

# HONEY PHILLIPS

## MISTLETOE

for my

## MINOTAUR



MISTLETOE FOR MY  
MINOTAUR

A COZY MONSTER ROMANCE

FAIRHAVEN FALLS



HONEY PHILLIPS

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## CHAPTER 1



Ginger stared out her window at the beautifully landscaped grounds that surrounded the Fairhaven Falls Inn. The temperature had dropped the previous night and now frost blanketed the lawn and sparkled on the trees. She was running out of time. Halloween had already come and gone, and she still hadn't gathered the courage to meet with Houston.

She'd even gone as far as arranging - through his secretary - to meet him for dinner, but she'd backed out at the last minute. She winced and turned away from the window to pace across her room. It was a pretty room, tucked away on the third level of the inn, with gleaming wooden floors, an old-fashioned patchwork quilt on the big bed, and comfortable chairs for reading and working. But after three weeks inside, any room started to lose its appeal.

She knew she was being foolish to hide away up here, but some part of her was convinced that the moment she left her temporary sanctuary, he would be there. Houston Ironmane had lived in her fantasies for so long that it already felt as if he were by her side, his big body towering over hers, his horns making him look even taller. She could almost feel the soft brown fur covering his muscular frame, the unexpected softness of his lips...

*Ten years.* Ten fricking years and she still couldn't forget.

It had been the night of her eighteenth birthday, and she and her best friend Susie had stolen some of Susie's mom's wine coolers. She returned home feeling warm and happy and

grownup. Houston was sitting on the porch swing. That wasn't unusual. He was best friends with her brother Owen and was frequently at their house. What was unusual was that he was alone.

"Where's Owen?" she asked, walking carefully up the porch stairs.

"Not where he's supposed to be - which is here, meeting me."

He grinned at her and her heart skipped a beat. She'd had a crush on him since the first time she'd seen him when they moved to Fairhaven Falls five years earlier, even though he'd never treated her as anything other than his friend's kid sister.

"So you're waiting for him?"

He shrugged. "It's a nice night. And for once I didn't have anywhere else I needed to be."

She knew how rare that was. He had a widowed mother and three younger brothers and was already deeply involved in the town's affairs. The time he spent with Owen was the only time he seemed to relax.

It was a nice night, the sultry warmth of the June day tempered by a light evening breeze and the air redolent with the smell of honeysuckle. The cicadas buzzed in the trees and excitement hummed in her veins.

"May I join you?"

"Of course. It's your house."

He grinned again but she was too nervous to return it. He was a very big male and it was a very small swing. She'd actually be able to feel him pressed against her side.

Perhaps it was nerves, perhaps it was the wine coolers, but as she crossed the porch towards him, she tripped and went flying. She threw out her hands in a vain attempt to catch herself, but instead of hitting the wooden floor, she collided with a warm, hard, fur-covered chest. Houston caught her and pulled her onto swing with him.

"Whoa there, princess."

He was laughing, but she couldn't. She was far too aware of the big body beneath hers. Her nipples beaded beneath her thin summer dress, and he noticed. His smile faded, his eyes darkening as they traveled from the stiff little peaks to her bare legs, exposed to the top of her thighs by the way her skirt had flown up when she fell.

He cleared his throat and his hands moved to her waist. She was sure he was going to put her back on her feet and pretend nothing had happened and she couldn't stand it. Giving in to a desperate impulse, she threw her arms around his strong neck and kissed him. His mouth was... not quite human, but his lips were warm and soft against hers.

"Ginger -" he started to protest, but as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, she licked inside his mouth, brushing against a thick, powerful tongue.

He groaned, and then he was kissing her back, his tongue sweeping into her mouth and dominating every inch. Those big hands pulled her closer and she moaned as the aching tips of her breasts collided with his rock hard chest. An almost frightening tide of arousal swept over her and she writhed against him, her hands sliding up through thick dark hair to grab those powerful horns. His hand flexed on her ass, rocking her against the shockingly large bar of his erection as excitement shivered down her spine...

And then she was on the swing alone and he was standing at the porch railing, his back to her, his shoulders heaving, and his breath coming in harsh pants. Her body ached and throbbed with unfulfilled desire, but the ache in her heart was far more painful.

"Houston?"

"I shouldn't have done that." She'd never heard his deep voice so strained. "I'm eight years older than you, Ginger."

"I know, but I don't care." She stood, her knees trembling, and walked over to him, placing a tentative hand on his back. "Please..."



He shied away from her, breaking her heart just a little bit more.

“I can’t.”

And then he was gone and she was alone, crying on the porch.

She’d only seen him once more, a few days later, and it had been terrible. His usual friendliness had vanished, replaced by an awkward silence and a refusal to look at her. And a week later her father and brother woke her up in the middle of the night to tell her they were leaving. In spite of everything, she hadn’t wanted to leave - she loved Fairhaven Falls - but they ignored her protests and pleas for an explanation as they bundled her into the car and drove off into the night.

*Ten years*, she thought again. Ten years had passed, and yet that one kiss had changed everything for her. No man had ever kissed her that way, had excited her so much, had ever felt so right.

Once she’d realized that she could never go back, she’d tried to move on. She’d lost her virginity to her college tutor, not consciously realizing until afterwards that he was also eight years older than her with dark brown hair and eyes. But he hadn’t been Houston. A blonde tennis pro her own age hadn’t worked either, nor had one of one of the other accountants in her brother’s company. After that she’d just stopped trying.

*Under the circumstances, maybe Donald wouldn’t be so bad.* She shuddered, even as the thought occurred to her. *No.* She just had to keep hiding her distaste until after the merger. She wasn’t part of the deal, no matter what he thought. And even though Owen had changed, her once light-hearted brother disappearing behind the ruthless businessman, she knew he’d never ask it of her.

As if he knew she was thinking about him, her message app chimed.

OWEN: ARE THE OCTOBER NUMBERS READY?

Ginger: Yes, I uploaded them last night.

A BRIEF HESITATION.

OWEN: WILL YOU BE BACK FOR THANKSGIVING? DONALD WAS asking.

*NOT IF I CAN'T EVEN GET UP THE COURAGE TO LEAVE MY ROOM.*

GINGER: IT'S NOT LOOKING GOOD. THE CLASSES ARE TAKING longer to complete than I thought since I'm working at the same.

OWEN THOUGHT SHE WAS AWAY TAKING THE PROFESSIONAL education classes she needed to maintain her CPA license. She hated lying to him, but she'd had to come up with a reason to vanish for a month, or two.

OWEN: HE'S ANXIOUS TO SEE YOU.

Ginger: I'll be home when I can.

A LONGER PAUSE.

OWEN: TAKE CARE.

HMM. SHE STARED AT THE SCREEN. THESE DAYS THAT WAS practically effusive for Owen.

GINGER: YOU TOO.

SHE CLOSED THE APP AND STARTED TO OPEN A SPREADSHEET, then sighed. Time to fish or cut bait as her father used to say. He hadn't been right about many things, but she suspected this was one of them.

FOR THE PAST THREE WEEKS, HER WORK ATTIRE HAD CONSISTED of pajama pants, an oversized tee-shirt and her favorite cardigan. It felt strange to pull on jeans and a pretty cream colored sweater, to smooth down her dark red curls and put on a little makeup. At the last second she opted for the knee-high boots with the heels that made her legs look as long as her diminutive size allowed rather than the more practical ankle boots. She refused to think about why she'd chosen them as she took a deep breath and left her room.

“Ah, there you are,” Flora said cheerfully. “I thought it was time. Past time, actually.”

Although the tiny old woman in the bright orange tracksuit grinning at her from the bottom of the stairs was actually an orc, she'd inherited her lack of inches from a fairy ancestor. The only sign of her orc heritage was her green skin - and her remarkably intimidating stare. A stare that was fixed on her now and Ginger blushed.

“I thought I might go out and see some of the town.”

“Uh-huh. He'll be in his office this morning, getting ready for the planning committee meeting.”

She winced and did her best to look confused.

“Who will?”

“Houston, of course. And no backing out this time. You're running out of time, missy.”

Then Flora was gone, leaving Ginger staring after her with an open mouth. The old lady couldn't possibly know anything. Could she?

But regardless of what Flora had meant by her comment, she was right. Ginger left the inn and took another deep breath of the crisp morning air, then headed for the mayor's office.

## CHAPTER 2



*Maybe I should stroll up to the inn. See if Flora has any thoughts about the planning meeting.*

*And see if I can catch sight of one elusive little redhead,* Houston's conscience prompted. He sighed, staring out the window of the Town Hall at the square below. It was unusually bare today, the Halloween decorations removed and the preparations for the Harvest Festival not yet under way, thanks to the squabbling in the Town Council. Half of the members wanted to go straight to decorating for Christmas, while the other half insisted that any type of Yule/Christmas/Solstice Festival - the name was also under debate - had to wait until after Thanksgiving.

"Did you have to put up with this?" he asked the portrait on the wall.

The portrait was of his grandfather, decked out in the official mayoral regalia, his horns gleaming, and gold pince-nez perched on his broad nose. The oldest male Ironmane in each generation had served as mayor, all the way back to his five times great grandfather Maxim, who had founded the town. Looking at the forbidding countenance, he had no doubt that his grandfather would have brought a swift end to any disagreement. He preferred a more diplomatic approach, no matter how painful.

His intercom chimed.

"Mayor, you have a visitor -"

"I'm not a visitor, I'm his mother."

He wasn't at all surprised the door to his office flew open and his mother marched in, his secretary Tomas hovering behind her. In many ways the kitsune was the perfect secretary - quiet, discreet, and efficient - but he hadn't quite mastered the knack of standing up to a stronger personality and his mother certainly fit that description.

"It's fine, Tomas."

"Of course, it is." His mother gave Tomas a friendly smile, happy now that she had her way. "I won't keep Howard long."

He looked down to hide his smile - his mother was one of the few people stubborn enough to actually use his given name.

"You do have that meeting at ten," Tomas reminded him.

"Oh I'll be long gone by then. I'm double-parked, but I just wanted a quick word."

He waved Tomas away and smiled at his mother. She must have rushed in from their farm because she was still wearing overalls and had tucked her slightly greying curls under a John Deere hat.

"What is it, Mom?"

"It's your brother, Jack. He didn't come home last night," she burst out, and he sighed.

"Mom, he's twenty-six years old. You can't expect him to fill you in on every detail of his life."

"But I worry. I just wish he were more like you. You never gave me a minute of trouble - although I still don't see why you had to get an apartment here in town."

He tactfully refrained from pointing out that between stepping in as the man of the family after his dad died, looking after his younger brothers, and helping to run the farm, he'd had little opportunity to get in trouble. Other than that once - and he wasn't sure that trouble was the right word.

"It's more convenient when I have late meetings," he said patiently. Again.

“I know. I just wish you were going home to a wife and a family.”

And there it was. His mother’s desire for him to get married had increased with each passing year. Rather than have that argument again, he cheerfully threw his brother under the bus.

“Jack didn’t call you to say he’d be out all night?” he asked innocently.

“No,” she huffed. “And it’s not as if I’d mind. I would just like to know where he is.”

He couldn’t really blame his brother for avoiding the inevitable inquisition, but he came around his desk and put his arm over his mother’s shoulders.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Oh, thank you.” Her face was wreathed in smiles. “I’m sure he’ll listen to you. You’ve always been so good with your brothers. That’s why I know you’d make a wonderful father.”

His mother was nothing if not persistent. He made a non-committal noise and gently urged her towards the door.

As soon as he opened the door, a sweet, tantalizing fragrance filled his head and he knew she was there. The woman who had haunted his dreams for the past ten years. Her hair was still red and curly, but it had darkened from strawberry blonde to auburn, and fewer freckles were sprinkled across her cute little nose. She was still a tiny little thing. The perfect size to fit under his arm. *Or in my lap.* His shaft actually began to stiffen at the memory as his eyes dropped automatically to her breasts. Those hadn’t grown either, and his palm actually tingled as if he were cupping one of the perfect little mounds.

“Ginger!” his mother exclaimed, enveloping her in a big hug. “It’s so wonderful to see you again. Why haven’t you been back?”

“I’ve been kind of busy,” she said, clearly uncomfortable and he stepped forward.

“Mom -”

“Where are you living now?”

“In Asheville.”

She’d been that close to him all this time?

“So close and you never came to see us?” His mother clucked her tongue as she pulled back to look at Ginger at arm’s length. “Well, you’re just as pretty as ever. Are you married?”

He groaned silently, already knowing where his mother was going with the questions. The look Ginger gave him was sheer desperation, and he immediately stepped forward to gently detach his mother.

“Didn’t you say you were double-parked, Mom? You know Bobby-Ray is always a little zealous with the tickets at the beginning of the month.”

“He’d better not give me one,” she sniffed, but to his relief she headed for the door. “But I do have some other errands to run. It was so nice seeing you, Ginger. Come up to the farm anytime. In fact, maybe Howard can bring you to -”

He closed the outer door, cutting off the flow of conversation. Tomas was trying - and failing - to hide a smile and Ginger looked shell-shocked.

“Did you come to see me?” he asked quietly, fighting the impulse to drag her into his office and start demanding answers.

“I... umm, yes.”

“Then why don’t you come into my office?”

He couldn’t resist putting his hand on her back to guide her, and almost groaned again at the softness against his palm. She shivered, but she didn’t pull away.

“Mayor, your ten o’clock -”

“Cancel it,” he said, ignoring his assistant’s shocked expression. He never canceled meetings.



He ushered her into his office, then reluctantly let his hand drop as he closed the door firmly behind them. She looked up at him, then swallowed and turned away, moving over to the fireplace to inspect the picture of his grandfather.

“You don’t look much like him.”

Her voice sounded a little breathless as he came up behind her, not quite touching her. It was all he could do not to lower his head and breathe in more of her delicious sweetness.

“You live in Asheville?” he repeated. She’d been less than two hours away all this time?

“Now, yes. I work for my brother and his company is headquartered there.”

“The last time I spoke to Owen, he was headed for Alaska.” It had been right after they left, and he’d called looking for answers.

She twisted her fingers together.

“Yes, we went up there to work in a mining camp.”

“You worked in a mining camp?”

He did his best to hide his appalled horror at the thought of his fragile little female in such a rough situation.

“Only for a summer. Then I went to college at UNC - we’d lived here long enough that I qualified for in-state tuition. My dad died up there and Owen moved back when I graduated.”

“I’m sorry.”

He’d never cared for her father, especially given some of the things Owen had let slip, but it was always difficult to lose a parent.

She shrugged, still twisting her fingers and staring at the painting.

“Maybe it was for the best. He wasn’t in good health, I mean,” she added hastily.

An awkward silence fell, and then he couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Why didn’t you come to dinner?” he burst out. “I... waited.”

Waited for two hours, until the restaurant was almost empty.

That brought her head around, pretty green eyes staring up at him.

“I called. I asked them to tell you I... I couldn’t make it.”

He was definitely going to have words with Damian, the restaurant’s owner, about that, but he had more questions for her first.

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t? Are you that scared of me, princess?”

Unshed tears pooled in those big, green eyes.

“Scared? I was never scared of you.”

“I thought I had frightened you away.” And something Owen had said in their last conversation had reinforced that fear. “I should never have touched you.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I was the one who kissed you.”

“But I was old enough to know better.”

Her lips drew together, his answer obviously bothering her, but then she shook her head and moved away again, heading for the window this time.

“It was all a long time ago. It doesn’t really matter now.”

It didn’t feel like a long time ago, especially with her standing in his office and her delectable fragrance filling his head.

“I see you haven’t started decorating for the Harvest Festival yet.”

“The council is still arguing about whether to have a Harvest Festival or go straight into the Yuletide Festival.”

She reached out and clutched the window sill, and when she turned back her face was pale.

“Harvest definitely. It’s tradition.”

“I agree, but a lot of the merchants want to get people in the Christmas spirit - so they’ll start spending money,” he added dryly, still watching her face. “We’ll work it out. But you didn’t come here to talk about festivals. Why are you here, Ginger?”

“I need a favor,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“All right. What is it?”

“I need you to pretend we’re a couple,” she blurted out. “Until Christmas Eve.”

## CHAPTER 3



Ginger clenched her fists at her sides to keep her hands from trembling as she waited for a response. Houston didn't look as shocked as she had expected, simply studying her thoughtfully. But then he'd always kept his calm whether dealing with her more volatile brother or his own rambunctious brothers. The night of the kiss had been the only time she'd seen him lose his even demeanor.

Her memory hadn't betrayed her - he was still as devastatingly attractive as she remembered. His deep voice still rumbled down her spine. He was even dressed much the same in faded jeans that clung to thick, muscular thighs and a crisp button-down shirt, but this time his shirt was closed over that massive chest. But her memories didn't have the same impact as having him standing next to him, his big body looming over her and his deep, musky scent filling her head.

God, it was good to see him. She was glad she hadn't run away when Tomas told her he was busy, especially since she guessed from the disapproving look on the assistant's face that he knew she hadn't carried through on the date he'd scheduled for her. She hadn't expected such a warm response from his mother either.

"Why?" Houston asked at last, his voice also as deep as it had been in her memories.

"Owen's company is on the verge of merging with another company. I don't think he's realized yet that the merger would render my position obsolete." It was more or less true - it was one of the reasons why Donald had told her she would be

better off married to him, but she wouldn't have a problem finding another job. "If I'm engaged, he won't worry about me when he finds out. It won't stop him from going forward with the merger."

The story she'd come up with sounded thin in her own ears, but he nodded and she suspected that he would have done just that if he were in Owen's position.

"Even to me?" he asked, his voice dry. "He hasn't exactly kept in touch. I thought perhaps you, I mean he, had decided you were better off amongst other humans."

It had never occurred to her that he might think that.

"What? No. You know I love it here."

"Then why didn't you ever come back?"

He crossed the room to her side, looming over her again, but the difference in their sizes had never made her feel afraid. Instead it made her feel safe and protected. And aroused, she admitted to herself as her body responded to his nearness.

"It's complicated."

She looked down at the floor, but he put a big finger under her chin and gently raised her face to his. Heat radiated out from that single point of contact.

"Try," he urged.

"I can't." It wasn't her secret to keep. "Please don't ask me. It would be for less than two months," she added hurriedly. "The merger will be finished by Christmas Eve."

"It doesn't seem like much of a present, breaking up on Christmas Eve."

"We would wait until after the holidays were over," she found herself saying, even though the truth would be out by then.

"Hmm." His finger traced a fiery path across her jaw, then dropped away, leaving her skin feeling cold and bare. "Do you think we could fool anyone?"

She nodded, unable to talk.

“Even my mother? It would be nice not having to spend the next two months listening to her worry about the fact that I’m not married or trying to set me up on blind dates.”

She certainly wasn’t the least bit jealous of those dates.

“Then it would be an advantage for you too.” She did her best to give him a convincing smile.

“Hmm,” he repeated, then reached out to put his hand on her shoulder. When she jumped, he let his hand drop but he shook his head, looking oddly hurt. “We won’t fool anyone into believing we’re in a relationship if you flinch every time I touch you.”

“I was just startled. And nervous. I’ll get over it.”

Determined to convince him, she grabbed his hand and put it on her shoulder. Big and warm, it easily covered the entire span, his fingers long enough to just touch the top swell of her breasts.

“I don’t know.” He slowly shook his head. “Touching is one thing. Kissing is another.”

Was he teasing her? But his face was serious, his gorgeous brown eyes fixed on her mouth.

“Maybe we should try it,” she whispered, nervously wetting her lips.

“Perhaps.”

He bent slowly towards her, giving her every chance to protest or move away but she had no intention of objecting. In spite of everything, she desperately wanted him to kiss her.

His lips brushed hers, as soft as she remembered. Her pulse raced as she waited for him to do more, but he simply pressed his mouth lightly against hers. Was he waiting for her?

*This kiss won’t fool anyone*, she told herself, and licked his lips, just as she had that night.

He groaned and then he was really kissing her, his thick tongue exploring her mouth, his hands pulling her against his big body and she went gladly. It was as good - better - than she

remembered. That hard muscular body pressed against hers, his scent surrounding her as his hand dropped to her ass, kneading it desperately as he started to lift her into his arms...

The door slammed open and Flora marched in, Tomas hovering apologetically behind her. His expression turned to shock as he took in their position, but Flora wasn't remotely bothered.

"Too soon for all that," she said briskly. "And Howard, we are not canceling the council meeting. Time's a ticking and we have decisions to make."

She knew her face was bright red, but when she tried to pull away, his grip tightened. He glared at Flora, his expression more intimidating than she'd ever seen.

"This is my private office, Flora. And I have every right to cancel a meeting."

The sight of an angry seven-foot tall minotaur had no perceptible effect on Flora.

"Not today. I'll give you two minutes before you join us in the council chamber."

He sighed as the door closed again, bending down and resting his forehead against hers.

"It looks like you're going to get what you wanted. You realize that the news of our... togetherness will be all over town by tonight."

"Do you mind?"

"No. Especially not if I get to keep kissing you."

His grin won an answering response from her before she shook her head.

"As long as we remember it's just pretend."

He gave her another of those thoughtful looks, but didn't respond directly.

"I suppose I'd better go to this council meeting after all, before Flora comes back and drags me out of here."

She wasn't entirely sure he was kidding - or entirely sure that the old woman wasn't capable of it. Despite her diminutive size, she was a force to be reckoned with.

"All right." Gathering her courage, she added quickly. "I thought maybe I could take you to Midnight Manor tonight. To make up for last time. If you want to, that is."

"I would like that very much. And Damian is the second biggest gossip in town - it will certainly help spread the word." He smiled down at her and ran a quick finger down her cheek. "But I think this time I'll pick you up at the inn, princess."

She winced, but his smile was teasing rather than malicious.

"Until then?" she whispered.

"Until then." He started to bend towards her again and she waited eagerly, but then he shook his head. "Better not, or Flora will be back. I'll pick you up at six."

She nodded silently, and then he was gone. She stumbled back against the desk as her knees suddenly went weak. That hadn't gone anything like she planned. Her body was humming with arousal even though her mind was still worried and her conscience was pricking her. And... she had a date. With him. Tonight. She couldn't wait.



## CHAPTER 4



Houston tried to slow down as he walked up the long driveway of the inn. He knew better than to turn up early for a date, but his pace had kept increasing as he made his way up through town and he was a full ten minutes early. Perhaps he should sit on the porch for a few minutes...

But the door opened as he approached and Alison, the pretty human innkeeper appeared. She was mated to his friend Will, a troll and the best mechanic in town, and the two of them were radiantly happy. Although in Alison's case there was another reason for the radiance.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he said, and she blushed and smiled.

"Thank you. We hadn't really intended to tell anyone just yet, but you know what Fairhaven Falls is like."

"I certainly do. I won't pass on the news, but I suspect the elf is already off the shelf."

"I think you're right. But speaking of gossip, I hear you and Ginger are... together."

Damn, that was fast. Even he had underestimated how quickly the news would spread. Not that he objected at all. He liked the idea that the town knew she belonged to him. *No she doesn't*, he reminded himself, despite his possessive urges. Not as long as she persisted with this charade of a fake relationship.

He knew there was something else behind her idea, even if she wasn't willing to admit it. Her explanation had been thin at

best. He could believe that her brother might be concerned about the merger affecting her, but her position could be guaranteed as part of the agreement. For that matter, he'd looked Owen up that afternoon and his friend had acquired a sizable fortune. He was more than capable of supporting Ginger while she looked for another job.

All of which made him wonder just what was going on in that pretty little head. He had too much respect for her intelligence not to believe she didn't have some kind of plan. All he had to do was figure it out - and convince her that their fake relationship didn't have to be fake after all.

Alison was still looking at him, clearly waiting for an explanation.

"Yes, we're together," he assured her. If he'd been a cat, he would have purred with satisfaction at the announcement.

"But you don't know each other. And she's been hiding away in her room, obviously worried about something, ever since she arrived."

"We do know each other - Ginger grew up here." Alison was a newcomer, she wouldn't know how long ago that had been - or be able to figure out just how young Ginger had been. Ignoring the familiar pang of his conscience, he added, "Things ended... awkwardly between us, but I'm delighted she's back."

She must have realized he was telling the truth because her face relaxed and she nodded.

"Okay. It's just that she's very sweet and I don't want her to be hurt."

"Neither do I."

Which meant he had to tread carefully, to be sure he wasn't rushing her. But then she appeared in the doorway next to Alison and his heart skipped a beat, even as his shaft instantly hardened. She'd been tempting enough this morning in her jeans and sweater. Now she was wearing a black sweater dress that skimmed her slender curves, the neckline low enough to reveal the upper swell of her pretty breasts, and when she

moved, the skirt revealed a flash of pale thigh. It was a sophisticated outfit - one that made it quite clear she wasn't a child, but he hadn't thought of her as a child since that night.

"You look..." He struggled to find the right word, his usual composure deserting him.

It didn't seem to matter. She blushed even as Alison laughed.

"I think you've made him speechless, Ginger. Have fun, you two."

Alison vanished back into the house as Ginger stepped out on the porch. Despite the dark fabric, he could see her nipples beading beneath the soft fabric, but then he realized that the tempting sight might not be entirely based on her response to him.

"Don't you have a coat?"

"Not that goes with this dress, and it's not far."

"I don't care if it doesn't go with the dress. Go and get your coat."

He wasn't sure who was more surprised by the command. He wasn't in the habit of ordering people around, but as long as she was his - even if it was only temporary - he wouldn't allow her to come to any harm. Her pretty lips parted in an entirely too enticing look of surprise. He was prepared for her to argue, but although pink highlighted her cheekbones, she only nodded and went back inside.

When she returned, he understood her reluctance. The fluffy white coat was adorable - she looked like a pretty white kitten - but it wasn't even remotely sophisticated.

"You see what I mean?" she huffed.

"You look very nice - and warm - but if it matters that much to you, you can take it off before we enter the restaurant and anyone sees you."

"I don't care what anyone else thinks. I just wanted you -"

Her words ended abruptly but it was too late. She was concerned about what he thought? He reached out and took her hand, tugging her gently towards him.

“I think you look beautiful,” he said firmly, running his hand up the fluffy sleeve to play with the collar. The pulse in her neck sped up with his touch. “No matter what you wear.”

She dipped her head down to touch his hand, her expression so vulnerable that he almost kissed her again. But he was afraid that if he did, his legendary control would vanish and he'd end up carrying her off to his lair. *Or just the nearest flat surface*, a wicked voice in his head suggested. His cock jerked enthusiastically at the thought but he pushed it aside and tucked her hand in his arm instead.

“Shall we go?”

When she nodded silently, he put his hand over hers and led her down the driveway to the street. As they walked silently down the quiet residential block, he noticed that several people had already started to put up their Christmas decorations and he bit back a sigh. The merchants had prevailed at the council meeting - the town was going to start preparing for the Yuletide Festival - assuming they could find the funds.

“What did the council decide?” she asked, mirroring his thoughts.

“To proceed with preparing for the Yuletide Festival.”

Her hand trembled under his, and he remembered the way she'd reacted to their earlier discussion.

“Why does that bother you?”

“It doesn't,” she said immediately, but he didn't believe her. He didn't challenge her on it but remained silent, waiting until she sighed.

“I was just thinking about when we first came to town. How I learned that fairies were real,” she said softly.

“Ahhh. Yes, that would have been a shock.”

“It was. I mean, I knew the Others existed, but I’d never really encountered any before.”

That wasn’t unusual. Despite the peace that existed between humans and Others, the Others tended to prefer their own spaces. But what did fairies have to do with the Yuletide Festival?

“Didn’t this area used to belong to them?” she asked. “Before your however-many-times-great grandfather came along and founded the town?”

“Not exactly. They lived up by the falls - that’s why they were originally called Fairy Haven Falls.”

“But they don’t live there anymore?”

“No, not for a long time. Are you concerned because the winter solstice was one of their traditional holidays?”

“N-no.”

This time she didn’t pretend not to be worried, but before he could ask any more questions, she looked up the road ahead of them and smiled.

“That must be the restaurant. It’s so pretty.”

He had to admit that Damian had done a nice job of converting the old bungalow into a stylish restaurant. Tiny white lights were wrapped around the porch columns and genuine gas lanterns flickered on either side of the old wood and glass door. Through the big windows he could see the glow of candlelight and the warm colors of the decorations.

“Do you want to take off your coat now?” he asked once they were on the porch.

She gave him a shy smile and shook her head.

“That’s all right. You’ve already... I mean, it’s too late now.”

He hid his smile as he opened the door for her.

The restaurant was still divided into the original rooms, with a reception desk in the hallway. Damian was leaning against it, frowning rather than displaying his usual mocking

arrogance, but he wiped his expression as they entered. As always he was dressed theatrically - this time in an open-necked white shirt with full sleeves and tight black pants. At least it would have looked theatrical on any other man, but the vampire made it appear perfectly normal.

“Why, Houston. How nice to see you again. Accompanied this time.”

His hackles threatened to rise, but he ignored the other man and turned to help Ginger off with her coat.

“And so delightfully accompanied,” Damian purred, his gaze wandering down over the black dress.

Bristling he stepped in front of the vampire.

“I don’t need your commentary on my date,” he snapped, and Damian raised a brow.

“My, my. You’re not as... placid as usual. I like it.”

Before he could inform the other man that he didn’t give a damn about what he liked, Ginger came up next to him and took his arm.

“About that. I called to let you know that I wouldn’t be able to make it and to let Houston know, but no one told him.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Damian actually did look regretful. “My receptionist took the message, but then her little boy got sick and she had to rush home. She left a note, but it must have blown off the desk when someone opened the door. I didn’t find it until the next day.”

She sighed. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“I am very sorry.” Damian swept her an elegant bow. “I care very much about good service, no matter what some people think.”

The frown reappeared on Damian’s face, distracting him from his own annoyance.

“Who said you didn’t?”

“Some pretentious little food blogger,” the vampire snapped. “I’m sure she doesn’t even know her bouillon from

her consommé. I have no interest in her opinions.”

*Her* opinions? Damian very clearly did care, but Houston refrained from commenting as he led them to a quiet table in the back parlor tucked away next to a big open fireplace. When Damian tried to seat Ginger, he stepped in front of him again and did it himself, ignoring the vampire’s mocking smile.

“Why do all my friends turn into savages the minute they meet a female,” Damian sighed. “I’d never be that foolish.”

“Then you haven’t met the right one,” he muttered softly as he went to his seat.

Damian raised a brow again but he didn’t comment. Instead he handed them their menus and excused himself, leaving Ginger looking at him a little nervously across the table. Had she heard what he said? He decided he didn’t care as long as it didn’t scare her off.

He reached across the table and took her hand, the small fingers trembling in his.

“Now, Princess. Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been up to since you left town?”

## CHAPTER 5



Ginger nestled closer to Houston as they walked back to the inn, glad she'd worn the coat after all. They'd spent a long time at dinner and the temperature had definitely dropped.

"Cold, princess?" he asked, then tucked her under his arm before she could answer him.

She didn't object, grateful for his warmth - and happy to be close to him. She'd spent the whole evening reminding herself that they weren't on a real date, but it hadn't prevented her body from reacting to his nearness. Every time she looked up and met his eyes, or their knees brushed under the table, or he took her hand in that casually possessive manner, her desire notched up just that little bit more.

Not that the evening hadn't had its uncomfortable moments as well. Every time she'd had to evade a question or give him a half-truth, she'd felt as if her guilt were written all over her face. She was equally convinced that he could see it, but he'd never pressed her.

Although Damian had placed them in a secluded corner, several times people came over to talk to Houston. He always introduced her, but he was so curt he was almost rude and she saw more than one surprised look as the person turned away. Only the fact that the surprise was usually followed by a knowing look stopped her from protesting. He was doing an excellent job of selling the idea that they were together.



*If only we could be.* She'd almost blurted out the truth once. He'd been feeding her bites of his dessert - a chocolate mousse so deeply chocolatey that it was practically orgasmic. His eyes were so intent on her face, his big hand so careful as he brought the spoon to her mouth, that her heart melted.

But then someone else came up to the table and the moment was lost. After they left, he gave her a rueful smile and mentioned the downside of his duties as mayor, including the struggle he was having trying to keep the town's finances balanced. Her guilt roared back full force.

But it was hard to think about guilt now, with his big hand warm on her waist and his delicious musky scent filling her head. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to drop her off, matching his steps to her much slower pace. The stars shimmered above them as a cold breeze sent the last of the dead leaves swirling down the street, and they paused at the end of the road to look down towards the river and the impressive bulk of the Town Hall standing protectively over the square.

"I love this town," he said softly, his deep voice rumbling against her side, and a lump appeared in her throat.

"Have you ever thought of going anywhere else?"

He shrugged slightly. "I intended to go to college, but then my dad died and left Mom with the tree farm and all of us. Jack was seven and the twins barely two. She needed me, but really I didn't mind. I eventually got a business degree online, but I don't think I missed anything by staying here."

"When did you become mayor?" she asked as they started walking again.

"The year after you... left. Mayor Wilkins marched up to me and told me he'd had enough and it was my turn." He shrugged again. "Everyone seemed to expect it."

"And I suppose you didn't mind that either?"

"Not most of the time. It can be annoying when I'm on a date with a beautiful woman."

“A pretend date,” she interrupted, blushing, reminding herself as well as him.

“If you say so.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond. “I suppose I like taking care of things. The town. My family. People.”

Despite the general term, from the way his arm tightened around her, she was quite sure he meant her.

“No one takes care of me,” she blurted out, then immediately blushed. “And they don’t need to - I’m just fine on my own.”

“Not even Owen?”

It was her turn to shrug uncomfortably. “He... changed when he was in Alaska, and I was at school on my own. I got used to it. He’s a good brother, but he’s very busy.”

He gave a noncommittal grunt as they reached the front porch of the inn. He walked up the steps with her, then paused outside the main door.

“This is where I say good night.”

“You don’t want to come in?”

“I want to come in very much, princess, but as you reminded me, this is all pretense. I am quite likely to forget that if I’m alone with you.”

Despite his denial, his hands had dropped to her waist, pulling her gently towards him.

“We’re alone now,” she whispered, her heart racing.

One big hand slipped down below the hem of her coat to grip her buttock, squeezing it almost absently, but making her clit throb in a corresponding rhythm.

“This is Fairhaven Falls and we’re in public. We’re not really alone.”

His voice was a low growl, and her hands slid up around his neck, nerves making them tremble.

“In that case you’d better kiss me. If we’re together, you wouldn’t end our date with a handshake.”

He groaned and then he kissed her. Perhaps the dinner had been just as tantalizing for him because this time he didn’t start off slowly and tentatively. He swept into her mouth, dominating, possessive, then groaned again and effortlessly lifted her up so their faces were level and he could demand more. Her legs automatically went around his waist and it was her turn to moan as the damp, needy flesh between her legs came in contact with his hard chest.

His hand was still on her ass and he encouraged her, rocking her against him until she was on the verge of climax...

“Oh!”

The soft, startled gasp barely had time to penetrate before he’d put her back on her feet and stepped in front of her to glare at Alison standing in the open door.

“I’m so sorry. Flora said there was someone at the door, but I didn’t realize... Umm, I’ll go now.”

Blushing, Alison retreated, closing the door behind her. Ginger suspected her own face was equally red as she took a nervous step back. How could she have behaved so wantonly?

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, not making any attempt to stop her retreat. “I should have been more aware of our surroundings.”

“That’s all right.” She twisted her fingers together, not looking at him. “I’m sure it was a pretty convincing act.”

“Act?” he asked incredulously. “Does this feel like an act, princess?”

He grasped her hand and pressed it against the very, very swollen ridge of his erection for one brief, glorious moment before moving away again.

“Well, no.” Her blush increased but she was smiling as she peeped up at him. “Should I apologize?”

“Fuck, no.” They stared at each other for a long moment and she almost reached for him before he sighed. “Go inside,

Ginger. Before I forget all my good intentions.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “Okay.”

“I don’t have a lot of time during the day, but if you don’t mind meeting me at the office, we could grab some lunch together tomorrow.”

This time she was smiling as she nodded.

He smiled back, ran a gentle finger along her jaw, and walked off into the darkness.

Sighing happily, she went into the inn. Alison was waiting for her, her expression anxious.

“I really am sorry. I’m just so used to Flora being right, I didn’t even think to ask any questions.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong. We were outside the door.”

They looked at each other for a second, then they both started laughing.

“I’m always right,” Flora said complacently, suddenly appearing in the hallway. “It’s too soon.”

“I’ve never heard you say that before,” Alison muttered but the old lady ignored her.

“Why don’t you ask Ginger if she’d like to help decorate?” Flora asked. “For Thanksgiving,” she added when Ginger paled.

“Would you like to help? I’ll make some hot cider and get Sylvie to help us too. She’s a dryad and an absolute whiz with flower arrangements.”

“I’d love to help.” Now that she’d finally left her room and confronted Houston, she was ready to meet people again. “That is, when do you want to do it? I’m meeting Houston for lunch tomorrow.”

Flora snorted, but they both ignored her.

“I wanted to start on it tomorrow, but we could easily take a break for lunch. Unless you have to work?”

She did a quick mental review, then grinned.

“You know what? I’m going to take a vacation day. There’s nothing pressing at the moment.”

“That’s great. Just come on down whenever you’re ready in the morning. You could even have breakfast with me, instead of in your room.”

“I’m sorry about that. I just needed time.”

“But everything is all right now?”

No, but she was going to do everything in her power to fix it.

She gave a noncommittal nod, aware of Flora’s discerning gaze fixed on her face, then said goodnight and climbed the stairs, feeling hopeful for the first time in months.

## CHAPTER 6



Houston snuck a look at his smart watch for the tenth time since the meeting began. Five minutes to noon and they were showing no signs of wrapping up. Normally he didn't mind the extended meetings. He believed that letting everyone have their say made it easier to compromise in the end and he rarely reined them in unless they started making personal attacks. But today he was meeting Ginger for lunch.

Just the thought made his cock twitch and he bit back a sigh. He seemed to have been permanently erect since she'd appeared in his office. He'd had to take himself in hand last night just to try and get some sleep, but despite the amount he's sprayed on the shower wall, it hasn't helped. He suspected that the only thing that would help was burying himself in her sweet little body - and he was far from sure that was even a possibility.

But being with her was a lot more important than listening to yet another debate about the number of parking spaces on Main Street and he rose to his feet. The other members of the committee looked at him as if he'd grown a second head, even Gladys stopping in mid-tirade.

"You will have to excuse me. Feel free to carry on or talk to Tomas about rescheduling another meeting later in the week."

"You're leaving, Mayor?" the pixie who ran the dress shop asked, her eyes wide.

"Yes. I have a date."

He derived no small amount of satisfaction from the announcement and the stunned silence that followed. Did they really think he was so immune to normal male needs? Then Gladys cackled and he remembered that the old witch was one of Flora's cronies.

"Planning on settling down, Houston? About time."

Ignoring her completely, he headed out of the chamber, taking the backstairs up to his office three at a time. He almost collided with Ginger as he rushed out into the corridor. He grabbed her arms to steady her, and she looked up at him, her eyes wide and her pretty lips parted.

He couldn't resist. He bent his head and kissed her, her sweetness making his cock harden instantly. But despite her shyly enthusiastic response, this was not the place and somehow he managed to pull back. She blushed as she looked around.

"At least we stopped before we were interrupted this time."

"I know. I half-expected Flora to appear and tap me on the shoulder."

He wasn't entirely kidding, although he had no idea why the old woman seemed to intent on cockblocking him.

She giggled and put a teasing hand on his chest.

"Maybe we didn't take it far enough."

"Unless you want to test that theory, princess, why don't we get some lunch instead? Is the River Cafe all right?"

"Oh yes." Her expression turned dreamy as she licked her lips. "Do they still make those amazing pancakes? I swear I dreamed about them."

"You only dreamed about the pancakes?" he murmured in her ear, watching with satisfaction as she blushed again and stumbled over an answer.

"I dreamed about you," he added. "Even though I knew I shouldn't. Even though I knew you were too young and too innocent."

“Really?”

“Really.”

She swayed towards him, but he forced himself to tuck her hand in his arm and head for the stairs. His sense of discretion seemed to have disappeared completely. If she looked at him like that again, he was afraid he'd have her up against the wall with her skirt around her waist. His cock was in enthusiastic agreement with that idea, but he did his best to ignore it.

As soon as they entered the cafe, he realized that he had made a mistake. Most of the people present were giving them interested looks which was ideal for her plan but not conducive to a private conversation.

“There's a table on the deck. Back in the corner under a heater,” Rona said as she hurried by and he flashed her a grateful smile. The blue-haired waitress in the old-fashioned pink uniform was as much a part of the cafe as the chef.

Ginger's cheeks were still flushed as he led her out to the table. Even though most of the leaves had fallen, it was a beautiful day and the heater provided enough warmth to offset the cool breeze off the river. The planters scattered around the deck offered at least a hint of privacy and he smiled at her as they sat.

“Is this better?”

“Much. I hadn't realized that everyone watched you so closely.”

Rona came by with water and coffee before he could answer, then hurried off again.

“They don't usually. I mean they know who I am, especially if they have a problem.”

“Houston, we have a problem,” she giggled, and he sighed.

He couldn't even remember who had come up with the nickname, but it was part of him now. It wasn't that he minded being the one people turned to when there was an issue. He considered it part of his job - his responsibility and his privilege - but it did get a little tiring sometimes.



“But you’re the reason they’re watching, Princess. They aren’t used to seeing me with a woman.”

He hadn’t been entirely celibate for the past ten years, but his few discreet liaisons had always been conducted away from Fairhaven Falls. And none of them had been as satisfying as simply having Ginger looking at him across the table, eyes wide and lips parted.

“Really? But you’re so... “

Her hand waved towards him as she tried to come up with the right word and he captured it and brought it gently to his mouth.

“I’m so what?”

He sucked a cute little finger into his mouth and curled his tongue around it, and her eyes went heavy with arousal.

“So... so big.”

Her eyes flicked down to his cock and any hope he had of controlling it disappeared. She licked her lips as it jerked beneath his jeans. Perhaps it was just as well that Rona came back with their food before he could give in to temptation and pull her onto his lap.

“Pancakes.” Ginger sighed happily. “How does she always know?”

“Magic,” he said lightly, although it was as good an explanation as any, and a shadow crossed her face.

Before he could ask what was wrong, she took a big bite of golden pancake dripping in syrup and moaned ecstatically, her lips sticky with syrup. “This is the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

“I might have to challenge that.”

This time her blush spread all the way down her neck. Did it reach as far as those pretty breasts, he wondered, then shifted uncomfortably when his cock responded to the thought.

He ate his own perfectly fried catfish while she enjoyed her pancakes, content just to appreciate the company and the

peaceful setting. He waited until she put her fork down on the empty plate with a satisfied sigh.

“So when do you think we should announce our engagement?”

She choked and started coughing.

He swore under his breath and pulled her onto his lap, rubbing her back until she stopped coughing. She wiped her eyes and took a grateful sip of the water he offered, then seemed to realize where she was sitting. She made a half-hearted push at his chest which he ignored, then sighed and settled back against him.

“Not the best timing,” she muttered and he laughed.

“Sorry. But you did say engaged, didn’t you?”

“Yes, it’s the only... The only way I think Owen will believe it,” she finished but he was sure she’d started to say something else.

“Which means we should announce our engagement.”

“I suppose so.”

She was twisting her fingers together again and he covered them with his hand.

“What’s wrong, princess?”

“Nothing. It just sounds so final. And it’s so soon.”

He shrugged. “When you know, you know. Most Others recognize their mates very quickly. No one will think it’s strange.”

“But I... But Owen...” She took a deep breath. “How about Thanksgiving? That gives us two more weeks.”

“Two more weeks of kissing?”

He nibbled on her neck and she shivered, softening against him.

“I suppose I could manage that.”

Her voice was breathless, her provocative little nipples thrusting against her shirt. He was just trying to decide if his

body concealed her enough for him to play with one of those tempting little peaks, when he heard an all too familiar voice.

“There you are,” Flora said cheerfully, plunking herself down at the table with them.

Ginger blushed but he kept his arms firmly around her.

“Why are you here?” he growled.

“Alison asked me to get some more candles so I thought I’d pick up Ginger while I was here.”

He’d never seen anything more suspicious than the saintly look on the old lady’s face.

“I’m going to walk her back to the inn.”

The innocent look didn’t change.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Gladys says they’re practically rioting in the council chamber. Of course, I could send Grondar down to sort them out... “

He groaned silently. Flora’s grandson was a full sized orc - big, gruff, and short-tempered. His mate had softened him considerably, but he still didn’t suffer fools gladly, and Houston could only imagine the complaints he’d have to listen to.

“In that case, I suppose I’d better go back. Do you mind, princess?”

“Of course not. I know it’s your job.”

“We could have dinner -”

“Not tonight,” Flora said firmly. “We’re throwing a little welcome party for Ginger. A girls only welcome party,” she added when he opened his mouth. “You’ll just have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Fine,” he snapped, even though he knew he sounded like a two-year old who’d just had his favorite toy taken away from him, then softened his voice as he turned back to Ginger. “Tomorrow, princess?”

“I’d like that.”

“Good. I’ll call you.”

She gave Flora a nervous look, then she reached up and gave him a quick, sweet kiss. It was far from enough, but it gave him the strength to put her back in her chair, growl a goodbye at Flora, and march back towards the Town Hall. Those squabbling idiots were going to wish Flora had sent Grondar by the time he was through with them.

## CHAPTER 7



Ginger couldn't help sighing as she watched Houston leave. He was even hotter when he was angry, his nostrils flaring, muscles bulging in those big arms as he clenched his fists - not to mention the way his absolutely spectacular ass flexed as he stomped away.

Next to her, Flora cackled, clearly delighted with the outcome and Ginger frowned at her.

"Are you trying to keep us apart?"

Black eyes twinkled at her.

"Good heavens, no, child. You two are perfect for each other. But it's all about the timing. Most couples need a little push - you two need a little pull."

"We're not a couple," she said, belatedly remembering that it was all a charade.

"Of course not, dear. Not yet." Flora hopped up with the agility of a much younger woman. "Ready to go?"

"I guess. Oh, I need to pay the bill."

"Don't be silly. It's on Howard's tab, of course. You don't think he's the type of male who expects his date to pay, do you?"

"Well, no. But it is the twenty-first century. Women do pay."

"It is important to keep track of the years, of course." That penetrating black gaze pinned her in place, and she had a

sudden terrible feeling that Flora knew everything. But then the old lady shrugged lightly. “Trust me. You’d only hurt his feelings.”

“Okay,” she whispered, still shaken, and meekly followed Flora out of the cafe.

Her apprehension vanished as the afternoon wore on and she continued the work she’d started with Alison and Sylvie. The dryad was a tall, slender female with brown skin and green-tinted hair - and an extremely dirty mind. She kept them laughing as they tied gold and orange ribbons around candles, arranged piles of pumpkins and gourds, and created colorful displays of leaves and fruits and autumn flowers on every available surface. They even made much smaller arrangements for each of the guest rooms.

“I think that’s it,” Alison announced at last, looking around the hallway with a pleased smile.

“If you mean it looks like a produce truck crashed into the inn, you’re right,” Sylvie teased and Alison elbowed her.

“Oh, stop. I think it looks great. What do you think, Ginger?”

“I think it’s perfect. I always think about decorating for the seasons, but I never seem to get around to it.” And thank goodness it wasn’t time for Christmas decorations yet.

“If you’re still around after Thanksgiving, you can help with the Christmas decorations,” Alison said cheerfully and Ginger winced. “You don’t have to,” she added quickly.

“It’s not that. It’s just that I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be staying. Although I suppose you need to know so you can handle reservations.”

“Nope. Flora said the room is yours until the New Year.” Alison laughed at her expression. “Don’t ask me why she said it. Mostly she lets me handle all the bookings, but sometimes she just tells me that someone is coming and how long they’re going to stay. It’s her inn so I don’t argue.”

Flora had known from the beginning that she planned to stay until Christmas? Another shiver went down her spine, but

then she was distracted by Pippa's arrival. The pretty young blonde worked part-time cleaning the inn and she'd reached out to Ginger several times while she was hiding in her room and she took the first opportunity to pull her aside.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For offering to help."

"Of course. I know what it's like to need a friend, or a helping hand." Despite Pippa's youthful appearance, there was a world of wisdom in the blue eyes studying her. "Do you need a hand?"

"N-no, but thank you." She blinked back a tear. "And I always want a new friend."

"Done," Pippa said, and gave her a quick hug.

Ginger gave her a somewhat watery smile, then looked around. "Where's your baby?"

Pippa laughed. "Trogar started pouting about both of us being gone. He said if I got a girls night, he got a daddy daughter night."

"Aw," Alison sighed as she came to join them. "Why do I suspect Will is going to be just like that?"

Since the big blue-skinned troll with the cheerful smile was already a frequent presence in the inn, Ginger thought she was right. Would Houston be like that too, she wondered. Based on the way he'd help raise his brothers she couldn't doubt it. *Not that I'll ever know.* Once she'd done what she needed to do, she didn't think she could face coming back here again.

The arrival of Nichola, Will's sister, distracted her from her morose thoughts. Nichola held up a pitcher of sparkling red liquid.

"Look what I have. It's my own special concoction, watered down for all you delicate little humans."

"Don't believe her," Alison whispered. "Mix it with a lot of soda."

*I should have taken Alison more seriously,* Ginger thought the next morning as she warily opened her eyes. Nichola's

devil potion had been as potent as her friend had warned. But it had been a wonderful evening, even if some of it was a little fuzzy. The last thing she remembered was sitting on the back porch with Nichola and Alison, waiting for Will to come and take Alison home.

Nichola started extolling the virtues of minotaur dick, and Alison rolled her eyes.

“Don’t listen to her. She likes to make it sound like she’s been with every kind of Other there is.”

“Nothing wrong with a little experimentation,” Nichola said defiantly. “And I’m telling you, minotaur dick is prime number one. Don’t you think, Ginger?”

“I don’t know,” she said mournfully, taking another sip of her yummy drink. “We haven’t done that yet.”

“Then you need to grab that bull by the horns.”

Nichola fell over laughing at her own joke, but she’d pouted like a two-year old.

“I might stand a chance if Flora didn’t keep interrupting us.”

“Flora is stopping you? Our Flora?” Alison gave her an astonished stare.

“That’s the one.”

“That’s weird. She’s usually all about the match-making.”

“Maybe she thinks you’re too small,” Nichola said, picking herself up. “I mean a minotaur’s dick is this big.” She held her hands a good foot apart. “And you’re only this big.” She pulled her hands together until they were almost touching.

“I’m not that small. And he’s not that big. Is he?”

He’d always felt pretty big when he was pressed up against her, but surely not that big. But both of the other women were nodding.

“Others do tend to be... larger.”



“Especially minotaurs,” Nichola added with a dreamy smile, and Ginger’s drunken thoughts suddenly put two and two together.

“Are you talking about my Houston?”

Nichola wrinkled her nose. “God, no. He’s practically ancient.”

She immediately went on the defensive.

“No, he’s not. He’s the perfect age. Why is everyone so obsessed with his age anyway?”

“I’m not obsessed. If you think he’s the right one, then go for it. Ride some of that big ol’ minotaur dick.”

“I did not need to hear that,” Will said as he walked up. “Are you trying to corrupt my poor innocent mate?”

Alison smiled at him as he reached down and picked her up.

“You’ve already corrupted me the perfect amount.”

Normally, Ginger would have looked away, but she had enough alcohol in her system to watch in fascination as Will squeezed Alison’s butt. She’d liked it when Houston had done that, but then she liked everything he did, she thought mournfully.

“I’m only trying to corrupt Ginger,” Nichola announced as Will sighed.

“Come on then, corrupter. Let’s get you home.”

Nichola had grumbled but obeyed and the three of them had left, leaving Ginger alone on the porch, thinking of Houston. She’d thought about him as she stumbled inside and locked the door, as she climbed the stairs and crawled into bed. She’d thought about him so much it was as if he’d been in bed with her, whispering dirty words in her ear...

“Oh my God.” She sat straight up in bed as her memory started to return, wincing at the sudden movement. “Tell me I didn’t run drunk dial him.”

She scrambled for her phone and found it half-hidden under her pillow. Her hand shook as she went to her recent calls. There it was - 12:13 am. Oh God, what would he think of her? And what had she said? Had it just been drunk sexy talk or had she told him why she was here?

Trying desperately to remember, she climbed out of bed and went to the bathroom. After she brushed her teeth and took care of the necessities, she stared at her pale face in the mirror. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she'd told him everything. At least she'd stop feeling guilty.

It was still dark outside so she climbed back into bed, tempted to pull the blankets back over her head and just hide for the rest of the day.

“Don't you look cozy?”

She squeaked as Houston came strolling into her room.

“What... what are you doing here?”

“You insisted, remember?” His eyes gleamed as he prowled towards her. “I believe your exact words were that I was to get over here and show you my ‘big ol’ minotaur dick.’”

The sheet went back over her head.

“Oh god, I'm sorry.”

“Oh, don't be sorry about that.” Her bed squeaked as he sat down next to her, and then he gently tugged the sheet down. “I'm happy to show you any part of me you wish to see. On the other hand, waking me up to tell me all the dirty things you want to do to me? That's not fair, princess. I didn't sleep again for the rest of the night.”

He tugged the sheet down a little further, far enough to reveal her favorite sleep tank. It was soft and comfortable - and so worn it was practically transparent.

“I spent the rest of the night thinking about you just like this. Well, not exactly like this. I didn't picture you wearing a giant Tweety Bird.”

He used one finger to trace the faded outline, the delicate touch making her shiver. Her nipples were so tight they ached.

“How did you picture me?” she whispered.

“Naked,” he said, and ripped the tank apart.

## CHAPTER 8



*Y*ou're going too far, the voice in Houston's head warned but his usual self-control seemed to have evaporated. It had started to disappear when Flora sent him back to his office, was further worn away by an afternoon of meetings and arguments, and finally vanished when he returned to his apartment, still annoyed that he couldn't see Ginger, and found his younger brother sprawling on his sofa drinking his beer.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Jack's eyebrows rose at the harsh question.

"What's up with you?"

"I'm tired of you showing up here whenever you feel like it."

"Whoa. Sounds like someone needs to get laid. I guess the humors about you and some human hottie weren't true."

Jack yelped as Houston grabbed him by the collar and hauled him up off the sofa.

"You talk about her like that again and I'll take you outside and teach you a lesson. Horn to horn."

Horn to horn combat was the old way of settling disputes. He would never have imagined the words coming out of his mouth but right now he felt savage enough to mean them.

Jack raised his hands in surrender.

"Chill out, man. I didn't mean anything by it."

“Chill out?” He dropped his brother back on the sofa. “You’re almost thirty and we’re a long way from the beach. Why don’t you grow up?”

The flash of anger faded and he immediately regretted the comment. He sighed and sat down next to his brother, elbowing him.

“Sorry. Rough day.”

“It’s okay. You’re not wrong, but really what’s the point? You’re *the* Ironman in this town. I’ll always be the little brother.” Jack didn’t even sound angry, just resigned.

“Not when the twins get back from college. Then you’ll be the big brother and everyone will give you shit if they act up.”

A broad grin spread across Jack’s face, his mercurial spirits already recovering.

“Nah. They’ll still give you shit.”

Unfortunately, Jack was probably right. He grabbed the beer from Jack and drained it.

“I suppose you deserve that one.” His brother grinned at him, then went and brought back two more. “So there really is a human h... a human?”

“Yes. Ginger. She lived here for five years when she was a teenager.”

“I think I remember her. Cute redhead? About my age?”

“Yep.”

Jack grinned. “Look at you pulling in the young hotties. Ow,” he added when Houston swatted him across the ear. “What’s that for? She is young compared to you. And she was certainly a hottie back then.”

When Houston glared at him he shut up, but not for long.

“Wait a minute. Wasn’t she Owen’s younger sister?”

He took a long swig of his beer. “Yep.”

“Holy shit. Does he know?”

“Not yet. Although...” He frowned, trying to remember if Ginger had mentioned telling him. Since her brother was the supposed reason for their relationship, he would have thought she would have been more eager to spread the news. But she’d even put off announcing the engagement.

“Better not wait too long,” Jack said seriously. “That’s against the bro code.”

“Bro code? What are you - twelve?”

“Just your baby brother.”

Jack blinked at him innocently and he laughed in spite of himself.

“I was going to make stew for dinner. Are you staying?”

“Nah, heading down to the Moonshine. Looking for my own little hottie.”

The Moonshine Tavern wasn’t exactly a dive bar but it was the closest thing to it in Fairhaven Falls and it tended to attract a rougher clientele. He shuddered to think how much trouble his brother could get into there, but he also knew it was useless to protest.

“Are you coming back afterwards?”

“I hope not. I hope I end up in my hottie’s bed. If not...” He shrugged. “I’ll just crash with one of my friends. I don’t want to wake you up. At your age you need the rest.”

“Gee thanks.”

Jack laughed, drained his beer, and left. Houston made his dinner, then turned on a game and listened to it while he went over the notes for his next series of meetings. Or at least he tried to. He couldn’t focus. He kept thinking of Ginger. Of the way she lit up when she was excited about something. Of the way she looked up at him with those big green eyes when he pulled her close. Of the way she’d sucked the mousse of his spoon, her mouth a pretty little circle.

*Her very small mouth*, he reminded himself when his body responded to the image. She probably couldn’t even take him. But the reminder was no use and he ended up in his shower

once more, shuddering helplessly at the vision of her on her knees in front of him. It was a long way from satisfactory, but he gave up and went to bed, falling into an uneasy sleep. Only to be awakened by a sleepy, drunk, and very dirty girl.

Which was why he was here at this ridiculous hour of the morning. And why he'd just ripped her shirt open. He knew he should close his eyes, apologize, wrestle himself back under control, but he was too mesmerized by those perfect little breasts, her nipples like bright red berries, quivering beneath his gaze. Her still uncovered breasts, he realized. She hadn't made any attempt to cover herself, her eyes fixed on his face expectantly.

"So beautiful," he murmured and bent his head to lick one stiff peak.

She made a mewling sound, but her hands flew to his head and tugged him closer.

"Like that, do you, princess? Want more?"

"God, yes."

He circled her nipple, licking it again and again as she moved restlessly against his chest and he looked down. She wasn't wearing anything except a tiny pair of green panties. Unable to resist, he slid his hand into them, the material little more than a thin strip on his big hand, and cupped her softness. She cried out as he sucked her nipple deep and rubbed her swollen little clit, her hot flesh slick beneath his fingers. He moved to her other breast, tugging hard and letting her feel the edge of his teeth as he pressed harder on her clit, and she arched her back with another soft little cry, her body shaking against him.

He pulled his hand free and sucked on his fingers, groaning as her sweetness flooded his mouth. His cock was leaking, straining painfully against his jeans as her eyes fluttered open.

"Are you ready to see my dick, princess? To play with it?"

She nodded frantically. He slid off the side of the bed, unzipped his jeans, and let his aching length spring free. Her

eyes widened as he spread the slickness down his thick shaft.

“See what you do to me. Look at the way you’ve made me all slick and hard for you.”

Her little pink tongue came out, licking her lips.

“Do you want to taste me, princess? Just a little kiss. Lick me off with that pretty little mouth.”

Her eyes were still wide, but she nodded and scooted to the side of the bed. He gripped the bedpost as she reached for him.

“You’re so big.”

He groaned as she tried to wrap her fingers around his throbbing shaft. Her other hand gripped his hip, and she looked up at him, her eyes as big and green as he’d imagined. Her hand stroked him gently, exploring, but he needed more.

“Like this.” He guided her up and down, watching her avid gaze as her sweet hand stroked him, moving faster and faster until he growled and clamped down on her hand, holding it in place.

She looked up at him, her expression worried.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“God, no.” His laugh came out as another groan as he forced her hand away. “I was about to come in your hand.”

“I wouldn’t mind.” She licked her lips again, her eyes suddenly sparkling with mischief. “Can I taste you instead? Just a little kiss, like you said.”

“Like you said last night.”

Her blush did extend all the way down to her pretty breasts but she leaned forward anyway and kissed his cock. When he groaned, she kissed him again, then started licking across the broad head, her small silky tongue perfect. He gripped the bedpost harder, trying to force his body under control, even as his other hand tangled in her soft curls.

“That’s good, princess. So fucking good.”



She licked harder as her hand started gliding up and down his shaft, and then her mouth opened over him. He tried to pull her back but she ignored him, stretching her mouth wider until she was enclosing the whole head, her hand going even faster. The wet heat of her mouth combined with that firm little hand and those big green eyes looking up at him were too much.

“I’m going to come, princess. Do you want me to come in your mouth?”

She nodded, eyes still fixed on him, and he groaned, unable to stop, his cum shooting in long hard spurts into her small mouth. She coughed but swallowed again and again, then licked away every drop.

“Was that okay?” she whispered when she was finished, and his cock jerked.

“Absolutely perfect,” he said fervently. “And now it’s my turn.”

## CHAPTER 9



Ginger squeaked as Houston pushed her back on the bed, hooked his thumbs in her panties and tore them off. Whatever she'd said to him last night had changed him, changed him from his usual controlled self into the demanding lover she'd glimpsed when they kissed - and she loved it. Loved how desperate he seemed, how hungry for her.

So hungry that he didn't take his time, didn't kiss and tease, he simply buried his face between her legs and covered her entire pussy with one swipe of that thick perfect tongue. Her back arched and he growled, his big hands holding her place as he feasted on her, his tongue finding her clit and lashing it ruthlessly. She came almost immediately, her body shaking but he didn't even pause, just growled and swiped his tongue over her, lapping up her arousal before thrusting at her entrance. Her body resisted but he pressed harder and finally pushed inside, stretching her as he delved deeper.

And that's just his tongue, she thought dazedly, but then he found her G-spot and she was too busy coming to think. She lost track of how many times she came, but she was a limp sticky mess when he finally raised his head.

"I can't wait any longer."

His voice was rough, his face strained, and she nodded frantically. He rose over her, fisting that giant cock. It looked ever larger from this angle and she shivered, a hint of fear mingling with her excitement. He must have read her expression because his face softened.

“Don’t worry, princess. You can take me.”

He leaned closer and the wide tip of his cock nudged her entrance like an enormous fist.

Her phone rang.

The sound echoed through her room, and he froze, his cock still pressing against her.

“If that’s Flora I’m going to fucking kill her.”

She was already shaking her head, her mouth trembling as reality crashed back down over her.

“That’s Owen’s ring tone. If I don’t answer, he’ll worry.”

His face closed down, but he was already pulling back and rising to his feet, leaving her feeling cold and naked.

“Are you going to tell him about us?” he asked, his eyes intent on her face.

The phone stopped ringing as she shook her head.

“Not yet. I told you, it has to be long enough for him to believe it.”

“I see.” He reached for his jeans, his expression unreadable, just as the phone started up again. “You’d better get that.”

By the time she’d picked up the phone with a trembling hand, he was gone. A sob threatened to escape, but she managed to make it sound like a yawn instead.

“Owen? Why are you calling me this early?”

For that matter, why was he calling her at all? He usually preferred text or email.

“I wanted to catch you before you started classes.”

She winced guiltily, but managed to keep her voice calm.

“Okay. What’s up?”

“Do you remember Fairhaven Falls?”

The question shocked her so much that for a long minute all she could do was stare at the phone.

“Remember? Of course, I remember. We lived there for five years. I didn’t want to leave.”

“Yes, I know,” he said uncomfortably. “But you never talk about it so I wasn’t sure.”

“It hurt too much.” The sob was harder to disguise this time.

“I’ve been thinking. Maybe it would be okay to go back. It’s been a long time and Pa’s dead. As far as I know, no one ever discovered what he did.”

“But why? Why now?”

“A business opportunity,” he said reluctantly.

“I should have known.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“I thought you might feel that way - that’s why I called. Don’t worry, I won’t go through with it.”

“No, wait a minute.”

What if he was right? What if it had been long enough? And if she put everything to rights, maybe it would be okay. Maybe she could come back too. A fragile thread of hope spun through her mind.

“When were you thinking about looking into this opportunity?”

“Not until the new year.”

One way or the other, she’d know by then.

“Then I think it would be all right.”

“Really? That’s great. Donald thinks it could be a real money maker.”

The thought of Donald in Fairhaven Falls made her skin crawl, but she’d worry about that later.

“All right. You can tell me all about it when I come home.”

“Which will be when?”

“I told you, not for at least another month.”

He sighed.

“I suppose you know best. Don’t work too hard, sis.”

She agreed and hung up, her head still reeling. Houston was long gone of course, but perhaps it was just as well. If he’d been here she might have been tempted to tell him the whole thing. To admit that not only was her father a thief and not only had he’d stolen from the town, but he’d stolen from the Ironmanes after they’d taken the chance on hiring him when no one else would.

She still remembered when Owen had told her. It was two days after they’d left Fairhaven Falls and they were in another cheap roadside motel with brown shag carpeting and stained bedspreads.

“Tell me what’s going on,” she demanded. “Why did we have to leave so quickly?”

Owen sighed, a defeated look on his face as he jerked his thumb at their father. “Because he’s been stealing.”

“It wasn’t stealing,” her father said, glaring at Owen. “Those things weren’t being used.”

“What things?”

“Apparently he found his caretaking duties a little too strenuous,” Owen said sarcastically. “He was looking for a place to hide out for a nap and discovered the attic in the town hall. A lot of things got stuffed up there over the years, mainly belonging to the Ironmanes, and he decided to help himself.”

“No one even knew it was gone,” her father muttered.

Owen ignored him, taking her hand.

“I know you liked it there. I did too. But if anyone finds out, he’ll go to jail. Hopefully, he’s right and no one will ever know. If they do eventually realize there’s something missing, we’ll have been gone for long enough that no one will think of him or us.”

She nodded, fighting back the tears. He hadn’t been much of a father, but he was still her dad.

“Besides, you’re going off to college in the fall. Starting a new life. You won’t even miss Fairhaven Falls.”

*I’ll miss Houston.* But she couldn’t say that aloud, not to Owen. She managed a watery smile.

“So what are we going to do now?”

“We’re going to Alaska. Hard work, but it pays well. And hopefully it will keep him out of trouble,” he added quietly.

It hadn’t. She was in her sophomore year when he was killed in a knife fight because he was cheating at cards. Owen told her not to come to the funeral, and he stayed in Alaska, banking most of his money. By the time she’d earned her CPA, he was ready to return to North Carolina with enough cash to start investing in real estate. His business had taken off, although she frequently thought it might have been better for him if he were happier rather than richer.

But then how happy was she? She enjoyed her work and her co-workers. She had a cute condo in an old house and a few good friends, but she’d always felt as if something were missing. And then two months ago, she’d made the discovery that changed everything. In an unusually sentimental gesture, Owen had kept a small box of their father’s belongings.

Struck by the nostalgia that always hit her in the fall, she’d started going through it one lazy Sunday afternoon. She’d read the document twice before she realized what it was. A contract, a very old contract between Houston’s ancestor and the fairies for whom the town was named, although Fairy Haven had been corrupted to Fairhaven over the years.

A contract that specified a tithe was due every fifty years - a tithe offered by a member of the Ironmane family using a ritual goblet. A goblet that was not present, only the small box with a fitted lining that must have held it. Her father must have taken the goblet. Taken it and sold it.

Her first impulse had been to dismiss it. It was the twenty-first century - the idea of a contract with fairies sounded ridiculous. Except... she’d seen a lot of strange things during

her time in Fairhaven Falls, not all of which could be explained away.

Her second impulse had been to go to Houston, but not only did she dread the inevitable disgust on his face, what good would it do? The goblet was long gone.

She read through the contract again, looking for options. There was only one - a member of the Ironmane family, by blood or affection, could offer themselves as sacrifice. It didn't specify the type of sacrifice, but the thought of Houston putting himself through that because of her father's greed made her feel sick.

*By blood or affection.* That was when she'd come up with her plan. Get him to agree to a fake relationship, then offer herself on the night of the Solstice.

Except now he knew she didn't want to tell Owen about them, what was her excuse? What if she'd screwed up everything?

A tear rolled down her cheek, then another, and she finally gave up and just let herself cry.

## CHAPTER 10



Houston stomped down the stairs, growling when he saw Flora sitting on the bottom step, clearly waiting for him.

“You always were a stubborn boy,” she said.

He would cheerfully have ignored her and kept going but the manners that had been ingrained in him since was a child wouldn't let him. *Manners that disappear when I'm with Ginger*, he thought guiltily, his anger beginning to fade. What must she think of the way he'd acted?

“Oh stop it. You're just a normal male - thinking with your dick instead of your head.”

He'd known Flora too long to be shocked. Instead, a reluctant smile twisted his lips as he sat down on the steps next to her.

“So if you aren't lying in wait to chastise me about my behavior, why are you here?”

“Because you need to be patient,” Flora said bluntly. “Ginger has something she needs to do.”

“Is that why she lied to me?”

Flora snorted. “You never believed that feeble excuse, did you?”

“Well, no.”

“Do you think the way she responds to you is a lie?”

“No.”



“Then get over yourself.” She reached over and smacked the back of his head, and he winced. Her orc blood made her a lot stronger than she looked. “Let her keep pretending. Stop rushing her and let her tell you when she’s ready.”

The more he thought about it, the more he agreed with Flora. He wasn’t ready to give up on Ginger, to stop seeing her, because...

“She’s my mate, isn’t she?”

Flora smacked him again.

“Of course she is, you idiot. Tell me you haven’t known that since the night you kissed her.”

“How did you -” He shook his head. There was no point in asking.

“I have a knack,” Flora said modestly. “Now get back upstairs and make her stop crying. But remember - slowly.”

She was crying? He was half way up the stairs before he thought to say goodbye, but when he turned back, Flora was gone.

“Thank you,” he said to the empty hall, then took the remaining steps as quickly as possible.

Flora was right. Ginger was crying, face down on the bed and sobbing like a child.

“Oh, princess, don’t do that.”

He wrapped a blanket around her and lifted her into his arms, tucking her against his chest. To his relief, she didn’t fight him, just sobbed against his chest as he rocked her gently. Her sobs finally died away into a few shuddering breaths. When she sniffed, he offered her his handkerchief.

“You carry a handkerchief? I should have known.” She mopped her eyes and blew her nose defiantly, then sighed. “I guess we should talk.”

“Maybe we don’t have to,” he said quickly. “Owen is your brother and you should be the one to decide when to tell him.”

“You don’t mind?” she asked hopefully.

“I mind, but I meant what I said. It’s your decision. I shouldn’t have walked out on you, especially after what we’d been doing. I’m sorry about that too.”

“You’re sorry?” She sat up and scowled at him.

“About touching you, never. But I’m sorry I lost control.”

“Hmm. I kind of liked it.”

Damn if his cock didn’t react to the teasing look on her face, but he shook his head.

“I think we need to slow down.”

“No more kisses?”

He wasn’t prepared to go that far.

“Oh, there will definitely be kisses, but I think we should leave it there.”

“You mean like no touching below the waist?”

“Definitely not.” he said, intercepting her hand as she reached for his cock.

*I must be insane.*

“What about above the waist?”

She leaned back a little, letting the blanket slip down far enough to reveal a rosy nipple, still swollen from his kisses.

“Maybe that’s a grey area.” His voice sounded hoarse. “For special occasions.”

“You know how ridiculous that sounds, don’t you?”

She let the blanket fall open a little more.

“I do. But I still think we need time. Time for you to trust me,” he added gently.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just...” She sighed, pulled the blanket together, and settled back into his arms. “Maybe you’re right.”

## CHAPTER 11



*W*orst idea ever, Ginger thought grumpily a week later as they headed out to his family's Christmas Tree farm. Oh, it had been a wonderful week in many ways, but the prohibition on anything but kisses was slowly driving her crazy. The kisses were wonderful and there were lots of them, but she wanted more.

They spent almost every waking moment together when they weren't working. No one even blinked an eye when they walked into the cafe together, or the coffee shop, or any of the other places they went. She even went to a couple of evening meetings with him, admiring his restraint at the constant complaints. No wonder he could be so controlled after all he had to put up with.

Even her worries about the upcoming Solstice had eased enough to let her enjoy the preparations for the Yuletide Festival. They'd spent an entire evening going through the town's old Christmas ornaments with Flora's formidable grandson Grondar and his mate Elara. Grondar wasn't exactly social but he clearly adored his mate and he had a sly sense of humor that amused her. Elara was a tiny voluptuous blonde with an equally wicked sense of humor. It had been nice doing something with another couple, and she'd never felt as if they were acting.

Or were they acting? She wasn't sure any more. They never discussed their relationship and he hadn't asked her about announcing their theoretical engagement again.

He'd cooked dinner for her several nights at his spacious loft in an old warehouse building behind the Town Hall and he'd turned out to be an excellent cook. She loved the loft with its high ceilings and original wood floors. His furniture leaned towards the oversized masculine type, but he had a lot of interesting books and artwork, all neatly arranged. She'd even spent the night, but that had turned out to be a mistake - not that she regretted it in the least.

It had started innocently enough with her falling asleep in his arms as they watched a movie. She was half aware of him carrying her to his bed, but she'd fallen back asleep almost immediately. But then she woke again in the middle of the night to find his arms wrapped around her and his very large and very erect cock wedged against her ass.

She very carefully wiggled around to face him, then started stroking him, delighting in the way he grew even harder under her hands. He came awake with a start and a second later she was on her back, his cock thrusting desperately between her legs. But she'd fallen asleep with her clothes on and before she could get them out of the way, he exploded with a hoarse cry, his seed flooding over her. He shuddered, then raised his head and gave her a dazed look.

"This isn't a dream, is it?"

"Nope. It's too sticky for that. I think you should wash me off."

He'd almost caved, but in the end she'd showered alone while he washed her clothes. *Dammit.*

And now here they were on the way out to the farm for the next three days. They were going to have Thanksgiving and help out the day after, on one of the busiest days of the year for the tree farm.

She had texted her brother and asked him if he had any plans, and he'd actually seemed surprised that she'd ask. When he asked her about her plans, clearly from courtesy rather than a desire to share the holiday, she simply told him she was spending it with friends.

“What did you tell your mom? About us?” she asked Houston, as casually as she could.

“That I was bringing a friend.” He shot her a look, then tugged her across the bench seat of the pickup so she was next to him. “Why?”

“Did you tell her it was me?”

He sighed. “Yes. And I have to warn you that she will immediately take this as far as she possibly can.”

“In that case, I was thinking maybe we should go ahead and tell her. That we’re engaged I mean.”

The truck almost swerved across the center line before he wrestled it back under control.

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes. If you still want to?”

He glanced over at her, his eyes blazing. “You know I do.”

“Well, good. That works out then.”

Smiling, she turned to one of the radio stations that was already playing Christmas songs and started singing along. He switched on windshield wipers as a light snow started to fall, then began to sing as well. Perhaps not surprisingly, he had an amazing voice, deep and resonant. When they pulled in next to the old farmhouse and he turned off the engine, she reached up and kissed him.

“Did I tell you that I always had a thing for singers?” she whispered.

“No, you never mentioned it.”

“Hmm, that’s a shame.” She trailed her fingers lightly over his cock. “It might come in handy one day. You know, if you ever wanted to seduce me.”

“That’s not above the waist,” he said, his voice strangled.

“Nope.”

She giggled and hopped out of the car as his mom came rushing out, immediately enveloping her in a big hug before

pulling back to look at her.

“Oh, Ginger, it’s so good to see you. And aren’t you just as pretty as a picture in that red scarf and hat? Some redheads can’t wear red but you’re obviously not one of them. Now come on in, I have some hot chocolate waiting after that long cold drive.”

“It’s a thirty minute drive, Mom,” Houston grumbled as he joined them, but his mother ignored him.

“Get the bags will you, Howard? You can put them in your room. You don’t mind, do you, Ginger? If you do, I’ll put him on an air mattress in the twins’ room. They’ll be home late tonight, and Jack promised to be here early in the morning.”

Ginger gave an exaggerated sigh, carefully not looking at him.

“I suppose I can put up with him for a few nights.”

“Wonderful. Oh, and I have some cookies fresh out of the oven for you too.” His mom led her into the big farmhouse kitchen, smelling deliciously of cinnamon and spices - and ginger.

“Is that gingerbread?”

“It is. You do like it, don’t you? It seemed only right given your name, but then I thought maybe it was one of those things where people always think you should like it but you can’t stand it.”

She laughed and patted the older woman’s arm.

“I like it just fine.”

“So do I,” Houston murmured as he walked past her and she couldn’t help blushing.

His mother beamed at both of them, then urged her into the rocking chair by the wood stove and brought her the promised hot chocolate and gingerbread. Houston came back a few minutes later and perched on a stool next to her, sneaking bites of her gingerbread and sips of her hot chocolate.

“Howard Ironmane,” his mom scolded. “You can get your own plate, you know.”

“But Ginger’s tastes better.”

“You’re so sweet to put up with him, Ginger. But then he does kind of grow on you, don’t you think?”

“I haven’t really had time to decide,” she said demurely, then smiled when his mom’s face fell. “But I kind of like having him around.”

“Excellent. Which reminds me. Howard, can you help me in the barn for a minute?”

“I can help too,” she volunteered.

“Don’t be silly, dear. You stay in here where it’s warm. We’ll be back in a minute.”

They disappeared, and she smiled as she looked around the big kitchen. It was cozy and warm with sturdy wooden cabinets and an assortment of well-loved and well-used furniture. The kind of home she’d never had. It was worth whatever she had to do to keep this home and the people in it safe. She blinked back a tear as Houston and his mom reentered.

“Howard has a little surprise for you,” his mom sang out.

“I can’t take the credit,” he said firmly. “But I think you’ll like it. Do you want to go for a ride?”

“A ride?”

He pulled the door wider so she could see the waiting sleigh, complete with a horse with a big red bow and bells on his harness. The tears threatened to reappear.

“I’d love to go,” she whispered.

“Wonderful.” His mom reappeared with her scarf and hat, plus red mittens and a big red coat. “We don’t want you getting cold now, do we?”

Houston lifted her into the sleigh, tucked a blanket over her legs and picked up the reins.

“No need to hurry back,” his mom said cheerfully. “Stay out as long as you want.”

They barely made it out of hearing range before she burst into laughter.

“I know, I know.” He sighed. “She’s about as subtle as a Mac truck, but she means well.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. But how many mothers set up romantic dates for their sons? Is that a picnic basket under there?”

“Yep. Complete with a bottle of wine.”

“She thinks we’re going to picnic in the snow?” she asked doubtfully. “I mean it’s very pretty, but it’s also cold.”

“No. She suggested I take you to my cabin.”

“That sounds much better. I’d love to see it. At least - it’s not going to have a heart-shaped bed and mirrors on the ceiling is it?”

He shuddered. “For heaven’s sake, don’t give her any ideas.”

She laughed and started to sing Jingle Bells. He joined in and the horse tossed the bells on his harness as they rode across the snow.

His cabin was just that - a cabin. Built from logs, it was essentially one big room with a fireplace and living area at one end and a big bed at the other. A galley kitchen ran along the back wall, and a bathroom with a big rolled top tub was the only room that was closed off.

He brought the basket in, then went to stable the horse in the attached lean-to while she explored.

It wasn’t a heart shaped bed, but the four-poster log bed had definite possibilities, she decided. An old wooden dining table stood in the center of the room and it was heaped with sprigs of an evergreen plant covered with pretty white berries.

“What’s this?” she asked, when he returned and he sighed.



“It’s mistletoe. I guess it’s her version of mirrors on the ceiling.”

She laughed and dropped the sprig back in the bowl as he went to start the fire. They ate their picnic on the rug in front of the fire and it was delicious. Roast chicken and homemade bread with fresh butter, fruit salad and green bean salad, tiny chocolate truffles and more gingerbread.

“That was amazing,” she said, leaning back against the base of the couch and watching the fire. “Your mom is a great cook.”

He threw another log on the fire and settled down next to her.

“Yes, she is. She can be a little overbearing, but her heart is always in the right place.”

“I wish I remembered my mom.” She plucked absently at the rug until he picked up her hand and held it. “She died when I was two.”

“I remember Owen mentioning that. He never went into detail, but I got the feeling that he was the one who really raised you.”

“He did.” She smiled wistfully. “I guess he’s like your mom - a little overbearing sometimes, but it’s because he cares.”

“Why did you leave town?” he asked suddenly, and her heart skipped a beat. “And why did Owen start ignoring me?”

“Why did you care? You wouldn’t even look at me.”

“Because I felt guilty.” He leaned over so he could look directly into her face, his horns silhouetted against the ceiling. “Because you were so young and I kissed you. And most of all because I wanted to do it again.”

“You did?”

When he nodded, she couldn’t help smiling, but then she slowly licked her lips, loving the way his eyes followed the movement.

“You could do it again now,” she whispered.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he said softly.

She reached up and caressed the base of his horns, feeling the quiver that ran through his body.

“I think it’s an excellent idea. And I’m sure your mother would approve.”

A startled laugh jerked out of him, and then he groaned, and then he was kissing her.

It was sweet and gentle at first, warm and affectionate. But then his big tongue slid deeper and she nipped his lip and the kiss caught fire. He groaned into her mouth, pulling her towards him and she went willingly. His hand slid up under her sweater, toying with her nipples until she gasped.

“That’s right, princess,” he growled as he started to pull her sweater up. “Let me know how much you like my touch.”

There he was, her wild, passionate minotaur, and she arched towards him. Her sweater was up over her breasts now, revealing her lacy red bra and his mouth started to descend... And he stopped.

She could have cried from frustration.

“Don’t stop.”

“I think this grey area is turning black,” he muttered, but his eyes were still focused on her lace covered nipples.

She cupped her breasts, offering them to him.

“Do these look black to you?”

“No, they look perfect.”

He stroked a much too quick finger across them and they both groaned before he rolled away from her, his arm over his face.

“Time,” he said. “You need time.”

“No, I don’t.”

But it was no use. He pulled her sweater back down and pulled her to her feet.

“We should get back before Mom gets worried.”

“She’s going to be more worried if we rush back,” she muttered as she reluctantly followed him to the door.

As she pulled her coat on, he opened the door and she gasped as a blast of snow and icy air rushed into the cabin. She couldn’t see anything outside except a swirling cloud of white. He swore and forced the door shut again.

“What was that?”

“A blizzard,” he said grimly. “We aren’t going anywhere after all.”

## CHAPTER 12



*T*his isn't good, Houston thought as he went to check their supply of firewood. Not the blizzard itself - he kept the cabin well stocked - but being alone with his impossibly tempting mate and no distractions. He'd been doing his best to follow Flora's advice but it was growing more difficult every day, especially as Ginger relaxed more, laughing and happy with him.

He wanted her, ached for her, but he didn't want to scare her by admitting the truth - that she was his mate, not just a pretend relationship. He frequently suspected she felt the same way, but he also knew she was still hiding something.

"So what do we do now?" She peered nervously out the window.

"Relax. We have plenty of food and enough wood to get us through a week of blizzards."

"A week?" Her eyes widened and she hurried over to his side, tucking her hand in his. "Do you really think it will last that long?"

"No, princess, I don't." He put his arm around her and hugged her. "But I'd better call mom and let her know we're fine."

Unfortunately, neither of their phones had a signal.

"I'm sure it's fine. She'll know the smartest thing to do is to stay put."

"What if we'd been on our way back when it happened?"

He frowned at the door. “It’s very unusual for a storm to come up this fast. Hopefully, that means it will blow out just as fast.”

She eyed him worriedly but finally nodded, then shivered. The temperature in the cabin hadn’t dropped so he suspected it was more from nerves than anything else.

“Let’s get you warmed up,” he said briskly and dug through the picnic basket to pull out two insulated containers, one filled with hot chocolate, the other with coffee. His mother was nothing if not thorough.

He poured her a mug of hot chocolate, then after a look at her pale face, added a healthy dollop of brandy. Instead of returning the rug, he sat down in the big chair by the fireplace and tugged her onto his lap before handing her the hot chocolate. She took a big swig, coughed, then smiled at him.

“Was your mother trying to get me drunk or is this your idea?”

“All mine,” he assured her, and she settled back against him, slowly sipping the hot chocolate.

The wind raged outside but they were warm and safe inside, the fire popping and crackling, and she gradually relaxed against him. By the time her mug was empty, she was drifting, her head nestled on his shoulder.

“Sleep, princess,” he murmured, taking the mug from her lax hand and putting it on the table.

“We have to tell each other all of our secrets,” she mumbled, and he sighed.

“When you’re ready.”

She sighed and snuggled closer, and he knew she was asleep. He kissed her hair, breathing in her sweet scent as he listened to the wind and she slept, occasionally making little snuffling sounds. His cock hardened beneath her, and he shifted restlessly. She felt so damn good in his arms. So right. His hand slid under her sweater to caress the soft skin of her waist. He wanted to move higher but she trusted him to hold her while she slept.

She wiggled in his arms and the sweater rose higher, revealing more pale, bare skin. He let his hand follow it, his thumb almost brushing the underside of her breast. When she wiggled again, it did brush the silky lace-covered flesh and she moaned in her sleep. Or did she? He looked closer and saw the flutter of her eyelids. She wasn't asleep after all. He slid his hand higher and tweaked an impudent little nipple and she squeaked, her eyes flying open.

"Faker," he said, and she gave him an unrepentant grin.

"You can't blame a girl for trying. Why don't you believe I want more? Or are you the one who isn't ready?"

He opened his mouth to deny it, then hesitated.

"When we were in your room at the inn, I felt different. Like I wasn't in control of myself."

For someone who had spent most of his life keeping a tight grip on himself, it had been... disconcerting.

"I know. I liked it." She smiled and shivered, and the nipple still beneath his hand tightened.

"Really?"

"Yes. Because you weren't thinking or worrying or trying to control what you did. All you wanted was me."

His cock jerked, recognizing the truth in her words.

"And you weren't frightened? I'm so much bigger than you are."

She gave him a radiant smile.

"I have never, ever been afraid of you, Houston. I trust you."

And there was that word again. Was this what Flora meant? He decided he didn't care. His mate was warm and willing in his arms and he was so damned tired of being in control.

She gasped as he yanked her sweater over her head, but the sweet scent of her arousal increased.

He caressed her soft curves, cupping the firm flesh, kneading them gently, running his fingers over the lacy bra, going slowly not because he thought he had to, but because he wanted to. He found the center clasp of the bra and opened it, spreading the cups apart to reveal the two perfect little mounds. Each nipple was a rosy red berry begging for his mouth. He licked his lips and bent over her breast.

Her hand tightened on his arm, her nails biting into his skin as her breathing sped up.

“Just one kiss, princess,” he breathed as he dipped his head and licked each taut little peak

“Or maybe more,” he growled, then sucked as much of her soft flesh into his mouth as possible, trapping the hard little berry between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

She groaned, arching closer as her eyes opened and fixed on him. He licked her, his teeth gently tugging on the pebbled flesh as her eyes went dark and glassy with arousal. Her hand slid up into his hair, circling the base of his horns.

“More,” she whispered.

He didn't answer, just sucked harder, feeling her shudders as he moved to the other nipple, giving it the same treatment. He loved how soft and silky her skin felt beneath his tongue, the way she squirmed against him. She was panting now, her cheeks flushed, her tongue licking those pretty lips, and he groaned, covering her mouth with his in a frantic kiss.

He thrust his tongue deep and she met him, her tongue tangling with his as she wrapped her arms around his neck, rising up to meet his kiss. She tasted sweet and spicy, perfect, and he wanted to keep on kissing her forever. But his cock was throbbing painfully inside his pants, and the urge to taste more of her was driving him insane.

He lifted her off his lap and onto her feet, then unfastened her jeans as she watched, her green eyes wide. He slipped her panties down as well, then paused to study her. Fuck, she was beautiful.

She shivered as he tugged her closer, close enough to lick each tempting little rosebud again, but he wanted more, wanted her spread out on his bed. She squeaked again as he lifted her, but her arms were tight around his neck and she pressed sweet little kisses to his neck as he carried her across the room.

“When I put you down, I’m going to spread your legs and fuck you hard with my tongue.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

He barely managed to walk the rest of the way. As soon as he put her down, he stripped off his own clothes, finally freeing his aching cock. Her eyes widened as she studied the swollen flesh, but she held out her hand to him and he went to her.

He knelt over her, parting her legs, just as he’d promised, then swept through her drenched folds with a single long swipe of his tongue, leaving her quivering. Then he concentrated on her clit, already swollen, the tiny head peeking out, begging for his touch, but he teased the surrounding flesh first, listening to the increasingly desperate sound of her breathing. Finally, when her hips were jerking against his mouth, he circled the tip with his tongue, then drew it between his lips, sucking.

She came with a hoarse cry, her hands clenching on the quilt as her body arched towards him. He smiled against her damp flesh and drove his tongue into her small entrance. *Fuck.* She immediately came again, squeezing his tongue so tightly it was almost painful. His cock was swollen and angry, but he had to open her first. He drew his tongue away, returning to her clit as he replaced his tongue with a thick finger. She gasped again and he smiled against her flesh.

“You like this, don’t you, princess?”

“God, yes.”

Her hips jerked restlessly as he tried to add another finger, but she was too tight and he had to work it slowly inside. As



soon as he was fully seated, her walls contracted around both digits, hot and wet and silky smooth.

“Look at how well you’re taking my fingers” he purred against her flesh as he started on the third finger. It took longer this time and she was panting by the time she’d taken all three. He started working them in and out, his tongue pressed against her clit, and when she finally came, he spread his fingers, stretching her, preparing her.

When her shudders finally died, he rose over her, unable to wait any longer.

## CHAPTER 13



Ginger expected Houston to wedge his cock against her immediately, but despite the hunger etched on his face, he kissed her instead, his mouth hungry and demanding, the thick tongue that tasted of her dueling with hers.

She kissed him back, her hunger matching his until he finally lifted his head, his eyes glittering.

“Now,” she begged.

“Now,” he agreed, and the wide tip of his cock nudged against her opening.

She shuddered as the full reality of his size hit her, her body straining to accept him. He maintained a firm pressure and her body softened, opening enough to take the wide head. She knew he was large, but nothing could have prepared her for the sensation of that massive cock splitting her, making her body stretch and strain around him.

“Take me, princess. Take every inch of me,” he said hoarsely.

She gasped as she was stretched impossibly wide, panting as she arched towards him, trying to make room for his impossible length and width. He was being so gentle, trying to go slow, but she wrapped her legs around his hips and he jerked forward. *Oh God*. He froze and tried to withdraw, but she shook her head frantically.

“No. Stay right there. Give me a minute.”

He stopped, and she could feel his body straining as he waited for her to adjust.

“Tell me when you’re ready, princess.”

Her pussy clenched and relaxed and then her body yielded to his invasion, sucking him deeper into her as her legs tightened around his hips and he groaned, grasping her hips as he surged into her. His hand slid between them and found her clit, fully exposed by the stretch, and stroked it until she shattered with a high pitched cry and he thrust harder, making her take all of him as he shouted his release.

She shuddered as she came again and again, her entire world exploding in pleasure as she clung to his big frame, helpless in the midst of the most intense orgasm she’d ever experienced. He continued to fill her with slow heavy pulses until at last he was done, slumping over her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, happier than she’d been in a very long time. Tomorrow they would talk, she vowed as she drifted into sleep. He woke her twice more during the night, once just to feast on her pussy, sending her into climax after climax until she couldn’t even move. The second time was long and slow and sweet and she fell back asleep still smiling.

After all that, perhaps it wasn’t surprising that they were still asleep when someone banged on the door. Her eyes flew open, still groggy and disoriented, and just had time to realize that there was sun outside before Houston stalked over to the door, still gloriously naked.

“What?” he snarled as he threw the door open.

“Whoa. Put that thing away. I don’t need to see it this early in the day.”

“Jack, what are you doing here?”

“Mom sent me. She wanted you to know she was fine with you spending the night out here but she expects you back for Thanksgiving dinner.”

Houston sighed, and rubbed his head.

“We would have been back last night, if it hadn’t been for the blizzard.”

“You had a blizzard? That’s so weird. We only got a few inches. But there is a lot of snow out here.”

“Yes, because there was a blizzard. Now go away.”

“All right, all right. What do I tell Mom?”

“That we’ll be there, of course,” she called from the bed.

Jack peeked around the door long enough to grin at her before Houston shoved him away and slammed the door.

“That wasn’t very nice.”

He shrugged. “He’s my brother.”

He returned to the bed but there was something in his face that worried her.

“Please don’t tell me you regret it.” she burst out. as he sat down next to her.

“Regret it? It was the best fucking night of my life, princess.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Just wondering what happens now, I guess. Are we still announcing the engagement today?”

He tried to sound casual, but his eyes were worried. She swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded.

“Yes. Your mom’s going to be thrilled.”

“So am I,” he said, so quietly she barely heard him, then he leaned forward and kissed her.

It was a slow, lingering kiss and her body started to respond, swaying toward him. He made a low, hungry noise in his throat, but then he released her.

“If we keep this up, we won’t make it in time for dinner.”

She nodded reluctantly and climbed past him out of the bed. She started to head for the bathroom, but he took her hand, holding her in place as he studied her body.

“I was hard on you last night,” he said quietly.

She followed his gaze and blushed. He wasn't wrong. Her nipples were still red and swollen and they were reddened patches on her breasts and her neck and her upper thighs. She suspected the area between her legs was even more red and swollen.

“I feel as if I should feel bad about it, but I don't. I love seeing the signs of our mating on your skin. Now I understand why werewolves give a mating bite. It never fades.”

“But minotaurs don't do that, do they?”

He absently traced a line of kisses that traveled over her hip as he shook his head.

“No. We knot inside our chosen females. It's an internal sign only.”

“You knot?” She wasn't entirely sure about the details, but she was pretty sure it hadn't happened.

His eyes snapped up to her face, but he didn't deny it.

“Things are not yet settled between us.”

He was right, of course, but why had it felt as if they were? And wasn't she holding back as well? She nodded and tugged lightly against his grip.

After a brief hesitation, he let her go and she hurried into the bathroom, fighting back the urge to cry.

By the time she washed and dressed, he had the sleigh ready to go. Her spirits lifted as they dashed across the new fallen snow, sparkling in the sunlight. She wasn't quite ready to burst into song, but she snuggled against his side and relaxed into the holiday.

His mother was clearly in her element, bustling around the kitchen to some internal schedule of her own and refusing any help. She finally allowed Ginger to set the table in the rarely used dining room and to shred some cheese, although she felt rather like a toddler being given a toy to keep her quiet. But she couldn't argue with the results. A massive perfectly browned turkey with dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy,

macaroni and cheese, green bean casserole, sweet potato casserole, and homemade rolls, followed by three different kinds of pie. It seemed like enough food for twenty people but Houston and his brothers demolished most of it at the main meal and took care of the rest of it as snacks throughout the afternoon and evening.

Houston insisted that his mother sit down after the meal and they all cleaned the kitchen. More accurately, she and Houston cleaned the kitchen while his brothers argued, wrestled, and stole more food. But she didn't mind. She'd never been surrounded by a big family before and she enjoyed it immensely. Afterwards, they watched football - another source of arguments - and the first Christmas movie.

No one seemed to think it was strange that she was there, tucked against Houston as they watched television, although she frequently noticed his mom smiling in their direction, and she finally nudged him.

"I think it's time," she said quietly.

Dark eyes studied her face

"Are you sure, princess?"

"Yes." Even if everything went wrong at least they would have had this time together.

He stood up, bringing her with him, and clicked off the television. Ignoring the complaints, he took her hand.

"I wanted you to be the first to know that Ginger and I are engaged."

There was a moment of stunned silence, then his mother burst into tears, the boys whooped and hollered, and Jack clapped him enthusiastically on the back.

"Does that mean I get to kiss the future bride?" he asked, his eyes twinkling. He was clearly joking but Houston growled.

"Absolutely not."

Jack laughed. "In that case, I'll fetch the champagne."

His mom hugged her enthusiastically.

“You’re just what he needs,” she whispered. “I’m so happy for the two of you.”

Ginger did her best to ignore her feeling of guilt and smile.

“Now let me see the ring,” his mom added, and she shot him a helpless look.

“I don’t have one yet, but I didn’t want to wait any longer to ask her.”

It was the perfect answer. His mom sighed happily and everyone toasted their happiness, but the feeling of guilt continued to haunt her as they climbed the stairs to his old room. She wasn’t at all surprised to find it extremely neat and tidy, books arranged alphabetically, trophies in an orderly row, and even an old set of toy soldiers in a neat formation.

“You do know I’m not this organized?” she asked before she thought about it.

“I don’t mind. My friend Trogar -”

“Daisy’s husband?”

“That’s the one. He’s the most orderly person I’ve ever met and yet he’s adapted just fine to a wife and a baby. Anything’s possible for the right person.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and then she cleared her throat and went to change into her nightgown. When she climbed into bed he reached for her and she went eagerly, but when he cupped her breast, she hissed out a breath.

“Sore, princess?”

“Just a little,” she assured him, but even the lightest touch was a little uncomfortable and he finally just pulled her into his arms.

“We’ll wait.”

“But I don’t want to wait.” The feeling she was running out of time had returned.

“We’ll wait,” he repeated firmly, even though she could feel his erection throbbing against her stomach.

“It doesn’t seem like much of a way to celebrate an engagement.”

“We did that last night. Today was for family.” He hesitated. “Are you going to tell Owen?”

“Of course. But... would it be all right if I waited until could tell him in person?”

“We could drive over to Asheville this weekend.”

She bit her lip, glad he couldn’t see her face in the darkness.

“I’ll check and see if he has some free time.”

“Because he’s so busy with this merger?”

His tone was just a hair short of sarcastic, but she nodded.

“Yes, he is. There are so many documents to be reviewed and he insists on going through all of them himself. I don’t think he trusts anyone completely.”

“Not even you?” he asked quietly.

It was a fair question and one she wasn’t entirely sure how to answer.

“He would - does - trust my conclusions about financial statements, but he’ll still go over them himself to make sure he understands everything. The same way you do,” she added, giving him a gentle nudge.

“Point taken. All right, see what you can work out. I would like to see him again.”

A lump appeared in her throat but she managed to murmur an assent. She expected to have trouble falling asleep after that, but safe in Houston’s arms, his delicious scent filling her head, she fell asleep in minutes.

The next day proved to be just as satisfying. People started arriving to buy Christmas trees as soon as they opened, the boys driving them out to the long rows of trees in a bright red



wagon pulled by a tractor. Houston and Jack handled wrapping and loading the trees and taking the money, while she spent the day helping his mom in the gift shop.

The shop sold some of her own crafts, plus ones she was selling on consignment and there was a steady stream of visitors throughout the day. Halfway through the morning, she pulled his mom aside.

“You aren’t charging enough.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to get rich off the shop - it’s just a little extra income.”

“It’s not extra income unless you make a profit.”

“I do make a profit.”

“No you don’t. It may seem like it on an individual item, but you aren’t considering the other expenses - insurance, electricity, rent...”

“But I own the store.”

“And you should rent it back to yourself. Trust me - raise your prices.”

She reluctantly agreed and Ginger spent the next hour quietly replacing the old prices with the new ones. At the end of the day, his mom added up the results and gave her a dazed look.

“That’s almost double what we made last year.”

“Good.” She hesitated for a moment. “If you ever want me to look at your books and see if there are other places where we can increase your income, just let me know. But only if you’re comfortable with that,” she added quickly.

“Comfortable? I’d be delighted. I know how to do basic bookkeeping but nothing more than that.”

To Houston’s obvious frustration, they spent the evening going over the accounting for the farm, his mom dazed but smiling by the time they finished.

“I know it’s a lot,” Ginger said sympathetically. “But don’t worry. I’ll make sure you know everything you need to know.”

And she would, no matter what happened with Houston.

“Finally,” Houston growled as soon as the bedroom door closed behind them, pulling her into his arms and kissing her until her knees went weak.

“It’s not like I went anywhere. Your mom and I were right there in the dining room.”

“But I couldn’t kiss you whenever I wanted.”

“You know that’s ridiculous, don’t you?”

He shrugged and she shook her head.

“Well, I might have missed kissing you too,” she admitted, giving him a teasing look. “Maybe we should make up for it.”

Thirty seconds later he had her naked in the bed, his big body looming over hers.

“Just kisses?” he asked.

“We could start there, but there are lots of places to kiss. I might not be as sore tonight.”

His eyes gleamed and he set out to find every place he could kiss her. All over as it turned out. She finally convinced him to enter her, his massive cock still a stretch but not quite so overwhelming this time, and fell asleep still quivering from her climax.

The next day they returned to reality.

## CHAPTER 14



“No, I don’t want to meet with the balloon maker,” Houston snapped, then immediately sighed. “Sorry, Tomas. Can you take care of him?”

“Of course.” His assistant hesitated. “Is everything all right?”

“You mean other than the Festival dissolving into complete chaos? Yes.”

Tomas nodded again, accepting the answer and quietly left his office. Houston sighed, then paced over to the window. It was two weeks after Thanksgiving and by this time the square was usually full of stalls from both the local merchants and outside vendors. There would be an ice-skating rink in one corner, a dance floor hung with lights, and Santa’s village with a jolly Santa inside.

Instead the ice skating rink kept melting, the dance floor was still under construction, and Santa’s village stood empty because he’d just fired the third Santa. Only a third of the local merchants had populated their stalls, put off by the ongoing construction and the applications from outside vendors had slowed to a trickle.

“It’s like we’re being cursed,” he muttered.

He was a rational male - he didn’t believe in curses - but the town was full of people with strange abilities. He was reluctantly beginning to consider consulting an expert, which probably meant bringing in Flora and he wasn’t at all comfortable opening that can of worms. He and Ginger spent

every night together and some of those occurred at the inn, but the old lady had been remarkably scarce lately - not that that was necessarily a bad thing, but it definitely made him suspicious.

And then there was Ginger, his beautiful, tantalizing, infuriating mate. He loved spending time with her whether they were going out to eat or meeting friends or just hanging out and watching television. He loved that they spent every night together and he didn't even mind finding ten different types of lotions and products cluttering up his bathroom counter. He loved having her in his bed and he most definitely enjoyed everything they did in that bed.

*Because I love her*, he thought, not for the first time, although he had yet to tell her. She was still keeping something from him, although he had no idea what it was. Despite Flora's advice to be patient, he was on the verge of trying to force the issue. The fact that she still hadn't arranged for the two of them to meet with Owen continued to bother him. For that matter the whole engagement bothered him. It felt real to him and she acted as if it were real, but was it? Was he being a coward for not wanting to know if it was fake?

And was he being a coward for not allowing himself to knot inside her? He'd never wanted something so badly, but if he allowed it and she really was pretending, it would destroy him. The other night he'd been so close to losing control that he'd actually started to expand, and he'd had to pull out. She hadn't questioned him, but there had been a hurt quality in her silence which bothered him.

Fuck, they couldn't go on this way. Flora or no Flora, he was going to do his best to get her to talk to him tonight. *Or maybe not*. Elara showed up in his office a short time later, accompanied by a glowering Grondar.

"It's the Christmas tree lighting tonight," she began but his blank state must have given him away because she sighed. "Let me guess - you forgot?"

"Temporarily," he said defensively. "I would have looked at my calendar later." He hoped.

“I told you, sugar,” Grondar said triumphantly.

“Told her what?” he asked.

“You’re having mate trouble. Makes a male crazy. I ruined an entire batch of cupcakes.” The admission was like a surgeon admitting he’d operated on the wrong patient.

“But I don’t understand.” Elara gave him an anxious look. “You and Ginger seem so perfect for each other.”

He wanted to snap that it was none of her business, but he knew she meant well. Besides Grondar would probably snap in two if he were rude to her - or at least he would try. The thought of forgetting his troubles in a good fight was extraordinarily tempting - which also horrified him.

“We *are* perfect for each other. I’m worried about the festival. This string of bad luck isn’t helping.”

Grondar scowled. “I don’t believe in bad luck.”

Elara lifted her chin. “Well, I do. Sometimes things go wrong for no reason.”

“There’s always a reason.”

The two glared at each other for a minute before Grondar grabbed his mate and threw her over his shoulder. Elara laughed and waved to him as her mate carried her out of his office.

“Don’t forget. Tree-lighting. Seven o’clock.”

He smiled in spite of himself as he shut the door behind them, then walked thoughtfully back to the window.

*There’s always a reason.* The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced Grondar was right. He’d been foolish - *or distracted*, he thought grimly - to assume it was just bad luck.

Returning to his desk, he buzzed for Tomas.

“Who do you think would be best at surveillance?” he asked.

As usual Tomas didn't ask why, just considered the question.

"Vampires are good at that sort of thing - if they're interested. Werewolves aren't bad but you know how aggressive they can get. Sam knows everything that happens on the waterfront. A dryad might pick up something that happened in the trees. And there are the witches, of course."

"I'd rather avoid them if possible." They would have far too many questions and it would take far too long to deal with them. "Who's our best technical person?"

Tomas shrugged modestly. "I suppose I am."

"Good. I'll go and talk to Damian and Sam, maybe Eric. While I'm gone, I'd like you to see if you can find out what happened to our vendor contracts. If they aren't coming here, they must be working somewhere else. See if you can find out where, or more specifically who they are working for."

Tomas looked at him thoughtfully, then nodded. He still didn't ask any questions, but Houston assumed he was smart enough to figure it out. He picked up his coat and headed for the doors, relieved to finally be doing something.

FOUR HOURS LATER, GINGER STOOD NEXT TO HIM AS HE PICKED up the master switch for the Christmas tree lights. She was wearing the same red hat and scarf she'd worn on their trip to his cabin and the happy memory gave him courage. They were going to talk tonight. Her cheeks were pink with cold and excitement and she wasn't the only one. Despite the unsettled state of affairs, a large crowd filled the square. The tree-lighting was always one of the highlights of the year.

He briefly considered making a speech, but he hadn't had time to prepare one and it had never been his strong suit. Instead he simply raised the switch and waited until a hush fell over the square.

"I'm delighted to present to you this year's Fairhaven Falls Tree."

He pressed the switch and thousands of tiny lights came on all over the tree, reflecting on the mixture of new and antique ornaments that decorated the tree. There was a collective gasp of amazement, followed by one of horror when the lights flickered. He waited patiently, praying they'd been in time, and then he caught the sounds he'd been waiting for - a muffled scream followed by a splash as the lights steadied.

Everyone cheered and then someone started singing Oh, Christmas Tree and the rest of the crowd joined in.

"I have to get and take care of something," he said softly to Ginger. "Will you wait for me here?"

"Sure. Is something wrong?"

"No, I actually think something might be going right for a change."

He gave her a quick kiss and strode over to the small dock that had once served the warehouses. Damian waited for him, a casual hand on the shoulder of a very wet, miserable looking human. The casual hand was deceptive - the human wasn't going anywhere until Damian allowed it.

A tentacle flicked against the man's ankles and he shuddered. Suppressing a grin, Houston walked over to the edge of the dock.

"Thanks, Sam. I appreciate it."

Sam waved a tentacle and disappeared as Houston returned to the sniveling human.

"Who paid you?" he asked, his voice hard.

"C-c-cold."

"And you will remain cold until I get some answers."

The man glared, trying ineffectually to shrug off Damian's hand.

"Or I could toss you back to Sam. He likes new playthings."

This time the man's shudder was not from cold, but his lips remained stubbornly closed. Damian shrugged and started

walking the man inexorably towards the edge of the dock.

“No! Wait! I don’t know his name - I get paid through his company.”

“What company?”

“Jentel Holdings.”

The name struck him as familiar but he couldn’t place it.

“And I did see him once,” the man added, apparently eager to talk now that he’d gotten started. “Some rich fuck, getting into a limo. The kind that thinks they’re better than anyone else.”

“Is that it?” Damian’s fingers tightened and the man winced.

“I swear that’s all I know. Are you going to let me go now?”

“No.” He would have handed him over to the sheriff, but the election wasn’t until next week.

Eric stepped out of the shadows, the big, dark-haired werewolf intimidating enough to make the man pale.

“I’ll take care of him. Not like that,” he added, shaking his head when Houston gave him a suspicious look. “I’ll stick him in a cell tonight and arrange to have him transferred tomorrow. Might even allow him a blanket.”

He looked over at Damian and the vampire shrugged so he nodded.

“All right.”

“Thanks.” Eric grinned as he grabbed the man’s arm when Damian let go. “Good practice for being sheriff.”

“I didn’t know he was running,” he told Damian after Eric pulled the whimpering man away.

“Me either. I can’t decide if it’s the worst idea ever or a surprisingly good one.”

“I guess we’ll see what the town thinks. Are you coming back to the festival?”



“No. I’m in the middle of a special... project.”

“Thank you for helping out.”

“You’re welcome.” For a minute all Damian’s usual mockery disappeared. “This is my town too, and I have every intention of protecting it.”

He nodded and put his hand briefly on his friend’s shoulder before the vampire disappeared into the night. He smiled at the theatrical gesture and headed back to the square, feeling more optimistic than he had in a while. Now that they had a lead on what appeared to be sabotage, he was sure they would be able to put an end to it.

As he drew closer to the square, he heard two men talking in low voices. Something about one of the voices caught his attention and he drew back into the shadows.

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re suggesting.”

The man’s voice was ice cold, but he suddenly realized why it sounded familiar. Was that Owen? Had Ginger finally asked him to come? His surge of excitement turned to horror as the conversation continued.

“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m simply saying this is a great little setup, especially given the recent interest in monsters. And I have to give them credit. These monthly festivals have done a good job of raising their profile. But if the festivals start going wrong?” The man shrugged. “Then the town’s back to struggling. That makes them more receptive to offers.”

Was this the man behind the sabotage? And why was he with Owen?

Before he could step forward and demand some answers, he spotted Ginger coming towards them. The two men did too.

“That’s my sister.” Owen sounded shocked, destroying his hope that she might have sent for him at last.

“Well, well, well. So this is where she’s been hiding.”

The words struck him as strange but as both men stepped out to intercept her, he followed, watching as she came to a

dead halt.

“Owen? What are you doing here? You promised you wouldn’t come until the new year.”

His chest started to ache. She’d never had any intention of telling her brother about him. And if she was expecting him in the new year, did she already know about the plan to take over the town? The combination of anger and betrayal made his pulse race so hard he heard thunder in his ears.

Ginger looked past her brother and saw him, but she didn’t look happy. Instead she paled, guilt spreading across her face like butter and making his chest ache even more.

Owen followed her gaze, looking equally shocked. “Houston? Is that really you?”

He ignored both of them, fixating on the man who he was sure was behind the sabotage.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

The man did his best to look down his nose at him, even though he was a good foot shorter.

“I’m Donald Ravitty, owner of the JT conglomerate. Owen is my business partner.”

His sense of betrayal grew as the man confirmed their relationship, but there was worse to come.

“And Ginger is my fiancé. We’re engaged.”

“No!” she cried, but he couldn’t take any more, his pain and anger too great too much for his body to contain. He had to leave before he killed the bastard who had stolen his mate and was trying to steal his town. He whirled and took off at a run.

## CHAPTER 15



Ginger stared after Houston's disappearing figure, her heart aching. There was no way she could catch him. She would have to find him later, after she took care of Donald.

"How dare you?" she asked, her voice low and furious. "How dare you tell him you were my fiancée?"

He only raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you were interested in that... monster. I really thought better of you."

"He's not a monster! He's kind and honorable and a better person than you will ever be."

His face darkened. "Then it's a shame that he isn't in a position to further your brother's interests the way I am. I told you it was part of the deal."

"What was part of the deal?" Owen asked, speaking for the first time.

His face could have been carved from stone and she shot him a nervous glance. And much as she loved him and as much as she wanted him to be successful, she couldn't sacrifice herself for him. Not when she was in love with Houston. She bit back a sob as Donald grinned.

"I told her - she's part of the merger. As long as she agrees to marry me, everything can go ahead as planned."

Owen looked from Donald to her and for the first time in many, many years he lost his temper, grabbing Donald's collar and hauling him up on his toes.

“You listen to me, you sniveling son of a bitch. My sister is not for sale under any circumstances whatsoever.”

“But... but the merger!”

“I no longer have any interest in going into business with you. Sabotaging a town so you can buy cheap real estate? You’re despicable.”

“We’re already signed the papers,” Donald said, trying to sneer. “It’s too late.”

“No it’s not. There was a thirty day right of rescission which I am exercising as of now. My lawyers will be in touch.” Owen released him and Donald stumbled back. “Now get the hell out of my sight.”

“Not that fast.” Damian appeared, giving Donald a sinister smile. “A little bird told me that JT Conglomerate is the owner of Jentel Holdings and we have reason to believe you’re responsible for some of the town’s recent... misfortunes. I’m sure our new sheriff will be delighted to have a second prisoner to eat. I mean, examine.”

Donald’s face turned dead white as Damian hauled him away. She would have grinned triumphantly if she wasn’t so heartsick about Houston. She turned back to find Owen at her side, his face still furious.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I know how much that deal meant to you.”

“I don’t give a damn about the deal. I give a damn about you. Whatever gave you the idea that I would sacrifice you for a business deal?”

“I wasn’t planning on marrying him, but I guess I was hoping that I could string him along long enough for the deal to go through.”

He sighed. and then he put his arms around her and hugged her, another thing he hadn’t done in years.

“You’re my sister. I love you. If anyone ever says anything like that to you again, you come straight to me, do you hear?”

“I will,” she promised, blinking away a tear.

“Or maybe I won’t be the first one you come to in the future,” he added thoughtfully, pulling back to look down at her face. “You and Houston, hmm?”

“I thought so, but he was so angry.”

“I wondered, you know. Something happened, didn’t it? The week before we left.”

“On my birthday. I kissed him. And he kissed me back.”

“Is that why you’ve never found anyone else?”

She looked down at her hands, knowing she was blushing. “Maybe.”

“And neither has he.” He sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have taken you with us.”

“I know you did what you thought was best.”

“But sometimes doing what you think is best for another person isn’t the same as what he wants?” He lifted her chin to study her face. “Are you doing that now?”

Her cheeks burned. “Maybe.”

“Then you need to tell him. Let him decide if it’s what he wants.”

She nodded silently, then gave him an apologetic smile.

“I really am sorry about the merger.”

“Don’t be. I never want to be in business with someone like that. Besides, I think some of the financial anomalies you pointed out are only the beginning. I suspect he’s not half as profitable as he appears on paper.”

“He did seem pretty anxious to force you to go through with it. But you won’t have to, will you?”

“No, although I do need to call my lawyers about the right to rescission.” He suddenly smiled, the shark-like grin of a successful businessman. “And I suspect the businesses Donald held that I was interested in may be for sale soon. at a very reduced price.”

“Can you stay for a few days?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't. Not tonight. But I'll try and make time to come back soon, okay?"

"Okay."

"And I assume you're staying?"

"Yes. I have to try and patch things up with Houston."

"Good luck. Just remember - tell him the truth and let him decide."

She nodded and he gave her another quick hug before walking away. She fought back another urge to cry, lifted her chin, and followed him. Houston had to listen to her.

"HOW CAN I TELL HIM THE TRUTH IF HE WON'T LISTEN TO me?" she asked Alison three days later. They were sitting on the back porch of the inn watching the sun go down.

"I don't know. This isn't like him at all - to go away and hide away like that."

Houston was holed up in his cabin, refusing to talk to anyone. She'd tried, his mother had tried, and even Jack had tried. The only way they even knew he was in there was the smoke rising from the chimney.

"I just want to explain. If he still h... hates me, I'll leave him alone. I just don't want him to spend the rest of his life thinking I betrayed him."

"I know, sweetie." Alison put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "Maybe you could just camp out on his porch?"

"I spent a whole day out there, but he still wouldn't come to the door. I need another blizzard. He'd have to let me in then. He wouldn't let me freeze to death." *I hope.*

"A blizzard?"

"Like the one the day before Thanksgiving."

Alison frowned. "I don't remember hearing about that."

"I guess it was a very small blizzard? Jack said it didn't affect much of the farm."

“That’s not the way blizzards work. Unless...”

A thoughtful look crossed her friend’s face.

“You know, when Will and I were getting together, we had a couple of those freak storms, although ours were rain rather than snow.”

“Where did they come from?”

“I’m not sure, but you know who I suspect.”

“Flora?”

“Yep. I don’t think she does it herself, but I think she has friends with certain... gifts.”

It was a thin hope at best, but it was better than nothing. She had to give it a try.

She eventually managed to track Flora down the next day. She was perched on the bench that circled the back deck of the cafe, wearing a bright pink sweatsuit that said *I’m sexy and I know it*, carefully tossing something from a brown paper bag into the river.

“Hi,” she said breathlessly. “I was looking for you.”

“Were you now?”

Flora’s expression was so innocent that she hesitated, then gathered her courage.

“I need to talk to Houston but he won’t listen to me. The last time we were at the cabin, there was a blizzard and I was thinking that if there were another one, he wouldn’t have any choice except to let me in.”

The expression of polite disinterest didn’t change, but she soldiered on.

“I was just wondering if maybe you knew when there might be another blizzard.”

“Me? I’m just a simple, small town woman.”

“Umm, okay.” she said, her heart sinking.

“But if I were in your position, I might consider going out there this afternoon. Around one. No later.”

Flora's face was still perfectly neutral, but Ginger breathed a sigh of relief, then impulsively reached over and gave the old lady a hug.

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me, dear.” Flora patted her back. “I haven't done anything.”

How could such an innocent look be so totally wicked? She laughed and left, her heart lighter than it had been in days. When she looked back to wave, she saw a big tentacle curled around the deck railing. She froze, wondering if she should call for help, but then she saw Flora was patting the tentacle.

“That's something you don't see every day,” she muttered and hurried off to make plans.



## CHAPTER 16



*H*ouston scowled into the fire. He knew he was being childish but he didn't care. For once he was going to do exactly what he wanted, and what he wanted was to hole up and lick his wounds in private.

*And go find Ginger.* No. That ship had sailed and he'd burned down the port.

Being here without her was torturous enough. Everywhere he looked he remembered her. Sleeping in his lap in the big chair, sprawled across his bed in naked abandon, her pretty nipples red and swollen from his mouth...

*No.* He needed to decide what to do next. Maybe he should leave Fairhaven Falls, go somewhere she'd never been, where he could see her everywhere or hear her voice. He could even hear her voice in the wind. He looked over at the windows and swore. The blizzard was back. Great. The moaning wind really did sound like her voice calling his name. And was that a thump on the door?

Probably a branch caught in the storm, but he crossed to the door anyway. Another thump and after a brief debate with himself, he opened the door. Ginger fell inside, accompanied by a gust of snow. *Oh fuck.* He picked her up off the floor and forced the door shut as he carried her over to the fire. Her lips were blue and her face so pale he could count every freckle.

Her clothes were damp and icy and he stripped them away, then opened his shirt and hugged her to him, shuddering as her cold body collided with his. Then he wrapped a blanket around

both of them and sat down in front of the fire. He wanted to get her a hot drink but raising her body temperature came first.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gave him the sweetest smile he had ever seen. His unruly heart wanted to respond, but he refused to let it.

“There you are,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. “I thought I lost you.”

He should tell her that she had, but he couldn’t make the words come out. Her fingers made a feeble attempt to grip his arm.

“Not engaged... Donald.”

Her eyes closed again as his heart skipped a beat. He held her until her temperature finally stabilized, then wrapped her in blankets while he went to make her a mug of hot, sweet tea. He was returning when she suddenly cried out, her body thrashing from side to side.

“Houston,” she sobbed, her voice a broken whisper.

“Hush, princess. It’s all right. I’m here,” he crooned, gathering her back in his arms. Her eyelids fluttered and he lifted the cup to her lips, encouraging her to swallow the warm liquid.

She didn’t seem conscious of what she was doing but she drank and when the mug was empty, she closed her eyes again. She called out for him twice more during the long afternoon, but when night fall came, she finally seemed to settle. He was sitting in front of the fire, holding her, when her eyes opened again. For the first time she seemed aware of her surroundings.

“Are you real?” she whispered, her voice low and husky.

“Yes, princess. I’m real.”

The endearment slipped out unintentionally, but she probably wouldn’t remember it. She tried to lift her hand to his face, but it was shaking too much to move. He sighed, then put his hand over hers and guided it up to his cheek.

“You’re really real.”

“Yes.”

She fell asleep with her hand still on his face and it was a long time before he could bring himself to lower it. Her breathing grew more normal as the evening wore on and he finally decided it was probably safe to go to sleep. He looked at the couch and he looked at his bed, and then he sighed again and took her to bed with him. She might be out of danger but he needed her close enough to check on her.

It was not the best night's sleep he'd ever had. Her temperature spiked several times and she'd try to throw off the covers. Other times her teeth chattered as if she were freezing. His original intention had been to put her on one side of the bed while he stayed on the other, but he ended up wrapping her in his arm and holding her close. That seemed to help with her restlessness as well and she grew gradually calmer.

He found he felt calmer too, the rage and pain that had been eating away at him soothed by having her back in his arms. He knew it was ridiculous, but it didn't stop him from relaxing as he breathed in her sweet scent and felt her soft, silky skin pressed against him.

Her nearness had the inevitable effect on his body and when he woke in the morning, his cock throbbed, trapped between their bodies. He started to ease away, but her eyes opened. Her lips curved in her usual sweet smile, but her smile faded as she remembered. And why did that bother him so?

Frustration made his voice unnecessarily harsh and she flinched.

“What the hell were you doing out in that storm?”

“I was late.”

*Late?*

“I was going to use the snowmobile from the farm but it was gone.” Her voice was still low and soft, husky. “I decided to walk but it took longer than I expected. And when I finally made it, I thought you didn't hear me.”

Guilt swept over him.

“I almost didn’t,” he said gruffly. “I thought it was just the storm.”

“I’m glad you let me in.”

“I couldn’t let you freeze to death.”

“That’s something, I suppose.”

There was the faintest hint of her usual spirit in her response and he was surprised at how much that relieved him. Which meant it was time to get out of this far too tempting position. He forced himself to let her go and climb out of bed, stalking across the room to the fireplace and taking deep breaths, trying to fill his lungs with something other than her intoxicating scent.

His cock refused to subside despite his best efforts, and he was aware that she was watching him as he searched for his pants. It’s not like she hasn’t seen it before. Or touched it, or licked it. As part of his rebellion he hadn’t maintained his usual neatness which made it hard to find things in a hurry - like his pants.

“Are you okay?”

She struggled to sit upright against the pillows, clearly weak, and he had to restrain himself from going to her assistance.

“I’m just fine,” he snapped. “In fact I’m better off than you are. Do you want some breakfast?”

He didn’t know if she wanted it or not, but she didn’t argue, just nodded. His pants were finally within reach and he pulled them on, grateful for the cover. But then he realized she was shivering again and he reluctantly returned to the bed, propping himself against the headboard and lifting her onto his lap. She nestled against him with a quiet sigh, but her teeth were still chattering so he draped another blanket over both of them.

She was naked against him once more, her perfect little breasts rubbing tantalizingly against his bare chest with each breath. At least this time his unruly cock was confined behind his pants. She eventually stopped shivering and her body

relaxed. He thought she was sleeping, but when he went to lay her down she cried out and clung to him.

“Hush, princess. You’re safe.”

Her dazed expression gradually cleared, her cheeks flushing as she nodded.

“Yes, I know I am. Thank you.”

He almost reached out to smooth away the worried line on her brow, but instead he nodded abruptly and went to prepare breakfast. She ate very little, but he managed to get another cup of tea down her before she fell into an uneasy doze. At least she never seemed to be as out of it as she’d been the previous day. He still found himself holding her several times to keep her warm and each time it was harder to let her go.

As the day turned to evening, she struggled upright, then started to swing her legs over the side of the bed.

“Wait a minute, princess. Where are you going?”

“To the bathroom.” She blushed again. “Although, maybe I could borrow a shirt?”

He hadn’t thought to wash out the clothes she’d been wearing in the storm so he nodded abruptly, found a clean shirt in his drawer, and dropped it over her head. He hadn’t worn it because it was on the small side for him but it was still much too big for her. He carefully refrained from thinking about how adorable she looked - and how right she looked in his clothing - and carried her into the bathroom.

He hesitated, reluctant to leave her in her weakened state, but she’d recovered enough of her spirit to shoo him away.

“Call me when you’re done,” he ordered. “Don’t you dare try and walk.”

“All right.”

She seemed to take a very long time and twice he was on the verge of barging in when he would hear water running. When she finally called for him, he found she’d managed to wash her face and brush her teeth and comb her hair into some kind of order, but the effort had clearly exhausted her.

“Back to bed,” he said firmly.

“Oh, please. Couldn’t I sit up for just a little while?”

He couldn’t resist the beseeching look in those big green eyes and he carried her over to the chair by the fireplace. It was also far too big for her small frame, but it was the warmest seat in the house and she curled up in it with a grateful smile. He thought she slept as he went to prepare food, hoping soup would tempt her fickle appetite. She was asleep when he returned, looking so innocent that his heart seized. Could she really have betrayed him so badly? Would she really have come all the way out here in the storm to tell him that if it wasn’t true?

She was still too weak to talk about it, he decided, but his voice was soft when he cupped her cheek.

“Wake up, princess. Time to eat.”

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at him, her face so warm and soft that his heart twisted. But then she bit her lip and looked away. *Fuck*. He didn’t want her looking away from him.

He’d put the soup in a mug to make it easier for her, but her hands still trembled so much he had to hold it for her. After a few tentative sips, he sighed, then he picked her up, and sat back down with her on his lap, supported against his arm. The position was more comfortable for both of them. Maybe too comfortable because it was a long time after she finished before he finally moved.

He didn’t bother putting her back down in the chair, but carried her back over to the bed.

“Time to rest.”

“But I’m not -” A yawn interrupted her half-hearted protest, and she smiled. “I suppose I could try and sleep.”

She was asleep before he stood up. He looked around at the chaos that had taken over his cabin, frowned, and started cleaning.

## CHAPTER 17



Ginger knew Houston was holding her ever before she opened her eyes - the massive chest, the delectable scent, and the big arms wrapped so protectively around her. It was just like it had been, but she knew it was an illusion and a wave of sadness washed over her. Tears threatened to sting her eyes, but she blinked them away. She felt better today, her head clearer, although her body was still weak. It was time to talk.

His hand started gliding up and down her back in long soothing strokes. Was he awake and aware of her sadness? Or was he touching her in his sleep? His hand slid lower, gliding beneath the hem of the shirt she was wearing to grasp her bottom. His hand flexed, kneading the soft flesh, and desire rocketed through her so quickly she felt dizzy.

His thumb slipped between her butt cheeks and slipped lower, barely grazing her entrance. The light, teasing touch was an exquisite torture. She wanted to press back against it, but she was afraid that he would wake and stop touching her entirely. His thumb pressed against her now damp entrance and she couldn't suppress her gasp. His hand froze - which meant he'd known what he was doing the entire time.

She waited, her heart pounding, and then he rolled her over on her back, looming over her as he studied her face, his horns silhouetted against the ceiling. He frowned.

“You’re too fucking tempting.”

She bit her lip and gave him an uncertain look. “I’m sorry?”

“Are you?”

He sounded as if he were asking himself instead of her, and she decided to keep quiet and let him work through whatever he was thinking. His thumb feathered across her jawline and down to her neck, resting over her rapidly beating pulse.

“Your skin is so soft. You have twenty-seven adorable freckles.”

His thumb slid lower, pushing the oversized neck down with it as it moved down the center of her chest, exposing more and more of her breast with each inch.

“Two perfect breasts. The smallest, more adorable belly button.”

She hovered between arousal and laughter as he circled the sensitive depression. His slow progress down her body halted as he finally reached the limit of how far he could stretch the neck of the shirt. He hesitated, then ripped the shirt open with terrifying ease, exposing her to him completely. He immediately returned to his inventory.

“A pretty little patch of red curls, as bright as your hair was once.”

Her throat threatened to close at the longing in his voice and she wondered for the millionth time what might have happened if they hadn’t had to leave Fairhaven Falls.

“And beneath these curls... This pretty, sensitive little button.”

He stroked across it and she couldn’t stop herself from arching into this touch. His eyes darkened, but he didn’t stop, parting her nether lips with his thumb. It was the only place he was touching her and her world narrowed to that single point of contact.

“Sweet and slippery,” he whispered, his eyes focused on his thumb as he reached her entrance. He pressed against it



slowly at first, then a little harder and harder still until he slipped inside.

“And this perfect little cunt. Hot. Wet. Tight.”

He pushed deeper with each word, and then he brushed against a place inside her that made her cry out, grabbing his wrist to hold him in place as she rocked frantically against him until her climax swept over in a burst of light. He stroked her down from it, then licked her juices off his thumb.

“Delicious. You are the most tempting female I have ever met.”

“Tempting for you,” she said, gathering her courage. “Only you.”

“You said you weren’t engaged to that bastard. Was that true?”

“Yes,” she said, then sighed. “He told me that if I didn’t marry him, he wouldn’t go through with the merger. I never, ever said I would marry him, but I tried to put up with him for Owen’s sake.”

“Did Owen know?”

“No, and he was furious when he found out. He rejected the merger.” Her eyes stung at the memory. “I thought his business was the most important thing to him, but I was wrong. I should have realized he hadn’t changed as much as I thought.”

“And the sabotage?” He was still watching her face.

“Owen didn’t know about that either. He’d told me that Donald had proposed a project in Fairhaven Falls, but he didn’t know what it was. He even checked with me to make sure it would be okay.”

He gave a great, shuddering sigh, his body relaxing, and started to lean towards her but she held up her hand.

“There’s something else you should know. Our father was a thief.” Her lips felt numb as she forced the words out, but she refused to look away from him, searching for any sign of disgust. “He’d been stealing from the attics above the Town

Hall, and maybe other places as well. I'll understand if you don't want anything else to do with me."

"Because of your father? That makes no difference to me."

It was her turn for a heartfelt sigh of relief, but there was one more thing he needed to know.

"It's worse than that. I found something in his belongings earlier this fall - a contract with the fairies about the tithe, and the box that held the goblet but the goblet was gone."

He didn't look as horrified as she expected.

"But it's all right," she hurried on. "As long as you don't reject our engagement before the solstice, I can go as the sacrifice in your place."

"In my place?"

"Yes, so you don't have to worry."

"Oh, my sweet, foolish little love."

*What did he call me?* Before she had a chance to think about it, he came down on top of her, keeping most of his weight off of her, but wedging his cock between her thighs. "The reason the contract was in the attic was because it was the old one."

"The old one?" Her head started spinning. "But what about the goblet?"

"It was broken during a previous ceremony. That's when we mutually agreed to write up a new contract." He shrugged, his cock moving deliciously between her legs. "I'm not sure it's really necessary, but elves are creatures of habit. Now I meet with Rafaelindaran - he prefers to be called Rafe - every year. We buy each other a drink and talk about what happened over the previous year. That's it."

"No goblet?"

"Nope."

"No sacrifice?"

“Definitely not. And as sweet as it is that you were willing to be a sacrifice on my behalf, if you even think of putting yourself in danger for me again, I will spank your pretty little bottom until it’s as red as your hair.”

They both felt her quiver and he grinned before he shook his head.

“And not in a good way.” He sighed. “You should have told me.”

“I know. But was I afraid that you’d be appalled by what my father had done and not want to be around me. That’s why we left,” she added. “Owen found out what he’d been doing and wanted to get him out of town before he got arrested.”

“And I lost you due to my cowardice.”

“Cowardice?”

“The moment we kissed, I knew you were my mate. But I was afraid - afraid that you were too young, afraid that you wouldn’t feel the same way.”

“I did feel the same way. I still do.”

“And if I’d told you, we wouldn’t have spent all these years apart.”

“Maybe we should start making up for them,” she suggested.

“Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“I’m sure. And this time, I want you to knot inside me.”

A tiny rush of liquid coated her thighs as he groaned.

“Are you sure? You’re very small.”

“I’m sure. I want to be yours in every way. I love you.”

“I love you too, princess.” He started to lower his head, then hesitated. “Traditionally this is done from behind, but I’d rather do it this way so I can watch your face.”

She blushed and nodded, and then he kissed her. He took his time, despite the tension filling his body, kissing her softly as his hands danced over her breasts and dipped between her

thighs, his touch light almost teasing but quickly driving her higher and higher until she was quivering and yanking on her horns.

“Now, Houston,” she demanded.

He managed to grin but his face was taut with strain as he moved back between her legs, parting her thighs and resting them over his legs, angling her body towards him. He stroked the impossible wide head the length of her slit, nudging against her swollen clit with each stroke, before he finally nudged her entrance. He was too big, much too big, but she opened for him and he pressed slowly inside until half his cock was lodged inside her, his gaze never leaving her face.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too,” she said, then wiggled impatiently. “Now give me the rest.”

He pulled back slightly before pressing deeper, gaining another inch, and then another. The tension in her body mounted steadily, the pressure growing and growing until she exploded, his name on her lips. As soon as she did, he roared and drove forward, claiming her completely, filling her beyond belief.

He started to withdraw and she moaned a protest, then gasped as he thrust back inside. This time she rode the waves of her orgasm, meeting his every stroke, his grunts of satisfaction feeding her excitement. He plunged inside one last time and the base of his cock expanded, locking him in place as he emptied himself inside her.

She was so unbelievably full that even the slightest movement sent another shock wave through her. The sensations were too much to process as she shivered and convulsed around him, and he finally rolled on to his side, drawing her with him and cradling her in his arms and stroking her until her body calmed.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m perfect. I may never walk again, but I’m perfect.”

He laughed and the vibration triggered another mini-orgasm as she clutched him.

“Oh God. How long is this going to last?”

“I have no idea. We’ll find out together.”

“I like the sound of that.”

She smiled at him and noticed the sunlight streaming through the window and gilding his horns. The blizzard had finally ceased.

*Thank you, Flora, she thought. Thank you for the blizzard and for giving us a second chance. Thank you for bringing me home.*

## EPILOGUE



*C*hristmas Eve...

GINGER SMILED AT HOUSTON AS HE RETURNED TO THE CABIN. He was still wearing the Santa suit he'd used to distribute presents to the children of the town, but he'd removed the padding, leaving the red coat open over his deliciously muscular chest. With Donald under arrest - and a little financial help from Owen - they'd been able to make the Yuletide Festival a success after all. The events had culminated with a visit from Santa and they'd done their best to make sure that every child in town had received one.

Now that the festivities were over, they had decided to spend the night at the cabin. Tomorrow they would be joining his family - *our family* - at the farmhouse. Her brother had even agreed to come. He was somewhat cautiously restoring his friendship with Houston, and nothing made her happier than seeing them laughing together. She couldn't wait for a big old-fashioned family Christmas, but she was glad they were going to have this time alone together first.

"You make a very sexy Santa," she said approvingly.

"Does that mean you want to come and sit on my lap?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure Mrs. Claus would approve."

She waved at hand at her outfit and his eyes heated. She'd decided to help him give out presents dressed as a sexy elf, complete with short, flirty green dress edged with fur and red

and white stockings. For modesty's sake, she'd worn a pretty lace scarf tucked into her dress earlier, but she'd removed it while he was stabling the horse, leaving her breasts perilously close to spilling out of the low cut neckline.

"I don't think she'll mind," he growled as he sat down in the big chair by the fire and patted his lap. "Come here, princess."

She made her way slowly across the room, even though her nipples were already diamond hard and heat was pooling in her stomach.

"I don't know, Santa." She stopped just out of reach. "I'm not sure I should sit on your lap."

"Why? Have you been a bad girl?"

"N-no."

His eyes narrowed. "Then come here, princess. Now."

She was almost tempted to make him chase her, but she pushed her lips into a pout and approached with mock reluctance. As soon as she was in arm's reach, he grabbed her and hauled her down on his lap, hard enough to make her squeak.

"That's better," he said with satisfaction, his eyes heating as he ran a finger along the low neckline, just barely above her throbbing nipples. "I think you've been a bad girl, after all."

"Oh no, Santa. I'm a very, very good girl." She ran her hand down the short thick fur of his chest and decided it was her turn to tease, tracing the edge of his pants, but not dipping under the waistband. "I think I can make Santa very, very happy."

"I don't have any doubts about that," he said, abandoning the game. "I never knew I could be this happy."

"Me either."

She put her hands on his shoulders and lifted up to kiss him. As she expected, his hands slid down her back to support her and she shivered as he dipped beneath the skirt, his big hands warm on her bare ass. He froze.

“You’re not wearing any underwear?”

“Oops. I forgot.”

She’d actually been wearing a pair of frilly little shorts that matched her dress but she’d discarded those as well. He lifted her skirt, staring at the lacy red garter belt that was holding up her stockings and framing her completely bare pussy. He didn’t say anything for so long that she started to get nervous. What if he didn’t like it?

But then he ran a finger across the bare pink skin and groaned.

“Spread your legs,” he growled and she obeyed as he tilted her hips towards him.

Oh, fuck. She hadn’t realized how much it would turn her on as well to have him watching her, completely exposed to him. She was so wet she actually felt a drop slide down her thigh before he caught it with his finger and lifted it to his mouth.

“So pretty.” His voice was so guttural as to be almost unintelligible. “So fucking pretty.”

His thick finger returned to her thigh, then slid upwards between her folds and she felt every inch of it. His cock had pushed past the waistband of his pants, the thick head gleaming, and she licked her lips in anticipation. His control broke.

In one swift movement, he yanked his cock free, lifted her higher, then slammed her down over his cock. She came so hard she actually saw stars but he didn’t pause, thrusting up into her frantically, desperately, until he roared, flooding her insides with heat as his knot expanded, sending her into a second climax as their bodies locked together.

She collapsed bonelessly against him, her whole pussy hot and throbbing and satisfied.

“I guess you liked it,” she whispered when she had the ability to speak again, and gasped when he chuckled and the reverberations spread through their joined bodies.



“I like everything about you, princess. And of course, I love you too.”

“Mmm. Then I guess that works out. But I definitely don’t think Mrs. Claus would approve.”

“Oh, I think she would.” He laughed again as he lifted her hand and something cool and heavy slid down her ring finger. ‘What do you think, Mrs. Claus?’”

She could barely see the diamond through the tears sparkling in her eyes, but she nodded eagerly.

“I approve, I approve.”

Satisfaction filled his face as he looked down at the ring on her finger.

“Mine. For now. For always.”

“Yours. For always.”

She smiled as she raised her face for his kiss. This was going to be the best Christmas ever.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Mistletoe for My Minotaur*! I always have so much fun in Fairhaven Falls! I don't write many second chance romances, but Houston and Ginger and their red hot attraction convinced me! And of course, I love all the trappings of the holiday season! I hope you enjoyed the story as much as I did!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

Thank you all for supporting these books - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today* bestselling author Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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