



# Sleigh Rides With St. Nick (Jinx Paranormal Dating Agency #11)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The last person Ivy expected to fall for was Santa.

Ivy is charmed when she meets Nick at a party and is willing to trust her heart and give him a chance. At least until she discovers her newest contract is working for his company, and there are strict rules about fraternising with clients.

Nick has two goals during the festive season, to make sure the children get their toys, and to share the Christmas cheer with those around him. He never expected to have his heart captured by the beautiful elf now working for him.

As the sparks begin to fly, the two of them realise that some things don't listen to the rules and that Christmas magic will always find a way.

Sleigh Bells With St. Nick is a mythology-inspired paranormal m/f rom-com and part of the Jinx Paranormal Dating Agency series. It features a light-hearted workplace romance with a Christmas theme.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

IVY

Christmas music blared from the speakers connected to my phone, and the tree twinkled with lights. From a distance, it looked kind of classy, but up close, it was decorated with all kinds of silly ornaments my roommate and I had accumulated over the years.

Laila came bustling out of her room wearing a form-fitting green dress and her heels still in her hand. "Is Eloise not here yet?"

I shook my head. "You can't expect her to be on time," I reminded her.

"She'll probably be working late," Laila responded with an amused smile. "And by working, I mean hooking up with her secret work boyfriend."

"Obviously." I let out a sigh. "If only it were that easy to find someone."

"I'm pretty sure you're supposed to go into work to work, not to hook up with anyone." Laila headed over to the other side of our open-plan kitchen-living room and poured us both a glass of wine. "Unless you have something to tell me."

I laughed. "Nope. My company is still full of stuck-up marketing executives."

"Aren't you a stuck-up marketing executive?" she asked as she handed me one of the glasses and I took a sip.

"Yep. But I've got my own account now. I start on Monday."

Laila frowned and sat down, stretching out her legs. "This close to the holidays?"

"Yes. And get this, they're a toy company."

She raised an eyebrow. "You'd have thought they'd come hiring months ago."

"Exactly. I dread to think what I'm walking into." I was about to sit down when the doorbell sounded, announcing the arrival of my oldest friend.

I made my way over to it, pulling it open to find her on the other side with a bottle of wine in one hand and a slightly chilled expression on her face.

"Ivy!"

"Hey, El," I said, letting her come inside before I hugged her.

"I hope you're ready to party," she said. "I have had such a week at work."

Laila snorted. "You mean you were almost caught with your boyfriend in the supply closet?" she teased.

"I didn't do anything with my boyfriend in a supply closet," Eloise countered.

"Ah, so you did do something with him at work still," I pointed out. "Otherwise you wouldn't be so specific." I put her bottle of wine in the fridge and fixed her a glass from the open one.

She sat on the opposite end of the sofa from me and accepted the glass of wine I brought her.

Eloise's cheeks flamed red. "Yes. Fine. We did something at work."

"Intriguing. And do we get to know his name?" Laila asked. "Or anything else? You've still not told us anything about him other than that you work with him and he gives good..."

"So, where are we going tonight?" Eloise's question was a little louder than it needed to be.

I smothered a laugh and leaned against the counter. "No idea. There's a wine bar on Main Street that's supposed to be really good."

"Oh, or maybe the club, we haven't been dancing in ages," Laila responded.

Eloise cleared her throat. "So, I do actually have another option."

"Go on?" Laila asked.

"What if I could get us into a Jinx mixer?" she said.

"One run by the dating agency you work at?" I checked.

"Well, yes. But the mixers aren't really about matchmaking. There's an open bar, and the guest list is kind of exclusive."

"And yet you can get us losers in?" Laila joked.

"Wait, is it because of your secret work boyfriend?" I asked.

Eloise took a sip of her wine. "Yes, okay. I can have him get us in."

"Well now I'm even more intrigued about who he is," I admitted. "If he's high up enough to get us on the list, then that means..."

"He's my boss," Eloise blurted.

"But your boss is Cupid," Laila said.

Our friend looked down at her wine glass, her cheeks bright red. "Yes, my boss is Cupid."

I whistled. "Damn, El, you hooked yourself a god?"

"Well, not on purpose," she said quickly.

"Hey, I'm all in for a Jinx party," Laila responded. "I've heard the drinks are really good, and I wouldn't mind finding myself a god or two."

I raised an eyebrow in her direction.

"Not at the same time," she said. "Though I've heard the stories I can't imagine that it would be impossible to find gods who would do that."

"I've not had enough wine for this conversation," I murmured. "Dating a god sounds complicated. And talk about the age gap."

Eloise raised an eyebrow. "Isn't your dad two hundred years older than your mum?"

"Well, yes. But that's just an elf thing."

"There are gods who aren't that much older than the oldest elves," Laila said. "And some who are younger, right?" She looked at Eloise.

"How should I know? I don't have access to profiles on all of the gods, only those who sign up for the matchmaking services. And I only know if they list that they're a

god. Not all of them do, it isn't required to disclose what you are when you're signing up unless you want to."

"How does that even work?" Laila asked. "What if someone doesn't want to be matched with a god?"

"Then they put that on their intake form, and it doesn't match them with anyone who has either disclosed they're a god, or has left that information blank.

But most people don't. I think they know that if they're using Jinx's services, then there's going to be a chance that they'll match with a god. "

"Oh, so who are we expecting to be there tonight?" Laila asked, leaning forward. "Do I need to change into a better dress?"

"Your dress is great," I reminded her. "Any god who doesn't want you in that dress isn't worthy of the title."

Eloise shrugged. "I don't know."

"What about Hades? I heard he's the hot brooding type," Laila mused.

"He's back with Persephone," Eloise said. "Which is kind of my fault. But kind of not."

I raised an eyebrow. "Now you have to tell us that story."

"There's nothing really to tell. Cupid was supposed to put a note on the file that they weren't to be matched together, but then we, erm, got a bit distracted and accidentally sent the file off as to be matched ."

"Distracted as in..."

"They totally did it on Cupid's desk," I said in answer to Laila's question, able to tell from El's face.

"No way?" She turned her attention to Eloise.

"All right, yes," she murmured. "There could be all kinds of gods there."

"Oh, what about Santa?" Laila asked. "He's got to want to blow off steam before Christmas Eve."

"I don't think Santa is going to be attending a Jinx dating event," I said. "He probably doesn't actually deliver presents on Christmas Eve either."

"He could be there," Eloise responded. "But I don't know. I've never seen him on the matchmaking system we've got, but that doesn't actually mean anything."

"Santa isn't going to be there. He's not even a god," I responded.

"Well, technically he could be," Eloise responded.

I gave her a curious look and picked up my glass of wine.

"If someone made him immortal, then he would have become a god by now," she said. "Cupid explained it to me. Apparently, none of them are quite clear on how the god part is supposed to happen."

"Or they know, they just don't want to tell us," Laila pointed out.

Eloise nodded. "Yes, true. But anyway. He said that someone becomes immortal

because a god makes them that way. And if they don't meet the requirements, they just stay immortal and nothing else happens. But if they have enough followers, they become a god."

"Ha, so Erik-what's-his-face could become a god?" Laila asked. "You know, the musician?"

Eloise nodded. "That's the way I understood it. If someone made him immortal and he continued to have the followers he does now, then he'd become a god, yes."

"Huh, so Santa's a god," I mused. "Who would have thought it?"

"Well we don't know for sure," Eloise responded. "Because if no one made him immortal, he'd just have died."

"I'm going to choose to believe in a sexy powerful god Santa," Laila joked. "Though he'd be more Ivy's type, she likes the older guy."

"It's not old if he was born in the same century as me," I protested.

They were never going to let me forget that I dated a ninety-five-year-old elf.

He looked like he was barely a year or two older than me, and in elf time, we were close enough together in age that it wouldn't have raised a single eyebrow.

Laila shrugged. "What do I know? I'm a Manjari, I was never supposed to leave the sacred forest."

"If we're going to go, then I should message Cupid and get us on the list," Eloise said, pulling out her phone. "And we should probably finish getting ready." She tapped out a message on her phone.



I finished my wine and thought about the party to come.

Despite the fact Eloise had worked in the matchmaking department at Jinx for almost a year, I'd never had a chance to go to one of their events, especially because of how pricey their elite membership was, and I had no idea what to expect as a result.

But I was kind of curious, especially in finding out exactly who was going to be there, and if I'd even be able to recognise a god if I was looking them in the face.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

IVY

Everything about the hotel we entered sparkled. A large silver Christmas tree sat in the lobby, dominating everything around it.

"Do the gods celebrate Christmas?" I asked Eloise.

She shrugged. "I suppose some of them probably do, but really, I think they just like an excuse to party. And we're trying to get a couple more good matches in before the holiday season in the hope that people might gift Jinx memberships to people they think might like them."

"I didn't even realise that was a thing."

She shrugged. "Why would you?" She gestured for the three of us to make our way over to where a large man in a dark suit stood with a clipboard. "Eloise Finch and guests," she said with the same kind of confidence she'd had her entire life.

The man checked his clipboard and nodded, lifting a rope to let us inside. I hadn't been to many events like this, and it made it feel really exclusive to have a guest list like this.

I took a deep breath, feeling surprisingly nervous about entering the room. "Do they often hold events here?" I asked.

"Oh, all the time. Jinx bought the hotel a few months ago."

"They bought a hotel?" Laila echoed.

"Yes. I don't have much to do with the events department, but I think they have a lot of them going on.

This is just a mixer, but there are Lock and Key parties run by Qestesh, she's over there.

" She nodded towards a dark-haired woman who exuded sensuality even from this distance.

"And then Venus runs a speed dating event.

She's over there glaring at Aphrodite." She gestured towards a dark-blond woman.

"How many gods do you know?" I asked, surprised that I was only just learning this.

She shrugged. "I only know the ones I've seen around the Jinx building, or who are signed up for matchmaking, and I don't really know them. It's more a case of knowing what they look like and their connection to the others."

"Well, I'm going to head to the bar and find myself a god to learn more about," Laila announced, not even giving us a moment before disappearing.

"Is she actually going to manage?" I asked.

"Probably. This party is for the top-tier clients of Jinx, there are a lot of gods in attendance," she said.

"Right, so be careful what I say to who."

She snorted. "Just steer clear of Zeus and you'll be all right. A lot of the rumours about him are true. And if Cupid is to be believed, he gets drinks thrown over him regularly at these events."

"All right, I'll steer clear of Zeus. Anything else I should know?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

I found that hard to believe when we were in a room with some of the people who had historically held so much power over the world, but I kept that to myself. So long as I was polite to everyone, it would be fine.

Eloise's whole face lit up as she spotted someone across the room. I followed her gaze and spotted a slight man with curly blond hair. He looked somewhat familiar, and it took me a moment to realise that was because of all of the depictions of Cupid I'd seen over the years.

"I guess this is your cue," I joked.

"I'll be back," she promised.

I laughed. "Don't worry about me, I can fend for myself."

"I promise I didn't bring you here just to ditch you."

"I'll be fine," I promised her, giving her a small push on the back so she went over to the man she wanted to see. She finally went, and I watched her for a moment before realising it made me feel like a bit of a weirdo.

I turned around, scanning the bar to find Laila. I shook my head as I spotted her flirting with a man I didn't recognise. I supposed it didn't matter whether he was a god

or not, she was getting what she planned out of tonight.

I let out a loud sigh.

"Abandoned by your friends?" someone asked.

I jumped and turned around, finding a handsome man with silver-grey hair and a short beard. It should make him look old, but it suited him and only added to his attractiveness. "So it seems."

"Me too."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that some kind of pick-up line?"

"Absolutely not," he responded. "I came with my friend over there." He nodded to where a handsome black man was flirting with someone who looked just like I'd expect a Norse god to look.

"I see."

"I'm Nick," he said, holding out his hand.

"Ivy," I responded, reaching out to take it.

His hand was warm, firm, and inviting in a way a handshake really shouldn't be. Was it weird that we were even shaking hands when we were at a mixer run by a dating agency? That wasn't a question I had an answer to, and I wasn't about to ask Nick about it.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked as he pulled his hand away. I was almost disappointed by the loss of contact.

"Isn't it an open bar?"

"Fair point. Would you like to have a drink with me, then?"

There was a part of me that wanted to say no just because the situation was a strange one, but I knew that wasn't the point of tonight. And it wasn't like Laila and Eloise were free to have a drink with me anyway. So much for girls' night. "All right."

He didn't touch me as we made our way over to the bar, which was a welcome surprise considering how much the people around us definitely were touching one another. There was a lot of it going on everywhere I looked.

"What do you want?" Nick leaned against the bar with all the confidence of someone who knew how good they looked, which was fair.

His dark suit was clearly tailored to fit him, and the look was completed by the open collar.

The only thing that would make it better would have been if he had an undone bow tie around his neck.

Though I knew that was the kind of thing that happened only in very specific circumstances.

"A glass of champagne. No reason not to if Jinx is paying."

He chuckled. "Sounds good." He got the attention of the bartender and asked for the drinks. "So, what brings you to a Jinx party?"

"It's girls' night," I responded. "As you can see, it's going well."

"So long as you're having fun, right?"

The glasses arrived, and I reached out for one of them, running my fingers up and down the stem of the glass and watching the bubbles float to the top. "I need more convincing."

"That's because the food hasn't come out yet," he responded. "Between you and me that's the main reason I come to these things."

"And presumably because you want to make the most of your Jinx membership."

He shrugged. "Most people want to find love. Is there anything wrong with using a dating agency to do it?"

"I guess not. I've never really thought about it," I admitted. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm not actually a member. My friend just happens to work at Jinx."

"Ah, an interloper," Nick joked. "Your secret is safe with me."

"You're not particularly concerned about someone having breached the sanctity of the Jinx party?"

"No, for two reasons." He took a sip of his champagne and turned to face me, a serious expression on his face. "For one, it's not my problem if people are here who shouldn't be, I don't work for Jinx."

"Good point. What's your second reason?"

"Oh, that one's easy. Why would I mess with it when I'm currently in good company?"

I laughed. "I could be terrible company for all you know. Maybe I leave the cap off my toothpaste and never pick up my socks?"

"Do you?"

"No."

"Then I'll stand by my current judgement," he responded in a warm, and surprisingly intimate, voice.

"So, is it just the food you come to Jinx parties for?"

"Well, the company," he said, which made sense considering his previous comment. "Which is pretty much the point."

"Have you met anyone yet?" I asked.

"No. Are you asking because you're interested, or because you're secretly writing a piece about Jinx and you want quotes from potential clients?" He took a sip of his champagne, his eyes twinkling as if in jest.

"I'm not a reporter," I assured him. "I'm in marketing. What about you?"

"Manufacturing," he responded.

"A vague answer."

"As was yours," he responded. "Marketing is a large discipline."

"Most people stop listening when I talk about my job. They think that marketing is all about photoshoots and snappy taglines. They switch off the moment I tell them it's



about numbers."

"Everything is about numbers," Nick responded.

A commotion down the bar broke through the tension brewing between us and I turned in time to see Laila throw a drink over someone.

"Oh, Zeus, what have you done now," Nick muttered.

"That's Zeus?" I asked.

He nodded. "That might not even be the last drink of the night he gets thrown over him."

"Maybe not, but that's the one I have to deal with, that's my friend."

"Ah."

"I'm sorry, I really need to check she's okay." Especially if he was right and that was Zeus she'd thrown her drink over. I paused for a moment, not really wanting the conversation to end, even if I had to go check on Laila.

"Would it be forward to ask for your number before you go?" Nick asked.

"It would." I unclipped my handbag and pulled out a business card to hand it to him.

"Do you always carry these around with you?"

"It's the easiest way for you to know that I'm giving you my real number," I responded. "If not, I'd just make something up and write it down."

"Ah, smart." He tucked it into his pocket without looking at it. "And if I were to use your number, what should I ask?"

"That's up to you," I said. "I can't tell you how to impress me."

He chuckled. "Or I'm just trying to figure out what you'll enjoy so we'll both have a good time."

I considered it for a moment and realised being cagey wasn't going to get me anywhere. "This is too many people. I'd rather be somewhere smaller and less crowded."

"Which is much better for conversation."

"Exactly," I responded.

"Food?"

"Well, you did say you came to Jinx events to eat. So how about dinner?"

"Are you free on Thursday?" he asked.

"I can make Thursday work," I said. "Where were you thinking?"

"Have you ever been to The Cedar?" He leaned in, which was when I realised we'd slowly been moving closer to one another as we spoke.

"No, but I've heard good things. Eight sound good?"

"I'll book a table," he responded. "Maybe I didn't need your number after all."

I laughed. "Apparently not. And if it's a successful date, then maybe I won't need your comment for my fake article about Jinx, I'll be able to use firsthand experience to write it."

Amusement danced over his handsome face. I could hardly believe I'd actually made a date with someone at this event, especially when I was only actually here as a guest of Eloise.

"But I should really go now," I said. "If that is Zeus, then I need to make sure Laila is okay."

He nodded. "Understandable. Perhaps I'll see you in a bit, but if not, I look forward to dinner on Thursday," Nick said.

"Me too." I gave him what I hoped was a warm smile, not wanting him to think that this was some kind of ploy to get away from him, when I was really just concerned for Laila. Though I supposed I had given him my number already.

I waved goodbye, regretting that I'd probably have to wait until Thursday to talk to him again, but knowing that it was probably for the best.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

NICK

I stared at the ledgers in front of me and ran a hand over my face.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, I had no idea what the accounts said.

It had been hundreds of years of running a business and I still couldn't get it right.

It wasn't that I didn't try, it was just that my talent lay in other parts of the business, mostly in product design and development.

Logically, I knew that was what Pieter and I hired accountants for, but I should still know the state of our business.

It was so much easier when things were simpler and it was nothing more than me and my tools in a shop.

Perhaps I should ask someone from accounting to come up and talk things over with me so I at least had some understanding of what I was looking at.

I reached out for the phone, only to stop when the door opened.

I looked up to find Pieter stepping inside with a serious expression on his face.

"I thought you spent the whole weekend with the guy you met at the Jinx party?" I asked him.

"I did."

"Then why do you look like you're about to tell me something both serious and horrible?"

He chuckled and pulled out the chair on the visitor's side of the desk. "I'm not. We've got a meeting with the account manager from Miracle Marketing Solutions."

"Ah, right. I lost track of time. I had some notes somewhere," I said.

"Mmm. This wouldn't even be necessary if you just let us have an in-house marketing team," Pieter said.

"We have an in-house marketing team."

"We have a graphic designer who focuses on our packaging and every now and again puts together a post for social media. We don't have a proper marketing department."

I sighed. "All right, fine. After the Christmas season is over, we can hire someone. Or maybe we can poach whoever they send if they do a good job."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Pieter said.

I snorted. "You own half the company, you don't have to hold me to anything."

"True. But we'll talk about that after Christmas is over.

We need to focus on the last-minute push.

It's three weeks until Christmas, we can catch all of the people who are running behind on their gift shopping.

That should get some toys out of the door," he said in a matter-of-fact tone I'd gotten used to over the years we'd been companions.

"Is that a problem? I was looking at the accounts..."

He snorted. "Are you really trying to tell me you understand them, Nick?"

"I understand the basic number. We're making profit. And both of us are living comfortably."

"We'd be living comfortably even if we weren't making profit," he pointed out. "Investing in the railways in the eighteen-hundreds really paid off."

"Mmm."

"But if you want the company to keep bankrolling your charity work, then we need to make more money."

"I can pay for it myself if it's an issue," I responded.

"Not the point, Nick. The charity coming from the company also looks good. Maybe this year you'll finally use it for marketing."

"Absolutely not," I responded firmly. "I don't want it becoming a massively gimmicky thing. I do the sleigh ride and gifts because it brings joy to the kids, not because it looks good for the company."

"Yes, yes, I know. It's just an added advantage that it gets our toys into the hands of children who then cherish the memory until they're old enough to buy them for their own children."

"What? No, that's not the point."

He shrugged. "Accidental bonus. You're just going to have to accept it."

I sighed. "Maybe it's time to get out of the toy business. I can just buy what I need from somewhere else."

The look he gave me said everything I needed to know about his thoughts on the matter. And that was fair. We have some semblance of this conversation every year. Without the company, I wouldn't be as aware of what the children actually wanted for presents, and that would lead to disappointed faces.

"I much preferred it when you were just holding feasts," Pieter muttered.

"We're doing that too," I reminded him. "It's next week."

"Yes, I know. I'm honestly surprised you sleep."

"It's only one month a year."

"And you could have stopped doing any of it years ago."

"Hardly. There are always going to be people who want to have a good night out, and children in need of presents," I said.

"And yet we can't use either for marketing," Pieter muttered.

"There are plenty of other things we can use," I responded. "And if this marketing company we've contracted can't figure out what to do without resorting to that, then I don't think we should be working with them."

Pieter nodded. "I won't say anything."

"When are they arriving?"

"In five minutes," he said. "It's just an introductory meeting, all we have to do is tell them what we're about as a company, and anything we don't want to do. Or anything we do want them to focus on."

"All right, I can manage that." I got to my feet and pulled my suit jacket off the back of my chair so I could put it on. "Let's get this over with. I want to go down to the factory floor and make sure the toys for the sleigh ride have been put aside."

Pieter rolled his eyes but didn't say anything about my revelation.

I knew he wouldn't. The sleigh ride was important to me, and he wouldn't do anything that compromised it, even if he did find it frustrating that I sometimes got caught up with the extracurriculars of the season rather than actually running the business, but that was just part of what the season meant for me.

I'd founded Cringle because of the sleigh ride and getting toys to children whose parents couldn't afford much for the season. That would always come first.

And it wasn't as if Pieter didn't have his own hand in it.

While he'd gotten out of the confectionery game years ago, he always made sure to have his pockets full of sweets to give to the children who came to the sleigh ride.

His love of giving was one of the reasons the two of us had become good friends.

But what we did for the sleigh ride was something for us, and I had no intention of anyone from Miracle Marketing Solutions knowing anything about it.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

IVY

I tried to calm the nerves bouncing around inside me.

This was the first time I was working as the lead on an account, and I was under no illusions that it was because my bosses wanted to give me this, it was more that everyone else was busy and this close to Christmas there was no juggling two accounts.

Added to that was the fact that a toy company didn't have this kind of thing sorted months in advance, which made me wonder exactly how difficult the job ahead of me was going to be.

No matter what the client turned out to be, I was going to make the most of it.

There was no way I was going to mess up this opportunity to prove my worth to my boss.

I might have only gotten this position by chance, but if I did well, it could mean better accounts next year.

The door opened and I got to my feet, smoothing down the skirt of my suit and preparing to meet my client.

My eyes widened and my mouth went dry at the sight of the man entering the room. He looked even better than he had at the Jinx mixer, with his silver-white hair neatly styled and the suit fitting him perfectly, the maroon shirt beneath the perfect pop of

unexpected colour.

"Nick?"

My surprise was echoed on his face. "Hello, Ivy."

The man with him gave him a strange look, as if not expecting us to know one another.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, that isn't how I was supposed to introduce myself. Hello, I'm Ivy from Miracle Marketing Solutions." I held out my hand.

Nick's lips quirked up into a smile and he reached out to take it, smoothing his thumb across the back of it. "I'm Nick, co-CEO of Cringle."

I raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you did say you were in manufacturing."

"And you said you were in marketing," he responded.

The man with him faked a cough, making me more than a little aware of the fact we hadn't broken our handshake yet.

Nick looked down and seemed to remember what he was supposed to be doing, letting go of my hand. "This is my co-CEO, Pieter."

"Good to meet you," he responded, shaking my hand in a much more perfunctory manner.

There was something familiar about him, and it took me a moment to realise that he'd also been at the Jinx mixer, and was the friend that Nick said he'd come with.

"Shall we get started?" He looked between us as if he expected one of us to say no.

"Of course." I retook my seat. "So I'm here today to talk about your needs as a company.

There's only a short window until Christmas, so there's not much time to get everything in order.

But we might be able to run some smaller social media campaigns.

It will be difficult to get some of the big influencers under contract at this point, but some of the smaller ones should be available, and working with micro-influencers has a lot of potential. "

Nick gave me a blank look. "I don't know what any of those are."

Right, I hadn't considered that. "Oh. Erm, in general, we pay for placement with influencers and send them one of your products. They'll demonstrate the product and hopefully their followers buy it."

"I see." He looked thoughtful. "And this sells toys?"

"It can do," I said. "It can also do nothing. It's a bit of a gamble."

"What other options do we have?" Pieter asked.

"We could do a flash sale on your website, but for that, we need to build some hype and make sure you've got the stock available," I said. "And that the website won't crash. I can talk to your IT team if you think that's going to be an issue."

"How would we get the word out about that?" Nick asked.

"That would be a bit of a challenge given the lack of time, but you have a good following on social media, and we can leverage your mailing list."

"I don't think we can get flyers printed in that quantity in time," Nick said.

"Your email marketing list," I clarified, watching him closely and wondering how old he was.

Given everything I already knew about him, I had to assume that he was some kind of fae, and considering he wasn't thinking in modern marketing terms, that put him at the older end of things.

It was the same when it came to my dad, he was clueless about modern technology and sometimes thought it was still the eighteenth century in terms of how things worked.

It had been a bit of a pain when I'd first started wanting to date and he'd tried to impose strict rules, but he'd gotten on board quickly enough.

"Ah, I forgot we had that," he admitted sheepishly.

I took a deep breath. "Have you been sending out emails?" I asked. "Or has the list gone stale?"

"I'm not sure."

The other man grimaced. "Sometimes."

"Okay, then the first thing I'm going to need is to have access to the business assets.

Your newsletter list, social media, and anything else that you use for marketing.

I'll do a full audit and make a plan based on that.

But if things are in bad shape, then it might not be possible to have much ready to go before Christmas. "

"That's fine," Nick said.

"No, it's not," Pieter countered. "Christmas should be the busiest time of the year for us."

"If it's going to take longer, then it'll take longer," Nick responded.

"It might not even be an issue," I said quickly.

"I just need to know what I'm working with.

After that, I can give you timelines and a more accurate view of what we can manage in the time available.

" As much as Nick seemed like a great guy, it just wouldn't be possible for me to pull off miracles this close to Christmas, no matter what the name of the agency I worked for was.

"I think that sounds acceptable," Nick said.

Pieter let out a frustrated sigh, but from the way he looked at his friend, I had to assume that it wasn't actually aimed at me, but at him. "I'll get you everything you need."

"Thank you." I gave him what I hoped was a friendly smile. "Would you prefer it if I worked from your offices, or remotely?"

"There's a spare office here if you'd like," Nick said quickly. "Perhaps we could have a welcome-to-the-building coffee so we can talk and I can make sure it has everything you need."

"That sounds amenable. We should have regular meetings to make sure everything is going to plan. Would those be with you?"

"I'd be doing those," Pieter said. "I focus on the day-to-day running of the business, while Nick works on the production side of things."

"Right. So catch-up meetings with you, but if I need to know about the products, then I should talk to Nick."

"I can tell you whatever you want about that side of things," Nick promised.

"Great, I'm sure I'll have questions." I met his gaze, seeing the same interest in his eyes that there had been the other night.

"All right, then I think we're done here," Nick said. "I'll just get the coffee machine going, what would you like?"

"How fancy are we talking?" I asked.

"So long as it's a black coffee or a latte, I can cope with it," he responded. "There are some fun syrups too."

"Perhaps you could show me where this coffee machine is for when I'm working on my own?" I suggested.

"That sounds like a great idea," Nick said.

I smiled at him, looking forward to some time alone. I might be here for work, but I wasn't about to complain about spending time with someone I found charming and handsome.

The main question was going to be if I still thought that by the time I'd been here a few weeks.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

IVY

The corridors of the building were neat and tidy, but weren't anything particularly special. I'd have expected posters of past successful toys, or something like that. Anything that gave me an idea about what made the company tick.

My attention strayed to Nick. Maybe it wasn't just the company I wanted to know about. I'd been thinking about our upcoming date all weekend and decided that I was excited about it, even if I had been a little bold in asking for it. And somehow, he was now the person I was supposed to work with.

"Was your friend all right the other night?" he asked as he directed me into a stairwell. "After everything with Zeus?"

I nodded. "She was fine. And she hasn't stopped talking about it since. I think she's proud of the fact she got to be one of the people who threw something over Zeus."

He chuckled. "I can see that she might enjoy being part of the elite club of people who managed to reject Zeus. Though in recent years, I think they've been admitting more members."

"Ah, the problem with the internet. People know what he looks like and have heard of his reputation," I said.

"Exactly." He held out a door for me.

I slipped past, only aware of how close it brought the two of us. There was no



ignoring the pleasant scent that came from him. It was part whatever aftershave he was wearing, but there was also the scent of freshly shaved wood. It only made me want to move closer to him, but I resisted.

We turned a corner and he led me into a small canteen-like staffroom where a state-of-the-art coffee machine sat waiting.

"Fancy," I said.

"It was what my staff asked for," he responded. "I think most of them thought I'd only put it where the management team could access it, but I insisted on it being here."

"This is where the factory workers come on their lunch breaks?" I checked.

He nodded. "Or whenever they need a few minutes of peace. The factory floor can be intense."

"I'm surprised you manufacture here and not somewhere cheaper."

"Toys have been made on this plot of land since my grandfather's grandfather started his toyshop, I have no intention of ever changing that. Our toys are premium, and that means that I can pay my staff a wage that reflects that."

"Ah, so a family history to go with the toys," I said. "That's good. And the made in the UK angle could also be good."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're still thinking about marketing?"

"Of course. That's what I'm here to do," I pointed out. "And part of that is learning what it is about your business that makes it unique."

He nodded. "That's fair. What coffee did you want?"

"A gingerbread latte," I said, picking up the gingerbread syrup.

He reached out to take the bottle from me, his fingers brushing against mine as he did. It did funny things to my insides to have him touch me, even if it was only a passing touch.

"It feels festive," I said weakly in an attempt to distract myself from the effect he'd had on me.

"Ah, you're getting into the Christmas spirit." His voice came out a little gravelly, only making it more appealing. I needed to be careful. It was okay for me to find him attractive, but I couldn't let it distract me from what I was supposed to be doing.

"It is that time of year. Can you not say that you feel the same?"

"Absolutely. I love this time of year." Something in his demeanour changed and his whole face lit up. "There's nothing better than having the chance to feast with friends or see the joy on a child's face when you give them an unexpected toy."

I chuckled. "So you're the CEO of a toy company, you love Christmas, and you love giving kids toys. That basically makes you Santa."

"Probably because I am," he responded without even missing a beat. He finished my latte and put it down in front of me before starting to make his own.

I blinked a couple of times. "You're Santa?"

"I prefer Nick," he said. "But yes. Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Sinterklaas, the Lord of Misrule, all me."

I cleared my throat. "Right."

"Huh, you're taking less convincing than I thought." He picked up his coffee and took a sip, nodding in satisfaction. "A gingerbread latte was the right choice."

"I did meet you at a Jinx mixer," I said. "And why would you lie about it?"

He shrugged. "To try and get you to sleep with me."

"Would that work?" My mouth was kind of dry at the insinuation, even though it wasn't like I hadn't been thinking about it.

He chuckled wryly. "You wouldn't believe the number of people who've tried over the years. I think the fact they can ask to sit on my lap makes them bold."

"Do you..." I stopped myself before I could ask the rest of my highly inappropriate question, especially when he was kind of my boss now. I picked up my mug and took a sip.

"Only when I like the person," he said. "And never in the suit."

"So you really do dress up in a red suit and hand out presents?" I asked, starting to get more curious now that the initial shock was wearing off a bit.

"Not to everyone in the world, but to some people, yes. If I was to listen to my grandfather, we were descended from Saint Nicholas."

"Wasn't he a member of the clergy?" I asked.

"Yes. So it's unlikely. But my grandfather was a toymaker, and he prided himself in always having a certain number of toys he could give to the less fortunate around this

time of year. He instilled the same desire in me."

"And when you're talking about your grandfather, how long ago was this?" I should have twigged that when he said that toys had been made by members of his family on this spot before, but considering I'd been assuming he was fae of some kind, that wasn't that unusual.

He shrugged. "Five hundred years or so."

"Oh, that isn't as long ago as I expected." I leaned back against the counter, considering everything he'd been telling me and if it changed anything.

"You don't seem particularly fazed by my age." He studied my face.

"My dad was in his three hundreds when they had me," I responded.

"Ah, you're fae."

I nodded, not disclosing any further. I didn't really have anything against him knowing I was an elf, especially when it couldn't be hidden the moment anyone saw my ears. "So, Mrs Claus?"

He chuckled, leaning in slightly. "Checking that I'm single?"

I shrugged. "You could be in an open relationship with her."

"There's no Mrs Claus," he assured me. "There never has been."

"Good, good," I said absentmindedly as I processed his answer.

His lips curled up into an amused smile. "Is there a reason you're so interested in my

marital status?"

"We are supposed to be going on a date on Thursday," I reminded him, picking up my latte. "Unless you don't mix business with pleasure." I took a sip, enjoying the sweetly festive taste. It really was a good way to get into the festive spirit.

He ran his hand across his short beard, looking at me with dark eyes. "I've never had a reason to before."

"And now you do?"

"If it doesn't break the rules of the contract you have with your company, then I'd still like to go for dinner." His voice was low and inviting, only drawing attention to how close together we were somehow standing. We were lucky there was no one else in the room.

I closed my eyes and groaned. "How could I forget the contract?"

"Ah, so no fraternising with clients?" The disappointment in his voice echoed deep within me.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I understand. We've only just met and your job is important. We can postpone the date until after you've completed your contract with us."

"Maybe you'll be fed up with me by then," I responded.

"Oh, I don't think that's going to be possible, Ivy.

"The way he said my name made my pulse race and my whole body go kind of warm

and fuzzy.

Which was a very bad reaction for me to have when my contract forbade anything with clients.

And it wasn't as if I was going to pass up on an opportunity to have my own client just because I found Nick attractive.

"We'll see," I said. "So, the office?" I stepped back, putting some well-needed distance between us.

Hopefully, I'd find some reason that he was less attractive to me so I could get those feelings under control, but even after barely an hour in the Cringle offices, I was starting to think that wasn't going to be possible at all.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

IVY

Snow drifted through the air, which was surprising for it still being early in December, but I liked the way it looked when it fell to the ground.

There was something peaceful about it. Though there was going to be nothing peaceful about the day ahead.

Whether we liked it or not, the Cringle marketing assets were in dire shape, and I needed to make sure that anything I suggested would help combat that.

It didn't help that my boss had scheduled a meeting later to ask for an update on the account, and I wasn't sure she was going to like what I had to say.

I pushed the thought aside and juggled the folders in my arm so I could open the door that let me into the building. Somehow, I managed to drop my pass and I cursed even as I tried to work out how to get it.

"Let me get that for you," a familiar voice said.

I turned to see Nick approaching, the snow landing on the shoulders of his suit and making him look even more dashing than usual. With his silver-grey hair, he almost looked more like Jack Frost than the images I was used to of Father Christmas, though I knew from what he said that wasn't true.

He crouched down and picked up my pass, handing it back to me.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He pulled out his own and swiped it through the card reader on the outside of the door. Once it clicked, he pushed it open and let me through.

"Thanks." I flashed him what I hoped was a grateful smile. "I should have brought a bigger bag."

"Maybe, but then I'd have had no reason to hold the door open for you."

"Ah, no wonder that's why you had non-automatic doors put in."

He chuckled. "I can't claim credit for that. The main reason is that the building is too old and built from solid brick. Putting automatic doors in would cost a small fortune and I'd prefer to spend it on other things."

"Like fancy coffee machines for your staff?"

He nodded. "And regular pay raises. Automatic doors won't keep my staff happy, extra money in their pockets, and free presents for their children, do."

"You give all of your employees presents for their kids?"

"Of course. As you so accurately surmised, I am Santa."

"How did that even happen?" I asked as we walked down the corridor.

"I was always a toymaker. It was what five generations of my family had already been doing.

And my grandfather liked to give children gifts when he could, especially those



whose parents couldn't afford it.

I was following in his footsteps already when I became immortal.

And then the normal stuff that happens when someone becomes a god. "

"I get that part, but how did you go from a toymaker to one of the most celebrated figures in the Western world?"

"Oh, right. Well, I don't know how much you know about my history?" he asked.

"Nothing more than everyone else knows. Your suit was green at some point, now it's red."

"Ah. That's very recent," he said. "If you're free now, you could come with me to give me a hand, and I can tell you about it?"

I should say no. Not because I had work to do, or even because I thought it wasn't worth doing whatever it was he had in mind, but because I didn't think it was wise to spend too much time with him. "All right."

He opened another door for me and let me through. "You're going to need these before we go through the factory," he said, gesturing to a dispenser of earplugs.

"Thanks." I pulled out a couple of them and pushed them into my ears.

He didn't take any from the dispenser and instead reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box.

He popped it open and pulled out some much fancier-looking earplugs, twisting them into place.

He saw me watching and offered a genuine smile.

"They work better and are better for the environment than the disposable ones.

Lots of the factory floor workers have their pairs too.

The disposable ones are really just for visitors. "

"Ah." The sound was more muffled than I'd like, but I imagined it wouldn't take us long to get through the factory so I could take them out. Maybe if I was going to be working at Cringle for a while and I kept finding myself on the factory floor, I'd get myself a fancier pair of earplugs too.

Nick pushed open the next door, and even with the ear protection, a whole cacophony of noise assaulted me. I was careful to stay on the clearly marked path. The loud whir of saws and the rush of air from heaters came from all directions, along with the shouts of the workers.

Several of them stopped to call a greeting towards Nick and he smiled and waved at all of them, using their names.

It was hard to tell from just seeing one interaction, but it was clear that he'd spent enough time down here that he knew the staff and they knew him.

That was always a good sign when it came to the work environment of a company.

It had taken me six months to even meet the CEO of the firm I worked at.

I doubted that was going to be the same here.

We got to the end of the factory and he pushed open another door, gesturing for me to

make my way through. After how loud the factory was, it was almost deafeningly quiet now we'd left.

"Through here," Nick said, removing his earplugs as he did and clipping them back into the box.

I pulled my own out, squishing them between my fingers for a moment before shoving them in my pocket. I had no idea what else to do with them, and until I did, this was my solution.

Nick showed me to a small workshop that made me feel as if I'd stepped back in time a hundred years or so. Maybe more. A heavy wooden workbench with scorch marks and so many scratches that there was no doubt it had been used for years dominated the space, and racks with all manner of tools.

I drifted closer to it, my attention caught by an exquisite doll sitting on it. I set my files down so I could look at her properly. She was everything I'd expect from a China doll, with delicately painted features and curly brown hair.

"Ah, you've found Annabelle," Nick said.

"She's beautiful," I said.

"She is." He smiled sadly at the doll.

"What's her story?"

"How do you know there is one?" he asked.

"Your face."

"Mmm." For a moment, I didn't think he was going to tell me anything about it.

"She was the doll who changed it all. I know she doesn't look it, but she's an old lady now.

I made her in the late eighteen hundreds for a little girl who lived down the road from me.

Her mother was a kind woman, but she barely had enough money to pay for the basic food and lodgings, especially after her husband died.

At one point, I employed her as a cook. I didn't really need one, it was just that I couldn't stand seeing her destitute like that. "

I tried to imagine what that must have been like, but I couldn't. It was so far from the world I'd grown up in that I didn't even know where to start.

"That was when I met Annabelle. The girl, not the doll," Nick said.

"She was a bright child, always asking questions.

Sometimes, she'd help me when I was stuck with something on a toy.

She played with a lot of my prototypes, but she never had a doll of her own.

I didn't know the methods the best nineteenth-century dollmakers were using at the time, but I knew she desperately wanted a doll like that, but that her mother couldn't afford one. "

"That must have been hard." I looked down at the doll's face. She looked exactly like I'd expect from a Victorian doll. Perfect and poised.

"It was. But I was determined, so I started learning the techniques I'd need to make the doll she wanted, and that's when I started working on this doll for her," Nick said. "But then Annabelle got sick." His voice cracked as he said the word.

"She died, didn't she?"

He nodded. "Before I'd finished the doll." He reached out to touch the fabric of the doll's dress. "I wished she'd gotten to see it."

"I'm sorry she didn't."

"Me too. After that, I increased the number of toys I gave to children.

Before, it had just been a handful of children whose families I'd met over the year.

After Annabelle died, I decided to make more of a thing of it and filled a sack with toys to take down the street.

It started with the toys that I didn't want in the shop anymore.

But then as manufacturing became more of a thing, I could do more. "

"You still do it, don't you?" I wasn't sure what made me so certain of it, maybe it was just something in his voice.

"Yes," he responded. "Every year. But you can't use that for any marketing you do," he warned me.

"Why not? People love to support conscientious businesses."

"Because I don't do it for the business. The business exists because I want to do this,

not the other way around."

"Ah." I studied his face, noticing the slight pain in his eyes and the determination in the set of his jaw.

He wasn't going to budge on not letting this become part of the company's marketing, and I could respect that.

But it was interesting to hear what had brought him to that point.

"You said that was how you became Santa like we know him now? " I asked.

"Not quite. Santa actually came over from America.

I was just Father Christmas. But yes, that's how I became known for giving out presents.

The children would tell their friends about the man with the sack of presents who came at Christmas time, and then they'd tell their friends, and so far.

I travelled around Europe at other points and did similar things there, which is how a lot of their traditions started.

And before I knew it, I was Father Christmas as everyone thinks of him today. "

"But that was only the eighteen-hundreds, right? What about before then?" I asked, leaning closer than I should. There was something so captivating about him that I wasn't able to get out of his orbit, even if I wanted to.

"Ah, before that it was all about feasting. I was the Lord of Misrule."

"I don't even know what that is," I admitted.

"It was something the Church came up with. They'd make one of the low-down members of the clergy into the Lord of Misrule to watch over the Feast of Fools."

"That all sounds made up," I said.

"Everything is made up, that doesn't mean it isn't real," he responded. "By the time I was made immortal, the Feast of Fools had become something bigger, it was done at court, at least up until the reformation, then it was the same thing, but a different title."

"All right, tell me. What else did they call you?" I asked.

He stroked his beard as he thought about it. "Oh, let's see if I can remember. It was things like the Prince of Christmas, the Christmas Lord, or Captain Christmas."

I snorted, going to cover my mouth with my hand after I did. "Sorry, it's just, Captain Christmas sounds like a superhero."

He chuckled. "I guess it does, but I can assure you, that's what they called me. It was all about feasting and making merry."

"That does sound nice," I admitted.

"You should come this year."

"What? To a feast?"

"Yes, absolutely. It's on Friday. You can bring your friends."

"Is it going to be decked out like a Tudor court?" I asked.

He laughed, the sound lightening the previous mood. "Yes and no. People aren't going to be walking around in hoods and ruffs, if that's what you mean. But some of the dishes will look just like they did. The atmosphere won't be that different than it used to be."

"That sounds like a lot of fun."

"It is," he said. "I'd certainly enjoy having your company there," he murmured, making me realise we'd been moving closer together without intending to. There was something magnetic about him that just made me want to get closer.

"I'll think about it," I said, not wanting to rush too quickly into it, especially when it felt like playing with fire. Though it wasn't technically fraternising if there were other people in the room and it wasn't a date. It still felt like it might be pushing it a little too far.

"That's fair," he said.

"So, you needed help here?"

"Ah, right. Well, I was going to wrap these toys." He gestured to a pile of boxes.

"I have a meeting at two, but I can help until then," I responded, even though I knew that I shouldn't. It was better if the two of us spent less time together, not more, because I was growing increasingly aware of his every movement. And yet I couldn't help myself from lingering longer.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

NICK

The feasting hall looked just like it always had and different at the same time.

It was good that I'd made bonds with some of the gods and immortals over the past century or so because now I could invite old friends and not just be saddened by the people who were no longer here to come to my Christmas feast.

It wasn't exactly the way it used to be.

The feasts had merely been presided over by someone whose job it was to run the Christmas festivities for a specific castle, palace, or inn, whereas now it was more of a one-off event, but I liked hosting them, it made me feel as if I was connected to that part of my past. I might have been a toymaker for a long time, but this was also part of me.

A heavy red cloak sat around my shoulders and a crown of evergreen leaves sat on my head.

It was a little less impressive when it was over a modern-day suit compared to the velvet brocade of courts centuries ago, but times changed, and if I didn't change with them then I'd be left behind, and that was something I'd never wanted.

I did one last check over the hall itself and went over to the entrance so I was ready to greet my guests. Pieter appeared beside me, his sleek suit making him look like a bit less of a spectacle than me, but over the years, he'd become as much of a host as I was of the event

The doors opened, letting in a cold burst of air, which would only make the feast inside more inviting for those who were coming in, and that was all part of what the event was about. Tonight was about a celebration of the season and everything that came with it.

The guests started making their way inside, and I greeted them all with smiles and welcomes, trying not to be too intimidated by gods who had been old before I'd even been born.

It was strange to think that even though I was considered old at my age, some of the Egyptian gods were ten times my age, and they weren't the only ones.

The line didn't stop moving and chatter filled the hall behind me, but the whole time I was looking for one person, wondering if Ivy was going to accept my invitation or if she was going to let it pass her by. I didn't think I'd blame her for doing that, even if I personally wanted to see her.

My heart squeezed in response to spotting her a few people back.

She'd already handed her coat in the cloakroom, revealing a low-cut deep red dress that somehow perfectly matched her lipstick.

I was barely going to be able to focus on not looking at her lips when she was talking to me, even though I knew I shouldn't be thinking like that at all until our contract with Miracle Marketing Solutions was over.

She leaned in to talk to a woman with long dark hair next to her.

It took me a moment to place her, but she appeared to be the same friend who threw a drink over Zeus.

At least he wasn't here this evening to make things extra messy, though he'd probably already forgotten about the altercation and moved on to his next attempted conquest.

I hurried through the next few greetings, getting a confused look from Pieter in response. I ignored him. He was here to assist me, and in this case, it meant getting to talk to Ivy faster.

She smiled widely as she appeared in front of me, and I could feel my own stretching over my face in response.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," I responded. "You came."

"I did." She frowned as she looked at me. "Your cloak is crooked." She reached out and adjusted it, each touch feeling like it was sending torturous pains through my heart.

"Thank you," I murmured.

"So this is what you look like when you're Captain Christmas," she joked, only just removing her hand from my chest. I missed her touch immediately.

"Something like that."

"It suits you," she said. "All I need you to do now is say ho ho ho , and it'll really complete the picture."

"Oh, I'm not going to do that, I don't think I've ever said ho ho ho ."

"Disappointing, but I'll live even if you don't." She was still standing closer to me

than she should, and I thought back to all of the times in the past week when we'd been in the same room. There was a gravity around her that pulled me closer and didn't want to let me go.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said, remembering that I should talk rather than allow myself to get completely lost in my thoughts.

Her friend cleared her throat behind her. "Are you going to introduce me?" she asked.

"Right, sorry," Ivy said, turning to her friend. "This is Nick, he's one of the CEOs of Cringle, where I'm working at the moment. And this is Pieter, the co-CEO."

From the surprised expression on Pieter's face, he hadn't expected to have been introduced.

"This is Laila, she's my flatmate," Ivy said.

"It's good to meet you," I said.

"Likewise." Laila gave me an intrigued look and from her expression, I could only guess what she'd heard about me, which only made me wonder exactly what Ivy had been saying about me.

Pieter cleared his throat. "We need to keep the line moving."

"Right, sorry, we shouldn't hold you up," Ivy said. "Thank you for inviting us." The way she smiled at me made everything inside me squeeze tighter.

She walked away, and I watched her go, only to get a further thrill when she looked over her shoulder and smiled at me.

Pieter let out a dramatic sigh. "You really had to invite her?" He didn't need to clarify what he was really asking, his tone said the rest.

"Of course I invited her," I said. "She's working with us."

Pieter snorted. "Yes, you invited her because of that reason and not because you're lusting after her."

"I'm not lusting after her," I protested.

"Say what you want," he retorted. "I don't believe you."

I didn't respond, though I could have pointed out that he'd invited the guy he was interested in, so it wasn't like I was doing anything different.

Other than the fact that Ivy's contract with her marketing company forbade her from dating clients and I wasn't about to cross any lines that she wasn't willing to herself.

A pale woman with dark hair entered alongside a man with bronze skin. They looked vaguely familiar, but I wasn't sure who they were.

Pieter cleared his throat. "That's Aine, CEO of Jinx, Celtic goddess of love, summer, beauty, and something else I forget," he murmured.

"Thanks. Who is she with?" I asked, hoping that he knew.

"Min, Egyptian fertility god."

"How do you know all of this?" I asked.

"Because I made sure to study the guest list before people started arriving," he

pointed out.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Pieter."

"We both know you'd have fallen apart long ago," he responded.

I flashed my friend a smile before turning to the newcomers. "Welcome," I said.

"Nick," Aine said. "Thank you for inviting us."

"The pleasure is mine," I assured her. Though in all honesty, I wasn't aware that I had invited either of them. But she was an important person in the realm of gods at the moment which meant that it was wise to invite her to something like this.

"It's good to see so many friendly faces here," she said. "Your guest list is quite something."

"I've been blessed with many good friends over the years, and it makes me happy to host them for festive revelry each year," I said.

She smiled again and headed into the room, going straight over to talk to someone she must have recognised.

"Is that everyone?" I asked.

Pieter nodded. "I believe so. There are three no-shows, but one of them is Loki and you know what he's like."

"Mmm. He'll either not show up at all, or he'll arrive just as we're about to serve dessert and ask why no one waited for him."

"I'll make sure to be ready for damage control," Pieter said.

"There's really no need," I said. "You're supposed to be here to enjoy yourself too, it isn't your job to make sure everyone behaves."

He snorted. "Except for you this year. I don't think I've seen you like this about someone since Annabelle's mother."

I stiffened, partly because I'd talked about her recently and the pain over the whole situation still lingered within me. "Nothing happened between us."

"I know. You held back because you didn't want to take advantage of her, especially after she was sad about Annabelle passing away."

"There could never have been anything between us anyway," I said.

"Perhaps not. But that doesn't change the fact that you're acting the same way about Ivy. What is it about her?"

I looked into the room and spotted where she'd found a spot at the feasting table with her friend. "I don't know," I responded.

"You should figure that out. And once you do, don't let another woman slip through your grasp," Pieter said.

That was easier said than done, especially with wanting to make sure she wasn't in breach of her contract. Which made me wonder what could happen between us if that wasn't an obstacle.

IVY

Nick's feast had become unruly within the first hour, and I found myself constantly looking around the room to see who I might recognise. Admittedly, that was mostly because of curiosity, I didn't think it was actually going to be useful information.

"I wish Eloise were here," I murmured.

Laila scoffed and took a sip of her wine. "I'm not good enough for you?"

"You know you are," I assured my friend. "But Eloise would be able to tell us who all the gods are."

"Oh, well that's an easy fix." Laila pulled out her phone and pretended to take a selfie while secretly taking a photo of the room.

"I don't think you're supposed to do that."

"I'm only sending it to Eloise," she assured me as she typed out the message. "Then we'll know who to be shocked about, and who it's okay to drool over."

"I don't think it's okay to drool over anyone," I countered. "Last time you did that, you ended up in trouble."

"Not even Nick?" she asked, her large brown eyes filled with a got-you expression.

I cleared my throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."



" Oh look, your cloak is crooked, let me fix it for you ," she mocked me.

My cheeks flamed with embarrassment. "That's not what I sound like."

"Maybe not, but it's what you did. You're totally smitten."

"I'm not," I insisted. "I think he's hot in a silver fox way."

"Oh, definitely," Laila agreed. "Though he's a bit ageless looking for a silver fox."

I looked over to where Nick was sitting on a throne, his cloak still around him.

He was chatting with a couple of the people around him, and I had to agree that there was something ageless about him.

It wasn't quite boyish, that definitely couldn't be used to describe him when he was definitely all man.

"Really?"

I turned to find Laila looking at me with a got you expression. There was really no fooling her when it came to this. "I think I need a drink. Do you want one?" I scraped my chair back.

"Sure."

"What do you want?"

"Surprise me."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Oh please. The minute Nick sees you heading somewhere alone, he's going to head over to join you and I'm not going to get a drink, so let's not pretend. Just bring me something back when you finally return."

"Nick's not even going to notice that I've left the table," I responded.

"Really?" She looked over to where he was sitting.

My gaze locked with his and I swallowed hard. All right, so that did look as if he was going to notice when I left the table. Now I just had to decide what to do with that. "I'm going to get a drink," I mumbled.

"Have fun." The teasing note in her voice was reassuring that she wouldn't actually mind if I didn't come back for a bit.

Not that I could really entertain that. As much as I wanted to talk to Nick, we shouldn't do anything that would potentially get me into trouble with my company, and I was starting to fear that being alone with him was going to do just that.

I made my way over to the bar, fully intending to just get myself a drink, but stopping in my tracks when I saw the object of my thoughts in the corridor to the left.

Without even meaning to, I found myself drawn over there, making my way over without a single care in the world.

"So you were watching me," I said to Nick once I was in earshot.

"I noticed you'd left the table, I wanted to check you were enjoying yourself. It is my job as host."

"Mmm. Do you check on everyone who leaves?" I asked, leaning against the wall and

trying to ignore the fact he was so close to me.

"It depends on who it is and how much I want to talk to them," he admitted, not moving closer, but also not doing anything to put more distance between us. Then again, neither was I.

"You're not wearing your cloak any more."

"I thought it made me stand out a bit. And it's hot in here."

"Mmm. The suit looks good, though." I moved closer and touched his arm. "The cloak made you seem very regal."

"I thought it made me look like a superhero?" he murmured, closing more of the space between us until I was pretty much shielded from view of the rest of the feast's attendees.

"If the superhero is Captain Christmas, then it's hot," I assured him.

"Oh, is that so?" His dark eyes sparkled as they bored into mine, and I couldn't help but want things that I shouldn't.

My breathing hitched and I looked past him, spotting a green plant with white berries hanging from the ceiling. "Is that mistletoe?"

"Not the most inventive way to persuade me to kiss you."

"That's not what I meant," I said hastily.

"Oh?"

"And it's not how I'd persuade you to kiss me." The words slipped out without me meaning them to.

"Mmm, and what would you do to get me to kiss you?"

I held his gaze. "If I had a drink right now, I'd pick it up and very slowly take a sip without taking my eyes off yours," I said. "And then I'd do this." I swiped my tongue across my bottom lip.

His eyes darkened as he watched, and he stepped forward, his intentions written all over his face.

I placed a hand on his chest, feeling the racing heartbeat beneath. There should be a lot of thoughts in my mind right now, but the only thing there was how much I wanted him to kiss me. How much I almost needed it.

My gaze slipped to his lips and my own parted, an invitation that I hoped he was going to take.

The air thickened around us, but he didn't move.

It only took me a moment to realise that I was going to have to be the one to make the first move.

He knew what was at stake for me, and I had to be the one to make the decision.

It was reckless, foolish, and all kinds of other things I didn't normally consider myself to be, but there was really no helping it.

I leaned in and pressed my lips against his.

The gesture unlocked something within him, and he threaded his fingers through my hair, deepening the kiss. It was raw and powerful, full of all the things he wanted to do to me, and all of the things I wanted to do back.

He pulled back, checking my face to make sure that I was okay.

I nodded, not wanting to break the moment. In fact, I wished there weren't so many people here and that we could sneak off somewhere. Somehow, I didn't think that would be possible when Nick was the host.

"I've been thinking about that all evening," he murmured.

"Me too." I trailed a hand over his chest. "I'm not sure it was enough."

He chuckled, the sound vibrating through me pleasantly.

"It definitely wasn't." He captured my lips with his again, pushing me back against the wall and caging me there.

If I was honest, there was a part of me that didn't even care that there were other people in the room outside, I wanted this moment to last so much longer.

A bell sounded from within the room, and we broke apart. "That's my signal to give a toast." His disappointment was easy to read on his face.

I nodded, not really knowing what to say to that.

"This will be continued," he promised.

I swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Good." He lingered a moment longer but then pulled away to return to the main room.

I let out a shaky breath and headed to the bar to get a couple of drinks. If he was going to give a toast, then I wanted to hear him do it.

I thanked the bartender and went back to where Laila was sitting, setting down one of the glasses in front of her.

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm impressed there's actually a drink."

"There's going to be a toast," I said.

"And how would you know that?"

"Nick told me."

"Was that before or after you kissed him?" The knowing twinkle in her eyes made it hard to deny.

"What? How did you know?"

"You didn't reapply your lipstick."

"Oh." I reached my fingers to touch my lips, looking over to where Nick was retaking his seat. His gaze met mine and my breath caught even just thinking about it.

"Must have been some kiss," Laila murmured.

"It was good," I said. "But that's all it was. A kiss." Or two.

"Mmm. For now."

I rolled my eyes at my friend, but mostly because I knew she wasn't wrong.

Nick rose to his feet, his red cloak back around his shoulders. "Good evening everyone," he called out.

The room fell surprisingly silent. But from what he'd told me about tonight, I suspected that made sense. Most of those invited were people known to him, so why wouldn't they want to listen?

"Thank you all for coming tonight. The season is all about celebrating, and this feast is just that. So eat, drink, and be merry. I hope you have all the joy you wish for in this season and the next." He raised a glass.

All around the room, people did the same and gave a cheer.

I lifted my own glass of champagne and then took a sip.

"Thank you for coming with me tonight," I said to my friend, wanting her to know that I appreciated the company.

"Any time. I could get used to going to events hosted by gods. Do you think Eloise can get us a discounted membership to Jinx?"

"You'll have to ask her," I responded. "But it's probably still going to be out of our budget."

"Mmm, true. Well, I wouldn't mind coming back next year if you can keep things good with Nick."

I almost choked on my champagne. "Next year?"

"Of course. This is a yearly event, right? So if you're still on good terms with Nick, he might invite us again."

"I honestly hadn't thought about it."

"No, I don't suppose you have," she responded. "But that's okay, I love you anyway."

I laughed and settled back into my seat. "Right back at you."

I snuck another glance over to where Nick was sitting, but he'd already been caught up in conversation by someone else. I suspected the chance to be alone had already passed, which was a shame, but at least I now knew what it felt like to be kissed by him.

Though that might be a potential problem with the fact that we were supposed to wait to do that until after I was done with the contract that tied me to his company.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:17 am*

NICK

I'd never had any particular feelings about Mondays one way or another.

They didn't really bother me, but I also didn't particularly enjoy them.

But this Monday was different. After the feast on Friday, and a few messages back and forth since, I was looking forward to the chance of getting to see Ivy again.

I knew I shouldn't, especially when it was going to be impossible not to think about the kiss we shared, but I couldn't help it.

I hummed to myself as I made my way down to the staffroom from my office. I didn't plan on lingering long in case a member of my staff wanted to use it, but I could really do with a coffee.

The door to the office I'd assigned to Ivy opened as I passed it and I inhaled a deep breath, smelling her perfume as I did.

She stepped out and turned, stopping in her tracks as she saw me.

"Hi," she said, looking up and meeting my gaze. Her lips parted and I didn't even have to ask to know that she was thinking about the kiss too.

"Hi," I responded, leaning against the wall, being careful to leave her a way to get away from me if she wanted to.

Instead, she leaned in. "The feast was a lot of fun," she murmured, looking up with dark eyes full of promise.

"It was the best one I've hosted in years," I said.

"Was it the food? The venue..."

"The company," I responded, moving closer. "It was much better than in previous years."

Her lips quirked up into a smile. "Is that so?"

"Yes. In fact, I was hoping I could..."

"Nick, do you have a minute?"

I closed my eyes and let out a groan at the sound of Pieter's voice. "Is it okay if I see what he wants?" I asked Ivy. The sooner he went away, the sooner we could return to talking about whether the kiss was something we could repeat.

She nodded, not moving from her spot.

I turned around and smiled at my oldest friend, wishing he was anywhere but here. "What's the matter?"

"There's been a problem with the elf-for-hire," he said, not even looking at Ivy. Probably because he was well aware of the situation he'd been about to catch us in. He'd been making enough comments while at the feast that made it clear what he thought of how we were acting towards one another.

"What kind of problem?" I asked.

"She's cancelled," he responded.

I closed my eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "Can we get someone else?"

"I've been calling around, but it's impossible to find someone this close to Christmas."

"Right. Okay." I had no idea what to even do with that. I supposed I could do the sleigh ride without an elf, it wouldn't be the first time.

"What's it for?" Ivy asked, stepping away from the wall.

I looked in her direction. "We need someone to help us with the presents on Saturday, and we normally just hire an elf."

"Ah, for giving the children presents," she said.

Warmth spread through me in response. I liked how much she paid attention, especially when I hadn't talked about it very much. "Yes."

She cleared her throat. "I could do it."

I blinked a few times, not having expected the answer.

She smiled and pushed her hair behind her ear, revealing a small point at the top. "I was an elf-for-hire through university. It was nearly twenty years ago, but I'm sure I could pull it off."

Without meaning to, my gaze drifted down her body and I imagined her in a cute little elf outfit. She'd be more than able to pull it off.

Pieter cleared his throat. "We can pay you."

"There's really no need," She said quickly. "I imagine Nick's not being paid."

"Nick never pays himself."

She raised an eyebrow and looked at me. "Really?"

I let out a cough, somewhat surprised that my friend revealed as much about me. "I don't need to be paid, I have money coming in from other places."

"You're quite a man, did you know that?" she asked.

I chuckled. "I'm just doing my best, same as everyone else."

"Well, it looks good on you," she said. "I can help on Saturday, I just need to know what to do."

Pieter nodded. "I'll send you the itinerary. The rest is fairly straightforward."

"Yes, give presents to Nick so he can give them to the children," she checked.

"Pretty much," my friend responded. "Do you need anything for it?"

"I don't think so, but I'll try on my elf costume tonight to make sure. It's a while since I've worn it."

"Let me know if you need a different one," he said. "There might not be any elves to hire, but I can probably still get a costume."

"Thanks." She gave him what seemed to be a genuinely appreciative smile.

Pieter nodded and started to leave before turning back around. "The corridor is not

the right place for anything that could cause an HR complaint if a member of staff catches you," he said.

Ivy's cheeks flushed red and she looked away.

I nodded, not really knowing what to say. It seemed to be enough for Pieter, and he went on his way.

"I was going to get some coffee," I said to Ivy. "Do you want to come with me?"

"The mood is rather ruined," she murmured.

"The mood?"

She froze in place. "Did I read the situation wrong? I thought you were going to kiss me again."

"Oh, I definitely was," I assured her. "You didn't read anything wrong."

She let out a sigh of relief and pushed her hair out of her face. "Good. I suppose coffee is an okay substitute."

"For now," I added.

Her laugh filled the air with warmth and I realised how much I wanted to hear it again. "For now," she agreed with a smile that made it clear exactly where she stood on that matter.

Hopefully, we'd be able to sort something out so it didn't risk her losing her job at the marketing agency, because as much as I really wanted to kiss her again, I also didn't want to risk her career.

But where there was a will, there was a way, and it was only a matter of time before we found the way.

IVY

I smoothed down my green and red skirt, feeling surprisingly nervous about being dressed as a Christmas elf for the first time in nearly twenty years.

Luckily, the outfit still fit. I was sure Pieter would have been able to find a suitable costume at short notice, but it wouldn't have been the quality I was wearing now.

I made my way down to Nick's workshop, knocking on the door before pushing it open. I wasn't sure what it was about coming in here tonight that felt different, but it did. Maybe it was because I hadn't been down here without him bringing me himself, so it wasn't the same to arrive by myself.

"I'm through here," he called from the next room.

I swallowed hard and made my way through. "Hey."

He turned around, his gaze instantly travelling over me and heating me in places that were entirely inappropriate given that he was currently dressed in a Santa suit.

I cleared my throat. "So, am I an acceptable elf?" I asked.

"Very much so," he murmured.

"Good." I let out a sigh of relief. "You're not portly enough for Santa."

He laughed. "I haven't put the stuffing in yet. I've got a more dramatic beard too, I

just haven't put it on yet because I need to finish setting up the sleigh."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think so, it's just turning on the lights now. But you can introduce yourself to Rudolph."

I frowned and made my way to the front of the sleigh where a man leaned against the prongs. "Hi," I said.

"Hi," he responded. "Rudolph."

"Ivy," I responded. "Is that...no, forget I said anything."

He snorted. "Yep. Unfortunate, isn't it? Reindeer shifter parents have a bit of a weird sense of humour. Unfortunately for their kids, it's not that funny."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "You're an elf-for-hire, you've got it just as bad."

I almost contradicted him, but when I thought about it, he wasn't entirely wrong. It was fine for situations like this where I was the one who'd suggested putting on an elf costume, but it was different when I'd done it because I had to.

"All right, are you both ready?" Nick asked, coming back around.

Rudolph nodded. "Just let me put the harness on. It's much less embarrassing if I do it myself."

I was about to ask what he meant when he slipped it over his head and shifted into a



reindeer right in front of me.

"Great, we should get into the sleigh," Nick said, hooking a white beard over his ears.

"Do I look the part now?"

I studied him for a moment, appreciating that he was going the extra mile with the costume. Though I supposed it made sense. People had an image in their mind when they thought of Father Christmas, and it definitely didn't line up with the hot man he was.

"You look great. Kind of cute." I leaned and kissed his cheek.

He chuckled. "Don't let Mrs Claus catch you."

"Mmm, don't want her to think you're having an affair with an elf."

"Absolutely not." He climbed into the driver's seat. "All right, when we get out there, wave."

"Wait, wave? How many people are there going to be?"

"A few." He shrugged. "I've been doing this on the same street for over a hundred years, people come to see it."

"Right."

He held out his hand glittering magic lept from it and encompassed the sleigh, lifting it ever so slightly.

"Wait, we're not being drawn by Rudolph?" I asked.

"Oh, definitely not. This sleigh is way too heavy to be drawn by one reindeer. He's just there for optics. That's why I hired a shifter to do it. That way, Rudolph knows that he doesn't have to actually pull it and doesn't get himself hurt."

"Ah." I hadn't even thought about things like that. It made me feel a little out of place with helping him. But it was too late to back out now, especially as I'd promised to help. I pulled my hat out of my bag and put it on my head, securing it with a pair of bobby pins so it stayed in position.

"You can stick that under the seat," Nick said, gesturing to my handbag.

"Thanks." I did as he suggested just as a loud clunk filled the air and the huge doors in front of us swung open. There was a surprising bite in the wind that hadn't been there when I was outside before, but now I was in the sleigh, that was definitely the case.

Rudolph started plodding along, keeping surprisingly even time with the sleigh without Nick having to call down to him about it. Perhaps this wasn't the first year he'd been hired by Nick.

I wondered if this was going to be a one-off for me or if I'd help him in the future. My gaze slipped to the man beside me and I realised that if I was considering helping him at this event again, then perhaps there was more I was thinking about too.

I banished the thoughts. Right now wasn't the time to dive into how I felt about our kiss the other night, especially when it became clear that Nick hadn't been exaggerating about people showing up to see him. The street was lined with children and their parents cheering and waving.

I took a deep breath and followed Nick's advice to wave at them all, smiling widely and hoping I looked just like an elf should.

We reached the end of the street where a grotto had been set up.

Nick waved his hand and the sleigh came to a stop.

He was probably only able to use magic so blatantly because the humans in the audience would think it was a well-produced illusion, just like they'd think my ears were just good prosthetics.

It was easier to believe those things than to consider the fact that magical beings might walk amongst them.

"If you get in the back of the sleigh and hand me presents when I ask for them, that would be great," he said.

"Will do. How do I know what's what?"

"I'll use a colour," he said. "Give me the present that matches it."

"Okay." I hopped down from the sleigh, smiling and waving at a little girl who was watching awestruck.

Pieter nodded to me from where he was standing by a rope, also dressed as an elf, though from his ears, it didn't seem like he was one. I'd never thought to ask him what he was, especially because that was rude.

He pulled something out of a small bag and distributed it to some of the children waiting. From their excited reactions, I assumed they were sweets of some kind.

I climbed into the back of the sleigh, being careful not to flash anyone. Pieter was already bringing the first child over, and I took that as a sign to get used to what was around me. It was easy to see what Nick meant about the presents.

"Why don't you come sit by Father Christmas?" Nick said, and I watched as the little girl who had been brought up took her seat. "What's your name?"

"Mika," she responded, barely able to look at him.

"It's good to meet you, Mika. Have you been good this year?" His voice was lower than normal, but not in a husky way, and I could tell that he was being Father Christmas. Which made sense, considering he was Father Christmas.

The little girl mumbled something and looked at her mum.

"She has," the woman said.

"Ah, that's what we like to hear," Nick responded. "And what would you like for Christmas?"

The little girl's face lit up. "A race track! With fast cars."

"What colour race cars are the best? Orange?" Nick asked with what seemed to be genuine excitement.

The little girl pulled a face. "No, silly. Red."

"Ah, yes. Much better than orange. Well, we'll have to wait until Christmas Day to see if you get your race track, but I have a present for you now." Nick turned slightly to take a present from me, which filled me with panic. He hadn't told me the colour present he needed.

Except that he had told the little girl one. Understanding dawned on me. He was trying to tell me without it being obvious and preserving the magic for the kids.

I picked up a parcel wrapped in orange paper and held it out to him.

He smiled but didn't say anything as he handed it to Mika. "Here you are."

"Can I open it now?" she asked, shaking the box slightly.

"If your mummy says you can," Nick responded.

The woman nodded and Mika didn't waste any time ripping into the present. She let out a loud gasp as she saw the race car within.

"Mummy, mummy, look!" She showed it to the woman.

"It's beautiful, sweetheart, what do you say?"

"Thank you, Father Christmas," she said, an adoring expression on her face.

"You're welcome. Merry Christmas to you and your family."

"Merry Christmas!" Mika hopped off the sleigh, and I watched her leave, my heart very full. It was hard not to be touched by the display he was making.

The next child came, and then another, and another.

It was hard to believe how many there were, but Nick had patience with each and every one of them, making sure they got the right present for them.

I had to admit that his colour-coding system was genius.

The children never knew what he was asking for, but they left believing the magic had given them the perfect present.

And with every passing moment, it became clear just how much Nick loved being able to make the children happy. It wasn't a chore for him to be giving each of them their gift, he was enjoying it. And I felt very lucky that I'd gotten to help, even if it meant dressing up as an elf.

IVY

The door to the workshop clanged shut behind us, and Rudolph was back in his human form within moments. "I'm out of here," he said. "See you next year, Nick." He waved as he left, not lingering for even a moment longer.

"Does he normally leave so abruptly?" I asked, moving in my seat so I was facing Nick.

He pulled off his fake beard and hat and let out a sigh of relief that they were gone. "Pretty much. It's a long time for him to stay shifted, I think he just wants to go home and rest afterwards."

"And what about you? Is it a long time for you to stay stuck like this?" I gestured to his suit.

He chuckled but pulled out the stuffing from his stomach even as he did. "It's worth it."

"It is," I agreed.

"Thank you for helping today, I couldn't have done it without you."

"Any time," I responded. "It was fun seeing you like this. It's a side I haven't gotten to see yet." Though there had been hints of it.

"Mmm."

I reached out to put a hand on his arm. "I appreciate you sharing it with me."

He looked up and met my gaze, his eyes boring into me and filled with something that went far beyond simple desire, though that was there too.

As soon as he leaned in, my eyes fluttered closed and I knew exactly what was coming.

Somehow, we'd managed to avoid kissing again since the feast last week, but that only meant that the urge to do so was stronger than ever, and now that we were alone and away from the world, it was time for that restraint to break.

I deepened the kiss, feeling the fire of something needy deep within me. It had been a while since I'd wanted anyone this badly, and even though I knew this wasn't the place or time, there was really no stopping the want that travelled through me.

The kiss ended, with both of us breathing heavily, and I could tell from the lust-filled gaze burning into me that I wasn't the only one who was hot and flustered from it.

I shifted so that I was straddling Nick, the short green and red skirt of my elf costume riding up and revealing where my stockings ended.

Nick ran his hand up my leg, his fingers dancing over the lace at the top of the stockings. "If I'd known you were wearing these, we'd have ended up here a lot sooner," he murmured.

I laughed. "I always wear them instead of tights. I hate that tights never stay up. Wait, no, forget I said that, it isn't a sexy image."

He chuckled, the sound vibrating through me. "Believe me, nothing is managing to erase the image in front of me right now."



I swallowed hard. "Sometimes, I feel like they're a sexy secret I have from the world," I admitted.

"Mmm, and do you have more?" he asked.

I bit my bottom lip and reached out to guide his hand higher up my leg. "Why don't you find out?"

"You should be careful what you wish for."

I walked my fingers up the red jacket he was wearing. "Do I get a Christmas wish for sitting on Santa's lap?" I asked, feeling a little mischievous even asking.

"That depends if you've been a good girl," he responded.

I ground against him, getting a loud groan in response.

"You're the one with the naughty list," I murmured.

He leaned in and kissed my neck, making my eyes flutter closed. "I don't think you're on it."

"Does that mean I get a present?"

He manoeuvred me onto my back so I was lying on the bench of the sleigh. He caught my lips with his and kissed me deeply.

I arched off the bench and pushed my body against his, desperate for more of his touch. He slid a hand up my leg and I let out a gasp when they moved from the silky fabric of my stockings to the bare skin of my thigh.

He broke the kiss so he could move his attention back to my neck even as his hand slipped inwards, grazing across my centre through my panties.

"Are these a sexy secret you have from the world?" he murmured.

"Yes." A moan almost cut me off from saying the word.

He pulled back and gave me a wicked grin before moving down so he was between my legs. Heat pooled within me as his hands travelled under my skirt and hooked over the sides of my panties, pulling them down over my legs and stripping them away from me.

I'd never really thought about it before, but the fact I was still fully dressed but didn't have panties on anymore was a lot hotter than I expected it to be, especially because Nick knew that was the position I was in.

Nick looked down at me, the intensity and hunger in his gaze something I couldn't ignore.

He leaned in and kissed the inside of my thigh, not teasing me for any longer than he needed to. I was sure that it would be fun for him to take his time, but that wasn't what I needed right now. I just wanted him to slake the burning need within me.

His tongue flicked against me and I let out a loud groan. My hands flew to his head, though that was covered in my skirt, driving me crazy with every touch.

My breathing was already coming faster, and I could feel the release building within me. He shifted his attention and his fingers grazed across my entrance, causing me to tense. He paused and I let out a frustrated grumble.

He reappeared from beneath my skirt, a concerned expression on his face. "Are you

okay?"

"Yes, don't stop," I murmured.

"Did you not like it?"

"I liked it too much, okay? Do it more," I responded, the urgency only rising within me.

Relief crossed his face and he flicked my skirt back up so he could return to giving me the attention I so desperately wanted.

When his fingers brushed against my entrance this time, he wasn't deterred and pushed them inside me, crooking them upwards until the only thing I was able to think about was how intense the pleasure building within me was.

I let out a loud cry, the pressure almost too much, but I was able to keep it at bay. I wasn't sure if he realised that and eased off a little, or if that was just how things progressed, but it helped keep me on the edge a little bit longer.

I was only dimly aware of my surroundings, but it didn't matter. I could be anywhere right now and I didn't think I'd want him to stop.

"Ah," I moaned, my breath catching.

He moved his tongue into a sharp point and crooked his fingers up with me, the dual stimulation so intense that it pushed me over the edge. My whole body started to shake and I reached out to grab hold of something. Anything .

My release crashed through me, an unrelenting wave of pleasure going through me and prolonged by Nick not stopping his attention.

It wasn't until the release had passed that I realised how sensitive I was down there.

"Nick." My voice came out a little raspy, but he heard me anyway, and reappeared, grinning widely.

"Yes?"

I let out a shaky breath. "That was unexpected."

He helped me sit up, brushing some hair out of my face. "Mmm. I can't say I've ever done anything like that in the sleigh before."

"What changed this time?"

"I've also never been in a position where I've wanted someone and they've wanted me but we've not been able to do anything about it," he said.

"Oh." I looked down. "I mean, I've been thinking about it, and as long as we're careful and you don't tell my boss, I think it'll be fine."

He chuckled. "Careful?"

"Well, yes."

"So, if I wanted to take you to dinner right now, it shouldn't be anywhere public?"

I frowned, disappointed at the thought of not getting to share a meal with him. "I guess not."

"Then let me cook for you."

"You want to make me dinner?"

"Yes. And find something a little comfier than a sleigh to finish what we started."

I made a strange noise in the back of my throat that sounded somewhat like a trapped moan. "Okay. Dinner sounds good."

"Great." He jumped down from the sleigh. "I'll finish tidying this up tomorrow."

"Is that going to be okay?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's my sleigh."

Of course, I should have thought of that. I reached under the seat and pulled out my bag. "Can we stop by my office first so I can grab my change of clothes? I've had fun being your elf, but I'd really rather not have dinner in a costume."

"Sure," he responded. "It's probably best that I don't spend too much time thinking about you in that costume now anyway."

My cheeks flamed red, but other parts of me heated in a much more pleasant way. "Maybe I'll keep it on after all."

He laughed. "I don't think what you're wearing will change much."

"And I suppose you're not going to intend for me to wear it for much longer after dinner either," I responded, letting him help me down from the sleigh.

"That's up to you." He pulled me closer. "I don't expect anything."

"Well, I'm hopeful to find out what's in this sack." Without thinking about it, I

reached down and cupped him, my eyes widening at how hard he already was.

He chuckled. "What were you expecting?" he murmured. "You just fell apart in front of me, that's going to make me hard."

"Then why didn't you..." I trailed off, not really sure what I was asking.

He leaned in, his breath tickling my cheek. "Because next time you fall apart, I want it to be in my arms and somewhere much more comfortable than a sleigh."

I licked my lips, drawing his gaze down to them.

"And I'm hungry in the normal way too."

I laughed without meaning to. "I am too."

"Good. Then we'll go eat something, and then we can continue the other part of this conversation."

I nodded, liking the sound of that even more than I thought I would have.

He leaned in and kissed me surprisingly gently.

It was a loaded kiss, one that spoke of far more than sex.

But I didn't question him on it, even if I knew what it meant and where that was likely to take us.

We had to take this one step at a time, and I wasn't about to rush into things with anyone, especially not someone who was immortal.

IVY

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting from Nick's flat, but it wasn't the clean and spacious modern home I'd found myself in. The kitchen sparkled, but the way the gadgets were left kind of haphazardly across the side suggested that it was well used.

"You're not allergic to anything, are you?" Nick asked as he started pulling ingredients out of the fridge.

"Strawberries," I responded.

"Good to know."

"I hope that's not going to be a problem."

He shook his head. "I only eat them when they're in season, they're just disappointing otherwise."

"True. I always think I'm going to enjoy other fruits just as much in winter, but they're never as good."

He set down a bushel of tomatoes and pulled open a drawer, getting out a heavy-looking pan. He moved with the confidence of someone who knew his way around the kitchen, and it was nice to be able to watch him, especially when the muscles in his arms flexed.

My dress wasn't the perfect choice for a date, but it was better than the elf costume,

and I was certainly grateful Nick was no longer wearing the Santa suit.

He'd looked good in it because he always looked good, but it would have felt wrong to be checking him out in it.

Logically, I knew that it didn't make a difference if he was wearing the suit or not, he was still the same person.

But there was no real logic to be had, not when I could still imagine the echo of his touch between my legs.

I shifted in my seat, trying not to think about it too much. We were supposed to be having dinner.

"Is there anything I can do?" I half-blurted out, desperate to do something other than sit and stare at him.

"You could chop the tomatoes if you want?" he suggested.

"Great. Sounds good." I hopped off my seat and went to examine the knife rack so I could find the perfect blade to do that.

"Are you all right?" he asked, turning and bringing us very close together.

I looked up at him and swallowed hard. "I'm feeling a little flustered."

"If it's because of what happened in the workshop, then I'm sorry."

"What? I mean, why are you sorry? That was..." I searched for the right word, but there was really only one that would do. "Hot. It was hot."



His lips quirked up into a smile. "It was."

"So why are you sorry?"

"Because I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable. I'm not really sure what I wanted, I wasn't really thinking."

"I'm not that kind of flustered," I murmured, putting a hand on his chest.

"Ah." Understanding dawned on his face.

"But it's not fair to you if I'm sitting over there thinking all kinds of fun things while you're being sweet and cooking me dinner."

"I don't have a problem with it." From the expression on his face, I believed him.  
"But I can make you my sous-chef if you want."

"Please."

"Then you'll be needing this." He pulled an apron off a hook and held it out to me.

I laughed and held up the red apron with the words Cooking For Santa written over it.  
"You have a novelty Christmas apron?"

"Pieter got it for me, he found it funny that I was always cooking for Santa. I have another one too." He grabbed another one off the hook, put it over his head and tied it around him.

"Whisk you a Merry Christmas?" I read, barely concealing my laughter.

"What? It's funny." He grinned.

"It's cute," I said, feeling something that was definitely more intense than just physical desire. "I just wouldn't have thought you were into this kind of thing."

He shrugged and put a chopping board down in front of me. "I wasn't at first. I hated everything about it because it took me far away from everything I was used to. Before it became about the presents, my job was mostly hosting Christmas feasts."

"Like the one last week?" I put my apron on and started slicing the tomatoes.

"Yes."

"How did a toymaker even get into that in the first place?"

"Because at one point I worked at court with the Master of Revels creating set pieces.

I'd been a toymaker for a hundred years or so and I wanted a change, but at that time, it wasn't as easy to change careers as it is now, so I did something that was adjacent to it, but not the same.

While I was there, I became the Lord of Misrule at court. "

I raised an eyebrow. "So you met royalty?"

He nodded. "A few times. But I never interacted with them much."

I finished dicing the tomatoes and slid the chopping board over to him. "What now?"

"Could you do the basil? It's in the bottom left drawer of the fridge."

I nodded and went to get it. "And then you went back to making toys?"

"Pretty much," he said. "I travelled around Europe for a bit too, until the mid-eighteen hundreds. That's where I met Pieter. He was a sweetmaker. When December came around, he'd go out and give sweets to children. The legends say he tosses them, but he'd never waste good sweets like that."

Ah. That must have been what he was giving to the children earlier.

"I can see how you became friends." It was similar to the way he was with toys. "Is he a god too?" I shouldn't ask, it was rude, but I was also curious.

Nick nodded. "But he became immortal after I did, so it's a more recent thing."

"Were you the one who made him immortal?"

Surprise showed on his face. "I didn't realise you knew that was how it worked."

"I don't know anything more about it," I responded. "Just that."

"It wasn't me. He was made immortal a few years before we met."

I nodded, thinking through everything he was telling me.

He slid some onions into the pan. It sizzled loudly.

"When I was ready to return home, he came with me.

It was a good thing he did, he's much better at the organisation of a business than I am, and everything was changing a lot by then with methods used to create toys.

And everything else too. I'm good at ideas and designing, not so good at the numbers needed to actually put it into practice.

We set up Cringle together, and have co-owned it ever since.

It was also his idea for us to invest in the railways when we did, which is where most of my money comes from. "

I raised an eyebrow. "Surprising."

"Perhaps."

"And it was after you came back from Europe that you met Annabelle and her mother?" I checked, setting down the basil now I'd finished tearing it.

"Yes." He stirred his onions. "Would you pass me the pepper?"

I picked up the grinder and held it out to him. He cracked it into the pot and added the tomatoes. I had no idea what he was making, but it already smelled great.

"That was when I really became Father Christmas. I didn't mind at first when it was just the local children, but then it started growing and growing. I started hating it because it moved away from what I was trying to do."

"What made you get back into the Christmas spirit?"

He left the pot and opened the fridge, pulling out a bag of fresh pasta.

"I realised that for the most part, it brought out the right reaction in the world.

A lot of people want to help and support those around them.

Some people use the season for greed, but most don't. So I embraced it and everything it meant.

But don't let that fool you into thinking that Christmas is my personality. "

I laughed. "Believe me, I didn't think that at all."

"Good." He smiled at me. "Dinner is almost ready."

"Do you want me to set the table?"

He nodded. "If you wouldn't mind. Cutlery is in the top drawer."

I pulled open the drawer and got out what we needed, taking it over to the rustic wooden table that looked welcoming. It was certainly going to provide a romantic spot for dinner.

I looked over to where Nick was putting the finishing touches to the pasta. It was a strangely wholesome sight, and there was a part of me that felt like I could really get used to it, and I wasn't entirely sure what to do with that.

NICK

Ivy twirled her fork around her plate, taking a bite of the pasta and letting out a satisfied hum. It wasn't necessarily the best food for a date, but I hadn't been planning on her coming back here, so it was the best I could do with what I had in the fridge.

"This is good," she said. "I'm guessing you learned to cook while travelling around Europe?"

I chuckled. "No, it's a much more recent skill. I went through a cooking show phase about ten years ago. Before that I could make a stew, but not much else."

"That's funny, I went through that phase too. When I was in my early twenties and just starting out, I used to go to the supermarket with a fiver and buy what I could get from the clearance section. When I got home, I'd turn it into my own cooking challenge."

"That sounds like it would either create really nice dishes or disasters."

"Pretty much." She ate some more of her pasta. "But I was a broke marketing intern at the time, I didn't have much of a choice."

"Is marketing what you always wanted to do?" I asked.

"When I was a kid I wanted to be a dancer.

" She smiled at the memory. "Then I broke my ankle trying to do a very basic move

and that was the end of that.

Marketing was actually an accident. I did some work experience while I was at university for a marketing firm and realised that I loved it.

Not the graphics part, I'm terrible at that and always have to ask the graphic designers at work to do even the most basic mock-ups, but I'm good at the rest."

"Even with a company in as dire a position as Cringle?" I joked.

She laughed. "It's not as bad as you think," she promised. "The re-engagement of your audiences has been going well, which is to be expected. You have great products at competitive prices for their quality, people want to hear from you and buy your products."

"Maybe we're going to have to get you to stay on full-time as the Head of Marketing," I suggested, and not just because it would mean that I still got to see her every day.

"No." She took a deep breath and set down her fork. "I mean, not yet. You can keep me on via Miracle Marketing Solutions, but if we're going to do this, then you can't be my boss."

"Of course, I'm sorry, I didn't think," I murmured.

"It's fine. It's just complicated because I'm not supposed to date you according to my contract, and working for Cringle would sort that out, but it would introduce so many other complications. What if we broke up? I know we're only just starting out, but it has to be a consideration here."

"It does," I agreed. I knew she was right, but I was still disappointed. "But the offer

could stay open. You can accept it when you're ready."

"Thank you, that's very sweet. But maybe let's just see how you feel once I've got numbers and results from what I'm doing. You might like me, but you might not like my work."

"I'm sure I will."

"Nick," she said sternly. "You should judge my work based on what it does for the company, not on how much you like me. Or you should get Pieter to do it."

"Oh, he will. I'm surprised he hasn't given you feedback already."

To my surprise, she laughed as she picked her fork back up. "He has. We talk about it almost every day."

"Then he must be pleased about everything you're doing. I've known Pieter for a long time, and he's not the kind of man who stays silent when he's not happy about something."

She nodded and ate the rest of her pasta.

"But we shouldn't be talking about work," I said.

"Probably not. But I suppose that is how we met."

"Ah, not true. We met at a Jinx event," I reminded her.

"So we did."

"We should still go to The Cedar sometime," I mused.



"We shouldn't. Not until my contract is over. If my boss finds out..."

"We'll take Pieter," I suggested.

"That's a weird date," she responded.

"Hmm, true. We could go to the god realm. There are lots of good restaurants there, and unless your boss is a god themselves, or invited by one, they shouldn't be there."

A curious expression crossed her face. "The god realm."

"Yes, there's a portal not far from here. If you go through it, then you'll come out in the god realm."

"I know what it is," she assured me. "I just didn't think about the fact you'd be able to go there."

"Technically, everyone can go there," I said. "They just need to know how. And if you're not invited then it can draw the wrong kind of attention, which no one really wants."

"What's it like?" she asked.

"A weird hodge-podge of everything you can imagine," I said. "There are temples, restaurants, and all kinds of shops. It's hard to describe what it's like."

She reached across the table and touched my hand. "I look forward to it. But you know what I'd like before that?"

"Mmm?"

"A tour of your flat."

"That can be arranged," I said, pushing back my chair and picking up both of our dishes so I could put them in the sink. Normally, I'd load the dishwasher straight away, but I didn't want to miss a moment with Ivy when I didn't have to.

She got up and came over, putting a hand on my chest to stop me from moving. "And thank you for dinner. That was great." Her voice dipped lower, and I could see the sincerity written all over her face, along with some of the other emotions that were lingering there.

"You're welcome. It's the least I could do after you helped me today. I was in a tight spot when the elf-for-hire company we normally use had to cancel."

"Well, maybe if this goes well, you won't have to use an elf-for-hire service next year."

My heart squeezed at the words. It should terrify me, I hadn't gotten close to many people since becoming immortal, mostly for fear of losing them.

But Ivy was different. Probably because she was an elf, and that meant she had centuries of lifespan still stretching out before her.

There wasn't the same risk that there usually was.

And I liked that.

She went up onto her toes and kissed me. Her lips were soft at first, warm and inviting all the same, but she soon grazed my bottom lip with her tongue, sending a bolt of desire through me.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her closer with a hand on her lower back. It was a different kind of kiss than the one we'd shared in the sleigh, but it was no less full of desire, and it made me want more.

She broke the kiss but didn't move away from me. "I've changed my mind," she murmured.

"Oh?"

"I don't need a tour of your flat, just directions to the bedroom."

I chuckled. "I think that can be arranged." I reached for her hand and led her away from the kitchen to where we both wanted to be.

IVY

My breathing was already shallow by the time Nick showed me into his bedroom.

"One second," he said, hurrying over to the bed and pulling off a blanket so he could throw it over the chair in the corner.

I laughed. "Laundry chair?"

"Yes," he admitted sheepishly. "If I'd known you were going to come back here tonight, I'd have cleared it away this morning."

"It's fine," I assured him, stepping closer and wrapping my arms around his neck. "I'm not planning on spending any time looking at the laundry chair."

"I'm certainly going to try and make you forget it." He leaned in and captured my lips with his.

I melted into him, giving myself over to the kiss that was full of the promise of what was to come.

There was an urge within me to strip off my clothes and tell him to hurry, but I restrained it.

There was no reason for us to do that. We could take our time and truly enjoy the moment for what it was.

He broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against mine.

"I don't even know what I want to do first," I murmured.

"I can help with that." He turned me around and took a step back, making me immediately miss the contact. His fingers found the zipper of my dress and he drew it down aching slowly, the intention behind every movement impossible to ignore.

I closed my eyes and gave myself over to each touch. The air was heavy with promise as he slipped his hand under the sleeves and pushed the sensible dress off my shoulders. It slid over my body and pooled on the floor.

Nick ran a hand down my arm, making me shiver in response even if he wasn't currently touching a particularly sensitive part of me. He brushed my hair out of the way and leaned in to kiss my neck.

"Your stockings look even better without the dress."

"You should see them when I'm wearing nothing else," I responded, turning so I could face him. There wasn't quite as much space as I'd like, so I stepped back, aware that it brought me closer to the bed. "But if I'm going to take more clothes off, then it only seems fair that you should too."

He raised an eyebrow. "Any preference?"

"Lose the shirt." It was only as I said it that I realised I'd never actually seen him without one.

He undid the buttons, not taking his eyes off me while he did. He dropped it to the floor, revealing a broad chest and strong arms that no doubt came from hours in the workshop and moving things around the factory.

My mouth went dry and I licked my lips in an attempt to stop them drying out too. His gaze lowered to them, his eyes darkening and his need written all over his face.

I unhooked my bra, glad I'd decided to wear one with a front clasp today.

And that I decided to wear a matching set just in case .

It wasn't that I'd planned for Nick to see it, I'd just wanted to be prepared in case he did.

I dropped my bra to the floor, letting the cool air wash over me.

My nipples hardened in response, though that could also have been because of the desire coursing through me.

He met my gaze, keeping it as he undid his belt.

The scrape of the metal and the whoosh of him pulling the belt through the loops filled the air.

My breath caught in my throat and a deep ache settled within me, the earlier release nothing more than a distant memory.

Something told me that it was merely the first of many.

The air in the room was growing hotter by the minute. I slid my fingers under the waistband of my panties and slid them over my legs, leaving my stockings in place. He seemed to like them earlier, and there was a part of me that felt extra desirable to still be wearing them.

He closed the gap between us and crushed his lips against mine, the kiss searing

through to my soul. I could feel him pressing against my leg, hard and ready for me.

I didn't break the kiss as I slipped my hand between us and took him in it.

Nick groaned into my mouth, sending a small thrill through me. One that only grew bigger as he trailed his hand down my back and cupped my ass in his palm, pulling me closer.

I broke the kiss, but only so I could pull him down onto the bed.

He didn't need much persuading, the weight of his body over mine only made me more aware of how good it felt to have him next to me.

He shifted on the bed, which was good for me, as it meant that his body was more accessible to me and I could continue stroking him.

He reached down and put his hand over mine, loosening my grip and pulling me away.

"Am I doing something wrong?" I murmured.

He shook his head. "I'm just very close."

"Oh." I swallowed hard. I hadn't even been doing much, and yet he was acting like a teenager with me.

"I just need a break," he promised, lifting my chin with his hand so he could kiss me again.

My skin tingled everywhere he touched, and I parted my legs as soon as his hand reached them, the tension building within me not leaving any barriers.

A cry escaped me as his fingers found my entrance. I was already so on edge that it barely mattered what he was doing to me, every touch increased the need for more and I could feel the intensity of a release building, one that was going to be even more intense than in the sleigh.

I reached out and grabbed his wrist, not really sure whether I was trying to guide him or make sure that he wasn't going to stop.

He grinned at me and leaned in to kiss my neck. The sensation was enough to push me over the edge and the release overtook me, making my whole body feel like it was on fire. I was barely aware of what was happening and everything was just sensation .

I laid back on the bed, breathing rapidly even as he continued to touch me. I let out the softest moan. "Please say you have a condom."

"I do."

"Good." I had one in my handbag, but I hadn't even considered bringing it to the bedroom with me, I'd already been distracted by my own desire. It was a miracle I was remembering now, but I was glad I did.

"I'll be right back." He leaned in to kiss me swiftly and got up to go into what I assumed was the bathroom.

I sat up. "You don't keep condoms by the bed?"

He reappeared with a small box in his hand and shrugged. "I only need them there if I'm going to have sex. It's a bit like the laundry chair, if I'd known you were coming, I'd have put them there."

"Oh."



"You keep them by the bed?" He asked as he pulled out a foil packet and put the box on the bedside table.

"Well, yes. The bed is where I'm going to need them."

"Makes sense." He sat down on the edge of the bed and rolled the condom on.

My breath caught in my throat as I considered what was coming next. There was no doubt that my desire and attraction had taken hold of me, but this wasn't just a fumble in the sheets, and there was no lack of rational thought to go with it. I wanted this.

"Stay there," I said, going up onto my knees so I could straddle him.

He seemed to work out what I was doing, as he guided himself to my entrance. My eyes closed and I let out a moan as I seated myself on him, feeling unbelievably full.

Nick reached out and brushed my hair away from my face, capturing me in a deep kiss. My whole body was still tingling from the release and the urge for more was growing within me.

I broke the kiss and started to rock back and forth. His hands helped keep me moving at a steady rhythm and his lips grazed against every part of me they could reach.

All thoughts fled from my mind as I gave myself over to the way it felt to be with him like this because it was far exceeding anything I'd anticipated.

And I was glad that this wasn't going to be the last time.

IVY

I stretched out, forgetting for a moment that I wasn't in my own bed.

But the pleasant ache in my body and the smell of the sheets was enough for last night to come flooding back to me.

I let out a contented sigh. Even if Nick wasn't in the bed with me, it was nice to wake up here, and not just because his flat was bigger than the one I shared with Laila.

I threw off the covers and spotted a t-shirt folded on the bedside table beside me.

Warmth spread through me at the gesture.

It hadn't been there last night, which meant there was only one reason it was here now.

I pulled it on, enjoying the scent of whatever detergent Nick used, with the hint of just him underneath.

Luckily, it fell to my thighs and pretty much covered me, which saved me from having to locate more of my clothing from wherever it had ended up last night. It wouldn't be a problem so long as I found it all before I returned home. I didn't want to make that trip while wearing my elf costume.

I let myself out of the bedroom and headed into the rest of the flat, realising as I did that we never managed to get to the tour of the place and I had no idea where Nick

was going to be.

The moment I entered the kitchen, he looked up from where he was sitting on a laptop with a pair of glasses on. He smiled at me and pulled them off, setting them down. "You're awake."

"Yes. Thank you for the shirt." I smoothed it down.

"It was purely selfish," he admitted, getting to his feet and coming over to me so he could pull me into his arms.

"You're going to have to enlighten me on that one," I responded, leaning into him.

"For one, I get to see you in my clothes."

"Mmm, and that's a good thing?"

"Oh yes," he murmured, the expression on his face full of adoration.

"What's your second reason?"

"If you're wearing my clothes, then you're going to have to get naked again before putting your own back on."

I laughed and wrapped my arms around his neck. "I don't think you need to try so hard for that," I assured him.

"Maybe not." He closed the gap between us and kissed me. It was slow and full of emotion and care. It was different from the kisses we'd shared in bed last night, but not in a bad way.

"Hi," I whispered as he pulled back, unable to really find any other words.

"Hey," he responded. "Do you want some breakfast?"

"Breakfast sounds good."

"All right, coming right up." He gestured for me to take a seat.

"Dinner and breakfast? You really are treating me well."

He laughed and got out a frying pan. "I am trying to impress you."

"Impress away, I could get used to this. Though I'm going to have to do well when you come to stay at my flat." It took me a moment for what I'd said to sink in. "Erm, what I mean to say..."

"It's okay, I don't think either of us thought last night was a one-time occurrence, did we?" he asked as he poured a mixture into the pan and it sizzled. I had no idea what he was making, but it already smelled good.

"I certainly hope not. It was a lot of fun. Though I will say your flat has some perks that mine doesn't."

"It's closer to work?" he suggested.

I let out an amused snort. "That hadn't even crossed my mind," I admitted. "I was mostly thinking about the fact yours doesn't come with a roommate. Unless you're about to tell me that Pieter lives here too."

"Absolutely not," Nick assured me. "He used to own the flat across the hall, but he sold it a few years ago to buy himself a house instead."

"See, no interruptions, that's definitely an advantage."

He laughed. "I'll keep that in mind. Though I suspect your friend might worry about you if you're never home." He frowned. "Is she going to be worried about you not coming home last night?"

I shook my head. "I messaged her before we had dinner last night."

"Really?" Amusement shone through his voice. He pulled two plates out of the cupboard and set them on the side, emptying the contents of his pan onto them.

"You knew as well as I did that I was going to stay the night as soon as I agreed to come here with you," I said. "I'd have insisted on dinner somewhere else if I hadn't wanted to."

"I didn't assume anything," he promised, finishing off the plates and bringing them over to the table.

He set one down in front of me.

"Homemade pancakes? You know I already slept with you, right?"

"I'm not trying to convince you to sleep with me," he responded. "I'm trying to convince you to date me."

"Consider me already convinced. Didn't we agree to that last night?"

"In a roundabout way." There was an intensity in his eyes that I didn't expect to be there. "I don't date casually, Ivy. If I want to date someone, then it's because I see something with them."

I swallowed hard. "I don't want this to be casual. Just a secret from my boss. At least for now."

"I'm not going to tell her," he promised.

"Thank you." Though his agreement wasn't a surprise, it didn't exactly benefit him if he said he was going to tell her, especially when it would mean that he had to betray my trust to do it.

I ate some of my pancakes, letting out a delighted hum.

"Good, right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I never used to be able to make pancakes, but then I found this recipe, and it's never failed me since," he said. "That's why I wanted to make them this morning. The batter needs time in the fridge anyway, so I figured I could have everything prepped before you woke up."

"I'm surprised you didn't wake me up when you left the bed. Or in the bed."

He chuckled. "You were fast asleep, I didn't want to ruin that."

"That's sweet." I was still a little surprised I'd slept through it while in someone else's house, but maybe that was just something about him and how comfortable I was around him. We'd been working together for a couple of weeks, and that had involved interacting almost daily in that time.

"Do you have any plans for today?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Usually I spend my Sundays watching rubbish TV and not getting dressed." I ate some more of my pancakes, marvelling at just how perfect they were. He really had made them well. "What about you?"

"Normally I go down to my workshop."

"Don't you do that every other day too?"

He nodded. "I've not really got much else to do. But if you're not in a rush to go home, perhaps you could watch rubbish TV and not get dressed here?"

"Only if you'll do that with me."

"I was counting on it," he responded with a grin.

"Then that sounds perfect." I smiled at him, enjoying the simplicity of sitting in his kitchen and eating breakfast while he was across from me.

Deep within, I knew that this was only the first of many meals the two of us were going to share, and I couldn't wait for each and every one of them.

IVY

One Year Later

The workshop looked exactly the same as it usually did, with half-made toys in various positions and tools that I still didn't know the names of hanging on the walls. Nick had told me about some of them in the past year, but I had no idea about the rest of them.

I made my way past them all until I came to the part of the shop where the sleigh sat waiting, gleaming red and full of presents.

"Hey," Nick said, appearing from behind it.

"Hi."

He stepped closer, pulling me to him and kissing me gently. "Thank you for coming to help tonight."

"Of course I've come to help," I responded.

"You don't think I'm going to let you do this on your own, do you?"

I know how much work you've put into it.

"Last year, I'd known how much he cared about the sleigh ride, but this year it had been something different."



I'd seen all of the late nights he'd put in, the long meetings with Pieter about organising, and the agonising over making sure everything was perfect.

"You still don't have to. You're doing enough for me by being my elf tomorrow."

"I'm your elf every day," I joked.

The look he gave me made my heart skip a beat. It was something only he could do, and instead of fading over the past year, it had only grown stronger.

"How did the meeting with your boss go?" Nick asked as he loaded up some of the presents.

"Well," I responded, handing him another stack of presents.

"It turns out that it's not the first time someone at the agency has ended up dating a client.

I had to fill in some forms, and there'll be a new contract for you to sign stating that you can't take legal action against the company over anything related to a potential breakup, but we're free to date openly. "

"Good." He stopped loading presents and stepped closer to me, putting a hand on my waist. "Because I have something to ask you."

"Oh?"

"Move in with me."

"I spend most of my time at your flat," I pointed out.

"Exactly. Move in with me, Ivy. I'd love nothing more."

I nodded. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes," I confirmed while laughing. "I'll absolutely move in with you."

He captured my lips with his, kissing me deeply and with barely contained desire.

We broke apart, and I was breathing heavily.

"It's a shame we're not at your flat now," I murmured.

"There's always the sleigh." There was a twinkle in his eyes that made it clear he was joking. I'd watched how many times he'd disinfected it in preparation for today and knew he wasn't about to suggest us fooling around in it again.

"I don't think I'm ever going to be able to look at the sleigh and not think about last year," I admitted.

"Good. I want you thinking about me." He kissed the end of my nose.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the easy affection that had become the norm between us. It was hard to believe it had been a full year since our first night together, but it had been wonderful, and I knew there were many more years of happiness and festive cheer ahead of us.

\* \* \*

Thank you for reading Sleigh Rides With St. Nick , I hope you enjoyed it!

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Five Years Later: Ivy

I hummed Christmas songs to myself as I made my way into the bedroom to get dressed, stopping in my tracks when I noticed a red velvet dress trimmed with white fur laid out on the bed instead of the elf costume I'd put there. I frowned and stepped closer, running my hand along the fabric.