



OBERON

CHRISTMAS SPRITES BOOK TWO

MACY BLAKE

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SYNOPSIS

Santa Paws is coming to town.

When Dr. Miles Lane purchases Paws and Claus, a veterinary clinic in the quirky town of Mistletoe Falls, he doesn't quite know what he's in for.

The small town offers a fresh start for Miles, his seven-year-old daughter, Holly, and their rambunctious Saint Bernard. What Miles doesn't count on is his immediate attraction to the local handyman, Oberon, whom he hires to do some work on their new home and clinic.

Oberon finds himself falling hard for the town's new vet and his adorable family. There's only one problem: Oberon is a sprite, a magical being tasked with bringing holiday spirit to the human realm. Every time he's around Miles and Holly, his chemis-tree goes a bit haywire.

But when a *pet-tastrophe* strikes Mistletoe Falls, Miles and Oberon must team up to make sure the town and all of its furry residents have the *ulti-mutt* holiday.

If you love fated mates, pets who like to play matchmaker, and magical elves, er, sprites, who make the season bright, you'll have a pawsitively wonderful Christmas time with this holiday romance.

MILES

“Daddy,” Holly said solemnly as they stood in front of the house that, as of this morning, was their new home. “It’s pretty.”

Her unspoken *but it isn’t our old house* might as well have been yelled.

“Don’t forget that there’s a big yard for Ivy,” Miles said, holding on to the leash of their Saint Bernard. Ivy glanced up at him, as judgmental of his decision to pack them up and move to Mistletoe Falls as his daughter.

“She’ll like that,” Holly said. “And I have my very own craft room, right? The pretty room with the seat in the window?”

“Yep,” Miles confirmed. “The man who is helping us build your shelves and everything will be here later today.”

Holly squeezed his hand a little tighter. “And I can paint my rooms *whatever* color I want.”

“Our deal was *almost* whatever color, if you recall. Chartreuse is out of the question, I don’t care how cute you are.”

Holly giggled. “I suppose we could go look at it.”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

Ivy barked, and Holly looked up at him with a smile. “Ivy says she’s ready.”

Adopting Ivy had been the best decision Miles had ever made for his daughter. Holly tended to be on the shy side but taking care of Ivy had helped bring her out of her shell. The two were

thick as thieves. Even though their move and all the changes it brought weren't easy, with Ivy at their side, Miles had no doubt they'd all settle in quickly enough.

Besides, no one could resist Ivy's charms, which meant Holly tended to make friends with everyone they met on their daily walks with Ivy. Miles hoped Mistletoe Falls would prove to be as welcoming as their old neighborhood.

Miles led them up the brick path to the front door. He'd been lucky to get the restored Victorian as part of his purchase of the clinic. The previous veterinarian in Mistletoe Falls had decided to retire a few months before, putting both his house and business up for sale.

When Miles had stumbled across the opportunity, something in him had lit up. He wasn't what anyone would call impulsive, by any means, but he'd known in that moment it was where he and Holly were supposed to be.

Convincing his daughter to leave behind the only home she'd ever known...well, that had been a different story altogether. Pictures of the storybook Victorian house had helped, along with the promises of her own space the large home would provide.

"The blue is prettier than in the pictures," Holly said suddenly. "It's almost purple. I think I like it."

Miles did too. At first, he wasn't sure about the blue with the white trim and red accents, but it worked. "We'll have to see if the previous owners left us any information about the colors," Miles said, knowing his artistically inclined daughter would love the information. "They might be drawn from a historically accurate palette."

Holly's eyes widened as she looked at the house with new eyes. He hoped her knew art teacher would be prepared for his daughter. He had an appointment to meet all of her teachers at the end of the week after they'd had a few days to get to know each other. Hopefully, she'd be as successful at her new school as she'd been at the last.

He walked up the rest of the path and to the wooden door inset with stained glass.

“It’s all so different,” Holly said.

“Just wait until you see inside,” Miles said, unlocking the door with the keys he’d picked up from the real estate agent on his way into town.

Miles pushed open the door and looked down at his daughter. Since the moment he’d made the decision to use a surrogate to have a child, she’d become his life. This move meant they’d have even more time together as his hours wouldn’t be nearly as busy as the clinic where he’d worked at in the city. She was growing up so fast and Miles didn’t want to miss out on a moment of it.

Holly clenched his hand, and they entered the house together. “Oh, Daddy. It’s like out of a movie.”

Miles let out a sigh of relief at the high praise from his seven-year-old. What could be better than a movie, after all? “This house is almost as old as the town. Can you believe that?”

Holly’s eyes widened. “That’s *old*.”

“I know,” Miles said. “Mistletoe Falls has a lot of fun stuff for us to explore. I can’t wait.”

“It was smart of you to ask Ms. Kaine for the brochure about the town,” Holly informed him. “I liked reading about it on the way here.”

His kid was too smart for Miles’s own good. Before he could give Holly a tour, Ivy sat down and gave him a very soulful stare from her big brown eyes. “I think our first order of business is to introduce Ivy to her new backyard.”

Holly glanced at Ivy and nodded. “Oh, yeah. She’s totally gotta go.”

They both knew the signals well. Miles led the way through the living room, then the dining room, and finally to the veranda. Like most old houses, their new home was broken up into a bunch of smaller spaces.

Miles liked it, though. The whole open floor plan thing had its perks, especially when you were a single dad with a toddler. But now he liked the idea of them having different rooms to spend time in. It was cozier and he could imagine the fun he and Holly would have figuring out how they wanted to decorate each of the spaces.

Holly opened the backdoor for Ivy and followed her out onto the snow-dusted grass in the back yard. After taking Ivy off her leash, Miles let her roam in the fenced in area.

“Daddy,” Holly gasped. “It’s so big!”

After Ivy picked her spot, Miles let the two of them explore the backyard for a few minutes. Every tree and bush got a sniff from Ivy while Holly observed. Ivy suddenly perked up before leading the way to the side of the house where the tall wooden fence had a gate. A tiny whimper came from the other side.

Miles groaned. Not again.

He opened the gate to find a small Labrador puppy, probably no more than four months old, shivering on the other side. Although most likely white, the little guy looked like he’d rolled in a dirty puddle, making him look even more pitiful. Ivy immediately sniffed the dirty puppy, then looked at him with an expectant gaze not unlike the one his daughter was shooting him.

With a sigh, Miles scooped up the puppy. “This town was supposed to be different,” Miles grumbled. “It’s not supposed to be the kind of place where people just dump their dogs at the vet’s clinic or house.”

“You should use the thing to check if he has a chip,” Holly advised.

Since the little guy wasn’t wearing a collar, that would be an option. There was a good chance a pup this young wouldn’t be chipped yet, though.

“We’ll do that,” Miles said as he quickly ran his hands over the little guy’s fur, checking for any signs of injury.

“Kringle!” A woman’s shout drew their attention. “Kringle!”

Miles walked out front and found an older woman frantically searching the area. When she spotted them, she let out a cry of relief and ran their way.

“Oh my goodness. This was not how I wanted to meet you,” she said to Miles. “But Kringle clearly had other plans.”

“This little guy belongs to you?”

She nodded and held up a leash with its very empty collar attached. “He slipped right out of his collar, the sneaky thing. We’re working on our leash training. Clearly, it’s not going as well as I thought.” She smiled and held out her hand. “Joy Claus.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Joy. I’m Miles Lane, and this is my daughter Holly. And this is Ivy.”

Miles passed over the puppy to her and it curled up against her chest with a happy sigh. Joy kissed the little escape artist on the head and cuddled him close.

“Thanks for your help. And I know who you are,” Joy said with a wink. “You’re living in my old house.”

It took a second for Miles to put the pieces together. “Joy *Claus*, as in Paws and Claus.”

She beamed a smile at him. “That’s me. My husband Chris was the veterinarian. I worked for the town council before we both retired and moved into a smaller house that’s much easier for us to manage. Besides, you have the secret path through the backyard to the clinic. It didn’t seem fair for us to keep it.”

“Secret path?” Holly asked.

“Yep, there’s a gate in the back left corner of the fence that leads you right to the back of the clinic.”

“It’s really nice to meet you,” Miles said. “I have a feeling you and your husband will have lots of good information to share with us. It’s so good to know you both stayed in town. I needed someone to let me know all the mischief makers I need to look out for.”

Joy laughed. “Well, there are more than a few, I can promise you that. And the first lot are headed this way now.” She

gestured toward the corner where an older woman and two young men walked their way. “We really appreciate you keeping on our staff from the clinic. It was honestly Chris’s biggest fear in retiring. We’re all pretty much family at this point. I had a feeling they’d be coming over to meet you today,” Joy said.

As they approached, the rumbling of a large truck sounded behind him, and Miles turned to see the moving truck they’d hired pulling up to a stop in front of the house.

“Joy!” The woman walking down the block stopped in front of her and gave her a quick hug. “I wasn’t expecting to find you here.”

“Well, Kringle decided he wanted to meet the new vet. The little devil pulled out of his collar and took off.” Joy gave the puppy a cuddle before reattaching the collar.

The woman turned to Miles and held out her hand. “I’m Gloria, your new office manager. And these two chatterboxes are Donner and Rudy.”

Since neither of the young men said a word, Miles assumed she was kidding about the chatty thing. Miles took her outstretched hand and shook it. “I’m Miles Lane. This is my daughter Holly, and our dog, Ivy.”

“Aww. Holly and Ivy. That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. You’ll fit right into Mistletoe Falls with names like those,” Gloria gushed.

“Thank you,” Holly said.

“Excuse me, Dr. Lane,” one of the movers said, walking their way with a clipboard in his hand. “We’d like to get the floor coverings down, and then we’ll start unloading.”

“Go on in,” Miles said. “I need to get the rooms labeled for you.”

“Oh, we can help with that, can’t we boys?” Gloria said, beaming a smile his way. “You’ll surely need some help unpacking, what with you planning on being at the clinic tomorrow, and with your sweet girl starting school. That’s a lot to accomplish in one day.”

Miles shot her a look, wondering how exactly she knew he planned on sending Holly to school so quickly. It wasn't like he'd advertised the information. "You're one of those managers who knows *everything*, aren't you?"

Gloria grinned and bumped their shoulders together. "How'd you guess?"

Miles laughed. "We're going to get along just fine, Gloria. Well, it's been nice meeting everyone, but we need to get the car unloaded and get busy. It really is going to be a long day."

Joy snickered, drawing Miles's attention. "She wasn't kidding about helping. She's been bored to tears for weeks since Chris and I officially retired."

One of the guys stepped forward. "We don't mind, Dr. Lane. I'm Donner, by the way. And yeah, I get the irony of my name living here."

"Try being named Rudy," the other guy said. "And Donner's right, Dr. Lane. We really don't mind giving you a hand. Besides, if we go back to the clinic, Gloria's going to find something really brain-numbingly boring for us to do. Everything's been cleaned multiple times already. Trust us. You'd be doing us a favor."

Miles had a feeling he was experiencing small town life for the first time. It seemed weird to invite strangers into his home to help them unpack, but they weren't exactly strangers. "If you're sure..."

"We're sure," Gloria, Donner, and Rudy all chorused.

"Then we can start with the car." Miles took out his keys and opened the trunk with the fob.

"Got it." The two guys walked to the back, where their suitcases were piled. They each grabbed one, then took other bags in their hands before lugging them into the house.

"Now, you said something about labeling the rooms?" Gloria asked.

"All the boxes are color-coded," Miles said. "So we'll need to put the colors on the doors so the movers know where to put

things.”

“Oh, I’m going to like you. That’s my kind of organization right there. Label makers are my friend. What do you say, young lady? Would you care to help me get some rooms labeled?”

Holly nodded. “I made the signs for the rooms. They’re in my backpack.”

“Aren’t you clever!” Gloria held out her hand to Holly, who took it and led Gloria to the backseat of the car where Holly’s backpack awaited.

“I’ll go drop this little monster off with Chris and come back to help,” Joy said. “The more the merrier!”

Miles wasn’t entirely sure what was happening, but he smiled at her anyway. “Sounds good.”

“Daddy, come on. You have to show us the rooms.”

Gloria and Holly waited for him by the front door. Miles glanced down at Ivy, who’d remained at his side. “I hope you’re ready for this.”

Ivy woofed at him before heading to Holly. Miles followed behind and helped her tape the painted signs she’d made on the door frames of each room.

By the time the movers had finished laying down the floor protection, Miles, Holly, and Gloria had finished their tour of the house. With each room clearly labeled, Gloria and Holly settled in her future craft room, sitting in the window seat as Holly explained in detail all of the crafts she liked to make.

With his daughter safely distracted for a little while, Miles headed back downstairs to direct the movers. He found Donner and Rudy standing near the door with the suitcases and boxes from the car. He directed them where to take everything, then took the bag of moving day supplies he’d put together and began putting everything away.

Within what felt like minutes, the entire house turned into a jumble of chaos. The movers brought in load after load of boxes, and the stacks in each room grew more quickly than

Miles expected. It took the movers a lot less time to unload the truck than it had for them to load it.

Before long, Miles had a mountain of boxes in every room of the house. He'd not figured out where to place the furniture they'd brought, so it ended up pushed into the corners of the rooms, surrounded by the boxes and basically inaccessible.

"Okay, Dr. Lane. We're all done. If you could sign here." One of the movers held out his clipboard, and Miles signed it. "Enjoy your new home."

And with that, they were gone, leaving Miles with a gigantic mess and a house full of strangers trying to help. He stood at the front door and ran his hand over his head, wondering exactly why he'd only given them one day to get settled in. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, especially as it meant Holly would miss very few days of school as they were coming off of the Thanksgiving break. And speaking of his daughter....

"Daddy! I need you!"

Miles went upstairs and found Gloria and Holly staring at the placement of her bed in her room. The movers, per the agreement, had put both of their beds together before they left. However, neither of them looked pleased.

"Yes?" Miles asked.

"Daddy, this just won't do. Ms. Gloria says the fang shoey is all off."

Someone save him. "I believe it's pronounced feng shui," Miles explained. "But it's fine for us to move it. I'll see if I can get one of the guys to come help me."

"Hello?" A deep masculine voice called from downstairs, as if answering his summons for help. "Anyone home?"

OBERON

Oberon glanced at his watch, hoping the doc didn't mind if he was a few minutes early for their appointment. From the sounds coming from inside of the house, Oberon wasn't entirely sure coming by was a good thing at all.

Piles of boxes stood inside the half-open front door. Oberon pushed it open a little further, hoping to find someone inside. He could hear lots of moving and banging but couldn't see a soul.

"Hello?" Oberon called. "Anyone home?"

"Just a minute!"

A man's voice answered from upstairs, and a few seconds later, Oberon watched as a stunningly handsome man walked down the steps. His dark hair looked as if he'd spent half the morning running his hands through it. But his blue eyes sparkled behind the frames of his black-rimmed glasses. His jeans looked old and broken in, and the long-sleeved T-shirt he wore announced the name of the veterinary school he'd attended.

Oberon ran his hand over his red beard, giving it a little nervous tug. The man stopped in front of him, a little out of breath and very clearly frazzled.

"Hi there," Oberon said. "I'm Oberon. Kandi set up an appointment for me to stop by today."

"Right. The handyman. Hi, I'm Miles." Miles held out his hand and Oberon took it. He didn't want to let go, but before

they could do more than a friendly handshake, another familiar voice came from the back of the house.

“Dr. Lane, there aren’t any boxes for the dining room. What goes in there?” Donner, one of the vet techs at the clinic, waved at Oberon when he noticed him, then turned his attention back to the doc.

Miles ran his hand through his hair. “Um, I...don’t know yet. Be there in a sec.”

“Daddy! Ivy needs to go again!”

A little girl appeared on the stairs with a huge Saint Bernard beside her. The dog locked eyes with Oberon and let out a woof before barreling down the stairs toward him. Seconds later, he had two giant paws on his chest and a huge wet tongue sliding over his cheek.

“Oh my god! Ivy! Down!” Miles looked horrified at the dog’s invasion of his space, but Oberon didn’t care. He was used to it. Dogs liked him, what could he say?

The little girl ran after the dog, skidding to a stop in front of Oberon. She looked up at him with big blue eyes that matched her father’s, then at the dog, who’d sat down with a pout at the Miles’s command.

“Wow. Ivy *never* does that,” Holly said.

“I’m so sorry, Oberon. She’s normally so well-behaved. Holly, this is Oberon. He’s here to help you with your craft room. Why don’t you take Ivy outside really quick, then we’ll get started?”

“Really?” Holly said, her eyes lighting up. “*This* is who gets to help me?”

Oberon grinned. “I’m the one.”

“I like him, Daddy,” Holly said before turning and leading Ivy toward the back of the house.

He also had a similar effect on kids. They probably recognized the sprite magic he held inside of him. Adults didn’t seem capable of it, but kids and dogs, well, they were drawn to Oberon and his cousins. Especially this time of year when

sprites all throughout the human realm were at their strongest, preparing to bring joy to the human realm during the Winter Solstice.

It didn't matter that their magic had been waning for years. Oberon and his cousins had made Mistletoe Falls a place where humans from all around visited to experience the happiness that came with the holiday season.

Being a sprite in Mistletoe Falls came with a lot of perks, including knowing just about everyone in town. It also helped that Oberon was basically the only handyman available for miles and miles. He'd made it his mission to be able to do as much as he could for the town's residents. It was his own way to add a little extra magic to his hometown.

"Obie!" Gloria came down the stairs, smiling widely at him.

"Hey. You causing trouble already? Don't scare off the new doc before he's even had a chance to unpack."

Gloria cackled. "I'm glad you're here. We need some extra muscle to move some furniture."

"We do?" Miles asked.

"I don't move furniture, Doc. There are limits."

"Oh, of course, Gloria" Miles said, seeming even more flustered than before. "I wouldn't expect you to move anything heavy."

Donner and Rudy came out of the kitchen area and grinned. "Man, there's a ton of boxes in the kitchen. You must like to cook."

"I do. And I should really get some things unpacked in there or we're not going to have anything for later. Unless there are places that deliver? I haven't had time to research any of that."

Poor guy looked like he didn't know which end was up. When his hand went into his hair, tangling it up even more than it had been before, Oberon realized he should give the poor guy a break. He obviously wasn't used to the glory that was small town life.

“Don’t worry about that, Doc,” Oberon said. “Gloria, make a call to Carol for me? See if she can hook the doc up until we can get him settled.”

“On it,” Gloria said, pulling out her cell phone and walking into the other room.

“Hey, Donner, why don’t you and Rudy get the boxes in the kitchen sorted. Looks like everything is labeled with what’s in it, so put everything together. Food boxes, dishes, that kind of thing. It’ll make it easier to figure out where to put things when it’s time to unpack.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Rudy said, and the two turned around and headed back into the kitchen.

Blissful silence filled the house for a moment, and the doc shot him a grateful look. “I’m not sure how you did that but thank you.”

“Easy when you’re not the one with all the boxes to unpack. So, what’s first?”

“My daughter,” Miles answered. “I want her room set up and for us to get the plan together for her craft room. It was how I convinced her to pack up and move in the middle of the school year, and I want to make sure it’s ready by Christmas.”

“Easy enough.”

“Knock knock!” Joy Claus appeared at the door with a smile. “Hey, Obie!”

“Morning, Joy. Have you met Miles?”

“Kringle the Escape Artist introduced us earlier,” Joy said with a laugh.

“Not again,” Oberon chuckled, shaking his head at the pup’s antics.

“I know, I know. Chris has finally convinced me to make him wear a harness. I can’t help it, though. All the little collars I bought for him are so cute. I came back to see if I could help unpack.”

Oberon smiled. "Hey, Doc. I have a crazy idea. Obviously, Joy knows that kitchen better than anyone. What if she helps Donner and Rudy get it unpacked for you? That way we can focus on getting Holly's room set up."

"Oh, I can absolutely do that," Joy said. "Besides, it would be like old times, me bossing those two around when my husband isn't looking."

Miles smiled. "Are you sure it's not too much of an imposition?"

"Positive. It'll be fun. And I'll make Rudy run over to the clinic to grab Gloria's label maker for me. We can make sure you can find everything until you get used to the space."

"That's a great idea," Gloria said, reappearing from the other room. "I can start on Holly's bathroom, if that would help. There were only a few boxes in there."

"You all are amazing," Miles said.

"We know," Joy and Gloria chorused.

Miles laughed, and Oberon's hands tingled.

What on earth?

"Daddy! Ivy went potty, one and two. We're ready to get my craft room done!"

Miles glanced around, realizing all of his "helpers" were busy at work. He looked at Oberon. "Thank you."

"We take some getting used to. Now, how about we take a look at this craft room?"

Holly cheered and ran up the stairs with Ivy hot on her heels. Miles and Oberon followed. Oberon noticed the signs on the doors, especially the one labeled "main bedroom." The Claus's had had their room on the ground floor. Oberon had helped them do some remodeling work in the bathroom.

Miles noticed the look and shrugged. "I prefer to be on the same level as my daughter. And I'm hoping I can have you do some work downstairs for emergency patients who need

overnight stays. Single dad here. I can't be at the clinic all night."

Oberon hadn't thought about that aspect. "I'm sure I can help with whatever you need."

Holly stood in the center of the turreted room waiting for them. She held out her arms and spun in a circle. "This is it!"

"This is my favorite room in the house," Oberon confessed. "So, what are we doing in here?"

Holly ran to the corner of the room and grabbed her backpack. She whipped out a sketchbook and carried it over to him. "I have some ideas."

It took everything in Oberon's power not to laugh. She was absolutely too cute. He sat down on the hardwood floor and patted the area next to him. "Let's see 'em."

He pulled his own small notebook and pencil from his pocket. Holly sat down next to him slowly, almost as if she didn't think he was taking her seriously.

She turned the pages in the sketchbook until she came to the one she wanted and held it out to him.

"A desk with good lighting. Done," Oberon said, making a note in his book. "Do you want the walls white like your picture, or is the color negotiable?"

"Not chartreuse," Holly said, then giggled as she glanced at her dad.

"Our deal is that she can choose almost any color she wants. Some are out of the question."

"Oberon?" She paused and pulled her lip between her teeth.

Honestly, he didn't know which of the Lane's was cuter. Ivy pushed Oberon's arm out of the way and collapsed onto his lap with a deep sigh. Only half of her fit, but Oberon scratched the top of her head and then used her as a prop for his notebook. "You can call me Obie," Oberon said. "All my friends do."

Holly took a breath. "Obie," she began again, "Daddy said old houses like this have colors from history. What if I painted my

craft room one of those colors?”

“We could absolutely do that,” Oberon said. “In fact, I think... hold on a sec.”

Oberon pulled out his phone and called his cousin, Eldon.

“Hey, Obie,” Eldon said.

Paper rattled in the background. No doubt Eldon was unpacking new arrivals for his shop, Deck the Walls, in the town square.

“Hey, do you still have that book about Victorian houses? The one that shows all the paint schemes and stuff?”

Eldon grunted and a heavy thud followed. “Sorry, heavy box. And yes, it’s in my office.”

“You mind if I borrow it? I have a very important client who has some questions about Victorian paint schemes.”

“No problem. I’ll bring it to the Inn this afternoon. Don’t forget that we’re meeting up with everyone.”

“I won’t,” Obie said. “Thanks, see you later.”

They ended the call and Obie turned his attention back to Holly. “We’re good. My cousin has a book about it, and he said we could borrow it. I’ll grab it this afternoon, and then stop by later so we can pick out which paint color you want.”

“Really?” Holly said.

“Yep. Now, what else can we do?”

“Daddy says I need storage.”

“Yeah, you crafty types tend to have a lot of stuff. My cousin Linus is crafty too. He has the *entire* attic of the Inn filled up. Can you believe that?”

Ivy let out a hefty snore, then pushed her head against his hand. Oberon continued his petting as he waited for Holly’s response.

“Yeah...I don’t know what else,” Holly confessed. “I’ve never had a craft room before.”

“Makes sense. It seems to me you have some daydreaming to do. So, let’s take a look around the room first. That’s always best, in my opinion. Excuse me, Ivy. Gotta move.”

The dog grunted but lifted her head so Oberon could wiggle out from beneath her. He held out his hand to Holly and helped her up.

“How do you do that?” Holly asked.

“Well, this is gonna sound kinda funny. I think rooms talk to you, tell you what they need and what should go where. You just have to learn to listen. I mean, take this window, for instance.” Oberon led her over to the window seat in the turret area of the room. “What do you think it needs?”

Holly looked it over. “Definitely some pillows. It’d be fun to sit here and draw or read. Ivy would fit, too, so we’d have to be able to wash them. She gets everything dirty.”

“It’s true,” Miles said, coming over to stand with them. He put his hand on Holly’s shoulder and smiled down at her. “I love the idea of pillows in the window.”

She beamed up at her father, and Oberon’s entire body trembled as if he’d been shocked. He sucked in a breath and forced himself to look away. The Tinseled Inn was across the street. He stared at it and tried to ground himself before something crazy happened.

“Obie? You okay?” Miles asked.

“Me? Yeah, I’m good. Admiring the view,” Oberon said. He pointed across the street. “My cousins and I own the Tinseled Inn. It looks great from up here. But be prepared once it gets dark. Linus went a little overboard on the holiday lights this year.”

“You live *there*?” Holly asked, her eyes wide.

“I do,” Oberon said. “Well, technically, I suppose you’d say I live in the carriage house behind the inn. But when I’m not working, I help out my cousin Linus who keeps the inn running.”

“How many cousins do you have?” Miles asked.

“Three, here in town,” Oberon said. “Linus manages the Inn. Eldon runs Deck the Walls, the big store in town square. And Nyall is the baker of the Mistletoe bakery.”

Miles’s stomach rumbled, and Oberon glanced down the doc’s body before jerking his gaze back up to his eyes. From the look on Miles’s face, he hadn’t missed a thing. Heat built for a moment before Ivy nudged between them and pushed her head against Oberon’s leg.

“I don’t have any cousins,” Holly said with a sigh.

“No cousins?”

“No. Daddy is an only child and so am I.”

“Well, then, I guess I’ll have to let you borrow mine. It seems only fair since I have three. They won’t mind sharing.”

Holly grinned. “Really?”

“Really. Now, let’s see what else this room says to us.” Oberon turned and sat on the wooden window seat. Holly climbed up beside him and Miles sat next to her. Ivy flopped down at their feet. “Just look around and imagine what would make you happy in here if you were working on your newest creation.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes before Holly looked up at him with a grin.

“I see a pretty rug,” Holly said.

“Oh, that’s good.” Oberon added it to his list.

“Some shelves for all your books,” Miles added. “Maybe close to the window seat so you can grab one to read.”

“Daddy, that’s perfect!”

Miles smiled and looked over Holly’s head at him. Oberon’s heart skipped a beat. A picture popped into his mind of them sitting in this very room. Sunshine yellow walls, a beautiful floral rug, and overflowing shelves of books and art supplies surrounded them. A big, overstuffed loveseat sat against the wall, and Oberon, Miles, Holly, and Ivy were all crammed onto it.

Happiness poured out of all of them.

Holly leaned against him, startling Oberon out of his vision. She let out a happy sigh. "I'm going to like it here. Do you think we could get a big couch for over there." Holly pointed to the exact spot Oberon had imagined them sitting.

He swallowed hard. "Sure, of course."

"Lunch is here!" Joy's call from downstairs broke the odd spell that seemed to have been cast over them.

"I think I have enough to get a plan together," Oberon said. "I'll stop by later so we can pick out some paint, okay?"

Holly smiled. "Okay!"

"Are you sure you don't want to join us for lunch?" Miles asked.

"Wish I could," Oberon said. "But duty calls. I'll see you both later. Don't let Gloria work you too hard, okay?"

"I heard that," Gloria yelled from the bathroom down the hall.

Oberon winked at Miles before leading them out of the room and toward the stairs. "As usual, Gloria, all your arguments are merry and right."

She groaned and came out of the bathroom with a stack of empty boxes. "Darn tootin' I'm always right. Now get back to work. Miss Holly and I need to get moving on her bedroom so she's ready for school tomorrow."

Oberon took the boxes out of her hands and carried them downstairs. He passed them to Rudy, who added them to a pile on the front porch. Oberon made a mental note to bring his truck by later to take them all to the recycling center.

Just to be neighborly. He was stopping by anyway to help Holly pick out a paint color. He didn't want to earn another smile from Miles.

Nope, that had nothing to do with it at all.

OBERON

I t wasn't just him.

Oberon sat in the cousins' upstairs living room at the Tinseled Inn, trying to process everything he'd heard from Nyall. Linus bustled after Nyall, who'd just left on his date with Aaron, the handsome reporter who'd come to Mistletoe Falls for the month to do stories on the town and their holiday traditions. Linus no doubt planned to spy on them from the front windows until they were out of sight.

Never let it be said that Linus wasn't nosy, at least where their love lives were concerned. Not that any of them had a ton of romances to speak of. They lived in a small town, and although they were all pretty open to love in all its forms, none of them had been lucky enough to find it.

Maybe it was a sprite thing. Oberon didn't know, but if what Nyall suspected was true and the attraction between them had set off Nyall's sprite magic...well, that didn't bode well for Oberon, did it? Especially with the way he'd reacted to Miles.

Leaning back against one of the armchairs in the room, Oberon pondered the new development. Sure, their magic had been waning over the years. But it wasn't like they were the only ones affected. All magical beings in the human realm had seen their power slowly lessening, year after year.

Oberon secretly worried that one day it would disappear and all the hard work they'd done to bring a little holiday magic to Mistletoe Falls would disappear with it.

Cookies didn't decorate themselves, though, and all the cousins agreed their magic was...different this year. If the tingling in his hands was any indication, Oberon *might* be having some magical reactions like Nyall. But *why*, and what did it mean?

"Reindeer got your tongue?" Eldon asked as he cleared away the ornaments the cousins had spent the afternoon creating.

"Just thinking."

"About?"

Oberon glanced up at his cousin. "Magic."

"You too, huh?" Eldon sat down on the coffee table. "Let me guess. The new vet?"

"Lucky guess."

Eldon laughed and reached for the book he'd brought with him. "In my defense, it was a bit obvious considering I knew what your job was today. So, the new vet wants to know about Victorian paint schemes, huh?"

Oberon tugged his beard. "His daughter. His ridiculously cute and sweet daughter whose craft room I've been tasked with designing in the turret room."

"Oh, that will be perfect. That's such a great space. I never thought the Claus's used it to its full potential. But don't you dare tell Joy I said that."

"I was thinking of using a couple furniture pieces from my workshop. Remember that old French desk with all the scrollwork we rescued from the side of the road a while back?"

Eldon nodded. "I remember how heavy it was when I had to help you get it into the back of your truck."

The thing had to weigh a couple hundred pounds. It was solid wood and even though it had some damage, none of it was worthy of it being trashed. "I've done most of the repairs on it. I think Holly will like it."

Eldon smiled. "Her name is Holly?"

“And, wait for it, their dog is Ivy.”

With a laugh Eldon sat down on the floor next to Oberon.
“You’re doomed.”

“That’s not...Eldon, you don’t really think all this is...real, do you?”

Eldon leaned against Oberon. “I believe in magic, Obie. And you do too.”

“I be-*wreath* in the spirit of Christmas.” Oberon chuckled at his own pun.

The cousins sat quietly for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. The idea that their magic could be returning should have raised their spirits, but the unknown how and why seemed to have Eldon as worried as Nyall and Oberon. Add to that Nyall’s inability to control his magic, and well, it was a recipe for disaster.

Oberon sighed. If he continued to sit and worry, he’d never get anything done. It wasn’t like answers were going to act like Jack Frost and nip on his nose. They were all going to have to hurry up and wait to see what happened next.

“You wanna go over to the Lanes’ with me and help Holly pick out her paint? You’re the expert on that kind of thing around here after all.”

“Sure,” Eldon said. “I’d love to meet the new vet and his ridiculously cute daughter. Who knows, maybe I’ll get a cat or something.”

Oberon snorted. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“What? I like...animals.”

“Uh-huh, just not in your space where you might get fur on something. Who do you think you’re fooling?”

“Not you, obviously. And honestly, I do not understand how people survive with all that shedding. Maybe I should ask Dr. Lane about those naked cats.”

“Those what?”

Eldon laughed. “Never mind. Let’s go pick out some paint. Then you can take me to dinner at Carol’s where we can spy on Nyall and Aaron’s date,” Eldon teased.

Oberon grunted. “I’m not that brave, or that stupid. But we can come back here and have dinner with Linus when we’re done. If we don’t, he *will* show up over there to spy on Nyall.”

They stopped downstairs and found Linus working on the morning’s breakfast menu. “Do not go to Carol’s,” Eldon said firmly. “We’re going to go help the new neighbors pick out paint, but we’ll be back.”

Linus huffed. “Who said I was going to....”

They waited for Linus to finish, but he didn’t.

“Good enough,” Eldon said. “Okay, let’s go pick out some paint.”

They walked across the street together with Eldon’s book in hand. The pile of empty boxes on the front porch had grown into a mountain, and Oberon realized he’d meant to bring his truck over. He’d have it tomorrow, at any rate, so he’d make sure to load them up then.

Eldon knocked on the door which led to the sound of trampling feet and a single, very loud bark.

Miles opened the door, looking flustered again, but he smiled when he saw Oberon. “You’re back.”

“And I brought reinforcements,” Oberon said. “This is my cousin, Eldon. I thought he might be willing to give Holly and me a hand perfecting her vision for the craft room.”

“And I happen to know a bit about Victorian paint,” Eldon said.

“Well, come in. Everything is...chaotic. But Holly really wants to pick out the color for her craft room so Oberon can get started. We finished unpacking her bedroom earlier, so she’s raring to go.”

As they followed Miles inside, Ivy took a good sniff of Eldon before turning her attention to Oberon. She nudged her head

against his leg until he squatted in front of her and scratched her cheeks. “Such a pretty girl. Yes, you are,” Oberon cooed.

A snorting cough drew his gaze upward where Eldon and Miles were both smirking at him. “What? Kids and dogs love me.”

“Speaking of,” Miles said when more footsteps alerted them to someone else heading their way.

“Obie!” Holly ran into the room from the back of the house and flung herself against Oberon’s legs. “You came back.”

“I told you I would! And I brought my cousin, Eldon.”

“Did you talk to him about...you know....”

“Paint?” Eldon said with a smile. “I brought my book to help you pick.”

Holly frowned but then forced a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Eldon.”

She leaned against Oberon and looked up at him. “The *other* thing.”

It took Oberon a second to remember. “Not yet,” Oberon whispered, reminded of his promise to share his cousins with Holly. “We’ll talk about it when we go upstairs.”

Holly nodded. “I’ll show you my craft room, Mr. Eldon.”

“Just call me Eldon. And I’d love to see your craft room and hear all about your vision.”

They trooped back up the stairs with Holly leading the way. She explained to Eldon everything they’d already discussed, and Eldon gave her his full attention.

Oberon hung back a couple steps and caught Miles’s eye. “You doing okay?”

Miles nodded. “Exhausted. Why did I decide to go to the clinic the day after I moved here?”

“Probably because you wanted to get both you and Holly settled as quickly as possible.”

Miles shot him a look. “That’s exactly what I thought.”

Oberon shrugged. "It's a good plan. And now you have help, so it'll all work out."

"Everyone is being so nice," Miles said as they reached the top of the stairs.

"You thought we'd all be mean to you?" He got another little smile out of Miles. Oberon's hands tingled when he smiled back. "If that's what you want, I guess I can bust out some of my best pet puns. I can even sing a few. It's torture, really, but —"

"Pet puns in song?" Miles asked. "You're kidding me."

Oberon cleared his throat. "You asked for it. Remember that."

Eldon turned from the doorway of the craft room with a gasp. "Oh no. Cover your ears, Holly. Quick."

Oberon took a deep breath and sang, "We wish you a meowy Christ-mutts, we wish you a meowy Christ-mutts, we wish you a meowy Christ-mutts and a furry New Year."

Miles looked absolutely horrified before he burst out laughing. And Oberon's power leveled up, as Linus would say. His magic bubbled inside of him, eager to find some place to escape, but with human eyes on him, it had nowhere to go.

Eldon's mouth fell open, but then he quickly caught the Lanes' attention and began chatting with Holly about paint. He showed them both the book while Oberon fought to get himself under control. It took longer than it should have.

Much longer.

By the time he walked over to join in the debate happening between Holly and Eldon, he'd managed to tamp down his magic, but it wouldn't last long. He shot a panicked look toward his cousin, who rescued him once more.

"What do you think, Obie? Should we go with the pale yellow, or the lilac to closer match the outside of the house?"

Without hesitating, Oberon knew the answer. "Yellow."

Holly shot him a look that was very similar to ones Oberon had seen from her father. "Why?"

“Because it’ll make the room look warmer and be bright and sunny for all your art projects. If you really like the lilac, we can do that in your bedroom. I mean, if that’s okay with your dad.”

“That sounds like a very good plan,” Holly said. Ivy woofed and tucked her body against Holly’s. “And Ivy agrees. What do you think, Daddy?”

“I agree as well.”

“Excellent,” Eldon said. “Now it’s up to Obie to do all the work.”

Holly giggled and smiled up at him. “I can’t wait.”

“Well, you won’t have to wait long. I should have the first coat up before you get home from school tomorrow.”

Holly did a little spin and Ivy jumped around her. “This is so exciting!”

“Speaking of exciting,” Miles said, “we need to get ready for our big first days tomorrow, which means bath and bedtime.”

Oberon and Eldon smiled and took the hint that it was time for them to go. “See you both later.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Eldon added.

Miles and Eldon started for the stairs, but Oberon stayed behind. He knelt beside Holly. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to him when we get home. I know he’ll say it’s okay, though.”

Holly threw her arms around his neck and gave him the best hug he’d ever had in his life. When Oberon stood, she took his hand and together they went downstairs.

Miles smiled at them as he held open the door for the cousins. “Thanks again, Obie. And to you as well, Eldon. I really want Holly to love it here, and you’re both helping me make that happen. I appreciate it.”

“Thank you, Obie. Thank you, Eldon. I love the yellow we picked out.”

“Happy to help,” Oberon said.

He smiled at Holly, then turned to look at her father.

Miles met his gaze and smiled as well. “Good night.”

He slowly closed the door but didn’t take his eyes from Oberon’s until the door separated them. Oberon let out a breath and headed back across the street. He didn’t bother going into the inn. Eldon followed him around back to the carriage house and once they were inside his workshop, Oberon closed his eyes and held out his hands.

Eldon gasped. “Obie.”

He opened his eyes and found the desk he’d intended to finish for Holly completed. All the scuffs in the paint had vanished, as had all the filler he’d added to the damaged pieces of wood. It looked brand new, not nearly a hundred years old.

“Not a word,” Oberon said. “I mean it, Eldon. Not a single word.”

“But....”

“Nope. Not yet. I...no. We don’t know what’s causing this. Let’s not put the sleigh before the reindeer, okay?”

Eldon nodded and put his hand on Oberon’s shoulder. “Okay. But you have to promise to tell me if anything else happens. This doesn’t just affect you and Nyall. We all need to be aware if our magic is going to start doing things without our knowledge.”

The look on Eldon’s face made it clear the subject wasn’t open for debate.

“I promise.”

“Good. Now let’s go find Linus and get something to eat.”

They got to the Inn only to find Linus dressed all in black, instead of the bright and bell-covered holiday sweater he’d been wearing when they left. He froze and looked at them with a bright, guilt-ridden smile.

“Why hello, dear cousins! I wasn’t expecting to see you back so soon this fine evening.”

Eldon snorted. “I bet you weren’t.”

“You absolutely cannot go spy on Nyall,” Oberon said.

“I would...not...well, fudge. You’re no fun. I just want to see if something happens. Aren’t you curious at all? What if this is a sign that we’re getting all our magic back?”

Eldon shot Oberon a very significant look that he absolutely and completely ignored.

“Then Nyall will tell us. In *his* time, and when *he’s* ready to share.”

Eldon scoffed under his breath, but Oberon’s pointed comment made his opinion clear. Until he understood what was happening, he didn’t want to get Linus’s hopes up.

“Ugh. Fine,” Linus said with a dramatic sigh. “Then someone else is in charge of dinner while I pout. I was planning on getting Carol to sneak me something.”

“Not it,” Eldon said before Oberon could even open his mouth.

Oberon grumbled but went into the kitchen and began poking around the cabinets. “How does breakfast for dinner sound?”

Linus perked up. “Pancakes?”

“Done.” Oberon pulled out the box of just-add-water pancake mix and began preparing their dinner. Luckily, he’d found something easy that wouldn’t take a lot of his focus because Oberon’s thoughts were everywhere but on their dinner. He was especially worried about Linus, whose soft heart and hopeful nature would be the most damaged if all of this turned out to be nothing.

As jolly as Linus appeared on the outside, he was the worrywart of their family. With Nyall as upset as he’d been earlier, it was no wonder Linus had been ready to take drastic action by the time they got back. And the more he knew, the more he’d worry. Oberon didn’t want to add more for him to fuss about.

Eldon got Linus busy setting the table while Oberon finished the stack of pancakes for them. He found some leftover bacon in the fridge from that morning’s breakfast and put it in the

microwave for a quick reheat. Linus usually made bacon crumbles out of any leftovers for something else, but Oberon figured the occasion called for bacon.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t go check on him?” Linus asked as Oberon put a stack of steaming pancakes and a bottle of syrup on the table.

“We’re sure,” Eldon and Oberon said in unison.

“But he was so worried about his magic. What if something happens?”

“Then he’ll call us.” Oberon said.

“Besides,” Eldon added, “everything that’s happened with his magic so far has been safe. I know it’s been a while since we’ve...well, it’s been a while, but don’t forget that our magic also protects us. He’s going to be okay.”

Eldon looked at Oberon when he spoke.

Message received.

Oberon let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding as he drowned his pancakes in syrup. “Eat up. We all have big days tomorrow.”

And maybe, if Oberon was lucky, he’d get some more clues as to why his magic seemed to be under Miles’s spell.

MILES

After taking Holly to school, Miles headed for Paws and Claus. Like the house, Miles had purchased the clinic based on photos alone. From the butterflies in his stomach, Miles was as nervous as his daughter on their first day.

He shouldn't have been surprised to find the front room full of visitors and a "Welcome to Mistletoe Falls" banner strung across the check-in desk.

Gloria, Donner, and Rudy stood behind the counter with beaming smiles on their faces. Joy and a man Miles assumed was Dr. Claus stood near the waiting area with a wriggling Kringle, decked out in a festive new harness, between them.

"This is..." Miles honestly couldn't find words. He hadn't known what to expect moving to a new town, sight unseen. From the warmth of his welcome, Miles's instincts had definitely led him to the right place.

"We're amazing. We know." Gloria high-fived Donner and Rudy.

Dr. Claus laughed and walked over to Miles with his hand outstretched. "Good morning, Dr. Lane. I'm Chris Claus. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"And you as well. Please, call me Miles. The clinic is even better than it was in the pictures."

Dr. Claus smiled and looked around the clinic fondly. "Thank you. Gloria's no doubt been scrubbing every inch of the place to make sure you couldn't find a single thing wrong. Call me Chris by the way. I suspect we're going to be good friends."

The older man clapped Miles on the shoulder and smiled. Miles wondered how often Chris Claus was mistaken for Santa himself with his white hair, beard, and the twinkle in his eyes. The offer of friendship was greatly appreciated, though, and Miles couldn't help but smile back him.

"I hope so."

"Now, let's introduce you to your first patient. It seems only fair for Kringle here to get his next round of shots from his new doctor."

Miles laughed. "Uh-huh, you just don't want to be the one to do it. I see how you are."

Chris laughed and scooped up the wriggly puppy. "True. But I also thought I'd show you around the back and help you get a feel for the place before you start accepting patients. I'm sure there will be a bit of a learning curve while you get used to the place, but we ran a tight ship. Gloria kept us all on our toes, and she's promised to do the same for you."

"We didn't book any appointments this week, Dr. Lane," Gloria added. "It'll be emergencies only, but at this time of year, there's always more than a few."

"Thanks, Gloria."

Chris led Miles and Kringle into the back area where most of the more technical procedures would take place. There passed a few exam rooms along the hallway, each with a gleaming stainless steel exam table and colorful animal artwork on the walls. The familiar smells of a veterinary practice filled his nose and allowed Miles to relax a bit more.

He'd wanted to be a vet since he was a small child and his parents gifted him his first dog, a black cocker spaniel named Buddy. He and Buddy had been inseparable for most of his childhood. Miles had wanted Holly to have a similar experience, although he'd had a smaller dog in mind for her.

She'd fallen in love with Ivy, though, and that had been that. Ivy's breeder had been at the clinic with her newest litter of puppies on a day Holly happened to be visiting. He'd had every intention of picking out a rescue dog for her, but he

couldn't deny that the two had connected immediately. A few weeks later, he'd had a tiny little fluff of a pup who turned into a hundred-and-twenty-pound sweetheart.

Something brushed against Miles's leg. He yelped before jumping about a foot into the air. Chris laughed so hard he nearly dropped Kringle.

"Vixen! You be nice to poor Miles. He doesn't know you really run the place yet."

Miles glanced down to find a pastel calico cat staring up at him. After letting out an annoyed meow, she defiantly lifted a paw and gave it a quick lick before turning and lifting her tail to him. He glanced at Chris and waited for his heart to stop racing.

"She's the clinic's cat," Chris explained. "A Siamese mix, as are her two babies, Dancer and Prancer. They're a little shyer, but you'll meet them soon enough."

"Three cats?"

Chris shrugged. "They picked us, what can I say. We tried to find her a home, and every time, she'd show back up at the clinic within a few days. They stay out of the way, for the most part."

"How are they with dogs?"

"Good. Vixen will show them who's boss if they try to sass her, but we've never had any trouble. They tend to hang out in Gloria's office most of the day, so they won't be underfoot."

Vixen hopped up onto one of the surgical tables and gave him another look. Then she yowled a demand for attention at him. "Oh, *now* you want me to say hello," Miles said.

He had to admit that he loved Siamese cats, especially how vocal they tended to be. Vixen looked away but Miles had no doubt he was absolutely expected to come and pet her. He did and she immediately began a rumbling purr.

"She likes you already," Chris said. "She never likes anyone right away."

Miles glanced over his shoulder at the older man. “You think you could have mentioned that before I put my hands on her?”

Chris chuckled. “Probably. Now, let’s get down to business. This little guy is ready for his next round of shots.”

“Gloria,” Miles called, “can you bring me Kringle’s chart?”

“Sure thing!”

Rudy came back into the room and reached out his hands for Kringle. “Hand him over, Dr. Claus. You know you can do this for any animal but your own. Such a softie.”

“You stop giving away my secrets. Besides, this is what I trained you for.”

Rudy laughed and cuddled Kringle as Gloria came in and handed Miles a tablet with Kringle’s chart on display. “Come on, Kringle,” Miles said. “Let’s get this over with.”

Chris hurried out of the room while Miles read over the chart.

“I can grab whatever you need,” Rudy said.

Miles nodded and rattled off the next round of vaccinations the puppy required. Rudy put Kringle on the table between them and went to gather the supplies while Miles began his exam on the little guy.

It didn’t take long for them to finish, then Miles carried Kringle out front to his waiting parents. Joy reached for Kringle and cuddled him close. “How’d he do?”

“He was perfect. We’ll need to see you in a few months for his next round,” Miles said.

Joy smiled up at him. “It’s nice being on this side of things at the clinic. Now, we’ll get out of your hair and let your team show you around.”

“But we’re here if you need us,” Chris added. “Call me anytime, and I mean that.”

“Thank you both for coming by and for letting Kringle be my first official patient. It means a lot to me.”

Joy nudged Chris, as if to say *I told you so*, then the two left the clinic with smiles on their faces and a sleepy puppy cuddled in Joy's arms.

Miles spent the next little while familiarizing himself with the clinic's layout. Rudy and Donner gave him the grand tour of the back areas where all the medical supplies were located, and then Gloria showed him around the offices, included the office that would now be his.

They'd just finished up when a bell tinkled above the front door, announcing another visitor. Miles and Gloria went out front and found Oberon waiting for them, carrying a cardboard tray filled with coffee cups and what appeared to be a box of pastries.

"Morning, Doc, Gloria. Came by to pick up the keys to the house so I could get started painting. I thought I'd bring some of Nyall's goodies as a welcome gift."

Miles had no idea what was in the box, but whatever it was, it made his mouth water. Then again, Oberon seemed to have a similar effect on him, so it could have been his appearance that set Miles off.

He'd never found himself so immediately attracted to someone. Oberon's broad shoulders, fluffy red beard, and twinkling gray-blue eyes had him itching to curl up against the man and see if the heat between them really went both ways.

"Thank you, Obie. You didn't have to do that."

Oberon smiled and passed both the coffee tray and pastry box across the counter.

"He most certainly did," Gloria said. She snagged one of the coffee cups and popped off the lid, only to let out a groan a second later. "Nyall's hot cocoa. I love you, Obie. Will you marry me?"

"Sorry, Gloria. I have a sneaking suspicion your husband would have opinions about that."

"Damn. Forgot about him. Nyall's cocoa does that to a gal."

Oberon chuckled and it sent a warm flutter through Miles's stomach. Miles reached for one of the cups and removed the lid. The cocoa smelled heavenly and after taking his first sip, he understood Gloria's reaction.

"Sorry, Gloria," Miles said. "If Obie's going to keep showing up with cocoa and pastries, I'm calling dibs on him."

Oberon's cheeks turned as red as his beard, which he began to tug nervously. "Now, Doc, you keep talking like that and you might turn my head."

"Whew," Gloria said, fanning herself dramatically, "things are getting hot in here."

Miles huffed and took another sip of cocoa before opening the box. He found a gorgeous display of muffins and cookies. "Wow, this is amazing. Thank you, Obie."

"Don't mention it. Would you mind grabbing me the keys to your place so I can get started on the paint? I wanted to have the first coat done before Holly gets out of school today."

"Sounds great. Actually, why don't I walk over with you? We don't have any appointments scheduled, and I'd like to go over the rest of the changes I'm thinking about while I have time. I'll also get a spare key for you so you can go in to work in the mornings without having to stop by."

Gloria smacked Miles playfully on the arm. "We like it when he stops by."

She absolutely wasn't wrong.

"I'll be back in a few. Call my cell if you need me."

"Will do. We have a shipment of supplies coming in this morning, so we'll get that unpacked. Feel free to hang out over at the house and get some things done. I can call if there's a patient."

Miles let out a small breath of relief. There really was so much more work to do at the house, but he hated skipping out on his first day at the clinic. "You sure?"

"Positive. Go on."

“Thanks, Gloria.”

Oberon smiled. “I’ll meet you over there. I drove my truck this morning to pick up the paint and the rest of my supplies. I’ll load up all the empty boxes on your porch when I’m done today and take them to the recycling center. See you in a minute.”

Miles watched as Oberon walked out the door and couldn’t deny admiring the view as he went. There was something to be said for a man who could pull off a great pair of jeans and a flannel shirt.

“Into the lumberjack look, huh?” Gloria said.

Miles jumped again, sloshing hot cocoa all over the front of his scrub shirt. Gloria covered her mouth to keep from laughing in his face, but it didn’t hide her muffled laughter.

“Maybe,” Miles confessed.

“I happen to know he’s single. You know, in case that maybe turns into a yes. Which it should because damn, that man could melt my snowman any day of the week.”

“Melt your...you know what, I’m not going to ask. Call me if you need me, okay?”

“Will do.” Gloria plucked an apple fritter from the pastry box and took it and her cocoa down the hall to her office.

Miles left through the back door and headed toward the promised shortcut to his house. He found it easily and opened the gate before heading to the back of the house. He stripped off his soaked scrub shirt as he went, leaving him in his long-sleeved undershirt. Luckily, he’d worn a black one, so it didn’t show the cocoa stain.

After unlocking the back door, Miles tossed the dirty shirt on top of the washing machine. Ivy greeted him happily and together they made their way through the house to the front door. By the time he got there, a Christmas-red vintage truck sat in front of his house.

Oberon climbed out, shutting the heavy metal door with a thud. Since when was a guy in an old truck the sexiest thing

Miles had ever seen? And since when did Miles react this way to someone he'd just met? Never, that's since when. Once he'd made the decision to have Holly and had received confirmation from the surrogate that his daughter was on the way, he'd closed down that part of his life. Before that? He'd never experienced anything remotely like this.

"Doc? Wanna give me a hand?"

Miles nodded and scurried down the steps with Ivy at his side. In the back of the truck, Oberon had a few gallons of paint and a bucket of supplies. The surprise was the beautiful antique white desk Oberon uncovered as Miles walked closer.

"What's that?" Miles asked.

"A present for Holly," Oberon said. "If it's okay with you, that is. It's been in my workshop for a while, so I finished it up last night. I thought it would be perfect for her."

Miles honestly didn't know what to say. Luckily, Oberon was distracted for a few minutes greeting Ivy, so it gave him a chance to find his words again. "It's beautiful, Obie."

Oberon hopped into the bed of the truck and began unstrapping the desk. "It needed a good home."

Miles helped Oberon lift the desk out of the truck. He couldn't help but grin as they carried it into the house. "She's going to absolutely love it. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I figured I'd get the first coat of paint on the walls, and then see if you needed me to do anything else while it dried."

Miles took a look around the downstairs rooms and let out a breath. "I'd appreciate that."

Oberon went back outside, returning with the paint and his supplies while Miles stood there like a lump trying to figure out why he couldn't seem to form a rational thought around a man he barely knew. Oberon smiled at him as he walked by, carrying everything upstairs.

Miles watched him go, then gave himself a little shake. He went into the living room and began unpacking the boxes of

books and photos he wanted on the built-in shelves. It took several hours to get the work done, but before he knew it, Oberon was back downstairs leaning against the doorframe with his impossibly wide shoulders and perfect smile.

“First coat done,” Oberon said. “Need some help?”

“I need some lunch,” Miles said with a laugh. “And I need to take Ivy on a walk. Are dogs welcome in the town square? I wanted to stop by Eldon’s shop and see if there was anything in there that would be nice for Holly’s room.”

“I think Eldon would make an exception for you and Ivy, and I’d be happy to introduce you to Carol over at Carols and Crepes, if you don’t mind the company.”

Miles shivered but managed to nod. “I’d love the company. Besides, buying you lunch is the least I can do after everything you’ve done for me.”

It wasn’t the very least he wanted Oberon to do for him, or to him, but he tried once more to tamp down those thoughts. The last thing he needed was to develop a crush on Oberon, especially when his thoughts needed to be on making sure his daughter settled into their new home without problems.

MILES

Something very weird was happening.

Miles thought at first that it was his imagination, but as he and Holly walked Ivy around the block, he became more and more certain it wasn't.

"Daddy," Holly whispered when Ivy stopped to sniff a tree. "Why does everyone keep giving us such sad looks?"

"I don't know," Miles said.

They'd both survived two whole days in Mistletoe Falls without issue. Holly loved her new teacher and apparently the art teacher was phenomenal—Holly's words, not his. She'd also fallen in love with the warm, buttery yellow color Oberon had painted the walls of her craft room.

He'd finished the second coat that afternoon, in fact, and Miles couldn't wait to show Holly the things he'd found for her in Eldon's shop the day before. At first, he'd thought about keeping them back as Christmas presents, but he really didn't want to wait. The craft room wasn't really a present anyway.

After their walk, Miles and Holly planned on sitting down at the computer and trying to find a couch to order for the room. They passed another neighbor, who gave them yet another sad panda expression. He and Holly shared a look.

"We should ask Obie," Holly said. "He'll know."

"You think so, huh?"

"Yeah. He's that kind of guy."

That kind of guy?

“What kind of guy is that?” Miles hoped she had a really great answer to the question, because he sure could use it.

“You know.”

Miles really didn't.

“Holly! Miles!” Joy Claus and little Kringle rounded the end of the block and waved at them.

“Daddy! I forgot to tell you. Mrs. Claus is the helper in my art class. Isn't that awesome? I get to see her all week.”

“That's awesome!”

They reached the pair and stopped to let Ivy and Kringle greet each other.

“How are you two settling in?” Joy asked.

“Slowly but surely.”

“It takes time. I can't wait to see what you do outside. Only one day left.”

One day left?

Why did Miles have a sneaking suspicion he was missing something extremely important?

“We'll get there,” Miles said. “But for now, we'd better keep going. Ivy gets antsy if she doesn't get her evening walk.”

Holly shot him a curious look but didn't question him.

“Bye, Mrs. Claus. See you at school.”

With a wave, they went their separate ways. Once they were around the corner, Holly stopped. “What was that?”

Miles couldn't get anything past her. “I think you were right. We need to go see Obie. He'll know what's going on.”

“Told ya,” Holly said with a grin. “Although what we could do is just wave at him.”

“Huh?”

Holly pointed down the street where a very distinct red truck was heading their way. Holly immediately began to wave, and Obie pulled the truck over next to them.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite Lanes. What are you two up to this evening?”

“We need to talk to you, Obie,” Holly said. “It’s really important.”

“Uh-oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

“We don’t know,” Miles added. “That’s what we’re hoping you can tell us.”

“Okay, let me go park the truck and I’ll meet you at your house. That way I can get some Ivy loves.”

Holly laughed and stepped back. “You *love* her,” Holly crooned.

“Have you seen her?” Oberon asked. “She’s absolutely the most lovable dog ever.”

“We think so,” Miles said.

“I’ll see you in a few minutes,” Oberon said.

He pulled away in the truck and Holly shot Miles a triumphant stare. “He’s going to fix it. Obie fixes things, Daddy. It’s what he does.”

“I hope so.”

The sky continued to darken as they approached the house. Dusk always came so early at this time of year. Miles had to admit that he missed the long days of summer. But the air was crisp and cool, and being bundled up in a sweater and scarf was nice too.

Holly and Ivy skipped ahead, and Miles couldn’t help but smile. Moving to Mistletoe Falls had absolutely been the right move for them. Even something as simple as an evening walk had been more difficult in the city. There was more people and more traffic and just more of everything.

The quiet of the evening was so much more peaceful and Miles found it somehow easier to breathe. He met up with

Holly and Ivy on the front porch as Oberon rounded the side of the Inn and made his way across the street to them.

As he reached their front yard, Ivy bounded out to meet him and Oberon dropped to his knees to give her a full rubdown that had her flopping over onto her back to get her belly scratched as well.

When she'd finally had enough, Ivy rolled to her feet and puppy pounced at him. Oberon chased her around the yard for a minute before finally approaching the porch with a bright laugh that made Miles forget how to breathe for a second.

Of course, Holly's sharp elbow in his side reminded him and he sucked in a breath. "Ouch, bony elbows!"

She snorted. "Daddy, ask him. I'm dying here."

"Well, we don't want that," Oberon said. He sat down on the step next to Miles and Ivy plopped herself down beside him before putting her head in his lap. "What can I do to help?"

Miles wasn't entirely sure how to explain it. He hesitated one second too long.

"Everyone is giving us funny looks," Holly said. "It's weird and we don't know why!"

"Funny looks?"

Miles nodded. "Like...they feel sorry for us? Or are sad? I don't know. I...do they think I'm, um, widowed or something? I've heard rumors can move fast in small towns, but..."

"No," Oberon said. "I don't think that's what it is."

"He's right, Daddy," Holly advised. "That doesn't explain the 'one day left' thing."

"Good point," Miles said. "Apparently we only have one day left."

Oberon smiled again. Then he stood and held out his hand to Miles. Miles took it and let Oberon pull him to his feet. Then Oberon did the same for Holly. "Come with me, Lane family, and let me show you the way."

Miles had no idea where Oberon was taking them, but he didn't let go of either of their hands as he led them down the brick path to the sidewalk in front of the house.

"Look around," Obie said. "One of these things is not like the others."

Miles frowned and looked around. Every house on the street was brightly lit...but theirs. "We...don't have decorations?"

"Ding ding ding. We have a winner."

"We don't decorate outside for Christmas, Obie," Holly explained.

Obie looked startled, then a little horrified. "What do you mean, you don't decorate outside for Christmas?"

"Or inside, really," Holly added. "I mean, we have a little tree we put on the table, and Daddy always puts our stockings up. It doesn't make sense to have decorations when you have a big dog in a small house."

Miles fought back a smile as his daughter parroted the explanation he'd given the last several years as to why they didn't put up a bigger tree. They really hadn't had the room in their old house, and it was the last thing on his mind this year.

"That's exactly right, Holly," Miles said. "But we do have room for a tree now. What do you think?"

She turned to him and her mouth fell open. "Seriously?"

"We'll see what we can do. Maybe after work and school tomorrow we'll do some shopping."

"No outside lights?" Oberon repeated the phrase as if they'd said something truly terrible.

"We'll make sure to go all out next year," Miles said. "At least now we know. I'm sure everyone will understand since we just moved in."

Oberon tugged his beard. "Okay."

"Thanks for your help, Obie. I told Daddy you know how to fix things. I knew you'd fix it."

“Yeah,” Oberon said. “I do know how to fix things. Happy to...help.”

“Daddy, I need to finish my homework. We should go.”

Miles smiled at Oberon. “I suppose we should get inside. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Oberon said, giving them a smile before walking backward down the sidewalk, “you will.”

OBERON

After a crazy couple of days, including an emergency plumbing job—the Joseph’s little boy Nicholas thought it’d be fun to flush all of his toy cars down the toilet—Oberon finally managed to catch up with his cousins and find out how Nyall’s big date with Aaron went.

To say he was stunned by what Nyall’s magic had done would be the understatement of the century. Oberon’s magical repairs to Holly’s desk might as well be a lump of coal in comparison.

No one was surprised when Linus got both jealous and excited about the development. Of all the cousins, Linus struggled most with their magic decreasing, and he longed for love.

“Oh, poor Nyall. Meeting a gorgeous man who is so into you it’s literally making your holiday magic blossom. Sorry if I don’t feel one bit sorry for you.” Linus scowled and leaned back against the couch. He pulled a bag of red hots from his pocket and began tossing them into his mouth.

Before Oberon could warn him against the idea, Linus gasped and reached for one of the glasses of water he’d put on the table for each of them. “Hot hot hot!”

He slurped water and waved his hand in front of his mouth while Oberon wondered if Miles might actually be the cause of his sudden burst of magic.

“Hot.” Linus repeated the word as if it meant something else. “Oh...Oh...Ohhhhhhh.”

Oberon scowled at his cousin, pulled out of his own thoughts by Linus’s dramatics.

“What, Linus?” Eldon snapped.

Linus spit out the candies into his water glass. “Aaron and Nyall. Hot.”

Nyall groaned. “Linus, yes, Aaron’s hot. And yes, what we did was super-hot. But that doesn’t explain—”

“Oh, but it does. Aaron is your mate. As in fated. As in sent by the Goddess to give you eternal, magical bliss.” Linus jumped up and did a karate kick but ended up toppling over the back of the couch and landing on the floor with a thud. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

Oberon almost swallowed his tongue. That wasn’t possible.

Nyall seemed to agree with him. “Fated mates aren’t...real?”

“Aren’t they?” Linus asked. “I mean, we’ve all heard the stories. And we all know magic has been wonky lately. I so called it. Sleigh my name. Sleigh my name.”

Oberon had to laugh at the dance Linus attempted as he sang. Before he could issue a warning to be careful, Linus spun and flew off the rug onto the hardwood floors. He slid several feet and ended up under their tree. “How has he survived so long?”

The cousins continued the discussion. Nyall was particularly worried about Aaron learning their secret. There were very strict rules in place about revealing the magical world to humans. The fact that Aaron was also a reporter added a level of complication that none of them needed.

“What do I do?” Nyall asked.

Oberon straightened his back, determined not to let this change in their magic freak any of them out.

“Nothing,” Oberon said firmly. “You do what you’re doing now. If Aaron is your mate, then we’ll celebrate it. If he’s not, we’ll know that Linus’s first prediction was correct, that there is more magic in the air this season and that it must be affecting you more strongly for some reason.”

His tone seemed to have a calming effect on his cousins. Linus immediately began teasing Nyall about sex magic, which lightened the mood even further. Even as they discussed

making pizza for dinner, Oberon knew they needed a distraction.

And he happened to have exactly the distraction they needed.

“Speaking of bad,” Oberon said. “The new vet doesn’t have any decorations for his place. I thought we could help him out and get at least a few decorations outside before the parade tomorrow.”

Linus froze, his eyes widening. “He doesn’t have what now?”

“De-cor-a-tions,” Oberon repeated, knowing the information would give his decoration-loving cousin heart palpitations. “Breathe, Linus. Not everyone has an entire attic full of every holiday-themed decor in the realm.”

Linus put his hand over his heart. “I can’t...I can’t....”

Nyall glared at him. “Couldn’t you have broken that news a little more gently? You know how he feels about people who don’t decorate.”

Linus lifted his head and straightened. Oberon had to fight not to smile. He did know his cousins well.

“Okay, new plan. Oberon, go get the doc,” Linus ordered. “He’s coming to dinner and picking out a theme. I might have bought two pizzas so I could have one later. This is an emergency, though. Nyall, go get Aaron and tell him the horrible....” Linus paused and shivered “... news. He’ll help. I know he will.”

“Uh, don’t forget that he has a daughter.” Oberon felt his cheeks heat. He hoped his cousins wouldn’t be put off by that tiny detail, but none of them seemed to care in the slightest.

“Well then, she can help pick out the theme,” Linus said. “Shoo. Go. Get them and bring them back so we can prevent this catastrophe. I can’t believe you didn’t say anything until now. Letting us go on about Nyall’s mate when we had a real problem on our hands.”

“Hey!” Nyall said.

“Shush. You know I’m right,” Linus said. “Plus, Obie already said we just go with the flow where Aaron is concerned and

that's what we'll do. Everyone knows their mission? Then break!"

Eldon and Linus hurried to the kitchen to start the pizzas, leaving Oberon and Nyall alone.

"Obie? You okay?"

Oberon shrugged. He wasn't ready to admit to anyone that Miles seemed to be affecting him similarly to how Aaron affected Nyall. "I guess we'll find out. Let me go get the doc and Holly."

If anyone could pull off a holiday miracle, it would be Linus. He crossed the street and knocked on their door, grinning at the familiar thumping of Ivy feet rushing to the door. She woofed as Miles opened the door, then rushed out to greet him.

"Hey pretty girl," Oberon said, rubbing her soft ears between his hands as he smiled up at Miles.

"I wasn't expecting to see you this evening," Miles said. "Not that I mind."

Oberon straightened and smiled. "I'm glad, because I might have thrown you under the sleigh."

"The sleigh?"

"Yeah. I might have told my cousin Linus that you don't have any decorations, and well...you'd better hold on for *deer* life."

Miles snorted. "How terrified should I be right now?"

"I honestly can't answer that question. But hey, there's free pizza. Does that help?"

"Pizza!" Holly yelled from the top of the stairs before she proceeded to rush down them and run for Oberon. "Obie! You're taking us for pizza? Daddy was making broccoli."

"Watch it, Miss, or we'll be bringing the broccoli with us. Obie invited us over to the Inn for pizza with his cousins. I take it you'd like to go?"

She nodded so hard her ponytail whipped over her head. She released Oberon long enough to shove her feet into a pair of

purple rain boots sitting by the front door. “I’m ready!”

Miles laughed and tucked his feet into a pair of boots as well. “I guess we’re ready.”

Holly grabbed Oberon’s hand as they walked out the door. Miles grabbed his keys and locked the door behind him, ignoring the pitiful whine from Ivy as they left her behind.

If Oberon didn’t know they’d be back after pizza, he’d have insisted they bring Ivy along. As it was, she’d have lots of fun once Linus unleashed his decorating fury on them.

Oberon took them directly to the kitchen where everyone had regrouped. “Um, Doc—er, Miles, these are my cousins, Linus, Eldon, and Nyall. And that’s, uh, Nyall’s friend Aaron. Everyone, this is Miles Lane and his daughter Holly.”

Miles looked a bit overwhelmed by it all—Linus’s decor could do that to a guy who had zero decorations—but Holly lit up and ran over to the table they’d set while Oberon was gone.

“I love Santa!” Holly gushed over the Santa-themed plates and glasses covering the table.

Linus grinned. “I’m glad to hear it. Okay, the pizzas are ready, and we have some important business to discuss.”

“We don’t really need—” Miles froze at the look Linus sent him.

Oberon put his hand on Miles’s back. He hadn’t heard the worst of it yet.

Eldon cleared his throat as he carried one of the pizzas over to the table. “Technically, you do. Did you not carefully read the HOA agreement when you bought the house?”

Miles frowned. “I…apparently not.”

“Decorations are a requirement in this neighborhood,” Nyall said gently. “It’s not a big deal. We have tons. It’s kind of Linus’s obsession.”

Linus nodded and pulled out a chair for Holly. She hopped onto it and Linus sat down beside her. “Okay, tell me what your favorite colors are.”

“Favorite?” Holly chewed her lip for a minute before looking over at her father. “Rainbow. Definitely rainbow.”

Miles nodded. “She’s a fan of all colors.”

Oberon guided Miles to a seat at the table and began serving up pizza and punch. Linus and Holly had their heads together, furiously negotiating the decorating scheme for the Lane’s house.

Once they’d settled, they looked up at Miles for approval. He looked like he’d been run over by a sleigh.

“So...because our last name is Lane, our house is going to be Candy Cane Lane?”

“Yes, Daddy! Isn’t Linus clever?”

“He absolutely is.”

“Don’t worry,” Oberon said. “Linus and Holly have a vision and they have all of us to make it come to life.”

“This is so exciting,” Holly said. “Can we start now?”

They’d polished off both pizzas and most of the bowl of punch. Oberon glanced at Miles, who nodded his approval. Linus grabbed Holly’s hand and the two of them made a dash for the storage room in the attic.

The rest of them followed and Linus piled up everyone’s arms with pins and bags. Not even Holly was exempt, she ended up with rolls of ribbons to carry over.

“Oberon, you’re on lights. You know what I like,” Linus said. “Miles, you can help him.”

Linus shoved a giant bin filled with spools of lights and the clips they used to hang them from the gutters. They carried them to the front corner of the house.

“Mind helping me carry my ladder over?” Oberon asked.

“No, of course not.”

Oberon led them to the carriage house and used the keypad outside of the garage door to open it.

“Wow,” Miles said when he saw the workshop inside.

The entire back of the room was filled with furniture he'd picked up here and there to restore. He hated seeing a good piece of furniture thrown away simply because it needed a few repairs. And he always seemed to find a good home for everything he rescued.

Oberon lifted his ladder from hooks on the wall. Miles grabbed one end and they went back over to the Lane's to find everyone else hard at work. Holly used pieces of wire to build little ornament bundles while Eldon and Linus hung a fluffy white garland over the front porch.

Aaron and Nyall sat on the ground surrounded by pool noodles, which they seemed to be turning into giant lollypops. Miles looked at everyone, then spared an extra-long glance at his daughter whose smile was enough to make all the hard work they were about to do worth it a thousand times over.

Oberon grabbed an extension cord from the box and went around the side of the house to plug it in. He'd learned long ago to test the lights before he hung them, so when he got the extension cord in place, he plugged in the first spool of lights, happy to see them light up.

"What do I do?" Miles asked.

"Just hold on to the spool and keep it from getting tangled."

"Shouldn't I hold on to the ladder? What if you fall?"

Oberon grinned at him as he put his foot on the first step. "Then I guess you better not let me."

Miles met his gaze and that spark between them grew. The lights on the spool glowed brighter for a moment, and Oberon worried they were going to blow a fuse.

Luckily, they didn't, and Oberon forced himself to look away and continue up the ladder. It didn't take long with them working together to get the first set of lights strung across the front of the house. When they finished, Linus pointed to a second box full of net lights.

Miles lifted the tangled mass and stared at it in horror.

Oberon laughed and began untangling it. “Don’t worry. These are easy.”

He plugged the end into another extension cord and then showed Miles how to cover the bushes with the set.

“Oh, that is easy. I’m pretty sure they’re going to be able to see my house from the space station, though.”

“Probably not your house,” Oberon teased, “but definitely our block. Linus might be obsessed with making sure everything is just so for the light parade.”

“Oh, right,” Miles said. “I read about that in the brochure. It starts tomorrow, right?”

“It does.”

Their next marching orders from Linus were to attach large ornaments to the rafters. They came in a variety of colors, making up the rainbow Holly had requested.

Linus and Holly then began setting up painted planters along the brick path. They held more lollypop shaped decorations and were covered with smaller versions of the ornaments Oberon and Miles hung from the roof.

All in all, it took the group a few hours to get the outside decorated to Linus’s exacting standards. Linus had Oberon turn off the lights before guiding them all to the front of the house.

Miles stood at his side with Holly in front of them holding tightly to Miles’s hand. She nervously leaned back against both of their legs as Linus did a countdown. Oberon connected the extension cord and the house lit up. Holly gasped and leaned even harder against them, her eyes wide with wonder.

Oberon couldn’t blame her. As usual, Linus’s vision had turned out a candy-themed, colorful yard that all of the neighbors would envy. Oberon’s entire body tingled, and he glanced down to realize his hands sparkled with magic. He quickly stuffed them in his pockets, hoping no one noticed the little golden sparks on the end of his fingers.

Linus spun around and gestured to Holly, then insisted they both take a bow. She giggled but did, then let Linus lead her in a little dance as Oberon, Miles, and the others applauded.

“And now,” Linus said, “for my final trick of the evening, I shall leave Miles and Oberon to put up the matching interior decor. Now Miles, before you argue, I know you’re new, so consider all of this a loan until you can acquire your own items for next year. I just can’t handle the thought of you not having a matching tree since Holly came up with such a clever theme.”

Oberon tried not to laugh, but Linus couldn’t be more obvious if he tried. Holly turned to her dad with big, hopeful eyes and Miles nodded his agreement.

“Yay! Thank you, Linus.” Holly flung her arms around Linus’s waist and held on for a minute.

Linus positively glowed.

Luckily, he wasn’t literally glowing. Unlike Oberon. He swallowed hard, thinking back to the earlier conversation about mates. Miles couldn’t be his...could he?

Oberon found himself imagining what life could be like, even as they carried the rest of the boxes inside and his cousins all said goodnight. He pictured living in the house with them, Ivy at his side as she currently was, and Miles upstairs helping Holly get ready for bed.

He could see it all so clearly.

But seeing and believing were two different things...and Oberon wasn’t sure his heart was ready for the second part yet.

MILES

“Can you believe it, Daddy?” Holly said as Miles tucked her into bed.

Ivy hopped up onto the foot of the bed and curled up on the soft blanket they left there for her.

“I honestly can’t,” Miles said. “I love how colorful it is, and I’m so happy we had Linus, Obie, and the others to teach us how to do it all. What do you think, should we stick with the Candy Cane Lane theme?”

Holly nodded. “It’s perfect.”

“Then we’ll start shopping for some candy-themed stuff of our own. I love you, baby girl. Sweet dreams.”

“Night, Daddy. I can’t wait to see the tree when I wake up.”

Miles kissed Holly’s forehead, then tucked the covers more tightly around her before making his way downstairs. He found Oberon sitting in the front room, staring at the mountain of boxes Linus had left behind.

“You—” Before Miles could tell Oberon he didn’t have to help, Oberon turned at the sound of his voice. The look in his eyes made Miles’s knees wobble.

Oberon stood and crossed the room, stopping barely an inch from Miles. His breath came in heavy bursts, as if he’d been running a race.

“Miles.” His name came on an exhaled gasp.

And Miles no longer had a doubt that his attraction was deeply and fiercely returned. He stepped closer and ran his hands up Oberon's chest. They both trembled as Miles leaned in, and then Oberon's lips were on his.

It had been so damn long for Miles. Oberon's arms came around his back, pulling their bodies together with a deep groan. Miles teased Oberon's lips with his tongue, then he slipped it inside when Oberon opened for him.

Miles honestly didn't know a kiss could be so perfect. He'd seen movies where all it took was a kiss. He'd laughed at the idea. It took so much more than simple chemistry for things to be right.

But it didn't.

He knew that now.

A kiss could be everything.

Oberon pulled back, his eyes gleaming. He ran a finger over Miles's lips, then down his cheek. "My beard is too rough."

"Your beard is perfect."

Oberon shivered and leaned his forehead against Miles's. "You're perfect."

Miles scoffed and pulled back. "I'm far from it, but I have a strange feeling you'll be finding that out for yourself."

"That's my plan."

"How did this happen?" Miles asked.

Miles sank down on the couch before reaching for Oberon's hand. Oberon sat down beside him then leaned back and wrapped his arm over Miles's shoulder.

"Magic," Oberon suggested with an irresistible smile.

Miles leaned his head onto Oberon's shoulder and put his hand on Oberon's denim covered thigh. "You know what would be nice?"

"What?"

“Some nice holiday music. Maybe a little fire and some wine. What do you think?”

“It sounds more than nice.”

“Good. Because we still have a tree to put up. I don’t want to disappoint Holly.”

“We won’t,” Oberon promised. “I’ll get the fire going, if you get the wine.”

Miles nodded and went into the kitchen. He leaned against the counter for a minute, wondering if he was dreaming what had just happened. Had he really kissed Oberon? Had they agreed to...what? Date?

He didn’t know. But whatever they’d decided to start, Miles couldn’t wait to see where it went. He’d not felt so giddy in... ever. After getting down a couple crystal wine glasses, Miles poured them each a glass of sweet moscato, then snagged the leftover cookies he’d brought home from the clinic.

Oberon had the fire started by the time he returned. Miles handed over a glass of wine. They stood in front of the warmth for a long moment, staring into each other’s eyes before Oberon held out his glass. “To us.”

Miles clinked his glass to it. “To us.”

They each took a sip as the fire sparked and the flame grew brighter. Miles looked down at it with a laugh. “Wow, that caught fast.”

Oberon looked down at it and then back at Miles. “Yeah, it did.”

“Let me get some music going, then we’ll see what’s in all these boxes.”

Oberon nodded and moved to the biggest of them all, no doubt the one with the tree. He sat his wine glass down on the end table before pulling a multitool out of his pocket. He used the knife to slit the tape on the top of the box, then pulled out a huge tree base.

Miles swallowed hard, his fingers frozen on his phone instead of searching for the promised music. Oberon glanced over his

shoulder and caught Miles practically drooling over him. He smirked.

“Come on, Doc.”

“Yep. I’m...coming. Um. I’m...oh, hell.” Miles glanced down at his phone and picked the first holiday station he could find. It began to play through the wireless speakers in the room. Miles marched over to Oberon, grabbed his cheeks, and planted another deep kiss on him.

Oberon dropped the bottom of the tree to the ground and pulled him close again. Miles couldn’t say how long the kiss lasted but it took every ounce of self-control he possessed to pull back.

“Damn. Now that I know what kissing you feels like, I don’t want to stop.”

“Tell me about it.” Oberon didn’t seem to be in any better shape than he did.

Miles took a deep breath. “Okay. Tree. I’m focused.”

“There should be a stand in there,” Oberon said. “See if you can find it for me.”

“Good. Keep giving me things to do, or I’m going to do things to you that are definitely not on the list.”

“Who says they aren’t on the list?” Oberon lifted a brow as he asked the question, and Miles nearly fell into the giant box.

“You aren’t helping.” Miles found the metal tree stand and emerged from the depths of the box with it.

Oberon laughed and took the stand from his hand. He centered it beneath the window facing the street, then grabbed the giant tree base and slid it into place. “Best thing about Linus’s tree obsession. He likes the pre-lit ones so he can focus on decorating instead of lights.”

Miles found another piece of the tree and tugged it from the box. He passed it over to Oberon, who put it in place. Then he plugged in the tree and the lights began to twinkle. “Halfway there,” Miles said.

“Ha. Now we fluff. Trust me, we will be judged.”

“Fluff?” Miles asked.

“Yep. Like our lives depend on it. Because they do.”

Oberon knelt by the tree and began straightening branches. Miles watched for a second, then began to help. It was scratchy as hell, but after he stepped back and looked at the tree again, he understood.

“It looks so much fuller.”

“Yep. Now let’s see what else Linus has for us.”

“Mystery box number one,” Miles said. He held out his hand and Oberon handed him the tool. Miles opened the box and found more of the brightly colored ornaments that they’d used outside.

“Good one. We need to find the topper. Linus says the topper goes on first, especially when they’re big and all ribbony like the one for this tree.”

“If Linus says so.” Miles handed the knife back to Oberon, who proceeded to slice open all the other boxes while Miles followed behind him and searched for the elusive topper.

“Ah ha!” Oberon pulled a concoction of lollipops and curlicues out of one of the last boxes.

“Exactly how much of this stuff goes on the tree?” Miles asked as he stared around the room at the dozen or so boxes they’d opened.

“Uh, all of it. And if I recall correctly, the big candy houses go around the tree.”

Miles stared at the piles and scowled. “Why am I suddenly feeling like *tree*’s a crowd?”

Oberon’s eyes widened and his grin lit up his entire face. “Did you just make a pun?”

Miles groaned. “It’s contagious. Someone should have warned me.”

Oberon carried the tree topper over and leaned in closer. “It won’t take long, and then we’ll see what else we can get up to.”

Miles shivered. “You keep saying things like that and I’ll make so many puns you won’t know what to do with me.”

Oberon turned and placed the topper on the tree. “Oh, I know exactly what to do with you, Doc. Don’t you worry.”

Miles couldn’t resist the urge to grab a handful of Oberon’s ass. He leaned in and nipped Oberon’s neck as he did. “I’m not worried at all.”

Oberon shivered and the fireplace snapped again as a log toppled over. He turned and met Miles’s gaze, the firelight reflecting in his eyes. “You make me want things, Miles. Things I didn’t know I wanted.” His voice was so low and husky Miles could barely hear him, but every word went straight to his heart.

“Same,” Miles said. “Okay, let’s focus this time. For real.”

“Deal. Pass me the ornaments and I’ll get them put on.”

They started an assembly line of sorts and had all of the plain ornaments set into the branches within a few minutes. Then Miles began handing over all of the candy-shaped baubles and Oberon put them in place. They added the crazy candy-shaped picks that stuck out in all directions before Miles helped Oberon spread out a giant, fluffy white tree skirt.

Linus had provided houses that looked like they were made from candy for them to arrange around the base of the tree. When the last box was empty, Miles stepped back and looked at the tree in awe. “How did we do that? It looks like it came from a store.”

“Many years of Linus’s training,” Oberon said. “Remind me to show you all the ones up at the Inn. He goes a little crazy, but he loves it so much it’s hard not to get excited with him.”

“When this is the result, it’s no wonder. I want to just sit and stare. Holly is going to love it.”

“So let’s sit and stare,” Oberon said. He handed over Miles’s wine glass, then grabbed his own.

They sat down on the couch. Between enjoying the firelight and the glow of the tree, Miles let out a deep sigh. He settled against Oberon’s chest and relaxed. He took a sip of his wine and smiled. “If someone had told me this is where I’d be a few days after moving to Mistletoe Falls, I wouldn’t have believed them.”

Oberon didn’t reply for a long time, and Miles turned to find him staring into the fire with a sweet smile. “Everything happens for a reason,” Oberon said. “I believe that, Miles. Don’t you?”

The words soaked into his soul and Miles found himself nodding. He wouldn’t have believed it before, but in this moment, sitting on his couch with the fire, music, and Christmas tree, Miles couldn’t imagine anything better.

“I really want to kiss you right now,” Miles said, “but if I do, I won’t want to stop.”

Oberon leaned over and rubbed his nose over Miles’s hair. “And your kid is right upstairs. I get it. How about we start with a real date and see where it goes? I bet I can find about a hundred volunteers to babysit.”

Miles settled back against Oberon’s chest again with a smile. “Yeah. A date. How about tomorrow night?”

“Well, tomorrow night’s the first night of the parade. I don’t want to miss Holly seeing it for the first time. Saturday?”

Miles turned and pressed a kiss to Oberon’s bearded cheek. “Saturday it is.”

OBERON

“Is a bow tie really necessary?” Oberon stared at himself in the mirror and fidgeted with the tie Eldon had delivered, along with the plaid shirt he currently wore.

Eldon smacked his hands away. “Yes. Stop touching it. You look very nice.”

Oberon supposed he looked good. He’d even stopped by the barbershop for a haircut and beard trim. The shirt and bowtie did look nice with his best pair of jeans.

“Maybe I should cancel. Nyall needs us.”

“Nyall will be fine. He gets one night to sit home and mope, and then we’ll work on cheering him up.”

Nyall had put on a great show the night before. Oberon hadn’t even realized anything was wrong at first. Then again, he’d been focused on making the walk with Miles, Holly and Ivy, so he’d been a bit distracted.

But at least his magic hadn’t done anything crazy again. Maybe it was a fluke after all. If Aaron really was Nyall’s mate, there’s no way he’d have packed up and left town. There may not have been mates around in as long as any of them could remember, but everyone knew that much.

“Stop thinking about it,” Eldon ordered. “Nyall’s situation has nothing to do with yours. You adore Miles and Holly already. Mates be damned. Maybe he’s just meant to be yours without magic having a thing to do with it. Did you ever think about that?”

“No.”

“Well, there you go. Love at first sight and all that.”

“It happens to humans all the time. Who says it can’t happen to us?”

“Exactly. Now, go wine and dine him. Then you can both stop by the booth and check on me and Holly. We’ll be serving cookies like champs. And if you decide to keep the night going, Linus and I pulled out a bunch of crafts to take over to their house. We’ll spend the rest of the evening making ornaments with Holly. Stay out as long as you want.”

The thought brought a smile to Oberon’s face. “Thanks, Eldon.”

“Uh-huh. I noticed you put the good sheets I bought you last Christmas on the bed.”

Oberon blushed. “They needed to be changed.”

“Sure they did, buddy. You keep telling yourself that story.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. It’s our first date! We’re going to take things slow.”

Eldon let out an extremely inelegant snort. “Did you actually agree to that or is that just you being the sweet summer child you are?”

“I’m not sure what that means.” Oberon hadn’t exactly discussed it with Miles, but they seemed to be on the same page. Then again, they also couldn’t seem to keep their hands off of each other, hence the changing of the sheets.

Not that he would tell Eldon he could be right.

“So how do I look? Really?” Oberon asked.

He turned from the mirror and Eldon looked him up and down. “You look good. I’m proud of you, you know?”

“Proud?”

“For taking a risk, even though you’re not sure what it means. It’s a big deal, especially considering what happened with

Nyall. But what you and Miles have isn't the same. It's yours to build, piece by piece. Just like one of your projects."

Oberon let out a breath and then pulled Eldon into a hug. "Thanks, Eldon."

"Anytime. Now go get your man while I go spoil his kid. This is gonna be fun."

Oberon drove them over to Miles's, even though it was across the street, and parked his truck in front of the house. If it weren't a light parade night, he'd probably have taken Miles over to Carols and Crepes, but it would be packed. He knew of a little place outside of town that served great Italian food, and it wouldn't be as busy as the places closer to town.

As they walked up the path, Oberon caught a glimpse of two faces peeking out of the craft room window. Holly waved, her beaming smile enough to ease Oberon's nerves. Ivy put both her paws up on the window and woofed before they both disappeared.

"I've never seen you look like this," Eldon said.

"I've never felt like this."

And honestly, Oberon didn't even know how to describe it. Content was the word that came to mind, but nothing about Miles and Holly made sense. Then again, as Linus would say, love isn't logical.

Love.

How could he possibly love them already? He'd not even been on a date with Miles, yet his mind and heart had already formed a place for them that hadn't existed before.

For the first time, Oberon began to believe Linus's prediction that a sprite finding his mate would be a magical experience. Was it the same for Miles, though? The attraction was there, for sure. Their steamy kisses made that abundantly clear.

Oberon wanted more, though. Needed more.

Eldon elbowed him in the side. "Stop scowling. You're going to get wrinkles and scare off the cute vet. We like the cute vet and his cuter kid."

Oberon intentionally frowned harder at his cousin. “Mine.”

Eldon snorted out a laugh. “You think you look mean, but we both know you’re the least scary of the four of us, and that’s saying a lot considering Linus is part of that equation.”

“Shut it. I’m mean and scary and you know it.”

“You are?” Miles asked. “Could have fooled me.”

Eldon laughed so hard he snorted. Oberon pushed him into the bushes, making his cousin squawk as he floundered around trying to untangle himself from the branches and lights.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Holly said. She gave Oberon a very disappointed look.

Oberon knelt down in front of her and held out his arms. She ran into them and wrapped her arms around his neck. He stood again, lifting her with him as he did. “I know. I’ll apologize in a minute. I talked to them about the thing, though. They all said yes.”

Holly pulled back and grabbed both of his cheeks in her hands. “Honest?”

Oberon nodded. “I would never, ever lie to you.”

“He doesn’t lie,” Eldon said, having managed to extricate himself from the bushes. He glared at Oberon but seeing Holly in Oberon’s arms beaming at them both had him smiling a second later. “And yes, I would be honored to be your cousin too. Everyone needs cousins.”

Holly reached out her arms to Eldon, and after he got over his surprise, Eldon took her from Oberon. She gave him one of her amazing hugs. Eldon began to look a little misty-eyed.

“You two are ridiculous,” Miles said with a happy sigh.

“Shh,” Eldon said, glaring at Miles. “Holly and I are bonding. We’re cousins now. Plus, I might have brought her a present.”

Holly’s head popped up from Eldon’s shoulder. “A present?”

“Well, it’s for you and Ivy, but yes.”

Holly turned to her dad with puppy eyes of her own.

“Go ahead,” Miles said with another sigh. “You’re all going to spoil her rotten, aren’t you?”

“That’s what cousins do,” Eldon said.

He held out a bag from his shop that Oberon hadn’t even noticed him carrying. Holly took it with shaking hands and tore the tissue paper off the top. Then she gasped and looked up at Oberon with so much joy he had to kneel down in front of her again.

“What is it?”

“It’s an elf costume. Like the ones you wear to the parade. Is it really for me?” Holly said.

“You’re one of us now,” Oberon said. “Why don’t you go put it on? The parade starts in a little while, so we’ll want to make sure you’re ready.”

With a squeal of happiness, she dashed upstairs. Miles watched her go before turning to Oberon. He still had a smile on his face, but it changed to a heated one as he looked Oberon up and down. “You look very nice.”

Eldon coughed.

“I will shove you into another bush,” Oberon threatened, without even looking his cousin’s way.

Miles’s smile widened. “Violence isn’t the answer. We need to set a better example for Holly.”

We. Goddess help him, Oberon’s knees wobbled. “I know. I’ll do better.”

They shared another smile that seared Oberon’s soul. Miles finally managed to look away. “Hey, Eldon. Thanks again for agreeing to keep an eye on Holly and Ivy for me.”

“It’s no problem at all. We have big plans, so you two take your time tonight.”

Miles gave Oberon another heated glance before returning his attention to Eldon. “I left my emergency info on the fridge. She’s already had dinner, and I told her she could pick *one* treat on the walk tonight.”

“Only one?” Eldon looked horrified at the idea.

In his defense, half the treats on the walk were made by Nyall. The beautiful light show wasn’t the only reason people flocked to Mistletoe Falls for the annual parade.

“What if they pick two, but share them?” Oberon suggested.

Miles gave them both a look. “That seems fair, but absolutely no sugar afterward. She was up for hours after last night’s parade. The sugar high was real.”

“That’s fair,” Eldon said. “I’ll make sure Linus knows the rules.”

“And you’ll make sure he follows them,” Oberon added.

“You ask too much,” Eldon teased.

Miles laughed again. “You’re all too much.”

Holly started down the stairs again, acting as if she was in a fancy pageant in her adorable little elf costume. Ivy followed beside her wearing the cutest reindeer ears on her head and a giant bow on her collar.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and did a twirl, causing the handkerchief hem of the costume to jingle all the little bells attached.

“You look awesome!” Miles said. “I love having my very own elf in the family.”

“Daddy, isn’t it awesome?”

“It is. And Ivy gets to dress up too?”

“I know! Thank you, Eldon. This is the best present *ever*.”

Eldon actually blushed. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you like it. Now, why don’t we head over to the Inn so I can get changed and we can get Linus. Then we’ll do the parade and work the booth for a while. And then we have crafts. It’s going to be a fun night.”

Holly bounced over to Eldon, making her costume jingle the entire way, before reaching for his hand. “I can’t wait!”

“Remember the rules,” Miles said. “You stay with Eldon and Linus at all times. Eldon negotiated that you would each get to pick a treat and share them, but that is all. Agreed?”

“Agreed. I’ll stay right with them, Daddy. I promise.”

Miles looked at Ivy next. “And you stay with Holly, young lady. Understood?”

Ivy woofed and trotted to Holly’s side.

They left the house together and walked down the sidewalk. Holly gave Miles a hug before she grabbed Eldon’s hand and dragged him across the street.

Oberon opened the truck door for Miles and turned to find Miles giving him another heated look.

Miles stepped closer and ran his hand down Oberon’s chest. “As if you weren’t hot enough, you have to have a sexy truck too? It’s too much.”

Oberon gulped and imagined all the things he could do to Miles in the back of the truck as Miles hopped into the passenger seat. Oberon managed to close the door and get around the truck to his side without making a fool of himself, but it was a close call. His knees were absolute jelly.

After he climbed in and buckled up, he started the truck. The old girl rumbled to life, her refurbished engine louder than most newer vehicles. She’d been another of Oberon’s side of the road rescues, and it had taken him a lot of years to restore her to her current glory.

“Yep. Sexy as you are,” Miles said. “Rumbles just as much too.”

Oberon growled playfully and glanced over at Miles. “I hope you like Italian.”

“I didn’t realize you were Italian,” Miles teased.

“If you don’t cut it out, this truck is driving straight back to my place.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

Oberon groaned. “*Doc.*”

“Let’s be real,” Miles said. “I can let you wine and dine me, which would be fantastic. But we could also go to your place, make out until I have so much beard burn people will wonder if I’m okay, then see what happens next.”

“That’s not really a fair option. I want to wine and dine you. And if I gave you beard burn on your thighs, no one would wonder a thing.”

Miles froze for a moment, then unbuckled his seat belt and climbed across the seat. “I pick that option.”

Oberon cupped Miles’s cheek in his hand before their lips met in a steamy, tongue-tangling kiss that left them both restless. Then Oberon’s phone rang, and he groaned before pulling away.

Seeing Eldon’s name on the display, he quickly answered. “Everything okay?”

“No,” Eldon said. “We can’t leave the house because you’re still parked there making out like teenagers. The parade is starting soon and since you clearly haven’t noticed, half the neighborhood is looking out of their windows getting a view of the excitement.”

Miles gasped and coughed, then started laughing. He climbed off of Oberon’s lap and back onto his seat.

Oberon didn’t bother replying to his cousin. He ended the call, put the car in drive, and drove around the block. After parking the truck, he and Miles climbed out and practically ran to the carriage house.

They barely made it upstairs before Miles grabbed Oberon and pushed him back against the door. “This is so not me,” Miles groaned as he pushed closer and stared into Oberon’s eyes.

“Same.”

Miles’s breath brushed against his cheek. Oberon’s heart began to pound in his chest. “I didn’t think...I had Holly on my own because romance wasn’t...I was never interested. I thought it was me. I was fine with it, too.”

“Same.” Oberon never expected to find love and wasn’t willing to settle for anything less. And finding a potential mate, the one person in the entire universe meant to be his? It hadn’t even occurred to him that it was a possibility.

“Was I waiting for you this whole time? God, you must think I’m nuts.”

Oberon grabbed Miles by the waist and pulled him close. He slid his hands across Miles’s back and then a bit lower so they rested on the curve of his ass.

“I don’t. At all. Which is probably the weirdest thing of all.”

Miles sucked in a breath and leaned in. He brushed his lips over Oberon’s once, then again. He reached for the bow tie at Oberon’s neck and gave it a firm tug. It loosened and he pulled it off before tossing it aside. Then he began working on the buttons of Oberon’s shirt, teasing them open one by one and revealing more and more of Oberon’s chest.

A thrill went through him and he leaned more heavily against the door as Miles reached the bottom of his shirt and tugged it free from his pants.

Miles bit his lip and ran his fingers up through the dusting of hair covering Oberon’s skin, then further to his shoulders. He guided the fabric back and down before Oberon helped drag it completely off.

Oberon wanted his own turn. Miles made it easy by wearing a long-sleeved polo shirt. He’d not even bothered to fasten the couple of buttons at the top, so Oberon simply reached for his waist and began tugging the shirt free. He had it over Miles’s head, getting his first glimpse of skin, when Miles’s phone began to ring.

Miles gasped for breath, letting out a near snarl before tugging the phone from his pocket. He scowled, then glanced at Oberon. “It’s Joy.”

“Answer it. She wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important.”

Miles answered the call but kept his hand firmly on Oberon’s chest. Luckily, Miles was close enough for Oberon to hear

what she said. A local pet rescue group had a horde of newly rescued dogs and cats that needed immediate help.

“Of course I’ll help,” Miles said. He glanced at Oberon with regret. “I’ll head over to the clinic. They can meet me there.”

MILES

When Miles agreed to help out, he didn't realize the rescue who'd contacted Joy had interpreted his agreement to mean he'd help them all. As a result, Paws and Claus overflowed with animals in need of care. Fortunately, Joy and Chris showed up to assist Miles and his team as they attempted to help all the animals awaiting care.

Oberon and Eldon both pitched in, giving much-needed baths to the dogs Miles had already cleared medically. Linus stayed at Miles's with Holly and Ivy. Nyall and Aaron showed up to help as well, much to the surprise of the cousins. Oberon quietly explained to Miles that Aaron had left town and wasn't expected to return any time soon. From their beaming smiles and inability to take their eyes off each other while they prepared food and water for the rescues, Miles figured they'd come to a happy resolution of their problems.

By the time the sun came up, Miles was ready to collapse. Their work wasn't done, though. None of the animals had homes, and the rescue wasn't equipped to deal with the number of animals they'd saved. Plus, they had a strict policy that all of the animals they adopted out had to be spayed or neutered.

That meant time and money, neither of which the rescue had. Miles didn't mind helping at all, but he had to at least be able to cover expenses, and it was shaping up to be a very pricey process. After Rudy and Donner volunteered to stay at the clinic to keep an eye on all of their patients, the Clauses left

for home and Miles led the cousins through the back gate and into his kitchen.

Linus, bless him, must have sensed them coming because he had breakfast prepared. “Go get cleaned up,” Linus said. “Then you all need to eat and crash.”

Miles pointed everyone toward the nearest bathroom. Oberon followed him up to his room, where they both stripped down to their boxers. Oberon washed his face and hands before grabbing a hand towel and drying off.

“I’ll get you some scrubs,” Miles said through a yawn.

Oberon leaned against the counter and blinked. “I’m exhausted.”

“Same. You should go home and crash once you’ve eaten.”

Miles dug around in his dresser for some scrubs. When he turned to hand them to Oberon, he found Oberon with his arms crossed over his chest and frowning.

“Why does it sound like you don’t plan on doing the same?”

Miles passed him the clothes and stepped close, so tempted to just climb into Oberon’s arms and sleep the day away. “Because I have a kid. She’s going to want to tell me all about her night and I’ll want to hear about it. I’ll be okay.”

Oberon tugged on the scrubs but didn’t look happy. “You need to rest, too.”

“You worrying about me, you sweet puppy wrangler?”

“Yeah, what about it?” Oberon’s little smirk lightened the mood.

“Nothing. Just checking. Can we get food now? We skipped dinner and I’m starving.”

“Tell me about it.” Oberon took Miles’s hand and led them downstairs to the kitchen.

The others already sat around the table, catching Linus up on the situation while he served everyone breakfast. Miles added his two cents about all the care and surgeries, wondering how

the rescue would come up with enough funds to help all the animals.

Linus handed Miles a plate loaded with eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes before pouring him a giant glass of orange juice. “So, you need money to help the animals get adopted?”

“Yeah, the rescue will. I can donate time, but equipment, food, and everything else will have to be paid for.”

“We need to hold an emergency fundraiser,” Linus said. He lifted an orange from the pile on the counter and tossed it in the air. “A No Balls Ball.”

Nyall cackled. “And we can have a *spay*-getti dinner! It’ll be great. I bet we can spread the word before the parade next weekend. I’m sure a lot of people will help, and then the tourists can do the dinner and the parade, and all for a good cause.”

Aaron nodded. “I can run a story about it. There are so many pet lovers out there, I’m sure if they can’t make it to the event, they’ll at least be willing to send donations. Tis the season and all that.”

“Good,” Linus said. “I’ll start getting food lined up. Oberon, can you get the town council to let us use the civic center for the ball?”

“No problem.”

“I’ll handle decorations,” Eldon said. “I have some stuff left over from last year that’ll make nice centerpieces. Give it a little more pizazz.”

“I can make Italian bread,” Nyall said. “This is a great idea!”

Miles blinked at them all. “What is happening right now?”

Oberon wrapped an arm over Miles’s shoulder. “Your new hometown in action. Everyone will *woof* down their *spay*-getti and Christmas will be saved.”

“Oh,” Linus gasped. “We totally need a Santa Paws to pose with the animals for promo pictures. It’ll be amazing!”

“I do have a Santa hat for Ivy,” Miles said hesitantly.

“Ivy Claus,” Linus squealed. “We can set up a photo booth.”

“Isn’t this...I mean...you do realize we have zero time to set this up, right?”

“Zero time?” Oberon asked. “Oh, sweet man, you have no idea what we can accomplish in a day.”

“Why aren’t you all tired?”

Eldon scoffed. “We’ll sleep after the holidays. Let’s get to work.”

“Dibs on Holly and Ivy,” Linus yelled.

“Wait, what?” Miles said as his daughter and his dog trooped down the stairs.

“They can help entertain the inn’s guests while I get breakfast served. Plus, we have flyers to make and a photo set to design,” Linus said. “Do you really think I can do that without them?”

Miles was pretty sure he could....

“More crafts?” Holly squealed excitedly. “May I, Daddy? Pretty please?”

“Besides, you obviously need some sleep,” Nyall said gently, patting Miles on the arm. “You aren’t thinking clearly.”

“I’m not...what?”

“Get some rest,” Eldon said, taking Holly by the hand. “We’ll come back later.”

And faster than Santa could disappear up a chimney, they were gone. Miles stared at the kitchen table, noticing that somehow everyone’s plate but his had been cleared.

“Maybe I am more tired than I thought.”

Oberon didn’t comment. “I wouldn’t mind a nap.”

It took Miles more than a second to realize they were home alone. “A nap would be good...together...in my bed...all alone.”

Miles had never seen a man move so fast in his life. Before he knew it, Oberon was up, had him by the hand, and they were

halfway up the stairs. He laughed when they reached the top and Oberon ran the last few steps to the bedroom.

“Please tell me you have supplies,” Oberon begged.

Miles might have stocked up before their date the night before, just in case. “In the nightstand.”

“Oh thank the goddess.”

Oberon tore off the scrub shirt and shucked the pants down his legs. “Hurry up, Doc. With our luck, another crisis will hit.”

Miles laughed and stripped out of his clothes as Oberon pulled back the blankets and dive bombed onto the bed. Miles pulled lube and condoms from the drawer and sat it on the nightstand before slowly crawling onto the bed and straddling Oberon’s glorious body.

“I refuse to be rushed,” Miles said. He ran his hands over Oberon’s chest and down to his stomach. “I am going to enjoy every inch of you.”

“I have quite a few inches for you to enjoy,” Oberon leered.

Miles cackled. “Now that was a bad pun.”

“Was it, though?”

The man might have a point, considering the significant length Miles could feel pressing against his ass. Miles leaned forward, still smiling, and looked into Oberon’s eyes. “I’d love to find out.”

Oberon groaned and ran his hands up Miles’s sides. Every spot he touched tingled. Miles’s entire body responded, shivering at each bit of skin Oberon’s fingers grazed. He closed the distance between them, brushing his lips over Oberon’s.

The kiss deepened with every stroke of Oberon’s hands over his body. When Oberon gripped his ass and squeezed, Miles’s entire body trembled in reaction. He broke away, gasping for air, as the most intense pleasure he’d ever felt flooded through him.

“Obie,” Miles gasped. He couldn’t even hold himself up anymore. His elbows buckled and he fell the few remaining

inches onto Oberon's chest.

"I've got you, Doc," Oberon whispered.

His muscular arms moved up Miles's back and wrapped him up, holding him as he shook. For a brief moment, embarrassment flashed through him. Miles raised his head and met those gorgeous grey-blue eyes that held the secrets to the universe in their depths.

"Aww, Doc, I feel it too. Kinda like you've touched a live wire, huh? But so damn good you don't wanna let go."

Oberon couldn't have described it better. And Miles wanted more. So much more. Oberon rolled him onto his back, then eased between his thighs. Miles wrapped his legs around Oberon's waist and held him in place. "Don't let me go," Miles demanded.

"Never," Oberon promised. "You're it for me, Doc. Knew it the moment I saw you. And feeling like this? Yeah, I'm keeping you forever."

Miles wasn't an overly sentimental type, or he hadn't been until the second Oberon made his vow. He wanted to be practical, even with this gorgeous man between his thighs. He should explain that they'd have to go slow. He couldn't commit to forever after only a few days.

But Oberon's crooked smile told him he knew all that too. How Miles understood the flicker of understanding as it passed over Oberon's face he didn't know, but he had zero doubts that Oberon got it.

"You want more?"

"I want it all," Miles said.

And he meant it. He wanted so much more than just the lust between them satisfied, even though Oberon reached for the lube and condoms the moment he had Miles's okay. He wanted this man and this town and the craziness of a No Balls Ball, and candy lights, and cousins for himself and Holly.

Miles ran his hands up Oberon's thick arms to his shoulders as Oberon slicked his fingers and teased his entrance. It had been

so long, but his body opened for Oberon easily. Every stroke, every stretch, brought him closer to release. He fought it back, not willing to let go too soon.

Oberon pushed closer, spreading Miles's thighs wide.

"Wait for me." His low, husky voice didn't help Miles's control at all. Oberon slid on a condom and slicked up his cock before adding more lube to Miles's entrance. Then he lined up and leaned forward. "Ready?"

"Yes." The slight pressure of the tip on his hole nearly sent Miles over the edge. He grabbed Oberon's biceps and squeezed, fighting the urge to shove his hips up, to get that full feeling he desperately wanted.

"Easy," Oberon gasped as he slowly pushed forward.

The stretch drew a slight hiss from Miles, but he wanted more. So much more. He breathed through the slight pinch and bore down, knowing it would help.

And, oh, did it.

Oberon slid completely into him, letting out a groan as he did. His biceps trembled in Miles's grip, alerting him to the amount of control Oberon was exerting. It sent another thrill through him, and he clenched his hole before slowly beginning to roll his hips.

"Oh goddess," Oberon moaned. He settled down onto his elbows, bringing his lips dangerously close. Miles reached up to claim them, and the action pushed Oberon's control over the edge. He began to move in the same rhythm as Miles, their tongues tangling as their hips thrust together.

Oberon broke away gasping for air, his hips jerking as his rhythm began to falter. "I'm—"

The look of awe that burst across Oberon's face as he lost control sent Miles over the edge. He shoved his hips up and managed to guide Oberon to the spot that lit him up from the inside. They both shook and trembled as their releases continued to flow through them, connecting them in a way Miles couldn't fathom.

He opened his eyes and swore Oberon glowed. It must have been the light from the windows, but it was the most beautiful thing Miles had ever seen. He leaned up again, catching Oberon's lips in one last desperate kiss as the last of his release poured from him.

When he fell back against the pillow, Oberon followed, tucked his face into the curve of Miles's neck. They both held on as aftershocks from the power of their release caused them to shake.

Miles had so many things he wanted to say, but again, he had no words. He ran his hands over Oberon's back, gentling the big man above him who seemed just as overwhelmed as Miles by the unexpected depth of their connection.

It took Oberon longer than him to come back to reality. Miles didn't mind. He loved having Oberon in his arms, feeling each little shudder of his body, each hot breath against his neck.

When Oberon finally lifted his head, the look he gave Miles sent another wave of pleasure through him. Oberon licked his lips, then swallowed. Opened his mouth, then closed it.

There weren't words. They didn't need them. And that was the best connection of all.

MILES

“O bie!” Holly shouted when she saw Oberon crossing the street to meet them for their walk to the No Balls Ball, as if she’d not spent half the day with him already.

Miles still couldn’t believe what they’d managed to put together in less than a week. He’d even worn a suit for the occasion, and a mysterious box had arrived the day before for Holly with an exquisite holiday dress she’d squealed over.

Although the box didn’t have the sender listed, Miles had no doubt Eldon was responsible. Oberon’s cousin had taken his new job as Holly’s adopted cousin seriously. And by seriously, Miles meant that they were all trying to outdo each other by spoiling her absolutely rotten.

Oberon had dressed up for the occasion as well, in a plaid shirt and bow tie combination no doubt also picked out by Eldon. Considering how well Oberon’s outfit matched Holly’s, it only made the culprit more obvious.

Holly and Oberon weren’t the only recipients of matching gifts. Ivy had on a brand new collar that just so happened to coordinate, and the wiggling fluff ball in Oberon’s arms had a matching sweater.

Ivy let out a woof of happiness as Oberon reached the end of their walkway, and he leaned over and released Jolly, the tiny schnoodle he’d fallen head over heels for when he’d seen her in the rescued group of dogs.

Jolly darted over to Ivy and the two sniffed each other thoroughly, as if they hadn’t also spent the entire afternoon

together. In fact, anytime Miles wasn't working at the clinic, he and Oberon had found a way to spend their time together.

With the holidays fast approaching, there were a hundred excuses and they'd no doubt find a way to use them all. Not that Holly cared a bit that Oberon and Jolly were with them nearly all the time. She'd welcomed Oberon and his cousins into her life like they'd been family all along.

Oberon crouched in front of Holly and she leaned in for her hug. "You look beautiful," Oberon whispered.

"Thanks, Obie. I like your tie. You're as handsome as Daddy."

"No one's as handsome as your Daddy," Oberon said. Holly giggled and leaned harder against him. Oberon lifted her up and reached for Miles's hand. "You both look *tree*-mendous."

Holly giggled again, finding all the holiday puns hysterically funny.

"Well, I think we all look be-*yule*-tiful."

"Not bad," Oberon said.

Jolly barked, then pawed at Miles's leg. Miles leaned over and lifted her into his arms where she immediately settled like the queen of the household she'd become.

"We should get going," Miles said. "Eldon will be miffed if we're late to our own event."

"It's true," Holly said, nodding her head and making the little ringlet curls Miles had managed to style into her hair bob around. The giant bow that accompanied the dress was firmly affixed on top of her head.

Miles leaned down and grabbed Ivy's leash as they made their way toward the center of town where the pre-parade event was being held. Miles was pretty sure the entire town planned on stopping by for a plate of spaghetti before participating in the light parade.

At last count, they'd already raised enough money from the ticket sales alone to cover the cost of feeding and sheltering all of the rescued pets for the next month while they healed and adjusted to their new lives.

Linus greeted them at the door, gushing over Holly's dress and making her blush. "Now, everyone, go straight over to see Santa and get your family photo made. I've reserved you all a table at the front of the hall so you'll be able to make your speech when it's time."

Miles nodded. "Thanks, Linus."

Oberon led them to a short line at the side of the room where Dr. and Mrs. Claus had dressed like their namesakes and posed for family photos with attendees. When Chris and Joy had learned they planned on doing photos, they'd volunteered.

It meant Miles didn't have to worry about Ivy posing for the amount of photos they'd realized would be taken, and instead, she'd become the star of all of the publicity shots, thanks to some quick photos Linus had taken of Ivy in her Santa gear. He'd really underestimated the power of Mistletoe Falls when the town, and Oberon's cousins, had a mission.

Aaron had bribed a photographer friend from the city to come down for the night and take photos, as well as making sure they had plenty of publicity by doing a special news segment on the situation happening in town.

"I still can't believe we did all this," Miles said, glancing around the quickly filling room of laughing guests, all of whom had paid a ridiculous price for a plate of spaghetti to help the animals.

"It's the magic of Mistletoe Falls," Oberon said as they stepped up to the Clauses.

Holly climbed onto Chris's lap and arranged the fluffy layers of her dress. "Hello, Dr. Claus, I mean, Santa."

"Ho, ho, ho," Chris said as he winked at her. "And what do you want for Christmas this year, my little Holly berry?"

Holly looked up at Miles and beamed. "The real Santa already got it for me. I wanted another Daddy and a puppy friend for Ivy. I wrote the real Santa a letter before we moved here," Holly explained to Chris. "I think he got it early because now we have Obie and Jolly and everything is perfect."

Miles grabbed Oberon's hand and clenched it tight. His heart was in his throat as his daughter made her confession.

Oberon seemed equally stunned by Holly's words. The poor man might even have a few tears shimmering in his eyes. Miles cleared his throat. "Okay, everyone in for the photo."

Ivy took a seat in front of Chris's legs while Oberon and Miles moved beside the throne-like chair he sat in. Miles cradled Jolly against his chest while Oberon wrapped his arm over Miles's shoulder. Miles didn't even have to fake his smile. He'd never been so happy in his life.

Nyall found them next, taking Holly's hand and leading her toward their table while Miles and Oberon followed behind with the dogs in tow. Miles did a quick search of the room for Eldon and found him in the back corner having what appeared to be a very intense conversation with a man Miles didn't recognize.

He didn't have time to think about it further, though, as they reached their seats. Miles remained behind with Ivy and Jolly while Oberon led Holly to the buffet style set up where they'd get their food. As he sat there watching, the man he'd seen with Eldon approached the table and sent him a charming... and flirty...smile.

"You must be Dr. Lane." The man held out his hand.

Miles stood and accepted the shake. "I am."

The guy didn't let go and stroked his thumb over Miles's. "It's amazing what you're doing for all these poor animals." His dark skin was a stark contrast to Miles's and from the expensive cut of his suit, Miles wondered exactly who he was speaking to.

"And you are?" Miles said with a smile while extricating his hand from the man's hold.

"Tate Williams, at your service."

His charming smile would probably have worked a few weeks before, but now Miles was completely immune.

“You’re barking up the wrong Christmas tree, Mr. Williams,” Miles said. “But thank you for supporting our event.”

The smile dimmed a bit. “Please call me Tate. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other. I’m the new owner of the Snowda Shoppe.”

And that explained the tense conversation from earlier. This was the man Eldon kept referring to as his nemesis.

“I’m sure we will,” Miles said.

Tate pulled a check out of his pocket and passed it over. He glanced toward the doorway where Eldon had been moments before. When he noticed Eldon wasn’t in sight, Tate’s smile changed to a more friendly and real version instead of the fake and flirty one he’d donned moments before.

“This is for the pet rescue fund. I think it’s amazing what you’re all doing. And if you need more help, please let me know. I’d rather keep this donation between us, though, if you don’t mind.”

Miles glanced at the check, blinked at the amount, then looked back up at Tate. “This is very generous of you.”

Tate waved off the compliment as if it didn’t matter that his donation alone would assure they had all the funds they needed for the animals. “Have a good evening, Dr. Lane.”

Tate walked off as Oberon and Holly returned with loaded plates. Oberon had somehow managed to procure a child-sized apron for Holly that he helped place over her dress before they sat down.

“Who was that?” Oberon asked.

“Tate Williams,” Miles said with a grin. He glanced down at the check and realized the name didn’t match the way Tate had introduced himself. Odd. “He’s the new owner of the Snowda Shoppe.”

“*Ohhhh*,” Oberon said, glancing after Tate with much more curiosity than he had before.

“Why’d you say it like that?” Holly asked. “It sounds like a secret. I can keep a secret.”

“I know,” Oberon said. He leaned closer to her. “We’re all wondering what Mr. Williams is going to do with the Snowda Shoppe now that he’s bought it. He’s not telling *anyone*, not even Eldon.”

“Whoa,” Holly said. “Daddy, you should go get your spaghetti. After we eat and you do your speech, can we go to the bakery for dessert?”

Nyall had already spoiled them both with his amazing baked goods. “I think we can arrange that. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Miles crossed the room, stopping and greeting several of Mistletoe Falls’s residents as he went. He’d met so many people over the past few days it was hard to keep them all straight in his mind. They’d made both him and Holly feel so welcome, though, it was hard to imagine they’d ever lived anywhere else.

Gloria had a plate of food ready for Miles when he approached the spread. She handed it over with a smile. “I went a little easy on the sauce, just to be on the safe side.”

“And I dropped off a spare shirt earlier. We make a good team.”

Gloria winked at him and started dishing up the next plate of noodles. “That we do.”

Before Miles knew it, Linus had him standing in front of the room, thanking everyone for attending. He gave a quick summary of the animals and their needs and made sure everyone knew their donations were going to a great cause. He kept it short and sweet, because if they were anything like him, they wanted to be out of here and taking in all the holiday lights.

Holly cheered for him when he finished, his sweet girl standing up in her chair and clapping like he’d just given the performance of a lifetime. The crowd all cooed over the cuteness, and Miles was pretty sure his sweet daughter convinced a few people to up their donations.

“You ready to go?” Oberon asked. “Certain furry individuals are getting restless.”

“I’m ready,” Miles said.

He held Oberon’s hand in one of his, while the other had Holly’s. Oberon had both dogs on their leashes beside him. Oberon led them back to town square and paused at the corner, looking up at the giant spruce tree that stood in the center of town.

“For a long time, I thought I’d spend all of my holidays with my cousins,” Oberon said.

His voice was so soft and gentle, when he turned to look at Miles and Holly they both moved closer to him. After wrapping an arm around both of them, Oberon gave them each a squeeze. They hugged him in return, staying in a tight little huddle in front of the giant tree.

“Now I know I was waiting for the rest of my family to arrive.”

Miles’s heart stuck in his throat at the words, but Holly pushed against them and shot a beaming smile up at Oberon. “You’re my favorite Christmas present *ever*, Obie. Even if it’s not Christmas yet.”

As if by magic, the tree in the town square lit up, casting a warm glow over all of them. Oberon’s eyes widened as he glanced at the tree, then back at them.

“Even the town tree knows it was meant to be,” Miles whispered.

He leaned in and gave Oberon a gentle kiss before reaching for his hand again. Ivy and Jolly each gave little woofs of approval before giving their leashes a tug.

Oberon nodded, still looking stunned by the tree turning on at the perfect moment. He leaned in and rested his forehead against Miles’s. “When we get home, there’s something I want to tell you.”

The tone immediately caught Miles’s attention. Oberon sounded nervous and excited.

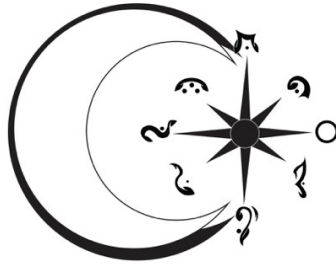
“Okay,” Miles whispered in return.

Miles held on tight to Oberon as they walked around the corner to Nyall's bakery, greeting friends and neighbors along the way. It was hard to believe that Mistletoe Falls had given him the best gifts he and Holly could ever receive.

But as he glanced at Oberon, whose smile was bright enough to keep all the lights on the parade route glowing, Miles realized they were exactly where they were *orna*-meant to be.



Things are heating up in Mistletoe Falls. Click [here](#) to see if enemies Eldon and Tate have found love at *frost* sight!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Macy Blake believes in unicorns and fairies, in moonbeams and stardust, and that happily ever after comes in all colors of the rainbow. She loves to lose herself in paranormal romance, living vicariously through her favorite sexy fictional heroes.

These days you can often find her pounding away at the keyboard, trying to capture the magic of her own worlds while arguing with her feisty German Shepherd, Minerva, and her adorable pound puppy, Pomona.

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