

Loose Id



JET MYKLES

REINDEER GAMES

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www.loose-id.com

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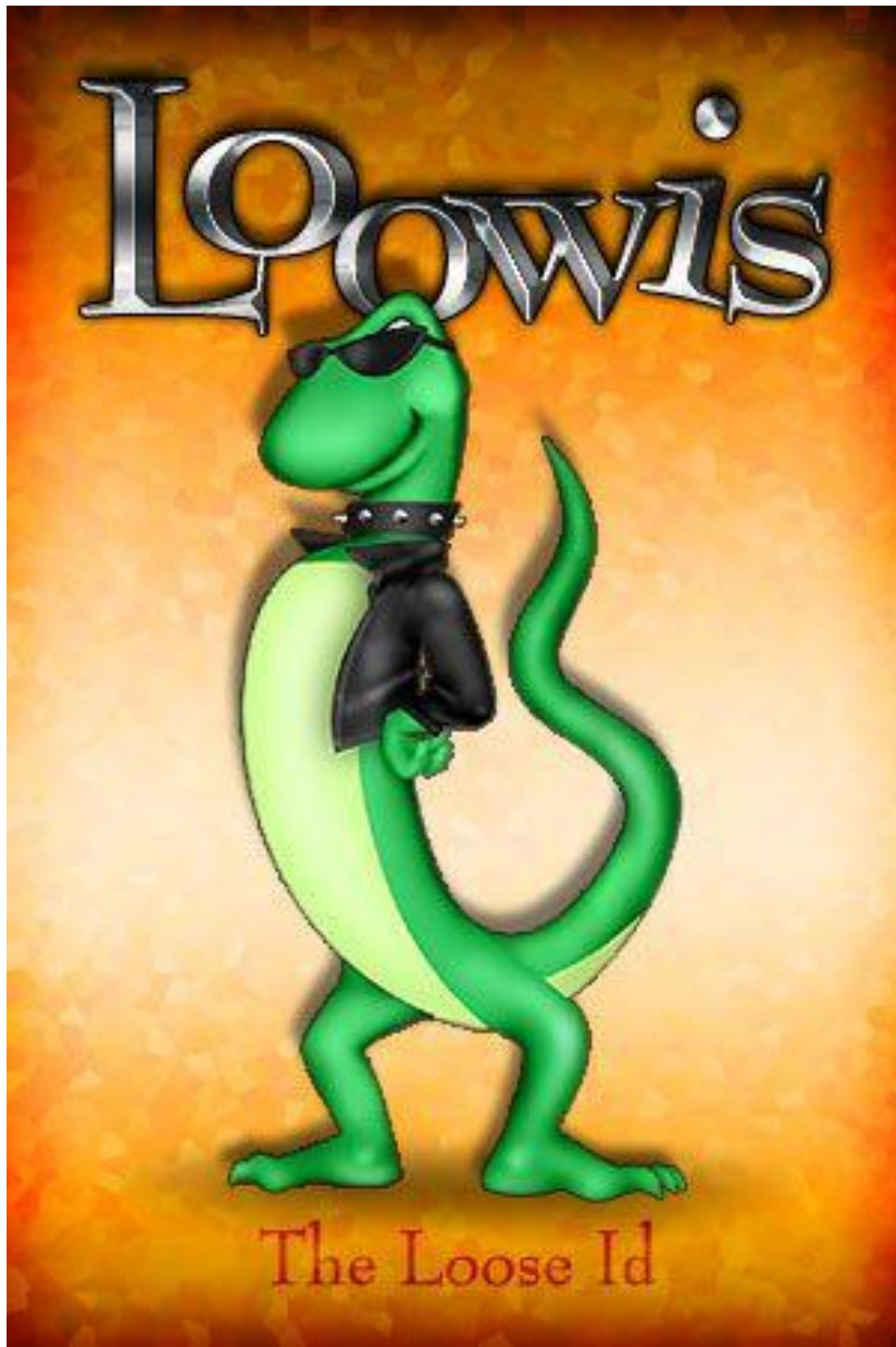
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Chapter One

There was a subdued *pop* far overhead. One moment there was only the pale sliver of moon and stars twinkling in the blanket of midnight sky. Then, from a faint sparkling of a cloud that wasn't a cloud, emerged the silhouette of a sleigh pulled by nine reindeer.

"Here they come." Pol pointed needlessly. They all knew what was there.

Lon watched with the rest of the handlers, captivated by the sight regardless of having seen it nightly over the past few months. At first, the sleigh and its chargers looked like little flying dolls, coasting shapes against the stars. Then they became more distinct as they neared. Reindeer galloping on air. The magical sleigh seemed weightless behind them. Even closer and the soft trill of jingle bells filled the air.

"Welcome home," one of the handlers behind Lon and Pol murmured.

Lon smiled, nodding. It still filled his heart to see Santa and his sleigh, and it always would. It was part of the magic that still affected him and his brethren even though, as elves, they didn't receive any of the physical bounty of the season. The feeling, the tone, the power of the giving and love of the Christmas season fueled the magic that kept their little corner of the universe in existence, and there was no harm in enjoying it.

The sleigh and its team touched down in the midst of a meadow spread before a sprawling barn at one end of Santa's Village. The pulsing beacon of Rudolph's nose shed its ruddy glow on the snowy field. Small hooves caused shallow dents in the deep rifts, the reindeer's magic keeping them from sinking. The sleigh itself, although weighted by its rotund master, barely caused any runnels in the snow.

The reindeer held their heads high, tossing proud antlers. They gradually checked their speed as they neared the barn, showing only a little of the exhaustion Lon knew they felt from the full night's work. Each year, for the six months prior to Christmas in the human realm, Santa, the reindeer, and the sleigh passed between dimensions, bending time so that Santa could personally deliver joy to human children. The magic of Christmas had created the realm of the elves and sustained it, and for that the elves worked tirelessly to feed the joy so that on the one magical day when the times of the two planes converged and Christmas Day was celebrated simultaneously in both realms, the magic would support them for another year. Even though that special day was still five weeks away, the anticipation was palpable.

Lon stood aside with the other handlers, making a pathway toward the open barn doors. He waited as the sleigh passed by, then followed in its wake into the brightly lit expanse of the barn. Specially designed to house a unique sleigh, the interior of the barn was brightly lit and efficiently ordered. A large cubicle in one corner housed the sleigh itself during the off hours. Along the wall beside it were cupboards and shelves to hold spare parts and materials for the mechanics who tended it. Along the opposite walls were matching cupboards and shelves where the reindeer handlers like Lon stored the leather harnesses and jingle bells that adorned the reindeer. Directly across from the large doors was the single red door that was an entrance to Santa's workshop. The reindeer brought the sleigh to a halt in the midst of the clear, hay-dusted floor, and only then did the runners settle from the air to the ground. Santa accepted the help of two assistants ready to see him safely to the ground as Lon and three fellow handlers approached the reindeer, two from each side.

Lon took a deep breath to still his nerves as he approached Dasher. Even after nearly a full season of working with the reindeer, he still found them wondrous, Dasher most of all. Three and a half feet at the shoulder, Dasher was the biggest on the team, and his thickly furred shoulder was on level with Lon's chest. Lon made sure to catch the attention of Dasher's large brown eye before reaching out to start

unbuckling the harness. Jingle bells chimed as Pol worked with another handler to free Rudolph of the harness, while their other coworker aided Dancer. Supple red leather slid smoothly through gilded buckles, but most of Lon's attention was on the gray and brown fur that covered Dasher's powerful shoulders. Dasher's spreading antlers rose above both their heads. By the time Rudolph had moved forward, free of the sleigh, Lon had the buckles loose from Dasher. A polite pat on the shoulder let the reindeer know he was free, and Lon held the harness until Dasher's rump had passed by. As he moved to his left to begin loosening the straps of Prancer's gear, Lon kept a part of his attention on the lead reindeer.

Dasher, Dancer, and Rudolph spaced themselves out in the center of the barn. Change charged the air, palpable to everyone. Slowly they turned, each carefully making sure everyone was clear of them. Then separate clouds of what looked like shimmering snowflakes filled the air around them, obscuring them briefly. One by one they emerged from the cloud in their true forms. Lon's breath caught, his hands stilling for just a heartbeat on Prancer's harness. From the cloud of magic that had encompassed Dasher emerged the most beautiful man he'd ever seen. Like his reindeer form, Rom was tall, just topping five feet. Sleek muscle filled every inch under pale, milky skin. He laughed and stretched skyward as the magic dissipated around him, proud and unashamed by his nudity. Not that he had anything to be ashamed of. He was a perfect specimen of an athletic elf, a prime candidate for his coveted spot leading Santa's team. Broad of shoulder, narrow of hip, and hung like a buck, with sky blue hair falling in a shining straight cascade nearly to his tight, trim buttocks. He reached over to slap the meat of Wod's shoulder, congratulating Dancer for another successful night. Wod grinned back at him, tucking his deep mahogany hair behind the delicate point of one ear. The blue-silver of their reindeer medallions shone from the centers of two powerful chests, Wod's satiny skin a few shades darker than Rom's, more of a pale caramel to smooth milk. Behind them, Tessie, the team's Rudolph guide, stretched and yawned under the cloud of her bright orange hair, her own medallion resting between two small, creamy breasts. The three of them moved to the side to make room for the next reindeer to change.

They were immediately surrounded by a number of other handlers, these bearing robes, shoes, and refreshment for the exhausted members of the team.

Lon bit his lip and forced himself to concentrate on his remaining work before his obsession with the lead reindeer became obvious. It wouldn't do to let anyone know he was hopelessly, madly in love with Rom. True, nearly *everyone* was in love with Rom, at least a little, but Lon was sure his feelings were different. His heart constricted when he was around the sexy lead reindeer. But he didn't want to be seen as a simpering follower. He wanted Rom to notice him as a man. He would, one day. Soon. Although he had yet to come up with a suitable way to make that happen.

He managed to keep his eyes off Rom, and soon all nine reindeer were free of their harnesses and had shed their four-legged forms. Five men and four women, all chosen for their physical prowess to fill the role of Santa's chargers. The waiting list to become one of the reindeer shifters included at least half of the population of Santa's Village, certainly most of the youths. Although it was acknowledged hard work, nearly everyone wanted not only the excitement of crossing into the human realm to deliver toys but also the unique magic that allowed the shift into reindeer.

"Ho ho ho." Santa's signature laugh got everyone's attention even if it was uttered by a feminine throat. Jannie mounted a small platform by the workshop entrance of the barn, still wearing the red pants with the white fur trim. But since the special coat that enabled her shift was slung over one shoulder, she was revealed as the elf she was. Her small breasts remained bare underneath the suspenders that held up the pants that sagged about her legs, pert, rosy nipples vivid against her snowy white skin. At all of four feet, she was much smaller than the five-and-a-half-foot form she presented in full Santa regalia. It wasn't physical prowess that qualified Jannie for her leadership as Santa among them. Jannie had gotten her job for her smarts and her natural talent for magic. Not for the first time, Lon wondered what humans would think if they knew that Santa wasn't always a

man. For five years now, Santa had been this petite little woman with short, grape purple hair and silver and gold rings pierced along the edges of her pointed ears.

Jannie raised a golden goblet. “A fine night and a fine job, everyone.” She toasted her team and the handlers that surrounded them. “We made many a child happy this night.” Cheers all around as Jannie drank, and then everyone with a glass—namely the reindeer—joined her.

The door opened behind Jannie, and Gus, the reigning Mrs. Claus, stepped through. Because he didn’t typically have a public face, he didn’t wear the shifting gown that would make him look like an aging, snowy-haired woman. Instead he just wore a sleeveless red jacket with something of a short skirt that flared out from his waist almost to his knees. The role of Mrs. Claus was no longer only held by the wife—or husband—of the current Santa but rather by a person appointed as the most qualified to run the “housekeeping” of Santa’s Village. Mrs. Claus was in charge of the communal kitchens and all housekeeping staff, leaving Santa to concentrate on the business of *The List of Good and Bad* as well as the acquisition and distribution of toys. Gus was the first man in history to fill the role of keeper of the house, but no one begrudged him the fine work he’d done for the past eight years.

Jannie saw Gus. He gestured over his shoulder, and she nodded. “Good work, everyone. Get a good night’s rest, and we’ll do this again tomorrow night.”

A genial groan followed her off the platform, and she laughed at it as she approached Gus. The housekeeper immediately started talking to her in a low voice as he accompanied her through the workshop door. Although the day was longer here than in the human realm, there was still much to do before the next night. Toys had to be gathered for the proper region, and the exact time schedule had to be perfected before Santa and the reindeer made their time jump to the Christmas Eve that wouldn’t happen for another month.

“Work work work.”

Lon jumped at the sound of a low male voice right behind him. He spun to see the reindeer second-in-command leaning against one of the posts that supported the storage loft. Like Rom's, Wod's hair draped heavy and loose almost to his waist, and it had something of a wave, so the tips just brushed the soft green velvet of his fur-trimmed robe. The robe was loosely belted so it fell half open in front, letting his Dasher medallion sparkle against the hairless backdrop of his muscular chest. Wod smiled at Lon, eyes every bit the deep almost brown but mostly red color of his hair. Lon wasn't entirely sure why but Wod's darkness of hair and eyes had always frightened him slightly. Wod wasn't the only elf with dark hair and skin, certainly, but they weren't many. Lon had heard that the darker-haired elves were descended from a different race of fae, maybe even a different realm, and had access to a different kind of magic. Neither Lon nor anyone he knew had ever been able to prove that, but it was the rumor nonetheless. Wod was certainly mysterious enough. Lon could only attribute the way his heart raced and throat tightened around Wod to fear of the mystery.

Wod's smile darkened, and he brought his goblet to his lips. "Are you all right, little Lon?"

Lon startled, realizing he'd been staring. "I-I'm fine." He tore his gaze from the taller man to stare at the loose hay at his feet. Wod remained barefoot, and a small silver ring winked around the second toe of his left foot. It matched the ring that dangled from his right ear. Wod said nothing, but Lon knew he was still watching. Wod did this to him often, showing up and saying little. Lon didn't know if the bigger man was teasing him or what. "E-excuse me, Wod." With a little bow that wasn't necessary but showed respect, Lon gathered up his harnesses and fled.

Or would have fled, if he hadn't slammed into a bigger, more solid person. The collision barely moved the other but sent Lon sprawling onto his back, harnesses spewing from his hands and landing about him in a loud jangle of jingle bells.

"Whoa, hey."

Lon knew that voice well and squinched his eyes shut, too mortified by falling to see.

But he heard the swish of Rom's robe and felt a strong hand on his shoulder. "Hey, little Lon, sorry about that. Did I hurt you?"

Suppressing a groan, Lon opened his eyes. Rom's face hovered above his, the sweep of his light blue hair draped down the right side of his face. His uptilted eyes shone crystal blue even in the shadow his head and hair made over his face.

Rom grinned. "You okay?"

Embarrassed, Lon reached up to rub the point of his ear. "I'm okay."

"Excellent." A slim, strong hand gripped Lon's shoulder to help him up. "You shouldn't rush about in a crowd like that."

Lon nodded, keeping his eyes down. Look at him, you idiot! he yelled silently at himself, but he was too mortified to meet those gorgeous eyes. He wanted Rom to fall for him. He wouldn't do it if Lon showed himself as a joke. He climbed to his feet and tried to keep Rom from brushing him off, but the bigger man would have none of it. Lon was grateful for the loose, long fit of his jacket, for it covered the state of his erection when Rom's firm hand dusted off Lon's backside.

To make matters worse, while Rom was righting Lon, Wod had gathered the strewn harness bits. He stood beside Lon and Rom, dark eyes gone stony as he watched Rom put Lon to rights. "Here you go."

Lon took the straps of leather from Wod quickly, avoiding any contact. "Thank you." He nodded his head at both reindeer as he backed from them. "Thank you. Good night." He spun before he could blindly collide with anything or anyone else and this time succeeded in fleeing the room.

Chapter Two

“No.”

Behind the shiny translucent dildo he held before him, Bok’s emerald eyes widened under soaring lime green eyebrows. “No?”

“No.” Lon put out a hand to firmly push Bok’s wrist down and away. Then, for good measure, he wrapped his fingers around his best friend’s arm and drew him inside the cabin. “And get in here before someone sees you with that thing.”

Bok’s expressive face fell as he passed by Lon. He pouted at the six-inch dildo in its snug plastic wrapping. “But it’s the exact color of his hair.”

After making reasonably sure that no one in the other cabins along the quiet path had seen, Lon closed his front door. Then Bok’s words struck him. “His hair?”

Beaming, Bok held the sex toy up to him again, using both hands this time. “Rom’s hair.”

Lon’s eyes went wide, and he blinked, first at the dildo, then at his friend’s bright green eyes, then at the dildo. “What?”

Although the smile was childlike, Lon knew well enough that Bok’s intentions were anything but innocent. “I thought maybe you’d like to give it to him. As a gift.”

Lon didn’t know whether to be appalled or amused. It must have showed on his face, because it made Bok giggle. Which made Lon frown. “I am *not* giving him a *dildo* as a gift.”

Bok’s grin twisted to show some of his unsavory intent. “It would make him notice you.”

Grumbling, Lon brushed past him into the room proper. “I don’t want him to notice me like *that*.”

Unrepentant, Bok followed Lon through the small main room into the bedroom. “I thought you were hot for his rod?”

Lon stopped and spun so quickly that Bok ran into him. Since Bok was half again as wide as Lon, they both stumbled. Before Bok could fully right himself, Lon thwapped him over the head. “Don’t be crude.”

“Ow.” Bok rubbed at his head, mussing the fine lime green silk of his hair. “Why not? Not being crude isn’t getting you anywhere.”

Lon grimaced at him but couldn’t find words of protest. So he settled for a “humph!” before turning back into his bedroom.

Bok followed, as Lon knew he would. “No matter what you say, I’m leaving this here.” He dropped the dildo onto Lon’s neatly made bed. The sky blue stood out against the pastels in the multicolored patchwork quilt. “In case you change your mind.”

Lon sat at his desk, putting his back to the bed, his friend, and the toy. “I won’t.”

Bok sighed as he lowered his bulk into the reading chair beside Lon’s desk. Lon bent his head over his writing and tried to ignore his friend. He knew it wouldn’t last. Bok couldn’t sit still for that long. “Whatcha writing?”

Lon grumbled and pushed frustrated fingers through the pale gold hair that was just long enough to gather on the table beside his letter. “Nothing much. I’ve been trying to write him a letter.”

Bok rolled his eyes and sank back in the plush chair. “The dildo’s better. More direct.”

Lon glared at him. “No.”

“I’m telling you. The toy would work. Works for me.”

The trouble for Lon was that Bok would know. He got girls all the time. He and his coworkers spent most of their time at computers, finding appropriate toys for the millions of human children that they served. The Department of Acquisitions was a relatively recent branch of Santa's operation. In the distant past, the elves had manufactured all the toys themselves. But especially in the last few decades, homemade toys didn't make the grade. The first acquisitions department had consisted of elves taking the list of names from the Department of The List, then venturing into the other realm disguised as humans to buy appropriate toys. Back then, the team had been vast. These days, acquisitions had far fewer members, and every one of them was a computer nerd. Bok and his coworkers used established accounts to purchase toys and have them delivered to spots where the shipping department would pick them up.

But that wasn't why Bok and his coworkers were so popular. No, that was because they could and did find and purchase *other* things besides toys. The elves didn't really need money, since food and shelter were provided to everyone in the village, nor did they need anything physical from the human realm. But they were not averse to having certain things: more mature toys, trinkets, doodads, you name it. Since neither Jannie nor Gus put a limit on what could be purchased—as long as things didn't get out of hand and the main job got done—the elves in acquisitions could acquire pretty much anything they wanted. Since few of the other elves had access to the computers that plugged into the human realm, that made Bok and his fellows very busy and very popular. Bok, in particular, had a penchant for buying adult sex toys and accessory items. There were a surprising number of women among them who enjoyed them and enjoyed *him*, even if Bok was on the roly-poly side.

"I'm not you," Lon grumbled, staring at the paper before him.

Bok sat up and craned his head enough to get a look at the paper. "Not much there."

Lon stared at the one line: *Dearest Rom*. Indeed, he'd not gotten far. "I'm not sure what to say."

Bok poked at the paper, nudging it slightly away from Lon. "That's not the way to say it."

Lon slouched in his straight-backed chair. "Your way's not the way to say it either."

"Mine gets right to the point."

Lon slapped a hand over his eyes. "That's not the point I want to make."

"What *is* your point?"

Lon peeked at his friend between his fingers. Although he'd been craving Rom for years, he'd only told Bok of it this season. Until recently, his longing had been manageable. He was still a relatively young man. His sexual encounters up to this point in his life had been brief and purely exploratory. He'd tried sleeping with women, and although he found it enjoyable, it didn't compare to the race of heat in his veins when he was with a man. He simply preferred cock, just as his friend Bok preferred pussy. Not a big deal among the elves, since they didn't make the deal about sexual orientation that humans did.

"I want...*more*."

Bok studied him for a few seconds, then nodded sagely. "You want a relationship."

"Yes."

"That's for old people."

Lon sat up, offended. "It is not."

"It is too. Why limit yourself to one person? It's not like we have to worry about the things humans do."

No. They didn't have unwanted pregnancies or sexual diseases among them. Couples of any pairing could request to have a child. When the time came, the Reproductive Committee would either grant their wish or not, in order of

application. Usually only those couples who wished to start a family would settle down, and those couples tended to be older.

Still... “But what about love?”

Bok shook his head. “You’re such a romantic. You need to stop reading those romance books.”

Lon crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s your fault. *You* got me the e-book reader.”

“Yeah. My bad.” Bok shook his head. “Still, you could have set your sights on someone...”

“Someone what?”

Bok’s gaze darted about the room rather than look at him. He shrugged. “Someone...easier to get? I mean, come on—Rom’s got his pick of everyone. Why would he settle for one?”

“Why would he settle for *me*?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Lon’s heart twisted as he sank low enough in his chair to rest his chin on his chest. “I know. It’s hopeless. But I can’t help how I feel.”

Bok sat forward to slap a hand on the desk. “Then you just need to *do* it.”

“Do what?”

“Go to him. Tell him how you feel.”

“He’ll laugh at me.”

“Maybe. But he’ll probably fuck you before he lets you down easy.”

“Oh, you!” Lon stood up. “You’ve got a one-track mind.” When he saw the dildo, he stopped himself from dropping onto the bed. Instead he turned in to the bathroom.

“So do you!” Bok followed, stopping in the doorway. The pale green of the bathroom walls made his hair look particularly vivid. “How do you know a good, solid fuck couldn’t turn into something more? Stranger things have happened.”

Lon stared at himself in the mirror. He was so ordinary. Straight white-gold hair with no curl to it whatsoever, ordinary blue eyes. His face was a little more heart-shaped than most, his chin quite narrow over a long neck. His ears weren't the kind that stuck close to his skull; rather, the points stuck out like a cat's. He'd never had the courage to mark himself. No piercings or tattoos that were all the rage these days. In a race of colorful, expressive people, he was just plain, ordinary Lon. Little Lon, barely over four feet tall. Even Bok was an inch taller than he. Why *would* Rom even notice him, much less fall for him?

He whimpered and covered his face with his hands. "It's hopeless."

"Don't think that way." Bok's arm slid around his shoulders. "Go talk to him. You've got nothing to lose."

"He might laugh at me."

"He could. But then you'd figure out he's a right bastard, and you'd get over him."

Lon punched his friend's gut lightly. "Don't say that. He's not a bastard."

"Then he'll listen nicely, fuck you soundly, and send you on your way. If nothing else, you'll know what it feels like to be with him."

Lon drew his gaze back up to the mirror. Bok had been his friend since they were both in diapers. His crudeness often made Lon cringe, but he knew Bok was firmly on his side. "Maybe you're right."

"Course I'm right." Bok walked Lon out of the bathroom. "You should talk to him tonight after the team gets back. The reindeer are usually horny after a trip, right?" Even though he worked directly for Santa, Bok, like most elves, had little direct contact with the boss, much less the reindeer team.

"Yes."

"Right." Bok stepped away from him to pick up the dildo from the bed. "Take this with you when you talk to him." There was that wicked grin again. "It'll help make your point."

Chapter Three

Be brave!

Despite his shy efforts, Lon couldn't get close enough to talk to Rom at all, let alone privately, that night after the team arrived. Rom was constantly surrounded by friends, handlers, and admirers, as always. It was like fighting through a flurry of snow in a stiff wind to get close to him. Perhaps not impossible, but uncomfortable and difficult. Lon wallowed in the hopeless memory of the previous night when Rom had been *right there* and paying attention. *Why* was Lon's timing so very bad?

To make matters worse, Lon had the blue dildo that Bok had given him stuffed inside his jacket, a strange weight resting just above his belt. He kept trying to adjust it inconspicuously, to keep the shape in a place where it couldn't be noticed. But having it pressed against his belly made him self-conscious. *Darn Bok and his ideas!* How had he let Bok talk him into carrying it with him?

"Just in case," Bok had said.

Lon should have known better. This close to the actual Christmas date, emotions tended to ratchet up as everyone felt the spirit of the season in the human realm begin to spill over into their own. It was the primary reason they were compelled to do what they did: that seasonal high. It fueled their magic and their very existence and made their lives worthwhile. Toward actual Christmas day, all tensions were heightened. It made Lon's longing for Rom all the more urgent, but unfortunately for him, he wasn't the only one.

Stashing the last harness on a shelf where he could retrieve it later, Lon geared himself for one last try in Rom's direction. Jannie had already spoken and

gone off with Gus. Soon the reindeer would be heading home. Lon grabbed a goblet of vintage sleighberry wine. One of the few spirits purely from their realm, it was sweet and mellow and packed quite a kick, thus its popularity with the reindeer who tended to live as hard as they worked. Wine in hand, he began to maneuver through the crowd, easily keeping the shine of Rom's blue hair in sight over the heads of all but a few of the others. Rom threw back his head to laugh at something, and Lon caught a flash of the embroidered blue silk of a robe sleeve. *Almost there.* He slid between two other handlers and danced around back of Yor and Tanty—Donner and Vixen—and their own little crowds. Intent on his mission, he didn't notice Tik—boisterous Cupid—swing a broad arm back as he told a story. Tik's elbow clipped Lon's right arm, jostling enough to loosen his hold on the goblet. Lon had to juggle and spin to try to keep it from spilling. He managed, but bumped into a support post, which tipped the goblet again. A small splash of wine wet the hay beneath his pointed red shoes as he twisted to avoid another handler with a matching goblet. Wide-eyed, they both cried out as they bumped each other and ricocheted into their own spins. Help! Lon thought, suppressing a whimper as he tried to bring himself to a halt, knowing he now had attention he hadn't wanted. Then disaster when someone trying to get out of his way managed to step on the point of his shoe. His ankle twisted, and the goblet slipped from his hands as he started to fall.

Started to fall—but didn't land. A quick hand with caramel skin snatched the goblet out of the air and righted it so quickly, only a few drops managed to spill over the rim. At the same time, a strong arm caught Lon about the torso, saving him from a crash to the ground. The arm curled Lon in toward the broad chest exposed between the loose sides of a dark green embroidered robe. *Wod.* Of course it would have to be Wod who caught him—literally—in such an embarrassing situation. Lon's face landed against Wod's chest, his panting lips just level with one small, light chocolate nipple. His hand splayed over the far side of Wod's chest, his pale skin so white against Wod's darker hue.

“Hey, little Lon.” Wod’s amused voice seeped through his skin directly into Lon’s ear.

Lon suppressed a groan. Beyond his hand and Wod’s far arm, he could see the crowd watching him. Worse, he saw Rom watching. Rom. Watching. Him. Wod. Wod’s arm around him. His face masked against Wod’s bare skin. Wod’s nipple close enough to nibble. Wod’s warmth oozing into Lon. This was *not* helping!

Wod squeezed Lon’s shoulder, inadvertently pressing him closer. “That was quite a trip. You okay?”

Lon pushed away from Wod’s body, keeping his eyes downcast. He’d tripped last night, as well. How embarrassing! “Y-yes, I’m fine.”

Wod chuckled, his arm trailing over Lon’s shoulders as applause erupted around them.

“Well done, Wod!” a male voice yelled.

“Nice trip, Lon?” A woman laughed.

Lon shut his eyes and grimaced. Then his eyes popped back open when he realized that he had both palms spread on Wod’s bare chest, with his gaze aimed at Wod’s groin. When they’d been pressed together, the robe had held shut. But the jostling of bodies had loosened the silken belt, and as Lon drew away, Wod’s robe fell open to reveal his nudity. As well as the semierect status of his dark, gorgeous cock. Embarrassed heat flooded Lon’s face and neck as he twisted out from under Wod’s arm, freeing himself from that intoxicating circle of warmth. Around him, more cheers and jeers. Of course he hadn’t been the only one to notice Wod’s state.

“Careful not to break him, Wod,” he heard.

A whistle. “Go for it, Lon!”

No no no! This was all wrong. They couldn’t think that he... That Wod... Rom would get the wrong idea! Head down, he backed away, clueless of what to do or say to make things better. Hands patted his shoulders, others mussed his hair, and yet

others tried to push him back toward Wod. He shook his head, his pale hair sheeting down to cover the panic on his face. He couldn't fix this. Not now.

Without any other options, he turned on his heel, shoved through bodies, and fled.

Chapter Four

I have to fix this! After hiding in a corner of one of the toy warehouses for a few hours, Lon had finally calmed down. Somewhat. His blood had stopped racing, and the nonsensical erection that had bloomed in his trousers had faded. The mortified tears he'd shed had dried. But the panic had melted into a cold, gnawing fear. *I have to fix this!*

He could live with Rom—and everyone else—seeing him as a bumbling, stumbling fool. It was bad enough, but he could suffer through the embarrassment. Maybe, by some horrible quirk of fate, that had even gotten Rom to notice him. But Wod... No, that was unacceptable. Rom had seen him in Wod's embrace. It didn't matter that it was accidental. It had happened, and everyone had confirmed what Lon had seen. What Lon had felt. Wod's thick, beautiful cock half full and nudging toward Lon. Just thinking of it made Lon's blood sing with panic again. Rom had seen him on the verge of dropping to his knees to worship Wod's cock and the tight balls at its lightly furred root. *Not* that he had been about to do that, of course, but to *Rom* it would have looked like that. Because who could not appreciate what Wod had to offer? Lon found his mouth watering, even now, and his fingers trailed over the shape of the dildo that was still in his jacket, a firm reminder of what he'd seen.

And that would just *not* do!

Groaning softly, he leaned back against the wall and tipped his face toward the high, murky window far above him. Crates, boxes, and sacks of toys were neatly stashed on rack after metal rack along the length of the cavernous building, obscuring his corner. The moonlight fought through the window's dust to provide him with enough light to see himself and his surroundings in mysterious half

shadows. Gleaming plastic or glass eyes from dozens of stuffed animals peered over the lips of the crates to witness his solitude. Lon had chosen the warehouse at random for solace, relatively sure no one knew where he was. Warehouse workers would find him in the morning, but he wouldn't be here that long.

He had to fix this! And it had to be now.

Decided, he nodded to himself, then stood. Tonight. It had to be tonight. He had to let Rom know his feelings before the idea of Lon and Wod could settle in Rom's head. Rom and Wod were friends. If Rom thought he was with Wod, even casually, Rom would likely stay away. That wouldn't *do!*

He slipped from the darkness and into the bright night air. The warehouses were each three stories tall, plenty to keep the snow in even the wide alley at a minimum. He passed by abandoned handcarts in various sizes, then reached the openness of a larger street. Jack In The Box Road was the street where all the warehouses were. At this time of night, only utility lights were on. Activity would pick up in the morning when men and women came to gather the toys for the night's excursion. He walked for two blocks, past crusts of snow piled against the warehouse fronts, then turned right toward the lights of Santa Claus Lane, the main thoroughfare through the village. Foot traffic was light, and Lon was thankful that he didn't see anyone he knew closely so he didn't have to stop and talk. He headed north, toward the densely wooded hill where the workshop stood and the elite had their cottages. Lon, as a handler, had a nice cabin at the base of the hill, but his modest abode couldn't compare to the split-level cottages sheltered by soaring evergreens that lined the lane on the way to the workshop at the crest.

He dug his hands deep into his jacket pockets and kept his eyes down, thinking furiously as he walked. Since their realm remained in winter, elves didn't feel cold as the same biting discomfort as humans, so he wasn't cold. But instinct hunched him into himself as he wrote a mental script of what he'd say to Rom. All the words he couldn't express in his letter had to come out verbally, and speaking

was no more his strong point than writing. At least by practicing, he gave himself as much of an advantage as he could.

At the base of the hill, Santa Claus Lane started to climb, the only road that provided a straight course to the workshop at the top. Toward the middle of the hill, small roads provided breaks in the fragrant trees and bushes, each marked with familiar signs. There wasn't an adult elf—nor many children—who didn't know all nine reindeer sigils by heart. On each neat sign, the real name of each reindeer was etched in silver. The roads flanked Santa Claus Lane in reverse order as they were hitched to Santa's sleigh, with the single exception that Rudolph, the newest addition, was first instead of last. Which meant Dasher and Dancer were toward the top of the hill, just a small distance from the open gate of the workshop grounds.

Lon reached the final road and stared briefly at the three arrows that stood for Dasher. He swallowed, heart in his throat as he passed through a natural arch created by the reaching branches of trees. To call the shaded footpath a road was a misnomer, since it was barely wide enough to accommodate one of the smaller reindeer carts, but in a village traveled largely by foot, it hardly mattered. Dasher Road was lined with sleighberry bushes, the sweet-tart scent of the berries laced over the clean, fresh tang of the snow that provided a light blanket to the bushes and ground. What looked to him like lone footsteps marked the snow at the center of the path, raising Lon's hopes that Rom was alone. It wasn't unheard of. Contrary to popular belief, most reindeer were too tired after the night's journey to entertain company, even of the intimate variety. If luck could just be with him for the first time that night, Rom would be home alone and not yet asleep.

"Please?" he murmured, gazing up at the stars. "Christmas luck, be with me."

A turn in the road brought Rom's cottage into view. Lon's hopes brightened at seeing the two windows flanking the sheltered doorway lit from within. At least Rom was home and not at an impromptu party somewhere else. Swallowing a mountain of doubt and uncertainty, Lon forced himself those last quiet steps to the front porch. This was it. For better or for worse, tonight he would tell Rom.

The sound of a cry stopped his hand from knocking. He froze, listening. A snowdrift fell from branches behind him. The scurry of tiny feet that probably belonged to a squirrel or raccoon gently rattled the bushes to the left. Then there was the cry again. Not an animal but a man. Perhaps pain but maybe...?

As though tugged by an invisible cord, Lon stepped carefully to the edge of the porch. The railing opened at the corner onto the dark side yard. The cleared area was empty, a half basketball court set up against the wall of the house. A spill of brightness lit the trees beyond the house in the back. Soft music reached Lon's ears, along with a rhythmic creaking. Again the invisible cord pulled at him. A dozen reasons why he should not cross the basketball court went through his brain, but the reasons didn't reach his feet, which soon brought him to the corner of the house.

Cautiously he wrapped the fingers of one hand around the edge of the wall, then slowly slid his head sideways until one eye could peek. Rom had a hot tub. Lon couldn't see it, since it was sunk into the raised deck, but it was the only explanation for the steam that filled the air, for the mild roar of bubbles, for the thick moisture that coated the perfect porcelain skin of the half of Rom that rose above the deck. It was the only explanation for the half of Tym spread out on his belly on the deck, crying out to the trees. The angle wasn't good, but Lon didn't need to be a genius to recognize the position, to know that the rhythmic thrust of Rom's slim hips was pushing his cock deep into Tym's willing body. Tym grasped at the decking, desperate groans drowning in the loud burble of bubbles. Rom reared straight and tall behind him, back arched, drenched hair a shimmering waterfall from the head turned up toward the twinkling stars.

Lon knew he should leave, should stop watching. Few elves minded an audience during sex, but it was common courtesy to be invited. But he couldn't move. Just as Tym gripped the decking, Lon gripped the side of the house. He pressed his body against the siding and found himself dry humping it in time with Rom's thrusts. The dildo dug into his belly, and he gave serious thought to taking it out to relieve himself as he watched. But he couldn't tear his eyes away, and he

couldn't figure out how to get himself or it into position without losing a precious second of what he was viewing. So he remained, frustrated and pathetic, seeking paltry relief from a dusty wall as Tym received the glorious pounding that he craved.

"Sweet Christmas, Rom!" Tym cried, his voice filled with all the ache Lon felt.

Rom laughed. Tossing his head, he bent forward, draping himself over Tym's back. Tym arched up, twisting his neck, seeking and finding Rom's lips for a sloppy, desperate kiss.

Leave. Barely suppressing a whimper, Lon forced his eyes shut. Firmly he pushed himself into the darkness of the side yard and rolled to press his back against the wall. He could still hear them, the rumbling bubbles, the creak of the planking. He even imagined he heard the slap of skin to skin. *Leave.* Yes, he must. It was wrong to watch unbidden, and it didn't get him anywhere. He spread a palm over the dildo at his belly, promising himself that he'd use it for relief once he got back to his cabin. At least he could have *something* sky blue tonight.

Trying to ignore the erection that tented his loose trousers, Lon strove to walk softly as he headed back down Dasher Road. The darkness within the trees enveloped him, but the cool night air couldn't assuage the heat that flamed his skin. He needed relief in the worst way, more than ever before, and it tore at him that anything he managed would pale in comparison to what he really needed.

He'd almost reached Santa Claus Lane when something shoved through the bushes to his right. Lost as he was in his own misery, his reaction was delayed. He hadn't managed to twist toward the sound when a large body was on him. No predators hunted the elven realm, but fear was natural when a large shape descended and strong arms circled a body. One big hand clamped over Lon's mouth before he could think to scream.

"What happened? Didn't like the show?"

Lon's eyes opened wide, focused on the bright arch that would bring him to the open street. So near yet so far.

A second hand slid down and underneath the skirt of Lon's jacket to cup and press his erection. "Feels like you did," murmured that dark molasses voice.

Lon shuddered, his eyes closing of their own accord as shards of pleasure ripped through him. Wod. He'd know that voice anywhere.

Hot breath caressed the back of his ear just before teeth gently nipped at the point. "Come with me, little Lon."

A halfhearted protest gurgled in Lon's throat, but his feeble attempt to free himself went unnoticed as he was whisked away. Quicker than Lon would have imagined, Wod swept him into the open moonlight of Santa Claus Lane, then back into the darkness of the road across from Dasher's. Lon dangled like a sack tucked under one of Wod's arms, with Wod's large hand still over his mouth to keep him silent. He didn't think he could have cried out. By the time it occurred to him, they'd come in sight of Wod's house. Dancer's cottage was similar to Dasher's in shape and size. But beyond Dancer's place, there were no trees, just the open space of the escarpment that broke down the far side of the hill to the meadows and frozen river far below. Only one window contained a dim light, matching the same that shone through the open front door. Lon watched in mingled horror and strange anticipation as the door came closer, until Wod carted him through it.

He grunted when he landed in the center of a plush couch. The piece of furniture was clearly built for humans, thus double wide, with ample room for smaller elves. With Lon's shoulders against the back, his feet barely dangled over the front edge. Around him, he only got the impression of dark-colored furniture in a cozy, dimly lit room. The scent of mulled wine hung in the air, buoyed by the merry crackle of flames.

The front door slammed shut, and a lamp flared to life, adding its light to that from the fireplace in front of Lon. Wod crossed the room to stand before him, effectively blotting out sight of the room, his hands on slim hips. "Well?"

Lon's voice caught in his throat. He had never seen another elf look so imposing. Clad only in snug, stretch velvet pants in what might be dark green, Wod

looked so very large. Lon could have sworn he was ten feet rather than five. His long, wavy hair looked black in this light, with just a few crimson strands shining in the dark. It was bound in a tail that trailed over the great expanse of one broad shoulder and bisected his chest. Lon had never appreciated the truly golden sheen to Wod's skin before, nor noted the length of his neck or the strong set of his angry jaw. His eyes were large, with even more of a slant than most elves', and completely black in the dimness. Currently narrowed, they looked almost bestial, as though Wod's other shape was carnivorous, not a reindeer.

When Lon didn't speak, Wod's chin tipped forward, and a shorter fringe of hair spilled over his forehead to shadow his eyes. "Well?"

Still Lon couldn't speak, captivated by those eyes. So mysterious, so much darker than most of the eyes he knew. He should say something, but all thought escaped his present state of mind in front of this fearsome creature.

Wod tilted his head to the side, exposing the quirk of one eyebrow. Then he smiled, a sensuous curl to the softest curves in his face. He leaned forward and propped a knee on the cushion to one side of Lon's thighs. Thick, powerful arms came forward to brace on the back of the couch. "Have you nothing to say for yourself, little Lon?"

Lon swallowed, and a small squeak escaped as he pushed into the softness behind him.

Wod's shadow engulfed him as the larger man leaned even closer. The thick tail of dark, wavy hair spilled into Lon's lap as Wod's face came closer. The scent of sleighberry wine laced the waft of his breath as it caressed Lon's parted lips.

Lips. Face. Shadow. Shivering, Lon closed his eyes to the confusing sensations, only to discover another as warm lips found his. *Too much*. His body couldn't take this. Too much anticipation. Too much want. He was wound tight, primed to blow at the slightest touch. His mouth opened to Wod's, seeking the relief of a true kiss, no matter its source. These weren't the lips he wanted, but these lips were *here* and more than suitable to slake his thirst. Seeking comfort, braving the darkness, he

reached out. He couldn't find clothing to grasp so settled for the rope of silky hair. His fingers tangled in it, jerking. That produced a deep grunt in Wod's chest, followed by a sweep of the world when Wod took firm hold of Lon's shoulders and swiftly stretched him out on the giving comfort of the couch. Lon whimpered, overcome. Both arms slipped up and around Wod's neck, scattering hair down the heated skin of his shoulders. Wod's weight descended on him. Lon whimpered, rolling his hips up, aching cock seeking the tautness of the other man's belly even through the layers of his trousers and jacket. All the while, Wod's mouth devoured him, sucking in his tongue, seeking and exploring every inch of his open, wanting mouth.

"Now this is more like it," Wod murmured against Lon's lips. He shifted his bigger body up, creating a little space to work his hand between them. "I was beginning to think you didn't like me."

"Didn't...?" Lon blinked his eyes open and swallowed over the ache of need at the base of his throat. Beyond Wod's dark head, shadows of flames danced across the ceiling.

Slight tugs signaled the loosening of his jacket's buttons. Wod's head descended to graze soft lips along Lon's collarbone just over his light undershirt. "Mmm. You've been avoiding me."

Shock mixed with the melting heat in his bones. He lifted his hand, fingers spread, and watched the dark fire of Wod's hair spill through them. He could easily imagine it as flames, singeing his skin. "Avoiding...?"

Wod chuckled, nipping softly at Lon's neck. "We'll talk later. Although..." He sat up and lifted one hand, brandishing the dildo, which looked cobalt in the shadowy light. "I would love to know why you've been carrying this around all night."

Sight of the dildo banished confusion from Lon's brain. *Oh no!* His state suddenly became blatantly apparent. He lay spread out like a feast on Wod's couch, belt discarded, jacket open, undershirt rucked up to expose a swath of his belly.

With his legs draped over Wod's bent thighs, his arousal served as an obvious pole in the tent of his trousers.

Before Lon could turn panic into flight, Wod slid his free hand over Lon's erection, squeezing through the heated velvet. The look in his eyes was every bit as hot as his touch, perhaps more. He waved the dildo in the air, the toy looking surprisingly comfortable in his grasp. "You'll tell me about it, won't you?"

"Oh no!" Lon's panicked thoughts finally reached his tongue. *Run!* He struggled to sit up.

Wod frowned. "What?"

"No no." Shaking his head, Lon pulled up his knees, prepared to roll over.

Trouble was, Wod kept hold of his cock. He squeezed to get Lon's attention. "Hold on."

Lon froze, knees and feet in the air, head turned toward the front door. "Oh no, I shouldn't be here. I *can't* be here!"

Wod's voice stayed low, soothing. "Lon, wait."

Frantic, he reached down to grab Wod's wrist. "Let go."

"Lon..."

"Please, let go. I need to go." A whimper colored his voice. Wod wasn't hurting him, but he had a good hold.

"I said *wait*."

Easily shaking Lon's hold on his wrist, Wod released his crotch to spread the hand over the center of Lon's chest. When Wod leaned into it, Lon had to give in. Even in his half-mad state, he recognized that he wasn't going anywhere unless Wod allowed it.

Hovering over him, slim arm curved with hard muscle, Wod pointed at Lon's face with the tip of the dildo. "What's with you?"

Staring at the tip of the dildo still encased in a thin layer of plastic wrap, Lon tried to swallow a hysterical laugh. Air dried his eyeballs, too exposed.

Wod shook the dildo. "Talk to me this time, Lon."

Swallowing, Lon shook his head. "I shouldn't be here."

"I want you here."

Surprise brought his gaze to Wod's. He opened his mouth to question the matter-of-fact words, but what came out was: "I love Rom."

Clearly this was not what Wod expected to hear. His mouth opened, then closed. Fine brows soared up, then knitted close over the narrow bridge of his nose as he studied Lon for a long moment. "Does Rom know that?"

Lon fought a whimper, unable to look away from Wod's penetrating gaze. "No."

"Hmmm." Wod started to ease back but leaned in again when Lon twitched. "You stay put, or I'm going to tie you down. Do you understand? You're going to *talk* to me."

The thought of Wod binding him effectively froze Lon. Although he didn't feel right in such an intimate position with Wod, he stayed where he was as Wod sat back on his heels. "C-can I sit up?"

"No." Wod tapped the bare sliver of Lon's belly with the tip of the dildo. "You stay exactly where you are and tell me what this is all about." He tossed long dark fringe from his face. "What were you doing at Rom's?"

Lon winced and hoped the relative darkness hid the flush to his pale skin. "I-I went there to talk to him. I d-didn't know he had company."

"Hmm. But you got a good eye anyway."

Lon allowed himself a small frown. It wasn't possible for him to flush with any more embarrassment. "How did you know?"

"I followed you."

"W-what? Why?"

"I saw you start down Rom's drive. I wanted to know what you were doing."

"Why?"

“Because—*Hey*.” Wod pointed with the tip of the toy. “*I’m* asking the questions here. What were you going to talk to Rom about?”

“T-that’s private.”

“You were going to tell him you love him?” There was a slight note of surprised derision in that low voice.

It allowed Lon to deepen his frown. “Yes. I was.”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Why? Do you even know Rom all that well?”

“Well, no.” Lon squirmed, trying to lower the hem of his undershirt without reaching for it.

“I didn’t think so. Did you think he’d confess the same back to you?”

“Well...no.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know.” His fingernails dug into the couch when Wod dropped his hand so that palm and toy rested on Lon’s bared belly, entirely too close to his aching arousal. For that matter, entirely too close to the evidence of *Wod’s* arousal, clearly defined in snug pants. “I just wanted to tell him finally.”

“That you’re in love with him.”

“Yes.”

Wod seemed genuinely confused, which just made Lon want to squirm more. “Did you want him to fuck you?”

Without thought, Lon pushed up on his elbows. “That’s not what it’s like!”

Wod raised a hand—thankfully without toy—to spread over Lon’s chest. But he didn’t push him back down, just left it there as a reminder. “Okay, okay, don’t get your knickers in a twist.” Wod grinned at a private joke. Was he laughing at Lon? “Why do you think you’re in love with Rom?”

“Because I *am*.”

“How?”

“How?”

“You admitted you don’t know him.”

“I-I... Well, what I *do* know is wonderful.”

“Really? And what do you know?”

“I don’t think I want to tell you.” He glanced pointedly down at their crotches. “N-not like this.”

Wod glanced down, and Lon would swear that both their cocks swelled. He bit down over a groan.

Then, to his profound relief, Wod shrugged and eased back. “All right, you can sit.” He stood but turned immediately, pointing at Lon. “But you’re staying here. We’re going to discuss this.”

From his seat, Lon glared at Wod’s back as the bigger man turned away. “You can’t make me stay.”

Wod threw a dark glance over one broad shoulder. “I *could*.” Just the look assured Lon that Wod had at least a few ways of physically detaining Lon. “But I think you’ll want to stay.”

Self-conscious, Lon drew his undershirt down and his jacket closed. The dildo fell with a loud thump on the thick rug that covered the hardwood floor, and he stared at it, unable to make himself pick it up. “Why?” he asked, unsure whether looking at the dildo or tracking the other man’s movements around the room was preferable.

Liquid poured into a glass mug, and Lon peeked up just as Wod poured a second mug of deep red sleighberry wine from a thick earthenware jug set on a side table. “Because,” Wod said as he pushed the cork back into the jug. He turned, two glasses in hand. “I can tell you *all* you need to know about Rom.”

Chapter Five

Lon stared up at Wod, ignoring the drink held a few inches from his face. “Excuse me?”

Wod raised an eyebrow and jiggled the mug. “Have a drink.”

Lon took the mug, more to get it out of the way than to sip. He wrapped his hands around the warmth he set on his knee. “What did you say?”

Wod’s grin was not hidden by the drink he lifted to his mouth. He sipped, watching Lon over the rim, then lowered the mug and licked moisture from his lips. “You say you’re in love with Rom.”

“Yes.”

Wod took his time lowering himself to the couch beside Lon. He stretched out, wedging into the corner with one knee bent over the side and the other resting against the back of the couch. The position opened his crotch to Lon, who tried his best to ignore the clear outline of the cock straining Wod’s pants.

Wod took another sip, then curled the glass against his cheek. “If you’re in love with someone, you should know all you can about them. Rom and I have been close all our lives. I know everything you need to know.”

Lon narrowed his gaze. “Everything?”

Wod’s wicked grin told him more than he perhaps wanted to know. “Everything.”

Hastily Lon averted his gaze. He brought the wine to his lips to buy time to think. But sleighberry wine would not be ignored, especially when it had been perfectly mulled. The berries themselves were tart, with a faint, cool sweetness to

them. When heated with sugar and a touch of peppermint, it was a feast for the taste buds. Lon couldn't help but close his eyes and savor it.

"You may have more, if you like," a seductive voice assured him.

He opened his eyes, belatedly realizing he'd finished more than half of the liquid in the mug he cradled at his lips. "No. Thank you." Aware that his voice had dropped a half octave, he lowered the mug to his knees, primly held closed before him despite the protrusion in his pants. "It's wonderful, though."

"Thank you. It's my own recipe."

"Really?" Lon stole a glance at Wod, who hadn't moved from his sexy sprawl. "You mulled this yourself?"

Wod raised his mug to the light, watching the light prism through the heavy glass. "My mother is a cook. I grew up in the kitchens." He brought the mug back down to balance it on one side of his chest. "We both did."

"We?"

Wod's grin widened. "Rom. And me. His mother was a cook too."

"Oh!" Lon found himself smiling, delighted to know such a thing. "That's nice. Both of my parents worked in the warehouses."

"You did as well, didn't you?"

Lon found his glass back at his lips but paused to glance at Wod. "How did you know that?"

Wod shrugged. "I heard."

"Oh." Lon sipped the lovely wine and sat back a little on the couch. Plush and soft. Dark, just like almost everything else in Wod's cottage, or at least this room. Only the walls were light, pale gold pine to offset the dusky colors of the furnishings. "It's true. I worked in warehouse eleven for a few years before I became a handler."

"Why the change?"

"Why? Because of Rom."

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

Lon grinned, basking in the fragrance and heat from his mug. What was *in* this? “He came to the warehouse with Santa once. I’m not sure why. But he was so...beautiful. I’d only seen reindeer from afar.”

“I’ve heard we have that affect sometimes.”

Lon nodded. “You’re all so very beautiful.”

Wod propped an elbow on the couch’s arm so he could lean his temple on his fist. “Even the women?”

Lon kept nodding, eyeing a clear sculpture on the table behind Wod. “All of you. Perfect.” The piece was tall and slim, a deer made of glass just before a mighty leap. Not a reindeer. It was far too long and slim for that, although the sweeping antlers were similar. The smooth glass caught the firelight and spilled it back on the wall in a splash of ruddy gold.

“But you’re attracted to men, aren’t you, Lon?”

“Mmm. Yes.” Lon’s body swayed because his head still nodded. It was a pleasant rocking sensation to go with the hypnotic buzz that ran through his veins.

Wod sat up, blocking Lon’s view of the sculpture. Lon blinked as Wod’s face came in focus. He resembled the leaping stag in a way that Lon couldn’t quite fathom. “Let me take that.”

Lon glanced down as Wod took the empty mug from his fingers. When had he finished his drink?

“Would you like more?” Wod’s voice was so close to his ear, breath tickling its tip.

Lon lifted his face and found his lips just inches from Wod’s. He stared at the end of Wod’s nose, and it made him dizzy. Swaying back, he closed his eyes and shook his head. “I’d better not.” He lifted a hand to run fingers over his own lips. Warm. Soft. “That’s strong wine.”

“Yes. I’m afraid it is.” Wod left the couch to return the mugs to the side table. Lon admired the roll of his ass, so perfect and trim underneath his broad, bare back. Quite a lot like Rom’s except the skin was darker. It must go with being a reindeer. “So”—Wod turned, and Lon dropped his gaze—“if you admire us all, why Rom?”

Lon sat forward on the couch again, squeezing his knees with his hands, fighting the wine’s pleasant effects. “Why? Because...because he’s nice.”

Wod snorted. He stepped into a small kitchen area. Only a handful of cottages in Santa’s Village had true kitchens, since the elves all got their food from the food hall, but most cottages and cabins had a sink, a refrigerator, and a small oven for reheating meals.

“He is,” Lon protested, watching Wod take a fresh glass out of a cabinet. “He listened to all of us gush over him and wasn’t rude at all. He answered all of our questions. He was the one who suggested I should become a handler.”

“Did he?” Wod started back toward Lon, a glass of water in his hand.

Lon stretched out his hand for it before Wod even reached him. “Thank you. And yes, he did.”

“Why you, specifically?”

Lon gulped down half the glass, then took a deep breath. The cool, fresh liquid was good, but his head still buzzed, and the edges of things were a little blurry. Strong wine indeed. “One of my jobs was to strap in crates. I was working with some of the straps when Rom came that day.”

Wod nodded understanding as he resumed his seat in the corner of the couch. “So you took his advice.”

“Yes.”

“Do you like being a handler?”

Lon’s head shot up. “I love it.” He blinked and swayed back. “Whoa.”

Wod’s hand spanned his back, steadying him. “You all right?”

Lon took a deep breath, swallowed the rest of the water, then took another breath. Things were still fuzzy, but the spinning slowed. “Yes.”

“I didn’t realize you were that sensitive. There was brandy in the wine.”

Lon shook his head. “Wow. Really?” It felt good but also kind of scary, like he wasn’t fully in charge of his limbs, and his eyelids kept drifting shut. “I’ve never had spirits before.”

Wod grimaced. “Sorry about that. More water?”

“No, thank you.” Lon carefully set the glass on the floor by his foot, since there was no table in front of the couch. Wod’s hand on his back felt good. Something steady while the room was weaving.

“So, you’ve been a handler all season.” Wod’s voice was so deep, soothing but exciting. “Why haven’t you confessed to him before this?”

Lon placed his hands on his knees and squeezed.

“It can’t have escaped your notice that Rom’s *very* friendly.”

Lon nodded, letting his hair fall down to shield his face from Wod. “I know.”

“Don’t you want to get close to him?”

“Yes.”

Their knees bumped as Wod shifted closer. “Getting him to fuck you wouldn’t be at all hard.” Gentle fingers hooked Lon’s hair behind his ear, revealing his face. “You’re certainly cute enough.”

Startled, Lon glanced at Wod. He fought that fuzzy feeling from the wine. “You think so?”

Wod’s smile could have melted a glacier. The hand near Lon’s face shifted to brush fingers down his cheek. “Oh yes.” Fingertips traced Lon’s bottom lip, and Wod watched them like a hungry cat. “In fact, if you’d let me, I’d love to fuck you right now.”

“No. Thank you.” Lon shied away to hug the far arm of the couch. Was it warm in here? The empty glass tumbled to its side on the rug and rolled away from his feet. “But I don’t just want...that. I want...more.”

Wod stayed where he was, leaning on an elbow braced on his knee. “More?”

“Yes.”

The bigger man cocked his head, one brow rising in query. “With Rom?”

Lon frowned, hearing the echo of Bok’s reaction. “Why is that so strange?”

Wod sighed and shrugged. “It’s not very Rom. He’s barely ever been with anyone twice, let alone exclusively.”

“Ever?”

Wod shook his head.

Lon’s heart fell. It was one thing when Bok, who didn’t know Rom, said it was hopeless. It was another thing entirely when Rom’s best friend said it. Flashes of Rom with Tym in the hot tub, then Rom with any number of others Lon had seen him with throughout the season, paraded through his memory. Depressing. He’d known Rom was sleeping around, but he’d thought that would somehow stop when he confessed. How stupid. How very stupid of him. Embarrassed and dejected, he dropped his chin to his chest and started to push to his feet. “I should go.”

A strong hand shot out and took hold of his wrist to keep him seated. “Wait.”

Lon shook his head, mortified to realize that his eyes were full of burgeoning tears. “No. You’ve been very nice to me.” He twisted his arm but couldn’t free himself from Wod’s grip. “I...I need to go.”

“Just wait.” Wod held until Lon stopped twisting. “You’re in no shape to go anywhere.”

“What?”

What was that look? Resignation? “You’re drunk. You’ll probably fall down if you even try and stand.”

An odd need to defend himself bubbled in Lon’s chest. “I won’t.”

“Yes. You will. And it’s my fault. You need to sleep it off.”

“What?” Lon’s eyes flew wide open. “Here?”

Wod rolled his eyes. “I swear your virtue is safe.”

“My vir—Oh no.” He yanked another way and managed to get out from under Wod’s hand, even if he still couldn’t free his wrist. “I need to go.”

“Lon—”

“No, I... Whoa.” On his feet, then...not? The entire room tilted, but the furniture stayed where it was, an absurd defiance of gravity, in Lon’s muddled opinion. He lifted a foot and set it down on something hard...mobile...rolling. The glass. “Yipe!” More spinning around the only thing that was steady—Wod’s hand. Lon veered, then fell through liquid space. He reached out, grasped and found Wod’s neck. Wod’s neck? Where was the ground? Christmas, what...? “Are you carrying me?”

“Yes.”

Yes. Two strong arms. He could feel them underneath his bent knees and his back. “No. Put me down.”

“No.”

Darkness. Cooler air. The fire was in another room. “Wait.”

“Shhh.”

Soft. Warm pine and wool. A mattress in the dark. “Wod, wait.”

“Shhh.” Big hands pulled off Lon’s shoes.

“Wod.” Why wouldn’t the world right itself? It was so dark. “A light.”

“Don’t need it for sleep.”

“Sleep.” As though the words were a cue, Lon felt his muscles respond to the mattress that supported him. Despite the panic in the forefront of his mind, the rest of him felt remarkably calm. Safe. “No.” He yawned.

“You’ll feel better after you’ve slept.”

“But...”

A warm palm smoothed over his forehead. “Sleep, Lon.”

“What...?” Drunk or no, Lon recognized a sleep nudge when he felt it. A minor spell that just about everyone knew.

Unprepared to resist, Lon went out like a light.

Chapter Six

Lon woke up. Sat up. The big, human-size bed was draped in midnight blue sheets with a matching comforter, and he was right in the middle of it. The morning sun shone through the slats of shutters to Lon's left, and his jacket was draped over a chair by the closed door to his right. One door of a big armoire was ajar to provide a peek of hanging clothes and neatly arranged shoes. A deep rust silk robe hung on the corner of the armoire. A door beside it led to a bathroom beyond.

He was alone.

Where was Wod? Better yet, what had he done with Wod that he couldn't remember?

Frantic, Lon lifted the sheets, relieved to see that he still wore his pants and undershirt. His socks were gone, but a peek over the edge of the bed showed them neatly tucked into his shoes.

Back to: where was Wod?

Cautiously Lon climbed out of the bed—literally, since the bed stood as tall as his waist—and scurried into the narrow, pine-scented bathroom. He used the facilities, rinsed his mouth with a peppermint wash, and finger combed his hair, for once happy to have no curls. He didn't *look* debauched, and he felt remarkably clear-headed, given that he'd been drunk the night before. Wod wouldn't have taken advantage of that, would he? Lon didn't feel like he'd done anything with Wod that he didn't remember, but details were a little fuzzy around the edges. He remembered most of his conversation with Wod, he thought, and he vividly recalled having seen Rom in the hot tub with Tym. Naked and wet, fucking Tym from behind. So strong, so gorgeous, so unbelievably sexy. Lon even remembered the

sparkle of water on Rom's pale skin in the moonlight. Overcome, Lon gripped the rounded edge of the porcelain sink and waited for a wave of desire to release him.

"He's barely ever been with anyone twice." He remembered Wod saying that too. A sense of loss drained the lust, and he lifted his face to stare at his dumbstruck reflection. What now? Was he fooling himself about Rom? Even if he got the other man's attention, would it be everything Lon imagined? Could it be anything close to what he imagined? Or would he get, at most, one night of bliss, followed by a lifetime of memory?

Maybe it would be worth it. Rom had been magnificent, thrusting into Tym. Tym certainly had been lost in ecstasy. But beyond the initial thought, it just didn't appeal to Lon. A single night didn't seem right.

But it wasn't a decision to be made right now. First things first, he needed to get out of Wod's cottage.

"If you'd let me, I'd love to fuck you right now." The memory of Wod's offer was crystal clear, resuming the desire in his blood.

Right. He couldn't let that happen.

Why not?

Never you mind why.

He left the bathroom, then sat on a chair to don his shoes. After pulling on his jacket and firmly buttoning it to his chin—well, okay, the base of his neck—he crept to the door and opened it a crack. The main room of the cottage looked very different in the daylight. Sunlight streamed in through the east-facing windows, bouncing off the light pine walls to give a gentle golden glow to the somber tones in the furniture. He saw no one as he opened the door fully and stepped out, careful not to let the hard rubber soles of his shoes make a sound on the hardwood floor. The front door was directly to his left. He could just slip out and pretend that none of last night had happened.

Except that it had. Wod had been nothing but nice. More than nice. He had, in fact, offered to help Lon...along with other things.

He deserved better. At least a thank-you.

“Wo—” Lon’s voice broke on a squeak. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Wod?”

“In here.”

Following the heavenly scents of coffee, sugar, and cinnamon, Lon crept around the corner into the main room. Beyond the sitting area with the couch and fireplace were a small table and chairs. Wod sat, bare-chested, with his back to the wall, watching the sun on the snowy escarpment that dropped to the river far below. Lon stopped, amazed at the way the morning light made Wod’s rich, loose hair the same deep red of the mulled wine that had jumbled his thoughts last night. A shadow from one of the trees that flanked the picture window mixed with Wod’s shadow on the wall behind him and gave it antlers. It was almost as though his other form hovered over his shoulder.

Wod turned to face him, and the shadows parted. “Good morning. How do you feel?”

“Much better.” Lon shuffled closer, unsure what to do. “Good morning. Thank you for...” He gestured toward the bedroom. “Thank you for letting me sleep it off.”

“You’re welcome.”

Lon put a hand to his head. “I don’t usually drink.”

“Good to know.” Wod leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table. Sleek muscles bunched in his arms, a minor distraction to add to that of a stack of a dozen fresh, hot cinnamon rolls set before him. “Even if it does pack a punch, the wine usually wears off by morning.”

“I’m sorry for putting you out of your bed.” He forced himself not to make it a question. For all he knew, Wod had slept beside him and had gotten up early. That sent an odd thrill through him.

“It’s all right. I’ve slept on that couch many times.”

So they hadn't been in bed together. Good. *Right?* Lon grabbed the back of one of the chairs as he stood behind it. "Still, you didn't have to."

"I did. I gave you the wine." Wod waved at the rolls on the table. "Please, sit. I got us breakfast."

Deliberately *not* licking his lips, Lon shook his head and released the chair. "No, I should leave. I've troubled you enough."

"Lon, sit. I can't send you home on an empty stomach."

Although touched by Wod's concern, Lon still protested, taking a step back. "I can't."

Wod stood. "Lon. They're already here. No sense in wasting them. I won't eat them all." He picked up his empty mug. "There's mocha coffee too."

Lon's mouth watered. He *loved* mocha coffee. Together with cinnamon rolls, that was his ideal breakfast. Of course, among the elves, he was not alone in this preference.

While he was hesitating, Wod crossed behind him. He pulled out the chair, then propelled Lon into it with a firm shove. "Eat. I'll get you a cup."

Lon bit his lip, staring at the cinnamon rolls. A half dozen of them were stacked in a neat pyramid on a plate, the icing clearly added after they were stacked, since it oozed unbroken over the whole stack. Still warm, with a little steam rising off them. Hadn't Wod eaten yet? But the small forest green plate in front of Wod's chair was as clean as the one in front of Lon. Surely he hadn't been waiting for Lon? Maybe he'd only just stacked them when Lon emerged from the bedroom. But wait... "When did you order these?"

Wod had opened the door of the oven to take out a familiar warming pot. Although most elves chose to eat in the common hall, anyone could order food to take home. Those with the high-pressure jobs—like the reindeer and Santa—could have it delivered. Lon had never enjoyed the luxury himself, but he'd seen food packed for delivery. "This morning," Wod answered, bringing the pot and a clean mug back to the table.

Lon glanced out the window at the sun in its glory. He'd never been good at judging time without a timepiece, but it still looked pretty early to him. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Don't worry. It's not that late. We'll have you out of here in plenty of time for work."

That wasn't what he was worried about. Both handlers and reindeer typically slept in, since the bulk of their jobs occurred at night. Lon spread his hands on the smooth pine of the table to either side of his empty plate. "Who delivered breakfast?" They lived in a small enough community that there was likely to be plenty of gossip if anyone found out he'd spent the night in Wod's cottage. Who had delivered breakfast? Would they tell Rom? Had Wod talked to his friend? What if Rom had stopped by and found Lon there? That would have been awful!

Wod chuckled as he poured fragrant brown mocha into the mug, filling the air with the scents of sweet chocolate and rich coffee. "Relax, Lon. No one knows you're here."

Lon winced, realizing his panic wasn't exactly flattering for Wod. "But you ordered for two."

Wod gave him a steady look as he set the cup by Lon's plate. "It's not that odd for me to have company in the morning."

Lon flushed and ducked his head. "No, of course not." It was considered an honor to have spent the night with any of the reindeer. "But if Rom finds out..."

Wod snorted as he refilled his own cup. "Lon, I assure you, it wouldn't matter to Rom if you had sex with me. In fact"—he set the pot down—"it could help you."

"Help me?"

"Sure. I could tell him how good you are." Passing behind Lon's chair on his way back to his own, Wod leaned near to Lon's ear. "Pique his interest."

Lon flinched, but Wod continued on to his chair. He sat, calm, as though he hadn't just propositioned Lon. Again. Gazing at the expanse of his bare chest and

the way loose waves of dark red hair curled over it and broad shoulders, Lon was a little hard-pressed to remember why.

Rom. "I'm sorry. I can't do that."

Wod's gaze didn't lift to meet his as he sipped. Then shrugged. "Suit yourself." Setting down his mug, he reached out to pluck the roll off the top of the stack. "Eat up. We need to talk about Project Rom."

"Project Rom?"

"Yes." Licking icing off his fingers, he handed Lon the full plate, then took the empty one. "We need to make a plan."

"We?"

Wod grinned as he put another roll on the second plate. "I said I'd help you."

Slowly Lon set down the plate, gaping in surprise. "You don't have to do that."

"I do if you hope to get anywhere with him." Wod took a bite from his roll and finally met Lon's gaze. "Because, frankly, you're not going to get anywhere at the rate you're going." Dark eyes were calm and matter-of-fact as he chewed.

Lon lowered his chin and concentrated on pulling an ooey-gooey piece of roll apart from the center. "I thought you said it was hopeless."

"Did I say that?"

"You said he wouldn't be interested in...what I want."

"A relationship? No. Not initially. You'll have to work on him. But first you'll need to get close to him."

"Why do you want to help me?"

"I said I would."

Lon stuck the bite of roll into his mouth and chewed, considering his next words carefully. "I thought you wanted me."

"I do." Again, it was said in a very frank, straightforward manner. A little disconcerting. "But you've made it obvious that you don't want me, so I might as well help you."

Lon flinched, fingers sinking into warm bread as he tore off another piece of roll. "It's not that I don't... I mean, you're... You're beautiful, and you've been really nice to me, but... Oh, I don't know." He reached for his mug, then stopped when he saw the mess on his fingers. Without thought, he put his fingers to his mouth to lick them clean.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Wod watching with casual interest. When he faced the other man fully, he saw the drop of heavy eyelids and the quirk to one corner of Wod's mouth. "My offer still stands."

Beneath the table, Lon's cock perked. His fingers stalled on his tongue when he froze, mesmerized by the heat Wod caused in his blood. But that was wrong. He was in love with Rom. Sure, Wod was beautiful, but Lon felt absurdly guilty for being turned on. Lowering his head, Lon pulled his fingers from his mouth and grabbed his mug, taking refuge by sipping the chocolatey coffee. By the time he had savored his sip and set the mug back down, the awkward moment had passed, and he felt prepared to speak again. Except he didn't know what to say.

Wod didn't have the same problem. Having bolted down his first roll, he reached for another. "Tomorrow's Sixth Day. That means Rom's probably going to the Mistletoe tonight."

The Mistletoe was what passed for a bar and dance club in Santa's Village. In recent years, as less and less long-term storage space was needed for toys, a warehouse at the end of the row closest to the hill had become a common meeting place. The bar and dance floor had evolved as elves learned more of human pastimes. It even had a few pool tables and dartboards. The Mistletoe was especially popular on the night of the fifth day of the elves' six-day week because tradition held that the sixth day was a day of rest.

"You should go."

Lon allowed himself a laugh as he tore off another piece of roll. "I've been to the Mistletoe. I've seen him there." He'd seen Wod there too, but he left that aside. "I'm not going to have a chance to get close to him there."

“Ah.” Wod raised one finger, sticky with icing, in the air. “But I can help you there.”

Lon swallowed, barely tasting his favorite of breakfast treats. “I don’t dance very well.”

Wod laughed. “It’s barely dancing. More like sex with clothes on, if you do it right.” He laughed again as Lon blushed. “All you have to do is move to the music.”

Lon took another sip of his coffee to give himself to a chance to remember seeing Rom and Wod gyrating to the music within the flashing red, green, and blue lights that strobed the dance floor. They were as beautiful there as they were just after a shift. Wod was right about the style of dance too. Not only was it like sex—it often led to sex. The lofts of the warehouse had been sectioned off into small, cozy rooms for quick trysts for those who couldn’t wait to get home. Lon had never been in one, but he’d heard of them.

He shook his head as he put the mug down. “I don’t know.”

“It’s perfect. Once I get you close, all you have to do is let him know you want him, and he’ll do the rest.”

Lon bit his lip.

“Of course, we could always go the more direct route.”

“Direct route?”

Wod licked his fingers, then reached for a third roll. “I could just tell Rom you’re interested.”

Lon froze. “No!”

Wod shrugged. “It’s the best way. Then there’s no chance he’ll misunderstand or overlook you.”

“No. You can’t.”

Wod watched him as he slowly sucked icing off one index finger. “Why not?”

Lon tore his eyes off Wod's finger to meet his eyes. "That's not... No." Instinctively, he reached for Wod but managed to stop his sticky fingers before he grabbed the bigger man's wrist. Hand hovering above Wod's, he pleaded with his eyes. "Please. Promise me you won't tell him."

Wod glanced down at Lon's hand, then back up at his face.

"Please."

"All right."

Relieved, Lon pulled his hand back. Instead of sucking on his fingers, he picked up a cloth napkin that lay neatly folded next to his plate and used it.

"Okay. How about if I arrange a time for you to be alone with him? Or we could go over there now. I'm sure his playmate's gone by now."

Lon spread his palms on the table and stood. "I've got to go."

"What?"

"No." Lon backed away from the chair. "Thank you for offering to help..."

Wod stood. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know but I... Just no."

He spun and fled. A part of him knew he wouldn't make it to the front door. Or, at least, *out* the front door. He managed to grasp the handle before Wod's larger body closed in behind him, pressing him up against the solid pine of the door.

"Stay and finish your breakfast, Lon."

Heat. Lon closed his eyes, trying not to wish that he wasn't wearing his jacket and shirt so he could experience just how good Wod's bare skin would feel against his. That was just frustration talking. "No, thank you."

"Did I do something to upset you?"

Yes! "No. I... I just need to...to think."

Wod's heat eased back, and Lon pried his eyes open to see the other man stepping away. Wod appeared in plain view in front of him, to lean against the wall beside the door.

He grinned kindly. "Don't think too hard, Lon."

Swallowing, Lon opened the front door. "I...won't."

He didn't want to know why Wod started laughing at that. He just left.

Chapter Seven

Lon couldn't avoid seeing anyone as he walked home, but he did manage to skirt Santa Claus Lane for most of his way down the hill by walking behind the bushes. Most of the reindeer's yards were more or less connected closer to the Lane, so there were only a few times when he had to shimmy through some narrow spots in the foliage. When he reached the bottom of the hill, he emerged on Peppermint Avenue, and the few people who saw him didn't even look twice.

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket, he put his head down and did some serious thinking during the short walk to his cabin. He'd spent the night in Wod's cabin. Wod, Dancer, the second-in-command of Santa's reindeer. True, Lon had set his sights on Dasher, but as he'd yet to truly spend time with Rom, Wod was the highest-ranked elf he'd ever spent time with. Although, if he was to believe Wod's overtures, he could have *been* with him. Imagine, all that caramel skin available to touch, the man's delicious weight settling on him as he drowned in exquisite kisses. Just the thought of those kisses made Lon lick his lips, as though to capture the taste of Wod again. Some of his favorite fantasies of Rom danced into his head with Wod now in the lead, and Wod fit them perfectly. A new fantasy even appeared, an echo of what Lon had seen between Rom and Tym but with himself spread over the deck and Wod buried deep within him.

Startled, he shook himself. But that was wrong. He couldn't just switch his feelings like that. He wasn't that capricious. He'd been pining for Rom for so long now. He couldn't just give that up.

Could he?

Answers were not forthcoming, and he'd reached his cabin. He walked in with a sigh of relief and pulled off his jacket on his way into the bedroom.

"*There* you are."

Lon yelped and jumped, spinning in the air and landing just as Bok rose to sit from where he was lying on the couch. "What are you doing here?"

He gave Lon the eye as he squirmed around to bend his legs over the side. Lon's couch was not nearly as wide and luxurious as Wod's. "Where were you last night?"

Lon frowned. "That's none of your business."

Rather than his taking offense, Bok's face lit up. "Oh, Holy Christmas, did the dildo work? Were you with *him* last night?"

"Was I with—" Lon's protest broke off as Bok's words hit him. His hand flew up to cover his gaping mouth. "Oh no!" Frantically he patted his waistline, then checked the pockets of his jacket. All empty. "Oh no."

Bok was on his feet and at Lon's side by now. "What?"

"Oh *no!* I left it at his... I mean, I left... I lost..."

"Oh no—I heard that. You left *what* at *his* what?"

Lon gulped. Frustrated, he slapped Bok's arm. "You! You and that darn *toy*."

Bok grabbed Lon's arms to quiet him. Small though he might be, Bok had a good grip, and he outweighed Lon. "Yes, yes, fine. But *where* is the darn toy?"

Lon closed his eyes and shook his head. "It wasn't Rom. It's at Wod's."

"W...?" Bok's mouth fell open in a brief moment of shock. "Wod? You slept with Wod?"

"No! I didn't. I... Well, I did sleep there, but I didn't sleep *with* him. I-I-I passed out after drinking some really strong wine, and he was nice enough to let me sleep it off."

"Mmmm. And just how did you get to Wod's cottage to drink this strong wine?"

“I...uh...” At a loss, he tried to think of a way not to tell Bok what had happened. But it was useless. He was used to telling Bok everything. He sighed and slumped in Bok’s grip. “I went to Rom’s to tell him how I feel about him.”

“Hold on.” Bok pushed Lon into the bedroom and guided him to the bed, where they both sat. “All right.” Bok tucked one knee up on the mattress so he could face Lon. “Go on.”

In stutters and starts, Lon told Bok everything. He started with what he’d seen at Rom’s—having to pause for a few moments to describe in detail what he’d seen between Rom and Tym because, although he was more interested in women, Bok was a fan of voyeurism of *all* pairings—then described how he’d gotten to Wod’s. Bok slowed him to excruciating detail about kissing Wod, then surprised Lon by allowing him to go on with the story without chiding him for not sleeping with Wod. By the time Lon reached the part about leaving Wod’s cottage, unknowingly without the dildo, Bok was unnaturally quiet.

Lon frowned at him. “What?”

Bok’s green brows crowded the bridge of his nose, indicating thought. “Do you think Wod likes you?”

A squirmy feeling tickled around Lon’s heart. “No. He was just taking advantage of the situation.”

“Actually, he didn’t take advantage.”

“I-I meant getting me alone.”

“Exactly.”

Uncomfortable, Lon stood. He crossed to his closet and held up his jacket to decide if it went in the wash or got hung back up. “It wasn’t *me* specifically. He saw someone lurking around Rom’s.”

“Uh-huh. And you weren’t the least bit tempted to just sleep with him?”

The jacket was hopelessly wrinkled. He stuffed it in the laundry bag that he was going to have to take to housekeeping soon. "I was tempted," Lon admitted as he sat at his desk chair. "But...I couldn't."

"You're going to say you couldn't because of Rom."

Lon paid inordinate attention to pulling off his pointed shoes. "I can't just change my feelings like that."

"Even after what you saw at Rom's? He's obviously not waiting for you."

Lon gripped his second shoe, bending the rubber sole in half. "He doesn't know how I feel."

"But Wod does. Why not accept his help?"

Lon pulled off his socks. "I can't... I mean, it doesn't seem right."

"But it's probably the only way you're going to get close enough to Rom. You haven't managed it even though you worked with Rom every night for the last five months straight."

"I'm choosing my time."

Bok snorted but chose not to berate Lon on his slow timing as usual. In fact, he stayed quiet for long enough that Lon sat up to look at him.

"What?"

Bok chewed the inside of his lip for a moment, then nodded. "I think you should let Wod help you."

"I—"

"No, really. If you're serious about Rom, you need to get things going, and Wod's the perfect person to do it. He can get you close, and he can keep everyone else away."

Lon's eyes widened. He'd expected Bok to champion his sleeping with Wod, not using Wod's help to get close to Rom. "B-but he shouldn't have to do that."

"But he *offered*. For whatever reason, he wants to help you. Heck, he probably could have seduced you himself last night, but he didn't."

Lon frowned. That was true. Though he'd said no, even he could admit that a few more kisses and Wod probably could have lured him into sex. Maybe, despite his offers, Wod really wasn't all that interested, at least in Lon specifically. Lon sat back in his chair, a little depressed at the thought.

If Bok noticed Lon's train of thought, he gave no indication. "You need to talk to Wod again and see if he's still willing. Maybe going to the Mistletoe tonight is a good idea."

"Yeah." Lon leaned an elbow on his desk, bringing one of his knuckles to his mouth to chew on it thoughtfully. "Maybe."

"Right." Bok stood and rubbed his palms together over a little laugh. "I'll see you there."

"Wait, what?"

Bok giggled. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

To that, Lon could only roll his eyes and groan.

Chapter Eight

Lon arrived late to work that night. Not that anyone noticed. He was still there in plenty of time to join the other handlers in gathering the harnesses and helping to load the sleigh, long before any of the reindeer appeared.

He'd taken great care with his appearance, trying to look nice without looking like he was trying to look nice. His jacket was sleeveless, cinnamon red with a sparkly gold ruff along the collar and arms. The shirt he wore beneath was more than a typical undershirt, long-sleeved and white with faint gold shiny pinstripes shot through. His pants matched his jacket, and he'd chosen stylish ankle boots rather than his more comfortable pointed slide-ons. He'd brushed his hair until it shone and even combed through some gold highlighting that Bok had once purchased for him, then pulled it all back into a tail, bound with a thin yellow ribbon. His outfit wasn't out of place and was suited for the work, but it was a bit more than normal.

None of his fellow handlers noticed. For which he was both grateful and put out. Then the reindeer arrived.

Wod noticed.

He entered with Rom, the two of them talking casually. Lon knew the instant they were there, and two heartbeats later his gaze met Wod's. Wod's dark eyes scanned him down, then up, and a wry smile curled his lips. He gave Lon a small nod, an acknowledgement that warmed Lon's heart. Embarrassed by his flush, he turned away to busy himself with his job.

Once the reindeer arrived, the barn erupted into activity. Rom and Wod were stark opposites tonight, the former in an ice blue robe so light that it was just a

shade away from white, and the latter in a green so deep it would be black in lesser lighting. The complementary contrast of their hair and skin stood out as they gathered with the other brightly garbed reindeer near the back of the barn. Rom spoke to the team every night, even though some of them had been teamed together for years. As leader, Rom felt it his duty, and it was one of the things in life that he took seriously. Wod, as second, stood at Rom's side, but his gaze roamed the barn, almost as though he were on guard.

Lon tried not to watch them, but it was difficult. Most of what he needed to do now waited on the reindeer to come out of their huddle. He and the other handlers stood by the sleigh, and he was not alone in admiring the reindeer.

"You lucky devil," Lon overheard Gunnie whispering to Tym. She nudged him with her elbow and murmured near his ear. "You spent the entire night alone with him."

Tym chuckled, jingle bells chiming as he adjusted his hold on the harness. "It was heaven. He's insatiable. I'm surprised I can stand."

The two of them laughed softly.

"You think you'll get a repeat tonight?" Gunnie asked hopefully.

Tym sighed. "I don't think so. Not soon, anyway. He was pretty clear about that this morning."

"You okay?"

"Oh sure. I knew that going in, and he was really nice about it. Anyway, the one night was *worth* it."

Lon tuned out as they continued to converse. What Wod had said about Rom was true. Lon had known it already, of course, through hearsay, but it was another thing to have it confirmed once by a best friend and a second time by someone who'd shared a night with Rom. The reindeer just weren't known for their monogamy, at least not when they were on the team.

Jannie's arrival broke up the reindeer huddle. Dressed in her coal black boots and fur-trimmed pants and carrying her jacket and stocking cap, she entered the barn from behind the reindeer and joined them for a moment before leading them toward the sleigh. She stopped in the middle of the barn to don the cap that was far too large for her head. Then she pushed her arms into the sleeves of the jacket. She had to bunch up the sleeves and get some help from a handler to button it up. Once she was sealed in, the handler stood back, and a twinkling cloud of magical snowflakes surrounded her. In that bit of an instant, Jannie was gone and there was a five-five portly man with chubby cheeks, a round belly, and a long snowy white beard.

The reindeer passed around her as she changed. They spread out in the middle of the barn, each shedding their robes and passing them to waiting handlers. There was a moment to admire their nude bodies. Lon, who was usually riveted by the way Rom's blue hair brushed the top curves of his trim ass or the way Rom's elegant cock nestled in a tuft of blue hair, found himself watching Wod instead. His ass was rounder than Rom's, inviting a squeeze or a bite, and he, unlike most other men among them, actually had a trail of hair guiding the eye down from the narrow slice of his navel to the patch of near black that sprouted a cock that was thick and inviting even when soft. Lon couldn't help but remember seeing it half erect the night before and shivered at the memory of feeling it pressed against him while Wod's soft but demanding lips devoured his mouth. It was a relief for Lon when that shield of sparkles obscured Wod. Although the reindeer that emerged was beautiful, this shape was not dangerously tempting like the other.

The reindeer were harnessed in two sets of four by four handlers, and then Rudolph was buckled in as the harnesses were checked. Lon stood by as Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen backed into place. First he strapped on Comet's personal harness while she waited patiently. Then he securely buckled the sturdy collar around her neck. The harnesses weren't traditional and would look woefully inept to any human who knew about such things, but magic enabled the elves to streamline the design so the reindeer didn't have to be too uncomfortable. Once the

first four were secure, Lon and his fellow handlers moved forward as the next four backed into place. Lon was normally fixated on Dasher, as this was usually the closest he could be to the lead reindeer, but this time he tried to catch glimpses of Dancer. Trouble was, Dasher was so big that Lon couldn't see much of the reindeer on his other side. Concerned by his wandering imagination, Lon tried to concentrate on his work. His fingers ran though Dasher's soft fur, but it didn't give him the same pleasure as usual. He finished his task and left Dasher's side without lingering. He was done in time to be one of the pair of handlers who strapped in Rudolph.

Once the handlers finished their tasks, everyone stepped back. The sleigh was packed high with the magical bags that held far more than they looked like they could. Santa sat in his—one must always think and speak of Santa as “he” when in that form—seat, looking over the special computer mounted before him that dictated the schedule for the night and told him which toys went to which house. He tested the headset that allowed him to communicate with Rudolph, and the guiding reindeer nodded in response. The reindeer pranced in place and tossed their heads. Rudolph lifted her head—unlike Santa, the reindeer didn't change sex when they shifted—and a neon red washed the inside of the barn as she tested her nose.

“All in place?” Santa called.

“Yes, Santa,” chanted the handlers. The reindeer all nodded broadly.

If Lon didn't miss his guess, Dancer's big brown eyes found him and the reindeer winked.

“Ho ho ho!” Santa picked up the reins and shook them lightly. “Let's get this show on the road.”

At the end of the barn, two handlers swung open the main doors. A sharp almost-bark came from Dasher, and the reindeer all moved in a synchronized wave. Slow at first, they quickly picked up speed to trot the sleigh into the gently drifting snow outside. Lon and his coworkers followed, watching as a thin shimmer of magic built around the sleigh. The trot increased into a canter, taking them across the

wide-open meadow and through a gradual turn that aimed them toward the beacon of the North Star. Even if the star couldn't be seen, the reindeer could feel it, that part of their magic better than any of the humans' GPS systems. Rudolph's hooves were the first to set in the air, but the reindeer behind her were soon to follow. Up they went at a gradual angle, then at greater speed as they gained altitude. Rudolph's nose blared to life as the sleigh and its galloping chargers became mere silhouettes in the gentle snowfall. The snow didn't allow a good view, but a distant *pop* and the abrupt disappearance of the red beacon were signs that the realm and time jump was complete.

Lon stared long after they were gone, long after he was all alone in the snow. Something had changed tonight. Something in him.

He was beginning to come to terms with what that was.

Chapter Nine

It had never really occurred to Lon before how hectic Fifth Nights were. Because Sixth Day was a day to be lazy and sleep in, Fifth Nights were usually a time of late-night parties. More people came to the barn on Fifth Night to meet the sleigh when it returned and see what the reindeer decided to do that night. Only two of the reindeer were in anything that could resemble a relationship, so many extra people came to the barn in hopes of catching the eye of someone important.

With half of his attention, Lon did his job. The other half, however, was focused on Wod. He'd done a lot of thinking during the hours the sleigh was gone and had come to the conclusion that he was being ridiculous. Rom barely even noticed him, but Wod actually *talked* to him. Wod had taken care of him, regardless of the fact that they didn't have sex. That had to mean something. Perhaps Lon's feelings toward Wod weren't quite the same as those he had for Rom, but that might not be a bad thing. Perhaps his parents and friends had been right all along and he wasn't in love but rather harboring an extreme crush. All of his thinking had brought Lon to the decision to take Wod up on his offer. If it didn't work out, so be it, but he had a good feeling about it.

But fate and the crowd were against him. He kept an eye on Wod while he worked to free the second set of reindeer from the harnesses. The magic that released Wod from his reindeer shape drifted away to reveal every long line of his sleek body, and for the first time, Lon looked with interest. In the blazing light of the barn, Wod's skin maintained its dusky tone and, together with his abundance of deep red hair and his greater height, helped him to stand out. Unfortunately, because of the crowd, Lon couldn't get a good look at the lower regions of his body. A

handler appeared almost instantly with a robe to cover him up, the same deep green one that served to bring out the red highlights in his hair. Beside him was a flash of blue as Rom tossed his head in laughter.

After accepting a goblet of wine from another handler, Wod straightened to his full height. As he brought the cup to his lips, he scanned the tops of the heads around him, almost as though he were looking for someone. Lon stepped back to allow Comet and Donner to step free of the harness. When he looked back to the crowd, Wod's dark gaze was on him. Lon's heart swelled, pushing the corners of his mouth up. Wod smiled back.

Someone bumped into Lon, forcing him to juggle his harnesses lest he drop them.

"Hey!" Pol scurried around to his side to help Lon secure his harness. "Are you going?"

Lon blinked at his coworker and friend. "What?"

"The party." Pol rolled his eyes, grinning. "Haven't you been listening?"

"I guess not. What's going on?"

"The reindeer are throwing a bonfire on the hill tonight." Pol's brilliant teal eyes sparkled as he spoke.

"A bonfire?" Lon's eyes widened. About once a month or so, Santa or the reindeer would make use of the park that sat beside the workshop at the top of the hill. Although no property in Santa's Village was really restricted, it was commonly held that only Santa or the reindeer could throw a party in that park, because they were the residents of the hill. Whenever it did happen, it was always a huge party that drew most of those living in the village.

"Yep. Bill's gone to set up the bar"—Bill was the proprietor of the Mistletoe—"and Gus has got a full spread of food. You *have* to come." Pol's grin widened as he threw a look over his shoulder toward the crowd around the reindeer. "Maybe you'll get lucky."

Lon bit his lip and scanned above the crowd for a glimpse of Wod again. As a friend, Pol knew of Lon's obsession with Rom. But he couldn't know that Lon's sights were set on a different reindeer tonight. A party on the hill wasn't a night at the Mistletoe, but it probably was even better.

But where was Wod? Was he sitting down? He couldn't have left already.

"Lon?"

"Hmm, what?"

"The hill. The party?"

"Oh! Yes, of course I'll go."

"Terrific! Let's finish up, then."

Giving up his quest, Lon nodded and bent to his work of helping secure the sleigh for the night. With six of them working at a task they did every night, it was quickly done, and Lon even managed not to rumple his clothes. But once he was free of his nightly duties, the crowd had thinned, and the last of the reindeer were leaving.

Oddly, Rom was the last. He stood by the door of the equipment room, tall and proud over the two men who talked with him. "Hey, little Lon!"

Lon stopped, shocked to hear Rom hailing him. Rom stepped away from his companions and closed the distance to Lon in a few easy paces.

He dropped his arm across Lon's shoulders. "Are you going to the bonfire?"

Lon blinked up at Rom's face. So close. So pale and perfect. Long and narrow, with a squared-off jaw. Bedazzling blue eyes to complement the frame of shining blue hair. Yesterday he would have killed to have Rom this focused on him. Tonight it just confused him. "I-I..."

"You must." Rom's arm squeezed Lon. He had changed out of his robe, but the poet's sleeves of his white shirt were nearly as voluminous of the robe's, and they draped Lon's back. His hip pressed into Lon as he held him close. "At least for a little while."

Without giving Lon a chance to protest, Rom walked him toward the exit. Lon glanced over his shoulder, but the two men Rom had been talking with had started up a conversation with the other handlers and were paying no attention. Alone with Rom, Lon walked into the cool night air. They circled to the side of the barn and the road that led up this side of the hill. Up ahead, at the crest, the sky was lit from the bonfire, signaling a party already begun.

Rom walked with his arm about Lon's shoulders, keeping the smaller man securely at his side. Lon's mind worked furiously. On one hand, he was finally pressed against Rom, and it was wonderful. Rom's body was just as taut and lean as Lon could have dreamed. But Lon was at a crossroads. As wonderful as it felt, it wasn't really what he wanted. It shocked him to admit it to himself, but he had to. Now that his brain had made the turning point, his body actually followed. Or was it his body that decided it loved the feel of Wod more than another? Regardless, despite a year of pining, after one eye-opening night, Rom simply wasn't what Lon wanted anymore. *Terribly* unfair of fate to finally deliver Lon to Rom's side.

"So, little Lon," Rom began, jostling Lon once they started up the hill. "I wanted to talk to you. Alone."

Lon glanced about. Ahead there were a few people passing through the trees, but otherwise he and Rom were alone with the snow, the fragrant foliage, and the moonlight as they left the barn behind.

"Me?" Delayed reaction. Confusion kept Lon off balance as he clung to Rom to keep his walking steady.

"Yes, you. What do you think of Wod?"

Only Rom's arm kept Lon moving forward. As it was, he did stumble. "Wod?"

"Yes. Because I think he likes you."

He gaped up at Rom's profile. "What?"

Rom kept his attention ahead of them, his blue hair floating loose on the soft breeze. "Do you know him well?"

“N-no.”

“I didn’t think so. He keeps to himself a lot. Only has a few lovers that visit him now and again.” Rom’s arm slipped so that just his hand remained on Lon’s far shoulder. Still, he kept his attention on the path before them. “But I had an odd talk with him this afternoon.”

“Oh?” What was going on?

“Yes. He came over to my place, and he was talking about you. Incessantly. He asked me if I noticed you or ever thought about having sex with you.”

Startled, Lon pulled away. Rom let his hand slide off Lon’s shoulder as they turned to face each other, the crunch of their footsteps coming to a halt in the trodden snow.

“What?”

Rom nodded, reaching up to tuck a wayward lock of hair behind his ear. A slight frown brought the elegant arches of his blue brows closer together. “It was weird. He never talks about anyone the way he talked about you. And he kept asking my opinion about you.” Rom grinned, a look that would have stopped Lon’s heart a day ago. “Don’t get me wrong.” He reached out to stroke Lon’s chin. “I think you’re adorable, but I knew I couldn’t be your type.”

Lon shut his eyes and shook his head, then opened his eyes again. No, Rom was still there. “Wait. What?”

Rom chuckled. “I’ve seen your type before, Lon. You deserve better than just a one-night stand, and that’s all I could offer you.”

Lon’s jaw dropped. Rom *had* noticed him. Had noticed him and made a decision to stay away from him. No *wonder* Lon had never gotten close!

“But Wod—he’s a different story.” Rom propped a fist on his hip and nodded. The breeze snagged the lapels of his shirt and blew them open to reveal the creamy expanse of his chest. “He’s never liked having a different lover all the time. He likes

to take his time with someone, before *and* after sex.” Rom rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I never understood that.”

Lon’s jaw couldn’t open any wider, so he tipped his head down, keeping his eyes on Rom.

Rom’s frown doubled. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re trying to set me up with Wod?”

Rom dropped his hand and shifted his feet, glancing at the trees. “Not exactly. I just thought I should point it out for you because Wod never would and”—he shrugged—“I think you two would make a nice couple.”

It was the latest shock in a very shocking two days, and it almost took Lon’s knees out from under him. He swayed and stumbled to catch his balance.

“Whoa.” Rom grabbed his arm to steady him.

Joyous laughter filled the air, and Lon discovered it was his. He clutched at the arm that held him and threw back his head to laugh with the stars. A stopper popped from his heart to let clear, fresh pleasure flood his veins.

“Lon.” He heard Rom as from a distance. “Are you okay?”

Gathering himself, Lon lowered his head and reached up to grip Rom’s shoulders. “Thank you.” Showing surprising strength, he pulled Rom down so he could give him a good, firm kiss on the lips. “Thank you so much.”

Still laughing, he released Rom and practically skipped up the path toward the top of the hill.

All signs led to Wod, and Lon was finally heeding them.

Chapter Ten

There was a full buffet on tables lined along one side of the area cleared for the bonfire, and a full bar at a wide angle right next to them. Evergreen trees surrounded three quarters of the area, those closest adorned with twinkling glass ornaments and magical fairy lights. The main road emptied into the open space with a clear view down the hill to the river. The bonfire blazed within a ten-foot circle of smooth stones in the exact center, the heat having long melted the snow in the immediate area. What snow that hadn't melted had been trodden into the ground by a multitude of feet. Either magic or luck kept the ground from getting muddy. A four-piece band had set up to one side of the view, the merry strings accompanying the light to fill the air. It was a large park, and Lon suspected every person even close to his age was enjoying it at this moment. And why not? The reindeer were in fine moods, and Christmas was only a few weeks away. The spirit was upon them, and it could be felt in the air.

Where was Wod?

Lon had circled the fire twice now, with no sign of the dark-haired man he sought. He couldn't understand how he could miss anyone of Wod's height and coloring. True, there was quite a crowd, but only a handful of the people in the village reached Wod's and Rom's height. Thus far, Lon had fended off anyone who tried to waylay him. Hearing what Rom had to say had set him on a mission, and he was determined to meet his goal.

But where *was* his goal?

By the end of Lon's third circuit around the fire, Rom had set up court at the end of the bar. The flowing sleeves of his shirt caught the breeze as he lifted his

goblet in a rousing toast. Lon watched him for a moment, noting the bevy of hopeful men and women surrounding him. Seeing them now, Lon wondered that he ever mistook their avid attention for love. Or maybe it was a type of love, a temporary type. Nothing wrong with it, if that was what you wanted. Rom did. Lon didn't. Evidently Wod didn't either.

Had Wod gone off with someone else? Fear stopped Lon as he worked that thought. Had Wod assumed Lon would be with Rom and skipped the bonfire to have his own rendezvous? Rom had mentioned Wod had a few lovers he saw now and again. Who were they? And how *dare* anyone be with Wod tonight!

As he was battling down an extreme surge of jealousy, someone bumped him from behind. Wearing an annoyed frown, he turned to face a chest framed by an open red shirt. The fluffy white trim that edged two converging lines from shoulder to waist just served to emphasize the dark hue of the skin revealed. Lon's frown faded as his gaze followed the shallow crevice between sculpted pecs, up a long neck partially hidden by loose burgundy hair, to behold the face he'd been searching for all night. Wod sipped from a thick goblet, and even from below Lon caught the scent of the fine wine he'd sampled the night before.

"What happened?" Wod asked, glancing briefly toward Rom, then back down at Lon as he lowered the goblet. "I thought you left the barn alone with Rom."

Lon barely heard him, too busy looking his fill of Wod. How had he ever missed how beautiful Wod was? Here, near the edge of the circle, the bonfire only lit one side of his face, leaving the other in mysterious shadow. The red highlights in his hair made it seem as though the warm wine he drank had been poured all over his head to stream over his shoulder and down his back.

"Lon?"

"Hmm?"

Wod cocked his head. "Are you all right?"

Lon felt a ridiculous grin curl his lips and didn't even try to suppress it. "I'm wonderful."

It was Wod's turn to frown. "But Rom's over there."

"I know."

Wod studied him a moment, then nodded. "All right." He shifted his goblet from one hand to the other, then reached into the waistline of his shirt. "Listen, I've got something for you." He stepped closer to the shadows at the edge of the circle, trusting Lon to follow. He stopped, waiting for Lon to reach him, then turned so his shoulder was to Lon's and both of their backs were to the bonfire. "Here."

Distracted by the body beside him, Lon didn't immediately look to see what was offered. But he did look down when Wod poked him with something hard. There, in Wod's grip, was the dildo he'd abandoned at Wod's cottage, the blue almost black in the shadows. Lon gasped.

"Here, take it." When Lon didn't, Wod pressed it into his chest. "Take it before someone sees it."

That was enough to get Lon to snatch it from Wod's grip. Hurriedly he lifted his jacket and tucked the dildo into the waistband of his pants.

"All right," Wod said as Lon worked, shielding Lon from the crowd with his body. "Here's what we'll do. I can get him away from the others. Meet us in the trees just over there."

"Wait." Lon pulled his jacket back into place, far too aware that he had a sex toy pressing against his belly.

"What? You want Rom, don't you?" Wod glanced around, but no one was minding them. "I did some legwork for you this afternoon. Don't worry—I didn't tell him directly. But I think I primed him for you. You're going to have to do something to keep his interest. I can only do so much. All right?"

"No." Lon grasped at Wod's arm, jostling the heated wine.

Wod ignored the droplets of liquid that splattered the back of his hand. "No?"

Lon gazed into dark eyes and felt his courage start to drain. What if he was wrong? What if Rom was wrong? What if Wod really *was* trying to help him be with someone else? Wod could be a bigger player than Rom. *No, that's not true.* He knew it.

Wod frowned at Lon's continued silence. "Come on, Lon. There's not much time. He's going to take someone else home any second."

"Let him." Lon shook his head, talking quickly before he lost all his nerve. "I don't want him."

Wod drew up to his full height. "What?"

Lon gripped Wod's arm tighter and reached out with the other hand to grab a fistful of shirt. Maybe if he hung on, that would work as well as words to convey what he meant to say? No, not likely. He stared at the base of Wod's throat and forced his mouth open. "I-I don't want him."

"Don't be ridiculous." Wod's free hand squeezed Lon's shoulder. His voice stayed low, gentle. "What are you saying? Are you scared? He wouldn't hurt you on purpose."

"No. No, that's not it." Lon pulled his hand from Wod's arm so he could gather another fistful of shirt. It was a better grip and allowed him to step into the other man so that there wasn't a breeze between them. The heat at the front of Wod's pants was at odds with the dildo tucked into Lon's waistband. "I...um..."

The hand at his shoulder slid back to span the space underneath his hair, just below his nape. "Lon?"

Desperately afraid he was making a mistake but oddly sure that he wasn't, Lon leaned in to press his forehead to Wod's collarbone. "I want you."

The words were hurried and soft, but evidence showed that Wod heard him. Only because he was so close did Lon detect the hitch in Wod's breath, but the gentle kneading of fingers on his neck was more obvious.

"Lon. Are you sure?"

He nodded, rubbing his forehead against Wod's chest. Drowning in the gorgeous scent of the man's skin, he pressed his nose to Wod's sternum and pulled in a lungful. "I want you." It was much easier to say the second time. "I want you." The third even more so.

"Well." Wod's hand slid down Lon's spine, spanning his back to pull him just a little bit closer. "In that case"—breath scented by wine gusted softly over his cheek right before lips brushed his temple—"may I suggest we go to my cottage?"

"Please." *Oh, please.*

The only way Lon convinced his body to pry away from Wod's was with the promise that an even better contact was in store. He turned under Wod's arm so they were side to side and wrapped his own arm around Wod's slim waist. With their backs to the party, they started into the trees.

Chapter Eleven

The dense growth of evergreen soon muffled the sound and light of the party. The darkness nearly blinded Lon, but Wod didn't seem to have a problem finding their way between the bushes and trunks. They were quiet during the short trip, pressed together, but it wasn't uncomfortable in the least. It was enough to hold and anticipate. Soon enough, they emerged from the trees onto a path. Lon didn't recognize it, but then he saw the side of Wod's cottage up ahead. The dense forest of trees muffled all sound of the party behind them. A soft, ruddy light beckoned from the window beside the door. Wod led him up the porch steps and didn't let go to open the door. The entry was wide enough for them both to enter with only a slight adjustment. Lon stopped and reluctantly released Wod, whose arm had slid away when he started for the kitchen. Silently the taller man set down the goblet that he still carried. Lon enjoyed the rich scent of mulled wine that filled the air.

Hands now free, Wod crossed the room to stand before Lon. He raised his hands to cup Lon's jaw, tilting his face up so they finally looked at one another. "Lon." His name was a sigh on generous lips. Wod's thumb caressed the tip of his chin. "Are you sure?"

Lon reached up to grip Wod's wrists. "I'm sure."

"What happened?"

"Huh?"

Wod smiled. "What happened to change your mind?"

"Oh." Embarrassed, Lon flicked his gaze down. His hands dropped from Wod to fold together into nervous fists. But then he forced his eyes back up, summoning courage. "I-I think you're right. I don't know him at all."

“You could. I’m serious about helping you.”

“I know. That’s part of the reason. You want to help me get what I want, even if that’s not what you want.”

Dark eyes searched his face, but no words seemed to be forthcoming.

Lon continued. “He told me that he’s stayed away from me on purpose.”

That made Wod frown. “He said that?”

“He said he knew that he and I wanted different things.”

Wod’s hands slid down Lon’s neck to rest on his shoulders. “Why would he say that?”

Lon had to smile, remembering his conversation with Rom. “He was telling me that he thought you liked me.”

Wod’s jaw dropped. “He what?”

Lon had to giggle, some of the joy he’d felt earlier trickling free into his bloodstream. “He said you came to his place and wouldn’t stop talking about me.”

Groaning, Wod slapped a hand over his face. “That moron. I was *trying* to get *him* to think about you.”

Lon put a hand on Wod’s hip as he edged a little closer. “He thinks we’d make a good couple.”

Wod’s hand found Lon’s shoulder again. “What do you think?”

Lon found he was biting his lip and forced his teeth to release it. “I-I’d like to see if he’s right. I-if you do too.”

Fingers threaded into the hair behind Lon’s right ear. “I do.”

Lon’s gaze fastened on Wod’s lips. “All right.”

The lips smiled, and then Lon couldn’t see them, because they were too close, drifting toward his mouth. He shut his eyes and parted his lips for the gentle kiss that brushed them. He sighed, stepping in to Wod’s body, needing to feel that warmth and strength pressed against him. One strong arm wound about his back as fingers tugged his hair to tilt his head farther. Wod’s mouth opened, and his tongue

descended to mate with Lon's. Lon submitted easily, eagerly, to Wod, clutching the larger man as fresh joy simmered and sparkled into burbling desire.

"Come on." Wod released Lon and used the hand at his back to guide him through the open door of the bedroom.

Giddy and dizzy, Lon nearly tripped over his feet but managed to make it to the mattress without falling flat on his face. Without a lamp, only the clear moonlight through the windows to either side of the bed lit the room. The soft comforter gave a sigh under Lon's weight.

"Are you all right?"

"M fine." Lon rolled over to sit on the edge of the bed. "I'm..." He stopped, overcome by the sight of Wod standing before him as he pulled off his loose shirt. "Christmas, you're beautiful."

Wod smiled, dropping the shirt on the floor. "Thank you." He cupped Lon's jaw. "So are you."

"No." The denial was immediate and instinctive. "I'm not like you. I'm not—"

His words stopped, thanks to a kiss. "Hush. You are if I say you are."

Lon sighed, head tilted back as he simply enjoyed the pleasure of this man's presence. "Okay."

Wod chuckled softly as his fingers started on the buttons of Lon's jacket. "Lon?"

Lon kept his face back, eyes closed, willing to let Wod undress him. "Yes?"

His jacket opened, and Wod slid it off his shoulders. "You have had sex before, haven't you?"

Lon's eyes opened. "Huh? Oh, yeah."

He looked down as Wod knelt. An abundance of dark hair hid his face from view as he tugged at Lon's ankle boots. "With women or men?"

Emboldened by the slight hesitance in that normally sure voice, Lon reached out to comb his fingers through Wod's hair. So soft, so thick. It nearly distracted

him from the topic at hand. He didn't mind that Wod mistook him for a virgin. He wouldn't be the only one. Bok said it was because of the way Lon acted. "*Too innocent,*" he'd say with a snort. "Both."

Setting Lon's boots and socks aside, Wod knelt so that Lon's knees nudged his chest. He set his hands on Lon's thighs. "We don't have to do this now. If you don't want. I don't want to go further than you're ready for."

Love clogged Lon's throat, prohibiting words for a moment. Needing to communicate, he parted his knees and reached to gather Wod closer. The bigger man came to him easily, burying his face in the curve of Lon's neck as Lon's arms wrapped tight about him. "I want you," Lon croaked as soon as he could manage. "So much. Please."

As Wod's teeth and tongue sampled Lon's neck, his hands made busy pulling Lon's shirt from his pants. They startled apart when he reached the dildo, still wedged in Lon's waistband. They both looked down at the toy that spilled into Lon's lap, and laughed.

"We'll get to this later," Wod announced, plucking it up and setting it on the nightstand. "I don't need any help for our first time."

Our first time. First of many, Lon promised himself. He pulled his shirt up and over his head, then lay back on the mattress at Wod's urging. Wod kissed his lips, his chin, his neck. Hands smoothed over his sides as Wod reached his collarbone, then veered down toward a nipple. Lon cried out at the gentle pinch of teeth around his sensitive bud. He gripped Wod's shoulders as the other man lavished attention on first one nipple, then the other. All the while, Wod unlaced Lon's pants and started easing them down his hips. Lips at the base of Lon's rib cage made him squirm, and he gasped when his cock was freed from the heated confines of his pants. Wod pulled back to remove Lon's pants, and then Lon lay there naked for Wod's perusal.

He appeared to like what he saw. "I've wanted you exactly like that for months," Wod murmured as he unlaced his own pants.

Lon pushed up on his elbows, unable to be fully embarrassed when he was far too interested in watching Wod get naked. “Really?”

“Oh yes.” Wod had to pause to bend and pull off his shoes. “I pictured you just like that, pale and perfect in the middle of my bed. Eager and waiting for me.”

Lon glanced at the erection that lay on his lower belly. He was not huge by any means, but he was nicely proportionate for his size. Or so he’d been told. That he was eager was self-evident. He imagined his cock, even erect, would fit all the way inside Wod’s mouth. And just that thought made his cock ooze a few drops of cum.

“It drove me crazy that you kept running from me.” Wod yanked at the last of his laces and began to ease his pants down his long legs.

Lon sighed, his mouth watering at the sight of Wod’s cock. It didn’t matter that he’d seen it before. This time it was hard and thrust up just for him. His palms tingled with a need to grip it. “You scared me.”

“That was the last thing I wanted.”

Lon nodded, far too distracted by the sight before him. “You’re so beautiful.” He sounded like a broken record, but his brain had shorted during their first kiss. He couldn’t properly concentrate on words.

Wod smiled as he tossed aside his pants. He leaned forward and wrapped his hands underneath Lon’s thighs from the inside, then lifted and parted them. In the same move, he pushed Lon further back on the mattress, making room for himself to crawl up after. Lon’s head fell over the far side, and he had to lift it to see Wod settle with Lon’s thighs draped over his shoulders. Wod’s attention centered on Lon’s cock, one big palm supporting it as he dragged his tongue from base to tip. Lon let his head drop back, eyes closed so he could fully enjoy the sensation. Wod took his time, bathing Lon’s cock thoroughly before he finally slipped the tip between his lips and lashed the hole with his tongue. Lon whimpered, digging his heels into Wod’s back as Wod lowered his head and did indeed take the whole of Lon’s cock into his mouth. Tongue and throat worked to squeeze Lon tight. Lon managed to lift his head, because he simply had to drink in the sight of Wod’s nose

brushing the sparse hair at the base of his cock, then the pull at Wod's lips as he dragged them up Lon's shaft back to the tip.

"Wod!" Lon cried after Wod had sucked him in a number of times. "Christmas coal, Wod!"

Then fingers were prodding gently between the cheeks of Lon's ass. The simplest of sex spells had wet Wod's fingers, lubricating them to press inside Lon's eager opening. First one, then two slid inside, a wonderful stretch and a gorgeous press to that spot just inside that made snowflakes flutter in Lon's brain.

"Wod, please."

He didn't know what he begged for exactly, but Wod gave him something wonderful. Mouth and fingers took up a rhythm—one pressing, the other pulling, in tandem. Lon's hips picked up the rhythm, and he writhed in abandon as pleasure built and finally crested in an explosion that left him blind and helpless.

He was aware of Wod moving, adjusting. At one point Wod tugged at his legs to pull him back onto the mattress so his head wasn't falling over the side. But he didn't open his eyes until Wod pushed one of his legs back, bending him in half so his thigh brushed his chest. Then he looked down to see Wod aiming his shining wet cock at Lon's anus. The tip prodded, and Lon groaned, grabbing his leg to hold it back. The other leg he spread wide, giving Wod as much access as he could manage. Wod spared him a grin, a light sheen of sweat making his skin shimmer in the moonlight. He pushed, and the tip of him penetrated Lon.

"Ah!"

"You're all right?"

As part of his answer, Lon rolled his hips so another inch of Wod slid into him. "Yes. More."

Wod went slow, leaning closer to Lon as his cock eased into Lon's body. Lon was on fire, his chest and belly heaving and his spent cock twitching, trying to rally to the cause. As soon as he could reach, he released his leg and gripped Wod's shoulders, pulling at him.

“Wod.”

Wod pressed his lips to Lon’s cheek. “Lon.”

Eyes shut tight over tears of joy, Lon wrapped his arms around Wod’s neck as the other man started to pull his cock out to the tip. Then that awesome filling as Wod stuffed back inside. Lon could only cling tight, no longer in command of his limbs as Wod rocked into him. Wod’s lips brushed his cheek, his neck, his lips, but only lightly. Their concentration centered at their hips, at the place where their bodies formed a perfect seal. Wod thrust into him, and desperate, breathless squeals spilled from Lon at every jolt. That gorgeous friction and fullness inside his ass drove all thought and breath from him, leaving him a mindless, greedy husk needing to be filled. He begged and pleaded, scratched and squeezed the muscles of Wod’s back, suckled and bit at the lips that mated with his. It all built, suffocating him with pleasure, making him squirm. He almost didn’t recognize that telltale tingle in his testicles, drowned as it was by the entire encounter. He barely realized when he reached the brink, snapping his head back and crying to the ceiling as ecstasy exploded within him, gusting from his cock into the inferno heat between him and his lover. He hadn’t finished spilling before Wod growled, forehead pressed to Lon’s neck as his rhythm shattered.

Blindly Lon turned his head to seek out Wod. The larger man adjusted slowly, rolling them both almost to their sides. Lon found his lips, and they shared a sloppy, wet kiss as their labored breathing mingled. At last, Lon opened his eyes to see Wod’s dark gaze drinking him in over a smile he could bask in forever.

“I love you,” Lon said on a sigh.

Wod blinked, and only then did Lon hear his words. *Too soon*. Everyone always told him he felt things far too soon.

“I-I mean—”

Wod’s finger at his lips stopped his words. “Shhh. I think I love you too.”

Lon's mouth fell open, but Wod kissed it anyway. The bigger man drew him close, chests pressed together, sweaty skin sliding. He laughed softly as he tucked Lon's head under his chin. "I plan to keep you close so we can both make sure."

Lon smiled and did his best to snuggle nearer. "It's a plan."

Epilogue

Lon swung open Wod's front door before Bok even finished knocking. Bok stumbled back a few steps on the porch, mouth hanging open.

"No *way!*"

Lon threw back his head laughing, knowing exactly what he looked like. Thoroughly and absolutely debauched. He wore Wod's oversized shirt over last night's pants and no shoes. His hair was loose and probably somewhat tangled, and he'd made sure that the collar of Wod's shirt draped open just enough to reveal the love bite that adorned his neck.

"Did you bring it?"

Giggling, Bok held up a plain brown sack.

"All right, you." A strong arm circled Lon's waist from behind and pulled him up against a hard chest and steely thighs. "You've had your fun. Get inside."

Bok's green eyes blinked myopically over Lon's shoulder. "Wow. It really is you."

"It's my house. Shouldn't it be me?" Wod pulled Lon clear of the doorway. "Come on in."

Lon squirmed, squeezing Wod's arm as his best friend passed them by. He grinned over his shoulder to see Wod's patient smile. His lover shook his head slightly, then graced the tip of Lon's nose with a kiss before releasing him. "Go," Wod prompted, patting him on his rear.

Happily, he skipped farther into the room, following Bok to the dining table.

“You weren’t specific on what you wanted,” Bok began, upending the bag over the table to spill out its contents. “So I just brought a variety.”

Lon’s eyes got big. Bok had brought *far* more toys than he’d thought.

“Well, well.” Wod purred, his eyes on the brightly colored sex toys that littered his table. “You are every bit the magician Lon said you are.”

Lon bit his lip and stuck his finger through a plastic ring, lifting to find that it was attached to a string of bright pink beads of various sizes. “Um, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

Wod hefted a pair of fur-lined cuffs. “This was an *excellent* idea.”

“Knock-knock,” called a voice from the front door. It reopened to admit none other than Rom. “Am I interrupting?”

“Not yet,” Wod called, hardly taking his attention from Bok’s bounty.

Both of the smaller men watched, agape, as Dasher himself crossed to the table. Bok nudged Lon, but Lon could only give him big eyes and shake his head. He’d called Bok but didn’t remember Wod calling Rom.

Rom’s eyes took on a feral gleam when he saw what was before them. “Merry Christmas! What have we here?”

Lon turned back to the table, to see Wod leering at him across the pile of toys. “Did I forget to mention that Rom often stops by on Sixth Day for lunch?”

Lon gaped, then glared. So *that’s* why he’d suggested they get dressed. Calling Bok had been a distraction. “You did forget to mention it.”

Wod shrugged, trailing what looked like a pearl necklace through his fingers. “Sorry about that.”

Lon squeaked when Rom’s arm slid around his shoulders. “I’m *so* glad you two hooked up.” Rom even kissed his cheek. “Judging from the spread here, it looks like you’ll do Wod a world of good.”

“They’re not mine!” Lon protested, backing away from Rom’s arm and the table. He pointed at Bok. “*He* brought them.”

Without Lon between them, Rom's attention fell on Bok. Bok just stared. No, he gulped.

Rom grinned and held out his hand. "I'm Rom."

An ecstatic smile crested Bok's face, and he gripped Rom's hand. "I know. I'm Bok. I work in acquisitions."

Rom's eyes lit up. "*Do you now?*" He glanced at the table. "Oh, wait, I've heard of you. I've gotten to benefit from some of your acquisitions."

Distracted by the weird conversation going on in front of him, Lon didn't realize that Wod had circled around behind him until his lover's arm circled his shoulders. "You think they'll make a couple?"

"What? Oh. No. Bok likes girls."

They watched their friends bend over the pile of toys, completely forgetting anyone else was in the room.

Wod nuzzled behind Lon's ear. "If you say so."

It was not remotely difficult for Lon to tune out Bok and Rom. He'd been looking forward to introducing Bok to Wod, but Wod had already discovered lovely ways to distract him. He leaned back and tilted his head to give Wod further access to his neck and was not disappointed by the lush attention his skin received. He frowned when Wod stopped. "Hey."

Wod chuckled. "We have an audience."

Lon opened his eyes to see two grinning faces watching them.

"Don't stop on our account," Rom encouraged.

Bok nodded eagerly, making his green hair spill over half his face.

"Not a chance." Wod took Lon's hand and led him to the table. "This one's all mine for a while." He set his palms on the table and surveyed the toys. "Now, before we go down to lunch, help us choose some toys appropriate for reindeer games."

 THE END 

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Jet Mykles

As far back as junior high, Jet used to write sex stories for friends involving their favorite pop icons of the time. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now regularly uses this art to illustrate her stories or her stories to expand upon her art.