



A
LOVE COMES
ROMANCE

*Love
Comes
at
Christmas*

USA Today Best Selling Author
LAURA ANN

LOVE COMES AT CHRISTMAS

A sweet, holiday romance

Love Comes

Book 2

Laura Ann

[Angel Music, LLC](#)

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LOVE COMES AT CHRISTMAS

Love Comes #2

By USA Today Bestselling author

Laura Ann

To my oldest.

I know you'll reach the moon one day.

You're amazing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No author works alone. Thank you, Tami.

You make it Christmas every time

I get a new cover. And thank you to my Beta Team and Editor.

Truly, your help with my stories is immeasurable.

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CHAPTER ONE

“No, Tyson, we don’t put those up our nose.” Susie bit her tongue to keep from sighing as she pulled a reindeer eraser out of the five-year-old’s nostril. “These are for you to take home and play with over the Christmas holiday.”

Tyson grunted and slumped in his seat. “I don’t wanna go home.”

Susie nodded, the sigh slipping through despite her best efforts. Why was taking care of children so energy sapping? She’d been doing this for years and should be used to it by now.

“We’re not going home quite yet, but we’re still not putting anything up our noses.” Susie straightened and began to walk down the line again, glancing back every few steps to make sure the young boy hadn’t rebelled as soon as her back was turned. Tyson wasn’t the easiest kid to get along with, but Susie tried not to make a big deal about it.

Every class seemed to have at least one difficult child, and Tyson came from a single parent household, which always seemed to make things harder. His dad was a good guy, but

was a bit clueless about creating any kind of organization or discipline.

Which meant that Susie's time with Tyson made for a battle of the wills, and it was a fight she was determined to win at all costs. If she let one kid win, she'd soon lose all control of her classroom.

"Two more minutes!" she declared. Her hand landed on a tiny shoulder. "Avery, that looks lovely. Good job! I'm sure your mom will be excited to put that on the fridge for Christmas."

The petite blonde grinned up at Susie with one front tooth missing, and Susie couldn't help but smile back. Avery was the golden child. There was one of those in every classroom as well. She was well behaved, she was always dressed in clean clothes, her hair was combed and cute, and she said all the right things.

If Susie ever got a classroom full of Avery's, she'd die happy.

"Miss Susie!" a high voice screeched.

Susie spun around, her dark hair slapping her cheek. Grumbling, Susie tucked the chunk behind her ear. Her thick, fuzzy hair didn't obey any better than her students.

"Tyson ate a sticker!" Lars cried, slumping in his seat, his nose dripping down his upper lip.

Oh my word, what next?

Susie knew she shouldn't give labels to the children, but Lars' propensity for tears made him the "crier," just as much

as Avery was “the golden child” and Tyson was “the difficult one.”

Grabbing a box of tissues on her way back across the classroom, Susie plunked them down at the table. “Lars, please wipe your nose. Tyson. Did you eat a sticker?”

Tyson grinned and refused to answer.

“Tyson.” Susie put on her best “in-charge” voice. “Did. You. Eat. A. Sticker?”

Tyson folded his arms over his chest and nodded.

Knowing she had very little power in the way of discipline, but also knowing she couldn’t let this go completely, Susie looked at the rest of the classroom. “Are stickers food?”

“No, Miss Susie,” the rest of the room chirped unannouncedly.

“What happens when we put things in our bodies that aren’t food?”

“We get tummy aches,” Avery said matter-of-factly.

Susie bit back a smile. “That’s correct, Avery. Thank you.” Looking back down at Tyson, Susie noticed with satisfaction that he wasn’t quite as triumphant as he had been a moment before. “Tyson. I believe you’re done with your crafting today. Please go sit in the chair in the corner.”

“But!” he argued.

Susie put up her hand. “You haven’t been following the rules, and you know that when we don’t follow the rules we get how many chances?”

Tyson's jaw set.

"How many chances, Tyson?"

"Three," he ground out.

"Very good," Susie said with a firm nod. "You've already had three warnings. Now you have to stop doing our craft. I'll bag up the rest of your things, and you can take them home to finish."

Tyson's head hung low as he shuffled at the pace of an eighty-year-old to the chair all by itself at the front of the classroom.

Susie hated to have to do it, but she needed Tyson to learn who was in charge. The boy needed attention, but was trying to gain it the wrong way. He liked to lash out, he had no discipline, and he hated to follow the rules.

He was young, only five years old, but Susie knew he was intelligent enough to follow the rules of her preschool classroom, and the daycare hours during the afternoon, which he stuck around for.

The poor kid needed some friends, but his actions during class meant that no one wanted to play with him during recess. Susie's heart pinched a little, and she wondered, not for the first time, if there was something she could do to help. But Tyson wasn't her child, and her hands were tied with certain rules as his teacher and daycare provider.

"Tyson, when you're ready to follow the rules, we'll be happy to have you sit back at your table," Susie announced, hoping to encourage his cooperation.

But when the little boy began kicking his chair leg and folded his arms over his chest in defiance, she knew it would be awhile.

Some days she wondered why she'd chosen this job. Her major in early childhood education meant she could have taught anywhere she wanted, but instead she'd ended up as the only preschool and daycare provider in a tiny town on the Oregon Coast.

It was great for business, but hard on her social life, what little there might have been. Susie had no delusions of having a family of her own, though she knew many women in their upper twenties were just getting started with marriage and babies. But some extra time with friends would be nice, a massage once in a while, maybe? What she wouldn't be looking for was a date.

A pair of gray eyes popped into her head, but Susie quickly shoved them away. If she ever planned to have a romantic relationship, which she didn't, it would absolutely *not* be the one guy in town who had caught her attention several years ago upon his arrival.

Elliott Brown was cute, charming, tall, and strong. An ex-military man and the older brother of Susie's best friend, he was part owner of the hardware store in town, sharing the job with his brother Theodore. The whole Brown family were wonderful people and the two single men had turned plenty of heads when they'd come to stay.

And therein lay the problem. He was the *only* man to catch Susie's eye, but *every* woman caught Elliott's eye. Little

Tyson, in the corner, was ornery with every one in his life, but Elliott was at the complete opposite of the spectrum. He was so friendly that there wasn't a woman in town he hadn't flirted with and made blush.

No...if Susie could dream of a normal life, she wouldn't want to be one of hundreds, she would want to be chosen, picked out from the crowd and treated differently than the masses of women who swooned at his feet. Something Elliott Brown wasn't keen on doing for anyone.

* * *

Elliott pressed the last button on the keypad and waited to hear the lock engage. Satisfied, he turned and walked to his truck. He grinned a little at the large, black monstrosity. He didn't spend his money very frivolously, but this truck had definitely been a splurge.

It came in handy for work at times, but the extra dark windows, heated and cooled seats and hand trimmed leather had nothing to do with hauling a load to someone's house. It was luxury, pure and simple.

He climbed into the driver's seat and pressed the button to start the engine, enjoying the deep sound the diesel engine made as it revved to life. Pulling out of the parking lot, he headed home, grimacing as a few snowflakes went through his headlights.

Elliott hated the cold.

The holidays were fine. He enjoyed Christmas as much as anybody, but it was still a week away from Thanksgiving, and it was threatening to bring down the white stuff on them? No thanks.

“At least it won’t stick,” he grumbled under his breath. One of the perks of living on the Oregon Coast was the fact that while they got cold and had moisture, it rarely stuck around very long. “Yeah...” he continued to his empty cab. “Because ice is so much better than snow.”

Okay...maybe the coast had less desirable traits as well.

Parking in the driveway, Elliott walked inside, sniffing the air. “Dude!” he shouted to his older brother who should have already been home. “No dinner?”

Thumping from upstairs went past Elliott’s head and started to come down the stairs. “What are you shouting about?” Theo asked, his brows pulled together.

Elliott tossed his keys in the bowl at the entryway table. “I’m starving.”

“Okay?”

Elliott gave him a disbelieving look. “You were home first. You should have dinner ready.”

Theo scowled and folded his arms over his chest. “It’s your night.”

“But I ended up closing,” Elliott argued, he couldn’t quite contain his grin. He knew the argument would drive Theo crazy. Just once, Elliott was going to get his brother to smile

instead of frown. It had been years since Theo had lightened up enough to joke or tease.

When the Brown family had come to Tidepool Cove, the three siblings had been looking for an escape. Their younger sister Charlotte had lost her fiance, Beckett, in the line of duty, and it had broken her. She'd quit her job in Seattle and crashed, both physically and emotionally.

Beckett had been Theo and Elliott's best friend, and they'd rallied around their sister. Grasping the first small town they'd come across, Theo and Elliott had bought out the hardware store, then took on a mortgage and brought their sister in, giving her a safe place to heal and figure out what she was going to do moving forward.

Beckett's death, however, hadn't only hurt Charlotte. The three men had served together, and when they'd retired, Theo had been a different man. His once-charming smile had been buried with Beck, and Theo had consumed himself in exercise and work, never bothering to look up and try to engage friendships or any kind of social life.

Last year, they'd managed to marry their sister off to a widowed dentist, and she was now living her best life as a mother and wife, happier than Elliott had ever seen her.

Which left him stuck with Mr. Grumpy, and Elliott was determined not to let their now-empty house become a cemetery for good times.

If Theo wouldn't smile, Elliott would smile enough for the two of them.

“Doesn’t matter,” Theo continued. “Your night. You cook.”

Elliott grinned wider and batted his eyelashes. “Aren’t you worried about my feet? Maybe I need to sit for a while. I’ve been on my feet for too long! Mr. Wilson came in tonight, and you know how he gets when you let him talk about his rheumatism.”

Theo rolled his eyes, a grand show of emotion for him. “It’s your turn.”

Elliott huffed. “Fine. We’re having fish and chips.”

Theo’s lip twitched, and Elliott hid his grin. Theo hated fish, which was awesome since they lived on the coast. There was more fish available than about anything else in their tiny grocery store.

“I’m cooking. I choose,” Elliott declared. He marched to the kitchen, chuckling when he heard Theo muttering under his breath. Fifteen minutes later, Elliott brought his brother a warm burrito and a bowl of salsa.

Theo looked up from the moving he was watching. “I thought you were making fish.”

Elliott shrugged. “Eh...didn’t feel like working that hard.”

Theo took the plate, and the boys grew quiet while they ate. Not that that was different than any other time in the house. Without Charlotte and all her dogs around, the cooking had become barely edible and the noise had become nonexistent.

It almost made Elliott wish for a new batch of pups, though his ankles gave a phantom ache in response. Those little biters had been cute, but the mess and early mornings had given both men something to complain about.

“Are you opening tomorrow?” Elliott asked.

Theo huffed. “No. Clarence is.”

Elliott put his feet up on the coffee table. “Well, I’m off tomorrow and then half of next week for Thanksgiving, so I’m thinking I’ll sleep in.”

“We’re all working Black Friday,” Theo responded, stuffing another large bite in his mouth.

“True.” Elliott made a face. “I hate Black Friday.”

Theo shrugged. “It’s good business.”

“Also true.” Elliott sighed and scrubbed his hands down his face. “What did you get Wyatt for his birthday?”

Theo froze.

“You forgot,” Elliott said with a laugh. “Nice.” Wyatt’s birthday was at the beginning of December, and as their new nephew, Elliott felt a need to do something epic. “I’m guessing Charlotte will veto any firearms.”

Theo gave Elliott a withering look.

Elliott put his hands in the air. “I didn’t say you couldn’t do it. Just don’t ask permission first.”

Theo rolled his eyes again. “I’m not that out of touch.”

“When was the last time you played a board game with him?” Elliott challenged.

“We played Chutes and Ladders last week.”

“Oh.” Elliott made a face. “Uh...”

With a pointedly triumphant look, Theo stood and took his plate back to the kitchen.

“I cooked, you clean!” Elliott shouted after him.

“You didn’t cook, you reheated.”

“Same dif.” Another grunt was all Elliott got in response. He stared at his plate. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but something about their life bothered Elliott. Maybe he was bored, maybe he was lonely, maybe he was...heck, he didn’t know. But nothing seemed to capture his attention any more.

The store was doing well. He still joked and poked fun at his brother when given the chance. Charlotte, Wyatt and Noah were doing great. Plus, the holidays were coming up which meant good food and family time.

So why was Elliott feeling so dissatisfied?

“Elli.”

Elliott glared at his brother. He hated that nickname. It sounded like a girl. “What?”

“Are any of your girlfriends available to work in the evenings for us during December?”

Elliott made a face. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a girlfriend. And why do we need a woman to work nights?”

Theo made a face. “Don’t you ever read your emails?”

“Apparently not the right one.”

“We’re hosting the Santa pictures this year.”

“So?”

Theo growled. “So, Clarence will be dressing up as Santa starting on Black Friday, but we need a woman to play Mrs. Clause.”

Elliott waved his hand in dismissal. “Have Charlotte do it.”

“Charlotte has a kid,” Theo ground out. “She can’t do it.”

“I don’t know why you think I can help.”

“Because you’ve dated every woman in town,” Theo shot back.

“Not the ones over eighty!” Elliott shouted.

“Whatever.” Theo shook his head and walked away. “I’ll figure it out.”

Elliott frowned and scratched the back of his head. So he’d gone on a few dates. Why did Theo make it sound like Elliott would date anything in a skirt? Grumbling about stupid brothers, Elliott stormed to the kitchen to drop his plate in the sink, then went upstairs. He *wished* he dated anything in a skirt. Then maybe he wouldn’t be stuck in this house with a jerk of a brother with nothing to do but watch television all evening.

The idea of having a girlfriend actually appealed to Elliott a little, but he had no idea who he’d even begin to pursue. There weren’t that many girls in town his age and he’d taken

several of them on dates already. They were nice, but none had appealed to him beyond friendship. He wanted something to... *zing*.

“Forget it,” he snapped. “It’s not worth the hassle.” He’d simply have to find something else to occupy his time. Maybe he’d try out deep sea fishing or some other hobby he had access to from the coastline. Anything had to be better than sitting around this house for yet another torturous dinner with Theo.

CHAPTER TWO

I *need a vacation.*

Susie tried to count in her head how long it had been since she'd had time off from her job, but the number began going so high she was embarrassed to continue. *At least Thanksgiving is almost here.*

The week of Thanksgiving was always a little lighter since school, and jobs were shut down, leaving her with fewer children to handle. The preschool only ran two days that week, and the after school daycare went through Wednesday, leaving her plenty of time to sleep in and eat until she had to roll herself around her small house.

It was going to be glorious.

“Thank you, Avery,” Susie said, taking the glue box from the little girl. Susie put it on the shelf and spun around. “Leave your pictures on your tables so they can dry, and let’s go outside to play for a few minutes.”

Excited shouts met her ears, and Susie smiled. This was part of what she loved about her job. The smiles, the laughter, the sweet children getting along so well. Her eyes strayed to

Tyson, who was poking his neighbor with a crayon. *Well... almost getting along so well.*

She walked over quickly and took the crayon. “Thank you, Tyson. I appreciate you helping me pack these up.” Snapping the lid on the crayon container, Susie took it and began gathering the ones from the other tables as well before putting them on the shelf next to the glue box.

Heading to the outside door, Susie waited patiently. “Line up, please!”

The sound of stamping feet and exclamations of excitement filled the room as the kids hurried to be the first in line.

“No pushing, please,” Susie called out, trying to be heard over the noise. She waited...and waited...and waited. Finally, the children had calmed down, and Susie let out the breath she was holding.

Using her back, she pushed open the door and winced at the cold wind. “Oh man...hold up.” She closed the door again. “It’s beautiful and bright outside, but did anyone else feel the temperature?”

“Yes, Miss Susie!” most of the classroom shouted.

“What did I forget?”

“Our coats!” a couple of voices replied.

Susie smiled. “That’s right. It’s almost Thanksgiving! We need our coats. Please put on your coat and gloves and then line up again.”

All the kids scrambled to obey...all except Tyson.

Susie frowned. "Tyson," she said firmly. "Would you please go get your coat?"

Tyson scowled. "I don't wanna."

"I realize that," Susie said with forced calm. Her patience level for dealing with the obstinate boy was dwindling today. The holiday break would be a welcome distraction. "But it's too cold to go outside without one. Please get yours anyway."

Tyson didn't budge, instead staring at his feet and twisting his toe against the carpet.

"Tyson, if you don't get your coat, you can't go outside," Susie tried one last time. She prayed he'd cooperate. She didn't want to stay inside with him, or find one of her aids to help out. Right now they were all doing prep work, and Susie preferred to keep them there until the daycare kids came in the afternoon. It saved her a ton of time by having them get the cutting and food prep done during the morning hours.

Stomping to the coat closet, Tyson grabbed a large brown coat and threw his arms inside.

Susie's eyes widened when she realized the coat was adult sized and completely dwarfed the small child. There were holes in the collar, and it looked like it hadn't been washed in years. *How did I not notice that when he arrived this morning?*

Her heart wrenched. Things might be harder at Tyson's home than she had originally thought.

"Okay, everybody," Susie said, calling attention to her so the children wouldn't say anything to embarrass Tyson. "Here

we go.” She pushed the door open again, and let the children run outside. Tyson was dead last, and Susie stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you for getting your coat,” she whispered. “Would you like me to roll up the sleeves so you can play?”

Tyson gave her a wary look, but nodded.

Squatting, Susie did her best to fold back the arms so his tiny hands were free in order to be useful. When she was done, he ran off, not saying a word, and Susie didn’t bother to correct him.

Standing, she watched him sadly, her mind running through what she could do to help his situation. Buying the young boy a coat was easy enough, but somehow she didn’t think that Adam, Tyson’s father, was going to be alright with her charity.

But Christmas is coming...

She shivered, having left her own coat inside and rubbed the goosebumps on her arms. Her mind jumped around as she tried to pin down ideas of how she could use the holiday season to help her charge.

“MISS SUSIE!”

Her head jerked toward the shout. While her mind wandered, a few of the children had gathered at the far corner of the yard. Sighing, she began trudging in that direction, pumping her arms to get her blood going. “Yes, Aiden...?” Her voice trailed off before she screeched, “Tyson! What are you doing?”

Tyson was halfway under a hole in the wire fence line.

He grunted and shoved some more, but his coat was keeping him from fully escaping, and Susie knew a moment of gratitude that it was so large.

“Everybody go back by the door,” Susie immediately ordered, not bothering to make sure the children obeyed. She dropped to her knees. “Tyson,” she breathed. “Come back this way, sweetheart. You can’t climb out the fence.”

“I want to go home,” the young boy ground out, pushing to the point that his coat tore.

Susie grabbed a hold of his legs. “Your dad’s at work,” Susie said, her voice shaking in her frustration and concern. “And you’re tearing your coat. I know you don’t want to spend all winter in a torn coat. Please hold still so I can help you.”

Tyson shouted a few words that Susie was sure he didn’t come by in church, and she bit her lip to keep from reprimanding him. This boy was a menace, but he also needed help.

“Hold still,” Susie commanded tightly. She spun and looked toward the children. “Avery!”

Avery came running, her blonde hair flowing behind her.

“Please go into the front room and ask Miss Tanya to come here,” Susie said in a carefully controlled tone.

“Is he going to be alright?” Avery whispered, though the sound wasn’t nearly as quiet as she probably meant it to be.

“He’s going to be fine,” Susie assured the young girl. “But I need a little help. Please get Miss Tanya.” When Avery ran off, Susie looked back at the situation. There wasn’t anything for it. The coat was twisted so hard, and the squirming little boy was stuck in a way that Susie knew she’d have to cut the fence.

She kept a basic tool kit in the storage room for emergencies and it luckily included wire cutters, but she’d never planned to use them quite like this. Sighing, Susie patted Tyson’s knee. “Hang tight, buddy. We’ll have you out of there in no time.”

His responding curse had her praying for deliverance. Whether her own or the boy’s, she wasn’t sure at this point.

* * *

Elliott grunted as he threw another back of peat moss into the back of the truck. “That oughtta do it, Mrs. Claybell.” Lifting the tailgate, Elliott slapped the top and sauntered to the woman’s open window. “You sure you have someone to help unload it at home?”

White hair bobbed as Mrs. Claybell nodded. “My neighbor has a teenage boy. He helps me with the heavy stuff.”

“Great.” Elliott smiled and stepped back while the engine turned over. “Good luck!” *Why the heck someone would want to start prepping their garden before Christmas is beyond me, but hey! Not my garden, not my problem.*

Chuckling under his breath, he jumped up the front steps to the hardware store and went inside. The store was filled with rows and rows of tools, but since their town was so small, they kept a section for outdoor supplies, such as the peat moss that Mrs. Claybell had ordered and come to pick up. It usually didn't get much traction during the winter, but apparently the older woman wasn't about to let snow and ice slow down her hobby.

Rubbing his shoulder, Elliott shifted the muscle to ease the ache. He needed to get back in the gym...or at least order a few weights. Apparently, his work out regime wasn't quite cutting it.

“Elli!”

Elliott scowled at his brother who was standing at the front desk.

Theo waved the store phone. “It's Charlotte. I need you to take it.”

Elliott frowned. “Why can't you?”

Theo pointed to the corner of the shop where a half set stage was starting to look very Christmassy. “I need to finish the tree and Santa throne set up.” He hesitated before handing the phone to Elliott. “Did you ever get a woman to play Mrs. Clause?”

“No. Why was that my job?”

Theo grumbled and shoved the phone at him. “Just take this.”

Elliott took the phone and brought it to his ear. “Hello, sister of mine. How can your favorite brother help you?”

“Oh, good,” Charlotte gushed. “I’m so glad you’re available.”

Shoot. Elliott had been teasing when he answered the phone, and with one little response, he knew he was going to regret whatever was about to come next. Dang sisters, anyway. “What’s up, Buttercup?”

Charlotte sighed. “Do you remember Susie? My friend who runs the preschool?”

Elliott wracked his brain. “Uh...maybe? Short? Dark hair?” If it was the same woman, she was a cute little thing. Button nose and a small smattering of freckles against soft pale skin. She was kind of quiet, and Elliott had a vague recollection of teasing her until her cheeks were so red she looked like she was ready to pass out. Charlotte had been ticked. “That her?”

“That’s her,” Charlotte responded. “I’m so glad you remember her. She needs help.”

“With?” Elliott shifted the phone against his shoulder and grabbed a pencil and paper.

“It’s a long story, but she had to cut her fence today to free a boy who was crawling underneath.”

Elliott froze. “Say, what?”

Another long sigh. “Yeah...you’ll have to ask her the story. It’s a mess. The poor kid really needs help. Anyway, she needs

to get that fence fixed pronto, and I'm hoping you can go help her get it fixed, or at a minimum, put up a temporary solution."

Elliott rubbed a hand through his hair. "But it's Thanksgiving this week. Can't it wait?"

"Elli, she has children in that backyard. It's dangerous."

"Right." He didn't bother correcting her about the nickname. Charlotte had never listened anyway, and she was a girl, so he couldn't punch her like he would Theo.

"Will you at least go look at it?" Charlotte asked. "Maybe it only needs a small fix? The less money it's going to cost her, the better."

"Right," he repeated. His shoulders slumped. "Of course I can go look. Do you want me to set up an appointment? Or just go over?"

"Um..." Charlotte hummed. "You can probably just go over. The sooner the better. I'll send her a text to let her know you'll be by."

Elliott nodded. "Right. I'm at the shop, so I'm not sure when it'll be." He eyed Theo who was draping tinsel on the Christmas tree.

"That's fine. I'm just glad you can go. I was afraid we wouldn't be able to help her until after Thanksgiving, so this is much better."

"Right." He was starting to sound like a broken record. He wasn't thrilled about having to go help repair a broken fence. After all, those wires were a pain in the backside, but if Susie was Charlotte's friend, then Elliott would do what he could.

Besides...maybe it would keep him out of the whole Santa Clause/Mrs. Clause thing, along with Theo's demands about Elliott's non-existent girlfriends playing the part.

After a couple more pleasantries, he hung up with his sister and tapped the pencil on the counter. "Theo?"

"Yep?" Theo didn't bother turning around.

"Charlotte needs me to go fix a fence in her friend's backyard."

Theo turned, frowning. "Now?"

Elliott shrugged. "Whenever we can spare me. It's Susie. Do you remember her? She runs the preschool."

Theo huffed. "Yeah. I guess she can't exactly have kids running loose back there."

Elliott nodded. "So...should I go now?" He began edging toward the back to grab his keys.

"Call one of your girlfriends first." Theo grunted.

Elliott pinched his lips together. "Theo, seriously. Stop."

Theo glared. "I am serious. We need someone. The pictures start in just a couple of days."

"Then call someone."

"I don't have anyone to call."

Elliott looked at the ceiling and prayed for patience. "I don't either. I don't have any *girlfriends* as you like to claim, and I doubt any of the girls I've taken on dates are looking to dress up like an old, fat lady with a white bun!"

Theo's brows pushed further together.

"Why not ask Mrs. Claybell?" Elliott threw out as he marched into the back to grab his keys.

"Because it wouldn't be right to ask her to stand for that many hours!" Theo shouted.

Elliott rolled his eyes and grabbed his coat and keys. Putting a list together in his head, he snatched a couple of supplies he would more than likely need to repair the fence. Hopefully, they wouldn't have to replace the whole panel. A few ties should at least get her through the weekend, if not longer. With the retail season about to come to a peak, that was probably all he could manage for now. If the fence was worse than he thought, then he'd have to set up a time later for something more permanent.

For now, he'd go play hero to a shy, quiet woman who blushed easily and would at least provide a few minutes of entertainment before he had to go back to working with Grumpy Pants Theo. This just might be the highlight of Elliott's day...so why did that thought make him so depressed?

CHAPTER THREE

“**B**ye!” Susie waved as her second to last child went home. The breeze was cutting right through her clothes, and the goosebumps from earlier were popping up all over her body.

Shivering, she turned and came back inside, looking at the one lone child left. Why did it have to be Tyson? “Hey, Buddy,” Susie said. “Do you know if your dad is working late?”

Tyson shrugged and continued to cut up the paper he was holding. It was making a massive mess, but Susie didn’t even care. He was quiet and occupied, and that would be enough for now. She could always vacuum the debris later.

Adam, however, was supposed to have picked Tyson up a half hour ago, and yet the little boy was still here. They’d called Mr. Cole when Tyson had gotten stuck, but as soon as the man had heard that Tyson wasn’t hurt, he’d said it was fine and hung up to get back to work.

Susie glanced at the wall clock one more time. She really wanted to clean up and get home, but she couldn’t do it until the children were all home.

“Susie?” Tanya poked her head in the room, and her eyebrows shot up. “Oh. I didn’t realize anyone was still here.”

Susie kept her smile placid. “Yeah. Tyson’s going to help me set up for Christmas while we wait for his father.” She turned to the boy in question. “Right, Tyson?”

He shrugged, his eyes glued on the paper.

Susie’s gut was a mixture of despair, regret and frustration. That poor little boy needed help, but what was she supposed to do when he shut her down at every turn?

“Leave the door open, would ya?” Susie said to Tanya, who propped it open with a wedge. Susie walked to her cupboards and began pulling down storage containers full of decorations.

If she wanted any chance of getting home at a decent hour, then she needed to get started on this now. Of course, she could always come back over Thanksgiving break and work... She squished her lips to the side, then shook her head. No, she wanted to veg in front of the television watching Christmas romances without even thinking about children. She definitely didn’t get enough breaks to be willing to come work over her holiday.

“Perfect!” Susie declared, opening the first tub. “I found the tree. Want to help me set it up?”

Before Tyson could respond, heavy boots stomped down the hall, and Susie looked up in anticipation. *Finally*. Adam was here to take Tyson home. The broad shoulders, shaggy

dark blonde hair and playful smirk that appeared in the doorway, however, definitely didn't belong to Mr. Cole.

“Hey, Susie!” Elliott Brown boomed. His personality had always been larger than life, and Susie felt herself blush to the very tips of her toes at his presence.

Something about him set her on edge, and she couldn't decide if it was good or bad. Heat immediately infused her cheeks, and her mouth opened and closed several times before she was able to find her voice. “What are you doing here?”

She almost slapped her hands over her mouth. That wasn't what she'd planned to say, though it had been what she was thinking. Actually...now that she thought about it, she was actually surprised he knew her name. Elliott was as friendly as friendly came, but he had never paid any attention to her, other than a few random flirtatious moments that he gave to every woman who crossed his path.

Elliott laughed, the sound ringing through the room. “Charlotte called.”

That heat grew stronger. Oooh, Susie was going to kill her friend. One little lunch time conversation where Susie complained about their recess mishap and Charlotte sent the cavalry.

It was wonderful and yet terribly frustrating.

“I heard you have a hole in your fence.” Elliott's head tilted to the side, and he looked away from Susie.

Turning, she realized he was watching Tyson, who kept eyeing Elliott from the corner of his vision.

“What’s up, Big Guy?” Elliott asked, walking in and offering his knuckles to the boy.

Tyson scowled and folded his arms into his armpits.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” Elliott nodded sagely and pursed his lips. “Miss Susie?” He looked over at her after calling her name. “You know what? I was just about to tell you that I’d need your help on that fence, but I think I found a helper.”

“You did?” Susie frowned, and panic began to grow. That hole had come because of Tyson’s actions to begin with. Taking him out to help fix it would be a disaster! “I don’t think —”

Tyson straightened, and Susie snapped her mouth closed. “You want my help?”

Susie’s eyes widened. There was no mistaking the interest in the boy’s tone. It was a sound she’d never heard before, and she’d heard plenty from Tyson.

“Of course!” Elliott boomed. “Look at you!” He waved a hand at all the paper pieces littering the floor. “It’s easy to see that you’re one heck of a handyman. Not everyone can create confetti in that many shapes and sizes. It takes extreme talent.”

Susie’s knees almost buckled when she watched Tyson’s cheeks turn pink. What in the world was Elliott doing? He had to be some kind of magician. She’d spent a couple of years with Tyson and he still seemed to hate her, but two minutes in Elliott’s company and the boy was beginning to look enamored.

“Whattya say? Want to come out and put a fence back together?”

Tyson began to smile, but seemed to come to himself and forced another frown, slumping in his seat. “I have to wait for my dad.”

“Miss Susie?” Elliott pressed. “Is it alright if he comes into the backyard with me?”

“I...” She swallowed hard, feeling completely unprepared for what was unfolding in front of her. “Of course.” She cleared her throat. “Just leave the door open so I can see you two.”

Elliott turned back to Tyson and raised his eyebrows. “Sounds like we got the okay. Come on, Big Guy. My dad always said, ‘daylight’s wasting.’”

“What does that mean?” Tyson asked, eagerly jumping to his feet and running after Elliott’s long strides.

“Your coat!” Susie called out before Tyson could follow Elliott into the backyard.

Tyson looked back and scowled, but Elliott laughed. “She’s right. It’s always better to be warm. Go ahead and grab it.” He winked at Susie and she tried to force the heat in her cheeks to go away, but it was as stubborn as Tyson.

Tyson dragged his feet to the coat hanger and grabbed the oversized coat, jerking his arms inside.

Susie winced at the tear in the back, hating what that was going to mean for a single dad. The coat meant things were

difficult already in the Cole house... Hopefully, this didn't make the burden worse.

“Awesome coat!” Elliott told Tyson as he walked closer. “I have one just like it.”

Tyson's footsteps slowly grew faster, and he was practically bouncing by the time he got back to Elliott. “Really?”

Elliott nodded. “Yep. I even have a tear in mine as well. Those coats last forever and are so warm. It's a great choice.”

Susie slowly shook her head as she watched the two march outside, and Tyson pointed to the hole. She wondered if he would tell Elliott he had been the one caught, or if Elliott had figured it out.

Not that it really mattered. This was the first time she'd seen the boy perk up...ever. Perhaps she could handle having Elliott around if he had this effect on Tyson. Heaven knew the boy needed all the help he was going to get.

* * *

Elliott was talking a mile a minute, and he was sure the little boy...Tyson, he thought it was...didn't understand a word he was saying. But those wide eyes were watching Elliott with a heavy seriousness that Elliott found hilarious and kind of sad.

From his size, the kid couldn't be very old, but he was determined to act like he was.

“We’re just gonna loop this here...” Elliott wrapped a twist tie around two pieces of the fence. “And here.” He brought the rest of the plastic through. “Then we’ll tighten it.” He showed Tyson how they could hold the sides together for a quick temporary fix.

The whole panel needed to be replaced. He’d have to apologize to Susie. *Susie*...The petite woman had completely caught Elliott off guard. The vague recollection he had in his memories of her from Charlotte’s wedding last year were nothing compared to the real thing.

Yes, she was short, especially compared to his six-foot-plus frame, but she had curves in all the right places, silky smooth looking skin and slightly wild, nearly black waves that made her look like some kind of fairy or mythical woodland creature.

Elliott hadn’t been prepared for his gut to flip at the sight of her, or for his fingers to twitch with a desire to touch when that blush...which he *had* remembered...came rushing to her cheeks.

In fact, it was his current state of thinking about the very attractive teacher that had him saying all sorts of stupid stuff to the kid in front of him.

“I’ll have to come back and fix this with the real fencing later,” Elliott muttered with one last jerk on the zip ties. “But this will hold for now.” He sighed and rested back on his heels, ruffling the hair of the boy. “We don’t want any of you guys escaping, right?”

Tyson shrugged.

Elliott eyed the huge coat, particularly the rip in the back. If he had to guess, he'd say that the quiet boy was the one who had caused the broken fence in the first place.

It was clear that Susie had her hands full with the little guy. The stubborn set of Tyson's jaw and the way he glared at everyone told Elliott this kid had it a bit rough, and Elliott grew curious about the child's story.

No one this young was this angry for no good reason.

"Tyson!"

Both heads whipped toward the building. Susie was standing in the doorway, rubbing her arms. "Your dad's here."

Tyson scowled, and Elliott's interest grew. "Hey! Your dad's here! That's great. We were just finishing, so it's perfect timing." Standing, Elliott wiped the dirt off his knees and put a hand on Tyson's head. "Good work. You're gonna make one heck of a handyman someday."

Tyson gave Elliott a careful smile, but the small show of emotion felt oddly like a victory.

The sun was starting to go down, and the light from the classroom seemed brighter than before as they walked together. Christmas music filtered through the doorway, and he grinned. Susie must have been listening while she was working.

His eyes darted around the room as they approached, noting all the decorations that had gone up while he'd been working outside. Man...she worked fast. A tree was up in the corner, though there were no ornaments on it yet. Snowflakes

hung across half the ceiling and a few were taped to the window.

A large cardboard cutout of Santa Claus stood off to one side, with another cutout of the Grinch standing only a few feet away, making Elliott chuckle.

But it was when his eyes went to the back of the room by the door that he came to a stuttering stop. A man, who had to be Tyson's dad, had Susie cornered and she looked like she was ready to puke all over the guy's boots.

A ladder stood to her left, while the man stood in front of her. Susie was slowly inching to the right, but the man kept countering her steps, which ticked Elliott off, though he wasn't sure why. The ladder caught Elliott's attention, and his eyes wandered upward where he quickly realized what Susie had been doing when the man had blocked her in.

"Mr. Cole," Susie said, her voice soft.

"Adam," the guy corrected.

Not a chance. Without another thought, Elliott marched across the room, cut into the small space where Susie was, wrapped an arm around her waist, and brought his head down to hers, only to have the world explode with color.

A small squeak escaped Susie when Elliott jerked their mouths together, but he held on, using his free hand to grip the back of her head and hold her in place. Electric shocks burst through his chest, and his skin felt like it was on fire. Her lips were soft, and when he breathed in, the sweet smell of citrus nearly had him rolling his eyes in the back of his head.

He adjusted his grip, ready to deepen the kiss when her hand landed on his chest, sending a heavy shock straight through his sternum. Jerking back, Elliott tried to keep the surprise from his face as he sucked in a deep breath.

Susie's eyes were so wide he could see the white on all sides, and Elliott scrambled to cover his behavior. "I thought you were saving the mistletoe for later," he said with a grin, using his head to jerk toward the ceiling.

Susie's eyes went up, and the color began to come back to her face. "Oh...um..."

Elliott forced a chuckle, though there was nothing funny about the situation, and leaned in to kiss her forehead. "That's okay. You know I'll be happy to test it out later as well." A throat cleared, and Elliott made a point of turning slowly to face the other man. "Oh, hey, sorry." He grinned, keeping one hand around Susie's waist, he reached out the other. "Elliott Brown. You must be Tyson's dad."

Mr. Cole huffed and shook Elliott's hand. "Adam Cole."

Elliott nodded. The guy's hands spoke of hard work, which Elliott could respect, but it had been clear he wasn't getting the message that Susie wasn't interested by the way she'd been trying to put distance between them. "You've got a great son. He helped me repair a hole in the fence just a few minutes ago. He's quite the worker."

Mr. Cole looked sheepish and turned to look at Tyson who was still standing in the doorway. "Yeah? That right? Tyson, did you help repair the fence you broke?"

Elliott's suspicions came to a rest with that statement.

Tyson shrugged.

"He's a regular handyman," Elliott added.

Tyson started to smile, but it disappeared quickly and Elliott's stomach hurt at the loss.

Mr. Cole looked back at Elliott and Susie. He cleared his throat again. "I didn't realize you were dating anyone...sorry about that." He stepped back farther. "Come on, Ty. We need to cook dinner."

Tyson's shoulders fell, but he didn't argue as he followed his dad through the classroom.

"Have a good Thanksgiving," Susie offered, though her quiet voice couldn't have been heard through the doorway. As soon as the door closed, she jumped out of Elliott's arms, and he had to clench his hand to keep from reaching for her again. Any expectation that she'd felt the earth shatter beneath her feet the same way he had was broken when she pushed his chest and shouted, "What do you think you're doing?"

Elliott pinned her hands against his chest and grinned. This little bit of fire actually made her even more attractive, which he hadn't expected. "Saving you, of course."

"I could have handled that myself," she said, her jaw tight.

"Maybe so," Elliott said, then leaned in. "But if I left it to you, you would never have found out."

Susie leaned back, but to his surprise she didn't try to pull her hands away. "Found out what?"

He raised a challenging eyebrow and fought the urge to kiss her again. “You’d have never found out just how much you like kissing me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Susie felt like there wasn't any oxygen left in the room. Her head was spinning and she was barely keeping her knees locked enough to stay upright, but there was absolutely no way she could let Elliott know just what he was doing to her.

This too-handsome man had every woman within reach wrapped around his little finger, and Susie refused to be another number in his little black book. Yes, Mr. Cole had been a little aggressive...okay...he'd made her *extremely* uncomfortable, and Elliott's little show under the mistletoe had been a very convenient way of getting Adam to back off.

It was a difficult situation that Susie hadn't known quite how to handle. She didn't want to hurt Adam's feelings. The Coles were good people. Adam worked hard, and she knew he was lonely since Amy passed away. Tyson was a handful, but the trouble she had with him had no bearing on her lack of attraction to the father.

It wouldn't matter if Tyson wasn't one of her children, Susie still wouldn't want to date Adam. He did nothing for her. She wasn't excited to see him. No butterflies erupted in her stomach, she didn't feel overheated or anxious to catch a

glimpse of his face. Nothing. Nada. There were absolutely no romantic stirrings in her blood that made her want to accept Adam's invitation. Susie had no plans to marry, but if she did, there would need to be more there than the simple friendship she felt for Adam.

Unfortunately, she thought with a grimace, those feelings are all too happy to be active when Elliott stomped in.

Susie was starting to believe that her brain and common sense were just as broken as her body. Why the heck would she be attracted to the town playboy instead of the good, steady worker? Elliott's chuckle brought her out of her wandering thoughts, and Susie's scowl deepened. He was looking deliciously smug, and rather than kiss the look off of him, Susie settled for punching his shoulder again. "I didn't say I enjoyed it."

"You didn't have to," Elliott stated boldly. "It's written all over your face, not to mention the fact that you melted completely in my arms."

She rolled her eyes, wishing she had a good rebuttal. "I should never have been in your arms to begin with. You had no right to come in and kiss me, thereby lying to Adam that we were a couple."

"I didn't hear you correcting me."

Susie clenched her fists. He had her, and they both knew it. "Thank you for your help," she ground out. "Now you may go, and we never have to see each other again."

Elliott laughed again and walked over, plopping himself in her chair. “I don’t think this is quite that easy, Sue.”

“Susie.” She absolutely would *not* let him call her Sue. Only her father had been allowed that privilege, and he was gone. Elliott narrowed his eyes as if taking her declaration as a challenge. Susie mentally scoffed. *He would.*

“I think you’re forgetting something.”

She fisted her hands on her hips and straightened her spine. It helped to appear taller when confronting an enemy, though her five-foot-three frame was anything but intimidating. “What’s that?”

Elliott’s smirk seemed to be a permanent part of his face. Why did it have to look so good? He studied his nails. “You owe me a favor.”

“What?” Susie sputtered. “I don’t owe you a thing!”

He pointed his finger at her. “I saved you.”

“And I said thank you.”

“And now you’re in my debt.”

“No,” she stated bluntly. “To be in your debt, I would have had to agree to it beforehand.”

“There was no time for that. If I had stopped to consult you, you’d have ended up on a date with *Adam*.” Elliott curled his lip as if the name tasted bad, and Susie paused.

Why would it bother Elliott that Adam had been pressuring her to go out? She barely knew Elliott. Yes, she was best friends with Elliott’s younger sister, but she’d barely spent any

time with the brothers, other than to know that Theo scared the pajebers out of her and Elliott was too flirtatious for his own good. *And the mental health of every woman in town.*

“Still doesn’t change the facts,” Susie said, though she felt as if her argument were losing. “I didn’t agree, so I don’t owe you anything other than a polite thank you.” She gave him a mocking bow. “Thank you, good sir. Your timing was impeccable.”

Elliott stood and rubbed his hands together. “You’re welcome, and I accept your offer of gratitude.”

“Great.” Susie sighed, grateful she’d won. “Now, if you’ll please leave, I have work to do.”

“You can report on Friday at six.” He started to saunter toward the door.

Susie made a face and shook her head. “What are you talking about?” she shouted at his too-broad back.

Elliott paused, spun, then marched back, and Susie scurried away from his looming presence. Why did he have to be so big? His charm would be much easier to fight if he wasn’t so...so...much.

Her backside ran into her desk, and Susie gasped, grasping the edge with both hands to stay upright. Her determination not to show any weakness was melting faster than hot butter in a skillet. Elliott paused just far enough away that she could still breathe, but barely.

“I just realized something,” he said, his voice low and coy.

“What’s that?” Drat her voice for being so breathy, and from the way his smile slowly stretched across his face, Elliott definitely noticed.

He raised an eyebrow and leaned forward, crowding her without ever touching her. “You said my timing was impeccable.”

Susie stood frozen. Was she supposed to respond to that? It wasn’t a question, but yes, his timing had been just right. Slowly, she nodded, feeling as if the other shoe were about to drop.

“What you forgot to say was that my kiss was impeccable.”

Her jaw dropped at his audacity. “You...y-...you...” Susie couldn’t even get out a full word. She couldn’t believe he was teasing her like this. He was brash, pushy and stupidly cocky. Why did he have so many admirers?

Susie braced her spine. *I will not be one of the crowd*, she reminded herself. “I think those voices in your head give you enough compliments without me adding to your ego.”

That slow grin widened. “Girlfriends are expected to feed their boyfriend’s egos.”

“I’m not your girlfriend.” Susie was seeing red. This guy was too much.

“According to Mr. Cole you are.” His gray eyes flared ever so slightly. “And after Friday, every kid in town is going to say something even better.”

“Better?” Susie scoffed. “Are you mentally insane? Nothing you’re saying is making any sense.”

Elliott straightened, still looking far too cocky. “I never knew how much fun it would be,” he mused, scratching at his chin while he studied her.

The words were out before she could think better of them. “How much fun what would be? Driving me insane?”

“Nope.” Elliott winked. “Having a wife.”

* * *

Elliott waited on the balls of his feet. Susie looked like her heart was about to stop, and he wanted to be ready to catch her, especially since that would mean holding her in his arms again.

Geez, she was cute, and *so much fun* to tease.

Kissing her had been jolting, in the best of ways, and he definitely wanted to explore the epic energy churning between them. But it was even more fun to ruffle her feathers along the way and that raging blush on her cheeks gave away how much she enjoyed it, even with all the bluster she was blowing his way.

“Wife,” she wheezed, putting a hand to her chest and breathing like an eighty-year-old smoker. “Elliott Brown, if you don’t explain yourself right now, I’ll...I’ll...”

“Kiss me again?” He offered.

“I’ll *never* kiss you again,” she snarled.

“Oooh, playing hard to get. I like it.” He didn’t mean for his chuckle to be so low, but it helped him play the part of diabolical fiend well. “I accept,” he said for the second time that day. “I’ll explain myself so that you’ll kiss me again.”

“That’s not...I didn’t...” She was gasping for breath again, a fist against her sternum.

“Want me to kiss it better?” Elliott held out his arms and took a step forward with his lips pursed, but her hand landed on his chest with a thud. He’d been teasing, but he really did want to kiss her again...you know...for science. Just to see if they could pull the Earth out of its gravitational orbit again.

“Don’t move.” She took a few deep breaths. “Explain.”

“The hardware store is hosting the Santa Claus pictures this year.”

One dark eyebrow went up.

“I’ve been tasked with finding Mrs. Claus.”

The second eyebrow joined it.

Elliott grinned and lifted his shoulders. “Lucky you!”

“So you want me to be Santa’s wife?”

He shrugged. “More or less...but since I’m playing Santa...and the Coles believe we’re dating...we might as well make the most of it.”

Her hands went to her curvy hips. “And just how do you suppose we make the most of it? Wait!” She followed up her question with a hand in the air. “I don’t think I want to know.”

That hand came to pinch the bridge of her nose as Susie closed her eyes. “This is a nightmare.”

“Hey, now,” Elliott said, pretending to be offended. “I didn’t marry you to have you talk bad about me.”

“We’re not married!” Susie screeched.

“Yet,” Elliott pushed. “Come Friday, it’ll be public knowledge.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Susie yelled. “You sound insane!”

“And you sound like you’re in denial,” Elliott said with a shrug. “Or do you want me to go call Mr. Cole back and tell him it was all one big mistake? Ah...I can blame it on the mistletoe.” Elliott looked over his shoulder with a frown. “Speaking of...why the heck do you have that in a kid’s classroom?”

Susie closed her eyes and shook her head, muttering under her breath. She was cute when she was mad. Like a tiny, angry kitten trying to defend itself. You had to give it credit for courage, but ultimately, it couldn’t do much.

“It’s not mistletoe,” she explained slowly, as if she were speaking to one of her students.

Elliott’s frown deepened. “What?” He looked up again. “I see red berries and green leaves. Mistletoe.”

“It’s holly berries,” Susie explained, waving an arm through the air. “That’s why I was attaching it to the garland. I have the supplies to do it every few feet for a spark of color in the classroom.”

Okay...now he felt like an idiot, but how was he supposed to know the difference? It was still red berries and green leaves. Ergo...mistletoe...ergo...kissing. “I still say my logic is sound.”

“You don’t have any logic,” she grumbled.

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you married me.” Elliott knew it was time to retreat or she’d end up backing out of the deal. He stepped forward, left a quick kiss on her cheek and spun on his heel.

His lips were burning with an amazing heat and it took every ounce of self control he’d earned during his time in the military to not turn around and kiss her senseless again. How he’d overlooked her in all the years they’d been here, he had no idea, but now he’d learned his lesson and the Santa Claus thing was going to be his salvation in keeping her by his side.

“I didn’t marry you!”

“Uh, uh, uh...” Elliott paused in the doorway and held a finger in the air. “Husbands don’t love screechy wives, not to mention, I’m pretty sure Mrs. Claus doesn’t speak that way. You really should practice before Friday.”

“Elliott...” she said, her voice dropping to something heavy and resigned. “Just stop.”

She looked so sad that Elliott felt his protective instincts surge to the forefront, and he almost gave in...but no...he couldn’t. Call him a selfish jerk, but he *knew* she felt this just as much as he did.

His life had become monotonous and boring, and Little Susie Malcolm was the best thing to happen to him since Charlotte got married last year and brought Wyatt into their lives.

He probably seemed crazy to her, but Elliott was far more calculating than anyone gave him credit for, and he planned to use this entire situation to his advantage not only for himself, but for Theo and Susie too.

“No can do, Mrs. Sugar Plum,” he said with a broad smile. “You agreed to this when you didn’t tell Adam that we weren’t dating.” He took another step through the door. “Friday, six, at the hardware store.” Another step back, then he leaned over the threshold, ready to make his escape. “And don’t worry, I plan to take you out to dinner afterwards so that everything’s legit.”

With one last grin, the very grin his last date said was dangerous, Elliott hurried down the hall and out the front doors. If he stayed, he was afraid of two things. One, that Susie would keep arguing with him and he’d run out of ways to keep her logic unstable and two, when he ran out of ideas, he’d simply grab her and kiss her until she agreed.

As pleasant as that would be, he wasn’t quite the monster she wanted to paint him as. Charming? Yes. Persistent? Also yes. Annoying in his persistence? A definite yes. But he’d never truly force a woman to do something she didn’t want to do, so he’d run before Susie could really put her foot down. That didn’t make him a coward. It made him smart.

Grinning to himself and whistling a Christmas tune, he leapt into his truck, revved the engine, and took off back to the store. He wasn't even upset that it was going to be a late night and he was going to spend way too much time convincing Theo to let him play Santa instead of Clarence.

In three days, Susie would be by his side, and she wouldn't be able to run away or pretend that she didn't like him. Every eye of every child in their small town would be watching them with glee as Santa worked his magic not only for their stockings, but on the woman who had finally brought him out of a funk that had been hanging over his head for too long.

This holiday season had just become amazingly interesting.

CHAPTER FIVE

Susie had never spit on someone's grave before, but she was currently ready to kill Elliott just so that she *could* spit on his grave. Then she might dance a little. Just for fun.

Rubbing her temples, she groaned and walked over to her chair, slumping down as if her legs would no longer hold her up. "What. Just. Happened?"

"That was pretty epic."

Susie jerked, then slumped again. "Oh my word, Tanya. Please tell me you didn't hear all that."

Tanya's lips were twitching. "Okay...I won't tell you."

Susie groaned again, rubbing her throbbing forehead. "That man is a menace to society."

"That man is adorable, and you're so lucky you're going out with him."

"I'm not going out with him," Susie argued.

Tanya rolled her eyes. "I'm young, not deaf. I heard him say you were going to dinner Friday after you play Mrs. Claus with him."

Susie pinched her lips together, wondering if Tanya heard anything else. Did she realize the relationship was fake? Had she seen Elliott kiss her? Tanya was sweet, but like most women, she enjoyed a good bit of gossip. If the right information got in her hands, it would be all over town, including making its way to Adam Cole, before Susie could stop it.

Tanya leaned her shoulder against the doorway. “So...how long have you been dating? It sounded like this might be your first dinner, but from the way he was teasing you, it sounds like you’ve been together forever.”

That is a very good question. “Uh...” Susie made a face and looked away. She wasn’t sure she could do this. She didn’t want to lie to everyone, but Tyson came here every day. If Susie told Tanya the truth, Adam would eventually hear about it, and he’d be hurt that didn’t tell him in the first place. *Why, oh, why did Elliott have to jump in like that?*

“Earth to Susie!”

Susie jumped a little when her assistant called her name. “Sorry. Daydreaming.”

“About Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome?” Tanya asked with a mischievous grin.

Susie shook her head. “You’re as bad as he is.”

“Mmm...” Tanya hummed. “Every girl in town has been wishing he would pick them.”

Susie’s stomach sank. “Every girl in town *has* been picked by him.”

Tanya laughed as if it were a joke. “Well, have fun! Playing Santa and Mrs. Claus together ought to be a hoot. I wish I had a boyfriend to do that with.” With a little wave, Tanya walked away, leaving Susie fuming in her anger and frustration.

She threw her head back against her seat, staring at the ceiling. The garland she’d strung from one side to the other had been a beautiful way to bring light and color to her classroom for the holidays, but now it had become witness to one of the greatest kisses in the history of all kisses.

And Susie hated it.

Correction...I should hate it.

And that made her hate it even more.

Her life was ordered and full. She had plenty of children to take care of, a schedule that kept her busy, enough money to live comfortably though not extravagantly, and if she didn’t have much time off...who cared? Nothing in life was perfect.

Except that kiss.

“Ugh.” Susie closed her eyes and swallowed back the desire to throw up. Elliott was going to be the death of her. She just knew it. She’d worked so hard to build a life for herself here. Her parents were gone, she was an only child, and here she’d been accepted.

She’d basically built herself a family. She had Charlotte and darling Wyatt, she had all her students, and she had the quiet ocean. What more could she want?

A good looking man to take you to dinner? Or how about one to pretend to be your boyfriend?

“I definitely *don't* want that,” Susie said out loud, but she couldn't hide the fact that her words were false. A love life was probably the only part of her that was missing, though Susie didn't dwell on it that often. She wasn't allowed to dream of it, not after...

She closed her eyes, sighing deeply. Would it really be that big of a deal to let Elliott treat her to dinner? Or to play Mrs. Claus with the kids for Christmas? That part might even be fun, as long as Elliott chose to behave.

She grinned and shook her head. She had no idea how he was going to pull off Santa Claus. Knowing the dork, he would promise every kid that came through some big fancy toy their parents already said no to.

“They'll love that.” Susie began to stand and then stopped, an idea beginning to flicker in her brain. Her weight landed back in the chair. What if...what if she used this mess to her advantage?

She'd already been wondering if she could help Tyson without doing anything to embarrass the boy and his father. But could she use her position as Mrs. Claus to help? Was there something they could do that would provide Tyson with a few pieces of clothing and a toy or two, all while leaving Adam still feeling in control?

She might not be interested in the man romantically, but that didn't mean she didn't like him as a person. Adam Cole was a good man. Not the man for her, but still, a good man. He

was struggling and it mostly showed through Tyson's behavior, but the boy's coat told Susie they were struggling with more than attention.

Well, that and the fact that Tyson had glommed onto Elliott like a lifeline. She'd never seen the boy take an interest in anyone or anything the way he had Elliott. Of course, it was hard not to be entranced by the larger than life personality that emanated from Elliott. Every word that came from his mouth was flattery, but kids seemed to eat it up, and Tyson needed more than most. None of the kids in town would be fooled by their costumes, but if Santa was being played by the person that Tyson liked? Then he'd be more likely to share his real thoughts about what he wanted and needed for Christmas.

She drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. This fake-dating situation was a disaster in the making, but she was beginning to think that if she played her cards right, she could use it for good.

So she had to spend time with Elliot... It would be worth it if it meant helping Tyson and Adam, right? Elliott wasn't really interested in her, he'd just been his usual flirtatious self and had taken advantage of the situation with Adam to be funny.

Goodness only knows how many women he'd probably already kissed in this town. A frown tugged on her lips, and Susie refused to think on how much that thought hurt. The point was, a relationship with Elliott Brown was doomed from the start.

So all she needed to do was be willing to play his little game through the holidays while using the situation to help Tyson and Adam, and then they could break up at the new year, claiming they both wanted a fresh start, and she'd be back in the classroom with no one the wiser.

“Perfect.” Standing up with renewed energy to get her decorating done, Susie found herself smiling and humming along to the Christmas playlist she had going. This holiday season looked like it was going to be much better than originally anticipated.

She couldn't wait to see Tyson's reaction to Santa having a coat and toy for him, especially a Santa that had already caught the boy's attention. And Adam wouldn't be able to say no. Everyone's pride was saved, and a little boy was taken care of. It was going to be the best Christmas she'd had in years.

* * *

“You want to do what?” Theo asked, his hands on his hips.

“I want to play Santa Claus.” Elliott grinned. “I'd be a good one! Don't you think?” He held his hands over his belly. “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas everyone!” Elliott made his voice as low as possible and was actually surprised that it wasn't half bad. The kids would love it.

Theo shook his head. “Clarence is playing Santa. He grew out his beard and everything.”

“So?” Elliott rushed after his brother when Theo began walking away. “Dude, come on! How often do I ask to do stuff

like this?”

“Never,” Theo grunted, climbing a ladder to finish putting stuff on the top of the tree he’d been decorating. “That’s why I’m suspicious about saying yes.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “It’s just Santa!” he declared, throwing up his arms. “How can I screw this up?”

Theo looked down, his left eyebrow up. “Are you really asking me that? Because I can give some pretty specific examples if necessary.”

Elliott scowled, then rocked back on his heels. “I found a Mrs. Claus,” he offered.

“Great. We’ll introduce her to Clarence.”

“But I’ll only use her if you let me play Santa.”

Theo’s hand froze midair, and he slowly turned to look down at his younger brother. Elliott would never admit it, but sometimes Theo scared him. And now was one of those times. The man had a weird ability to drop every ounce of emotion from his face and with his gray eyes, that Elliott shared, Theo looked like pure stone. It was no wonder women tended to shiver when he passed. It was the coldest stare this side of the Mississippi.

“You like her.”

It wasn’t a question, and Elliott tried to quickly figure out how to respond. He shrugged. Susie had completely caught him off guard, but yeah...he did like her. In for a penny, in for a pound. “Sure.”

“And you want to play Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus together?”

“Yep.” Elliott popped the ‘P’.

“Who is it?”

Elliott grinned. “Not telling you until you promise to let me be Santa.”

Theo’s jaw hardened, and he went back to the tree. “No one will be fooled by you,” he muttered. “You’re too young.”

“Then why did you want me to find a Mrs. Claus from the women I’ve gone on dates with? They’re too young too.”

“People care less about the age of the woman.”

“That’s sexist.”

Theo ignored him.

“Theo, seriously. This is important to me.”

Theo sighed, and his arm dropped to his side. “Don’t you think you’ll be busy enough with helping run the store?”

Elliott tried to hold in his smile. The resigned tone in Theo’s voice said Elliott was close to winning. “Clarence can help in my stead. I’ve never done anything like this before, and I’m not asking a lot.”

Theo turned just enough so he could look at his brother. “You’re asking me to let you take pictures with every kid in town who believes in Santa.”

“Probably a few who don’t, as well,” Elliott added, still smiling. Victory was close. He could smell it.

“I don’t want us to be responsible for ruining their Christmas because you wanted to use this as a chance to flirt instead of actually playing Santa.”

The smile fell from Elliott’s face. “That’s a low blow.”

Theo shrugged. “But not an untrue one.”

“You really think I’d put flirting above making kids happy? Do you know me at all?”

Theo paused again, but his stare wasn’t as intense.

Elliott took a step toward the ladder, feeling unusually defensive. Between protecting Susie and now Theo’s accusations, Elliott felt as if the instincts that had gotten him through the military were being resurrected more today than they had in years. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about it.

“Can you name a single time when I dropped the ball while we served?”

Theo closed his eyes.

“Did I ever leave anyone’s back exposed?”

Theo shook his head and took a long breath.

“I went through training and missions same as you and anyone else there. My record was impeccable and you know it.”

Theo’s mouth shouldered fell even more, but Elliott didn’t care.

“Just because I’m choosing to face life after service with a smile and laughter doesn’t mean I don’t still know how to help people.” One side of Elliott’s lip began to curl, but he forced it

back down. “Going on dates with a few women doesn’t make me a playboy, nor does it mean I’m immature or incapable of knowing right from wrong. You want to face life like a grouchy bear and push everyone away? Fine. I haven’t given you grief about it, even if I do think you’re an idiot.”

Theo’s head jerked up.

“But I deserve the same respect. I don’t want to spend my life alone. You’re my brother and I love you, but someday I want a housemate who isn’t you. Today I found a woman I’m interested in...more than any other woman I’ve spent time with since we got into this tiny town, and I’m asking you to be understanding enough to give me the opportunity to spend time with her.” Elliott was on a roll now, and he couldn’t quite stop himself. “I’m not asking you to sacrifice the children. I’m not asking you to ruin our store. I’m asking to play Santa Claus. Short and simple. A little extra time with a woman who has piqued my interest. Now you tell me why that’s too much, and I’ll consider backing off.”

Elliott’s heart was pounding harder than he would have expected, but the words had come tumbling out of him in a mass of pent up emotions that had obviously been percolating far too long, and the situation was ripe for an explosion.

Theo sighed again and ran a hand over his short cropped hair. “You’re right.”

It took a great deal of self restraint not to tease Theo about those words.

“I shouldn’t act as if you don’t know how to do your job.” Turning back to his work, Theo waved him off. “It’s cleared

by me. You talk to Clarence.”

“Will do.” Rather than take the opportunity to poke the bear a little more, Elliott took his victory and ran with it. This was too important to him to risk losing it all because he liked to push Theo’s buttons.

His excitement began to build as he walked to the front desk so he could grab the phone and dial their employee. Clarence had already gone home for the night and Elliott felt a little bad about taking the Santa position from him, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Susie had quite a bit more bite than Elliott had expected, and he knew if he was ever going to explore that insane kiss again, he was going to have to find a way to get her to stick by his side and this was it.

There was a clicking sound on the other end of the line. “Hello?”

“Hey, Clarence!” Elliott boomed. “It’s Elliott Brown. I’ve got some amazing news for you.”

CHAPTER SIX

Susie shoved her phone in her back pocket and stared up at the hardware store. Christmas lights were strung all across the front, and even from the parking lot, she could see a decorated tree with a huge chair next to it.

It had to be where the Santa pictures would be happening. Reindeer began to dance in her stomach, feeling much less pleasant than sweet butterflies. Susie wasn't sure if she wanted to throw up or laugh. All she knew was that it was taking all her courage to be here, even though she kept picturing Tyson with a brand new coat in her head.

The biggest obstacle to her walking inside was Elliott.

He was too handsome, too loud, too brash, too... everything. He made Susie feel things she wasn't prepared to feel, things she wasn't supposed to need in her life. Her lips were still tingling from his kiss a couple days ago, and Susie was afraid that if she went inside and stood by his side all evening, she'd be too tempted to walk away when it was over.

Helping Tyson was going to mean risking her heart, and that scared her.

“Man up,” Susie muttered under her breath. “Tyson needs help, and you’re in a position to help him. He’s more important than you being a baby.” Wrapping her coat more tightly around herself, she marched inside.

A wave of heat smacked her face, and she sighed, her muscles involuntarily relaxing as she stepped out of the cold. The scent of pine and soft holiday music only added to the ambience. “Holy cow...”

“Pretty nice, huh?”

Susie spun, putting a hand to her chest. “Charlotte!” Susie laughed and walked over, reaching up to hug her friend. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever!”

“That’s because you haven’t.” Charlotte squeezed Susie hard, then stepped back.

“And Wyatt! My favorite!” Susie bent over and gave the young boy a hug, but he pulled away shyly, tugging on the leash of his service dog, Nana. “Hello, Nana.” Susie didn’t try to pet the dog, knowing that she was working at the moment. Wyatt had epilepsy, and as cute as the dog’s doodle curls were, she needed to focus on her charge. “Did you gain ten pounds over Thanksgiving?” Susie teased, causing Wyatt to roll his eyes. “Or maybe ten inches instead?”

“I wish.” Wyatt shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking a little nervous.

Susie raised an eyebrow at Charlotte, who shook her head slightly. *Later then.* “So...I’m guessing you had something to do with all this?” Susie waved a hand at the ambience. It was

pretty amazing for a shop that was filled with tools and construction supplies.

“Some of it.” Charlotte grinned. “Believe it or not, Theo did most of the building. I simply created the outline.”

“If you’re bad-mouthing me again, you can kiss your Christmas gift goodbye.”

Susie would recognize that voice anywhere as Elliott came sauntering around the corner in a full Santa costume. For once, his strong build and charming smile weren’t on full display, and Susie had a fleeting thought that maybe she could get through this after all. However, when he winked at her and her heart rate responded instantly, she knew it wouldn’t be quite so easy.

“I’ll just keep the big guy with me,” Elliott said, wrapping his arms around Wyatt and tickling him.

Wyatt laughed and punched Elliott in the gut.

“Boys!” Charlotte said in her “mother” tone. “Enough of that.” Charlotte’s greenish eyes turned to Susie, dancing with humor. “I, uh, understand you’ve agreed to help Elliott out with the pictures this year.”

Susie turned narrow eyes to Elliott, who had to be smiling underneath all that white hair. “Sort of.”

Charlotte huffed. “Yeah...well...we’ll talk about *that* another time.” She gave a pointed look to Wyatt who was jumping from adult to adult, as if trying to figure out what was going on. “For now, how about I help you get dressed, and then I’ll show you the set up.”

Susie nodded, the trembling starting back up in her legs. She was really going through with this. Susie had never been a limelight sort of person, and once she added the rest of the ingredients to the situation, she wanted to run away screaming and never come back.

“Right in here.” Charlotte held open an employee’s only door, and they slipped inside. “Okay, so we rented the dress and wig, I’m hoping it’ll actually fit you.”

Susie grimaced. She wasn’t as slim as Charlotte. “Should I have gone on a pre-Mrs. Claus diet?” She tried to smile through the joke, but there was no way to hide the fact that she wasn’t a size zero. *Unlike all the other women Elliott has kissed.*

“What?” Charlotte gasped. “Susie, you dork. No. Absolutely not. I’m concerned about the length, not the width.” Charlotte shook her head and scowled at her friend. “You’re gorgeous, and if you ever say otherwise again, I’ll let the puppies have you.”

Feeling only marginally better, Susie forced a laugh and put her hands in the air. “I’ll stop. But no short jokes then. I’ve had enough of those to last me a lifetime or three.”

Charlotte’s face softened. “I’ll bet you have.” She sighed. “What I wouldn’t give to be tiny and petite like you.”

“Puh, lease.” Susie snorted. “Barbies like you have been catching men’s eyes since the dawn of time.”

“And petite girls have been stealing basketball players just as long,” Charlotte shot back.

The women looked at each other, then burst out laughing. The release did a lot for Susie's nerves, which had been ticking tighter and tighter with each passing moment.

"Okay, let's give this a go." Susie held her hand out for the dress, slipped behind a stack of boxes, and stripped down to a tanktop and shorts. She'd come prepared, knowing she absolutely *would not* be wearing a costume without some layer of protection.

"So..." Charlotte ventured in a nonchalant voice. "What's up with you and Elliott?"

"Nothing," Susie grunted as she tried to reach the zipper in the back. "Your brother's a flirt. Nothing more."

"That's not what I heard."

Susie froze. "Uh, what did you hear?" Her heart banged against her ribs. Had word gotten around town about their fake-relationship already? Should she tell Charlotte the truth? Why hadn't Elliott told them the truth?

"I heard you and Elliott are an item." Charlotte laughed softly. "I have to admit I never thought he'd so willingly step off the market."

Susie grimaced and closed her eyes. "Where did you hear that?" she whispered, a knot in her throat.

"First from the clerk at the grocery store!" Charlotte declared. "And then I confronted Elliott about it because I couldn't believe my *best friend* and my brother would leave me out of the loop like this."

As much teasing as there was in Charlotte's tone, Susie could hear the hurt. She couldn't do this. Slowly, she stepped out from around the boxed, the back of the dress still hanging open. "Charlotte," Susie said. "You need to know something."

Charlotte sighed. "I know," she responded. "Elliott told me everything."

"Everything?"

Charlotte nodded. "I'm glad Elliott got Adam to leave you alone, but..." She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "But I hope you know what you're getting into." She studied Susie intently. "Elliott's a good guy. He's charming and kind and a hard worker."

"But?" Susie pressed when she noticed Charlotte wasn't going to finish her thoughts.

"But he's also flighty and obtuse."

Susie nodded, hating the sinking recognition in her gut. *You knew this!* She reminded herself, but the pain didn't abate. "I know. That's why it's fake...and temporary."

After a moment, Charlotte nodded. "Right." She smiled, but it wasn't happy. "Turn around, and I'll take care of the zipper."

* * *

Elliott teased and joked with Wyatt for several minutes, but his brain wasn't in it. It was in the back, wondering what his sister was saying to Susie and if Susie was going to back out and

how he could get Susie to still go to dinner with him and if Susie would let him kiss her after the dinner and if she had had enough time to calm down from their bantering at the school and...

He blew out a breath. *My brain needs a break.*

He hadn't been this worked up about something for ages, and he felt unprepared to handle it. Life had become predictable and monotonous, and now a dark haired sprite had landed in his lap...okay, arms...and he wanted to grab her and run away with her.

You're gonna make her run for the hills if you tell her that.

He knew he'd already pushed Susie to her limits the other day, but he'd been working to keep her off guard. She was far too logical and intelligent. If he gave her enough time to think about his arguments, she'd neatly put him in his place and walk away without looking back.

He couldn't let that happen.

“Uncle Elliott?”

Elliott shook his head to clear it off his tsunami of thoughts. “What's up Big Guy?”

“Are you really dating Miss Susie?”

Oooh, this was a tricky one. Elliott had told Charlotte what was going on, only after reassuring her for a good half hour that he actually was interested in Susie for real, and Elliott had to assume that that meant Noah knew...but Wyatt? That was a harder one. He didn't want to lie to his nephew, but he also

didn't want to spill the beans and have all his hard work go down the drain.

"I think Miss Susie is amazing," Elliott said carefully. "And I'm planning to take her to dinner tonight."

Wyatt wrinkled his nose. "Why?"

After letting out a sigh of relief that that was enough, Elliott grinned. "Why not? Don't you think she's pretty?"

Wyatt shrugged. "She was my teacher."

"And that makes her amazing, right?"

Wyatt shrugged again. "I don't want to date anyone."

"Good thing," Charlotte said, coming back around the corner. "Because you're too young."

Wyatt rolled his eyes and wandered down the aisle, Nana following dutifully at his side.

Charlotte made a face. "He's gotten over his initial delight that Noah and I got married. Now everything we do is gross."

Elliott chuckled. "Sounds about right."

Charlotte narrowed her gaze at her brother. "You better be careful with her."

Elliott groaned. "I already told you everything, Charlie. I like her."

"You've known her for years."

"I've passed her for years," Elliott said in a lower tone, not wanting anyone to hear. "I don't know why she didn't catch

my eye before then, but she has now. Is it really that bad that I want to give this a try?"

Charlotte pinched her lips together. "What's bad is that I'm the only one she had in town to cry with if you break her heart. Do you realize what kind of position that puts me in?"

Elliott huffed. "I don't know what to tell you. Right now, according to the town, we're dating. I want to see what happens. That's all I can offer you."

"How about a guarantee that you won't hurt her?"

Elliott's shoulders sagged. "I can't promise that. Nor can I promise that she won't hurt me." His siblings' lack of confidence in him was really starting to weigh Elliott down. A few smiles and a few dates, and suddenly they all think he's incapable of anything real. "I've been hurt before and I'll bet she has too." Elliott leaned in. "And so have you."

Charlotte sucked in a breath.

"Would you really ask me not to give this a try just because you're scared? What if I could have the same thing with Susie that you have with Noah?"

Charlotte's eyes misted over, and she cleared her throat, stepping back. "Susie!" she declared, looking past Elliott's shoulder. "You look amazing!"

Elliott turned and his mouth turned into an automatic smile. Dressed in red velvet with white trim and a white wig that was swept back in a bun, Susie looked every inch the classic picture of Mrs. Claus. But it was the bright snap of her dark eyes that gave away her age as being anything but old.

The dress fitted a little too well to her curves, and though it looked a bit long, Elliott wasn't the least bit upset that he'd be seeing it several nights a week for the next month.

In other words, she was adorable...and all his.

Walking forward, he ignored the wariness in her body language. Bending over, he pulled down his beard and left a feather soft kiss on her cheek. "You look amazing, wife of mine."

Susie's cheeks were flaming red by the time Elliott straightened. "You can't call me that," she bit out in a quiet tone.

Elliott shrugged. "While you're in that, it's exactly what you are."

Susie glared. "I have a favor to ask."

His eyebrows shot up. "Oh? A favor, you say?" Elliott tapped his lips in thought. "I'm listening."

"I'll agree to come be Mrs. Claus for the pictures, if you'll agree to help me—"

"Wait, wait, wait..." Elliott put up his hand. "My dear wife, you owe me for saving you. You coming to play Mrs. Claus is the fulfillment of your gratitude."

"My *thank you* was the fulfillment of my gratitude, as you so poetically put it," Susie snapped. "I came tonight with a different bargain."

"Nope. We already agreed on this."

Susie threw up her hands. "This is important, Elliott."

“Okay. So offer me something else.”

She gave him a disbelieving look, and Elliott made his move.

He leaned in close so the conversation was only between them. “I’ll agree to help you with anything you want if you agree to go to dinner with me every time we do pictures together.” He held his breath. He was taking a huge leap here. He’d already mentioned dinner with her, but Elliott knew Susie would turn him down if given half a chance.

Women like her were duty driven. She’d shown up to the Mrs. Claus thing, he’d known she would, but he also knew she’d find any excuse in the book to not to go to dinner. Playing the Clauses together was great. But it was the one on one time that was going to help him turn their little charade into something more.

Susie stared back, unblinking for several long moments. “Okay...” she said slowly. “I agree.”

Elliott smiled. “Done deal.” He held out one gloved hand, wishing he could feel her skin on his when they shook. Not about to let a chance slip by him, he gripped her fingers and pulled her in for a quick kiss. “Sealed with a kiss,” he whispered, his tone a little husky.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” she whispered back.

“Actually, I think it’ll be the other way around.” Elliott straightened his coat. “I have a feeling whatever project you want help with isn’t going to be easy.”

Susie's smile was soft and slightly shy, a far cry from the fierce woman she'd been portraying up to this point. "Actually, I think it might be right up your alley."

Heaven help him when she looked like that. Dinners or not, Elliott was beginning to think he'd follow this pint-sized fairy to the ends of the earth and right over a cliff, whistling and smiling the whole way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“**Y**ou guys ready?” Charlotte asked, her hand braced on the front door. She turned and squinted through the glass. “Oh my word, I think there’s a line!”

Elliott looked up at Susie. “Ready, Mrs. Sugar Plum?”

Stupid reindeer. Susie took a deep breath to calm her stomach. “Absolutely, Mr. Stocking Head.” She smiled at him robotically, but almost lost her composure when Elliott snorted.

Wyatt didn’t help matters when he laughed.

“Don’t encourage her,” Charlotte groaned. “Wyatt. Stop laughing. Elliott, remember who you are. Susie, be nice.” She rubbed her forehead. “I can’t believe I’m having to say all this. Most of you are adults.”

Susie straightened her shoulders. “Sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“I make no promises,” Elliott threw out. He threw a hand in the air. “Release the kraken!” he declared.

Susie almost snorted this time. Playboy, flirt, bozo... whatever label she wanted to put on him, Elliott could be

funny when he wanted to be. She just wished he wouldn't use his charms on *her*. She couldn't risk falling for them, especially since she'd stupidly agreed to go out to dinner with him every time they had picture night.

Charlotte pushed open the door, ringing the little bell up top and smiled. "Welcome! We're so glad you're here! Hi, Tony! Megan! So good to see you! Oooh, you brought the little one! Will it be her first picture with Santa?"

Susie had to admire Charlotte's ability to work a crowd. The woman had been withdrawn and quiet when she'd first arrived in town, but ever since Noah and Wyatt had come into her life, Charlotte had blossomed, and it had been an inspiring miracle to behold.

Heavy thumping on the floor caught Susie's attention, and she turned to see Theo racing through the aisles. "Sorry," he whispered, pushing a hand through his brown hair. "I got caught in traffic."

"Traffic?" Elliott scoffed. "In Tidepool Cove?"

Theo jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "You should see the line of cars down the street. I don't know why, but I think every person in town decided to come on the first night."

"They want pictures for Christmas cards," Susie said. She stepped to the edge of the platform. "Are you manning the line then?"

Theo nodded. "I'll send them up to you, then step behind the camera. Can you handle placing the kids on Elliott's knee?"

“Absolutely.” Susie smiled as childrens’ voices began to overtake the Christmas music. She waved and several kids waved back.

“It’s Miss Susie!”

Susie recognized that voice, and she gave a special smile to little Avery.

At Averys’ declaration, several more voices began to shout their recognition of their beloved daycare teacher.

“They’re here for you,” Elliott said, his tone muffled under his beard.

“No. They came for Santa,” Susie said primly. “But they might chat extra because of me. Sorry about that.”

Elliott shrugged. “I love kids. It’s fine.”

Something fluttered in her chest at his words. It was much more delicate than the reindeer that liked to race in her stomach whenever she was physically near Elliott. She’d seen him with children before. Wyatt adored both his uncles, even scary Theo. And Tyson had taken to Elliott like a fish to water.

The man’s playful ways were a magnet to anyone under the age of eighteen...okay, maybe anyone under the age of eighty. But this was different. This was a softening of her feelings, and it frightened Susie because it downplayed her desire to fight the pull between them. Elliott’s love of children was actually all the more reason that they couldn’t be together.

Theo talked to the first child in line, then helped them around the small barrier. “Mrs. Claus,” he said in his deep tone. “This is Nicholas. He’s six.”

“Nicholas!” Susie put a gloved hand to her chest. “Why, that’s my husband’s name.” She smiled invitingly. “Have you met him?” The boy took her offered hand with a firm grip, nodding.

“Yeah. I met him last year.”

They tromped up the steps together. “Nicholas, you remember Nicholas?” Susie gave Elliott a pointed look, but she shouldn’t have worried.

Elliott laughed, holding his stomach. “Ho, ho, ho! Nicholas! Good to see you, my boy!” Elliott slapped his knee. “Come on over here.”

Nicholas let go of Susie and ran over, jumping on Elliott’s leg with enthusiasm.

Susie stepped to the side, eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Have you been a good boy this year?” Elliott asked, settling the young man’s weight on his leg.

Nicholas nodded enthusiastically. “I helped my dad mow the lawn this summer. Twice.”

Elliott nodded sagely. “Sounds like you did good work. I like a man who can take care of his property.”

Nicholas beamed.

“Do you have ideas of what you want for Christmas?”

Nicholas nodded again, but hesitated, looking back at his mom. Then he stretched up, reaching for Elliott’s ear.

Elliott obliged by leaning down so Nicholas could whisper.

Susie strained to hear without appearing to do so, but she never could make out the words. The twitch of Elliott's mustache, however, told her it had to be a good one.

"That's a big order," Elliott said in a serious tone. "And one that I'd have to get permission from your parents for."

Nicholas made a face and slumped. "I thought Santa could bring me anything."

"Santa *can* bring anything," Elliott agreed. "But I don't. Your parents love you and have rules for their house, so I have to make sure the present fits their rules before I can bring it to you."

Nicholas rolled his eyes so well that Susie had to wonder if the boy had an teenage sibling.

"How about we take a picture?" Elliott said cheerfully. "Now that I know what you want, I can speak to your parents when it's more convenient."

Nicholas huffed, but turned where Theo was standing behind the camera. He waved Susie in a little closer and she stepped right up next to the chair, only stiffening a tiny bit when Elliott took her hand.

"Say...Happy Holidays!" Charlotte shouted over Theo's head.

"Happy Holidays!" they dutifully repeated.

Elliott couldn't stick to the script, though. "And a happy new year!" he bellowed after the flash had gone off.

Instead of rolling her eyes, Susie found herself smiling at his enthusiasm. Maybe dinner with him a few times wouldn't be so bad. *Yeah right*, she thought sarcastically. *And being struck by lightning is fun and won't leave a scar.*

* * *

"Thanks, Melody! Keep being good!" Elliott waved as the tween-aged girl giggled and followed her parents and older brother out the door. Though Melody didn't believe in Santa any more, the family had come to take a picture together for their Christmas cards, exactly as Susie had predicted people would.

The families were fun, but the little kids were the best. The night had started with a bang when a boy named Nicholas had asked for a real cannon. Elliott hadn't even bothered to try and find a way to mention it to the parents. This Santa didn't have to be psychic to know how that request would go over.

"Only a few more," Susie murmured as she grabbed a few more candy canes from the bowl on the other side of the stage set up.

Elliott shifted his weight. As fun as this was, his backside was about to go numb and his back ached from the hard chair they were using. Would it kill Theo to get him a pillow or something? Didn't he realize that Santa was old and broken?

"Nicholas," Susie said, her tone very soft.

Elliott looked over, and his heart stuttered. His very lovely Mrs. Claus had a tiny baby in her arms. Wrapped in a bright

red blanket, the newborn was fast asleep, and Susie appeared to be working to keep it that way.

Elliott loved kids, but he'd never felt in a hurry to be a dad or anything. He knew he had plenty of time before he needed to worry about getting to that stage of life. However, there was something about seeing Susie hold that bundle that had his skin breaking out in a sweat and his blood pressure rising.

It looked so...perfect.

He had to wonder if something was wrong with him? How had he gone from being bored to thinking his sister's best friend looked just right with a baby in her arms? He had to be dreaming.

Susie was smiling, and her eyes were lightly misty when she bent over to hand him the child. "It's her first Santa picture," Susie offered reverently.

"I'd hope so," Elliott quipped with a soft laugh. "I would've had a hard time getting in the picture with her last year."

Susie gave a short laughing snort and carefully handed the baby to Elliott.

He cradled the tiny infant, feeling a tug in his chest. No... there was no way this was a dream. Maybe he'd reached some magical age in his adult life where men begin to look for something more, something bigger than themselves, he didn't know. What he *did* know was that Susie drove him wild, and the baby made him want to speed up their relationship, which

was absurd because if she had her way, she wouldn't even go to dinner with him.

Going faster was *not* going to be an option.

Elliot twisted sideways and held the baby up for the camera and Susie came in on his other side, smiling widely, and for a split second, all felt right with the world.

He frowned, however, when he realized that her misty eyes were heavier now, and she looked on the verge of real tears. "Are you alright?" he asked when she took the baby to give back to the mother.

Susie sniffed and gave herself a little shake. "Of course." Her smile was tired. "Just tired, but we're almost done."

Elliott frowned, but quickly fixed his expression as the next child was brought up. For thirty more minutes, he laughed, smiled and cried "Happy Holidays" for the camera, and by the end of it, Elliott was high on adrenaline and absolutely exhausted.

Once the door to the shop had been closed and locked, he stood up and stretched his back with a groan. "We need a different chair."

"You don't like your throne?" Theo asked with a snort. "I built that sucker from scratch."

"Very nice on the eyes," Elliott admitted. "But terrible on the butt."

Theo snorted again and began unplugging all the light strands around the store.

Looking around, Elliott realized that Susie had disappeared and he had a moment of panic.

“She went to change her clothes,” Theo muttered.

Elliott let out a breath of relief. “Thanks.”

“If you don’t hurry, you’ll miss her on the way back out.”

Elliott started to move, but Theo stopped him again.

“You’re not planning to hurt her, are you?”

Elliott didn’t have much of a temper, but he was starting to find one now that no one was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. What did he ever do to them that made his entire family think he cared about no one but himself? It was absurd!

“No,” Elliott ground out. “I’m not.”

Theo nodded curtly. “Fine.”

“That’s it?” Elliott challenged. “No threats? No declaring I’m too immature?”

“Do I need to?” Theo asked without bothering to look at him.

Some of Elliott’s ire faded. “No.”

Theo shrugged, giving him a quick look. “Then go. Have fun. Woo the woman.”

Elliott chuckled. “Woo the woman. Right.” He turned and began walking to the area where he’d hung his clothes. Woo. It was such an odd word, but strangely enough, it fit. He was trying to woo Susie. And he’d been blunt about it to everyone, even Susie herself knew.

“Oh!” Susie’s eyes went wide as he pushed open the backdoor and nearly ran her over. “Sorry.”

Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair was standing up in a few places from where the wig had been pressing.

“No, I’m sorry,” Elliott said, his eyes not leaving her face. He couldn’t look away. She was so pretty, but even now, she still held a bit of sadness in her. A sadness that hadn’t been there when they’d started the night. He wanted the fiery spark back, the one where she tried to eat him for breakfast. He knew how to handle that. He didn’t know how to handle this.

“You ready for dinner?” he asked, clearing his throat to clear his thoughts.

Susie blinked and stepped back a little, tucking her messy hair behind an ear. “I forgot about that.”

“Never let it be said I don’t keep my wife well,” Elliott teased with a wink. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

His smile fell when the door closed, and he realized she hadn’t argued at all about him calling her his wife. Something was wrong. Really wrong. But what? What happened during their time tonight that had her so depressed?

Shaking his head, Elliott hurried to get dressed. He wouldn’t find out by staying here, and he wasn’t going to waste time mulling over something when he could go straight to the source.

Besides, Susie had something she needed to talk about as well. She wanted his help with a project. Elliott grimaced a

little. He didn't know what she was going to ask him to do, but he'd given her such wide parameters that he was a little afraid to find out. Still, it would be worth it. He was sure of it. Between the electricity he'd experienced when they kissed, to the vision of her holding that baby...Elliott knew he was well and truly caught. And if he had his way, whatever project she was going to ask him to work on would only be the first of many.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Susie tapped her fingers against her jean clean knee. The car was still a bit cool, but any minute now she knew the heater would kick into gear and she'd be able to relax.

Ha!

Her sarcastic inner voice balked. "There's no relaxing as long as you're going to be spending time with Elliott." Susie blew out a breath through her nose. She couldn't believe how emotional she got at the end of the picture session. One tiny, newborn baby, and Susie was ready to cry her eyes out.

She sniffed as the emotions tried to trickle back into her consciousness. "No," she snapped to the empty vehicle. "Not again." Susie had spent years crying over her fate. Over her broken body. And she'd worked her tush off to eventually accept her lot in life. A body without a uterus would never produce a baby.

"But you have plenty of children," she reminded herself. "You have students and you have others that you care for. You might never be a mom, but you'll always have a mothering influence."

Those words had been carefully picked and were a personal mantra whenever things became difficult. Like today, when the sweet smell of baby powder had nearly brought her to her knees.

The taillights in front of her flashed, and Elliott pulled into a small parking lot, Susie reluctantly following him. She didn't want to be here, but she'd made a bargain. Geez, Elliott was a hard nut to crack. He was never serious, but he'd been pushing her like a man on a mission and the way he'd finagled a dozen dates out of her was quite impressive, though she would never admit that to his face. Elliott's ego needed no fuel for its fire.

She stared at the small seafood restaurant, her heart pounding in her chest, but Susie couldn't tell if it was excitement or fear. Either one wasn't good. "For Tyson," she reminded herself.

Opening her door, she got out of her car and jumped when a body appeared in the dark.

"Sorry," Elliott said, though she could hear the smile in his voice without being able to see his face.

Susie smacked his chest, pulling back immediately as the instant tingling on her fingers. "No, you're not."

"Okay, I'm not," he agreed, snatching her hand and intertwining their fingers. "You're cute when you're mad."

Susie rolled her eyes and tugged on her hand when he began to pull her inside. "We don't need to hold hands," she told him.

“According to the public, we’re a couple,” Elliott reminded her. “You might have agreed to the dates separately, but no one else knows that.” He gave her fingers a little squeeze. “Besides, we need to conserve body heat. It’s freezing out here.”

Oh no, it’s not. Susie didn’t dare tell him that she was actually feeling a little overly warm. She’d never need a heater again if Elliott stuck around. *But he isn’t going to stick around. Which is as good as it is bad.*

“Table for two, please,” Elliott told the hostess, who happily grabbed two menus and led them toward the back. The restaurant had very few patrons at the moment, more than likely due to the late hour.

“Your waitress will be over soon,” the hostess said, grinning and walking away once they were settled.

“What the—” Susie squeaked when Elliott gave a yank on her chair and pulled her closer to his side. “What are you doing?” she hissed, looking around to see if they were being watched.

“You were too far away,” Elliott said with a shrug. He put his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. Their knees bumped a few times until Elliott just rested his against hers. “I thought this would be more comfortable,” he said with a smile.

“For who?” Susie asked, grabbing her chair to move away. Every time their knees touched she felt fire lick up her spine. This man was simply too much. She couldn’t handle it all, and she was here for business purposes, not for an actual date.

“Uh, uh, uh,” Elliott whispered, leaning closer. “People are watching. You don’t want Adam to find out we’re having a tiff, do you?”

Susie closed her eyes and counted to ten. “Elliott...this has to stop.” She opened her eyes. “We’re not really dating. You don’t even really like me. Why are you pushing this so hard?”

Elliott’s eyes widened. “Don’t like you? Are you kidding?” He came closer until they were only inches apart, but it was clear it wasn’t to kiss, though Susie’s pulse didn’t get that memo. His voice dropped but grew in intensity. “Do you really think I make a habit of going around and kissing random women under the mistletoe?”

“Holly,” she corrected, trying to distract herself from their nearness.

It wasn’t working.

“Semantics,” he whispered, looking angry.

Susie paused. Elliott looked *angry*. She’d never seen that emotion on his face. She’d seen him laughing, chatting, charming, teasing, full of mischief, and several other annoying looks, but she’d never seen *angry*. “We’ve known each other for years,” she said slowly. “If you liked me, why wouldn’t you say something earlier?”

Elliott sighed, then immediately perked up.

“Good evening,” a feminine voice said. “How are you doing tonight?”

“We’re good, thank you,” Elliott said with a broad smile. He took Susie’s hand and toyed with her fingers. “Actually,

no. That's incorrect. We're starving."

The waitress laughed and pulled out her notepad. "Well, then you've come to the right place. What can I get you?"

Elliott turned, raising his eyebrows at Susie.

"Um..." She hadn't even begun to look at the menu, and the idea that they were both waiting on her sent panic straight to her chest. Without thought, she threw out the first thing she could think of. "I'll have a Caesar Salad."

"Sounds good." The woman put it down, and they both turned to Elliott, who was frowning.

Susie nudged him. "Your turn."

With his brows still pulled together, Elliott grabbed the two menus and handed them back to the waitress. "I'll have the sirloin, please. Medium rare. And can I get tater tots instead of onion rings, please?"

The woman nodded, wrote everything down and spun on her heel. "Be back soon."

The mood at the table had grown somber, and Susie had no idea why. He'd been mad before the waitress came up and then mad after Susie ordered. Her stomach gurgled with unease and the sense that she'd lost something precious, but Susie had no idea what it was or why it even mattered to her.

"So..." she ventured when Elliott didn't break the ice between them. "Tell me about your job." She took a sip of water. "You and Theo own the hardware store."

Elliott nodded.

“Was it always your dream to be the town handyman?” she asked, venturing a small smile. “Is that why you came to Tidepool Cove? So you’d be a local celebrity?”

Elliott’s shoulders relaxed, and Susie’s muscles relaxed with him. She could do this. Small talk that would eventually give her the opening she needed to talk about Tyson. Whatever had happened before was out of her hands, but this, she could handle. She’d have to.

* * *

Elliott tried to let go of the frustration that was pulsing in his gut. Why did everyone assume he was too stupid to be serious? He thought he’d been plenty clear to Susie that he liked her, and yet she thought this was all one big gag. What had he done to make her think that he was running some kind of elaborate prank on her?

Faked a relationship? Kissed her before ever taking her on a date?

He pinched his lips together. Sometimes his logical voice was a little too logical.

Elliott leaned back in his seat, although all he wanted to do was get closer to Susie, and gave her a half grin. “Somebody’s gotta do it,” he said. “Not all heroes wear capes, after all. Some of us do plumbing and use skil saws.”

Susie’s smile was more genuine than before, and it helped ease some of the anger running through him.

“You oughta know all about that, after all.”

Susie's dark brows pulled together. "What do you mean?"

"You help with children." He leaned in again, unable to resist her lure even when he was upset. "That's the biggest hero of all."

Susie scoffed. "Flatterer."

"Truth teller."

She shook her head. "What do you want?"

Elliott groaned. "I don't want anything, Susie. Why can't you take a compliment?" He scrubbed his hands over his face. This woman was driving him crazy in multiple ways. He was desperate to hold onto the spark between them, but she seemed determined to extinguish it as quickly as possible. Was he really that bad? What made her want to run?

She watched him, but didn't respond right away. "Maybe we should get to the real reason we're here," she said carefully.

Elliott tried to hide his sigh, but he didn't think he managed it very well. None of this was turning out the way he wanted. He was supposed to be given a chance to sweep Susie off her feet, keep her on her toes and send her home with another earth shattering kiss on her lips.

Instead, she was blocking his attempts at flirtation and refused to let him cultivate any kind of romantic moment at all. If he hadn't experienced what he had in her classroom, he'd think they were completely incompatible. But there was something there. She might not be eager to accept it, but he was and he wasn't going to drop it that easily. Other than his

desire to serve in the military and fulfill his obligation there, Elliott hadn't had anything pull on his conscience the way that Susie did.

Maybe he needed to slow down just a little. Not everyone was the "jump first, ask questions later" type. Susie was a little more straightlaced. That was alright, Elliott could work with that. She was also kind, charitable, a good teacher, good with children and a quiet strength in their community, not to mention adorable and beautiful all in one.

Elliott hadn't missed the way the children lit up when she spoke to them or how many had recognized her despite her costume. The parents were thankful their children were in good hands, and the children loved who was watching them.

What man wouldn't snatch a woman like that into his arms and never let go?

"Here we go!" The waitress was back with their meals, and the conversation took another halt as their plates were placed in front of them.

Elliott eyed her dinner. Salad. Only women who were worried about their weight ate salad for dinner, and it bothered him, the same way her comment about him not liking her bothered him.

Susie seemed to have a low opinion of herself, and he wanted to correct that.

"You're looking at my dinner like it's going to jump up and eat you," Susie said with a laugh. "I didn't realize Caesar salad was so offensive."

Elliott picked up his knife and fork. “Not offensive,” he countered. “Just dissatisfying.”

She choked on her bite. After a moment to chew and swallow, she wiped her mouth and gave him a glare. “I love Caesar Salad.”

“But you’ll love this more.” Elliott held out a fork with a bite of the steak on it. He hadn’t tried a bite yet, but the inside looked just the right color and he’d eaten here before. He grinned when her frown deepened.

“Maybe I don’t eat meat.”

Elliott rolled his eyes and leaned closer. “I know better than that. You ate Christmas with us last year.”

“Okay, maybe it’s just red meat I don’t eat.”

“Try again.” He put the fork right in front of her mouth, wishing it was his mouth and not his fork there. “Come on, Sue. You’ll love it.”

“Susie.”

He just smiled. Her hatred of that name was just another mystery he had every intention of figuring out. His smile widened when she gave in and took the bite. Slowly, he brought the fork down and waited on his elbows while she chewed.

Her fingers went over her mouth, and her eyes widened.

Elliott tried to catalog every emotion running through her eyes, but there were far too many. Shock, surprise, contentment...she was all over the place. “It’s good, huh?”

“Okay.” Susie put up a hand and nodded reluctantly. “It was delicious.”

He quickly began cutting another bite. Starving as he was, he would feed her the whole thing if it meant she’d continue to eat from his hand. He hadn’t realized how much he would enjoy that. He held up another bite.

“No, no,” she hurried to say. “It’s your dinner. You eat it.”

Elliott shook his head. “I’ll enjoy it a lot more if you eat what you want first.”

Confusion. That was the emotion crossing her face now. Her brows were furrowed and eyes narrowed. The way she had her head tilted to the side said she couldn’t quite figure him out. *Well, the feeling’s mutual, sweetheart.*

Several bites later, his steak was all but gone, and Susie still looked bewildered. “Last one, here we go.”

Susie’s eyes popped out of her head. “You’re kidding.” Her eyes dropped to his plate, and she groaned. “I’m so sorry, Elliott. I didn’t mean to eat your dinner.”

“Hey.” He grabbed her hand that she was covering her face with. Tugging, he pulled it down and got close enough to smell her amazing citrus shampoo. “I enjoyed that much more by watching you eat it, than I would have by eating it myself.”

Her cheeks went even redder than they already were. “You shouldn’t say things like that,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Why not?” Elliott made a point of looking around. “No one’s paying any attention to us and besides, we’re dating.” He

massaged her fingers, which were a little cold. Funny, since her cheeks had to be flaming hot.

“But we’re not really dating.”

Was he mistaken? Or was there disappointment in her tone? *Run with it*, he told himself. “Again, I’ll ask...why not?”

Her mouth opened and closed several times, apparently, unable to find a proper response to his statement. “I came tonight because I needed to ask you a favor.”

Elliott nodded, though he was disappointed she was changing the subject. He wasn’t exactly the patient type, but fate obviously had a sense of humor, because he was beginning to realize that if he had any hope of getting through Susie’s stubborn brain and showing her just how good they could be together, he was going to have to be more patient than he’d ever been in his life.

It would be hard, but for the sake of everything he’d felt since he arrived at the school? It would definitely be worth it.

CHAPTER NINE

Susie cleared her throat, feeling the need to put her thoughts in order. Currently, they were wilder than her preschoolers after a cookie break.

Could he really be asking her why they weren't dating? Didn't he know how dating worked? They'd known each other a long time...sort of...okay...they'd been acquaintances a long time. They just hadn't spent much time together.

One crazy, insane, amazing kiss under the mistletoe, oops, holly, was *not* enough to begin a relationship on.

And yet, that's exactly what happened.

Susie pushed her sarcastic voice aside. She didn't need its help tonight. "So, I have this student." She glanced up from under her eyelashes, surprised to see that Elliott was giving her his full attention. He had always seemed so flighty and restless, it felt odd to see that he could also be attentive and serious. She blinked when she realized she was acting as if the two had never met. "I just realized you already met Tyson, and now I feel like an idiot."

Elliott grinned and continued toying with her hand. "It's fine. I get flustered around you too."

Susie yanked her hand back, ignoring his knowing chuckle. “Anyway, I’m sure you could see that Tyson needs a little...”

“Attention? Help? Hugs?”

“Yes,” Susie breathed. “All of the above.”

Elliott leaned back and brushed a hand over his messy hair. His wig hadn’t done him any favors either. “It wasn’t hard to see the little guy needs a friend or two.”

“And that’s just it,” Susie plowed on. “Adam is a good guy. But ever since his wife died, things have been hard.”

Elliott nodded, frowning slightly. “Do you...? Do you like him? I mean, I interfered because you looked ready to lose your lunch on his work boots but...” Elliott blew out a breath and made a face. “Was I wrong?” The words sounded like they cost him his entire ego, and Susie was once again rendered speechless.

Her life had always been neat and ordered. Except for that one moment where she discovered her body had betrayed her and womankind, Susie knew exactly who she was and what she wanted out of life.

When she’d discovered she couldn’t have children and a husband, she’d pivoted and created her own family, knowing it meant she’d never have what other women have. Men like Elliott weren’t supposed to look twice at her. She was broken. No one wanted broken.

Men like Adam did look once in a while, but it wasn’t usually because of her. She knew Adam didn’t hold a true

fondness for her. He was simply a lonely man and she was his son's teacher and at one time had been his wife's friend. It was an easy match and it probably would be a fairly comfortable match, but Susie didn't love Adam and she wouldn't condone him or any other man to her messed up life.

But men like Elliott didn't come after her at all. Or at least, the type of man she thought Elliott to be. He was a playboy, a flirt, an eternal child himself, and yet here he was trying to apologize and do right by her.

He was also fantastic with Tyson and every kid who came through the line at the Santa pictures. He saved you from Adam's advances, he kisses like a Greek god, he's defended you, been kind, opened your door and done everything, except flirt with other women.

Suddenly, she felt nauseous. The dinner, delicious, was about to come right back up.

"See?" Elliott declared, pointing at her face. "It's that look right there. You look like you're ready to lose your guts."

Susie swallowed hard and then again. "You're not helping matters," she muttered.

Elliott pinched his lips together and blew out a breath. "Sorry. I'm trying to understand, and you still haven't told me if I jumped the gun the other day. I mean, I hope I didn't, but now you've got me scared." He chuckled nervously. "I've never really worried about this before. I don't think I like it."

A completely inappropriate giggle came bubbling up Susie's throat before she could stop it. When it slipped through

her lips, she quickly slapped her hand on her mouth, but still, her body shook with the force of the laughter.

Elliott slowly smiled, his body relaxing at her amusement. “Are you going to share why you’re laughing?” he asked, reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

The laughter cut off rather quickly when his finger came from her earlobe and drew down her cheek. She sucked in a breath. “Uh, I’ve just never seen you unsure before.”

Elliott scrunched his nose. “It doesn’t happen often,” he admitted. “Count yourself lucky.”

“I think I will,” Susie quipped back, laughing again at his sheepish face. “But seriously...” She stopped laughing and centered herself. “Tyson needs some help.”

Elliott nodded. “Agreed. But tell me about the dad.”

She swallowed. Elliott was serious. “Adam is very nice,” Susie said carefully, watching Elliott’s expression. “But I’m not interested in him.” Her heartbeat took off on a crazy race when relief eased Elliott’s entire body. Maybe his actions toward her were sincere, after all. Could it really be possible?

“Well, now that I know the competition is out of the way.” Elliott rested his arms on either side of his plate and leaned forward. “Helping will be much more enjoyable.”

Susie frowned. “Wait. Are you saying you would’ve helped even if you thought he was competition?”

Elliott shrugged. “Yeah. I just wouldn’t have been happy about it.”

“But now you’re happy.”

Elliott nodded.

“Because Adam isn’t competition.” They weren’t questions, more like statements, but Susie had to say them out loud. That putting it all into words somehow made it more real.

“Right.”

She opened her mouth, but quickly shut it. They weren’t here to talk about their relationship, fake or otherwise. They were here because Susie had made an agreement for his help. It was time to focus on something other than her quickly, stupidly developing crush.

“I was hoping we could use your position as Santa to get Tyson a couple of things that he needs,” Susie said softly, glancing around to make sure no other patron could hear.

“You want the hardware store to sponsor him?” Elliott asked as he stole a bite of her salad.

Susie pushed the plate over. It was only fair, after all, since she ate most of his meal. Elliott grabbed it and ate like he was starving. *He probably is*, she scolded herself. “No,” Susie quickly stated out loud. “I’m not asking you to spend any money. I’ll purchase the coat and supplies he needs. I just don’t want to be the one to deliver them.”

Elliott leaned back and watched her carefully. “You want it to be anonymous?”

She shrugged. “More or less.”

More seconds ticked by while Elliott stared with heavy intensity. She wanted to squirm under his gaze, but like prey in the headlights of an oncoming truck, she was frozen to the spot. She didn't want to share all the details with Elliott. Things were hard enough on Adam and Tyson as it was, they didn't need the pity of every person in town. That thought, however, proved to be fruitless when Elliott responded, "You want to save his pride."

* * *

Susie deflated against her chair like a popped balloon, looking shell shocked. "How did you know that?" she rasped, her fingers rubbing across her forehead.

Elliott shrugged, he fought with his mouth to keep a smirk from forming and his chest from expanding in pride at Susie's soft heart. He couldn't have found a better woman to be his Missus. At every turn, the woman was surprising him with how *good* she was. The only thing they needed to work on was her sense of fun. If he could just get her to lighten up a bit—

"You can't tell anyone," Susie added in a rushed voice. "He can't hear. No one can. I don't want—"

Elliott reached over and put a finger on Susie's lips, and she immediately stopped her rambling. "I get it," he said with a confirming nod. "I won't tell anyone." He traced her lips with his finger. Geez, he wanted to get her out of here. Where could he find some mistletoe?

She took a shuddering breath. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Elliott dropped his hand and grinned. “I think it’s a great cause, and you’re right. Adam won’t accept it from you. Playing the Santa card is much better.” Pursing his lips Elliott let his mind muse over the situation. “But I don’t want you doing this alone. I’ll chip in as well, that way we can make sure they both get what they need, not just Tyson. I’ll bet Adam could use a little help as well.”

Her eyes grew misty, reminding Elliott of earlier in the evening. “Thank you,” she said again. “I wasn’t sure exactly how I was going to pull this off by myself.”

He leaned in. “So my help was worth a dozen dates, huh?”

Susie gave a soft laugh and looked down at her lap, her cheeks going delightfully red. “I suppose it is.”

“Like I said earlier...hero.”

She shook her head. “Anyone would do this.”

“But they don’t.”

She didn’t have an answer to that one, and it made Elliott smile wider.

“Lots of people want to help, but they rarely take the initiative. The fact that you not only set up a plan, but have already started it and were willing to spend time with me to accomplish it, tells me a lot about you.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Oh? I don’t think I want to know what it’s saying.”

“Find me some mistletoe, *real* mistletoe this time,” Elliott teased, “And I’ll tell you exactly what I think.”

Those cheeks were absolutely flaming, and it made Elliott chuckle. Yeah...she was a good one. She might not be as ready for their relationship as he was, but the more he got to know her, the more he was determined to make it all real.

“You’re incorrigible,” she muttered.

“I don’t even know what that means, but I’ll take it as a compliment,” he retorted.

Susie shook her head, but she was smiling.

Elliott noted the easiness of her look. He was slowly wearing her down, and he was enjoying *almost* every minute of it. He took her hand, playing with those delicate fingers. “So...how should we do this? Just go on a shopping spree?”

She shook her head and tugged on her hand, but Elliott held on and she gave up almost instantly. “I’d really like Tyson to visit Santa and for you to find out exactly what he wants.”

Elliott raised his eyebrows. “That should be easy enough.”

Susie shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know if Adam will take him, and honestly, I’m not sure if Tyson will open up. If you couldn’t tell, he’s a little difficult at times.”

“Stubborn kids make great leaders,” Elliott joked.

Susie snorted. “I’d love it if that were the case.”

“I’ve been told I’m stubborn,” Elliott added. “Or incorrigible. They’re practically the same thing, right?”

Susie's lips curled into a tiny smile. "And are you a good leader?"

"I'm a veteran." Elliott shrugged his shoulders. "That should count for something."

Her face softened, and she went from amused to concerned. "I think that counts," she said in a quiet tone. "Charlotte told me once about you serving with Beckett and Theo."

Elliott nodded. "Yep."

"How long were you in the military?"

Elliott took a deep breath. "About ten years."

She nodded slowly. "Were you ever..." She made a face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't ask that."

"What? Injured?" Elliott didn't spend a lot of time talking about his military career. It happened. He worked hard and learned a lot and lost his best friend. It was enough. He never tried to hide it, but he also didn't tend to offer up excess information either.

But Susie, he found himself wanting to tell her things, wanted to build connections between them. It was new, and for the first time since he'd jumped into calling her his girlfriend, Elliott was hesitant.

Susie shook her head again. "It doesn't matter. It's not my business."

Elliott let it drop. He'd like to tell her all about himself, but this particular piece of information was a little more precious

than the others and he wasn't quite ready to give it away. "Did you know I have a degree in engineering?"

Susie jerked back. "What?"

Elliott nodded. "Yeah. Believe it or not, this noggin is pretty good at math." He winked. "Who knew, huh?"

Susie huffed. "Just when I think I'm starting to get to know you, you throw a wrench in my thoughts and I'm left scrambling all over again."

"I've always enjoyed keeping people on their toes." Standing, Elliott pulled Susie to her feet and began walking toward the front of the cafe. He paused, letting go of Susie just long enough to pay for their meal, before taking her hand again and leading her outside. "Remind me which car is yours?" he asked.

She pointed to a very sensible blue four-door.

Elliott laughed in his mind. He hadn't noticed earlier, but it fit her. Neat, clean and sensible. By the end of the holiday season, he was definitely going to have to corrupt her...at least a little bit. The fact that she wanted to play sleuthing santas was already a step in the right direction.

Guiding her to her car, he held out his hand.

Susie frowned, shivering slightly. "What?"

"Your keys."

Her frown deepened, but she pulled them from her purse and put them in his hand.

Elliott unlocked the car, leaned in and started the vehicle, turned the heater on high, then stood up and shut the door again.

“Uh...”

Without another word, he swung her around and caged her in against the car.

Susie’s dark eyes were wide, and her nose was turning pink. “It’s too cold out here to linger,” she whispered, the white steam of her breath puffing between them.

Elliott leaned in. “I hear body heat is a great way to stay warm,” he murmured, bringing his mouth to her cheek. Her skin was just as soft as he remembered.

“Elliott.” She pushed against his chest. “We can’t do this.”

“We’re dating,” he argued. “Of course we can.” He could feel her shiver underneath him, but he wasn’t sure if it was cold or his proximity. He was pretty warm, but girls were hard to gauge.

“We’re not really dating.”

He brought his face up, their noses nearly rubbing. “I brought that up earlier, but you didn’t seem to want to talk about it.”

Susie closed her eyes.

“Shall we tell Adam together?”

She shook her head.

“Then what do you want to do?” Elliott held his breath. He was in this too deep at this point to simply stand by and let her

go, but she needed to make a commitment one way or the other. She kept pushing him away, but also saying she didn't want to come clean. He needed to know where he stood, or he'd have no chance of trying to take the next step.

She sighed. "I suppose it's fine until the new year. When we have all this Christmas business out of the way."

Bingo! "Well, I beg to differ." He rested his cheek against hers, making sure his lips were right by her ear. "Because instead of calling it quits at the end of the year, I'm going to make sure this is real by the end of the year." She could take that promise to the bank.

CHAPTER TEN

“Who had a good Thanksgiving break?” Susie asked, clasping her hands in front of her. The children all waved their hands wildly through the air and she smiled. Their enthusiasm was such a joy. She might never experience it on an individual level with her own kids, but she could savor every moment of it here.

It didn’t matter how many years she’d been teaching, it never got old to watch the children get excited about the holidays.

“Who wants to share something fun that their family did?” She looked around at the waving arms. “P.J. Go ahead.”

The small boy stood and made a face. “We had pie for breakfast.”

Giggles erupted around the room.

“Pie! For breakfast!” Susie put her hands on her hips. “Well, that doesn’t sound healthy at all!” She grinned. “But it sounds fun. What’s your favorite type of pie?”

He shrugged. “Chocolate.”

“Apple!”

“Pumpkin!”

The other children offered their own ideas, and it took Susie a moment to calm them down.

“Listen to Miss Susie!” Tanya reminded them from her seat in the corner. She was currently cutting out their afternoon project for the daycare group, but Susie was always grateful for a little backup when the kids were wiggly.

Slowly, the noise tapered down. “I love chocolate pie, too,” Susie said, motioning for P.J. to sit. “And I also love apple, pumpkin, and even cheesecake.”

“That’s not a pie,” Avery said with her nose wrinkled.

“Remember to raise our hands,” Susie said, keeping her smile to herself when Avery straightened and folded her arms primly. “But you’re right. Cheesecake isn’t really a pie, but it’s shaped like one, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Miss Susie,” the room responded.

“Who can tell me what shape a pie is?” Susie’s eyes landed on Tyson, who was slumped in his seat, his arms folded over his chest in a defiant manner. She frowned. While he wasn’t the best behaved child, Tyson wasn’t usually angry during a discussion like this. His behavior troubles came during crafts and activities where he liked to fudge the rules. But class chatter had never been a problem. “Tyson? Can you tell me what shape a pie is?”

Tyson scowled, his heel kicking his chair leg.

Several hands went up when Tyson didn’t respond.

Still curious about his attitude, Susie pointed to another child. “Megan?”

“Circle!” she yelled proudly.

“Right.” Susie turned around to her whiteboard. “Pies are in the shape of a circle.” She motioned to the shape, then turned back to the kids. “What else is in the shape of a circle?”

They spoke about shapes for another ten minutes before the children began to get restless and Susie moved on.

“It’s time for the Reading Corner!” she said in an excited tone. Her eyes kept going back to Tyson, who was still looking like he wanted to throttle anyone who came near him. He wasn’t raising his hand, his face was pale, and his arms weren’t moving from their protective position. Something was definitely wrong. “Remember our line order,” Susie said. “Single file, let’s sit in our seats, and I’ll share a brand new story with you.”

The children were chatty and eager to get to their spots, except for Tyson. She’d have to take them outside soon. The month of December was always a rough one for kids’ behavior. The holidays had a way of making even the most well-behaved children restless and overly loud. *But it doesn’t usually make them angry.*

While reading the new picture book she had picked up, Susie’s mind wandered as she tried to figure out how she could get Tyson alone. How could she get him to speak to her and tell her what was wrong?

“Did you enjoy that?” she asked, setting the book in her lap.

“Yes, Miss Susie!” they shouted, many of them bouncing on their knees.

“Well, we don’t have snow like the elves in the book,” she began. “But we can still go outside and play.” Susie stood up and put the book on the seat she just vacated. “How about we quietly grab out coats, and then head outside?”

The suggestion to be quiet was studiously ignored as the children ran to the coat cubbies, shouting and pushing at the top of their lungs.

Sighing, Susie shook her head, grabbed her sweater from her desk and waited at the outside door. Once the children were as lined up as they were going, she opened the door and let the little monsters free.

“Tyson?”

The blond hunched his shoulders but stopped just past the threshold of the door.

Susie waited, but he didn’t turn around and all the other children were gone. She squatted down, ignoring the bite in the air. “Sweetheart, is something wrong? You don’t look very happy.”

Tyson glared at her over his shoulder and shrugged.

“Did you have a good Thanksgiving?” she asked. When his brows pulled lower, Susie quickly changed the topic, noting that his mood had something to do with the break. “I’m

so happy to see you again,” she hurried to say. “I missed you while you were gone.”

The deep lines in the child’s forehead eased a little. “You did?” he asked, his voice sounding raspy from misuse.

“I did.” Susie smiled. “In fact, I was able to go see Santa this weekend, and while I was there, I picked up an extra candy cane. Just for you.” She made a show of looking around then came back to him. “I don’t have enough for everyone. So you make sure to find me after school today, and I’ll let you take it home, okay?”

Tyson’s hunched shoulders had continued to ease, and his brows pulled back into a more relaxed position. “Okay,” he whispered back.

“Good.” Susie winked, stood up and patted his shoulder, though she wasn’t sure if he could feel it through the huge coat he was wearing. “Now go play, and we’ll chat later.”

With a spring in his step that hadn’t been there before, Tyson took off, racing toward the small monkey bar set.

Susie stood watching, worry churning in her stomach. Something had happened over Thanksgiving. *Or something didn’t happen over Thanksgiving.* Did Adam celebrate the holiday? Had Susie’s talk of pies and parties put Tyson out because his house didn’t have any of those things?

She blew on her fingers and rubbed her palms together. It was something to take note of for the future. Susie had never had a student in quite the same straights at Tyson, and it was clear she needed to watch her step.

Tidepool Cove was a small town and the people here weren't wealthy executives, but most of them were able to put food on their tables.

Somehow, I don't think money is the issue here.

Susie sighed, acknowledging the thought was probably correct. Adam could afford to have pie and turkey. He held down a steady job. But that didn't mean he knew *how* to do all those things.

Guilt ate at her about dismissing his advances, but just as quickly she thought of the feel of Elliott's fingers against her cheek and his lips at her jaw. No...she couldn't accept Adam's invitation to dinner. Not that she could ever consider anything serious with Elliott, despite his declaration the other night. But after experiencing what it was like to truly be attracted to someone, Susie would never be happy settling for something else.

But that didn't take away her responsibility to help. She just needed to figure out how.

* * *

"I think it went well the other night," Elliott said as he restocked shelves. He stretched up on his tiptoes, eyeing where his brother was. "Don't you think so, Theo? Don't you think Susie and I made a great Mr. and Mrs. Claus?" He grinned when Theo grunted, essentially ignoring Elliott's attempt at conversation.

Both brothers had slept most of the weekend, after the long day on Black Friday. They'd opened at five am and hadn't closed until nearly nine, at which point Elliott had gone out to eat.

But it had been more than worth it.

Susie was clearly interested in him, even if she was choosing to be stubborn about admitting her feelings. Not to mention, it seemed like every time they got together, something happened to give him an excuse to spend time with her. First the fence, then the pictures, then the dinners, and now playing Secret Santa with little Tyson's family.

"Maybe next year we'll help you find your own Mrs. Claus," Elliott shouted over the shelf. He put a fist to his mouth, biting back a laugh at Theo's deeper grunting response. His brother needed to loosen up. "I'm sure I could call someone for you."

"You do and you die."

Elliott shook his head. "I don't know...it might be worth it."

Theo growled this time, and Elliott wished he'd recorded it. It would have been awesome to put it on his phone as a ringtone or something, at least until Theo figured out what Elliott had done.

He went back to stacking shelves, figuring he'd give Theo a few minutes before annoying him again. It was the only thing that kept the day interesting when Susie was at work.

"Are you serious about her?"

Elliott jumped, then cursed under his breath when he glared at his brother.

Theo's lips twitched.

The fact that he *almost* smiled *almost* made it worth being caught off guard. "You shouldn't sneak up on a guy like me," Elliott snapped. "You're liable to get shot."

"When your gun goes missing from the safe, I'll be sure to be more careful."

"Like a stinkin' ninja," Elliott grumbled, shoving a couple more lightbulbs on the shelf.

"I asked you a question."

And I've been ignoring it. Elliott was happy to chat with his brother, but he hated the fact that the only conversation people wanted to have with him lately was to make sure he wasn't going to hurt Susie. When had he gotten a reputation for breaking women's hearts? Just because he liked to have fun didn't mean he left a string of broken women in his dust.

"I know." This time the frustration in Elliott's tone was real.

"And you didn't answer it."

"I know!"

Theo waited, but Elliott wasn't about to budge. "You've been talking about being a couple for hours now."

Elliott gave his brother a look. "And they say I'm the dramatic one." He glanced at his watch. "It's been fifteen

minutes. Fifteen minutes since we closed and I decided to bug the heck out of you because you hate talking and I'm bored."

Theo's eyes narrowed. "It felt like hours."

Elliott grunted.

"Funny how you don't seem to want to talk anymore. I thought Susie was your favorite topic." Theo folded his arms and leaned his shoulder against the shelf.

Elliott fiddled with the box in his hand. "Maybe I'm tired of answering the same question over and over again."

"Who else has been asking it?"

Elliott gave his brother an incredulous look. "Who do you think?"

"Charlotte?"

"Bingo." Elliott made a finger gun at his brother.

"At least two of us have good heads on our shoulders."

"Seriously, Theo. What do you want from me?" Elliott held his hands out the side. "We've already had a discussion on this. I'm not going to hurt her on purpose. Yes, I'm serious about her. No, I don't know why I didn't see her before, but I see her now, I like what I see and I'm working to get to know her. There's nothing wrong with that. We're two adults, she's agreed to everything that's happened between us...mostly... and I'd be grateful if you just stood by and let me razz you without coming back with an interrogation of my character."

This time there was no mistaking the half lift on one side of Theo's mouth. One of these days, the bozo would actually

smile, and Elliott was sure he'd be shocked into a coma. *Maybe Susie would be willing to kiss me awake.*

"If you don't want me interfering with your love life," Elliott continued. "Maybe stay out of mine."

"I've been trying," Theo said wryly, straightening up from the shelf.

"Not hard enough."

Theo chuckled low and unfortunately, Elliott found he did *not* faint. He'd have to come up with another way to get Susie to kiss him again. He was starting to go through withdrawals.

"She made a great Mrs. Claus," Theo tossed over his shoulder as he walked away.

"Told you!"

"But you were a ridiculous Santa."

"What!" Elliott's head jerked up. "You're lying! I was a great Santa!"

"I heard one of the kids say you didn't have enough wrinkles!" Theo poked his head back around the corner. "Maybe I could help you with that. Do they have reverse Botox?"

Elliott rolled his eyes. "You'd like that wouldn't you? You want me to mar this perfect face so that your ugly mug actually gets noticed, right? You just want Susie for yourself." He ducked, covering his head when Theo threw a plastic cone from the corner display at him. "Easy on the merchandise, bro!"

Theo scoffed. "I'm not interested in Susie."

Elliott paused. There was something in that tone. "Then who are you interested in?" He waited, but Theo didn't respond. Still, it was something to think on. Elliott would have to keep his eyes open. Theo had a crush, but who? The guy didn't speak to anyone, and that included family.

Still pondering on the matter, he pulled his buzzing phone from his pocket.

We might have trouble with Tyson. Do you have a few minutes?

Elliott grinned and rubbed his chin in thought. Man, she was too easy. Elliott had been working on an elaborate plan to get her to spend time with him, but instead Susie was handing him the plan on a silver platter. All he had to do was sit down and indulge.

Meet me at Santa's house at seven. Do you need the address?

He waited a beat, then responded.

Oh wait, I forgot you're married to him.

He sent a kissy face.

See you at home, Mrs. Sugar Plum.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Susie's heart was fluttering as she pulled into Elliott's driveway. She actually hadn't been back at this house since Charlotte got married, which was almost a year ago now.

It wasn't that large of a home, but it had two stories and was big enough for the three siblings and a few friends to have dinner together, which they had done on multiple occasions when Charlotte was still living there.

Now, however, things had changed. Susie wasn't here to see Charlotte. She was here for Elliott, and that made the house look much more intimidating than before.

It was impossible to ignore the fact that her heart was racing in her chest and her breathing was faster than normal. The knowledge that Elliott was too-good looking for her sanity had never been disputed, where she was struggling was being so eager to spend time in his company.

She wasn't supposed to like him. Well...she wasn't supposed to *like* like him. He was her best friend's brother. He was supposed to be like a brother to her, or at least a brotherly acquaintance. Instead, her heart, her breathing, her skin, all

reacted in a decidedly non-sibling like response to his nearness.

“For Tyson,” she reminded herself. “For Tyson.” That was why she was here. Flirting aside, fake relationship or no, she was here because she was determined to help Tyson and Elliott was the best way to do that.

She marched up the front steps, hoping no one could see the tremor in her hands. She could feel Elliott’s hands at her waist, on her cheek, caressing her neck and she found herself wanting to return the gesture, leaving her entire body shaking with want.

He’ll want children someday.

The thought was like a splash of cold water on her overheated face and did exactly what she knew it would. It brought the heat in her cheeks to a resounding stop. With her hormones now under control, she pushed the doorbell, completely unprepared for the door to burst open and for her to be yanked inside and crushed against a wide, warm chest.

“Oof,” she muttered into Elliott’s shirt. Why did he have to feel so good? Why did he have to fulfill all her fantasies in one fell swoop? She wasn’t supposed to get caught up like this.

“I missed you,” Elliott murmured into her hair, his arms tight and secure.

Susie told her hands to come up and push him off, but they refused to listen, instead coming around his back and fisting tight in his shirt. When he sighed and began rubbing a hand down her back, Susie knew it was a lost cause. Her heart was

too involved at this point. Elliott with his bantering, pervasive optimism and cockiness was wearing her down.

And she didn't want it to stop.

"You saw me just yesterday," she whispered, forcing herself to remember why she was there.

"That's a whole twenty-four hours," Elliott exclaimed, finally leaning back, but just enough so they could see each other. "How's a Santa supposed to survive without his missus for that long?"

She had no control. Laughter, like bubbling champagne, came up through her chest and throat and spilled between them. "Elliott," she said between her giggles. "You're ridiculous."

He shrugged, smiling widely. "I know." He leaned down nose to nose, causing her laughter to choke. "But you like it."

Susie shook her head, but her smile probably gave her away. "We need to talk about Tyson."

"Right." Elliott finally dropped his arms from her back and pushed a hand through his hair. A piece of it stuck up, and Susie found herself wanting to comb it down for him...right after he wrapped her in his arms again.

Now who's ridiculous? she scolded mentally. *Focus. Tyson.*

Without warning, Elliott grabbed her hand and led Susie farther into the house and straight into the kitchen. "Have a seat." He pulled out a bar stool for her, and Susie hesitantly sat down. Continuing forward, Elliott began grabbing things out of the cupboard.

“What are you doing?” she finally asked.

“Getting brain food.” Elliott didn’t turn around, just continued to pile the counter with sprinkles, chocolate chips, marshmallows and other random chunks of sugar.

Susie eyed the display, finally understanding when he began pulling out containers of ice cream. “So you like sugar with your sugar? Or is it the other way around?”

Elliott winked. “Definitely the other way around.”

“Mother always said he’d rot his teeth out.”

Theo’s deep voice spooked Susie, causing her to jump in her seat and spin. The man was as big as Elliott, but twice as intimidating. Where Elliott was like a large, playful puppy, Theo was the doberman. Stoic, strong and ready to take you down if you so much as twitched wrong.

He nodded at her. “Susie.”

“Hey, Theo,” she squeaked, then cleared her throat. “Sorry to barge in like this.”

Theo shrugged and continued into the kitchen, grabbing bowls and bringing them to the bar area. “It sounds to me like you’re going to be barging in a lot.”

Elliott pointedly cleared his throat. “What my brother is trying to say is that I told them about us.”

“Us?” Susie raised an eyebrow. “You told them about our fake relationship?”

Theo’s eyebrows went up. “No. He didn’t mention it was fake.”

“Because it’s not,” Elliott added easily.

Susie took a deep breath and rubbed her forehead. “Thanks,” she muttered, accepting a bowl from Elliott as they each dished up sundaes. Her thoughts were such a mess. She was beginning to really like Elliott, but she couldn’t be in a real relationship with him. Someday he’d find out her secret, and then he’d run screaming the other direction, leaving her with a broken heart. She was already well on her way to getting one when their planned break-up happened in January. Susie had a feeling that getting over Elliott was going to be one of the hardest things she’d ever do.

Elliott plopped into the seat next to her, nudging her shoulder with his. “So...what’s going on?”

She glanced uneasily at Theo who was leaning against the counter, facing them and eating from his own bowl.

“It’s fine,” Elliott assured her. “He won’t tell anyone.”

Turning back to Elliott, she told him about the afternoon and her thoughts on the matter. “I know Adam makes enough to pay the bills, but it sounds like they didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving and I’m a little worried they aren’t going to celebrate Christmas either.”

“What happened to his wife?” Elliott asked around a mouthful of cookies and cream.

Susie frowned. “She passed away a couple years ago. Car accident, I think. No one saw it coming.”

Elliott grunted. “That had to be hard. And Tyson’s an only kid?”

She nodded, setting her spoon in her empty bowl. “Which is good on one hand, but hard on the other. A sibling would give him company, but it also would have been harder on Adam.”

“Are you sure he’s making the money you think he is?” Theo asked.

Susie turned to him to respond. “He works at one of the lumber mills just outside of town. I’ve never heard that they don’t pay their workers well.”

Theo pursed his lips and nodded slowly. “I would think it would be enough to live on, at least.”

Susie nodded. “I knew his wife, and I never got the impression they were anything but comfortable.”

“But Tyson is wearing his dad’s old coat,” Elliott said slowly. “And they don’t seem to be celebrating the holidays.” He narrowed his eyes and looked to Theo. “Could it just be a guy thing? The first holiday after her death, I can see how he’d be depressed and not want to celebrate. But several years later? And with a kid? It doesn’t quite make sense.”

Theo huffed and set his bowl to the side, then folded his arms over his chest. “Maybe I’ll do some asking around and see if anyone knows anything.”

Elliott turned to Susie. “How long has he been asking you for a date?”

Susie’s cheeks heated. “Uh, why does that matter?”

“I’m wondering how long he’s been ready to move on from his wife’s death,” Elliott said, his voice a little softer.

“Not that I blame him for trying to use you to move on, but if we’re guessing at motives here, it might help.”

Susie couldn’t quite meet his eyes, though she wasn’t sure why. Something about this topic was decidedly uncomfortable. “He’s, uh, been asking me to dinner since summer.” She twisted her fingers together. “I watched Tyson all during school break in my daycare. He wasn’t old enough for preschool until this year, but he stays during the after school daycare as well.”

Elliott nodded thoughtfully. “So this isn’t brand new.”

Theo sucked in a long breath. “I think there’s something we’re missing,” he murmured. “Something has changed.” His gray eyes met Susie’s. “And I think we need to figure out what.”

* * *

Elliott could tell they’d embarrassed Susie, and he loved it. Her bright pink cheeks were like a siren’s call, and he wanted to be the one to answer.

“So how do we figure it out?” Susie asked, bringing Elliott’s attention off her warm skin and back to the conversation. “You said you’d ask around, but I don’t really know who might know. Tyson certainly isn’t going to open up to me.”

“He might to me.” The words were out of Elliott’s mouth before he thought better of them, but they were true nonetheless. Tyson had jumped at the chance to hang out with

him while they fixed the fence. Clearing his throat, Elliott put on a thoughtful expression. “You don’t happen to need anything fixed around the school, do you?”

Susie studied him. She did that a lot, as if trying to read the sincerity of his thoughts. Little did she know he *was* serious, and about more than just spending time with Tyson.

One of the perks of being an owner of the store was that he could take time off when needed, and if Theo was in on the plan, he’d help Elliott get the time he needed to spend at the school.

School during the day, Mr. and Mrs. Claus at night. He wanted to cackle in glee, but Elliott restrained himself... barely.

“That might work,” Susie finally concluded. She tapped her short fingernails on the counter. “The building I use is far from new. I have no doubt there are a dozen and one things you could fix.” She made a face. “But I need us to be careful. I don’t necessarily have the budget to do everything.”

Elliott shook off her concerns. “We’re not going to worry about that. This is about Tyson and making his Christmas better than his Thanksgiving.” He grinned and winked. “You’ll find I’m pretty cheap labor, all things considered.”

Theo snorted into a mug he had produced from somewhere. It probably contained hot chocolate. Tease as he might about Elliott’s addiction to ice cream, Theo rarely went without a mug of hot chocolate in the evenings. It seemed a weird obsession for a guy like him, but Elliott hadn’t bothered to worry about it.

“Cheap labor?” Susie laughed. “Why does that just sound wrong?”

Elliott just grinned. “I’ll plan to come by tomorrow.”

She nodded, still smiling. “It might be easier to get him to chat if you come by late in the afternoon. Tyson is usually the last one picked up because Adam has to travel so far to come get him. I often have twenty minutes to a half hour alone with him.”

Elliott slapped a hand on the counter. “I just realized that your smoke alarms haven’t been checked in awhile. I should take care of that.”

Susie laughed softly.

He leaned in, ignoring yet another grunt from his caveman brother. “After all...it’s what a husband does.”

Susie gave him an exasperated look. “You’re not my husband.”

“So you say,” Elliott said, narrowing his eyes and leaning even closer. He could smell that sweet citrus again. It was quickly becoming his favorite scent. “And yet tomorrow night, we’ll be Mr. and Mrs. Claus. Sounds like a husband and wife to me.”

Susie huffed. “It’s fake.”

“You keep saying that about our relationship too.”

“Because it’s true,” she replied with a sigh of exasperation.

“True or fake?” Elliott held his hands out to the side as if weighing her responses. “They can’t be both.”

Susie rolled her eyes. “Elliott, you’re deliberately misconstruing my words.”

“Well, you’re deliberately trying to crush my dreams, so I guess we’re even.” He thought she would laugh at that, but all humor dropped from Susie’s face and it left Elliott unexpectedly feeling like a heel. What had he just said that had upset her? This wasn’t the first time they’d been teasing and having a good time only to have her suddenly go serious.

Susie stood up, picking up her bowl and taking it to the sink. “I’ll just wash this up and be on my way.”

“I got it,” Theo muttered, taking the bowl from her.

Susie backed away, looking frustrated and slightly scared.

He scares me too sometimes, Elliott thought wryly. Instead of saying it out loud, however, he used the moment to his advantage. Walking around the counter, he grabbed Susie’s hand. “Thanks, bro! See you in a bit.” He hoped Theo got the message, but a huff was his only response. It was good enough.

“I can see myself out,” Susie said, her voice monotone.

“I’d never let my wife walk to her car by herself,” Elliott said. “You should know that by now.” He grinned at her sigh. It could almost see the resigned tolerance. He could work with that.

Elliott opened the front door, then paused. “You didn’t bring a coat.” Somehow he had missed that when she arrived. He’d been too eager to hold her again. It was kind of becoming a problem.

“I left it in my car,” Susie explained. “It’s not like it takes long to walk across a driveway.”

“Charlotte would’ve never made it,” Elliott said with a chuckle, loving that Susie grinned and followed him outside. He guided her down to her car, then pulled her in front of him and wrapped his arms around her just as he had before. She fit so perfectly. He still couldn’t believe he’d never noticed her before. She’d always been *right there*. He was an idiot for dismissing her as his sister’s friend.

“You’re smothering me,” she muttered against his chest.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” he joked. “When you faint from lack of air, I’ll be right here to catch you.”

She laughed, easing the tension between them. Looking up, she studied him again.

Elliott ran his fingers over her forehead, smoothing the wrinkles. “Why so serious?”

She didn’t answer right away. “I can’t figure you out.”

His finger took on a mind of its own and began tracing her cheekbone. “What you see is what you get.”

She slowly shook her head, not to dislodge his hand, but to answer his statement. “That’s not correct.”

“Oh? Tell me what you think.” He hadn’t meant to, but his voice had dropped and his eyes couldn’t stop from straying to her mouth. He enjoyed flirting, but he definitely had something else on his mind. Something he hadn’t managed to get again in almost a week, and he was growing restless with waiting.

“I think you want people to underestimate you.”

The words were so soft it took him a moment to comprehend them, and when he did, he was struck momentarily mute.

“I think you like making people happy,” she continued, swallowing audibly. “But you can’t make everyone happy, Elliott. Not everything in life is good.”

One side of his mouth pulled up. “That’s kind of rich coming from the woman who’s willing to date me just to help one of her students.”

She shook her head and turned away, but Elliott cupped her cheek and pulled her in tighter when she shivered.

“Tell you what,” he whispered, slowly lowering his head. “We’ve already got our next date planned, and we’ll have to wait until tomorrow to start our plan with Tyson and Adam... so how about instead of worrying about anyone else, we just focus on us.”

“Us?” she squeaked, similar to the way she had inside.

“Us.” Elliott nodded, brushing his nose against hers. Her chilly skin froze in the winter air. “Right here, right now, we’re just going to make ourselves happy.” He kissed right next to her mouth. “Want to know how we do that?”

“Hmm?” Her eyes were closed, and her warm body leaned into his.

She probably had no idea what he’d just asked, but from her mannerisms, she knew exactly what was coming, and he wasn’t going to disappoint. “Just.” Another kiss next to her lip.

“Like.” One on the tip of her nose. “This.” He finally brought their mouths together, and found that his memory hadn’t been exaggerated. She was perfect, and she was his. She just didn’t know it yet.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Life was never going to be the same. Susie's fingers slowly crawled up Elliott's chest and then locked onto his neck as she held on for dear life. This man. He annoyed her, teased her, prodded her, and generally did everything he could to get under her skin and yet he was also kind, a gentleman, cared for others, looked out for his family, was good with children and had a heart bigger than anyone else she'd ever seen.

Despite how large he was, it seemed nuts that that much...muchness...could be packed into a single human being. And that human being was quickly stealing her heart, piece by tiny piece.

She pulled back, gasping, her breath visible in the cold night air.

Elliott smiled down at her, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, his finger leaving a trail of fire against her skin.

She was burning inside, but her skin was frigid in the winter temperatures. It was an interesting sensation. "Thank you," she whispered.

Elliott's eyebrows went up and then he chuckled. "I can't say I've ever been thanked for something like that, but you're

absolutely welcome.” He bent for another peck. “I’d be happy to have your thanks anytime.”

So much for cool skin. Why had she said something so stupid? Her cheeks were on fire and it reached all the way down her neck and chest. “You had said you were trying to make me happy,” she explained. “I thought I’d let you know it worked.”

His chuckle grew, and he tucked her under his chin. “Since I made myself just as happy, I think we can call it even. In fact, many would say that my kissing you was completely selfish.” He left a kiss on her hair. “I can’t say I completely disagree with them.”

Susie closed her eyes and sighed into his embrace. She shouldn’t do this, but...would it really be so bad? Would it hurt to pretend it was real? Despite Elliott’s declarations, Susie knew that when he found out about her secret, he’d be on his way. There was no way someone as vivacious as him would be content with a broken significant other. Susie had tried once, and she’d learned her lesson the hard way.

Despite that, would it really be terrible to enjoy the time she had? To let herself dream a little? To imagine what it would be like to be loved by someone like Elliott Brown?

“Take a walk with me,” he said in a husky tone.

Susie looked up. “A walk? It’s late, and it’s cold.”

“Grab your coat,” Elliott suggested. “You said it’s in your car.”

She nodded.

“And we’ll stick to the sidewalk. There’s light.”

Susie thought about it, and while she wasn’t thrilled with the weather, she also wasn’t thrilled with the idea of going to her dark and empty home. “Okay.” She unlocked the car and grabbed her coat, then her scarf as well.

“Let me.” Elliott took the scarf and slowly wrapped it around her neck before using it to pull her forward for another lingering kiss. “I never knew these things were so useful,” he murmured against her lips.

Susie couldn’t even get herself to respond. This man was sweeping her off her feet, and she wasn’t doing a thing to stop him. Giddiness, like she’d experienced as a young teenage girl, was running rampant through her system, and it made her feel young and light in a way she hadn’t experienced in a long time.

At almost thirty years old, Susie often felt her age keenly, especially as she watched other women her age getting married and having children. *But that’s not for you.*

An instant weight settled on her shoulders, and Susie grit her teeth against it. Tonight, her logical voice wasn’t welcome. She *knew* what her future held. But right now wasn’t the future, and she wanted to enjoy the present moment. She’d deal with the consequences later.

Holding hands, they began to saunter down the street, a brisk wind tugging at her coat as she snuggled down into her scarf. Too bad she hadn’t brought gloves, and maybe a hat as well.

“Did you always want to go into the military?” She blinked, just as surprised as Elliott by the question. She hadn’t been planning on starting up a conversation, but apparently her brain was just as out of control as her hormones.

He shrugged. “I suppose.”

Susie watched the somber look on his face. He didn’t like to talk about it. Maybe it brought up bad memories. She knew the story of Charlotte’s lost fiance. Charlotte had once mentioned that Beckett was good friends with the boys. The pieces began to fall into place. His service was probably associated with the death of his friend. She’d have to respect those boundaries no matter how curious she was.

“What made you go into engineering?”

His face softened as he glanced down at her. “I told you I’m good at math.”

“That doesn’t make someone want to be an engineer,” she shot back. “There are a million ways you can turn math into a career.”

He shrugged again, pursing his lips slightly and began walking again. “I don’t know. I like building things. I used to want to be a civil engineer and help design streets and other stuff, but once I went into the military...things changed.”

They walked in quiet contentment for a few more minutes.

“Did you always want to work with children?”

Her heart instantly leapt with sorrow. “Uh, no,” she said with an awkward laugh. Now she knew how he felt about not wanting to talk about it. Her decision to work with children

hadn't come until after her diagnosis. She'd realized it would be the only way for her to have a family.

Susie's mom had tried to assure her that she could simply adopt, but Susie had learned all too well the first time she'd spoken to her boyfriend about adopting, that men simply weren't interested in that. Dallin had walked away, and she knew Elliott would eventually do the same. *Men don't want to raise other men's kids.* A shiver ran through her at the memory.

"What did you want to do first?" he asked, openly curious and having no idea what a touchy subject he was hitting on.

"I wanted to be a chef."

Elliott stopped and put a hand to his heart. "Are you telling me that you like to cook?" he gasped.

"Bake, actually," she corrected, her smile less tight than before. "Although I don't mind cooking, it's not my favorite."

Elliott slowly shook his head. "Just wait until I get you into my kitchen."

"I was in there," she reminded him. "Tonight."

"But I was ignorant of the talent that lay before me!" Elliott began walking again, but this time back toward the house. "In fact, I'm sure we have time tonight for you to bake some cookies. Let's give it a try."

Susie laughed and planted her feet, tugging on his hand with both of hers. "Not tonight," she told him.

Elliott stopped and dramatically sighed, his shoulders slumping. “You have no idea how disappointing that is.”

Feeling slightly bold after their earlier kiss, Susie stepped up, rose on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “I promise I’ll make you some Christmas cookies soon, okay?”

Elliott’s eyes flared, and he took the hand he was holding and wrapped it around her back, tugging her in close. “I’ll hold you to that,” he murmured as he lowered his head.

“I hope you will,” Susie managed before he kissed her again.

* * *

Elliott stuffed his hands in his pockets, trying to warm them up as he watched Susie drive away. A warm fuzzy feeling was burning in his gut and he once again had a pang of regret that he’d never seen her before. It seemed like they wasted too much time apart when they could have been together. *Maybe you weren’t ready for her before.*

He paused at the thought. It had merit. When they first arrived in town, none of the siblings were in a good mental place, though he and Theo were spending most of their energy trying to keep Charlotte afloat. She had taken Beckett’s death the hardest and was a shell of her former self.

“But that’s all changed,” he muttered, his breath creating white steam in the cool air. Shivering just a bit, he turned and walked up the steps to his house, sighing at the heat when he closed the door and locked it.

“What time are you planning to go over tomorrow?”

Elliott worked hard to make sure his brother had no idea just how much he scared that pants off Elliott. Theo could be deadly quiet when he wanted to be, and apparently that was way too often for Elliott’s sense of well being.

“Probably around four,” Elliott said, slowly turning around to give himself enough time to not look startled. He folded his arms over his chest. “I’ll start with the smoke detectors and then see what actually needs to be fixed.”

Theo nodded slowly. “I remember changing batteries with Dad as a kid. Thought it was cool. Tyson’ll probably like that.”

Elliott nodded in return. “Yeah. I figured.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“You really like her.”

Elliott’s head jerked up. “I told you I did.”

Theo nodded again. “I needed to see for myself.”

“Pictures the other night wasn’t enough?”

Theo gave him a wry look. “You were dealing with children all night. Both of you were acting.”

Elliott huffed.

“She seems to like you back.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “You sound surprised.”

“Maybe I am.”

Elliott narrowed his eyes and began to stalk forward.

Theo raised an eyebrow. “Are you really going to try and take me down? You’ve never won. You might as well accept that now.”

“You’re getting older.” Elliott punched his brother’s shoulder, then bounced away. They hadn’t wrestled in years, not since well before Beckett passed away.

Theo glared right back. “One of these nights I’m going to sneak up on you while you’re sleeping and return the favor.”

Elliott made a face. “You’re creepy, you know that?”

Theo sniffed, began to walk away, but shoulder bumped Elliott on his way past, sending Elliott into the wall.

Knowing he was grinning like an idiot, Elliott straightened. “Well, if that wasn’t a challenge, I don’t know what is.” He ran after his brother, but Theo pounded up the stairs and slammed his door in Elliott’s face. “Coward!” Elliott pounded on the door.

“Somehow I doubt Susie’ll like it if you have two black eyes,” Theo shouted from the other side of the door.

Elliott chuckled and walked down to his own room, shutting the door and collapsing on his bed. He wasn’t tired yet, but he was feeling happier than he had in ages.

It was funny how a spur-of-the-moment decision could lead to something amazing. All it took was one spontaneous choice to protect Susie from an unwanted invitation, and now Elliott was acting like a stupid teenager with his first crush.

The pint-sized beauty had proven to be so much more than the quiet mouse he’d assumed she was, and now his life was

lining up before his eyes. It was decidedly better with his brother acting like his old self...even if only for a moment.

Elliott let his eyes drift closed as Susie's face came to mind. He could see her dark eyes, her wild curls and her dark pink lips. His fingers twitched with the desire to touch her skin and run his fingers through her hair. He didn't like to admit it, but the last few years had been hard. It had improved when Charlotte had found Noah and gotten married, but nothing quite compared to what Elliott was experiencing right now and what he was imagining for his future.

Susie still had doubts, he could tell, but tonight something had shifted. She'd let down her inhibitions and even initiated a kiss. Like his progress with Theo, it wasn't where Elliott wanted it to be, but it was a start.

She'd let him kiss her not once, but twice. She hadn't balked when he'd teased her. She'd accepted his help at the school and was planning on being there for pictures and dinner tomorrow night. And lastly, she said she'd make him cookies.

In other words, she was starting to accept their relationship.

Which was helpful, since Elliott had no plans of ever letting it end. He wanted Susie to be his. No matter how long he had to cajole, tease, or play Santa, he'd do it if it meant being at her side.

Who was he kidding? Even when she was his for good, he'd still act that way. Life was too short to act like anything but a kid on Christmas morning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Susie glanced at the clock. Only an hour or so left. She could handle that. Maybe. Okay, it was going to be a stretch, but at least she had help. The older kids were doing homework and Miss Tanya was reading a story to the youngest of the group.

Sitting in her chair, Susie surveyed the space, grateful for the good women who worked for her. She absolutely wouldn't be able to do this alone.

"I'm here!"

Every head in the room jerked up, and Susie's eyes bugged out when Elliott made a boisterous entrance, posing in the doorway and causing the children to laugh hysterically. She put a hand over her mouth at his antics, trying to reign it in, but it was no use. Her sort of fake, sort of real boyfriend was pretending to be a bodybuilder and the children were young enough to be eating it up. Except a few of the more studious girls. Ever, in particular, had stuffed her nose deeper into her book, though Susie was sure there had been an eye roll before the action.

Done with his posing, Elliott began sauntering across the room, and Susie jerked upright when she realized he was coming to her desk.

“Hello, Mrs. Claus,” he said in a low tone, leaning over her chair and caging her in.

Susie was trapped, but for the first time since they began this facade, she didn’t want to escape. “Hello.” Dang her voice for being so breathless. She might as well have a neon sign on her forehead that said *I’m attracted to Elliott Brown*. As if his ego really needed the boost.

One side of his mouth quirked up. It was so boyish and so *him*. “I’m looking forward to our dinner tonight.” His eyes dropped to her lips, then back up, the motion like phantom fingers drawing down her cheek.

I’m never going to make it until the end of class.

“I thought you were here for the smoke detectors,” she squeaked.

“Smoke detectors, schmoke detrectors,” Elliott teased, leaning in a little more.

Her heart began to pound, apparently trying to break through her ribcage. Was he going to kiss her right here? Right now? What about the—

“Eewww!” several children groaned.

“That’s what my dad does,” someone whined.

Susie pinched her lips together to keep from laughing, but she couldn’t quite stop it. And from the light wrinkles forming

on the side of Elliott's eyes, he couldn't either. Jerking upright, he turned toward the kids, hands on his hips. "Did you know you have a beautiful teacher?" he asked.

The reactions were varied. Some of the girls nodded, a couple boys gagged, and another groaned again, slumping in their seats until they were practically on the floor.

Susie, herself, was trying to contain the roaring inferno in her belly. Her cheeks were so hot she was sure she could melt all the snow outside, and from the way Tanya was watching her, everyone could tell.

"But you know what? Pretty as she is, I didn't come here to talk about Miss Susie." Elliott walked back around the desk and stood at the front of the room, then pointed upward. "Who knows what this is?"

The shouting was almost unbearable, and Susie winced before she could calm them down. "Raise your hands, please," she hollered, trying to control the chaos Elliott was creating. The smirk on his face said he wasn't the least bit repentant about it, either.

"Right!" he declared. "A smoke alarm." He raised a challenging eyebrow at the kids. "Now...by raise of hands, who knows what to do to make sure your smoke detector works?"

The kids looked at each other in confusion, but Ever, looking bored, raised her hand.

"Yes?" Elliott pointed to her.

“You have to put batteries in it,” Ever drawled, as if she were speaking to a particularly dense individual.

Susie frowned, but Elliott didn't look the least bit put out by the snarky girl's response.

“Right! I'm here to change all the batteries in your smoke detectors,” he announced. “Miss Susie and Miss Tanya love to keep you safe, so I'll be helping out for the next couple of weeks.” He looked carefully around the room and began ticking off his fingers, as if counting the number of detectors. “But you know what?” He turned back to the kids. “I'm going to need a helper.”

Immediately a dozen hands went in the air, but to Susie's shock, Tyson's wasn't one of them.

He sat in his chair, glaring at all the other children. It took Susie a minute to figure it out, but she realized he was jealous. The thought actually gave her some relief, since she knew the jealousy would be appeased in a moment. They needed Tyson to *want* to help Elliott. Their plan wouldn't work otherwise.

“Hmm...” Elliott tapped his lips with a finger. “So many choices...” Slowly, he walked the room, narrowing his eyes and studying each child, who straightened and tried to look their best.

It made Susie smile. She had no idea how much something like this would appeal to the children.

“Susie.”

Susie jerked and looked to the doorway. “Oh, Mrs. Stephens.” Standing, she motioned to Ben. “Your mother's

here,” she said to the now sulking child. Putting her arm around Ben, she leaned down. “Maybe you can help next time, okay?”

Ben nodded, but continued to drag his feet.

“Get your stuff from the cubby,” Susie urged, waiting until he had his backpack, then she walked him to the door.

“What’s Elliott doing here?” Mrs. Stephens asked with a low laugh.

Susie glanced over her shoulder to see Elliott being ridiculous again. “He’s helping with a few projects around the school.”

Mrs. Stephens frowned. “Are you shutting down for a renovation?”

“Oh, no,” Susie quickly assured her. “Just a few little things. It won’t affect our ability to be open.”

Relief was palpable from the woman’s face. “Oh good. I wasn’t sure what we would do if you closed up.”

Susie smiled and waved goodbye as the two walked out.

“She’s right,” Tanya said from just behind Susie.

She turned around.

Tanya gave her a small smile and tilted her chin toward Elliott. “If he sweeps you off your feet like he’s trying to, this town is going to be left with a hole the size of Texas.”

Susie shook her head. “If I didn’t run a daycare, someone else would. It’s just a business.”

Tanya's face became very serious. "It's not just a business, Susie." She put her hand on Susie's arm. "It's you. The children *and* the parents love you. They'd be devastated if you shut down because you got married or something."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing that's not happening, huh?" Susie tried to keep her words light, but the pain they brought was a stark reminder of a future that would never be hers. She might be playing house with Elliott right now, but it would never be able to last.

And someday Elliott will know, then he'll find someone he can have a family with.

* * *

Elliott wasn't sure why Susie grew so serious at the door, but he was too deep in his work to be able to find out. The kids were still watching him with wide eyes, at least most of them were. And he needed to pick one to help him with the detectors. Tyson, was playing hard to get, and it made Elliott all the more determined to draw him out.

"What about you?" He nudged Tyson's chair with his toe. "You look like a guy who can change a battery."

Tyson glared up at him, not giving into the compliment. His clothes hung off his slender frame and were wrinkled, though whether or not that was from unfolded laundry or simply a kid at play, was anybody's guess.

"Tyson?" Elliott asked. "Do you want to help me?"

Tyson glared a moment longer, looked around the room, then gave a short nod. The other kids groaned, and Tyson's lips twitched just a little bit. He apparently enjoyed the attention, even if he didn't want to admit it.

"Come on, Big guy," Elliott said with a wave of his hand. "Let's get this show on the road." He spun. "Oh, Miss Beautiful!" Susie's cheeks immediately flushed while the kids made more noise. Dang he loved doing that.

"Yes, Mr. Fix it?"

Elliott's grin widened. "I found my work partner. You don't mind if Tyson helps me, do you?"

She shrugged, playing along. "I think Tyson's a great choice."

Elliott nodded and pretended to hitch up his pants. "We'll start in the hallway," he told his helper and then he gave an exaggerated saunter as they walked out. The kids were laughing and making a ton of noise, but Elliott only felt a little guilty for the chaos.

They were kids. Let them cause a ruckus now and then.

He winked at Susie and smiled at Tanya as he and Tyson went through the doorway. "Do you see that one down there?" Elliott asked, pointing to the far end of the hallway.

"Yeah."

"Here." Tyson handed a pack of batteries to Tyson. "I'll need one brand new one with every smoke detector we work on."

Tyson stared at them. “These are weird.”

“Yeah?” Tyson pulled out his short ladder from where he’d set it against the wall on his way in. “How come?” They walked to the first detector and he planted the ladder, then climbed up.

“They’re square.”

“Those are called nine-volt batteries,” Elliott explained. He opened the detector and unhooked the first battery. “They get used a lot in kid toys.” Stuffing the old battery in his pocket, Tyson held out his hand for the new one, which Tyson dutifully supplied. “Santa probably brought you a toy or two with those inside.”

Tyson scowled.

“Wait...what’s that face for?” Elliott asked, locking the cover back on. He grabbed the ladder. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you don’t like Santa!”

Tyson shrugged and followed Elliott into a side room.

He set up the ladder once again, moving a touch slower. This would go too fast if he wasn’t careful. “What did Santa ever do to you?” Elliott teased. “He always brought me the best presents. I still remember getting a lightsaber one year.” Elliott gave Tyson a conspiratorial look. “I hit my brother with it so many times that my mom took it away.”

Tyson gave Elliott a shy grin. “I don’t have a brother.”

Elliott nodded. “That’s okay. If I didn’t have a brother, I probably would have hit my cousin or my neighbor.” He

shrugged. “I was always hitting something.” Elliott waited a beat. “What do you like to do?”

Tyson opened his mouth, paused and snapped it shut. He shrugged again.

Dang it. This wasn’t going to be as easy as Elliott had hoped it would be. “Nothing? You like to do nothing?” Elliott put his hand out for the next battery.

Tyson plopped one on Elliott’s palm, not answering.

“Well, how about I ask you this then, what are you going to ask Santa for for Christmas this year?” There. Blunt and simple. This beating around the bush stuff was stupid.

Tyson’s eyebrows pulled together. “There’s no such thing as Santa.”

Elliott’s hands froze. “What?”

Tyson rolled his eyes. For a kid with no older siblings, he sure acted like he was older. “I’m not a baby. I know there’s no Santa.”

Elliott made a face. “Um...I’m an adult, and I believe in Santa.”

Tyson’s face slipped just a bit. “You believe in Santa?”

Elliott nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“Does he...?” Tyson stopped whatever he was going to ask and studied the floor.

“Does he what?” They packed up the ladder and headed to the next room across the hall. The storage room wasn’t as easy to navigate, but they eventually found the detector. “Does he

fly a sleigh? Have eight tiny reindeer? Really visit all the children around the world on Christmas Eve?”

Tyson shook his head, still struggling to meet Elliott’s eyes.

“Help me out, Bud,” Elliott pushed. “What were you going to ask?”

Tyson held out the next battery. “How many brothers do you have?”

Elliott hesitated, but decided to give the kid a break. “One.”

“The one you hit with the lightsaber?”

Elliott grinned. “Yep. He’s older than I am. I also have a younger sister.”

Tyson blinked a few times. “There were three kids in your family?”

Elliott nodded again. “Good counting. Yes.”

“And you’re in the middle?”

“Uh, huh.” Elliott unlocked the detector, yanking out the perfectly good battery. They were going through a lot of waste today for no good ideas.

“Did Santa ever forget there were so many kids at your house?”

The question brought Elliott to a screeching halt. His hands froze in mid air and he looked down. “Not that I can remember,” Elliott said carefully. “Why do you ask?”

Another one of those infernal shrugs. Whoever thought up that vague movement of body language was going to get an earful from Elliott.

Stepping down from the ladder, Elliott sat down on the second to bottom rung, and leaned forward so he was about the same height as Tyson. “Hey, buddy,” he said softly. “Why don’t you tell me what you were going ask earlier? Why do you think Santa would forget how many kids were at my house?”

Several long heartbeats pounded through Elliott’s chest before Tyson finally spoke up. “Because he forgot how many were at mine.”

If someone’s heart could stop from a single sentence, this one made Elliott’s come to a halt. He felt as if he couldn’t breathe for just a split second before the world came back into view. “Tyson, when was the last time Santa came to visit you?”

Tyson shook his head.

“You don’t remember?” Elliott clarified. “Or you don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” Tyson whispered. His face was red and his eyes downcast as if he couldn’t bare to look at Elliott. “That’s how I know he’s not real,” Tyson defended himself, his voice growing louder as his shame turned to anger. “Every other kid says he came to their houses, but he doesn’t come to mine. He *never* comes to mine.”

Elliott reached out and put his hand on Tyson's shoulder. "I think, maybe...Santa just got confused."

Tyson stepped back, breaking their contact. "I don't have a mom, and Santa doesn't come. I hate Christmas!" Dropping the pack of batteries, Tyson turned and ran out of the room.

Elliott didn't chase him. The boy needed a moment to collect himself, and Elliott needed to process everything that had just happened. This was so much worse than he'd expected. Assuming Adam had no money was a lot different than a child not having any kind of childhood. But why? Adam seemed like a good guy, if a little overbearing, so why would he neglect his son like this?

Standing, Elliott rubbed the back of his neck. He needed to talk to Susie. It seemed they had only pulled back the first layer of this mystery.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Don’t eat it all at once,” Susie teased, tweaking the little boy’s nose.

He grinned, crinkling that tiny nose, and grabbed the candy cane before bounding off the little stand and taking the hand of his waiting mother.

Susie waved, but the little boy’s attention was solely on Santa. She turned, noting Elliott’s smile was less than genuine. Not that he wasn’t being good with the kids, he absolutely was, but there was less playfulness in him tonight and it made her wonder what had happened during his time with Tyson today.

Tyson had come running back into the room, declaring glumly that they were done. Afterwards, he’d sat down and refused to participate in any more activities until his dad came to pick him up.

She’d been so busy getting all the children gone before grabbing her costume and rushing to the hardware store that she hadn’t had a chance to speak to Elliott yet. A quick glance at the clock told her they only had half an hour left before they

would go to dinner and she could finally get all her explanations.

“This is Miss Penny.” Theo handed off a toddler, who was pushing against him with all her might.

“Miss Penny!” Susie declared. “Aren’t you just precious!” She smiled wide, but the girl was having none of it. “Are you ready to see Santa?” she asked.

Twisting her body, the little girl tried to go back for her mother.

Susie followed the line of sight and raised her eyebrows. “Do you want to help?” she asked. “Or do you want us to get pictures with them alone?”

The mother hesitated. She looked young, very young, and Susie noticed she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Swallowing hard, Susie kept her smile in place.

The child pushed and cried out, reaching for her mom again.

“Fine.” The mother stepped up and took back Penny. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“It’s fine,” Susie said, still forcing her smile into place. The more she looked, the more Susie realized the mother could still be a teenager herself. “She just loves her mother, is all.”

The mom paused and gave a shy smile. “Thanks.” She looked at Elliott who was waiting patiently. “Do I just...” She nudged a shoulder toward him.

“Oh, yes.” Putting her hand on the girl’s back, Susie led her up. “Santa. This is Miss Penny.” The little girl had her forehead tucked on her mother’s shoulder and her thumb in her mouth. “And this is...” Susie raised her eyebrows.

“Uh, I’m Morgan.”

“Miss Morgan.”

Elliott smiled, his eyes crinkling over his huge beard. “Ho, ho, ho!” he said, holding his belly. “Welcome, Miss Penny and Miss Morgan!” He held out his arms, but Penny clamped onto her mother like a monkey.

Susie laughed a little under her breath.

Elliott leaned forward. “Okay, then...Miss Penny. What is it you want for Christmas? I can see you love your mother very much, so you must be a very good girl.”

Penny blinked several times, but didn’t speak.

Morgan bounced her a little. “She doesn’t really talk much. I was hoping to get a picture to send to my mom?”

Elliott nodded. “Absolutely.” He patted his knee. “Come on over.”

Morgan hesitated, and Susie’s eyes widened.

What is he doing?

“If Miss Penny won’t sit by herself, we’ll have you do it together.” He patted his knee again.

Susie swallowed back a large swirl of jealousy that threatened to choke her. Elliott was just being silly and acting the part, but a completely irrational part of her hated the

thought of a young, beautiful woman with a baby sitting on Elliott's knee.

It's not like you can give him that.

Darn that cynical voice in the back of her head. Why couldn't it just leave her alone until after the holidays?

"Mrs. Claus?"

Theo's deep voice caught Susie's attention, and she forced eyes away from the giggling mother and petulant child.

Theo waved a hand toward the chair, and Susie rushed over, standing next to the chair/throne and smiling dutifully.

"Merry Christmas!" Elliott yelled, making everyone smile.

Once it was over, Susie helped the girl down, gave Miss Penny a candy cane, which she was all too happy to take, and they left the building without looking back.

And so it went for the last half hour. Susie was immensely grateful it went so fast since her feet were killing her and she was ready to throw the stupid Mrs. Claus wig into the rafters.

"Thank you," she said to Theo, when he held out his hands for the bowl of candy canes.

He nodded, not showing any emotion on his face.

Despite their chat the other night, the man still made Susie nervous. She wished she could get a better read on him, but he was as closed off as Elliott was open. She thought he cared and maybe didn't hate her, but it was extremely difficult to tell.

Elliott stretched and groaned. “That chair is going to paralyze me before this season is over.”

Susie smiled. “Not good, huh?”

“Well, I can’t feel my backside at this point, so there’s a plus.”

She laughed, feeling a little lighter. She was still worried about Tyson, and the ugly flare of jealousy had Susie in knots. What was she really getting into here? How long could this possibly last? Could she hide her secret from Elliott through the holidays? Would he throw her away before then?

While her mind wandered, Elliott tugged her into his chest, and she found herself choking on fake fur and itchy backing. “I can’t breathe,” she wheezed.

Elliott’s chest rumbled with a laugh. He kissed the top of her head, then let her go. “Meet me in five.” With a hairy peck on her lips from his synthetic beard, he bounded down the stairs, not looking like his legs and back were bothering him at all.

Shaking her head, Susie grabbed the sweet sensation of his kiss and held on with both hands like Penny had held onto her mother. Moments like this were the only thing that were going to sustain her when it was all over.

Yanking off the wig that had bothered her the whole night, she pulled out her ponytail and ran her fingers through her hair, sighing at the relief it created in her scalp. She probably looked like a sweaty rat, but right now Susie didn’t care. Wig

hair was real, and it was going to be a part of her life for a few more weeks yet.

Fifteen minutes later, she eyed her watch in a teasing manner when Elliott came sauntering out of the backroom.

He grinned unrepentantly and swept her into his arms. “Sorry,” he said in a low tone. “I had to make sure I looked good for my wife.”

“You’re married!” she replied in mock horror. “And what does your wife think of your moonlighting with me?”

The last of the tension that had been sitting in Elliott’s eyes eased, and he lowered his face to hers. “You’ll have to ask her yourself,” he whispered, their lips just barely brushing. “You know her better than anyone else.”

Susie leaned into his kiss and eagerly grabbed his shirt. This. She needed this. It was selfish of her, knowing they couldn’t last, but a kiss like this would last her for years. Elliott had caused a longing in her that she thought she’d buried years ago, and she knew she’d pay for it later, but right now, Susie ignored her cynical voice and took what he was willing to give.

Soon enough it was all she’d have left.

* * *

Elliott held open the door of the sandwich shop. It wasn’t exactly fancy, but he was starving, and it would get them food quickly, not to mention, at this time of night they could sit and chat as long as they wanted.

“What sounds good?” he asked, leaning down so he was close to Susie’s ear. He grinned when a shiver ran through her. He didn’t care if it was due to the cold. He was going to claim ownership.

“Hot chocolate,” she said, glancing over her shoulder, giving him a soft smile.

He rested his hands on her hips and tucked her back against his chest. “You need dinner too.”

She made a face, but Elliott raised an eyebrow and she rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Smiling at his victory, he looked back up at the board. Within a few minutes they were sitting at a table, waiting for their orders. Susie had her hands wrapped around a steaming mug while Elliott sipped at a soda.

“So,” she began, blowing over her mug. “What happened with Tyson this afternoon? He came back looking a bit dejected.”

Elliott scoffed. “That’s a nice way of putting it.” He looked up from under his eyelashes. “I think I messed it up with him.”

She frowned, her bottom lip poking out just the slightest bit and catching Elliott’s attention. “What do you mean?”

Leaning back in his seat, Elliott pushed a hand through his hair. He’d taken the time to comb it after wearing the hat and wig all evening, but right now his mind was on other things. He went through each and every painstaking detail, sharing what Tyson had told him, and by the end Elliott felt worse than he had when the little boy had run out of the storage room.

Susie's eyes were wide. "Oh, wow," she whispered.

Elliott nodded. "Yeah." Their conversation paused for a moment while a worker brought them their plates, but neither of them began eating right away.

Susie was chewing on her bottom lip, her eyes unfocused.

"What are you thinking?" Elliott asked, toying with the pickle on his plate. He was half worried she'd walk off, telling him he was stupid and not worth her time. She worked with children all day, and Elliott had never seen any of them run away from her the way Tyson had run away from him.

"I think we might need to talk to Adam."

He jerked upright. "What?"

Sighing, Susie's dark eyes came back to his. "I think we need to talk to Adam." Reaching over the table, she put her hand on Elliott's. "I told you, he's a good guy. I've known him a long time, and I can't imagine that he's a negligent father."

Elliott frowned.

"I'm not ready to call child services or do anything drastic until we've talked to him." She let go of Elliott's hand and rubbed her forehead. "If things look bad at the house, then we'll get someone else involved, but otherwise, I feel like we need to give him a chance to explain himself or ask for help."

Elliott drummed his fingers on the table. "What if he isn't willing to talk to us?"

She shrugged. "Then I guess we take the next step." She looked up, her eyes pleading for Elliott to understand, but he

wasn't sure what she wanted him to know. "I have to make sure Tyson's okay," she said in a low tone so no other patron heard their conversation. "It's my job to keep my kids safe."

This woman was going to make a fantastic mother someday, and the image of her holding the tiny baby during their first picture night came flashing back with shocking intensity.

Elliott didn't like the idea of Susie confronting Adam. Yes, she might have known them for several years, but people changed. After the death of his wife, he probably wasn't the same guy she remembered from before. "I'll go with you," he said, not leaving any room for argument in his tone.

But Susie still hesitated.

Elliott shook his head. "I know you think he's harmless, but I don't want to risk it. I'll be with you."

She shrugged. "I suppose he thinks we're together anyway, so it's fine."

A sharp prick hit his chest. "And what do you think?" he dared to ask. Elliott knew he'd been pretty bold during their little fake-dating stint. But he also thought he'd been awfully clear that he didn't want it to be fake. Who cared if he was the type of guy to make quick decisions? He'd kissed her; he'd known. It was as simple as that, and Elliott made a point of not being the type of guy to be swayed by popular opinion.

He might have control over his choices and reactions, but the one thing he didn't have control over was Susie. She'd

been a good sport about all his shenanigans, but Elliott was never quite sure where he stood with her.

She hasn't slapped me yet, so we'll count that as a partial victory.

A small smile played on her lips. "Honestly? I'm not sure what I think."

That wasn't quite what he was hoping for, but it wasn't a no. "And why is that?" Elliott reached across the table, unwound one of her hands from the mug and played with her warm fingers. "I thought I'd made myself clear in my own opinion on the matter."

Susie watched their fingers and didn't respond right away. "I haven't been sure how much is play and how much is real," she admitted in a low tone.

He stopped. "None of it is play." He waited. Hopefully, she'd hear the sincerity in his voice. He'd never thought his desire to laugh and have a good time would make having a love life so difficult. When he took a woman on a date, they usually enjoyed his outgoing personality.

He hadn't always been quite so extroverted, but when he was making up for the somberness of others, it sometimes meant he was over the top.

She frowned. "I just don't get how you can ignore me one minute and then decide you want to date me the next." She shook her head. "I like you, Elliott, more than I should. But that doesn't really negate the fact that we've known each other for several years. Why now?"

He cleared his throat, glad he didn't have any food in his stomach yet. At the rate they were going, dinner was going home in a bag. But if it meant they walked out of here with Susie fully his, it would be worth it.

Pushing his plate to the side, he did the same with her mug and took both of her hands. "I don't think I ever gave you a chance," he said firmly. "You were Charlotte's friend. That was all I cared about. She needed friends, and you were there —. End of story." He took a deep breath. "But after kissing you under the holly"—he grinned when she laughed a little—"something changed. You weren't just my little sister's friend. You were a woman. You were always beautiful, but now I also know you're kind, you're smart, you're caring, you're stubborn"—he gave her a look which she returned—"and you're an amazing caregiver. I also like you...a lot, but definitely not more than I should." He squeezed her hands. "I want to get to know you more. I want this thing to be real. I don't want to lose you after the holidays are over." He took a deep breath. "And I want to help you take care of Tyson. I don't know what's going on with Tyson and Adam, but something's wrong and I want to help you figure it out."

Her eyes were misty and Elliott a frisson of electric fear ran down his spine for a moment that she was going to turn him down. The fake-dating had been useful in the moment, but he didn't want it to keep being fake. He didn't want to keep teasing about it being real, he just wanted it real.

But she had to agree.

After a moment, she blinked several times, pushing the tears away and slowly nodding. “Okay,” she breathed.

“Okay?” he asked, slightly shocked she had agreed.

“Okay.” She laughed a little, probably at his expression and pulled her hands back. “But you better eat your dinner,” she scolded. “Because I have every intention of making my boyfriend take me for a walk under the stars tonight. You’ll need your energy.”

Elliott grabbed his sandwich, though what he really wanted to grab was her, and took a bite. “Yes, ma’am,” he said around a mouthful, smiling when she gave him a tolerant yet amused look. He had a feeling he’d be seeing that expression a lot, and he couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Susie's stomach was in knots. She couldn't believe she had been bold enough to tell Elliott her real thoughts. *Well... most of them anyway.*

Someday, her decision to hide her condition was going to come bite her in the backside, but right now, she was flying too high to care.

Elliott held open the door, and they walked into the cool, crisp night.

Susie shivered and wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck. "I hate winter," she muttered.

"Girls," Elliott said with a laugh. He took her hand and yanked off the glove she'd put on only moments before.

"Hey!"

Ignoring her, Elliott entwined their fingers, and he pulled her hand up to press a kiss on the back. "I promise to keep it warm," he murmured, his eyes trained on her.

Another shiver went through her, but this one had nothing to do with the cold.

“Come on.” He tugged on her hand, and they began a slow meander down the street.

Her nose quickly went numb, but true to his word, the hand that Elliott was holding stayed toasty and comfortable. Men were natural born heaters, and it wasn't fair.

“When do you want to talk to Adam?” Elliott asked, giving her fingers a small squeeze.

Susie pursed her lips. “Do we have pictures tomorrow?” she asked. “I can't remember off the top of my head.”

Elliott shook his head. “Not until Thursday. Then we're solid through the weekend.”

Susie nodded. “That's right. Umm...I suppose I'll chat with him when the opportunity presents itself.” She huffed. “Hopefully, that's sooner rather than later. I'd really like to make sure we get Tyson the help he needs before Christmas.”

Elliott glanced down at her, concern written all over his face. “And you don't think we need to call Child Services?”

She quickly shook her head. “No. I really don't think Adam is hurting Tyson...at least not intentionally.” She sighed, her breath coming out in a great puff of white steam. “It's more likely he's depressed and forgetful, rather than abusing Tyson. I haven't seen any real signs of abuse. Tyson is angry and seems to want attention, but there's no unexplained bruises and he doesn't duck or run when an adult approaches.”

Elliott didn't respond, but his face was solemn.

“You don't believe me,” Susie stated.

Elliott shrugged. “I don’t know him like you do. But I’ve seen people I knew as children become completely different when life smacks them upside the head.” His shoulders slumped slightly. “When his wife died, it might have done something to Adam that changed him. I just...I don’t want you to be caught off guard by it.”

Susie frowned, facing straight ahead, her mind churning with the beginnings of anger. Elliott was right, he didn’t know Adam the way she did. Adam was a good dad. A good guy. She was positive he’d never do anything to hurt Tyson, not on purpose. He was grieving and lost, that’s all it was. He didn’t know how to handle young kids, and Tyson was a handful. Anyone would have trouble with him.

“I can hear you arguing with me in your head,” Elliott said with a sigh. “I’m not trying to crush your thoughts about your friend, Sue. I just want us to go into this with our eyes wide open. Tyson needs help. Our job is to find out how much.”

She scoffed. “Don’t call me that.” She sounded like a petulant child, but she didn’t care.

Elliott turned his head to look at her. “Can I ask why? Or are you too angry to talk?”

She glared up at him, but forced herself to keep holding his hand. *He’s warm, after all. Can’t afford to lose that body heat.* Funny how it took so little time to crash to the floor of reality after floating on the ceiling of dreams from their little chat at dinner. Why did life always have to get in the way of everything?

“My dad used to call me Sue.”

“Okay...?” He left the question hanging, but she knew what he was really asking.

“He’s gone,” she whispered. “And my nickname went with him.”

Groaning, Elliott stopped and pulled her into his chest. “I’m sorry,” he murmured into her hair. “That had to be hard.”

“He and my mom went at the same time.”

Elliott stiffened. “You can’t be serious.”

She nodded into his chest and wrapped her arms around him. She didn’t talk about her parents much, for this very reason. The weight of their deaths still hung heavy around her neck. Yes, she’d been an adult when they passed, but that didn’t erase the pain of being orphaned.

Most people would be upset that their mother and father would never be at their wedding, or would never get to see their grandchildren, but Susie’s pain was much more simplistic.

She wasn’t going to have a wedding or children, which meant she missed the tiny things. She missed Sunday dinners and asking her dad for help on the crosswords. She missed watching them open her Christmas presents and receiving something in return. She missed her mother’s voice while she preached about certain cooking techniques that Susie knew forward and backward, but pretended to just be learning for the sake of her mother.

“I lost someone close to me as well,” Elliott said softly. “I’m sure Charlotte told you all about it, but...it was hard on

all of us, not just her.”

Susie tightened her hold, her anger forgotten in the moment. “I’m sorry.” She could feel him shrug. “I’ve heard Charlotte’s side of the story, but it had to hurt to lose a friend, as well.”

They held each other for several minutes, but eventually, Susie began to shake from the cold. No matter how warm Elliott was, he couldn’t quite counter the grasp of the frigid winter air.

“I need to let you get home,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

“I don’t want to go.” She snapped her mouth shut, not having meant to give so much away. She’d already told him too much at dinner. At the rate she was going, every piece of her was going to be displayed between them by Christmas, and when Elliott inevitably decided they wouldn’t work, Susie would be left picking up too many pieces.

He chuckled, bouncing her slightly and rubbing her back. “If I wasn’t worried about you getting hypothermia, I’d say let’s sit on the beach and watch the sunrise, but I’m pretty sure we’d never make it.”

“Ugh. That sounds sandy and cold.”

He laughed harder. “So noted. Not a morning person.”

Smiling, Susie looked up, resting her chin against his sternum. “Actually, I get up pretty early, I have to in my line of work, but I’ve never been a big fan of sand.”

He gave her an amused look and tucked some hair behind her ear. “You live on the coast. How is that possible?”

“It’s lovely to look at,” she clarified. “But such a mess to clean up.”

He made a face, looking awfully sheepish.

“You were the type of person to bring a mess into your mom’s house, weren’t you?” she asked, not the least bit surprised by the revelation.

“Uh...” Elliott rubbed the back of his head. “Maybe?”

Susie tsked her tongue in a teasing manner. “Your poor mother. I’ll bet every gray hair she has is because of you.”

Elliott nodded. “Probably.”

“You don’t even sound repentant!” she cried, slapping his chest.

Elliott’s smile was so bright, Susie could have watched it forever. He caught her hand and brought it up for a kiss against her palm. “If you think I drove my mom crazy, just wait to see what it’s like to have me for a husband.”

Susie rolled her eyes. “We’re not married,” she groaned. “Seriously, Elliott. I’m just now beginning to think you’re not joking with me. The marriage thing is getting old.”

He leaned down, their mingled breaths drifting through the air together. “Then I suppose we’ll just have to make it real in order for me to stop, hm?”

* * *

He'd scared her. He could feel it in the way she stiffened and leaned back from him, but Elliott pushed the concern aside. So, he'd gone a little too far. It was fine. He knew what he wanted, and he would eventually wear her down the same way he'd worn her down about admitting they were dating.

No pain. No gain.

It was a simple enough motto, and it had gotten him far in life, whether through physical activity or through mental games like this. All he had to do was to outlast Susie's fear, and then their future would be set.

He was a bit shaken at the fact that she didn't have siblings and her parents were gone, though. Not to mention he couldn't use a certain nickname since her father, who had passed, had claimed it first. That was an eye opener.

"Elliott, please don't tease about things like that." She pulled back, fussing with her coat and gloves.

He gave her a bit of space, but this conversation would come up again. He'd already made up his mind. Holding out his hand, he decided tonight wasn't that night. "Let me walk you back."

Relaxing a little, she took his hand, and they walked back to the restaurant. This wasn't exactly the romantic walk he'd had in mind when they'd begun. Not after she'd been willing to admit to liking him and making their fake relationship real.

Like all the other moments, he was going to keep marking it as a step in the right direction.

“I noticed you’ve got some trim that’s rotting,” he said casually, swinging their hand. “I’ll plan on coming to work on replacing that tomorrow.”

“Any idea on cost?” she asked.

Elliott huffed. “This isn’t about the cost.”

She pulled him to a stop. “I’m not letting you pay for all these repairs,” she said softly, but firmly. “I run a good business, and I can afford to take care of it. But I want to know ahead of time what to expect. You’re spending your time and efforts helping me. I’m not going to take advantage of you.”

Elliott smirked and couldn’t stop himself. “I kind of wish you’d take advantage of me.”

Susie let her head drop back and closed her eyes in exasperation. “Elliott,” she groaned. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

Those dark eyes glared at him. “I’ll come buy the supplies.”

“Susie, I’m not worried about that.”

“But I am!”

“Woman!” he declared. “Are you trying to out stubborn me? Because it won’t work.”

Her frown shifted, but she was trying hard to hold it into place. “Did you just call me ‘woman?’ Because I think that term went out a long time ago, and it was never meant to be anything but derogatory.”

He kept his grin on and wound his arms around her waist. “I don’t see what’s derogatory about it,” he assured her. “I rather like that you’re a woman.”

“I believe it’s the fact that men saw women as inferior to them,” she said wryly, but didn’t resist when he buried his face in her neck.

Geez, she smelled good.

“Then those men were idiots. Anyone with half a brain knows that women run the world.” Her soft laugh did funny things to his nerve endings, and he scrambled for a way to make her laugh again.

“I’m serious though, Elliott. I don’t want you to do these things for free.”

“I’m not.” He raised his head. “I’ve been promised Christmas cookies, and you better believe I’m holding onto that promise like a kid with a candy cane.” He tugged her slightly closer.

“That’s it? That’s all you want is Christmas cookies?”

He smiled and leaned down. “Well...now that you mention it...I wouldn’t mind a few moments under the mistletoe. Those are by far my favorite.”

“I thought your favorite was holly berries,” she teased in a whisper, stretching up to meet him.

“Red berries. That’s all I need.” Just as he was about to bring their mouths together, she pulled back and patted his cheek.

“Too bad there’s no red berries around here. You’ll just have to wait, I suppose.” With a triumphant grin, she began to march down the street, but Elliott wasn’t going to let her get away. The chase was half the fun, and he knew how to track things down better than anyone.

Lunging a couple of steps, he grabbed her waist and brought her back to his chest. “Cookies or a kiss, Susie. I need one of those as payment for this afternoon. What’ll it be?”

“I don’t have any cookies,” she said breathlessly. “And I’m fresh out of mistletoe and holly berries.”

He grinned. “Put that amazing brain to good use, Mrs. Claus.” He kissed the tip of her ear. “I need my payment.”

“You won’t take an I.O.U.?”

He slowly shook his head, his arms wrapping around her even tighter. “I know better than that. You’re a runner. If I don’t get paid now, I won’t get paid at all.”

“You just said you work for free.”

He chuckled, letting his forehead fall on her shoulder. This woman had an answer for everything. “I changed my mind,” he said, his voice slightly muffled against her coat.

She slowly spun in his arms and he let her. “I thought that was a woman thing,” she said with her eyebrow raised.

“I told you, women run the world,” he responded. “So pay up. Cookies or kisses?”

She took a breath, grabbed the edges of his coat and tugged.

He let her pull him down, anticipating the moment their lips touched. He would never get tired of kissing her. His body warmed, and his fingers flexed. His heart thumped hard against his chest, and hopefully, she couldn't hear quite how excited he was. He had to maintain at least a light semblance of being in charge.

Their lips were just about to brush when she spoke. "Cookies," she whispered. Stepping back, she winked, then turned and strutted, actually strutted away from his shocked state until she reached a door just barely down the street. Pointing to the sign, she slipped inside.

Elliott hurried to follow and laughed out loud when he realized it was a cafe and they sold cookies. He shook his head. Susie had shifted tonight and she was playing dirty...and it was the best thing to ever happen to him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Susie winced every time she heard Elliott crack more trim off the floor. The few kids left at the daycare were watching the door, completely distracted from their homework and craft activity.

“What in the world is he doing out there?” Tanya muttered as she cut out construction paper trees.

“He’s replacing some rotted trim,” Susie muttered, wondering if the whole building was going to come down on their heads. Elliott was a military guy, right? Where did he learn to do remodels? Was this his first one? Why had she trusted him in the first place?

Because he’s intelligent, capable, and somehow can sweet talk you into anything with the tiniest wiggle of his finger.

She huffed at herself. Weren’t women supposed to play hard to get? Instead, Susie was falling into his arms like a stupid fairy tale princess with no brain of her own. This was what she got for not dating for so long. She’d become so lonely that she was making rash decisions.

CRACK!

She winced again. She didn't have to have a boyfriend to go on the occasional date. Maybe she needed to prioritize some more social time in her life so she never got this desperate again.

That'll be difficult when you have a broken heart at the start of the new year.

Curse her logical side. It always interfered at the worst time. It was just a month. Couldn't she have one month of peace before going back to her lonely existence? Snorting softly at her dramatic thoughts, Susie put the problem out of her head and focused back on the children left.

"Who needs help with their homework?" she asked, standing from her desk and walking around. It was the end of the day, and the kids were wearing out. Dinner and time with their parents would be a welcome distraction.

Fifteen minutes later, all but Tyson were gone, and he was still helping Elliott. Hopefully, the little boy was more forthcoming this time. *At least he hasn't come running back.*

"Where's Ty?"

Susie's head jerked up at the sound of Adam's voice. "Hey, Adam." She stood and brushed off the front of her pants, more from nerves than actual need. "He's, uh, helping Elliott work on some trim."

Adam frowned, but he was smiling a little as well, like he wasn't truly upset. "Again? Are you starting to use the kids for child labor?"

Susie's laugh was forced. "Not quite. He seems to enjoy it, and it helps him get out his energy."

A dirty hand went through Adam's hair. "Yeah...I can't quite keep up with the little guy."

Susie nodded and swallowed. Should she bring it up? Should she ask him some questions? It seemed like the perfect opportunity had fallen into her lap, and now she was too scared to take it. Elliott had wanted to be here, but he was distracting Tyson, which would probably make it easier.

"Adam," Susie ventured, glancing around to make sure no one else was in the room. Tanya had left when the last child had been picked up. "I just wanted to ask if everything was okay at home?"

Adam's thick brows pulled down. "What's this about, Susie?"

She took a breath for courage, but her racing heart had to be heard from the other side of the city. "I'm worried about Tyson," she said carefully. "He struggles with friends, and he's said some things about Christmas that lead me to believe—" She cut off when Adam stomped toward her.

"What did he say?" he growled, his voice low and intense.

Susie backed up, not sure what to think of this version of her friend. She'd never seen him so upset. "Adam, you're scaring me," she said, forcing herself to remain calm. She knew panic would absolutely not help her right now, but it was taking every ounce of self control she had to keep from giving

into it. Where was her childhood friend? Where was the man who'd married sweet, quiet Amy?

Adam stopped and closed his eyes, stretching his neck from side to side before he looked at her again. "I'm sorry," he ground out. "I just..." He spun and marched away, then turned to face her. "It's hard, you know? It's hard."

Susie nodded. "I know," she responded softly. "I can imagine."

"Amy...she..." His words cut off, and his lip curled before he shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he grunted. "Where's Ty? I need to go."

Susie's heart fell. She didn't have any answers yet! "Adam, I'd like to help."

"No one can help," he grumbled. "Seriously. Where's Ty?"

"Please, Adam, let's just—" She stopped talking when Adam stormed out the door, apparently tired of asking her where Ty was. She scrambled after him, knowing the construction noises would guide the way.

"Ty, let's go," Adam said tightly as soon as he rounded the corner.

"Dad!" Tyson yelled.

Susie could hear the smile in the boy's voice before she arrived on the scene. It caught her off guard. It had been a long time since Tyson had smiled about anything. She hurried to the room entrance, but stopped at the door.

"It's time to go," Adam said gruffly.

Elliott slowly stood up, looking wary. He glanced at Susie, then Tyson.

“Dad, we were—”

“I said it’s time to go,” Adam enunciated more clearly. “Come on.”

Tyson’s face fell, and he dropped the hammer he was holding with a loud *thunk*.

“Adam,” Susie tried one more time.

“Drop it, Susie,” he growled.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Elliott warned.

Tyson stopped moving, and he looked up at the men, his eyes wide and scared of the tension that was building in the room.

Taking a deep breath, Susie stepped past Adam. “Tyson, let’s go get your coat and things, hm?” She smiled gently. “Your dad’s tired and ready for dinner.” She held out her hand, inviting him to join her, but Tyson was rooted to the spot.

“Go with her,” Adam commanded, his eyes trained on Elliott.

Elliott raised an eyebrow, then looked down at Tyson, who still wasn’t moving. “Go on, bud. It’s gonna be fine.” He smiled. “We’ll work again tomorrow.”

Tyson nodded, sniffed, then straightened his shoulders and began walking toward Susie.

“I think he’s done working with you.” Adam’s words were soft, but there was no mistaking the hint of steel in them.

Susie's heart nearly stopped.

Tyson's feet stopped again as well. "Dad..." he pleaded.

"Go get your coat, Ty. Right now."

Knowing there would be no reasoning with anyone tonight, Susie reached over and took the boy's cold hand. "Come on, Tyson," she said as gently as she could. "I have an extra special treat for you on the way home, okay?"

Tyson's eyes were misty, but it was clear he was trying to swallow the tears back. His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared, and he jerked away from her hold. Head high, he marched back to the classroom, and Susie scrambled to keep up with him.

* * *

Elliott watched, waiting anxiously for Susie and Tyson to be gone. Adam was angry, and he'd much rather the anger was directed at him instead of the other two. Once they disappeared into the hallway, Elliott went back to the father.

Adam pointed a shaking finger at Elliott. "Stay away from my son."

Elliott put his hands in the air. "All I'm here for is to do a few repairs. Tyson likes to help."

"He's not your responsibility," Adam ground out.

Elliott could tell the man was trying to keep his voice quiet, but the anger was nearly palpable. If they weren't careful, the two of them would be brawling. Elliott had seen

this type of anger before, and it always got physical before everything was said and done.

He set down the crowbar he'd been holding, ready to defend himself and Susie if necessary. He wasn't sure what Adam and Susie had talked about before they came down the hall, but Elliott wished Susie had waited for him the way they'd discussed.

She was so set on her childhood friend being easy to get along with, but Elliott knew what grief could do to a man, or woman, for that matter, and he knew that Adam likely wasn't the same person Susie remembered.

"You're right," Elliott stated, hoping to diffuse the situation a little. "He's not my responsibility. But he's a good kid, and he's desperately looking for a father figure."

Adam growled, his fists clenching. "And you think that's you? Just because you're kissing Susie and I'm not? You think you have the right to take over my child?"

Elliott shook his head, his muscles tightening. "No. I'm not trying to take over your child, but I am trying to help him."

"He doesn't need your help."

"He needs something," Elliott said bluntly. "Did you know that Tyson never smiles? Did you know he's afraid to go out to recess because he's wearing a coat meant for a grown up instead of a kid?"

Adam's face reddened. "I'm gonna say it one more time before I do something about it...stay away from my kid."

Elliott raised his hands in surrender again. “I’m not trying to pick a fight, Adam. I’m trying to help.”

“When I need help, I won’t be asking you.” Adam’s shoulders twitched as if it were hard for him to stay put, but eventually, he turned and began to leave.

Elliott wasn’t quite ready to let things go, though. He didn’t want a fight, but he did want answers and he didn’t like sending a young boy home with a dad who was ready to blow his top. “Adam, wait.” Elliott took a deep breath. “Let’s talk this out, man. Susie’s worried about you.”

“Susie doesn’t have anything to worry about,” Adam shot over his shoulder. “Nothing about my life has anything to do with her.”

“She’s with Tyson every day,” Elliott called out. “She sees more than you think.”

Adam turned in the doorway. “Just because I don’t own a store and have employees under me doesn’t mean I’m a charity case. Tyson and I are *fine*. You need to mind your own business.”

Elliott was starting to get angry at the man’s stubbornness, but he kept himself under control, just like he’d done in the military. “Tyson’s just a little boy.”

“Exactly. My little boy,” Adam shot back.

“Just because you’re his father doesn’t mean he’s safe with you.” He shouldn’t have said it, but Elliott’s mouth had gotten him in trouble before. He noted the response in Adam’s eyes.

They went from disbelief, to hurt to anger in a matter of moments.

“Are you accusing me of hitting my son?” Adam snarled.

“I don’t have proof that you hit him,” Elliott admitted. “So I’m not accusing you of anything, yet. But I’ve spent time with Tyson in the last week, and that kid is hurting. He doesn’t believe in Santa, he hates every kid in his classroom, and he barely obeys Susie. Those aren’t signs of a healthy, happy kid.”

“What would you know about it?” Adam took a couple of steps in Elliott’s direction. “You don’t have kids. You’ve never been married.”

Elliott bit the inside of his cheek. “You’re right,” he said, his tone softer. “I haven’t had a chance to be married and have kids yet.” He straightened. “But I know what it’s like to lose someone. I know how it changes you.”

Disbelief crossed Adam’s face, and he stumbled back a few steps. The men stared at each other, but eventually Adam shook his head. “You don’t know anything,” he rasped, his face pale and his voice shaking.

Turning, he practically ran out of the room, and Elliott was unsure whether he should follow. After a moment’s hesitation, he stepped out so he could see the classroom, unwilling to let Adam be around Susie without Elliott being there.

But Adam was storming out the door with Tyson in his arms and didn’t bother looking back.

Sighing in regret, Elliott headed toward the classroom where he found Susie sitting at her desk, tears rolling down her pale cheeks. “Ah, Suze,” he groaned. Walking over, he pulled her out of her seat, sat down, and tugged Susie into his lap where he wrapped his arms around her and held her while she cried.

Like a dam that had been waiting for the right moment, as soon as her head was tucked against his chest, she let loose, and Elliott closed his eyes, praying for answers. After that chat, he was fairly certain that Adam wasn’t hitting Tyson. They didn’t have any indications of that, but Elliott was still worried about neglect, and Adam’s anger hadn’t helped matters.

The issue was that Elliott and Adam’s standoff might have made things worse. Now Adam wouldn’t trust Susie any more than he trusted Elliott. The blow about his passed wife had hit hard, and Elliott knew it was the trigger point.

He’d seen it before when it had nearly destroyed his family. Charlotte almost hadn’t made it. And honestly, if he hadn’t had Charlotte to take care of, Elliott wasn’t sure how well he would have handled his friend’s death either.

It was insane how losing one person could affect so many people’s lives.

Susie wasn’t immune either, since she was obviously still hurting from the death of her parents. It was something every person on this earth had in common and yet no one could get away from it.

No matter how far they ran, how few relationships they had, and whether or not they had a family, everyone was eventually affected by death. Ruthless and uncaring, death came for everyone in the end and changed those left behind, whether for good or bad.

“I’m sorry.” Susie sat up and wiped at her face.

Elliott grabbed a tissue from her desk and handed it to her. After a moment, he simply handed her the box, which finally brought a short laugh to the surface. “I’m the one who should be apologizing,” he grunted. “I’m the one Adam’s angry at.”

She wasn’t looking at him, but Susie shook her head. “No. He’s mad at the situation.” She sighed and finally brought her teary eyes up to his. “I ticked him off by asking if he was alright, and you were a convenient target when he went to get Tyson.”

Elliott blew out a breath. “The worst part is, I didn’t get anything from him.”

“Me either.” Her bottom lip trembled. “And that only makes me more worried.”

Elliott grabbed her neck and pulled her in to leave a fierce kiss on her forehead. “It’s Christmas,” he murmured against her skin. “It’s the season for miracles.” Pulling back just slightly, Elliott made sure she knew he was serious. “We won’t stop until we make sure one happens in Tyson’s life, okay?”

Susie’s eyes darted between his, and she didn’t answer him right away. “Do you promise?” she asked, twisting a tissue in her hands.

Elliott nodded. “I do. Whether he wants to admit it or not, Adam needs a nudge in the right direction. He’s hurting just as much as Tyson is, and we can both see it. I don’t care if the guy ends up punching me in the face before this is over. We won’t just walk away.” Elliott grinned. “If Santa and his missus can’t help, then who can?”

With a soft cry, Susie threw her arms around his neck and hung on tightly, much to Elliott’s delight. He wrapped his arms around her, closing his eyes and soaking it all up. The situation might not be pretty by the time it was all over, but this was a cause worth fighting for. Just like Charlotte’s had been once and Susie’s was now.

Someone needed to knock some sense into Adam and help him get out of his own head, and Elliott was all too happy to volunteer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Susie rushed into the hardware store, her shoes skidding on the floor. “Elliott!”

Theo came around a corner, a severe frown on his face. “What’s going on?”

Susie’s fingers were going numb, but she couldn’t seem to stop wringing them. “I-I need to talk to Elliott,” she rasped, her breathing much too labored to speak clearly.

Theo walked toward her, glancing over her shoulder as if expecting there to be some danger lurking just outside, but the danger wasn’t in the parking lot. Actually, Susie wasn’t quite sure where the danger was, she only knew that something was terribly wrong.

“Susie,” Theo said in a careful tone, as if afraid to spook her. “I need you to tell me what’s going on,” he stated. “If there’s trouble, I need to know about it.”

Susie shook her head. “It’s about Tyson,” she stammered. “Elliott needs to know.”

“What do I need to know?” Elliott moved swiftly through the store, obviously having been in the back getting dressed.

He was wearing the large belly and pants for his Santa suit, the suspenders holding them up, but only a white t-shirt adorned his upper body, and for a moment, Susie was struck mute.

She knew he was tall and strong, but seeing his muscles bulge through his tight shirt had her practically salivating. She shook her head. Hard. This wasn't the time to let her hormones get out of control. "Tyson wasn't at school today," she rushed to say, hurrying to his side. "I didn't get a call, I don't know what's going on. Tanya tried to call, but no one answered the phone." She felt a large body come up behind her and knew Theo was sticking around.

"Do we need to send in the police?" Theo asked, his tone deadly serious.

Susie turned so she could include both men and shrugged. "I don't know. I don't have any evidence of wrongdoing, just suspicions."

"Do you think Adam is hitting Tyson?"

"Easy, soldier," Elliott said to his brother, obviously trying to lighten the mood, but even Elliott's joke was more somber than normal.

Theo's eyes went to Elliott. "Do you?"

Elliott shook his head and sighed. "No. That wasn't the impression I got from our argument."

"I haven't seen bruises or anything that would indicate physical abuse," Susie whispered, her throat closing up with emotion. She'd been holding in her tears all day, terrified that

her attempt to talk to Adam yesterday had sent him over the edge.

But what could she tell the police? She had nothing but her own emotional turmoil to report, and they'd laugh in her face.

"But?" Theo pressed.

"But nothing. It's all the same concerns we talked about the other night," she continued, her words stumbling on top of each other. "He doesn't have a good winter coat. He's difficult to work with and doesn't get along well with others."

"He told me he doesn't believe in Santa because Santa has never come," Elliott added. He reached out and put a hand on Susie's shoulder, squeezing lightly. "He doesn't remember his mother and said Santa has never come." Elliott sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. "Honestly, when Adam and I faced off yesterday, I..."

"You what?" Susie asked, her eyes searching his face for clues. He was watching Theo, as if silently asking for permission, but she didn't know for what. Theo hadn't even been there. What could he possibly add to the conversation?

"You what?" Theo asked.

Elliott swallowed and sighed. "He got really angry at me," Elliott continued. "But the anger wasn't directed at Tyson. Just me. Like Adam felt threatened that I was paying attention to his son."

Susie frowned.

"He sounded like a man who's drowning in grief," Elliott finished softly, his eyes back up on his brother.

Theo froze. It took several long seconds for his face to move, and when he did, it was to curse softly under his breath. “We considered this,” he reminded them.

“We did,” Elliott responded. “But it’s been long enough that no one knew for sure.”

“He won’t want our help.”

Susie felt like she was at a ping pong match, the way her head was whipping from side to side. It took her several confused moments before she realized what was stirring in the undercurrent.

These men, they’d been through death. Probably more than one, though Charlotte’s fiance had to be the worst. Charlotte had been like a zombie when they’d arrived in town, and Susie had befriended her. The Charlotte who was married and living again was a completely different creature.

Her brows pulled together as she studied Elliott. Did he recognize the symptoms in Adam because he’s seen them before? Or because he’d *been* there before?

Does it matter?

She blew out a breath. It really didn’t matter. All that mattered was that they were able to figure it out and get Adam and Tyson the help they needed.

“We need to convince him he needs help,” Elliott said softly, still addressing Theo.

Theo pushed a hand through his short hair, causing it to stand up a little. It was the most unkempt Susie had ever seen the older brother, and it took her off guard. If Elliott didn’t

already have most of her heart, she could see the appeal of the strong, silent one. When he didn't look like he wanted to kill a person, he really was quite handsome...in a stoic, statue sort of way.

“That’s kind of hard when we can’t talk to him,” Susie interrupted. “I told you, he’s not answering his phone.”

Theo pursed his lips. “We’ll have to be patient for a bit. His life is here. He might have panicked, but I doubt he’s going to leave for good. Give him a day or two. If they haven’t come back by Monday, then it’s time to take it to the next level, but if we spooked him, you need to wait him out.”

Elliott grunted. “Meanwhile, there’s a line growing outside. Come on, Mrs. Sugar Plum. We need to finish getting dressed and take care of the kids who *are* here.”

Susie was sure she wouldn’t be able to get through the night, but she let Elliott guide her to the back anyway. Her makeshift dressing area was in a storage room, and she went inside, her hand on her stomach. She’d never had anything happen like this before, and she was cracking under the pressure.

They lived in a small town. Nothing exciting ever happened, unless you counted births and marriages. “Not that this is excitement,” she muttered as she slipped into the uncomfortable wig. “It’s more like a nightmare.”

After finishing, she closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. Theo and Elliott both appeared to have experience with this type of behavior. She would trust them. She would *choose* to trust them. Really, there was little other

choice. She was out of her element and had no idea how to handle it other than to involve the police, which her gut said wasn't the right choice.

“He’s not going to hurt Tyson,” she whispered to herself, as if creating a new mantra. “Adam loves his son. He’s just hurting and still figuring things out. It’s going to be okay.”

Pasting a smile on her face, she left the storage room and walked out into the store just as Theo opened the front door. Squeals and laughs of children helped ease some of the tension in Susie’s chest, but after only a few minutes, her jaw started to ache from holding it in position.

It was bound to be a very, very long night.

* * *

It seemed to Elliott that every kid in town came to get pictures tonight, which was ridiculous, considering how many had come during their opening. The only good thing about the long line was that it helped the evening go faster, but Susie’s pale face and trembling hands made Elliott feel as if every minute were really an hour.

He hated seeing her so upset, even if he couldn’t quite blame her for her worry. Elliott was worried too, but probably less so than Susie.

He’d scared Adam.

And rightly so. Elliott had accused Adam of some harsh things, and Adam hadn’t taken it well, which was why the man

had become defensive. But seeing the grief and pain in Adam's eyes told Elliott all he needed to know.

Adam wasn't abusive. He was simply broken.

But broken men sometimes do bad things.

Elliott pushed the thought aside. The thought was truth. Elliott had seen it multiple times, and Tyson didn't act like a kid being hurt, at least not physically. He acted like a kid who wasn't seen.

Tyson needed his father to see him. To understand him. To spend time together and notice that Tyson was growing and interested in the world. But Adam was too caught up in his own broken world to notice his son's.

"I think that's it," Theo grunted as the last child left, his own demeanor darker than normal, a good match to Susie's anxious state.

Susie was wringing her hands again and she stared at the door. "I thought we'd never finish."

Elliott stood and stretched his back. "It was a long line tonight. We'll have hit every kid in town by the time the weekend's over." He smiled at Susie trying to break the tension. "Then what'll we do with our time?"

Susie gave him a weak smile in return. "I have no idea."

He slipped an arm around her waist and brought his mouth down to her neck. "I can think of a few things."

"Elliott," she scolded, pushing at his chest.

He didn't let go. and she gave into a small laugh.

“I think I’m getting beard burn.”

He pulled back and frowned. “Note to self. Never grow a beard.”

Her smile was more relaxed than before, and Elliott’s shoulders dropped a little. “My dad always had a beard.”

“And did your mother complain?”

“She did.” Susie laughed a little and patted his chest. “But he never cut it. He said he looked too young without it. No one would take him seriously.”

Elliott grinned, letting go of Susie to pull off his hat and facial hair. “What did your dad do for a living?”

“He was a manager for a grocery store,” she explained as they walked down the stage steps. “He was in charge of the stores for the whole region, which was about a dozen locations and he was constantly in meetings, so I can understand why he wanted to look in charge.”

Elliott rubbed his chin. “I think your dad and I are opposites. When I grow facial hair I just look homeless.” He smiled when she laughed again. He really needed to keep it going. Anything to help her set down her worry for a bit.

“Somehow I doubt you could ever look homeless,” she stated as they walked into the back room.

Elliott raised an eyebrow at her. “You didn’t see me when I got back from the military. I let my hair grow and my beard. Basically, everything I couldn’t do while in the field.” He pretended to flick hair over his shoulder. “I fit in with the surfers and the bums at the same time.”

She scrunched her nose. “I’m not a fan of long hair on guys, but...” Stepping up, Susie ran her fingers over his jaw.

Did she have any idea how much power she had over him? Elliott’s heart rate immediately reacted to her touch, and his skin began to tingle. He was already sweaty from the suit, and she was gonna send him over the edge if she wasn’t careful.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing what a little bit of scruff looked like.”

“Done.” He spoke before it even registered, and Susie stepped away with another soft laugh.

“Just like that?” she asked, snapping her fingers. “You’d grow facial hair for me?”

He smiled and tweaked the end of her nose, making her cheeks turn pink. “Just like that.”

Susie shook her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you’re cute.”

“And both of you are nauseating,” Theo said wryly as he walked by with an armful of boxes. “At least with Charlotte and Noah I didn’t have to watch it.”

Susie’s cheeks were flaming now, and she spun, rushing to her little dressing room.

Elliott growled at his brother. “Really? Was that necessary?”

Theo scoffed. “It was worse than the ‘you hang up,’ ‘no, you hang up’, thing,” he grouched. “If you want to flirt with her,

take her somewhere else. One of us has to keep this place afloat.”

Elliott paused and watched Theo’s face. Was he serious? “I’ve been working same as you,” he grumbled.

Theo snorted. “Right.”

“What’s your problem?” Elliott snapped, stepping up to his brother. “There’s nothing wrong with me dating and flirting with Susie.”

“I never said there was.” Theo’s voice had gone from sarcastic to cold.

Elliott shook his head, scowling. “You’re being more of a jerk than usual.”

“And you’re being more of a pest than usual.” Theo spun on his heel, dropping the boxes on the closest table. “In fact, I think you’ve been shirking your duties enough. You can close tonight.”

Before Elliott could protest, Theo was gone. Staring at the door, Elliott tried to digest what had just happened. It wasn’t like he and Theo never got in a fight, but the reason for the fight was odd.

Okay...so maybe Elliott needed to keep the mushy stuff away from the public eye, but why would that send Theo into the kind of mood where he looked ready to kill?

You’re overthinking this, he told himself. “Everyone’s in a bad mood. We’re all worried about Tyson and his dad.” Shaking his head to clear it of the frustrated thoughts, Elliott got out of his suit and back in his regular clothes.

Susie emerged a couple minutes later, looking slightly flustered, but gorgeous, as usual. “Hey,” she said softly. “Are you hungry?”

Sighing internally, Elliott put his hand on the stock boxes and gave her a too-wide smile. “How would you feel about ordering in?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Susie was exhausted. The weekend had gone quickly, with the Santa pictures keeping her hopping, but her emotions had been all over the place and she was barely keeping her eyes open by Monday morning.

Who knew that worry could be so fatiguing?

Every mother who ever existed, she thought wryly as she hung her coat up in her space. “Then why do women do it?”

“Do what?” Tanya asked, slipping into the classroom.

“Nothing,” Susie muttered. She took a deep breath to try and calm her fluttering heart. If Tyson wasn’t there today, Susie was going to the police. She didn’t care if they laughed. She didn’t care that she had nothing but a hunch. She was going to do something.

It had been horrible to not see him at school two days in a row, and she needed to take action. Her conscience wouldn’t rest otherwise.

“I wonder if Tyson and Adam are back,” Tanya said casually.

Susie spun, her eyes wide. “Have you heard something?”

Her employee frowned. “I...what do you mean?”

“I thought no one had been able to get a hold of them,” Susie clarified.

Tanya shrugged. “We didn’t. I just assumed they were out of town. Where else would they be?”

Susie pinched her lips, choosing not to answer. There were any number of places that they could be, but Susie didn’t have enough information to make that call.

“Miss Susie!” Avery walked in, her hair and dress as perfect as always, just like a little doll.

“Why, Miss Avery,” Susie gushed. “You look like you’re all ready for Christmas.”

The little girl spun, holding out her red dress and gave a wobbly curtsy. “My mom made it for me.”

Susie looked up at Mrs. Perry, who rolled her eyes and shook her head. She put her hand on Avery’s shoulder. “I bought it, not made it,” Mrs. Perry clarified. “And only because you said you’d never make it through the weekend unless you had red sparkles.”

Susie bit back a laugh. Avery might be the best behaved child in class, but she apparently was a bit of a drama queen at home.

“I’ll see you later.” With a quick wave, Mrs. Perry was gone, and Avery was headed to her seat.

The next ten minutes were full of children filing in, their parents rushing away like they couldn’t wait to get a break and

Susie's stomach tightening ever so slightly with every minute Tyson didn't show.

"Susie?"

Susie looked over her shoulder, realizing the whole class was here...except for Tyson.

"Are you ready?" Tanya pressed, giving Susie a look that said the assistant was worried.

"Yes," Susie declared, clearing her throat when the word sounded garbled. "I'm so glad to see you all today!" She walked to the front of the room, her knees shaking. Somehow, she needed to get through today without the children knowing how concerned she was, and then she'd go to the police.

The first hour went by like a slug pulling a car uphill, and Susie fought to keep from breaking apart at any moment. Every question, every laugh, every time she helped a child, she saw Tyson's face and it terrified her that she didn't know what was going on with him.

Just as she was sitting down to read the children a story, a throat cleared from the doorway. She stiffened and glanced over, her eyes going wide. "Tyson," Susie breathed.

The young boy stood in the doorway with a wide smile on his face. His hair was combed, his skin freshly cleaned, and he wore a brand new coat that fit him like a glove.

Slowly, Susie stood up and walked over. She wanted to yank the boy into her arms and hug him, but she held herself back. Tyson probably had no idea that she'd been worried at all, and she didn't need to declare it to the world.

Clasping her hands instead, Susie smiled. “Tyson. We’ve missed you,” she choked out. Looking up, Adam was a direct contrast to his son. Where Tyson looked happy and eager, Adam looked dark and angry. It caused Susie to take a step back. “Adam,” she said carefully.

Adam put his hand on Tyson’s shoulder and gave him a small push. “Go on, son,” he said. “Put your stuff away and join the others.”

Tyson bounded away, proudly walking through the room and depositing his stuff in his cubby before sitting down on his spot at the front of the room.

“No more,” Adam said in a low tone.

Susie jerked. “What?”

“No more talking about my son and our family. Do you understand?” he whispered fiercely.

“Adam, I...” Susie trailed off, unsure what to say.

“You were her friend,” Adam continued.

She was grateful he was keeping his voice down since the underlying anger felt threatening. It made Susie want to back up more, but she refused, not willing to let him come farther into the classroom.

“You knew Amy, and you know full well that she wasn’t married to a monster.”

“I never said you were a monster,” Susie hurried to defend herself. “But people change, Adam,” she tried to explain. “Life gets hard, and it can be difficult to adapt.”

“We’re fine,” Adam ground out. “Ty’s fine, I’m fine, we’re fine. Nothing about our life is any of your business and definitely not those Brown brothers.”

Susie clenched her jaw. She’d hurt him. She’d hurt Adam by bringing Elliott into the mix. How could she have been so stupid? She’d been trying to find a way to save his pride and by asking for help she’d crushed it anyway.

“Just stick to babysitting,” Adam threw out as he backed up. “It’s what you’re best at.”

Gasping, Susie had to stiffen her spine to not fold over from the sting of his barb. He wasn’t just angry, he was livid, and he’d hit her exactly where it hurt the most. Always a babysitter, never a mother. How could he have known?

“Ms. Susie?”

She couldn’t let the children or Tanya see her like this. Susie blinked rapidly, fighting back tears and swallowing down the lump in her throat. She took a deep breath. Then another and rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them enough to function.

Slowly, she turned forcing her stiff jaw into compliance with a smile. “We’re so glad to have Tyson back,” she gushed, her voice a little too high to be believable, though the children didn’t seem to notice. “Are we ready for that story now?”

“Yes, Miss Susie!” they declared.

Feeling like a robot, Susie walked over and sat down, picture book in hand. She had no idea what she was going to

do now, but one thing was for sure...she needed to make sure Elliott stayed out of it.

* * *

Elliott snapped the beard into place, grimacing at the scratchiness of it. While playing Santa was fun and he was falling head over heels for Susie, his skin was taking a beating. He'd be lucky if he had any left on his chin by the end of the season.

“You ready?” Theo asked from the doorway.

Elliott frowned, glancing at the clock. “Isn't Susie here yet?”

Theo shook his head. “No. But the kids are already lining up. You need to get up front.”

“Let me just give her a call.” Elliott reached into his jacket for his cell, but Theo shook his head again.

“No time. She'll get here when she gets here. Come on.”

Scowling, Elliott followed his brother into the main room. Pasting a smile on his face, he waved at the children who were pressing their noses against the front window, staring wide eyed as he walked to the little stage with his chair.

Eager hands and smiles greeted him, easing Elliott's worry. He climbed the two steps and sat at his chair, holding back a groan. He was getting so stinkin' sore from sitting on this wooden throne.

“Here we go.” Theo walked to the door and unlocked it. “Welcome,” he told the kids, smiling widely.

Elliott glanced at the clock again. Why wasn’t she here? She was never late. Had something happened that he didn’t know about? His heart sank. It was Monday. They were going to be making a decision about Tyson today.

Susie was supposed to have texted, but he hadn’t heard from her all day. As the pieces fell into place, his concern began to ratchet up, and Elliott found his knee bouncing.

“Santa,” Theo said, a forced calm in his voice, as if to tell Elliott to do the same. “This is Harley.”

“Ho, ho, ho!” Elliott immediately threw out. He held out his hand and brought the little boy up to his knee. “Have you been a good boy this year?”

“Miss Susie!”

Elliott’s head jerked up, and Susie was pushing her way through the crowd. Her soft cheeks were bright red as she navigated the crowd, apologizing and saying hello to work her way into the deeper parts of the store. Once she got past the crowd, she ran for the back door, not giving Elliott a glance. He frowned, but Theo cleared his throat, pulling Elliott back to the child on his lap.

“Ho, ho, ho,” Elliott said, tearing his eyes away from the place Susie had disappeared. “Have you been a good boy?”

“You already asked me that,” the young boy said with a frown.

Elliott kept his smile in place. “I’m getting old,” he teased. “My hearing and my memory aren’t as good as they used to be. Would you mind telling me again?”

Dark brown eyes narrowed at him. “You’re not real. How can you be that old? There aren’t even wrinkles at your eyes.”

“Harley,” his mother hissed from the sidelines. “Knock it off.”

Harley rolled his eyes and folded his arms in defiance. “Can we just take a picture? I want a candy cane, and Mom won’t let me go until we’re done.”

Elliott held back his surprise at the kid’s candidness. He was going to be a hard teenager. Waving toward Theo, Elliott said, “Smile for the camera! Say, ‘Happy Holidays!’”

“Here you go,” Theo offered the kid a candy cane and watched him move down the stairs, where his mother immediately began to berate his behavior.

Elliott gave a small shake of his head, grateful that it wasn’t his own child. Considering his own history, Elliott knew he’d have enough problems with his kids when he decided to become a dad.

“Excuse me.”

Susie’s voice caught his attention, and Elliott’s smile became genuine for the first time that evening. “Mrs. Claus!” he boomed, standing up and reaching for her over the crowd. “You don’t mind letting my wife through, do you?” he asked the children with a wink.

Most of them giggled and stepped aside, their parents smiling and making room the best they could. The space for the line wasn't large so it was a tight fit, but finally he pulled Susie up and wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Elliott," she whispered, smiling at the kids, then scolding him with her eyes. "Let me go."

"Mrs. Claus was running late tonight," Elliott announced. "I haven't been able to see her at all!" He made a frowny face, not knowing if the children could see much of it, but they were reacting well enough. "Don't you think I deserve a kiss hello?" he pressed.

"Santa!" Susie scolded, her cheeks flaring back up.

He loved it when she did that. Her act of being embarrassed was adorable, especially when he knew she was just as attracted to him as he was to her.

Her hands pressed against his chest. "This isn't the time."

"There's no mistletoe!" someone called out.

Elliott jerked as if surprised and looked up. "Well...you're right!" He gave Susie one last squeeze and let her go, then turned to the crowd. "Looks like I've got some work to do after we're done here."

Snorts and twitters came from the crowd with a few groans thrown in for good measure. It left Elliott feeling much lighter than he had before they all started.

"Theodore! My favorite elf! Who's visiting me next?"

Theo schooled his face quickly, and they got the line going again with Mrs. Claus back in the mix.

The next couple of hours flew by, and when it was done, Elliott was ready to seclude himself and Susie away from the world. He was really getting tired of sharing her with the entire town, even if this had been the best way to get her to spend time with him.

“Locked,” Theo announced, wiping at his forehead. “That was another busy one tonight.”

“Finally.” Elliott stood and stretched his back. “Seriously. We need a pillow for this thing. I’m not gonna be able to walk by the time we finish.”

“You could always let Clarence take over,” Theo threw over his shoulder.

“Not a chance!” Elliott immediately shot the idea down. “Hey!” He jumped off the platform and ran for the retreating back of his girlfriend. He gently grabbed Susie’s arm and smiled as he pulled her back. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asked, his voice low and hopefully enticing.

Susie’s smile was tight and gave Elliott a bad feeling in his gut. “I was going to change,” she stated, pulling on her arm a little. “It’s hot in this costume.”

Elliott pulled his beard down, exposing his face and leaning down. “I’m looking forward to some alone time. How about you?”

She nodded too quickly. “Yep. Great.”

Elliott frowned and let go of her arm. “Okay, then,” he said, feeling like she’d somehow rejected him. “Let’s get changed.”

She was gone before he finished the sentence, and the feeling in his belly grew stronger.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There was no way she was going to be able to eat. Susie swallowed when her salad was put down, but her stomach rebelled at the thought, simple as the food was. Picking up her fork, she moved the vegetables around in random directions.

“You look like that cucumber personally offended you.”

Elliott’s tone was light, but Susie knew he was worried. There were tiny lines next to his mouth that were refusing to leave, and she knew him well enough to know they weren’t laugh lines. Not this time, anyway.

“Maybe it did,” she said, sticking her nose in the air just a little.

He smiled, but it lacked sincerity. “Are you going to tell me what happened?” He sounded wary, like she was about to drop a bomb on him.

You sort of are.

Susie took a deep breath. “Tyson showed up for school today.” She kept her focus on her plate. “He had a new coat, and his hair was wet and combed as if he’d just taken a shower.” She looked up from under her lashes.

“That’s good, right?” Elliott asked, still watching her carefully. “I thought this is what we wanted.”

Susie shrugged. “I suppose.”

“Then why are you still so upset?”

She squished her lips to the side, trying to figure out how to express her concern and yet keep Elliott out of her plans.

His hand landed on hers, and a *zing* of electricity went up her arm making Susie jerk a little. One side of Elliott’s mouth lifted, but again, it was lacking his carefree playfulness. “Suze...please tell me.”

Tears stung the back of her eyes, and Susie blinked rapidly. Why did he have to decide to be so sweet right now? “Adam told me to have us stay out of his business.”

Elliott stiffened. “Did he threaten you?” he ground out.

She shook her head and leaned back. “Adam won’t hurt me.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Susie sighed. “Elliott...he’s...” She shook her head. “He’s hurting. And he’s hurt that I asked you to help.”

Elliott folded his arms over his chest. “The man needs help. He’s not taking proper care of his son.”

“I agree,” Susie said. “But maybe we went about it the wrong way.”

Elliott stared at her a moment longer, then relaxed slightly and picked up his fork. “Well, you said Tyson has a new coat and stuff anyway, so I suppose our work is done.”

Susie didn't respond, but she picked up her own fork, still not feeling like eating.

"Isn't it?"

She froze.

"Susie..." Elliott pressed. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?"

She couldn't even enjoy the fact that he'd called her beautiful because she was so worried about the next part of this conversation. "I'd still like to do some kind of home visit," she stated softly, keeping her eyes down. "I'd like to take Adam some things and make sure he has everything he needs to take care of Tyson properly."

"Susie," Elliott groaned. He dropped his fork and plopped against the back of the chair. "You're not Child Services. You don't have any jurisdiction to do that."

"I'm aware," Susie snapped, then forced herself to stop and calm down enough to speak without anger. "But I'm his caregiver, and I love Tyson. I need to know he's okay. His mother was my friend, and nothing has been the same since she passed," she pleaded with Elliott, hoping he would see just how sincere she was. "I can't walk away yet."

"He's not safe to be around," Elliott said softly, reaching for her hand. "He threatened me when we met, and you just said he was threatening you again today."

"It wasn't a threat," she automatically responded.

Elliott raised an eyebrow. "Then what was it?"

She shrugged, knowing they were playing with words. Adam had been mad and he'd said cruel things, but he hadn't threatened to hurt her. He just wanted to be left alone.

"If this means that much to you, I'll help you take him a box of stuff, okay?"

Aaaaannd, there's the problem.

"You can't."

Elliott jerked back as if he'd been slapped. "What?"

She straightened her spine but kept her words soft. "You can't come with me."

Elliott's brows pulled together. "I thought you just said you wanted to do a home visit?"

"I do."

One eyebrow went up. "But you don't want me to go with you?"

Susie hesitated, but forced herself to shake her head. "Adam doesn't want you around." She knew Elliott wouldn't like it, but she hadn't expected this. Instead of anger, Elliott's face went perfectly blank. It reminded her so much of Theo's stoicism that she wanted to cry.

Sweet, adorable Elliott wasn't meant to look like a statue. He was meant to be full of life, laughter and happiness. This looked so wrong, and it twisted Susie's heart in the worst way.

"It's not safe."

"Adam won't hurt me," Susie assured Elliott. "He's a friend."

Elliott's face stayed hard. "Friends don't threaten each other." The words were short and clipped and almost entirely monotone.

Susie reached across the table and grabbed his hand. "Elliott. It's going to be fine. I think Adam was embarrassed enough when we brought things up that he's starting to change. But I need to make sure he's alright. The kind of hurt they've been through doesn't change overnight. I need to know that Tyson is well taken care of, and Adam won't talk to me if I let you go with me."

His eye narrowed ever so slightly. "Do you realize what you're asking me to do?"

She sighed and dropped his hand. "You're making this out to be a bigger deal than it is." There was nothing in that sentence that felt truthful, but Susie wouldn't take it back. The real truth was that Adam had scared her, and she desperately wanted Elliott's large, protective presence with her when she went to the house. But the fact of the matter was that her concern for Tyson overruled her concern for herself. If the only way to get to Tyson was to leave Elliott behind, then that was exactly what Susie would do.

"You're making a mistake," Elliott tried again, his face still serious. "You need to let me go with you."

Slowly, against her own better judgment, Susie shook her head. "I can't," she whispered. "Or Adam will run."

* * *

Every protective instinct in Elliott's body was screaming at him right now. He couldn't let her go over there. Adam was volatile and angry, and there was no way this was going to end well. But how did he make Susie see that? She wasn't listening to him at all, just brushing away his concerns as if everything was hunky dory.

"I can't let you do it."

Susie's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Dang it. He'd stepped in it now. He'd been trying to help her see the truth, but he'd gone too far. Charlotte was the same way, she hated being dictated to and Elliott should have known better, but he was too caught up in the danger to think of how he was phrasing his words.

"You don't have any control over what I do or do not do," Susie said, her voice tight.

Elliott's heart pounded in his chest. He needed to fix this. Susie was becoming the most important thing in Elliott's life and the thought of her going off by herself and throwing herself into danger was more than he could bear, but he couldn't control her either.

He needed a different tactic.

Forcing his shoulders and face to relax, Elliott leaned over the table. "Suze," he said carefully. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." He slowly reached out to take her hand, grateful she didn't fight him even though she glared. "You're right. I'm not in charge of you. But I'm asking you, as someone who cares for you, to please reconsider." He stroked

her palm. “If you really feel that Tyson is in that much trouble, then we need to call in the professionals, not go barging in ourselves.”

Susie was already shaking her stubborn head. “If I call the state, he could lose Tyson,” she rasped, her emotions all over her face. “I can’t do that to him, not after already losing Amy.”

Elliott nodded and entwined their fingers, bringing the back of her hand to his lips. “I get it, sweetheart, but you need to consider the long term here. You have no sway over Adam and no jurisdiction over Tyson. If you got in trouble over there, not only could Adam hurt you physically, but he could charge you with trespassing or even take Tyson out of your daycare for good.” He let his lips linger on the back of her hand again. “Please just take a little time to consider all this before you go marching in, okay?”

Her lips were pursed, but the sternness of her face had calmed. “Okay,” she said slowly. “I’ll take a little time to think about it.”

That wasn’t good enough. “Tyson just got back today, right?”

She nodded.

“So what if we took the week to watch him? See if he’s happier, if he’s talking more and getting along better,” Elliott continued. “Maybe Adam did change. The hurt won’t go away overnight, but maybe us asking about Tyson was enough. Maybe Adam doesn’t need more interference.”

Images of hurt soldiers and friends were flashing through Elliott's brain as he spoke. He had far too many horror stories that said none of this would end well, but he wasn't going to share them with Susie. She wanted to aim for a happy ending, and he wasn't going to take that from her. In Elliott's experience, there *could* be a happy ending, but it required a lot of work and a lot of outside help. More than he or Susie or a box of child supplies could provide.

Grief had a way of destroying people if left untouched. It ate a person from the inside out, like a deadly disease. The cure, funny enough, was easier than people thought, but it required being vulnerable in a way a grieving person usually hated most.

Only by exposing the grief, could a person heal, but the pain of exposure was often more than a body could bear, which left a lot of broken hearts in the world and a trail of pain in their wake.

Susie stared intently at him, her mind obviously churning with indecision. "A week brings us awfully close to Christmas."

Elliott nodded. "I know, but Santa comes on Christmas Eve. You'll still have plenty of time." He mentally high fived himself when her shoulders relaxed another notch.

"Okay," she finally agreed. "I'll watch him this week, and then we'll see if I need to do more."

"I'll be by tomorrow to fix the rest of that trim," Elliott declared, leaving no room for argument.

Susie opened her mouth to do just that, but shut it again and nodded. “Fine. But you can’t pick Tyson as your work buddy. Adam won’t like it.”

Elliott would take his victories where he could get them. Just being in the same building was going to be enough for now. Yes, he’d like to be around Tyson more, but as long as they were on the same premises, it would be okay. It meant that Adam couldn’t try anything funny, and Susie couldn’t go running off without telling him anything.

“Deal,” Elliott agreed. “I’ll just watch from the background.” He smiled at her, hoping to break the last of the tension between them. His thumb rubbed over her knuckles. “Are we alright?”

She gave him a small smile. “Yeah,” she replied on a sigh. “We’re alright.”

“Good.” He took her hand and set it down on top of her fork. “Then you better eat. You’re going to waste away if you don’t and that won’t do either of us any good.”

Susie rolled her eyes, but she dutifully stabbed at her lettuce. “It’ll take much more than a missed meal for me to waste away,” she muttered.

“Hey.” Elliott put his hand over hers, then cupped her chin and brought her face around. “Don’t say things like that,” he scolded, gently caressing her jaw. “You’re beautiful and perfect, and I don’t like it when you degrade yourself.”

Her face was bright pink, and she was having trouble looking him in the eye. Her lips pressed together as if she was

holding back a comment, but she didn't say anything.

He leaned in and left a small peck on her lips. "Alright?" he raised his eyebrows, waiting for her to respond.

"I'm not—" She cut off when he cleared his throat and took a deep breath. "Alright," she agreed reluctantly.

Grinning, Elliott gave her another peck. "Thank you." He leaned back. "Now...eat."

"Bossy," Susie teased, but her lips were playing in a smile, letting him know she was coming out of her frustrated mood.

He chuckled. "You should've seen me when I was in the military." A bite of cold mashed potatoes went in. "You haven't seen bossy until you've seen Theo shouting at his men in the field."

The tension relaxed even further, and Susie laughed softly. "I believe it," she said, taking a bite from her own plate.

Grateful to have the problem solved between them, Elliott rested a hand on her knee and relaxed into their meal. He knew they'd still have more to face with Tyson and Adam, but he'd think about that later. Susie was going to be his to protect, and Elliott didn't take that responsibility lightly. She might not know it yet, but when he'd kissed her under the holly berries, their paths had become forever entwined. As soon as she gave him the "go" signal, he'd never leave her side.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Her mental list was beginning to get too long to remember. Susie pulled out her phone and glanced at the list she'd put together last night. Her mind had been rushing and she wasn't sure she had it all down properly, but there was no time for that now.

She had things to do this afternoon and was playing Mrs. Claus tonight with Elliott, so she needed to get this errand done now.

She'd given it a week, just like Elliott had asked, but Susie's mind hadn't been changed.

Tyson needed help, and she was the only one who could help him. Adam would just have to be willing to let her stop by. She would be strong. She would put her foot down and demand to be involved in Tyson's life. And she would do it without Elliott, so as not to spook Adam any more than he was already spooked.

She marked "coat" off the list, shaking her head. Tyson already had a new one. Susie wasn't sure why she'd put it down at all. She looked up at the aisle markers in the store.

“He doesn’t need a coat, but there’s plenty of other things he could use.”

She browsed the aisle for socks and underwear, then a couple of sweatshirts with some of Tyson’s favorite action characters. After that she went back to the food section.

There was no way of knowing what was in Adam’s cupboards, but surely anything would be appreciated. Tyson always looked so thin, and Susie knew a few of his likes from his lunch habits at the daycare.

She started with a few boxes of cereal, then snacks and bread, finally adding a few fruits and veggies.

Eyeing her cart, Susie pinched her lips together. It would have been so much better to have shared the finances with Elliott and the hardware store. It was going to cost her a good chunk to give this all to Adam.

“It’s worth it,” she reminded herself, smiling when another shopper looked her way with a scowl. She could certainly survive on light meals for a couple weeks if necessary. It’s not like her hips would mind.

Walking with her head high, Susie headed toward the front of the store. She’d ended in the very back and had to wind through a lot of aisles before she could check out. Before she could get there, however, a voice caught her attention.

“Suze!”

She stiffened, her foot catching on the concrete floor with a screech. Dread pooled in her stomach as she slowly turned to see Elliott walking her way with a wide smile. *No, no, no...* He

was going to see what was in her cart. He was going to figure out what she was doing. Closing her eyes and sending a prayer heavenward for deliverance, Susie gripped the cart tightly and braced herself for what was to come.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Elliott said, brushing her cheek with a light kiss. “What brings you...?”

Susie peeked open one eye, watching the exact moment he realized what she was buying.

The humor dropped from Elliott’s face, and his jaw tightened. His gray eyes met hers, and she flinched at the accusation there. “Nevermind. I can see exactly what you’re doing.”

Susie pinched her lips and put her hands on her hips. “I told you I wanted to do this.”

“And I thought you promised to wait.” Elliott’s nostrils flared. “I trusted you.”

“I *did* wait,” she shot back. “I waited all week, but I haven’t changed my mind. Tyson needs my help.”

“But you don’t have that authority,” Elliott said in a calm voice. “Adam is Tyson’s father. You can’t go against that, unless you’re looking to have him arrested or Tyson taken away.”

“You know I don’t want that.”

“So you’re willing to push where Adam has told you to stay away?” Elliott shook his head. “You can’t do this, Suze. Either Adam and Tyson need to be left alone, or you need to get them professional help.”

“And how would taking Tyson away from his father help anything?” She argued. “Adam is a good guy. He’s just going through a hard time.”

“Then why aren’t you respecting his authority in the matter?” Elliott pointed out. “He told you to stop.”

“He said he didn’t want you and Theo to interfere.”

Elliott’s eyebrows went high. “So he said you were welcome? That doesn’t concern you at all? From a guy who asked you to date him just so you could take care of his son?”

Susie rubbed her forehead, a sudden headache hitting her hard and fast. “Elliott, I don’t want to argue about this.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then why can’t you accept that I need to help them?”

He stepped just a little closer. “And why can’t you accept that Adam wants you to butt out? If you aren’t going to date him, then you have no right to come barging in unless you’re wanting to call the authorities.”

“It isn’t like that,” she whispered, feeling on the verge of tears. “There’s nothing illegal going on, and I care for Tyson. I watch him every day. He’s hurting. He needs attention.”

“Then give it to him in the classroom.”

“I am!” she cried, swinging her arms to the side. “But it’s not enough! Why can’t you see that?”

“I can,” Elliott said tightly. “But you’re overstepping your bounds, and it’s going to get you hurt.”

Susie opened her mouth to argue, but she quickly noticed that the two of them were gathering a crowd. Snapping her mouth shut, she spun and began walking to the front again.

Elliott's heavy footsteps sounded behind her, and she braced herself for another confrontation. She'd known he wouldn't be happy about this, but the sour feeling in her stomach was so much heavier than she imagined. Why couldn't he understand? Why couldn't he just let her do what she wanted to do?

He's trying to protect you. Susie scoffed at her inner voice. *And I'm trying to protect Tyson,* she argued back.

She began dumping her haul on the conveyor belt, studiously ignoring Elliott, but he never left her side. Standing at the end of the row, watching and waiting for her to finish. She thought he might say something when the total came up on the scanner, but the only sign of his thoughts was a raised eyebrow, which Susie chose to ignore.

It was her money, and this was her choice.

Elliott had nothing to do with it.

* * *

Why couldn't she see reason?

Elliott kept his mouth shut, frustrated and embarrassed that they had drawn such a crowd inside the store. He knew the gossip vine would be flying with his and Susie's spat and he wasn't excited about it, but even more than that, he was concerned with Susie's decision to go over to Adam's.

How could she not see that she was backing a wounded animal into a corner? He understood her concern for Tyson, he really did. Elliott was worried as well, but taking matters into her own hands wasn't the right way to handle this. As long as Adam was angry, he was unpredictable and dangerous. In his current state of mind, he could easily hurt Susie without meaning to. Any animal, when threatened, tended to react badly and Adam was going to be no different.

Susie pulled up to the back of her vehicle and Elliott put a hand on her trunk before she could open it. "Wait," he said softly, hoping to bring the tension down a notch.

"There's nothing to wait about," Susie sniffed. She looked up and had tears in her eyes.

He felt as if she'd gut punched him.

"I need to go."

Elliott shook his head. Hurt as it might, he couldn't let her go. "You can't go alone."

"And you can't come with me."

"Then call the police."

Susie squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her fists as if trying to stop from lashing out. "Elliott..."

"No," he insisted, stepping right up into her space. "Suze, you're not listening to me."

"I could say the same thing!" she cried, her voice growing in volume. "Adam's threatened by you. He's embarrassed, and he didn't like me asking for your help."

“How can you not see that red flag in that?” Elliot pushed a hand through his hair, tugging on the roots in exasperation. “If everything is alright, he shouldn’t be so upset!”

“Wouldn’t you be upset?” she argued. “Would you want the whole world to know that you were still broken from the death of your wife?”

“I’m hardly the whole world,” Elliott ground out. “I’m one guy.”

“But still, you can see how that would hurt, right?” she begged him. Her hand landed on his chest, and it felt like a branding iron. “He’s my friend,” Susie said softly, as if that should explain why she was willing to risk her safety.

“Is he?” Elliott asked, daring to voice a thought that had been mulling through his head for a while. “Is that all he is?”

Susie gasped and stepped back. “What are you asking?”

“Maybe I should never have interfered when he had you cornered,” Elliott muttered, folding his arms over his chest. “You looked upset and I thought you needed help, but if Adam is such a *friend*, then I guess I should have let you be. It’s apparent you find your friendship with him more important than what’s between us.”

Her eyes were swimming now. “It isn’t about Adam,” she rasped.

“Then who is this about?”

Susie’s jaw worked several times before she was able to speak. “Tyson.”

“And what about Tyson?” Elliott pushed. “Again...if you think he’s in danger, you need to call the police. If you don’t, you need to let Adam make the decisions for him and his son.” Not thinking clearly through his frustration, Elliott leaned in. “He’s not your kid, Suze. You can’t do this.”

Her skin paled so quickly that Elliott was sure she was going to faint, and he immediately regretted his words.

“Susie, I’m so—”

She held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks. “You’re right,” she said, her voice barely audible. “He’s not my son.” The tears were pouring down her cheeks. “But he’s as close as I’m ever going to get.”

Elliott blinked a few times, frowning. “I don’t understand.”

“I can’t have children.”

The words burst between them with all the finesse of a lead balloon, and Elliott felt as if that balloon landed on his pinky toe. Pain scored through his chest, and he barely caught himself before he stumbled backward. “You...can’t have kids?”

Susie shook her head, a chunk of hair whipping across her forehead from the icy breeze swirling around the parking lot. “I was born without a uterus,” she said, her voice broken and angry. “They discovered it when I was a teenager.”

The picture of his future, the one with Susie holding a tiny baby and smiling at him just like she had the first night of Santa Pictures, stung behind Elliott’s eyes. He wasn’t sure what to say. He felt like someone had slapped him and stolen

something very precious from him, but after that flash, his mind went straight to Susie.

This woman spent all her time caring for children, knowing she'd never bear her own. What kind of strength did that take? No wonder she couldn't let this thing go with Tyson.

Even with the fighting between them, Elliott reached out and pulled her into his chest. Susie crumpled, crying and letting him carry her weight. He wrapped her up tight, hoping she could feel how much he was willing to hold her pieces together. From the way she was sobbing, it was clear that not only was information painful, but it had been held back for a long time.

Rubbing her back, Elliott didn't speak. He worked the words through his mind, letting his own dreams of children with her dark hair and his gray eyes fade into nonexistence. Sorrow, much stronger than he'd expected, sat heavy in his chest. It was as if he were mourning the loss of a dear friend, and yet his dreams were only weeks old. He couldn't begin to imagine the pain that Susie was experiencing.

"It's going to be alright," he finally whispered, clearing his throat to find his voice. "We'll get through this together." He kissed the top of her head. "I'll go to Adam's with you."

She immediately yanked herself away, shaking her head. Her nose was bright red, and her cheeks flushed and damp. "You can't."

Elliott fought the urge to bellow in frustration. "You can't go alone."

Susie took several deep breaths. "I can." She jerked open her trunk, turning her back to him. "And I will."

Elliott watched her finish loading her supplies and only moved when she got into her car. As she pulled out, she hesitated, glancing at him through the window as he stood at attention, watching her carefully.

After a couple of seconds, she turned away and finished pulling out, then drove away.

Elliott stood watching until she was completely out of sight. He was out of ideas, and he was out of hope. As she drove away, he couldn't help but think that she was driving away not only with his heart, but that she was never coming back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The tears didn't stop, and Susie was utterly sick of them. Angrily, she wiped at her face as she carefully drove down the gravel road to Adam's house.

He and Amy had lived out in a darling home on a small homestead, but it was easy to see that the grounds hadn't been maintained since Amy had died. Bushes were overgrown, the grass was dead, and Amy's favorite roses were so overgrown that Susie wouldn't have known what they were if she hadn't been there before.

Her car crawled to a stop, and she put it in park. Still the tears came. She grabbed a handful of tissues out of her glove compartment and did the best she could to fix her face.

The idea of leaving the box on the doorstep and running was sounding more and more appealing. Elliott's anger had been real, but unlike when Adam grew angry, Susie hadn't felt afraid of Elliott.

His anger had been more...protective. He was worried for her, concerned that she was getting herself into a bad situation.

And she didn't blame him.

She didn't like the position any more than he did, but the thought of Tyson needing help was more than Susie could bear, almost as horrible as the thought of strangers taking Tyson from his home. No child needed to be separated from a parent who loved them.

And Adam *did* love Tyson, Susie was sure of it. But Adam was hurt and probably lonely and he simply wasn't at his best, but that didn't make him a bad father. A sorrowful hiccup broke free as Susie continued to look at the home. It looked abandoned, as if the people inside had given up on life. That was probably exactly what Adam had done. With Amy gone, he'd given up.

His idea of dating Susie had probably been made out of desperation. Something...*anything*...that would help break the pain in his life.

It was a pain that Susie was getting a small glimpse of as she thought of what it had cost her to drive away from Elliott. But she'd known this day was coming. She'd finally been honest with him. It was done.

He knew her secret, he knew she couldn't let this thing go with Tyson, and he knew why. To his credit, he hadn't belittled her or called her broken, but he hadn't stopped her from leaving either.

Swallowing the next sob that tried to work its way up her throat, she climbed out of the car and forced herself to breathe deeply. She needed to get control of herself, or Tyson would wonder what had happened. He'd already been upset that other children had been helping Elliott around the daycare this last

week. The young boy obviously didn't agree with his father's edict that Elliott stay away and had been pouty every time Elliott came into the room.

Blinking back more tears, Susie opened the trunk and pulled out the box she had prepared. Between the clothes and food, Tyson should be set for awhile, and Susie would do something else she'd been neglectful of.

She'd be a friend to Adam.

Their friendship had been based on Amy, but from the state of things, he needed someone at his side. Susie had no romantic notions toward the man, but if he had some help, perhaps their lives would never have plummeted this far.

The gravel crunched under her feet and her nose ran from the cold as she walked forward. Gingerly, she walked up the wooden steps, only slightly afraid they wouldn't hold her weight, then shifted the box and rang the doorbell.

No noise came from inside, and Susie chewed on the inside of her lip, half afraid and half eager for them not to be home.

You could always leave the box and go.

The longer the silence went, the more the thought began to appeal and after a moment, Susie started to set the box at her feet just as the door squeaked open.

“What are you doing?”

She froze, halfway to the ground. Adam's voice was anything, but friendly and her heart began to race. Forcing her muscles into action, Susie pasted an absolutely fake smile on

her face. “Hi,” she whispered, then cleared her throat. “Hey... uh...I wanted to...” She cut off at the disdain on Adam’s face. “I wanted to bring a few things by for Tyson,” Susie finished carefully.

Adam’s eyes narrowed. “We don’t need your charity,” he spat.

Susie closed her eyes and prayed for strength before opening them. “I’m not bringing charity,” she argued. “But I know things have been difficult since Amy passed, and I wanted to offer a little holiday spirit for you both. I love Tyson, and I know he’s looking forward to Christmas.”

Adam shook his head and stepped out the door, closing it behind him. “You don’t get it, do you?” he snarled.

Susie felt her muscles go taut, ready to bound away like a scared rabbit, but her feet were frozen to the deck.

“I don’t want you around here.”

“Adam,” she tried to plead.

“NO!” He growled and pushed his hands through his hair. “Why can’t you just leave us alone? We’re fine! We’re doing fine! So what if I can’t do all the things that Amy could do?” His shout ended on a whine and for a moment it appeared as if he might cry, but all too quickly anger replaced the sorrow once again.

“You and your boyfriend and the people at church, they all just need to leave us alone.”

Susie shook her head. “We’re friends, Adam. This is what friends do. I’m sorry I didn’t—”

“This is what *friends* do?” he scoffed. “They bring charity boxes around, making a man feel like he can’t take care of his own?” His nostrils flared, and his cheeks were red above his week old beard. “*Friends*,” he ground out, “don’t ignore people for years, only waiting until they can come in and play hero when a guy’s down on his luck.” He took a step toward her, and Susie backed up. “Friends don’t tell other people when their children’s coats don’t fit.”

Susie took another step back and stumbled down the couple of steps, landing on her backside with a painful thud, her box spilling to the side.

“Go away,” Adam sneered. “You’re no friend of mine, and you were never a friend of my wife’s.”

Before Susie could open her mouth, a short siren cut her off, and she spun, feeling as if she were going to be sick. A police car drove up, screeching a halt just as an officer jumped out.

“What’s going on here?” he shouted, his hand hovering near his side.

He didn’t, Susie thought, swallowing bile. *He couldn’t have.*

A stomp behind her had her whipping her head around again before she scuttled away as Adam stormed down the steps.

“This woman is trespassing,” he shouted, pointing to Susie.

Her eyes widened, and her mouth gaped as she looked back and forth between the two men. “I...Adam...”

The officer narrowed his eyes. “Miss Susie? Are you hurt? Did he touch you?”

Despite the pain in her heart and bum, she shook her head, watching Adam warily. “No,” she croaked.

The officer sighed, as if disappointed and asked in a resigned tone, “Do you have permission to be here?”

Susie closed her eyes when Adam’s face didn’t falter and shook her head. “No.”

“Then I’m gonna need you to go home. Do you understand?”

Without looking at either of the two men, Susie stood, brushed off her pants and got in her car. She didn’t even bother wiping away the tears this time. They were flowing too heavily for her to keep up with, and there was no way she could stop them.

Her heart had just been smashed into tiny pieces, and she wasn’t sure what hurt worse. Knowing Elliott had called the police on Adam, or knowing Adam was willing to turn her in to protect himself.

Two betrayals within minutes of each other was more than she could bear, and without letting herself think too much on it, she took the first freeway exit she found and gunned it.

* * *

Elliott slammed open the front door of his home, not even wincing when the door smacked the wall. Right now he didn't care if he put a hole all the way through. In a moment of indecision as he watched Susie drive away, he'd made a choice that signed his death warrant.

Or at least that of his heart.

She'd never forgive him for calling the police. He knew it. He knew it as well as he knew every shelf in the hardware store and as well as he knew that Wyatt, his nephew, snuck cookies from the cupboard every night before bed, sharing them with his dog Nana.

Theo's head came around the corner. "What's going on?"

Elliott's lip curled, and he didn't answer, simply slammed the door back shut and marched toward the stairs.

"Elliott!" Theo shouted, stepping to intercept him. "What's going on?"

Elliott stopped, but his breathing was too shallow and his mind too chaotic to have a decent conversation. "We're over," he snapped.

Theo froze. "Do you mean you and Susie?"

Elliott nodded curtly and tried to go around, but Theo countered again.

"What happened?"

Elliott threw up his hands. "I don't want to talk about it, Theo. Let me by, or I'll move you myself."

Theo snorted. “In your condition? I could take you with my eyes closed.”

Elliott saw red and moved to take Theo down, but Theo was quicker, landing a quick punch to Elliott’s jaw. Stumbling back, Elliott caught himself on the wall, shocked at his brother’s bold move.

“Stop for a minute,” Theo ground out, his fist clenching and unclenching. “You’re not thinking clearly, and we need to figure out if there’s a way for you to get her back.”

Theo’s first punch had been a smart move as Elliott realized that the fight was draining and he was feeling exhausted. Letting his back fall against the wall, he slid down, hanging his hands over his knees. “I did something she’ll never forgive,” he rasped.

Theo’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Elliott could barely bring himself to meet Theo’s accusing gaze. “I made a police report.”

Theo’s glare turned into a confused frown, and he folded his arms over his chest. “Explain.”

Sighing, Elliott let his head fall back against the wall, barely noticing the pain when it hit. Even his jaw was nothing compared to the feeling in his chest right now. Deep down, he knew he’d done the right thing. Susie was putting herself in danger, and he wasn’t able to help her.

But even knowing it was right didn’t ease the hurt.

In broken, barely audible sentences, he told his brother everything. From first kissing Susie, to seeing her with the

baby and realizing that he wanted more. From convincing her to give him a real chance, to the fight that led to their demise. Throughout the entire ordeal, Theo's face stayed still, not giving any of his feelings away. It was impressive really, but Elliott wasn't in the right frame of mind to congratulate his brother on his self control. He was too busy wallowing in his own misery and destroyed future to be concerned that Theo seemed to have no feelings at all one way or the other.

“You're screwed.”

Elliott's head jerked up at the words. “Ya think?” he snorted sarcastically.

Theo sighed, and the emotionless look faded, finally bringing him into the human realm. “What are your plans?” he asked.

“What do you mean, what are my plans?” Elliott growled. “I just told you we're over.”

“I heard. But I don't believe it.”

“Oh, believe it,” Elliott drawled. “In fact, any minute now we might need the police here, because she's bound to be coming for blood.”

“You hurt her.” Theo's shoulders raised and then dropped.

“I was trying to protect her.”

“But you didn't trust her,” Theo pointed out. “And that's why she'll be hurt.”

“Would you?” Elliott shot back. “If you were in love with a woman, and she was refusing to listen to reason, would you

have simply let her go?”

Theo's brows furrowed. “Are you so sure that Adam would hurt her?”

Elliott sighed and closed his eyes, hanging his head forward. “I've seen it too many times,” he whispered, not knowing if Theo could hear him. “The grief, the hopelessness, the pain...” He swallowed, but nothing eased the ache in his chest. “It seems they go one of two ways.” Elliott finally raised his head. “Either they shut down all emotion and basically turn into zombies, or they bottle it up until it explodes and they do something they regret.”

Theo's jaw hardened again.

“Charlotte became a zombie,” Elliott stated, then stopped, letting Theo fill in the rest.

Theo's smile was anything but friendly. “I guess we both know what I became. What about you?”

Elliott returned the smile in kind. “I became the village idiot.”

Theo scoffed. “Sounds about right.” He sighed, his stance finally softening. “I would've called them, too.”

Elliott nodded, blinking against tears. It had been years since any had escaped his eyes, and he wasn't ready to give into them now. “I know.”

Theo nodded, his eyes on the ground. “So now what? You just back off and let her go?”

Elliott splayed his hands to the side. “What else would you have me do? She already made her stance clear, and by calling the cops, I put the final nail in our coffin.”

Theo sucked in a deep breath. “You’ve changed.”

It was Elliott’s turn to frown. “What?”

Theo eyed his brother, then turned away again. “Since you began dating her. You’ve changed. Become more... purposeful...I don’t know.” He made a face and rubbed the back of his neck. “I can’t do these kinds of talks,” he muttered. “Where’s Charlotte when you need her?”

“Taking care of her family,” Elliott groaned as he stood up. “Which leaves us on our own.”

“You’re family too.”

Elliott chuckled darkly. “You’re finally claiming me?” He put a hand to his chest. “I’m honored.”

Theo rolled his eyes and slapped Elliott’s back, ushering him into the kitchen. “Come on. I made dinner.”

“Are we fixing this with food?”

“Would it work?”

Elliott took a split second to notice how his gut was churning before shaking his head. “No.”

“Then I suppose you have your answer.” Theo kept pushing. “But you’re coming in, anyway.”

Elliott was out of words. He followed Theo without comment and sat at the bar, feeling like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He’d spent years trying to fix his

family after Beckett's death. Laughing, smiling, teasing... everything he could think of that would break the cycle of grief that had held the family captive.

But this was a new grief, and for the first time, Elliott had no answer for it. He couldn't laugh his way out of this, or tease or brag or annoy...there was nothing to do. He'd lost her. He'd made a choice to protect her, and in so doing, he'd lost her.

The empty cavity inside his chest felt all consuming, and Elliott realized that it was probably the same thing Adam had been going through. No wonder it drove him mad. Losing someone who had become part of you had consequences, and Elliott was experiencing them first hand. He knew he'd never be the same, and truthfully, he didn't want to be.

Susie had brought something beautiful into his life and Elliott wasn't ready to brush it aside, but the hurt, it felt as if he were being chewed up from the inside out by a tasmanian devil.

He took one breath, and then another, unsure how long he could keep going. Each moment felt like an eternity, and the future looked bleak. Closing his eyes, he laid his head down on the cool tile counter. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to feel anymore. Hopefully, becoming a zombie really did run in the family because right now, it was the best option Elliott had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The scenery was starting to blur, but Susie kept driving. She had no idea where she was, but as long as there was a road, did it really matter?

On a whim, she followed a turn off and pulled up to a public beach.

Stepping out of her car, she was grateful to see it was deserted. The wind whipped across her face, snapping her hair and causing her nose to run. The coat she was wearing did little to keep out the cold, but Susie barely felt it.

Walking forward, ignoring the abrasive sand, she came to a bench at the top of the beach and plunked down.

Numb.

That was the best way to describe what she was feeling right now. Her body was functioning, but everything else had been shut off.

Flashes kept going through her mind. Adam storming across the deck. The officer's lights coming up the drive. Falling and dropping all the gifts she'd offered. Adam accusing her of trespassing and the officer questioning her.

Next she saw Elliott, and for just a moment, her heart twinged. In that split second, she was grateful for the numbness. She didn't want to feel it. The first part of her heartache had already been there when she'd gone to see Adam, and it had been horrible. She couldn't even begin to imagine what was going to happen when her protective wall broke down completely.

Elliott had been so worried about her, he'd tried to stop her. He'd begged and commanded and done everything within his power, and she'd left. She'd taken her convictions and drove away without looking back.

A shiver rocked her and Susie wrapped her arms around herself, still staring straight ahead. She couldn't bring herself to dwell on the look of devastation on his face. She had to leave. She'd known she would have to leave before they'd ever truly been dating.

You didn't give him a chance to respond.

She scoffed at the thought out loud. "I didn't need to give him a chance to respond," she whispered, her voice blowing away with the wind.

The sky was darkening now, almost faster than Susie could keep up with, but she still didn't move.

The horizon disappeared, followed by her view of the ocean. A heavy isolation came, thrusting her shoulders down with a weight she hadn't expected, and in her current frame of mind, Susie almost collapsed under the pressure.

“It’s fine,” she whispered, though she didn’t believe it. “Everything’s going to be okay.” But it wouldn’t. She’d played with fire, and she’d lost. She’d tempted fate and opted to enjoy the moment rather than think about the long term, and now she was paying for it.

Adam’s betrayal flashed in her mind over and over again. Susie had known him a long time. She’d seen him when he was happy and laughing. She’d held Tyson when he was only a few days old. She’d hugged Amy and wished her well in her marriage.

Susie simply couldn’t reconcile the man who had accused her of trespassing with the man who’d married her friend.

Elliott warned you.

Closing her eyes, Susie let the sleet slash at her skin. She was shaking now and the cold began to seep into her bones, but she still didn’t move. The numbness was breaking way under the extreme weather, but Susie couldn’t bring herself to care.

Her teeth rattled and her hands shook so hard she could barely clench them together, but nothing compared to pain in her chest. The pain she’d brought on herself.

She’d failed Tyson.

She’d hurt Adam.

Worst of all...she’d lied to Elliott.

“Well,” she rasped. “Now he knows.”

But where did she go from here? How could she ever face the two men again? There was no other daycare in town. How could she see Adam and not relive every terrifying moment of their time this afternoon? How could she look at Tyson and not be scared his father was going to do or say something that would threaten Susie again?

How could she visit Charlotte and not think of Elliott? His was the only hardware store in town. Could she manage to never run into him or Theo again? Would they kick her out, refusing her service? Did he hate her for being so stupid that he had to call the police in order to protect her?

Would he ever be willing to speak to the liar again?

She didn't blame Elliott. Not for their fight and not even for the police. From the moment she'd fallen down the stairs at Adam's, she'd known this was on her head. She hated, however, that Elliott had felt his only choice was to call the authorities. That he'd called in someone else and washed his hands of her.

Any chance they had of overcoming her lies and stubbornness in going against his recommendations were long gone. The officer had been a sure sign.

But now she had to figure out where to go from here because Tidepool Cove sounded more like purgatory than home.

Sighing, Susie let her head hang. Curse small towns. Tidepool Cove wasn't big enough for her to hide in. If she wanted to avoid certain people, the only way was to leave. Tears joined the icy rain, dripping off the end of her nose and

blending with the moisture running through her hair, causing it to stick to her face, despite the heavy breeze.

It was the only solution. She'd have to go away. She'd have to start over. The men would get along just fine, but Susie knew she didn't have the strength to see them again... ever.

Charlotte's quick departure now made a lot more sense after Noah broke her heart, and Susie wished she'd been a bit more sympathetic to her friend's plight.

Sometimes pain was simply too great to manage in one person.

She'd sell the business. It wasn't worth as much as it would be a big city, but it would be enough to get her started. She could get a job working for someone else and have enough money to live on until she had a steady paycheck.

It was the only way. Or at least, it was the only way she'd be able to survive. Facing either of them was too much, and Susie's strength to forge through her current state of being was broken...just like the rest of her.

* * *

Elliott climbed into his truck and carefully pulled out of the parking lot. The line of children walking through the lot was difficult to count, but he went slow, navigating his massive truck through the crowds coming to take pictures with Santa.

With me.

Elliott snorted. He'd given the job to Clarence to finish for the season, and the older man had been all too happy to comply. Elliott didn't know what he was thinking, having done it all himself for the first half of the season.

You were drawn in by a pair of dark eyes and kissable lips.

"A kiss does not a relationship make," he grumbled to himself as he finally got out on the road.

It had been several days since he and Susie had fought and he'd let her go to Adam's. Officer Mathis hadn't said much about his check in, other than to reveal that no one was seriously hurt and Adam hadn't pressed charges.

One side of Elliott's lip curled. "Why would Adam get to press charges?" It made Elliott insanely curious as to what had happened, but he hadn't spoken to Susie, though he'd tried texting a couple times, and there was no way he was approaching Adam.

The last thing Elliott needed was to have Adam fly off the handle again. The guy was unstable as it was. But Tyson... Elliott winced. He still couldn't figure out what to do about Tyson.

Susie was lost to him. If she was going to give him another chance, Elliott would know by now. But she hadn't responded to his texts and she hadn't come by the house. His hands were tied.

He felt the same way about Tyson. Elliott's hands were tied. Sending the police had been the best Elliott could do, even if it was more about protecting Susie than saving Tyson.

But if the young boy needed help, Susie wouldn't let him down. She saw him every day and would be able to handle things.

It was time Elliott left things alone. He'd messed up enough already.

Frowning, he pulled into his driveway. An older truck was sitting on the side of the street, and Elliott didn't recognize it.

Parking in his usual spot, Elliott climbed out of his own vehicle, giving only a cursory glance to the one on the street. It was probably just a neighbor who had parked wrong. But he came to a stop when he got to the bottom of his porch steps.

Adam slowly stood up from the front porch bench and watched Elliott carefully.

"Adam," Elliott said curtly, his eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?"

Adam didn't respond right away. Tilting his head to the side he studied Elliott. "Where is she?" he asked, his voice gravelly.

Elliott frowned. "She?"

Adam snorted. "Don't be dense. We both know who I'm talking about. Where is she?"

Elliott's pulse immediately picked up from a lazy crawl to a fast walk, and he leapt up the steps. "What do you mean where is she?" He walked toward Adam. "I haven't seen her since she took off for your place."

Adam's eyes flared, but he brought himself back under control quickly.

"That was days ago," Elliott ground out. "Are you telling me she hasn't been at the daycare all week?"

Adam slowly shook his head. "No. Miss Tanya's been running it."

Elliott clenched his fist rather than punch the guy in front of him. "And you didn't think this was a problem?"

Adam gave him an incredulous look. "Are you seriously blaming this on me?" he snapped. "She left my house in one piece. I'd like to know what happened to her after that." He waved a hand toward Elliott. "You're her boyfriend. Shouldn't you know where she is?"

Elliott swallowed the curse word on his tongue. He'd already thought his world was basically over, now it was only getting worse. "What did you say to her?" he demanded.

"Me?" Adam huffed. "What did you say? If she didn't come back to you, then I don't think any of this is my fault."

He looked entirely too smug, and it took all of the tiny bit of self control Elliott had not to knock the guy to the ground. Instead, he brought tight hands up in a surrender motion. "She broke up with me when I told her not to visit you."

The words visibly shook Adam, and he stumbled back a step. "What?"

Elliott worked to keep his breathing under control. A sudden sense of urgency was clawing at his chest to go find Susie, but he needed more information first. "I told her to call

the professionals and walk away.” He took a deep breath. “She refused.”

Adam closed his eyes, the fight sliding out of his shoulders. “I...didn’t even pause to wonder why the cop was there.” Tilting his head back, Adam pushed a hand through his messy do. “I just...I just want people to back off. Is that so bad? Can’t a guy be left to his own misery?”

Elliott shook his head. “The problem isn’t leaving you alone,” he dared, preparing himself for a reaction. “The problem is the child you’re dragging into it with you.”

To Elliott’s shock, Adam sank down into a chair and buried his face in his hands. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he groaned. “It was never meant to go this far.”

“What did you say to her?” Elliott demanded again. He was too worried about Susie to be empathic to Adam’s plight. “Did you threaten her?”

Adam shook his head, then gave a noncommittal shrug. “Not outright, but the implication was there.” He looked up, his eyes wet and his face pale.

It reminded Elliott of so many of his buddies from the military, and in an oddly, uncomfortable way, it reminded Elliott of himself. He knew those feelings. He’d experienced them. Heck, he was experiencing them right now. He wasn’t going to spend time examining them, however, until Susie was found. Elliott took a step forward, and Adam leaned back, his turn to surrender.

“I didn’t hurt her,” Adam said quickly. “I swear.” Making a face, he dropped his eyes. “I didn’t hurt her physically,” he admitted.

Elliott growled and forced himself to hold still. “Then tell me why I shouldn’t lay into you right here and now.”

Adam closed his eyes and sunk again. “You should,” he admitted. “But as I’ve never enjoyed broken bones, I’d rather we focused on finding Susie.”

Elliott twitched and clenched and unclenched his hands several times. “She hasn’t been in to work at all?”

Adam shook his head. “Have you texted or called? Was it a clean break?”

Elliott looked away. “I tried texting once,” he said. “But she didn’t answer.”

“So we’re both idiots,” Adam said with a sarcastic laugh.

“Pretty much.” Elliott eased the tension in his hands, but his mind was still trying to figure things out. “I need to find her.” He spun, ready to jump in his truck and drive to Susie’s house.

“We need to find her,” Adam corrected.

“I think you’ve done enough,” Elliott shot over his shoulder.

“When you can prove to me that I’ve been worse than you, then we’ll chat,” Adam argued. Without another word, he marched toward his own vehicle.

The only hope Elliott had was to beat Adam to the punch. He yanked open his door and jumped inside, gunning the engine as soon as he had it running. Girlfriend or not, future Mrs. Brown or not...Susie was precious and he needed to make sure she was safe. She could hate him later, right now he was going to push himself into her life one more time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Susie pocketed the receipt from the hotel clerk and began walking outside to her vehicle. The wind pulled at her coat, and she tugged it tighter across her body, ducking her head against the winter weather.

Christmas was in just over a week, and despite the decorations lining the small hotel she'd just exited, nothing felt happy and jolly at all. The numbness wasn't quite as severe as it had been the first night she ran away, but it wasn't completely gone either.

During her time laying in bed at the hotel, Susie's emotions had drifted from one end of the spectrum to the other. She'd spend the first hour in the hotel sitting inside a steaming bath, doing her best to bring feeling back to her outer limbs.

A stop at the store previous to her hotel had meant she had a set of cozy pajamas, and she hadn't taken them off for days. That little "Do Not Disturb" sign in hotels was wonderful for situations just like this.

Other than food, Susie hadn't left the room, and she was regretting leaving now. Leaving meant she had to face the real

world. Leaving meant going back to work. Leaving meant talking to Tanya about selling the business. Leaving meant finding a new job.

Leaving meant having to dodge Adam and Elliott until she finally managed to get out of town.

Her car picked up speed as she merged onto the freeway, and Susie had an idle thought of how many messages were probably waiting for her on her cell phone. She'd only turned it on long enough to tell Tanya she'd be gone for a few days.

Luckily, it was Friday, so she would be able to spend the weekend gearing up for whatever torture the work week would bring. Perhaps the weekend would bring clarity in what direction she should go and where she might be best suited to find work.

An early childhood education degree could be used just about anywhere, from daycare centers to elementary schools. There had to be somewhere Susie could find a job. And for the first time, she was ready to move anywhere. The farther from her beloved coastline, the better.

Gray clouds covered the horizon and the spitting rain was mixed with snow, which melted as soon as it hit the asphalt. When the temperatures dropped that night, Susie knew from years of experience that the roads would become slick and icy, but she was grateful it sat above freezing at the moment, even if only by a few degrees.

Normally, she found the gray soothing. It was a peaceful color, matching the waves that crashed into shore every few seconds. But there was no peace in it now. Now there was

numb mixed with betrayal and anger and a fierce dash of stoic determination.

She *would* get over this.

She had to.

She'd known for years that a future with someone like Elliott had never been in the cards for her, but somehow she'd let his enthusiasm and boyish good looks push her good sense to the side and now she was paying the consequences for it.

Even Adam's betrayal wasn't lingering as much as the loss of Elliott was.

Susie sniffed, refusing to cry again. Both men had hurt her, but she knew that the pain from Elliott was mostly her fault. She'd said yes. She'd kissed him. She'd held back the fact that she was broken. And she'd been the one to walk away...or drive away as the case may be.

Ultimately, it didn't matter. She was leaving, and if she was lucky, she wouldn't even see them before it all happened. Sneak in, sneak out, start fresh. No more relationships, no more troubled students, no more poking her nose where it doesn't belong.

Her one regret was the fact that she hadn't been able to help Tyson more. The little boy needed a shot of love straight in his arm, and Susie had been unable to give it to him, though not for lack of trying.

Painful as it was, he was the real victim.

When signs for Tidepool Cove began to show up, Susie knew she needed to start the ball rolling. Pressing the call

button on her dash, she opened a line to Tanya.

“Susie! Where have you been!” Tanya screeched, making Susie wince. “Everyone’s been looking for you, and no one’s been able to get a hold of you. What were you thinking?”

Susie took a calming breath. Now wasn’t the time to be emotional. “I’m sorry,” she said carefully. “I turned my phone off so I had time to think.”

“What in the world did you need to think about?” Tanya snapped. “How much you were worrying us to death?”

“Tanya,” Susie said more sharply. “I’ve made some decisions.”

The line quieted down.

“I’m going to sell the business.”

Tanya gasped. “What?”

“I wanted to give you first dibs,” Susie continued. “I know you enjoy working there, and although I’ve enjoyed working with you as well, it’s time I moved on. You’ll need to apply for all the licensing and such, but if you’d like to work out a deal for the preschool and daycare, then I’d love to leave it in good hands.”

It took several seconds before Tanya spoke, and her voice had dropped considerably. “Susie, let’s not be rash here. What happened?”

Susie shook her head even though her friend and colleague couldn’t see her. “I’m just ready to move on,” she said, trying

to add a little perkiness to her tone. “I’m ready for a new challenge.”

“You’ve lived here forever,” Tanya replied. “There’s something else. Is this about Adam? Or Elliott? Did something happen between the three of you?”

“It’s nothing like that,” Susie stammered, trying to keep her head on straight as her eyes filled with tears. “I just need a change. You know how it is. Life gets stagnant and boring, and the best cure is to tackle a new dream.”

“This business has been your dream for as long as I’ve known you. This can’t be the end. Let’s talk this out.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Susie stated, getting a better handle on her wayward emotions. “Are you interested in buying me out or not?”

Another few moments crawled by. “Maybe. But I’d like a little time to think about it.”

“That’s fair.” Susie tapped a finger against the steering wheel. “How long do you think you need?”

“I don’t know. A few days? Are you here in town?”

“I’m on my way. How about we talk about it over lunch on Monday? That’ll give me time to come up with a number and you time to speak to someone at the bank.”

“Okay.” Tanya sounded like she was on the verge of tears, but Susie tightened her grip on the wheel and refused to be moved. “Where will you go?”

Susie pinched her lips. She didn't have a good answer for that. It all depended on where she could find a job. Farther was better, but anything was good.

“Wherever I feel inspired.”

* * *

Susie's house came into view, and Elliott blew out a long breath. Finally. It had only taken a few minutes to drive there, but it had felt like an eternity. He'd tried dictating a couple more texts as he drove, but Susie had yet to answer.

His concern was full-blown worry at this point, and if they didn't find her at home, Elliott wasn't sure what he was going to do.

He leapt out of the truck before the engine completely shut down and raced to her door, banging on it with a swift fist. “Susie?” he hollered, ignoring the second truck arriving in the driveway. “Susie, it's Elliott. Open up!”

“If you'll stop pounding for a second, maybe we can listen for an answer,” Adam said curtly as he walked up behind Elliott.

Glaring at the other man over his shoulder, Elliott bit back a retort and stopped moving. When he didn't hear anything, he leaned in, putting his ear to the door. Stillness met him, and the longer it went on, the more his heart fell.

No. He couldn't give up. She had to be there. She was probably still ticked at him and Elliott could understand that,

but he needed to know she was alright. He pounded again. “Susie! I know you’re mad, but we need to talk for a sec.”

Nothing moved. The curtain didn’t twitch, the floor didn’t squeak, no voice came over the doorbell. The house was as empty as Elliott’s spirit. A shiver ran through him, and it had little to do with the icy temperatures of the late afternoon. “She’s not here,” he said sullenly.

“No kidding, Sherlock,” Adam muttered.

Elliott spun and pushed Adam. “What’s your problem?” he snarled. “It was your fault this whole thing got started in the first place. You cornered her in the school and I had to come to her rescue and now you’re mad at me because she’s gone missing?”

Adam scoffed. “Are you kidding? I’m not the one who kissed her and then let her walk right into a situation where she could have gotten hurt.”

“And why could she have gotten hurt?” Elliott bellowed, advancing on Adam. “You were supposed to be her friend. She takes care of Tyson like he’s her own kid, and you pushed her away like she meant nothing.”

Adam’s face was getting progressively redder, and Elliott knew he, himself, was about to blow a gasket. The two men were already shouting at each other, but a full out brawl was on the horizon and he didn’t care.

“Who do I need to hit?”

Both heads jerked so fast it almost hurt Elliott’s neck, but it was the little woman with a broom over her shoulder that

took his attention. Her eyes were narrowed and darting back and forth between the two men like they were criminals. Gray hair was pulled back in a tight bun at the base of her neck, while a sweater larger than Theo draped off her thin frame overtop a dress that had definitely seen better days.

While it looked like a slight breeze would knock her over, the menacing gleam in her pale brown eyes gave Elliott pause.

“What did you say?” Adam asked with disbelief in his voice.

The broom shifted. “I said who do I need to hit?”

Elliott’s eyes widened. “Hit?” Her eyes narrowed so tightly that Elliott wondered how she could even see.

“You two standing here bellowing at each other like a couple of bulls in pasture,” the woman stated. “The only way to deal with idiots is to clock them over the head.” She tilted her head toward the broom. “Maybe I should just hit both of you.”

Elliott stepped back, wary that the stranger was serious. He might not be afraid to tackle Adam, but a broomstick was a whole other matter, not to mention he’d be afraid to fight back against someone literally half his size and female.

Adam rubbed a hand over his face. “This is ridiculous.”

“So are two grown men acting like toddlers,” the woman spat.

Elliott sighed and nodded. “You’re right.” He forced himself to step forward and hold out his hand. “Elliott Brown.”

“I know who you are.”

“Uh...” Elliott wracked his brain but could not, for the life of him, figure out who he was talking to. Had she come into the store at some point? Or maybe a husband?

The woman rolled her eyes. “My husband buys every fly fishing lure before it ever hits your shelves, young man. While I usually wait in the car, I’m not an idiot when it comes to names and faces.”

“Sorry,” Elliott said automatically. Taking a deep breath, he glanced toward the door. “Do you know where Susie is?”

“Not here,” came the curt reply.

“Right,” Elliott said slowly. “No one has been able to get a hold of her. I’m worried about her.”

The woman scoffed. “You two sounded a little less worried and a little more like proud peacocks strutting for a mate.”

He pushed his hand through his hair. “Do you know where she is or not?”

The broom lifted, and Elliott immediately felt guilty.

“I’m sorry. I really do want to help.” He forced his tone to stay soft even though panic was still coursing through his system. “I...” He swallowed hard. “I love her,” he admitted, finally saying it out loud to someone other than himself.

The woman tilted her head, and her eyes darted to Adam. “And you?”

Adam shifted his weight from side to side, his eyes downcast. “She’s my friend,” he muttered.

The woman thought about it a little longer. “I don’t know where she is,” she said bluntly.

“What!” Elliott bit back a curse word.

“But her friend at the daycare probably does.”

He could have punched himself for being an idiot. Why hadn’t he thought of that? When Susie wasn’t home, the logical person to know would be Tanya. There was absolutely no way that Susie left town without telling Tanya about it so she could cover at the daycare.

“Thank you,” Elliott said, keeping his voice calm. “I appreciate your help.” He grabbed his phone out of his pocket and headed for his truck when something whacked his backside. “Ow!” He spun, glaring at the neighbor.

She shrugged and put the broom over her shoulder again. “What good is being old if you can’t get away with a few things now and again?”

“Are you going to hit him too?” Elliott bit out, waving at Adam, who had wisely retreated further away from reach.

The woman shook her head. “Nope. He’s not the one stealing hard earned retirement money from my husband every time some shiny new lure comes out.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “I’m not responsible for your husband’s spending habits.”

“Quit stocking ‘em, and he’ll quit buying ‘em.” She grinned sweetly at him.

Rubbing his backside, Elliott decided it wasn't worth the fight and walked away. Finding Susie was much more important than arguing with a weird neighbor who was still holding a weapon.

Once inside his truck, he pulled up the daycare number and pressed send.

"Tidepool Cove Daycare," a perky voice answered. "How can I help you?"

"Tanya?" Elliott asked. "It's Elliott Brown."

"Oh, hey, Elliott," Tanya said less formally. "What's up?"

"Have you seen Susie?" he cut right to the chase.

She hesitated, which oddly enough, gave Elliott hope. "Uh, I haven't seen her, but I just talked to her on the phone."

Relief began to trickle through his system. "Great. Where is she?"

"I'm not really sure..."

"Tanya," Elliott said, the panic rising again. "We're all a little worried about her. Can you please tell me what you know?"

A long sigh came over the line. "Maybe you better come over here. When I spoke to her, she said she wanted to sell the daycare."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The drive home felt like it had taken forever. Susie sighed as she pulled into her garage and shut off the engine. She felt exhausted even though the last few days had been as lazy as she'd ever had.

She'd barely moved, and she didn't want to move now.

Groaning, Susie forced herself to step out of the vehicle and go in the house. She dropped her keys in the dish and looked around. The house was dark, and nothing had moved since she'd been gone.

It seemed odd, since she felt as if she was extremely different. She'd left determined and eager to help, and now she'd come home broken and without hope.

Shaking her head at her own melancholy thoughts, Susie went to her room to dump the items of laundry she was holding from her impromptu trip. At least the new pajamas would be warm for the winter.

Susie studiously ignored the Christmas tree in her corner and the lights strung across the ceiling. The animated Santa that sat on the coffee table was unmoving, and she planned to keep it that way.

This house wouldn't see any celebrations this year. Even if Susie couldn't find a job and move right away, she knew she wouldn't be able to enjoy any time spent enjoying the holiday.

Throwing her stuff on the bed, she watched her phone buzz, but walked away, ignoring it. Instead, she gathered the laundry from the basket and combined it with the bundle in her arms and headed to her washer and dryer.

The large appliances were a luxury in small homes like hers, but it had been one of the conditions Susie had worked out before being willing to rent. It was an unusual day when she didn't come home from work with something that needed to be washed, making the appliances not just nice, but absolutely necessary.

She heard her phone buzz again, but Susie continued to ignore it. She wasn't ready to talk to anyone yet. She'd done the necessary by speaking to Tanya, and they were going to meet Monday at lunch, but until then, Susie planned on keeping her misery to herself.

Not a half hour later, she was pulling her first batch out of the washer when a knock sounded on her door. Susie froze, unsure if she should bother to answer. Her emotions weren't yet under control, and she was afraid if someone showed her the tiniest bit of kindness, she would break apart.

Or worse, it's Elliott, and he'll tell me off.

Shaking her head, Susie went back to the laundry. No, she simply couldn't handle either of those scenarios right now. It was far too painful.

“Susie!” a feminine voice yelled while knocking again.
“Please let me in!”

“Charlotte,” Susie breathed. Sighing and hanging her head, she knew she couldn’t keep her friend waiting forever. Considering how long Susie had been gone, Charlotte was bound to know what had happened, even if Elliott hadn’t been the one to tell her about it. Their fight at the grocery store was probably the best water cooler gossip this town had had in a decade.

Forcing her feet into action, Susie shuffled across the floor, her socks slipping ever so slightly against the hardwood. “Charlotte?” Susie pulled open the door only a few inches. “What are you doing here?”

Charlotte put her hands on her hips. “Susan Malcolm. You let me in right this second, do you hear me? Don’t make me call Theo or Noah and have them break down the door.”

Sighing with resignation, Susie opened the door the rest of the way and waved her arm toward the house. “Come on in, then. I can’t afford a front door repair right now.”

Charlotte stomped inside and spun before ever getting to the sitting room. “You and Elliott broke up.” It was a statement, not a question, but Susie swallowed and nodded anyway. “I want to know why,” Charlotte demanded.

Susie frowned. “There’s no way you didn’t hear why.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to hear what Old Lady Herschel said, I want to hear what *you* have to say about it.”

Her eyes were already pricking with tears as Susie walked past Charlotte and plopped onto the coach, laying back as if she didn't have the energy to hold her head up any more. "It would never have worked, Char."

"What do you mean it would never have worked?" Charlotte sat in a side chair, leaning forward with a deep frown marring her brow. "Elliott was head over heels for you, and I last time we spoke, I got the feeling you were headed that way as well."

Susie closed her eyes and shook her head. "I am not headed that way, I'm already there."

Charlotte gasped. "Then why?" she whispered.

Susie raised her head. "That's why."

Charlotte's frown deepened. "You'd never work because you fell in love with him? Susie, you're not making sense."

Susie rubbed her aching forehead. It was hard enough to keep back the tears. She really didn't want to hash this out. "Can't this wait? I'm really not in the mood."

Charlotte stood. "I'm going to make you some tea," she announced. "But we *are* going to talk about this. I'm sorry you're hurting and I'm sorry you don't want to, but I've got a brother who has spoken less in the last week than he normally does in ten minutes and Tanya is screaming from the hilltops that you're abandoning her and moving away, so yeah...we're talking anyway." She began walking. "But first, tea."

Susie closed her eyes again. She couldn't blame Charlotte for pushing, but Susie was so tired...She'd almost nodded off

by the time Charlotte came back.

“It’s hot,” Charlotte stated unnecessarily. The steam rising from the top would have been a dead giveaway even if Susie hadn’t already expected the heat. After handing off the cup, Charlotte sat again and clasped her hands in her lap. “Spit it out, Susie. The good, the bad, the ugly...I don’t care. Just spill it.”

Susie set the tea on the coffee table. Her hands were shaking too hard to hold onto it and took a fortifying breath. A single tear went down her cheek, and she hurriedly wiped it away. If she let one go, the hundreds of others waiting on the sidelines would jump in as well.

“Oh, Susie...” Charlotte whispered. “Just tell me.”

Susie nodded, wiping at another rogue tear. “Your brother is the pushiest, dorkiest, most annoying man I’ve ever met,” she began.

Charlotte laughed softly. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

Looking up, Susie forced herself to meet Charlotte’s gaze. “And I’m utterly and irrevocably in love with him.”

* * *

Elliott almost dropped off his barstool when the front door slammed open. He quickly grabbed a paper towel to mop up what had spilled of his drink.

“Elli!”

Pinching his lips together, Elliott refrained from shouting something unsavory toward his sister. Instead of answering, he wiped the counter, knowing she'd find him eventually.

“Has Theo mopped the floor with you yet?” she asked from behind him.

Elliott straightened and gave his sister a look. “He about took my jaw off. Isn't that enough?”

Charlotte huffed. “I suppose.” She came the rest of the way into the kitchen and slunk into the seat beside his spot.

Elliott watched her warily. “If you're planning to smack me upside the head, you're too late. I've already done it enough times to myself.”

Charlotte looked tired as she slumped in her seat. “I just came from Susie's.”

His eyes flared. “Was she finally home?”

Charlotte nodded, and Elliott felt a huge relieved rush that left him slightly dizzy. He gripped the counter to keep himself upright and sent a quick prayer of thanks heavenward.

“She's a mess, Elli.”

He ignored the nickname that drove him nuts. “As horrible as it is to say it,” he muttered, “it's nice to know she cared enough to be.”

Charlotte slapped the counter and scowled. “You're right. That was horrible.”

Elliott shrugged. Now that she was safe, he didn't have anything else to say. She had told him how she felt when she

walked away, and Elliott had chosen her safety over his heart when he'd called the authorities. Now that he knew she was safe, there wasn't anything else for him to worry about.

He did, however, wish Charlotte would leave so he could nurse his wounds in private. They weren't going away any time soon.

"You really didn't think she cared?" Charlotte asked, her voice softer.

Elliott shrugged and scrubbed at a wet spot on the counter. "She walked away easier than I could have."

"She didn't walk away," Charlotte argued. "She went to help a little boy."

He glanced up sharply. "She went to help Tyson without thinking about the consequences. Adam isn't in a good state of mind, and he could've hurt her."

"How do you know?" Charlotte pressed. "I know that Adam didn't respond well. I know you sent the police. But how were you so certain that Adam was dangerous?"

Elliott pressed his lips together. He'd only talked to one person about this, and Theo wouldn't gossip. The two men had seen much more than most because of their time in the armed forces, and there was a sort of unspoken agreement that they didn't tell it to anyone else.

That was the whole point of serving, wasn't it? To protect the loved ones back home? And often that meant protecting them from the stories just as much as it was about protecting them from physical harm.

“You’ve seen it before, haven’t you?” Her question was quiet, a bit uncertain, but she didn’t back off. “We’ve had it in our own family.”

Elliott looked up, watching her without responding.

Sighing, Charlotte closed her eyes for a long moment. “I didn’t get angry and threaten the people around me,” she offered, defending herself.

Elliott nodded. “I know. But just because you were dealing with your grief differently, doesn’t negate the fact that you were still dealing with grief. People tend to react in two different ways.”

“Let me guess,” Charlotte added. “They either shut down or they lash out?”

Elliott shrugged, though she’d hit the nail on the head.

“So what are you going to do now?” she asked. “Where do you and Susie go from here?”

Elliott snorted. “Nowhere. I knew before I called the authorities that it meant the end of our relationship. She had already chosen Tyson over us, and my sending the cops severed any chance of reconciliation.”

Heartbeats went by and Charlotte didn’t say anything, but Elliott could feel her gaze. It bore into the top of his hanging head like a laser, and it burned, though he tried not to show it.

“So why do it?”

Elliott glanced up from under his lashes. His response wasn’t any faster than her question. “Wouldn’t you do

anything if it meant saving the person you were in love with?”

To his surprise, Charlotte’s face completely shifted, and instead of frowning at him, she was grinning like a fool.

Elliott made a face and stepped back. “Are you enjoying this? Thinking I deserve this comeuppance?” He waved an arm in the air, a sudden surge of anger bursting through his chest like lightning. The emotion had been his constant companion since Susie left, though Elliott had worked to contain it. Adam brought it out the most, but lazy, easy-going Elliott was about ready to break, and seeing Charlotte smile at his confession sent him over the edge. “I’ve done nothing but try to help this family,” he snarled, glad when the smile fell from her face. “I’ve plastered on grins and winks and laughed when I didn’t feel like it. I’ve done everything I could to lift you and stupid Theo out of your shutdowns and now you’re *laughing* at me because my social life fell apart?” Elliott stepped back, shaking his head. He held up his hands when she opened her mouth to speak, ignoring the tears that were starting to fill her eyes. “I know,” he rasped. “I know it didn’t work. I’m not stupid. I can look back and see how nothing I did helped, but...” He took a deep, shaky breath. “It was all I had.” His jaw clenched, and Elliott lifted a trembling finger to touch his chest. “It was all I had because...” He pounded his chest this time, the anger rising again. “Because I was hurting too.” He swallowed the bile those words created. “I loved Beckett, too.”

Spinning on his heel, Elliott set to march out of the house. He didn’t know where he was going, and he didn’t care. All he knew was that he had to get away. He’d spent years shoving

his own hurt aside to try and help his siblings, and Charlotte's audacity to laugh at his recent heartache was too much to take.

A hand landed on his arm, tugging hard. "Elliott," his sister sobbed. "Wait."

He made to shake her off, but the door to the garage opened and Theo stepped in, his serious eyes quickly assessing the situation. "What's going on?" he asked, standing at attention in the small hallway.

"Move," Elliott snapped, still trying to remove Charlotte without hurting her.

Theo's eyes darted to Charlotte, then back. "I don't think I should."

"Elliott!" Charlotte said louder this time. "You need to stop and listen."

He shook his head. He'd heard and seen enough.

"Why does he need to listen?" Theo asked, ignoring Elliott's determination to get away.

"Because," Charlotte pleaded, tugging again.

Elliott finally glanced over his shoulder.

Charlotte's face was red, and her eyes puffy as she looked at him, pleading silently for him to stop. "Because I know we can fix this."

Elliott scoffed. "You know we can fix it? How would you know that?"

Charlotte let go of him and wiped at her face. "Because I just happen to be aware that Susie loves you too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Susie blew out a heavy breath as she walked inside her home. A shiver ran through her as she went from the cold outside to the heat indoors. “Thank goodness for whoever invented indoor heating systems,” she muttered, rubbing at her arms after she took off her coat.

Her legs felt like they weighed a thousand pounds as she moved farther into the house. Mondays were always hard, but today had been excruciating. The meeting at lunch hadn’t gone well at all.

Instead of being willing to talk business, Tanya had spent the entire time trying to talk Susie out of leaving. Susie had tried to listen politely, but her nerves were at an end and if that lunch hour had gone even one minute longer, she was sure she would have snapped at her employee.

She understood where Tanya was coming from. The woman simply wasn’t ready to take on the type of responsibility that came with owning her own business, so Susie had decided not to push. Her best bet was going to be to look outside Tidepool Cove for a new owner.

Groaning, Susie flopped onto the sofa. The problem with that plan was the fact that it would probably be picked up by a larger business, and her little daycare would simply be grandfathered into a system. The personalization and relationships that Susie had built were likely to fade away, and it hurt to think about that happening to her children.

“Not as much as it hurts to think about meeting Elliott again,” she whispered to her too-still house. Susie had resigned herself many years ago to being alone, and for a long time, she’d been fine. But right now, the loneliness of her breakup made her feel as if the walls were closing in. She struggled to breathe, and her stomach went from craving ice cream to feeling like she was going to lose her lunch in a matter of seconds.

Closing her eyes, she sent another prayer out. It seemed like that’s all she did lately. Pray, sleep and cry. Even spending time with the students today hadn’t broken the cycle.

A knock at the door had her jolting upright and rubbing at her face. A warm cup of tea and sleep beckoned and for a moment, Susie considered not answering. But when the knock came again, she sighed and stood up, moaning again at how old her body felt.

Emotions were funny things. Their capacity to enable or disable a person’s physical body had never been so apparent to Susie as it was now. Her time with Elliott often left her breathless and flitting about like a fairy, feeling light and happy. Now that they were no longer together, her depression had her crashing back to Earth, while each movement of a

limb felt like ten times the usual effort, and she wanted nothing more than to fade away into oblivion where nothing hurt and her troubles no longer existed.

“I’m coming,” she responded to a third round of knocking. Opening the door, Susie hesitated when she spotted Charlotte. They’d said a lot to each other over the weekend, and Susie’s level of energy right now wasn’t enough to handle another heart to heart. “Hey, Char,” Susie said, clearing her throat. “I, uh...I’m not feeling well, so—”

Charlotte pushed past Susie and went inside, leaving Susie standing aimlessly at the door. “Sorry to barge in,” Charlotte threw over her shoulder. “But we’ve got an emergency, and I need your help.”

Susie frowned and closed the door. “You need my help? With what?”

Charlotte headed to the bedroom, and Susie followed, curiosity getting the better of her. “Where’s that Mrs. Claus costume?” Charlotte muttered, looking through the closet.

Scowling, Susie moved Charlotte aside and grabbed the garment bag from the far side of the closet. “Sorry. I planned to have it dry cleaned before returning it, but I suppose you probably need it since they’re still taking pictures.” She shoved it at Charlotte, trying not to think about how fun it had been to work with Elliott in the store.

Charlotte shook her head, pushed the bag back and grabbed Susie’s hand instead. “Come on. We’re already late.”

“What are you doing?” Susie cried as Charlotte dragged her along.

“We need to get to the store!” Charlotte declared, swiping Susie’s keys from the bowl. “Pictures start in just a few minutes, and you need to get dressed.”

“Charlotte.” Susie dug her feet in and pulled them to a stop. “I’m not going to go take pictures as Mrs. Claus again.” She shook her head vigorously. “Surely you can understand why.”

Charlotte gave her a patient look. “I understand *that*. But this isn’t about Elliott. Clarence has been subbing for him ever since...” Charlotte made a face and leaned closer. “Should we call it ‘the incident?’”

Susie paused. “He hasn’t been doing Santa?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“But he loved it.”

Charlotte’s shoulders fell. “He did.”

Guilt began to swamp Susie’s stomach. So much for thinking of binging on ice cream tonight. The sudden bout of nausea caused her to bend over, gasping for air. This was all her fault. Elliott was so good with the kids. He loved spending time with them, and she’d ruined that. He probably thought she was still going to be there, that she’d show up for pictures like a good girl, and he wanted nothing to do with her.

“Susie?” Charlotte asked, her worry evident without seeing her face. “Sweetie...” She rubbed Susie’s back. “It’s going to be okay. Come on. You can do this. This is the last week of

pictures, and we've had a specific request for Mrs. Claus to be there."

"I can't," Susie rasped, still trying to breathe through her mouth instead of her nose. "You'll have to cover for me."

The back rub continued. "I won't fit the costume," Charlotte said softly. "You know we're not exactly shaped the same."

Susie closed her eyes and groaned. How could she do this? How could she go there, knowing what memories would assault her and take her already shattered heart and turn it into oblivion? She had at least a small amount of self preservation, and this was crossing a line. One that Susie was positive she would never be able to come back from.

"Please," Charlotte pleaded. She leaned down, wrapping her arm around Susie's back. "I know it's a lot, and I know you don't want to go, but this isn't about *him*," she whispered. "It's for the children."

Susie grasped onto those words as if they were the only buoy in a stormy sea. *For the children. For Tyson, for Wyatt... for all the little ones who still believe and don't need my adult problems to ruin their magic.*

Forcing her breathing to slow in an effort to slow her heart rate as well, Susie slowly straightened her spine. She could feel a heavy flush in her cheeks and neck and the world felt just a little woozy, but she locked her knees and clenched her fists. "Okay," she rasped. "I'll do it."

Charlotte's smile was soft and sympathetic. "You're the best person I know, Susan Malcom."

"You mean I'm the dumbest person you know." Susie wiped at her damp forehead. She could do this. She had to. Clarence was playing Santa. The children would love having her there. She didn't need to see *him* at all. She could do one last good deed before leaving town.

Her job application was ready to go, and tonight after getting home, she would reward herself with not only the ice cream but taking that next step of moving forward in her life.

Swallowing several times in a rapid fashion, Susie followed Charlotte out to her car and got in the passenger seat, crushing the Mrs. Claus costume in her lap.

She wished the numbness she had felt last week would settle over her again, but the feeling wasn't within grasp. Instead, her system was overloading with riotous swells of anger, betrayal, guilt, anxiety and determination.

You can do this, she told herself as Charlotte drove. Her friend was chatting away as if they were going to a happy place, but Charlotte knew better. Even with Elliott gone, Susie knew that every part of that store would remind her of the man she loved but could never have.

It's not about him, it's not about you...it's for Tyson.

Tyson. She would focus on Tyson. She had never been able to help him the way she wanted, especially since Adam had most likely thrown away the gifts that she had brought with her last week.

Tyson wouldn't be there, of course, but he could still be her mental mascot. She could remember him and remember how much he needed an advocate, and Susie made a promise to herself that she would advocate tonight. She'd help keep the magic of Christmas alive for all the children she came in contact with, and she would use this to propel her forward.

Somewhere out there were more kids she could help. Her time in Tidepool Cove was over, and she would never have her own children to take care of, but she could help somewhere else. She's learn from her mistakes and do better, making sure no child ever suffered again.

* * *

Elliott blew out the mustache from between his lips, and his eyes strayed once more to the door. When would they get here? *Would* they get here? He wondered for the thousandth time if Charlotte would be able to convince Susie to come help.

She hadn't come back to the store since their fight and she'd been almost impossible to track down, but Charlotte had spoken to her, Tanya had seen her, and Elliott had been assured that Susie had been at work today. However, Tanya had also said that Susie wasn't herself. She was withdrawn and spent most of her time in her office rather than with the kids.

Guilt clenched Elliott's gut once more, a feeling he was becoming far too used to.

“Ho, ho, ho!” he bellowed as the next child came up the stairs. They’d only been doing pictures for ten minutes, and Elliott was already ready to quit. He was jumpier than a cat in a parking lot full of bicycles. Normally, he loved hearing the kid’s Christmas wishes, but today he couldn’t get into it.

His future was riding on the outcome of this picture session, or at least the future he *hoped* for was riding on this evening’s activities.

But none of that would matter if Charlotte couldn’t get—

His mind snapped back to the present when the bell over the door rang. Elliott’s eyes jumped straight across the space, begging with every fiber of his being that it wasn’t another family coming to wait in line.

“Your beard,” Theo hissed, coughing to cover up his message. His eyes darted between Elliott and the door, the waiting line of children and their families being ignored momentarily.

Elliott’s eyes widened, and he scrambled with his gloved hands to pull the fake hair up higher on his lip and the hat a little lower on his head, then slumped in his seat. He didn’t want Susie to recognize it was him, at least not right away.

The whole plan relied on her believing it was still Clarence working the pictures, but once Susie was dressed and out in the picture area, it would be too late for her to get away, and Elliott would finally have a chance to speak to her.

Yeah...it’s a little devious...but can she really expect anything less of me?

A smile twitched at his mouth while his eyes honed in on his prey. Susie was walking with Charlotte, and she looked... tired. Her face was pale, her steps seemed sluggish, and the hunch in her shoulders made it appear as if the weight of the world were riding on her back.

Elliott's fists clenched, and he had to force his muscles to relax and stay put. He wanted to jump and run across the store, grabbing Susie and taking all the worries and concerns away from her. His protective instincts were bellowing like an angry bull, and it took all his self control to keep from acting on them.

"Miss Susie!" One of the children in line recognized their beloved teacher, and soon a chorus of hello's and a dozen arms were waving wildly as Susie came farther into the store.

She smiled, though Elliott could see the tightness behind it. Her hand rose, and she waved at the children. "Give me just a minute!" she said, her voice higher than normal.

Her dark eyes glanced his way, and Elliott froze, wanting to run to her but also wanting to sink into his fake hair and never emerge. He'd been the one to put that exhausted, worried look on Susie's face and the knowledge made him feel like dirt.

After acknowledging him with a swift nod, she turned back to Charlotte, and the two disappeared into the back of the store.

Elliott blew out a breath, grateful that the steps one and two had been accomplished. She was here, and she hadn't realized it was Elliott.

Now comes the hard part.

Elliott smiled at the line of children. “Ho, ho, ho!” he exclaimed. “Who’s next, Theodore?”

Theo shot Elliott a glare for using his full name, but helped the next child, a young girl, up the stairs. “Santa, this is Maggie.”

Santa held out his hand, but Maggie hung back, watching him like he was a curiosity she hadn’t figured out yet.

“Go on, sweetheart,” her mother urged, stepping up behind Theo and giving her daughter a small push on her back. “Tell him what you want for Christmas.”

The frown never left Maggie’s face, and it made Elliott want to laugh. It reminded him so much of the woman in the back getting dressed to be his wife. Skepticism practically oozed from Maggie’s tiny body, and when she stumbled forward from her mother’s urging, the frown deepened.

Elliott leaned forward. “Maggie. Would you like to stand here beside me?” He had a feeling if he offered his knee, she would claw his eyes out.

Without a word, she walked until they were about a foot apart. After another moment of silence, she put her hands on her hips. “What’s your name?”

Elliott held his hands out to the side. “Santa Claus. What’s yours?”

“You already know it’s Maggie.”

Santa nodded. "My helper Theodore did tell me that." *Oh my word, Susie? Where are you? I'm in over my head with this one!* He thought about giving her his best smile, but his beard was too thick. Maggie would never see it. He was stuck with only a muffled Santa vocabulary.

"Have you been a good girl this year?"

Maggie cocked her head to the side. "I make my bed every morning. I eat my vegetables. I only push my brother when he deserves it. I hold my mom's hand when we're crossing the street, and I'm the top reader in my class."

Elliott's eyebrows were nearly up to the top of his hairline. "That's a pretty impressive list," he said with a laugh. "I'd say you're a good girl, indeed." He reached into the bowl next to his chair. "Would you like a candy cane?"

"They rot your teeth."

SUSIE! How long did it take to put on a simple dress? Elliott set down the candy cane and drummed his fingers on his knee. "Are you interested in a toy this year? Maybe you like to dance? Do you want a tutu?" He didn't usually have so much trouble, but this little girl wasn't about to give in.

Theo snorted, then cleared his throat and gave Elliott an innocent look.

Maggie rolled her eyes so hard Elliott could barely see their color. *Now I get why Mom always said they'd stay that way.*

"Do I look like a ballerina to you?"

“Maggie,” her mother hissed, then gave Elliott an apologetic look. “Sorry,” she mouthed.

Elliott waved her off. “Well...Maggie...” He tried to turn on the charm, but he was so keyed up waiting for Susie that he was floundering. It wasn’t until this moment that Elliott realized how much he relied on smiling and other facial expressions to charm others. “I think your mother would like us to get a picture today. What do you think?”

She narrowed her eyes, looked at her mom, then back at Elliott. “Fine.”

Heaven save us from stubborn girls.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Susie's smile felt like it would crack as she walked out of the backroom. Her wig was on, the dress zipped up, but she felt like a complete fraud. Yes, the children knew she wasn't really Mrs. Claus, but they were still excited to see her.

Today, for the first time ever, Susie wasn't excited to see them.

Her chest ached, and her stomach churned as she forced her stiff legs into action. "Hello," she called, keeping her smile wide and her voice light. Inside she was screaming for her isolated house and a chance to bury herself in the covers, leaving the world behind for yet another night.

Her weekend hadn't been long enough.

"Mrs. Claus," Theo said, his smile careful and soft. He held out a hand to guide her up the steps. "We're so glad you're here."

Susie blinked at the rare show of emotion from the normally stoic brother. *I'm so glad it's Theo and not Elliott*, she thought, taking his offer to help her up the stage. She held back a wince at his touch, the heat of his skin reminding her too much of Elliott's large, warm hands.

The ache in her ribs grew, and breathing became difficult while her eyes began to swim with tears. *Not here! Not now!*

“Mrs. Claus,” a deep voice said from her right side.

Susie stiffened. *Is that...* She turned, narrowing her eyes at Santa. She could barely see his face through all the hair, but Charlotte had said Clarence was doing the Santa pictures...

Santa nodded, but there was too much wig to see if he was smiling. “Ready?” he asked.

A small girl stood to Santa’s side, and she looked ready to be off the stage.

Susie smiled again, pushing thoughts of Elliot out of her head. He wasn’t here. It was her imagination acting up and it was time to get back to reality. “Hello, sweetie,” Susie said, bending over to be on level with the girl. “What’s your name?”

She pursed her lips, completely unimpressed with Susie. “Maggie.”

“We thought it’d be nice to come get a picture with Santa,” a woman said from the bottom of the steps.

Susie looked over to see the woman wringing her hands, her face tight. *Ah...the signs of a stressed parent.* She looked back at Maggie who had to be the source of the stress. “Have you told Santa what you want for Christmas?”

One tiny eyebrow went up.

Guess that answers that question. “I’m Miss Susie.” Susie held out her hand.

Maggie took it. “Maggie.”

“Maggie,” Susie said with a short nod. “Is that short for anything?”

“Margaret,” the girl groaned. “It’s an old lady name.”

This time Susie’s smile was genuine. “I think it’s beautiful.” Her legs were starting to cramp, but she stayed put. “Very feminine.”

Maggie gave her a tentative smile, looking less hostile than before.

“Well, Maggie,” Susie said, leaning in and pulling her voice down to a whisper. “I have a favor to ask.”

Maggie’s eyes widened.

“I was once a little girl just like you,” Susie said in a soft tone. “And do you know what my favorite thing to do was?”

Maggie shrugged and shook her head.

“I *loved* making my mom smile.”

Maggie frowned. “You did?”

“I did,” Susie said in an overly serious tone. “My mom had the best smiles.” She looked over to Maggie’s mom. “Do you like your mom’s smile?”

Maggie followed Susie’s gaze. “Yeah.”

“Your mom is beautiful, isn’t she?” Susie’s grin widened when Maggie’s mom smiled at her.

“Yeah.”

Standing, Susie held out her hand. “Then how about we do something really easy that will make your mom very, very

happy?”

Maggie blinked a few times, then finally turned from her mother and took Susie’s hand. “Okay.”

The rush of victory could barely be felt over Susie’s pain, but she relished the momentary sense of relief. Sixty seconds later, Maggie waved and skipped beside her mother as they headed out the door.

“You’re amazing.”

Susie’s head jerked down, her eyes wide, and her heart kicking into high gear. There was no question this time. She knew that voice, and it definitely *wasn’t* Clarence. “Elliott,” she rasped, the word feeling like sandpaper against her throat.

She couldn’t see him. Not now. Not when she still wasn’t in control of herself and when her heart still ached for his touch, his words and his comfort.

Gray eyes peered at her through the white hair, and Susie wondered for a split second how she’d missed them. Those eyes were seared into her brain and had haunted her dreams during this last week.

“Hello, my beautiful wife,” he said softly. Before Susie could sputter a response, he turned back to the crowd. “Who’s next, Theodore?”

Theo clenched his jaw, and an inappropriate giggle tried to claw its way up Susie’s throat. She didn’t know what had upset Theo, but her nerves were stretched so thin at the moment that even something as ridiculous as Theo’s irritation at Elliott was sending her over the edge.

“Don’t run.”

Susie jerked before she realized that Elliott had spoken those words to her. She gaped at him.

“Don’t run,” he whispered again, then turned and acted as if the words had never happened. “Ho, ho, ho!” he said, shaking his fake belly. “Who do we have here?”

“Santa, Mrs. Claus,” Theo stated, “This is Dylan.”

“Dylan, my boy!” Elliott held out his arms, and unlike Maggie, the little boy ran straight forward, leaping into Santa’s arms.

Susie swallowed her jealousy. She wanted to be held by Santa...by Elliott. Her limbs ached and her heart was stretching toward him, but she held herself back, only smiling when forced to. She couldn’t be held by Elliott. Not ever again. She’d betrayed him and she’d let him believe they could have a future...but they couldn’t.

So why did Charlotte bring me here?

“What do you think, Mrs. Claus?”

Susie smiled, once again feeling brittle and breakable. How her body was staying in one piece was a mystery, but she was grateful for it. “I think that’s the perfect gift,” she said dutifully.

The little boy beamed and Santa bounced him on his knee. “You keep being good,” he said, tweaking the boy’s nose. “And I’ll do my best to bring you exactly what you want.”

If only you could bring me what I want.

Susie took a step back, not sure if she could stay with her thoughts racing so dramatically, but one look at the smiling boy and she locked her knees into position. For years she'd sacrificed her own wants and needs for those of her children. Her failure with Tyson came back with a vengeance, leaving her breathless and ready to collapse. But with that reminder also came the vow she'd made herself.

Never again would Susie give up on advocating for a child. She'd messed up with Tyson, but she wouldn't now. She could be strong for this. She could set aside her own heartache. One more minute. One more hour. One more night.

What did it really matter in the long run? The children wanted her here, and she wouldn't be here that much longer. She could give them this. A little holiday magic to add to their holiday. After this one last hurrah, she'd be able to leave in peace.

* * *

Finally... The last child was just heading out the door, and Elliott could feel Susie's foot twitching as she prepared to make a break for it. He braced himself and as soon as she moved, he leapt up, wrapping his arms around her.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked, his voice unintentionally husky. Oh man, it felt so good to have her back in his arms. The weight of her against his chest, his arms wrapped around her back. The warmth and rightness of it were overwhelming, and made it difficult to keep his head on straight.

“We’re done,” she whispered, pushing against his chest. “I need to get changed.”

“Not quite.” Keeping hold of her, Elliott spun her around, ignoring her protests and pointed to one last waiting child.

Susie gasped and stopped struggling. “Tyson,” she breathed.

Elliott took the moment to step up closer and wrapped his arms tighter around her waist, stepping into her back and resting his chin on her shoulder. “Don’t you think we should give Tyson a chance to share his Christmas wish?”

Susie nodded, but she still wasn’t speaking.

Adam shifted his weight and gave Elliott a wide-eyed look.

Frowning, Elliott brought his head to the side just enough to see that tears were coursing down Susie’s face. “Geez, sweetheart.” He spun her around, wiping at her cheeks with his thumbs. “You weren’t supposed to cry.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her trembling hands scrubbing harshly at her own skin. “I don’t know what’s come over me.”

Elliott kissed her forehead and tucked her into his chest again, grateful she was more willing this time. Susie sighed and melted into his embrace, letting him take her weight, which Elliott was all too happy to do.

“Miss Susie?”

It took a moment, but she finally turned, looking only slightly more composed. Nothing would be able to hide her

red eyes and nose completely. “Tyson, hon, come on up. It looks like it’s your turn to talk to Santa.” She held out her hand, and Tyson gladly bounded up the stairs to grip it. “Santa, this is Tyson,” she stated with a wide, genuine smile.

Elliott patted his knee. “Come on up, son.”

Tyson rolled his eyes. “I know it’s you, Mr. Brown.”

Elliott laughed, not bothering with the “ho, ho, ho.” “I think Miss Susie would still like to have you join me up here.”

Shrugging, Tyson came over, and Elliott helped him up. “Have you been a good boy?” Elliott asked, getting back into character.

Tyson made a face and looked at Ms. Susie sheepishly. “Not really,” he admitted. “I don’t obey Miss Susie, and I tried to climb under the fence.” He turned back to Elliott. “I tore my dad’s coat.” Tears welled in the little boy’s eyes, and Elliott felt a surge of compassion.

He’d obviously been through a lot, but no kid should feel like they’re naughty. Before Elliott or Susie could do anything, however, Adam put one foot on the top of the stairs and leaned forward.

“It’s not a big deal,” he reassured his son, giving a small smile. “We talked about it already, remember?”

Tyson nodded more eagerly, the tears forgotten. “Oh yeah. Dad took me to see a nice lady.” Tyson’s grin was so wide Elliott could have counted his teeth. He was looking back and forth between Elliott and Susie as he spoke rapidly. “She said I could tell her anything, and I’d never get in trouble.”

Adam cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. “Which you won’t,” he added to Tyson before turning to Susie. “But I’m afraid I don’t have the same kind of promise,” he said gruffly. “And I need to apologize.”

“It’s fine—” Susie began, but Adam cut her off with a swift shake of his head.

“It’s not fine,” he insisted. “I was wrong. I was angry, and out of touch and...” He cleared his throat again, scratching under his chin. “And I’m afraid I took it out on you.” Sighing, he jerked his head toward the back of the store where Charlotte was waiting. “Tyson, do you mind waiting back there for a minute? I think Dr. Miller’s wife has a candy cane for you.”

Tyson whooped and leaped off Elliott’s knee, almost tripping down the stairs as he ran toward Charlotte.

Slowly, Elliott stood, ripping off his thick gloves and entwining his fingers with Susie’s. She was going to need him for the next few minutes. It wasn’t a conversation Elliott wanted to have, but it was one that was needed, and once it was over, he was going to take his time convincing Susie to forgive him and come back.

Susie’s hand was clammy, but she clung to him like a lifeline, bringing Elliott’s protective instincts up to a earthshaking roar.

“I...” Adam blew out a breath and once again rubbed his neck. “Sorry, this is harder than I thought.”

“It’s really okay,” Susie said, stepping forward, but not breaking contact with Elliott. “I’m not mad at you, Adam. In fact, I feel like I should be the one apologizing.”

He barked out a laugh. “We both know that you’re not the problem, Susie.” Closing his eyes, he straightened his shoulders and blew out another breath. “After everything went down at the house, and you left looking so broken, I...I realized I couldn’t continue like this.” A sad smile crossed his face. “I like you Susie, but we both know I’m not in love with you. You were right to not be willing to go on a date with me”—his eyes strayed to Elliott and back—“even if I was angry about it at the time.”

Another deep breath. “The truth is, after chatting with that therapist lady this week I’ve realized I’m still in love with Amy and not ready to let her go. But I was so...so...desperate to find something, *anything*, that would break through the stupid monotony of life. I felt so...numb, I guess.” He groaned and kept rubbing at his neck, which was growing red.

“Adam,” Susie said, stepping away from Elliott, leaving his hand cold, and moving over, she wrapped Adam in a hug. “It’s okay,” she murmured as Adam relaxed into the hold. “We’re friends. Sometimes we all do stupid stuff. I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard, but I was worried about Tyson and kind of...” Susie stepped back, wiping at her face. “Kind of got overzealous I guess. I’m sorry, too.”

Adam gave her a sad smile. “It’s not hard to forgive you, Susie.”

“And I forgave you a long time ago,” Susie reassured him.

Elliott held back a sigh, sympathy coursing through him for Adam's confession. This was never an easy part of recovery, but it meant everything would be fine. Tyson *and* Adam were getting the help they needed, and Adam was setting things right with Susie, who'd been as much of a victim as Tyson during this ordeal. He reached for Susie's hand as soon as she was within range again, needing contact with her.

Now I just have to hope she'll be as understanding when I ask forgiveness as she was with Adam. Grieving men aren't the only ones who make stupid mistakes...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Susie could have stood here and held Elliott's hand all day, but as she watched Adam and Tyson finally walk out the front door, she knew she needed to pull back. It had all been such a wonderful gift, knowing that Adam was finally getting the help he needed and that Tyson would be taken care of.

She couldn't have asked for a better Christmas miracle... unless it was to wish that Elliott would be willing to take on a broken woman.

Clenching her muscles, she pulled her hand free from his. "Thank you," she whispered, forcing herself to man up and look him in the eye. "That meant a lot to me, especially after what I did to you."

Elliott's gray eyes were so focused on her that the entire hardware store seemed to fade away. One side of his mouth lifted up, and he took a step forward, crowding her personal bubble. "What you did to me? I don't think you have any idea what you do to me."

A shiver ran down her spine at his changing of the words. An ache in the pit of her stomach wished they could be real.

“For what it’s worth,” she continued, her breathing growing shallow and quick, “I’m sorry how things ended between us.”

One of Elliott’s hands slipped around her waist, and the other came up to cup her cheek.

She closed her eyes, savoring the feeling of him even as she knew she’d regret it later.

“Then why don’t we un-end it?” he whispered, running his nose along her cheek.

She took a shuddering breath, raising her hands to his chest and giving a small push. She couldn’t think when he was acting like this. “Elliott, I mean it. I’m sorry.”

He pulled back, frowning. “You apologizing wasn’t exactly how this was supposed to go,” he teased. “Groveling is my job.”

She snorted a small laugh in spite of the situation. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I called the cops,” he said, his face growing serious. “When you wouldn’t let me protect you, I did the only other thing I could think of, knowing you wouldn’t be able to fight me on it.” He took in a deep breath and deflated a little. “I’m sorry. I knew as soon as I did it that it was the end of us, but I couldn’t...” He choked on the words, and Susie watched his Adam’s apple rise and fall several times. “I couldn’t let you go there without someone covering your back...even if it wasn’t me.”

Susie shook her head, her heart aching at his guilt. “I never blamed you for that,” she assured him, patting his chest. “I

knew when I drove away from you, after telling you everything...” She forced the tears back. “After choosing Tyson over us and admitting that I couldn’t have children”—her voice dropped to something barely audible—“I knew as I drove away, it was over. Your sending protection hurt, but wasn’t the problem. I understood why you did it.”

“Ah, sweetheart,” he groaned, pulling her closer and burying his face in her hair. He pulled back, muttering and began throwing pieces of their costumes away. First his beard and wig and hat, followed quickly by hers. “Stupid stuff,” he grumbled. “Always in the way.” Once his beard was off, he gasped loudly like a drowning man coming up for air. “Who the heck keeps that much hair on their face?”

Yanking her back into his chest, he took a long breath through his nose. “Much better.” His words were slightly muffled. “I can feel you, I can see you, I can smell you... mmm...”

Susie closed her eyes, wanting to give into the riot of emotions and sensations he was creating, but she couldn’t quite let go of the sharp pit in her stomach. The other shoe was going to drop. She just knew it. Elliott might have brushed right over it for a moment, but as soon as he realized what all this really meant, she knew he’d walk away, just like others had done.

“Suze, don’t you ever leave my side again,” he said, his voice husky with emotion.

Her lips were aching, desperately wanting him to bring their mouths together, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t give in.

Slowly, the pain rising as she pushed, Susie stepped out of his arms. “We have to stop,” she scolded, though the breathlessness of her tone took away any sting of the words.

Elliott’s smile was pure mischief. “Why?”

“You’re not seeing it, Elliott,” she cried, her voice suddenly gaining strength as anger joined her worry. “You just keep acting like we can brush this under the rug and live happily ever after!”

Elliott’s head tilted to the side, and he looked genuinely confused. “Why can’t we? It’s a choice, isn’t it? Do you need me to apologize more? Get on my knees and beg? I guess I thought...” He huffed a sarcastic laugh. “I guess I thought apologizing and sharing why I sent the police would be enough. But I can do more.”

“This has nothing to do with the police!” Susie jumped at the sharpness of her voice more than Elliott did. She hadn’t meant to be so dramatic, but years of repressed emotion about her broken body were bubbling to the surface, and she felt powerless to stop it. “Don’t you see? Don’t you get it?”

Elliott’s eyes were wide as he shook his head. “I guess I don’t,” he admitted.

Susie pounded on her chest. “I’m broken, Elliott. I’ve said it twice now, and you haven’t heard me. I. Can’t. Have. Kids.” Tears were rolling her face without permission, but she didn’t even try to stop them. Her hand was still against her chest, the pain from her slaps joining the pain deeper, inside her chest where her ache for motherhood was constantly shoved and not allowed to surface.

Elliott stood with his eyebrows up, as if waiting for the punchline. “Okay...” he finally responded. “I understand that.”

“Do you?” Susie shouted. “Do you really?” She waved her hand toward their little Santa set-up. “You love kids,” she ground out. “It’s evident in every thing you do. You befriend them, play with them, chat with them like they’re worthwhile. Not every adult feels that way.” She sniffed hard, trying to gain some control, but she was too far gone. “Do you really think you’d be happy for the rest of your life going without ever having that moment where you get to become a father yourself?” She shook her head, a few tears flying from the edge of her chin. “Never hear the words, ‘Congratulations! It’s a boy!’”

Susie backed up another step. Her pain in her chest was growing stronger, as if she were being crushed. Even as she tossed out the scenarios to Elliott, she could see them in her mind. She could see the bundle being handed to him, see the light on his face and how wide and bright his dancing gray eyes would be.

She could see him playing with a tiny boy with her dark hair, but Elliott’s light eyes. See them playing catch, see them laughing and wrestling in the backyard...it was too much.

With a moan, she doubled over, struggling not to be sick. It couldn’t ever happen. She couldn’t give him that, and Dallin, her first and only serious boyfriend, had made it clear that no man wanted another man’s child. If she truly loved Elliott, she

had to end it now, she had to let him walk away and find someone else.

Tyson got his Christmas miracle, that would be enough. It would have to be.

* * *

Elliott stared, his legs frozen, and his heart stuttering an uneven beat against his ribcage. Susie was bent over, gasping for breath as if she'd just run a marathon, but it was the tears and the yelling that had him planted like a tree in Central Park.

She loves me.

Of all the words that had come pouring out of Susie's mouth, those were the ones he'd latched onto. Yeah, the idea of not having children stung a bit, but she seriously thought he wouldn't want her because of it?

He shook himself like a wet dog coming in from a rainstorm, then got his legs moving enough to step forward and wrap Susie in his arms. "I've got you," he whispered, pulling her back until he was able to sit on his stupid throne, he brought them both down.

All evening, he lamented how hard it was to sit on, but now he was grateful to have a seat so close. Especially one that was big enough for him to draw Susie into his lap and wrap himself around her.

She was breaking apart, sobbing in his arms, and he was going to be the one to hold her together. "I'm here," he told her, whispering in her ear before kissing the side of her head.

“I’m not going anywhere, Suze. I’m yours, I have been since that stupid moment under the holly.”

He left more kisses along her hair. “You sent my protective instincts through the roof that day, and I’ve been happily captive every day following.” He rubbed her back, breathing a sigh of relief as her sobbing grew quieter, like she was listening to his words. “I love you,” he whispered hoarsely, clearing his throat at the emotion clogging his throat. “I love your beautiful pale skin, your dark wild hair. I love watching you with the children and seeing their faces light up every time they see their favorite Miss Susie.”

She sat up, staring at him with puffy eyes and lips. Her dark eyes searched his face as if to tell whether or not he was serious.

He cupped her cheek and used his thumb to rub away tears. “I love how dedicated you are to your profession. I love how you give your heart and soul to everything, especially those you love and take care of. I love how well you fit in my lap.” He grinned when she snorted a short laugh. “I love your reactions to my hilarious jokes.”

Susie rolled her eyes, but her lips were curved upward in the start of a stunning smile.

“I. Love. You,” he stated clearly and slowly. Reaching up, he cupped her other cheek to make sure she looked directly at him. “Hear me carefully, Susie.” He waited, eyebrows raised as the smile fell from her face, and she gave a short nod. “Children are wonderful, but there’s more than one way to build a family.” He couldn’t seem to stop his wandering

thumbs. Her soft skin, red though it was, was too enticing to ignore. “There are plenty of children out there looking for good homes. Children who *need* good homes. Someone to love and cherish them and give them a chance to experience an amazing life they can’t get in an orphanage or temporary home.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “Men don’t want to raise other men’s kids,” she whispered.

Elliott scowled. “Where did you hear that?”

Susie swallowed audibly. “I was engaged once,” she responded. “Many years ago,” she hurried to add. “But when I told him about my...situation...he broke it off. Those were the last words he said to me.”

Elliott let out a word that his mother definitely didn’t approve of, and if Susie’s raised eyebrows were any indication, he wouldn’t get away with cursing in front of her very often either. “The guy’s a snake,” he said through gritted teeth. “Don’t you listen to him.” He leaned forward until they were practically nose to nose. “You’re not broken, Suze. You’re human. All of us have pieces that don’t work. You just saw Adam admit that he’s got things he’s fixing.”

“This isn’t fixable,” Susie stammered.

“Maybe we can’t give you a uterus,” Elliott pushed, “but we can still have a family. Do you have any idea how many children need you? How many need *us*?”

She shook her head, her eyes locked on his.

He let his slow grin come out even though he didn't feel like smiling. "Babe, you and I are going to take the world by storm. With adoption, we don't have to wait for your body to heal or anything. We'll rope Theo into building us the biggest house ever and we'll adopt every kid in the world if you want, but whether they're two days old, two years old or two days from emancipation, you and I are going to aim for parents of the year, do you hear me?"

"You really don't care?" She was blinking back tears again, her eyes glossy.

"As long as you're with me," Elliott stated bluntly, "I don't care. There's plenty of broken parts in me. If you're willing to take them on, I can only do the same."

Elliott jolted when she lunged forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Grunting in surprise, he quickly wrapped his arms around her back and responded to her call, but it lasted only a couple seconds.

"Wait, wait, wait," Susie said, pulling back and grinning when Elliott tried to follow. She put her fingers on his pursed lips. "Did you just propose to me?"

"Nope." Ignoring the hurt look on her face, Elliott gently pushed her off his lap, stood up, glanced at the ceiling, then brought Susie over to stand with him in just the right spot. "Susan Malcom," he said, his tone deep and serious. "I've already spilled the beans that I think you're the most wonderful woman on Earth," he told her. "This last week has

been the worst week of my life, and I've had a few doozies over the years."

She gave him a sympathetic smile and rested a hand against his chest.

"I hate being without you. I need your smile, your laughter, your scoldings, your teachings, your joy, your sorrows, your everything, in my life. In other words...I simply need you." He leaned down, pausing just before their mouths touched. "This is me proposing," he stage-whispered to her.

She gave a nervous laugh and stepped a little closer.

"Would you make me the happiest man alive and celebrate this Christmas with me as my fiancée? With the intent to be my wife by the next one?"

Susie slowly shook her head, and Elliott's gut fell to his feet in momentary panic. "I was trying to force myself to believe that Tyson's Christmas miracle was enough," she rasped. Her fingers curled against his Santa suit. "But it wasn't. It's selfish of me, but I really wanted something else."

"Yeah?" One side of Elliott's mouth pulled up and he squished her against his large belly. "What did you want?"

Susie's smile was wide and inviting. "You."

"Just for the record," Elliott teased, leaning down. "I made sure to hang holly berries above us in case you needed a little more help being convinced, but I'm much happier that you were willing to agree on your own."

"Holly berries aren't for Christmas kisses," Susie said with a laugh.

“They are for us, baby,” Elliott murmured before leaving tiny kisses on her cheek and jawline. “We set our own path, sweetheart. Twenty kids, one kid, no kid—six of Charlotte’s dogs or zero—mistletoe or holly berries. We get to pick. This is about you, this is about me and our very own Christmas miracle. Because this one just came true. You got me. All of me.”

“Heaven help me,” she whispered, threading a hair through his hair to guide his mouth to hers.

“Well said. Now stop talking.”

Eventually the Santa belly had to go since Elliott couldn’t pull her as close as he wanted with it in the way, but by the time they separated for the evening to satiate their growling stomachs, his emotions toward the jolly man’s throne had definitely shifted from near hatred to something much more pleasurable.

In fact...Elliott thought he might keep the throne when the holiday was over...just for fun. It would be well worth pulling out year after year if only to remind him of the wonder of how he managed to snag the most amazing woman alive to be a permanent part of his life. A life that was going to be insanely awesome no matter what path they chose. Now he just needed a permanent collection of holly berries to last him through the year, and they’d be set for life.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading
my Christmas story!

I hope you enjoyed Susie and Elliott's journey as much as I
enjoyed writing it. If you're curious about Charlotte and Noah,
I've got just the thing for you! You can find her story here:

["Love Comes Again"](#)

P.S.

In the words of some of my readers...

Have your tissues ready. :)