


A  
Holly  
 Jolly  
Mess

A CAMBRIC CREEK  
HOLIDAY MONSTER ROMANCE  
C.M. NASCOSTA

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## About the Author



This fluffy little story began on Patreon, where all of the individual couple stories still live, and my patrons are the recipients of this dedication. Believe me, if I could make the announcement that you could pack your bags and move to Cambric Creek, I would. Until then, you all take my humble little stories as recompense, and I appreciate you SO much.

(For Ava & Kenta's origin — subscribe to my newsletter to receive Setsubun this February)

This fluffy little holiday novella is full of strong women who don't need to be rescued.

They want partners, not white knights, and aren't interested in mothering anyone but their children.

For all my HBICs out there — I see you.

Content Advisories:

Somnophilia, mentions of spousal death & grief, financial upheaval and career loss, family frustrations, abused candy canes, and background

## Hemmings

### **A note about chronology:**

This book takes place “last winter” in Cambric Creek  
That means the “Winter” sections of Parties, to give you a touch point!



The red teddy was on sale.

It was the only way she could justify the frivolous expense, and the chiffon and lace confection was nothing but frivolous. Ava had walked past the high-end-looking boutique a hundred times before that day, never slowing, but the presence of a small red placard in the corner of the window had slowed her down that day, wondering if the sale would be more than a few pennies off. It was still more than she would spend on lingerie normally, but the sticker shock of the filmy little scrap's original price had her feeling chuffed over the sale. Splurge on something nice for a change.

The inside of the shop matched the expectations she had formed from the sidewalk — sylph-like employees in sleek black suits, antiqued gold fixtures, and a subtle soundtrack of classical music. Holiday carols, Ava realized after a moment. I'm not sure this is going to get you in the mood for celebrating. A sable-haired selkie glided over to offer assistance, but she'd already zeroed in on an unexpected target — sheer, red, and on the sale rack — a winning trifecta.



The lace cups were flimsy and held up with little more than chiffon-covered dental floss dotted with bows. She wasn't certain they would actually hold the weight of her breasts, which had never been what one would consider "firm," and at no point in her life would have ever been confused for being "perky." Still, hope sprung eternal, Ava reminded herself as she followed the sales associate down the pink-hued hallway. The padded satin hanger faced her as if it were attempting to stare her down, but she'd never been easy to intimidate and had no intention of starting that day.

Sure enough, the lace cups offered little in the way of support, but support wasn't really the point. *It's not like you're going to wear this jogging.* The sheer chiffon overskirt softened the round fullness of her hips in a way she liked, in a way she thought Kenta would like as well. *Who are you kidding? He'd like you in a potato sack.* Ava snorted at the thought, opening the door to her fitting room to peek out to the curtained hallway.

Her boyfriend overthought everything, but the surest way to halt his spiraling panic was to direct the blood flow away from that big, beautiful brain of his to his *other* big, beautiful head. All she had to do to steam up his glasses was pull her shirt up over her head; no fancy lingerie required, but it was the holidays. *Maybe he'll even loosen up a little with his office being closed for two weeks.* It was unlikely, she was forced to admit, but again . . . hope sprung eternal. Kenta's brain turned off when his cock got hard, and they'd enjoyed a *very* satisfying ride since their disaster of a first date, but she had reconciled herself to the reality of needing to call the shots. *It'll take a Christmas miracle.*

There was an elf in front of the three-way mirror — young and beautiful, with shiny chestnut hair falling to the middle of her back in loose, expertly curled tendrils, her wide green eyes critically examining her perfect ass with

a look of pained concentration, her furrowed brow smoothing when her head raised at Ava's cracked-open door.

"Oh, please don't let me hog the mirror. Help yourself!"

Ava blanched when she realized the girl was wearing the same teddy in a pale blue, contrasting her lavender skin beautifully. *Welp, that's the difference twenty years make. Plus, a kid.* The lace cups had no problem holding up the other woman's full assets, which were both firm *and* perky. *Whatever. I'm pretty sure elves don't age until they're a hundred or something.* She refused to compare herself to her fitting room mirror companion and instead turned to eye her own rear-view.

"You should definitely get it," the elf smiled in the mirror. "That color is great on you. The style is so flattering, don't you think?"

A shop associate ducked behind the curtain then, her arms full of lace and charmeuse, blinking in surprise to find the two of them side-by-side in the mirror. The elf's eyes never strayed from her reflection, but her words halted the associate.

"I don't care for this color, but if you have it in the mint, I'll take it. Same size, thank you. And I don't want to see anything in black or red, so you can take those away."

"O-oh, I just thought . . . well, the last time you were here—"

"The last time I was here, I was shopping for some jerk who didn't care about what looked good on me," the pretty elf interrupted serenely, taking a ballet-pink chemise from the clerk's arms, holding it up to herself with a smile. "And that jerk is long gone. What about my friend here? Do you need a different size?"

"Oh, no . . . no, I'm good."

"Thank you," the elf called again, examining her own posterior view.

Ava smiled at the young woman in the mirror once the sales associate disappeared behind the curtain once more. The girl had a whisper of the haughty confidence life had taught Ava to expect from the upper class, as if an invisible red carpet lay before her, unfurled by generations of privilege and power, but none of the supercilious malice that usually seemed to accompany such an advantage in the world. Her eyes were kind, and as she watched the elf critically examining her own reflection, Ava had the distinct impression the girl was trying to envision how someone *else* would be seeing her in the pretty lingerie.

“New boyfriend?”

Wide green eyes met hers, an aubergine flush heating her neck. She knew well what that look meant, regardless of how the girl might answer.

“Maybe,” the elf mused softly, turning in the mirror again. “I mean . . . yes. Yes, he is. I just . . . I haven’t introduced him that way yet. But this time, I’m shopping for things *I* like . . . it just so happens that he likes everything I like.”

“That’s what we call a keeper.”

“I think so, too.”

Ava laughed, focusing on her figure one final time in the mirror. The teddy wasn’t terrible, she decided. It would make Kenta stammer and blush, and that’s all that was important. She didn’t look anything like this coltish young woman, but she wasn’t twenty anymore, and that was fine. It was *nice* being in an adult relationship. “You sure this doesn’t make my ass look big?”

“Oh, it *definitely* makes your ass look big, but in the best way. Whoever that’s for is going to love it. New boyfriend?” she asked cheekily, and it was Ava’s turn to heat.

It felt ridiculous using titles like *girlfriend* and *boyfriend* at their age, but

there didn't seem to be a better term to use. *Partner* implied a level of commitment and dependability they'd not yet achieved, while *lover* made her throw up a bit in her mouth. *Paramour* sounded as if they were acting out the torrid storyline of a soap opera, and *Beau* brought to mind a senior care facility romance. *Boyfriend* he was, even if it made her feel a bit silly.

"He is, I suppose."

The elf grinned knowingly. "And how did you meet?"

At that, she *did* flush. Ava thought back to that day at the elementary school as Kenta jogged through the hallways wearing nothing but that tiny loincloth. *I wonder what kind of underwear he had on that day. Must have been something supportive; otherwise he would have put someone's eye out.*

"He was my accountant," is what she told the elf. "Still is, technically."

It wasn't a lie. She'd never planned on starting her own business. Baking had been a hobby when she was a kid, making birthday cakes for friends and family something she was happy to do. Zoë always had photoshoot-worthy cakes at her yearly party, and Ava hadn't been surprised when another mother had asked if she would make the cake for her own little darling's celebration . . . but she'd been shocked when she was paid for her efforts. Astonished when others were willing to do the same. Stupefied when her side hustle was earning the same amount as the day job she wound up quitting. Social media mommies were willing to pay a premium for perfection, and the mothers of Cambric Creek proved to be no exception.

Kenta had been the one to help her set up everything for her new business, guiding her through filings and reportings, advising her on what she could declare, what receipts needed saving, and finding her the biggest tax breaks. She'd had a crush on the anxious ogre for months before that fateful February

afternoon. The Setsubun celebration at the elementary school had simply been the tiger-print loincloth to break the ice.

When the elf disappeared behind the door to her fitting room, Ava let out a breath, forcing her gut out and turning sideways. Even at the unflattering angle, everything she saw in the glass made her smile, eyeing her full ass appreciatively. Definitely not twenty anymore, and that was fine. The young woman was right, she decided. The teddy would be a fun Christmas surprise. *After all, he's a keeper too.*

Weekdays were spent in the bubbles of their own separate lives.

She got up each morning and put her electric kettle on to boil as Zoë got ready for school, getting out the door was always a flurry of last-minute wardrobe changes and forgotten homework and lunches. She tackled the school drop-off line, clicking the untouched kettle on again once she returned home alone, examining her order queue for the day before getting to work.

Once the school day was over, the morning's entire operation would happen in reverse — breakfast traded for dinner for two, homework and gymnastics, nature scouts and bedtime routines taking the place of packing lunches and braiding hair.

She would wonder, once she was stretched out beneath the cool sheets in her empty bed, exhausted from her day with an itch beneath her skin, what he was doing and how he had spent his evening. If thoughts of her distracted his routines, as thoughts of him distracted hers. Sometimes she'd call him, finding him half-asleep in front of his laptop or still working, but more often than not, she'd simply roll over to her bedside table, letting the bright red silicone stand-in do its job so that she could fall into an unrestless sleep and count the hours until Saturday.

Their weeks may have been an exercise in self-control, but weekends —

weekends were spent together.

Zoë had reached the age when weekly sleepovers had become de rigueur within her small circle of close friends. Ava knew each of the families well, although all the parents involved got together to set ground rules. Absolutely no visitors — no uncles or cousins or boyfriends, no outside friends of elder siblings or the kids next door. Host parents monitored discreetly, ensuring there was no wayward bullying or homesickness.

She had lucked out into being the de facto Friday host, which was fine by her, as Kenta would still be working late. Her living room would be filled with several giggling little girls every Friday night, the sofa pushed against the wall as they spread out blankets and pillows, eating pizza and squealing over movies starring the newest tween heartthrob, a fae-ish looking youth with long ears and a permanent pout, and with the exception of the time they would spend posing for social media stories and choreographing elaborate dance routines to post on TicketyTak, it wasn't much different than what she remembered from her own youth. Ava would sit at the kitchen table with her laptop, far enough away that she was completely out of sight, but close enough that she could overhear their non-stop chatter and monitor the mobile device usage.

On Saturdays, the party was hosted by one of the other families, a rotation of weres and goblins and trolls, and by hosting the girls on Fridays, she was blissfully off the hook, leaving her free to give her vibrator the night off and spend time with the big ogre who'd inspired it, occupying her bed the way he occupied a not-insignificant amount of her brain space during the week.

"It's embarrassing to keep coming back here," Kenta would mumble like clockwork, popping a dumpling into his mouth, every time they dined at the little dim sum restaurant where they'd spent that ill-fated first date, when a

mixed-up reservation and dead car battery had led to her waking up beside him for the first time, rather than him disappearing into the night like a hulking shadow, as he'd nearly done.

“How can you say that?!” she would exclaim, just as predictably. “This place is a cornerstone to our romance. Fundamental to our success. Without it, you'd be doing my taxes right now.”

“I've literally been talking about your taxes for the last ten minutes. Were you listening?”

“I'm trying not to, Kenta. You *do* realize we're coming here for our anniversary, right?”

Other nights, they would share sushi and tapas, trading stories about their respective work weeks over drinks at a pub in the business district before walking hand-in-hand to Grass and Grain, one of the pricey farm-to-table restaurants Cambric Creek boasted. Every weekend was like the very first time when he gripped her waist on her sofa, restored to its rightful place in the darkened living room, his heartbeat jackrabbit quick as she sucked the jumping pulse point in his thick neck, climbing his giant body like a tree, like a desperate, sex-starved wild animal, which she supposed she was at that point.

Once they made it down the hall to her bedroom, his ever-present nerves would melt away, and there were few things more enjoyable than waking up sex-sore on Sunday mornings beside him in her bed — pressed to his broad chest, the rich red of his skin radiating heat that she loved snuggling into, the curve of his burnished gold horns making a crescent-like depression in the pillow and his solid erection pressing into her belly as he slept.

She had always been an early riser. Kenta, Ava had learned over the last eight months, needed an alarm to rouse him groggily from his slumber. The

fat red ogre beneath the sheets, however, worked on a completely different internal clock. Without fail, he would be thick and straining, his cock wide awake and ready for her when she stirred against him in the early dawn hours.

Each week, she told herself that she ought to ignore it and let him sleep. That she ought to get up if she wanted to get up and let him deal with his morning wood on his own . . . but she'd yet to take her own advice. She was horny in the mornings, still slick from the previous night's exertions and eager to be filled again, and — even if the ogre attached to it was sound asleep, breathing deeply against the pillow — his cock always seemed eager to oblige.

The skin of his sac was a darker red than the rest of his massive body, and she loved the way the fat testicles they contained would bob and rise when she gently ran her nails down the tender skin; loved the way she could coax the fat club to drool a steady stream of pre-come with just the tips of her fingers until it pooled in a sticky spot between their bodies. His stomach muscles would tighten every time she pulled his foreskin back to caress his head with her nails, pressing the pad of her finger into the loose sheath of skin and teasing his weeping slit.

His balls would pull up, and his thick shaft would twitch, and her weak ability to let him sleep would burn off with the dawn. Kenta was sweet and cerebral and overanalyzed *everything*, but without the handicap of his conscious mind, his cock woke hungry, operating on a base, animalistic level . . . *her* level, Ava was forced to admit.

She had perfected the art of hitching her leg over his hip, his round ass providing her the leverage she needed to slide her slick folds against the swollen club of his cock, humping against him as shamelessly as a lagomorph



in heat. The pressure against her clit was delicious — not enough to make her come, but enough to make her head drop back and stars dance behind her eyes, the early morning edging a good warm-up for what would happen next.

He always woke when he breached her.

Ava imagined that a less permissive partner might be horrified to find themselves being used in such a way — an entire bottle of lube wouldn't have been enough to slicken his cock the way her needy cunt had, and she would be gasping as she fucked herself on his bulbous head, desperate to come at that point. A lesser partner might have left in a huff, might have ignored her calls . . . but Kenta only groaned, rolling over to pin her beneath his heavy weight.

“Someday you're going to let me sleep in, right?” he would mumble sleepily, pushing into her slowly until he was balls-deep and she was keening. “Gods, I'm ready to come already. What were you *doing* to me?!”

He would grip her hips tightly as he fucked her, pistoning his hips in a way that kept their bodies connected, his pubic bone hitting her well-edged clit in a way that had her arching beneath him within minutes, a warring torrent of profanity and begging falling from her lips as her body shook and spasmed, his hammering thrusts slowing only to enjoy the way she clenched rhythmically around his cock. She'd still be throbbing when his fingers moved to rub her as his thrusting resumed, and the direct contact was usually enough to tease a second, weaker orgasm out of her before he groaned, those big balls emptying into her as his hips faltered.

Kenta overthought everything, every tiny little detail and particulate, and the time spent in her bed was no exception. Ava certainly hadn't thought far enough ahead to consider the state of her sheets after her early morning games, but he had already planned ahead, placing a small stack of towels on

the bedside table shortly after his arrival the previous night, an easy arm-reach away as he snagged one, sliding it beneath the curve of her ass as he withdrew carefully, dutifully trooping off to her laundry room as she slipped from the bed.

They had a favorite brunch spot for the mornings that Zoë stayed to have breakfast at the neighbor's, and on the days she was deposited at the end of the driveway by a minivan packed with girls, the host family saving everyone the trouble of pick-ups, he would make them breakfast, flipping pancakes as Zoë chattered about her night, or else asking her questions about school and music and popular games with a startling degree of knowledge until Ava remembered his own niece was close to her daughter's age.

Zoë had transitioned from calling him Mr. Hayashi to Kenta, had professed a preference for his pancakes to Ava's own, and would occasionally ask her mid-week if he would come over to have dinner with them.

An answer would stick in her throat, a hasty swallow to find her composure to explain that Kenta was very busy and worked late a lot of nights, changing the subject before Zoë could press the issue.

*He's very busy. He's happy with the way things are. He's not going to change anything until I tell him I want them to change, and I don't want to have to do that because I'll never know if it's actually what he wants. Being a widow is the hardest job in the world, and I don't know how to do any of this shit anymore.*

Not a conversation she could have with her fourth-grader, that was for certain. She had begun to sympathize with Yuriko, Kenta's allegedly bossy sister. *Because bossing him around is probably the only way to get him to stop over-analyzing and **do** something.*

“What do you think?” The voice of the sales associate made her jump,

smiling over her shoulder. “Is there another size I can get for you? A different color?”

*I’ll take the lingerie and some BDE for my boyfriend, if you’ve got it. Biggest size in stock.*

“I don’t think so, this is the one. I need to stop gawking at my ass and change so I can pay for it.”

They laughed together as she disappeared into her fitting room once more. The sales floor, when she made it to the register at last, had been transformed in the short amount of time that she’d been sequestered in the back. Little balls of mistletoe hung from the ceiling, and on the velvet paneled walls, white twinkle lights lay nested in gathered red tulle, all around the upper shelf. It gave the lingerie boutique a jewel-box-like effect, secretive and special. Maybe, she thought as she tapped her credit card to the reader, she should take the beautiful young elf’s example — treat herself to the things *she* liked once in a while, and fancy lingerie was definitely on that list.

She would initiate a conversation after the holidays, Ava thought decisively, leaving the little lingerie boutique with a shred more confidence than she’d possessed upon entering. She *liked* being in an adult relationship, and he had fit into their lives seamlessly so far . . . but he was an ogre, and ogres were big. *He’s got the big dick, but none of the energy.* She knew Kenta second-guessed everything, but if he wanted to graduate from *boyfriend* to *partner*, he needed to actually be a partner on the decision. *He needs to fill a bigger space or admit that he doesn’t want to change anything.*

She and Zoë had been invited to join him at his sister’s house for a holiday dinner, but they were going to be visiting family, both her own and her late husband’s, and she’d still not determined if they would even be home for Christmas, deciding to let the visits direct the course of events. The red teddy

would have to hold its breath to find out if it was going to be dropped in a heap on her bedroom floor for Christmas or be part of a New Year's celebration.

*And then . . . then we'll talk. New year, new you, baby. No more halfway anything.*



Lolly Gornish was full of excuses.

She'd inherited the Yuletide celebration too late in the year. She'd already been so busy with the Halloween party that she'd been slow to start the planning for Yule. The company she'd called to book performers had never called her back. The volunteers had been wishy-washy on their contributions. There had been so much rain, after all.

Sandi Hemming knew her clenched teeth and squinted eyes likely did not resemble the understanding smile she was attempting to approximate. As the goblin before her continued to gesticulate wildly, as if *the rain* had truly been the reason why she'd dropped half a dozen balls with the planning of the community Yule celebration, Sandi hunched slightly, the pain of remaining unflappable twisting through her until it had her lungs in a vise.

It was hard, keeping this face on day in and day out. Sandi Hemming wasn't supposed to care about silly, inconsequential things like other people's complete inability to do a single thing right without having their hands held

every step of the goddamned way. She smiled beatifically at excuses, took ineptitude in stride, didn't bat a mink eyelash at having to do it herself.

Sandi Hemming was a picture of composure, but Didi Conti had never been one to suffer fools. Inside her there were two wolves — one did yoga and practiced mindfulness, while the other was ready to rip out someone's throat, and also made a mean manicotti. She thought about the way she used to carry a hammer in her car — plausible deniability, for it wasn't a weapon, obviously. She was doing some fix-it work, that's all. If it happened to be an excellent blunt object to take to the side of someone's head, well, she hadn't designed it.

She had lived more years as Sandi than she'd ever been Didi at that point, but it didn't matter how many silk-blend twinsets she might purchase — that other wolf inside her would always be that pack girl with the police record for assault.

"It's fine, Lolly," she burst in, cutting off the goblin before she could blame the full moon on her ineptitude. "It's fine. Everything is *fine*." She could hear the manic note in her voice and knew her face had likely taken on the guise of a demented circus clown as she attempted to school her features into a bright smile of understanding. "We'll just get by with what we have."

She let out a shuddering breath as soon as the goblin escaped, clenching and unclenching her fists. She sucked in air through her nostrils, keeping her eyes closed as she faced the wall, knowing all too well that it wouldn't do for the mother of the soon-to-be mayor to flip the table or throw a folding chair at the other volunteers.

She tried to imagine the voice of her meditation coach, but after a few minutes of sucking air in like a gasping fish, she decided this situation, like so many other things, was a matter of doing it herself if she wanted it done

even halfway right. Delegation was the first component of good leadership. It was a skill the current community planning committee lacked, but one she had in spades.

“Yuriko?”

The ogress appeared at her side in a flash. Another vital leadership skill was identifying one’s lieutenants.

The Hayashis — a brother and sister duo and the latter’s family — had immigrated more than a decade earlier, settling in Cambric Creek when Liam was transitioning to the middle school and she was president of the district’s Parent and Teacher Association. Yuriko had joined the PTA almost immediately, something Sandi took note of. It was typical for parents to join the group, but most unusual to do so before one’s child was even school-aged.

Yuriko had risen quickly through the ranks, chairing committees and holding offices until she set her sights on a bigger prize — the community planning committee, because why be satisfied with the elementary school when you can organize the whole town? She was bossy and authoritative, quick to take control and demanding of others’ time and effort. She was perfect. She was everything a good capo needed to be, and as the mother of an elementary school-aged child, she would be in the system for years to come.

“She shit the bed on everything, didn’t she?”

Sandi was unable to hold in her little yelp of laughter as she rubbed her temples. “She did, and we’re going to fix it. As per fucking usual.”

Yuriko nodded, not needing any more direction. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Food is about the only thing we don’t need to worry over. Entertainment,

games. Performers to give presents out to the kids. Santa. Befana. Go through your network, see what you can turn up. We can turn this around.”

“Oh, I know we can,” Yuriko huffed. “But why do we always have to?”

She was still rubbing her temples an hour later from her husband’s favorite position on the deck. Jack didn’t need a meditation coach. He had always had the ability to shut them all out and astrally project himself to a different plane of existence, a deck chair and a bit of sunshine the only tools necessary, no fancy crystals or candles required. Sandi used to joke that he was part lizard person, happy to bake himself in the sun on a rock, but the weather never seemed to matter. As long as it wasn’t raining, he hid outdoors, and at that moment, she needed a bit of Jack’s ability to teleport away from the present reality.

That was where he found her.

“Let me guess.” His voice was wry, and she could hear the half-smile there without needing to turn. “The new holiday planning committee isn’t living up to the promises made?”

She exhaled sharply, all thoughts of zen forgotten.

“Jack, I will stab you.”

His rich laughter vibrated against her as he sunk down into the seat behind her chaise, the arm he dropped around her pinning her in place.

Sandi inhaled deeply, allowing the familiar scent of him to bring her back down to earth. He’d always smelled expensive to her nose. When they were young, back when she was still Didi, she’d assumed it was something he wore, some high-price designer aftershave made from imported botanicals, but now she knew better. Jack smelled the same way fresh from the shower, like an expensive hotel, as if the privilege and power that ran through his veins seeped from his pores.



“You do remember you’re not in charge anymore, right? I thought you were taking a step back. Being selfish for a change.”

“She didn’t follow through with any of the entertainment! What are people supposed to do? Wander around the empty room picking their noses? Who’s going to pass out gifts to the kids?!”

“Isn’t all that someone else’s job to fix? You’re not the committee chair anymore. Let someone else worry about it.”

At that, she twisted out of his arm, turning back to glare. “I’ll remind you of that the next time you go swinging your dick into town hall to intercede on some stranger’s behalf. Christmas in this town has *my* name on it. I’m the one who started it here. The lights contest, the sweater party, the giving tree. That was all me. If there’s a winter holiday-themed celebration in this town that flops, I’m the only one people will remember. And I don’t want there to be a string of disasters before the election!”

He was still chuckling. “Sandi, nothing about this is worth—“

Jack cut off when her eyes narrowed, daring him to finish his thought.

She knew he was right, technically. A party at the community center wasn’t significant enough to derail the wheels of progress, but it was important to her. She would never forget how small and powerless she’d felt when she’d first moved to Cambric Creek all those years ago, and exerting control over the planning committee had been her small reclamation of control on her life.

She’d turned it into a well-oiled machine, and she knew Jack was wrong. It *was* important. The community involvement had been restricted to those with important names and similarly impressive bank accounts, but she’d brought that to everyone. The festivals and picnics, the street fairs and farmer’s markets — the community and the schools were what made Cambric Creek

so attractive to call home. Take all that away, and the real estate boom would fizzle like an unwound balloon.

Sandi knew she could make a powerful argument to counter his opinion, but she didn't have time for that. Instant cooperation was required, and that meant stooping low.

"It's important to *me*, Jack."

She didn't envy her children. Heartbreaks and infatuations, the growing pains and learning stage of every new relationship. The rush of young love was quickly tested by the realities of the long-term, but they had been weather-tested for decades. It was important to her, and that was all that was needed to be important to him. She breathed him in again when he leaned in to press a kiss below her ear.

"Tell me what you need."

"People," she said decisively. "There are plenty of volunteers for serving and set-up, but there's no one to entertain, there's no one to pass out gifts, and it's too late to even try to rent costumes at this point, so people who can get creative."

Jack smiled grimly, and Sandi matched it with a Didi-like grin of her own. After all, there were certain perks to being married to the most influential man in town.

"Well, good news, babe. People, I have."



***B**aby, I'll be your star,  
Shining bright on the darkest night.  
Gimme your love, all of your love,  
And watch the world ignite.*

The tinny, upbeat soundtrack of modern, auto-tuned-to-hell-and-back Yule carols seemed to reverberate within the grocery store, causing Charlie's eye to twitch as she navigated the packed aisles, strewn with the detritus of holiday trappings people were not yet desperate enough to snap up.

The grocery store was overflowing with customers. It was not, she admitted begrudgingly, an unexpected turn of events, considering it was less than a week before the Christmas holiday. The superstore off the highway had been similarly packed with shoppers. Carts crowding every aisle, impatient hands reaching out to snatch the last sack of mini dark chocolate chips off the shelf, and she'd left the warehouse-like mega-store empty-handed, not wanting to

go through the trials of waiting in the endless check-out line, only to *still* have to go to another store. Instead, she'd continued home to Cambric Creek.

Charlie sucked a slow breath in between her teeth before directing her cart up the next aisle, knowing she was likely entering a battlefield. She wasn't wrong. Despite her lack of success at the super-center, and even with the holiday being less than a week away, she'd not expected the Food Gryphon to be as busy as it was. Christmas was barely celebrated here, after all. That *should* have meant she'd have her pick of the minimal shelves dedicated to the human holiday. But, evidently, this day had chosen violence and was determined to see it through. *Well, it's not the only one.*

The processed fruits aisle was similarly pilfered through. Not to be confused with the fresh fruit carried in the ample produce section, nor with the prodigious selection of frozen fruit in the freezer cases, a bevy of bagged fruit concentrates filled a third of the aisle, with tinned fruit cocktails, diced peaches and cherries in light syrup, organic apple sauce, pear sauce, plum sauce. Charlie had never before considered the levels of fruit consumption of her bat and mothfolk neighbors, but she supposed she should have.

*It's fine, everything is fine. Today was annoying, but you survived it, right? Look at how aggravating it was sitting in city traffic, how drab everything looks even though it's the holidays. You would have been miserable living there long term.*

It was true, she agreed with her inner monologue. The city had been nothing but an annoyance that day, as she ran Sulya's errands. *Better that it happened this way, like ripping off a bandage. You got out while there's still time to start over again. The alternative probably would have been much worse.* Charlie clicked her tongue, shaking her head at what those alternatives might have been. *You would have killed yourself for years, for decades! And*

*then one day, when you were grey and exhausted with nothing and no one outside of those ovens, they would have raised the rent and forced you out regardless.*

“Do you mind?” she snapped as a heavily muscled arm reached across her, lifting a jar of locally pressed applesauce from the shelf she’d been ruminating in front of, turning to glare at the orc to which it was attached.

“I do, actually,” the orc shot back, “I didn’t realize your cart had priority placement on half the aisle while you stand there daydreaming for ten minutes.”

He turned away, muttering under his breath as he placed the applesauce into his own cart, although Charlie caught a growl of the word *entitlement*. Her cheeks burned with fire as she realized she was being gawked at by two small, green-skinned girls with pointed ears and miniature tusks, the one sitting in the cart pushed by her muttering father clutching a stuffed unicorn.

Her entire face heated, the stress of the previous several hours coalescing into the very real threat of tears, but she swallowed them down. *Not today, Satan*. She had a mind to apologize because she *had* been standing in front of the applesauce for an interminable amount of time, blocking several feet of the aisle, but the orc family had already moved on, the older of the two girls casting a swift look back with wide eyes as they turned off the aisle.

Charlie gripped her shopping cart, turning haphazardly to back out of the aisle the way she’d come, nearly colliding with an exhausted-looking goblin in nursing scrubs, swerving around a troll filling their basket from the end cap. She needed to finish her shopping and get the fuck out of dodge. Straightening her shoulders, she turned towards the baking supplies. *The final frontier of holiday shopping. Kill or be killed. What horrors will you commit in the name of butterscotch?*

She was in a foul mood, also an unsurprising turn of events. Any errand that necessitated the drive back to Bridgeton sent her spiraling into melancholy. That afternoon's journey into the city she'd once called home hadn't been any different. But that didn't mean she wanted to take her mood out on her hapless neighbors. *No one needs to die. Just get the shit you need and get out of here.*

She turned up the baking aisle, leaving her cart behind. Cream of tartar, baking soda and powder respectively, necessary tools of the trade. Cursing Sulya as she navigated the press of bodies, Charlie filled her arms as she snatched items from the decimated shelves. A tube of almond paste, the last bag of butterscotch chips, a highly coveted sack of mini dark chocolate nibs, a bag of miniature marshmallows, then a quick spin to deposit the items in her cart a few feet away.

Turning back to her battlefield, she spotted it. There, just beyond the sacks of flour that were stacked like sandbags along the trenches, the last jumbo-sized can of apple pie filling. She crouched like a leopard, ready to spring at her target.

A cart pushed by a passing mothman fishtailed as her arm reached out for the pie filling, its back wheels stuck, grazing her hip and ending her slightly off target. Nonetheless, her hand closed around its warm, bony prize. Charlie yelped in surprise when the can wriggled like a fish beneath her grip, realizing too late that she had trapped the hand of the satyr who had attempted to make off with the pie filling. *Her* pie filling. Her grip tightened.

“Are-are you planning on letting me go?”

The satyr backed up a step, his polished hooves glinting on the white-tiled floor. His voice was wry, a dark eyebrow cocked in amusement as a tumble of caramel-colored curls fell over his forehead. He smiled winsomely, to no

effect. Charlie refused to be taken in by his boyish attractiveness. She had cookies to bake, a white lie to enact, and she would *not* break her promise, even if doing so would be easier than keeping it in the first place.

It *had* occurred to her, as she made the defeated drive back to Cambric Creek from Bridgeton earlier that evening, that she could simply order a cookie tray from another bakery and lie. She had promised her cousin that she would provide the cookie box, but that didn't mean she needed to personally *make* the cookies, even if that was what Sulya was assuming. After all, Sulya was a million miles away. It wasn't as if the community club of strangers would know the difference. A bakery was a bakery.

*But what if they ask questions? What if they **do** know the difference?*

No, she'd decided. She would make the holiday assortment box with her own two hands, three tiers of festive cookies, the same one she'd churned out dozens at a time, selling hundreds a week last Christmas. One last hurrah, and then she would put the hurt and regret away and close this chapter of her life for good. It was time for a new start, but in order to do so, she needed to reach an ending, and to do *that*, she needed to make these fucking cookies. Charlie planted her feet. She was not giving up.

"That depends. Are you planning on letting go of my pie filling?"

"*Your* pie filling?" His voice was incredulous, and still colored in amusement. "You mean the one I'm holding? The one that's going into *my* basket as soon as you let me go?"

The satyr hadn't stopped smiling. Charlie glowered. *If he wants to fuck around, let him find out.* "Well, then I guess you have your answer. I was already reaching for this can when that other cart almost knocked me over. *You* swooped in out of nowhere. So no, I guess not. I'll let you go when you drop *my* pie filling."

“Oh ho, we have a fighter!” She gasped when he tugged the can— just enough force to draw her in without dislodging her. Hazel eyes glittered in amusement, but their mutual grip on the over-sized target did not slacken. “Attacking me in the middle of the grocery store . . . this is going to make the Town Tattler for sure, you know.”

“If you think I’m supposed to be afraid of a bitchy gossip column, I have bad news for you. I don’t have a reputation to slander, so why don’t you just . . . let . . . go!”

Each word was punctuated by a tug on the can, to no avail. The boyish satyr clucked his tongue as she attempted to shake the can from his grip.

“It’s a small town, sweetie. Everyone has a reputation. How about this? Let’s trade recipes. The one with the better pie wins.”

Charlie squinted in disbelief.

“Pie? *Pie*?! If you’re even thinking of making a pie with this can of goop, you don’t deserve to get it in the first place. I win by default, goat boy.”

He looked like he ought to be the male lead in some charmingly British rom-com, she thought, taking in his high cheekbones and wide, shell-pink mouth. The mop of curls gave him a youthful appearance, but the lines around his sparkling eyes belied the impression. *Late thirties, maybe? Do satyrs even age like humans? Whatever, so what? He’s cute. You don’t have time for cute. You’re done with men, remember? And right now, he’s fucking up your shopping list.*

“What—if you’re not making pie, what do you want pie filling for?! I think that means *I* win by default, actually.”

He twinkled down, resolute and defiant, and she slumped, feeling the fight suddenly die out of her. She should just order a cookie tray from a real



bakery, one with industrial ovens and baker's racks and an owner living out their dream. *Just give up. Close the book for good.*

“Really though, what are you making?”

“Cookies,” she answered woodenly, releasing her grip on the satyr's hand. She ought to abandon this cart as well and simply go home. She could call a bakery in the morning. *Home*. Sulya's house wasn't truly home, no more than this strange little town would ever feel like home, but it was all she had. “Apple pie cookies. It's—it's fine, take it. Do you need some butterscotch chips? I think this was the last bag.”

His basket landed on the front of her cart, his arm still gripping it, blocking her path.

“Hmm, that sounds amazing, actually. What are you doing with the butterscotch?”

She was able to envision the neat, powdered sugar-dusted squares stacked in an ever-diminishing pile on the shelf, the bright overhead lights reflecting over the chrome finish on the old-fashioned case that she'd painstakingly restored after salvaging it from an industrial equipment graveyard. The walls had been painted a smooth sea foam green with white accents, and the sleek chrome, coupled with the color, had brought to mind quaint, mid-century appliances, matched by the ruffled aprons worn by her staff. The blondies were a favorite, always had been, gone by mid-morning every day.

“Butterscotch blondies,” she answered tonelessly. “And the almond paste is for the cherry stars. Look, mister, I don't know why you hate whoever you're making this pie for, but if you're planning on dumping this can of gel into that freezer case pie crust you've got in your basket there, it would be easier and cheaper to send them a box of rat poison. But I give up. You win. Take it. You can have this stuff, too, if you want it. I didn't realize the whole town

got a collective memo to celebrate Christmas this year. Have fun with your disgusting pie.”

The satyr made no move to clear her path, angling himself in such a way that she was trapped.

“Well, that’s fly paste, so your cherry stars — ridiculous name, by the way — are going to be a bit off.”

Charlie glared, turning back to the cart she’d been attempting to abandon.

“What are you talking ab—“ The well-known tube of almond paste she’d purchased a dozen times before wasn’t as familiar as she’d originally thought, she realized, heat spreading up her neck. *Midge’s Own Superior Fly Paste*.

“And in case you weren’t aware, cookie girl, tomorrow is Solstice, so you’re the one shopping out of turn. The werewolves are determined to make Christmas a *thing*, though, so you’re not entirely wrong . . . I tell you what, let’s make a deal.”

Her eyes narrowed as his smile stretched. It was not a predatory grin. Nothing about him seemed especially threatening. He was lean and lank, of middling height, neither brawny nor burly, and she was confident if he did attack her in the parking lot, unlike the vast majority of her hulking orc and ogre neighbors, she’d have a decent chance of overpowering him for a least a long enough moment to escape.

Hazel eyes crinkled with his smile, erasing their age lines for a heartbeat. She was reminded of a foppish rom-com star once more, and Charlie knew the effect — his easy smile and blinding white teeth, cherubic curls and preppy-casual appearance — were meant to disarm, not intimidate. He was a charmer, the most dangerous sort of villain, as she knew well.

“You can have this can,” he dropped the can into her cart before she could

protest, “and you can have this one as well.” He lifted a second can of the pie filling from his basket, and Charlie’s nostrils flared. “But *only* on the condition that you make me some cookies. I have to bring a dessert to a holiday function, and I don’t think the organizer would appreciate your rat poison suggestion. Let me text you my phone number so you can message me when they’re ready.”

Her mouth dropped open at his audacity, watching in disbelief as he pulled a cell phone from the back pocket of his modified jeans, waiting expectantly for her to do the same.

“No offense, but are you out of your fucking mind? Do you actually think you can just demand that a perfect stranger make you a dessert?”

“Of course not! I think *you’re* going to make me a dessert because we’ve spent the last ten minutes standing here basically holding hands, so it’s not like we’re perfect strangers anymore.” He beamed down with the air of someone used to getting their way, and Charlie’s fingers twitched, wanting to reach up and tug on the fat curl between his eyebrows. *Tug it and cut it off. Then we’ll see how cute he is.*

She let out an undignified squeak when his hand suddenly twisted in hers, palming the pie filling easily with the one she wasn’t still gripping. His long fingers knitted themselves with her own, until they really were holding hands. Her internal organs all seemed to dislodge when his thumb scraped lightly against her palm, her stomach swinging low.

“Look, how else am I supposed to get your number? Would you prefer if I tried chatting you up in the parking lot by the cart corral? And I’m happy to pay for your baking supplies, especially if you’re going to make the cherry fly stars. I actually think that would be quite the hit. C’mon. It’s Yuletide.

Cut a guy a break. And let me just remind you that *you* are the one who accosted *me*.”

At the top of the endcap, the towering orc appeared, his cart considerably fuller than it had been several aisles ago. There was a deep furrow of aggravation between his thick black brows as he turned onto the baking aisle, the little girls playing tug-of-war with a bag of candy. The holiday pop song was now one of a slower tempo, the teenage chanteuse lamenting being alone on the darkest night of the year with an abundance of vocal ornamentation on every third word. Charlie’s eye twitched again. *Just take him up on it. An extra dozen cookies are nothing. Just hurry up and get the fuck out of this store.*

“Fine,” she snapped, tugging the satyr’s sleeve to follow her in the opposite direction, pushing the back end of her cart haphazardly up the aisle. She spotted two tubes of the real almond paste on a top shelf, snagging them as they passed. “I’ll do it, but yeah, you’re paying for *all* this. C’mon, the check-out is this way.”

She took her time navigating her way home. The day had been too shit-tastic to leave the journey to chance. The odds were stacked in favor of her winding up in a fender bender with St. Nick himself if she hurried back to Oldtowne, and the orc from the grocery would turn up as the responding officer, little girls in tow.

Breathing through her nose, she tried to focus on the affirmations she’d practiced with an online therapist the year prior. It’s fine. *You’re healthy. You’re almost home. You have a home to go back to in the first place.* Charlie

knew she was fortunate. After all, not many people in her position could say they had wealthy, eccentric relatives living overseas who were happy to provide the use of their tastefully appointed home in the toniest neighborhood in town.

It had been her mother who had jumped into action the instant she learned her only daughter was about to be left homeless. Her parents had downsized years earlier, and she hadn't relished the thought of moving back across the unification to stay in the undersized spare bedroom of their retirement condo, and evidently, her mother hadn't especially wanted that either. Sulya, her mother's cousin, had lived overseas for more than a decade at that point, her house in Cambric Creek sitting empty.

Of course Charlie was welcome to stay there. After all, they were family and the Slades stuck together. And as it happened, Sulya was in need of a new PA. The girl she had used for years had recently graduated from University, leaving Cambric Creek, a perfect low-stress position for someone whose entire life had just imploded.

A free roof over her head, and a lavish one at that, a paycheck for doing virtually nothing beyond facilitating Sulya's shopping addiction, and all the time in the world to contemplate all the things that had gone wrong, all of the red flags she had ignored, and the way her life had spectacularly shat the bed.

*Look at you. It's nearly 7 PM and you're just getting home for the night. A year ago, you would've been getting ready for bed. That's progress, right?*

Charlie pursed her lips at her internal monologue as she turned onto Magnolia, passing Slade Manor, the family's historic home where old Lettie lived with her ghosts. A right onto Pear Tree, the peaked roof of Sulya's house beckoning. It was true. A year ago, she would have already been in her pajamas at seven p.m., reading or crocheting, or maybe catching up on one of

the formulaic holiday romance movies she loved. By eight, it was lights out. She would have the ovens fired up by four a.m., necessitating an early bedtime.

*See? Look at how much time you have for life now. You even met someone!* She snorted at the thought, pulling the shopping bags from the backseat and unlocking the front door from the app on her phone. Despite her inner voice, she wasn't sure if this was what could be considered *living*.

She hadn't given the annoying, obnoxious satyr any opportunity to turn on the charm as they checked out. Charlie had positioned herself at the end of the checkout conveyor belt, methodically bagging up her baking supplies, leaving him standing before the cashier, a safe gulf of space between them. When he'd attempted to smarm down at her with his blinding white teeth outside the Food Gryphon's automatic doors, she'd made good her escape.

"I need to give you my number," he'd reminded her as they crossed the empty vestibule, not a cart to be had for the incoming shoppers. He slowed to a stop just inside the doors, forcing her to acquiesce.

"I'll give you my number instead," she blurted, not allowing herself to feel guilty for the devious plan that quickly took shape in her mind. "Why don't you double check when your party is and text me the info."

Another wry grin. "Oh, cookie girl, do you think I haven't given out a bad number in my day? You're going to give me a burner number from your burner number app, let me call it to prove you're not an utter charlatan, and then delete it the second you're out of the parking lot, my groceries in tow. And I need them on Thursday, no need to check. C'mon. You've got to do better than that."

She flushed as he twinkled down on her, pulling her unlocked phone from her hand, texting himself. He waved his own mobile at her triumphantly as

the notification chimed, handing her phone back. His number and a name.  
*Tris.*

“Fine then,” she’d gritted, glaring up at his smile. “I’ll text you when they’re ready to be picked up. Or dropped off. Whatever.”

“I’m looking forward to it, cookie girl. There’s no rush, as long as I have them before Thursday.”

*Whatever.* She would make the cookie box her bakery had been known for, and some extras for the irritating satyr. As she stared at the ceiling that night in her giant bed in Sulya’s house that would never feel like home, Charlie replayed his words.

*It’s a small town, sweetie. Everyone has a reputation.*

*That* was the problem. A slow breath, forcing her eyes to close. She didn’t need her reputation following her from Bridgeton. She didn’t need rumors of Clayton and crimes and her potential involvement to follow her here; didn’t need to torture herself with all of the what ifs and could have beens. Her bakery was gone, and nothing she could say or do was going to change that. Cambric Creek was meant to be a new start, a fresh beginning. The beginning of what, she didn’t know. *At your age, you ought to.*

Charlie rolled on her side, pushing away the voice in her head and forcing out the image of that bouncing curl between his laughing eyes. It was bad enough she still had one of the damned Yule carols playing on a loop in her head. Next week she could start again, again. This week, she had cookies to bake, one last time, and get through the fucking holidays.

*And then . . . new year, new you. Maybe.*



The alert on his phone was a discordant jangle from somewhere within the sofa cushions.

Lucas made no move to retrieve it. It was the alert for his email, and there was nothing anyone could possibly be sending him via email that was more important than the bounty spread out before him. Wild salmon, roasted parsnips, a Brussels sprout salad thick with dried fruit and shaved parmigiano. Talia gagged when he added a handful of chopped bacon to his mound of greens, but Lucas only shrugged, pointing out that he wasn't making her eat anything, and that she wasn't the one who needed to build her strength back up.

Every meal was a feast after the rut. He would load up on protein and complex carbohydrates, filling his diet with omega 3-rich fish and a colorful variety of greens, maxing his gains as quickly as possible to recover and get back to normal. The last thing he needed was to go staggering into the office looking weak and haggard, a reminder to all that he'd just spent the previous few weeks fucking his brains out.



“I wonder if anyone has ever thought of making a rut reality show?” Talia mused around a mouthful of Brussels sprouts from where she reclined on his floor cushions. “It would have to be on one of the porn networks, obviously. Isn’t that a good idea, though? Like, a house full of heat helpers and cervs, just getting through it. Free use everywhere, all the time. You’re trying to eat breakfast and one of the helpers is laying across the table in front of you, and a whitetail housemate is just humping away, right in front of your avo bagel.”

“*Talia!*”

She grinned cheekily, ignoring his outrage.

“What?! Don’t act like that’s not a good idea. It’s a biological imperative, not something to be ashamed of. And just think, when you finish your bagel, it’s your turn to unload! That’s good programming. *I’d* watch it.”

It was his turn to scowl in disgust, shaking his head at his girlfriend.

“You would,” he huffed. “How did I wind up with a cervid fetishist?”

He could complain all he wanted, but Lucas was well aware that this rut had been the easiest and most enjoyable of his adult life.

He had been reticent, at first. Even though she had been there last year, showing up on his doorstep unexpectedly, peeling off her underwear and presenting herself to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. They needed to establish guidelines. Safe words. An understanding that she could tap out at any point. After all, this was his burden to bear, not hers.

She had only rolled her eyes to his monologue, delivered as he paced in front of her anxiously.

“Lucas, you’re being an idiot. Do you happen to remember that I was here last year? I know the drill. I know what’s expected.”

“But we need to discuss things! I don’t want you getting hurt, I don’t want you feeling forced into doing something you don’t really want to do. I just

think if we have a thorough conversation about this and lay down some ground rules now, we'll both be able to enjoy the week safely and respectfully.”

The eye roll that time had been so exaggerated, he wondered if she might get stuck that way.

“Okay, how's this? I'm to stay with you for the duration. We're going to go shopping the week before to make sure there's no reason to leave the house once you start dripping pre-cum on the floor. My only mandate is that you lick my pussy at least three times a day. Beyond that, you have free use of me, whenever you need.”

He had dragged a hand over his face, feeling a tension headache brewing behind his eye. He wasn't sure why he was surprised that she was stubborn about this, when she was stubborn and bullheaded about literally everything else.

“That's pretty broad —“

“Any time. If I'm asleep? There's no need to wake me up, enjoy yourself. If I'm eating my avocado bagel? Just let me swallow before you slide it in.” Her head cocked, biting her lip as she considered. “No filming. No anal unless I'm prepped. Uhhh . . . No cum in my hair, if you can help it. Oh, or in my eyes. That shit burns. There. Now we have rules.”

She'd spent the next two weeks making good on her promises. The first time he had come staggering in from outside, cock already dropped and drooling, finding her eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table he had purchased for her use, he'd nearly gone cross-eyed in desperation. She had been wearing a long T-shirt and nothing else, easy to have, easy to take. He reared up blindly, hips already canting.

A small splash of milk spilled from the cereal bowl on every thrust into her,

her breasts smashed against the table top, its glossy surface absorbing her breathy moans. There had been a puddle of white to clean up on the table afterward, and a puddle of white on the floor, gushing out of her when his cock slipped free, limp and drained for at least a brief moment.

Lucas thought back to that day now, realizing the pornographic reality TV show she was pitching was a mirror of what they had already done.

“I am absolutely not a fetishist, but if that’s the way you want to be, I believe you have some rules to stick to, Bambi. Since you want to eat so badly . . .”

It should have alarmed him how infrequently she bothered wearing underwear in his house, but as she flounced around their meal, seating herself for him on the modified sofa and stretching open her long, brown legs, he decided it was a worry for another day.

The first lick to her slick folds was like a sip of ambrosia, and he wasted no time digging in. Every meal after the rut was a feast, and eating out his girlfriend was no exception. Talia gripped his antlers as he moved his tongue against her, licking and sucking, slurping and biting, relishing the way her hips bucked against his mouth. They were well matched. She was stubborn where he was acquiescent, impatient while he had patience to spare, loved having her pussy licked as much as he liked being the one to bury his face in it. Her libido hadn’t flagged during the previous month, even though he was the one in heat, well-matched in that as well.

Her nails scraped through his thick white hair, scratching around his ears and against his scalp, gripping his antlers once more as she rode his tongue.

When she came with a hot pulse against his mouth, Lucas couldn’t imagine having made any different choices over the course of the past year. He could have never bothered Jack Hemming, could’ve put the obnoxious little vandal

out of his mind as she stood before the judge, facing a federal charge. He could've decided she wasn't his problem at all, but then his face would not currently be glistening, her clit would not be pulsing against his tongue, and she wouldn't be sighing in satisfaction before him, stretching as he delivered a few last, lingering licks to her sweet cunt.

“Finish eating,” Talia commanded, pushing herself to her feet once he'd withdrawn his head. “Because after dinner I want you to fuck me in the shower outside. Here's your phone, by the way, I thought it went up my ass for a minute there.”

Lucas didn't need any convincing. He was shoveling food into his mouth once more as he swiped open his phone screen, checking on the missed notifications. When he swiped down to see a preview of the messages, there was one that made him stop chewing.

Talia watched in concern as his eyebrows drew together, quickly opening the email from Jack Hemming himself.

“What is it?” she asked.

Lucas's frown deepened.

“It's the Pied Piper,” he muttered, scrolling through the short, to the point message. “Calling in a debt.”



**H**is name was Tris, and he was every bit as obnoxious as she'd initially suspected.

*So are you new in town?*

She'd been waiting in line at the post office when the text came through. Charlie glanced at her phone, doing a double take when she realized it was not a spam advertisement.

She rarely received text messages out of the blue anymore. Her mother, gods love her, sent emails. Most of her friends had fallen away in the past year, not that she'd had many to start with. Keeping people close had never been a strong suit. College friends had scattered all over the globe, and she wasn't close with anyone from her hometown. The bakery had been her whole life. The bakery and Clayton.

Her friends, the few that she'd had, had been from the neighborhood, from her building, and other business owners on the block. Peers in the small business collective she had joined. Once she had left their ranks, she supposed it was natural for the friendships to fall away. The common bedrock

they'd shared was common no longer. A handful of them kept in touch, would check in to see how she was holding up for a while . . . But after she left the city, that was that. Out of sight, out of mind. They were busy living out their own dreams, and Charlie couldn't begrudge them that.

His exchange wasn't local, at least, not one she recognized. The only reason she knew it was him at all was the previous message he had sent to himself. She hadn't bothered saved his name. It wasn't worth it. After all, she would only be contacting him the singular time to let him know his cookies were ready, and to arrange the drop off. She certainly hadn't signed up for *chit chat*.

*If you need someone to show you around, I'd be happy to make room in my agenda.*

She gritted her teeth. If there was one thing in this world she didn't have time for, it was another charmer. Clayton had been all charm, and she'd had enough for a lifetime.

*Sorry, no time. Busy baking.*

It wasn't strictly true. At least, not yet. For now, she was doing what she did every week — running errands. Running errands, like the glorified errand girl that she was. Sulya's to-do list was endless, although this week was particularly busy with nonsense for the upcoming holiday.

*I want to make sure we get everything dropped off the day before the celebration, darling, this is very important. Businesses will be closed, people will be busy with their own holiday parties, and may not be around to answer the door when you arrive. Please make sure you take extra care with the pick up from Shia's studio. That is not to be left outside, the crystals will be fragile to the weather. If there's no one home, don't leave it on the stoop. You can try again the following morning at the office address.*

She sighed heavily, not relishing the thought of gallivanting back to Bridgeton just to deliver a holiday gift to someone Sulya had likely not seen in years.

“She’s really got you keeping busy,” laughed the troll behind the service window when Charlie heaved her sack onto the counter.

“Yeah, no kidding,” she grumbled, fishing out the credit card she used for household expenses. As the clerk scanned the packages, Charlie glanced back to her phone, biting her lip at the nameless text before shaking the thought of him away again, swiping back to Sulya’s email.

*There is a great deal of significance in the types of wreaths you’ll be picking up from Talontail. Each should be tagged. Please ensure you do not accidentally switch the tags. There’s no faster way to insult a witch than by sending her the wrong greenery. The chocolate Yule logs will be ready on Tuesday afternoon at Sweetlinghams. You have the list of where they all go, and do make sure you take one home for yourself, darling. Just drop a message if you have any issues. Ta!*

Charlie had read and reread Sulya’s message several times already, all in her cousin’s lilting, over-the-top mid-Atlantic accent. Sulya was, according to Charlie’s mother, *a continental*. She supposed it wasn’t surprising that the absentee shifter had adopted an affectation that signified as much.

The parcels had been accumulating in one of the bedrooms for months, until Charlie had received the green light to load the whole lot of them up to be gift-wrapped by the volunteers at the community center. She hadn’t known what to expect upon arriving, but the regimented army of college-age students and senior citizens, surrounded by stacks of bows and spools of ribbon, wrapping the boxes with terrifying efficiency hadn’t been it.

“So, do they pay well or something?” She posed the question to the college-

aged mothgirl who was, at that moment, expertly tying a silver bow around the box of crystals.

“Nope, it’s all volunteer. I mean, they buy us coffee in the morning, and Jack sends lunch in. I just like wrappin’ stuff.”

All that was left was the delivery itself.

The pain in the ass crystal that was too delicate for the weather was her first stop. *May as well get it over with.*

Charlie was somewhat shocked when the GPS led her to a house and not another business, and was positively stupefied when the door was answered. The man on the other side of the threshold was huge and handsome and only half-dressed, squinting down suspiciously when she announced the reason for her presence at his door. He flipped the fluttering gift tag on the ribbon, letting out a deep bark of laughter.

“Let me guess — it’s a trio of holistic essential oils, but it requires a pilgrimage and a shamanistic consultation to open the vials.”

Charlie shrugged with a wry smile. This was clearly someone who knew Sulya’s particular flavor of bullshit well. “Pretty close. It’s a healing crystal that will shatter if you leave it in the cold. You probably have to heat it with a rebirthing ceremony.”

He continued to laugh as he took the heavy box from her, as another car rolled into the driveway, parking opposite her own. When Charlie turned back, the dark-haired man had already placed the crystal box on a table inside the doorway and was closing her hand around a folded bill.

“Happy holidays to you.”

She had already reached her car when the woman in the other vehicle got out, giving her a little wave as she headed up to the house, the tall man waiting with the door open for her.



“How are you not dressed yet?! I told you to be ready!”

“What difference does it make if I’m dressed if you’re not even home?”

“I’m standing right here!”

Ducking her head, she quickly slid into her own vehicle, not wanting to be a witness to a domestic dispute.

“Yeah, but you’re not *in* the house. Orders from the sidewalk don’t count.”

Opening her palm, Charlie’s eyes widened to find a fifty dollar bill, folded around the gift tag that had been dangling from the ribbon on the box. The couple had already disappeared into the giant house. She snorted, shaking her head as she backed out of the drive. *Secrets of the Rich and Privileged, Cambric Creek Edition.*

Despite her earlier dread over the chore, the easy crystal drop-off and unexpected tip led to a cascade of good luck. A trip to Sulya’s numerologist and acupuncturist, a salon that looked like a historic home, the jeweler on Main Street, a sensory deprivation studio, and an aura colorist, whatever that was. She was able to unload each parcel with ease. Each stop required an uncomfortable period of gushing over Sulya’s generosity, gushing that Charlie, in her role as proxy, was forced to tolerate, squirming through hugs from increasingly eccentric strangers.

It occurred to her, as she left the numerologist’s small studio, that Sulya had been living on a different continent for at least a decade at this point and hadn’t seen any of these people or availed herself of their services in years. *And they still get presents, probably really nice ones!* It was the sort of mindless largesse only afforded by the astoundingly wealthy. *And I’m just happy to have enough generic mac and cheese in the cupboard to survive on.* She felt simultaneously sorry for herself and her circumstances, and humbled by her relative’s generous spirit.

It was with that spirit of generosity that she pulled on her apron that afternoon, once she'd returned from successfully delivering the evidence of Sulya's thoughtful giving. Her distant relative had told the president of the town's planning committee that her "niece" was a baker and would be able to provide a cookie tray for their party — not strictly the truth, not anymore, but not exactly a lie — and she was determined to see it through. *It's the least you can do for free room and board.*

The Cookie Jar had been her dream. Other little girls in her class had wanted to be ballerinas and dolphin trainers, astronauts and vets. She had only ever wanted to bake.

After culinary school, she'd spent her the rest of her twenties working as the pastry chef at a Bridgeton hotel, until burnout and the desire for a kitchen to call her own sent her to the other side of town, sinking her meager savings and all of her inheritance from her grandmother into the industrial space between a quick service counter that sold pizza-by-the-slice and a stationary shop. She was able to live in the small apartment above, consolidating her entire world into that single dream, that she made reality with her own two hands.

For the first few years, life didn't exist beyond the bakery's doorway. They had a line every morning, the blondies and triple chocolate chunks being the first to go each day, pignoli and sesame-covered butter cookies, powdered sugar-rolled tea cakes and flaky baklava. She thought in flour and sugar, measured time in butter and eggs. The Cookie Jar was a success, her dream come true.

And then she met Clayton.

He worked in finance, in one of the offices at her bank, assets management, and chatted her up weekly, always ready at the door when she passed.

Accepting his offer of dinner to get to know each other had been a leap of faith all on its own. Considering something other than her precious ovens, prioritizing something other than her recipes seemed unthinkable. But then he'd been perfect too. Handsome and charming, successful and driven. Charlie didn't know what she'd done to earn the fates' favor. She was living out the storyline of one of those greeting card romance channel movies — her dream job, the dream boyfriend, making her little cookies all the way to a happily ever after.

When the police showed up, forcing her to close prematurely one grey Wednesday afternoon so that she could follow them to the precinct to answer questions about Clayton's whereabouts, Charlie understood.

It wasn't a fluffy romance, and there were no happily ever afters in store. She was living a true crime horror, and she was one of many hapless victims.

*Who cares? That's all over now. It's in the past, you live in Cambric Creek now, delivering Sulya's mail. Make these last few cookies and then let all of this go for good.*

Adjusting her quality-tested recipes to make a fraction of the amount was too bittersweet a notion to contemplate, with a marked absence of the sweetness. Charlie decided instead to follow Sulya's generous example. Cookie boxes for her Oldtowne neighbors, one for the community center, and the promised box for the ugly sweater party thrown by the town's planning committee. One for the local elementary school and middle school, one for the firehouse and Healer's Memorial hospital, and one for old Lettie, another Slade, who lived all alone in her giant mansion of ghosts and memories. And one for the cocky, charming satyr, she conceded, wiping her hands on the flour-dusted apron.

Her signature holiday cookie box was a mix of gourmet selections and

comfort recipes people remembered from childhood — chocolate kiss-studded peanut butter blossoms finding their home beside inside-out s'mores and marzipan-iced confections, delicate opera cakes, and old-fashioned almond-flavored spritz cookies. Every recipe had been perfected and optimized for speed of execution without impacting the quality, and she had sold hundreds of the giant, triple-tiered boxes each year.

*Happy Holidays from the Slade Family.*

Her handwriting, too, had been perfected and optimized over the years, her evenings once spent writing in holiday greetings on the folded down boxes before they were assembled and filled. She finally plucked up the courage to text the blasted phone number sometime in between pulling the jam thumbprints out of the ovens and slicing the pistachio-cranberry shortbreads.

*Cookies are done.*

*I can meet you back at the Food Gryphon?*

*There.* Putting her mobile facedown on the counter once the deed was done, she put it out of mind as she dusted the blondies in powdered sugar and dipped the orange zest-infused madeleines in dark chocolate.

*Perfect!*

*Why don't you meet me this evening at the Pickled Pig?*

*Nice and public, safe for both of us.*

Charlie snorted, shaking her head in disgust. The Pickled Pig was a gastropub in the business district that was perpetually full of trendy young professionals, of which she was not one. She had no desire to have dinner with him and would be just as happy meeting in the grocery store parking lot to do the hand-off, as she'd suggested. *And that's just what you'll do. Meet him at his car, leave him standing in the glow of your tail lights as you drive away.*

*Sounds good to me!* she replied, vowing that she'd arrive fifteen minutes early to pass off the heavy cookie box and leave him standing there. The thought of his wide smile faltering as his rom-com charm failed him made *her* smile, completely at odds with the holly jolliness she was attempting to project with the cookie boxes. She had no idea why the satyr got under her skin so much. He was, after all, a perfect stranger . . . but Charlie was unable to keep her own smile from stretching at the thought of leaving him there feeling foolish. *That's what he gets for being so smug. It's a perfect plan.*



Few things in the world were more enjoyable than sitting in a quiet room, indulging in a hobby that wasn't meant to be done with anyone else, with someone else sitting there doing the same. They had taken a tea-blending course the previous year, and the cinnamon chai lattes they were drinking had remained a favorite learn from the class.

The room wasn't *entirely* silent. They had discovered the joys of the fireplace channel late last winter and had made up for lost time this year. The subtle pop and crackle had been a calming backdrop in their townhouse since October had blustered its way through town, which was right around the same time they'd gotten into creating different simmer pots for the stove.

Mother's Bounty, an all-organic shop off the main thoroughfare where they did their shopping, avoiding the Food Gryphon when they could, provided all they needed for the hobby. Bulk spices and herbs, several aisles worth, perfect for experimenting. The steamy aroma that day was concocted to combat the drizzly chill outside — eucalyptus and star anise, a few cinnamon

sticks, and the peel of two red apples, with several slices of the same fruit bobbing in the pot.

“Do we need to bring something specific to dinner at your parents’ house? Like, do we get assigned a side, or . . .”

Owen looked up from his book. On the other side of the sectional, Tabitha sat with her legs crossed, working on her tablet at her lap desk. Her brow had furrowed, eyebrows drawn down as she waited for his response.

“No? We can bring whatever we want. Maybe that orange cranberry pull-apart you bookmarked? Or we can just pick up a bottle of wine. It’s not like there’s a shortage of food.”

“Let’s do the pull-apart *and* the wine. Just to be safe. Did I tell you game night is picking back up at Morris and Shani’s house? The second week in January, back on Wednesdays.”

“You did, but I think we’re still going to be up north then. Unless you want to come straight home from your brother’s place?”

The conversation was interrupted by the ring of his phone on the ottoman before them. It was his turn to furrow his brow as his father’s name flashed on the screen. Owen quickly swapped his book for his phone, abandoning his drink.

It was rare that his father called directly. He usually received information filtered through Jackson or Trapp, occasionally Gray, and sometimes through sheer happenstance when he stopped at his childhood home to visit.

“Dad? Everything okay?”

Tabitha’s eyebrows shot up, her mouth dropping open slightly. She, too, knew the rarity of a direct summons from on high.

“Is everything okay?” she whispered. “Your mom?”

Owen nodded, although his expression did not soften as he listened to the

reason for his father's call.

“Did Grayson announce that he's running for super mayor or something?”

He turned away from the sofa, disguising his laugh as a cough, pacing around the room for a moment until Jack had said his piece.

“Okay, first off, of course. We're happy to help. Anything mom needs. I just want to make sure that you meant to call *me*, dad.”

It was Tabitha's turn to hide her laughter, allowing it to soak into the sofa pillow she hugged.

“I'm—I'm just saying. Yes, I know. Well, I wouldn't need to ask if there wasn't an established precedent. I'm telling you, yes, we'll do it. But I don't want to show up on the day of and have you look behind me for Trapp. So, as long as you meant to call me, then yes. You can count on us. Tabi and I will both be there.”

She waited until he'd replaced the phone on the ottoman to remove the pillow.

“He's probably like ‘*who*’? I'll bet you a doughnut he's texting your mom right now to ask who *Tabi* is.”

Her shoulders continued to shake in laughter, and Owen dropped back to his seat.

“Your family is so fucked up. Somewhere across town, Jack is saying right now ‘Oh my gods, who did I call?!’”

Owen shrugged, giving her a beaming Hemming smile.

“That's why I'm in therapy.” He leaned forward to accept a chai-flavored kiss before picking up his book once more.

“Wait, what do they want?”

“Something about the Yuletide party at the community center this week. They're desperate for volunteers, I guess.”



“And we’re doing it?!”

At that, he looked up with a frown. “What? Of course. *Yes*, we’re doing it. Don’t you realize what that is?” He huffed at her gesture of confusion. “Those are dad points, Tabitha. *He* called *me*. I’m going to show up, and I’m bringing you, so that’s like double dad points.”

“Therapy’s not doing a good enough job.”

“Dad points are currency, Tabi.”

“Can they be traded for goods and services? I don’t know if I can go to the store and shop with *dad points*.”

“With Jack Hemming points? You probably could. And that’s the point. You accumulate them. Because someday, we’re going to need help. Maybe we’ll find a house we want to buy, or a boat or something, and we’ll need just a *tiny* bit of extra Jack Hemming oomph. Dad points.”

“Do you want to buy a boat?”

“Wha–no!” Owen dropped his head back against the sofa. She didn’t understand. She would, someday, but not just then.

“What do we have to do?”

“Something with a costume,” he sat up, turning sideways to face her, as he’d been originally. “Something winter or Yule-themed.”

Tabitha cocked her head, considering. “You still have that ridiculous white suit from that wedding in Vegas,” she mused. “You can find a blue shirt, and we’ll spray your hair. Jack Frost?” She grinned broadly as Owen nodded. “I can paint your skin to match your shirt.”

“Perfect. What about you?”

On the stovetop, the saucepan began to rattle, a sign it needed more water. He quickly pushed to his feet, crossing the room as she considered.

“I have that purple leotard from the ballroom class we took. If I can find

wings, maybe a sugar plum fairy?”

“That’s perfect. See? Done. We’re gonna look adorable, and it’s one night.”

“Double dad points.”

“See? Now you get it.”

They settled back into their respective corners of the sofa, back into the peace and quiet, punctuated by the pop and crackle of a fireplace they never needed to clean.

Exactly how they liked it.



“Well, I think you need to shit or get off the squat. It’s not fair of you to jerk her around like this.”

Kenta exhaled sharply through his nose, the Yuriko-shaped headache he’d been nursing for several days not subsiding at his sister’s words. He’d made the colossal mistake of relaying his last conversation with Ava after Yuriko expressed disappointment that she’d not be joining them for their holiday dinner, and she hadn’t stopped needling him since.

“No one is being jerked around, Yuri,” he grumbled, forcing his features into a bright smile as Mai waved wildly from the miniature chairlift taking her up the sledding hill. He was certain his sister was, as usual, making assumptions and casting aspersions, but her words rankled in his mind with teeth he was certain they shouldn’t actually possess.

He still wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong. Ava had been distracted that last night, fretting over her upcoming trip, the first extended stay she and her daughter would be taking since they’d moved to Cambric Creek. She was worried she’d forget something crucial, was anxious about the visit with her

late husband's werewolf family, and was dreading the possibility that her own family would make her feel guilty for moving so far away.

Her breath had caught when he kissed the spot behind her ear — a soft, needy kitten mewl coming out as an unsteady exhalation when his teeth caught on the soft flesh of her earlobe, his mouth dragging down her neck as she gripped his shirt front.

Kenta hated seeing her upset in any way. *He* was the anxious worrier, not her. Ava was a ball of brash smiles and quiet confidence and jasmine-scented sunshine, and the unacceptable tension she held in her shoulders had no business infecting her. He wanted to make her forget her stress, wanted to kiss her until her anxiety was a hazy memory, wanted to make her gasp and shudder as he buried his face in the nirvana between her thighs, licking her until she was a boneless puddle beneath him and his face glistened. He wanted the sharp scoring of her nails down his back and her ever-rising moans of pleasure as he rocked into her to completely replace the tightness in her eyes and the furrow between her brows, to remind her that she was an amazing mother and businessperson and all-around badass and that he was irrevocably in love with her.

Instead, his thoughts had twisted and tumbled, all of his intentions elbowing each other and jockeying for position as his hands tightened at her hips — what if he inadvertently said something flippant about her late husband's family? What if he agreed that her family had just cause for being upset that they were so far? What if he jammed his foot into his mouth sideways without the time to practice and plan what he might say? — until she'd pulled back with a small, defeated sigh.

She'd looked tired at that moment, tired and — he thought with an uncomfortable twist in his stomach — disappointed.

“We have to get an early start tomorrow, so I guess . . . I guess I should say goodnight. Please tell Yuriko thank you again for the invitation. I’m sorry we have to miss it. I still don’t know how long we’re even staying. Zoë doesn’t want to miss the party here in town, but who knows how that might change with her cousins around. I’ll call you when we get back into town.”

She’d pushed up from the sofa before his clumsy tongue had been able to form a rebuttal, glad that his deep red skin hid the heat that burned up his neck. He didn’t *want* to leave. He wanted to help her finish the last-minute packing chores and put the bags in the car, make her forget her stress and be there in the morning to make Zoë breakfast and kiss Ava goodbye . . . instead, he lumbered to his feet, hyper-conscious of the small smile that didn’t quite reach her dim eyes, mollified only slightly by the heat of her mouth pressed to his, the kiss ending all too quickly.

“Merry Christmas,” he’d murmured against the full apple of her cheek, wanting to shed the coat he’d only just pulled on, wanting to announce his intention to stay.

“Happy Yuletide, Kenta.” Her hand had already been on the doorknob, and her lips had pressed to his once more, but he’d found himself on the other side of the closed door all the same, snow lightly accumulating on his broad shoulders before he’d been able to force himself to move.

Mai craned her neck back to wave wildly as the miniature cable car came to a standstill, a backlog of sledders at the top of the hill slowing things down for everyone. Kenta raised a huge red hand, high above the collection of goblins and nymphs and other smaller species, waving at his niece.

“No one is being jerked around,” he repeated. “But—but I upset her, I think. I don’t know what I did, though.”

Yuriko looked up sharply, looking so much like their mother that he

shuddered, remaining uncharacteristically silent for a long moment, scrutinizing him before letting out a put-upon sigh.

“Okay, tell me everything. You know, for someone so smart, you have the emotional intelligence of an ant. You’ve always been shit at reading people.”

He haltingly relayed that last night, right up to his premature exit in the snow, pausing when Mai finally got her chance to careen down the giant hill in her sled. The story somehow didn’t sound nearly as bad as it had felt at the time, although he wasn’t sharing his tumultuous inner monologue with his sister. Still, he knew he hadn’t imagined the sad look in Ava’s eyes, nor the heavy stone of certainty that had taken up residence in his stomach since, positive he’d done something terribly wrong, but completely clueless as to what.

“Go again!” Yuriko shouted down the hill, pointing to the chairlift queue. Her voice was lost in the din of shrieking children and other parents, but Mai understood, rejoining the line excitedly. “So she asked you to leave. But you normally stay the night?”

“She didn’t ask me to leave,” he protested, “she said they had to get up early.”

The excuse sounded hollow, even to him. Ava got up early *every* morning. She made a game of fondling him as he slept beside her on the weekends, until she was practically purring in need and he was ready to erupt. They made breakfast and went to the park, spent time together that was more meaningful than every day they spent apart combined. The thought of not seeing her at the end of that week made the stone within him turn. He *loved* spending time with her and Zoë, loved being in their house, being a part of their routine, of their *normal*.

“But she still asked you to leave,” Yuriko countered sharply, “and you said

you normally stay the night. So what was different?”

“Are you listening to me? I just told you they were traveling for the holidays. They had to get up—“

“What *else* was different, Kenta? Was Ava acting differently, or was it a normal night?”

Irritation pulsed behind his eye. He loved his sister, he reminded himself. He got along well with his brother-in-law and adored his niece. Pushing Yuri off the giant hill wasn't an option he could consider.

“She was stressed out over the trip. Visiting with her late husband's family, and she said it's the longest trip they've taken since they moved.”

“Mhm, so she was stressed out, tense. Probably a lot on her mind. Anxious. All things you can identify with, that's your wheelhouse. And what did you do?”

Kenta blinked down uncomprehendingly, raising his hand again as Mai finally entered one of the miniature cars.

“On second thought, I have a better question. What does Ava do when *you* overthink yourself into a stroke?”

His brow furrowed as he considered the question. Ava was unflappable, confident and funny, always in control, no matter what crazy curve balls life seemed to throw at her, not allowing him to muck up the gears of their relationship by second-guessing everything, taking the lead.

“Mhm, that's what I thought. Okay, so I'll ask again: Ava was stressed and anxious. What did *you* do?”

His mouth opened and closed several times, the stone turning over with a heavy thud.

“Well, you just answered your own question, then. You probably sat there gaping like a codfish, just like you're doing right now, instead of taking

control and actually comforting *her*. For fuck's sake, Kenta, you're an ogre. Fucking act like it once in a while!"

Fire burned his ears. He'd *wanted* to do exactly that, he wanted to exclaim! He'd thought about taking her in his arms and kissing away her stress, had thought about doing all sorts of things! *You thought, and thought, and thought. As usual.*

"What, I'm supposed to behave like some barbarian just because I'm a bigger species? Next, you're going to tell me I should have refused to leave and dragged her to bed by the hair. That's specist, Yuri."

"I didn't say to act like an orc!" she snapped, pausing to rub her temples before smiling brightly to return Mai's wave. "Look, all I'm saying . . . She's a single mom, Kenta. She runs her own business, owns her own home, and she's far away from her whole support system. She's got her shit on lock, clearly. She doesn't need someone to pick her up like she's some damsel in distress. But just because she doesn't *need* it doesn't mean she doesn't *want* it. It's nice to have someone else pick up the pieces once in a while. Do you think Maiko just sits back and lets me make every single decision on my own?"

"Yes," he answered automatically. "Because you're a bossy, autocratic tyrant."

"Well, you're wrong, asshole. We're partners. Good relationships aren't about things being fifty-fifty, you know. Sometimes it's sixty-forty. Sometimes it's eighty-twenty. Sometimes you need your partner to carry you, and you need to know that they *will*. She runs her business, takes care of her kid, deals with family . . . she doesn't need to do all the emotional heavy lifting with a partner. If you can't pick her up once in a while, she doesn't need you. You're too good of a guy to let that happen, Kenta."



The ability to swallow around the heart-shaped lump lodged in his throat was suddenly extremely difficult, but then Mai was taking her place at the top of the hill, her powder blue coat standing out against her red skin; one final wave and then she was off. Zoë was involved in just as many extra-curriculars as his niece, and he considered the way Yuriko's household ran like a well-oiled machine with a regimented schedule. *And that's with two adults.* Ava did the same, all on her own through the week, and there he was on Saturdays, coming around to avail himself of her company and her bed, scooting out on Sunday evenings to let her return to her non-stop grind of responsibilities on her own.

"I'm a shit boyfriend."

"Mhm, sounds like it. Fortunately, you're not a shit guy, so there's still time to fix things. But you can't think about the things you'll do differently for three months because by then, you'll be single again. So like I said: it's time to shit or get off the squat. There! Relationship fixed, you're welcome. I should start charging for this shit, its gold. Okay, so when we're done here, I need you to come in and try on the Santa suit when we get home. I'm pretty sure I got the right size, but let's not have any nasty surprises the day of the party."

"The *what?!?*"

Yuriko gave him a sour look. "I told you. The community Yuletide party! It's a disaster, but I'm fixing it. Do you think I'm supposed to have some little goblin play Santa when my giant, Santa-shaped brother is sitting on his ass right here?"

"Yuri, we don't even celebrate Christmas! And I am *not* Santa-shaped!"

"Oh, we do now. It's secular. Sandi said so! You don't need to do any of the magical baby-in-a-barn shit if you don't want to. So we're all going to the

community party and you're going to play Santa, and then we'll have fried chicken and cake at my house like normal."

Yuriko cocked her head, deep in thought for a moment before her eyebrows shot up. Kenta imagined he could see the wheels of his sister's devious mind beginning to crank to life as her hands began to flap.

"Oh. Oh wow . . . I just had the *best* idea! Ava should start making Christmas cakes! Traditional style, with strawberries! Do you remember when Mama made them from scratch when we were young? I can introduce them to Sandi, and we'll have them at the ugly sweater party! It'll be another little piece of home we're introducing here, and it will be good for her business!"

"You mean it will be good for you with the planning committee."

Yuriko smiled broadly. "Well, it sure won't hurt! Okay, I need you to fix things with her as soon as she gets back. And do *not* fuck things up before next year, got it? Next Christmas depends on it!"



It started several days into their trip.

The visit with Bryce's family had been equal parts joyous and bittersweet, culminating on the third day of their stay when his mother had come through the door with tears in her eyes, murmuring that Zoë had mentioned Ava had a boyfriend.

It had been nine years since he'd been gone at that point. Nearly a full decade, almost all of Zoë's life. They visited his parents several times a year, video chatted, exchanged letters and packages, anything they could do to keep them involved in her life, the last tie to the father she didn't remember.

She knew it was fine that she was moving on — hells, it would have been fine six years ago, eight years ago! But she'd had a baby to raise alone and her heart had been too heavy with grief to even think of starting over with someone new then. Zoë had been all that had mattered.

She'd dated casually for years, but that didn't matter, because now she was in a relationship, the first serious one she'd been in since Bryce's death, the first time she'd ever considered what *moving on* encompassed and entailed.

Giddiness and excitement, guilt and worry, the weight of it was enough to crush her if she let it all creep up on her unawares.

Her tentative composure broke when the she-bear wrapped her in a hug, the sob that ripped from her throat muffled in the other woman's hair, her tears soaking through the fabric at Ava's shoulder.

“We're very happy for you, Ava. And I know he is too. I hope you know that.”

It was a small relief to leave after several days for her own family's home at last, but Zoë had been thoroughly spoiled by her grandparents, and the back of the SUV had been considerably more full when they arrived at her parent's house that evening.

As if he'd known to give them some space, the first text from Kenta had come later that night, shortly after she'd slipped beneath the sheets in the guest bedroom.

*I hope everything is going well*

*Hopefully the driving's not too bad?*

Ava smiled, shaking her head. He was the sweetest man in the world, always worried about causing offense. *This is progress. He asked about the driving and not the weather.*

*Everything is good, we got to my parents house tonight*

She knew Kenta well enough by then to be able to envision him at home, knew exactly what his thought process likely was. She could picture his sigh of relief, big shoulders sagging, a release of the anxiety that he'd misjudged the timing of her unscheduled travel, and that they were, at that very moment, sitting around the dinner table with her late husband's family, toasting his memory — a toast interrupted by his inopportune and insensitive text.

*I hope Zoë is having fun*

*You holding up okay?*

Closing her eyes, she let go of the stress she'd been carrying for the past twenty-four hours. She *was* holding up okay. She *liked* being partnered again, and despite the nerves she'd had going into this trip, the holiday was shaping up to be a good one.

*I am. And I'm even better now that I get to talk to you again*

*Call me, ok?*

*I want to hear your voice before I go to bed*

It only took a moment for the phone to ring, his voice on the other end muted and soft.

"Hi," he murmured. "I-I wasn't sure if you'd even be awake—"

"I'm dead on my feet," Ava assured him, laughing. "I don't know why driving makes me so tired, but I'm about to go unconscious. I just wanted to hear your voice before I did."

"Everything's going well?" His voice was still gentle, gentle and serious, so at odds with massive size, and she felt like might be able to slip into it, like a pool of warm butter.

"It is. We had a really nice visit. They love her so much. I'm really glad we took the time to come."

"Well, that's understandable. She's a lovable kid. They'll always be family, no matter how much distance there is."

Ava could nearly feel the weight of his heavy arm around her. She liked being in a relationship again, and she *loved* being in a relationship with someone who understood he wasn't a replacement, and that her past would always be a part of her.

"I don't want to keep you awake, I'm sure it's been a long day. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Love you."

Her eyes, pressed tightly shut, burned and overflowed with tears. He was right. It had been an overwhelming few days, and she couldn't wait to go home to him, and figure out where they went next together.

"I love you too."

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*Well, wish me luck*

*The last day of dignity I get to enjoy*

*I'm probably going to need to move after this, you know*

*Who knows? Probably be put in Santa jail for my crimes*

*Do you think they need accountants in the North Pole?*

Ava squinted at her cell phone, not having any idea of what Kent was going on about, but giggled all the same. She was no stranger to his doom spirals. She hated laughing at him and never wanted to add to his stress, but he was always so over-the-top melodramatic that sometimes she simply couldn't help it.

*Are you going to provide clarification or do I need to use my imagination on this?*

He didn't answer immediately, and soon she got swept into the holiday hustle and bustle of her mother's house. Her brothers were there with their kids, and they were all tearing around as if the house were an indoor amusement park.

The kitchen looked like FEMA needed to step in to aid in the emergency rescue effort. Ava had to remind herself to breathe at several points

throughout the morning and afternoon, stepping out the back door to suck in a lungful of the icy December air.

She was used to a serene kitchen, well organized and even better stocked, a place for everything and everything in its place. She kept her work countertops clinically clean, scrubbed down her cupboards on a weekly basis, swept every night, in preparation for work the next morning.

*Preparation* didn't seem as if it had been on the shopping list for her own family's holiday dinner. They were having their Christmas dinner mid-week, as both of her half-brothers would be splitting the holidays with their respective in-laws. The frozen turkey was sitting in the sink, her mother and her brother's wife were arguing over what vegetables the kids would actually eat, and whether or not they even have them to make, and the greatest insult – a stack of store-bought pies on the counter.

Her contributions to the meal — whipped sweet potatoes with brown sugar and maple syrup, and Zoë's favorite roasted Brussels sprouts, with onions and chopped bacon — were the only things finished. She'd also brought a two-tiered cake, a rich double-chocolate bûche de Noël with a creamy mascarpone filling between layers, enrobed in chocolate ganache that she'd styled like tree bark. Her tree stump was decorated with sugared cranberries and bits of edible moss, a showstopper of a cake, her most popular offering of the season.

It had been quickly tucked away in the refrigerator in the garage shortly after her arrival, after one of her nephews had run his unwashed fingers over the ganache icing, piercing the side of the cake and coming out with a finger coated with sweet mascarpone filling, which he'd declared as *nasty*.

She took another deep, cleansing breath, attempting to unclench her jaw. She had told Kenta she was allowing the trip to remain fluid, to determine

when they would head home based on Zoë and the weather and other vague factors. She hadn't admitted that the reason why she didn't want to put a definite start and end point on her visit home was because she wanted to retain the ability to cut it short whenever she deemed it necessary, which at the moment, felt like it was going to be a lot sooner than later.

She loved her mother dearly. Her parents had been young and unmarried when she was born, and the relationship had not lasted long. Ava sometimes wondered if the fact that she had been born presenting as human, not resembling her faunish father at all, contributed to his hasty departure from their lives.

Her mother was human, marrying another human when Ava was three, and that was that. She had two half brothers with sons of their own. Zoë sat between her cousins in age, and while they had all enjoyed playing together when they were younger, Ava could see the separation a few years made now.

“Sweetie, it's just so nice having you home.”

It was already the tenth time her mother had made the comment. She had only just turned back into the kitchen from outside, and could already feel her jaw clenching once more.

“You know, the school board just passed a levy here for an upgrade to all the outdoor athletic facilities at the high school. This can be a new football stadium, a refinished baseball field, upgrades to the basketball court . . . Wouldn't it be nice if Zoë could finish school with all new everything?”

On the other side of the counter, her sister-in-law hummed in agreement. Ava gritted her teeth. *Fix your face. Keep it easy breezy beautiful.*

“All new everything . . . except for the school itself? I don't know, as the mother of a fourth-grade girl, I can't say a new football stadium is that



enticing. They should be putting that money into updating the classrooms, making sure the buildings are air-conditioned, new laptops for every student.”

She heard a slightly strident tone enter her voice, and attempted to lighten it after pausing.

“Zoë loves her school, mom. She has a million friends, she loves all her extracurriculars. They have elective classes at the elementary school level! Right now she’s taking Spanish and Trollish for language, and pollinator sustainment study as a science elective. If we were anywhere else, I would be paying a premium for a private school of this level, and this is just the public school in our community. The school is amazing.”

She sucked in air through her teeth, forcing her mouth into a smile as she turned her gaze to her sister-in-law, already preparing her rebuttal. “But no, before you ask – we don’t have a brand-new football stadium. So I guess there’s that.”

By the time she got back to her phone, there were several missed messages from him, one of them being a most curious photo.

Kenta was dressed in a red velvet suit, several shades brighter than his own skin, with furry white trim and matching hat, perched behind his curling gold horns. The fluffy white beard was a cascade of tightly coiled blue-white curls. His black-rimmed glasses sat heavily on the puffed mustache of the beard, and his expression was miserable. Ava was unable to hold back a snort of laughter.

“Baby, come look. Kenta sent us a picture.”

Zoë came running from the living room, doing a double take at the screen, and that time, Ava didn’t bother attempting to stifle her reaction.

“Why is Kenta Santa Claus?!”

“I don’t know, baby, but I’m so sad we’re missing this. Doesn’t he look like he’s having fun?”

Her daughter’s eyebrow cocked dubiously, a honey-blonde miniature of her father. They wouldn’t know if Zoë would inherit Bryce’s were-gene until puberty. It had been the main impetus behind her relocation to Cambric Creek. Bryce’s parents wouldn’t be around forever, and Zoë wouldn’t have anyone like her when they were gone. And even if she never made the change, she didn’t *want* her daughter growing up in an all-human town the way she did, cut off from who she was, *what* she was, regardless of how she presented outwardly. Cambric Creek was the perfect home for them, and a brand new football stadium wasn’t going to change that.

“Um, he doesn’t look like he’s having fun at all.”

Ava laughed again. “He doesn’t, does he? I wonder why he’s wearing it?!”

They looked at each other, already knowing the answer. “Yuriko.”

For the next several hours, a regular flurry of texts and photos arrived in her inbox of him preposterously dressed in the Santa costume. In some, he was side-by-side with a human-looking man with blue painted skin and sprayed white hair.

Her youngest brother and his wife joined in on the hilarity, crowding around her phone to watch when a video pinged on her screen, a somber-looking Kenta standing beside an even more serious-faced cervitaur with snowy white hair and a beautiful white pelt. Pine boughs were strung across the deer-man’s majestic elk-like antlers, culminating in a big red bow in the center, and his expression was completely wretched.

“This is what happens when you run afoul of the Cambric Creek community board,” Kenta intoned flatly. “My sister is one of their lackeys, and I’m the collateral damage.”

The camera panned back to the miserable-looking cervitaur. “I owed Jack Hemming a favor, and now I’m the Yule Stag. This is the most humiliating night of my life.”

“Oh, stop it, you look adorable. We all do!”

On the edge of the frame was a beautiful, olive-skinned young woman with greenery and gold-painted twigs in her hair and elaborate gold eyeliner curling across her face. “I *love* being the ivy queen! Lucas, we’re going to dress like this every year; it’s going to be our new tradition.”

The camera operator was apparently the blue-painted man from the earlier pictures. He swung the phone around to wave gaily. “I’m just happy to help.”

“He’s just happy to have been remembered.” The deep voice came from somewhere off-screen, and everyone laughed as the blue-skinned man scowled.

“Remember, kids,” Kenta grumbled, the phone’s camera swinging back around, zooming in on the fluffy white beard concealing his broad face, and Zoë nearly collapsed in laughter. “Stay in school, don’t get in trouble. Otherwise, you, too, might owe a favor to the community board someday.”

*What is going on?!* she typed out, gratified when he quickly responded.

*Costume check and run-through for the Yuletide party tomorrow night*

*I can’t say I’m upset that you’re going to miss seeing me like this*

She, by contrast, was crushed that she was being denied the opportunity. After all — this was exactly how they’d first gotten together. Kenta had been roped into dressing as the Setsubun oni for the holiday pageant at the elementary school, jogging through the hallways in his sexy little loincloth and roaring at the kids as he was pelted with toasted soybeans. He hadn’t wanted to do that either, but he had, and had done it with gusto.

*Because he’s dependable. He’s a good sport. He’s a good uncle. He’ll be a*

*good dad. So what if he over analyzes everything to death. He's perfect in every other way.* The chime of another notification sounded.

*Jack's son volunteered us all for a reprise at the sweater party*

*I hate this family*

Ava laughed out loud. *The sweater party!* The Yuletide celebration was held on the solstice, but the ugly sweater party was a secular Christmas celebration at the end of the week. Suddenly, there was nowhere Ava wanted to be other than back home in Cambric Creek, regardless of how she'd felt upon leaving. That was home. Kenta was home, the friends they'd made, the business she'd built . . . she and her daughter had carved a new life from the shell of tragedy, and that was their home now.

That night, as she and Zoë tucked into the double bed they were sharing in the spare bedroom, Ava made up her mind. Her mother would be upset, of that she had no doubt. But she would get over it. After all, she had plenty to keep her busy and occupied.

Her youngest brother's two sons, upon learning that Zoë got to sleep over at her grandparent's house, proclaimed that they, too, would be sleeping over. The older of her two brothers' sons, upon learning that their cousins had decided to stay, loudly announced that they were as well. No one bothered correcting any of the children that Zoë and Ava were sleeping over because there were no close hotels and the other option was their car.

The boys were still playing out in the living room, and she closed her eyes determinedly. She would let her mother know the following night would be their last, and they would be leaving the morning after next. They would arrive home in Cambric Creek in time to attend the ugly sweater party, to see Kenta in his Santa Claus finery, and who knows — she might even get the opportunity to sit on the big man's lap, and tell him she'd been a good girl.

Now all she had to do was make the announcement.



It was not a perfect plan. She'd shown up twenty minutes early, confident that she'd be able to head him off as soon as he arrived, making the hand-off and fulfilling her promise, and now she was freezing. She realized after pulling into the long, narrow parking lot that she'd have trouble spotting him, unless she managed to find a space near the top of the aisle, of which there were none available. She got out of the car every time she saw a patron moving through the lot, but none of the goblins and weres she spotted were the satyr.

Time ticked by . . . and by, and by. Charlie shivered as she waited, standing beside her car and scrutinizing every patron that moved in and out of the restaurant's door. The lizard person in charge of the valet stand was giving her the stink eye by then, but she ignored his stony, flint-eyed glare, pulling out her phone to jab at the screen.

*Running late?*

The mobile buzzed with his response immediately.

*Are you? No worries.*

She blew out a hard breath, turning away from the valet stand to tap out her aggrieved message.

*I'm not*

*I'm standing here in the cold*

*How much longer until you get here?*

His fast reply set her teeth on edge, aggravation shivering up her spine.

*I've been here for ages, cookie girl.*

*Come in before you freeze*

*I already snagged us a table.*

Her hands clenched into fists, and she wanted to beat against her car's frozen hood, but her fingers were already numb. She glanced down at herself, furious over being one-upped again by the obnoxious prick. She wasn't dressed for a night on the town, least of all at a place like this. *And you don't need to be, because you're not staying. Go in, drop his cookies, and leave. Fuck you, and happy New Year.*

As she'd known it would be, the pub was packed with bodies, fashionable hipsters of every species rubbing elbows over small plates of foie gras and expensive cheeses, jockeying for space at the bar. It was a place where the socially conscious came to see and be seen, *not* an ideal drop-off point for baked goods. Eyes turned in her direction as she squeezed through the crowd, hampered by the giant, unwieldy box. *Stupid, inconsiderate prick.* When she found him at last, seated at a rounded banquette, he twinkled up at her blithely, annoying curl bobbing.

“Let me get that for you . . . oh my, I didn't expect it to be this big! That's what she said, right?”

He winked as he jumped up, relieving her arms of the box. Charlie felt her face heat, a poisonous retort forming on her lips, but his reaction to the box

brought her up short.

The forehead beneath the boyish curls furrowed, brows drawing together. His hazel eyes met hers sharply, appraisingly, and the age lines around them reminded her of her previous supposition that his cherubic curls and wide, white smile made him appear far younger than he was. He was at least her age and probably a few years older, and for some reason, the thought mollified her annoyance slightly. *At least he's not actually some punk kid.*

“This is . . . this is so unexpected and *extremely* generous. I'm honored, truly.”

His reaction to the box was likely due to its size, to its weight and obvious fullness and nothing more, but his sober tone and the reverent hand he placed over her signature seafoam green and white box made her breath catch and her face heat for reasons other than annoyed aggravation, tears she *refused* to let fall begging to form.

“Well,” she choked out, forcing her emotions down, “this is what you paid for, right? A deal's a deal. The debt's paid. It was nice knowing you.”

“Please, have a seat. The food here is really excellent; if you've not been here before—“

“I should really get going. Enjoy your cookies.”

His hand closed on her wrist as she turned, all of the minor goodwill he'd built up in the previous ten seconds melting away. *Hate is a very strong word, but I'm pretty sure you hate this guy.*

“Please, I insist you join me. I've already ordered! Our food should be coming out any minute now.”

“You want me to stay for dinner, and you already *ordered* for me?!”

His perfect smile stretched, cockiness fully restored.

“It's the chef's tasting menu. I don't know what's on it either, cookie girl.”



An orc wove through the tables in her direction, and although she was positive it was not the same orc from the grocery store, Charlie ducked her head all the same, realizing she was in danger of colliding with a bustling server coming up the aisle at her. Squeezing into the banquette was the only way to remove herself from being in the way, and she realized too late that she was trapped as a second server unfolded a serving stand where she'd just been standing, blocking her way. No where to go.

“Ah, perfect timing,” the asshole satyr, *Tris*, announced cheerfully, beaming at her like the sun as a bottle of wine was ceremoniously uncorked tableside, two glasses being filled. She allowed herself to be pulled by the wrist to a sitting position, and her control over the situation utterly vanished. “So glad you’re staying for dinner, cookie girl.”

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“So, how long have you lived in Cambric Creek?”

The food, she was forced to admit, was excellent. Her ex had been fond of trendy eateries like this, and Bridgeton was full of them, but few were able to boast the skill in creation each small plate before them possessed. She wondered why a chef of such an obvious caliber was wasting away in a small suburb, but answered her own question as she looked around. The place was packed, the crowd appreciative, and the wait staff efficiently turned tables over, ensuring a solid take for the night.

Charlie ignored his question, coating a toasted baguette slice with a generous slather of the aubergine burrata purée, closing her eyes in appreciation of the rich, garlicky flavor. The flatware had gone largely

untouched, as most of the dishes were meant to be eaten with one's hands, and that, too, was a concept with which she was familiar. It was one of the reasons why she preferred cookies to other desserts she might have sold. There was something intensely personal about touching one's food, at once primal and childlike, removing all obstacles between one's mouth and a perfect marriage of ingredients. The best foods awakened multiple senses, and touch was an overlooked but vital part of that gastronomical ballet.

Her eyes opened. He was watching her intently, a small smile playing on the edges of his mouth, and his head cocked consideringly.

“What do you think? It's excellent, right?”

“It really is,” Charlie admitted begrudgingly. She didn't want him to think she wanted to be there at all, let alone that she might be *enjoying* his company. “This is top caliber. They must have lured the chef with a yacht and a six figure bonus to get him here.”

His laughter shimmered around her. “Well, he's actually the owner. Does a fantastic business here. You're probably right about the bonus, though. You have very pretty eyes . . . such an unusual occurrence of color. Are you a shifter? I suppose if that's the case, it wouldn't be that unusual . . .”

She ignored his pivot and the compliment. Her eyes possessed only a hint of the silvery gleam most shifters had, but it was evidently just enough for him to pick up on.

“He's doing a great business, from the look of it. Good for him, the food is excellent. Half. Half-shifter. My father is a human.”

“Have you lived here long? You know, my offer still stands. I'm an excellent tour guide.”

“I haven't,” she answered carefully, her well-guarded answers as practiced as her handwriting. “I used to live in Bridgeton, though, so I'm familiar with

the area. I have a relative who needed help managing her affairs here,” she added, knowing the *why* would be his next question, “and I was moving anyway, so it worked out for the time being.”

*Managing her affairs* amounted to little more than picking up the mail from Sulya’s post office box and stacking her never-ending collection of online purchases in one of the grand house’s bedrooms, but he didn’t need to know that. She was a glorified errand girl, a house-sitter, but she had a roof over her head and the loftier-sounding title she ascribed to her *work* sounded far more impressive than the reality was.

“Are you over in one of the developments?”

Charlie closed her eyes, savoring the manchego and bacon-stuffed figs for a moment before answering, dragging her forkful through the sticky caramelization at the edge of the plate.

“No . . . no, I’m over in Oldetowne. On Pear Tree, just past Magnolia.”

“Oldetowne?” His dark brow cocked, and she was nearly able to see the wheels turning beneath his horns. “Do you take care of an elderly relative? The houses there go for a mint and they tend to be generational. The younger folks who manage to snag something there are basically winning the lottery.”

“No, she lives overseas. Sulya needed help running her . . . day-to-day affairs here. And like I said, I was moving out of Bridgeton anyway, so—“

“Sulya Slade? You’re a *Slade*?”

Charlie cursed her sloppiness. It wasn’t often that anyone paid any mind to the things she said, and she’d clearly lost her touch at subterfuge.

The Slade name was storied but she didn’t share it, and besides, her own humble parentage was so far removed from Lettie and the manor house that she may as well be a completely different species. As it was, Charlie was half convinced Sulya was barely a blood relative — she was technically a second

cousin, but how many times removed, Charlie didn't know. She was fine with the anonymity of not being a Slade here, and to mention Sulya without thinking was idiotically amateurish.

"I'm not. Well, I mean . . . I *am*, but not in the way you're thinking," she gritted out, stuffed figs forgotten as her neck heated. "I'm not one of *those* Slades if that's what you're hoping for, so if you were planning on robbing me in the parking lot, you're gonna be mighty disappointed."

"Well, I hadn't started the evening planning on it, but the night is young, cookie girl."

His wide smile was eminently punchable, and her fingers twitched.

"I understand what you mean, though; good for you for not wearing a name badge around town. One of my neighbors likes to announce she's a Hemming everywhere she goes, thinks it's going to get her faster service or better tables. And she is, technically, her last name *is* Hemming, but I'm fairly certain Jack wouldn't be able to pick her out of a lineup, and that's really all that matters at the end of the day. She did *not* appreciate me pointing that out to her, but I felt it was a public service."

Charlie burst out laughing in spite of herself. Tris shrugged, looking pleased.

"Look at that. Speak of the devil and he shall appear."

His attention was caught by someone or something over her shoulder, and he raised a hand in greeting. Charlie twisted, glancing back to see three nearly identical dark-haired men making their way across the dining room. The tallest of the trio was the recipient of the crystals, she realized immediately, cursing the fact that she'd left the house in such a disarray. The kicker was, she'd changed to meet him. The denim shirtdress was faded and worn, and she'd hoped, back in Sulya's bathroom mirror, when she'd put it

on, that it would project a blasé attitude, which was how she felt about the annoying satyr and his fucking cookies.

Now though, as the second of the three gave her a blinding smile on their approach, she wanted to crawl under the table.

“Aren’t you —“

“The delivery girl. Yup. Errand girl extraordinaire. That’s me. Did you put your crystal in the snow?”

“You know, I didn’t, but I’m going to need to rent a burro to take me to the only woodswitch who can activate it. Snow might be a better plan.”

Tris looked back and forth between them as she laughed, like a spectator at a tennis match, a delighted, grinch-like smile slowly stretching his mouth.

“Gray, this is Charlie. Charlie Slade. But I guess you’ve already met?”

Her head whipped back to the smug satyr, a correction on her lips, but the bigger man’s incredulous tone halted her.

“*Really.*”

The younger of the three gave a short bark of laughter, one that was swiftly silenced the bigger man’s sharp look. They were all different ages, she realized. *Brothers?*

“What a small world.” His smile had a sharpness that sliced her like a knife. “Wonders never cease. Well, I’m certain this won’t be the last time our paths cross, Ms. —“

“Charlie,” she blurted, not wanting to perpetuate Tris’s obnoxious lie, and a lie was all it was.

“The Founder’s Fund will be turning over, what? First of February? Aren’t you on the board, Gray?”

The crystal recipient held up a hand, cutting the satyr off. “Tris, don’t even try it. I am here to enjoy a drink with my most annoying sibling, because he’s

only in town for the week,” — the youngest of the trio’s mouth opened in a wounded expression of shock and Charlie almost choked on her drink to disguise her laughter, — “Not to discuss business. About anything.”

“Nice to meet you Charlie,” the second man cut in, with another beaming smile. “We’ll let you get back to your dinner. Kiddo’s only in town for the holidays, but I’m sure we’ll see you here next week.”

The crowd seemed to part for the three men as they made their way to the far wall, before bodies once again filled the space, swallowing them up.

“What the hell was that?” she hissed, the instant the three men were well out of earshot. “Why would you tell him that?! We literally just talked about people who do this. Who were they, anyway?”

Tris took his time answering, tipping back his wine glass until it was drained.

“*Those* are the Hemmings. Some of them, at least. If you’re wondering what the top of the food chain looks like? That’s it, cookie girl.”

“I’m not,” she grumbled. “I don’t care about anything like that. When I was young, my mother liked to tell me we were from a very important family, but not *our* family. It was *the* family. I didn’t get it then, and I understand it less now.”

“Well, places like this are built on their history, and everyone wants to claim a piece of it. Especially when there’s so little of the old guard left to help themselves, if they even want it, which some of them don’t. Imogen Irondritch doesn’t even live in Cambric Creek, and old Lettie never leaves the house. Have you met her yet? She’s just around the corner, over on Magnolia.”

“I left a cookie box on the porch,” she admitted, cheeks coloring. “But I didn’t ring the bell. I didn’t want to disturb her.”

“I’m sure that will be much appreciated. Who doesn’t like a nice holiday cookie? And I heard she has a nurse now, so there will be someone there to share them.”

“There was a car up the driveway,” Charlie confirmed. “I hope it’s true. I feel bad for her.”

He leaned forward on his elbow, giving her a prime view of his forearms, exposed by his rolled-back shirtsleeves. She didn’t understand why something as unsexy as an arm managed to be so fucking hot, but forearms had always been her weakness. *Who cares? You already know he’s cute. He’s also a smug jerk.*

“Why is that, I wonder?”

“Why do I feel bad for her?” Charlie sputtered. “Because I have an ounce of decency? She’s all alone in that big old house. The outside was creepy enough; I can’t even imagine what the inside must be like.”

“I assure you, she’s far from *alone*.”

“Well, that only makes it worse,” she went on doggedly.

She had spent a lot of time thinking about the aged werecat to whom she was somehow related, alone in Slade Manor as the clock of her life steadily ticked by. Charlie empathized greatly with Lettie’s desire to lock herself away from reality and exist in the past.

She had often wished she had the ability to do the same thing. Her cozy apartment above the bakery, the four a.m. alarm and the warmth of the ovens, her bright, cheery interior, and the smiling customers who crowded the cases, the daily reality that she lived out her dreams. She wanted her life back, the one she’d built alone, before Clayton had come along and spoiled everything. She wanted it back so badly, there were some days she could almost smell the

almond paste and cold butter on the air at four a.m.. She understood how easy it would be to fall into a well of the past and never climb out.

“She’s all alone with her memories and ghosts. You said yourself that she never leaves the house. She’d rather hole up with memories of what she once had and the people who used to be there instead of actually living. Do you know, Sulya said she holds a seance every year at Halloween, hoping her husband Ezra will answer her, but he never does. She’s locked herself in with her the past, and—“

She cut herself off, drawing in a deep breath and steadying herself, realizing she was dangerously close to tears once more. Tris was watching her closely; hazel eyes crinkled as he nodded.

“That’s fair. Everything you said . . . that’s spot on, cookie girl. You’ll have to come as my plus one next Halloween; see for yourself what the inside of the house is like.”

“Why do *you* get one?“ she demanded, picking up her wine glass and draining it before continuing. “Are you an Ironhorse or Ironditch, or whoever?”

His laughter was a melodic shimmer, refilling her glass.

“Oh no, not me. Nothing like that. I’m just a nasty little nobody.”

It was a repetition of something he’d been called before, she could tell, perhaps his not-quite-a-Hemming neighbor.

“So, why were you moving in the first place?”

She was unprepared for the unexpected pivot, her mouth gaping for several seconds until she pulled herself together, another one of her well-practiced lines aiding her recovery.

“I-I was getting out of a relationship. We both agreed to vacate the apartment once the lease was up.”



“And your ex?”

Her nostrils flared at his nosy impudence. “He moved upstate, and I moved here. I haven’t seen him since.”

It wasn’t a lie, not technically. The prison was upstate, and she hadn’t seen him since the day he’d been sentenced after she’d testified against him in the embezzlement case. He’d bankrupted her, stolen her money and her business and her dreams, in addition to a slew of other people’s money, and she didn’t care if he rotted in a cell. The satyr’s eyes squinted slightly as if he could see the outline of her omission, but the conversation drifted back to more benign topics, and she didn’t bring up her past again.

They moved from their table to the bar once the plates were cleared, and he’d waved away her attempt to split the check that never actually materialized; craft cocktails with delicate botanicals, a shot of an Elvish drink with silvery-white burn, chased by something that reminded her of summers at the beach in her university days. She was pleasantly buzzed when her hand reached out, her finger twining that obnoxious curl around itself and letting it *sproing!* back to his eyebrows.

She would never, ever admit that she had kissed him first, not to herself nor to him, and would call any on-lookers that said otherwise the filthiest of liars, but she grabbed his collar all the same, pulling him in to plant one on his wide mouth.

She hadn’t meant anything to come from it, hadn’t thought of anything beyond taking something that wasn’t hers, and she was genuinely surprised by the way he reciprocated. She shouldn’t have been, she realized, for he was cocky and smug, but she didn’t push away when his tongue pushed through the soft barrier of her lips to taste her mouth. The evening hadn’t been as horrid as she’d feared. She wasn’t interested in repeating it, but that didn’t

stop her body from responding when he kissed her, invading her mouth and striking a match low in her belly.

“I should go,” she gasped when he finally allowed her to come up for air. *Definitely time to go before you do something stupid.*

“Yes, we should move on; it’s not the venue for this type of dessert.”

Color heated her cheeks at both his words and the hand at her hip, wondering how long it had been there as he steered them to the door. She’d meant that it was time for her to go, not for them to leave together, not for his arm to be around her like they were *together*, not for there to be a tingle between her thighs ignited by his kiss.

“Fancy an after-dinner fuck, cookie girl?”

Charlie gasped up at his audacity, incensed at his wide smile, infuriated that the tingle increased at his words. She hadn’t gotten laid in what felt like a hundred years, and a mindless fuck was exactly what she needed . . . but tumbling into bed with too-cute goat boy would be a bad idea.

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Why do you think I want to have anything to do with you?! You’re a pig.”

His smile stretched, eyes twinkling like stars in the streetlamp’s glow. “Well, for starters, there is a crackling chemistry between us and a clear physical attraction. You held my hand at the grocery store; you just kissed me at the bar. I thought it was my turn to initiate something, give and take, you know. And I’m not a pig; I’m a satyr. Our cocks are never far from mind; you ought to be aware.”

“What?! I didn’t kiss you; you kissed *me!*”

A group of laughing passers-by edged them to the wall of the building as they passed, her breath quickening when he leaned in, teeth grazing the shell of her ear.

“Oh, when I kiss you, cookie girl, you’ll know it.”

He decided to prove it to her, for Charlie found herself trapped a moment later, off the sidewalk, just into the alley beside the building with the brick to her back and his forearm pressed to the masonry, caging her in while his other hand gripped her chin. His lips had the softness of someone who regularly applied balm, a pleasant cushion as he trapped her lower lip in between his, sucking it into his mouth and gently swiping it with his tongue. She gasped softly, her mouth opening wide, which was apparently his aim.

She realized the truth of his words as his tongue stroked lasciviously against hers, lips and teeth and tongue, sucking and stroking and biting, not so much kissing her as he was fucking her mouth with his, a promise of what was to come. She didn’t know when his hand had moved up her dress to tease at the front of her underwear, but soon enough, her thighs were trembling, warring with the desire to fall open and grant him access, and the need to keep her upright.

“I’m not going *anywhere* with you,” she sneered, the effect slightly dampened when she whimpered as one of his cunning fingers stroked her clit through the thin cotton. *He’s cocky. He’s smug. He’s a jerk. You hate him.* All possibly true, but it increasingly seemed like she was going to let the smug, cocky jerk fuck her, and her pussy was thrilled at the turn of events.

“Fine, we don’t need to go anywhere then. But when I make you scream, the next time we have dessert is in my bed. Deal?”

“Wh-what do you mean? Do you think I’m going to get arrested for public indecency right here on the sidewalk because you’re a horny satyr who can’t keep it in his pants?”

His finger pushed beneath the edge of the cotton, dragging through the slickness he found there, and he hummed appreciatively rather than

answering her. “So wet already, and we’ve only just gotten started! I want you nice and slippery for my cock, so we have some work to do. Next time we go back to my place.”

She should have demanded he let her go, should have stomped back to her car and gone home alone. She should *not* have let him lead her down a twisting network of alleyways and small lanes, stepping over a small guardrail until they were behind a building stacked with boxes.

The crisp smell of newsprint met her nose as she was hoisted to sit at the top of several stacks of boxes, her panties pulled down her hips and legs spread wide.

Tris wasted no time. She barely recognized the sound that came out of her when he raised his hand to drag up her thigh, cupping her mound with his palm, before allowing his fingers to stroke into her. Back and forth, dragging through her wetness, rubbing her clit as if he’d received a written set of instructions on exactly how she liked it.

She couldn’t take her eyes off that fucking curl.

It bobbed between his eyes like a lure, bait for doe-eyed girls who were taken in by such boyish affectations, which she was not. *He’s probably some sort of angler fish. Angler fish mer? Mer satyr? How would that work?* Satyrs were incorrigibly horny, and she didn’t doubt they would try getting it on with merfolk. *Whatever. We’re going to snip that curl off the first chance we get.*

Charlie was at war with herself.

She wanted to go home. She wanted to go *home*, to her cozy little apartment above the bakery, *her* bakery. Sulya’s well-appointed house felt more like living in a museum exhibit; nothing at all like coming *home* each day. She wanted to snip the distracting caramel-colored curl, wanted to wind

it around her finger and pull with all her might, wanted to thwack the side of the short horns that sprouted from his head, several shades darker than his hair.

She wanted the finger he'd worked into her to curl a *teensy* bit further, as it wasn't quite reaching her g-spot yet, but she had no complaints about the thumb that circled over her clit. She was a writhing ocean of contradictions, floating adrift on a sea of pleasure and annoyance, and no one was angrier about it than her.

He'd unbuttoned her dress, and his perfect, punchable teeth scraped over her nipple as his mouth fastened, sucking the swollen peak into its hot confines and she arched at the sensation, and *then* he was hitting just the right spot, like a fuse being lit beneath her skin as she cried out.

"*There we are.*" His voice was smug, and the impulse to punch him grew stronger, but by then, it was too late. "Are you going to come for me, cookie girl?"

His arm moved like a piston, thumb rotating with the precision of an unwinding clock, and the fist she swung at his face glanced ineffectively off his shoulder. His smile widened when she moaned again, the flat edge of his teeth catching at her hardened nipple in a way that made her legs stiffen. "Come for me, cookie girl, let me hear you sing. I want you to get my cock nice and wet. Come for me."

The wave seemed to start somewhere behind her knees, shaking up her legs until its swell centered on her core and her clit throbbed, his hand pulling the pleasure from her like a game of tug-of-war she had no hope of winning. She began to pant breathily as she fell apart, giving the smug bastard the exact sort of overt display he wanted.

The first crashing wave made her voice break as she clenched around his

still-thrusting fingers, pulse after pulse that made her legs shake, grateful that he was supporting her weight. Charlie didn't want to admit it was the best orgasm she'd had in recent memory, or even in distant memory; she didn't want to give him the satisfaction . . . until the arm that had been snaked around her vanished, leaving her to cling precariously to the box where she balanced as he dropped to caprine knees.

She had had her chance, at last, to pull on that fucking curl. Instead, Charlie sunk her fingers into his mop of hair, betraying herself when he licked a broad strip against her still-spasming cunt, holding onto his horns for dear life and moaning with her whole throat when he began to suck on her clit.

“One more for me, cookie girl. I know you have it in you. Give me a big gush of that honey.”

His tongue flickered like an errant light fixture when his lips refastened around its still pulsing target, nursing on the swollen pearl as though he'd stolen a wineskin from the gods, sucking and licking her relentlessly until her spine felt liquified.

She hated him. He was arrogant and filthy, overly charming and entirely too pleased with himself . . . but he was working her clit like a hot, wet vacuum, and she had no idea what kind of satyr vacuum person he was, but she never wanted him to stop.

It never occurred to her when she'd left the house that evening, cookie box packed securely in the trunk, that the night might end with frenzied, nearly-public sex with the cocky satyr, but now she was nearly sobbing as his tongue worked against her, sucking on her clit until she nearly launched like a rocket off the stack of boxes.

There was no question that she was going to let him fuck her. She might hate herself in the morning, but if he used his cock half as well as he used his

fingers and tongue, Charlie decided she would let him do anything he wanted, as often as he wanted to do it. She practically sobbed when her spine stiffened, and her thighs trembled anew, the buzzing vibration of his pleased laughter making her pull as hard as she could on his mop of curls as the tidal wave washed over her once more, wracked with pleasure and completely at his mercy.

When he pulled himself to hooved feet, his boyish face shone in the halo of the streetlight, slickened with the evidence of her pleasure, and his wide smile was cocky as ever.

Her hands were clumsy at the front of his pants, undoing his belt buckle with trembling fingers. The modified clothing worn by the residents here fascinated her, for although she'd known nonhumans all her life, most of them had been like her — or, at the very least, humanoid in presentation, like goblins and trolls.

The pants were cut to fit his wider, caprine hips, ending in neat tapers just above oddly bent hocks. The fur that covered his legs began just below his hipbones, and she was relieved to discover that the cock the pants concealed, as the open fly spread open beneath her fingertips, was of a familiar shape. It wasn't any longer than the human men she'd been with, but as she gripped him, a soft grunt escaping him as she did so, Charlie marveled at his girth.

“I'm very glad you stole my pie filling, cookie girl. Happy Yuletide.”

His teeth grazed her throat as he slickened his cock with her juices, the press of his head into her already deliciously snug. Her fingertips brushed something soft behind him, something that twitched beneath her fingers as he pushed into her slowly, and Charlie gasped at the realization of what it was.

“Oh my gods, you have a cute little tail!” Her head dropped back as he bottomed out, the squeeze of his fat cock making her see stars already, and

he'd not yet begun moving.

“Is it sensitive?” His reaction to her brushing fingers answered her question, and she cried out when he bucked unexpectedly against her, the little tuft continuing to twitch.

“Like I said,” he bit at her neck, “next time, you’re coming back to my place.”

“Like there’s going to be a next time, goat boy.”

Her words were taken as a challenge, and Charlie bit her lip as he pulled back slowly, thrusting back into her completely. Several more passes to ensure she wasn’t in any discomfort, and then she was tugged against him as he braced his pubic bone over her and bent slightly.

When he began to fuck her, it was at a frenzied pace, his hips moving with the same piston-like precision and urgency that his arm had earlier, and she was lost. She would make him a cookie box every week of the year if it meant she’d be fucked this soundly, for every inch of her cunt was being rubbed from the inside by his thick, meaty rod, and all too soon, she was unwinding in his arms.

There was a van parked behind the building, and in the reflection of the glass, she could see the way he rutted into her, goat-like hips thrusting deeply on every pass. It felt animalistic and wild — the near-public setting, the rub of his coarse fur against her spread-open thighs and the light slap of his balls against her, the sounds emitting from his throat. She didn’t know if all satyrs fucked like this, but if they did, she understood why they’d always gotten so much ass.

When he came, she was right behind him, the full pressure of his spurting cock tipping her over the edge.

She didn’t like him, she was sure of it. He was smug and cocky and too



cute, and she didn't have room in her life for *charming* and never would again. Charming had taken too much from her already. Even still . . . she would have been lying to herself if she had pretended she wasn't hoping they would do this again. *Fuck you, fuck me, and Happy New Year.*



She found Zoë the following morning, reading by herself in the tiny room off the dining room.

“Hey, kiddo. You maxed out on playing with the cousins?”

Zoë shrugged. “We were playing Uno, but Garrett and Caleb got into a fight over the reverse card, and they pushed everything off the table. I’m not helping them clean it up, so I came to read.”

Ava clicked her tongue. “I don’t blame you. Well, if you think you have reached your limit of family time, I have a proposition. Do you want to go home for Christmas?”

Zoë raised hopeful eyes. “Could we? Can we have dinner at Mai’s house? She said we were invited. But won’t grandma be mad?”

The loveseat was undersized, but Ava squeezed in next to her daughter. “You let me worry about grandma. I just want to make sure you’re fine with leaving though, sweetie. If you want to stay, we can stay.”

“I want to go home,” Zoë blurted. “Will Kenta still be dressed as Santa?”

“If we leave tomorrow morning, we can make it back in time for the sweater party at the community center. He’s playing Santa again.”

Zoë bounced to her feet. “I’m gonna go pack my stuff!”

Ava laughed. “Slow down. Let me tell your grandmother first. Maybe we can come back and visit grandma and Tom this summer.”

The conversation with her mother went about as well as expected. She wanted to be forthright and honest, but it quickly became evident that honesty was only going to cause hurt, and instead she took part in the ancient tradition of sparing the feelings of her loved ones by enacting a little white lie.

“I can’t say no to this, mom. You have to understand. This is how I pay my bills, this is how we keep a roof over our head. Yes, the order is last-minute, but it’s too big for me to turn down.”

They were headed back to Cambric Creek so that she could get to work on a last minute New Year’s order that would take her the week to complete. There was no way out of it, and no room for debate. More importantly, her parents didn’t need to know the truth.

Her mother was teary-eyed the following morning.

“I just worry about you both so much, all alone . . .”

“We’re not alone, mom. We have a good support system. I’m in a serious relationship and his family is there. I promise you don’t have to worry about us. We’re going to plan a trip to come back sometime in the summer, maybe we can take the kids to that big waterpark in Maplewood for the weekend. I’ll make Kenta take off work so you and Tom can meet him.”

She breathed a sigh of relief once they were back on the road, headed home at last. Zoë had already settled into the backseat with a movie and her headphones, and the radio was playing upbeat carols. It was going to be fine. They just needed to get home.

She had a lap to sit in and a Christmas to save.

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The community center was packed with ugly Christmas sweaters, worn by every species in town. There were colorful lights, tinsel trees, and a bountiful dessert table. Her bûche de Noël cake sat in the center, and it and the giant tray of gourmet-looking bakery cookies were the stars amidst the homemade offerings from all the attendees.

She couldn't imagine another community pulling something of this scale off so well. It seemed like the entire town had turned up, spilling into the hallway and out into the parking lot. Free food and non-alcoholic beverages, music and dancing, games for the kids, a white elephant game for adults, a hot chocolate station with horse and carriage rides, and costumed entertainers roaming through the crowd. Entry fee was simply a dessert to share and a wrapped child's gift for the donation drive.

The blue painted man was one of the Hemmings, Ava realized as they entered the gaily-lit space. *The one who volunteered them. You'll have to thank him.* In addition to the powder blue makeup on his hands and face, his dark hair had been dusted white, he wore a white suit, and he flung a pocketful of blue glitter at Zoë as they entered the room. The young woman at his side wore sparkly, flesh colored tights and a spangly purple leotard. Iridescent fairy wings graced her back, and purple plums had been painted on her cheeks.

"This is insane," Ava murmured to herself, surveying the room slowly, catching sight of the white cervitaur's antlers. Zoë had already been absorbed

by a throng of her friends, and there was security at each exit, preventing any elementary school aged children from leaving. “Time to find Santa.”

It wasn't hard to do. He was in the area between the main room and the space that had been reserved for the tables of food, a hallway that was normally used for storage. Someone had done an excellent job constructing a red foiled throne, which upon closer inspection, she realized was a leather club chair with a styrofoam back.

He didn't know she'd be there. That was a component of her plan she had decided some time on the road — their appearance at the party would be a surprise. She wanted to catch Kenta unawares, not giving him the chance to overthink anything or be swept up in a tidal wave of his anxiety. That was how she had fallen in love with him. He was unselfconscious and in control, completely sure of himself behind the desk of his office, numbers and figures as comforting to him as buttercream and fondant were to her. He claimed that he'd been mortified during his half naked sojourn through the elementary school for Setsubun, but he hadn't expected her to be there, and so she'd gotten to enjoy his unselfconsciousness that day as well.

Joining the line to visit with Santa, Ava allowed several families to go ahead of her until the back of the line was declared.

“Don't worry, kids! Santa needs to go feed the reindeer, but he'll be back in just a bit! We'll have someone new passing out presents, so you don't need to get out of line.”

She did her best to make herself appear small behind the family of orcs in front of her. Dress code for the ugly sweater party was, unsurprisingly, an ugly Christmas sweater. Hers was a cardigan, a deep V varsity style, dark red with enormous white felt snowflakes, that hit her mid thigh. She had paired it

with a scooped-neck dress that hugged her curves. *It definitely makes your ass look big, but in the best way.*

Her plan worked. The orc family completely blocked the side of her, until it was her turn to have a seat on Santa's lap, too late for his brain to click into overdrive.

"What-what are you doing here?! When did you get home?"

She heard his quick intake of breath as she dropped onto his velvet-encased thighs, twisting her hips ever so slightly.

"Just a few hours ago, actually. We wouldn't have missed this for the world. Aren't you gonna ask me if I've been a good girl?" Ava knew a grinch-like grin of satisfaction had spread across her face as she ground herself on his red velvet-covered lap, pressing her ass to him until he grunted. "Is that a big fat candy cane in your pocket? Or is Santa just *real* happy to see me?"

"Ava."

"I hope you're planning on stuffing my stocking with that later."

"I don't need to ask," he growled in a strangled voice. "I already know you're not a good girl. You're a very *bad* girl."

The remaining line of children had been diverted in the opposite direction down the hallway, where a hunched goblin was dressed as an old woman in a brown cloak that Ava was certain was actually a potato sack. She was passing out presents with another man who'd been styled like a tree, wearing a golden crown.

*Good. Coast is clear.* She leaned back against his chest, tipping her head up and cupping his cheek, tugging on the fake beard gently.

"You're right. I'm a bad girl. And bad girls love big red cocks. I think yours is getting hard, Santa. Why don't you come outside and let me suck on

that peppermint stick so that you can get back to work. Unless you're going to be too busy feeding the reindeer."

Kenta pushed to his feet with a swallowed groan, and Ava squeaked at the abrupt dislodging. His grip on her arm never faltered as he pulled her down the hallway, until they reached what appeared to be a janitor's closet.

"There's too many people outside. What is going through your head?! You show up looking like *that*, make my cock hard, fully knowing I've got kids waiting to sit on my lap."

She recognized a Kenta doom spiral when she saw it. Ava giggled, tugging the front of his furry white lapels until he bent to meet her mouth. "Hey wait a minute, what do you mean looking 'like that'? How do I look?"

He growled against her lips. "Like you have ass for days. Isn't that what you always say? And it looks good enough to eat. There's barely any room to even turn around in here."

Ava grinned deviously, gripping the elastic waistband of his Santa pants. "Then it's a good thing you don't need to turn around. Like I said, I want to suck this fat candy cane."

She didn't know if there was a saying about shy guys and how quickly they got hard, but if there wasn't, there should have been. When she pulled down the red velvet pants, she was nearly blinded by his thick red peppermint stick. Kenta swallowed a groan at the first broad stroke of her tongue on the underside of his dark red shaft.

The red vibrator she had purchased a year earlier paled in comparison to the genuine article. His balls were fat and heavy, swinging pendulously in their sac, his cock erupting like a thick root. It was slightly thicker through the middle, a delicious swell she loved to sink down on, and when his foreskin

was completely retracted, the shiny head revealed a doubled frenulum, like an extra ridge.

He was extremely sensitive there. He was extremely sensitive *everywhere*. Kenta was the most responsive lover she'd ever had, and acted as if she were a goddess every time she got on her knees to suck his cock. *As if it's not something you enjoy doing.*

She could take her time when they were at home. She would lick him slowly from root to tip, mouth each of his heavy testicles, tease the slit in his tip with her tongue until he was dripping, stroke him slowly. She would suck him dry at home.

For now, though, the clock was ticking. The knowledge that there were hundreds of their neighbors just down the hallway ratcheted up the tension, and she began to bob her head down his shaft like she was standing before a bucket of water and his balls were the last apples in the world.

Kenta choked down a moan, gripping her head as she sucked him, thrusting up lightly into her mouth. Ava let him set the rhythm. He needed to come so that he could go back to being a jolly, bearded stranger for the children in town, and she was more than happy to let him use her mouth to achieve that aim.

Her own dating experiences with men of other species had been eye-opening, but moving to Cambric Creek and making friends with some of the other mothers in Zoë's grade had been an education in and of itself.

She'd since learned of the "sliding scale of splooginess," as Tirza, the hilarious and gloriously profane mother of tiefling twins in Zoë's homeroom, put it. The mothers of Cambric Creek weren't afraid to kiss and tell, and their tales of laundry woe were shared over glasses of wine when they got together throughout the week, waiting for the kids during various activities. The



conventional wisdom Ava had learned was that the bigger the species, the messier bedroom activities had the potential to be.

“I dated a centaur before I met my wife, and the plumbing in my house was completely fucked,” Tirza had insisted once, as the rest of the table screamed in laughter. “Centaur, minotaur . . . you gotta buy that enzyme shit to break down the jizz, otherwise it gums everything up. If I have to add a special cleaning product to my shopping list every week, that pussy eating game had better be worth it, and it usually wasn’t. That’s why I married a woman.”

“Ogres, orcs, mountain trolls,” a slender troll across the table had counted off on her hands, “they all go off like geysers. Rubber sheets should come standard in housing here.”

“That’s why my husband does the laundry,” snorted an orc with streaks of purple in her black hair. Fresh laughter had met the orc woman’s words, and Ava’s cheeks had heated as her shoulders shook. *Ogres, like geysers.*

Now, she was urging the geyser on. She gripped his balls, squeezing them rhythmically in her palms, keeping tempo with his jerking hips as he fucked her mouth. She felt his orgasm as it built, the heat and pulse of it, his cock thickening before the first burst hit the back of her throat.

They had been together for almost a year, and by now, she was a pro. Ava tightened her lips, focusing on breathing through her nose and keeping her throat open. Kenta hissed as he came, and her eyes streamed. Pulse after pulse, his cock spasmed, and she didn’t spill a drop.

If they were hentai characters, she thought as he swallowed another moan, she would be a lithe faun and her belly would be bulging with his cum. The reality was better. *Curvy suburban mom blowing Santa Claus in a closet. Literally the dream.*

“I don’t know how you do that,” he grunted once his limp candy cane

slipped from her lips. “But don’t ever stop.”

“Like you could make me, big man.”

Ava rejoined the main party once Kenta was reinstalled at his station, promising that she was reformed and committed to being a good girl the rest of the night. *This is turning out to be the best Christmas ever.* She would follow through on her promise to her mother. They would make the trip that summer, make Kenta take time off to join them. Introduce him to her family, as a maybe permanent part of her life. *New year, new you.*

“Excuse me? Are you the one who made the cake in the middle of the table? The Christmas log?”

“The bûche de Noël,” she corrected with a smile as she turned. “Yes, I am.”

The speaker was a satyr with a tumble of light brown curls. He was smartly dressed, although there was nothing at all ugly about his sweater vest and shirt combo. *Well, not everyone embraces the theme.*

“Ava Esben,” she introduced herself, extending a hand. This was how she met most of her clients. They were guests at a party for which she had made the cake, realizing they, themselves, were in need of the same.

“Tris Tatterswain,” he smiled warmly, gripping her palm. “I have to say, your confections are to die for. I have sampled *quite* a few of them over the past few years. I imagine business must be booming?”

Ava smiled. *A charmer.* “Business is good,” she laughed. “Business is so good it’s starting to outgrow my kitchen. I certainly can’t complain, but I feel terrible having to turn people away.”

She hadn’t suspected he was baiting a trap until she stepped into it. His eyes gleamed, and Ava realized he wasn’t merely a prospective client. The satyr pounced.

“Have you ever considered opening a brick-and-mortar shop here in town?”

Did you know,” he continued hastily when she began to point out that commercial rents in town were bound to be exorbitant, “that the Founder’s Fund is specifically for small businesses like yourself to establish residency here in the downtown landscape? That grant money is never something you have to repay. Successful businesses mean a successful community.”

She eyed the goat man carefully. *Watch yourself.* “The Founder’s Fund is Jack’s baby, right?”

His smile was disarming, and she knew that was a weapon.

“All of the founding families contribute to the fund, actually, but yes. Jack is the one who started it. It’s changed the landscape of this town for the better.” He gave her a slight bow and another grin. “Well, I’ll let you get back to the party. It’s very nice meeting you, Ms. Esben. I do hope you’ll consider what I said. If you do, there’s someone I would very much like to introduce you to. Perhaps we could meet up in the new year, and I can make introductions. Please, hold onto my card.”

She had never considered a brick and mortar operation. She didn’t know the first thing about running a physical bakery, the staff and maintenance it likely entailed, and besides that, she was positive she’d never be able to afford it. *Still.* The satyr was intriguing. Tris Tatterswain, *Cambric Creek Gazette*. Rather than sending his card into the bin, she slipped it into the pocket of her dress, making a mental note to put it on her desk later.

She and Zoë left the party on their own, the long drive and the rush of excitement of the celebration hitting them like a tidal wave of exhaustion.

She didn’t expect Kenta to take him up on the offer she texted, letting him know she was leaving a key in the mailbox. She was asleep from the moment her head hit the pillow, waking after a few hours to the buffeting, warm presence of his body in bed behind her, his heavy arm draped over her waist.

Ava turned against him, nails scraping down his chest, deciding if this was a dream, she really didn't want to wake. *Home.*

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He was gone when she woke the following morning, hours later than she normally did. *Returning the big man's suit before I doom us all to lumps of coal.*

*Dinner at my sister's house at seven, I hope you and Zoë will join us.*

She realized, as she sipped coffee in the silent kitchen, the note left in the middle of the island beneath her favorite cup, where he knew she'd see it, that it was shaping up to be the most low-key and enjoyable Christmas in recent memory.

The morning was uneventful in its quiet hustle and bustle — a bit of grocery shopping to account for the things she hadn't purchased, knowing they would be gone. A few last minute gifts, and then Zoë received a text from a friend, eager to show off her Yuletide presents.

“You need to be home by five so that we can get ready for dinner,” she reminded her daughter, as the phone in the cup holder buzzed.

*Can we talk?*

Surely there were no three worse words in the common tongue, Ava thought, particularly when they were strung together in such a way.

*I'll come over to your place.*

Her phone had pinged with the message just a few seconds after she'd pulled into the Ulragh's driveway, forcing a smile onto her face when the front door of the house swung open, Zoë's friend waving wildly, her mother appearing behind her and raising a hand in greeting.

“I’ll pick you up in two hours,” she called out the window as her daughter bounded up the driveway, eager to review toy hauls with her friend. *Sure thing*, she tapped out in her lap.

*I’m dropping Zoë off, but I’ll be home in 5 minutes.*

Kenta was not one to initiate hard conversations. Maybe he needs help picking out a present for Mai. Or maybe he wants to break up. Honestly, who even knows. She wondered if this was one of those alien parasites, the type that took over a host’s brain, infiltrating them fully until nothing remained. The Kenta she’d left behind a week ago would have protested *vigorously* to a semi-public blowjob, and likely would not have taken her up on coming back to her house, instead of sleeping alone in his own. Whether or not this was the real Kenta or a parasite in his brain, she was embarrassed to admit that so far, she didn’t have any complaints.

His empty car was at the curb. They were due at his sister’s in just a few hours. For now, though, his keys and wallet sat on the kitchen island, with no other hint of where he could be. There was no sign of the big ogre, no peek of gold horns on the other side of the sofa, or a flash of red skin in the dining room. It was a mystery, and Ava grinned, feeling her heartbeat kick up a few notches.

She edged down the hallway to the bedroom, pushing the door open slowly, clinging to the doorway giddily at the sight that met her. Kenta lay stretched across the bed, and the expression on his face — a warring mix of emotions, attempting to seem confident while burning in mortification — left her giggling, but she already knew he was a good sport, had known from that very first day when he’d gone jogging through the elementary school in a loincloth. He was completely nude, save for the red Christmas stocking over his erection.

“I didn’t know ogres celebrated Christmas.”

“We don’t,” he shrugged, “but I’m an honorary Santa Claus now. I’ve been entrusted with stuffing stockings. I wasn’t sure if we’d get the chance tonight. You’ve been a very good girl, and your stocking was never stuffed, Ava.”

Fresh laughter shook her as she peeled out of her leggings and socks, hooking her fingers in the waistband of her panties and dragging them down her legs, kicking them in the direction of the bed. “I hope there’s something in the stocking I’m going to like.”

“Oh, I hope so. Santa told me the motor is dying on the one you’ve got in your drawer, so I thought I’d bring a model with more staying power.”

Her hoodie and bra joined the leggings on the floor as she crawled onto the bed, kissing her way up his tree trunk thighs until her nose bumped the velveteen stocking, giving a whole new meaning to the “velvet-wrapped steel” cliché. He sucked in a breath as she pulled the stocking off, nosing his heavy balls before kissing up his shaft. He was already thick and swollen, and she knew from experience that he wouldn’t last terribly long once his cock was already this engorged, but his refractory period was minimal compared to a human’s.

The slit in his cockhead was already pearling with pre-come, and she teased it with the tip of her tongue, fluttering all around his head before closing her mouth over it, sucking him deeply. Kenta groaned, but she never had a chance to find out just how ready to come he was, for before she knew what was happening, their positions were reversed, and she stared at the ceiling, sinking her fingers into his black hair as he got down to business eating her like a man starved.

Gripping his horns for leverage, she subtly directed his movements as his tongue stroked her, just as eager to be filled with his cock as she was for him

to make her see stars this way. His glasses were already on the bedside table, probably deposited there, when he heard her coming down the hall, and Ava closed her eyes, smiling. They belonged there, just like he belonged here, in her bed, at her table, in their lives.

The crinkle of a wrapper distracted her, just as he stopped licking.

“Now, I’ve been told this is formulated without sweetener so its body safe. But we’re not going to use it anywhere else, just to be safe.”

She yelped when the peppermint stick was held to her clit. It was a white-hot burn, tingly and *delicious*. Kenta took his time, gently pulling back her hood to ensure he’d covered her from every angle, until her clit was throbbing.

Ava nearly sobbed when the heat of his mouth closed back over the tingling bud of nerves, hot and wet, smacking his lips as he licked her.

“Santa’s favorite meal is a peppermint pussy.”

“Yeah, well, I hope Santa bought more than one of those candy canes, because he can eat this peppermint pussy every day.”

His chest rumbled, vibrating against her, and she arched, writhing against the onslaught of his tongue. Kenta was always solicitous and careful, always concerned about her comfort and anxious over hurting her, but this . . . *this* felt different. His big hands stretched her thighs wide as he devoured her, a man taking what he wanted. He didn’t stop when she tensed, licking her straight through her first orgasm of the night. *And it’s still the afternoon! He’s definitely been body-snatched.*

The orc’s comment about rubber sheets came back to her when he flipped her, her thighs still quivering from her peak, the wet spot she’d left on the comforter easily felt. She saw stars again when he pressed into her from behind, big cock seating itself to the hilt in one smooth thrust.

“Give me that big candy cane,” she wheezed, her eyes rolling back when he began to move. She wondered how it might have happened, if it was something he’d eaten, or if it passed like a virus . . . but when his hand pressed to the center of her back, pushing her face to the mattress as he hammered into her from behind, she decided she didn’t much care.

“You’ve been a very good girl,” he repeated seriously. “And good girls get Santa’s cock.” It was the hardest he had ever fucked her. His balls bounced against her ass, her g-spot felt electric, and when his arm curled around her, thick fingers rubbing at her still-tingling clit, she was lost.

“I need to leave Santa the *biggest* plate of cookies,” she wheezed when he increased speed, fingers digging into the soft flesh at her hips. “He knew exactly what I wanted.”

When he came inside her, she jolted, the increased pressure making her knees shake. *Like a geyser.*

Ava didn’t know how this parasite had infected him, but it was good to know that her Kenta was still in there somewhere, for he produced a towel she’d not noticed, hadn’t even thought of, catching the flood of his release as he pulled out slowly. She dropped against him after cleaning herself up, the familiar warmth of his body and the smell of his skin leaving her impossibly content.

“I bought fancy lingerie; you never even gave me a chance to put it on. I have it on good authority that it makes my ass look huge in the best way.”

“Mmmm, save it for tonight.”

“You nearly gave me a heart attack, you know. ‘Can we talk’ is like shots fired. You could have just said, ‘Come home and get your stocking stuffed,’ and I would have figured it out.”

Kenta leaned on his elbow, dislodging her to reach across the mattress for



his glasses, and Ava gulped.

“I-I did want to talk. I do; I mean, I still do.” He stacked the pillows behind him as he spoke, leaning back and pulling her to rest against him once more, so it clearly couldn’t be *that* bad, she told herself. “We’ve hired a new CPA right out of school. They’re just doing clerical work right now, preparing files and setting up pre-tax meetings with clients, but it’s taken a bit of weight off things. I thought I could maybe start staying over on Wednesdays . . . I can pick up Zoë from scouts, I drive past the school to get your house from work anyway, and we can take care of dinner. I know Wednesdays tend to be your busy day, so I just thought . . .” he trailed off, sucking in a deep breath. “I want to start being more involved with your lives, Ava. I love you. Both of you. I-I don’t want to be a weekend boyfriend. I want to be *here* for you.”

Tears pricked at the back of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall and spoil the moment. *We’re very happy for you, Ava. And I know he is too. I hope you know that.*

She did, and she did. She wanted Kenta to be more involved, wanted him to be a part of their every day, wanted him at her side and in their lives for the rest of her days, and she knew wherever he was, Bryce approved of her choice. But first, they could start with Wednesdays.

“That sounds perfect to me. I definitely need to write Santa a thank-you note for the stocking stuffer and the parasite. It’s my first job of the new year.”

“The *what?*”

Ava smiled, nuzzling his skin. “It’s not important. Besides, Zoë needs to be picked up in an hour, and I think there’s a corner of my stocking that could still use some stuffing. Merry Christmas, Kenta.”



Charlie fidgeted, glancing at her phone for the dozenth time. There were no notifications, no new messages, but that was fine. It was New Year's Eve, a beautiful day, and she had plans that night. Well, she corrected, not strictly *plans*. The community New Year celebration was quite the to-do, she understood, and most of the town would be there. It would be difficult to run into someone in that press of bodies, even if one knew that someone would be there . . . which she did.

*I hope you're planning on coming to the New Year festival, cookie girl.*

It was only communication there'd been between them since *that* night, but to be fair, she'd not messaged him either. Hadn't messaged and hadn't responded, extremely sensible of her, but that wasn't preventing her heart from racing as the minutes ticked by, nine a.m. turning to noon before she knew it, each tick of the clock taking her closer to the town square celebration, where he would be.

Charlie turned away from the coffee shop's window, refocusing her attention on the newspaper that had been at the edge of the table when she sat

down. The Bridgeton Ledger was full of news from the city, news she didn't need to care about anymore, and the crossword was already filled in. She huffed, pushing the paper away until she noticed the Cambric Creek Gazette beneath it.

The little local paper had a surprisingly wide circulation, and she was half convinced hers was the only house on her street that did not have a special letterbox for it. News from the local college, a story about the recent water main break at the end of Main Street, and the supposition that it had been caused by a drunken dragonborn. She read an article on a new city ordinance allowing open containers of blood-based beverages in public and about the new fashion exhibit coming to the small art museum. The gossip column contained news about some goings-on at Applethorpe Manor and if the current mayor would even bother seeking re-election with the growing whisper that one of the Hemmings was ready to retake up the mantle . . .

*Those eagle-eyed attendees of the community Christmas celebration may have noticed a familiar addition to the dessert table. The Cookie Jar, a popular Bridgeton sweet spot, was forced to prematurely close its doors a year ago in the wake of a financial scandal perpetrated by the then-partner of its innocent owner-operator. The Ponzi scheme was detected by a part-time bank teller, bringing the ill-gotten empire down, and financially ruining more than two dozen Bridgeton residents, both human and non-human. Clayton Guilemore is currently serving his sentence at a state penitentiary, but it's those of us with a sweet tooth who were made to suffer . . . until now.*

*The celebrated baker behind the Cookie Jar has taken up residence right here in Cambric Creek, gracing us — temporarily, for now — with her inimitable confections. With the purse string of the Founder's Fund there for*

*the asking, one can only hope that the Cookie Jar finds new life in our downtown landscape.*

**Motherfucker.** He knew everything about her. Charlie could barely breathe. She shifted, balled her fists to beat on the table, earning the glare from the troll behind her, and then read the short write-up again. *The Town Tattler, Tris Tatterswain.* He knew everything about her, and likely had from the moment she'd brought in the gods-damned box.

*But he didn't make you sound suspicious, even though everyone thought you were a part of it. He didn't make you sound stupid for falling for Clayton in the first place. He made you sound like an innocent victim.*

There was a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth on the third reread, and she took up her phone without another moment to doubt herself.

*I am. Are we meeting up so you can tell me all about the glamorous life of a gossip columnist?*

His response was swift, as she knew it would be.

*Actually, I want to tell you all about the Founder's Fund. Started by the founding families, the portfolio is managed right here in town, with an aim to help local non-human businesses put down roots in the community. Very interesting stuff, if you know who to ask.*

Charlie frowned. *But I **am** human, mostly.*

*Sweetie, you're a Slade. You and Grayson are practically bosom chums. You can probably write the check yourself. There's another baker in town, Ava Esben, who only makes cakes. With your powers combined . . .*

Her heart thrummed with a nearly foreign sensation, one that she'd once known well. *Possibility.* It was a new year, Charlie reminded herself. *New year, new home, new start. New year, new you.* The whole world was possible. Anything could happen.

Her phone chimed again, and she smiled in spite of herself.

*And just a reminder, cookie girl*

*Tonight we go to **my** place.*

## ***NEXT IN CAMBRIC CREEK***

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C.M. Nascosta is a USA TODAY bestselling author of Monster Romance and a professional procrastinator from Cleveland, Ohio. She's always preferred beasts to boys, the macabre to the milquetoast, the unknown darkness in the shadows to the Chad next door. She lives in a crumbling old Victorian with a scaredy-cat dachshund, where she writes nontraditional romances featuring beastly boys with equal parts heart and heat, and is waiting for the Hallmark Channel to get with the program and start a paranormal lovers series.

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