



Naughty Elf: Humbug

(Santa's Naughty Elf Mates)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Humbug has no intention of letting Santa dictate what he does or who he mates with.

But when he shows up to find lonely changeling Baxter, he can't just up and leave. Bax doesn't know elves are real, so Humbug sets about teaching him how to be a mate, and to understand his magical side.

Can they find the love they both want, even with a deadline from Santa on the line?

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Chapter

One

S anta? Could suck it.

“I’m going to send you just where you deserve to go,” Santa had said, putting one finger beside his perfectly wonderful Santa-y nose and winking as Humbug had poofed out of the room.

Now here he was, and he was so over this.

He sat on the shelf, watching the room he’d been...sent to. The plaster encasing him was stifling. And he had the desperate need to relieve himself.

This was what he got for years of faithful, if not dutiful, service? An elf stepped out of line once, or maybe three or four times, and he got his ass not just fired, but sent away to somewhere he’d never seen, reduced to the size of a doll that no one even liked, and stuck in a ceramic-style doll body.

So he’d tried to modernize his part of the toy line. Without permission. So what? His ideas had been good ones, and dammit, Gavin Humbug McPherson stood by his ideas, as well as his ideals.

He wiggled his nose, which was the first part of him that had come back online, so to speak. Then he tried to wiggle his fingers.

Damn.

His toes worked, so he inched forward, trying to see out through the plaster. The shelf he sat on was obviously a mantel, and a Christmas tree across the room, the lights twinkling in the darkness. Three wrapped presents crouched under the tree, which seemed...miserly. The inhabitant of the house clearly lived alone.

There was one stocking hanger he could see, though the stocking wasn't visible from inside the box. He pressed his nose to the plaster, trying to see more, and he promptly went butt over teakettle.

Oh, hot chocolate, that was going to hurt.

He tumbled off the mantel, and he knew he was a goner until his full size reasserted itself during the fall and he landed on the floor with a thud that shook balls off the Christmas tree.

Thank Kringle, the tree skirt under it was quilted and huge and nothing broke.

“Ugh.” His body came back to life all at once, just in time to feel the hard impact of the fall. It rattled not just the floor and the tree, but his bones as well.

He heard a woof, then the click of nails on the floorboards, and Humbug scrambled to his feet, hands out to ward off the huge dog that came trotting into the room, tail waving like a flag.

Was that a Saint Bernard? Santa's beard, he was going to get bitt—licked. He was being licked. The silly beast was licking his hand, then his arm.

“No stranger to elves, are you?” he murmured. This big guy was super friendly, thank the holly and the mistletoe. “Well, let's see what we can see.”

Humbug started with the tree. The three gifts under it all said, “To Baxter, from Mom.”

Ouch. The guy was old enough to either rent or own his own home, because there was no way a female lived in this house, for all that it was neat as a pin. But he was still just getting presents from Mom. And it was Christmas Eve, so he knew there was no one else sending presents...

His belly rumbled, reminding him that he hadn’t had a bite to eat since yesterday afternoon, when he’d gotten himself boxed up and shipped off, Santa style.

Rudolph’s asshole, he resented that magic man.

He headed to the fridge, the giant dog on his heels, breath hot on the backs of his knees. “So, what do we have in here?” he murmured.

Milk. A half-eaten pie of some sort.

A turkey breast, uncooked and waiting for tomorrow? Shit, so the guy didn’t even get to eat with his mom? Maybe he was needed here. The dude needed someone to eat his Christmas dinner with.

“Woo. Score.” He found a plastic-wrapped batch of cold pizza. Pulling out a piece, he sniffed it. Still good. Yay.

A soft woof made him jump. “Shh. I’ll share with you, but don’t wake up your dad.”

He wasn’t ready for that conversation. Because while it was tempting to walk out the door, he knew there would be consequences if he didn’t do whatever the hell Santa number fifteen wanted from him. There always were.

He knew he would have to do some fast talking to get this guy to understand that he had to be able to stick around until he was allowed to go. Not back to the North Sparkly Pole, though, dammit. He was going to be a lone elf. Strike out on his own.

He pulled out the pizza, unwrapped it, and stuck a piece in his mouth narrow end first while he looked for something to drink.

Milk? Nah, not with pizza. Iced tea? Not the thing. Sprite, maybe... Aha. Beer.

He pulled one out, nipping off a bite of pizza. He put the beer down to open it, then shared a bite with the St. Bernard. Just to keep him quiet.

He did a little butt wiggle dance while he hunted for a bottle opener. Humbug had never been able to pop a top with just his hand. He wasn't exactly tiny, but he did have the more delicate elf limbs and features...

When he finally found the weird utensil drawer, he opened his beer, put his pizza on a plate, and headed back out to the main room. He could watch TV for a bit. He was totally in a different time zone than he would have been at home. His former home.

For a moment, he let the sadness of that wash over him. But then, his best friend had also been sent off in a box to somewhere, so there was no job, no friend, and no place for him back there now.

He settled in the recliner, noticing that the butt grooves worn into it were a wee bit big for him. Jingle bells, it was tempting to go peek in the bedroom and see what his erstwhile host looked like, but that might be a bad idea. He needed to wait until the guy woke up to spring this whole situation on him.

He grabbed the remote and turned on the TV, hitting the volume right away so nothing got loud and weird. Now he just needed to find something—absolutely not a

Christmas show. Easier said than done on Christmas Eve.

Finally, he found a comfy spot and a good movie so he could eat his pizza and sip his beer. The dog settled in at his feet, waiting for more bites. He got engrossed in the movie, and he didn't hear anything else he probably should have until the click of nails coming back to him sounded, followed by someone turning on the lights.

He looked back toward the bedroom hallway, eyes widening at the sight of a huge man standing in the opening to it, filling it up.

“Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my fucking living room, eating my leftover pizza?”

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Chapter

Two

Baxter Killian crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for an answer. He wasn't worried, really. The guy sitting in his living room with his dog, eating his pizza, was small. Almost delicate.

While it was hard to distinguish his hair and eye color with just the light from the TV, he could see the guy wore some sort of roughhewn clothes. Maybe he was unhomed, though he didn't smell like it, and Sir Guffy sure seemed to like him.

"You scared the tinsel out of me!" The guy waved a hand, a piece of pizza flying through the air. Guffy leaped, catching it midair, drool flying.

"You're in my living room," Bax said. "Imagine how surprised I am."

"Yeah..." The guy winced. "So, about that."

"Mmmhmm." Baxter knew how to loom. At six-three, two hundred and fifty pounds, and covered with tattoos, he knew how intimidating he was.

Not that this elfin fellow eating his pizza and drinking his beer seemed afraid of him.

"I'm waiting for my explanation."

"Santa sent me."

He blinked. Okay, that was a new one.

“Santa.”

“Yep.” The guy sucked down half a beer. “See all that plaster on the floor? I was in that.”

Curious now, because it was either give into the unholy urge to go look at the stuff all over his floor, or call the cops, Bax went to the fireplace and looked. Sure enough, the stuff that sat on his floor, and the dust on the mantel right above his stocking, was plaster. And it looked like the remains of a doll.

There was a tag that said, from Santa, hanging from a piece of tape on the mantel.

Clever.

“You expect me to buy this shit? I’m calling the cops.” He had left his phone on the bedside table, so he turned to go back to the bedroom to grab it.

“Wait.” The guy popped up out of his, Baxter’s, recliner. “Please.”

“Dude, you broke into my house, and now you’re claiming Santa put you in that weird plaster mold and sent you here? You’re nuts.”

Quick as a bunny, the guy moved in front of him, putting a hand on his chest to stop him. “Wait. Let me ask you a couple of questions.”

“You want to ask me questions?” Baxter looked down at the guy’s hand, though, because the touch on his bare skin made him shiver, his nipples going hard, his cock firming up in his pajama pants.

What the actual fuck?

There was no way he was horndogging over the guy who had broken into his house and eaten his pizza.

Guffy padded to the kitchen door and gave a soft woof, so he turned on his heel to go let him out to potty. It was cold as a witch's tit in a brass bra out there, but Guffy loved the snow.

He went to the fridge then, grabbing the milk before getting a pack of Pop-Tarts off the counter. Might as well have a snack.

“Okay,” Bax said as his cock calmed down with the distance. “Ask away. Then I’ll call the cops.”

The guy licked his lips, following him into the light. He had these wildly green eyes, his hair a dark, shaggy blond. His features were almost dainty while remaining totally masculine, his nose sharp, his ears peeking out of his hair in points.

Fuck, he was adorable.

“Where am I?”

Bax scowled. “In my kitchen. We established that you were eating my pizza.”

The guy waved a hand. “I mean, where in the world. Like on the map.”

Was this the game they were gonna play? “Outside Telluride, Colorado. I kinda live in the middle of nowhere.” Baxter liked his solitude. He’d never really fit in with his peers, so as soon as he’d been financially independent, he’d gotten a house and a workshop in the boonies and gone lone wolf.

“Huh. Figures I go from snow to snow.” The guy rolled his eyes.

“What the hell does that mean? And what’s your name?” So he could stop calling him the guy.

The guy brightened. “Humbug. And you’re Baxter, yeah? I mean, I assume Mom is not sending gifts to the dog.”

“The dog is named Sir Guffy.” Baxter scowled. “Your name is Humbug?”

Humbug bowed. “Gavin Humbug McPherson, at your service.”

This had to be the weirdest dream he’d ever had. Bax leaned on the counter and tore open the Pop-Tarts, which made Guffy woof at the back door to be let back in.

He could hear the crinkle of a wrapper from the old Tomboy mine.

“I’m Baxter, yeah. Bax.”

“Nice to meet you.” Humbug waggled his eyebrows. “So, San Juans. Western Colorado. You live alone but for your dog... Have you always had trouble with people? Always felt like you didn’t mesh with them?”

That had him almost choking on his toaster pastry, but really, that wasn’t hard to surmise from his house, was it? One stocking. The only presents under his tree from his mom. A turkey breast and a box of Stove Top in the fridge and on the counter. The sign on the back kitchen door that said, “I like maybe three people and my dog.”

And that was pushing it.

“Maybe,” he owned. “What of it?”

“And did your mom have trouble conceiving?”

He jerked, staring, his milk halfway to his mouth. Yes. “That’s a damn personal question.”

Humbug’s face scrunched up, his expression both apologetic and wry. He sucked his teeth a bit. “Yeah. Sorry. But I need all the facts.”

“What facts?” Why was he answering this nutbag? Who called themselves Humbug and broke into a man’s house claiming to be a gift from Santa.

And why was he so damn pretty?

“About you. And why Santa sent me to you, specifically. He said you were just what I needed...” Humbug crossed his arms and tilted his head, his eyes flashing this crazy metallic green for a moment. Like something out of the Emerald City in the Oz movie.

“You’re nuts.” That was the only answer for it. Humbug was loony tunes.

“No. I’m an elf, and I think I know how I ended up here. The reason you never fit in?”

“Oh, yeah?” He fed Guffy the rest of his Pop-Tart. “And why is that?”

Humbug grinned, dimples showing in his cheeks. “Because you’re a changeling, of course. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

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Chapter

Three

H umbug had to admit it; Santa was a canny old bastard. Well, one of many of them, right? But this was a stroke of genius.

If Baxter—Bax—was a changeling, then he would never find a human mate. He would always chafe a little under the constraints of not being able to be fully himself. But if someone sent him an elf...well, then he could share every part of himself.

And Humbug couldn't really bitch about being handed a huge, beautiful, tattooed wonder on a silver platter, either. Which he was sure Santa knew. The old fart knew all of his weaknesses, including that he liked his men huge and hot and not a little dangerous.

Which put a whole new spin on the deadline Santa had given him when he'd sent Humbug off, sounding like nothing so much as some sage in an old movie about the Greek gods.

"A year, Humbug. That's how long you have to make your place where I send you. Or you will become a doll forever."

Such drama.

But now he knew it was just a little added incentive for him to get his sexy on with Bax here and not get the cops called on his happy ass.

That would be a colossal waste of time.

“A changeling.” Baxter snorted. “Well, at least you’re original. I mean, why me, though? I’m not rich or anything. I make a decent living, sure. Do you have a thing for Saint Bernards?”

Humbug glanced at Sir Guffy, which was a hilarious name for a dog that big. “Not that I know of, though he seems an agreeable sort.”

Bax shook his head. “You are sunk really deep in this delusion, man. Is there someone I can call? Do you have someone who can pick you up?”

Aw, that was sweet. But the truth of it was he had nowhere else to go. So he forced a cheerful, “Nope. I’m stuck here. So you might as well get used to me.”

Now a thunderous frown swept over Baxter’s features again. He was incredibly hot, if not conventionally handsome. He had dark hair, cut short, he would bet, to tame the wave in it. His eyes were a smoky gray, ringed in charcoal. His nose was long and straight, his chin strong and stubby, and his body...

It was banging. Big and muscled and covered in tattoos that were wild. Ravens and gothic rose mirrors. A human heart dripping with pearls and jewels. One arm was covered by a black and gray fox surrounded by night-blooming flowers.

“I bet you work with fire, don’t you?” he asked.

Those dark, slashing eyebrows flew up. “How did you know?”

“It’s in your blood.”

Now Bax scoffed. “Sure. God. You really are a piece of work.”

“When you call your mom in the morning, ask her to tell you if you’re the same baby she gave birth to.”

“I will not.” Bax started out of the kitchen, but Humbug flicked his fingers at Guffy, who was going to be his partner in crime, and the big dog bounded in front of Bax, tripping him up.

“Ooof!” Bax flailed, and despite the fact that he had to outweigh Humbug by a good fifty pounds, he caught Bax before he could fall.

A little too enthusiastic there, Guff.

Guffy wagged and bounced as if to say, “I do good?”

He danced Bax around, trying to keep them upright. He was sagging by the time they staggered back out into the living room and flopped on the couch.

“Ugh.” He tried to wiggle out from under Bax’s weight, but he was pretty squashed.

“Sorry.” Bax levered up on one hand, and their faces were right there together, and he wanted to tell Santa bloody fifteen to just suck a Kringle toe, but that would be super silly. Because he wanted to kiss Bax. Badly.

So he did.

Bax’s eyes went wide when Humbug—and who named their kid Humbug, even their middle name—kissed him.

He grunted, having to work not to fall right back down on the man because he was so shocked.

Then those soft, amazing lips moved under his, hot and firm, and he moaned, the feeling shocking as hell.

It wasn't like he hadn't kissed before. Or had sex. He and his tattoo artist, Lukas, had been incredibly quid pro quo before the guy had gotten married. But this was...very different to that.

This was Humbug...and he was going to think of the guy as Gavin, kissing him. One hand slid into his hair, holding him there, the other hand on his shoulder, kneading him like a cat would.

He wanted more, he realized. Even though he thought Gavin might be deranged. It did seem as if he was a Christmas present right at this very moment, and Bax wasn't going to look a gift horse in the proverbial mouth.

He slid to one side, his butt hitting the couch, and he pulled Gavin onto his lap, taking control of the kiss. He tasted Gavin with his tongue, letting them tangle together.

"Mmmm." Gavin straddled his lap, rubbing against him as they kissed.

He heard Guffy go by, heading down the hall to the bedroom. Good dog. This wasn't something he really wanted an audience for, canine or otherwise.

They rocked together, Gavin clutching at him, licking him, biting at his lower lip.

Panting, he pressed up, his cock as hard as he could ever remember it being.

"Bax."

"Shhh." He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to realize that this was a monumental mistake. It was Christmas Eve, and for a little while, he wanted to believe in elves in

boxes and Santa and the heat between them.

Gavin searched his face, that bright green gaze so amazing, then nodded, diving back into the kiss the next second.

Better. He ran his hands down Gavin's back to squeeze his tight little ass, which was firm and hot and the perfect size to fill his two hands.

"Uhn!" Gavin arched, his mouth leaving Bax's so he could throw his head back, his neck right there for Bax to bite and suck at.

He took off Gavin's shirt first, tossing the weird homespun thing aside. Then he touched Gavin's skin, leaning down to kiss at the base of Gavin's throat.

"Mmmhmm." Gavin rode his lap, grinding against him. His worn, soft pajama pants were no protection for his rigid cock, and Bax reached down to touch Gavin, wanting to give him the same kind of sensation.

"Jingle, that's good."

"Jingle?" A laugh huffed out, which felt weird. He'd never been amused during sex before, but it also felt good.

"Yes. It's like 'wow' or 'woo'." Gavin tugged his pajama pants down out of the way just enough to get a hand around his bare dick.

"I'll go with 'uhn'," Bax said. And since that whole hand-on-skin thing was such a good idea, he lifted Gavin just enough to pull his pants down, then got them together, both their cocks in one hand as he stroked.

They moved faster and faster, and beads of precome started to ease the way as they

grunted and moaned and sweat dripped off their skin. The musky scent of sex and man filled the air, and Bax breathed deep, taking Gavin in with every breath.

It seemed like hours and it also felt like only seconds passed before Gavin groaned. “Gonna. Bax. Gonna come.”

“Come on, then. Come on me.” He wanted to feel the hot, wet spurts of come on his skin.

“Fuck!” No more jingle. Just that hard, flat word, bursting out as Gavin came all over them, the heat and impact of it enough to make his eyes go wide, his body stiffening.

A harsh cry escaped him, and Bax came as hard as he could remember, his hips thrusting up, his balls pulled up tight and his ass clenching.

They slumped together on the couch, both of them breathing hard, the sweat drying on their skin.

“Damn,” Bax finally said.

“Uh-huh.” Gavin turned sideways to look at the side table. “I think Guffy ate the rest of the pizza.”

“That’s okay. He deserved the treat.” He felt kinda...sticky. “Wanna go take a shower?”

“Yes.” Gavin climbed off him, holding a hand down to help him up.

He heaved himself to his feet, and they headed to the bathroom, and Bax was not about to think about how weird it was that he felt so comfortable with this guy who had invaded his home and claimed to be sent by Santa.

In fact, he decided he wasn't going to think about it tomorrow, either.

Now, the day after Christmas? All bets were off.

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Chapter

Four

H umbug woke up Christmas morning, warm and snug in a huge bed, hemmed in on both sides by big bodies. One was very hairy and kind of drooly. The other was hot, smooth, and hard.

Very hard in one place where Bax's cock prodded his hip.

Well, jingle all the way.

"You need to go out, buddy?" he asked Guffy softly.

Woof.

"Okay, come on." He rolled out of bed reluctantly, but he wanted to see what he could make for breakfast. Obviously Bax at least knew how to assemble food. He'd deduced that from the turkey breast and stuffing mix, as well as the bag of potatoes instead of instant mashed mix or refrigerator ones.

If there was flour, eggs, and milk, he could whip up something. His cousin Taffy was a chef for Santa number...something. He had no idea which.

After he let Guffy out into the pristine, silent dawn, snow everywhere, he headed back to the living room to look at the mantel and the tree. Sure enough, there was another two stockings hanging, one labeled Sir Guffy, one Humbug. And there were

now five more presents under the tree. One to Guffy, one for him, and three for Bax. All neatly labeled from Santa.

Undoubtedly, his stocking and gift would be coal.

The kitchen yielded flour, sugar, yeast, eggs, and milk, so he decided to go for cinnamon rolls. The spices were in a well-organized cabinet, and they were all within their expiration date.

Once he got the rolls made up and rested, then filled and rolled for the rise time, he washed up, let Guffy back in, then made his way back to the bedroom, slipping into bed and putting his cold feet on Bax.

“Ack.”

“Morning,” Humbug murmured. “I let your dog out.”

“Did you bring him back in?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know if I was supposed to towel him off, but he wasn’t super wet.”

“No, he’ll roll around on his bed in the living room. He has a towel in there.”

“Well trained as well as polite to elves,” Humbug said.

“Still with the elf thing?” Bax asked, sliding a hand down his back.

“Call your mom,” he said. “I started cinnamon rolls.”

“No shit?”

“Not even a little. We have an hour until the rolls are ready to put in the oven. Whatever should we do?”

Bax laughed. “I can think of a few things. What time is it?”

“Uh, early?” He looked at the clock by the bed. “Six thirty.”

“My mom will call at eight. So...”

“So, hello.” He took the kiss he wanted, and things got pretty gymnastic and sweaty for a nice long while. So much that they fogged up the windows in the bedroom.

An hour later, the rolls were in the oven, smelling amazing, and Bax stood in the living room, looking at the mantel and the Christmas tree.

“Did you bring me presents?” Bax asked, his voice toneless.

“Nope. Santa came while we were sleeping. The big candy-cane dick.”

That had Bax’s gaze cutting to him in disbelief. “Tell me how you really feel, Humbug.”

“Okay. Why did I have to get Santa fifteen? Why not five? Or eight? They both have nice wives and are too busy to stick their noses in an elf’s private life or hold a grudge because a guy has ideas.”

Bax opened his mouth, but then his phone rang, and he pulled it out of his robe pocket. He sighed, then clicked it to answer. “Hi, Mom. Merry Christmas. How’s Vermont?”

Bax strained to hear the woman on the other end, but he could just barely hear the

murmur of her voice. And when he closed his eyes to sharpen his other senses, Guffy licked his fingers, making him laugh out loud.

“Huh? No, I have a friend staying over. I have friends. No, it is not my tattoo artist.” When Humbug stared, Bax shrugged. “Oh, did he? That’s nice. Another ring is always handy. Uh-huh. Look, Mom, can I ask you a question?”

Oh. Here it went.

“Yeah. It’s gonna sound weird.” Bax stared at him. “Is there a reason I’m an only child? Well, sure. I know you told me how hard it was to—uh-huh. And I was sickly, huh?”

Bingo. Humbug knew it! Bax was a changeling. The sickly human had been taken away to heal up in the land of summer or wherever, and big old Bax, who would be a mountain in the elf world, was sent to the human realm to make art and never know why he wasn’t fitting in.

“Right. No, I just read this book about this kid who was a changeling. Have you ever heard of that? You did? Wild. I love you too, Mom. No, I haven’t opened them yet. I’ll text when I do. Oh, you’re welcome. I’m glad you like it. Okay. I love you too. Bye.”

Humbug waited, tapping his foot.

“What?” Bax asked, shoulders hunching.

“What did she say?”

“That she used to joke with my dad about me being a changeling. I was sickly when I was born, and then two months later, I was this hale, hearty, good eater. She just

figured they misdiagnosed me.”

“Nope.” He chortled, going to pour coffee when the pot dinged, signaling it was done brewing. “Changeling.”

“Stop it. Most infant birth conditions fade in a couple of months. Jaundice. Colic. Hydrocele.”

“What is that last one?” he asked, tilting his head.

“Water on the balls.”

“Uh...”

“I saw it on a medical show once. I can’t sleep at night sometimes.”

“That’s because you come from subterranean stock.”

“Stop it. I need to open my mom’s presents.”

“Well, let’s get coffee.” He poured them both a cup. “How do you want yours?”

“With hot chocolate mix in it.”

His eyes widened. “You can do that?”

“What? You’re supposedly Santa’s right-hand man.”

“No. That’s Ed.” He sighed. “I never got as far as supervisor.”

“That’s—” Bax closed his eyes for a moment. “You know, sooner or later, you’re

going to have to tell me who you are.”

“I told you. Gavin Humbug McPherson.” Humbug pulled down the cocoa mix he’d seen when he’d found the coffee.

“Right, but what’s your real story?”

Humbug sighed. Sooner or later, Bax would figure out he wasn’t a liar. “I told you. Box. Jolly old elf. Bad elf.” He pointed at his own chest. “Presents.”

“Okay. But?—”

“Your mom backed me up.”

Bax’s expression went skeptical. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Come on.” He stirred in just enough cocoa to sweeten the coffee. “Presents.”

They settled in on the floor of the living room with Guffy, the gas log blazing merrily. Bax stole glances at him as he distributed presents. He opened his stocking, peering in.

Humbug sighed. Black jellybeans labeled “Coal”. Holly leaves, he hated licorice.

“Did you bring that with you?”

“Trust me, I would never give me black licorice.” He stuffed it back in the stocking before Guffy tried to eat it.

“Huh.” Eyes widening, Bax pulled a little gift out of his stocking. “From Santa?”

“I bet it’s not coal. Open it.”

Bax did, staring at the little glass figurine of a raven he pulled out.

“Neat! It’s like your tattoo.”

“Yeah.” Bax glanced back and forth between the figurine and him.

“So what did your mom get you?” Curiosity drove him to see what kind of gifts Baxter’s mom got her kid.

“Um...” Bax set the bird aside and grabbed the first gift from his mom. He tore it open. “Socks.”

Humbug winced. “Well, it is cold here.”

“True enough.”

The next gift yielded pajamas, and the third was a hand-knitted hat that had ear flaps and an elfy-style tail.

“Now that’s cute,” Humbug said.

“It’s the third one this year. You want it?” Bax offered it over.

“I do.” He plopped it on his head. Guffy stood and immediately started nibbling on the pom-pom at the end of the tail.

“Guffy, quit it.” He pulled the tail over his shoulder.

“So, uh, what did Santa bring you?” Bax peered at the one gift that had been under

the tree for him.

“Probably underwear.” That was what bad elves got, besides coal.

“Let’s see.”

He ripped off the wrapping paper, tilting his head. Huh.

“What is it?”

“A day planner.” Why on earth had Santa sent him a calendar book? Weird. And pens. That was a nice touch. A set of multicolored gel pens.

“You like planners?”

“Not really. I’m not very organized.” So what did this mean? He flipped it open, looking through, and on the December monthly page, the one twelve months in, Santa had circled Christmas day in red.

His deadline.

Nice.

“It’s a joke, I think.”

“Hmm.”

He grinned, trying to force some cheer on them. Opening presents was meant to be fun. “How about we see what he brought Guffy?”

“Good idea.” Bax opened the stocking, finding a bag of treats and a bandana. The

wrapped gift yielded a giant stuffed monkey that unrolled and seemed to expand. Guffy pounced on it right away, the squeaker going to town.

“He likes it,” Humbug said, watching him play.

“He loves monkeys.” There was a note in Baxter’s voice that sent off little warning bells for Humbug, but he ignored it.

“Okay, you should open your last ones.”

“Sure.” Baxter still stared at him. Then he seemed to break the moment and he opened the “Santa” gifts. One was a fluffy scarf with some kind of cartoon character on it. The second was a smart watch band. And the third looked to be some sort of...pliers.

That left Bax staring at them in his hands.

Finally, he looked up at Humbug, his wild gray eyes gone icy clear. “Are you stalking me? Is that what this is? You’re a stalker?”

“What?” The accusation caught him flat-footed.

“You’re stalking me. How else did you know Guffy likes monkeys and that I love Totoro and ravens and that I broke my good jewelry pliers?” Bax’s voice rose with each word, causing Guffy to abandon his monkey and come lick his face.

“I didn’t know any of that.”

“Bullshit! You show up at my house with presents for me that you’d have to be watching me to get, and you pretend to be an elf from Santaland and tell me I’m a fucking changeling? That’s deranged.” Bax scrambled to standing. “You need to get

out.”

He sat right where he was. It made sense without context for sure. “I am not a stalker. I had never seen you until last night.”

Those huge fists balled up, and he realized that even Baxter’s fingers and hands were tattooed. Not with words, but with vines and berries and tiny birds.

“I want you to get out.” Baxter’s tone strained under the weight of anger.

“No. You don’t. I’m not a stalker. I’m an elf, like you. And Santa sent me.”

“That’s nuts. And I got carried away last night, but?—”

“But nothing. Look, I’m a crappy elf. I have a big mouth and I had big ideas and I’m being punished. But you got me as a present, so you must be a very good boy.”

Bax’s cheeks darkened. “You little shit—” He started forward, clearly intent on mayhem.

“Ah, ah, ah.” He held up a finger, which caused a shower of golden sparkles, causing Bax to stop in his tracks. And then sneeze.

“What the hell?”

Guffy leaped into the air, barking and chasing the little sparks of magic.

“I am not above using what I have to keep you from doing violence on me.”

“What you have?” Bax sneezed again.

The timer on the oven went off, and he uncurled from the floor, rising. He grinned at the confusion in Bax's expression. "That will be my rolls. Time for breakfast!"

And he sailed off to the kitchen, his grin widening when he heard Bax sneeze one more time. Silly cave elf. Santa's elves were mostly from the Norse tradition.

Their magic could be incredibly like an allergy when they wanted it to be.

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Chapter

Five

“Happy New Year!” A shower of sparkles came from Gavin’s hands, which he had cupped but then flung them up and out to the sides as if he was tossing confetti or rose petals or something.

How was Gavin still in his house nearly a week after he’d arrived?

Bax knew it was crazy. But somehow, Gavin kept charming him into letting him stay.

He’d even gone to the Walmart over in Montrose to get the guy some clothes, because he’d arrived wearing one set of weird homespun stuff, and while he looked adorable wearing only the socks and hat Bax’s mom had sent, that was a serious distraction. And had been pretty cold while Gavin had waited for his one set of clothes to wash and dry.

“Happy New Year.” He blinked away the spots on his vision, then grabbed Gavin to kiss him. Hard. It was midnight on New Year’s Eve. Kisses were way better than sparkles.

“Mmm.” Gavin kissed him back, fingers sinking into his hair. Guffy was sound asleep on his bed, so they could make out madly without an audience.

He still wasn’t sure he bought the elf-on-the-mantel thing, but there was something...magical about Gavin. Something that told Bax he wasn’t a stalker.

Maybe that was just loneliness and desperation talking.

They pulled apart, breathing hard. They had made each other come a lot in the last few days, but he still wanted more.

“Should we have our champagne and charcuterie?” Gavin asked, rubbing Bax’s cock with one hand.

“It can stay nice in the fridge. This first.”

“Good idea. Couch?”

“No.”

Gavin raised his eyebrows, questioning.

“Bed. I want more than a hand job or a blow job.”

“Ohhh, Jack Frost. Yes, please.” Gavin dragged him toward the bedroom, towing him like a tug and a barge.

He chuckled, letting his feet move fast. He wanted that tight, tiny ass with a fervor that kind of shocked him. The guy made him nuts, no doubt about it.

They hit the bedroom door and staggered through it, and after he closed it to keep Guffy out, he almost tossed Gavin on the bed.

“Oof.” Gavin bounced, then made grabby hands at him.

“Coming.” Soon, he hoped.

As soon as he was within reach, Gavin reached out and pulled him down on the bed with him. They kissed so hard he tasted a tiny tinge of copper, and he moaned. That was so damn intense, and it made his cock rise even harder, higher.

“Naked.” Gavin plucked at his sweats, and he nodded, rising up on his knees to tear off his shirt, then Gavin’s. Gavin moaned right back at him when his hands skated over that lean chest, the flat nipples more pink than brown.

So sweet, that hot chest.

“Jingle, you’re amazing,” Gavin said, stroking his chest. “So strong.”

“Well, you know...”

“Uh-huh. Metal work. Blacksmithing.” Gavin had been fascinated about his job, about him doing all kinds of metal art and having his own forge.

“It’s in the blood, big guy,” Gavin had told him.

He was still pushing the whole changeling elf thing. And he was starting to believe in Gavin’s magic, at least. Not that he believed he was anything but human.

“Stop frowning.” Gavin pushed his pants down, grabbing his cock and tugging.

“Fuck! Gavin.”

“Mmmhmm. Hot and hard and perfect.”

“I want you.” He wanted more than a hand or mouth. He wanted to fuck Gavin senseless.

“Good. You can have me.” Gavin rolled to his back, letting go of his cock, and wiggled out of any clothes he had left. Then he spread his legs, giving Bax the most amazing freaking view.

He licked his lips, breathing through his nose as he tried to calm himself down. If he tried to take Gavin’s ass now, he would come like a teenager.

“Bax?” Gavin’s smile started to fade.

“I need to breathe a moment. I’m so hard it hurts. Gavin. I want you so bad. So damn bad.”

“Oh. Good.” Gavin arched, showing off for him.

His mouth went dry. “Gav.”

“Oh, a nickname.” Gavin beckoned with two fingers. “Come on, big guy. I need you.”

“I need to find the lube.”

“Not needed.” Gavin winked. “Just come here, babe.”

He crawled up on the bed, moving right into the vee between Gavin’s legs. Gavin’s scent filled his nose, musky with a hint of pine and peppermint, which was always such a trip.

He bent to kiss Gavin’s belly, that hard cock nudging his chin and neck.

“Mmm. That’s it. Just like that. Now, touch me. Slide your hands behind my balls and touch my hole.”

Bax grunted at the words, his hips jerking, dancing a little at how perfectly filthy those words sounded. He liked a little dirty talk, which Gavin seemed to have figured out.

And he did as he was told, pushing two fingers back over Gavin's perineum to his hole, finding it hot and slick and so, so wet.

Gavin laughed, the sound breathless. Sexual. "That's all natural, babe. The perils and delights of fucking an elf."

He blinked. "That's not?—"

"Don't you dare say possible." Gavin stared right into his eyes. "It's a thing. And I'm super wet because I want you so much. I want your knot."

"My what?" Stunned, he pressed his fingers deep, and the wetness really did feel natural. Holy... This was wild. The lengths Gavin was going to in order to make him believe this elf thing were out of this world.

"Touch me, Bax. I need you to stretch me so you can fuck me. Your knot is gonna be huge."

"Do you kiss Santa with that mouth?"

"Ew, no. What, you think my Santa is number sixty-nine? No. Mine is the quintessential jolly old elf." Gavin smacked his shoulder. "No bringing him up when your fingers are in my ass."

"Right. Sorry." He got to laughing, which was something he'd never done during sex before Gavin.

“More sexy times, less snorting,” Gavin demanded.

“Right, honey. Sorry.” He opened Gavin up, moving his fingers in and out, his breath starting to come fast and hard. Something about the lube Gavin had used felt supernatural, superslick, and he wanted his cock in there. Now.

He’d never wanted anything more.

“I need you,” Gavin said.

“Yes.” He rose back up on his knees, his body on fire, and he pressed his cock to Gavin’s entrance. Then he moved forward, sinking into Gavin an inch at a time. He closed his eyes against the rush of need. He was right.

This was infinitely better than a hand or blow job. This was heaven.

Gavin wrapped both legs around him, hands on his shoulders to pull him down for a kiss. Those soft lips always made him feel like a king, and he pressed his tongue and his cock deep, trying not to just shoot right away. Something swelled huge as he pushed into Gavin, bigger than he’d ever felt, but he didn’t have time to think about it.

Gavin squirmed under him, and he thrust, finding a rhythm that suited them both. He couldn’t slow it down, but he could keep this up as long as he needed to. As long as he had to.

“Oh.” Gavin tore his mouth free to breathe. “Soon, babe. Soon.”

“Uh-huh.” He was close too, his balls up tight to his body, his skin too damn tight and hot. His ass clenched as he tried to hold on one more sec?—

Gavin squeezed down on him, on that crazy swelling, then cried out, coming all over his belly and chest in great spurts, and that was all he could take. He slammed into Gavin and came, his come filling Gavin up, his body on fire.

They slumped down together, and Gavin petted his back and neck, then stroked his hair. “Mmm. Definitely happy New Year.”

“Hell, yes.” He was so sleepy. And he was damn happy. “So what was that about my knot?”

“You don’t know?” Gavin wiggled. “Feel that?”

He grunted. He felt like he was...stuck. Like he and Gavin were molded together.

“That’s your knot. It swells up when you fuck me.”

“Honey, I’ve had sex before. I’ve never had a knot.”

“You haven’t had sex with me. It will go down.” Gavin patted his back. “Just go to sleep.”

Huh. He tried to move again, and he couldn’t really get free. But he wasn’t going to panic. He was going to breathe and relax, and it would pass. And it was the best sex he’d ever had, so he would take it.

Even if he had no idea what he was going to do with Gavin if he decided to stay.

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Chapter

Six

“ O ne teaspoon of salt...” Biting his lip, Humbug measured salt into the sauce he was trying to make for Bax’s Valentine’s Day dinner.

Bax loved Alfredo sauce on his fettucine, and Humbug had never made it before. It sounded easy enough, but he was a baker, not a cook. His chocolate tarts? Were perfect where they sat cooling on the wire rack next to the toaster oven.

But, since Bax was working out at the forge, and he was mostly sitting on his ass with the dog watching soap operas, Humbug wanted to do something nice for Bax.

He had cream and milk in a pan, and he was whisking while the pasta boiled. Then he would put in the painstakingly grated parm and pepper and?—

The sound of hissing water boiling over made him jump. “Well, sparkle.” He grabbed a towel, mopping up the water, then stirring and turning the burner down.

Then the smell of burning cream hit him, and he growled, turning just in time to see it boil right over.

“Argh!” He pulled the pan off the stove and tossed it in the sink, which vibrated hard. Which dislodged his carefully shaved parm, knocking it to the floor.

Guffy leaped, licking up the cheese in mere seconds, and he groaned. “Damn it all to

the frozen sleigh barn!”

“What’s wrong, honey?” Bax came through the back door on a wave of frozen air, the wind making him gasp. He tended to wear a T-shirt and sweatpants inside, since Bax kept the house way warmer than his place in the North Pole ever had been. But that gave the outside air a chance to find all his vulnerable spots.

“I burned the cream after the water boiled over, and now I’m out of parm.”

“Oh, man.” Bax’s eyelines crinkled up like he wanted to smile, but he didn’t. He reached out to turn off the stove. “Guffy ate the cheese?”

“Yes.” He tried not to pout.

“Makes him fart like death.”

“Great.” He sighed. “Does anyone deliver pizza out here?”

“No. I can call it in and go get it, though.”

“Oh. I don’t want you to do that.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind. Just let me wash up.” Bax did grin then. “I know you like pizza.”

“Okay.” Gavin cleaned up while Bax was showering superfast, and he tried not to be...sad. He hadn’t left the house since he got there. Not to go anywhere but the forge and the studio.

But he knew Bax wasn’t sure what to do with him, and he was half afraid Bax would just leave him in town.

“Hey.” Bax came out looking incredibly handsome in a heavy cable-knit sweater in dark green that played up his dark hair and gray eyes. “It’s Valentine’s Day. Want to go with me and have pizza in town?”

He opened his mouth to say no, but the scent of a horrifying dog fart filled the room.

Bax wrinkled his nose. “That was fast.”

“Let me go put on real clothes,” Humbug said.

“Cool.” Bax caught him as he passed by. “Thanks for trying.” Bax gave him a happy, hot little kiss.

“I did manage to make dessert.” He waved at the tarts.

“Let me put those on top of the fridge. Chocolate could be lethal for Guffy, and he’ll try it.”

“Oh, holly berry. I would die if something happened to him.” Guffy was his new bestie since he wasn’t hearing anything from Stardust, who had been sent somewhere else by their Santa.

“No dying for anyone. Go on, honey.”

“Thank you.” He ran to the bedroom to put on jeans, a sweatshirt with rainbow hearts all over it, and good socks and boots. He grabbed his coat and his big pom-pom hat on the way back. “Ready!”

“Come on, honey.”

“So where are we going?” He slipped his hand into Bax’s after he locked the front

door. He'd learned that even this far out, Bax always locked up because Guffy would go make messes.

"A place called Brown Dog Pizza. So good."

"Was that what I had on Christmas Eve?"

Bax wrinkled his nose. "No, that was grocery store take-and-bake. Not bad, but not Brown Dog."

"Yum." He was used to the one kind of pizza they served at the pizza place near his little condo up north. It was cute. Quaint. Very, uh, bland. He bounced when he got into the truck. "You're taking me out!"

"I am." Bax glanced at him as he got them moving. "I should have done this before now."

"No. I get it. This whole thing is weird. You think I'm crazy; I think you're a changeling..."

"I don't think you're crazy. I'm not sure what you are, but you're magical."

"Literally." He winked. "But I do feel like I need to do more than spend your money and bake... What can I do to help your business? I'm a great toymaker. And I'm pretty good at things like websites and social media. I mean, I'm self-taught, but I had ideas for Santa."

"And he said no?"

"He said there was protocol." Which there was. Humbug had just never been one to submit ideas in writing and wait years for the wheels to turn.

“Ah. Well, that’s why I work for myself.”

“I know!” He glanced sideways, noting Bax’s grin. “But I could help.”

“Sure. You can look at my website tomorrow. I have the commissions side and the webstore side, but I think my sales site sucks.” Bax drummed a little bit on the steering wheel. His hands were never still.

“Cool!” Woo. He didn’t dance too much more, but he was so tickled. Jingle, how cool would it be if he could help make Bax’s life easier instead of harder.

He wanted to do all the things for his lover, because that was what Bax was. And it really had nothing to do with his own doll-forever thing. He just wanted Bax.

“I’ll take all the help I can get.”

He reached over to put a hand on Bax’s knee. They’d settled into a pattern of having meals and sex together, watching movies and stuff, but they rarely talked about anything personal. So he was going to try something.

“Want to play a game of questions?”

“Sure. What kind of questions? And what do I get if I win.”

“Um. I guess it’s not exactly a win-lose kind of game? But I could give you a kiss per question? Payable whenever.”

“Sounds good. I will offer the same.”

He beamed, because they both liked kissing. A lot.

“Okay, so I’ll start. What’s your favorite color?”

“Charcoal.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s soothing. What’s yours?”

“Turquoise blue. Like the sky when it clears off after a snowstorm and is really cloudless and cold.”

“Neat. I’ll have to look. It’s supposed to snow again next week.”

“You do have summer here though, right?”

“Yep. Okay, my turn. What’s your favorite pizza topping?”

“I like veggies most, but really, anything but lutefisk is fine.”

Bax glanced at him, one eyebrow raised. “Lute-who?”

“Fisk. It’s a preserved white fish.”

“Okay ew.” Bax shook his head. “Why would anyone put that on pizza?”

“Well, you know. Elves.” He shrugged, car-dancing to the radio. He loved the music Bax listened to. It was kind of gothy, but definitely had rhythm and melody and all the fun stuff.

“Huh. Sounds horrible.”

He grinned. “Hence me liking the veg pizza. What do you like?”

“All the meats. Though I also love a mushroom pizza.”

Bax was so subterranean. And he said he wasn’t a dark elf changeling.

“I dig mushrooms.”

“We should get one mushroom and one half and half meat and veg.”

“Or just a supreme. I like those too, as long as there’s no fish.”

“Done.” They didn’t drive into town, exactly, he thought. In fact, Bax kinda steered around it out to the ski village. He’d studied all the maps. He knew the area, even if he was seeing it all for the first time.

“Hmmm.” He pondered his next question carefully. He knew what movies Bax liked. Lord of the Rings style fantasy, action-adventure, and light horror. No torture porn. He knew Bax’s music. He knew what Bax did for a living, and he knew Bax’s art intimately. He’d spent hours staring at various pieces.

“Do you like to read?”

“Yes. And two for one, I like fantasy, thriller, and cozy mystery.”

“Cozies? Really?” That was so cool! He loved the Elf Who series...

“Yep. And, of course, Stephen King.”

“Scary.” He grinned. “I adore cozies, though.”

They talked all the way through the drive, getting seated, and ordering at the restaurant, where they did order their pizzas as well as garlic bread and drinks.

It was like a date. It was a date. Humbug had never really had one of those. They even lit a little candle on their table and gave them a free beer or glass of wine for Valentine's Day, which made Bax flush a dark pink.

He reached across the pizza bones almost an hour later to touch Bax's hand. "Thank you for this. I needed to get out of the house."

"I could tell." Bax sighed. "This is such a weird thing, Gavin, but I don't want you to worry that I'm going to kick you out."

"Good? That's good. But I need to contribute. I'm really a hard worker."

Bax gave him a wry grin. "I know. My house is cleaner than it's ever been, and the way you churn out baked goods, I'm going to have to start jogging again to keep from blowing up."

"I like to bake." It was his turn to flush.

"I love it. Hell, you could sell your stuff to local coffee shops."

That made him brighten. "Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Hmmm." Okay. He needed to do research. Which meant he needed his own laptop. He closed his eyes. Dear Santa, I need a phone and a laptop. Just to get me started. My birthday is in a week. Please?

He would see what happened with that.

“Where did you go?” Bax asked, squeezing his hand.

“Just making a wish.” He beamed at his lover. “Now, should we go home for dessert?”

“Oh, hell yes. And we also need to burn some calories.” Bax signaled for the check. “Right?”

“At least two or three thousand,” he agreed.

Now that Bax knew what his knot was? He liked to use it a lot. So did Gavin. It was a win-win.

It was Valentine’s Day. And it was turning out to be a really good one. The best one ever.

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Chapter

Seven

Bax checked on Guffy, who was out playing in the April Fool's Day mud. That was going to be a joy to clean up. Then he went looking for Gavin, who was sitting at the kitchen counter, head in his hands, his laptop open in front of him.

The computer had arrived mid-March, on what he'd found out was Gavin's birthday. No shipping label. Just a box with a Macbook and an iPhone, both already loaded with apps and ready to roll. And with a plan attached to the phone, too.

He'd twitched some, thinking maybe Gavin had another sugar daddy somewhere, but he'd just smiled his mysterious elf grin and said it was from Santa.

"Hey, honey. What's wrong?" The scent of baking cookies filled the air.

"Hmm?" Gavin glanced up, his eyes a little red-rimmed, his face pale. "Oh. Hey, babe. I just don't feel so great. I tried to have some coffee, and it made me barf."

"Ugh." He moved quickly, going to press the back of his hand to Gavin's forehead. "You don't feel hot."

"I'm not running a fever. I don't get it, Bax. I'm never sick."

No, that he believed. He'd caught a rotten cold in March, and Gavin had never so much as sniffled.

“Well, I can watch your cookies if you want to move to the other room. Smelling food might make it worse.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Gavin grabbed his laptop and phone, then dragged ass to the front room to sit on the couch with Guffy, who whined and licked Gavin’s face. He looked so damn puny.

He sniffed the cookies. Oatmeal scotchies. Yum. He knew Gavin had probably made a double batch. Some to wrap up in little bags with ribbons to sell, some for Bax. Gavin had gotten a bunch of clients for his desserts already, and was bringing in plenty of money to help with the bills.

The guy was incredibly good at making things salable. His website had never looked better.

He poured a cup of coffee, then leaned on the counter, waiting for the timer to ding.

When it did, he called out to Gavin. “Is this the last batch, honey?”

“Yes. Would you pull them out? I’ll come put them on the cooling rack in five or so.”

“I can do that.” He’d washed up out at the studio, so he wouldn’t get anything contaminated. Gavin ran a tight ship, the kitchen so clean that even Guffy’s fur didn’t dare shed in there.

“Thanks, love.”

“You’re welcome.” He liked the love as much as the babe. Maybe more. That had started after Valentine’s Day, when they’d had their first night out, and then the most amazing night of explosive sex ever.

He set the timer, and when it went off, he transferred the cookies with extra care.
“Can I have one, honey?”

“Of course.” He heard Gavin gag. “I made the batch for you. The others are already boxed up.”

“I’ll eat it out here, okay?” He had no desire to make Gavin feel worse.

“Thanks, love.”

When he was done dunking his cookie into his coffee, he cleaned up, then went to check on Gavin. He was prone on the couch now, the back of his right arm over his eyes.

“Do you want a cold cloth, honey?”

“No. I think I’m going to go back to bed for a bit. Is that okay?”

“Hey, I’m not gonna judge.” Poor baby. “Do you want me to run out and get you some Sprite?”

“Ohh.” Gavin looked at him from under the arm. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” That was the truth. His sicky-sick lover had made him cookies. The least he could do was get soup and lemon-lime soda. “I’ll be back. Guffy, help Gavin to bed, huh?”

Guffy hopped down, and sure enough, he let Gavin lean on him all the way to the bedroom.

That was just awful. Nothing was worse than puking.

Bax grabbed his keys and his wallet, his phone in his pocket, and headed for the door.

An hour later, he was back with noodle soup and broth, tea and Sprite, and a new pair of jammies for Gavin that he hadn't been able to resist. They'd been in the clearance bin, and they had Christmas elves on them.

He let himself in quietly, then went to check on Gavin. Guffy wagged for him but didn't leave the bed.

"Good dog," he murmured. He moved to pour a glass of Sprite to leave by the bed. He grabbed the box of saltines he'd gotten to go with the soup too. Sometimes they helped.

That way, if Gavin was still nauseated when he woke up, he would have crackers to chew on.

Moving back to the kitchen after he dropped off the drink, he thought of how sweet Gavin looked when he was asleep. Those bright green eyes always held mischief and a little bit of the devil, but asleep, Gavin looked young. Angelic. Adorable.

Even with tired shadows under his eyes.

Bax had another cookie before he decided he needed some protein. He'd had cereal for breakfast, so he needed something... Maybe a turkey sandwich. Tuna was tempting, but the smell might linger and make Gavin gag. Or worse, be ill again.

Baxter wasn't great at listening to someone else puke.

So he had a sandwich and, instead of going back to the studio for the afternoon, he worked on ordering some supplies and doing some financials, just to stay close in case his lover needed him.

He hoped to hell Gavin recovered soon. He didn't like Gavin being sick. He didn't like it one bit.

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Chapter

Eight

This sickness thing wasn't going away.

And Gavin understood why now. He had his own money these days, and he had, very stealthily, not only ordered a pregnancy test, but he had used it.

Kringle help him, how was he going to explain this to the big lug who still thought he was a giant lying liar, even after living together for five months?

He sighed, glancing down at Guffy, who had been glued to his side ever since that first day he'd been sick. "Well, I guess I should bake something, huh?" The morning saltines had helped the last week or so, so maybe the morning sickness was easing up.

"Yeah. We'll bake something to make it easier to take." He wandered out to the kitchen, still in the amazing soft jammies Bax had gotten him, though now that it was May, it was getting a little warm for them by midmorning.

He'd just ordered summer clothes, which sucked, because now he was going to have to get more pants with looser waists.

He grabbed his little vintage recipe box, opening it to look at the keeper recipes he'd created since he'd started his cookie and pastry business. He had plenty of orders, but not nearly many local ones since the ski lodges had closed for the season.

Mostly he had online orders for flooded cookies.

“Maybe I’ll just make bread.” He had a yummy buttery bread recipe where the smell didn’t make him hurl, and Bax loved it with honey butter. Or as a component of mushroom toast. The man really was a cave elf.

He glanced out the kitchen window at the shed where Bax had his studio. The giant metal black bear that stood outside the forge made him smile every time he saw it, and he had taken to dressing it for the season.

Right now, it wore a lei of silk flowers and a crown of green vines. Bax just rolled his eyes every time it changed.

The forge was working hard, smoke rising, the clang of hammer on steel telling him Bax was still working on a sword commission for a local collector.

He grinned, loving his life.

Even if he did have to explain to Bax that he was preggers and that he was still a guy...

He grabbed the yeast out of the fridge, then the milk and eggs. This was an enriched dough, so he would need to warm up both.

The dough was rising and he was settling down in front of his laptop to look at his orders when he heard a car pull up out front.

He frowned, because Bax hadn’t mentioned anyone coming to pick up a commission today. And Bax had a lot of clients, but not real friends to speak of, so...

Guffy woofed, then headed to the front door, wagging. Okay, so maybe it was

someone Guffy knew.

The doorbell rang, and he called on the doorbell cam to show him who it was. A leggy older lady stood there, her purse slung over one shoulder.

Gavin went to the door, opening it just enough to look out. “Hi. Can I help you?”

She frowned at him, her gray gaze taking him in. “I’m looking for Baxter. Is he—” She sniffed. “Is he out back working?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m his mother. Who are you?”

Oh, sparkle. He hadn’t heard Bax talk to his mom since Christmas, but maybe he did it when he was out in the studio.

“Oh. Um, come on in.” He opened the door, and she stepped inside, studying his pajamas. Guffy licked her hand, and she chuckled.

“Hello, you great mutt.”

“Guffy, go get daddy.”

Guffy trotted off, and he stepped back to let Bax’s mom into the house. “Let me just go get changed.”

“Of course.” She watched him like a hawk, and Gavin fled. Oh, Santa’s boxer shorts, this was unexpected.

He pulled on the one decent pair of pants he had that were not jeans or sweats, then a

nice pullover. He also pulled on socks, because it seemed weird to have naked toes in front of his lover's mom.

He hung out in the hall until he heard Bax coming in the back door.

"Mom? What are you doing here? I thought you were in Aruba."

"I was, but it was dreadfully boring. Do you have a new roommate? Is your little art hobby not paying the bills anymore?"

Oh, that was super high-elf mean. He headed into the living room at a march, his hands clenched.

He had wanted to hear what Bax called him, but he was in high dudgeon now.

"This is my boyfriend, Mom. Mom, meet Gavin. Gavin, my mom, Barbara Killian."

"Oh. Well, it's nice to meet you, Gavin. Bax has never mentioned you."

He bared his teeth. "You've been out of the country, I hear."

"I have." She stared at him like a snake she expected to strike. "And where are you from, Gavin?"

"Up north," he said, going for vague.

"Oh." She blinked.

"Mom, you know I love you. But why didn't you call?"

"I'm just stopping through on my way to Jackson Hole. Can I borrow your guest

room tonight?”

“Of course you can. And I can take you out to supper.” Bax gave him a raised eyebrow.

He wagged his own.

“We. We’ll take you to supper.”

“Can we go to Allreds?”

That was a swanky place out at the ski mountain. “Sure,” Bax said.

“Excellent. I’ll take a shower now. I’ve been traveling forever!”

“I’ll get your bag,” Bax murmured.

Sympathy filled Humbug’s heart, and he went to hug Bax. “Hey. You okay?”

“Yeah.” Bax rolled his eyes. “We just don’t click, me and Mom. You all right?”

“I had my crackers.”

“Good.” Bax dropped a kiss on his head. “Let me get her bag. She’ll want all her shit.”

“I’ll make some finger sandwiches.” She seemed like that kind of a lady.

“Thanks, honey.” Bax stomped outside, and he glanced at Guffy. “This is sad, buddy.”

That was so often the case with changelings. A mother knew when a kid wasn't hers. The fae moms did the change out of love, but the human ones usually didn't even get to know. They just knew something wasn't right.

But that was okay. Bax wasn't just Humbug's lover. He was his mate, or he wouldn't have been able to get pregnant. He would love Bax for the rest of his life.

"Really, I never understood where his need for fire and land of his own came from," his mom was saying at dinner over her filet and lobster. "His father is so...urban. And I'm just a jet-setter." She whacked Gavin's arm.

"I can see that." Gavin picked at his jumbo berry salad. "My pop always says kids surprise a guy."

"Your father sounds very smart."

"Oh, no, Dad is stubborn and swears he knows all."

Mom frowned. "Pop is your grandfather?"

"No, I have two dads."

Bax took a sip of his drink to hide his surprised expression. That sounded...progressive for the North Pole.

"O-oh." His mom's hitch was telling. She was shocked. Which was weird, because she knew he was gay...

"Yeah. They're both good elves." Gavin winked.

His mom giggled. "I'm sure." She drank some more wine, which Gavin hadn't

indulged in. Honestly, Bax was worried about his stomach. Maybe he should take Gavin to urgent care.

“So, you’re leaving tomorrow, Mom?” He didn’t mean to be ugly, but he wanted to be able to talk to Gavin, to make sure he was okay, and he had a huge commission for one of the parks in town. He was on deadline.

Her lower lip quivered for a moment. Then she buttered some lobster. “I am. My friend Lottie is in Jackson.”

“Well, you always have fun with her.”

“I do.” His mom chuckled. “I won’t cramp your style, son.”

“I’m on deadline, is all.” Now he felt bad. “I mean, if you want to stay.”

“No, no. I’ll call when I’m on my way back and then I can spend a few days.”

Relieved, Bax nodded. “That’s perfect. Right, Gavin?”

“I would love that.” Gavin still had bruised shadows under his eyes, but he smiled gamely.

His mom tucked away at the last of her lobster. “I’ll take the rest of the steak home to Guffy.”

“Good idea. Gavin made turtle cheesecake.” His mom loved caramel. “He bakes for all the coffee shops locally.”

“Would anyone care for dessert?”

He grinned at the waiter. “What’s the prix fixe dessert?” They could always take it home.

“Pecan pie torte.”

“Is it terribly unclassy to take it with us?” his mom asked. “This young man has made me cheesecake.”

“Not a problem.” The server smiled. “I’ll bring that right out in a box.”

“Thanks.” They all sort of sat there as dishes were whisked away, until his mom smiled brightly.

“So, Baxter says you bake, Gavin?”

“I do.” She’d sat with Bax while he’d made the cheesecake, letting them have time alone. Bax had also shown her his studio and his latest works.

“And you make money that way?”

Gavin pursed his lips. “Yes, ma’am.”

“How entertaining!”

“Mom.” Bax was starting to feel a little hunted.

“Well, it is. What’s your bestseller?”

“Um, to the local places, chocolate croissant and oatmeal scotchies. Online, flooded cinnamon sugar cookies.”

“I watch a cookie show on the Food Channel. They call themselves cookiers.”

“I’ll have to order some from you for Christmas.”

Gavin wrinkled his nose, and Bax kind of expected him to say?—

“Humbug.”

“What?” Mom blinked.

“What I mean to say is get your order in early, ma’am. I’ll be swamped.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Thank God the dessert came then, so he paid the enormous bill and they headed out.

His mom was nodding off in the truck, but they had cheesecake and decaf when they got home, and then she kissed his cheek, gave Gavin a wee hug, and rubbed Guffy’s ear.

“Well, I’m exhausted, you two. I’m going to go on to bed. Night!” She wagged her fingers, her QVC rings glinting in the light.

“Night, Mom.” Bax bit back his sigh. She was a wonderful woman, and she had been very nice to Gavin.

But he knew she would be gone when he woke up in the morning.

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Chapter

Nine

His morning sickness was never going to end.

Humbug sat on the floor of the bathroom with his laptop and his phone, trying not to cry. Today when he'd opened the milk to make a dough for his sweet rolls, it had spoiled.

And he couldn't get that smell out of his nose, so he just kept tossing up his frosted sugar cookies.

"Gavin? Honey? Where are you?"

Crap. He hadn't expected Bax back until lunch. He'd gone off to deliver a big piece of art to the city.

"I'm in the bathroom, babe," he called. "Just on the floor."

He heard the thud of Bax's big feet, and he appeared just seconds later, staring into the little room. "Why are you on the floor?"

"The milk was spoiled." Tears welled up in his eyes, and he sighed because hormones.

"Babe? I'm starting to worry about you. You've been throwing up for what? Two

months?”

“About.”

“Okay, come on. I’m taking you to urgent care.”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “You can’t do that.”

Bax’s dark eyebrows went almost up to his hairline. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not something they can fix. In fact, down here, it might be something that lands me in a research facility.” He put his hand on his belly as it roiled. He gagged, and Bax sprinted out of the bathroom, returning with his ever-present tube of saltines.

“You need to get something in there. It will help.”

“Ugh.” He nodded, though, and grabbed a couple of crackers.

Bax waited for him to settle, watching him chew. Then his expressive brows snapped together. “Explain what you mean.”

“I’m not sick, really, Bax.”

“Bullshit, you’ve been sick. Violently.” Bax reached out to grab his hand. He toyed with Gavin’s fingers, watching him.

“I’ve had morning sickness.” He let that drop, watching Bax’s face.

The scowl deepened, and then Bax started laughing. “Oh, come on, babe. Be real.”

“I am. Male omega elves can bear children just like females can. You’re an alpha, so you never have to worry about it.”

“You really believe—” Bax stare at him, that gray gaze sharp. “Babe, I love you, but you’re crazy as a bedbug.”

Humbug blinked rapidly. Then he smiled, feeling like the sun had broken overhead, warm and right. “You love me?”

Bax’s cheeks flamed. “Well, I mean, yeah. I want you to stick around.”

“Good. I want to be here too.” He beamed. “Wow. But I really am pregnant. I took a test.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I ordered it from Amazon.” He sighed. “I would offer to show you but—” He brightened. “I have another one. Just in case the first one was a dud. Sometimes they are.”

“A dud.” Bax so didn’t believe him. Not a bit. And why would he? Humans didn’t know about the ways of elves and other magical creatures where the males could bear children. Like the reindeer...

“Yep. Want to watch me pee on it?”

“Um...”

“It’s okay. I know you don’t believe me. But you’ll only believe it if you see it. So I’ll let you open the test and we’ll do it together.”

“Unholy curiosity makes me say yes.” Bax chuckled, but he still looked a little wild around the eyes.

“Okay, cool. The test is under the sink.”

He was going to make Bax do all the work of opening the sealed box and getting out the test. He wasn’t going to give Bax a reason to doubt the results even a little.

Bax nodded, his movements jerky, and grabbed out the box, seeming surprised it was actually there. Because why else would it be there unless Humbug had put it under the sink, right? So one of his points was already proven.

Bax opened the box while Gavin watched, then opened the safety-sealed pouch. “Okay, so this one was definitely still sealed.” Bax handed it to him, reading the instructions.

“Yep. Okay, babe. Ready?” He could pee a little, he thought.

“Uh-huh.” Bax watched him like a hawk, which was a little weird. It took a sec to get over the self-consciousness, but then he was able to pee on the test. He set it aside where Bax could keep an eye on it before washing his hands. Then he sat back on the floor and had another cracker.

“How long?”

He knew Bax had read the leaflet. “Two minutes.”

“Okay.” Still frowning, Bax reached out to touch his cheek. “I’m sorry you feel so sucky, love.”

Hey, he was progressing from honey to love, as well as I love you. That was so hot.

“Me too. But you make it better.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. You’re my mate.” He grabbed Bax’s hand and held on.

“Mate.” Bax nodded, the movement slow and deliberate. “I—why does that sound so right?”

“Because you’re an alpha. You’re all growly and possessive.” He grinned, raising their hands and kissing Bax’s fingers.

“Hmm.” Bax looked down at the test, his eyes widening. “It says pregnant.”

“Yep. And you can’t accuse me of pouring stolen lady pee on it.”

Bax hooted with laughter. “Stolen lady pee. God.”

“I know you were thinking it,” he teased.

“But—how? I mean, I know you’re a man.”

“I’m an omega elf, Bax. I have the parts to bear children.” He shrugged. “We’re like, throwbacks to the land of summer.”

“The what?”

“Well, that means the fae. Fairies. But in Scandinavian lore, we’re elves, and we’re associated with craftsmanship. I make toys and bake. You play with fire to create amazing stuff. But physically, that makes us a bit of magic.”

“Magic.” Bax shook his head. “Okay, but if I’m a changeling, how did I escape notice from my pediatrician?”

“That same magic. You never get sick, right? And the school had a record of all your shots.”

“I thought my mom was an anti-vaxxer.”

“She probably is.” Humbug grinned. “That’s why it worked for you to be given to her. And since your changeling mirror was sickly and suddenly you weren’t, your mom wasn’t going to jinx it by jabbing you with needles.”

“Yeah.” Bax looked stunned. “I mean, that makes a crazy kind of sense.”

“Right? And then you knotted me. If you could knot me and I got preggers, we’re truly mates. Just like that old coal shoveler Santa said.” He climbed to his feet. “I think the saltines have worked.”

“What else do you have to do today?” Bax asked, gathering up stuff to toss in the trash.

“I have to make a cookie order. And I was going to make some pastry, but now there’s no milk. It wasn’t an order, though, so I’ll make something else for us.”

“So can we go snuggle while I ponder all this?”

“Tinsel, yes. Of course we can.” That had gone far better than he’d expected, actually. He just hoped it stayed that way when he started to show.

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Chapter

Ten

Gavin was starting to show.

It had been pretty easy to settle into a routine of forgetting that Gavin had taken a pregnancy test and told him that male elves could get pregnant. The morning sickness had eased off some. Only certain scents set him off.

Gavin got tired more easily, and he was a little more emotional at times, but really...

And after the first time he'd asked and Gavin had laughed hysterically, he'd never brought up going to the doctor again. Baxter guessed that was kind of stupid. What doctor wouldn't keel over in shock with a pregnant man who was physically male at birth?

But he did worry about stuff like prenatal care when he thought too hard about it.

Which he just wasn't doing.

But Bax woke up with Gavin's butt snuggled back against his cock, and he ran his hand down over Gavin's chest and belly, and there was a distinct...bump.

A baby bump.

Wow.

“Mmm. Hey.”

“Hey, love.”

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Gavin asked, hand covering his.

“You’re starting to show.” And that made it real somehow. Far more real than the pregnancy test, which he’d tucked away in the box it came in, stuck deep in a dresser drawer.

“Uh-huh. Good thing it’s the Fourth this weekend. I really want to go to the big picnic, but I won’t be able to go out much longer without people noticing.”

“Yeah...” He blinked. “So about that.”

“What?”

“What are you—we—going to do?” He and Gavin did a date night at least twice a month.

“Well, luckily, I work from home and we do get Amazon deliveries here. I’ll hang out until the baby is born.”

“And then what do we tell people?”

“When we have a baby? That one of our relatives had her and gave her to us because they couldn’t keep her.”

“I guess that could work.”

“It will. And if I can get a hold of him, I know someone who can make sure she has

all the paperwork.”

He nuzzled the back of Gavin’s neck. “Santa?”

“Nope. My bestie, Stardust. He’s an amazing forger.”

“Oh.” Wow. An elf forger. Well, he assumed Stardust was an elf... God, listen to him.

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll have to get a hold of Cupid to see if he knows where Stardust was sent. Santa didn’t approve of his little hobby.” Gavin chuckled, tracing lines on the back of his hand. Then he wiggled. “Bax?”

“Hmmm?” His cock started firming right up from the contact.

“I’m horny.”

That was one of the very best things about the hormones raging through Gavin and the morning sickness being mostly gone. Gavin kept crawling into his lap and humping him. Sucking him. Riding him.

It was amazing.

“I could totally get with that,” Bax murmured. He did love touching Gavin, kissing him. Fucking him silly. He wasn’t sure how he felt about some of the other stuff Gavin brought with him, but he was sure about this.

“Oh good.” Gavin twisted around, arms going around his neck, lips finding his.

“Mmm.” He kissed Gavin back, deep and strong, his cock rising hard and hot and ready, his knot swelling. And he knew Gavin was wet for him. His lover was always

ready for him in a heartbeat. That slick, tight hole was heaven on earth.

Gavin climbed up to straddle him, and he made sure Guffy wasn't in the room before he grabbed Gavin's butt, squeezing. "You going to ride me, love?"

"Oh, yes. As long as you plan to knot me." Gavin grinned down at him, green eyes sparkling, and he chuckled, joining in the joy of the moment.

He still had no idea what to do about Gavin starting to show, but he decided that right at the moment, he just didn't care.

Gavin finally gave in about a week after the Fourth of July and emailed his dads.

He didn't call, because while Santa had sent the phone, he was worried about calling the North Pole. The phone was meant for business, and Santa had told him he was on his own for a year.

And it was easier to tell his dads he was pregnant over email.

And that he wanted to get checked out by a doctor just to make sure all was well.

And that he needed to get a hold of Stardust...

He shut the computer down and went back to cleaning, and he didn't think anything about it until about ten thirty that night when Bax was in the shower and he was putting the last few touches on a tray of flooded cookies that he would ship out in a few days.

That was when he heard the thud of something landing in the yard, and Guffy set up a deep-throated, stranger-danger barking.

He jumped a good foot. “Guffy! You almost scared the pee out of me!” And these days, if he needed to go, he needed to go now.

He peered out the kitchen window, squinting through the dark, and he saw a sleigh with a reindeer yoked to it, his alpha dad and one of the doctors he knew from the infirmary climbing out of it.

“Wow,” he breathed. “That’s soo cool. Come on, Guff.” He ran to the back door, grinning so wide his face hurt. He threw the door open, waiting for his dad to come give him hug.

His dad smelled like cinnamon and pine, like he always did, and he leaned in, teetering on the edge of sobbing.

“Dad.”

“Hey, love.” Dad hugged him hard. “Pop would have come, but it’s just a two-seater, and I brought Doc.”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” He sniffled. “Santa said I was a bad elf!”

“I know.” Dad’s jaw tightened. “We talked about it.” He looked down at Guffy, and his smile returned. “Who is this?”

“Sir Guffy.”

Dad knelt. “Hello, pup.”

Guffy snuffled, then licked his dad.

Doc came creaking up to the porch. “Is there tea?”

“Of course. Come on in.” He peered at the reindeer. “Is that Hopper?”

“Yes.”

“Come on in, Hop!” he called. “I’ll get you a robe.”

“Love?” Bax came out from the hall in his jammies, drying his hair. “You okay—hey! What the hell?”

“Bax. This is my Dad, Hamish. Dad, Baxter Killian. And this is Doc Andersen.”

The back door breezed open again, Hopper making his way in naked, his brawny, tanned bod hot as always. “Whoops. Hey, you got that robe?”

“And this is Hopper. He pulled the sleigh. Let me get it for you, man.” Humbug ran to get the robe, coming back to find Hopper hiding behind Dad while Doc unpacked his stuff.

Bax stood there, staring at them while Guffy moved back and forth, dancing and wagging and drooling.

“Thanks, bud.” Hopper slipped into the big, fuzzy robe that was one of Bax’s old ones. He didn’t wear it anymore.

Baxter raised an eyebrow at him.

“Hopper is a shifter. So if he didn’t expect to come in, he didn’t bring clothes.”

“You took a pregnancy test?” Doc barked. He didn’t like to travel.

“Of course. And—” He raised his shirt. “Baby bump.”

Doc pursed his lips. "You should have called me in sooner."

"I was waiting for?—"

"Me." Bax crossed his arms. "I've been struggling with believing all...this." He waved a hand at Dad and Doc and Hopper. "I guess this is my definitive proof."

"I guess it is." That was Dad, glaring a little.

"Dad," he singsonged. "This is my ma-ate."

"And so far, I am not impre-essed."

Humbug rolled his eyes. "Who wants a cookie?"

"Do you have ones that aren't spoken for?" Bax asked, rubbing his back.

"Yeah. I messed up a bunch." His hands had shaken while he was doing the unicorn horns, so he'd had to redo a batch. He always made extra.

"I'd love to try them," Dad said.

"Sit down," Doc growled.

"I want cookies," Hopper said. "I turboed down here."

"I'll get the cookies," Bax said. "You meet with the doctor."

"Doc would like tea."

"I'll put the kettle on." Bax moved around the kitchen, and Humbug winked at his

dad.

“Sit down, Humbug.”

“Yessir.” He sat and let Doc help him pull off his shirt. Doc had the stethoscope and the tongue depressors. He also had magic hands, and that was what he used to examine Humbug.

“Everything seems fine, kiddo,” Doc said. “Where is that tea?”

“That’s it?” Bax plonked some mugs down on the counter. “You feel him up and that’s all?”

“Mr. Killian.” Dad stared at Bax. “Doc is perfectly proficient. He’s been doing this for two hundred years.”

Bax blinked a lot, then snorted. “Right.”

“Two hundred and thirty-eight,” Doc grunted out. “I got my medical when I was thirty.”

“Dude, Doc, you’re old.”

“I miss Cupid,” Doc said.

“Yeah, well, he mated up some roe deer shifter from Scotland.” Hopper grabbed a cookie and had at the unicorn’s horn with a crunch.

“I thought Christmas people were nice,” Bax murmured.

“We are, but we also run the biggest delivery system in the world. We’re not soft.”

That was Doc. “He’s fine. A little anemic.”

“A lot of the high-iron foods make me puke,” Humbug admitted.

“What about cereal?”

“Oh. I can eat that?”

“As long as it’s fortified.”

“I’ll get some,” Bax said. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Corn Flakes, Special K, or Shredded Mini Wheats,” Doc said. “Tea.”

“Right.”

Humbug put his shirt back on, then grabbed a cookie for his dad. “Cinnamon sugar cookie flavor.”

“Thanks, Bug. So, your mate, hmm. Santa will be pleased.”

“He can suck?—”

“Bug.”

“A candy cane. He sent me here as a doll! Said I would go back to being a doll if I didn’t get with my mate! And that’s not nice to Bax, either. He should have some choice.”

“I do have a choice,” Bax said. “I’m getting there.”

“Well, I don’t want you to keep me because you’re coming around to the idea of a baby.”

“I said the L word already,” Bax said. “And I knot you every chance I get.”

“I know.” He walked over to put his head on Bax’s chest. “But I need you to know it all.”

“Maybe you should come up to Christmas Village before you get too big to travel, Bug. Show the big guy here around. Meet Pop.”

“Oh. I don’t—Am I allowed?”

“I asked you to come visit me, not to come back to work.”

He grinned slowly. “Right.”

“If you think I’m hauling all of you in a two-seater, you’re nuts.” Hopper munched another cookie.

“You can take Doc back tonight and send a four-seater with a double team for us tomorrow night.”

“I can do that,” Hopper said. “Doc, you just let me know when you’re ready to go.”

“After I have this tea. And a couple of these lovely cookies.”

Humbug laughed, leaning on his mate. Bax was about to get a trial by fire when it came to believing.

He just hoped it didn’t freak him out too much.

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Chapter

Eleven

B ax figured there was no way he had plausible deniability on the whole elf thing now.

He'd flown to the North Pole. In a sleigh pulled by two not-at-all freaking tiny reindeer. These guys were brawny AF. And now he was where Gavin had grown up, and it was...disturbingly perfect.

The streets were cobblestone, and clean as a whistle. Decor lined each one, along with arctic willows and dwarf birch trees. The houses looked like something out of a fairy tale. Everything smelled like a Michael's store at Christmas: pine, cinnamon, and peppermint.

Oh, and gingerbread. There were gingerbread stands. Roasted chestnuts. Hot chocolate.

Lord have mercy.

"Are you okay, babe?" Gavin asked, squeezing his hand. They'd gone into town for lunch with Gavin's dads, who were even now walking a very excited Guffy down the avenue in front of them. The folks at the cafe had thought he was hysterical.

"I am. I mean, I think I am." In fact, his meal sat in his belly like lead.

“What’s wrong?” Gavin squeezed his hand.

“I’m—” He hunted the words. “I think I was just still convinced you were making some stuff up. I mean, I know you’re pregnant, and I know you’re totally a guy. I guess I just assumed you were magical, but this?” Bax waved a hand.

“Was all made up? Yeah. I get that.” Gavin sounded sympathetic rather than angry.

“Do you?” He didn’t deserve that kindness. He really didn’t. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Why?” Gavin squeezed his hand. “You fell for me even when you thought I was nuts. How cool is that?”

Bax laughed. “True enough. You’re amazing, though. Nothing could hide that light, you know?”

Gavin leaned on him a little. “Thank you.”

“This place is wild, huh?” He looked around, seeing something new from every angle. It was like a horror movie. Everything was so perfect it was...wrong.

Wrinkling his nose, Gavin nodded. “You can see why an elf named Humbug doesn’t fit in.”

“Hmmm.”

A man strode out of one of the stores, the only person Bax had seen who was bigger than him. Huge, with a barrel chest and legs like tree trunks roped with muscle, the man had a close-clipped silver beard and piercing blue eyes.

He was smoking hot.

“Who is that?” Bax murmured, staring even though he knew it was rude as hell.

“That’s Santa Sixty-Nine. He’s a silver fox, huh?”

“That’s a Santa?” Gavin had explained that there were lots of Santas in order to cover the world in one night.

“I know, right?” Gavin chuckled.

“Is he?—”

“Omnivorous.” Gavin winked. “All.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“So, do you miss it?” He needed to know. Why would Gavin want to live with a bad-tempered blacksmith and a drooly dog in Western Colorado when he could have this?

Gavin stayed silent for a moment, clearly giving it the import the question deserved. “I miss my dads. And some of my friends. But I don’t miss the village at all. And I love being with you and Guffy and having my cookie business and our own house and—I love you.” Gavin stopped them, tugging him around so they stood face-to-face, those green eyes all but glowing.

Bax could see his breath, his chest rising and falling fast. “I love you too.”

“Then that’s that. Okay? I can see you’re wiggling out.”

“It’s just all so perfect.”

Gavin rose on tiptoes to kiss his cold lips. “Too perfect. I love our life.”

“Promise?” Bax asked, needing to hear it.

“I promise.” Gavin stroked his stubbly cheek. “Now, come on. I want to show you the reindeer exercise yard.”

“Do they play reindeer games?” Bax teased.

“Totally.”

Laughing, he let Gavin take his hand and tow him along. Guffy was barking up ahead, so they hurried, because the big dog could cause some real havoc if left to his own devices.

And he was fascinated with reindeer...

“Are you happy, son?” Pop asked him as they sat around the table that night, preparing to play cards. Pop had made hot cocoa, and Bax was out walking Guffy because, while his dads had a little fenced yard, and there was still full daylight out there thanks to the late summer hours, Guffy had proven unreliable with shifters of all kinds.

He wanted to chase them.

“I am.” He put a hand on his belly. “I really am.”

“Maybe you should stay up here until the baby comes,” Dad said. “It will suck peppermint sticks to have to hide while you’re pregnant from now on.”

“Oh, no. I have so many cookie orders leading into Halloween and Christmas already,

and Bax needs his studio.” He was a homebody anyway.

“Are you sure?” Dad asked. “We worry about you.”

“Doc says I’m perfect. So don’t worry. Bax is all I need.” He grinned, sipping his cocoa. “Well, and Guffy. He’s going to be such a good nanny.”

“Mmm. One assumes there are no shifters where you are.” Dad’s wry grin made him laugh.

“Not that I know of, though he gives the deer some serious coal stockings. And there was a black bear once who did seem awfully friendly...”

“Your mate is a fine artist,” Pop said. Humbug had shown him Bax’s website.

“He really is. You’ll have to come down and see his studio.” His pop was an amazing painter and loved art in all its forms.

“I will. We’ll come down when the baby is born.”

“Oh, good.” He blinked hard, happiness making him tear up. “I love you both.”

“We love you too, son. I’m sorry Santa was so...stern.”

“I’m not.” Shrugging, he picked up the cards to shuffle them. “I wasn’t happy here, and Bax is everything.”

“I admit, I was worried when I showed up,” Dad murmured. “He seemed a little disbelieving.”

“Well, he’s cured of that now, isn’t he?” Pop said, his tone as dry as bad gingerbread.

“I think so, yes.” Bax’s face had been a study of awe, worry, and amusement in the village. But Humbug hoped his confidence grew after their conversation.

“I just want you happy,” Pop said.

“I am. I’m with my mate, and we’re having a baby. No worries that I will actually be turned into a doll permanently.”

“Is that what the old man threatened you with?”

Humbug grimaced. “Yes. But he did send me a laptop and a phone when I asked for them.”

“Which is why there won’t be a revolt,” Dad said.

“No elf uprising,” Humbug agreed.

“Is there anything you need, son? Anything we can do for you?”

“Can you find out if Stardust is okay? I have no idea where he was sent.”

“Of course. We’ll find out and send you his contact information.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you want to see the old man?”

He thought about that for a long moment. “No. He knows where I am. If he wants to talk to me, he can stop by.”

“Fair enough.”

“Whew. No reindeer.” Bax walked in, then closed the door and let Guffy off his leash. “Are we ready?”

“We are.” Gavin wagged the cards. “Come on, babe. Let’s kick the dads’ gift bags.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bax gave him a searching look, relaxing at his tiny nod.

So he dealt the cards, glad to have his family altogether for now, at least.

Chapter

Twelve

“ B ax? Is that you. Can you help me pull the turkey out of the oven so I can put the dressing in?” Gavin called as Bax walked in from the shop. He wasn’t in the kitchen, so he was probably in the bathroom again.

He was peeing a lot these days.

“Give me two shakes to clean up, love!” he yelled back.

Guffy set up a howl, and he groaned, wondering what that meant. The crunch of gravel on the drive out front made him blink. They didn’t have anyone coming for Thanksgiving dinner. They saw very few people together since Gavin had gotten so big.

The baby was late, in fact, if their Valentine’s Day conception estimate was right, but Doc had stopped by just a few days ago and said all was well. Sometimes elf babies just dug in and got stubborn.

The dads had backed that up, saying that Gavin had been almost a month overdue.

He washed up, scrubbing to his elbows, then pulled out the turkey. Whoever was at the front would probably realize they’d pulled up to the wrong house and go.

He heard footsteps coming into the kitchen, and he smiled, still setting down the

turkey. “Where’s the dressing, love? I’ll put it in.”

“I’m afraid I’m not Gavin, honey.”

He whirled around, clutching his hot pads to his chest. “Mom?”

“Hi,” she said brightly, holding out a box. “I brought pecan pie.”

“Mom. What are you doing here?” Sparkle. He was trying to adopt Gavin’s curses so he didn’t say things like fuck in front of the baby.

Right now, it was hard.

Her smile slipped a bit. “I didn’t manage to get back by after the Fourth, so I thought I’d come for Thanksgiving. I can, can’t I?”

“Well, I mean?—”

“Babe, did you get the... Oh, wow. Hi, Mama Killian.”

Mom’s smile went megawatt again as she turned to greet Gavin. They’d talked on the phone a lot while he was at work, striking up an oddly endearing friendship.

“Gavin! I—oh. Oh, my goodness, do you have a tumor? Baxter, why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s not a tumor, Mom,” Bax said, fighting the laughter that tried to break out.

“I’m pregnant.” Gavin dropped it like a hot rock, then put the dressing in the oven.

Mom blinked about a dozen times. “So, you’re a transman?”

Shit. He didn't know his mom even knew that word.

"No, Mama. I'm an omega elf." Gavin grinned. "I won't show you my parts, but you can see my belly." Gavin whipped off his shirt.

"Gavin!" But Mom looked, didn't she?

"Here, feel." Gavin took her hand and then put it on his belly.

He could literally see the baby kick. He'd felt it more than once in just the last day.

"Baxter! He's pregnant."

"And trust me, he's a male omega elf. I have seen things, Mom."

"Want some coffee or a glass of tea?" Gavin asked.

"A glass of tea would be lovely." Mom staggered to a chair and plopped down. "I'm going to be a grandma."

"Yes. But you have to tell people we adopted. Once he has the baby." Bax got the tea while Guffy licked Mom's hand.

"Oh. I can see why." Mom watched, wide-eyed, as Gavin pulled his sweater back on.

"You can, right?" Gavin asked. "No one down here knows Santa and his elves are real."

"Naturally."

Mom looked more than a little pale. Bax totally didn't blame her. He might talk to

Gavin when they went to bed to see if Santa did debriefings on humans who were unsuited to keep this secret.

Or like, a flashy light like there was in the silly aliens movie from the '90s.

"I won't tell," Mom said as if she'd read his mind. "How amazing."

Gavin beamed. "Would you like to help me with dinner, Mama?"

"Of course, sweetie. Baxter, will you go get my bag? I'd like to change into my slippers."

"Sure." He headed out almost at a run. This was the weirdest day in an admittedly bizarre year. His mother had just discovered that his omega Christmas elf mate was pregnant.

He glanced at Guffy, who had come out with him. "So nuts, buddy."

Guffy huffed as if agreeing.

"You're my best friend, Guff. Thanks for having my back."

Guffy licked his hand.

He grabbed his mom's bag and headed back inside, and Gavin had made magic already. Mom was making a relish plate, slicing delicate little pieces of celery to fill with cheese.

He glanced at Gavin, who winked at him, and he chuckled under his breath.

Then Gavin winced, and he moved to his mate's side. "You okay?" he asked, his

voice hushed.

“Just my back aching.” Gavin stretched. “Okay. Next? Sweet potato casserole.”

“Got it.” He could mash the already-cooked sweet potatoes like a boss.

All he had to do was make it through until Mom went to bed. Then he could talk to Gavin. He rubbed his mate’s back a moment, then moved to whip up potatoes, pecans, and maple syrup.

He did love him some Thanksgiving dinner.

The remains of the pies sat on the dining room table, a tub of Cool Whip scraped clean right there beside them.

Bax...liked his pie. Pumpkin and pecan. And Cool Whip. He loved his Cool Whip.

Gavin stifled a grunt when his back spasmed. It had been hurting him all day, but with Thanksgiving dinner and Bax’s mom showing up, he hadn’t had time to worry about it. Maybe he should clean up and head for bed.

He stood up, and a hard rush of liquid burst out of him, making him yelp.

“Love? Are you okay?” Bax jumped to his feet.

“My water just broke.”

“Oh, my God. Oh shit. What do I do?”

He grinned. “We talked about this with Doc. It’s okay.”

“I’m calling Doc.” Bax grabbed his phone.

“Let me clean that up. Bax, get Guffy out of here,” Mama Killian said.

“Right. Come on, Guffy.” Bax led the big dog out of the room, and they could hear him. “Doc? Yeah, it’s time. Can you come?”

“Let me just clean this up, Gavin.” Mama guided him to lean against the counter while she mopped up. Then she smiled and held out an arm. “Okay, now you. I’ll trade with Bax, and he can take you for a quick wash. Is Doc coming, do you think?”

“Once it’s dark.” It was only about five thirty. Doc would have to wait for darkness to fall. “Thanks for the help.” He kissed her cheek. “I’m so glad you came.”

She sniffed, her eyes glinting with tears. “Me too.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you but?—”

“Oh, please. As if I would have believed you before today.” She chuckled. “So...is Bax really a changeling?”

“He is. But what you have to know is he’s yours.” He put his hand on her waist so he could lean a little. “You’re his mom.”

“I know. But—after he recovered from his baby illness, he didn’t smell the same. I always knew something had happened.”

“But you love him so much. I can tell.”

“I do. I’m just not very good at being around all the time.” She sniffled. “Just ask his dad.”

“Today you just happen to be here when it’s really important.” They walked slowly into the bedroom, where he smiled. “I can take it from here.”

“I’ll send Bax in. You wait for him,” she admonished.

“I will. I promise.” He would, too. He grabbed his phone while he waited and texted Stardust, who the dads had tracked down for him.

Water broke

He got a reply immediately. Well, at least you got sent to the right place

Gavin snapped a selfie of him making a face, eyes crossed, and sent that. Poor Stardust. He was not having any luck.

Srry

Eh. Happy giving birth! And Happy Thanksgiving

It was Stardust’s first American Thanksgiving, just like it was his.

Much love

You too

“I called Doc,” Bax said, rushing into the room. “He says he’ll be down once it’s dark enough. What can I do?” His lover was pale and a little pinched, his gaze worried.

“Take a shower with me?” he asked. “I need to clean up, but I don’t want to slip. And you always get the water just right.”

Bax's wry smile made him chuckle. "Flattery will get you anything, including me calming down. Keeping me busy, huh? Come on, love."

"Thank you. I am totally messy." He took Bax's outstretched hand. "And thank you for believing in me, Baxter. No one but my dad's ever have."

Bax's gray gaze sharpened. "That sucks. You're amazing. You bake such yummy cookies, you've totally revamped my business, and you love me and Guff with your whole self. How are you not the coolest weirdo ever?"

That made him laugh out loud, which made a little cramp hit his belly. "Oh. Whoo. Don't make me laugh."

"Sorry." Bax sat him on the toilet while he got the water going and adjusted the temperature.

"Are you hurting?"

"It's not too bad yet. My back was bothering me, but I was so caught up in Thanksgiving... And you do like your pie. You should have told me! I would make you pie every week."

"Oh, baby." Bax helped him rise, then stripped off the rest of his clothes. "Come on, and take a shower, and then you can rest."

"Okay, but I want to go sit in the living room and watch Christmas movies while we wait for Doc. I don't want to be locked away in the bedroom with nothing else to think about."

Pop had told him that distraction was key. That he should hold off on going to bed as long as he could.

“Okay, love. Anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Well,” Bax helped him into the walk-in shower. “I would rather you didn’t jump on the Hopper express with Doc and go to the village.”

Humbug wrinkled his nose. “No way. I want to be here, in our home.”

“I want that too.”

Guffy woofed outside the closed door, and they both chuckled. “He’s checking on you,” Bax said.

“Is your mom okay?” The warm water felt so good. Maybe later he would fill the tub and float.

“I don’t know. I hope so?”

“She asked me about you being a changeling.”

Bax sighed. “I worried about that. I mean, I want to be the best son I can be to her. Sometimes we just don’t know how to meet each other halfway.”

“Well, sure. All parents are that way. And sparkle, I have a Santa. Talk about like, the worst old uncle syndrome ever.”

Bax laughed, grabbing the baby shampoo, which was what they’d been using for bodywash since he’d known he was preggers. “Okay, you win. She’s just going to be so excited to have a grandkid. Heck, she had a cow when I got Guffy. Came and stayed for a week.”

“I hope she does that this time. I still have at least a dozen cookie orders to mail out.”

“We’ll make an assembly line.”

“You’re the best,” Humbug told his mate.

Bax grinned hugely, washing him with the gentlest hands. “I know.”

Chapter

Thirteen

Bax paced, Guffy right behind him, matching him step for step.

His mom had produced a ball of yarn and a crochet hook, and was making booties. Where the hell had she pulled that out of?

“It’s been dark for an hour,” Bax said, and his back teeth hurt from grinding them.

“Doc will be here as soon as he can. Hopper isn’t supernova speed, you know. He’s just a magical reindeer.” Gavin was starting to sound strained.

“I know, baby. I just want Doc to get here and tell me everything is okay.” He couldn’t do this by himself. His mom had dealt well with Gavin’s water breaking, but she freaked out anytime anything went wrong with someone physically. If Gavin had a problem, she would fall apart on him.

“We all do,” Mom said. “Can’t we just go to the—no.” She pursed her lips. “I guess we can’t, can we?”

“Nope. They would take one look at me and call the government, I bet.” Gavin grinned, but he was grimacing through a contraction, Bax thought.

“Yeah. I need you to be safe, though.”

“I will be. I feel fine, if tired and sore. But it hasn’t been that long, even.” Gavin held up his hands. “Come help me up. I want to walk.”

“Okay.” He rushed over to help Gavin ease up to standing. Gravity would help. Right? He thought that was what Doc said. Or it was wishful thinking?

They walked for what seemed like forever, Gavin stopping to breathe every so often, bending half over as he moaned.

“Baby—”

“Nope. I’m fine. Just a contraction.” Gavin patted his chest, and they started walking again.

He’d never been so relieved in his life as when he heard the clatter of hooves and the whoosh of the sleigh sliding in. There was snow on the ground now, so it was far less alarming than it had been in the summer.

Guffy let out a single bark, then headed to the back door, wagging.

“I’ll get it. Mom, can you come help Gavin?”

“Of course.” Mom hopped up, coming to put an arm around Gavin. “What’s going on?”

“Doc is here.”

“Walk me to the kitchen window so you can see,” Gavin said.

Bax moved to the back door, but Gavin and Mom got to the window about the same time, and there was the big four-seater sleigh. Doc was coming to the back door, but

his pop was unhitching the guys so they could come inside where it was warm too.

“Oh my goodness.” Mom stared, her face slack. “Those are reindeer.”

“Yes, ma’am. Hopper and...” Gavin squinted. “Dodger.”

“I can’t believe it, and I’m seeing it.” She shook her head.

“Hey, Doc,” Bax said when he answered the door. “Man, am I glad to see you.”

Doc snorted, the sound kind and not derisive. “I bet. Bug, come let me look at you.”

Gavin laughed. “Hi, Doc. Good to see you too.”

“Yeah, yeah, get your ass over here, McPherson.” Doc waved a hand at Gavin, so Bax stepped out into the frigid night air to call to Pop. “Do I need clothes for the guys?”

“Nah, they brought their own this time.” Pop held up a backpack.

“Good deal.” He waited at the door so he didn’t have to put on boots, and he handed out towels as the guys came in. The snow was pretty fierce.

Mom’s eyes went wide when Hopper and Dodger stepped out of their lines and headed for the house, shifting as they came up to the back door.

“Whew! It is cold enough to shrivel the jingle bells, man.”

“Your bag. You know where the bathroom is.”

“Uh-huh.” The two of them headed into the hallway, Mom watching them go, her

head tilted to one side.

He chuckled. Those were some great reindeer cinnamon buns.

“No ogling the cervidae, babe,” Gavin said, huffing out a laugh.

“Not dead.” He closed up the back door after them, then returned to Gavin’s side, warming his hands before reaching for his mate.

Doc hummed and listened and touched with his magic hands, and then he nodded. “I’ll have some tea. Who is this lovely lady?”

“My mom.” Bax grinned, because his mom was blushing like a schoolgirl.

“Ahem.” Doc glared at him.

“Mom, this is Doc Andersen. Doc, my mom, Barbara Killian.”

“Doctor. How is my grandchild?”

“Just where they’re supposed to be. All is going well. Do you like tea?”

“I—”

“How long, Doc?” Bax asked, trying not to snarl.

“Could be an hour, could be thirty. Try singing to her.”

“Her...” Gavin had said that more than once.

“Yep.” Doc took Mom’s arm to steer her to the kitchen. “Have you ever been to the

North Pole?”

“Doc is macking on my mom.”

Gavin laughed, then wheezed. “Oh, ugh. It might be time for the bedroom.”

“Come on, then.” He let Gavin take his arm, then led him to the bedroom, and they passed the reindeer guys in the hall, fully dressed. “Hey. There are tons of leftovers,” Bax told them. “Help yourself to anything in the fridge.”

Their eyes lit up. “Thanks, man,” Hopper said. “You can do this, Bug.”

“I know.” Gavin gave them a thumbs-up.

He hoped they had it right. That everything would go smoothly.

Because Bax was damn well terrified that something awful might just happen.

Chapter

Fourteen

H umbug thought he might just have to kill his mate.

That would make him sad in the long run, his logical mind told him, but right now, it would give him vicious satisfaction.

“Can I push yet?” he asked, panting hard.

Doc smiled slightly. “Soon, Bug. But not yet. We need to make sure she’s in the right position.”

“Ugh.” This baby girl was being a butthead, and Bax wasn’t helping. In fact, he was pacing. “Bax, get your ass over here and help me!”

“What can I do?” Bax came to his side immediately, taking the hand he held out.

“Hold my hand. Sing to your baby girl. Tell her you’ll keep her safe.”

“Oh, I will. I’ll protect you both with my life.” Bax’s gray eyes were almost silver with emotion as he stared into Humbug’s. “I love you so damn much.”

“Sing to her, Bax.” He’d heard Bax sing while he worked and in the shower and while they cooked together. He had a deep voice, but a good one. It would help. Doc had said so.

“What should I sing?” Bax asked, looking at his belly.

“Something Christmassy?” It was after Thanksgiving dinner, after all. Santa had been at the parade today. They sent a different one every year so people thought it was an actor...

“Uggggn.” Another pain hit him, and he tried to breathe through it. It got easier when Bax started to sing, his voice warm and melodious, the song “White Christmas.”

He was able to breathe then, and Doc met his gaze, Doc’s bright blue eyes serious. “Okay, Humbug. It’s time to push.”

“Kringle, it’s about time. Tell me when.”

“When you feel it, you’ll know.” Doc grinned again, and Humbug decided he wanted to hit him more than Bax, who was singing the baby right out of him.

He felt it, though, the urge to push, so he did, grunting long and low to help the discomfort dispel.

Almost an hour later, discomfort was a jingling pale word. He was hurting .

“What should I sing now, baby?” Bax asked, his voice hoarse.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are?” he snapped.

“I love you,” Bax said, his laughter plain.

“Don’t you laugh at me.” It took effort to poke Bax in the chest. “I’m tired, I’m gross, and I hurt! If I ever see Santa again, I am going to kick him right in the chestnuts.”

Now Bax did laugh at him. “Oh, baby. I love you.” Bax put a hand on his belly. “Come on, little girl. I promise, it will be amazing. Guffy and your granny and pop want to meet you. We need you.”

The urge to push came over him again, so he bore down, groaning, and this time—this time, he felt it. Progress. He actually felt her move.

“Very good, Bug,” Doc said, crouching between his legs like a baseball catcher. “I can see the crown of her head.”

“Yay!” Oof. He shouldn’t yell. It hurt his abs.

“Come on, baby girl,” Bax said, his tone so loving it made Humbug tear up. Him. The naughty elf.

“Okay, here it comes. Again, Bug.”

Humbug pushed. He labored, for holly’s sake. And finally he heard Doc tell him to stop pushing. “Here she comes, Bug.”

He stared, trying to see, but sweat ran in his eyes. “Is she okay?”

“Got her.” Doc cradled their little girl in both hands, turning away slightly.

“Wait! Doc!”

“I just need to clear her nose and mouth and—” A wailing little cry split the room, so angry, and Doc laughed. “She sounds just like you, Humbug.”

“Get frostbite, Doc.” He collapsed back on the pillows, smiling at Bax. “We did it.”

“You did it, Gavin. You. She’s amazing.”

Pop bustled into the room with Mama. “Did we hear our granddaughter?”

Bax sniffled. Was he crying? “Yes, sir. And as soon as Gavin gets to hold her, we all get to meet her.”

That sounded perfect. He’d done all the heavy lifting, so he should get to hold her first.

“Cut the cord, Dad,” Doc told Bax.

He blinked, trying to stay awake, and in no time, he held a swaddled, fussy little girl. “Oh, hello, sweet.”

“What are we going to call her?” Bax asked. “Holly? Noelle?”

“Are you kidding?” Gavin snorted. “I think we should name her after my dad’s mom. Merida.”

“Oh, I like that. And her middle name can be Yule.”

“Like Merry Yule?” Humbug had to laugh. “Yule it is.”

“You two are as weird as mistletoe,” Pop said, but he was beaming.

Humbug nodded, his eyelids getting heavy.

“So can male omegas feed their babies?”

“We can, though evolution has played kind of a cruel joke on us. So we look more

human, we're a little deficient in boob, so milk is sparse if it comes in at all. I ordered formula off Amazon."

"And I brought some elf-specific nutrient powder," Doc murmured.

"Oh." Bax chuckled. "Cool. That way I can feed her when she needs it, and you can rest."

"Bax, take your daughter so I can clean up Gavin here," Mom said. "That way he can be comfortable."

"I'll help. You two go fawn over the baby," Doc said.

"Sounds great," Pop said, helping Bax ease Merida away from him. "Rest, Bug. We'll bring her back in a bit."

"Be careful." He was so tired. He yawned, then offered his mouth to Bax for a kiss.

He got it, Bax smiling against his mouth. "Love you, mate."

"I love you too." And with that, he drifted off and let Mama and Doc take care of him.

Chapter

Fifteen

Bax stared down at his daughter's face, completely stunned at the turn his life had taken in one short year.

He'd found out he was an elf. He'd discovered his knot. He'd mated with Gavin. He had a baby.

And now, in his house, which was decorated for Christmas with an exuberance he'd never been able to muster on his own, his daughter was having her first Christmas.

Gavin was asleep, hopefully dreaming of sugarplums or something. Hell, he hadn't even known what sugarplums were until Gavin made them for him. Weird little hard candies. But cool.

"It's late, little snowflake. But I guess your tummy knows no time." He bounced her on his shoulder, pacing, hoping to get her to burp. "Should I sing, baby girl? I know you like that." He hummed a little, then launched into "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas", which had her dozing in no time.

Then she burped, her whole body getting into it, her eyes opening wide.

"That's my girl." She had Humbug's temper, but his manners. The idea made him laugh.

The clatter of hooves out in the yard made him frown. It was Christmas Eve. Hell, Christmas Day by the actual hour. It was the busiest night of the year for the family he'd married into. Well, he was going to marry Gavin. He just had to figure out how since Gavin had no paperwork...

But at any rate, no one should be arriving by reindeer. And that was a lot of clatter. Maybe it was a herd of elk.

"Should we go see, baby girl? That would be a neat sight."

Guffy woofed softly, rising and heading to the fireplace, not the kitchen door. And, as Bax looked out the window at the huge sleigh and the eight reindeer attached to it by harness, he heard the sound of... Christmas twinkle.

That was what Gavin called any kind of elf magic that happened, and now that he had accepted his elf side, it was happening more and more frequently between the three of them.

The fire had mostly gone out, but the coals went completely dark, and something popped out of the chimney, starting small and becoming a full human-sized male in a bright red suit and hat trimmed in white. He glowed in the lights on the tree and the mantel.

Bax stood there, mouth hanging open, while the old fellow opened a bag and started putting presents under the tree.

"Good morning, Baxter. Ho-ho! Do you think you might go wake up Humbug? I want to say hello."

"You—I?—"

"Yes." The guy really did look jolly, his nose and cheeks bright red from the cold, his

blue eyes twinkling. “Humbug.”

“Right. Be right back.” He took Merida with him. No changelings needed. Not that he hated his life.

Far from it. He did wonder if his human counterpart was happy.

He put Meri down in her bassinet, which was in their room for now, and woke Gavin up. “Santa is here to see you.”

“No yellow snow?” Gavin yawned. “Well, hand me my robe. The old coal breath is on a tight timeline tonight.” Gavin slipped out of bed and into house shoes. Bax helped him into his robe, and Gavin shuffled to the front room.

Santa was squatting down, rubbing Guffy’s belly. The big St. Bernard looked ecstatic.

“Et tu, Guffy?” Gavin muttered.

“Now, Humbug, are you still out of sorts with me? Look at your life.” Santa’s booming laugh had Bax grinning.

“Yeah, yeah.” Gavin grinned at Santa, then threw himself at the old guy. “Thank you.”

Santa hugged Gavin hard, patting his back. “Congratulations, Bug. You did it.”

“I did. I love them both, and even Guffy, so much.”

“I knew you would.” Santa patted Humbug’s back. “I always know.”

“Bah.”

“What can I say? His name is Baxter Alexander Killian.”

Gavin blinked. “B.A. Ba. Ba Humbug. Oh, sparkle.”

Santa laughed heartily. “Anyway, this is for you.” He backed off, pulling more stuff out of his bag. He handed Gavin a flat box. “Papers. So you can get married and all. And for little Meri.”

“Aw, Santa. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. There’s something under the tree for all of you, as well. Your mother’s gift is at Doc’s house,” Santa told Bax.

“Oh? Is she in the pole with him?” Wouldn’t surprise him one bit.

“She is.”

“Well, good on her.” He winked.

“I must be off. But I wanted to stop in and say Merry Christmas.”

“Santa...”

The old elf slung his bag over his back. “Yes, Bug?”

“About Stardust...”

Santa hooted. “He’ll be fine, my boy. I won’t turn him into a doll. I promise.”

Gavin relaxed, and Bax grinned. That had been Gavin’s last worry.

“Thanks, Santa. I’ll see you in June when we come up for the long days.”

“I’ll see you then.” And with a nod, Santa disappeared, and the fire came back to life.

“So that was Santa fifteen, huh?” Bax asked, holding his arms out for Gavin, who came to him right away and hugged him tight.

“It is. The old reindeer hienie.”

That made him laugh. “He looks just like the one in the parade.”

“Might have been. Some of them look like that.”

“Not all, huh?”

Gavin rubbed his cheek against Bax’s chest. “Nope. Wait until you see sixty-nine this summer without all his winter clothes.”

That still blew his mind. “I can’t wait.”

“I can. We have so much good time to spend together first. All of us.”

“We do. I love you, Gavin Humbug McPherson.”

“I love you too, BA Killian. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, love.”

Wrapped together, they headed back to bed. They had a busy day tomorrow, opening presents, making dinner, and making love.

Just the way Christmas should be.

End