



SOS HOTEL: Ho, Ho, No

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Category: LGBT+

Description: One day, we might leave the hotel for a date or a shopping trip and not be hunted, shot at, kidnapped, and almost unalived by a hoard of gnomes...

Apparently, that day is not today.

My name is Adam Vex, and this is what happened when a day trip to a well-known Scandinavian home furniture store turned into a nightmare for me, Victor and Zee.

No cacti were harmed in the making of this book, but some gnomes were. A whole lot of gnomes, actually. Reader discretion is advised.

SOS HOTEL Christmas Special can be read anytime after book 5 in the series to avoid spoilers.

This book is a NOVELLA, and is shorter in length than the main books in the series.

Total Pages (Source): 8

CHAPTER 1

“Look at him, he’s in fuckin’ vampire utopia.”

Victor rode the huge lobby escalator two steps above me and Zee. His black pants and black turtleneck sweater gave him a handsome, young-college-professor appearance. But from his unreadable face, it was hard to tell whether this was the best day out he’d had since he’d corrupted a virginal cult, or his worst nightmare because of that piece of furniture we’d bought that he’d put together for the hotel bar, and that he still couldn’t pass by without whipping out his ruler to make sure its angles hadn’t shifted.

He clutched the tiny wooden pencil now like a warrior clutches a sword, and scribbled on the little slip of paper we’d picked up on the way in.

“He has a list! A fuckin’ list... with bullet points and footnotes.” Zee snorted.

“How else will we know what the hotel requires?” Victor said, without looking back. Acute vampire hearing meant he heard everything, even our heartbeats, and Zee’s not-so-quiet whispers.

“You’ve got a photographic memory,” Zee continued, deciding this was the hill he wanted to die on.

The line of Victor’s shoulders tensed. His long dark hair had been braided so tight it swished against his back like Zee’s tail. “I do. However, I enjoy the physicality of holding a pencil.”

Zee blinked, and it seemed likely that behind those long pretty lashes that framed deep, emotive purple eyes, his thoughts plunged toward the spicier content where he was imagining all the other things Victor liked to hold. A grin curved his lips, and his gaze slid sideways, checking in to see if I was on the same mental journey. Pencil did sound a lot like penis, which happened to be one of Victor's favorite words. And Zee's.

"I know what you're thinking, demon," Victor said.

"Are we sure he doesn't read minds?" Zee whispered.

"We're sure," both Victor and I answered together.

We stepped off the escalator onto a polished, open-plan landing, with a cute pink and white bedroom display to our right, and a stack of big blue wheelie-baskets to our left. The main exhibit however, was the enormous sparkly Christmas tree. We'd arrived at a blue and yellow cathedral-like wonderland, bejeweled with holiday cheer.

Zee's dark pupils grew, drinking in the tree's shiny baubles and twinkling lights. "Fuck, that's the biggest shiny thing I've ever seen."

"Didn't you have a holiday tree at Razorsedge?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah." He shrugged.

"I'm sure it resembled every other normal, decorated tree found in living rooms up and down the country," Victor said, collecting a basket with an efficient flick of his wrist.

Zee screwed up his nose. "We decorated it with whatever we had laying around... condoms, cuffs. Butt plugs make great baubles, but baubles do not make great butt

plugs—ask me how I know.”

I winced. “Nope, not asking that.”

“It was a hit with the regulars.”

The bauble butt plugs or the tree? I didn’t dare ask.

“The condoms weren’t used ,” Zee added, following along behind Victor. “Demons don’t really do Christmas or holidays. A squishy human was born... It’s fuckin’ massacre time if you happen to be a turkey... Mariah Carey sings, a lot... and I get a whole lot more likes on my socials for wearing a fluffy red hat.”

And I suspected that was all he was wearing. “Jesus,” I said as we ambled forward, following Victor’s marching pace into the temple of green and yellow devoted to all things Scandinavian furniture.

“Alright, Kitten. No need to get spicy about it.”

“No, I mean... the squishy human? Jesus was born, right? On Christmas day.” I was very human, so I knew these things.

“Him again.” Zee rolled his eyes. “Such an attention seeker. Also, why’d he change his name to Gareth?”

“Uh . . . He did?”

“Baby Gareth. King of Christmas? That Gareth?”

Were we talking about the same person? “I guess.” Admittedly, I didn’t know much about human religions and rituals. Humans didn’t have a Wilson’s Guide , like the

Lost Ones did. If you were human, you were just expected to know human things. I'd read a lot of human books, though. Some books. Mostly those left in the hotel.

"It must have fuckin' sucked having his birthday on Christmas Day. Imagine only getting presents once a year." Zee heaved a sigh, then smiled. "Birthdays are the best."

"It wasn't Christmas when he was born," Victor intervened from a few steps ahead.

"Uh, yes it was." Zee rolled his eyes at Victor's back. "Everyone knows Gareth was born on Christmas Day. They sing a fuckin' song about it. Aren't you supposed to be intelligent?"

"I thought so too, but conversing with you generally reduces my IQ."

"Because I am smarterer."

Both Victor and I let that one slide, and Victor pushed on by adding, "At the time, Jesus had more pressing matters than fewer presents. Besides, humanity's holiday season has grown into a time of being thankful for family and human life in general. It's no longer reserved for a single religion. Lost Ones could learn a great deal by participating in human rituals."

Zee side-eyed me. I shrugged. Victor knew more about humans than we did. He'd spent centuries among them. He was also right about most things.

"He's almost as old as Gareth," Zee mumbled.

We sauntered toward the main entrance, with Victor ahead, list in hand and basket at his side, clearly on a mission to retrieve everything we needed to smarten up the hotel for the holidays. Zee sashayed behind him, wings hidden, but still larger than life

wearing an oversized pink sweater, a tiny pair of black ass-hugging shorts, fishnet tights with a snake design woven into them, and boots with soft soles, no heels. The outfit was subtle, but he still managed to make sure everyone noticed him.

We veered toward a section of plants, where Zee picked up a mug-sized spiky cactus, grinning at its provocative shape.

“Do not linger,” Victor advised, eyeing the dick-shaped cactus, then Zee’s grin. His eyebrow of judgment arched, and Zee’s grin pinched into a frown. “We have a limited amount of time and a long list of items to procure before the store closes.”

Zee headed back toward Victor, carrying the little cactus. “If your admittedly very fine, lily-white ass wasn’t terminally allergic to sunlight, we’d have more time to shop, Fancy Fangs.”

“I did offer to begin this trip earlier, at my peril,” Victor sniped back.

I’d refused to let Victor suffer in daylight just for some new hotel furniture. “We can visit for longer another time,” I told them. Our trip hadn’t started out the best. Downtown traffic had been bad, and we’d arrived later in the evening than we’d planned for. This wasn’t so much a shopping spree as a shopping mission that needed to be completed in record time.

Zee narrowed his eyes at Victor, and carefully placed the spiky cactus in the bottom of the bright yellow basket. Straightening, he grinned again and folded his arms, waiting for Victor’s comment. A few other shoppers maneuvered around the pair of them, avoiding Zee’s swishing tail.

We’d barely begun and they were already in a standoff over a tiny dick-shaped cactus. But this was how they did things. Contempt during the day, scorching shenanigans at night.

“Hey Zee, wanna see if there’s a bed big enough for three?” I suggested. It was probably best we left Victor to complete the important list, while Zee and I wandered off to browse for things we probably didn’t need.

“Why, yes I do.” He scooted around Victor, then leaned back in. “Touch my spiky dick at your own risk, Daddy Fancy Pants.” He wagged his fingers in a wave and swaggered ahead, so he didn’t see Victor’s surrendering smile.

Victor dipped his chin at me in silent thanks for distracting Zee, leaving him to get the job done. He was happier working down his list, and Zee was happier bouncing on beds. I was just happy to be out with the both of them in a location where we were unlikely to be kidnapped, shot at, or murdered.

“Wait up...” I hurried after Zee, and caught up just as he stopped and stared at a large arrow stuck to the floor, pointing the way.

“What’s that for?” he asked, tail lashing.

The big yellow arrow he’d avoided pointed toward the bed section up ahead, where another arrow continued to point out the suggested route. “You gotta follow the arrows so you don’t miss anything,” I told him.

He screwed up his nose. “Can’t we just amble?”

“Sure. Nobody is going to stop us. It’s just a thing these stores have, I guess. Maybe so people don’t get lost?”

“Hold up. People get lost in these places?”

“It’s real big and there aren’t any windows, so yeah... I guess. I mean, before they put the arrows in.”

Zee eyed the arrow again. “Were they ever found?”

“Who?”

“The lost people.”

“I dunno... I guess that’s why we follow the arrows.”

“Follow the arrows, right.” He straightened, and used his fingers to fluff the hair between his horns. “We have got this.”

With a chuckle, I looped my arm in his and we wandered along the arrow pathways, checking out all the immaculately presented rooms, which despite the bargain price tags we couldn’t afford. We could dream though. Zee, of course, loved the rooms full of candy colors and sparkle. We both agreed that Victor would have loved the all-black and very boring vampire kitchen.

After weaving through the fancy showrooms, we reached the kids’ section, where Zee made a beeline for an enormous box of small, colorful rubber balls.

“Not for eating,” I warned.

He rolled his eyes and grinned, as he plucked a ball out of the mound of thousands like it and gave it a squeeze. “What’s it do?”

“It’s kinda doing it, I think.”

The rubber ball twanged from his fingers, pinged off the floor, and struck a lamp on the end of a shelf filled with desk lights. The lamp toppled. Zee poofed to the shelf and caught the teetering lamp, but the bouncy ball was on its own mission to wipe out anything in its path. It boinged off a mirror and hurtled toward a shelf of glass

ornaments.

My heart dropped.

Zee poofed again, and reappeared in front of the fragile shelf. He snatched the ball in the air and froze.

Hand up, ball clutched in his fist, he blinked as though expecting to hear fifty glass trinkets raining to the floor behind him. But he'd stopped the ball. The glass trinkets were safe. And nobody had died.

Disaster averted.

Zee grinned, shook himself all over and shrugged the whole escapade off. "Lightning fuckin' reflexes. Did you just see that?" He tossed me the ball.

And that was his mistake.

I had my hands shoved in my pockets and struggled to yank them out in time to catch the bouncy ball.

It twanged off my forehead.

I reeled, surprised, and nudged the giant box of balls. Honestly, I'm not sure exactly what happened after that, just that the entire container of bouncy balls exploded, springing balls in all directions. Several struck Zee like rubber bullets, knocking him into the shelf of fragile things. After that there was a whole lot of noise, some screaming, sounds of lots of fragile things breaking, and... So. Many. Rubber. Balls.

Everywhere.

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CHAPTER 2

I stood in the eye of the storm—or ground zero. The scene was calm now the riot of ricocheting balls had passed, but it had left a swathe of destruction behind.

Victor arrived and casually assessed the carnage while the rest of us checked for mortal wounds. “I see.”

“It was Adam.” Zee pointed. His wings had popped out during the pandemonium, probably from shock.

Victor sighed.

“It happened so fast,” I admitted.

“Was it an accident, perchance?” Victor asked.

“It was exactly that.”

A distraught manager sprinted toward the carnage and stood on a bouncy ball. Her bottom half went up, her top half fell. Victor, being the dashing sort, caught her before she could break her neck and cause the well-known Scandinavian furniture company to sue us for manslaughter.

“Why leave a million bouncy projectiles where they might explode?!” Zee whined, clutching his tail, probably to prevent it from whipping up more damage.

Victor righted the woman on her feet. She huffed and straightened her uniform. “Sir, sirs!? Why did you molest the balls?”

“Excuse-moi.” Zee dropped his tail and realigned his wings with a ruffle. “The balls molested us.”

She gaped at the scene. “How is this level of destruction even possible?”

“It’s a skill,” Victor said, unhelpfully. “As you two are clearly enjoying yourselves, I have a shopping list to complete.” He strode off, wheeling the bright yellow basket behind him.

“You’d better still have my spiky dick in there!” Zee called.

“His... uh... He means his cactus,” I told the manager. Which didn’t sound any better, honestly. I wasn’t sure she cared anyway. She continued to eye the debris and clutter, twitching every few seconds, traumatized by the destruction.

I began picking up some balls, but with nowhere to put the lethal little things, I quickly stuffed them into my pockets. I’d find somewhere to stash them later. “So... uhm... I guess, Zee, we should maybe... uh... just... get the thing for the thing...” Sidestepping toward the kids’ bedroom displays, I beckoned Zee to hurry up, and together we scooted away, leaving the manager twitching and muttering to herself.

“Nobody died ,” Zee mumbled. His wings fizzed away, dusting purple sparks behind him as they vanished.

“I know, right? It was just a few balls.”

“It’s not our fault they exploded.”

“Exactly.”

We ambled on, oohing over various displays of kitchen cutlery and wall art, then into the drapes section with its enormous floor-to-ceiling curtains on racks. Gremlins had eaten most of our curtains during the last few weeks, meaning we did need a few more, and they weren't on Victor's list so this was something useful we could do.

I studied some of the tall racks, looking at colors and thickness. And price. Yikes.

“Hey, Kitten? Where'd the arrows go?”

Stepping back from the curtains, I scanned the shiny floor around us for the guiding arrows. There didn't appear to be any nearby. There weren't any signs leading the way either. “We'll just head back the way... we came...” If I could remember it. The shelves of cushions and rows of curtains all looked the same. “Didn't we take a left at the cow cushion?”

“Yeah...” Zee shrugged. “That was right over—” He poofed away, was gone a few beats, and poofed back to my side. “Nope. Not back there. Maybe over there?” He pointed toward a gloomy section of the store.

“It's fine...” I picked an aisle and headed down it. “These aisles all lead back to the same place anyway.” But the more we walked, the darker and sparser the aisles became. And where were the other shoppers?

A few minutes of walking past stacks of rugs, and it was clear the arrows had gone. “I don't think we're in the right part of the store anymore.”

“But we followed the fuckin' arrows.” Zee worried his bottom lip between his sharp teeth.

The store lights dimmed and a disembodied voice came over the Tannoy. “Please note, this store will be closing in fifteen minutes. All shoppers please make your way to the checkouts.”

“It’s fine,” I said again, hoping to ease Zee’s concern. “It’s this way.” I hoped... and set off in a new direction. The aisles had to lead somewhere. We couldn’t have wandered too far off the main pathways. The store wasn’t a subdimensional portal to a mirror realm that looked exactly like ours but happened to be devoid of all life... That wasn’t likely... Right?

“Where is everyone?” Zee asked, whispering now.

Maybe walking aimlessly wasn’t a great idea. I stopped by a shelf of coffee mugs. “Try your phone.”

“Oh, fuck, yeah.” He pulled his phone from the pocket of his little shorts. “No signal.”

“Store closing in five minutes.”

“Ugh.” He frowned and turned on the spot, looking around us. We were lost in a maze of blue and yellow mugs and bowls. “Imma take a look ahead,” he said. “Wait here. Do not move.”

“Yeah, but?—”

He poofed away, leaving me to huff a sigh. The last time he and Victor had told me to stay I’d been stalked by a robot murder dog. This store wasn’t Reynard Technologies, but there was something creepy about the place, especially when empty.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and aimlessly studied the different mugs.

Victor must have noticed we were missing by now. He'd be looking for us. This was just some silly mix-up with the arrows, and we'd be back in the right aisle at any moment.

Zee poofed back. "So... I didn't find an arrow, or a way out—everything looks the same. But I did find this." He showed me his phone's screen and what looked like four jagged grooves carved into a drywall.

"What's that?"

"I know exactly what that is." He shoved his phone back into his pocket. "That is a fuckin' neon sign that says"—he swept his hands through the air—"Leave Now ! Do not pass Go. Do not collect Daddy Vampire. Get the fuck out!"

We had been trying to do that. "Okay. But what is it?"

"It's claws, Kitten. Big claws!" He raised both his hands and bent his fingers, showing off the shiny nails—also known as claws. But even his looked small compared to whatever creature had made the gouges in the wall.

"Oh." It didn't have to mean anything bad. "Maybe it's old, and they didn't get around to decorating that part of the store?"

"They left fuck-off ginormous claw marks in the walls so human spawn can get their daily dose of nightmare fuel?"

"Wait, that was in the kids' section?"

"Right over a cutesy crib."

I winced—"Yikes"—and started walking again. "Can't you just poof outside and find

someone?”

“I would, but nothing is where it’s supposed to be, and I haven’t found an outside wall. Even if I did, I’m not sure what I’d be poofing into on the other side. Everything feels fucked-up.”

“Yeah.” It was definitely time to double our efforts into leaving.

“This store is now closed. Have a good night.”

We hurried on, jogging but not running. Running might attract whatever had left those claw marks.

Everything was going to be fine. There would be a way out. The store couldn’t go on forever.

Halloween hadn’t been that long ago—another strange human custom. Humans did all sorts of weird things for Halloween, such as dress themselves as skeletons and pretend they were being chased by axe murderers. Zee’d had a great time dressed in black and purple leather while wielding an axe and stalking the hotel’s corridors, until we’d gotten complaints that his performance had been a bit too realistic. So maybe those claw marks had been left over from their Halloween decorations?

The aisle ended up ahead. We’d take a right and be back on the arrows. I was sure of it.

Zee’s pace quickened. He turned at the end of the shelf. “It’s probably right around this—” And stopped dead. I plowed into him, teetered over someone sleeping on the floor, and grabbed Zee’s arm to keep from falling.

“Woah, there...” Zee scowled at the sleeping form. “Hey lady, we’re walkin’ here.”

The person didn't move. Or respond.

“What a strange place to fall asleep.”

He toed her shoulder with his sneaker, and when she didn't move, realisation sunk in. She wasn't sleeping. “Oh, fuck. Are we like, fuckin' murder magnets or something?”

She wore a store uniform, and as the word murder echoed around us, a pool of glossy, dark red blood crept out from under her, toward our shoes.

“Wait. We didn't do this, right?” Zee asked, face stricken.

“No, what? No. Wait, did we?” The bouncing balls couldn't have murdered someone... That wasn't a thing that happened. “No. This wasn't us.” We had accidentally murdered a few people lately, but we usually knew about it at the time.

“Good.”

“Although, if we didn't, someone else did, I guess.”

“Right.” Zee scanned the gloomy shelving units, only half-stocked with what looked like rejects and returns. He scooted me along beside him, and we hurried on, reaching a plastic-plant section.

Zee pinged a trailing ivy, then batted it out of his face when it came back at him. “So... imma just put this out there. Are we fucked right now? Like... are we trapped in some weird Scandinavian furniture dimension with something that's slicing up drywall and unaliving the staff? Because that's what it kinda feels like. But also, this was supposed to be a normal afternoon out with Daddy Fancy Fangs to buy a fuckin' shelf and some fairy lights for my pole. Yes, that pole—I heard you thinkin' it.”

“Maybe. Apart from the pole thing.”

“Okay. Fuck. Fine. I knew I shoulda brought Shareen.” He stopped in the middle of an aisle. “Christmas can suck my bouncy balls.”

I scanned the shelves, unsure if we’d passed this way already. “I don’t think aimlessly wandering around is helping.”

“What other options we got, Kitten?”

“We should go back to the bedroom section and hole up there for the night. If there’s something here that wants to eat us, it probably won’t find us there.”

Zee cocked his head. “You mean hide?”

“I mean... yeah, I guess. Hiding’s not so bad.”

“Ugh. So which way are the fancy bedrooms?”

“Let’s retrace our steps. We’ll find it . . .”

We turned around and headed back, stepping over the unalived staff member again. Whoever had killed her hadn’t cared about cleanup or getting caught. That wasn’t a good sign. Leaving the body on display meant they were either insane or powerful. Or both.

Passing by shelves of cutlery, Zee picked up a metal spork.

“What’s that for?” I whispered.

He made stabbing motions. “In case we get company,” he whispered back, poking the

spork's prongs to test their sharpness.

I didn't have the heart to tell him his own claws were longer and more deadly than a spork. "Wouldn't a knife be?—"

He shoved a knife into my hand. I thumbed its edge. "It's pretty blunt."

"If we find a sword section, you can switch it out. Until then, you get a table knife."

It was better than nothing. I dropped it into my pocket alongside the collection of rubber balls.

We pushed on, moving quietly, keeping low. Only the hum of air-conditioning ducts high above our heads accompanied our soft shuffling.

"Do you think Fancy Fangs is okay?" Zee whispered. "Not that I care or anything. I don't. But he's looking for us, right?"

"Oh, for sure."

The bigger question was why hadn't Victor found us yet?

We rounded a bend and were met by a wall of twinkling lights, a forest of giant plastic Christmas trees, fake-snow blankets strung over the aisle to make a long, wintery tunnel, and a whole lot of creepy gnome yard ornaments wearing homicidal grins.

"What in the flying fucking reindeer is this creepshow?"

"It's the holiday section." We definitely hadn't been through here yet.

Zee's wide eyes quickly narrowed. "No way am I going through the twinkly fuckin' snow tunnel of death. Nah, dawg. Nope. Fuck. That. With a side order of Fuck No , and a dessert of Fuck Off ."

We hadn't arrived that way, so the bed section definitely had to be behind us. I didn't much relish the idea of walking through that tunnel of wintry doom either. "It's okay... let's... uhm... go back..."

A crackling sound scratched from the store speakers and tinkling music began to play from all around. "Do you hear what I hear..."

Icy fingers of dread tickled down my spine.

Zee straightened, pinched his lips together, and pointed up. He grimaced and gave his head a rigid shake, rattling his horn-ring. "Nope. Nuh-uh. Hello nope sleigh. We leavin' this fuckin' creepy-ass reindeer ride to nightmare hell."

I was on board with that idea.

Zee grabbed my hand and hauled me in the opposite direction from the holiday nightmare display, leaving the creepy music and weird gnomes fading behind us. But as it quietened, a hearty "ho, ho, ho" rang out, that didn't sound as though it belonged to the music.

The fine hairs on my arms lifted.

We weren't alone.

CHAPTER 3

Zee found the most colorful bedroom suite to have ever assaulted human eyes, highlighted with candy plastics, fluffy pinks, and soft pastel velvets, and immediately began to make it even more outrageous by gathering up all the multicolored cushions from the other bedroom displays.

The overhead lights were off, but the little bedside lamps worked, so we kept one of those aglow while he nested. The result was a comfy nook. If there hadn't been a murderer lurking somewhere nearby, it would have made for a great sleepover.

"Get in, Kitten." Zee sprawled on the large bed, propped his head on his hand, and patted the spot on the quilt beside him.

"Shouldn't we stay on guard, just in case?"

"You can rest up while I keep an eye out for our unfriendly neighborhood murderer."

It was tempting, but also, I couldn't shake the image of the bloody body and those claw marks in the wall.

"Sit, babycakes. You're making me nervous."

"Alright." I perched on the edge of the bed, then scooted up to the cushions and shuffled into their floofy embrace. Zee wriggled in closer, draping all of himself against my side. His purple eyes sparkled in the dim lighting.

Zee's hand settled on my hip non-suggestively, but it was unlikely to stay there. I let him see my soft smile, and his tail wrapped itself around my ankle.

"This is kinda nice," I admitted.

"I know, right? And if anyone fucks up my nest, they're getting a spork to the face. We're badasses, we got this. We'll wait it out till morning." He walked his fingers up my waist, over my crinkled shirt. "Hm... What can we do to pass the time in this comfy bed, I wonder?"

"I have no idea." I played along. "What do people usually do in beds all night?"

"If it's my bed, Kitten, there ain't a lot of sleepin'." His fingers traced my chin, turning my head. His dazzling eyes drank me in, and pulled me down to where all the worry vanished—to where the only thing that mattered was me and Zee in our own little bubble of lusty bliss.

Every time he looked at me like this, I was sure he'd realize his mistake and go find someone better, but he never did. When Zee looked into me, he made me wonder whether I really was more than just a failed Chosen One who'd only been good at hiding from people and was definitely not great at saving them.

My heart pounded, my body knowing exactly where this was headed. Despite our life-and-death situation, I was here for some spicy action in Zee's rainbow nest. Or maybe because of the life-and-death stakes. Nobody else made me feel protected quite like Zee. Except Victor.

Zee's finger stroked across my bottom lip and my heart thudded harder. Heat scorched my veins. It wouldn't be long before I forgot where we were—about our plan to hide—and fell down the rabbit hole that was Zee, like I always did when I was the subject of all his intense focus.

A blood-chilling scream echoed through the store. It pierced through my lust-fueled haze and dumped a bucket of ice-water through my veins, flushing out all the heat. Zee clutched me, smooshing me against his chest.

“Ah, there you are?—”

I twisted in time to see Zee’s tail fling the spork at Victor’s face. Victor caught the spork in the air, an inch from his eye. And blinked.

“Did you just attempt to stab me with a spork, demon?” Victor asked in his smooth, unhurried murder voice.

“No?”

“Victor!” I sprang from Zee’s arms and reached for him. It was a reflex at this point, and with a similar impulse, Victor knelt on the bed, scooping me into his arms. We snapped together like two magnets. He always smelled so damn good. And felt good too. Solid. Firm. So firm. Hm. Oh wait, that was parts of me. Ahem.

“Was that your scream, Fancy Fangs?” Zee asked.

“When have you ever heard me scream?” Victor’s voice rumbled through me, rekindling the heat.

“I dunno. It just seemed like a vampire scream. All high pitched and whiny like y’all are. Just sayin’.”

“Prey scream, demon,” Victor growled. “Vampires are not prey.” His warm touch stroked down my face. “It seems you are pleased to see me, Adam.”

“Oh, that’s . . .” He’d noticed how hard I was from Zee’s teasing. “I uh . . . Zee and I

were . . .”

“Ugh.” Zee flopped back into his nest of pillows. “Your timing sucks. I was about to give him head so we could forget this shit-show of a shopping trip, but no, you gotta show up and spoil the fun times.”

Victor tossed the spork onto the bed. “I rather think the scream spoiled it. Also, it is a foolish time to engage in sexual exploits while you’re hiding from a bloodthirsty creature of unknown origin. By rendering your senses blind to all but passion you missed my approach, and would also likely miss the approach of said creature hunting you.”

Zee blinked too fast. “Did you say something? I zoned out from boredom . Besides, I knew it was you, that’s why the spork didn’t hit its target.” He examined his nails, pretending Victor’s arrival was meaningless when it hadn’t been long ago he’d been concerned about where he was. He reached down and adjusted his shorts, which were so tight they looked like they’d been painted on around his eager and generous dick. Zee’s grin was the icing on the incubus cake—that cake being the whole fluffy, candy-colored bedroom showroom. “Also, au contraire, ye olde fanged fossil. Now is the perfect time for sex. I get a power-up, and Adam gets to let off steam in this fabulous fucking bedroom nest I made for us. Win-win.”

“I don’t know what’s more disturbing. The creature stalking the store or your interior design.”

“Isn’t it great?” Zee’s grin grew.

“It’s an assault on the visual spectrum and entices me to gouge my own eyes out with that spork.” Eyes that shone like molten silver in the soft ambient lighting.

Zee narrowed his eyes. “Do you still have my spiky dick?”

“I left your phallic cactus with the rest of our shopping at the checkouts when it became clear you weren’t going to make the exit before the wards sealed you inside.”

“There are wards?” I asked, separating myself from Victor’s embrace and sitting near the end of the bed so I could see them both.

“Yes, keeping unsavory people out, and unfortunately us inside, until the store reopens. I was able to slip back inside prior to the store closing.” He sat on the edge of the bed. “It seems, however, we are not alone.”

That explained why we couldn’t find the exit, or a way out. The wards were a theft deterrent, and for those who did break in, it kept them inside, walking a maze, until the authorities could deal with them at opening time.

A warning sign about the wards would have been helpful. Although, we’d still have been lost in the store, even with a sign. But at least we’d have known what we were dealing with.

“We found a body. Was that you?” Zee asked, reclining on the many cushions.

“I haven’t murdered anyone, no.”

Zee peered at Victor through narrowed eyes. “A bit sus, though. Daddy Vampire gets trapped inside with us and the staff start dropping like flies.”

“C’mon, Zee . . .” I warned.

“I’m just sayin’ what we’re all thinkin’.”

He knew it wasn’t Victor. When Zee was nervous he deflected, and right now he was deflecting sass all over Victor.

“I heard something when we were running away from the Winter Wonderland section,” I said.

“The what?” Victor asked.

“We weren’t running ,” Zee clarified, so there weren’t any misunderstandings about bravery in front of the thousand-year-old vampire. “Just walking real fast.”

“What did you hear, Adam?” Victor asked, shifting to face me.

“Someone laughing. A man, I think. He had a deep voice. Maybe?”

“I didn’t hear anything.” Zee dismissed with a flick of his hand.

“Maybe I didn’t hear it. I don’t know. It was mixed in with the music, so it could have been part of the song? I’m kinda doubting myself now.”

“What did the voice say?” Victor asked, his expression hardening, turning focused.

“It sort of laughed, in a weird way. It sounded strange, but went something like... ho, ho, ho .”

Zee snorted, then shivered all over as a darker thought occurred to him. “Maybe it was one of those freaky-ass gnomes?”

“Ah,” Victor said, drawing both our gazes back to him.

“Ah?” I asked.

“I fear we’re dealing with a bloodthirsty sociopath with no boundaries, who plays by few rules but their own. Infamous for animal cruelty, with a slew of unlawful-entry

and criminal-damage charges. And it appears they've escalated to mass murder."

Zee propped himself up on his elbows. "And this peach is?"

Victor paused for dramatic effect.

"Santa Claus."

CHAPTER 4

“The Santa?!” Zee sat bolt upright, knocking a few fluffy cushions off the bed. “The Santa Claus? The jolly red giant?”

“So it would seem,” Victor confirmed, then added. “Although, I don’t believe he’s a giant?”

“I thought you said Santa was a human myth?” I asked.

“I believed so, but when the veil weakened, letting untold numbers of Lost Ones through, there’s no knowing what arrived. Perhaps Santa Claus has always been real, but resided in our world. Now he’s trapped here with the rest of us, all year round. I’ve seen the claw marks, and with you hearing his distinctive laugh, Adam, I suspect Santa is indeed who we are dealing with.”

Zee flopped his head back. “Ugh. And now this jolly beardo is on a killing spree the same night we go shopping, because why the fuck not?! Fuck my life. If you put this in a book, nobody would believe it.”

Now there was an idea I’d revisit later... A series of books based around our insane lives at the hotel. Zee was right though; nobody would believe it.

“You said he didn’t have claws.” Zee pointed at Victor. “You said, and I quote: He is called Santa Claus. He does not have claws.”

“I admit, occasionally—rarely, you understand—I have been known to be...” Victor

swallowed and glanced between us. “Wrong.”

“It’s fine. We’ll just stay here in this nest until morning.” Zee grabbed a purple grinning-devil-emoji cushion and hugged it.

“What is Santa?” I asked Victor softly. “What are we dealing with?”

“A leshy, I suspect.”

“What’s a leshy?”

“Shape-shifting forest dwellers with a penchant for eating children.”

“Hence the claw marks over the crib,” Zee muttered. “We’re safe though, as we’re not tiny human spawn. Why we gotta get involved? I just came for a dick plant and meatballs.”

“The staff were not small humans,” I said. “I don’t think Santa cares who he eats.”

“We should stay here, have fantastic sex, and sneak out in the morning,” Zee suggested. Nobody has to know, or die, and someone else can do the save-the-world-from-Santa thing.”

“Sure.” It sounded easy enough—stay in bed, wait it out, escape in the morning.

“Ugh,” Zee groaned. “You’ve got the face.”

“No, I don’t.” I frowned.

“There it is.” He circled a finger at my face. “The face .”

“I don’t have the face.” I looked at Victor, who winced. “Do I?”

“It’s your yeah-but face,” Zee explained. “Daddy Vampire knows the face.”

Victor didn’t deny it, even as both his eyebrows lifted. “You do have a unique and telling frown that indicates you’re thinking something we’ll likely not enjoy.”

Oh. I had a face. “Well, I was just thinking that if more people die, and we walk away in the morning, won’t it look suspicious? As though maybe we were somehow involved with Santa? Especially if more humans die.”

“Do we look like we’re involved with Santa? I’m an internet sensation, Vampire Daddy looks like a lawyer, and you’re... boring you. I think we’re good.”

“If we do nothing,” Victor rumbled. “We’ll have to sneak away prior to the checkouts opening, and we will not be able to purchase the items we need for the hotel, including your phallic cactus, demon.”

“Leave my spiky dick out of this...” Zee flopped back and blinked at the ceiling for a few beats. “Do we have to stop Santa?”

“I think we do,” I said.

He rolled his eyes and head dramatically and sat up. “Alright then.” He hopped to his feet, grabbed the spork, and gave himself an all-over shake. “Let’s fuckin’ cook.”

Victor and I both blinked at him.

Zee glared back. “Are we gonna save Christmas, or am I just standing here looking pretty for free entertainment?”

“We should formulate a plan,” Victor, our voice of reason said.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, or we could go find Santa”—Zee counted on his fingers—“get our funk on, have amazing sex, raid the meatballs, and be done by morning.”

“That’s not a plan,” Victor grumbled. “It’s a wish list.”

Zee cocked his head and fluttered his lashes, then planted a hand on his hip. “Say it. Say you wanna save Christmas.”

With a reluctant sigh, Victor got to his feet and offered me his hand. “I don’t believe it needs to be said.”

“Say it, Fancy Daddy. We all know you want to.”

“I’ll say it.” I grabbed Victor’s hand, got to my feet, and grinned. “Let’s go save Christmas!”

Victor took a deep breath, and with the world’s smallest, tightest smile he said, “Indeed.” Which was as close to him saying we were saving Christmas as we were going to get.

CHAPTER 5

The Winter Wonderland section sparkled and twinkled. Knee-high gnomes with murder grins all glared in our direction. Even the ones who were fishing looked as though they'd escaped a gnome asylum.

“The chance of that miniature army of ankle biters coming alive is one hundred fuckin’ percent. Right?” Zee said, clutching his spork while his tail swished.

“Can Santa do that? Make things come alive?” I asked Victor, who was standing to my left and glaring at the winter doom tunnel.

“I cannot say for certain either way. We should expect the worst.”

“At least they’re not frogs.” Zee shuddered.

Okay. We were here. And this needed to be done. “I’ll go in first?—”

“No, what?!” Zee blocked my path.

And of course Victor added, “I do not approve.”

“Look, I’m the most human out of the three of us—” They both gave me disbelieving looks, so I quickly rushed on. “I’m the one who looks like bait. Zee, you’re seven feet of demon badass. And Victor, honestly, your murder-daddy vibes are off the charts, which is great, but if we’re going to lure Santa out of his grotto, we need something cute—like me.” I shrugged. It was true. I’d made it true by being small and squishy

and harmless looking. We all knew I wasn't small, or squishy, or harmless, but that wasn't the point.

Zee was shaking his head. "I think we should wait and call Agent L'Oréal."

"You mean Agent Leomaris?" Victor corrected.

"That's what I said."

"No, Leomaris is just as likely to arrest us as help us. We've got this. We're badasses, right?"

"I mean..." Zee shrugged a shoulder and begrudgingly mumbled, "I'm a badass. Lord Fang-Banger is okay if he stays awake."

"It's just some fake snow and weird chubby gnomes that can't be any worse than gremlins, and we've dealt with lots of those. And that's even if they come alive. Maybe they won't?"

Zee snorted a laugh. "Have you met us, Kitten? This is classic SOS Hotel night-out happenings. It starts off fine, then wham, some fucker screws it all up, we get kidnapped, Fancy Daddy falls asleep, and I have to save everyone."

"I was tranquilized during the incident you are referring to," Victor quickly clarified.

"Still asleep."

It didn't always happen like that.

I pulled the table knife from my pocket and faced the glistening wintery tunnel mouth. "I'm going in."

As they didn't immediately stop me, I started forward, one foot in front of the other. Maybe they would stop me? I had argued for them not to stop me, but... A glance behind revealed Zee with his thumbs up and Victor looking grumpy. Okay. They'd listened and were hanging back, waiting for Santa to make an appearance.

And... why had I been so adamant I'd go first?

I flexed my grip on the table knife and entered gnome alley. Too many lights twinkled, shifting shadows around and distorting the gnomes' smiles. Whoever had made this display clearly hadn't considered what it would look like at night while being hunted by a child-eater.

"Do you hear what I hear . . ."

The creepy music was back.

But that was fine.

Music never hurt anyone.

I swallowed the sharp lump in my throat and pushed on.

Had the gnomes always faced toward me? I thought they'd been watching the entrance?

No, nope, the creepy gnomes hadn't moved, it was just my own mind playing tricks. They were not coming alive.

"Do you know what I know . . ."

Yeah, probably not.

The blunt table knife in my grip shimmered.

Strings of white fairy lights strobed.

“Come out, Santa,” I crooned. “I’ve been a good boy.” Mostly. Lately. Not so much before that, but those were extenuating circumstances.

The song ended, a crackly record clicked over, and the opening plink-plings of a Mariah Carey track Zee assured me was popular at this time of year began to play. “I don’t want a lot for Christmas...”

“Fuck yeah!” Zee announced.

I turned back to see him flick his hair, crack his knuckles, and strut forward. He raised his spork like a microphone, sashayed to the beat, and sang at the top of his voice. And since he had a generous pair of lungs, he belted out the lyrics in a voice made for theater.

When he reached me, he sang, “All I waaaant for Christmaaas iiiiiiiiiiis yooooooooou...” And took my hand, yanking me into his embrace. “Go with it.” He winked and we were off, strutting down the snowy tunnel, lit by flashing lights. Zee grabbed a fluffy red pointed hat off a gnome and popped it on my head.

I mean, I’m not going to lie, Zee’s energy was infectious. And within a few steps I was jiving along, scary gnomes forgotten, murder-Santa shoved to the back of my mind while Zee and I danced and he belted out Mariah Carey’s money-making hit.

Were the lights getting brighter?

It didn’t matter—Zee and I were killing it. I could dance, and this was just like when Victor had taken me to the swing club. My heart soared, my grin ached. So what if

something mean was out there that likely wanted us dead. Zee lived for the moment, and right now, so did I.

There was no way Santa could ignore Zee, even if he wanted to.

We approached the end of the tunnel as Mariah reached her climax. Zee pranced ahead, struck a pose, and belted out that final high-pitched “yoooooooouuuuuu” into his spork microphone.

The music faded. I clapped, thrilled, and Zee cut off, grinning. Soaking up my praise, he took an exaggerated bow and said into his spork, “Thank you, thank you. I’m here all week.”

“Ho, ho, ho...” A deep, thunderous voice rumbled from all around.

I stopped clapping.

Zee jolted upright, and spun to face a sparkly shed adorned with fake gingerbread panels, that looked like either something a witch baked to lure human babies inside, or Santa’s grotto—it was all sort of the same. Human fairy tales are real dark.

The gingerbread door flung open, and a jolly overweight bearded man wearing red felt weebled out. He looked harmless. But if you were a child-eating mass murderer, what better disguise than a jolly old man who gave out gifts? I should know, one carnivore-in-disguise to another.

“Ho, ho, ho!”

Zee side-eyed me. “The fuck?”

I wasn’t sure whether this was our murderer or someone’s grandpa in a suit either.

“Have you both been good?” He plodded closer.

Yeah, okay... I was beginning to get the ick now.

“Santa knows all your wishes and desires. Sit on my knee and I’ll give you all you could ever wish for.”

“Yeah...” Zee grimaced and took a step back. “I’m good. Adam? You good?”

“I’m good.”

“Ho, ho, ho! I like good boys!”

“Yup, Kitten.” Zee spoke from the corner of his mouth. “I be gettin’ serious predator vibes off Mr. Happy Pedo, and not just the weird kind.”

Santa opened his arms and kept on waddling forward, as though we’d just happily hug a random person in a scratchy felt suit. His grin stretched, and beneath those plump lips, jagged teeth began to fill his mouth.

“Oh-kay . . .” Zee recoiled.

Santa’s shoulders twitched, jolting at odd angles. His neck bent, and his large body began to ripple in ways human bodies did not ripple. Glamor. And it was unraveling fast. Beneath the melting Santa mask, a jagged, woody, skeletal figure emerged.

“Ho, ho, fuck no!” Zee stabbed his spork into Santa’s thigh and sprang back. We all stopped to stare at the spork sticking out of Santa’s flesh, and Santa looked down, as shocked as we were to see the spork there—in his leg.

I had a horrible feeling about this.

A creepy, about-to-be-murdered feeling.

Santa's glamor collapsed, exposing his towering, skeletal figure. Murder-Santa flung out dagger-length claws and roared around a lashing forked tongue.

Zee grabbed my arm and we bolted back into the tunnel. Mariah started up again, but the music had slowed, warping it like Santa's jolly glamor had melted, and turning Mariah's iconic voice into a monstrously twisted, howling version.

We shot out the end of the tunnel like two rounds from a shotgun, and Victor tore out of the tunnel behind us, then quickly piled some of the Christmas gnomes on top of the snowy blanket to keep Santa from escaping.

Santa's screeching roar echoed through the store, reaching every nook and aisle.

"Run!" Victor yelled.

CHAPTER 6

I made it back to our rainbow nest with Zee, where we cut the lights and sat on the bed, half-buried in cushions, and stayed there, panting in the dark until Victor appeared a few minutes later, confirming we hadn't been followed.

"So, what did we learn?" he whispered, standing watch at the doorway.

"Santa is definitely a pedo, and Adam looks great in a red hat."

Zee wasn't wrong. We did learn that.

"I was thinking of answers more relevant to our dire circumstances," Victor grumbled. "But far be it from me to get in the way of your fashion expertise, demon."

"You like me in red?" I asked Zee.

"Kitten, I love you in red. But I love you out of it more," he purred, and scooted over, scooping me under his arm.

"Aw." I snuggled closer, needing to feel him so I knew we were both alive and safe.

Victor's scowl softened. "Perhaps we should focus on our efforts to survive this night and not whether the color red complements Adam."

"It really does though."

I pulled my fluffy red hat off. It was a great color, but Victor was right. We had a Santa problem. “We found the murderer.”

“Fancy Fangs, you speak Swedish, why don’t you go back there and talk to him? For science. Adam and I will wait here. If one of us is going to be Santa’s Christmas sacrifice it should be your ancient ass. We’re too young and pretty to die.”

Victor gave Zee his resting Victor face. “Santa spoke English.”

“Oh, yeah...” Zee draped his arm around my shoulders, and tucking me closer, drew circles with his fingernail on my thigh.

“He didn’t seem all that interested in talking,” I said. “If the store opens tomorrow with Santa in his grotto, he’s definitely going to eat people. Not that I would know anything about eating people. He just... seems the sort... to do that.”

“What else did we learn?” Victor prompted.

“He’s fast,” Zee replied. “Super old. He smells musty, like he’s been stored in an attic most of the year. Huh, kinda like you, Fancy Fangs.”

“If you channeled all that wasted sarcastic energy into bettering yourself, you’d be remarkable.”

“Ha! Joke’s on you. I already get remarks. Lots of them. All over the internet. And some are nice.”

Victor slid his nonchalant gaze to me, where he probably hoped to focus our efforts toward dealing with murder-Santa and less on Zee’s unique perspective. “Now we’ve managed to get a better look at who and what we’re dealing with, we can at least better formulate a plan.”

“Does this plan involve meatballs?” Zee asked.

Victor hesitated for a heartbeat. “Why?”

“Is nobody else hungry?” With a shrug, Zee hopped from the bed and adjusted his baggy sweater. “Attempted murder makes me peckish.”

“I could eat,” I agreed.

“Great. Let’s go find some meatballs while His Lordship gets his rocks off making plans.”

“And should Santa make an appearance while you eat, we’re going to... what?” Victor asked. “Share a hot dog with him?”

“I don’t think Gramps Beardo is interested in that kinda sausage.” Zee flashed Victor a smile. “You’re cute, though.”

Victor huffed a long-suffering sigh. “As it appears Santa is reluctant to leave his grotto, we’ll visit the restaurant and see if there are meatballs. But we must do so quietly, and quickly.”

“Pfft, I can do quiet. It’s like you’ve never met me.” Zee sashayed off in the hope of finding an arrow or sign pointing toward the restaurant. I followed, tossing Victor a grin, which grew wider when he smiled back. He wasn’t nearly as annoyed by Zee as he let on, but it was important he let Zee think he was. Reyzee was complicated—but cute.

As we ambled in the general direction of where we guessed the restaurant might be, Victor went over some possible plans to lure Santa from his grotto. Santa was fast, but probably not Victor-fast. And in the kitchens, if we could find some more

impressive knives that had a chance of beating Santa's claws, then we'd be able to dispatch his branch-like, shape-shifting self without too much fuss. We did all agree that Santa wasn't going to fall for Zee's Mariah Carey act again. We'd have to come up with a new show.

After finding the deathly quiet restaurant, we ambled between the tables fixed to the squeaky floor and headed for the food bars.

Zee leaned over the counter and rummaged underneath, then found a box of ring donuts that had been put away until tomorrow's service. He leaned a hip on the counter's edge, popped the box open, and chomped into a donut.

"Striptease, right?" he said around a mouthful of sugary sweetness. "We know Jolly Pedo is into good boys, so I'll strip, then you two turn him into a pin cushion."

Victor's permanent frown turned more frowny. "You're clearly not good, or a boy."

"Excuse-moi. I'm the fuckin' epitome of sweet and innocent," said the demon wearing fishnet tights under painted-on shorts that happened to leave very little of his masculinity to anyone's imagination.

Even I had a hard time swallowing the idea he might be innocent. "I'll do it."

"Adam does resemble the typical good boy," Victor said, and for some reason, my entire body got chills. The good kind. Y'know, the kind that wakes your libido up like a slap to the face.

Zee's eyes widened, catching the little skitter of nerves that fluttered low in my belly. Yeah, okay. I maybe had a thing for Victor saying good boy. Who knew?

Zee smirked around the donut. "Say that again, Daddy."

“Say what?” Victor asked, perplexed.

I chuckled. “Really, there’s no need . . .”

“Good boy?” Victor asked.

I closed my eyes, relished the tingles, and gave my head a clearing shake. “Yeah, okay,” I croaked. “Uhm... maybe not right now?”

“Adam?” Victor asked.

I opened my eyes to find his face concerned, and Zee grinning, tail flicking, his interest piqued.

“It’s uh...” I cleared my throat. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s clearly something.” Victor was growing more concerned with each beat of my now-racing heart.

“Yeah, Kitten . . .” Zee snorted. “It’s clearly something .”

“Zee.” I held up a finger. “I don’t think now is a good?—”

“Adam is such a good boy,” Zee purred the last two words and I almost melted in my shoes.

“I’m just . . . uh . . . hungry, I guess? Yeah. That’s it.”

“You’re hungry, alright,” Zee snickered. “For Daddy’s meaty-balls.”

With a huff, Victor said, “I am clearly missing something.”

“No, it’s nothing.” I waved them both off and leaned over the counter, searching for something to eat that would take my mind of Victor, the walking sexual feast who pushed all my hungry buttons.

A quick look over my shoulder revealed Zee whispering into Victor’s ear, and when he turned back toward me, cocking a hip next to Victor, their gazes devoured me as though I were the all-they-could-eat buffet.

Oh dear.

Victor blurred from Zee’s side, appearing hard up against my ass and thighs. “Allow me?” He leaned over me, pressing harder still and shifting a little, seating himself properly against my ass.

I squeaked, “Okay.”

“Hm... What would you prefer? A hearty snack of donuts, or something...” Turning his head, his gaze sharpened, his target in his sights. “Hotter?”

His voice, when it did that deep, smooth, audible lick through my soul, turned all my insides to jello and other parts of me to iron. Mercy, I was already falling, even though he pinned me to the counter.

“Uhm . . .”

“Hm?” Victor purred.

“Hmm.”

Yeah, alright. I was into this.

The ball of his thumb rode up my spine, and then his fingers swept the back of my neck, combining hard massages with swift, delicate strokes. I searched for Zee, checking he was alright and not upset over being left out. He'd draped himself in a plastic chair, one leg up on the table, smirking at the show. "Don't mind me, Kitten. It ain't often I get to watch."

Victor's hips gave a small jerk, then his hands were gripping my hips, his mouth skimming my ear and a very hard part of him nudging my inner thigh in slow, rhythmic strokes.

"I'm uh... I just... You said... distracted by passion was... bad?" I really wanted this to happen but I was also aware that we were potentially being hunted, which was also kinda hot.

"We have a lookout."

But Zee wasn't so much looking out as looking in, at us.

Zee rolled his eyes. "I can multitask. Just pretend I'm not here. Have at it. You're good."

"Like a good boy..." Victor's voice hummed at my ear and I was done. If Santa showed up and tried to kill us, he'd have to wait until after Victor had ravaged me, because that was definitely where this was headed. "You remember our safe word?"

Oh mercy, we were going that deep?

I bit my lip and nodded.

"Good."

“Heads-up,” Zee said, then tossed something that Victor snatched from the air without looking. “I always come prepared.” I heard him chuckle at his own joke.

With that comment, it had to be lube.

I was going to get railed in a restaurant where people ate their meatballs, and nobody would ever know.

Victor’s fingers tightened around my neck. “Hard and fast or soft and slow?”

There was only one correct answer. The time and place for soft and slow was not bent over a buffet counter. “I think you know.”

His growl reverberated down my spine, hardening my already enthusiastic dick. Victor’s efficient hands dealt with my fly, and I assumed his, in record time. Cool air touched my ass. The rough handling might have been too much for a normal human, but I wasn’t normal. After a few restrained, savage jerks, warm, slick fingers dipped between my ass cheeks while his other hand shoved me forward. Electric lust spritzed through my veins. A purple haze cast us in eerie, shifting light. I didn’t need to look to know Zee’s wings were out. He was feasting on more than donuts.

I did look over my shoulder to see Victor’s serious expression making all his handsome angles sharper. His lips parted, and his wet tongue swept over curved, sharp fangs. Unhinged Victor was my favorite Victor.

His fingers dove in, offering minimal prep, and then as his free hand encircled my dick, the hard, hungry part of him replaced those fingers, pushing in. I stopped thinking after that, and turned into a pillar of sparkling feelings. He called me a good boy, then slammed in hard enough to rattle the entire food counter, and my soul. His hand worked my dick, while the rest of him worked my ass. Heat turned into pleasure, spiraling higher, and sensing my untethered release about to blow, he

stopped jerking me off, grasped both my hips in his hands, bent me under him, and pounded me with all the ruthless efficiency you'd expect from Daddy Vampire.

The thrill of it—being hunted with murder in the air, Zee watching, knowing I was in Victor's safe hands while he railed me—it wasn't romantic, but I needed it like I needed to breathe, like my heart needed to beat and my veins burn.

I clutched the counter, clinging on, dick bouncing with every one of Victor's hammer-like thrusts.

"Come for me, Adam." His powerful voice poured into my ear and deep into my dick, where the permission freed the last of my threadbare restraint. I came hard, stuttering a gasp. Victor's arm locked around my waist, his panting breaths stroked my neck, and with a few staccato jerks, he growled his climax into my ear.

For a few wonderful, buzzing seconds, we clung to each other as though we were the only two left in the universe.

"Fuck me with bells on. That was the hottest fuckin' thing I've seen, not including my own explicit films, obviously."

A rumbling grumble replaced Victor's growl. "Does he ever stay quiet?"

"Never." I peered over my shoulder and caught Victor's contented, post-sex grin. The grin that softened his whole face and revealed a side of him few ever saw. A rare event, and one I'd always cherish.

Leaning in, he planted a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth, made all the more special since it followed his brutal hammering. "You are, and will forever be, a marvel to me," he whispered.

When he said things like that my heart scrunched in a good but achy way—as though, maybe this was love but I didn’t think I deserved it.

“Oh-kay.” Zee planted his feet and cocked a hip. His wings sizzled, framing him in all his spicy, incubus glory, even in tights and a baggy top. “Let’s get this Santa-slaying show on the road. But first, imma need a new spork.” He poofed behind the counter, and clattered through the cutlery containers.

Victor dealt with cleanup, then neatly tucked himself away, and if I hadn’t already been coming down off a sex high, seeing him tuck himself away and jerk that zip up would have been enough to get me fired up again. Mercy, why did he have to be so naturally gorgeous?

“Demon, do you not recall the need for us to be quiet?”

“Meh. If you two fucking didn’t attract psycho-Santa, I think I’m good.” He flicked a wrist and launched a spinning knife toward Victor.

Victor snatched the blade from the air and side-eyed Zee. “Really?”

“Oops.” Zee grinned.

“Nice reflexes,” I told Victor, as Zee poofed back to my side and handed me a similarly long, deadly looking carving knife.

“Let’s recap, fam,” Zee said. “I’m the bait?”

“I’m the bait,” I corrected.

“Ugh, I thought you’d forgotten that with all the sex.”

“Nope.”

“Fine. Whatever. You’re the bait...” His gaze shifted over my shoulder and fixed on something behind me. “Was that there before?”

“What...” I turned and immediately spotted the gnome by the entrance to the restaurant. The little guy stood there in his red boots and blue raincoat, looking demure. “Maybe?” It seemed like something we’d have seen on our way in.

“Fancy Fangs, you go poke it.”

Victor arched an eyebrow and folded his arms. “Why me?”

“Because nobody likes vampires.”

“I’ll do it.” I started heading over toward it. It was just a gnome. Nobody needed to be afraid of a two-foot-high yard ornament. We’d fought and beaten much worse. What was the worst thing the little guy could do?

I stopped with a stride’s length left between me and the gnome. “Uh, hey there?”

The gnome predictably didn’t move. Its smile was off-putting, but it hadn’t changed or twitched. I gave his round belly a poke with my shoe. The gnome rocked, but it was clearly just one of those weird human things they liked to decorate their homes with—like me with cat trinkets. There was nothing supernatural about it.

I looked over my shoulder. Zee and Victor stood side by side, watching curiously. “I think it’s just a gnome.”

Something heavy leaped onto my leg.

I looked down and met the gnome's flat, soulless eyes peering back at me. Its arms hugged my shin.

Panic clamored in my head.

The gnome was on me!

This was fine.

I didn't need to lose it.

"Ugh, guys?"

I lifted my leg and gave it a shake. The gnome stayed glued. Had its grin gotten bigger?

"A little help?"

"I've got you." Victor's arms encircled my waist from behind. "Zodiac, remove the gnome from Adam's leg."

Zee grabbed the gnome, lifting it and my leg. He tugged. "It's stuck."

"We can see that. Unstick it."

Zee adjusted his hold around the gnome's chonky middle, while Victor tightened his grip around my waist. "Pull!" Victor ordered.

Zee dug his feet in and heaved, wings and tail out, yanking on my leg. "I'm pulling!"

"Get it off, Zee." I wasn't panicking. This wasn't panic, just... slight concern.

“I’m trying! Little fucker’s stuck!”

“Harder!” Victor barked.

“Steady with that voice, Daddy Vampire.” Zee shook his head. “I got this.”

“Clearly, you do not have it —it has Adam.” Victor had begun to sound concerned too.

The gnome’s little arms tightened. Was I about to lose my leg? “My foot’s numb.”

“Pull, demon!” Victor growled.

“I’m fuckin’ pulling! You get down here and pull!”

My hip groaned, the thigh bone about to pop out of its socket. Grimacing, I turned my face away and wished I hadn’t. Six more gnomes had appeared, all with eerie grins, brightly colored little outfits, and murder in their otherwise empty eyes. “Oh dear.”

“Sweet baby Gareth! That’s a fuck-lot of nope-gnomes.” Zee gave one more mighty tug, and the gnome popped off. He held it aloft like a prized trophy. “I got it!”

The gnome’s head swiveled a one-eighty... and it yowled.

Zee screamed, and drop-kicked the possessed yard ornament, pitching it through the ceiling. Bits of dryboard rained, but at least the gnome was gone. One of them. The rest glared. Their grins turned upside down, into angry frowns bristling with sharp teeth.

“That way!” Zee pointed toward the buffet counter and poofed behind it, then opened the kitchen doors. I vaulted over the counter and dashed through the door. Victor

dashed in behind us. Zee swung the door shut, and we stood panting in the dark.

“Fuck, there’s no back door,” Zee growled.

“Are they still out there?” I whispered.

Zee stood on his toes and peeked through the door’s high window. “Yeah. And there’s more. It’s fuckin’ gnomeageddon out there.”

“What are they doing?”

“Coming this way.” He turned away from the glass and eyed his knife, which wouldn’t be much help against a supernaturally animated critter poured from cement. He tucked the knife down the back of his shorts, grabbed a nearby chair, and threw it at the ground, smashing it to pieces. “Here.” Handing me a chair leg, he took one for himself and one for Victor. “You ever played baseball?” Zee asked, eyes twinkling in the dark.

“What’s baseball?” I tucked my knife away, like he had, and clutched the chair leg tighter.

“Never mind. Hold it like this.” He demonstrated and I copied, holding my chair leg in both hands. “Awesome. We’re goin’ out swinging, and we don’t fuckin’ stop until those little fuckers are rubble. Fancy Fangs, you follow. Keep Adam sandwiched between us.”

Victor nodded and raised his chair leg.

Zee’s gaze pinned mine. “You ready?”

“Yup.”

“On three.” Zee grabbed the door handle. “Three!” And burst through, howling a battle cry.

CHAPTER 7

I plowed through the doorway. Gnomes scattered under the swings of Zee's bat, like skittles at a bowling alley. What his chair leg didn't swipe, his tail smacked away, but as quickly as he repelled them, more surged in.

One sprang at my middle. I swung, channeling all my available strength into it, and when my bat struck the gnome, the gnome exploded, smothering me in a cloud of dust and debris.

Grit burned my eyes, but through the haze I spotted Zee's outline—his purple beacon of gnome-murdering fury—and I followed, swinging left and right, fending off gnomes.

But more kept coming.

The store must have housed the entire West Coast stock of holiday gnomes.

"Go, go!" Zee ordered, holding back a wave surging at us from the left. I dashed behind him, toward a gap in the gnomes' frontline.

"Adam, wait!" Victor called. "Not that?—"

I burst from the fray then spun, bat raised, spluttering hard, tasting gnome, and blinked, clearing the blur.

They'd gone—the gnomes, Zee, Victor—all of them had gone. The store was quiet,

the kitchen aisles undisturbed as though nothing had happened. I could even see as far back as the restaurant, and there was nothing there. No gnome army. No clouds of gnome smoke. “Victor?”

Nothing.

I lowered my bat. “Zee?”

Had they vanished or had I?

“Okay...” I turned on the spot, expecting something to be lurking behind me, but I was alone... Kind of. The crawl of an unwanted gaze made my skin itch. “So, uhm... Let’s talk about this?”

No reply came. Not even a ho, ho, ho . It was worth a try. But Santa hadn’t seemed the chatty sort.

I still had my knife, and my chair leg. And the real me, hidden under my glamor. If I could get close enough and catch Santa off-guard...

“I get you’re hungry for uhm... people, I guess. You may not believe it, but I know what that’s like.” I drifted forward, figuring we all knew where this was going to end up—in the Winter Wonderland—but I was in no rush to get back there. “Sometimes, folks need eatin’. Am I right?”

If I could lure Santa out by looking small, sweet, and innocent, I’d have the upper hand.

Mariah Carey began to sing again, but just like before, the music dragged, unevenly paced, as though it was sung by Mariah’s slightly unhinged sister who gave a whole new, darker meaning to the lyrics... all I want for Christmas, is you.

This was how it was going to be. One predator to another. But Santa didn't know what I knew.

I wasn't the good boy he was looking for.

A snort sounded down an aisle. I stopped, and swallowed at the sight of a reindeer. They'd always looked fluffy and adorable on the holiday cards I'd seen in stores, but this one wasn't cute. It was big, and strips of what looked like torn clothing hung from its enormous antlers. Rudolf had gotten mean. Another snort, and it scraped its cloven hooves on the smooth floor.

It dropped its head.

Oh deer.

And charged.

I turned on my heel and ran. I'm not going to beat on a reindeer, okay? Demons who mean to kill me? Yes. Vampire dukes who need to be taken down a peg or two? Also, yes. Leg-munching gnomes? For sure. But not reindeer. I have to draw the line somewhere.

I bolted down the cushion aisle. Hooves pounded the floor close behind me. I dashed through the curtains and leaped over piles of rugs. The reindeer snorts came fast and close. Mariah Carey's darker twin moaned out warped lyrics.

If this was the typical Christmas experience, I wasn't a fan.

Up ahead, the sparkly winter tunnel loomed. Of course the reindeer had been herding me there.

Fine then.

I plunged in, ignoring how the gnomes all turned and watched me dash by.

Bursting from the tunnel's end, I stopped and turned.

Rudolf stood at the opening and snorted, his work done.

“Alright, Santa.” I straightened. “You wanna murder me? We’ve got all night. Have at it.”

Mariah Carey’s warbling cut off.

“What are you waiting for? An invite?”

This was getting tiresome. Either Santa was a homicidal, child-eating maniac, or he was wasting my time.

Maybe he needed some persuasion? Zee had lured him out with a show, so maybe I could do the same?

I cleared my throat. I’d never been the best at singing, but nobody was here—just me, the creepy gnomes, and Santa crouched in his grotto. “Alright, fine... Uhm... Here goes nothing. Santa baby, just slip a Sable under the tree...”

My voice fell flat, as did my performance. How did Zee just flick a switch and turn into a Broadway star from one second to the next? If he were here, he’d tell me to rub some funk on it.

I gulped, wet my lips, and took a deep breath. Dancing, I could do . So, with the song’s beat in my head, I imagined Zee on stage working his pole, and put some

spicy hip action into my steps. “Been an awful good boy...”

The accompanying music came over the Tannoy, and I got my Christmas funk on.

Dropping my bat, I grabbed a fluffy red hat with a bell on and popped it on my head, getting into the swing of it.

“Ho, ho, ho...” Santa emerged from his gingerbread grotto, wrapped in his jolly red outfit, and as I was committed, I kept on singing “Santa Baby.” I’d like to think Zee would have been proud of my performance, but it was more likely he’d have been horrified. Don’t judge, I was saving Christmas.

Santa’s glamor glitched as he ventured closer.

I kept up the performance, really getting into the flow of it now—adding some naughty steps, hip-cocks, cheeky grins—and maybe I was enjoying it a bit too much, knowing where it would end.

I’d have lured him almost within stabbing distance if the little fishing gnome hadn’t ventured under my feet. I danced around him, but there were more dotted about, suddenly everywhere. I stumbled into a Christmas tree, sending several baubles bouncing off. Their tinny ping-ponging ended my cheeky dance routine.

The music stopped.

Santa’s watery eyes narrowed.

I dropped my hand, and almost made it to my knife before Santa’s jovial grandpa face split in half and the timber-faced, snarling monster spilled out. A foot-long split tongue lashed, red eyes blazed, and Santa freed a high-pitched wail.

I shoved my hand into my pocket, grabbed the bouncy balls, and flung them at murder-Santa.

One of the rubber balls smacked him between the eyes.

His yowl cut off. The ball pranged away, striking a Christmas tree, sending it tumbling into its neighbors which fell one after another like a line of falling, twinkling, bristling dominoes. Balls pinged and twanged , ricocheting up and down, left and right. Gnomes scarpered. Three balls felt as though they'd multiplied into a hundred as they bounced and dinged , somehow picking up speed.

I ducked, and freed my knife.

The rubber projectiles smacked Santa from all angles, jerking him like a puppet on strings. Then one punched him in his meatballs. Nightmare-Santa bent double, spluttering.

I sprang and Santa whirled, trying to whack me aside. I was small and fragile looking. I should have been an easy takedown.

That was the mistake everyone made.

I caught his arm, using all my strength to hold him. His eyes swelled, and just like all the others who dared cross me, Santa had a last-minute epiphany: Adam Vex is not what he seems.

I grinned. My knife flashed. "Ho, ho, ho."

CHAPTER 8

“Holy Saint Nick! What the fuck happened here?” Zee skidded to a stop on the broken bits of Christmas tree and shattered lights. “Kitten?! Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” From my sitting position on the floor, I ruffled glitter from my hair, popped my red Christmas hat back on with its jingly bell, and held out the knife for Zee.

He took it and eyed me sideways, checking for telltale cuts and scrapes. “After you vanished, we figured you’d end up here. Looks as though we missed the party.”

Victor surveyed the broken gnomes, twisted winter tunnel, toppled forest, collapsed gingerbread grotto, and me sitting in the middle of it all, mostly untouched. “It appears you have taken care of Santa?”

I pursed my lips, planted my hands on my hips, and took a fresh look at the carnage. “It was like this when I got here.”

“Hm, was it?” Victor gripped my shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze, then swiped his thumb at something on my cheek. “Just a little blood.”

“Oh.” I brushed a hand across my cheek. “How’d that get there?”

“Wait.” Zee spun in a circle until facing me again. He blinked and whispered, “Did you eat Santa?”

“What? Me?” I gave a half-hearted snort. “That would be silly.”

He straightened, but his lips tucked sideways into his cheek. “Right. Sure.”

“And if I had—which I’m not saying I did—it would have been an accident.”

Victor coughed a laugh. “Excuse me, a little dust in my throat.”

Zee poked half a gnome, toeing it over, and grimaced at the hole where its face had been. “Hey, so, this has been fun and will be giving me gnomemares for the rest of my fabulous life, but now that it’s over, what do we do?”

“Wait until the store reopens,” Victor replied. “And make sure our stories are aligned for the inevitable arrival of the authorities.”

“Ugh.” Zee huffed, then perked up as a new thought brightened his eyes. “I know a place full of bright, fluffy cushions that has room enough for three.”

That sounded like the best way to pass the rest of the night. We both turned toward Victor, hoping he might agree. “I’ll watch for threats,” he said. “Should any remain.”

“Right.” Zee rolled his eyes. “You can watch , Daddy Vampire. Adam?” Zee offered his hand, and when I took it, he reeled me against his side. “Lovin’ your hat.” He flicked its tinkling bell.

“Aw, thank you.”

“Victor wishes he had one just like it. Don’t you, Fancy Fangs?”

“No.”

“Pfft, whatever. Keep it on, Adam. Imma make that little bell ring when we get back

to my nest.” He waggled his eyebrows and I chuckled back. “So, how’d you lure Santa from his grotto to gobble him up like the cute little murder-weirdo you are?” Zee booped my nose.

I grinned back. “Oh, you know... maybe took some hints from your playbook?”

“Wait, you did a striptease ?!” he squeaked.

“Not really, but kinda?”

“Gah.” He clutched his heart. “I fuckin’ missed it.”

“Honestly, it was impressive.”

“ If you’d done it,” Victor said, following along behind.

“Right. If I’d done that, which I didn’t.”

“Right,” Zee laughed. “Because you’re such a good boy, Adam Vex.”

I smiled, like I really was a good boy. Good enough for Santa, anyway.

Zee, Victor, and I had stood under the store’s entrance canopy in the early morning hours as the multiple black-bagged bodies were wheeled out. The police sirens and flashing lights were a little disconcerting, but there was one person whose face was potentially more unnerving than all that—Agent Leomaris.

Leomaris’s arrival was inevitable. We watched their tall frame topped by glossy green hair weave through the EMTs and police cordon, and duck under the crime-scene tape.

They didn’t smile, just regarded us with that cool, professional expression of mild

disdain, and withdrew an electronic tablet from inside their long coat. “You three,” they said, as a greeting.

“Us again.” I beamed, then winced. I’d maybe read the room wrong. “We were shopping and got stuck inside, and wow, some crazy stuff happened which was nothing to do with us.”

“Nothing,” Zee echoed. “We spent most the night in the cafeteria. They sell great donuts. You should try ’em, unless you don’t like donuts since you’re probably on a strict fae diet. That’s how you get such great hair, amiright? Your coat is the best. Family heirloom, or did you get it from Amazon? Do they give all SSD agents awesome coats? It’s a shame dusters went out of fashion, right? Have you tried a cloak? Fuck, you’d look the rizz in a cloak.”

The SSD agent waited a beat. “Are you done?”

Zee pinched his lips and wings together. “Yup.”

Leomaris’s keen gaze skipped over me to Victor. “Lord Reynard, I suppose your version of events runs something similar to Zodiac’s?”

“Indeed. But more concise, and without the fashion critique.”

“Of course.”

We were going to get arrested, I could tell. Victor would have to summon a vampire lawyer, which would get him into all sorts of trouble with his fanged family, and one problem would spiral into another, Daisy would get involved, there would be fingers on cushions! Ugh.

“We really didn’t do anything,” I said. “We’re innocent bystanders in all this.” If I could appeal to their softer side—if they had one—we might get away with a

warning?

A coroner wheeled a gurney and bagged body toward their waiting van.

Yikes. “We just wanted baubles.”

“I came for dick.”

“He means the phallic cactus,” Victor said, then gestured at the tiny cactus in the woefully half-empty shopping basket next to us.

Leomaris’s eyebrows lifted. They studied us one at a time, then slotted the tablet back inside their coat and lifted their chin. “I have read the statements you gave to my colleague. Your version of events is highly improbable and rather fantastical, not to mention the inaccuracies. Two claim to have been attacked by gnomes, but one of you says it was... children?”

A growl simmered from Victor. “Demon, there were no children.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” Zee explained. “Human spawn are vicious and they’re the same size as gnomes.”

I was pretty sure we did know that. “Zee, it was just gnomes.” And a reindeer. But as Leomaris hadn’t mentioned it, I wasn’t going to either. Hopefully it was off living its best reindeer life and not murdering innocent people.

Zee ruffled his wings. “Whatever. I have fuckin’ trauma, okay? I just want to go home with my spiky dick, order a Tom Collins special, and forget this night ever happened.”

“Stop!” Leomaris snapped, then rubbed the bridge of their nose. “Thankfully—or not, depending on your perspective—there was CCTV footage of the night’s improbable

and alarming events.”

“Footage?” I squeaked, while my heart fell through the ground.

“There were cameras?” Victor asked, his voice just a little bit higher than normal.

Zee grinned. “Can we watch?”

“No. I have watched the entire event from multiple angles and it is not something I’d wish on anyone, not even my worst enemy.” Leomaris’s penetrating gaze drilled into me.

Oh mercy, the striptease to “Santa Baby.” I gazed back, slowly dying inside... And the eating Santa part, which I’m not saying I did, but could have... Maybe there hadn’t been cameras right there ...? And the improvised rough sex in the cafeteria... Had they seen that ? They couldn’t have, or we would surely have been arrested and tossed in the back of a police van.

“That frog plushie was like that when I got there,” Zee said, feet shuffling.

Leomaris closed their eyes, took a breath, and slowly sighed it out. “You are free to go.”

We looked at each other, unsure if Leomaris was joking, since they must have seen enough to at least charge us with criminal damage.

“Oh-kay. We’ll just . . . leave then?” Zee asked.

“Yes. Go,” Leomaris said so sharply their face got all mean. “I do not want to see you anywhere near this store again. Ever.”

“Okay, sure. Uh-huh. Adam?” Zee beckoned. “Fancy Fangs, don’t forget my spiky

dick.”

Victor grabbed the yellow basket on wheels and headed for the Love Wagon , parked nearby in the lot. The basket rumbled along the asphalt, ensuring everyone turned to watch him leave.

“Uhm, thank you?” I told Leomaris.

The agent nodded tightly. “Thank you , Mr. Vex, for saving Christmas.”

“Oh, uh... We didn’t... I didn’t really do that... We just sort of happened to be nearby and some things happened while we were here?—”

“Take the win and go. Now.” Their lips ticked and a sparkle of knowing made their eyes shine. “Before I change my mind.”

“Yup, okay. Uhm, bye?” I scooted off after Victor and only glanced back when we made it to the minivan. Leomaris was watching us without blinking. They’d let us leave for now, but they’d also seen things they shouldn’t have.

Would they use it against us later?

“I think we got away with it,” Zee said once we were all in the van. He started the engine and grinned at me beside him, then at Victor in the back.

“Perhaps.” Victor handed Zee his cactus.

With a broad grin and a hand-flourish Zee propped the cactus on the dash. “Worth it.”

It was a cute little cactus. Probably not worth almost dying for though.

Zee flicked the bell on my hat, then rammed the van into gear. “Happy holidays,

Kitten.”

“Indeed,” Victor agreed from the back seat.

My smile grew. We may not have had the most peaceful of Christmases, but I did get to spend it with my two most favorite people, and we were all still alive. Like Agent Leomaris had said, we should definitely take the win.

And Santa wouldn’t be eating any more people, ever.

There was only room for one apex predator at the top of this tree.

And that was me.

“Ho, ho, ho.”

The End