabbed it in the creamy mashed potatoes, then added a green bean to the end. A perfect bite. He popped it into his mouth and closed his eyes as the rich flavors rolled over his tongue. He'd been living on noodles and whatever was on sale at the grocery store for the past few months, so a real, home-cooked meal was worth savoring.

He resisted the urge to moan, but when he opened his eyes, he found York looking across the table with what Gabriel had quickly come to think of as his knowing smirk.

"It's very good," Gabriel said.

"Just wait until you have dessert."

Gabriel was pretty sure York wasn't offering himself up as the final course, but Gabriel's mind certainly went there. "I can't wait."

YORK

One hundred and forty-seven. Nope, make that a hundred and forty-eight.

York hadn't exactly thought through the plan of inviting Gabriel to dinner at Carol's. It just sort of happened. Gabriel had captured his attention in a way that had kept his thoughts on the man and his sweet little corgi for the entire day. And that? Well, that never happened to York, which was how he found himself in his current situation.

For the past however many years Carol had been making her post-craft fair special, York had taken his order to go. It wasn't antisocial of him, a lot of townsfolk did the same thing. The craft fair started the holiday season in Mistletoe Falls and the lead-up meant a lot of work for everyone. The reward at the end was a delicious meal they could only get once a year.

The reason for the now one hundred and fifty-plus looks from his nosy neighbors was the fact that York never ate *inside* the kitschy restaurant. *Ever*. Sitting inside the diner invited conversations that York had zero interest in having. And the amount of times someone approached him to describe the weird noises their car happened to be making and ask if he had any idea what it could be...well, those would be unstoppable if he was trapped at a table in the diner eating.

Carol had already made twelve phone calls. York could make an educated guess as to at least three of the recipients. He'd never hear the end of it from his cousins.

"Um, you okay?" Gabriel asked.

“Yeah. So, how do you feel about small-town gossip?”

“Feel? I...I’m not a huge fan of gossip in general.”

York nodded. “I probably should have thought of that before I brought you to dinner. I don’t, uh, normally—”

“Invite strangers to dinner?”

“Well, that too,” York said. “I’m kind of a loner. Carol’s having the time of her life telling everyone I’m here with a guy. A hot guy, at that.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened. “I’m not...I mean...I’m not sure what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. It’s worth it. I get to have dinner with you and Bogie. Trust me, the pleasure is well worth a little gossip.”

Gabriel’s cheeks brightened to a shade of pink like the one they’d been earlier from the chilled fall air. The sight pulled at York’s belly, warming him more than the rich meal they’d just eaten.

But why?

York pushed the question aside as Carol carried a tray their direction. There wasn’t a better way to finish Carol’s amazing meal than with Nyall’s fantastic dessert. Gabriel was in for a treat.

“Now, I brought some more tea, Gabriel. It’s my special cinnamon blend.”

York whistled and leaned back in his chair. “Not the legendary cinnamon blend. Carol, you’ve not once offered me your special tea in all the years I’ve known you.”

She scoffed and kept her attention on Gabriel. “You’re too sweet for words, Gabriel. Why, Felicity told me that you helped get her yard cleaned up before her grandkids came. And then wouldn’t let her pay you a dime even though...well, never you mind, you’re a good one. Too good for this one, likely. He’s a rascal.” Carol looked over at York and winked. “Then again, bad boys do have a certain appeal.”

“Hey!” York protested but couldn’t help his grin.

Gabriel’s breath caught, and he flushed even brighter. “I do have a type,”

Gabriel said, glancing up at Carol with a grin.

“So do I, sweetheart. If only I was forty years younger. Now, eat your cheesecake and drink your tea. Oh, and I had my granddaughter bring over one of my Momma’s quilts. Felicity says you’re sleeping in some sort of glorified tent in this cold.”

“I—”

“I didn’t even have a chance to look at your ornaments today,” Carol continued. “Can’t have you coming down with a chill. Felicity said Joy Crawley bought half your stock.”

Gabriel opened his mouth to reply but Carol kept talking.

“She should have saved something for the rest of us. Then again, she does give the sweetest gifts every year, so perhaps she plans on gifting them to us. Oh, I’ll have to call Felicity and see what she thinks.”

Carol rushed off leaving Gabriel looking confused.

York laughed. “Better save her something tomorrow. She’ll brag about it for weeks if you do. Heck, probably months.”

York poured some of the cinnamon tea into Gabriel’s cup before leaning back with a grin. It was fun seeing people’s reaction to Nyall’s cheesecake. It had a cult following. Edgar said there were entire threads online where bakers tried to figure out the recipe. So far, no one had succeeded.

He only had to wait a second for Gabriel to put a forkful of deliciousness in his mouth.

Gabriel’s eyes widened as he slowly chewed. Then he swallowed hard and glanced up. “What is this magic?”

York laughed and once more drew Carol’s unwavering attention. *Dammit*. He didn’t care though. The sparkle in Gabriel’s eyes as he dove in for another bite, the second one much larger than the first, made all the gossipmongering worth it.

“That is Nyall’s white chocolate cranberry cheesecake.”

Gabriel took a sip of tea, then shot the flirtiest grin York had ever seen in his direction. “So, is this Nyall single?”

York snickered, pleased more than he understood by Gabriel’s teasing. “You’re out of luck. Madly in love with some big shot reporter.”

“Well, damn.” Gabriel teased his fork around the plate for a second before looking up at York. “And, um, how about you?”

“Single all the way.”

Gabriel leaned his head to the side a bit and narrowed his eyes. “Was that a pun? Are you being punny?”

“I don’t know, Angel. But I’d love to have you on top of my tree.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened again before he started choking on his tea. Carol came running and chaos commenced as she thumped Gabriel on the back while Bogie barked his adorable head off. York ended up hauling the dog onto his lap and giving him pets while Carol fussed over Gabriel.

When Gabriel finally convinced her that he was okay, Carol walked away, shooting a glare at York. Funnily enough, Gabriel had a similar expression on his face.

“I almost died,” Gabriel hissed. “And you made an angel pun? Not original. I expected better from you.”

“Well, I thought it was better than checking the tag on your sweater to see if it said, ‘Made in Heaven.’”

Gabriel groaned. “Bogie, you traitor. Get off his lap and come comfort me. I’ve been traumatized by angel jokes.”

Bogie wiggled until York put him down. He immediately bounced at Gabriel’s feet until he was once more picked up. York took the opportunity to pour himself a cup of coffee strong enough to keep him up half the night into the Santa mug Carol had left by the carafe. She may give him a hard time at every opportunity, but the woman made him extra strong coffee any time he came by to pick up food.

Gabriel’s gaze softened, and he took another bite of cheesecake. “You’re on

the naughty list.”

“Exactly where I’m supposed to be,” York teased, even though the words carried more truth than Gabriel knew.

“I suppose I should get back to the camper. It’s going to be another long day tomorrow.”

York didn’t miss the reluctance in Gabriel’s tone. He didn’t want the evening to end either. “I’ll walk you to your Jeep. Got to get one more look at that beauty.”

“Between Bertha and Bogie, it’s a wonder anyone notices me at all.”

Gabriel looked over his shoulder and waved to get Carol’s attention. She smiled and ignored him. York cackled at his exasperated sigh. Why was every single thing Gabriel did sweeter than a candy cane? “The bill’s already taken care of.”

“What? How did you—”

“She put it on my tab,” York explained. “I invited you to dinner. I pay.”

“That’s...” Gabriel paused and chewed on his lip. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s get you two angels back to heaven.”

Gabriel stood with Bogie in his arms, and the moment York moved beside him, he got a gentle elbow to the ribs. “Cut it out.”

“Why? You’re too cute not to flirt with. What do you want from me?”

Gabriel grinned. “You just like my Jeep. And my dog. Maybe both.”

“Maybe all three. You’re a triple threat, Gabriel. Just my luck, huh? I meet a gorgeous man with a perfect car and the cutest dog, and he’s not from around here.”

York didn’t give Gabriel a chance to respond. He simply adjusted the bag filled with an oversized quilt Carol had slipped him when Gabriel wasn’t looking and tucked his hand around Gabriel’s waist. He led Gabriel, sputtering and all, outside. His stunned silence continued until they reached his car.

Bogie began to wiggle again. Gabriel knelt and placed him on the ground where he began to sniff around the bushes. "I, uh...thanks again for dinner."

York hadn't expected Gabriel's awkwardness. Most of the time, his flirtations led to something steamier by the time he reached this part of the evening. Then again, he hadn't been thinking of trying to convince Gabriel to come home with him.

Huh. Maybe something weird was going on after all. He'd already broken a half dozen of his rules for Gabriel, and he barely knew him. And York *wanted* to get to know Gabriel. Definitely weird.

"I, uh, guess I'll get going."

York shook his head, trying to remove the snowflakes flying around in it. Goddess, his head might as well be a glitter-filled snow globe. Something about Gabriel had his tinsel in a tangle, that was for sure. "I'll see you in the morning."

Gabriel smiled and helped Bogie into the Jeep. "I'm looking forward to it."

York leaned against the open door as Gabriel settled himself behind the wheel. He resisted the urge to lean in and instead handed over the bag from Carol before closing the door.

Gabriel smiled and twisted the keys.

The Jeep gurgled.

Gabriel's eyes widened, and he shook his head before twisting the keys again.

This time, poor Bertha clunked.

York held up his hand. "Stop. Pop the hood."

Gabriel did, and York moved to the front of the vehicle.

"She's never made that sound before," Gabriel said, leaning out of the once again open door.

"I'd hope not. Try one more time," York said.

Gabriel winced and tried again. The ca-chug sound might as well have been the engine's death knell.

"Way to bust my baubles, Bertha," Gabriel groaned. "You only had to hold out for another few weeks."

"Don't give up on her," York said. "Let's get her to the shop, and I'll see what I can do."

"The shop?"

York grinned. "You lucked upon Mistletoe Falls's number one mechanic."

"Seriously?"

"Proud owner of Peppermint Condition Mechanics, at your service."

"Pepper...you're kidding."

"Nope. My cousins named the shop, and well, it stuck." York held out his hand. "Come on. Grab Bogie. I'll get you settled and bring the tow truck over."

"Oh...I...uh...that's really not in the budget," Gabriel said. "Thank you, though."

"Don't worry about it," York said. "The shop is two blocks away. Just let me take a look at her, and we'll figure out what to do from there."

Gabriel leaned his head against the doorframe. "You're sure?"

York didn't like the defeated tone. His stomach turned as he watched the earlier lightness fade from Gabriel's face.

"Yeah. It's not a problem at all." York closed the hood and moved around to Gabriel's door. "These old girls shake things loose sometimes. That's probably all it is."

Gabriel didn't believe York's lie any more than York did. It was hard to mistake the sounds the Jeep had made as anything other than something very bad.

"Thanks, York."

Gabriel helped Bogie out of the Jeep. York led them the couple blocks to the shop. He hesitated for a second, then glanced over at Gabriel. "I'm going to get you two settled upstairs in my apartment. This is going to take a little while."

"I—"

"—need to get some rest. It was a long day today, and tomorrow will be too. You might as well be comfortable while Bertha and I have a little chat."

Gabriel let out a breath. "Yeah. I don't know what I'm going to do if it's as bad as it sounded."

York nodded. "I get that."

He led them upstairs. Gabriel looked around and smiled at the bare tree in front of the window. "It'll be pretty when it's decorated."

"So says my cousin. I've gotta get it done or he's threatened to decorate it himself. Trust me when I tell you I do *not* want that to happen. It'll make Carol's place look downright unfestive."

Gabriel scoffed. "Not possible."

"Oh believe me, it is. Now, bathroom's back there. Kitchen's that way. Remotes for the television are in the basket. Make yourself at home and I'll let you know when I have news."

Gabriel handed over the keys and sank down on the couch. Bogie jumped up onto his lap and flopped down with a huff. York walked away to the sight of them curled up together.

It absolutely didn't send a warm feeling through his belly.

And he absolutely didn't have the same feeling hours later as he walked upstairs, ready to deliver the worst possible news, only to see Gabriel curled up on the couch with the thick sherpa blanket York kept on the back. Bogie's head popped up from behind the bend in Gabriel's knees.

York sucked in a breath, then blew it out. He needed his head examined. Maybe he'd been spending too much time with Leif. His cousin was always googly-eyed over West. Maybe it was contagious.

Plus, he'd had more than one of Nyall's desserts in the same day. York knew more than anyone what a sprite's magic was capable of.

Gabriel's eyes opened slowly, and he blinked in confusion for a minute before realizing where he was. He noticed York and sat up.

"Well, I've got good news and bad news," York said. "I can fix her, but it's gonna take a few days to get the parts in. I'll make a few calls in the morn—well, in a couple hours, actually. I have some friends in the junk business, so I'll probably be able to get everything pretty cheap."

He'd never lied through his teeth so thoroughly.

"Really?" Gabriel's smile lit up his face.

He jumped up from the couch and ran to York. A second later, York had his arms full of Gabriel, who'd wrapped him in the tightest hug he'd ever received. It took him a moment to return the gesture.

It was his worst mistake of the night.

Because he never wanted to let go.

GABRIEL

The second morning of the craft fair was as hectic as the first. The line in front of Gabriel's booth formed before he'd even finished setting up, which was one more thing to add to York's ever-growing tab. York had driven him out to the camper, loaded up his remaining bins, then helped him unpack and set up everything.

Gabriel blinked and suddenly it was lunchtime. He'd not even had a moment to sit down. Luckily, Felicity showed up to check on him and offered to cover the booth for a few minutes so he could take a break.

"Thanks, Felicity," Gabriel said, smothering his yawn. "I could use a minute, and so could Bogie."

"You take that sweet boy for a walk around the square. And get some cocoa for goodness sakes."

"Yes, ma'am."

She huffed but grinned. "The girls will be so jealous that I get to sit back here. Oh, and I hope you don't mind, but I accepted a few orders for wreaths on your behalf."

Felicity handed him a sheet of old-fashioned legal paper, the yellow pad kind he'd not seen in forever. He didn't know people still used that kind of thing. But when he unfolded it, he saw her neat script with names going all the way down the page.

Gabriel coughed. "A few?"

“A few dozen. It’s fine. I suppose you’ll have to stay a bit longer. And oh, shucks. Since your Jeep is in the shop, you have to anyway.”

If he didn’t know better, he’d blame Bertha’s demise on Felicity. But his poor old Jeep had needed work long before he’d come to Mistletoe Falls. “Very sneaky.”

“I try.”

“And I suppose you have a plan for me to get all the supplies I need for these orders to town before York fixes Bertha?”

Her dismissive scoff shouldn’t have been as funny as it was. “By the way, Joy Crawley wanted you to come decorate her whole house. I told her you were booked up. I know, it was evil of me to speak for you like that, especially when Bertha’s repairs might be costly, but honestly, if you’re decorating anyone’s house, it’ll be mine.”

“I don’t do houses.”

“Exactly. Yes, say that.” Felicity bumped him out of the way. The gleam in her eyes equaled that of a queen surveying her kingdom.

Gabriel laughed and picked up the bag he’d set aside earlier in the day. After grabbing Bogie’s leash, he crossed the street and walked toward Carols and Crepes. The diner was packed, unsurprisingly, which made it the perfect time to drop off his gift.

He hadn’t counted on Carol spying him from across the diner and squealing his name. She came running, her red and white gingham apron twirling around her. Then he was wrapped in a hug like they were family. She squeezed him for several minutes before letting him go and putting her hands on his cheeks. Was everyone in Mistletoe Falls so affectionate?

“My sweet boy. I heard what happened. Your poor car. Don’t you worry. York will take good care of her. He really is the best. Why, he’s kept his cousin’s sorry excuse for a truck running for much longer than it should have. And don’t get me started on my poor Rudolph. York finally convinced me it was time to let the old boy go, but he helped me get Blitzen, so it all worked out in the end.”

“Thanks, Ms. Carol,” Gabriel said. He’d only understood half of what she said, but a bit of gratitude seemed appropriate. “I, um, brought you something. I found this a while back and...well, it didn’t fit in with everything I usually make, but now I know it was supposed to be for you.”

Gabriel handed over the brown paper bag with his logo stamped onto it. His hand shook a bit. His nerves were a mess and he really hoped she liked the gift.

She squealed again. “For me!” Then she tore into the bag with gusto. Her gasp when she pulled out the ornament silenced the entire diner. “Gabriel!”

He’d found a stack of old holiday cards at a thrift shop a while back. One of them had an Victorian Santa. The image had called to him for some reason, even though it was completely opposite from the rustic woodland style he normally chose. After sealing the image in resin to protect it, Gabriel had hand-beaded an ornate frame to surround it.

Needless to say, it wasn’t like anything else he sold in his shop, so he’d not put it out with his other wares. Now he understood why. Carol had tears in her eyes as she held it up, showing it off to all the diner’s customers.

Gabriel was sure his cheeks were Santa-red as a result.

Carol wrapped him up in a hug again, nearly squeezing the air out of him. “Oh, thank you so much, you sweet man. Since you’re here, would you mind running York’s lunch order over to him? He’s planning to pick it up in half an hour, but it’s ready early. I’d hate for it to get cold.”

Gabriel gave her *the look*. “Ms. Carol, are you being sneaky? I’m sensing a Carol and Felicity scheme here.”

“Who me?” She fluttered her lashes at him. “Go on. You know you want to get a peek at that handsome face.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“I’m only going because I want to get an update on the hunt for parts for Bertha.”

“I’m sure that’s all it is, sweetheart. You keep telling yourself that story and

I'll pretend to believe it. Oh, and there might be enough food in there for you and a little something for Bogie, too."

"This was a coordinated effort." Gabriel glanced over his shoulder to his booth where Felicity appeared to be selling one of his most expensive wreaths.

Carol giggled and patted his arm before handing over a heavy bag. "Poor deluded boy. It's okay. You'll get used to us eventually."

Gabriel wasn't sure he would. "What do I owe you?"

Carol scoffed. "After that beautiful ornament? Nope. Lunch is on me. One time offer, so don't expect it again."

Gabriel didn't believe her for a second. Just like he hadn't believed York the night before when he'd claimed Bertha's problems weren't that bad. Gabriel shook his head and left the diner with Bogie in tow. Multiple visitors stopped them to coo at Bogie in his hand-knitted sweater. If Gabriel didn't watch out, his dog would become the town's mascot.

Both bay doors at Peppermint Condition Mechanics were open and from the clanging noises, York was hard at work inside.

"Knock, knock," Gabriel called. "Lunch delivery has arrived."

York rolled out from beneath Bertha and smiled. "It's not lunchtime yet."

"Sneaky Carol is sneaky," Gabriel said. "Plus she had help from Felicity."

"Thick as thieves, those two. Let me wash up and we can eat."

York gestured to a folding table toward the back of the shop. Gabriel took the food over and began setting it out. York cleaned up, then carried over a ridiculously fluffy pillow covered in cherubic reindeer. "This mysteriously appeared at my door earlier. I have a feeling it wasn't a gift for me."

Bogie clambered onto the bed, then spun around in a few circles before collapsing into the fluff.

"So weird. Right?"

York nodded. "And now we have the matchmakers after us. I only have

myself to blame. You couldn't have known what I was getting you into when I asked you to dinner."

Gabriel sat down and stared at the neatly packaged mystery lunch. "I think I would have still said yes."

"Now *that* is weird," York said, the twinkle stronger than ever in his eyes.

"So, tell me the truth," Gabriel said. "How bad is it?"

York shoved a giant forkful of food into his mouth and gave a muffled reply.

"I'll wait." Gabriel put his elbows on the table and propped his chin on his hands.

York chewed slowly. When he finally swallowed, he narrowed his gaze at Gabriel. "It's Saturday. I haven't finished making calls yet."

"Uh-huh. How bad is it, York?"

York shrugged. "Could be worse. I'd plan on staying a few days if I were you. It's going to take me a bit to get her up and running."

Gabriel had been afraid of that. He pulled out his phone, hoping the weather report from a few days ago had changed. He'd wanted to make sure the weather for the fair was nice before making the trip. The weekend looked great, perfect craft fair weather in fact. The few days following, on the other hand, were going to be cold.

"You aren't eating," York said, putting down his fork and leaning forward.

How to explain? He was broke, and the money he'd managed to make at the craft fair would no doubt go toward Bertha's repairs. He'd been counting on that money to put down a deposit on an apartment before winter.

"It's...I just have some things to rearrange to stay. I'll figure it out. But I'd better get back to the booth. I left Felicity unattended and who knows what she's gotten up to."

York covered his meal and stood. "I'll walk you—"

"You stay. Eat your lunch so it doesn't get cold."

York frowned but didn't sit back down. "You think I want to miss seeing what Felicity did in your absence? You're obviously new here."

The teasing fell a little flat. The eye twinkle wasn't there. But Gabriel appreciated the gesture anyway. He wrapped his scarf a little tighter around his neck and braced himself to find his holly jolly in time to charm his customers. "Thanks, York. For everything."

"Meh. Gives me something to do. This weekend is always slow for me. Plus, I like a challenge."

And the twinkle was back. Gabriel's breath caught and he couldn't help but smile. "Bertha is a challenge. I believe in you, though."

"Who says I'm talking about Bertha? It's Bogie I've gotta win over."

York winked and patted his thigh. Bogie, the traitor, went running. York grabbed Bogie's leash, then held out his elbow. Gabriel tucked his hand in it, and they made the short walk toward town.

They barely reached town square before York cackled. Gabriel frowned. "What?"

"Meddling busybodies."

"Huh?"

York shook his head. "Don't worry about it. And, uh, is it me or is your booth...empty?"

Gabriel glanced toward the booth and found several women standing there with Felicity looking...very mischievous. However, as to his booth, it didn't appear that a single item remained.

They crossed the street and Felicity called out. "Gotcha! Mistletoe alert. Pucker up, boys!"

She giggled like a schoolgirl.

York glanced at Gabriel and his eyes...sparkled. That was way more than a twinkle and must have been a trick of the light or something because....

"Mistletoe? Last time I checked, strawberries and mistletoe were not the

same thing.”

York glanced up and Gabriel followed his lead. They stood beneath one of the ornate streetlamps that surrounded town square. Gabriel had noticed the simple decorations on his first day, but now, the one in front of his booth had a few additions.

“Strawberries!” Felicity squawked and came out from behind the booth. She looked up at the streetlamp and huffed at the strawberry vine hanging on the post. “For goodness sakes.”

“Nice try,” York said. “Keep these two out of trouble for me. I’m going to get back to work. Oh, and he didn’t eat lunch.”

Gabriel scowled but York simply lifted his hand and pressed a gallant kiss to his knuckles. All the ladies tittered as York released his hand, gave him Bogie’s leash, then turned and walked away.

“I swear, that man,” Gabriel said.

He glanced up and frowned. There were strawberries there not a minute ago, but now, the streetlamp very clearly had sprigs of mistletoe instead. Maybe he shouldn’t have skipped lunch.

“Gabriel!” Felicity tucked her arm through Gabriel’s the moment he got close. “Let me introduce you to a few of my friends. Now, we had a bit of a run on your booth while you were gone, so you have a few disappointed customers on your hands. Since I heard through the grapevine it might take York a few days to get your Jeep up and running, I thought a few more custom orders might be okay.”

She handed him the entire legal pad this time. There were multiple pages worth of notes.

“Ms. Felicity....”

“I know, it’s a lot. But we’ve all agreed to pay extra so you can get the supplies express shipped. You’re welcome to use my house as your shipping address. And Eldon stopped by. He was very impressed with your work and wants you to come by the shop when you have a minute. He runs Deck the Walls.”

Felicity pointed to the store across the street, on the opposite side of the square from Carols and Crepes. Ornate decorations filled the shop's display windows. The entire look screamed Christmas perfection.

Everything Gabriel was not.

"I'll be sure to do that." As soon as he had a minute, which wouldn't likely be anytime soon.

The custom orders, on the other hand, might be just the thing he needed to get through this mess relatively unscathed.

YORK

After leaving Gabriel in the mostly safe hands of Felicity and her friends, York headed back to the shop. Like Gabriel, he'd lost his appetite. He wanted to know what had put that scared look on Gabriel's face, and he wanted to make sure he never looked like that again. But why? Gabriel was little more than a stranger. A hot stranger with an adorable dog, but they'd barely had time to talk much less form anything deeper. So why did York care so damn much? It made no sense.

After half an hour of putzing around, he gave up pretending to work. Instead, he closed up shop and piled into his truck. His buddy owned a junkyard a couple towns over that was open on the weekend. If he had a little luck on his side, he might be able to find a few parts he needed to rebuild Bertha's engine.

And maybe if he had a little holiday magic to spare, he might discover an old Jeep he could use for spare parts. He needed them. Poor Bertha could use a lot of help. It absolutely did not have anything to do with wanting to help Gabriel. The old girl deserved someone of his caliber working on her. That was all.

Sure it was.

And Rudolph's red nose didn't glow.

If York didn't get his head out of the clouds, he'd need Rudolph's help to guide his sleigh. Well, his tow truck, but same difference. York glanced in the rearview mirror and noticed the glow in his eyes. He definitely needed to

get out of town for a while. The last thing he needed was for his confused thoughts to mess with his magic. He needed to be ready for phase one of the plan he and his cousins had put together.

Hours later, after scouring every inch of the junkyard with his buddy, York found gold—a wrecked jeep with an engine in good shape. The parts alone would solve a whole lot of Gabriel’s, er, Bertha’s problems. Still, York couldn’t help but dance a little jig at his luck. What were the odds of him finding exactly what he needed at the first place he stopped? It took a while to get the old Jeep loaded onto the tow truck. By the time York got on the road, he realized he was going to be late meeting his cousins for their first prank of the season.

“Well, jingle my balls. I’m never going to hear the end of this one.”

He glanced in the rearview mirror at the old Jeep attached to the back of the truck. It was worth dealing with his cousins’ ire to have found a solution to Gabriel’s problem. He dropped her off at the shop and grinned. Yeah, it was absolutely worth it. He could rebuild the engine...and Gabriel would have to hang out for a few more days while he did the work. Maybe he could figure out what it was about Gabriel that made him feel so...well, feel in general. He hadn’t cared about anything other than his cousins and his shop in a long time.

York hurried over to Uriel’s bookshop, resisting the urge to give a merry little jump and click his heels together. His magic bubbled away inside him. He must be more excited for their planned prank than he realized to feel so good.

Edgar wasted no time tearing into him the moment he opened the door. “You’re late—”

“You’re *smiling*,” Leif said, cutting off Edgar’s rant before it could go any further.

“I am not,” York said.

He tried to tame the out-of-control grin on his face.

“He’s broken,” Uriel said, closing his book and rising from the overstuffed chair he kept at the front of the shop. “This doesn’t bode well for our

adventures.”

“I’m not broken,” York griped. “I went to the junkyard this afternoon. It was fun. My own little scavenger hunt. Good times.”

Leif shivered. “You’ve been at the junkyard since this afternoon? Do you know what time it is? That sounds horrifying.”

Considering he was about five minutes late meeting his cousins, he would guess it to be about five minutes after midnight. He’d really lost track of time. He couldn’t let Leif’s dig slide, though. “Well, spending the day petting trees and telling them they’re pretty sounds horrifying to me. To each their own.”

Edgar coughed. Loudly. “Before this gets any further out of control, we should begin.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Leif said, giving Edgar a jaunty salute.

They marched toward the back of the shop and up the stairs to the roof of Uriel’s building. With the bookstore’s location just off town square, they had a good view of their target from the roof without being too visible from any passersby.

Either way, they all took a good look around to make sure no one could see them. Their spot was pretty sheltered behind an old chimney stack and an air conditioning return box, but still, it never hurt to be careful. Especially considering they had no idea what was about to happen.

York looked down at his fingers and flexed his hands. Little sparks formed, which reminded him of the magic trick he’d managed to perform earlier with the strawberries. He should probably tell his cousins, but that would mean explaining and...yeah, he wasn’t going to do that.

“Remember what we agreed on,” Edgar said.

“How could we forget?” Uriel said. “And if you pull out your phone to show us the same image one more time, I promise you, I will drop it down the chimney stack where it will remain for all eternity.”

Edgar slipped his phone back into his pocket without another word.

“Let’s do this thing,” York said. “A set of streetlamps that resemble legs wearing fringed lampshades coming right up.”

Leif cackled. “This is so evil. Who do you think will be the first to see them?”

“Who knows?” York said. “Maybe Nyall. He gets up early to bake.”

“I’m hoping for the mayor,” Edgar said. “If I hear one more word about...ugh, I don’t even want to think about *him*. Let’s do this.”

York grinned, imagining Gabriel’s reaction to their little prank. Sparks shot from his hands, and he focused on transforming the streetlights into leg lamps. It didn’t take long.

Uriel actually laughed. *Out loud*. His *leave me alone I’m reading an ancient tome* cousin currently had a shocked expression on his face. At least York wasn’t the only one surprised by his reaction. Uriel appeared to have shocked the snowballs out of himself, too.

Edgar, on the other hand, looked entirely too pleased. “Nicely done, Lads.”

York had to admit, the streetlamps looked hysterically funny. He could only imagine the town’s reaction. The sheriff would get involved. The mayor would offer a reward.

“And on that note, I’m heading back to the shop to get to work.”

“Hold on there, York,” Uriel said. “I’m sensing a *Taming of the Scrooge* moment with you and find myself undeniably curious, particularly after the rumors I’ve been hearing around town.”

“York has the hots for the cute ornament guy,” Leif said. “He even took Gabriel to dinner at Carol’s. As in *inside* the diner. Carol says Gabriel really is an angel, though. Well, not a real angel, but you know what I mean. And he has a cute little dog named Bogie. Carol says Bogie really likes York, too, and even let York pick him up while they were having dinner. It was super sweet.”

York stared wide-eyed at his cousin. “Really, Leif?”

“What? It’s not like you don’t all know I have a thing for West.

Unfortunately, other than thinking of me as his handy-dandy tree surgeon, West doesn't know I exist. You, on the other hand, seem to have captured the angel's attention. I'm intrigued."

"Goddess, someone should polish the man's halo," Edgar snapped.

York scowled. "Get your tinsel out of a tangle, already. It's not our fault actor dude is *reining* on your parade."

"Ha," Leif said. "Good one." He turned to Edgar. "I happen to like seeing York happy." Facing York again he said, "I hope things work out with you and Gabriel. Carol seems to think you two are *mint* to be. See what I did there? Mint!"

York shook his head. "And that's a *wrap*."

He winked at Leif who cackled at York's lame joke as York left the bookstore and his bickering cousins. He couldn't wait to get to work on the junker Jeep and see what kind of magic he could make happen.

It was too bad his magic didn't work to fix things. He'd love to wave his sparkling fingers and have Bertha as good as new by morning. He'd have to take care of her the old-fashioned way though: with a lot of caffeine and elbow grease.

Hours later, footsteps outside the shop pulled York's focus away from the underbelly of the junker. He rolled out from under the Jeep as someone knocked loudly on the bay door.

Gabriel peeked in through the window, his worried expression enough to get York moving. He rushed to the door, pulled it open, then had Gabriel in his arms before thinking twice about it.

"What's wrong?"

"We need help," Gabriel gasped. "Someone...oh, York...everyone's so... well, upset, but..."

York eased back and looked down at Gabriel's face once again. Yeah, there was worry but also a slight twitching of his lips. "I'm going to need a complete sentence to have an elfin' clue what you're talking about."

“The streetlamps...you’ll have to see it to believe it.”

Oh right. York glanced at his watch. “What in the frosted gingerbread cookies are you doing running around at four in the morning? And where is Bogie?”

“He’s with Felicity. She woke us up because Carol called her after Mrs. Crowley called her because the mayor called her after Nyall called him.”

York processed for a second and realized he’d followed Gabriel’s explanation. “So Nyall found the...streetlamps?”

“You know, you can fuss at me for being out at four in the morning, but at least I was snuggled up shivering in my bed and not working. Have you even been to sleep yet?”

“No,” York said. “And what do you mean shivering?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing. Will you come help with the streetlamps?”

York nodded. He let Gabriel go and turned to grab his toolbox. Oberon, one of the sprites, usually served as the town’s handyman, but York had a feeling he’d need backup. Honestly, York didn’t even know exactly how their magic had changed the streetlamps.

“Oh, tools. Good thinking. And how are you even thinking clearly without any sleep? You need to take better care of yourself.”

York snagged Gabriel’s hand in his. “I’m fine. I found some parts at the junkyard for Bertha. I wanted to get started on them. I know you’re worried about...well, I know you’re worried. I want to help.”

Gabriel stared down for a second before he slipped his fingers between York’s. “I’m being weird. This town is making me weird.”

York couldn’t tell from Gabriel’s expression if he was upset or befuddled by his newfound weirdness. “If it helps, I like weird.”

Gabriel looked up. “That’s, um, good. Nice. You’re nice. And good. Um.”

York grinned and gave Gabriel’s hand a gentle tug. “Come on. You think Carol will make me some coffee?”

“Probably. We’ll all need it. The mayor hopes we can get the lights fixed before any visitors arrive.”

“Oh man, the mayor is there? Help me avoid him. He’s always convinced something is wrong with his tire pressure, no matter how many times I check and tell him they’re fine.”

Gabriel grinned as they reached town square. “Bogie and I will protect you.”

York stopped and snickered as he looked around at the streetlamps. They’d really outdone themselves. The streetlamps even had the fishnet stockings like the photo Edgar had shown them. From the roof of Uriel’s building, York hadn’t seen the level of detail they’d managed to create.

“Don’t let the mayor see you laughing. He’s on a tear.”

“Come on. This is funny.”

Gabriel’s lips twitched again. “It’s pretty funny.”

“York!” Felicity came running with Bogie beside her, his little legs struggling to keep up. He ran straight to York and jumped on his leg.

York released Gabriel’s hand and bent down to scoop up the corgi. He got a quick lick to the cheek, then Bogie huffed and settled against his chest.

“Thank goodness you’re here.”

Over a dozen people stood around town square, all of them staring with a combination of horror and hysteria. “What can I do?” York asked.

All the sprites stood in front of the Mistletoe Bakery. Oberon had his toolbox and a ladder beside him. Felicity led Gabriel and York toward them, as they seemed to be in charge of fixing the mess.

The subterfuge had York shifting awkwardly for a second. Gabriel glanced at him, seeming to sense something off with York. Then he noticed York juggling both his toolbox and Bogie. “Oh! Let me take your toolbox. How are you even carrying Bogie with that thing in your hand? And holy heavy.”

Bogie wriggled and York put him down as they approached the group. Oberon knelt and greeted Bogie, who ran straight to the sprite. Right. His

mate was the town's new vet, and they had two dogs at home. Oberon probably smelled like the dogs. York had forgotten for a second. He'd have to let Gabriel know about Dr. Lane, though. Just so he'd...have the vet's information. In case. Or something.

"Oh," Felicity gasped. "Who woke up Uriel?"

York glanced down the block where his cousin lived, and sure enough, Uriel walked toward them dressed in his plaid pajamas, a thick robe, and furry slippers. The frown on his face would have scared small children, but the man who appeared behind him didn't seem fazed at all.

"My guess would be Joe," York said.

Apparently, the new Snowda Shoppe manager was an avid reader. Uriel had waxed poetic about his choice of reading material a few times since Joe had moved to town. At the moment, though, Joe looked as bleary-eyed as the rest of them.

"Coffee incoming," Carol called from behind them. "Everyone except York, be warned. It's strong enough to put hair on your chest. York, sorry, buddy, but I couldn't serve liquid sludge to everyone else."

York cackled and moved to the closest streetlamp. Their magic hadn't damaged the lamps, but it would take some finagling to get all the parts unattached.

Nyall and his mate, Aaron, walked over to York and Gabriel. After shooting a puzzled frown toward York, Nyall looked up at the lamp. "How did someone pull this off without being seen?"

Gabriel shook his head and leaned against York. He shivered a bit and York frowned again. He took off the thick jean jacket he wore at night when the shop got chilly and put it over Gabriel's shoulders.

"It had to be more than one person," Gabriel said. "Probably quite a few. Don't you think, York?"

"Definitely more than one," York agreed.

"Why am I in town square at this goddess-forsaken hour?" Uriel grumped as

he and Joe approached.

York pointed up.

Uriel scowled, then looked at the streetlamp. His eyes widened as he slowly panned to Joe. “*This* is the emergency?”

“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 for him to drink on the way. He’s a lump of coal until he’s caffeinated.”

“Morning definitely 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 as he quoted *The Christmas Story* movie and glanced at Gabriel who let out a little shiver before smiling in return.

“It must be Italian.”

GABRIEL

Felicity and her husband, Clark, drove Gabriel back to the camper a few hours later. The streetlamps once again stood proudly around town square and its towering evergreen tree. Oberon had enlisted the band of merry helpers who'd come to their assistance to change the decor to the holiday wreaths he usually hung over the course of the following week.

Apparently, the town's street parade started the week after Thanksgiving and drew as many visitors as its craft fair. Who knew? Well, other than the residents of Mistletoe Falls and the horde of people who'd made coming to the parade part of their holiday traditions. At any rate, town square was now decked out in its holiday finest.

Other than the giant tree, that is. York had explained that the town held a special lighting of it for Winter Solstice.

Gabriel certainly hadn't had a clue what a big deal Mistletoe Falls was over the holiday season. He'd only researched the craft fair and hadn't come to the town as a tourist. His mind had been focused on digging himself out of the financial hole he was in and figuring out what his future might be.

He hadn't even considering staying in Mistletoe Falls as one of his options. But now, as Felicity filled him in on the fundraising parade, he wondered if the town had some sort of special magic that made him feel more at home than he'd ever felt in his life. It made absolutely no sense, but Gabriel couldn't explain it any other way, especially as Felicity dragged him up to her house to eat the breakfast her family had made in her absence.

Apparently, Felicity's sisters and their families planned on staying through Christmas to take part in all the town's festivities. Considering the noise and the amount of chairs surrounding the extended dining room table, Gabriel wondered if the house would survive the invasion. His host seemed to be in her element, though, and her sisters laid out a breakfast spread big enough to feed an army.

Gabriel loaded up on French toast casserole and sausage before excusing himself. He had the final morning of the craft fair to get to, after all. And he honestly needed a few minutes to himself to clear his head.

"Here," Felicity said as he shrugged into York's jacket. "Take my car. And be sure you have the sign-up sheet for orders!"

Gabriel hadn't even considered how he would get back into town. He really must be more sleep deprived than he realized. His emotions got the best of him for a moment, and Felicity smiled gently at him and patted his arm.

"You're going to be okay, Gabriel. I know a lot about this sort of thing, so you just listen to a woman of my advanced years."

"Advanced years? Not someone as be-*yule*-tiful as you."

Felicity laughed and tugged the jean jacket more snugly around him. "I'm glad to see the town's puniness is contagious. We'll have you feeling merry and bright in no time."

"I'm on to you," Gabriel said, pecking a kiss to the older woman's cheek. "You're trying to charm me into staying."

"Well darn, I was trying for brute force."

Gabriel laughed. "Thank you for helping. I know you didn't count on my camping out for so long with your family here. If I'm in the way—"

"Nonsense. But honey, it's going to be cold tonight. Why don't I have Clark bring the mattress in from the camper? I'd offer you a sofa, but they're all claimed at the moment."

Gabriel gave her arms a little squeeze. "Thank you for the offer. We'll be okay. I did order a bunch of supplies to be delivered today, though. Would

you mind putting them in the camper for me if they get here before I'm back?"

"Not at all." She frowned and Gabriel could see the thoughts swirling in her head. "Felicity, I'm fine. I promise. Give me a chance to figure something out before you and Carol come up with another scheme to try to convince me to stay forever."

She huffed. "I think we've had enough schemers for today. If I find out who turned our beautiful streetlamps into—"

"Sexy leg lamps."

"Sexy?" Felicity asked. "I think not."

"Oh, come on. Fishnet stockings and high heels? Don't you think Clark would—"

Felicity covered his mouth with her hand. "That's enough out of you, young man."

Her saucy wink proved she agreed with him, even if she wouldn't say it out loud. No one had exactly enjoyed taking down the pranksters' decorations, but Gabriel had seen most of the clean-up crew snickering over them at one point or another.

"I'll be back after the craft fair is over."

"Well, if you happen to receive a dinner invitation from a certain mechanic...."

"Then I'll be back after that, Cupid," Gabriel teased.

Bogie rubbed against Felicity's legs before they left the house. His dog had on a new sweater that hadn't been on him when they'd walked into the house. It had cute little reindeer with red noses embroidered on them.

Gabriel shook his head as he reached the camper. "You're going to be so spoiled you won't want to leave."

Bogie paused and lifted his leg at a tree.

Yep, marking his territory. Everyone around him seemed to think it was

orna-meant to be that he and Bogie would stay in town. Gabriel laughed at his lame joke as he put the dregs of his supplies into the back of Felicity's SUV.

Even though he was out of finished product, he planned on following Felicity's advice and taking preorders. He did have a portfolio of sorts with his favorite designs which he could put out as well.

He yawned as he parked behind the Mistletoe Bakery, then carried his supplies to his booth. Hopefully, seeing him create in person would inspire some of the craft fair's visitors.

What he wasn't expecting was to see York sitting on the lone chair behind his booth waiting on him. Gabriel couldn't help but grin as he walked up to York.

The moment York saw Gabriel and Bogie approaching, he stood. Then he sexy smirked, and Gabriel's stomach flipped.

After putting the bins down, Gabriel took a hesitant step closer. He couldn't seem to resist himself. What was he even doing? He barely knew this man and yet he wanted nothing more than to curl up in York's arms and be told that everything would be okay. If York told him, Gabriel would believe it. With everything going on in his life, that was probably the strangest thing of all.

York grabbed the lapel of the jean jacket and tugged Gabriel even closer. "You look good in my jacket."

York's voice was a low rumble. It sent even more shivers through Gabriel's body. He'd heard the expression "like a moth to a flame" so many times but had never experienced it himself. Then again, maybe if he listened to this instinct that seemed to be coming from deep inside him, he wouldn't get burned.

Gabriel swallowed hard and stared into York's eyes. "I look like a mechanic. It's covered in grease stains."

"You look like you belong to a mechanic." The sexy rumble correcting Gabriel's statement had an added growl to it. It sounded like York *wanted* Gabriel to belong to him.

Gabriel leaned closer, daring to slide his hands around York's waist. What he wouldn't give to belong to someone...and to have someone belong to him in return.

Did it make him a romantic sap? Probably.

Would he do it? Probably not.

How many risks could he afford to take? York didn't know anything about him. He couldn't take another chance and be let down again...could he?

Gabriel laughed, but even to his own ears it sounded forced. "Alas, I'm already owned by a four-legged furball."

York brushed his thumb over Gabriel's cheek. "I don't know what it is about you, Angel. I think you're—"

"If you say I'm the answer to your prayers, I'll tell Carol to make your coffee unleaded for a weak."

York threw back his head and laughed. Tingles shot down Gabriel's spine at the sound. He clenched his hands in the flannel shirt York wore over a Henley. Gabriel bit his lip as York met his gaze again. That damn twinkle... this time his eyes even had little sparks of red in them.

His imagination was seriously running away with him.

"You win," York said, laughter still in his voice. "You've found my weakness."

"In my defense," Gabriel said with a big grin he couldn't contain, "it was pretty easy to discover. Although it was fun seeing Carol laugh at you drinking her strong coffee. I swear, I had to put cream in half the cup to make it drinkable and you claimed it tasted like brown water."

"Don't remind me. I thought Krampus had come to town or something." York shivered dramatically. "But speaking of super-leaded, I have a proposition for you. Mine has worn off, so I'm going to go get some sleep since I was up all night. That means I'll be up most of the night working on Bertha. How about you and Bogie crash at mine tonight? And before you say no, it's going to be in the thirties tonight, Gabriel. You and I both know you

can't stay in the camper."

Gabriel sighed. "Yeah, I know. Felicity offered to let me stay with her...."

"But she already has a houseful, and you wouldn't be comfortable around that many people."

"Exactly, although I'm not sure how you knew that. And the inn is booked, not that I could afford it anyway. I hate this feeling, York. Like I'm trapped. I just...I can't stand it."

York put a hand on Gabriel's neck. The warm grip helped calm the rising anxiety. "I'd hate being stuck, too. And even though I'm thinking it, I'm not going to throw you a line about it being fate."

Gabriel couldn't deny that he'd had a similar thought. It seemed the Universe wanted him to stay in Mistletoe Falls. "I'm not sure I believe in fate."

"You should," York said, his voice softer, gentler than Gabriel had ever heard it. "Fate is a beautiful goddess who makes sure we're where we need to be when we need to be there. And, huh, isn't that something for me to think on as I fall asleep this morning. Maybe I'll even have a few dreams about gorgeous strangers showing up in town and stealing my every thought."

Wouldn't it be a beautiful dream if that's all the past few months had been?

Gabriel leaned into York's warmth, daring to tuck his nose into York's neck. He breathed deeply. "Fate would be a cruel goddess to put me through everything I've been through the past few months. Wouldn't it have been kinder for me to just come here and meet you?"

York put his hand on Gabriel's neck and leaned his cheek against Gabriel's hair. "Tell me about it."

"It's the old sad tale. Boyfriend cheated with my best friend, then threw me out of our apartment. He let me keep Bogie and threw in the camper as a consolation prize. Of course, I'd just quit my job to try to build my crafting business, so my resources were strained, and then a dog bit Bogie at the campground and he needed surgery so...."

"Farking iceholes," York said. "Is Bogie okay?"

Gabriel lifted his head, managing a smile. “Yes. Full recovery.”

“Good, but Dr. Lane is the vet over at Paws and Claus, so if you need—”

“He’s fine, York. See for yourself.”

Bogie had curled up on the ground and stared up at them with very judgmental eyes.

“Oh garland, I didn’t say good morning to him,” York said.

He let Gabriel go and went over to Bogie, knelt on the ground, and proceeded to provide an obscene amount of belly scratches. Bogie easily forgave York’s transgression.

When York stood and turned back to Gabriel, his smile didn’t have the same sparkle to it that it had previously. “And as for you....” York paused, then reached for Gabriel’s cheek. He cupped it in his hand and rubbed his thumb under what was probably a suitcase-sized bag under Gabriel’s eye. “All of the stuff that happened to you does feel cruel. But I promise the goddess isn’t mean-spirited. Sometimes...well, some of us are stubborn, Gabriel. We can’t be gently nudged in the right direction. We’ve gotta be shoved.”

“Is that the royal we, or do you just mean me?”

York chuckled and leaned his forehead against Gabriel’s. “I think I’m referring to both of us in particular. I’m...well...I’m known for being pretty set in my ways. I’m sorry for everything you’ve been through, but I’m damn glad you’re here.”

Gabriel’s heart flipped in his chest and his breath caught. “Say it again, York. Because I really need to believe it.”

York leaned in and brushed a fleeting kiss over Gabriel’s lips. “I’m so happy you’re here, Angel. Now get to work. I’ll come by after I wake up and take you and Bogie to Carol’s for dinner. Let Felicity know you’re staying at my place tonight, so she doesn’t worry. If I were you, I’d make it abundantly clear that I’ll be working on Bertha all night, or tongues will be wagging. She’ll defend your innocence if anyone starts talking.”

“Are you sure she should?” Gabriel teased. “I may not be so innocent after

all.”

York groaned. “And now I know exactly what I’m going to be dreaming about. See you soon, and just so we’re clear, I certainly wouldn’t mind checking out your heavenly body.”

Gabriel sputtered but before he could find a coherent comeback, York had already crossed the street. He tossed a heated look over his shoulder before he turned the corner and disappeared.

“Now that was hot.”

Gabriel yelped and spun around.

Nyall, the owner of the Mistletoe Bakery, stood a few feet away with a plate of mini-muffins in his hands. “Sorry! Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay. I was...uh...”

“Say no more,” Nyall said. “Been there, done that, have the hot boyfriend asleep upstairs to prove it.”

“Oh no. You’re not going to get any sleep today, are you? You were supposed to be baking.”

Nyall yawned. “The baking is good. It’s the decorating I’m behind on, plus getting ready for the parades to start. It’s going to be a long week.”

“Tell me about it,” Gabriel said.

“You don’t...um...happen to have any experience decorating cookies, do you?”

Gabriel shook his head. “I mean, I wield a mean glue gun, but I don’t think it’s the same.”

“Hmm. Maybe. Come by and see me tomorrow. From what Carol says, you’re going to be in town for a few days. Maybe we can help each other out.”

Gabriel swallowed. “Yeah, okay.”

Nyall smiled and put the tray down. “A few muffins for you and Bogie. His

are the ones with the little bones on top, to be clear.”

Gabriel laughed. “Thank you. I’ll be sure not to get them mixed up.”

“Well, it’s just a small thank you for helping us clean up the mess this morning. A bunch of us went to the Tinseld Inn for breakfast, but I realized Felicity and Clark had whisked you back to their place.”

“They fed me very well. I think her sisters cooked enough for half the town.”

“I’m sure they did. See you later, Gabriel.”

Gabriel sank down in the chair behind the booth. Bogie put his paws on Gabriel’s leg, so he bent down and scooped his dog into his arms. “This town is weird, Bogie. It’s getting to me.”

Bogie licked his chin.

“Yeah, I know. It’s getting to you too. Do you think York was right? Did some mystery goddess shove us toward Mistletoe Falls?”

Bogie looked into his soul for a long moment before nuzzling Gabriel’s cheek.

“Yeah, I think she might have, too. But now that we’re here, what are we supposed to do about it?”

YORK

O h elusive sleep.

York couldn't stop thinking about his conversation with Gabriel. He hated the pain Gabriel had been in for the last few months, and the hopelessness he'd seen in Gabriel's eyes. He tossed and turned, his thoughts more tangled than the Christmas lights he'd accidentally on purpose donated a few months back.

York finally gave up. Only one person would be able to talk some sense into him: Uriel.

York headed for the bookstore, unsurprised to find his cousin sitting in the big leather chair near the shop's fully decorated front window. At least one of them would have Edgar off their back. York still hadn't gotten around to decorating his tree.

Uriel had a tea service at his elbow, the elegant china set one of his few obsessions outside of books.

"Cousin?" Uriel said, setting his book aside when York walked in. "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."

York blinked, then sank down onto the ottoman in front of his cousin's chair.

Since when did Uriel's tea get cold? About as often as his cousin displayed gaudy—*holy mistletoe madness*. York had been too distracted to even notice the actual decorations in the front window of the bookstore when he'd walked in, but there weren't Uriel's usual poinsettias and elegant decorations in the bay window.

Nope. A miniature tree sat front and center with bright pastel baubles. Sure, the base was one of Uriel's antique blue and white planters, but pastel ornaments and a big ribbon bow as the topper?

"Not one word," Uriel said as he returned with a tray in his hand.

"I...I...Uriel, what in garland's name is happening?"

The moment of hesitation gave Uriel away.

York realized he wasn't the only one dealing with controlling the recent magical changes. It gave him a bit of relief, but not as much as he'd hoped to obtain from his normally unflappable cousin.

When the china rattled on the tray, York groaned. Cold tea, totally out of his taste décor, and now he'd rattled his precious tea set?

"Just how freaked out are you right now?"

Uriel huffed and gently set the tray down on the side table. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're impossi-*bell!*"

"Dearest York, I believe you're missing the *elf*-phant in the room."

York hopped up and stood nose to nose with his cousin. "One, that was a terrible pun. Since you're the expert at word play, Uriel, that *proves* something is roasting your chestnuts on an open fire."

Uriel sank down in his chair, ignoring York as he poured them both cups of tea. He passed over the cup and saucer before lifting his own and leaning back in his chair. "Perhaps I have a few things on my mind. However, I'd rather hear your tales of woe. How is the adorable ornament maker, anyway? He certainly seemed smitten with you this morning."

“Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual. Which is weird, right? I don’t...I’ve never...that’s not....” York let his ramble drift to a stop. If he’d been able to make sense of his thoughts, he wouldn’t be here. He had absolutely no idea what to say.

“Our ancestors placed great meaning on the Winter Solstice,” Uriel said after a long pause. “It is a time to say goodbye to any old, stagnant parts of your life and embrace new beginnings. It is a time to rest and reflect.”

“I know,” York said. “That’s why the Sprites chose this time of year for their big happy magic thing. Longest nights of the year and all that. Cold and dreary so they impart holiday cheer and why we came along to shake things up and keep the balance.”

Uriel took a sip of his tea, then slowly crossed one leg over the other. “And tomorrow is the full moon, the last one before Winter Solstice. York, I believe you need to rest and reflect, now. You’re clearly exhausted.”

“You know I don’t follow all of the moon stuff. That’s more your and Leif’s thing.”

“Well, it’s time to choose your priorities, York, and it seems to me that yours might be changing.”

Red sparks shot out of York’s fingers. Uriel’s teacup morphed into one of the hefty Santa head ones his cousin loathed. He blinked and stared down at his hands before looking into his cousin’s horrified gaze. “Uriel, this is freaking me out.”

“So it seems.”

It took York another minute of staring at Uriel to realize his cousin was equally disturbed. However, Uriel wouldn’t say a word until he’d thought over whatever was going through his mind and reached his own conclusions. He’d have to do his full moon ritual or whatever before he’d give York an answer at this point. York could see the determination in his eyes. Why hadn’t he paid more attention to all of that stuff over the years?

York sighed. “Rest and reflect, huh? I take it that’s what you’re planning on doing as well.”

“More than you know, York. Now, if you’d be so kind as to return my china to its original form, I would greatly appreciate it.”

York wiggled his fingers, and although some red sparks formed, the only thing they changed was Uriel’s sweater. The formerly elegant cream cable knit had been replaced by a...oh gingerbread. He’d definitely not survive this one.

“Bye, Uriel!” York made a run for it, hearing Uriel’s bellow a second later when his cousin noticed the truly ugly Christmas sweater York had morphed onto him.

He ran through the lane behind the businesses on town square and entered his shop through the back door. He couldn’t stop laughing, even as he looked at Bertha and decided to do a little work on her before trying to get some sleep.

“What’s so funny?”

York swung around with a wrench in his hand. Then remembered Gabriel wielding a branch against him when they first met and continued laughing. “En garde!”

Leif looked at him like he’d grown reindeer antlers before sitting a giant box on the ground. “Should I call a doctor? I’m pretty sure you’re broken. You never laugh.”

“I don’t know what I am, Leif.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is happy.”

Happy.

York almost scoffed, but he couldn’t deny the lightness of his spirit. Every thought of Gabriel brought a smile to his face. He’d never gone so far out of his way to see someone, had never even thought of anyone as special and important. His priorities had changed without him even realizing it.

“Oh my garland, you’re in *love*,” Leif yelled.

He bolted forward and flung his arms around York, giving him a giant hug that lasted an uncomfortably long time.

“I’m not...I mean...*nutcracker*. I’m in love with a man I just met.”

Leif gasped. “You met your mate. Just like the sprites did last year. Holy cranberry snow cones, York!”

York dropped the wrench. Its clatter echoed through the shop for several minutes while York tried to remember how to breathe. “I...wait...what? No. What?”

“Think about it,” Leif said. “You’ve been captivated by him from the moment you saw him. You had no idea why, but it’s because he’s your mate. This explains so much.”

Sparks shot from York’s hands. Car parts began dancing around the room, floating in the air, and spinning around until they started attaching themselves into....

“My magic,” York gasped.

“Is it...fixing the car, York? Our magic doesn’t do that. Does it?”

“No.”

“Tell that to old Bertha over there, because I’m pretty sure that carburetor is repairing itself.”

“That’s a water pump,” York said, watching as the pieces moved together with red sparks floating all around them.

Finally, the sparks dimmed and the engine pieces slowly slid through the air until they clinked on the concrete floor of the shop.

“Uriel told me to rest and reflect,” York muttered. “Maybe I should take his advice.”

“Have you even slept? Maybe this is your magic going all Prancer and Vixen because you’re exhausted?”

York bent and lifted the water pump. He couldn’t have done a better job putting it together. “Maybe,” York agreed.

“Or maybe....” Leif’s voice drifted off, and he never finished the sentence.

York looked up to find Leif deep in thought. “Penny *fir* your thoughts,” York teased.

“I’m *pine*,” Leif replied. Then his cousin laughed. “I don’t know, York. It could be anything. Don’t worry about it too much. You’ll get wrinkles or something, and that might scare Gabriel away. Oh! And speaking of Gabriel, I bought some pinecones and stuff from the tree farm. I thought he might be able to do something crafty with them.”

“He’ll appreciate that.”

“Yoo-hoo! York!”

It was convenient he hadn’t decided to spend the day sleeping considering the unusual number of visitors he was getting. “Hey, Felicity. What brings you into town?”

“Gabriel told me he’s staying here tonight, so I brought him a few things from the camper as well as the craft supplies he ordered.”

Clark entered the shop a second later with a giant box in his hands. “Hey, York. Where you want me to put this?”

“Anywhere is fine, Clark. You need some help?”

“It’d be appreciated. I thought Felicity went a little crazy with this stuff. Gabriel’s boxes put her orders to shame.”

Felicity snickered. “There are several boxes. I managed to get Gabriel quite a few orders. Well, I take the credit for the orders, but honestly, his work is so beautiful that it really sold itself.

With Leif’s help, York and Clark brought in the stack of boxes. Felicity brought in a small bag that appeared to have Bogie supplies, as well as a small gym bag.

York’s workspace looked like a shipping center instead of an auto repair shop. After Leif, Felicity, and Clark left, York began lugging the many boxes upstairs to his apartment. Since he’d accidentally disposed of last year’s holiday décor—had Edgar honestly expected him to keep champagne and lime green decorations—York had space in the storage closet for Gabriel’s

supplies.

He set up a little area for Bogie's food and water bowls in the kitchen, then took Gabriel's bag into his bedroom. When he couldn't hold his eyes open for a second longer, York curled up on the couch and passed out.

What felt like five minutes later, his alarm woke him. York peeled open his eyes and went to take a steaming hot shower. Then he stood in front of his closet, trying to decide what to wear. Another first for him.

Rest and reflect, his cinnamon buns. But priorities? York suddenly had a very clear idea of what his were, and all he needed was to get Gabriel on the same page.

York grabbed the fancy sweater Uriel had given him a few years before and pulled it on. It was a red and green striped turtleneck number that he'd never worn. As far as festive sweaters went, it wasn't too bad. Plus, Uriel bought it from Deck the Walls, and Eldon swore it would bring out the sparkle in his eyes or something ridiculous like that.

After hurrying to finish getting dressed, York grabbed his thicker winter coat and made his way toward town square. Gabriel's booth had a small crowd around it.

York's heart skipped. A rush of pride poured through him. His...Angel...was a hit. Not that it surprised York. From the moment he'd seen Gabriel's crafts in the booth, he'd known they'd be a success.

The crowd parted and Gabriel looked up. His gaze locked onto York's immediately and a wide smile appeared on his face. The ladies surrounding him began to giggle, whispering among themselves as York walked closer.

Might as well give them something to talk about. He went around to the back of the booth and pressed a kiss to Gabriel's cheek.

Gabriel's cheeks turned pink, and his eyes brightened. "Hey. Did you get some rest?"

York shrugged. "You about done?"

"Yes. We're finishing up some custom order requests before we go on our

date, right ladies?” Gabriel turned to the women around the booth who were all oohing and aahing over them.

The word date triggered a rush on the order form. And a lot more giggling. York turned his attention to Bogie to hide his smile. The chonky corgi didn't mind one bit. York cooed over Bogie the way the ladies did over him and Gabriel. They were all ridiculous, including York himself.

Since when did he invite their attention? Since Gabriel, that's when. His fingers sparked, and Bogie looked up at him with a curious frown. The cute little sweater Bogie had been wearing transformed into one with....

Oh sweet goddess.

Those snowmen had their carrots placed where no carrots had gone before. Well, carrots probably had gone there before based on some of the late-night shows York watched on TV sometimes. He'd rather not think about that, though.

How in the frosted sugar cookie was he going to get Bogie's sweater changed back to something not perverted before someone noticed? *“Come on, magic. Don't do this to me.”*

York wiggled his fingers, even gave Bogie multiple belly rubs while channeling his inner chi or whatever, but nothing. Raunchy snowmen remained. “This is not the time for a prank. Gimme a break, here!”

Bogie jumped up and put his paws on York's chest. He scooped up the dog and wrapped his coat around him.

“York? You okay?” Gabriel asked.

“Yep. I think Bogie needs a potty break. We'll be back in a few.”

Gabriel smiled at him before turning his attention back to the ladies placing orders. York hurried Bogie toward the back of the bakery before sitting him on the ground. Bogie did his business while York tried to summon his magic.

“No, no, noooo.”

“Cousin?”

York yelped and spun around. Edgar stared at him like he was the one with an unfortunately placed carrot. “Edgar! I need help.”

“I’ve never seen you in a panic,” Edgar mused.

York scooped up Bogie again. “My magic made his sweater...well, look at it! Change it back, Edgar.”

Edgar’s eyes widened and he laughed so hard he snorted. “That’s the most....”

He couldn’t finish the sentence because he’d doubled over laughing.

“You’re useless. Stop laughing!”

Edgar didn’t stop laughing.

York growled and wiggled his fingers over Bogie’s back. “Come on, magic. Work with me here. Unless you don’t want Gabriel to be my mate, because if he thinks I did this to his fur baby, he will be so done with me.”

Edgar stopped laughing. “What did you say?”

“Gabriel won’t like this. Bogie is his baby, Edgar! I’ve got to fix this.”

“Not that, you gingersnap. The part about Gabriel being your mate.”

York froze. “Oh, right. Well, it’s...I mean, I’m not positive, but...who am I kidding? Yes, I am. Gabriel’s my mate, but I’ve got to take things slow with him because of reasons that aren’t any of your business. He’s my priority. But I can’t let him see this sweater! His trust is fragile, Edgar! Fragile!”

“Uh, York....”

“You don’t understand! He’s perfect, even though he doesn’t know it. And he likes me. The way he looks at me, Edgar. He makes me feel like... goddess, a million snowflakes falling on a cold winter night. Like a warm blanket and a fire, cuddled on the couch with Bogie between us. I’ve never had anyone look at me like that, and now I want Gabriel to look at me like that every day for the rest of my life.”

“You really should—”

“No, Edgar! The only thing I should do is make sure I don’t mess this up. Gabriel might not think he’s an angel, but he’s my—”

“You’re the only one who thinks I’m an angel,” Gabriel said.

York froze.

“I tried to tell you he was standing right behind you,” Edgar said. “Hi, Gabriel. I’m Edgar, this frosted snow brain’s cousin.”

“Hello, Edgar. It’s nice to meet you. And as for snow brain, well, he’s melted my heart, so I think it’s all going to be okay.”

York swallowed hard. He glanced down at Bogie and found the sweater returned to its former reindeer covered state. “So, um, how much of that did you hear?”

“Enough,” Gabriel replied. “More than enough.”

GABRIEL

Gabriel couldn't believe what he'd heard. How could York feel so strongly about him in such a short time? It didn't seem...right. Except it was exactly right, which confused Gabriel even more.

"I think we need to talk," Gabriel said.

"And on that note," Edgar said backing away slowly, "I'll be leaving."

"Gabriel—" York said.

Gabriel held out his hand. "Come on. We need to get the booth packed up, and then maybe we'll get our food from Carol's to go."

"Yeah, okay."

They made quick work of the booth, and Gabriel put the bins and Bogie's leash in York's hands. "You take this stuff to the shop. I'll go pick up the food."

York looked worried.

"York, I'm sending my dog with you. I promise, I'm not running away or anything."

"Right," York said. "Sorry. I just...I've never told anyone...well, what I said and—"

"And we'll talk about this once we have some privacy, okay? I swear, I think the walls in this town have ears."

“They probably do. It is a weird town, after all.”

Gabriel grinned. “Yeah, it is. But you like weird, remember?”

York finally managed a small smile before he turned and walked away with Bogie and the bins, leaving Gabriel alone on the sidewalk. Gabriel watched them go for a minute, his mind spinning.

Gabriel’s my mate.

What did that even mean? York had seemed so very sincere, and...Gabriel swallowed hard...it was almost as if York had said Gabriel was the love of his life. But that was ridiculous. They’d only known each other for a weekend. And not even an entire weekend.

Love at first sight wasn’t a thing. Gabriel snorted and drew the attention of a view visitors. He covered the sound with a little snuffle. “Sorry about that.”

The lady gave him a disgusted look, as if he’d sprayed his cooties through the air at her. If only she knew he was debating whether or not he could be in love with a man he’d just met.

Of course, he couldn’t.

Then he remembered York fantasizing about them cuddling on the couch. And he’d included Bogie. That meant more to Gabriel than he could even explain. But still...love at first sight?

Not that any of the ladies he’d met in town would let him argue his point. They were all aflutter with the supposed romance in the air. Christmas magic, Felicity had called it, then she’d gone on about how Nyall and his cousins had all found love the previous year.

Gabriel had to admit, all four cousins finding the loves of their lives was a pretty big coincidence. He could see how she’d added a little fantasy element to the romances of the previous year. It didn’t mean he and York were following in their footsteps though.

Or did it?

“This is ridiculous.”

“Talking to yourself is generally considered ridiculous.”

Gabriel looked up to find a handsome black man in a gorgeous tweed coat standing in front of him. He had a carryout bag from Carol’s in his hand and a big smile on his face. “I think Mistletoe Falls is making me weird.”

The man laughed and held out his hand. “Tate Bixby. I’m going to guess you’re the talented Gabriel I’ve heard so much about.”

“How does everyone in this town know everything?”

Tate laughed again. “In my defense, my mate, Eldon, desperately wants to talk to you about adding some of your products to his store. He’s the owner of Deck the Walls.”

That word again. *Mate*. Maybe it was some sort of regional slang Gideon hadn’t heard before?

“You seem concerned,” Tate said. “Eldon would work with you on any issues —”

“Oh no,” Gabriel said. “It’s not that. It’s...why did you say Eldon was your mate? It’s such a peculiar word.”

“Peculiar, huh?”

Gabriel shrugged. “I, uh...how about oddly specific? But it isn’t really. I mean, *ahoy matey*. Perfectly reasonable usage.”

“If you’re a pirate. Which I am not.”

“Fair point.”

“Eldon is my mate, the love of my life. My partner, my everything. Do you have a mate, Gabriel?”

“No. Well, maybe? I don’t know. I’m confused.”

Tate smiled and put his hand on Gabriel’s shoulder. “Don’t be. Trust your heart...and the magic of Mistletoe Falls. Have a wonderful night, Gabriel. I hope to see you around town.”

Gabriel watched Tate walk away. He shook the tinsel out of his brain and

headed for Carol's. He didn't want York to worry.

Walking into Carols and Crepes gave him another cause for concern. The always smiling Carol stood scowling at a man standing in front of the counter. Gabriel hurried forward and drew her attention. She immediately began to beam at him.

"Gabriel! Honey, I have your food ready. I'm still giddy over my ornament, you sweetheart. I can't stop staring at it. You're so thoughtful."

Gabriel pulled out his wallet and handed over enough money to cover their food. He shot her a dirty look when she opened her mouth to argue. "I'm paying for dinner, Ms. Carol. Don't make me use my serious voice. You won't like it."

Carol cackled and took the cash. "Fine. I can't help it. Unlike *some* people —" Carol shot another dirty glance at the man standing beside Gabriel—"I'm delighted to have *you* in Mistletoe Falls. Gabriel, you know Uriel and Joe, right?"

Gabriel nodded, curious about the random subject change, and popped one of the little butter mints Carol kept in a dish by the register into his mouth.

"They're such a cute couple, aren't they?"

"They're a couple?" Gabriel asked.

Carol's gaze narrowed and he was pretty sure if looks could kill....

Since he only had half the story, Gabriel decided to play along. He really didn't want to be on Carol's bad side. Besides, she might take it out on York and make his coffee decaf. He couldn't risk it. "Ms. Carol, you seem to forget that I've only been in town for two days."

He gave her his sweetest, most innocent grin.

"Honey, it feels like you've been here forever! How could I forget you've only been here for the weekend? And oh goodness, yes, Uriel and Joe are quite the pair."

"I should have known. They arrived together yesterday morning when we fixed the—oh, maybe I shouldn't say anything about that in front of a

stranger.”

His emphasis on the word made her happy if the wicked gleam in her eyes meant anything. He had a feeling he'd be getting extra desserts for a while.

Carol grinned. “Don't worry. Mr. Javier McLeod won't be staying long.”

Her voice dripped disdain at his name, even though her smile remained firmly fixed in place. Gabriel was really happy she'd decided she liked him.

“I won't?” Javier asked.

Carol huffed and turned up her nose at him.

Gabriel leaned forward and whispered. “Did I tell you Uriel was in his pajamas?”

Carol's eyes widened. “No!”

“He was. I should have figured out they were together from that, but honestly, it was like four in the morning, and I hadn't had coffee yet.”

Carol leaned closer, completely ignoring her mortal enemy, otherwise known as the mysterious Javier. “They were working on the other side of the square from me, so I didn't see,” Carol whispered conspiratorially. “Uriel was really in his pajamas?”

Gabriel nodded. “And Uriel wouldn't let Joe go up the ladder at first. It was a whole thing. Cute as can be. And Joe went to get him coffee once you came out because he said Uriel was sleep-deprived. I mean, four in the morning and sleep deprived...I'm not saying, but I'm saying....”

Carol snickered. “I hear you. Those two. Anyhoo, you get going before your dinner gets cold. And I put a little something in there for our sweet boy.”

“I'm sure York will appreciate it,” Gabriel teased, knowing good and well she meant Bogie.

Carol laughed and tossed a butter mint at him. Gabriel caught it in his mouth before turning and leaving the restaurant. He was still smiling when he walked into the shop.

York sat at the bottom of the steps leading up to his apartment. He jumped up

when he saw Gabriel, then let out a sigh of relief. “That took forever,” York said. “And...why are you grinning like that?”

“Carol just had me convince a stranger that Uriel and Joe were a couple? I didn’t know they were together.”

York frowned. “They aren’t.”

“Well, for some reason, Carol wanted Javier to think they were. Weird, right?”

“That is odd. I’ve never heard of a Javier, but it’s rare Carol doesn’t like someone.”

Gabriel moved closer and smiled at York. “Let’s go upstairs and eat, okay? We can figure out the mystery after we figure out a few of our own.”

“Sure. Lead the way.”

Gabriel walked up the steps. He waited until they’d entered York’s apartment and he’d put the bag of food down on the kitchen table before turning and facing York again.

“I also met Tate, Eldon’s mate.”

And yep, there it was. York froze at his use of the word.

“Y-you did?”

“I did. I asked him why he used that specific word, considering that’s the way you described me earlier.”

York let out a long breath. “I wondered if you’d heard that.”

“I heard. Are you going to explain it to me? Because I may be new, but I know there’s something you aren’t telling me. I’m not a big fan of secrets, for obvious reasons.”

York nodded. “And I don’t want to keep secrets from you. In my defense, I didn’t exactly realize you were my mate. It’s been like five minutes, you know?”

“Not a believer in love at first sight, are you?”

“Nope. Well, not until...now. Goddess, this sounds completely ridiculous even though I know it’s true.”

“Tell me,” Gabriel demanded.

“I...” York scowled and clenched his hands into fists. “...can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“*Can’t*,” York repeated, putting a very strong emphasis on the word. “But Gabriel, I...all I want is for us to get to know each other, to see if this thing that has sparked between us will grow into something bigger. If it’ll be what I think it is, and if I’m what you need, which is what being mates is all about. That’s all I want.”

York’s bared soul sparked the magic Gabriel had hoped to feel through his confusion. He had no idea what was going on, but he knew one thing for certain. He wanted exactly what York did.

Without another second of hesitation, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around York’s neck. Then he kissed him.

York gasped and wrapped his arms around Gabriel as he deepened the kiss. Gabriel’s entire body began to tingle, in the best possible way. His stomach fluttered, his knees went weak, and he wondered how he’d gone his entire life without knowing a kiss like this.

But then, instead of being hot and wondering how far they could take this, a chill ran up Gabriel’s back. Not a fear kind of chill. The breezy kind. And then....

Gabriel pulled away from York and glanced down. “Um, York...why am I wearing....”

“Oh dear goddess.”

“There’s a carrot on my boxers, York. I wasn’t wearing boxers a minute ago. I was wearing jeans, but also I’m a briefs kind of guy, not that you would know that. I do not own boxers with a carrot...that happens to be embarrassingly pointed at the moment. Well, not embarrassingly, because I’m not ashamed of how hot that kiss was or about how much I want to do it

again. However, standing here in—” Gabriel froze. “—York, why are sparks flying out of your fingers....and...oh no, what happened in here?”

The brightest, most cheerful holiday decorations in existence filled York’s space. Gabriel tried not to be horrified. It wasn’t that he minded other people enjoying colorful decorations, but it wasn’t his style at all. And he’d thought he and York were on the same page with at least that much.

“No, no, no,” York groaned. “Not now.”

York held up his hands as red sparks leaped around the room changing the cozy couch into a giant Santa throne like the ones Mall Santas sat in for photos. And gentle twinkling lights? Nope. York’s entire apartment lit up with colored lights that seemed to be dancing a tango or something with their rapid flashing.

And then...Gabriel’s brain finally put one and one together...he probably got twelve instead of two. It didn’t make sense. It wasn’t possible. Was it?

“You’re actually magic. Mistletoe Falls magic is *real*.”

“Yep,” York said, staring at his hands in betrayal. “And I suppose now that you’ve seen it, I can tell you. There are rules about this sort of thing. Serious rules. Magic is real, Gabriel. And I’m what’s known as a Yule Lad. I can tell you more later, but I think I need to call my cousins for help. I’m a little out of control, here.”

Gabriel had two options. He could let York call his cousins, who would arrive to find him in his carrot-boxer glory, or he could kiss York again. He chose the second option.

With his hands firmly planted on York’s cheeks, Gabriel poured every ounce of his heart and soul into the kiss. He honestly hadn’t needed the show of magic to know there was something special about York, something fantastic and yet more real than anything he’d ever known.

York groaned and pulled him close again. The sparks of magic warmed his back, tickling their way up his spine. He didn’t even care what they did to him. He’d probably end up looking like one of Santa’s helpers at the rate they were going.

But as the kiss heated, York's magic cooled. The air changed, settling into something much more...normal. Gabriel leaned back and stared into York's eyes. "Better?"

York glanced around the room and let out a sigh of relief. "Yeah. Wow, this is how I've always dreamed my place would look."

Gabriel's mouth fell open. All of the décor had gone from the brightly colored ornaments from before to the more subtle rustic style he used in his art. In fact, almost all the pieces matched ones he'd made in the past. And they all looked perfect where they were.

There was only one thing that might not be perfect. Gabriel didn't want to stare down at his boxers to look.

"Am I still..."

York looked down and snickered. "Yeah. But, I mean, I can't blame my magic for wanting to keep you looking like this. Wow. But, um, the rest of the place...it's all your art, isn't it?"

Gabriel nodded. "I was hoping to get my hands on that naked tree of yours."

"Don't say naked. It's making my hands spark all over again."

Gabriel groaned. "I'm never going to be able to look at a carrot the same way again."

"Neither am I," York said, his eyes still firmly positioned downward. "You know, I've heard carrots are really good for you. Excellent for your health, even. Vitamin C and whatnot." He slowly slid to his knees as he spoke. His hands rested at Gabriel's waist as he looked up. "May I?"

"Yes, York. Yes, you can."

YORK

Nothing in the universe tasted as good as Gabriel. York savored everything about the moment, from the slick heated skin to Gabriel's scent and flavor. York swallowed, drawing a low moan from Gabriel.

York didn't need any further encouragement. He wrapped his hand around the hard length and added strokes into the mix of his sucks and licks. Gabriel trembled. It wouldn't be long. His mate was so on edge, so ready to come, and York wanted it desperately.

He picked up the pace, and when Gabriel grabbed his hair, giving him a tug back, York simply sucked harder, giving Gabriel a wordless answer. He didn't want to back off. He wanted Gabriel's release in his mouth and down his throat.

And Gabriel gave it to him moments later with another shaky groan. York continued suckling until Gabriel softened in his mouth, then he let him slip free.

He looked up, not caring what he must look like sprawled on his knees with his hair tangled from Gabriel's fingers and his mouth red and swollen.

Gabriel shuddered and sank down onto his knees. He straddled York's legs, then sat down on them while wrapping his arms around York's neck again. He tucked his face into York's neck, panting as his body still came down from his release.

York ran his hand down Gabriel's back in long, soothing strokes until Gabriel

raised his head and gazed at him through hooded eyes. “May I return the favor?”

Before York could shout *hell yes*, a thundering knock sounded on his door. “York! Come quick!”

“Well, I was hoping to,” York groaned.

Gabriel stood and looked around in a panic.

“Your bag is in my room.”

Gabriel dashed down the hall as York went to the door. “What, Edgar?”

His cousin looked absolutely horrified, and York’s annoyance at the interruption disappeared. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I don’t...this wasn’t part of the plan, York. Oh my goddess, have other Lads invaded Mistletoe Falls? What will we do? It’ll throw the balance off! We have to get rid of them. But first we have to fix the mess! The entire town is freaking out and I don’t know—*oh....*”

“It’s okay,” York said, turning to reach out his hand to Gabriel.

His mate had thrown on some sweats and hurried to join them. He threaded their fingers together, which drew Edgar’s immediate attention. “So I take it things went well?”

York couldn’t help but smile.

“Very well,” Gabriel said. “But you sounded freaked out. What’s wrong?”

“The, uh, pranksters struck again.”

“What?” York said.

“Oh no! What’d they do this time?”

Edgar shook his head. “There are carrots everywhere. It’s like someone came through with a truckload of them and threw them all over town. It’s a mess.”

York froze.

Gabriel on the other hand, began to sputter. “D-did you s-say c-carrots?”

“Yes...oh my goddess, it was *you!*” Edgar’s eyes widened and he looked back and forth between them. “*Carrots?* Do I even want to know?”

“No,” Gabriel said. “You really don’t. It’s exactly what you’re thinking, if you’re as gutter-brained as I am, which I can see from the look on your face that you absolutely are.”

“Well, I did see the sweater York’s magic put on your sweet little dog—”

“The *what?*” Gabriel asked.

“Oops,” Edgar said, not looking the least bit sorry. “I guess York has a thing for carrots. It’s both something I wish I didn’t know, and also something I will hold over him for the rest of his life.”

“Fair,” Gabriel said. “Bogie should never have to face the carrots, York.”

“Will you stop saying carrots? Because all I’m imagining is—”

Gabriel’s hand covered his mouth, and his wide eyes drew a laugh from York. York pulled the hand away and kissed Gabriel instead.

“Enough with the smooching. We have a *carrot*-astrophe to manage.”

Gabriel snickered against York’s lips and pulled away.

“This town is so weird.”

While Gabriel went to put on some shoes, York made sure Bogie had water in his bowl. The dog hadn’t budged from the fluffy rug in front of the couch. The weekend had clearly been a lot for the little guy.

“Let’s go clean up your mess,” Gabriel teased when he returned.

“Well, I already cleaned up yours, so I suppose it’s only fair.”

Edgar groaned and went down the stairs. “I don’t need to hear this.”

“Why?” Gabriel said with a laugh. “Afraid you’ll start thinking of carrots too?”

Edgar began to sing. “Fa la la la. I can’t hear you.”

“Why would he be afraid of carrots?” Felicity’s voice came from the entrance

to the shop.

Gabriel nearly tripped on the stairs, but York snagged his arm and saved his mate. “Easy or we’ll be adding ‘What’s up, Doc?’ jokes to the carrot line-up.”

Gabriel snorted again. “Cut it out. Everyone’s going to think I’m *Looney Tunes* if I keep laughing like this.”

“Wascally Wabbit,” York said.

Gabriel doubled over at the bottom of the steps. Felicity looked extremely confused and even took a step toward him.

“I’m okay. Sorry, it’s been a morning.”

“You’re telling me.” She lifted a bunch of carrots and waved them around. “Why carrots? And how did someone even get their hands on so many carrots at this time of year? Do you know how big some of these suckers are?”

At that, Gabriel officially lost it. He sank down onto the concrete floor and laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks.

Felicity dropped the carrots and knelt beside him. “Gabriel, honey, are you feeling okay?” She pressed the back of her wrist to his forehead. “He’s a little warm.”

Edgar snorted. Before York could stop him, he spoke. “I think I interrupted, ahem, something pretty hot, Felicity.”

She frowned for a moment then gasped. “Ohh! Oh how wonderful! York finally pulled his head out of his...carrot patch.”

Gabriel lost it again and York sank down on the floor beside him. “We’re doomed,” York said.

“Carol will have to make a carrot cake in our honor.”

York snickered. “I hate carrot cake.”

“Okay, enough nonsense you two,” Edgar said. “We need to get the mess cleaned up.”

York stood again, then reached out his hand to Gabriel. He pulled his mate to his feet and smiled. “It’s okay. We have time. Gabriel isn’t going anywhere.”

Felicity squealed again and flung her arms around both of them. “I knew it. I just knew it. Gabriel, everyone in town has been hoping you’d stay. Oh, I can’t wait to tell the girls.”

“I’ll need to find a place to stay—”

York cleared his throat. “You can, um, stay with me.”

“Isn’t that...moving quickly?”

“Yeah....” York was disappointed that he hadn’t immediately agreed, but then again, Gabriel didn’t know the significance of being mates. Besides, York had already told himself he needed to be patient. He wanted to build something special with Gabriel and not rush past all the little moments that came at the beginning. Huh. He really did have his priorities straight. He’d have to tell Uriel about it later.

“We’ll talk about it after carrot duty,” Gabriel said.

York nodded.

He didn’t blame Gabriel for wanting to take things slowly, especially considering what he’d been through only a few months before. If they needed to find a place for him to live while they built their relationship, York would make it happen. He could always let Gabriel stay at his apartment while he crashed with one of his cousins.

Felicity looped her arm through Gabriel’s and led him out the door. Edgar stayed behind but brushed his shoulder against York’s. “This is big.”

“Really big,” York agreed. “I never thought...but wow, Edgar. I’ve never felt so alive, so full of magic.”

“I bet. Let’s go clean up your magical mess. We’ll have to talk to the cousins later and give them all the dirty details.”

“Maybe not *all* of them,” York laughed.

They followed Gabriel and Felicity toward the town square. Luckily, most of

the visitors had already left town, so it was only their friends and neighbors out cleaning up the absurd number of carrots all over the downtown area.

His magic had made quite the mess. As far as pranks went, though, it wasn't a bad one. Uriel stormed toward him, his expression as ferocious as Edgar's had been earlier.

"Have we been usurped? I will—"

"It was me," York confessed. "I, um, might have realized Gabriel is my mate and my magic went haywire."

"You?" Uriel said. "You covered the town in root vegetables?"

York shrugged. He refused to explain again. Edgar would tattle soon enough. "By the way, I hear you and Joe are boyfriends now."

Edgar squawked. "What?"

Uriel sighed. "Due to circumstances beyond my control, Joe and I have decided to pretend to be in a relationship for a short period of time."

"Circumstances such as Javier McLeod. Sexy name, huh, Edgar?"

"Who is Javier McLeod?"

"Someone connected to Joe."

"His ex," Uriel snapped. "Who will be leaving town sooner rather than later if I have anything to say about it."

"Oh, someone has their tinsel in a tangle," Edgar said.

York thanked his lucky stars Edgar had something else to focus on besides him and Gabriel. While his cousin grilled Uriel, York hurried to catch up with Gabriel.

"We're apparently donating the carrots to the petting zoo. I didn't know there was a petting zoo," Gabriel said.

"It's a nativity fundraiser/petting zoo combo. We even had a kidnapped goat last year. Exciting stuff. You have a lot to look forward to. Mistletoe Falls never ceases to surprise me."

The epic pranks he and his cousins had in mind would top the list of things in town that would shock and amaze Gabriel. York reached for Gabriel's hand as his magic began to tingle again.

"You're buzzing," Gabriel whispered. "I can feel it. Are you going to...." Gabriel whirled his hand in the air to imitate York's earlier shenanigans.

"I think I'm in control."

"I'm glad one of us is," Gabriel teased. "Here."

Gabriel shoved a reusable grocery tote into York's hand.

They went toward one of the patches of carrots and began loading them into the bag. It really did look like some crazed animal had dug up a garden and flung the carrots in every direction.

They filled their bag quickly and carried it over to the bakery where everyone congregated with their own bags. Nyall had brought out a cart and everyone loaded the carrots into it.

"If this keeps up, we're going to have to form a neighborhood watch or something. Oh, Gabriel, this is my boyfriend, Aaron. Aaron, this is Gabriel. He's the one I was telling you about who makes the beautiful ornaments."

Aaron shook Gabriel's hand, then shot York a look he couldn't interpret. "And he's thinking about coming on part-time to help you with cookie decorating, right?"

Gabriel glanced at York and nodded. "Thinking about it. It looks like my plans have changed, and I'll be staying in Mistletoe Falls for a while. A part time job while I get a few things figured out would make things easier."

Nyall's smile widened. "Oh, that's wonderful news. I wasn't sure if Carol was serious when she said you two might be an item. But I definitely need the help. Aaron and I are attending several holiday events in his hometown this year with his parents, so it's going to make getting all the preparations for the parades difficult without some help."

"I'm sure we can work something out," Gabriel said.

He reached for York's hand once more and smiled.

“As long as you have time for your crafts, I’m good. Your work is too good for you to neglect it.”

Gabriel leaned into York’s side. “We’ll see how it goes.”

“Whoa,” Aaron said. “Why does Uriel look like he’s about to shove some coal into that guy’s stocking?”

“Uh-oh. That’s Javier,” Gabriel explained.

York caught a glimpse of sparks on his cousins’ hands. “I better intervene.”

He took off running, only to be beaten to Uriel by Joe, who flung his arms around Uriel’s waist.

They stared at each other for an uncomfortably long time.

“I need help in the Snowda Shoppe. Uriel, come help me.”

Uriel glanced at York, sucked in a breath, then looked back at Joe and nodded. “I’d be happy to.”

Gabriel came up to York and took his hand. “Is it me, or are they not just pretending?”

“I don’t know,” York said. “But I do know that we skipped dinner and I’m starving. Let’s go home.”

“Home,” Gabriel said. “Yeah, let’s do that. And then maybe we can finish decorating the apartment for the holidays. I might have made a few ornaments today when I wasn’t busy.”

“Oh yeah? I might have had other plans.”

“Really?” Gabriel seemed rightly suspicious.

York grinned as they walked into the shop. “I have a question for you, Angel. Is that a *Lad*-der in your pants, or a stairway to heaven?”

Gabriel groaned. “Lad and angel joke combos. You must be stopped. Plus, I’ve already had a Lad in my pants today.”

“That was just the beginning of what I want to do in your pants,” York said.

With a laugh, Gabriel led the way upstairs to the apartment. Bogie met them at the door and received lots of pets before York went to unpack their long-cold carryout from Carols and Crepes.

Gabriel picked up Bogie and whispered their new plans to his dog. York couldn't help but smile as Gabriel explained that they were staying. It was his final words, though, that had York grinning from ear to ear.

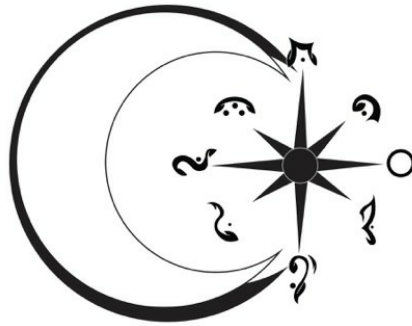
“Don't worry, Bogie. Everything will be okay. We go together like peas and carrots.”



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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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