



L. FRANK 2012-

W i n t e r
T h u n d e r

Winter Thunder

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Brownstones looked impressive from the outside but, to the inebriated, manifested themselves as the impoverished rat holes they truly were on the inside. Nikos didn't remember opening the hallway door that led to his part of the building. He did recall drunkenly stumbling up the four flights of stairs, however. Memory was a funny thing if, by "funny", you meant "disturbingly selective". Most of his walk home from his studio had been that way: full of holes. He knew that he must have passed Brooks Brothers on West 65th but could only remember the part, a few blocks later, where he leaned up against the window of The Emerald Inn on Columbus.

Why throwing up all over the pavement on his way home should stick in his memory was just another perverse piece of evidence against the goodwill of God. Around the edges of the memory was someone—hopefully not the handsome bartender who worked there—shouting at him to move on and not mess up the sidewalk with his sick. He'd stumbled off, home, in disgrace.

Through the tilt and pan of his vision, he looked at his latest sketch. He figured it must have taken him about an hour.

He sighed. Drawing beefcake erotica wouldn't impress the folks at Dawnstone Greeting Cards any more than it impressed himself. And having taken the job to create a dozen, holiday-themed cards was really his own fault. He'd missed his deadline four months ago, gotten fired two weeks later, and spent the remaining time between then and now running between his apartment and his studio. He felt stuck in neutral: drawing Santa, elves, Christmas trees, menorahs, mistletoe, and even the occasional dreidel.

He'd taken the other illustration jobs (there were plenty of ways to prostitute his talent during the holidays) but only enough to keep him in his home. None of it helped with his annual descent into self-pity. None of it conjured up a boyfriend out of thin air.

Looking down at the human-shaped reindeer he'd just soiled his sketchpad with, he sighed again. He knew that he'd do better if he just turned off his phone, curled up by the fire in his second-hand recliner, and slept until New Year's. It wouldn't be the first time.

After stuffing his sketch paper and pencils back in his pack, he attempted pouring a refill of the ouzo-on-the-rocks he'd been drinking. The bottle was empty. He blinked at the dim vestiges of grimy sunlight shining through his window. At this hour even most of the liquor stores would be closing for Christmas Eve. Still, facing the twenty-fifth of December sober was not a prospect he wanted to endure. About ready to retrieve his jacket from the floor, he stopped at a crashing sound from the ceiling.

Blinking blearily, he traced the sounds with his eyes.

Clomping bangs moved in a line from where they'd begun above the door towards the ceiling on the far side of the living room. There, they stopped. He furrowed his brow. There was no fifth floor. Unless he wanted to start believing in Santa Claus, he couldn't think of anyone—especially his lazy landlord—who would be up there at this time of the year. In the distance, outside, a rumble like distant, winter thunder rolled through the streets.

Soot trickled down into the hearth of the fireplace and he caught his breath.

Rats? Urban squirrels on a stroll from Central Park?

Either would be preferable to the more logical alternative. Break-ins on the Upper West Side were common even if coming down the chimney wasn't the preferred method.

Nikos was just about ready to either light a fire or call the police when someone banged on his door. He nearly fell over as he spun about from the crouch he'd been in.

He stared at the door. After a few seconds, he called out. "Who is it?"

No answer.

He took a few steps towards the door when the pounding repeated itself. He furrowed his brow. Enough of this was getting through his drunken haze to piss him off. His self-preservation was still being drowned in the last dregs of his ouzo. "I said," he shouted, "Who the fuck is it?!"

The voice that answered didn't sound like it belonged to anyone who lived in the brownstone's apartments. "It's your Christmas miracle!" It was a gruff but warm voice that responded. A final knock—more of a heavy thump, really—accompanied the answer.

Nikos drew himself up to his full five-foot-seven, skinny height, and yanked open the door.

The door to the stairway was still open and a cold wind blew down it and into the hall. His visitor, who he probably should have checked out through the peep-hole, was standing there looking down at him, scowling.

He stood six-foot-six not counting his antlers.

The man, the creature, looming in his doorway was covered in dark brown

fur with a shaggy mop of black swept forward over his brow and dotted with melting snow. His musculature was extreme, even by the standards of the guys working out at Golds, and—fur or not—was mostly bare. He wore thigh-hugging shorts and black-strap suspenders set with large, silver bells that jingled, softly, when he shifted position. A pair of straps, similar to the suspenders, crossed his abdomen just above and below the bared midriff. His hooves shifted from one side to another on the wooden landing and his eyes—set in a reindeer’s face on this humanoid, fur-covered body—narrowed.

Nikos could think of nothing to do but stand there, the door still open into his apartment. He gawked and blinked a few times. The reindeer man remained.

“Are you going to invite me in?” he rumbled.

“Uh...”

Mrs. Kuehler, from 4b, opened her door and poked her head out into the hall. “Damn it! Will you keep it down? It’s a holy night, for Christ’s sake!”

Nikos glanced to her and then back to the towering, antlered man in his doorway. Mrs. Kuehler’s eyes grew wide as she stared. The stranger, tilting his head to look back over his shoulder at the interruption, just nodded.

“I’m sorry, ma’am; didn’t mean to disturb you.”

With those words, he pushed past Nikos and into 4a. The artist stumbled back, unsteadily. The reindeer walked on large, cloven hooves over towards the drawing table. Behind him, his fluffy tail—as festooned with snow as the fur above his brow and his antlers—twitched from a small hole in his shorts. Nikos looked back to Mrs. Kuehler and blushed, not sure what to say.

“Sorry, Mrs. K. I ...er... we’ll try and keep it down.”

Without waiting for a response, he closed his door and turned around.

“What are...? Who...?” he stammered.

The reindeer was holding the drawing he’d just finished in one hand and laying his other on his chest. “Jesus, kid: these nipples wouldn’t be out of place on Dolly Parton! Fetish much?”

Nikos’ cheeks burned. “Now wait just a second,” he said. “You put that down!”

“Why? You got a mirror I could use instead?”

He turned and, true to his implication, displayed a look that was decidedly similar to the drunken sketch. From the crown of antlers (Nikos hadn’t drawn them damp, but the melting snow had provided moisture) to the powerful muscles and improbably over-sized bulge in his shorts, he was—in every aspect—the embodiment of the drawing.

“You have *got* to be a hallucination...”

The reindeer chuckled. “Have you really had that much to drink?”

Nikos glanced at the empty bottle on the table. Getting drunk on ouzo wasn't recommended but he'd never had a hallucination either this strong or realistic. He felt himself getting belligerent.

"Maybe I have and maybe I haven't. What is that: a costume? How did you know..."

"You know it's not a costume," the reindeer said. "It's no more a costume than your skin is. Granted, I've only been in it for the last twenty minutes or so and you've occupied your flesh for—what—thirty-six years?"

Nikos was having trouble following the conversation. "Maybe," he said. It was his default word that he used when drunk and not following his surroundings. He tried to focus. "Look, who are you? What's going on?" His demand sounded too drunkenly similar to a bum trying to ward off unwanted police attention.

"My name is Donner," the reindeer said, "and, as I mentioned before, it's time for your Christmas miracle."

Silence followed as the visitor waited for his words to sink in and Nikos tried to wrap his mind around what had just been said.

"You mean like Santa's—?"

"You *know* what I meant," Donner said. "You were the one who called me here with your drawing. Normally, I'm more of an intangible concept, only seen by children and the occasional, insightful adult. But every now and then strong enough beliefs will bring me into focus and I simply have to follow up on it." He spread his arms, the small bells on his wristbands jingling. "Granted, I can say 'no' to it all but you seemed like a special case."

Nikos cleared his throat. "Oh, really? You're here to teach me the true meaning of Christmas or something?"

"Or something," Donner replied. A smile crept across his muzzle.

The strangeness of the scenario pushed against Nikos' reality with a harshness that didn't come from his drunken state. Even completely smashed, he could tell that there was more to this than a hallucination.

Yes, he'd drawn a sexually provocative reindeer. Yes, it appeared to be standing before him right now. Yes, it was getting distracting staring at him in his jingle-bell straps and bindings. But something deep down made him feel downright dismissive of his guest and his guest's words.

"Yeah, well, maybe you can get to me after the holidays. I think I left something back at the studio." He reached twice for his coat and managed to snag it on the third attempt. "You'll have to leave now; I'm going out."

Donner looked a bit surprised at Nikos' response. "Are you? You don't want to know...?"

“No, I don’t,” Nikos interrupted. “I’m way too drunk for this and don’t really think the true meaning of Christmas is something I’ve ever really wanted to know about.” He gestured towards the door. “Besides, it’s probably something that I’ve already learned by watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.”

“I never used the phrase, ‘the true meaning of Christmas’,” Donner said. “Those are *your* words. Frankly, I’m just surprised at how well you’re taking this.”

Nikos grimaced. “You’re probably at least four-fifths ouzo and one-fifth regret. How else *should* I take it?”

“I’m no hallucination.”

“Yeah? Prove it.”

Donner stood stationary for a moment. A large bit of melting snow dropped from one of his antlers onto the hardwood floor. Then, the towering reindeer nodded briefly before taking three, clomping steps forward, gripping Nikos by the shoulders, and planting a huge, firm kiss on the startled artist’s lips.

While struggling to get unhanded, Nikos felt his heart flutter. No one had kissed him—passionately or otherwise—in a very long time. Despite himself, he was growing aroused. Breaking out of the grasp, he stumbled back, catching himself on the hat rack by the apartment entrance. His cheeks burned with both emotion and the ouzo.

“*Get out!*” he shouted. “*Get out or...!*”

“That didn’t prove it to you?” the reindeer asked. “Tell me honestly that you still think I’m not real and I’ll go. But wasn’t that indicative—maybe even part—of what’s been wrong with you for a long time, now? For a moment, didn’t that address it?” He stepped back a few paces. “If knowing that doesn’t make me real, I don’t know what would.”

Adrenaline had momentarily brushed some of the cobwebs from Nikos’ mind; adrenaline and testosterone, probably. In that second, and in reflection, he realized that Donner was right. Mostly. It hadn’t been the physical contact that was evidence but, rather, at how he felt by it. The loneliness, for just a moment, had gone away. To be held in another man’s arms—to be kissed like the other guy meant it—had broken through the haze of his mood. And even if it had been just his own subconscious flowing out into his hallucination, it meant more than nothing. In his mind, it counted.

His brow furrowed. He didn’t say anything.

Donner smiled thinly, raising an eyebrow. “Proof enough that—at least—I have some idea of what I’m talking about? Proof that I’m more what I say I am than an alcohol-induced dream?”

Nikos stood for a full minute as the haze re-descended. His mood, though,

had been shaken. He blinked a couple times and, then, walked to the door. "I think ... I think I should turn in; get some sleep," he said, quietly.

"Don't you have to go to your studio?" Donner asked.

"That was an excuse."

"One that's no longer valid since its pretty clear you believe me, now."

Nikos just nodded slightly. "Maybe," he confessed.

"Tell you what," Donner said after a few more moments of silence. "Why don't we head out? Where we go doesn't matter. There's a cosmic law at stake, tonight, and I'd hate for it to fail on account of your drunkenness."

"Cosmic law'?"

The reindeer nodded. "Besides, I only have about forty-five minutes left before I have to leave." He inclined his head so that his antlers indicated the clock on Nikos' kitchenette wall. "I've got to get back to the North Pole. They probably won't depart without me but I'd rather not risk it."

A smile crept onto Nikos' face. "Seriously?"

Donner crossed his heart with a fingertip. "Scout's honor."

Nikos looked his guest up and down again. Despite his bestial appearance there was also enough of a human anatomy that it still thrilled him. He chuckled slowly under his breath. "Go out? What will people think?"

"Let's find out," Donner said.

The snow swirled in the urban gusts funneled and concentrated by the concrete canyon walls that rose around West 72nd. Only several blocks from Central Park, the street was less busy than on a normal day when shops didn't close early. Still, the throng of pedestrians was denser and more active than Nikos would have liked. Crowds, especially during the holidays, made him uneasy; claustrophobic. The cold bit into him more than earlier; it was darker and his alcohol level had plummeted along with the temperature. And although he didn't know exactly why, he walked in a direction away from both home and the studio. Donner clearly knew where he lived but, for some reason, Nikos felt vulnerable by the idea of taking him to the closet-sized room in the communal artists' building.

People pointed. People stared.

Outside, Donner seemed even taller. His long shadow would lengthen and shorten as they passed beneath streetlights. Nikos didn't sneak any more peeks at his drunken fantasy come-to-life. He walked a few steps ahead, shoulders hunched forward, as if he didn't know there was a massive, near-naked, humanoid reindeer following up behind him.

Not knowing where to go, Nikos simply kept going in a straight line. The eaves of the park grew more outlined in Christmas lights as they neared its

perimeter. The bare branches of trees reached up and out over Central Park West. After dark, the bright lights of the city contrasted starkly against the silhouettes of the trees. Set in tiny beads of light for the holidays, it looked darkly pretty.

“Let’s head in there.”

Donner’s voice caught Nikos off-guard. He’d been doing a better job of ignoring his half-hallucination/half-fantasy than he’d thought. Nikos looked at the restaurant where Donner was pointing.

“Are you kidding? We don’t have reservations; we’re less than a block from the Park!”

The reindeer chuffed. “Trust me: I know a guy.” With that, he put a ham-sized hand on Nikos’ shoulder and guided him to the main door.

Garlands of evergreen hung over the lintel with small, tasteful ornaments and bows hanging between the branches. The smell of warm Italian food wafted out onto the street as Donner held the door open for him. People walking past continued to stare as the reindeer bent down to clear his horns of the relatively low entrance.

The *maître d’* looked up from his podium and smiled. “Good evening, gentlemen.” He glanced up at Donner and—for a moment—looked puzzled. “Do you have a reservation?”

Donner just bent down and whispered something in the man’s ear. The man’s eyes widened. Then, his smile widening, he nodded. “Right this way, sir.” With that, he grabbed two menus and started weaving his way between tables towards a small table for two by the window. Nikos just looked surprised. Donner strode past him towards the table. A half-moment later, Nikos followed.

“How did you do that?” he hissed. The stares of other patrons were impossible to ignore so Nikos didn’t. He just stared dully back as if he and Donner were the most ordinary thing in the world. “I mean, this place has probably been booked solid for weeks!”

“Months,” Donner replied. His tone was quiet and respectful. “But, as I said, I know a guy.”

Nikos snorted as the *maître d’* pulled out his chair for him. “Who? Chris Kringle?”

Donner just shrugged.

The two sat down after Nikos took off his scarf and coat, laying them over the back of his chair. He felt woefully under-dressed for the restaurant. Everyone he could see was dressed up in either formal attire or their best night-on-the-town wear. His sweatshirt and jeans were horribly out-of-place. He glanced at

the placard the *maître d'* had left for him.

Everything on the menu was expensive.

“Look, I can’t afford any of this—”

“It’s the holidays; live a little.” Donner smiled and, when their waiter came, ordered a bottle of Prosecco.

“And you?” the waiter asked Nikos.

Nikos looked at the menu. “Sorry; I’m just really dying for a cappuccino right about now.” His words were less blurry than they had been back at home. The cold night air had helped fight through his drunken haze a little bit. “I don’t know—”

“We’re in New York, sir,” the waiter said. He jotted something down on his order form. “Every restaurant can make cappuccino.” With that, he turned to the kitchens to fetch both Nikos’ drink and the bottle of champagne that Donner had ordered.

“For a guy with only, what, forty-five minutes left, you certainly are placing a high regard on how quickly they can get our order out,” he grumped.

Donner smiled. “Twenty-five minutes,” he corrected, “and, well, you’re a special case. I think I can go over my limit by a few minutes if I have to.”

Soon, their drinks were served and Donner poured a glass of the fizzy, white wine for Nikos.

“So, you’re telling me that you’re really one of Santa’s reindeer,” Nikos finally said.

“Sort of,” Donner said. “More of an embodiment of the concept, if you can follow that.”

Nikos couldn’t.

“It doesn’t matter,” the reindeer said. “In short, though, a pretty important law-of-the-Universe is in danger of being broken tonight, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

The artist cocked his head and looked up at his host. The other tables, now, weren’t staring quite so openly. The few wisps of conversation that Nikos could hear still surrounded their astonished perceptions but most were making comments about “fancy costume” or “stunt for a Christmas movie”. A few comments about “shockingly inappropriate” attire also reached his ears but Nikos wasn’t sure whether they were talking about the pseudo-bondage gear that Donner was wearing or his own shabby attire.

“You mentioned that before; what ‘cosmic law’ are you talking about?”

Donner raised his glass and sipped at the sparkling wine. “For at least one day out of any given year, each mortal—man, woman, and child—should experience gladness. If even for a second, happiness should enter everyone’s life.

Should this ever fail, the world will end.” He sipped his wine again and looked down into Nikos’ eyes across the rim of his champagne flute. “I think that last part is mere hyperbole, but do you really want to take that chance?”

Nikos shook his head as if the motion would clear it.

“So, what, you’re going to give me a happy night or the world will end?”

The reindeer’s brows furrowed and he looked momentarily grim. “Big, fancy displays—single nights of explosive joy—do not make up for a lifetime of wasted chances and half-hearted efforts,” he said. “No, my friend: I’m here to let you know that you’re messing things up for yourself; if not just for tonight or the recent months, for the rest of your life.”

Nikos looked up at Donner, eyes lingering on the jingle bell straps and expansive musculature. “Tell me about it,” he said. “I’m talking to a pornographic reindeer on Christmas Eve.”

Donner allowed a momentary smile to creep onto his face. “I prefer the term ‘erotic,’” he said. After his smile vanished, he added, “But yes: I’m symbolic of your troubles. Then again, if you hadn’t drawn me this body, I doubt I would have noticed your despair. There are so many people this time of year who are miserable. You were practically screaming to be heard over the choir.”

Nikos drank his glass to the bottom in one, long gulp. The ouzo, clearly, was not doing its job any more. Yet if that were truly not the case, why was Donner still here? He sighed. The “hallucination-based-on-alcohol” theory was fading even faster. Maybe the reindeer was actually a bum wearing one of those Christmas antler-hats and, in reality, he was now sitting in a posh restaurant, stinking up the place.

That could explain the stares.

“So, what do I do about it?” Nikos asked. “I’m a fucking failure. Everything I touch turns to ash. I haven’t had a boyfriend who can stand me or a family member who cares about me in years.”

“Interesting that you chose family to talk about rather than your art,” Donner said. “I take it that, on some level, you at least recognize that you have talent?”

He scowled in response.

“I’ll take that as a begrudging ‘yes’.”

“Do you know what its like,” Nikos finally replied, “to have all your hard work ignored by the people you’re doing it for? Do you have any idea what it’s like to be practically invisible, going about trying to make your way in a field that’s packed with other invisible people, each trying to do the same thing? It’s like stumbling through a forest of ghosts!”

Donner’s expression stayed neutral. He simply nodded.

“You say that if a person doesn’t have at least one good day a year, even a

little, the Universe will end? Well, I say: fine. Let it.” He reached over his cappuccino for the Prosecco and poured himself a refill. “I don’t care anymore.”

Donner reached across the table and gently put his fingers on the rim of Nikos’ glass. Keeping it down, he sighed. “Yes; I can see that.”

Nikos scowled but didn’t try to lift the flute. Instead, he reached for his sweetened, frothy coffee.

“So, even you can’t fix me, eh? Can’t wave your magic wand or whatever-you-have and make it all better?” He sipped his hot drink. “Didn’t think so.”

“Nikos,” Donner said, quietly, “I already told you: big displays don’t solve anything. It’s ironic given how extravagant Christmas gift giving has gotten these days. No one’s really doing anything but fulfilling their perceptions of everyone else’s material desires. That’s fine as far as it goes, and it can be a really good thing from time to time, but it’s starting to crowd out the thought behind the gifts.” He shrugged. “In your case, it’s almost completely gone.”

Nikos sipped his cappuccino quietly for a few minutes.

The waiter hadn’t come back for their order. He didn’t mind. He wasn’t hungry.

He looked up at Donner’s deep, brown eyes and saw something there for a moment. Probably his emotions were getting the better of him, but he had a brief flash of insight. It bothered him.

Putting his cup down, he said, “this ‘Cosmic one-good-day rule’; it applies to more than just humans?”

“Every living thing.”

Nikos continued. “Even recently manifested spirits of a holiday concept?”

Donner nodded. “Even us.”

Nikos pursed his lips. He was miserable, no doubt. He got this way every holiday season ever since his last boyfriend had left. But had he really been miserable every day out of the last year? There had been a few bright moments. He could remember them clearly. And what did “one good day” really mean, anyway? If it was all on a scale, and even if a person was continually spiraling downwards, by comparison wouldn’t some of those earlier days be considered ‘good’? He nodded slowly.

“You’ve had a really bad year, haven’t you?” he asked at last.

A thin smile crossed his drinking companion’s face. “You care about that?”

Nikos looked Donner up and down. He felt a smile tickle the edges of his mouth. “Well, you clearly care for my moods; what kind of person would I be if I didn’t care about you in return?”

“Pretty typical,” Donner replied.

Nikos affected a wince. “Ouch. That’s a bit dark for the holidays, isn’t it?”

He stood up and walked around the small table to stand at the reindeer's side. "Maybe this is more about you than it is about me," he suggested. He placed a hand on Donner's upper arm.

"Maybe," the reindeer said, "it's about both of us."

Nikos hoped it wasn't just the alcohol talking. He leaned in and kissed Donner, softly. No one at the nearby tables seemed to be watching. It was as if they had faded into the background in that strange, surreal setting. When he pulled back, the sound of quiet talking and the clinking of silverware on plates had resumed.

"It's not much, but I hope it makes your day a little less crappy."

Donner smiled. "Likewise," he said, returning the kiss.

The big reindeer pushed the rest of the bottle across the table to Nikos. "Here, you take the rest. I'm driving, tonight."

"You can't stay?"

"Gotta fly," he said. He stood slowly, being careful so that his antlers wouldn't snag a swoosh of evergreen branches hanging above.

"Eight tiny reindeer my ass," Nikos said. He was openly smiling, now. "If the others are anything like you, 'tiny' isn't an adjective I'd use."

"Hey, you made me, remember?"

Nikos leaned in to wrap his arms around the stranger who had come into his life only about an hour before. "I guess life is like Christmas: you only get out of it what you're able to put in."

Donner shrugged. "As long as you include the little help you get from your friends, yeah. I'd agree with that." He looked down into Nikos' eyes. "Just keep yourself open to others," he advised. "You already decided to trust one stranger this season. You should aim for a few more."

With that, he handed Nikos a small, folded greeting card. In large, shiny red letters it said, "Saint Christopher Street Annual Christmas Party - a benefit for LGBT people who want to celebrate the holidays with new friends." It was dated the twenty-fifth.

"Are you going to be there?" Nikos asked. He looked back up into Donner's eyes, but the reindeer was already turning to leave.

"I've got the fly around the world in one night," he said. "Tomorrow is my weekend."

"Will I ever see you again?"

"In one form or another," Donner replied. "Just keep that picture around." He winked and turned to go. He weaved his way through the dining tables, all eyes on him, and—bells jingling—stepped out into the night.

Nikos grabbed his coat and scarf and ran to look out onto West 72nd. There

was a fading swirl of thicker-than-normal snow, but—otherwise—the street was empty. His drunk was still on but the card he held in his hand was real. “You get out of it what you put into it,” he said. He didn’t think he’d heard that sentiment on *A Charlie Brown Christmas* but it seemed like he’d heard it a thousand times before. Perhaps it was the ouzo and perhaps it was the nearly-seven-foot-tall hunk he’d been hanging out with but, for some reason, those words didn’t have the same, pedestrian meaning they’d had, before.

He left the restaurant without talking to the *maître d'*. If Donner could just muscle his way in, Nikos doubted there was a tab.

He walked the three-and-a-half long blocks back to his home and went to sleep.

He was awakened by the snow-bright sunlight streaming in from his window. The blanket he normally had blocking it had fallen off during the night. The brightness was cold, yet fulfilling. Blinking the sleep from his eyes he got up, showered in the frigid brownstone water, made himself a few eggs, and looked for the invitation he’d gotten the previous night.

It was still there. Of course, in the light of day, he realized that it was probably something he’d had mailed to him and forgotten about. It had his address on the front along with a cancelled stamp. There were no pools of moisture on the floor where Donner had stood the previous night and Mrs. K wasn’t in the hallway to reinforce his experiences. He didn’t know if he wanted to. Then again, a conversation—like everything else—yielded only what you put into it. Maybe he would talk to her later.

After putting the blanket back over the window (and vowing to finally buy some curtains at an after-Christmas sale) he checked the time on the card, grabbed his coat, slung his ever-present backpack over one shoulder, and headed outside.

The party was a little less than four miles away and the subway—while on its holiday schedule—was his best bet. He paid his fare and, sitting in amongst a few other morning travelers, reflected on the previous night. It was a shame he hadn’t drawn Donner naked, he thought with a smile.

Maybe next year.

His grin returned a half-hour later when he realized that the building in which the party was held was within a stone’s throw of an animal hospital; large cut-outs of reindeer taped to the inside of their street-facing windows.

He met with the organizers and realized he’d arrived a bit early. He helped them mix punch and set up a few last-minute decorations as guests began filtering in. Writing “Nikos” on his nametag, he forced himself to mingle as more and more family-lacking people arrived. As the afternoon wore on and

food was served, he felt warm. He was looking out the window onto the darkened New York streets when a tap on his shoulder interrupted his reflection.

He turned to find a tall man there, wearing an antler hat and suspenders with jingle bells on them.

“Hey there,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind me saying so, but I’ve been seeing you everywhere at this party, tonight.” His voice rumbled and was soft. “Are you one of the organizers? If so, I’d like to say ‘thanks’; I really needed to get out like this.”

Nikos smiled back, eyes on the bells. “Uh, not really; just a guest helping out.”

The man smiled. His nametag had “Hi! My Name is Thunder” written on it. “Well, it’s a good way to make the world a little bit better,” he said.

Nikos nodded to the man’s nametag. “I’m guessing that’s not your real name.”

Thunder smiled. “No, but I get called that a lot.” He blushed a bit. “Stupid nickname, really; I’ve had it since I was a kid. After I learned that most of Santa’s reindeer had German names, I kept reciting the whole *‘Twas The Night Before Christmas* thing with English translations. My favorite was—”

“Mine too,” Nikos interrupted with a widening smile. “Say, listen, I’m not good at this—and its honestly not a come on—but would you like to see some illustrations of mine?” he asked. “I tried drawing some Christmas cards for a local company but they really weren’t what they wanted.”

The man laughed. “Well, that’s definitely the most creative way of saying ‘would you like to see my etchings’ that I’ve ever heard.” He nodded. “Sounds good: I’ve always liked looking at art,” he added. “And it sounds like a great way to end a really good day.”

Nikos put his arm through Thunder’s and led him to a window seat, where he could open up his pack and show a few sketches to his new friend. The sketch of Donner was still at home but he had a few others that might serve as an opening to getting to know Thunder, better.

The End