

# SAVE ME, MRS. CLAUS



Cheree Alsop

Save me, Mrs. Claus

By Cheree Alsop

Copyright © 2023 by Cheree L. Alsop

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by

[www.ChereeAlsop.com](http://www.ChereeAlsop.com)

Christmas means something different to everyone.  
Be it love, happiness, family, friendship, or nostalgia,  
The Christmas season can be one of magic.

This book is to my family:

Michael, Myree, Ashton, and Aiden;

With them, Christmas magic happens all year 'round.

And to my readers:

You deserve all the love within these pages.

May this book fill you with warmth and a renewed belief  
That Christmas can be just as magical as when you were a  
child.

To the best beta readers an author could ask for: Faith  
Burt, Kim Schiavone, Monique Mymryk, Sariah Horowitz,  
and Cathy Pontious, thank you for your time, your kind words,  
and your edits. This book is better because of you.

~A Musical Note~

When I write, my first step is to create a playlist that captures the settings and emotions I want in my book. I listen to this playlist over and over in the times that I am not sitting and actively writing to help keep me in the book's Universe. The songs help weave the scenes and round out the characters so that they are whole and real.

Music is such a powerful tool and can speak to us in ways that resonate with the soul. I feel adding music to a book is like sprinkling fresh grated parmesan cheese on homemade pasta. It is still pasta without the cheese, but with it, another level of flavor and enjoyment is achieved. Level up and listen.

This is the playlist/parmesan for Mrs. Claus-

Song to the Siren- Remastered by This Mortal Coil

Save Me by Jelly Roll

I Know Where I've Been by Ellie King

San Fransisco by Stu Larsen

Two of Us On the Run by Lucius

Kind of Love by Natalie Jane

Give Me Something by Seafret

Poison & Wine by The Civil Wars

Telepath by Manchester Orchestra

Every Time I'm with You by Seal

# Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)



# Chapter One

Chrissy

Sometimes a woman on the hunt needed finesse; other times, she needed a sledgehammer. Chrissy looked the man at the bar up and down before checking her tracker again. Eyeing it with doubt, she slammed it on the table hard enough to make the nearest drunk lift his head and reveal the dollar bill stuck to his face before he slumped back into a stupor. The man she watched didn't show any sign of awareness. He merely stared into the contents of his half-finished beer, his eyes cloudy, his hair uncombed, the scratch of several-days' worth of dark stubble covering his cheeks, and the reek of a man on more of a life path of alcohol than a weekend bender.

It made no sense.

Chrissy wished she'd brought her beacon. Jax would lecture her for leaving it home again. She usually didn't need to double-check the tracker's target, but this time she had real doubts.

The man at the bar downed the dregs of his glass and set it on the counter with a loud enough thud to attract the

bartender's attention.

"I'm cutting you off, Grish. No more tonight."

Chrissy checked the information on her tracker. Grisham Berg, age thirty-two, five foot ten, born in New York City.

"That's bad service," the man replied, his words slurring. "How do you plan on making money in this place if you won't serve beer to your customers?"

The bartender laughed. "If I wanted to make money, I never would've bought a bar."

Grisham chuckled in return. It was a dry sound filled with bitterness enunciated by the screech of his stool sliding back. "You're the best of us, Charlie."

"I keep telling you that," the bartender replied. When Grisham set several bills on the counter, he waved them away. "On the house tonight."

A look of sharp awareness overtook Grisham's dark eyes. His face was turned toward Chrissy enough that the stark depth of loss made her breath catch in her throat. He blinked back the moisture before it could spill over and said in a voice that cracked, "You're too good to me."

“You get home safe,” Charlie replied. “Text me when you get there.”

Grisham walked toward the door without a reply. He appeared mostly stable until his toe caught the corner of a turned-out chair. He stumbled forward, hit the edge of the next table, and practically fell out the door. The brass bell hanging on the door frame chimed merrily when it closed behind him.

Chrissy’s heart lifted at the sound. She had always liked bells. They tended to signal something of importance for her to watch out for. It seemed that despite her doubt, she was destined to follow Grisham until she figured out why she had been led to him.

A man in a dirty apron poked his head from the doorway of the kitchen. A wafting of bar fries and onion rings followed. “Anniversary, huh?”

“Yeah,” Charlie replied with his gaze on the door. “Poor sap.”

“Think he’ll make it home this time?” the cook asked.

“I pity anyone who gets in his way,” Charlie replied.

A patron walked to the bar to request another beverage and the conversation ended.

Chrissy took that as her cue and rose. She slid the amount of her bill plus a twenty-five percent tip under the amber ale she had been nursing and picked up her purse. Nobody commented on her leaving; not that she expected it. The perfume she wore was one of Jax's latest inventions. It was subtle and flowery, but not enough to keep her from wearing it. He had named it Forget Me Not in one of his ironic twists considering the whole point was for the wearer to be unremarkable and forgettable the moment they walked away. Charlie Knox, the bartender, wouldn't remember who had paid him and the waiter and cook, Calvin Montrose, would already have forgotten who ordered a serving of mozzarella sticks with ranch instead of marinara.

Chrissy shut the door behind her far softer than Grisham had and heard the bell's nearly silent farewell. The dark city street was mostly empty. A couple walked arm in arm across the way with quick steps as though their show had let out later than they expected, and they were anxious to get home. A woman with a miniature poodle urged it to hurry and do its business while she tried to keep her footing in heels on the tiny rectangle of green around the apartment's two trees. The poodle had no qualms about taking its sweet time to sniff every blade of grass despite its owner's pleading.

Chrissy glimpsed Grisham turning down a side street several blocks away and picked up her pace. The tracker wouldn't let her lose him, but the bartender's words sat uneasily in the back of her mind. One usually worried about the person walking home alone at night, not who they would run into.

Turning down the dark alley away from the lights that lit the main New York streets set Chrissy's senses on edge. The click of her sensible two-inch heels echoed against the brick walls and sent a rodent skittering into the darkness. Chrissy passed it with barely a glance, her focus on the man who had chosen the shady passage instead of the well-lit street behind them.

Voices from the next corner reached her.

"I told you I'd be back."

"Well, if it isn't the hero," a voice replied. "I thought you'd have the brains to stay away."

"You should've had the brains not to mess with those girls," Grisham replied, the resonance of his deeper voice easily recognizable despite the way his words slurred.

“They were drunk. Easy targets. We would’ve gotten away with their purses if you hadn’t shown up,” a second voice said.

“Speaking of drunk, check him out,” a third chuckled.  
“I’m pretty sure he’s barely standing as it is.”

An ominous chuckle was followed by the first voice stating, “Drunken bravery isn’t a good look on you. You really should’ve gone home.”

“Yeah, we missed out on an easy payload. Glad you showed up to settle your debt,” the second said.

Chrissy stayed in the shadows as she eased around the corner. Grisham leaned against the wall with his back to her, appearing for all the world as if the bricks were the only things holding him up. His head hung low and moved slightly from side to side as he kept his focus on the three men in front of him.

Two of them held knives. The switchblades looked ominous in the hands of the two who flanked Grisham. It was clear at one glimpse of their faces that the three intended to make the man pay for his interference. Chrissy couldn’t fathom why Grisham had searched out armed gang members in his drunken state.

“Give us your wallet,” the one in front said. He glared at Grisham with his massive arms crossed in front of his chest. The black widow tattoo on the side of his neck flexed with the strain of his thickly corded muscles. The man needed to lay off the steroids.

“Will we let him go if he does?” the second, a skinny man who appeared strengthened by the knife he held, asked in a whine. The spider tattoo on his neck looked weak and paltry compared to the first’s, but it linked them together.

The third man passed his knife from hand to hand, his movements jittery and off enough that she wondered what he was on. His black widow had bulging eyes that matched the man on whom it had been tattooed. “Of course, we don’t let him go. He has to pay interference tax, right Xavier?”

Chrissy fought back the urge to point out that black widows were solitary creatures and so it didn’t make sense to have them as a gang sign. Plus, the tattoos were female and female black widows tended to eat the males of their species. It took all of her self-control not to ask if the gang members might have a second life they hid behind petty theft and bullying.

“Right,” the leader said. He eyed Grisham as if he was an interesting type of insect. “The question is, where should we start?”

Before the trio could decide, Grisham punched the leader with a haymaker so hard the bigger man spun halfway around.

A gasp escaped Chrissy at the suddenness of the attack. Fortunately, the sound was buried beneath the impact of Grisham’s forearm as he blocked an attempted stab for his head and answered with a chop to his assailant’s Adam’s apple. He used his other hand to disarm the man of his knife before he punched the man in the chest hard enough to stagger him back.

The other man lunged, his blade low to catch Grisham in the stomach, but Grisham reacted with a sidestep and a block followed by a left-handed punch to the man’s kidneys that dropped him to his knees.

Any sign of drunkenness had vanished completely. Chrissy could only watch in stunned amazement as Grisham met the recovered Xavier in a brutal exchange of punches. He caught several on his ribs while answering with one to the man’s jaw and another to the ribs that Chrissy swore must have broken a few. Grisham caught the first man’s boot and swept it aside



with a simultaneous open-handed heel-palm to the man's sternum that dropped him to the ground. Grisham sidestepped Xavier's punch at his face, caught the man's arm, and threw him over his back and against the closest wall where he slid down into a heap.

The last man met a nose-crushing hammer fist that dropped him to the asphalt with his comrades.

Grisham stood there in silence waiting to see if they would rise.

Chrissy found herself hoping they would. There was something to be said about watching a man take down three assailants by himself. Any impulse she'd had to step in had been smothered at the first punch. It was clear Grisham knew what to do in a fight. Even though his tactics were rough, they were effective. Where he had received training was unknown. Chrissy kept to her code to not check his background. She preferred to have the truth of the man she had been led to revealed as it came instead of cheating. It felt more honest to them because they didn't know a thing about her, and she would keep it that way.

The leader, Xavier, rose. At his angrily barked command, the other two staggered to their feet as well. Grisham opened

and closed his hands in anticipation. His knuckles were bloody, but he didn't seem to care.

“Why are you still here?” Xavier demanded with one hand on his ribs and the other on the wall for support.

“I figure you can learn your lesson this way or from the police,” Grisham replied.

“What lesson?” This came from the man whose nose had been smashed. He cupped it with both hands and blood spilled between his fingers.

Chrissy had a side profile of Grisham and stifled a smile when he rolled his eyes.

“Not to steal,” Grisham replied. “Though I think the lesson's lost on you idiots.”

Xavier scooped up one of the switchblades.

Chrissy had lost sight of the other one.

“Time for you to learn a lesson of your own,” Xavier said through gritted teeth. “And in case you missed it, it's don't stick your nose where it don't belong.”

He swiped at Grisham's chest.

Grisham stepped out of reach and charged him as soon as the knife blade missed. He bowled Xavier into the wall hard enough to stun the man, then threw him over and slammed him onto the ground. Two punches to the man's jaw left him completely senseless.

The other two rushed Grisham before he could stand up. Grisham was knocked off his feet and took several punches to the face and chest before he was able to block an attempted knee to the head. He held onto the man's leg and turned on his knees, forcing the skinny man to follow or risk having his knee snapped. Grisham put his shoulder into the man's gut and lunged, driving him to the ground. A haymaker laid him out with the leader.

The last man switched the knife from hand to hand.

"You sure you want to press your luck?" Grisham asked.

He levered to his feet and wiped his hand across his mouth. When his palm came away bloody, he grinned, showing red teeth to match.

"You're crazy," the final man standing said.

"I've been called worse," Grisham replied.

"Xavier's going to kill me if I run."

“What do you think I’ll do if you stay?”

Grisham’s question lingered in the air.

Chrissy thought the man would run.

She could tell by the tightening of Grisham’s shoulders that he was as surprised as she when the jittery guy stooped and picked up the other knife before squaring off with a blade in each hand.

“You sure about this?” Grisham asked.

A slightly strangled sigh escaped the man and he said, “I’m going to regret it either way. It won’t be said I went down a coward.”

“Oh, it’ll be said you were a coward, a coward who didn’t know when to apologize for stealing from helpless young women.” Grisham spat blood on the ground, the action one of disgust to match his tone.

The man dove at him with both blades swinging.

Grisham ducked under the higher blade and punched the man hard in the stomach. He knocked the knife away with his elbow and gave two hard punches to the body followed by an uppercut that snapped the man’s head back before he crumbled unconscious to the ground.

Grisham watched in silence for a moment before he swore under his breath. He pulled out his cellphone.

Chrissy watched with curiosity as the man called the police. She couldn't hear the conversation on the other end of the line but was amused when Grisham said, "I just saw three men try to jump a guy in an alley. They were armed with knives. I think they were the same men who were reported trying to snatch purses off women after the show on Forty-fifth let out earlier tonight."

He paused, then said, "No, the man left and the three are in pretty bad shape. They probably need some handcuffs and an ambulance. My phone's going to die, but you can reach my friend at the Portly Pig. Ask for Charlie. Thanks. Bye."

He glanced back once at the men on the ground. The leader gave a moan of pain.

"Should've listened when you had the chance," Grisham muttered before he turned away.

Chrissy ducked back around the corner and hid behind a dumpster when Grisham walked past. He was nearly to the mouth of the alley when he stumbled slightly. He caught himself against the wall and put a hand to his side. When he brought it back, slick dark blood showed in the streetlight.

“Damn,” Grisham muttered.

He slid to the ground with his back against the wall.

Chrissy told herself to leave him. The tracker had to be wrong. There was no way this was the man she was looking for.

And yet, looking down at his face silhouetted in the light, she had to admit there was something in the cast of his gritted jaw and in the pained line of his eyebrows. Blood darkened the corner of his lip and the split in his eyebrow would definitely need stitching. She would be better off leaving him to the ambulance that would show up for his assailants.

She paused mid-thought with the admission that he was actually the assailant and they were the victims, deserving or not. He would probably get some jail time given the shape he had left them in, stolen purses notwithstanding.

Against her better judgment, Chrissy ducked under his arm and levered him to his feet. He muttered a few choice words with a hand on his side but didn't let his legs give out again. She took it as a good sign.

At this point, she needed any kind of a sign.

She eased him into the seat of the waiting vehicle and shut the door. He slumped to the side and had to be levered upright for her to slip in beside him.

“Ready, Madam?” Jax asked.

Chrissy nodded.

Jax didn't ask the question she read in his eyes.

That was good, because she had no idea how she was to turn Grisham Berg into the next Santa Claus.

## Chapter Two

Grisham

Waking in pain was nothing new; what was new was the scent of cinnamon and chocolate that touched his nose before Grisham opened his eyes. He kept his face carefully locked in the stillness of sleep as he strained his senses for any hint of where he was. He vaguely remembered being at the bar. Charlie had cut him off, though he had already imbibed more than the bartender usually let him. Remembering the date made nausea roil through his stomach. He gritted his teeth against the sensation.

*Man up. Another year. Empty. Lost. What does it matter? I can't change the past.*

Such rousing pep talks might have given another person a reason to continue wallowing in despair, yet for him, it wasn't bad.

He allowed himself the slightest lift to the corners of his lips. It was a humorless attempt at a smile, but an attempt was a step in the right direction. Now why on earth did his side hurt so blasted much?



Grisham opened his eyes to find that a cool, damp cloth had been laid over them. He lifted a hand to remove it.

“He’s awake!”

“Run!”

Grisham froze with his hand in the air.

The voices were small as if from very far away, but extremely clear as though they had been spoken next to his ear. It made no sense.

Certain he was delirious, Grisham pulled the cloth from his eyes and looked toward the source of the voices.

A tiny picture in a frame slid to the right on top of a night table, but not before he caught a glimpse of a very small shoe vanishing through the space behind.

Grisham jerked upright without questioning whether it was smart to do so. Pain so sharp it felt as though the knife was still in his side made his breath catch. He pressed a hand to the bandages wrapped there and hunched over in an effort to ease the pain. Spots danced in his vision. It was only through slow, steady breathing and keeping absolutely still that he was able to will himself to stay conscious.

By the time he remembered what had driven him to sit up, he was sure he had been imagining things. He'd been delirious with injuries before. The mind played cruel tricks to survive; he knew that all too well. The small shoe was surely a figment of his imagination, one he wouldn't allow himself to fall for again.

A glance at his hand showed cuts that had been tended to. Someone had taken the time to wash the blood from his palm and from his knuckles. Stark bruises stood out against his skin and several lacerations had been treated with strips of cloth and bandaging. He tried to remember who had been in the alley. He was fairly certain he remembered a woman's voice, but that couldn't be accurate. Other than the three gang members he had taken down, the place had been empty. Nobody in their right mind would be caught dead in those alleyways at night.

That thought taunted him.

He had been an idiot. Charlie had tried to keep him at the Portly Pig as long as he could to help him out. He owed the man an apology and needed to pay his tab. Who knew what shape he had been in by the time he left? There was only so far he could push someone's generosity. The fact that Charlie was

one of his few remaining friends would only carry him so long.

Grisham needed answers.

He rose gingerly to his feet. The sudden realization that he wore a long white robe and fluffy white socks threw him off completely. It felt as though as soon as he came to terms with one part of his current reality, another was thrust into his attention.

*Why on earth am I wearing fluffy socks?*

Grisham gave the room he had awoken in a closer look.

It was small, barely big enough for the bed, the nightstand, and a dresser. Three doors occupied the walls, and all three were closed. There was a fire in the fireplace in the corner. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen an actual fireplace. There was a white planter above it that contained purple flowers with small, round leaves he had never seen before. The walls appeared to have been made of logs like the interior of the Jackrabbit Bar and Lounge down the road from the Portly Pig. Why on earth he would be in the Jackrabbit was lost on him, unless someone dragged him there after the fight in the alley.

*None of this makes any sense.*

His gaze lingered on the framed picture above the bed. It was a painting of a snow scene. The pine trees were laden with snow around a cozy little cabin whose roof also carried the thick white stuff. A wisp of smoke curled from the chimney and a wreath hung from the red front door. A bemused smile touched Grisham's lips like a stranger lingering with uncertainty at their welcome. The smile vanished and a furrow formed between Grisham's eyebrows.

There, at the corner of the cabin, stood a man in a white robe and wearing what appeared to be fluffy white socks. The man's dark, unruly hair and thick scruff stood out in stark contrast against the wintery morning. An unbidden chill ran down his spine at the realization that the man held his side the way he was doing at that moment.

Grisham turned away.

With his hand held tightly to his bandaged side, he took a step forward. His knees wanted to give out, but he refused to let them. Thirst tormented his mouth which felt as parched as a rock in the desert sun. He tried to swallow but had nothing left with which to do so.

Using slow, measured steps, Grisham made his way to the first door. He had hoped the one across from the bed would be a bathroom, but when he turned the white doorknob, he found himself staring into the depths of very dark space. Scents of pine, cinnamon, and something minty met his nose. He fumbled for a light switch and found one on the left near the door frame. He flicked it on and stared.

Being from New York, Grisham was used to conservative spaces and minuscule apartment designs. Any thought he had of being in the Jackrabbit was dashed at the sight of the biggest walk-in closet he had ever seen.

He leaned against the door frame and stared at the rows upon rows of red robes lined with fur, some with silk, others with black leather or brown. There was an entire wall dedicated entirely to black boots with various buckles, straps, heights, and linings. Another rack held robes similar to the one he wore. Most were white, though there were a few green ones interspersed. Beneath them, two shelves of faux fur-lined slippers sat next to two dressers. The thought that one probably held fluffy white socks kept him from investigating further.

*Who needed red robes and boots? Am I in some sort of fetish haven or smoking bar?*

There was no way he would go out into the unknown in only a robe and socks. With that in mind, he searched deeper in the closet. A sigh of exasperation escaped him at the sight of shelves of black pants. Most were leather and lined with faux fur. He selected a pair that appeared remotely close to sweatpants material and stalked further in with his hand pressed against his throbbing side.

“Finally. Something normal,” he muttered as he grabbed a plain white tee-shirt from several hanging toward the back of the closet.

He made his way out to the main room and sat on the bed. The short trip had cost him an alarming amount of energy. His side hurt, his head was beginning to pound, and he was still thirstier than he ever remembered being in his life. He wondered how much blood he had lost. The secondary mystery of who had patched him up tormented him. He needed answers and sitting there in a futile attempt to regain his strength wasn't going to get them.

Grisham bent as low as he was able and slipped his right leg into the pants. Gingerly, feeling like a feeble old man

despite his thirty-two years, he managed to hold the waist of the pants out and slip his other leg inside. He rose and tied the waist of the pants so they sat just below where he had been stabbed. He picked up the tee-shirt and lifted his arms to put it over his head.

An expletive escaped him at the angry pain that knifed through his middle.

*This is getting ridiculous.*

Gritting his teeth, he ducked his head as low as he could and slipped the shirt over it. A hiss escaped him when he raised his left arm to put it through the loop. Angry at himself for the situation he was in, he shoved his left arm through followed by the right and sank back onto the bed to lower the shirt. He allowed himself a moment of holding his side while he waited for it to stop protesting. He wasn't a coward or a wimp, but right then, he felt like both. The thought of what lay beyond the door was nearly as terrifying as the weakness he felt from his wound.

*I can't sit here forever.*

He eased to his feet again and made his way to the door on the right. To his relief, it opened to reveal a bathroom. He collapsed against the sink and turned the faucet. Without

bothering to check for cups, he shoved his head under the running water and sucked in several amazingly refreshing swallows. He closed his eyes and drank deeply, filling his mouth with the liquid that tasted better than he ever remembered water could coming from a faucet. When he swallowed, he felt his body's delight at the life-giving fluid.

He took several more swallows and then lifted his head with a wry grin at himself. Never before had he felt so desperate and then so content after something as simple as a mouthful of water.

His gaze caught on the mirror above the sink and ice ran through his veins.

His face was bruised almost beyond recognition. His right eye was nearly closed and had already blackened down past his cheekbone. Steri-Strips had been placed along his right eyebrow to hold a gash closed. His lip was swollen and something had been spread over the cut that split it. He remembered taking several punches and perhaps a boot.

His one consolation was that the others no doubt looked far worse than he did. He hoped the police had taken his word about them stealing purses; otherwise, they might not have learned anything from their beating. The scruff of his chin was



thicker and longer than he usually let it grow, and his hair was starting to look like he hadn't seen a barber in a year. He looked angry and unkempt like a street brawler.

*Brylee wouldn't be happy with me.*

Grisham turned away and walked back into the main room.

Attacking them had been stupid. He knew it now as he had known it then. One single man against three armed and known robbers wasn't exactly a winning plan, but it had felt good and given him the outlet he needed. His hands clenched into fists of their own accord, but he immediately opened them again at the pain in his swollen knuckles. He gave his right hand a searching look and fingered the bones carefully. The pain and swelling beneath his first finger made him wonder if he had a hairline fracture. The knuckles of the ring finger of his left hand were so swollen he couldn't have gotten his ring off if he tried. Good thing he didn't care to attempt it.

He eyed the last door. It would either reveal where he was or lead to more confusion like the closet. Either way, he couldn't stay in the small room any longer. Claustrophobia pressed against him at the log walls and the strange picture above the bed. Anything was more welcome than that.

He opened the door and was hit by a blast of icy air. White flakes rushed inside and pooled around his stockinged feet. His mouth fell open as he stared at the world beyond the doorway.

Snow covered everything in sight. He could only stare in shock. New York had been cold, but snow wouldn't be falling for at least another month, and they never received nearly the amount that lay beyond the doorstep. White capped the trees and the tops of bushes. The very tops of a white picket fence poked out of the drifts. Beyond the small porch which appeared to be losing its battle to the encroaching white stuff lay a path that appeared to have been shoveled not long before, but was slowly filling in again thanks to the drifting flakes and the breeze that twirled in tiny cyclones before depositing more snow onto the walkway. He couldn't see far past the porch thanks to the falling flakes, but he had a feeling he wouldn't find skyscrapers and office buildings beyond the line of trees.

A sound caught Grisham's attention. He turned to the left to see tan and white animals marching through the snow.

His brain had first used the word prancing, but there were no light steps in the precision the animals showed as they followed their leader through the drifts. With antlers upon

proud heads, they looked like the deer Grisham had seen stuffed at the museum down the road from his apartment, but these were bigger and shaggier by far. The way they held themselves spoke of a pride he hadn't seen in the dogs and cats that walked beside coddling owners in New York. Nor did they bear the curious, friendly countenances of the horses the mounted police rode. Instead, these held an alertness and aloofness that spoke of full awareness of self and their place in the grand scheme of things. He envied their certainty until he realized he was jealous of a pack of animals.

His heart leaped into his throat when the leader turned his way. The rest of them pivoted as well, holding their V formation like a flock of geese. Grisham counted eight total. He wondered if he should retreat inside his cabin, but before he knew it, they were upon him.

The leader stopped about a foot from where he stood. The creature's antlers brushed the roof of the porch. A trickle of snow landed on the strange deer's head.

Grisham had the oddest urge to reach between its antlers and brush the snow off, but he didn't dare break eye contact with the creature. It studied him with unusual golden eyes whose black pupils were slits instead of circles. The animal

looked him up and down as if assessing him. It sniffed, its nostrils flaring from a velvety nose Grisham was certain hid many sharp and dangerous teeth. He held himself perfectly still as the creature's ears moved back and forth in time with its sniffing.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there before the creature finished its perusal. It startled him by giving a shake of its head that sent the snow flying; then, with a stomp, it trotted off with the other members of its battalion behind it.

*A herd. I'm pretty sure a bunch of deer is called a herd. Though those may have been elk. I wish I could remember the museum plaques because those don't look like any creature I've ever seen before. Maybe I have a concussion.*

The thought was a reassuring one. If he had a concussion, perhaps he was just imagining things and that would make them not real. He looked down at his toes which were becoming very really acquainted with the snow on his porch. He wondered if he should grab some of the slippers or boots from the closet, but the thought of approaching that weird place again set his teeth on edge.

*None of this is real.*

With that thought held firmly in his mind, Grisham stepped off the porch and began to wade through the snow. After several steps, he realized two things; one, that he had no idea where he was going or where the path would lead, and two, that wading through the snow was exhausting, especially with the way his side was throbbing.

The wind began to pick up. He shielded his face with one hand whose fingers were beginning to turn pink from the cold, and clutched his side with the other. He was vaguely aware that his side felt damp. He told himself it was the snow and pushed forward. The flakes blew around him in swirls that cut off sight of anything in front of his face. He wasn't sure if he turned around if he could even find the cabin again. He shivered so hard thoughts of the red robes that had hung in the closet teased his mind. His toes had stopped hurting, which he acknowledged was probably the precursor to frostbite, and snowflakes clung to his eyelashes and scruff so that he probably looked like some sort of deranged Santa Claus.

The toes of his right foot hit something and he let out a surprised yell. Frostbite couldn't have set in yet if it hurt that badly. He told himself there was no way he had been in the snow long enough, although he had no idea how much time

had passed since he left the cabin. He stumbled forward and found one step and then another. His free hand clutched at a railing and he pulled himself upward. The roof of another porch sheltered him from the worst of the storm. Nearly blinded by the snow in his eyes and the darkness pressing around him, he fumbled for a doorknob. His numb fingers managed to grasp the protruding knob and turn it. He put his shoulder against the thick wood and felt it open beneath his weight.

He fell to his knees in the room beyond entirely aware that the sounds from within immediately ceased.

Warmth bathed his face. He lifted his head and found himself staring into the surprised blue eyes of a woman with long blonde hair. She was half-risen as if his entrance had driven her to her feet. She held out a hand but didn't move as though afraid he would startle like one of the deer creatures outside.

“You shouldn't be up,” she said.

“Where am I?” he asked. The question came out gruff and demanding. It wasn't the first impression he wanted to make, but pain clouded his judgment.

The corner of her mouth lifted with just enough humor to promise a laugh, but it vanished almost as fast as it had appeared. Instead, she finished rising to her feet and glanced right and left. Whatever she looked at lay above where he could see on his knees. She said something too soft for him to hear and gave a slight nod. An answering whisper sounded.

“Right,” the woman said. “Let’s get you sorted out.”

Grisham let her help him to his feet with the knowledge that he wouldn’t have been able to rise on his own. He clenched his jaw against the pain but was aware a sound may have escaped him anyway. He was grateful she didn’t comment on it as she helped him to the couch she had occupied. He settled slowly onto the cushions, the tight breath he had been holding leaving him in a whoosh that left him lightheaded.

She stepped immediately back when she released him and stood far enough away that he couldn’t have reached her without lunging. He didn’t plan on lunging but couldn’t blame her for keeping her distance. He was certainly a mess and wouldn’t have trusted the guy he had seen in the mirror if he passed him in the street. The fact that he had just gone through

a snowstorm meant he looked even worse. He hoped she didn't throw him back out in the snow.

He made an attempt to sound like a civilized person instead of a demanding grizzly bear. "I'm not quite sure where I am or what happened."

The woman's eyes creased at the corners. He couldn't decide if it was with pity or amusement, but it brought a softness to her features that told him she was someone who was accustomed to smiling.

"What do you remember?" she asked.

"The alley," he replied. He shook his head at the realization that she would probably have no idea what that meant. The motion made his headache pound harder and he put a hand to it. He squeezed the bridge of his nose in an effort to ease the pressure and said, "I got into a fight in an alley, then blacked out. When I woke up, I was in a cabin." He gestured toward the door.

"So, you decided to go trudging through the snow at this hour and dressed like that?" she questioned.

Embarrassment heated Grisham's cheeks at the stupidity her tone implied. He tried and failed to keep from bristling.



“What was I supposed to do, lay there doing nothing?”

“Yes,” she replied. “You’re hurt. You’re supposed to be giving your body the chance to heal.” Her eyes narrowed with her gaze locked on his side. “You’re bleeding again.”

Grisham followed her line of sight and saw red staining his white shirt. He pulled the fabric up and grimaced at the sight of the soaked bandages.

“Stay here,” the woman commanded.

Grisham leaned forward with his elbow on his knee. His stomach knotted and his head swam. Before he could stop himself, he pitched toward the carpet. He put out his right hand to catch himself, but his arm buckled and he rolled onto his back with a pained gasp. He pulled into a fetal position for a moment and willed his breathing to slow.

He refused to pass out on the woman’s floor. She hadn’t seemed surprised at his appearance, so she knew of his presence, that much was certain. He could surmise she had been the one to help him or was at least in the know about what was going on. The last thing she needed was more trouble on her doorstep.

“He fell.”

“Is he hurt?”

“Of course, he’s hurt. He’s bleeding!”

The voices were small as though they were spoken from very far away, and yet they sounded right next to his ear.

He turned his head and found himself staring at a person the size of his thumb. Her eyes widened when they met his and a yelp escaped her. She had long brown hair with pointed ears just visible through it. She blinked at him, her face not far from his.

Grisham’s weary mind decided it would be easier to accept the concussion rather than try to explain what he was looking at. His eyes closed of their own accord and a sigh escaped his lips before he gave into the bliss of unconsciousness.

## Chapter Three

Chrissy

“What did you do?” Oxford demanded when he entered the room by way of the mouse-sized door in the molding.

“He saw me! I couldn’t help it. I tried to hide, but he fell right by the couch I was hiding under,” Vera replied in a tiny voice that was close to tears.

“It’s not Vera’s fault,” Chrissy said. “He shouldn’t have left the cabin. That wasn’t in the plan.”

“He doesn’t seem the type to stick to the plan,” Vera replied. She eyed the man on the floor with uncertainty. “In fact, I have no idea what type he is. Where did you find this guy, Chrissy?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” she replied. “But the tracker has never been wrong.”

“It might be this time,” Vera said.

All three of them nodded.

“He’s bleeding a lot,” Oxford pointed out. “I’m guessing he broke through his stitches. We’ll have to redo them.” He

eyed the unconscious human with a practical look. “At least we know he’s strong. If you can roll him over, Madam, we should get started.”

“Here?” Chrissy asked.

She didn’t like the thought of Grisham being operated on in her cabin. It felt, well, personal.

“I don’t think we should move him again. He’s lost a lot of blood and would do best if he could be persuaded to stay put for a while. I really don’t think he should be walking on his own in case he falls again.” He shot Chrissy an appraising look. “Unless you want me to get the reindeer involved.”

She rolled her eyes at his tactic. “Fine. He can stay. Just try not to get blood all over the rug.”

As cold as the words sounded, she couldn’t bring herself to look away when Oxford returned with his team of physicians to work on the man.

They cut through his shirt without a care for how exposed that left his chest as it rose and fell with steady breaths visible in the light thrown from the fireplace. She heard his breath catch several times during the restitching and hoped he didn’t wake up. She could only imagine what his response would be

to finding himself doctored by a handful of elves. It wouldn't matter that they were the best trained surgeons in the world with degrees from the most prestigious medical universities that offered online programs. Sure, their training hours had been completed by proxy with cameras from laser-guided surgical centers. They had saved hundreds of lives before being invited to join the crew.

Oxford kept the stitches small while his team monitored pain management and sanitization of both the wound and the equipment. They checked his other wounds and finished bandaging before giving their report.

“He's lost a lot of blood. I'd recommend an IV for at least fluids if he doesn't wake up in the next hour or so,” Oxford told her. “His concussion's going to bother him for a few days, and he risks falling if he doesn't take it easy. I've already put in a request for O positive blood in case something like this happens again.” He gave Chrissy a searching look. “I'm assuming he's going to stay?”

Silence filled the room. The elves that had been busily bringing pillows and blankets to make the man more comfortable paused in their actions, and Oxford's team who

were in the middle of disposing of large bloody squares of gauze and old bandaging looked at her as well.

It would be easier on them all if she gave the command for Grisham to be disposed of back in his old life and find another Santa, someone who was far less stubborn and prone to making rash decisions. Surely, that would be the correct choice.

Chrissy's gaze lingered on the bruise that had darkened across his cheekbone. His features appeared far softer when he was asleep. The few moments she had seen him awake, lines of frustration, anger, and pain, both internal and external, marred his features and aged him beyond his years. She had no idea what he had been through, but whatever it was made him seek out his own vengeance. He was a man lost and searching for something probably even he didn't know.

The tracker had never been wrong.

Chrissy let out a quiet breath of acceptance and nodded. "He's going to stay. Make the necessary arrangements."

Her words spurred a burst of action. Within minutes, Vera's team of competent caretakers had arranged blankets and pillows around Grisham so that he could sleep in comfort. Everything bloody had been cleared away and no sign of the

surgery remained. It was amazing what a troop of elves could accomplish when they worked together. It never failed to amaze Chrissy and had been one of the reasons all of this had started in the first place.

She brushed that thought away before it could take hold. There was no room for melancholy on the night they had found their next Santa. Plenty of work was to be done and it was already beginning. Misty had already taken Grisham's measurements and would begin working on the new suit. She was looking forward to seeing what the spirited elf would come up with this time. The Marm had a knack for crafting a suit that brought out the finer points of the man who wore it. Though what she found in Grisham would remain to be seen.

“He needs a good shave.”

Chrissy startled at Vera's voice so close to her ear. She hadn't realized she had been staring at the sleeping man for so long. A glimpse at the elf sitting on the shoulder of the couch showed a wistful expression on her face.

“He wouldn't look so bad once he's shaved, I reckon,” Vera continued. “I don't mind that Oxford didn't bother to put a shirt back on him. The bandages make him look tough.”

Chrissy smiled. Vera had been a hopeless romantic for as far as Chrissy could remember. The elf had sighed after several of the new Santas. Why would this one be any different?

Chrissy rose to her feet. “We’re not getting anything done by sitting around here.”

“Speak for yourself,” Vera said, though she climbed to her feet as well and slid down the arm of the couch to the floor.

Chrissy swore she heard Vera sniff Grisham’s hair when she passed by.

The elf’s infatuation helped Chrissy view her own feelings in a more professional manner. The man wasn’t there for her. She couldn’t help that seeing him passed out on her cabin floor made her heart go out to him. He had obviously been through a lot; there was no denying it. Giving him a purpose wouldn’t be such a bad thing. She only hoped he saw it that way, also. In the end, it would be his choice.

She couldn’t help noticing his wedding ring. She knew there wasn’t a wife; the tracker wouldn’t let that happen. Attachments didn’t support their line of work. That meant he was either a widower or had been recently divorced and refused to take it off. Most men she had been around didn’t



waste a day in getting rid of the ring once they were divorced, so that left the former of the two. It could complicate things or make them easier. She wasn't sure which. Only time would tell.

Chrissy occupied herself making faces for the bears that would be put into production the next day. She enjoyed the needlework. It calmed her mind by letting her hands work so her thoughts could wander. She found herself reviewing Grisham's fight in the alley the night before. His moves had been efficient, but there had been plenty of wasted movement. They would have their work cut out for them during training, but at least he had a solid base with which to start.

She glanced up as she had done frequently during her sewing to check on Grisham. When she found his eyes open and studying her, her fingers froze mid-stitch.

*It's perfectly normal for a man to be staring at me from the floor of my cabin. Breathe, idiot. You don't want to pass out and have Oxford give you stitches next, do you?*

She plastered what she hoped was a friendly smile on her face and said, "How are you feeling?"

His lips tightened as he assessed his situation. He glanced down at his newly bandaged side which he fingered with his

right hand. He then flexed the hand as if testing it. “I know I won the fight, but I’m not sure my body believes it.”

A surprised chuckle escaped her before she could stop it. She hadn’t expected humor. Fury, frustration at being uprooted without a choice, or hostility even, but not the dark humor laced with dry sarcasm that colored his voice.

“If you hadn’t won, you wouldn’t be here,” she replied.

She stared at him in dismay. She hadn’t meant to admit that she knew about the fight. Obviously, he was beat up, but to tell him she had watched him take down those men in the alley would give far too much of herself away. No self-respecting woman would allow a dangerous man into her home; yet, here he was, wrapped up in blankets that smelled of homemade ginger detergent and laying on pillows with wreaths stitched into the cloth.

He must have still been nursing his concussion because he didn’t press her. Instead, he went with, “Would it be trouble to ask for a glass of water?”

Chrissy was about to reply when a voice did so for her.

“I’ve got it!”

Chrissy wanted to interfere but knew these things were better dealt with sooner rather than later. She had planned to give him a few more days before he was accosted by the realities of his situation, but it was already too late.

A yip sounded as Vera called to one of the other elves. In no time, the two of them had a full glass of water between them that they balanced all the way to Grisham's side.

Chrissy watched Grisham's expression when he first spotted the elves and stared at them during their entire journey across the hardwood floor. The elves deftly maneuvered the glass over the edge of the white bearskin rug and brought it to within an inch of his fingers.

She marveled at the elves' bravery. Vera showed absolutely no fear at being so close to a stranger big enough to harm them both; in light of Vera's reaction, Star kept a calm front and smiled at the man before she backed away and flitted through the door in the molding beside the couch. Vera lingered until Chrissy's pointed cough sent her on her way.

“So, you see them, too?”

She turned back to find Grisham watching her with a desperate cast to his gaze. When she nodded, the concern in them faded.

“I thought it was the concussion, but I’ve never been prone to visions or fantasies. Even when I’ve gotten high with my friends, I’ve never...” His voice trailed away. “Forget I said that. It doesn’t matter. Anyway, I just mean my mind usually doesn’t make stuff up.” He fell silent for a moment, his expression musing, before he said, “Though I’m not sure that makes it any better.” He looked at the tiny door in the wall, then glanced at her again. “There were deer in the snow.”

Chrissy knew what he was getting at and answered the unspoken question. “They’re real. They won’t bother you if you keep to yourself. They also like candy canes.”

She didn’t know why she told him that. It was something she kept to herself, a secret treat she shared with the reindeer when nobody was looking. Franklin would be upset if he found out she was breaking the animals’ carefully regimented diet.

Grisham’s head fell back and he stared at the ceiling for the space of several seconds.

Chrissy wondered if he would fall back unconscious. Perhaps the strange world along with his loss of blood and his concussion were proving to be too much for his mind. Maybe despite her attempts to make things work, he would have to be

returned before his brain convinced him that he was going crazy. She had seen it happen before.

“Grisham, you don’t—”

He held up a hand, cutting her off. “How do you know my name?”

She knew by the intelligent, searching look he gave her that a lie wasn’t going to cut it. She swallowed and said, “The bartender said it.”

A light flickered in the depths of his dark eyes. “Charlie. That old brute. Is that what this is? Is he playing a joke on me?” He raised his voice. “Nice try, Charlie. You’d better get up earlier in the morning to pull something like this and think I’ll fall for it.” He levered himself upright with his left hand and glanced around. “What is it, mirrors? And where’d the deer come from? Is this a reality show or something?”

While Chrissy found it amusing that he thought her life could be a reality television show, she had tried enough tactics with those she had brought back over the years that she knew there was only one course of action that ever really worked. The truth.

“All of this is real.”

Grisham brushed aside her comment with, “I’ve seen special effects before, but creating miniature people and making them carry a cup is just impressive.” He picked the glass up and drained it in two swift gulps. He winced and lowered gingerly back to the ground. “But the pain is real.”

There was a catch to his voice that revealed what it cost him to pretend for the sake of his sanity.

Chrissy wasn’t sure whether to wait and ease it to him gently, or tear the blinders off his reality like a band aid in once swift movement. Regardless of his current situation, she never had been one to tiptoe around the truth.

“I need to show you something.”

He opened his mouth as if to reply with a quippy answer, but when he met her gaze, he paused. He closed his mouth and gave a small nod before he said, “Alright.”

He pushed up to a sitting position and, with her help, made it to his feet.

She took slow steps toward the door behind the couch and felt him stiffen slightly when she reached for the doorknob.

At her glance, he kept his gaze on the door and said, “I haven’t been too successful finding anything normal behind

the doors here. Can't say I really want to know what's behind this one."

She hid a smile at his flat statement and said, "I'm sure it's not what you're thinking."

"I can almost guarantee that," he replied.

At his nod, she pulled the door open and helped him down a hall with an unusual, arched roof that came to a point in the middle.

She felt him trying not to lean on her. The attempt was almost chivalrous, though she knew if needed, she could have carried him down the hall for the most part herself. She wasn't a daisy. The value of hard work outlined her every day. But she had forgotten what it felt like to have someone care about the burden he put on her despite his own pain. It caught her by surprise and tried to hack through the walls she kept carefully up, walls that years of experience had told her were necessary for a multitude of reasons. One injured trainee wasn't going to change that.

She knew what she would find when she opened the door to the room at the end of the hallway, but hearing Grisham's intake of breath helped her see it fresh through his eyes.

The room was more like a warehouse. It ranged the length of several football fields and could have easily held an entire army, and in a way, it did.

From their vantage point on the lift above, the conveyor belts, assembly lines, rows of tools, shelves of paints, and stacks up on stacks of pieces, gears, screws, levers, and parts was nearly overwhelming. The components appeared to move on their own until Chrissy pressed the button on the lift and lowered it to the ground. At the closer vantage point, one could see the elves that ran everything.

They wore uniforms to match their stations, red for assembly and painting, green for outdoors and wheels, gold for soft toy creation, purple for electronics A, maroon for electronics B, and blue worked on pack and wrap. There was a myriad of other color shades among them for section leaders, seconds in command, and specialists. Their small stature was made up for by the overwhelming number that worked with swift efficiency. Songs could be heard among the groups. Chrissy knew all of them by heart and usually joined in, but not this time.

The sounds and songs faded by the time they reached the ground. Chrissy was sure word of Grisham's arrival had



already spread through the compound. Curiosity flourished and production slowed. The sooner the elves satiated their curiosity, the better for all.

She kept her volume normal but her words carried across the room.

“Grisham, welcome to the toy factory.”

She couldn't put it off any longer. Turning, she made herself look at his face. His expression would tell her everything; how he was handling it, if he accepted the truth, if he was about to go crazy and become a liability to those she cared about, if he trusted her. She had seen the moment go a million different ways. She just wasn't sure she could take another setback at that moment, and so took her time before she focused on him.

Grisham's eyes were wide and his face paler than before. He gripped the railing of the lift, though it wasn't clear whether he did so for support due to his injury or because he was overwhelmed. His dark eyes roamed across the room, focusing here and there and taking in the details. His thoughts weren't easily readable. Unlike most, he kept a carefully expressionless wall as he surveyed their surroundings. His eyebrows were pulled low, and he probably appeared angry to

the elves around them, but Chrissy saw something different in his eyes, something pensive and searching as if he was recalculating his entire existence and trying to figure out where he fit into this new, strange world.

“Hi, Grisham. It’s good to see you feeling better.”

Vera smiled up at them from the tables that held what Chrissy knew were the beginnings of the new suit.

Misty hadn’t wasted any time getting started. The Marm was happiest when she held a needle and thread, even if those items were nearly as tall as she was. While Vera didn’t work in the toy shop, she loved to assist anywhere she was needed when there wasn’t housework to do. It made the elf valuable as a fill-in when others took a sick day or their required rest hours, and she didn’t feel the need to be stuck in the cabin all the time.

Grisham’s deep voice rumbled beside Chrissy with a tone of unexpected self-consciousness. “Um, thanks.” He glanced at Chrissy and then back at the elf. “I, uh, missed your name.”

“I’m Vera,” she replied, beaming up at him.

“It’s good to meet you,” he replied.

“I’m Misty,” the Marm piped up. “And this is my team of seamstresses.”

Names began being called out everywhere.

To Grisham’s credit, he didn’t give in to the urge she saw on his face to flee this situation that was obviously over his head. Instead, he said in his solemn way, “It’s good to meet you Misty, and you Vex, and you Bartholomew.”

Other elves crowded forward, crossing the platforms from table to table until they were at Misty’s table closest to the lift. Grisham greeted those that introduced themselves, his expression still pinched with apprehension, but also patient as if he bided his time until they were done.

Elves continued to hurry forward. Those who had spoken to him made way for the others. Despite the number he had greeted, Chrissy knew given the number of workers in the shop that it would take up a large part of the day. Grisham hadn’t left the lift, but she saw him lean against the railing as though his strength was beginning to lag. She held up a hand.

“Thank you all for your kind introductions. We will return, but for now, there are other things we must do. I wish you all a wonderful workday and look forward to dinner together.”

Chrissy pressed the button for the lift and heard Grisham suck in a steadying breath. He gripped the railing tighter so that the knuckles of his left hand showed white. His right remained open, and she wondered if it was bothering him. She made a mental note to ask Oxford to examine it later.

To her amusement, the elves lifted their voices at Vera's motion and called out, "Bye, Grisham!"

A slight twitch at the corners of Grisham's eyes showed amusement before he lifted his right hand. The elves below cheered as though he had given an impressive speech. Chrissy wanted to tell them to tone it down before they scared him off entirely, but even she couldn't help smiling at their enthusiasm. It had been a long time since any of the Santas had cared to show them individual attention during a visit.

Chrissy watched Grisham carefully, unsure what he would do or say after they exited the lift. As soon as the door shut, he leaned against the closest wall and slid to a seated position. His head tipped back, and he closed his eyes with a world-weary expression.

"I can't be what you seem to need me to be." His admission was short and tight as though it cost him a lot to say it.

When she didn't answer, he opened his eyes and looked up at her.

"I don't know who you think I am, but I'm not this." He gestured toward the toy workshop through the closed door.

"This is, well, something else entirely." He rubbed his forehead as if it hurt. "This isn't me. I'm not even sure it's real."

"I told you—"

He lifted a hand. "I know. You said all of it is real. That's the problem." His brows drew together, forming a little ridge between them. "I don't think I can exist in the same world as all of this." Before she could press him further, he said, "I'm too dark for it." He put a hand over his heart, his eyes pleading for her to understand. "There's no room for something like this place in here. It's too broken." He shook his head and lowered his gaze. "Old dog, new tricks, and all of that. This old dog is done."

## Chapter Four

Grisham

To his surprise, the woman lowered onto the floor across the hall from him. He looked at her, really looked at her, while she studied the wallpaper on the wall beside him.

She had long blonde hair that was nearly white. The roots were the same color, so a natural blonde, then, unless she was in the practice of dyeing it every few days. With her knees up and her hands around them, she seemed less in command than she usually did. The few moments he had spent around her, she had appeared not easily flustered and calm no matter how many times he passed out on her.

The thought was an unnerving one. Falling unconscious was a very exposing situation. He felt so helpless when he awoke in these strange situations, his entire world turned on end and even his location unknown. He didn't like relying on someone else for information. He had learned to depend only on himself.

Yet looking at her, he felt like he could trust her. It was a strange impulse, but one his thoughts resonated with. He

looked up at the ceiling of the arched hallway. It appeared to be made of wood and plaster, but he wasn't so sure. In one place, he swore he saw a handprint amid the white. It was tiny, about the size of the tip of his pinky finger. Thoughts of the room they had just left after encountering several hundred of the small people swarmed him. He could imagine them building the hallway with the tiny hammers and saws he had seen in the toy factory.

He shook his head.

*It can't be real. None of it can. I'm concussed. That's the only explanation. This is ridiculous.*

“This is ridiculous.” He realized he had repeated the words aloud when she looked at him. Her eyes were so starkly blue amid her white-blond hair. He was captivated by them and unable to turn away.

“I know,” she replied.

That was it, a simple sentence; yet her acceptance of the situation was somehow reassuring.

“A toy factory.”

She nodded.

“With elves.” He paused, then said, “Is that the correct term? I’m not offending anyone, right?”

“They’re elves,” she replied. “They’re proud of it. They do have their own titles for themselves. The women who are married like Misty are Marms, the unmarried are Missys and Mattys, and the married men are known as Matts. Until you know for certain whom you are addressing, Marm or Matt usually works.”

“Whom I am addressing,” Grisham repeated. He quirked an eyebrow. “You assume I’m still going to be here.”

She quirked an eyebrow of her own. It looked cute in an unpracticed way as if she was giving it a try for the first time. “You haven’t run screaming for the door.”

Her wry tone brought an uncharacteristic smile to his lips. “Has that happened before?”

The way she nodded spoke far more than words.

He leaned his head back against the wall, his thoughts sluggish in a way he attributed to the concussion. The mild pounding in the back of his head was increasing. He forced himself to focus.

“What am I doing here? Also, where is here?”



“You know where you are,” came her assured reply.

Grisham wanted her to say it aloud, to confirm the possibility that had been swirling in his mind, teasing him with its absurdity. If she spoke the words, perhaps it would solidify for him. At the present, he felt as though he sat in a cloud; the edges of his thoughts were fuzzy, though he wasn't sure if it was from being beaten or waking up in a world that shouldn't exist.

“Toys, elves, weird marching deer like a military troop; there's only one place I can think of where that all meets.” He glanced at her expectant expression. Instead of giving the answer he was beginning to suspect was true, he went with, “Congress.”

A laugh escaped her. It made her eyes twinkle and her cheeks rosy as it burst out of her in a rush. She covered her mouth with her hand to hide her smile and shook her head.

“You are too much!”

“Am I wrong?” he asked. “You want me to be the next president, right?”

She gave an exasperated shake of her head. “Though I think that'd be easier.”

“Say it, then. Why did you bring me here?”

He held her gaze. She wanted to look away, he could tell. But he didn't let her. It had been a while since he had asked anything of anyone, but he needed to know for sure. He was glad she didn't turn away.

“I need you to be the next Santa Claus.”

Hearing the words aloud didn't make them better.

Grisham squeezed the bridge of his nose in an attempt to calm the headache that was becoming persistent. “I need a drink.”

The words left him by habit, telling him how much it had become his go-to for escape when reality became too much to bear. The knowledge that those moments had started to become days and then weeks wasn't lost on him.

“Alright.”

He opened his eyes. “What?”

“A drink couldn't hurt at this point,” she said. “At least you're not asking for a gun and a helicopter out of here.”

He watched her closely. “You're serious.”

She nodded and gave a wave of her hand toward the toy factory. “I’ve learned to expect any reaction. A drink isn’t so bad, though Oxford might disagree this close to your pain meds. We’d be good not to overdo it.”

“We’d?” Something warmed in his chest at the realization. “You’ll have a drink with me?”

“Nobody should drink alone,” she replied.

A flicker of something passed through her eyes, stark sadness or regret. It went by so quickly he almost missed it, but he couldn’t deny having seen it. There was no way she had seen him drinking alone the night of the fight, was there? He hoped not. Here she was asking him for help; she didn’t need to know the depths a man could get to.

Yet she knew his name from Charlie. He cringed inwardly. Where would Charlie think he had disappeared to? No doubt the man was calling around for him. He made a mental note to find his cellphone so he could let the few people who still cared about him know he was fine, though he wasn’t sure if that was true quite yet.

He pushed to his feet with her help. It was far harder to get up than it had been to sit down. He decided to avoid sitting on floors until he was healed.

The woman ducked under his arm without waiting for him to ask for help. He felt weaker than he wanted to admit and hated that he had to rely on her assistance to make it up the hallway. It felt as though it stretched further the longer they walked. By the time they reached the door, she was carrying more of his weight than he was.

A grunt of pain escaped him when she helped him through the door and eased him onto the couch. His head lolled back of its own accord, and he sat there with his eyes closed listening to the familiar sounds of ice added to two glasses before liquid was poured inside. He followed her footsteps across the carpet; they were light and soft as if she tried not to wake him.

He opened his eyes to see her looking down at him with a pensive expression.

“I thought you’d fallen asleep.”

He shook his head and eased to a more upright position.

“Not with a promised drink on the way.”

That brought a half-smile to her face. She held out the glass of amber colored liquid and he accepted it. He downed half in a quick gulp. It burned his esophagus in a pleasant way and pooled in a warming puddle in his stomach. A contented sound escaped him.

“That good, huh?” she asked, reminding him that he wasn’t alone.

He glanced at where she had taken a seat on the overstuffed armchair next to the couch. Her white and tan slippers waited on the carpet. She had her bare feet tucked beneath her in a posture that was both feminine and relaxed. Her hand that held her glass was perched on the back of the chair while her other arm rested on her knee.

“Very good,” he replied. He realized something and his heart fell at his lack of manners. It had been far too long since he’d sat anywhere alone with a woman. “I apologize. I never caught your name.”

She tipped her head in acknowledgement. “You were busy trying not to die, so it’s understandable. I’m Chrissy.”

“Chrissy,” he repeated. “It’s good to meet you.”

“So you said to the elves,” she replied. “It’s good to meet all of us. Good to meet, and good to leave.” She drank the contents of her cup in one gulp without any sign of the burn he had felt. She eyed the remaining ice cubes and asked without looking at him, “When would you like me to take you back to your life?”

Her words hung in the air between them.

As quietly as she had asked the question, it sounded like a challenge. She didn't look at him and he could only view her profile, but it was easy to see by the way her jaw clenched and the tightening of her fingers around that glass that she expected him to immediately jump at her offer. He should. His brain yelled for him to get out of there as quickly as possible. If he was trapped in some concussion dream, or if all of this was indeed reality, he needed to go back to his normal life and pick up where he had left off, as miserable as that sounded.

He found himself saying something completely different than what he was thinking. "Out of the millions of men I assume you could have chosen, why am I here?"

"Would you accept that it's a coincidence?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't believe in them."

"Me, either," she admitted. She fell silent for a few minutes.

The sound of her ice swirling in her glass was a peaceful counterbalance to the crackling fire in the fireplace. Grisham couldn't remember the last time he had sat in front of a real fire. It was calming and beautiful the way the flames danced

above the logs. The light, heady scent of burning wood graced the air like perfume. It mingled with the ginger smell of the blankets still spread where he had been operated on, and the aroma that belonged to Chrissy, cinnamon and cedar that fit her so perfectly he could only believe it came from her.

“You’re not the type of guy the tracker usually brings in.”

Her words said so many troubling things Grisham didn’t know where to start. He chose the first one.

“What’s a tracker?”

“A device,” she replied. She gave him a sideways glance from her seat on the chair before she refilled her glass with the decanter she had set on the small coffee table between them.

“It’s programmed to find the best possible next candidate to be Santa. It’s never steered me wrong.”

He heard the unspoken conclusion to her words. “Until now?”

She lifted a shoulder before turning to face him. “You’re too raw for this job.”

Her words cut through him with their honesty to the point that he didn’t have a reply.

She saved him from needing one when she said, “Most men who come here are in the middle of a transition in their lives, a divorcee ready to try something new, a man’s who finally moved out of his parents’ basement, someone who quit college and is looking for another life path, a person who grows tired of being on the police force or the fire department and still wants to contribute to society.” She opened her hand, her red and white fingernails catching in the light. “This is the perfect job because it’s temporary.”

He caught what he thought was a note of bitterness to her words.

She just as quickly covered it up with a shake of her head that sent her hair cascading over her shoulder.

She took another drink from her glass before she said quietly, “They do it until they’re done, then they return to society and pick up their life where they left off. It’s a simple enough process. Do the job until you’re bored of it, then get on with your life. Cut and run.”

Her expression told him it was rare for her to be so candid. She wasn’t lightening her tone as she had during most of their brief conversations. He wondered how long it had been since she’d had a drink.



He took a sip from his glass and savored it. The whisky was strong and aged. He hadn't had a drink so smooth in a very long time. Smooth and with a bite, just the way he liked it. In fact, the pain medication Oxford had given him must have set in because he felt very comfortable there on the couch in her room chatting as if they had known each other longer than the few hours he had been conscious. He had no idea how long he had before the whisky and the pain medication made it impossible to do more than sleep, but he enjoyed Chrissy's company and wanted to keep her talking. As strange as their conversation subject was, he pressed it because she seemed open to discussing it.

“How often do you find a new Santa?” he asked.

“Every few years,” she replied. There was a depth to her words that hinted at the toll the process took. “Most aren't cut out for this business. They give it a shot, then leave when they've had enough. It's an easy out for them.”

He caught the underlying tone behind her words. “What about you? How long have you been doing this?”

His words made her giggle.

She covered her mouth with her hand, her expression one of shock. “Did that sound come from me? I never giggle.” She

shook her head, her actions exaggerated. “Grisham, I believe you’ve gotten me drunk.”

Amusement lightened his thoughts and he said, “Unintentional, but I’ll admit I’m enjoying it.”

She sighed and reached out to smack his knee with her free hand. The movement upset her precarious balance on the chair, and she fell into the blankets.

Grisham tried to ease her fall, but the quick movement pulled at his stitches and nearly dropped him to the floor. He pressed his hand against his side and held it there until the throbbing eased. When he was certain he wasn’t about to pass out again, he opened his eyes and was relieved to find Chrissy on the blankets, her eyes closed and her hair spread in a soft halo around her.

He thought for a moment that she was asleep, then she said with her eyes still closed, “I’ve been doing this far longer than you’ve been alive, my friend. I may look young, a trick of the water here at the North Pole and some of Jax’s concoctions, perhaps, but trust me when I say I haven’t aged as gracefully as the whisky, though I was certainly around when it was barreled.”

He studied her with heavy eyelids. “You don’t look a day over thirty.”

The softest of smiles touched her lips. Her eyes didn’t open when she replied in syllables that were slurred by the drink and the need for sleep, “I’ll keep you Grisham. You know how to make a person feel seen.”

She reached up a hand.

It was a simple gesture, one that spoke of trust like a small child asking for reassurance.

Grisham had a feeling Chrissy wasn’t often open with anyone, and the impulse had left her with a need for comfort. He couldn’t deny her that.

Brushing away the worry that he wouldn’t be able to get back up again without help, he settled onto his back on the blankets near her but far enough away to give her space. He found a position that was mostly comfortable despite his wounded side, though it took a few stifled grunts of pain to locate it. Turning onto his uninjured side, he took her hand carefully in his and held it against his chest.

The warmth of her fingers surprised him. He found himself watching her sleep, her expression peaceful in repose. There

was something alluring and yet distant about the woman as if she needed him but didn't know what it truly was about him that she needed. By the sound of things, she'd had many men here training to be Santa, though he had the high suspicion that it didn't involve laying with them on blankets on the floor of her room or drinking whiskey until the walls of truth lowered and the beginnings of friendship could be felt.

A shine of light on metal drew Grisham's eye. His gold wedding band glinted in the firelight. He rubbed a hand down his face.

*Brylee would understand. It's not like I'm cheating on her. I'm holding a hand, for crying out loud. It means nothing. And this? This is as innocent as the day is long, and this day feels never-ending. I'll tell her tomorrow that I need to go home. Don't worry, Brylee. This is nothing.*

## Chapter Five

Chrissy

Chrissy awoke feeling incredibly comfortable and well-rested. She wasn't sure when Vera had started putting heavier blankets on her bed, but they felt extremely warm and inviting.

It took her a moment to realize the weight she felt was an arm across her shoulder and the heat was from a body pressed against hers. She vaguely remembered drinking far too much and falling onto the blankets. Had she really passed out drunk with a man in her bedroom? The knowledge that Grisham was a stranger made everything that much worse. It took everything in Chrissy's power not to leap up from the floor and demand that the security squad handle the situation with their usual swift and merciless efficiency. The elves might be small, but they were a force to be reckoned with when put to the task.

She was about to move his arm away and roll to her feet when a change in Grisham's breathing let her know he was no longer asleep.

Slowly, as if to keep from awakening her, he eased his arm off and moved away.

Chrissy squelched her strange regret at his distance. It was obvious by the way he moved that he didn't want to offend her, but that he also felt keeping distance was necessary. Why, then, did she wish they could have stayed that way a little bit longer? The truth that it had been a long time since she'd been held whispered at the back of her mind and threatened to break down walls she had erected long ago. She shoved the whispers aside and reminded herself that she was fine and had things to do. There was no point in delaying the inevitable.

Grisham's cabin was truly through the woods and the snow. She had a sneaking suspicion he didn't know how to get back. The thought of him wandering off the path in his stockinged feet made compassion rise in her chest despite her resolve.

Chrissy sat up and tried to smooth her hair into some sort of order before facing him.

He saved her from speaking first with, "Man, whatever Oxford gave me knocked me out hard. I think I could've slept for days."

“You should,” she replied. “No matter what you decide to do, you need rest and sleep first, and probably no more whisky.”

That brought a chuckle from him followed by a hand pressed to his side.

The sight of him in pain resolved Chrissy’s train of thought.

“I’m going to send Oxford back in to check on your wound and your head. You can rest here as long as you’d like. I don’t think a trek back to your cabin would follow doctor’s orders, especially with your choice of footwear.” She rushed on without waiting for his reply. “Vera’s caretakers will be in with breakfast and plenty of water. I’d recommend staying put until your body’s had a chance to heal. Oxford’s threatening a transfusion if you bleed anymore.”

She stepped outside without giving him a chance to respond. Waking up beside him had set her so off kilter as to find herself in slippers in the snow despite her jab at his stockings. The ridiculousness of that situation cleared her head and firmed her resolve to get on with her daily tasks despite the way he threw her off. Without a better option, she turned to

her left and trudged through the snow toward the cabin that was supposed to be his.

By the time she reached the porch, any warmth that had remained from their sleeping arrangement had vanished. Her teeth chattered and toes were beginning to grow numb. She fumbled for the doorknob, grateful that at least the reindeer hadn't seen her. She didn't need to lose their respect along with whichever of the elves had seen them sleeping together.

Shaking off the thought, Chrissy shoved the door open with her shoulder and stepped inside. Warmth surrounded her. At least the caretakers had kept the fire going.

Without a better course of action at hand, she went to the closet and fingered through the available clothes.

A small smile touched her lips. No wonder Grisham had been so freaked out. She really should remember to have the Santa stuff removed when there was a new trainee. It didn't do to get in their head so early on.

The way she thought of it, accepting the Santa role was like putting on a new pair of dance shoes. They would be tight and pinch at first, but eventually the foot and the shoe material would stop fighting each other. The shoe would mold around



the foot as if it had always been there, and both would be seen as better because of the other.

It sounded far easier in her head than real life. The last three trainees the tracker had chosen hadn't been able to handle the North Pole. One glimpse of the toy factory and they had run off screaming. Well, maybe not screaming. Actually, one had. The other two had swiftly declined and demanded to be released back to their normal lives.

She had done so reluctantly. Once a trainee made up his mind that this life wasn't for him, there was no talking him out of it. She kept waiting to hear Grisham say the same thing. She knew she had been pushing him in showing him the toy factory so early on. Usually, she waited a week or so for a Santa trainee to get acclimatized.

*I'm so tired of them running away that I'm driving him to do the same as quickly as possible. But we need a Santa.*

That reality was the heaviest. The North Pole, the elves, the delivery system, it all depended on having a Santa at the helm. As funny as it sounded, she could have tried to step in and had been forced to do so in years past, but the place ran much smoother when there was a Santa in place. It didn't matter where he came from, his background, his age, or his

sense of humor, though that was definitely a bonus. What mattered was that she found the right Santa for the North Pole, and that she did so quickly. They were drawing closer to Christmas and she didn't want to risk messing up the way they had the year before.

She shoved that thought aside and grabbed a white tee shirt from the closet. The boots were far too big, so she went with a pair of fur-lined buckskin slippers and a pair of pajama pants that needed rolling up at the bottom in order to not drag. She chose a red robe from the rack and slipped it on.

A glance in the mirror of the closet showed her exactly what she expected, a thirty-something going on eternity dressed in what Santa would have worn making his way home in a walk of shame, and hair that looked as though she had stuck her finger in a light socket. She sighed. Today might not be her day, but the work must go on.

A scent clung to her skin as she made her way around the room. It took her a moment to realize it was Grisham's. The thought stopped her in her tracks. Unbidden, a smile lifted the corners of her lips. It had been nice to relax and chat with someone who didn't think the bolt size appropriate for a

teenager's race car or the necessary tension of strings in toy pianos captivating conversation topics.

The elves didn't know any better. She really couldn't give them a hard time about it. They were the reason she kept going in the first place. How were they to know anything to talk about beyond the toy factory when it was their favorite place in the world? Elves from all over begged to be allowed to work at the North Pole. There was a list a half-mile long. She was grateful for the potential of another year running the place, but it all centered on finding the right Santa for the job.

The knowledge that Grisham had been brought to the North Pole concussed and bleeding changed everything. She had no idea if his amazingly calm reactions were from the extreme situation, or if he would actually settle in. The thought of searching for another Santa was an exhausting one. True, Grisham wasn't like the normal candidate the tracker located. He was rough around the edges, hurt physically, and had emotional pain she saw hints of but didn't know the depth. He had gone after those gang members with no thought for his own life. Having a Santa with a death wish didn't exactly fit the bill for the job.

She left the cabin with one thought in mind, to lose herself in her work and not think about Grisham for the rest of the day.

However, her thoughts drifted to him as she checked the finishing touches on the newest tablets the elves had rolled out. Haversham was in charge of the technology department and always kept at the frontline of newest releases. Children didn't want second-hand or outdated toys. Now that the word toy included so much more than stuffed animals, roller skates, bikes, or dress up sets, Haversham's division had grown to include an entire wing of the toy factory. One branch was entirely dedicated to computer chips for talking dolls and robot dogs; another kept up with the newest watches, VR headsets, and gaming systems. Needless to say, it took another branch of researchers to ensure the families who received the higher-tech toys had the Wi-Fi capabilities and game passes to support them.

It was a tricky thing, matching what a child wanted with the toys they could have given their current family situation. The Claus family worked hard to ensure they didn't outspan a family's reach or outshine what the parents wanted to give their children. In some instances, gifts from Santa were the

only presents a child received; in others, they were lost beneath the shuffle of a mountain of toys. The goal had never been to assist with spoiling those who had plenty, but to give to those who had little. Everyone deserved something for Christmas. Without Santa, there were those for whom it would be impossible.

“The shading protects the screen from UV rays, but still allows the eReader to function in direct sunlight,” Haversham was informing several of the elves around him. “It is the best escape for a child who isn’t looking for electronics.”

“It’s still an electronic,” another elf, a Matty by the name of Bounder, pointed out.

“But it’s also a book,” Haversham replied.

“Hey, books are our territory,” Matilda, a Marm who had come to them straight from one of the world’s biggest libraries in London, called from several tables away. With her hands on her hips and her glasses slightly skewed as she surveyed the proofs around her, she appeared ready to go to war over the matter.

Chrissy held up a hand. “Alright, we’ve been through this before. EReaders and books are cousin departments. Some children love freshly pressed pages and rich ink beneath their

fingers, while others prefer the ease of thousands of books at their fingertips. There is a place for both.” She glanced at the pink-uniformed elf who stood at the head of the research department. “John-Matthew, are we closing in on more sources for free eBooks? I want to ensure those without the internet at home still have access to the printed word.”

The elf’s face colored red at being singled out. He puffed up his chest and said proudly, “We have been focusing on it day and night, Madam. Don’t you worry; those little ones will have plenty of adventures ready to sweep them away.”

“Age appropriate, this time,” Matilda said in a scolding tone.

John-Matthew ducked with a hint of embarrassment. “Of course, Marm. We won’t be making that mistake twice.”

Chrissy made her way to the woodworking department. While the demand for electronics was on the rise, there would always be requests for dollhouses, skateboards, wooden dolls with dresses and suits, toy ducks pulled with strings, clogs, bats, and other handmade materials. It varied greatly by country, but one never knew when yo-yos or badminton would come back in style. It didn’t hurt to be prepared.

A boomerang flew by her head.

“Head’s up!” a voice shrieked.

At the shout, elves paused what they were doing and searched for the dangerous item so they would be prepared if it came their way.

Chrissy followed the object’s progress in a great arc over the toy factory. It clipped one of the overhead lights but managed to miss the bulb, came close to taking out the rows of threads from the kite department, and narrowly missed the tube of one of the ball-makers’ machines before it hurtled back the way it had come. She saw the elves to the left of her scramble away with shouts of warning as it came on far too quickly for any of them to stop.

Chrissy acted without thought, throwing herself over one table, ducking under another, and then vaulting the sand pouring conveyor belt. A shoe on the top gear put her just within reach. She snagged the boomerang and landed on the ground without knocking anything over. A pause of stunned silence was quickly followed by applause.

Chrissy smiled and handed the boomerang back to one of the toy makers.

“I’d recommend taking down the angle just a bit. We don’t want it to knock out a neighbor’s television dish, do we?”

“No, Madam,” the four elves who had been working on tweaking boomerangs to make them trendier said in unison.

She ran a finger over the purple and green paint. It shimmered in the lights from overhead. “Fantastic artistry. You might have these coming back yet.”

The elves beamed at each other before lowering their heads around the offending boomerang to discuss how to adjust it accordingly.

“Was that a boomerang joke?”

Chrissy turned to find Vera sitting on the edge of one of the desks. The Missy held a strand of miniature twinkle lights they used for the smallest Christmas village trees.

“It should’ve been,” Chrissy replied with a chuckle.  
“You’re cleverer than I.”

Vera shook her head. “I’d never say that. You just saved us from a boomerang before anything got broken. Remember the tennis ball fiasco of seventy-six?”

The memory brought a smile to Chrissy’s face. “That was the last time the elves attempted to make balls defy gravity when they bounce. If I recall correctly, there were flames and glitter and the balls wouldn’t stop bouncing!”



Vera laughed. “And all the Wendy wetting dolls were used to hose the place down!” She wiped a tear from her eye. “That was quite the sight.”

Chrissy grinned. “A stray boomerang isn’t that bad when you put it in perspective.”

Vera gave her an appraising look. “Speaking of perspective, how’s the new Santa?”

Chrissy leaned against the desk, her smile fading. “I’m trying not to scare him off his first week. He’s been through some things.”

Vera nodded with wide eyes. “You brought him down here.”

Chrissy cringed. “That may have been a little hasty. I figured if he was going to run—”

“Why not give him a reason?” Vera finished.

The little elf knew her better than Chrissy wanted to admit. She glanced around the room and noted that the elves had returned to their work. Nobody was paying attention to their conversation. One of the many things that could be said about elves was once they were engrossed in their work, they were focused and hard to distract. Regardless, light conversation

and laughter could be heard around the toy factory. They often joked that it wasn't work at all because they loved what they did.

"I'm that easy to read?" Chrissy asked quietly.

Vera's smile turned into a pensive line as she studied Chrissy. She reached out her hand and patted Chrissy's finger. "Don't be so hard on yourself, love. It's not always easy here."

"I have one job," Chrissy replied. "It should be easy."

"Sometimes I think your job is the hardest of all." At Chrissy's look, Vera explained, "Ours is straightforward here. We make the toys, adjust the electronics, test the dollies and cars and game systems, and pretty much get things from pieces to complete. It's simple if you follow the instructions, and we have a very decent instruction creation team."

Chrissy knew the elf was trying to cheer her up and had to give her kudos along with a small smile. "You're making it sound far too simple."

Vera shrugged. "It is. It should be. Simple is good. Simple is easy. Simple means getting things from point A to point B." She looked up at Chrissy. "Santa training? That isn't simple. There's not a mess of circuits and wires you can connect to

make him say, ‘Yes, ma’am, point me in the right direction.’  
Know what I mean?”

“Far too well,” Chrissy replied.

She took a deep breath of air and held it for a moment. The smells of soldering, painting, drilling, and sawdust were whisked upward by huge ventilation shafts to leave the faint conglomerate of scents that defined the toy factory as much as the workers themselves. To her, it was the smell of home.

“Think Jax could make a cologne for that? Call it, ‘Yes, ma’am, point me in the right direction.’”

Vera laughed. “I tell you what. If he makes the cologne, every woman in the world will be asking for it for Christmas.”

Chrissy chuckled at the thought. “It’d be dangerous.”

“But useful,” Vera said with a grin. “I could use it on Oxford, and he wouldn’t run away the next time I ask him to a dance night.”

Chrissy stared at her. “Oxford?”

Vera blushed. “I know; he’s a bit stuffy and a little obsessed with his work, but if you ever catch him off duty, he’s surprisingly sweet and is actually a great conversationalist.”

The sight of the Missy twitterpated made Chrissy both extremely happy and a little caught off-guard. Elves lived far longer than regular humans, so they took their time falling in love and starting families if they chose to. Some elves preferred to stay single their entire lives; those who did marry were entirely dedicated to each other. She wondered if it was that commitment that made them take their time. Such single-mindedness meant having an individual in their life they felt deserved it. Seeing Vera there made Chrissy's heart give an unexpected ache.

Vera clicked her tongue. "I shouldn't be talking about this stuff."

"It's alright," Chrissy replied. She gave herself a mental shake and forced a warm smile. "In fact, I might be able to help."

Vera brightened. "How so?"

"I'm sure Grisham's wounds are going to need some more doctoring given how I can't make him take it easy; what if tonight I have you be the one to get Oxford and oversee the items he might need during Grisham's care?"

Vera's mouth dropped open. "You'd do that for me?"

“Of course,” Chrissy told her. “You’re my girl!”

Vera grinned so wide it revealed her cute, crooked teeth.

“Yes, I am. And you’re my girl, setting me up like that.” She winked at Chrissy. “If that doesn’t let him know how much I like him, I don’t know what will. He may be hopeless, but I’m a hopeless romantic, so we might be a match.”

“You just might,” Chrissy replied.

## Chapter Six

Grisham

*None of this is real. It can't be.*

Grisham opened his eyes. The constant companion of his concussion headache sent shards of pain knifing into his skull. He closed his eyes and squeezed them tight with one hand.

*This is all a dream from getting hit in the head one too many times. I'm not in the North Pole and there isn't a toy factory managed by a thousand elves. There aren't reindeer running patrols through the snow. There's not a mysterious, gorgeous blonde asking me to be Santa Claus.*

The last thought gave him a moment's hesitation. It wasn't the Santa Claus part, but the memory of Chrissy's eyes, so piercingly blue and with a depth that said she had seen more than her share in one lifetime. There was something about her that circled his thoughts in a haunting way. He tried to deny that she was real, but it was impossible to place her as a figment of his imagination.

If she was real, that meant everything else was, also.

*Damn.*

Grisham opened his eyes again. The sight of cabin walls, a crackling fire in a fireplace larger than a wall of his apartment in New York, the bearskin rug beneath him, and last, the fuzzy white socks on his feet, sent tingles of hot and cold running over his skin. Purple flowers grew in a planter over the fireplace; they matched the flowers he had seen in his room. The soft ginger smell of the blankets in which he had slept lingered when he forced himself to his feet.

He leaned against the bed as his side burned in protest. The tingles turned more intense, heat and chills running over him in waves. His body wasn't thrilled about being stabbed. He probably should have gone to a hospital; instead, he found himself in some fever dream of a toy land run by magical creatures.

*Maybe I'm dead? If I'm dead, what does that make this place?*

He was pretty certain he hadn't done enough good to warrant going to heaven; however, the thought of Chrissy in hell didn't fit, either. If he wasn't dead, and if he was truly present.... He smacked his side. The answering pain nearly sent him back to the floor.

*Pinch yourself next time, idiot!*

So, he was very much alive and present. Pain was a convenient, if miserable, signifier that whatever else might be happening, he was where he was and there was no more denying it.

He settled back onto the floor with a grunt and held his head in his hands to slow the painfully pulsing headache. Something wedged under the bed caught the corner of his eye. He turned carefully on one knee and reached for it.

The box lay just out of reach, forcing him to lower onto his belly and wiggle partway under the bed. The thought of what Chrissy would think were she to find him there made him stretch further than he should have to grab the box. He let out a hiss of creative words as he hauled the object back toward him. As soon as it was secure, he scooted out from beneath the massive four-poster bed whose posts appeared to have been made from solid tree trunks carved with holly.

Sweat dampened his brow. He ignored it and drew the lid off the box with the hope that his efforts were worth it. He needed some lifeline to reality, anything that would give insight into this place. So far, it was too out there to be believed. If he was going to figure out heads or tails of what to do, he needed knowledge to draw on.



The lid revealed a book. It was fairly large with bindings that appeared hand stitched through a leather cover. He pulled it out and balanced it on his knees.

There was no title on the front. Upon opening it, he found two blank pages, then an inscription:

*To my lovely Chrissy Christmas Claus, we started this together and we'll continue it for as long as our bodies and souls are willing. From love it began, from love it will always be.*

A sketch of a wreath with holly and berries had been crafted under the words in beautiful detail. The paper itself was rough beneath his fingertips and had ragged edges as though it had been hand cut. The entire creation felt ancient and creaked as if it had been a long time since it was last opened. Grisham turned the page and began to read.

*The thought of children with nothing is where our journey began. We chose the Yule holiday because the winter solstice is a time of year when those without feel it most ardently. Bringing joy to those huddled together for*

*warmth and comfort was the most enjoyable thing we could imagine. We had only planned to do it for a year, and our reach wasn't far given that it was just the two of us with toys we had made by hand and placed on doorsteps, but as we hid in the shadows and watched the expressions on the faces of the children when they found their gifts, we realized this was a tradition we had to continue.*

There was another sketch which depicted children crowding onto a doorstep with toys in their hands. The crafts were crude, a horse, a dolly, a bear, and some others he couldn't make out, but the enthusiasm in the eyes of the children was unmistakable. On the other side of the lane were bushes with the brisk outline of two individuals hiding behind them. The resemblance of the woman to Chrissy was obvious. Grisham looked for a date but couldn't find one. He turned the page and read on.

*Then you made friends with an elf. Chrissy, love, you would be the one to befriend an injured elf and carry it home. I about fainted and thought I was seeing things, but*

*you shushed me right up and tended to the darling all the same. Nobody was supposed to know of their presence, that much was clear. She was terrified of what her kin would think. So we fed her, bandaged her, and when she was ready, you sent her on her way. The next day, three more arrived at our house, sent by the first due to ailments. I'm pretty sure you became the first ever elf doctor!*

This sketch showed the profile of a woman kneeling with her hands held low to the ground. The darkened sketch of a little elf with pointed ears holding onto the woman's thumb made Grisham's heart lurch. They were real. He had seen them with his own eyes. How had he gone his entire life without knowing of their presence? Certainly, in this day and age of cameras and the internet, someone would have posted about them. It was a mystery he made a mental note to investigate. He turned the page.

*They became our solution. With them, we were able to create more toys and faster. You became a toy expert and had the idea of asking children what they wanted for*

*Christmas when we saw them in stores, restaurants, and anywhere else we could. It became a balm for not being able to have little ones of our own. I'm pretty sure you adopted every child within reach right then and there. They certainly loved you at first sight!*

The following sketch was of a younger Chrissy surrounded by children in a store. Their beaming smiles were unmistakable and mirrored the one she wore. The artistry was fantastic. He would have recognized Chrissy anywhere from that sketch. His admiration of the artist grew with each drawing. He turned the page.

*When the police burst into our house under suspicion that we were robbers because of all the toys we had, they almost found the elves. Thank goodness for that giant elephant! That was the day we began to look for a place where nobody would find us. It was the only way to keep them safe. We checked about a million options, but none of them were suitable. Finally, we spun the globe, closed our eyes, and pointed. When we landed on the North*

*Pole, both of us laughed, then it struck us that it was meant to be!*

The sketch had a young couple, the woman with pig tails and the man wearing a fedora that fell over one of his eyes as they laughed and stared at their entwined fingers pointing at the North Pole on a globe. The scene was so adorable Grisham pictured it in calendars sold for Christmas. His heart ached at the sight because he had a guess at what was coming, and it wasn't going to be easy to see.

*Who knew elves could talk to animals? The reindeer especially took to the task of delivering toys almost immediately. It took a while to figure out how to get the sled in the air so we weren't landlocked in our endeavors, and then remember the chaos of teaching the reindeer to fly? Thank goodness Reginald got them sorted out, otherwise we'd still be grounded.*

The picture showed a little elf standing on the head of a reindeer with a finger held up as though he was in deep

discussion with the animal. It was intricately drawn with the fur around the reindeer's nose and eyes so detailed Grisham almost felt as if he could pet the animal. It looked far less intimidating than they had in the snow the other day. He turned the page.

*It was a beautiful thing watching the development of technology and the way the elves were able to help us perfect our delivery system. We began a network of Santas in malls and stores all over the world in order to find out what children wanted for Christmas and who had the most need. Our Santa system was unmatched in communication until cell phones and the internet were invented. The elves were then able to use the satellites to increase our range, making it even easier to do what we do. Even though it became harder to deliver presents with security technology growing in homes, knowing which children were the most in need became so much better.*

It showed a drawing of a man in a Santa costume setting toys beneath a rickety excuse for a Christmas tree. A little

child peered around the corner with wide eyes and the biggest smile at the sight of all the presents.

Grisham turned the page and his heart slowed.

*I'm sorry I couldn't keep up with you, love. My mind was willing, but my heart betrayed us both. I told myself love was enough to keep us going forever. Hundreds of years should have been enough, but even a year away from your side is going to be far too long. I'm sorry to leave this all to you. Please know that if you decide to set down the duty when I am gone, I will never be disappointed. You dedicated your life to seeing to the needs of others; it's alright to take time for yourself.*

*But I know you, don't I? I know you won't give up because I find myself realizing as I write this that you were the genius and the driving force behind all of it; I was merely the willing participant in your grand and selfless schemes. Chrissy, just promise me one thing. If you find a Santa with a good heart and a need to help others that matches your own, let yourself love him the way you love me. You have so much to give; it breaks me to think of all of that fading*

*away. I know you won't say the words aloud, but will you promise me?*

The next page bore a simple drawing of a heart with the initials C and N and a plus sign in the middle. Beneath the drawing, the book ended with these words:

*Your love has given us a place in eternity. I go there first because the world still needs you. Take care of your heart the way you have always taken care of me, for yours is unique and all-encompassing. Thank you for sharing your love with me. Yours forever, Nicholas Claus*

Grisham stared at the heart until the image of the two letters surrounded by the simply drawn symbol of love was burned into his mind. He flipped back through the pages, sure that there was more to the story that hadn't been captured by the words and drawings. They had created this together, Nicholas and Chrissy Claus working with elves and reindeer to see their dreams of delivering toys to children come true. It seemed so simple, and yet he had seen the toy factory and met



the reindeer. It was complicated and crazy, a kind of dream that normally couldn't be achieved. But here he sat at the North Pole with the origin story in his hands. The rest was undeniable.

Grisham let the book fall back into the box. He stared at the far wall, his thoughts blurring around each other like a chaotic whirlwind.

*What am I missing at home?*

*Home.*

The word was empty, a blank slate wiped clean after it had once been so full of dreams and ideas that it could barely contain them. Now it was a shattered remnant of a past that no longer existed, of a future that could never be, and of lives that had been stolen in the blink of an eye. It didn't matter that he hadn't gone with them. He had died the day they did; now, he was a mere shell of a man.

There was no place for a person like him.

*So why not? It's not like I'm giving anything up. It's all given up on me.*

His gaze strayed to the pile of blankets on the floor.

She had done that. She had made him a bed in her room when he couldn't go back to his own cabin. As inconvenient as having a strange man sleeping in her room must have been, Chrissy had a kind heart and hadn't turned him back out into the cold like she probably should have.

He couldn't forget the honesty in her admissions when she had been drunk. She probably told him far more than she meant to about the Santa process. It was an intriguing thing, the fact that a Santa stayed for a few years until they were tired of it and moved on. As much as she had tried to hide it, he could hear in her voice how exhausting of a process it was.

Her words circled in his head.

“I'll keep you, Grisham. You know how to make a person feel seen.”

A smile touched his lips. That was the nicest thing he had heard in a long time.

Did it make up for being kidnapped after fighting in an alley only to wake up at the North Pole? He couldn't deny that she had probably saved his life by not leaving him to bleed out on the asphalt, not to mention he could have ended up in jail. It wouldn't have been the first time. He still wasn't sure how she had gotten him there in the first place. She wasn't petite, but

she was still a head shorter than him and would have struggled to move him anywhere by herself. Given the condition he must have been in, he couldn't have been much help. Chrissy was very much a mystery, and one that beckoned him like a moth to a flame.

*It's a purely professional interest. She's offering me a job. I'm an employee. That's all.*

He couldn't deny that he had woken up with his arm around her that morning. The thought made his heart ache. The echoing twinge through the swollen knuckles of his ring finger were a coincidence, he was sure. He ran his thumb across the ring out of habit. The stickiness of his hand made him grimace. He needed a shower.

With that thought in mind, he pushed to his feet. He kept a hand on his side to ease the pain and made his way to the door. The thought of braving the snow was a daunting one, but there was no way he would shower in Chrissy's cabin and risk her finding him. Talk about a non-professional complication.

A blast of icy wind met him when he opened the door, tearing it from his grasp and sending snow spilling onto Chrissy's bedroom floor. She probably wouldn't be thrilled to find a wet floor when she got back from wherever she had

vanished. With that thought in mind, Grisham did the best he could to push out the snow with his socked feet before he stepped out as well.

It was embarrassingly easy to follow the path back to his cabin. What had felt like a tremendous journey of survival the day before turned out to be a jaunt along a shoveled path with unmistakable reindeer hoof marks lining each side.

He picked up his pace out of the want to avoid another confrontation with the intimidating animals. Despite both the book and Chrissy's reassurances that they were friendly, he didn't want to risk it, especially without candy canes as peace offerings.

The thought made him chuckle at the abrupt turn his life had taken. It wasn't like he would ever be the kind of person to carry candy canes in his pocket as a treat for the North Pole's four-legged militia. He definitely wasn't cut out to be the Santa Chrissy was looking for; she had even admitted he wasn't the type of person the tracker usually found, whatever that meant. Perhaps he should just throw in the towel and ask to go back.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob to the cabin. The thought of returning to his life in New York brought with it a

wave of darkness. He couldn't go back to that place where his actions had become less and less meaningful by the day. His diet had begun to subsist of alcohol and bar peanuts as each lucid moment was drowned in the numb solace of another drink. He couldn't recall the last time he had been back to his apartment. Thank goodness Brylee had put everything on automatic bill pay or the landlord would no doubt be locking his doors for good.

The thought of Brylee and the rooms within his apartment he avoided made his chest give such a hard pang he rested his forehead against the cold door. He could no longer feel his feet and his hands were almost numb, but he didn't care. He longed for another drink to drown his pain, but he couldn't bring himself to walk back to Chrissy's cabin. He wasn't sure the whisky bottle was still there anyway. Things seemed to move of their own accord at this place.

*Elves. It had to be the elves. What am I getting myself into? At least it's better than going back.*

Grisham opened the door and stepped inside the cabin. He closed the door behind himself and surveyed the space with a critical eye.

Someone had made the bed. He shied away from the thought of little elves cleaning up after him. While his mind was getting clearer without the alcohol, he wasn't sure he was quite ready to grasp his new reality. He walked past the crackling fire in the fireplace without letting himself think about who had kept it up to give him a warm cabin to return to. He caught a glimpse of the picture hanging above the bed and grimaced at the sight of a guy with overgrown scruff, wild black hair, bandages on his face, and wearing ridiculous clothes. He continued into the bathroom and shut the door with a resolute bang as if he could close out the entire world in general.

He stripped and dropped his clothes into a pile on the floor. The sight of the bruises that ranged up and down his body let him know just how badly the fight had gone. He might have taken them down in the end, but the price had been dear, almost too dear. He looked at himself in the mirror. So what if they had stolen a few purses from play-goers? They had scared people, not hurt them beyond the psychological damage of being robbed.

But he couldn't deny how good it had felt to fight them. The pain, the connecting blows, exchanging punches; it all

echoed with the hurt he felt inside in a way that made him feel alive again. If he taught a few lessons in the meantime, what did it matter? It helped him forget her.

No, not forget.

Her face surfaced in his mind, its edges less substantial now as time slowly erased the sharp realness of them.

He saw himself sitting at the edge of the bathtub while she soaked in the bubbles. Her pregnant belly was just visible above the edge of the water no matter how hard she tried to submerge it. In the end, they had both laughed, she because it was a ridiculous situation, and he because of how cute she looked when her nose crinkled at the glop of bubbles he had put on her stomach in his effort to help.

*“You’re so beautiful,” he had told her.*

*“I’m not. I’m fat,” she had replied in that teasing, petulant voice she used when she was trying to annoy him.*

*He’d snorted. “You’re glowing from carrying our baby.”*

*She had laughed. The sound was his favorite in the entire world. “Glowing is a glorified way of saying you look so pregnant you’re about to explode.”*

*“Maybe,” he had replied.*

*A handful of bubbles landed on the collar of his suit.*

*“I still have to go to work,” he had protested.*

*She pulled his lapel until he leaned down to kiss her.*

*“Farewell, my glowing beauty,” he told her after.*

*She picked up a double handful of bubbles.*

*He managed to duck out of the bathroom before they made more spots on his suit. He wasn't sure the guys at the office would understand if he got into a bubble fight with his wife before they negotiated their biggest deal yet.*

He glared into his battered face, his dark eyes staring accusingly. He was a mess. She would be so disappointed with the direction he had taken his life. He had let it all fall apart, first by drinking himself into a stupor, fighting petty thieves, and nearly getting himself killed. Now, he was being asked to take on a position of love and giving. Who was he to help the world when it had taken everything from him? Why couldn't he just go to her?

*Because I'm a coward.*



He punched the mirror. It shattered around his right fist, cutting the knuckles. A hiss escaped from between his clenched teeth at the pain to the broken bone in his hand. He clutched it to his bare chest. A glance at the mirror showed it smashed and bloody. He shook his head at his lack of control. Perhaps if he kept this up, Chrissy would send him back herself. Then where would he be?

Somber, he turned the knobs for the shower and waited for the water to heat up. Careful to avoid dripping on the floor and causing the elves more of a mess to worry about, Grisham held his hand under the water after checking the cuts to ensure there wasn't glass embedded in the skin. During the process, he spotted an electric razor on the shelf in the shower. A can of shaving cream sat next to it. Both were new and apparently waiting for him. The fact that the shaving cream was peppermint candy scented wasn't lost on him.

He glanced at the distorted image of himself in the mirror. That grizzled angry man could certainly do with a shave and a haircut. The haircut he wasn't sure he could manage with his hand even if he had ever given one to himself, but shaving he could do. If ever there was a time to stop looking like a homeless, battered drunk, this was it.

He picked up the razor and turned it on.

## Chapter Seven

Chrissy

Chrissy was immersed in fixing the edges of a miniature dollhouse that had misaligned due to a hiccup in the belt system of the molder and didn't notice when the singing and chatter in the toy factory died away.

“Chrissy, look,” Vera whispered loudly.

She glanced up to see the lift from her cabin lowering slowly toward the floor. On it stood Grisham, but not the Grisham she had left behind when she fled early that morning with all the grace and elegance of a newborn colt.

This Grisham appeared clean and refreshed, his black hair combed back and shiny as though it was still wet. The strands curled behind his ears and hung almost to his shoulders in curled smooth locks she wanted to push her fingers through. His beard had been trimmed to a well-manicured style that defined his jaw and gave him a rugged look that suited him.

*Whoa, Chrissy. Check yourself!*

She gave herself a mental shake and tried to view him as an impassive bystander.

He looked good in the light, long black coat, black boots, dark pants, and white undershirt. She knew the contents of the closet at his cabin well because all the clothing there had been stocked under her orders. She thanked herself inwardly for having such good taste, then gave herself another mental kick for being unable to remain impassive.

“Is that Grisham?” Vera asked breathlessly.

Chrissy tossed the elf a wry smile. Apparently, Grisham’s good looks weren’t lost on the elves around her. Even with the bandages across his eyebrow, the bruising around his eye, and other bandages around his right hand she hadn’t noticed before, he looked surprisingly healthy and bright-eyed.

His gaze shuttered a bit when he looked around and realized he had the attention of every elf in the toy factory. His eyes darted across the room as though attempting to find something to focus on that wasn’t overwhelming. When he spotted her and their eyes met, the relief that washed across his face made a smile come unbidden to her lips. She could see his nervousness increase the closer he got to the ground. Tension straightened his shoulders, grooves deepened across his brow, and the corners of his eyes tightened as though he was bracing himself for the moment the lift touched the floor.

She half-expected him to press the button for the lift to rise again so he could escape the center of attention in which he found himself. Instead, when the lift stopped, he collected himself visibly and stepped off. Chrissy wasn't sure whether to go to him or give him his space. Grisham met her gaze again and nodded before he slowly turned toward the first long table.

He cleared his throat. The sound was loud in the room over the usual hum and chaos of assembly. Only the belts and production lines continued amid the stillness that had settled on the toy factory. Chrissy swore she had never heard the place so quiet.

“So, what do you do here, Sir Elf?” Grisham asked.

Martin stared up at him, his awe at being addressed personally and with such formality freezing him to the spot. Luckily Martin's wife Lizzy kept her cool and elbowed him nearly hard enough to shove him off the table.

“I, uh, I assemble the pegs, Mr. Santa Claus, Sir,” Martin stuttered and adjusted his glasses to peer up at the human.

Grisham's eyebrows lifted as though he was very interested in what the elf said. “So, what does that entail?”

Martin appeared to gather himself a bit at the familiar topic. “I, uh, I take the peg, smooth it down like so,” he described in his Irish brogue as he demonstrated running the sandpaper across the wooden surface, “And then fit it in the hole along with a dab of glue. That ensures some little mite ain’t gonna break it off and swallow it down.”

A glow lit Grisham’s eyes and he nodded. “I see. You are doing an excellent job.”

Martin surprised everyone in the room by sketching a very neat and precise bow. “Thank you very much, Mr. Santa Claus, Sir.”

Grisham seemed to consider the title for a moment. He looked around the room and his gaze lit on Chrissy for the briefest instant before he turned back to the elf. “I’m not quite sure I deserve such a title as of yet, so what if we go with Grisham for now?”

Martin nodded solemnly as if the man offered him the utmost trust. “Very well, Mr. Grisham, Sir. It’s an honor.”

Grisham’s mouth twisted as if he didn’t know how to take the elf’s words, but he nodded and his expression cleared. “Thank you.”

He moved on to the next elf. Lizzy swiftly and eagerly explained how, when Martin was done, she was then tasked to test the pegs to ensure they were securely fastened before she painted them a bright, pretty yellow.

“I get to pick out the colors. It’s part of my degree in color and materials design,” she explained happily.

Grisham’s eyes widened. “You have a degree?”

“Of course,” Lizzy replied in her peppy chirp. “We all have degrees based on what field we liked best. Of course, we do it all online because elves in public colleges might raise a few eyebrows, if you know what I mean.” She tittered a happy laugh before she said, “Martin enjoyed graphic design and used to create graphics for the model airplanes and race cars, but when his eyes started to go, he moved to assembly.”

The little elf nodded with a red hint to his cheeks at receiving Grisham’s attention once more. “I like working with my hands and I don’t need to squint at all the little parts. Chrissy thought I would be a great fit here, and it’s worked out swimmingly.”

Chrissy felt a flutter in her stomach when Grisham’s gaze turned to her once more. His eyebrows lifted just a bit as if

they shared a secret. The smile that played about his lips said the same before he turned back to the elves.

“I think she was absolutely right,” he said.

Warmth rushed over Chrissy in a wave. She forced herself to turn back to her work, but couldn't help following his progress as he made his way slowly through the first room. Grisham took his time talking to every elf in the assembly wing. It was about a tenth of the elves that made up the toy factory and took him most of the morning to do.

By the end, his exhaustion was apparent in the way he leaned against the last table as though it was the only thing holding him up. He spoke to Maverick, Iversham, Binkie, and Winifred about the intricacies of groove depth and screw hole lineups, things she was sure Grisham didn't care about, but toward which he was showing complete interest.

His attention to the elves was utterly incredible. Never had any Santa since Nicholas shown much interest in the inner workings of the toy factory. The elves Grisham had spoken to beamed at the attention they had received, and she could read the anticipation on the faces of the others. The problem was that there was too little of Grisham to go around, and she was worried about how far he had pushed himself already. He



should have been resting and healing. The pallor of his face was unmistakable.

When he glanced up to see just how little of the toy factory he had reached, the daunting enormity of the ninety percent that remained could be read on his face. Chrissy decided she should step in.

“It’s time for the lunch bell,” she announced. “I’ve heard some grumbling tummies.” She shot Trembleton a look laced with humor. “Yours especially, Trem.”

The little elf laughed the loudest as he patted his generous stomach. “The tummy never lies.”

The dining bell rang and more laughter erupted.

“What did I tell you?” Trembleton said with a proud grin as if he had personally made the bell ring instead of the cafeteria elves who worked hard to create their lunch.

Chrissy looked around at all the expectant faces. “Why don’t we show Grisham where the cafeteria is? I’m sure he could use some food.” She held up a hand when excited chatter followed her words. “I have some other things to show him around here, so he won’t be back down today, but I’m

guessing he would love to make his rounds of the next department tomorrow.”

She finished her statement as a question directed toward Grisham.

His relief at getting a break was easy to read, but he nodded without letting it show in his voice. “I’ll be back for sure tomorrow. Now, where do we eat? I’m starving!”

The elves who had met him bounced around him excitedly before they took off for the mini lifts that lined the walls. Though there were enough doors to meet security’s fire codes, the elves preferred the fun of the lifts to go up and the numerous slides that led down to the toy factory.

“You don’t have a slide?” Grisham asked when she joined him on the main lift and hit the button for it to rise.

She shook her head. “Actually, Benjamin from the design team once offered to put in a slide my size so I could enjoy it as well, but I talked him out of it in consideration of the logistics and space it would take up.” At his look, she shrugged. “I like watching them go down when the work shift starts each day and after lunch, and that’s good enough for me.”

“They’re an enthusiastic group,” Grisham replied.

She couldn’t decipher by his tone what he was thinking. She felt off-kilter when he was around as though she was waiting for him to do something or say something negative about the place she had worked so hard to create. The fact that he looked so nice and clean after his shower added to it.

He caught her studying him and ran a hand through his hair in a self-conscious gesture.

“I don’t usually let my hair get this long. It’s kind-of a mess.”

She refrained from commenting that it was a good-looking mess that she wanted to push her fingers through. Instead, she composed herself and replied, “I’ve been known to give a fairly decent haircut from time to time.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “How do I know if this will be one of those times?”

His teasing tone made her smile. “You’ll have to trust me.”

He turned to face her as the lift neared the top and crossed his arms in front of his chest. He regarded her with a directness that kept her off-balance. “I think I could do that.”

She felt the weight of the words as though he was talking about far more than just a haircut. She swallowed and said, “Alright. I’ll hold you to it.”

When they stopped at the top, Grisham reached for the lever of the safety gate latch. She saw him wince and tuck his right hand against his side before he opened the gate with his left.

She gave him a straight look. “Let me see your hand.”

“It’s fine,” he replied.

She held out her hand without a word.

He gave a roll of his eyes that said her worry was unfounded before he put his palm in hers.

She lifted his hand with care and eyed the obvious swelling beneath the bandages wrapped from the base of his first finger and across the back of the others. Running a finger gently along the bone, she felt where the swelling intensified.

A glance at him showed that even though he kept silent, sweat had broken out on his forehead.

“This is broken,” she said.

He nodded as if he had suspected as much.

“And these?” she asked, lightly fingering the red marks that showed through the white bandages. Other than his side, he shouldn’t have any wounds that were still bleeding. She wasn’t sure where he would have gotten something like that since she last saw him.

“I slipped on the ice.”

It was a blatant lie and they both knew it.

She felt it best not to press him about it other than to warn him about the break. “You need to stop using it,” she told him.

“I know,” he replied. “It’ll heal.” He pulled his hand from her. “Don’t worry about it.”

At his short dismissal, she led the way to one of the hidden doors that lined the hall. She found the button among the wallpaper flowers and pushed it by habit. The door swung inward.

“Whoa,” Grisham breathed. “How’d you do that?”

She gestured up and down the hall. “There are eight doors on each side. Each one leads to different parts of the Pole.” At his awed look, she said, “Nic...I mean, I...liked the thought of hidden passageways. Back when we were designing this place, it seemed like a good idea, but whenever I’m trying to show

someone around, it gets complicated. You don't want to think you're heading for the cafeteria and end up at the stables. It's happened plenty of times."

He gave her a sidelong look. "It has."

She couldn't read his flat tone. Did it bother him that she had trained other Santas? The idea was preposterous. That's what the place was for.

She brushed the thought aside. "You'll learn it quick enough. Look."

She pointed to the tiny hamburger shape in the middle of a daisy. "Cafeteria." She moved further down the hall. "See the holly here?" She showed him the holly leaf in the place of a daisy leaf. "This leads to the greenhouse gardens. And this reindeer hoofprint—"

"Let me guess. The stables?" Grisham replied. At her nod, he leaned closer. "It doesn't look like the hamburger. They shouldn't have gotten mixed up." At her searching look, he lifted a shoulder. "I'm just saying I question the intelligence of these Santas you've trained."

That brought a snort from her that was decidedly unfeminine and shocking to them both. She smothered it with

a laugh. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

He shook his head as she led the way back up the hall and through the cafeteria door. “I’m not jealous, I’m concerned.”

She threw a glance over her shoulder at him. “Why?”

“Because you said the tracker didn’t normally take you to guys like me. It’s obvious that you’ve been working with inferior male intellect.”

A true laugh escaped from her. “Inferior male intellect?” she repeated. “That’s a harsh judgment considering you don’t know any of them.”

“They mixed up a hamburger and a reindeer hoofprint. What’s to know?”

The question hung in the air between them as the commotion of the cafeteria drew near. Chrissy opened the door at the end of the hall and led the way into the dining room. She felt Grisham halt behind her and turned to find him staring with wide eyes and a grin on his face. It was the most endearing expression she had seen from him, filled with childlike wonder and pure happiness.

“Look at all the little tables,” he said in a breathless whisper as if he was afraid the elves would overhear.

Fortunately, elves were very serious about eating and dove into the spread before them with even more enthusiasm, laughter, and conversation than the toy factory. The family style bowls were passed with practiced ease, each long table filled with plenty for its occupants while the elves who ran the vast kitchen beyond the half dozen swinging doors rushed in and out.

Another human-sized door stood open as it usually did and gave a glimpse into the kitchen in case Chrissy's help was needed with some crisis or another. Grisham's grin at the small tables that spanned the long room widened at the sight of the many miniature ovens, sinks, preparation areas, cutting boards, utensils, and multiple tables for cutting, dicing, slicing, and kneading. In the back corner stood one human-sized stove that dwarfed the other appliances by far.

"Everything is so small!" he whispered loudly as if he couldn't contain his enthusiasm.

Chrissy couldn't help the chuckle that escaped her. "It didn't make sense for me to build everything human sized and make them cook on dangerously large appliances."

"Yes, but how did you find functional ones that were so small?" Grisham asked in awe.



Pearl, the Marm who ran the kitchen, spotted them and waved from one of the main stoves.

Chrissy waved back as she said, “We made them ourselves.” At Grisham’s raised eyebrows, she said, “Well, why not? We design toys, so why not everything else we need for this place to run like a well-oiled machine?”

The look the man gave her was filled with respect.

Pearl used the lift by the door. Chrissy waited until the Marm reached the platform she used to survey the kitchen staff and the cafeteria.

“Hello, Pearl,” she greeted. “How are things running today?”

The elf’s British accent came through thick when she replied, “Running easy peasy. The pies all came out scrummy and there’s no complaining.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Chrissy said. “We’re looking forward to trying it ourselves.”

“The table’s all set and ready to quench your hunger,” Pearl replied. She winked and said, “Let me know what you like best.”

“Will do.”

Chrissy led the way into the next room by yet another human-sized door.

“We don’t eat with the elves?” Grisham asked.

Chrissy studied him as he eased down to his seat at the table. He held his left hand to his side as though it was bothering him. She didn’t want to bring it up at lunch given how he had responded about his broken hand, but she promised herself she would have Oxford treat him and give her an update later.

“Some of the trainees haven’t been exactly comfortable around the elves,” she told him honestly.

“So, they had you build this room to eat separately,” he replied with understanding in his voice. He set his bandaged hand on the table. “Did Nicholas eat with the elves?”

A jolt of electricity ran through Chrissy. “Where did you hear that name?”

Grisham watched her as if unsure of her reaction. “I could lie and say I guessed it from the songs. You know, Jolly Old St. Nicholas and all that.”

She watched him closely. “But you won’t lie.”

He probed his hand with the fingers of his left as if trying to distract himself by the pain. "I won't lie," he said without looking at her. "I found a book under your bed."

Hot and then cold ran through Chrissy. Her first reaction was to be angry and yell at him for prying into something that wasn't his. The next was sadness. She couldn't remember the last time she had looked at Nicholas' gift. The pain that came from turning the pages was a meager consolation from the loss that nearly consumed her every time she let herself dwell in the past.

Grisham looked up at her and then back at his bandaged hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

"You really shouldn't have," she replied.

A thick silence filled the air between them. She felt guilty and exhausted. Thinking of Nicholas always made her sad. But Grisham had been through a rough couple of days. She felt like she owed him something, anything, after the trust he had placed in her.

"He liked to dine with the elves," she said. "We both did. I do it when there isn't a Santa to train."

Grisham looked up at her. There was a depth to his eyes as if he felt the sorrow she did and it was multiplied a thousand times. The look threatened to swallow her with its overwhelming sadness. She wanted to cry and had to blink to keep the moisture from overflowing her eyes. Whatever he had gone through was so much more than she had originally guessed. She wanted to wait for him to bring it up, but wasn't sure now if he would do so. Such deep pain was as hard to share as it was to carry. It cut either way. Perhaps talking through it would ease his burden somehow.

She was about to ask when the little door from the kitchen opened and several of the kitchen elves in their orange aprons came in.

Grisham blinked and the connection was gone. He watched the elves use the lifts to the table. An amused smile raised one side of his lips as they set their little plates in front of both him and Chrissy. They were served three tiny platters, each of which would be a normal portion for an elf, but were a very paltry mouthful for a human.

At Pearl's nod, the elves backed up to the edge of the table and waited with their white-gloved hands behind their backs for Grisham to try the food.

He picked up the tiny fork next to the first plate and attempted to stab a piece of chicken. It took three tries, but he finally got the morsel onto the minuscule tines. He lifted the fork toward the elves in a salute before he put the chicken in his mouth.

Chrissy nearly laughed out loud when he chewed the piece with his front teeth and swallowed. It couldn't have been bigger than a crumb, but he swallowed and gave an appreciative smile.

“That’s very good,” he said.

The elves broke out into laughter. Pearl laughed so hard tears streamed down her face. She set a hand on Chrissy’s arm.

“You found a good one,” she said. The Marm then turned to the elves and clapped her hands. “Send the plates,” she commanded.

The amusement that spread across Grisham’s face when he realized it had been a prank lightened Chrissy’s heart.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “They asked if they could play a joke on you. I’m glad you’re not upset.”

He chuckled. “I couldn’t be upset. The food was great!”

She shook her head in amazement. “That’s maybe three mouthfuls.”

“Three really good mouthfuls,” he replied.

A buzzer sounded and a door opened to reveal a conveyor belt where the table met the wall. Two heaping plates of human-sized food rolled in and came to a rest in the middle of the table. When Chrissy moved them off, the buzzer sounded again and two glasses of iced punch came through the door.

“Is that spiked?” Grisham asked in a tone of uncertainty as though he wasn’t sure how he felt about it either way.

“No,” Chrissy told him. “But try it. It’s a specialty of theirs.”

Grisham raised the glass to his lips and took a sip. He gave the contents an appreciative look before he drained half.

“Very good,” he said when he set it back down. “I didn’t know what I was missing.”

“Elfin punch. It’s the good stuff,” she said.

He picked up the regular-sized fork. “I’ve had my appetizer. I’m ready for this,” he said.

The sigh that escaped him when he dug in was met by smiles of approval from the waiting elves. At Pearl’s

command, they went back to the kitchen and left the two to finish their lunch.

## Chapter Eight

### Grisham

Grisham couldn't help glancing at Chrissy as he ate. Guilt welled up in him. He should never have read the book. When he found it under her bed, it had obviously not been left there for him. The things he had read inside had given him both insight into the woman who sat across from him and almost made him more confused. There hadn't been any dates listed, but even the book itself had appeared ancient. How old was Chrissy, really?

He knew it wasn't polite to ask a woman her age, and he had a sneaking suspicion Chrissy wouldn't appreciate it. She had been fairly closed-off regarding her history. Asking for more information after admitting he had delved into her personal property didn't feel right.

She ate the chicken and twice-baked potatoes with nearly as much zeal as he did. She must have been working hard while he had spent his time wandering among the elves. He had to admit, the things he had learned from them far exceeded his previous knowledge of toy making. It was



fascinating to hear just how much they enjoyed their jobs. Each described their position with the utmost zeal and knew just how it fit into the rest of the toy factory. The elves carried a pride in what they did that Grisham felt had been missing in his life for some time. What he wouldn't give to feel even the smallest bit of what the elves displayed so easily. The thought of contributing in a way that the whole was far better for it made Grisham's chest ache.

He shoved aside the dark thoughts that threatened to envelop him and cleared his throat.

“Chrissy, what do you do in the toy factory?”

Chrissy paused with a forkful of brown sugar carrots halfway to her mouth. She gave him a closer look as if wondering why he wanted to know. He felt her suspicions, but didn't know how to ease them, so he kept silent.

“I help wherever I can,” she said. She lowered her fork in admission, “Truth be told, sometimes I feel like they humor me. The toy factory runs very smoothly for the most part. Today, the edges of the small dollhouses weren't lining up, so I helped straighten those that had already been produced, but the design team had the problem fixed within a half hour and it was up and running again before lunch.”

“They humor you,” Grisham repeated. The thought caught him as an interesting one. “Why is that?”

She tipped her head to the side as though considering. “I think they like me there even though my hands are too big for the little work they do.” She pinched the fingers of her left hand together. “You should see me try to use one of their screwdrivers.”

“I tried to use their fork,” Grisham pointed out. “Not with great success. I almost ate it.”

That brought a smile to her lips that chased away the lingering solemnity since they had spoken of Nicholas. “I can’t believe you thought those little plates were for you.”

He chuckled. “You played it off well. I hoped maybe you would show me some secret stash of food later so I didn’t waste away.”

She ate her carrot and turned her attention to the potatoes, but not before he caught a gleam of merriment in her eyes. He couldn’t help watching her, captivated. When she smiled, she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen, and when she wasn’t smiling, all he could think about was getting her to smile again. It was bizarre.

His ring clinked against his glass when he picked it up. His heart stuttered and his gaze shifted to the circle of metal. What would Brylee think?

He set the glass down and ran the fingers of his right hand angrily through his hair. It was a habit of his that made his teeth clench at the answering pain in the broken bone.

“Are you alright?”

He didn't know how to reply to Chrissy's question. He felt battered and exhausted. At least his stomach was full with far better food than he would have thought to find at the North Pole. Even that failed to lift his spirits.

Truth be told, he felt as though he was cheating on Brylee by having lunch with this stranger who had essentially kidnapped him and somehow taken him halfway across the world away from anything he knew. Though anything he knew had been colored and shaped by Brylee.

He shied away from that thought and forced himself to meet Chrissy's gaze with the knowledge that he had waited far too long to respond.

“I feel like I can't answer that right now,” he said quietly.

She nodded.

He appreciated that she didn't press further.

They ate several more bites in silence before his appetite left him and he stood up. "Where do I wash this?" he asked, indicating the dish.

"We've got it!"

The tiny proclamation was made by the same elf who had ordered the food to be brought in the first place. She appeared on the table with enough speed that he barely caught sight of the small door that swung shut behind her.

"Don't you worry about it. My crew has got it covered." She clucked her tongue at him in a motherly fashion. "Don't you go taking jobs away from them, now."

He raised his hands. "I wouldn't dream of it."

She nodded. "Good to hear. Now, if there is any type of food you miss from New York, you let me know and I'll have the staff learn how to make it, you hear?"

He nodded. "Definitely. Thank you."

At her command, more elves dressed in orange hurried out of the door and pushed his plate back onto the conveyor belt. At Chrissy's motion, they did the same to hers. A button was pushed and all the elves crowded forward to ride on the belt

with the plates. Grins were exchanged as they enjoyed their ride into the darkness beyond the room.

When the door shut, a sound must have escaped Grisham because Chrissy asked, “What?”

“They certainly have fun, don’t they?” he replied.

Fondness surfaced on her face as she looked at where they had disappeared. “They really do. Their enthusiasm is catching.”

Grisham found himself agreeing. “It certainly is.”

She looked at him as if debating what to say. Her gaze lingered on his hair before she suggested, “Want to take me up on that haircut?”

“I don’t know. Shaggy is in if you ask the reindeer, and some of those elves sport some pretty interesting hairstyles.”

Chrissy snorted. “If you start dyeing your hair green and going for mohawks like the Outdoors and Wheels department, you might have to be banished.”

Grisham grinned at her teasing. “You don’t think it’d look cool?”

“Oh, it’d be cool,” she replied as she motioned for him to follow her out another door and up the hallway. “But I’d have

the entire elf crew asking to do the same, and it'd be chaos and green everywhere.”

“Isn't it already?” he asked with a pointed look at the holly leaves and evergreen boughs that decorated the dining room.

She gave him a sidelong look. “You think you're sick of red and green now, just wait until December.”

He stared at her. “Was that a joke?”

She shrugged. “Why don't you stick around and find out?”

“I just might.” The words escaped him before he thought about what he was saying.

He saw it in her expression, the slightest hint of hope amid her carefully placed façade of indifference. She needed him to stay. The thought made something twist in his chest.

She tipped her head for him to follow her.

He did so without a word.

He thought she would take him back to her room. The relief that filled him when they ended up in a nondescript workroom told him more about his feelings than he wanted to analyze at that moment.

“This is an idea room,” Chrissy said as she made her way to the drawers that lined each side with a familiarity that told of much time spent there. “Sometimes the best ideas come at night and I end up here working on things for the next Christmas or even the one after.” She pulled several things from one drawer and then a pair of huge scissors from another. She opened and closed them with a glance at him. “Ready for that mohawk?” At his wide eyes, she laughed and selected a smaller pair.

She motioned toward a stool waiting near a workbench. He obeyed with the sound of her laughter still ringing in his ears. It was the most magical thing he had heard in a very long time. If he had to submit to many more haircuts in toy creation rooms in order to hear it again, it would be worth it.

*You're a sap.*

He let out a breath and pushed his hair back from his forehead. It was certainly time for the haircut.

“You alright?” Chrissy asked.

He looked up to find that she had stopped in front of him and was watching him quizzically. She held a pair of scissors in one hand, a water bottle in the other, and there was an apron and a towel draped over her arm.

“Wow, you’re serious about this, aren’t you?” he asked, forcing his voice to be light.

“I’m always serious when I have a water bottle in my hands,” she replied.

A mischievous light came into her blue eyes. He thought she was going to spray him. He wanted to goad her into it to make her laugh again, but the other side of him held back. Her brows creased slightly as though she saw something in his expression. She set the spray bottle on the counter and held out the towel. He took it without a word and shrugged out of his tee-shirt so that it didn’t get hair on it during the haircut. He tossed the shirt on the counter and put the towel around his shoulders as she tied the apron.

When her eyes returned to him, he saw them stray to his bare chest. He felt exposed, his every bruise illuminated by the bright lighting of the work room. He knew how bad it looked without glancing down. The pain he felt was reflected in her eyes. The silence between them thickened with unspoken questions.

He looked away from her.

She cleared her throat and he saw her grab the spray bottle out of the corner of his eye. She squirted the cold water on his



hair in quick, efficient movements.

“How long do you usually keep it?” she asked.

Grisham searched for an example. He settled on, “Like Liam’s.”

The look she gave him was searching as if he had caught her by surprise. “You remember the elves’ names?”

He nodded. “I try to. I’ve never been the best with names, so I repeat them when I hear them and then come up with ways to remember. For Liam, it was with locks he was putting on the jewelry boxes.”

“Liam locks. I get it. And now hair?”

“Also locks,” he replied with a smile of acknowledgement for her train of thought.

She studied his hair with her head tipped to the side.

“Alright, I see it.”

He held up his hand. “Not a mohawk?”

She lifted a shoulder. “We’ll see what happens.”

She sprayed the hair around his face and he closed his eyes, submitting to her will.

Grisham tried not to think about his current situation.

Being at the North Pole presented all sorts of mind-exhausting realities, not to mention the fact that he had just been introduced to a hundred elves, and now sat in a work room alone with a woman who was very quickly showing herself to be much, much more than any female he had talked to the last two years.

What a strange two years it had been.

In his want to avoid his current reality, he let his thoughts flow back through the past several months. Moments of soberness were punctuated by flashes of him breaking things, vases, a picture frame, the fat ceramic cow she had insisted on buying at the thrift market because it had pizzazz, pizzazz that he had shattered across the wall of their apartment. He pushed to before that, to the darkness that had become his reality, board meetings he had missed, his boss' tone changing from understanding to anger to sending him away with a box filled with his things.

Fingers ran softly through his hair. He heard the quiet snip of the scissors and felt the smooth pull of her comb through the wet locks. Her breath tickled against his ear. He closed his eyes tight against tears that threatened.

When was the last time he had been touched with such gentleness?

He hadn't allowed anyone to touch him, not since it happened. Even at the funeral, he had stepped out of hugs out of fear that if he let their emotions break through his walls, he would never be able to put them back up. Her parents had tried to invite him to their family dinners afterward, but the thought of walking through their door without her was too much. He ignored their calls long enough that they eventually stopped. He didn't know if ignoring them or not receiving them any more hurt worse.

She would be sad he hadn't kept in touch with them. He knew it would disappoint her to know he had walked away. The thought hurt more than any physical wound. He wished for a bottle to drive away the image of her face that lingered in his mind whenever he closed his eyes, a face whose edges were losing their clarity. He no longer remembered the exact tone of her voice, or the way her hands had felt when they ran up his arms. He was losing her, and that was almost too much to admit.

“Grish?”

He opened his eyes and was surprised to feel that his cheeks were wet. He lowered his face before Chrissy could see it and wiped the tears roughly away with his hand heedless of the bandages.

A hand settled gently on his shoulder.

“Talk to me?”

It was a quiet question, one that lingered in the air with a hint of hesitancy as though she was afraid to cross any line without his permission.

He never talked about Brylee. It was the way he coped, pretending the part of him that loved her didn't exist, which, in essence, meant he didn't exist. If he talked about her, he would have to admit how he had failed her. He had never been able to put his thoughts into words.

And yet, with Chrissy, he suddenly wanted to.

“I should have been there.” The words escaped him in gruff, short syllables through a throat that already felt raw.

“She shouldn't have gone alone.”

“Where?” Chrissy prompted when he fell silent.

He closed his eyes to avoid looking at anything. It was easier to remember that way.

The memories he had kept at bay for so long rose swiftly to the surface as if they had been waiting anxiously for this moment.

“She loved to go jogging around the park. It was her favorite way to wind down after working a shift at the hospital. She said it helped her clear her head and let go of the things she had seen in the E.R. that day, things that would keep her up at night when the weather was bad and we didn’t get to go.” He let out a breath, settling into the story in a detached way as though he was a spectator instead of a participant. “I usually made it home in time to go with her. If I couldn’t make it, she could talk Zoey down the hall into joining her, but that night the subway had delays and I was late, and I found out later that Zoey’s mother had gotten sick and she was gone taking care of her.”

Grisham let the emotions of that night wash over him. He swallowed thickly before he said, “She was pregnant.” His head lowered of its own accord. “We were having a son. She wanted to keep as healthy as possible so he would be healthy also. I later found out that she had called me when I was stuck on the subway, probably to tell me she was walking and would meet me at our usual spot. She knew I didn’t want her walking

alone, and I would have talked her out of it if I had gotten her call.” His voice dropped. “But I never got it.”

He clenched his right hand into a fist. The pain helped to center him. “When I made it home and found her gone, a pit formed in my stomach. I felt nauseous and knew immediately that something was wrong. I ran down the stairs so fast I almost bowled our neighbor over, but I didn’t stop. I don’t think my feet even touched the ground, I ran so fast toward the park. But the police still managed to beat me there.”

He heard Chrissy’s breath catch.

He kept his eyes closed, aware and mortified of the tears that wouldn’t stop falling now that they had started. He pushed on, “She had been stabbed twelve times, and all because they wanted the twenty bucks she kept in her jogging pack for emergencies. By the time I reached her, she was already gone. I had to shove the police aside to get to her. I held her. I remember the smell of the blood. I don’t remember when it started to rain.”

The memory overwhelmed him with the feeling of her motionless body in his arms. Her warmth hadn’t left yet, but her eyes were sightless. It was obvious from the wounds that the baby was gone. He couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t

process. He stared at her numbly as people moved around him. Someone spoke to him, but he was unable to make out the words that were said as he clutched her to him.

“You’ve got to wake up,” he remembered saying. “We need to go home.”

Of course, she didn’t listen. She wasn’t there anymore, but to him, if she would just look at him, maybe say his name, it would all be just a dream. She was joking; it was a horrible prank. He wanted to tell her that if she would only wake up.

“I wouldn’t let them take her,” he said, his voice broken and ragged as if he had run through a smoking building. “I tried to fight them, to defend her. They had to pin me down.”

He remembered the feeling of the asphalt against his cheek. Something had gleamed in the lamplight. It was a piece of the necklace she had worn to work that day, the lobster claw clasp of the silver spiral chain he had given her for Christmas.

A howl had torn from him then, something primal and jagged that he didn’t recognize as coming from his own throat.

They had left him alone after that, giving him space so he could cope with his new reality. That same space had followed him to the funeral and to his work at the office the next week.

It felt as though he had suddenly become ensconced in a bubble untouched by the world and also not touching. He drifted and he knew it. He couldn't blame his boss for firing him, but with his job went the last lifeline he had to the normal life he had once led.



## Chapter Nine

Chrissy

*The tracker must have been wrong. There was no chance it would select a man this broken to become a Santa Claus. It was absurd and impossible.*

Chrissy stared at the man who sat with his head bowed, his haircut half done and forgotten, and his expression lost as though he drifted in the painful memories he had dredged up at her question. She shouldn't have made him go through that again. It was obvious how very agonizing reliving those memories had been. She had no right.

*He could have refused.*

She wasn't sure what to do. Her heart ached with his pain at a loss that was so very different than losing Nicholas had been. She'd had a chance to say goodbye. She had lived a wonderful life at his side. Though she had no idea how long Grisham and his wife had been together, it hadn't been long enough. Ending with the abruptness it had certainly had not given him any room for closure or healing.

She didn't know where to go from that moment.

The thickness of sorrow in the room was nearly choking. She could almost see the memory he had spoken of with such visceral clarity as if he lived it over again. His hands closed and opened as though they longed to hold her again, to fix her in the way he hadn't been able to. He needed something to do with his hands. She doubted toy design would help distract his brain.

A thought struck her.

"I have an idea, but I need you to trust me."

He looked up at her, his vision a mixture of sorrow and despair.

"Just give me a minute to finish this haircut, and then I know something that will help. But you have to just go with it." She held out a hand.

He hesitated, and then shook it with a puzzled expression that lightened his features a bit.

"I'm holding you to that," she said.

She finished the haircut in a silence that didn't feel as heavy as before. The fact that Grisham trusted her enough to reveal the things he did meant the world to her. She understood so much more of him and appreciated that he had

told her instead of her using other means to find out his history. No wonder he was so lost. She couldn't imagine going through what he had. Losing Nicholas had been horrible and tragic, but he had felt it coming. Whether or not that gave her closure was something completely different, but that was for her to deal with, not put on someone else's shoulders, especially someone carrying the weight Grisham did.

When his haircut was done, she wiped the hair away from his neck the best she could and removed the towel. Grisham rose and pulled his shirt back on. Chrissy winced inwardly at the numerous bruises that colored his bare torso. The dark ones around his ribs said that some were probably cracked and maybe even broken, while those darkening above and below the bandages where he had been stabbed told of potential internal bleeding. She made a note to keep a close eye on him, though the voice in the back of her mind noted that wouldn't be a problem.

She gave herself a mental kick and turned away from the sight of his shirt being drawn down over his well-muscled body. She needed to get a life.

*One just showed up.*

She fought back a smile at her snarky internal voice. Her gaze lingered on the sight of blood showing through the bandages on his right hand as he smoothed his shirt back down. He had said he'd fallen. Maybe he had cut it on ice?

“What really happened to your hand?” she asked.

His cheek twitched as though he bit it from the inside. His eyes narrowed, his gaze distant, when he admitted, “I got mad and punched a mirror.”

His honesty was colored by embarrassment as though admitting the loss of self-control took something from him.

Chrissy needed to see how bad it was before she took him where she planned. She held out her hand. The man let out a breath without looking at her before he set his hand in hers. With slow, careful movements, she unwrapped the strip of gauze. Underneath was a thick pad of what turned out to be toilet paper folded and pressed against his fingers. It was entirely soaked with blood.

She glanced up at his face.

He watched her motions, his face carefully enshrouded behind its emotionless wall once more.

She peeled back a corner of the blood-soaked paper and glimpsed cuts beneath. Her heart fell.

“Grisham, these need stitches.”

“Do you have superglue?”

She gave him a straight look. “You can’t be serious.”

He nodded. “My sister’s husband grew up on a farm. One time, he cut his finger on a broken wine glass, glued it right there, and it healed just fine.” He gestured to the room with his left hand. “I’m certain a toy designing workroom has superglue.”

“It’s not made for that,” she pointed out.

He shrugged. “I’m sure I’ll survive.”

Chrissy left him holding the gauze and wandered around the room. She knew right where the superglue was. She had been the one to organize the room in the first place. But the thought of using it to repair the gashes in his knuckles made her cringe. She should insist on calling Oxford, but there was something she couldn’t put her finger on. She felt as though they had made a breakthrough. Grisham trusted her, and in his own way, he was asking her to help after letting down his

walls and allowing her to see why his exterior came across so gruff. She couldn't betray that.

She selected a small, unused bottle of fast-drying superglue from the drawer and carried it back to him with a paper towel and a handful of fresh bandages and gauze. Fortunately, she always insisted on first aid kits in the workrooms, so the supplies were readily at hand.

He pulled the gauze away and spread his hand on the counter. The gashes appeared to have closed mostly, but a few drops of blood worked free when he moved his fingers.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked.

He held out his left hand. “I really can take care of it.”

She moved the superglue out of reach. “These need to be sanitized first.”

He sighed but allowed her to spray the area thoroughly with antiseptic spray and wipe it down. To her relief, the doctoring helped close the gashes for the most part.

She spread the superglue slowly over each wound, careful not to let it drip.

“A farmer, huh? Are you sure you should take medical advice from someone who spends his days with animals?” she

asked as she kept her focus on the task at hand.

“Don’t you have a herd of reindeer?” he replied.

She looked up at him unprepared for how close his face was to hers. She found herself looking into his dark eyes near enough that she could see tiny gold flecks within his brown irises. His eyes creased at the corners as if he enjoyed their banter.

He glanced to the side, then said, “It’s dripping.”

She jerked the glue back and dabbed at the drops between his fingers as she felt her cheeks heat up. She rolled her eyes when the paper towel she used stuck to the glue.

“This is a mess,” she said. “I don’t think Oxford’s going to approve.”

“That’s alright. I’ll tell him you did it,” Grisham replied.

That made her laugh. “Thanks for throwing me under the bus. I have undergone plenty of first aid training, and superglue wasn’t a part of it.”

Grisham surveyed the wound repair. “I can tell.”

She pushed his shoulder before grabbing gauze. “I’ll wrap it again in case the superglue doesn’t do the job. I don’t need you bleeding out on me because you punched a mirror.” She

gave him a teasing look as she finished wrapping his hand and tucked the ends of the gauze underneath so they wouldn't catch on anything. "Isn't that seven years of bad luck?"

"Starting today," he replied with a nod of approval at her bandaging job. "You sure you want me to stick around? It could be a rough seven years."

"I'll be sure to buy more superglue," she replied as she led the way back to the hallway of doors.

"Another hidden door?" Grisham asked with interest.

She pointed at the little picture inside the daisy in place of the center yellow disc.

Grisham's tone was skeptical when he said, "Is that a bullet?"

"Maybe," she replied. "Just remember, when you pass through this door, there's no turning back."

He watched her as if debating whether she was serious. "Alright."

His curious tone brought a smile to her face. "Alright."

She pushed the door open and led the way inside. She felt more than saw him pause behind her as she waited for the



automatic lights to flicker on. When they did, she heard a sound of amazement escape him.

“What is this place?” he asked with awe in his voice.

“This is the training room,” she replied. She crossed to the set of tables that spanned the entire far wall. “Trust me when I say it’s taken us years to develop.”

He gave a grunt of approval.

She turned and followed his gaze, seeing it the way he did instead of from years of practice.

There were four dividers in the room that split it into four long hallways. Each wall was bulletproof and soundproof. The first had a variety of moving parts, dummies and targets that were on automated systems that began the moment the lights flickered on. The second hallway contained obstacles, beams, ledges, columns, and objects on the floor like matchbox cars, squeaky toys, and even an automated dog that barked if disturbed. The third held a variety of surfaces like slick shingles, tin roofing, clay tiles, gables, and wood shakes at varying heights. In the ceiling an embedded weather system washed across the rooftops with snow, sleet, hail, and rain in varying degrees. The moisture soaked through the floor and

was recycled in a clever system the elves who designed it had been very proud of.

The fourth room made Grisham pause. He took several steps forward to study it more closely.

“What is this?” he finally asked without looking back at Chrissy.

She had been expecting the question. “This is our latest development. Trust me when I say being a Santa is dangerous and getting more so by the year. Armed security systems, guard dogs, motion sensors, and even security guards have made the job much more hazardous than it used to be. We had to get more creative.”

“Are those lasers?”

She nodded. “Laser triggered defense systems.” She shot him a look that challenged him to be afraid. “Some of the millionaires and billionaires take their security very seriously.”

He looked torn between amusement and concern. “Have Santas died during deliveries?”

The question was never an easy one. She let out a breath.

“Yes?” he said with surprise. “You’ve lost Santa Clauses? No, wait. Is it like deer? Can Santa Claus be singular or

plural?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Santas have been killed in action? It’s not like they’re robbing the place! They are literally putting things inside of a house, not taking them.” He gave her a straight look. “Unless I’ve got this entire Santa thing wrong and it’s a front for a very complicated theft ring.”

“That’s not a half-bad idea,” she mused.

He rolled his eyes. “Santas have been killed,” he said as if trying to gauge whether she was serious.

She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. “We’ve lost Santas, yes. There are people and a very particular organization called the Anti-Santa Agency intent on destroying all we do here, but there are failsafes in place—”

He shook his head. “I didn’t agree to getting shot while wearing a red suit and climbing down people’s chimneys.”

“The suit protects you,” Chrissy pointed out quietly.

“And it’s not like I even have the Santa body type,” he continued.

“I noticed,” she said, unable to help herself.

He continued on as though he hadn’t heard her. “This entire North Pole thing is pretty absurd to begin with, and now

you're saying I could die doing something I'm not even sure is real in the first place? And there's an organization who will gladly kill me called the Anti-Santa Agency? Do you hear yourself? This seems beyond ridiculous."

"It's for a good cause."

He rounded on her with wide eyes. "A good cause? Delivering toys?"

"Delivering hope," she replied.

She had heard it before. There had been plenty of times that prospective Santas had backed out at just that moment. They inevitably asked if someone had died. She braced for the question every time, but for some reason she thought Grisham wouldn't balk since he had pretty much come to her with a death wish already.

She would have to start over again. They were running out of time to find a suitable Santa for Christmas. Desperation made her snap.

"It shouldn't be any different to you anyway!" The words left her mouth before she could stop them.

Grisham stared at her. "Why not?" he demanded.

She had gone too far to backpedal now. “Because you were looking for death when I first saw you. You wanted those guys to kill you. Why else would you go searching them out? You didn’t care if you lived or died.”

“You saw me fight them.” His statement was flat, emotionless.

It felt like a hundred years had passed instead of four days since the tracker had led her to the Portly Pig where she first laid eyes on Grisham.

She gave a loud sigh to cover up the tightness in her chest when she admitted, “Who else do you think dragged you from that alley instead of leaving you there to die?”

“Or for the police to find,” he replied.

He didn’t look at her when he spoke. Instead, he walked over to the table against the wall and leaned against it. He picked up a pencil and flicked it through his fingers.

“Not bad,” she said.

One eyebrow lifted. “Debater’s flip. Learned it in business school. Big hit with the ladies.”

That brought a chuckle from her. “I’ll bet.” She let the silence settle between them a bit before she said, “There are

safeguards in place, a return to normalcy, if you will.”

He eyed her with doubt in his expression. “Normalcy? Does that even exist anymore?”

Instead of answering with a light tone of her own, she said with all seriousness, “It does, and you are welcome to go back to it if you want.”

He flipped the pencil one more time, then held it in his hand with a distant look on his face. His eyes tightened slightly. “What safeguards?”

“A code phrase.”

He snorted at that. “A code phrase is going to save my life if someone is shooting at me.”

She nodded.

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, the pencil forgotten in his hand. “How?”

“Elfish enchantment.”

His gaze darkened with skepticism. “Enchantment?”

She waved a hand. “Magic, voodoo, witchcraft, whatever you want to call it. Say the words and you’ll be returned back to your life the day before you were brought here.”

“Back in time,” he asked, his voice clouded with doubt.

“I’ll return to the moment you found me.”

She opened her hand. “You’ll return to the day before the alley to face whatever consequences come from your actions, and you’ll forget you were ever here.”

His brows pulled together and he asked, “Will you forget?”

She shook her head. “I never forget.” She couldn’t help the heaviness of her tone. Having survived plenty of Santas and remembering how each of them came into and out of her life had affected her in ways she couldn’t hide. As fun as parts of her life were, there was also the other side of the coin, the loneliness, the lack of family. There were the elves, yes, but she was different enough to always be aware that, though they treated her as such, she would never truly be family.

“What words?”

She tried to put off that question as long as possible.

“Here, you’ll get to practice them. The entire room is warded, so just be careful when you leave.”

“What words?” he repeated. His head tipped, making him look both curious and endearing, especially with his new

haircut that made his dark hair sweep across his forehead in a way that beckoned her to touch it.

She couldn't hold back a smile. "There's a few. Say, 'Ho ho ho', and you will be returned to that day." Before he could do more than chuckle, she said, "Put your finger to your nose and say, 'Giving achieved,' and you'll be returned to the roof."

"To my nose?"

She nodded. "It's a totem."

"What's a totem?"

"The elves love totems. They are items they infuse with their enchantments to carry out the charms they put on them. That's how they hide in the normal world, and it's how we make Santa happen." Her lips lifted teasingly. "Magic."

"My nose will be magic?" His doubt was thicker.

"Your nose will be prosthetic," she replied, enjoying running him in mental circles. "The prosthetic nose will be a totem."

"Why—" He cut himself off and paused before he said, "Because I'll be dressed up like Santa."

"With a bulletproof suit."



A playful light flickered in his dark eyes. “Bulletproof?”

She nodded.

He grinned. “You should’ve led with that. That’s just cool. No one would say no to a bulletproof Santa suit.”

“Noted,” she replied. She shook her head. Sometimes the verbal back and forth with him could be both exhausting and invigorating. “You should start practicing. You fall, get shot, or set off the alarms, say, ‘Ho ho ho’, and everything will reset.”

He shook his head at the irony of it. “I think I’m starting to understand why a few of the Santas didn’t stick around.”

She shrugged. “If they can’t hack it, I’m not about to talk them into it. It takes something special to be a Santa.”

“And you think I have what it takes?” Grisham replied.

“That’s left to be seen,” she said, keeping her tone as vague as possible.

To her relief, he laughed. “Nice to have a vote of confidence.” He cracked his knuckles. “Let’s try it.”

He stepped up to the second hallway and eyed it.

“You should wear a suit,” Chrissy suggested.

“Do you ever practice this?” he asked over his shoulder.

She nodded.

“Do you wear a suit?” he pressed.

Chrissy smothered a smile as she shook her head.

His eyes lit with the challenge. He stepped onto the platform, which activated the obstacles to begin moving. She heard him give a murmur of surprise.

“Go slow,” she offered.

He shot her a grin. The smile was full of roguish confidence and made her stomach warm.

He dove forward over the first spinning bar and then crawled under the next.

Just when she thought he was doing great, he mistimed the swinging bar and was hit hard enough to slam against the padded wall and then to the ground.

He laid there long enough that she was worried he had damaged his ribs further. Doubt began to make her question her decision to bring him to the training room while his injuries were still healing. Oxford would certainly have something to say about it.

“Ouch,” he said. He pushed up to his elbows. “Slow?”

“Slow,” she replied.

He made his way gingerly back to the beginning.

“Grish, you don’t have to—”

He waved a hand at her and squared up against the hall again.

She kept her mouth shut as he made it over two hurdles, under another, timed the swinging bar right, and then was pummeled to the ground by the padded, spiked obstacle bars.

She winced but didn’t say anything when he pushed himself upright and made his way back to the beginning of the hall.

She may have underestimated his stubbornness and knew the medical team would give her a hard time later if he tore his stitches.

The next time he got further, but he landed on the matchbox cars and careened into the Christmas tree, knocking both him and the tree over.

He rolled out from beneath the branches.

“Ho, ho, ho,” he said in a wry tone.

He limped back to the beginning as the tree reset itself and the cars returned to their positions. He leaned against the wall and sucked in a breath.

“I’m tapping out,” he said. “But I haven’t given up.”

“I think that’s probably a good idea,” she replied. “I shouldn’t have brought you here so soon.”

He straightened with a hand on his side. “But you were right.”

“With what?”

“I’m definitely not thinking about my past.”

That made her smile. “I’m glad.”

He indicated the rest of the rooms. “I get the need for them all but the first one.”

“Combat,” she said. “Hand to hand and evasive maneuvers. You never know when you’re going to need the skills.”

He took a step toward it.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said.

He regarded the hallway before he replied, “Show me.”

Truth be told, she had been itching for a chance to try it. Jax changed the setup every few weeks to keep her reflexes fresh; she hadn't attempted it since returning with Grisham.

She approached the hall.

“Shouldn't you wear a suit?” Grisham asked.

She smirked at him. “You'd love to see that, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, it's not made for me. But you'll have Misty's prototype to test out soon enough.”

She walked past him and stepped onto the platform.

The robots began their cycles.

Chrissy stretched her neck from side to side, followed by her shoulders, then she shook out her arms. She eyed the first robot.

Jax's close combat robots weren't exactly the gentlest creations. If she was grabbed, she would be slammed to the ground as hard as any MMA fighter. Out in real life, Santas had to be quick and efficient in their putdowns so their opponents wouldn't have the chance to call for backup. One wrong move, and he might not have the chance to even say the safeguard before he was rendered immobile and unconscious. It had happened before.

“It looks dangerous,” Grisham said quietly.

Chrissy acknowledged his comment with a half-smile before she threw herself forward.

The instant her foot touched the weight-sensitive pad, the first robot threw a fist. She ducked and punched him in the ribs with a left followed by a right haymaker that made him stumble back on his track the way a human would. She spun and met a kick from the robot to the right, blocked it with her forearms, and slid a chop up to the robot’s groin and then an elbow to its back when it doubled over.

She rolled over the robot’s back and slammed into the next robot with both feet, sending it into the one behind it. She caught the leg of the robot to her right before it could kick her in the ribs, spun with a leg out, and swept its feet out from under it. She came out of the spin swinging to clock the next robot before it could land its haymaker. Two more punches, a block, an elbow to the face, and then a well-placed kick to the jaw landed her on the platform at the far end.

She turned and studied her fallen opponents the way she always did, searching for opportunities where she could have handled the attacks better and with less wasted motion. The kick at the end had been foolish. She had allowed herself it

when she realized how close she was to finishing. A forearm block followed by a chop to the robot's neck would have put him to the ground safer. Jax would scold her for being frivolous about her safety. There was no doubt she would hear from him when the elf reviewed the recordings later.

## Chapter Ten

Grisham

Grisham knew he was staring, and he didn't care.

Chrissy had flown through the hallway littered with robots that wanted to tear her from limb to limb. Her hits had landed without hesitation, her kicks and rolls accurate and smooth, and she finished with barely any sign that she had defeated eighteen robots that appeared more than capable of sending a human opponent to the hospital. She had made it look easy!

“I didn't know Mrs. Claus was a ninja. I think that would change some of the stories,” he said.

Her eyes snapped from the fallen robots to him and widened as if she had forgotten he was there. Red blossomed on her cheeks in a very becoming way. The knowledge that she was embarrassed by his presence wasn't lost on him.

“That was impressive,” he told her. “I've got a lot to learn.”

She crossed between the fallen robots slowly as if delaying getting back to him as long as possible. He had the distinct feeling she usually practiced alone. What would bring the



woman to square up against robotic opponents with such discipline that to fight them looked like more of a graceful, beautiful dance? How long had she practiced to achieve such skill?

“Just Chrissy,” she told him. “Mrs. Claus was a very long time ago.” She waved behind her at the hall. “Way before all of this. This grew as the times required it.”

He considered that. “What have other times required?”

She watched him closely, her lips pursed together consideringly. “Are you trying to figure out how old I am by asking what I’ve prepared for?”

“Perhaps,” he admitted, inwardly chagrined that she had seen through his question so easily.

She clicked her tongue. “Allow a woman her secrets. Trust me when I say it’s better that way.”

He let it go. If she wanted to be evasive about her age, he could give her that. Given what he had learned about elves, their magic, and the North Pole in general, nothing seemed beyond the grasp of imagination. If the woman in front of him was two thousand years old and had seen the dark ages, who was he to question?

He could see it in her eyes. She was very youthful in appearance, maybe a year or two older than him, but her bright blue eyes appeared bottomless as though he stared into the memory of time itself. He couldn't imagine what she had seen in her life. Why had she lived when Nicholas had died? He wanted to ask, but he had already imposed on her privacy by reading the book the man had given her. He didn't want to see that type of pain on her face again. It was better not to know at this point than to press the issue.

"This is serious work," he said, indicating the training room in general. "It's a lot to trust someone with."

"It is," she replied simply. "Some can't hack it."

His ribs gave a throb of protest regarding the rough treatment they had received.

*What if I can't hack it?*

He shook off the thought. Returning to his normal life wasn't an option he wanted to consider. His current situation was strange, yes, but intriguing in a way that kept him entirely off-kilter. Watching Chrissy handle herself in the hallway made him wonder if he ever wanted his life to be on-kilter ever again.

She had given him something when she took him from that alley. She had given him the chance to step back from his life, from the day-to-day that had become too painful and depressing, and deposited him in a place where there wasn't even a glimpse that it still existed. He hadn't known how very much he needed it until he woke up in the unknown bed smack dab in the middle of the North Pole.

That night at dinner, Grisham was surprised to see that their table had been moved into the main room with the elves.

"You sure you don't mind?" Chrissy asked in a whisper when he sat down with his gaze on the rows of tiny tables overshadowed by their big one.

"Not at all," Grisham replied.

He could feel hundreds of eyes watching him. The expressions on the faces of the elves were hopeful. He wondered what he could do to show his gratitude for their acceptance of him in such a short time.

"This is a big empty table for the most part," he said.  
"We're still pretty separate. What if we—"

"Move extra tables up here and eat on a rotation so everyone gets a chance to dine with the Clauses?" Vera piped

up at his elbow.

He wasn't sure when she had climbed to the tabletop, but she looked up at him with huge eyes that blinked with innocent eagerness.

He glanced at Chrissy. "Are you alright with that?"

She was busy glaring at Vera for the elf's brashness, which made Vera grin in a way that showed the two were close friends and couldn't offend each other if they tried.

"Of course," Chrissy gave in.

"Then I'm good with it," Grisham said.

A cheer ran through the crowd.

In short order, a series of small tables which had been stacked inconspicuously by the wall as if waiting for just such a moment were carried over. Two dozen elves climbed to the top using the hand and foot holds that had been placed along the beams of the table and soon joined them in raucous enjoyment of their minuscule chicken and dumplings.

Grisham found himself watching them as they jostled and teased each other, peppering food when others weren't looking, switching drinks, tying shoelaces together, and

switching spoons for butter knives. It was a very entertaining way to eat a meal and far better than the lone room had been.

At one point, he caught Chrissy watching him.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “Is this how you eat when you aren’t training a Santa?”

“Always,” she replied. She looked around to ensure the elves weren’t paying attention, then lowered her voice and leaned her head closer to his to say, “Sometimes the trainees are a little disconcerted by the elves, but the elves don’t get that they can be a bit much at times.”

A dumpling flew across the table and landed on an elf’s head. The Marm glared at a younger elf who immediately ducked his head and dropped his spoon back onto his plate with a clatter.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Grisham said right on cue.

Chrissy laughed, her eyes sparkling with merriment. “Me, neither.”

Grisham met the gaze of one of the elves who appeared to be a little shy.

“So, what’s your department?” he asked. He had found the question was an excellent icebreaker with most elves because they truly cared about what they did. He hoped it would help draw the young man out of his shell.

“Oh, I, uh....” The elf swallowed. “Cyber security, Sir. My name’s Pym.”

Grisham smiled at him. “Pleased to meet you, Pym. What do you do with cyber security?”

Pym shifted in his seat and was rewarded with a glare when he bumped into the older elf sitting next to him. He cleared his throat and said, “Half of the cyber security team monitors the movements of the Anti-Santa Agency and keeps us off their radar. My side of the team patrols the internet and deletes anything that mentions elves, including photos, descriptions of sightings, theories, recordings, or anything that might put our presence at risk.”

Amazement filled Grisham. “No wonder I had no idea you exist!”

Pym smiled, revealing a gap in between his front teeth. “That means I’m doing my job right, Sir.” He caught himself and glanced at those around the table with him. “I mean, we are doing our job right.”

The older elves seated on either side of him nodded.

“It’s a fulltime job, Sir,” the one on the left said. “We have trackers and blockers that pick up keywords and erase objectives as fast as they are created, but there are a few humans who are more stubborn than most and put up information as quickly as we take it down. It keeps us busy.”

“It would be hard to hide an entire civilization,” Grisham said. He had a hard time wrapping his mind around the enormity of it. “What about pictures on cellphones and things like that?”

“It’s hard to gain access to individual phones,” the elf on Pym’s right answered. “But we have several apps that include cyber security markers that can pick up if someone has taken a photograph of an elf. These pictures are deleted or altered without the user knowing it.”

“Is that ethical?” Grisham asked curiously.

Chrissy spoke up. “It’s survival,” she said. At his searching look, she explained, “It’s the same with Santa pictures. For a while, believe it or not, Santa Claus was one of America’s most wanted because one of our Santas slipped up and got caught on several cameras sneaking in and out of houses. That’s when we found the Anti-Santa Agency trying to track our Santa back to the North Pole. The cyber security team was busy for months putting new fortifications into place. We’ve had to take extra precautions against certain groups tracking us down ever since.”

“Not to mention Dasher’s little escapade,” Pym said. “That didn’t help.”

The elves on either side of him elbowed him.

Grisham watched them with interest. “Dasher the reindeer? I thought he was in charge.”

The elves around Pym smirked.

“The last Santa put him first so he could keep an eye on him. Dasher’s still working to earn his position after he messed up,” the elf on the left said. He tipped his head. “I’m Bronx. Pleased to meet you.”



Grisham nodded. "Same to you." He glanced at Chrissy. "How did he mess up?"

Her expression was one of amusement, but she kept her lips pressed as if she wasn't about to get involved. He had a feeling that he had opened a can of worms and she was going to let him deal with it.

"Don't badmouth the reindeer," a voice from below called.

Grisham leaned forward to see an elf dressed in yellow standing on the ground glaring up at the table.

"Come on up," he invited.

"You made Franklin mad, Bronx," another elf said from further down the table. "You're in trouble now."

"I'm not mad; I'm disappointed," Franklin said when he reached the top of the table. "The reindeer are a team. Dasher is their leader. You know that and yet you continue to doubt his abilities. How do you think that makes the other reindeer look at him?"

Bronx's grin was visible through his beard. "I don't say bad things about him in front of the deer. It's all good."

"Reindeer," Franklin corrected. He turned his attention back to Grisham. "And for that matter, Dasher has a female

friend at the Central Park Zoo. He visited her in November last year and it caused quite a stir.”

Grisham could think of several reasons that may have caused a commotion, but the most obvious one came to mind first. “Did he fly there?”

“Of course,” Franklin replied, his tone implying the stupidity of the question.

“Franklin,” Vera scolded from Chrissy’s side. “That’s the Santa you’re talking to.”

Franklin’s eyes widened. “Sorry, Sir. I wasn’t thinking,” he apologized quickly.

“No apology necessary,” Grisham replied. “I’m not really sure how everything works around here yet, so I figured it didn’t hurt to ask. Also, please call me Grisham. I’m not so sure about the rest yet.”

“There are no stupid questions,” Misty called up from a table below, her peppy voice recognizable.

Aware that he had to handle the situation carefully, Grisham turned back to Pym. “So how did your team handle the breach on this one?”

“Publicity stunt,” Pym replied immediately.

“It was Pym’s idea,” Bronx said in his gruff voice. “The kid’s a natural.”

Pym’s pointed ears turned red with his blush. “I figured it was easier to say it was a pre-Christmas warmup rather than try to hide it altogether. It helped that the few videos and pictures they had of Dasher were in the dark. At least he was smart that way.”

“Thanks,” Franklin muttered.

It was easy to see how much the elf cared about the reindeer. Grisham thought quickly.

“Would it be easier if we were to find a way to bring the reindeer he likes back here so he doesn’t breach security again?”

Silence fell through the entire cafeteria.

Grisham was afraid he had made a serious mistake with the suggestion and looked to Chrissy for support. Her expression was one of consideration.

“You would do that for Dasher?” Franklin asked.

Grisham turned back to him. “If we can. I mean, I assume the North Pole is able to support another reindeer, and if it keeps Dasher happy and the female is willing....”

“Oh, she’s willing,” Franklin replied. “Any reindeer would love to be welcomed here. Trust me. Logistically, we just have to see if we can find a replacement that would match her coloring and antlers. Humans aren’t smart enough to tell the difference beyond that.”

“Okay, slightly offended here,” Chrissy said.

“Agreed,” Grisham said. “But honestly, I’m not sure I would know the difference.”

That brought laughter from the rest of the elves.

“Don’t worry. Dasher will help with that,” Franklin said. “He knows a herd south of here. There are several who would give their right hoof to land a posh retirement in that zoo. Reindeer there are treated like royalty.”

Grisham nodded. “Let’s do it.” He met Chrissy’s gaze. “That is, if it’s alright with you. I don’t want to step on any toes here, but it seems worth it for Dasher to have the deer,” he looked at Franklin and corrected, “reindeer he loves here so he doesn’t have to risk so much to see her.”

Chrissy tapped a finger on the tabletop as she considered. “With Comet expecting, it wouldn’t hurt to have another

reindeer on the roster,” she mused aloud. She lifted a shoulder in her characteristic half-shrug. “Let’s do it.”

A cheer ran through the elves.

## Chapter Eleven

Chrissy

Chrissy walked with Grisham back to the main door. He kept throwing her off-guard by the things he said and did. Eventually, she couldn't keep her thoughts in anymore.

“You surprised me back there. I didn't think you would care so much about the feelings of a reindeer.”

“Oh, I don't know. It's kind-of romantic, don't you think? Risking the press and the entire North Pole setup to see the reindeer he loves?” Grisham replied. He caught her searching look and asked, “What?”

“I've just never known any of our Santas to care so much about the reindeer.”

Grisham gave her a straight look. “Maybe it's time you quit comparing me to the other Santas. You said I'm not like any of them, so you might need to prepare for this time to be different.”

He opened the door to the outside and strode off into the snow, leaving her to stare after him with his words circling through her head.

He was right. She was so used to the way most men handled the Santa situation that she couldn't help but be thrown off when one did something different. Truth be told, she hated when they did something different, because it meant she couldn't compartmentalize them in her mind as just another Santa who would be here a few years and then leave when he tired of it. It wasn't an easy job; she understood that better than most. She couldn't blame them when they left, but the motivation to find and train a new one was getting harder.

What would the world do without Santa?

She had stepped in before. The tracker had found her three last year and all three had left before Christmas. She'd had no choice. If Christmas was meant to continue, she'd been forced to step in.

The whirlwind that had accompanied Misty making her a new suit, training with the reindeer, and throwing herself into practice in the hallways had almost been fun, but when she actually got out there and started delivering the presents, she realized the cold, hard truth:

She needed a Santa. Christmas needed a Santa. It just wasn't the same.

That led her to this year and possibly the very last. Two more Santas couldn't hack it, and then she had found Grisham. The elves felt it. She was sure of it. She could see it in how hard they worked now that Grisham was there. They were eager to please, enjoyed their jobs again, and there was a new light of enthusiasm that filled the hallways and cafeteria. She didn't have the heart to let any of them know her fears, not even Vera. Keeping to herself that there might not be a Santa if Grisham left nibbled away in the back of her mind, but she tried to ignore it. For now, Grisham would be enough.

He threw himself into the work with a zeal that impressed her. Grisham was up as early as she was and made his rounds of the rest of the elf departments that week. By Friday, he had only two more to go, and the pack and wrap and design departments were excited to have him. The elves were thrilled with the attention and production was up far more than any year she could remember. They even had to hire a few more elves from England to assist with electronics as the demand for the newest games and game systems was growing exponentially. Fortunately, there were always elves ready for a change of pace. Being promoted to the North Pole was a high honor, and the new faces that peered up at her from the



cafeteria tables practically glowed with enthusiasm that was contagious.

Her high spirits faltered at Grisham's expression when he joined her at the table for breakfast a few days later. The outdoors and wheels department had taken their place at the small tables set on top of their large one that morning, but Grisham had just met with them the day before, so they were content to chatter among themselves about plans for the day's building allotments.

No one noticed the look on Grisham's face except her. She hadn't realized just how even keeled he usually was, and how much she relied on it, until it was gone.

He nodded at her and slid into his spot at the table without a word. His gaze was distant as though he saw things beyond the room in which they sat.

"What's going on?" she asked quietly.

He blinked and then focused on her as if seeing her for the first time. His eyes shifted around the room and then back to her as if he didn't remember walking there.

"Grish, what's up?" she probed, keeping her tone light.

His mouth twitched. It was a slight movement, but expressed his hesitation enough that her heart fell. He had been healing so well Oxford had removed the stitches. He still favored his right wrist, but fractures took longer and he was better about protecting it during training bouts. Had he taken a turn for the worst and kept it to himself?

“I got a text.”

Chrissy ran a hand through her hair to push it off her face. That wasn't what she had expected him to say. “Alright.” She didn't want to pry, but he wasn't exactly forthcoming with information. “Was it bad?”

“Well, I guess it's not the worst thing in the world,” he said. He waited for Pearl's team to deliver their plates of cheesy hashbrowns, scrambled eggs, and sliced tomatoes.

Chrissy waited on pins and needles for the team to give their usual morning introductions and explain what they were about to eat. She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying that she could obviously see that they were about to eat hashbrowns and eggs, and managed to stay civil when the elves jumped back onto the conveyor belt and returned to the kitchen.

Grisham must have been able to tell by her expression that she was at the end of her rope, because he cracked a smile. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“It could be,” she said under her breath.

Grisham opened his left hand and spread it on the smooth surface of the table as if to ground himself. “It was from my sister.”

Chrissy kept silent. If he wanted to tell her what it was about, he would. It wasn’t her place to pry, even though every fiber of her being screamed for him to tell her because it could affect the entire fate of the toy factory and the North Pole.

Grisham let out a breath and said, “We need to go to Thanksgiving dinner at her house.”

Chrissy stared at him. “What?”

“Dinner,” he replied. “You know, eat food, chat. We can keep it to small talk. I’m not sure how much you two have in common.”

Chrissy knew she couldn’t make herself stop staring or sounding like a parrot when she repeated, “What?”

Grisham turned to face her fully. “I’ve gone to my sister’s to eat every Sunday since Brylee was killed, and now I’ve

missed a few.” He rubbed his jaw as though just saying the words had been painful. He lowered his hand and continued, “Izzy’s been texting me every day and I haven’t replied. I haven’t been able to figure out what to tell her, so I’ve been avoiding checking her messages.” He motioned vaguely at the room around them. “I wasn’t sure what to say, but she knows I never went back to Charlie’s pub after that day. Apparently, she’s been checking every hospital and police report because she’s been convinced I’m either convicted or dead.” He gave a pained smile. “She always was one to jump to conclusions.”

He picked up his fork and began to toy with the eggs on his plate.

When he stopped talking, Chrissy couldn’t stay silent any longer. “So, you texted her back,” she prompted.

He looked up from his plate. “I did, and she sent me so many angry and then happy and then angry texts that I finally had to call her to get her to stop.” He blinked. “You have excellent reception here. I didn’t expect that.”

“You can thank cyber security,” she replied, her thoughts half-focused. “It’s crucial for what they do.” She waved a hand to clear her mind. “What did she say?”

“Who?”

Chrissy held back a growl. “Your sister!”

“Oh,” Grisham said with a glow in his eyes that told her he may have guessed just how frustrated she was at his unwillingness to be forthcoming with information, and he was actually enjoying it. He tapped his fork on his plate and said, “We’re going to Thanksgiving dinner at her place tonight.”

Chrissy spluttered. It was the only way to describe how her tongue seemed to forget how to form words and left her with a variety of sounds that might be understandable only to fish and small crawling creatures.

Grisham smirked and put a forkful of hashbrowns in his mouth. When she kept staring at him, he motioned to her plate. “You should probably have breakfast. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

“Tonight,” Chrissy managed to force out. “We’re going there tonight?”

He nodded. “I figured you had some fast way to travel given how quickly we must have arrived here before I bled out.” He indicated his side. “And sooner is better with Izzy or else she’ll no doubt put on some boots and trek her way up here. She’s that persistent.”

“To the North Pole,” Chrissy said, her mind whirling. “She would come up here?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure it’s illegal for her to try to track my phone, but knowing Izzy, she’ll end up contacting someone at the CIA and convincing them I’m a national security threat or something or other. She always gets her way. She’s very forceful, that one.”

Chrissy shook her head. “You actually told her we’d be at to dinner tonight. We, as in you and me.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Why is that an ‘of course’?” she replied, exasperated.

He set down his fork carefully so that it didn’t make a mess and turned back to her. His expression was patient and endearing in a way that made her want to strangle him.

He took her hands in his. That one action chased all others away. The whirlwind in her mind silenced and everything inside of her focused on his dark brown eyes and the way his hands warmed her.

“Chrissy, let’s be honest. Telling my sister I have a girlfriend is a whole lot easier than telling her I was kidnapped and woke up at the North Pole as a recruit to become the new

Santa Claus.” He smiled and dropped her hands. “We aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend, of course, but we’re going to have to pretend for a night so she’s convinced she doesn’t have to throw me into isolation somewhere for my own safety. It’s the only thing I can think of that will explain why I’ve ghosted her for so long. It’ll work; trust me.”

He turned back to his food and dove into the hashbrowns with a zeal that said he had no idea how much he had thrown her world off its axis.

Chrissy left as soon as it wouldn’t make a scene and fled to her room. She dove into her closet and began rummaging through outfits.

She didn’t turn at the sound of someone clicking their tongue.

“You really should have gone shopping in the last century or so,” Vera said. “I’ve told you it would be good for you.”

“I know, but I had no reason to go out,” Chrissy replied. She pushed aside several outfits that would have looked fine during St. Patrick’s day in Ireland, but in no way would convince Grisham’s sister that she was remotely sane if she showed up in November in New York wearing any of them. She sighed in exasperation at her measly collection of normal

clothes. When did lounge pants and overly large sweaters take over her closet? And when did she accrue such a large assortment of fluffy socks?

“It’s a good thing you have a friend who knows you so well.”

Chrissy didn’t hear Vera in her panic, delving through the bottom of her closet until the elf shouted the words at the top of her lungs.

Chrissy withdrew from the depths with something on her head. She pulled it off and found a tee-shirt with the words, ‘I’m on the nice list’, printed on it. She tossed it to the side and turned back to her friend. “What?”

Vera nudged a package with her foot.

“What’s that?” Chrissy asked.

“Let’s just say, I hoped this day would come,” the little elf replied with a smug smile.

“What day?” Chrissy questioned as she pulled the package over. The elf must have used an enchantment to get something so big into her closet, let alone hide it for however long it had been there. Granted, it had been a very long time since Chrissy



had looked for anything other than lounge pants and comfy sweatshirts.

She opened the package from a shipping company they often used and stared at the pile of black silk in her hands.

“What’s this?”

“Try it on,” Vera said.

Chrissy gave her an exasperated look.

Vera waved her toward the bathroom. “Go put it on! Seriously, it’s not going to fit me and if you wait another year, it’ll be out of style. Now go!”

Chrissy managed to trip over two pairs of boots and get her ankles wound up in a scarf that nearly sent her headlong into the door frame before she unwrapped herself and stumbled toward the bathroom.

She shrugged out of her comfortable clothes, gave the black silk dress a skeptical look, and pulled it over her head.

The material fell to mid-calf with surprising comfort. It hugged in all the right places, enunciating her toned arms, dipping generously to highlight her cleavage with just enough sass, but not enough to give away the entire shebang. Looking

into the mirror, she found herself taken aback by the woman she saw returning her stare.

She turned and nearly blushed at how much of her back the dress revealed. It had built-in support and didn't require a bra, which made her feel both brazen and a little shy. When was the last time she had shown so much skin?

"I know you like it," Vera called from the other side of the door. "And since you do, you're going to like these even more."

Chrissy opened the door to see the elf perched on top of a shoebox.

"When did you do all this?" she asked for lack of a better way to thank her friend.

Vera practically glowed with pride. "When the last Santa left us. I had a feeling the next one would be a keeper."

Chrissy shook her head. "I'm not so sure he is. Now I have to meet his sister?"

"That's a good sign," Vera insisted. "Meeting the family's a big deal!"

Chrissy lowered to her knees so that she was closer to the elf. She could feel the worry pressing against her from all

sides and buried her face in her hands. She refused to let her emotions spill out all over in a teary mess. She wouldn't let them.

“Chrissy, what’s really going on?” Vera asked, her voice soft.

Chrissy felt the elf’s little hand touch her arm. She lowered her hands and admitted, “I’m not great with people.”

Vera laughed, realized Chrissy was being honest, and sobered up. She held her hands behind her back and regarded Chrissy with a very serious expression.

“Alright, then let’s practice.”

Chrissy rolled her eyes. “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Why hello. I’m Grisham’s beautiful sister,” she said in a voice even higher than her own.

“Vera, I don’t think—”

“Who’s this Vera you’re talking about?” the elf continued. “She must be wise and gorgeous and have fabulous hair and always be right when it comes to picking out outfits, not to mention have excellent taste in shoes which you haven’t even tried on.”

Chrissy couldn't help but smile. "She is quite fabulous."  
She gave the elf a grateful look. "And she's the very best friend a person could ever ask for."

Vera nodded. "And the shoes?" She jumped off the box so Chrissy could look.

Chrissy tipped the lid back and stared down at black heels inset with black gems that caught the light and sparkled.

"Oh, Vera," she said. She withdrew them from the box and slipped them on her feet. The fit was perfect. She shook her head with a sigh. "I don't deserve you."

"Yes, but you're working on deserving me every day," Vera said.

"I was talking to the shoes," Chrissy told her.

They both broke into giggles.

Chrissy finally tipped her head back with a sigh. "I don't suppose I can back out now."

Vera shook her head. "From what I hear from Oxford, Grisham's nervous, also."

Chrissy stared at her. "Why?"

Vera shrugged, but her smile said plenty. “Now, let’s work on your hair.” She put her fingers to her lips and gave such a loud whistle Chrissy jumped.

As if they had been waiting for the command, four of the elf’s caretakers spilled through the little door near the fireplace that led into Chrissy’s room. At Vera’s command, Chrissy scooted next to the couch so that the five elves could get to work.

After much tut-tutting and a few struggles with getting the brush through Chrissy’s long wavy blonde hair, Vera proclaimed that they were finished.

Chrissy rose to her feet, wobbled on the new shoes as she attempted to find her equilibrium, and then made her way slowly to the bathroom mirror.

She stared at her reflection. “I barely recognize myself,” she said.

Along with doing her hair, Vera had touched up Chrissy’s usual makeup with darker eyeshadow, a hint of rouge, and lipstick a shade darker than her normal lip color. Her hair was pulled up into intricate curls on top of her head held in place with little black gems interspersed throughout, while other locks had been left to curl down the back of her neck.

Vera cleared her throat. It was a tiny, feminine sound that drew Chrissy's attention to the edge of the sink.

"We thought this would go with the dress," the elf said.

Chrissy's gaze landed on the black velvet box two other elves held up.

"You guys," she said.

"We know," Margaret, one of the elves holding the box, said.

"Jax made it with a tracking chip in case something goes wrong while you're gone," Thea, the other elf holding the box, explained.

Chrissy took the small velvet container and opened it.

The pendant inside was a woman's profile on a dark background. The cameo was surrounded by silver filigree which offset the black background perfectly. The pendant hung on a black ribbon with pearl bead ends.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"We know," all of the elves replied.

Chrissy slipped the necklace from the box and tied the ribbon at the back of her neck. A glance in the mirror showed

that it went perfectly with the lace that edged the bodice of the dress.

“Remind me to give my appreciation to Jax,” she said.

“You know he won’t hear of it,” Vera said. She glanced sideways at Chrissy. “I think he’s sulking.”

Chrissy’s heart fell at the thought of the little elf heartbroken. “Because I’m going with Grisham. Does he know it’s not a real date?”

“Looks like a real date to me,” Margaret commented.

Chrissy shook her head. “Grisham said it himself. We’re telling his sister we’re a couple to explain why he’s been out of contact, but it’s just a ruse.” She wasn’t sure about the hint of bitterness that surfaced in her tone. She swallowed it down and forced a smile. “But it’ll be a fun ruse, just the same.”

“Have fun for all of us,” Lutia said.

“That’s right,” Vera seconded. “We’ll be expecting stories when you get back.”

“I’ll have them for sure,” Chrissy reassured them.

## Chapter Twelve

Grisham

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Grisham said.

“I’m one hundred percent serious and thoroughly enjoying this,” Chrissy replied. “Maybe I should be recording it.”

Grisham sighed. “This is ridiculous.”

“It’s what we use to train them because Santas change, but they know whoever wears the hat is in charge,” she explained.

He held out the fluffy red hat with the white ball on the end made of patchwork material. “Then we both know you should wear it.”

She rewarded him with a wink before she climbed into the sleigh. “You’re smarter than you look,” she said over her shoulder.

“That’s because I’m wearing this stupid hat,” he replied.

He heard her quiet laugh before he turned to the vehicle that awaited them.

The garage held at least thirty different sleighs ranging from the old school variety he had seen on cozy Christmas



paintings pulled by eight reindeer with ridiculously small legs and cherubic smiles, to a streamlined sleigh that would fit on a bobsled track, a sleigh with jet propulsion, and another with what appeared to be a steam-powered engine that Chrissy explained was what one Santa requested in order to leave out the reindeer entirely. Her accompanying sigh said what a failure that had been without him asking.

Other sleighs changed color according to temperature, had a variety of lighting tracks and streamlined options, and one was inset with mirrors along the bottom to reflect whatever showed below.

The elf named Jax that led them to the sleigh they ultimately selected detailed its qualities with great pride.

“The Santa’s Helper Thirty-one is made of radar-absorbing material and internal infrared sensors. The traditional ruby red metallic tri-coat paint is overlaid with cloaking technology that manipulates the direction of visible and near-infrared light or electromagnetic waves so that if someone looks up at the sleigh, it will appear as though it isn’t even there,” the elf explained. He ran his hand down his black mustache and said, “The cloaking extends to the reindeer using cameras and holographic projection technology that makes whatever is

behind the sleigh appear to be in front of it.” The elf’s enthusiasm was clear when he continued, “Its newly integrated E.L.F. system allows it to track prospective landing sites without emitting radar that could be picked up from above or below.”

“E.L.F. system?” Grisham questioned politely.

“Electro-optical Landing Fidelity,” Jax explained.

“Catchy,” Grisham said, earning a sharp look from the elf.

Jax continued in an annoyed tone, “The reindeer have practiced with the Thirty-one on five solo flights this year, but they may be a bit rusty, so watch the landings. If we need to upgrade the shocks, let me know. These have done the job, but they tend to leak oil over time, and I wouldn’t mind the chance to replace them.”

Grisham nodded as if he followed everything the elf said with no problem. He had a driver’s license, which many citizens in New York chose to forego. The license came in handy on the rare occasions Lizzy asked him to drive her car, but he had never changed the oil and he always called roadside assistance if he ever got a flat. Jax’s enthusiasm regarding the sleigh’s upgrades went entirely over his head.

Whatever Jax had done to the sleigh looked as though it would certainly add to its speed. The design was slick and appeared efficient with no wasted lines or space. According to the elf, the entire machine as well as the trace lines on the reindeer were reinforced with carbon fiber cords for both lightness and durability. The animals appeared eager to begin. The thought that they awaited his command was intimidating at the least.

He had avoided them the best he could during his stay at the North Pole, but the trek to his cabin and back to the main cabin Chrissy's room was a part of meant another confrontation had been inevitable.

The reindeer didn't at all act or look like the spindly-legged, fluffy, sweet, doe-eyed creatures from the storybooks his mother used to read them around the holidays. On the far end of the spectrum from Bambi and other such deer illustrated to emphasize their cuteness and likeability, Dasher's herd, as he had come to think of them, looked like horned and hoofed bringers of death and destruction. Each bore antlers with at least a dozen tips and, thanks to their carefully monitored diet by an elf Grisham had met named Franklin, they were far bigger than normal reindeer in both musculature

and height, necessary, the elf reassured him, to pull the sleigh for an entire twenty-four hours without running out of strength.

The reindeer had thick coats ranging from Vixen's white fur to Dasher's dark gray. When he snorted and stomped his cloven hoof the size of a dinner plate, it was easy to see why the rest of the herd followed him.

On the day of the second encounter, Grisham had just finished dinner followed by a tour of the extensive greenhouses. His earlier introduction to the entire soft toy creation department had taken longer than he expected, especially since the majority of the elves were creating stuffed animals by hand and wanted to show him what made their creations special. He hadn't wanted to hurt feelings by rushing, which meant a late arrival to dinner and an even later greenhouse tour. Weary from the busy day and his healing wounds that didn't appreciate how far he pushed his body, Grisham hadn't been paying attention on his way back to his cabin. He had heard a rushing sound and looked up to find himself surrounded by the reindeer herd. His awe of their stealthy approach changed to a tingle of nerves when Dasher stepped forward and lowered his head.

Certain he was about to be skewered and in turn end up as the shortest surviving Santa at the North Pole, Grisham fumbled in his pocket. He snagged the candy cane he had kept there at Chrissy's suggestion, transferring it to each pair of pants in case of just such a moment.

Pulling it free, he quickly unwrapped the candy and held it out with almost steady fingers.

"Eat the candy and don't stab me," he said, keeping his tone conversational.

Dasher eyed the offering with his strange blue eyes. Jax had mentioned their eyes changed color to give the reindeer better eyesight during the North Pole's polar night when it was dark far longer than Grisham was used to, and he was reassured it would continue to get darker the closer they got to Christmas. The effect of Dasher's eyes was eerie and set Grisham on edge, but he held perfectly still and didn't take his hand away. The reindeer sniffed the candy with a dark nose that appeared soft and beckoned to Grisham to pet, but he was convinced that underneath the velvet exterior lay teeth ready to take off his fingers.

To his surprise, the creature opened his mouth to reveal no teeth at all along the top. Dasher leaned forward and carefully

nipped the candy cane with bottom teeth that easily snapped it off against his toothless top plate. The reindeer snorted and crunched the treat. His ears waved back and forth and he gave a funny, happy sound Grisham had never heard before.

The reindeer nosed Grisham's hand like an eager puppy searching for more treats. The other reindeer crowded forward. Grisham regretted not carrying eight candy canes for self-preservation purposes. Fortunately, one stomp from Dasher made them all back up and fall into a line like regimental soldiers. The reindeer took the rest of the candy cane and ate it with obvious enjoyment.

When it was gone, he looked Grisham up and down as if debating whether he carried more treats.

Grisham held up his hands. "It's all gone."

Dasher nudged Grisham's hand with his velvety nose.

"Uh, you're welcome," Grisham said.

Dasher turned away, bumping Grisham with his shaggy shoulder in a way that felt not at all accidental. A snort from the reindeer made the rest of the herd fall in behind him. Grisham rubbed his shoulder and watched the animals trot off into the snow. He wondered how he could smuggle eight

candy canes next time, and debated what kind of lecture he would get from Franklin if he got the animals all hyped up on sugar.

Seeing Dasher's herd lined up and ready for action was something else entirely. Steel filled the reindeers' eyes as well as readiness in every line of their bodies. They leaned into their harnesses in their eagerness to fly. When Dasher stomped, every reindeer stomped in response. It was an intimidating display of power that the elves harnessing them responded to with respect and calming words spoken in hushed tones.

Feedbags were strapped to the reindeers' muzzles. A strong scent of cinnamon, clove, and lemon filled the air. To Grisham's shock, their antlers began to glow in a pulsing, golden light.

"What is that?" Grisham asked.

A throat cleared close to Grisham's ear. He jumped at the unexpected sound and turned to see Franklin standing on the beam near his head as if he had been waiting for just that question.

"It's an oat mixture treated with highly potent spices grown with elfish enchantments," Franklin said matter-of-

factly. “We’ve been perfecting the formula for years.”

“Is that why their antlers are lighting up?” Grisham asked.

Franklin nodded. “When the pulsing becomes a full glow, we know they’re ready to activate.”

He didn’t want to ask, but made himself say, “Activate what?”

“The Quantum flux. Reindeer have the ability, with our enchantments of course, to use a form of quantum teleportation. Their antlers have a unique web of blood vessels that turn our enchantments into a control of the space/time continuum. How else did you think Santa could be at every house around the world within twenty-four hours?”

“Christmas magic?” Grisham replied. His brain whirled as he attempted to come to terms with what the elf was telling him. He could see the ghost of a smile on Chrissy’s face from the corner of his eye as though she was enjoying the moment. Her expression was quite distracting. He gave himself a mental kick and forced his thoughts to focus on what Franklin said. “So, in essence, the reindeer are a time machine.”

Franklin’s mouth opened as if he was going to deny it, then he shut his mouth again and glanced at Chrissy.



“I told you he was a sharp one,” she said.

The elf gave an annoyed twitch of his mustache. “Calling this a time machine is an oversimplification of the process, but yes, for all intents and purposes, they are a time machine. Just don’t end up in the Jurassic Era.”

Grisham’s mouth fell open. “Is that possible?”

The elves around the room burst into laughter.

Grisham gave Chrissy a searching look. “Is it?”

“I’m sure the dinosaurs wouldn’t mind presents,” she replied. “Just keep the skateboards away from the Velociraptors. I don’t think they’re ready for that kind of transportation.”

Grisham rolled his eyes. “Maybe they would’ve survived extinction and you’d have Troodon working here instead of reindeer.”

Silence filled the room. He looked around. “What? I liked dinosaurs growing up.”

“They don’t have antlers,” an elf in blue pointed out.

“They’d need antlers for the feed bags to work.”

Grisham fought back the urge to point out that he doubted antlers were the only problem with his theory. Instead, he

nodded and said, “You’re right. Silly theory. Just remind me to keep the skateboards on the sleigh.”

Laughter rang through the room.

“I made you a dinosaur.”

Everyone turned to look at an elf with a white beard and merry blue eyes who stood on the edge of the sleigh with several other elves.

“You what?” Grisham asked.

The elf smiled so big his cheeks reddened. “I wondered where I had heard the name Grisham Berg; then with your comment about dinosaurs, it all clicked. You wanted a dinosaur when you were seven and it was my task to make you one.” He held out his hands as if crafting it by memory. “A triceratops with red horns, a blue body—”

“And a green tail,” Grisham said in breathless wonder. “I thought my parents bought it. It was my favorite gift!”

The elf nodded. “Many times, parents take credit for the presents Santa puts under the tree. A mother might think the father bought the gift, or vice versa. Things get forgotten in the chaos, but in the end, we don’t care where the gift came from,

just that the children have the best Christmas they possibly can.”

Grisham felt warmth run up and down his arms. He didn't know what to say. He had played with that dinosaur more than any other toy he could remember. It had looked exactly as he had described it in his letter to Santa. In all the years following, he had never been so happy as when he had unwrapped the triceratops. Gifts got more complicated and meant less. Why was it that the simplest toy had been so important to him? Perhaps all along, he had known it came from Santa.

“You good?” Chrissy asked.

“I'm fine,” he replied automatically.

She shot him a searching look before she settled onto the sleigh's bench.

He climbed in next to her and closed the door with a quiet snick. The elves removed the feedbags and jumped off the reindeer. Their antlers glowed with a steady golden hue that made the lights in the room pale in comparison.

Chrissy motioned toward the reins. “You remember your briefing?”

He picked up the intricately worked leather strips with an outward show of confidence that hid the way his insides shuddered.

“There’s something I haven’t told you,” he said.

“I’m sure we’ll figure it out,” she replied. “But we’d better get going.”

Grisham wanted to argue, but he felt the eyes of every elf in the room waiting for him. Dasher stomped again and shook his radiant antlers.

Chrissy’s smile was filled with enough mischievous enjoyment at his discomfort that Grisham had to smile in return. He clicked his tongue the way she had taught him and shouted, “On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen, now Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen.”

The speed with which the reindeer hit their traces sent Grisham to back of his seat so hard it was all he could do to hold onto the reins with one hand and the ridiculous hat Chrissy had insisted he wear with the other. They darted through the wide-open doors and across the snowy landscape that fronted the cabins.

The reindeer appeared to pull the sleigh with barely an effort, their legs churning through the snow and then upward into the sky in unison with military precision. Grisham gripped the side of the sleigh in one hand and the reins in the other to avoid falling out.

“Tell them where you want them to go,” Chrissy said.

Grisham had been grilled on the dangers of being unclear in his diction when he gave commands. Apparently, one Santa had imbibed a bit too much of the proffered beer at a stop and slurred when he spoke his destination. They had ended up in an eastern battle zone across the ocean and lost half the reindeer and all of the toys before he made it back to the North Pole. The bullet holes that peppered Santa’s Helper Twenty-two were displayed as a sobering reminder to speak all commands with clarity.

“To New York City,” he said.

The reindeer’s antlers gave a blinding flash. Grisham blinked at the brightness. When his vision cleared, buildings rushed past in a blur of lights, the sounds of traffic beating up from below.

Grisham ducked his head to keep from passing out.

“Grisham, what’s wrong?” Chrissy asked, her voice raised to be heard above the sounds.

“I tried to tell you,” he replied.

Her hand touched his shoulder. “Tell me what?”

Horns honked below. He couldn’t bring himself to look over the edge and see what was happening.

“I have a crippling fear of heights,” he forced out.

He gritted his teeth to keep the spots flashing in front of his eyes from taking over. His head swam and his stomach roiled. He felt Chrissy’s hand slip away from his shoulder in surprise. She called something out to the reindeer. He felt the sleigh shift. Every muscle in his body tightened. His breaths came in short, spasmodic gasps. He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on breathing.

“We’re down.”

Her words sounded as though they came from miles away.

“Grisham, we’ve landed.”

He sucked in one breath through his teeth and then another. His head began to clear of the numbness that filled it.

“You need to let go,” she said. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Grisham felt her hands on his. He opened his eyes to find that he was gripping the reins so hard his knuckles showed white. The bruising and swelling of his right hand had lessened with the care he had given it at the North Pole, but he could feel the pain holding the reins so hard had reawakened. He opened his hands slowly.

“Just breathe,” Chrissy said. Her voice quieted and she told him, “But try to breathe quickly. We’ve got to send the sleigh out of here.”

The hint of anxiety in her voice centered him. A glance over the side of the sleigh showed that they were in a heavily wooded area with buildings just visible above them.

“We landed in Central Park?” he said in amazement.

“Yes,” she replied. “And the sleigh needs to leave before it’s seen. Jax’s cloaking only extends so far, and only if someone doesn’t walk directly into the sleigh, which has happened before. They need to return to the sky. They can stay in a holding pattern there for hours with their enchantments.”

Grisham opened the door and nearly fell to his knees in his haste to leave the death vehicle. He stumbled a few feet away and waited for Chrissy. She gave the command he had practiced and should have been giving since he was the one wearing the hat.

Dasher's antlers pulsed once and the sleigh lifted into the air, all of the reindeer churning their hooves as though they were running. The sleigh surged forward and then vanished from sight.

Grisham bent over with his hands on his knees and pulled in two gulping breaths. "How-how were we able to see it if it was cloaked?" he managed to get out when Chrissy approached him.

"Because we knew it was there. That's why children can see you when their parents don't. It's the children you have to hide from when you enter their houses. Their parents wouldn't see you if you stood right in front of them." She shook her head with a baffled expression. "Why didn't you tell me you were afraid of heights?"

Grisham took a final steeling breath before he straightened and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I'm not afraid of



heights; I have a crippling fear of heights. It's different because it's debilitating."

"I can see that," Chrissy replied. Her tone carried only a cautious whisper of lightness as though she wasn't sure how to deal with the situation.

Grisham rubbed the back of his neck to ease its tightness. "I didn't mention it before because it's embarrassing, and I figured when we got to the sleigh part, we'd probably just, you know, whoosh and we're there. I didn't think there'd be actual flying involved."

"You've seen the pictures," she said levelly.

"Yes," he replied in as level a tone. "And Santa's jolly." He swept a hand to indicate himself. "Yet here I am, not jolly in the least but apparently the best candidate you've got." He lowered his voice before their preposterous argument caught the attention of anyone on the nearby bike path. "The reindeer could have blipped or something. Point A to point B. No flying."

"They have to clear the stables," Chrissy pointed out.

"A landing strip would do it."

“That would require landing, which would require flying,”  
Chrissy replied.

Grisham shook his head at her stubbornness. “Are you sure  
the other Santas didn’t run away because of you?”

It was the wrong thing to say. He saw it immediately in the  
hurt that appeared in her eyes. She blinked and the pain was  
hidden behind her blank expression he found she used when  
she was done talking to him.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Grisham told her.

She didn’t reply and instead headed in the direction of his  
sister’s apartment. He didn’t question how she knew where  
Lizzy lived. He tried not to be surprised by anything Chrissy  
did, which was impossible because everything he learned  
about her was so far-fetched and amazing, she continued to  
shock him beyond words.

At that moment, his attention was captured by the way the  
dress she wore hugged her curves in the most flattering of  
ways. Her head was held high at a confident angle, her  
shoulders were back, and her hips carried enough sway to

catch the attention of the three men talking on the corner. He glared at them before he hurried to catch up to her.

“Chrissy, I’m sorry,” he said.

When she kept walking, he caught her elbow and gently turned her to face him. The glow of the lamplight caught in her blue eyes and illuminated the brooch around her neck. Her blonde hair glimmered with strands of gold he hadn’t noticed before. She looked like an angel. He felt the urge to do better and be better just from being around her.

“That was the wrong thing to say. I didn’t mean it. I’m deeply sorry.” He lowered his gaze. “I’m an idiot.”

He didn’t know how to fix the hurt he had caused. How did he even deserve to be near such a beautiful woman? And he had ruined it by thoughtlessly insulting her.

*I have nothing to give except honesty.*

With that thought in mind, he said, “I had an older brother once.”

Her eyes lifted to his, her thoughts shielded behind her expressionless wall.

He took her attention as a sign that he was heading in the right direction, so he continued with, “We were best friends.

He was a year older than me, and I wanted to be just like him.”

He rubbed his throbbing hand to ease the pain and said,

“When I was six, my parents took us to visit their friends who lived in a big house by the beach. My brother, Zach,” he swallowed at the pain of saying a name he hadn’t repeated in years, “Zach found a door that led to a balcony. We didn’t know the balcony was being repaired and that the door was supposed to be locked. To us, it was the coolest place we had ever seen.” A memory of the sunset across the ocean rose in his mind. He had long forgotten how beautiful the evening had been. “There were seagulls at the end of the balcony where the railing should have been. Zach and I had tried to catch the seagulls at the beach earlier that day, so this didn’t seem any different.”

He leaned against the bricks of the building Chrissy stood by and put his hands in his pockets. “We ran at the seagulls and didn’t see the unfinished part until it was too late. Zach was faster than I was. He managed to catch the edge in one hand and my shirt with the other.”

His voice quieted and his vision blurred as he saw the scene he described. “I remember staring at the ground. It was three stories to the driveway straight below us with no bushes

or anything in our way. I felt the collar of my shirt begin to tear. ‘Grab the roof, Grish,’ Zach said. His voice was calm. I’ve never forgotten it. ‘Hold onto the roof and don’t look down no matter what,’ he told me. I felt him pull me up. I used to relive it in my dreams. It should have been impossible. He was only a year older than me and not much bigger, but he lifted me high enough that I could turn and grab the edge of the balcony.”

Chrissy’s hand touched his elbow. Warmth ran across his skin, calming the knot in his throat. He looked at her and said, “As soon as I had a good grip, he fell. I heard him hit the ground, then nothing. His voice kept repeating in my head, ‘Hold onto the roof and don’t look down no matter what.’ So that’s what I did. Our parents saw him fall past the window where they were chatting with the Thompsons and went running outside. By the time they got to me, the muscles in my hands and arms were so torn from holding on I had to go to physical therapy for months.” He tipped his head back against the brick wall and said quietly, “Zach was the one who liked dinosaurs.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Chrissy

How did one respond to a story like that? It was all true; that much was obvious. She could see the little boy staring out through Grisham's eyes, lost and left alone by a tragedy that could have been so easily prevented by locking a door. It was clear to see how much telling her had cost him. How long had he gone without having to relive such a tragedy? How did a man survive with so much loss in his life?

*You should know.*

Chrissy blinked back the moisture in her eyes. The last thing he needed was for her to turn into a blubbery mess.

He hadn't cried when he told her what had happened. She could tell by his tone that he was keeping himself apart from the emotions in order to hold himself together. It was something she knew well. She wanted to help him save face, especially considering that they were about to have dinner with his sister.

He needed something to help chase away his sadness.

"You need ice cream."

“What?” he replied in surprise.

“Come on,” she said and headed in the opposite direction than the one they had been walking.

“But my sister’s expecting us,” he replied, no doubt caught off-guard by her abrupt decision.

“She’ll understand; trust me,” Chrissy told him.

The way her heart fluttered when he nodded and fell in step beside her made her shove aside thoughts she didn’t want to consider there and then. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her.

“You can take off the hat now.”

He put a hand to his head and grinned at the feeling of the red and white hat he still wore. He took it off, which left his hair mussed in a way that made her want to straighten it for him. She held out her hand instead.

When he put the hat in her hand, she gave it a fond look.

“This is vintage, you know.”

“A vintage hat?” he said skeptically.

She nodded. She was tempted to keep silent about its history, but his story prompted her to give something back. “I

made it for Nicholas.”

She felt his shoulder straighten beside her. She kept her gaze on the red velvet and white faux fur that lined the hem and made up the ball at the end. “It’s been repaired many times since then, so I don’t know how much of it is really original, but it’s the thought that counts.” She made sure her voice was light as she explained, “He used to say it helped his intuition. He loved giving toys to children; I don’t know how the hat helped, but he swore up and down that it did. When Nicholas died, it took me a long time to decide to continue doing what we did.” She frowned at the hat. “But the world was getting darker, and people were beginning to lose hope. By the time I found someone who could take up his mantle, the reindeer had gone wild and wouldn’t listen to anyone. I was about to give it all up as lost despite the elves begging me to find a way to continue and bring some light back to the world.”

She waited for the light to turn so they could cross the street with the rest of the crowd who had gathered there. When they were walking and had some semblance of privacy once more, she continued, “I’d put all of Nicholas’ things in boxes in the storage cabin and was clearing them out. I didn’t want his box of favorite things to end up being donated like the rest,



so I was carrying it back to my cabin when I tripped. The box hit the ground, and everything went flying.” A little laugh escaped her at the memory. “It was windy, so I was in a scramble to get it all back together. I found this hat and put it on my head while I stuck the rest of the stuff back in the box before it was ruined.” She glanced at him. “Imagine my shock when I stood up to find the reindeer in a line watching me.”

“The hat,” Grisham said with a light of understanding in his eyes.

“The hat,” she replied with a nod. “I realized they associated the hat with their work, and they were as eager to get back to it as I was. Wherever the hat went, they were happy to go.”

“Smart reindeer,” he said. A smile chased away the shadows that had filled his gaze when he spoke of his brother. “I did like you said with the candy cane.”

“You fed Dasher!” she replied. She warmed from the inside out at the thought that he had listened to her even though that felt like so long ago.

“I fed him and he acted like a puppy begging for more,” he said with a laugh at the memory.

His laughter was warm, full, and deep as if he didn't hold back around her. The thought cheered her immensely.

"I'm thinking of bringing one for each of them next time," he said.

She shook her head. "Don't do it."

His smile fell.

She rushed to explain, "He's the leader. They follow him. It's like running a business. You pay the man who's the highest in command the most money, and those who follow him get a little less, and those below them get less. They know who's in charge because that's the natural order of things. It's a pecking order. If you gave them all the same amount of money and there was nothing to aspire to, there would be no leadership."

"But isn't Dasher always in charge?" Grisham asked.

"The Dasher is always in charge," she replied. At his confusion, she explained, "Dasher isn't the name the lead reindeer is born with. It's a title."

His eyes widened. "You're kidding me."

She chuckled and led the way around the corner, the click of her heels on the pavement loud in the quieter alley. "Each position has its own name, and as the reindeer move up in

ranks, they take on that name. Reindeer live roughly seventeen or eighteen years. On the diet Franklin's family line has perfected, our reindeer live about thirty. That may seem like a long time, but given all the years we've had Santas doing delivery runs...." She let the thought die away.

Grisham whistled. "That's an awful lot of reindeer to train."

"Exactly." She held up the hat. "So, we raise them from the beginning with the end in mind. It's an honor to the reindeer when we extend invitations to the herds in the Arctic tundra. Yearlings are given a chance to audition as trainees; those who are chosen have select qualities required for whatever place on the team we want to train them for."

Grisham ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up even more. Chrissy liked it when he did that. It was endearing in its own way. She noticed it was one of his unconscious actions whenever he was deeply considering something. The fact that he pondered the things she told him as if they were important meant a lot to her. She waited for him to come to whatever conclusion he was considering and led the way down the next street.

“So, it was a big deal when I offered to bring Dasher’s romantic interest back to the North Pole,” he finally said.

“It was,” she agreed. She caught his glance and said, “But you’re the Santa in training. I thought it was great initiative and showed concern for those who work with us.”

“But it’ll be complicated getting her back home.” His voice caught at the last word.

Chrissy couldn’t deny the way her heart thrilled at him calling the North Pole home. It had been home to her for more years than she wanted to contemplate, but after Nicholas, she couldn’t remember a single Santa calling it such. Maybe Grisham really was different.

She pretended she hadn’t noticed and said, “It will, but trust me when I say Dasher will be forever grateful. He hasn’t been the same since he met her.”

“I know the feeling.”

Chrissy wondered if he had meant for her to overhear the whispered words. Grisham’s head was ducked, and he kept his gaze on the sidewalk as they walked through the cooling darkness. She couldn’t read the emotions she saw in his profile, and so kept her thoughts to herself.

After a few steps, he held out his hand.

She almost put her hand in his out of impulse before she realized what he wanted.

She handed him the hat.

Warmth flooded through her when he put it back on his head. It might have looked silly for someone to wear a Santa hat in the middle of November, but him wearing it after he knew what it meant to her sent tingles from her fingers to her toes. A smile spread across her face that he noticed. It made him smile in reply.

“Millions of shopping mall Santas have you to thank for this design?” he asked, batting the white ball on the end of the hat away from his face.

“In hindsight, I would have designed it differently if I’d known. It was a whim at the time and the puff ball was a joke because Nicholas was always in the middle of a snowball fight with one elf or another. They came up with some amazing improvements on slingshot designs that we never brought into production for fear that parents would start banning Santa from their homes.”

He chuckled at that. It was a warm sound of enjoyment that eased her sorrow. It amazed her how she could talk about Nicholas without feeling overwhelmed by sadness. Grisham was an amazing listener and allowed her to have her feelings without trying to shape her experiences from the outside. She was grateful he trusted her with the same.

She paused beneath a sign with a blue ice cream cone laden with three types of ice cream, a hefty helping of chocolate syrup and sprinkles, and a cherry on top. “This is it.”

“The North Pole Freeze,” Grisham read. “I can see why you like the place.”

She grinned at him. “Just like home.”

She pushed the door open and led the way inside. The scent of sugar in the air made her mouth water. While she tried to eat healthy, she enjoyed sweets as much as the next person, if not more. Pearl was always coming up with different recipes for chocolate truffles, peppermint bark, and other Christmas goodies for them to leave for parents who didn't have enough money to buy themselves something for the holidays. Chrissy's fondness for chocolate raspberry sticks meant Pearl often made more of them than necessary, and she felt Chrissy's duty was to finish up the extras so they didn't go bad. She

never questioned the Marm's wisdom when it came to confections.

Chrissy and Grisham approached the counter where a long spread of ice cream containers waited beneath a refrigerated dome. The fingerprints of eager children could be seen along it. Chrissy smiled at the thought.

“What's your poison,” she asked.

A hint of something twisted Grisham's lips. Was that embarrassment?

“What is it?” she pressed.

He turned back to the ice cream as if debating, then finally let in. “My favorite is peppermint chip.”

A laugh escaped her. “See, you were meant to be Santa.”

He grinned at her. “I'm beginning to believe that.” He tipped his head toward the containers. “How about you?”

“Chocolate moose tracks.” She leaned closer to him and whispered, “Though at the North Pole, we call it reindeer tracks because the reindeer don't get along with moose.”

“Do the reindeer eat a lot of ice cream?” he asked.

She winked. “Don't tell Franklin.”

“Your secret’s safe with me. I wouldn’t dare take ice cream away from them.”

The attendant who took their requests held out the two cones with a roll of her eyes as though she found their conversation strange. Chrissy saw her eye Grisham’s Santa hat.

“He’s in training,” she said.

“Isn’t it a little early to start with Christmas?” the attendant asked.

“Some people live it all year,” Grisham replied with a straight face.

Chrissy nearly burst out laughing.

When they approached the register, she saw Grisham check his pockets.

“It’s on me,” she said. She took a twenty-dollar bill out of her small purse and handed it to the girl behind the register.

“Keep the change.”

The girl’s eyes lit up. “Thanks!”

Grisham held the door open for Chrissy and waited until she passed through to join her.



She appreciated what it meant to walk beside a true New Yorker through the streets. He wasn't furtively checking every alley and shadow for an attacker. Granted, she had seen him take down the robbers in the alley without hesitation and knew he had the skills required if they were jumped. Regardless, there was something confident and sure about him that she hadn't seen in a long time from someone she trained. He felt at home there walking the streets even if he didn't know it himself. He might have called the North Pole home, but he certainly wasn't a stranger to dangerous places and unknown situations.

They both ate their ice cream with relish.

"It really does hit the spot," Grisham said. "Thanks."

She gave him a sidelong look. "Peppermint chip?"

"My favorite for as long as I can remember," he replied as he finished the last bite of his ice cream cone.

A bit of ice cream was caught in his close-trimmed beard. Without thinking, she reached up and smoothed it away. She paused with her hand in the air when she realized what she had done.

Grisham's gaze was shuttered when she met it, but he gave a small smile. "Thanks."

She lowered her hand and continued walking in silence in the direction he indicated. Her chest was a knot of mixed emotions and her ice cream flavorless amid the whirlwind of her thoughts.

He cleared his throat and said, "If Izzy knew I got hurt fighting...."

"Your secret's safe with me," Chrissy told him.

His smile of gratitude chased away her embarrassment at the ice cream. As they walked on in silence, she mused about what she was even doing there. She hadn't been in a social situation with humans for longer than she could remember. Her insides were trembling with anxiety she had never felt before.

What if she made a fool of herself? What if they hated her? Would Grisham give up the job if she didn't make a good impression? Why on earth had he even insisted she go with him?

She tried to straighten her dress. It felt like it was riding up and she didn't feel exposing more of her legs was called for. It

was a good thing she had shaved that morning, though it wasn't with the intention of wearing a dress. Dresses didn't exactly fit the type of attire required for the North Pole's unpredictable weather. That wasn't even considering shoes. Heels were ridiculous. She had to remember to make her ankles stay straight or else she wobbled like a newborn reindeer. Boots were much more convenient and forgiving. She felt like a fish out of water and was about to turn around and head back to the park when Grisham spoke.

“This is it.”

Chrissy followed his gaze to an apartment building across the street. The moment he said the words, the front door flew open and a woman rushed out. She was followed by a man who leaned against the door frame and gave a short wave of welcome.

The woman whose dark, wavy hair matched Grisham's surprised them both when she ran past Grisham and threw her arms around Chrissy. Chrissy stumbled back on her heels, but the woman held her up with surprising strength.

“Izzy,” Grisham said.

When she continued to hold on, Chrissy patted her back awkwardly and threw Grisham a questioning look.

“Iz,” Grisham repeated. He pulled her gently away.

Isabelle kept her focus on Chrissy as if she couldn’t bring herself to look at her brother. “I thought he was dead.” She looked over her shoulder at the man in the doorway. “We both did. That many days is far too long not to communicate.” She finally looked at Grisham and glared at him despite the tears in her eyes. “I thought you were dead, Grish. Seriously. You have no idea.”

“I’m sorry.”

The simple words melted the anger from his sister’s face. Isabelle hugged him tight enough that Chrissy saw him wince at the pressure to his healing ribs.

Isabelle must have felt it because she held him at arms-length and looked him up and down.

“You have bruises.” She peered at his face. “They’re faded, but still green which means they were probably really bad.” Her eyes narrowed. “What happened? Charlie said you left the bar in a rage and that he never saw you again. He regrets letting you go.”

“You went to Charlie?” Grisham said. “Izzy—”

“No,” she cut him off. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to chastise me when you’re the one who vanished! I checked the hospitals, police stations, the morgue.” Her voice died away. When he reached out to touch her arm, she shrugged out of reach. “You don’t get to do that, Grish. You almost put me in the morgue myself.”

“She was really worried.” This came from the man at the door. He walked down the steps. “We all were.” He held out a hand and Grisham shook it.

Chrissy saw the muscle in Grisham’s cheek twitch at the pressure to his broken hand. When he had unwrapped it earlier, she hadn’t questioned; now, considering Isabelle’s worry, she realized why he hid the injury from them.

“I’m sorry for the trouble I caused you,” he said. He turned to look at Chrissy. “Evan, this is Chrissy.”

Chrissy shook his hand as well.

“Uncle Grizz!” a voice shouted from the doorway.

Grisham and Chrissy turned just as a young boy propelled himself from the steps right into Grisham’s arms. Luckily, Grisham seemed used to the action because he caught the boy and held him close.

“I missed you, Parker.”

The little boy leaned up to look him in the face. “Are you Santa Claus?”

## Chapter Fourteen

Grisham

Grisham froze and saw Chrissy do the same. He stared down at his nephew with ice running through his veins.

“Wha-what did you say?” he asked.

Parker repeated himself with all the innocence of youth.

“Are you Santa, Uncle Grizz?”

He didn't know what to say. Chrissy had stressed the importance of keeping his secret no matter who they spoke to. He had always been close to his nephew, but how had the little boy figured it out within the first ten seconds?

“That is a nice hat,” Isabelle said. “Are you trying to start a fad?”

“Oh,” Grisham said with an uneasy laugh. He pulled the hat off his head. “This was supposed to be a joke.”

“If it snows because you're dressing up like it's Christmas, I'm blaming you,” Evan said.

Grisham made a show of handing Chrissy the hat. “See, I told you they wouldn't laugh. I'm not funny enough.”

“You’re funny,” Parker said. “Funny looking!”

Grisham stared at him. “Ouch!”

“Don’t mind him. He goes to first grade and picks up zingers all day long,” Isabelle said. She poked Parker in the stomach. He laughed and ran back up the stairs. “Don’t you?”

“You know it,” he replied. He turned back to Grisham. “Uncle Grizz, are you coming in to eat?”

“The rolls!” Isabelle cried. She ran up the stairs and called over her shoulder, “Make yourselves comfortable. Dinner will be ready soon!”

Evan motioned for them to follow his wife. “Come on in and make yourselves at home.”

“Thanks,” Grisham said.

He led Chrissy to the small living room which was separated from the kitchen by a countertop laden with a freshly cooked turkey, stuffing, green beans, peas, sweet potato casserole, and warmed cider that colored the turkey-scented air with clove and cinnamon. The dining table in the adjoining room was set with paper plates complete with cartoon turkey prints, cups with turkeys on them, and napkins that also matched the theme.



Grisham followed Chrissy's gaze to the table and chuckled.

"You really went all out with the turkeys," he said.

Evan passed them on his way to the kitchen. He pulled an apron over his head and turned to show them the print on it as he tied it. The apron had a close up of a cartoon turkey's face and words beneath it that proclaimed, 'Get your fat pants ready!'.

"You said you were coming over and she got all excited and went shopping," he told them with a shrug. "Can't say I mind too much when it means a full turkey dinner."

"With cranberry sauce?" Grisham asked loud enough for Isabelle to hear over the sound of pans clattering.

"Of course," she replied, sticking her head around the corner. "You know what Dad always said."

"It's not Thanksgiving without the cranberry sauce," Grisham replied.

He couldn't help the smile that refused to leave his face. There was something about being back at Izzy's house after all he had gone through that made life feel normal again. It almost

seemed as though his time at the North Pole had only been a dream.

Did he want it all to have been a dream? Chrissy had told him the key. All he had to say was, 'ho, ho, ho,' and it would all go back to the night before the alley. Did he want that? It felt like far too much power in a life in which he felt much had been out of his control.

To distract his thoughts, he found himself studying Chrissy when she wasn't looking. She stood next to the counter and chatted with Izzy. The woman appeared natural with her shoulder against the wall and a smile on her face, but something was just a bit off. It was amazing how well he felt he could read her after the short time they had been together. Her brows were pulled together just enough to reveal how hard she was trying; he remembered the same sign of her anxiousness when she showed him the toy factory the first time. She watched Izzy with the posture of someone who was reacting to the situation as expected, leaning in, offering to help. How long had it been since she had been with a family? The thought sent a pang through his chest.

The furtive glance she shot him when Izzy acquiesced and handed her a cucumber to slice for the salad bowl nearly made

him laugh out loud. He took pity on her and joined her at the counter.

“I can cut it,” he offered, sliding the cutting board and the cucumber over.

Isabelle’s eyes widened. “She offered to help.” She looked at Chrissy and then back at Grisham as though afraid she had misread the situation. Grisham knew the kindness of his sister’s heart would be shattered if she knew just how out of her element Chrissy was.

“I did offer to help,” Chrissy replied. She pulled the cutting board back. “I’m capable of cutting cucumbers.”

“You can cut onions, Grish,” Isabelle said with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. “Just don’t cry and make a big scene, alright?” She slid the board over she had been about to use, complete with a white onion and a knife at the ready.

“I won’t promise anything,” Grisham replied.

Izzy leaned over the counter toward Chrissy and whispered loudly, “He’s a big softie.”

Chrissy gave a true smile. “I’m starting to realize that.”

Grisham pretended to be offended in order to stifle the warmth that spread through his chest at her words. “Don’t you

be telling my secrets now,” he warned his sister in mocking tones. “I’d like her to keep some respect for me.”

He chopped the onion with the knife and pain spasmed through his entire hand. The blade fell with a clatter as a hiss escaped through his teeth. Both girls looked at him.

“You alright?” Isabelle asked.

He picked up the knife again and feigned innocence. “It slipped. That’s all.”

His sister eyed him with uncertainty. “You sure?”

“I’m sure,” he replied. “I think the rolls are burning.”

She spun back to the oven to see that she had already pulled them out.

Grisham laughed.

Izzy picked up a towel and swatted him with it from over the counter. “You’re a pill.”

He motioned toward the turkey. “A hungry pill. Are we ready to eat?”

“Almost. I’ll ask Evan to start carving,” she replied. She disappeared up the hall.

“Give me the onion,” Chrissy said under her breath.

Grisham was about to argue, but she gave his hand a pointed look. “You really shouldn’t.”

He sighed. “I forgot until I tried to use it.”

“I noticed,” she replied. She glanced behind him. “Quickly. They’re coming.”

She chopped his onion and her cucumber with a speed and proficiency that amazed him. At his look, she shrugged self-consciously. “We have a greenhouse, remember? I just didn’t know how she wanted it done or if there was a way she preferred them. I don’t want to mess it up.” There was a tightness to her voice that said she was talking about far more than a salad.

“You’re doing great,” he replied as Evan and Izzy returned.

Chrissy’s cheeks reddened as though the compliment meant a lot to her.

“Do you want to carve?” Evan asked.

His brother-in-law honored him with the offer, but Grisham didn’t want to repeat the onion incident and make his sister worry. As it was, he had caught her look when she noticed both cutting boards in front of Chrissy.

He shook his head. “Man of the house, you carve. But thanks for asking.”

“Anytime,” Evan replied. He set to work slicing pieces from the turkey and setting them on the plate Isabelle provided. The man gave Grisham a searching look. “So, you’ve been alright?” He looked over his shoulder at where the women were setting things on the table. Lowering his voice, he said, “Izzy was beside herself.”

“I know,” Grisham replied softly. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t want to worry anyone.”

“I told her that,” Evan said. He was quiet a moment before he said, “You deserve whatever time you need. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost Izzy.” He frowned at the turkey, his gaze a bit lost. “Honestly, I don’t think I’d survive it.”

In all the years Grisham had known Evan, the man had kept mostly to himself and seemed content at the relationship they had adjacent to him and his sister. Seeing the man emotional over the thought of losing Isabelle caught Grisham off-guard.

“I think you’d figure it out,” he said, trying to keep his tone light.

Evan shook his head; his gaze was on the turkey, but the knife was no longer moving. “I wouldn’t. Not at all.” He shot Grisham a look. “She does the most when it comes to raising Parker. We both work, but she pays the bills. She cleans the house and cooks.” He gestured at the kitchen. “I help clean up, but that’s it. It doesn’t feel like a lot. If I lost her, I’d fall apart completely.”

Grisham blinked at the man’s sincerity. He was taken back to Brylee’s funeral as people passed by him in the line and spoke their condolences. He hadn’t heard them. He had been running through the same list Evan just said, though his had been far more detailed. Brylee had taken care of everything. She had been the detail oriented one. When they traveled, she had been the one to book the hotels and airlines, making sure everything connected from point A to point B. At home, she had set all the bills to auto pay, which was the only reason he didn’t have a million calls from debt collectors on his cell phone. The savings they had built up would last for some time.

His thoughts wandered to his apartment. Was it dusty? He hadn’t gone into the bedroom since the day she died except to grab clothes, and the dust buildup had been getting bad. The bed was still made as if waiting for her to return while the

couch had turned into his sleeping spot. He really needed to find another place, but the thought of abandoning the home they had built was nearly too much for him to consider.

“I’m glad you met Chrissy,” Evan said.

The man’s voice brought Grisham back from the bottomless abyss he had been staring into. He looked up to see Evan’s approving look.

“She seems great,” his brother-in-law continued. “And funny, with the hat being her idea. Christmas at Thanksgiving. Could you imagine?”

Grisham shook his head with an inward laugh.

*More than you know.*

He wasn’t sure what to say, and so went honestly with, “We’re still getting to know each other.”

“Of course,” Evan said. “I don’t mean to assume. It’s just that, well....” He let the thought die away.

Grisham knew exactly where he was going with it. “I’ve never brought another woman home.”

“Exactly.” Evan met his gaze and then looked back at the turkey he was carving. “It seems serious.”



Grisham hadn't been thinking beyond using Chrissy's presence as an excuse to assuage his sister's concerns about his absence. He hadn't considered how it would look from Isabelle's point of view. No wonder his sister was trying so hard to help Chrissy feel comfortable; Izzy had even gone out of her way to include a salad for the Thanksgiving dinner because Chrissy had wanted something to do. She had never made a salad for the dinner before. He had thought it unusual at the moment, but it suddenly made sense.

Isabelle looked incredibly happy at Chrissy's presence, while the woman who had come with him appeared to be trying hard to fit in. It really hadn't been fair to either of them to force Chrissy to come with him.

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought her."

The realization that he had said the words aloud struck him at Evan's sharp breath.

"What makes you say that?"

Grisham admitted, "I should have realized how much it would mean to Izzy. I don't want to hurt her."

Evan put down the knife and motioned for Grisham to follow him down the hall. Grisham wasn't so sure he wanted

to, but followed his brother-in-law anyway. Evan opened the door to his small office and motioned for Grisham to go inside. He then entered and shut the door behind them.

The instant the door was closed, Evan rounded on him.

“What’s your deal?” the man demanded with more frustration and emotion than Grisham had ever seen from him. Evan glared, his face a foot from Grisham’s. “What on earth is your problem?”

Grisham lifted his hands and leaned into the door behind him. “What?”

“You are the number one source of stress in Izzy’s life, man!” Evan said in exasperation. “She worries about you so much! Every day, I hear, ‘Do you think Grish is safe? Do you think Grish is in trouble? I should call Grish. Why doesn’t he return my calls?’” Evan leaned closer. “Say what you want, but I know from Charlie that you’ve been fighting, that you’re drunk all the time, and that you got fired from your job.” He put his hands on his hips. “Deny it.”

Grisham’s heart thundered as if he had run up twelve flights of stairs. He wanted to deny the accusations and tell Evan he was wrong. How dare Charlie tell his secrets!

He opened his mouth to shout back, to refute the statements, to lie if need be. Instead, he shut his mouth and lowered his head.

Evan jabbed his finger into Grisham's chest, forcing him back against the door. "You can't deny it because it's true. You're throwing your life away and it's killing your sister to watch it. She can't have any peace because she worries about you when everything here is great. You've gone through so much that she worries about the day she'll get the call that you're dead in an alley somewhere with a knife in your stomach because you have a death wish."

Grisham cringed inwardly at just how real that had almost been.

"You need to check yourself," Evan continued. He waved toward the door. "If Chrissy is the way to do that, you can't let her go! You need to find some focus in your life, no matter what it is." He glared at Grisham as if he wanted to hit him. "What's your focus, Grish? Because I promised my wife a happy life, and you are the only thing standing in her way of truly enjoying it. I can't compete with the phantom that is her unstable big brother, but she deserves happiness. You know she does."

Grisham hadn't realized how much Evan had been harboring against him, but hearing the words spill out of his brother-in-law in a torrent he seemed unable to stop, Grisham knew he deserved it. He owed it to Evan to give him some of the truth, even if he couldn't give all of it.

Evan stood there with his chest heaving and his face turning red as though he was just realizing all he had said. The man would have never spilled so much truth if he hadn't reached his threshold. Grisham had never seen him lose his cool before that moment.

Grisham saved him any sort of apology. "You're right."

Evan frowned. "I am?"

"Yes," Grisham replied. "Everything you've said is right. I lost my job, I'm an alcoholic, and I nearly died a few weeks ago in an alley with a knife in my stomach."

Evan's face paled. "What?" he said in a voice just above a whisper.

Grisham pulled up his shirt to show the scar. It was pink and healthy with fading stitch marks where Oxford had removed them with Vera's help. The greenish hue of fading

bruises could still be seen where his ribs had taken such a bad beating. He lowered the shirt and met Evan's gaze.

"I almost died, and Chrissy saved my life."

Evan studied him. "Literally or figuratively?"

"Both," Grisham admitted. "She took me, well, somewhere and got me patched up, and she's given me a new purpose in life." Before Evan could second-guess what he meant, he rushed on to say, "I have a new job, one she gave me that could potentially change everything I've ever stood for."

"What is it?"

Evan's question stopped Grisham's train of thought. He stared at the man, his mind racing for a way to escape, but it was too direct to avoid. He could go with something vague. He needed to deflect. Yet his internal voice pressed against his thoughts, beckoning him to be honest, truly honest.

*I need to tell someone.*

*But Evan?*

"Can I trust you?"

Evan snorted at Grisham's question. "Can you trust me? What are you, CIA?"

Grisham shook his head. “It’s different, but something I’m not supposed to talk about.”

Evan must have heard the seriousness in Grisham’s voice because he crossed his arms in front of his chest and regarded him steadily. “Are you doing something illegal?”

“That’s where your thoughts go?” Grisham replied, exasperated.

Evan flung his arms out to either side. “You disappear for weeks and return with a beautiful woman on your arm and an apparent new lease on life? What am I supposed to assume? Now you ask if you can trust me.” He glared at Grisham. “I am your family. Izzy, Parker, and I are what you have. If you can’t trust us, who can you?”

Grisham sucked in a breath. “You can’t tell Izzy.”

Evan stared at him. “Seriously?”

Grisham nodded. “I don’t think she’d understand. At least, not yet. I’m still figuring things out myself. When I do, I’ll tell her.”

Evan gestured for Grisham to take a seat at one of the two leather chairs. He did with relief and leaned forward with his

elbows on his knees. A glance at his hands showed that they were shaking. Was he really that nervous?

He sat back and set his hands on his legs to steady them.

“What is it?” Evan prompted. “What do you do?”

Grisham figured it would be better to just come out with it since he had drawn Evan on for too long. “Alright. You’re sure?” He speared his brother-in-law with a serious look.

“Yes!” Evan replied in nearly a shout. He glanced toward the closed door and lowered his voice to say, “Out with it already.”

Grisham’s shoulders rose and fell before he said, “I’m Santa Claus.”

Relief filled him as the words left his lips. Saying them aloud made it feel less ridiculous. It was as if by saying the words, he accepted the truth. He felt as though something settled over his shoulders that was less of a weight and more of a mantle of responsibility that he wanted to carry.

He was Santa Claus.

A variety of emotions flashed across Evan’s face. He frowned, tipped his head to regard Grisham closely, then said, “You’re Santa Claus? As in, you’re training to be a Santa

Claus at a department store or mall for Christmas?” The idea seemed to strike him as fitting, because he nodded. “I can see that.”

Grisham shook his head. “No, I am Santa Claus, as in, the real Santa who delivers toys to children all over the world.”

Evan kept silent for a few seconds.

Grisham wasn't sure what the man would say.

His brother-in-law finally rose without a word and walked to the door. He paused with his hand on the doorknob and looked back at Grisham.

“I don't know if you're joking, delusional, or if your drinking has finally addled your brain past the concept of reality, but if you speak a word of that to Izzy, I will move her and Parker away from here and make sure you never find us,” Evan said in a tone that was quiet and left no room to doubt just how serious he was. “I won't let you hurt her anymore,” the man concluded before he left the room.



## Chapter Fifteen

Chrissy

Chrissy could tell something was wrong when Grisham returned to the living room. He glanced at her, gave a weak smile, and made his way to the table where Isabelle dished turkey and stuffing onto Parker's plate. Chrissy followed with a feeling of foreboding pressing against her.

Evan sat next to his wife. Isabelle shot him a questioning look. Evan replied with a shrug and picked up the bowl of mashed potatoes.

"I don't want potatoes," Parker said.

"You need to eat," Isabelle told him. "You've gotten too picky. You're going to waste away to nothing if all you want are rice cakes and ice cream."

"Potatoes and turkey are good for you," Evan said.

Grisham sat in silence.

Chrissy caught Evan's probing look before he turned away. What had Grisham told him? The tension between the two men was palpable. Isabelle seemed not to notice with her focus

on Parker and on how the food was being received, but it was obvious how hard the men worked not to look at or talk to each other.

Chrissy searched for something to say to break the tension. She might not have been great with adults, but children were easier to relate to.

“Parker, what’s your favorite animal?”

The little boy threw her a grin. “I like grizzlies because of Uncle Grizz.”

She smiled back. “Uncle Grizz is a great name. Where did it come from?”

“Parker couldn’t say Grisham when he was little, so he called him Grizz and it stuck,” Isabelle explained with a warm look at her son.

“I like it,” Grisham said with a shadow of his former smile. “It makes me sound tough.”

“Like a grizzly,” Parker replied with a satisfied nod.

“Exactly,” Grisham told him. “And can you eat like a bear?”

That perked Parker’s interest. “How does a bear eat?”

“With big bites,” Grisham replied. “They don’t leave anything on their plate.” He took a huge bite of his turkey to demonstrate.

Parker did the same and chewed it with relish. “I’m a bear!” he said.

Chrissy saw Isabelle throw her brother a grateful look and mouth ‘thank you’.

Grisham gave her a half-smile in return.

Soon enough, conversation at the table fell into the easy chatter of siblings reliving the memories of their childhood.

“Do you remember the time Mom made six batches of stuffing because she thought the Williams were coming over with their eight kids, and then Rachael got sick so none of them could come?” Isabelle asked.

“We ate stuffing for a month,” Grisham said. “I think she even froze it.”

“She did,” Isabelle replied. “I couldn’t eat stuffing for a year after that.”

They both laughed.

“What about you, Chrissy?” Isabelle asked. “Do your parents have any Thanksgiving traditions?”

Chrissy kept her smile carefully plastered on her face when she said, “My parents have both passed away.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Isabelle replied immediately.

“That’s alright,” Chrissy reassured her. “It was a long time ago. I honestly don’t remember any of the holiday traditions they had.”

The image of a boar on a spit filled her thoughts. Her dad used to save the apple for her after it was roasted in the boar’s mouth. The smokey, sweet flavor was something she had never forgotten.

“I hope you have some of your own traditions,” Isabelle said with a warm look. “If not, you’re welcome to borrow some of ours.”

“I have a few,” Chrissy told her. “Some fun ones, mostly for Christmas.”

“Do tell,” Isabelle replied with enthusiasm. “I’m always looking for more to add to ours.”

Chrissy hoped she wasn’t treading on dangerous ground given the situation between Grisham and Evan, so she kept to the easy stuff. “Cookies and milk for Christmas dinner.”

“Like Santa,” Parker said. He looked at his mom. “We should do that!”

Chrissy saw Grisham’s shoulders stiffen.

Isabelle didn’t seem to notice that anything was off. She chuckled and told her son, “I don’t think you’d sleep at all with that for dinner.”

“If Santa can stay up, I can too, right Uncle Grizz?” Parker asked.

Grisham’s eyes widened and he threw Chrissy a desperate look.

She searched for a quick change of topic and landed on, “How do you like being a teacher?”

“It’s great,” Isabelle replied. She gave a self-deprecating chuckle and said, “At least, that’s easy to say during fall break. Before this, the kids were bouncing off the walls. I think they needed a break as much as the teachers did.”

“Yep,” Parker cut in. “First grade is hard. We needed a break.”

The two women exchanged a smile.

Parker’s attention jerked back to Grisham. “Uncle Grizz, do you want to see the playdough sculpture I made at school?”

“Of course, I do,” Grisham replied.

Parker jumped up from the table and took off down the hallway and then up the stairs.

“Come on, Uncle Grizz!” the little boy shouted. “Hurry!”

Grisham pushed back from the table. “Thank you, Izzy. This was fantastic. I’ll be back to help with the dishes.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” his sister replied. “You’re a guest.”

“The cook doesn’t clean, remember?” he shot back. “Mom would be disappointed if I forgot.”

He took one last bite of his turkey before rushing up the stairs to join his nephew.

Chrissy felt awkward sitting there with a husband and wife she barely knew. She rose and picked up Grisham and Parker’s empty plates.

“I’ve got those,” Isabelle protested.

“Nonsense,” Chrissy said. “Grish is right. The cook shouldn’t clean, and this was an amazing meal. It must have taken you hours.”

Isabelle waved the comment away. “We’re just happy to have you and Grisham here. Thank you.”

Chrissy nodded and carried the plates to the kitchen. She scraped the dishes into the garbage and proceeded to wash the glass ones along with the other bowls and utensils left in the sink after the food preparation. From the dining room, she could hear the conversation between husband and wife begin to escalate. Despite her attempts not to eavesdrop, by the time she finished drying the dishes, it was impossible not to overhear.

“I think she’s good for him. Look how happy he is!”

“I don’t think he’s as happy as he lets on,” Evan replied. “Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Isabelle shot back. “He’s smiling. Did you see that? When was the last time we saw Grish smile?”

“It’s been a long time,” Evan replied in a tone that said he wasn’t sure it was such a good thing.

Whatever he knew, it was obvious Evan wasn’t telling Isabelle everything. His answers about his concerns were vague despite his wife’s continued questions.

“All I know is that you shouldn’t put so much store in what Grisham says,” Evan repeated. “He’s bound to let you down again and you’re going to be all depressed and worried like last time.” He paused, then said, “I think you need to tell him not to come back here.”

“I won’t do that,” Isabelle said firmly. “You know I can’t. We’re all the family he has. He needs us.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Evan said. “But we both know if he disappears again, he won’t think twice about leaving you in the dark.”

“Because he’s been lost,” Isabelle pointed out. “And now, look at him. Whether Chrissy is a new romantic interest in his life or not, I believe she’s brought him to a much better place.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Evan muttered.

“What was that?” Isabelle replied even though the man’s words had been loud enough for even Chrissy to hear.

“Nothing,” Evan said with a sigh. “I just hate seeing how happy you are when he’s here and how worried you get when he’s gone. He’s too unstable for you to place all of your happiness in. It’s not fair to me or to Parker.”



Chrissy paused with her hand on the door. She didn't want to overhear, but it was impossible in the small apartment. For all she knew, Grisham was up the stairs listening as well. He shouldn't have been talked about like he was some undisciplined youth. He deserved better.

The thought made her heart give a painful throb.

Maybe he deserved a normal life that was far more stable than what she had to offer him. Perhaps Isabelle was right. Grisham had gone through enough and needed his family. She hadn't had a family for so long that just sitting around the table with one reminded her of what she was missing. She had no right to take him from that.

She slipped through the front door and made her way down the steps. November was cold in New York, and she had left her coat in the sleigh. Luckily, she had the benefit of being quite used to winter weather. A few blocks in a dress and heels shouldn't be too much trouble.

The chatter of her teeth told otherwise as she made her way down another street. The lamplight lit circles on the sidewalk that did little to warm her when she passed by. Rain began to fall in a slow, unending mist that seemed to hit all sides at once. She was soaked to the bone almost immediately.

Only the thought of reaching the reindeer so she could return to the North Pole kept her from seeking shelter beneath one of the many dripping balconies.

She was so focused on reaching Central Park that she forgot to pay attention to her surroundings.

The scuff of shoes in front and behind her set every nerve on edge. Jax would be severely disappointed in her lack of awareness.

“It’s a little late to be out alone in the rain,” the man in front of her said. He eyed her up and down with an appreciative expression. “Especially dressed like that.”

“Or is it just the right time?” the man behind her asked, his voice heavy with innuendo.

Chrissy stepped into the street to keep both of them in view.

“It’s a little late for the two of you to be wandering the streets,” she said. “Nothing good happens after eleven.”

“Oh, I think something good is just about to happen after eleven,” the first man told her. He ran his hand across his wet, bald head and gave her a toothy smile. “Something very good.”

“You’ll regret this,” Chrissy warned them lightly.

“Oh, I doubt it,” the first man said.

He lunged at her.

Chrissy ducked under his arms and elbowed him in the side hard enough to crack ribs. She swung her elbow up and around and brought it down in the middle of his back. He hit the pavement with a surprised umph and lay there stunned.

Chrissy backed up two steps to keep his partner in view. The first wasn’t out, but he would probably be slow to get up. She would use that to her advantage.

“That wasn’t very nice,” the second man said. His tone and the way he moved told her that he was the more dangerous of the two. As if in answer to her assessment, he pulled a butterfly knife from his pocket and spun it open. “You’re going to pay for hurting Davey.”

“Davey hurt himself when he thought preying on single women at night was a good idea,” Chrissy said.

She kept her eyes on the knife as she eased out of her heels. The bite of the cold, wet asphalt into the bottom of her feet sharpened her senses. She stooped and picked up the shoes without taking her gaze from the man.

“Think you’re going to defend yourself with those?” he asked.

“I know I am,” she replied. She spun the heels around her hands the same way she had practiced with Sais in the training room.

His eyes widened slightly.

He lunged with the knife aimed at her chest.

The fact that he was willing to kill her wasn’t lost on her. She crossed both shoes in front of her with the heels facing opposite directions. They effectively caught the blade and jerked it from his hand in one smooth motion, sending it flying into the wall a few feet away. Chrissy slammed one shoe into the side of his head and the other into his stomach. He doubled over in time to meet her knee with his chin. He crumbled to a heap on the ground.

“You’re a bit of a handful,” the first man said as he stooped to pick up the knife.

Chrissy rolled her eyes. “Haven’t you learned your lesson yet?”

“You haven’t,” he shot back. “You need some respect.”

“For you?” she said. “Unlikely.”

He threw the knife at her. It caught her by surprise so that she had to turn and block it with both shoes to avoid being struck in the shoulder. The man followed the blade and slammed a fist into the side of her face before she could block it. Stars flashed in front of her eyes. She stumbled back and blocked his second punch with her forearms. He tried the same move again, but she was ready this time.

She swept her arms to the left, taking his fist with her. She slid her right arm up his and landed a chop squarely to his throat. He gagged and stumbled back. She followed with a left haymaker to his ear followed by an uppercut to his stomach. When he doubled over, she drove her knee into his face and felt his nose break. He dropped to the ground and received two kicks to the stomach for good measure. When it was clear he wasn't going to rise again, she backed up to the wall and allowed her knees to give way.

Her head hurt. She shouldn't have taken that hit. Him throwing the knife was something she hadn't trained for. It didn't seem smart for him to chuck his only weapon, but then again, she wouldn't give thugs jumping women at night the benefit of having brains. She would have to tell Jax to program

it into his simulator at random so she would be better prepared if there was a next time.

At that moment, all she wanted was for the pounding in her head to calm down. She pulled up her knees and rested her head on her arms. She willed her breathing to slow so that her heartbeat would follow and hopefully slow the blood pounding through her skull and the bruise she felt forming on her cheek. She tipped her face to the side so the rain could fall on it and hopefully cool the heat burning there.

“Chrissy?” her name was called out in a broken, desperate voice.

Knees hit the wet ground in front of her and a hand touched her head with fingers that shook.

He said her name again in a whisper. “Chrissy?”

She lifted her head and looked into eyes that were clouded with tears. Grisham’s dark gaze was filled with pain and the fear of reliving the worst night of his life. He stared at her as if he didn’t believe that she was looking back at him.

“I’m alright,” she reassured him. Her skull pounded when she spoke. She put a hand to it to ease the pressure.

Grisham shook his head as if he didn't believe her. Rain dripped from his hair. "I couldn't save Brylee. When I realized you had left without me, I thought of a thousand things that could happen to you and I panicked." He blinked quickly. "Then I saw you here with them and I thought... I thought I had failed you the same way."

One of the men groaned. Grisham spun, keeping himself between her and them. He appeared wild and ragged, ready to tear the men apart if they so much as dared to breathe wrong.

"It's alright," Chrissy tried to tell him. "They're not getting up for a while. Trust me."

"Trust you." His voice came out tight and raspy. He turned back to her. "Trust you? You left, Chrissy! You didn't say a word."

The pain in his voice struck her to the core. "I took you from your family, Grish. I shouldn't have done that. They need you and you need them."

He rubbed his hands across his face hard before looking back down at her. "I've made up my mind."

Fear pulsed through her with whispers of loss. He was going to tell her he didn't want to be Santa anymore. Evan's

anger and Isabelle's need to know he was safe meant too much to him. He didn't want to leave Parker to grow up without Uncle Grizz there. She couldn't blame him; so why did she?

Grisham let out a loud breath. "They're not home, Chrissy. I don't have a home here anymore."

She willed her pounding head to ease so she could focus on what he was saying.

He lowered to his knees in front of her again. His hand gently touched her face. "Now isn't the time for this. You need a doctor."

She caught his hand. "Tell me where your home is, Grish."

He stared into her face as if daring himself to say it. When he did, his brows pulled together and formed a little furrow between them. "I belong at the North Pole."

Her smile came unbidden and was quickly mirrored by his. "Doesn't that sound ridiculous to say?"

"So ridiculous," he agreed. "What have you done to me?"

"I believed in you," she replied.

"So, what now?" he asked.

One of the men gave a pained moan.



“I need some ice for my cheek,” she said. “Let’s go somewhere dry and call the police. They can take care of these guys.”

“I know where we can go, but are you sure you don’t need a hospital?” Grisham asked.

“Definitely,” she replied. She rose to her feet with his help. “Trust me when I say there isn’t insurance that would cover someone my age.” At his worried look, she chuckled. “If I couldn’t take a hit, I wouldn’t be cut out for my job. Just wait until the outdoors department decides to test out water balloon slingshots again. You’ll get what I mean.”

She was aware of his eyes on her as he walked beside her and led her to the Portly Pig. A few patrons lounged around the room, but at the late hour, they were already deep in their cups. Grisham took her straight to the bar and eased her onto a stool with a care that touched her.

“Charlie, can we get some ice?” he called out.

The bartender came through the swinging door from the back room with the speed of a charging bull.

“Is that you, Grish?” he said in shock. He reached Grisham without slowing and caught the man in a bearhug. “I thought

you were dead!”

Chrissy watched their exchange with amusement tempered by her growing headache.

“I know,” Grisham replied wryly. “You told my sister as much.”

Charlie let him go and shook his head. “I only told her what I knew, and that’s that you left here nearly sloshing and raring for trouble after I cut you off. I haven’t seen you since. What did you expect me to tell her when she came here in tears? Lies?”

“No,” Grisham told him, his tone apologetic. “I’m sorry I put you in that situation. I’m alright, but my friend got hit in the face. We need to call the police on the men who tried to jump her.”

“The police or the morgue?” Charlie asked, his tone level.

Grisham held his gaze. “The police.”

Charlie’s eyebrows rose. “You have changed.”

Grisham fought back a wry grin and said, “Can you get the ice?”

“Oh, right.” Charlie slipped behind the bar and piled ice in a cloth napkin that he handed to Chrissy. “You alright?” he

asked, his voice far gentler than it had been with Grisham.

“I’ll survive,” she replied. She pressed the ice to her cheek and fought back a wince.

“Smarts, doesn’t it?” Grisham said. He eased the ice away and gave her cheek a closer look. He gently moved the ice back and said through gritted teeth, “Maybe it should’ve been the morgue.”

Chrissy couldn’t deny how good his concern for her felt. The elves were always attentive, but the look in Grisham’s eyes, the one that said he would tear apart every man in the world who dared to bother her, sent warmth fluttering in her stomach. He hovered around her as if anxious to do everything in his power to keep her safe.

“I’ve got to call the police,” he said, his tone apologetic.

“Please do,” she told him. “I’ll stay right here.”

He speared her with a look. “I’m trusting you.”

She smiled despite the way her cheek hurt at the movement. “I’ll be right here.”

When he stepped away, she laid her arm on the bar and rested the unbruised side of her face on it. Her head felt heavy and foggy. She knew she was possibly concussed, but it wasn’t

as bad as the time she had tried to stop the lava lamp filling machine from pouring all over the conveyor belt and got clocked in the head with the control arm. She still had a scar above her ear from the stitches Oxford put in after that one.

“You doing alright, love?”

She opened her eyes at the sound of Charlie’s voice.

He gave her a kind smile that touched his eyes.

“Fine,” she replied. “Just resting, thanks.”

“Rest here all you want,” he told her. “My bar is your bar, especially when you’re with Grisham.”

There was a questioning note to his words she didn’t feel up to answering. “Where is Grisham?” she asked instead.

He gestured to the door. “The police wanted him to show them where the men were. He should be back shortly and asked me to keep an eye on you in case you needed anything.” His voice was apologetic when he said, “The police might need a statement.”

“I’m happy to give it,” she said. “Men like that need to learn their lesson.”

“By the sound of it, you gave it to them,” he replied with admiration.

She appreciated Charlie's easy manner. The man wandered off to attend to his other patrons. The music from overhead was quiet enough that it didn't bother her head. She listened to it until footsteps returned.

"This is what I call the headache reliever," Charlie announced. He slid a drink in front of her. "Takes it out right and has a bit of a kick."

"The best do," she replied. She eyed the copper-colored drink before taking a sip. "Nice," she said with a smile. "Old Fashioned?"

"With Bourbon," he replied. "The best for taking off the edge."

She sipped it until it was empty and found another already waiting for her.

"Five stars for the service," she said.

Charlie winked. "Only the best for Grisham's friends."

"Does he bring many friends here?" she asked, curious.

He shook his head, "So you have a lot of making up to do," he said with a kind smile. "Another?"

"Please," she replied.

## Chapter Sixteen

Grisham

Grisham paused in the doorway of the Portly Pig and watched Charlie and Chrissy talk.

She looked tired but happy and her cheeks had a rosy glow that said Charlie had given her one of his specialty cocktails. She needed it after the night she'd had.

He had thought, well, he couldn't put into words what he thought. He felt as if the entire world had nearly slipped from beneath his feet.

*Walking around the corner and seeing her sitting in the alley with those men on the ground....*

*She hadn't moved....*

*I couldn't make myself believe....*

When she lifted her head, Grisham had felt like laughing and crying and beating the men to a pulp and curling up in a ball all at the same time. What kind of world asked a man to go through the same thing twice, albeit with far different outcomes?

*My heart wouldn't have survived it a second time. I barely survived the first.*

He saw the blood again, Brylee's closed eyes, the stab wounds, her stomach. Tears filled his eyes to wash down his face with the rain that still dripped from his hair.

“Come on, old friend.”

He wasn't sure when Charlie reached him, but the old man's gaze was knowing when he ducked under Grisham's arm and led him to the stool beside Chrissy.

The bartender slipped back around the bar and set a drink he had already prepared in front of Grisham.

Grisham sipped it and then gave an appreciative sigh at the way it pooled in his stomach and warmed him from the inside out. He downed the contents in two gulps.

“Careful, it's strong stuff,” Chrissy said.

*Did she just slur her words?*

He gave her a closer look. “You are drunk.”

“A bit,” she admitted. She pointed to her cheek that was already darkening. “It doesn't hurt so bad anymore.”

He chuckled. “That’s Charlie’s specialty. He’s pretty good at chasing away the pains of this world.”

“Is that how you became friends?”

He tipped his head at her question. “Charlie knew me a bit before Brylee was killed, but he got to know me really well after.”

“We’re both a little broken,” she said, indicating his swollen hand.

“We make quite the pair,” he replied.

“Should we go home?” she asked. Her question held so much more than the words she spoke.

“Yes,” Grisham replied.

They both rose. He waved his thanks to Charlie and made a mental note to settle up his tab when he figured out where his wallet had ended up.

“The police didn’t need to talk to me?” she asked as they made their way back to Central Park.

“I gave them a statement of what you told me along with my phone number. They said they would call if they needed more information, but apparently both those guys have records, so it shouldn’t be hard to hold them.”



“Good,” Chrissy replied. She wobbled on her heels.

When Grisham put his arm around her to steady her, she leaned against him. He wished he had a jacket to keep her warm. The rain had eased a bit, but by the time they reached the park, they were both completely soaked through again.

He took them to the place where they had landed and eyed the sky. There was no sign of the sleigh or the reindeer. Either the cloaking worked very well, or Dasher had gotten bored of waiting and taken them back home.

Chrissy put her fingers to her lips and gave two short whistles followed by a longer one.

Jax had put the sleigh in what he called stealth mode, meaning it didn't have any of the bells or decorations reserved for Christmas deliveries, so the only sound to herald its landing was a whoosh followed by the clicking of reindeer hooves touching the snow. Dasher grunted in greeting and the others stamped their hooves and tossed their heads.

“Thank you,” Chrissy said. She took the time to pat each reindeer. “You are amazing. You are beautiful. You are so smart.”

Grisham grinned at her drunken compliments. The reindeer appeared just as pleased, snorting and sniffing at her as though they enjoyed the attention.

By the time he helped her into the sleigh, he couldn't help but notice how hard she was shivering. He fumbled behind the seat and was relieved to find several thick blankets.

"Here," he said.

He carefully wrapped one all the way around her, set another across her lap and tucked around her poor bare legs that were as cold as ice, and then put the last one around both of them so he could use his body heat to help her.

She tucked up against his side. When he lifted his arm, she snuggled against him.

A smile spread across his face at her contented sigh.

"This isn't half bad," she said. "We need to visit Charlie's place again sometime."

"Deal," he replied.

He lifted his voice and said, "On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen, now Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen. To the North Pole!"

The reindeer's antlers glowed in unison and they surged upward.

Grisham kept his eyes closed and his attention fully on the woman he held in his arms. It was easier to pretend they were still on the ground when he was distracted by the soft cinnamon and cedar scent of her hair. Her breathing eased into the steady rhythm of deep sleep. He gently brushed her hair away from her bruised cheek. The sight of it filled him with frustration. He should have been there.

She said she had left him to stay with his family. When he went downstairs and found Isabelle and Evan in a heated argument, he knew he was the cause; but his anger when he found that Chrissy had left unnoticed had him charging out the door into the rain heedless of his sister trying to call him to come back. He couldn't believe his stupidity in leaving her alone. Of course, she wasn't comfortable with people she didn't know. He shouldn't have abandoned her to go up with Parker.

That had been a strange moment for him.

Parker had brought him a red and green turtle made out of playdough. When he sat on the chair in Parker's room so he could look at it, his nephew had jumped onto his lap.

“Can I tell you what I want for Christmas now?”

“What?” Grisham had asked, caught by surprise.

“It’ll make it so Mom and Dad don’t have to take me to see one of those secondary helper Santas at the mall,” Parker said.

Grisham didn’t know what to say. The child knew without a doubt that he was Santa. He had no choice but to nod.

The little boy began checking off his fingers. “Clay, but the type that doesn’t crack when it dries so I can paint it. A remote-controlled car. A stuffed animal dog because Dad is allergic to the real ones. A bike with training wheels, and I guess something for a baby sister because Mom said there’s one coming to live with us soon.”

Grisham’s heart had skipped a beat at the boy’s words. Another baby. Isabelle was going to have a daughter.

Evan was right. Though his brother-in-law’s words might have been harsh, he wasn’t wrong to say that Grisham brought stress to Isabelle’s life. He had been so caught up in his own grief that he hadn’t stopped to see how his choices affected those dearest to him.

“A baby sister, huh?” he had said, forcing his tone to stay light for Parker’s sake. “Sounds like fun.”

“Maybe,” Parker said doubtfully.

“Oh, trust me,” he told the boy. “Your mother and I had a blast growing up. You’re going to realize someday that this little sister is one of the greatest people in your life. Don’t forget that.”

“Alright,” Parker said. “And maybe the bike?”

Grisham had laughed at that. “I’ll see what I can do.”

There was no denying the warm glow that filled him after speaking to Parker. After all that had happened since, he still felt the satisfaction that had come from listening to the boy’s deepest wishes and having the chance to fulfill at least a part of them. He wanted to speak to other children, to hear their hopes and dreams and figure out how he could do something special for them, like that dinosaur had been to him.

When Zach died, he hadn’t wanted anything for Christmas. But when his parents took him to sit on Santa’s lap, he had looked into wise blue eyes and known then and there that he was speaking to the real Santa. Something had prompted him to ask for what Zach had wanted. When he found the dinosaur

under the tree, he had been convinced Zach had done something to ensure he got exactly what he had asked for. He took that dinosaur everywhere without fail, and it had felt like he had a little bit of his older brother with him. How much would he give to provide that to other children?

The landing wasn't nearly as rough as he remembered. It might have been because he held a sleeping woman against his chest and had forgotten entirely that they were even flying, but when the reindeer hooves and then the sleigh touched down, it felt as though they glided across the softest snow to the front door of Chrissy's cabin.

Jax and Franklin were there to take care of the reindeer. Oxford and Vera held the door open to Chrissy's room as if they had been waiting for just that moment.

"We had a rough patch," Grisham whispered as he eased Chrissy onto the bed; her head tipped to show her bruised cheek. He grimaced because it looked worse than it had at the bar. "Can you do anything for her?"

"I have a salve that will help take away the pain and speed up the healing process," Oxford replied. "Be right back."

"I'm going with you," Vera said.

The elf held open the tiny door by the fireplace for her and waited until she passed through before he followed.

Grisham was left to tend to Chrissy who was still in the same deep sleep from the sleigh. He couldn't in good conscience leave her in her soaking wet dress. She could catch a cold or worse.

He rummaged through her closet and returned with a thick robe and fuzzy socks. The thought that he had been dressed in the same thing when he first awoke at the North Pole brought a wry smile to his lips.

He eased the dress off her as carefully as possible and quickly wrapped her in the robe without looking at anything in particular. Her skin was still chilled, so he bundled more blankets on the bed and added a few more logs to the fire to ensure she stayed warm as she slept. After a moment's hesitation, he leaned over and smoothed the wet hair from her face.

"You are a softie," she mumbled.

He paused with the backs of his fingers brushing her cheek. "Don't tell anyone."

"Your secret's safe with me."

He turned to leave, but her voice stopped him.

“You must be freezing. You should climb under the blankets.”

Grisham paused. Until she mentioned it, he hadn't realized that he was shivering. His clothes were soaked all the way through, and he was pretty sure there was a puddle in each of his shoes. Given that he still had to make the trek back to his cabin, that puddle was bound to freeze.

“I'll promise I'll be good,” she said, her words soft and slurred with sleep.

He smothered a smile. He hadn't exactly been thinking about that but couldn't deny the appeal of climbing into the bed next to Chrissy.

“Two are warmer than one,” she coaxed without opening her eyes.

He couldn't deny the logic. Only the thought of Vera and Oxford's imminent return made him second-guess her offer. A warm bed beside her was certainly more appealing than the empty bed in his cabin. She patted the pillow next to hers. It was a sweet gesture that reminded him of someone trying to



coax a puppy over. She opened one eye just enough to ensure he was watching, and patted the bed again.

Grisham reached down to pull off his shirt when the little door by the fireplace flew open.

“I’m just saying that your organizational system for your salves could use a bit of tweaking,” Vera said as she followed Oxford to the bed. “You don’t want Eucalyptus next to Oregano, and who puts Lemon by Rosemary?”

“I have them organized by use, not name,” Oxford replied.

They climbed the little ramp that led up to the foot of the bed without any knowledge of what they had interrupted.

“So, the only way to find anything is to know the use for it?” Vera asked.

“Naturally,” Oxford said.

Grisham looked down to see Chrissy watching him. She looked so adorable with her pale hair splayed across the pillowcase and her cheeks rosy from the warmth of the fire. He hoped the darkening bruise didn’t reach her eye, but doubted a black eye would do anything to detract from her beauty.

‘Rain check?’ she mouthed.

He nodded. 'Next time.'

She held out her pinky finger. It was a childish gesture, and one that echoed her sentiments of complete honesty and trust.

Grisham linked her finger with his own and shook it.

When he let go, Chrissy snuggled deeper under the blankets and closed her eyes.

"We need to be able to reach your cheek, hon," Vera reminded her.

Grisham did his best to minimize the amount of frigid air that swept into the cabin when he left. His last glimpse was of Chrissy watching him, her blue eyes sparkling even with the weariness that attempted to pull her into dreamland. He wished he could follow her there. Perhaps then, this life he had stumbled into would make more sense.

The thought solidified when he opened his door and found a very disgruntled Jax standing on his bed.

"How did you let her get hurt?" the elf demanded.

Grisham felt as though he had dunked his head in the snow at the realization that the elf's hostility stemmed from a place of jealousy. He should have recognized the signs. From what he had seen, Jax held a very high up position at the North Pole,

not to mention had the power to add a bomb to the sleigh if he wanted to end Grisham's Santa career. He had to handle the situation carefully.

Grisham lowered into the chair next to the bed.

He kept his voice level and humble when he said, "Jax, I apologize. I am still learning how headstrong and independent Chrissy is. I should have been more careful."

The elf blinked at his humility, clearly caught off-guard by the route Grisham had chosen to take. "Well, I, uh, yes. She is independent and headstrong. Don't you dare try to change that."

Grisham held up his hands. "I won't. I respect that about her." He put his hands on the side of the bed and regarded the elf steadily. "And you. I can understand how my being here puts the both of us in an awkward place." He hoped his direct route wasn't too forward when he said, "I can tell you care about her."

Jax sniffed and glanced away. "Yeah, well, a lot of good that's done."

"Are you kidding?" Grisham replied. "I've seen how much she adores you. You're her right-hand elf here."

Jax glanced at him over his shoulder. “I am.”

Grisham nodded and continued with, “The way I see it, you’ve given me some pretty big shoes to fill.”

Jax gave a small smile at the imagery. He turned fully around to face Grisham and said, “I know it’s never meant to be.” He gestured at himself. “She’s a bit too tall for me.”

“Just a bit,” Grisham agreed, keeping his smile to a minimum. “But she cares for you and respects you. You have a big part in her life, and I’m never going to try to change that.”

Jax regarded him steadily for a moment. “What about the danger? How are you going to protect her?”

“I can’t let her leave my sight in the city if she has no fear about being in the streets alone,” Grisham began.

Jax shook his head. “Not that. I mean against bigger threats, like the Anti-Santa Agency.”

Grisham refrained from pointing out that the agency had a stupid name. Instead, he went with, “It would be easier for me to know how to protect her if I knew more about this Agency.”

Jax sat on the bed and crossed his legs. He ran a finger along his black mustache before he said, “The Agency has been trying to stop us for years because they feel we’re a

world threat with our access to every home. There are rumors they want to utilize our abilities in order to destroy enemies in their sleep, wipe out their families without giving them a chance to fight back. They would turn Santa into the deadliest assassin in the world.”

“That’s horrible,” Grisham said.

He could only imagine how dangerous an assassin would be if they could use the technology of the sleigh combined with the enchantments of the elves to sneak in and out of houses undetected. The thought was terrifying.

“They’ve gotten closer in the last few years,” Jax said.

“They nearly killed our Santa three back because they managed to put a tracker on the sleigh at one of his stops and nearly blew him out of the sky.” The elf shook his head. “Even the reindeer had to get patched up from that one. From then on, Santas don’t fly alone. Franklin and I will be going with you to help with security and the sleigh.”

Grisham sat back in the chair. “I appreciate that. It’s all a bit overwhelming. I’m grateful for the help and your expertise.” The reality of just how much the threat him being tracked posed to Chrissy and all of the elves was a sobering one. One slipup could put the entire North Pole in danger.

Jax shrugged. “That’s why we’re there. We can’t throw new Santas out to the masses and expect them to know all the dangers.” He shot Grisham a serious look. “But putting Chrissy in danger is something I can’t let slide.”

“I get it,” Grisham said. “I take all responsibility.”

An appeased look crossed the elf’s face. “Glad to hear it. Don’t let it happen again.”

“Never,” Grisham promised.

Jax climbed to the side of the bed and stepped onto the end table. He reached for the concealed door behind the lamp, then paused with his hand out.

“You know, I might not like to admit it, but of all the Santas I’ve known here, you’re not the worst.”

Grisham fought back a smile at the backwards compliment. “Thanks, I think.”

Jax touched his hand to his head in a salute and said, “Have a good night,” before he stepped through the little door and pulled it shut behind him.

Grisham stared after the elf for a few minutes, his thoughts a whirlwind after all that had happened. By the time he fell asleep, he slept fitfully, tormented by images of Chrissy sitting

in the rain with her back against the brick wall and her head bowed on her knees. Sometimes a knife lay next to her, other times it was a gun. In some of the dreams, the thugs were knocked unconscious, while in others, the ones that truly haunted him, they leered down at her with their knives lowering in slow motion to take her life as they had taken his wife's.

Grisham awoke early, showered, and made his way toward Chrissy's cabin. He hesitated at the door. She needed sleep considering all she had been through. Turning, he walked around her cabin to the main door. In the few short weeks he had been at the North Pole, he had only ever entered that way two times. Chrissy's cabin door led to the same hallway and was closer to his, so it had become his quick access to the rest of the Pole. However, standing in the doorway to the main hall, he realized she might not appreciate that breach of privacy. He should respect her space. He made a vow to avoid her room unless invited.

*Why would she invite me?*

*She invited me last night.*

The thought sent warmth running through him in waves. He shook his head at his own foolishness and pushed the door

open.

His intention had been to make his way to the cafeteria and see what was on for breakfast, but his wandering feet took him further down the hallway from which all other doors could be accessed. He thought of going to the training room and honing his combat skills against knives to chase away the images that had haunted his dreams. His gaze roamed across the daisies that lined the hall as he passed, intent on the one with the bullet. He regarded the symbols within the flowers with familiarity until he spotted one he hadn't seen before. He paused and peered closer at it.

A single Santa hat sat within a daisy with a little contrasting splash of color. Chrissy had never shown him the room before. He wondered if he should wait until she chose to do so. However, he told himself that if he was Santa, he certainly had the right to go into a room marked with a Santa hat. Curiosity got the better of Grisham and he pushed it.

The door next to it swung open and lights flickered on.

Grisham's eyes widened. He stepped into the room with his gaze on the walls.

Pictures of men in the vintage Santa hat hung from the ceiling to the floor on three of the walls. The clothing they



wore changed with the times and was the only sign of when they had taken up their post. There were no dates or names, only faces with a variety of facial hair, skin color, age, and an identical wide-eyed look as though they had agreed to something they didn't fully understand.

“Our room of fame.”

Grisham turned to see Chrissy leaning against the door frame. She wore a white sweater on which a cat wearing a Santa hat had been sewn, red leggings that clung to her like a second skin and emphasized how hard she worked in the training room, and a pair of fuzzy white calf-high slipper boots. Her hair was pulled back from her face by a red and white handkerchief with snowflakes embroidered along it. The bruise on her cheek was less intense than it should have been thanks to Oxford's salve. She looked comfortable and far too good-looking when the memory of her inviting him to stay in her bed the night before surfaced in Grisham's mind.

He quickly turned back to the pictures.

“They look surprised,” he noted in an almost-level tone.

Chrissy stepped into the room to join him. “We usually take their picture on the first day they come to the North Pole.”

His eyes lingered on an empty frame on the last wall.

“What about mine?”

He saw her smile out of the corner of his eye. “We didn’t think it would fit the ambiance.”

That brought a deep chuckle from him. “What, is bleeding out and mumbling incoherently not your thing?”

She laughed. “While I normally like that, we thought you deserved a few days to recover.” She paused, then said, “If you’re alright with it, I’ll let Jax know he can add you to our wall. It’s really bugging him.”

“Happy to oblige,” Grisham told her. His gaze lingered on her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

She touched the bruise. “Better than I thought I would as long as I don’t smile, speak, or try to brush my teeth.”

“That’s all,” he replied with a smile at her wry tone. “I thought you’d be sleeping in.”

She shrugged and said lightly, “Bad dreams. I thought channeling some of my energy in the training room would help.”

Grisham didn’t comment that he’d had the same intentions. He regarded the frames again. “There’s a lot of them.”

The breath she let out said a great deal more than her words. “There has been.”

“Do you come in here often?”

“Never.” At his surprised look, she said, “I’m too busy training the next Santa to dwell on the previous ones.”

He followed her gaze to the very first frame. The painting of a man in the Santa hat depicted someone with a kind smile, round cheeks, and a light in his eyes that captured the joy being a Santa should bring. Grisham felt the distinct difference between himself and the rest of the men in the room, especially Nicholas. Regardless of the fact that he had been bruised and bloody his first night at the North Pole, he had never had the innocent awe of the other Santas in training. He was too world-weary and beaten down to have that naive wonder in his expression.

“Why was I chosen?”

“Why not?” Chrissy replied in a level voice that said she had expected the question.

He looked from one face to the next. There were dozens of them, maybe more than a hundred. “I don’t fit the mold.”

“I know,” she replied simply. Her voice lightened and she said, “That might be why you’ll survive.”

He sputtered, choking on his surprise. “Survive? How many of these guys died?”

“A few,” she said. She pointed. “That one fell off a roof and broke his back. That one was shot when he surprised an armed mother. That one was tracked by the Agency. That one was bitten by guard dogs. That one fell out of the sleigh.”

At his sound of disbelief, Chrissy gave in. “None of them died. They all said the enchantment. They returned to their lives before they were hurt and continued on as if they had never set foot at the North Pole.”

Her tone gave no impression of what she thought about them giving up.

“How long did they last?” Grisham asked.

“Some made it a few seasons. Others did their first delivery and were done.” Her lips pressed into a line before she said, “Those that didn’t stay to do a delivery were removed from the wall.”

“Wimps,” Grisham said.

She snorted a surprised laugh and then covered her mouth in shock that it had escaped. “Did you just say that?”

He shrugged, happy to have caught her off-guard. “Never give up,” he said. “How hard can it be?” He felt driven to say the words he felt with true honesty. “I’m never going to say them.”

Chrissy’s mirth faded and she regarded him seriously. “You don’t have to do that.”

He held her gaze. “Do what?”

“Do that,” she said. “Make promises you can’t keep.” Before he could argue, she held up a hand. “Being a Santa is hard work and it’s getting harder. Some really have died. Others have burned out. It takes a lot of love and devotion to do what we do. It’s more of an intermission to life than a real way to live.”

He looked meaningfully around the room. “Then what do you do?”

She lowered her gaze as if unable to meet his eyes and said softly, “This isn’t really a life.”

“I beg to disagree.”

She sighed, her shoulders sinking. “Grish, don’t.”

“What’s the reason we live?” When she didn’t answer, he said, “Come on, Chrissy. What is the meaning of any of this? You know the answer.”

“I don’t think I do anymore,” she said without looking at him.

“Most people live to find meaning. You give meaning to life. You’re fueling children’s imaginations, bringing hope to the hopeless, and reminding those who are on the verge of giving up that they’re not alone.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Honestly, to do this forever has got to be one of the greatest callings on Earth. These guys are idiots!”

“Grish,” she said.

He shook his head. “No, I’m serious. If they would walk away from this,” his voice lowered, “if they would walk away from you, then they’re truly idiots.”

She looked up at him then, her eyes bottomless as they searched his face. She must have found what she was looking for because she closed her eyes and pressed her lips against his.

He kissed her truly and deeply, returning her passion with his own. Any hesitancy she showed at the beginning fled when

he didn't back away. She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer. He slid his hands around her waist and did the same, eliminating any space between them.

She kissed him long and hard as though she had been waiting more than a single lifetime for someone to truly see her, to understand her, and to trust her enough for her to lower her walls and exist as just Chrissy.

Grisham met her thirst and need with his own, quenching the fire that burned deep in his stomach with the taste of her lips and the feeling of her fingers running across his biceps and through his hair. It had been so long since he had been touched like that. Far too long. He needed her so badly his hands shook as he traced her sides with his palms.

A small throat cleared. "Excuse me?"

They broke apart as though they had been doused by ice water.

Chrissy's cheeks blushed a gorgeous red when she turned to see Jax leaning against the little door near the frame of the big one.

A knowing smile spread across the elf's face. He looked anything but apologetic for interrupting them. "Are you ready

for your picture, Grisham, Sir?”

Grisham looked at Chrissy and then at the elf. “Call me Santa.”



## Chapter Seventeen

Chrissy

Chrissy stood next to Grisham and observed the new picture in the frame. Grisham's photograph didn't look like the deer in the headlights Santa pictures around his. Instead, there was a red blush across his cheeks and a proud but almost shy look in his gaze from getting his picture taken right after being caught kissing her. It made her blush to look at it, and when she glanced at Grisham, she saw the same red to his cheeks. It suited him very much. She was just grateful Jax had finally taken a hint and left them without further questions.

“So, um,” Grisham said as if searching for something to talk about. “What's the thing with the flowers?”

She puzzled over his strange question and realized he was talking about the small planters that lined the walls between the picture frames.

“I've noticed them everywhere around here,” he continued. “Are they significant or just the only thing that grows in this place?”

Chrissy reached out and ran her thumb across one of the purple petals. The fondness she felt for the plant surfaced in her voice when she said, “Purple Saxifrage is my favorite. It grows in some of the most inhospitable places in the world. It’s tough enough that its name means rock-breaker because its roots can find footing in the tiniest crevices, and it makes wherever it wants home.”

“I’m starting to understand why you like it.” Grisham’s gruff voice spoke closer to her ear.

When she looked back at him, he reached around her and touched one of the scale-like leaves.

“Tough yet beautiful.”

Those three words made her heart feel as though it was going to explode from her chest.

His voice lowered and he said, “Able to make a home wherever you want.” He paused, then said, “Chrissy, you’ve done an amazing job here.”

“I don’t know about that,” she replied.

He grunted. It was a deep sound she felt as much as heard with his chest nearly touching her back. “I mean it. You’ve put

so much of your soul into this place. I can feel it everywhere I look. I don't want to leave, because I don't want to leave you."

Her breath caught. How many years had she been waiting for someone to say just those words?

She stared at him, her gaze centered on his lips as she thought about how nice it would be to kiss him again.

"We have a serious problem!"

Vera's voice made Chrissy jump.

Grisham let out a sound that sounded very much like disappointment and annoyance at the interruption, but he turned and gave the elf his attention. "What's wrong?"

Vera's eyes were wide and her hair was a mess. Chrissy hadn't seen the elf so frazzled and disheveled since her infatuation with Oxford began.

"The scooter line has gone completely off its rocker," the little elf said. "Something happened in the gears and it began shooting scooter wheels everywhere! And those things hurt." She rubbed the back of her head in emphasis. "The chassis are being flung out like boomerangs, which is dangerous in and of itself, but one of the frames hit the outdoor ball receptacle and now there are balls all over the place! Not to mention, Kegan

was hit by a ball and bounced against the bubble tube testers, so now there are bubbles, balls, and wheels flying all over the place!”

Grisham looked as though he was holding back a laugh. “You can’t make this stuff up,” he said. To Vera, he replied, “Lead the way!”

She put a finger to her nose and said, “Tut tut.”

When she vanished, Grisham threw Chrissy a questioning look. “Enchantment?”

She nodded. “One of her favorites.”

As she and Grisham raced down the hall, Grisham said, “Maybe we can get an enchantment like that. It’d be handy!”

“I’ll mention it to them,” Chrissy replied.

Grisham reached out a hand. Chrissy slipped her fingers into his with all the giddiness of a child telling a crush she loved him.

Despite the chaos they needed to fix, she wished the hallway was just a bit longer.

When they burst into the toy factory, the view from the top of the lift was one of madness. Bubbles filled the air, balls flew everywhere, and wheels from the scooter machine

ricocheted off other machines, smashing glass and plastic and disrupting everything from bead counters to bath bomb creators to pillow assemblers. Fluff and stuffing spilled in every direction while elves hid beneath conveyor belts, behind tool boxes, and inside dollhouses to avoid the danger.

“We need to stop the wheels first,” Chrissy said as they rode the lift down.

They both ducked and then stared at each other when a pair of wheels hit the wall where their heads had been.

“Right,” Grisham replied. “I’ll go after the wheel machine. You rescue the elves in the duck pond.”

Chrissy’s head jerked to the right and panic filled her at the sight of several elves flailing in the pool made for testing rubber duckies.

“Right, be careful,” she said.

“You, too.”

She put her hands on the railing and leaped over the top before the lift stopped. Grisham jumped right behind her. He rolled up to his knees, picked up two fallen garbage can lids, and handed her one before he took off running with the lid held in front of him like a shield.

She used his example and did the same as she made a beeline for the duck pond. Wheels, balls, and various rubber toys bounced off the lid as she made her way to the water's edge where several elves were trying to throw shoe strings to their friends. A few of the elves had managed to scramble onto the backs of the ducks, but others were floundering.

Chrissy ran into the knee-deep pool and scooped up elves right and left. She deposited them on the side and searched frantically for any others who had been missed.

“Martin! Martin's in there!”

Chrissy spotted Lizzy at the edge of the pool and saw where she was pointing. She peered through the water and spotted the elf's body drifting near the bottom beneath a pile of ducks. Chrissy's heart skipped a beat. She fished Martin out and set him gently on the side of the pool. The elves gathered quickly around.

“I've got this,” a stocky elf named Pup said.

The other elves backed away to give him room. He knelt by Martin, checked his pulse, and then tipped his chin back and listened.

“He has a heartbeat, but he’s not breathing,” the elf announced.

A squeak of fear sounded from Lizzy.

Pup linked his hands together and proceeded to give the elf chest compressions. Martin’s lips had a bluish cast and his head lolled lifelessly to the side. Chrissy’s throat tightened when Pup paused to check for any sign of breathing. After the third set of compressions, Pup leaned down to listen to Martin’s chest, then scrambled to roll him onto his side. Martin proceeded to cough and sputter water from his lungs before sucking in a huge breath.

“Oh, my Martin!” Lizzy exclaimed.

She threw her arms around her husband and held him.

He reached up with a weak smile and patted her on the cheek.

“I wasn’t gone very long, my dear,” he said, his voice raspy.

“Long enough. Never do that to me again!” she said with tears in her eyes.

He coughed, then said, “That’s a deal.”

The elves around them cheered until someone yelled, “Heads up!”

Chrissy grabbed the garbage can lid and crouched so it sheltered her and the elves. A dozen balls bounced off it before she dared to peek over the edge.

Grisham hung from the top of the ball chute with a wrench in one hand. “I’ve got the scooter line fixed, but this ball machine’s impossible!” he called down. The moment he was done speaking, another volley of balls shot from the top, bounced off the ceiling high above, and rained down in droves that bounced up again.

Chrissy knew exactly what was wrong. She propped the lid over the elves with a scooter frame to hold it up and took off running. She leaped the paper doll cutting line, ducked under the stretchy toy testers, spun around the kinetic sand pouring stations, and scooped up a boomerang from the pile that had spilled onto the ground. She chucked it underhand as soon as her goal was in sight.

“Duck!” she shouted.

The boomerang spun past Grisham’s head and nicked the arm of the timing assembly that had been jarred out of place by one of the many projectiles flying through the room. The



arm swung back around and hit the lid of the ball chute, clamping it back into place. The whirring from the machine stopped, bathing the toy factory in a rare silence that was broken only by the last of the balls bouncing out their energy, and a cough from Martin as his friends patted his back and shoulders.

Grisham slid to the bottom of the ball chute, his hair wild and his cheeks streaked pink and yellow from the sand tinters.

He walked to meet Chrissy with a relieved grin on his face.

“That was crazy.”

“Welcome to the toy factory,” she said with a grin of her own.

They stopped a foot from each other. Chrissy wasn't sure what to do. Did she kiss him like she wanted to or was it too soon for the elves? Maybe it was too soon for herself. Was she being too rash? What if Grisham decided he wasn't cut out for this after all the chaos?

She needn't have worried about that part because when a ball rolled to a stop against his foot, he bent down and picked it up.

“This is really cool,” he said, eyeing the way the sparkles inside swirled with his motion.

“Give it a bounce,” Monroe, an elf who worked in design, urged.

“You sure you haven’t had enough balls bouncing around in here?” Grisham asked.

“Never,” Monroe replied.

Laughter rushed through the elves.

Grisham obliged by throwing the ball down at the epoxy floor hard enough to send it almost to the ceiling. He caught it with admirable reflexes on its way back down.

“I didn’t know they could bounce so high,” he said in amazement. “I barely did anything to it!”

“That’s our new design,” Monroe said. “We’ve filled them with a combination of compressed air and helium to give it a better bounce.”

“Man, I would’ve loved this as a kid,” Grisham said.

Every elf in the room smiled.

It was a moment Chrissy would remember forever.

Elves worked their entire life to hear a statement like that. She made sure they heard reviews of their toys and any comments on the designs, and the security team published electronic reviews in the Elfish Times, but it wasn't the same as hearing it in person. Grisham's pure delight at the bouncy ball design mattered to each and every one of them. She knew by his quizzical look that he didn't understand the impact his words had, but she would be sure to tell him when they were in private.

The thought of being anywhere alone with Grisham was enough to awaken the butterflies in her stomach.

"How in Donner's bloomers are we going to get this place cleaned up before Christmas?" Vera asked.

Everyone sobered at her words.

She was right. Christmas was only a few weeks away, and given the state of the toy factory, they were going to fall behind very quickly.

Chrissy wasn't sure where to start. They had survived disasters before, but the mess around them was by far the very worst. With Christmas looming over them, they would be hard-pressed to meet their deadlines.

“We don’t have to work harder,” Grisham said.

Expressions of disbelief turned to him.

“This place is a disaster,” Vera reminded him. “We need to get everything back in order before we can even think about starting again.”

“Don’t put it back in order,” he replied.

Chrissy couldn’t help her own expression of doubt.

He read her misgivings and said, “I might be out of line here, but most of the toys laying around are finished, right?”

“Yes,” an elf named Annabelle agreed. The Marm headed the soft toy design and still held a needle and thread in her hand. “But they’re a disorganized mess.”

“So don’t bring them back to their stations, load them on the sleigh now to save time,” Grisham suggested.

“They would need to be quality tested,” another elf said.

“Can we do it on the way?” Grisham asked. “We can run it like an assembly line and have everything checked before they’re loaded.”

“Checked and checked off,” Riff from quality control said. He nodded at the elves around him. “It would work.”

Little Marianne from wrapping spoke up in her high-pitched voice, “If we skipped pack and wrap, we would save time.”

“But that means toys being delivered unwrapped,” Vera said with an aghast expression.

“I think...I think that would be alright,” Chrissy said, thinking it through. “If we put them with the already wrapped presents, it would look like it was done on purpose.”

“Agreed,” Grisham said. “Good thinking.”

Pym from security held up a pad of paper he had been writing on. “By my estimate, that would only put us four days behind.”

“Four days is a century!” Lizzy said, her voice laced with panic.

Martin nodded from his seat at her side, his hair still slicked back with water.

“No, four days are only four days,” Grisham replied.

“What else should we do, cancel Christmas?”

Every elf in the room gasped at the suggestion.

Grisham grinned. He had gotten his point across. “Alright then, elves assemble!”

Chrissy watched with amazement as the elves looked at their neighbors and then back at Grisham. He waited, his smile and confidence reassuring.

“He’s right,” Vera said. “We can do it.”

“He’s right,” Mizzy, the elf next to her, echoed.

“Let’s do it!” another elf shouted.

Soon, every elf in the room had gathered together. With Chrissy and Grisham carrying the heavy items and a group of elves involved in cleaning, the rest moved toys from the toy shop to the testing station, and then to the sleigh preparation rooms where they were organized into delivery zones. They sped up processing by including the kitchen and gardening staff, and by roping in the reindeer elf crew who had their own wild way of going about things. In three and a half days, the toy factory was fixed, elves happy, and sleigh packed. Chrissy was exhausted but thrilled, not only that Grisham’s plan had worked, but that she had been able to spend so much time with Grisham in the process.

As Christmas drew near, Grisham was buried under all he needed to learn in the short span. Enchantments were taught to move the toys from the North Pole into his bag for delivery in each neighborhood. Others controlled his way in and out of

houses and apartments, allowed him to return to the sleigh without the reindeer landing in high-security situations, and covered up any trace of his presence. He learned to dispatch alarm systems with the no-fail elf security codex, situate presents in any home's state of cleanliness or upheaval, and even placate the variety of animals he might encounter so they didn't raise alarm.

Chrissy was there every step of the way guiding him and helping him see other ways of doing things he might not have thought of on his own. Her years of experience paid off as he got faster and more efficient in all things related to the upcoming toy drop.

At the end of every night, exhausted and happy, they gathered in the cinema room and watched Christmas classics. It was their way of remembering why they did what they did. Grisham didn't seem to mind because it meant plenty of cuddling and stolen kisses when the elves around them were focused on the screen. Chrissy looked forward to every shared moment, and Grisham even admitted he truly enjoyed the old movies.

By the time Christmas Eve came around, Grisham looked as if lightning buzzed from his fingertips. Every action he took

was related to toys or security. Chrissy was amazed at how well he had fallen into the Santa roll.

“Just breathe,” Chrissy told him for the twentieth time. “And lay off the coffee; I think you’ve had enough to keep three elephants awake for a week.”

“Right,” Grisham said. He set the cup he had been holding onto the windowsill inside the stable where they oversaw Franklin and the others preparing the reindeer.

Dasher and Freesia, the reindeer they had successfully switched out from the zoo, exchanged nose bumps and loving grunting sounds while the rest of the reindeer stomped and swayed in their traces, eager to be going. Their antlers glowed with rich, warm light that bathed every corner of the room.

The organization of the toys was something to marvel at. The toy factory had a dozen underground warehouses where toys were sorted and stored under a network of very intricate enchantments. As long as Grisham kept the order right, whenever he spoke an enchantment, the toys for that area would then be transferred to his bag for delivery. The unwrapped toys they had loaded onto the sleigh from the scooter disaster had also been enchanted as overflow and what Chrissy called sway toys. With so many families traveling for



the holiday, there was the chance that the organization of the toys was off, and a family might end up at a relative's or a hotel where they had no assigned toys. The sway toys would offset this.

All-in-all, the system was impressive, the sleigh ready, and the new suit from Misty's team fit like a glove with both combat ready lining and flexibility for all the tight spaces Grisham would need to get into. Chrissy admired the seamstress' work as Grisham leaned against the sleigh. The suit was a combination of the older print from the Santa hat and a newer styling that fit him well. The padding inside looked both comfortable and gave him the more rotund appearance of a Santa so that children's expectations would be met. The best was the Santa nose. Grisham had tested the enchantment dozens of times to ensure he could get in and out of houses and apartment with ease. With his bigger nose, enchanted white beard and mustache, and the new suit, he looked like he had just stepped from one of the Christmas movies they loved.

“You've got this,” Chrissy said.

“I've got this,” Grisham replied.

He climbed into the sleigh amid the cheers of the entirety of the North Pole's elves. Jax sat in the back of the sleigh near the toys while Franklin rode up front in case the reindeer had any problems. Both elves wore outfits that matched Grisham's. The sleigh had been decorated with bells and lights so those children who believed would be able to catch a glimpse of them as they flew.

Chrissy leaned close as Grisham settled into the chair.

"Just remember," she said quietly. "If things get too dangerous, say, 'Ho, ho, ho,' and you'll be transported back to safety."

He leaned forward, slid a hand behind her neck, and kissed her soundly.

Chrissy's breath caught in her throat and she kissed him back with a fervor that caused a few elves to whistle. She smiled against his lips before she stepped back.

"And risk forgetting you and all of this?" he replied quietly with his eyes on her as if she was the only person in the room. He shook his head. "It's not going to happen."

She gave him a warm smile, but couldn't keep the worry from her voice when she said, "Just be careful, alright?"

“I will,” he replied. “I promise.”

She stepped back. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

He touched the fuzzy brim of his hat in salute. The elves shouted and cheered even louder.

Grisham raised his voice. ““On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen, now Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen.”

The reindeer surged forward. Ready for their burst of speed this time, Grisham held onto the reins and steered them into the night with an ease that told of much practice. A blinding flash followed and the sleigh and Grisham disappeared from sight. Chrissy felt her heart go with him and hoped with all her might that he would return safely to the North Pole.

## Chapter Eighteen

Grisham

The deliveries were much easier than he had expected thanks to his training. Grisham found himself rushing from home to home with barely even a need to slow. The enchantments made getting in and out easy, and the organization of the toys meant that everything was where it was supposed to be. It was easy enough to put a finger to his nose and say, ‘Giving begin.’ He then found himself in whatever room would work best for toy delivery, be it a living room, basement, kitchen, bedroom, or single living quarters. He put the stealth he had practiced to work in slipping presents silently beneath trees, on mantles, or on couches. When he was done, he put his finger next to his nose and said, ‘Giving achieved.’ He was then returned to the sleigh whether it was parked on a roof or hovering above in situations where there wasn’t enough room to land.

They jumped from continent to continent and from country to country in the same direction as the rising sun. With the reindeer’s quantum teleportation, it was easy to stay on schedule and ensure that things were delivered safely.

He was spotted by children a few times. Most usually hid and spied from stairways and doorways; others had set up camp right in the living room so they would be able to see Santa when he appeared.

Those who saw him were given some of the unwrapped toys and asked to promise not to tell anyone what they had seen. Wide eyes and nodded heads followed, but the smiles on their faces said they would never forget. He wondered how many stories parents would hear about him in the morning.

There was a rush in putting the perfect presents beneath a tree knowing that the child would get exactly what they had asked for. Their messages arrived at the North Pole either through mall Santas, the postal system, or whispered wishes that were collected by the network of elves all around the world. The vast reach of the North Pole was astounding. Grisham was amazed he had gone his entire life without knowing just how intricate the Santa system was. He found himself grinning, chuckling, and even singing quietly as he zipped from home to home. He couldn't imagine a better calling in life than delivering presents to children in need.

Grisham particularly enjoyed stopping at one apartment.

He used the totem and appeared in the familiar living room. The Christmas tree he remembered from years past was hung with white and gold ornaments, glass decorations that had survived the two siblings growing up, and cutouts of painted handprints, deer made from pipe cleaners, and the other types of decorations children made at school and brought home to their parents for Christmas. It was made all the better by the remote-controlled car and the stuffed animal dog he put beneath it. He added a rattle and teether toy for the baby. The thought that it might be a little presumptive for Isabelle made him smile.

“Who are you?” a voice demanded.

He rose and turned slowly. Training demanded that he take it easy and assess the situation. Most surprise circumstances were with children because they still believed in Santa and could see him. This was the first time the voice came from an adult.

“Hello, Evan,” he said.

Evan’s eyes widened as he looked Grisham up and down. He lifted his gaze back to Grisham’s face and his mouth fell open. “Grish, is that you? Why are you dressed like Santa?”

Grisham lifted his arms. “I told you.”

A light of disbelief came into his brother-in-law's eyes.  
"You're delusional."

Grisham smiled. "If I'm delusional, you should see my reindeer. Prancer's a hoot."

Evan kept staring at him, his eyes taking in the suit, the bag he held, the prosthetic nose, and the fake beard. "This is too extreme," he said. "You need serious help."

Intuition struck Grisham. "Didn't you like the skateboard you asked for when you were eleven?"

Evan stared at him. "How do you know about that?"

"Or the chemistry set when you were twelve. You wanted to become a scientist," Grisham continued.

"You could find that out in pictures," Evan said. "You're just trying to throw me off."

"The best, though, was when you got that robot construction set when you were thirteen." He paused, then asked, "Why didn't you ever build it?"

Evan frowned. "My dad got fired from his job and we had to move. It got lost in one of the boxes. I think my mom accidentally donated it." He stared at Grisham. "How in the world could you know about that?"

Grisham set a hand on his brother-in-law's shoulder. The man flinched, but Grisham ignored it and said, "I love my sister very much. I promise to stop being a negative part of her life. I've found my purpose, and it's to make others happy." He lowered his hand. "See you at Easter, Evan."

He put his finger to his nose. When he appeared in the sleigh, it was with one less present in his bag. He wondered how Evan would feel when he found the robot construction set beneath the tree that morning. The smile refused to leave his face as he continued on the route with a light heart and laughter in his soul.

Grisham's training became more necessary in homes with high-tech security defense systems, attack dogs, or guards posted at doors and gates. He was nearing the end of his run when he reached a mansion with a separate pool house, its own playground that held more slides than most theme parks, and a double-high multi-car garage with vehicles illuminated in the windows like a toy store display. He slowed the sleigh to check out some of the cars before steering the reindeer toward the roof.

"Tracking is showing a pressure-sensitive alert system and motion sensor beams on the roof," Jax announced from his



multitude of control panels in the back of the sleigh. “I recommend a hover approach, Santa.”

“Will do,” Grisham told him.

He picked up his bag and checked the enchantment against the address on the sleigh’s global positioning system. There were only a few things in the sack. Children in more wealthy neighborhoods tended to need less from Santa, but everyone got at least a little something and didn’t deserve to be left out.

“I remember these guys from a few years ago,” Jax said with a note of warning. “Their security guards can be touchy. Don’t hesitate to drop and run.”

“Got it,” Grisham said. “Be back before you miss me.”

Franklin and Jax chuckled.

Grisham appreciated their humor and quiet presence. Both elves had been jovial companions during the long, drawn-out night. Their expertise was most welcome, and he was grateful for the knowledge from those who had been on many such deliveries. Whenever the nerves and anxiety of all that was expected of him threatened to become overwhelming, they were ready with hot cocoa, words of encouragement, and

stories of Santas before him. He thanked Chrissy silently for her selection of the elves to cover his first run.

“Giving begin.”

Grisham blinked and found himself in the living room, one of many, no doubt. His eyes widened at the sight of at least twelve Christmas trees, each more splendid than the last, surrounding a life-size nativity scene that appeared to have been carved from pure marble. There were presents under most of the trees. Given the state of the house, he had to believe none of them were merely empty boxes wrapped for show.

“Enough presents for a small country,” he said under his breath.

The lights that had been dimmed for night flashed on to full brightness. An alarm sounded in a high-pitched shriek and dogs began to bark from various rooms in the house.

“Oh shit,” Grisham said.

He pulled the presents from the bag. His intuition said one was a handmade teddy bear and the other was one of Misty’s beautifully ugly Christmas sweaters. He added a high bouncing ball for good measure and reached for his nose.

Something slammed into his shoulder so hard he was flung completely around and fell against one of the pristine white couches. Pain exploded through his chest. He stared at the red that splattered the white microfiber beneath him.

“Put your hands up!” a voice demanded.

Grisham tried to catch his breath. Hot and cold flooded through his body in waves.

He forced his brain to focus.

He was compromised.

He had to say the words.

*I promised Chrissy I would never say them.*

“Put your hands up or the next bullet is through your skull!” the voice barked.

He couldn't let them take him in. Santa would be compromised. He had to keep the Santa secret safe. He had made a promise.

*I won't leave her.*

His heart throbbed almost as painfully as his shoulder at the thought. If he said the words, he would forget her, forget

the North Pole, and forget being Santa. He would go back to the day before the alley, a nobody lost and adrift in the world.

None of that mattered to him. The only thing that mattered was not losing Chrissy. He had seen the loss in her eyes when she spoke of Nicholas. He knew she hadn't fallen for any of the other Santas. It was clear by the way she talked about them that their relationships were purely professional. But for him, she had let down her walls and allowed him to see the real her that had snowball fights with elves, created special toys for children with disabilities, and cried sweet, happy tears at the end of Christmas movies, only to laugh at herself for being silly. He had fallen for her, all of her. He wouldn't give her more pain. He couldn't.

*They'll have to kill me before I leave her.*

He put his hands up the best he could. His left shoulder bled heavily, soaking through the fabric of the Santa suit. Whatever type of bullets they used must have been armor-piercing because anything else would have been absorbed by the ballistic lining. It had torn him up pretty good; he could tell without checking that he had taken major damage. One to the head would certainly finish the job.

“Turn around,” the man commanded.

Grisham rose gingerly and turned. His left arm refused to stay up and dropped as he obeyed.

“Keep your hands up,” the man barked.

Grisham peered into the extremely bright light of the gun pointed at him. He couldn't see the face of the man beyond it, but could hear the growls of the dogs on either side ready to tear him apart should the man order it.

“I'm not a thief,” he said.

“Shut up,” the man ordered. “You are under arrest for robbery.”

Grisham gave a humorless laugh. “I'm adding presents, not stealing them.”

“That's for the police to decide,” the man said. “Get on your knees.”

Grisham was glad enough to oblige since his knees felt as though they were on the verge of giving out anyway. He sank to the carpet and regarded the man steadily.

“I'm Santa Claus,” he said.

“Nice try. Santa isn't real,” the man replied.

“What do your kids think,” Grisham asked. A thought struck him and he said, “Do you tell Amy and Josh the same thing?”

The light lowered slightly. “How do you know my kids’ names? They don’t live here. I’m just a security guard.” He took a step forward and the dogs’ growls increased. The light shined brighter in his eyes. “Tell me how you know their names!”

“I left them toys, too,” Grisham continued. Images appeared in his mind. “Amy wanted a dolly with a bottle and Josh asked for a scooter.” He swallowed and continued speaking to buy time to come up with a plan. “Scooters are hard to wrap, so he’ll probably know what it is the minute he sees it. The elves try, but it’s a scooter. What can you do?” He shrugged and immediately regretted it as pain made him hunch and grab his arm.

“Keep your arms up!” the man said.

“I can’t,” Grisham replied. He shook his head wearily. “What will your kids say when you tell them you shot Santa?”

“I didn’t shoot Santa,” the man shot back, but it was clear by his tone that a hint of doubt was beginning to surface.

Grisham waited for the gun to waver. He knew he would get one chance. If another of those bullets hit him, he doubted he would survive.

“I’m just trying to bring good will and cheer back to the world by delivering toys,” Grisham said, keeping his voice light despite the pain. His shoulder throbbed and he spoke through gritted teeth, “I nearly took an arrow in Australia, though it was a kid with a suction-cup bow and arrow set that was ironically similar to the one I put under his tree.” The feeling of blood flowing down his chest was unnerving. Spots danced in his vision. He was running out of time. “Another kid made me drink dairy-free milk to go with the gluten-free cookies his mother had made.” He grimaced. “Gluten-free isn’t my favorite.”

The radio at the man’s belt crackled to life. “Backup is on its way.”

Grisham looked up into the light. “Are you really going to arrest Santa on Christmas Eve?”

“I-I don’t know,” the man said. His gun muzzle lowered a few inches and the light with it.

It was the moment Grisham had been waiting for. He let out a groan of pain that was real and hunched forward. He

touched his finger to the side of his nose and said, “Giving achieved.”

“What?” the guard asked.

Before the end of the word, Grisham lurched and found himself in the bottom of the sleigh.

“What took you long— Santa?” Jax said. “Santa, you’re shot!”

“Bad luck,” Grisham ground out.

“You have to say the words!” Jax said. “You can start over. You’ll be alright. That’s what they’re for.”

Grisham was shaking his head before the elf finished speaking. “Never.”

Jax stared at him, his disbelief obvious that Grisham wouldn’t take the easy way out. Understanding then filled his gaze. “Because you love Chrissy.”

Grisham nodded. “I won’t leave her.” He winced against the growing pressure surrounding his arm. “But it hurts,” he forced out.

Jax’s voice tightened and he said, “Franklin, get us to a hospital.”



“But—” Franklin began.

“He’s bleeding out,” Grisham heard Jax say, the elf’s words muffled by the humming in his ears. “Go!”

Jax pressed bandages to the wound and helped Grisham keep pressure on it. Every bump of the sleigh sent pain coursing through Grisham’s body. He slid in and out of consciousness.

“Stay with me, Santa,” Jax said. “Chrissy will never forgive me if I let anything happen to you.”

Grisham felt the sleigh touch down. Snowflakes landed on his face with the feeling of tiny, cold kisses against his too-hot skin. He peered up at a sign that read, ‘Urgent Care. No one turned away.’

“Think you can make it to the door?” Jax asked.

Grisham realized how precarious their situation was. If anyone came out and saw the sleigh or the elves, it would be the end of all Chrissy had worked for. The cloaking of the sleigh didn’t work as well in the falling snow. It was harder to hide something that was being outlined by the weather, and the tracks beneath them were obvious.

“I’ve got it,” he reassured them.

He rolled to his knees and used the half-door of the sleigh to pull to his feet. He glanced back at the elves.

“Can you guys finish the route?”

Jax nodded. “Don’t worry, Santa. We’ve got this. You were nearly done.”

Grisham gave a wry, pained smile. “Then I got myself shot.”

“You’ll be fine,” the elf reassured him, though he could tell Jax was putting on a front by the way his eyes kept straying to the bullet wound soaked in a halo of blood.

“I’ll be fine,” Grisham replied.

He stumbled from the sleigh and nearly faceplanted in the snow. A set of antlers looped under him and gave him something to hold onto as he righted himself.

He looked into Dasher’s concerned gaze. “Thanks, old buddy,” he told the reindeer.

Dasher grunted, his worry clear.

“I’ll be fine,” Grisham repeated. He nodded toward the sleigh. “Take care of them, alright?”

Dasher nodded back with a sweep of his antlers.

Grisham made his halting way through the empty parking lot of the urgent care center. He was almost to the glass doors when they slid open and two people walked out.

“I’m just saying that—oh my goodness, Thatcher, help me!”

A woman and man dressed in blue scrubs rushed forward and ducked under Grisham’s arms.

The man glanced behind him and said, “Did I just see...?” He shook his head. “It couldn’t be.”

“What?” the woman asked.

“Nothing,” Thatcher replied. He gave Grisham a closer look. “This guy’s been shot!”

Grisham’s boots skidded on the linoleum floor.

“Amber, page Dr. Renard,” the woman directed.

“Get him onto the bed,” Thatcher said.

Grisham felt himself be helped onto his back on a hospital bed. The glaring neon lights overhead made him close his eyes.

“Stay with us, buddy,” Thatcher urged. “Tell us what happened.”

Grisham heard the wry humor in his voice when he muttered, "I got shot."

"No kidding," Thatcher replied with a hint of his own humor as he tried to use scissors on Grisham's coat. "Where'd you get this thing? I can't cut through it."

"Bulletproof," Grisham said, his words slurring. "Or not."

"Apparently not," Thatcher replied. "But scissor-proof. This is the most legit Santa costume I've ever seen. We're going to have to roll you to get it off, alright?"

Grisham turned and bit his cheek to keep from crying out as they eased the suit coat over his shoulder. He glanced down to see blood staining a huge swath of the white shirt he wore beneath.

"This guy's in trouble," the woman said. She raised her voice, "Amber, call Dr. Thoreson. He's going to need surgery if we're going to save his arm."

The thought of the presents that remained undelivered pressed against Grisham's hazy mind. He tried to rise, but hands rushed to hold him down.

"Easy," Thatcher said. "The more you move, the more you bleed. Give yourself a chance." His gloves were dark with

Grisham's blood as he piled more gauze onto the wound. The man's gaze shifted to the woman. "I've seen bullet holes, but not like this. What size of caliber do you think it was?"

She ignored him, her attention focused on Grisham's other arm as she put in an IV. "I'm going to give you something for the pain. It'll help you breathe. Your blood pressure is skyrocketing."

Grisham tried to tell them that he had to get home to Chrissy, but he couldn't make his mouth work. Warmth flooded up his arm and across his chest.

"Stay with us," Thatcher said.

Grisham's head lolled to the side and darkness swept over his thoughts.

## Chapter Nineteen

Chrissy

The cheers of the elves faded at the sight of the empty sleigh.

Chrissy's heart felt as though it shattered in her chest.

"What happened?" she asked as soon as they came to a stop in the stables.

"He was shot," Jax said.

"He was bad," Franklin echoed.

Both elves looked so heartbroken Chrissy could only assume one thing. "He was killed."

Jax shook his head. "No, and the dolt wouldn't say the words. He insisted that he couldn't do that to you."

Chrissy stared at him, her thoughts racing in every direction. "Where is he?"

Jax lowered his gaze. "We took him to a hospital called The Hopeful Saint Urgent Care. We hoped it'd be easier for him to hide out at a small one. He made us leave him and finish the deliveries."

“Of course, he did,” Chrissy said with a roll of her eyes.  
“Foolish man. Why would he put himself through this?”

Franklin’s voice was quiet when he said, “I think we all know why.”

Chrissy’s heart gave a painful throb. “Take me to him.”  
She climbed into the sleigh.

“We can’t,” Franklin said. “The reindeer are spent. They won’t be ready to fly again for a week.”

It was clear when she looked at them that the elf was right. The reindeer appeared exhausted, their heads hanging low and antlers no longer glowing. They needed to rest after flying around the entire world.

An overwhelming need to be with Grisham pressed against Chrissy from every side. She didn’t know what to do. They had no other way to leave the North Pole and make it to him that night. She couldn’t push the reindeer; she didn’t dare. Yet Grisham hadn’t said the words; he hadn’t taken the easy way out.

“What should I do?” The words escaped her in a desperate plea as a tear slid down her cheek. “I have to go to him.”

A soft nose touched her elbow.

Chrissy looked over to see Freesia's soft winter blue eyes. She thought at first the reindeer was trying to comfort her and ran a hand across the animal's furry white and tan face, but Freesia snorted and trotted away. She came back with one of the feedbags in her teeth.

"She wants to take you to him," Franklin said in awe.

Chrissy looked from the reindeer to the elf. "Can she?"

He nodded. "Reindeer are extremely strong. She could carry both you and Grisham on her back with ease if she wanted to." He gave the animal a searching look. "But most don't like to be ridden. Are you sure, Freesia?"

The reindeer reached her nose out to where he stood on the edge of the sleigh. Gently, she nudged the little elf.

He laughed and patted her nose. "Alright, alright." He raised his voice. "Get her some oat mix, fast!"

Excited chatter ran through the elves as a feedbag was prepared and held up to Freesia's snout. She quickly ate the mixture, chewing and gulping it down until her antlers began to glow.

Chrissy watched in silence, hope and anxiety thundering in her chest as her need to get to Grisham warred with what she



might find when she got there. Elves brought her a Santa coat and a pair of boots. She stepped into them numbly and felt her friends tie the laces.

When the feedbag was done, Freesia lifted her head, oats still clinging to her furry lips. Her antlers glowed with a steady, solid light.

“You’re sure about this?” Chrissy asked the reindeer.

Freesia lowered her head and butted Chrissy lightly.

Chrissy gave a small smile. “Alright, let’s do this.”

Several of the elves spread a thick blanket over the reindeer’s back and belted it across her chest and beneath her rib cage with straps from one of the sleighs. Bells jingled as they tightened the bindings.

“Travel safely, Madam,” Jax told her.

“Thank you, Jax.” Chrissy lifted her voice as she looked around the room. “Thank you, everyone. You’ve always been the truest and most loving family a person could hope for.” She met several wet eyes, Vera’s included. “I’ll be back.” She told them.

They all knew the danger. A single reindeer didn’t have the cloaking abilities the sleigh did. If she wasn’t careful, Chrissy

could be shot out of the sky as an unknown threat. It wasn't something she could practice in the training rooms.

“For what it’s worth, your coat is also bulletproof,” Misty told her as she straightened Chrissy’s lapel with tears on her cheeks. “This was one of Grisham’s prototypes, so it comes with all the safety features. If all else fails, duck and cover.”

That brought a teary smile to Chrissy’s face. “Duck and cover. I’ll remember that.”

Chrissy used the sleigh to climb onto the tall reindeer’s back. She pulled the coat closer around her and wrapped her hands in the reins that hung from Freesia’s soft leather harness.

“Ready?” Chrissy whispered.

Freesia snorted and stomped a hoof against the cobblestones.

“Alright,” Chrissy said with a smile. “Let’s do this.” She raised her voice and said, “On Freesia!”

The reindeer burst through the open stable doors and took off into the air.

Chrissy remembered her advice to Grisham and said in a clear voice, “To The Hopeful Saint Urgent Care in New York City.”

A flash blinded Chrissy. When she was able to blink the brightness from her eyes, she found that they were flying through the skyscrapers of New York. Dawn was just beginning to spread its glow across the buildings that reflected its light back with dazzling beauty. Fortunately, at the early hour on Christmas morning, not many people were out to witness the lone reindeer she steered low enough to avoid the city's radar horizon so the airport wouldn't call in an unauthorized aircraft.

Her heart slowed at the sight of The Hopeful Saint Urgent Care nestled between an apartment complex and a skyscraper business building. Freesia flew over the cream and blue stucco structure and landed in the small ambulance parking lot behind it. Chrissy slid off the reindeer's back and eyed her companion critically. The reindeer's glowing antlers were impossible to miss. Anyone who happened to glance out of the buildings around them would spot her immediately.

"I hope you don't mind," Chrissy said apologetically.

She pulled the blanket from the reindeer's back and held it up. To her relief, Freesia lowered her head and allowed Chrissy to wrap the blanket around her antlers.

“It won’t be for long,” Chrissy told her. Under her breath, she whispered, “Hopefully.”

The reindeer bumped her shoulder gently with her soft nose.

Chrissy nodded. “Thank you.” A thought occurred to her. She quickly searched through her pockets until she found what she was looking for. She held up the green and white candy cane. “Mint is Dasher’s favorite. Care for it?” She hurriedly unwrapped the treat.

The reindeer licked the proffered candy tentatively. A sound of approval escaped the animal, and she ate the entire thing in one swift bite.

Chrissy patted her nose, then hurried across the parking lot to the emergency room entrance. A glance back showed Freesia settling herself near the back wall in the shadows. She lowered to the ground and began to chew her cud as though content to wait for as long as it took.

Chrissy practically ran through the sliding glass door into the emergency room waiting area. Two orderlies behind the counter looked up at her entrance.

“I’m looking for—”

“Santa?” the young man asked. His tag said his name was Thatcher.

Chrissy’s eyes widened. “Yes; how’d you know?”

He gestured.

She looked down to see the coat she was wearing. The red and white with the thick black belt was hard to deny.

“Oh, right. Can I see him?”

Thatcher and a woman whose tag read ‘Emmaline’ exchanged a look.

Chrissy’s heart fell. Was she too late? Had he succumbed to the bullet wound and died before she got there? The thought that he might have died alone in an unfamiliar hospital made tears burn in her eyes. She shook her head to clear her vision.

“It’s...it’s not too late, is it?”

Thatcher’s eyes widened. “No, it’s not. I mean, he just got out of surgery; we just....”

“We usually need to see some proof of relation,” Emmaline said.

Chrissy’s mind raced. “I don’t have my ID with me. I left when I heard what happened.” She was at a loss as to what to

do. The fact that a piece of paper could stand between her and seeing Grisham was maddening.

Emmaline pointed at the coat. “But that’s just like his.” She looked at Thatcher. “I think we can count it?”

Chrissy nodded quickly. “Same seamstress,” she said.

Thatcher smiled as if relieved at the chance to bend the rules. “Definitely. Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Emmaline told him.

Chrissy’s stomach tightened with nerves.

“They haven’t cleared him from surgery. You should probably wait,” the woman explained apologetically.

Chrissy’s eyes filled with tears she could no longer keep at bay. She couldn’t help it. The stress of the day’s events overwhelmed her to the point of overflowing.

“I-I just need to know he’s alright,” she said, her voice catching. “If I could just see him, I mean, I just...” Her words died away, choked off by the emotions she couldn’t hold back.

“Oh, Em,” Thatcher said, his voice pleading.

“You know it’s against the rules,” Emmaline replied. “Are you sure you want to risk your job?”

“I just pulled a shift on Christmas Eve and have another one scheduled for New Years,” Thatcher told her. “If they’re going to fire me, they know where to send my holiday pay.”

Emmaline shrugged. “It’s your funeral.”

Thatcher grinned at Chrissy. “Let’s go.”

Chrissy rushed to the door in her effort to get to Grisham. Thatcher obliged by using his keycard so they could pass; he then walked quickly at her side down the hall. They were nearly to the end when he put a hand on her arm.

“I need to ask you a question.”

Chrissy’s heart skipped a beat at his tone, but she forced herself to nod calmly. “What is it?”

“Is he...?” Thatcher glanced around to ensure they weren’t in danger of being overheard, then he said, “Is he the *real* Santa?”

She stalled in an effort to come up with a good answer that wouldn’t compromise them both. “What makes you ask?”

“I saw the sleigh.” The words burst out of Thatcher as if he had been holding them in through the night. “With his outfit, and the fake hair and nose, I just thought...I mean, it would be so cool if...” He shook his head. “I know it’s silly.”

Chrissy's instincts were to shut down the question immediately by laughing it off and saying that Grisham was a mall Santa who had been jumped for his candy canes. Instead, she gave the man a closer look.

Thatcher was young, perhaps in his twenties, and held the youthful enthusiasm that made his entire being practically thrum with excitement. There were shadows under his eyes and the stubble of a six o'clock shadow that said he had pulled a long night. The knowledge that his long night also included caring for Grisham made Chrissy think twice about what she wanted to say.

It was dangerous for any human to know Santa was real. There were theories, of course, and plenty of movies, but the truth was like hearing that aliens existed. The knowledge could be too much for some people to handle. She didn't want to be responsible for the man having a mental breakdown. However, in the right circumstances, knowledge was also power. If Grisham survived, she needed to get him back home. She didn't dare entertain the thought of sneaking him out of the hospital herself. Grisham was taller and outweighed her through sheer muscle alone, especially after all his training.



She was pretty sure they would frown on her bringing Freesia into the hospital to carry him.

She took a chance. “He is the real Santa.”

Thatcher stared at her long enough that she wondered if she had made a mistake.

Finally, a gasp escaped him and he laughed so loud she was afraid someone would overhear. “I knew it! I knew it and I was afraid I was going crazy!” He danced around. “I stayed two hours past my shift because I knew it was him and I wanted to ensure he had the best possible care.” He stilled and grabbed Chrissy’s hands. “That means I’m in the presence of royalty, Mrs. Claus. Your husband is in the best place to recover in this city.”

It was easier to go along with his words rather than deny them and get into an entire explanation, so Chrissy nodded. “Thank you. Can I see him?”

Thatcher gave such a warm smile it cheered her heart. “Definitely. Let’s go check on Santa.”

He led the way to the room at the end and peered inside.

“Back, quickly,” he whispered.

They hurried into the darkened doorway of the next room and waited.

Several voices passed them.

“Keep him sedated and that shoulder immobile. He needs plenty of fluids. Have you been able to reach his next of kin?”

“He didn’t have any ID on him. We’ve put out an APB on anyone looking for a John Doe Santa who got shot, but no luck yet. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you. I’m heading home, but page me if he takes a turn.”

“Will do, Dr. Thoreson. Thanks again for coming out on Christmas.”

“It was a good call,” the man replied. “I think we saved his arm. Just watch his fingers. Any sign of lack of blood, call me back.”

Their voices and footsteps faded up the hall.

Thatcher motioned for Chrissy to follow him. They ducked into the room at the end.

Chrissy’s steps slowed at the sight of Grisham in the bed. He looked pale and vulnerable with monitors connected to his chest, an IV in his arm attached to fluids as well as an empty

blood bag, and oxygen in his nose. Bandages covered his shoulder that had been immobilized with straps across his chest. His coat lay on a nearby chair with his fake white beard, hair, and nose in a bag next to it and his boots below it.

“He’ll probably be under for a while from the surgery,” Thatcher told her quietly. “But you can talk to him. There are studies that show people under anesthesia can still hear their loved ones. It gives them comfort.”

Chrissy approached the bed with tentative steps. She was afraid of touching something or doing anything that would bring him pain. Why didn’t he say the words? He could have saved himself from surgery and possibly dying.

“Stubborn man,” she whispered.

She slipped her hand into Grisham’s unbound one. The knowledge that it had been the one he broke made her careful, but the swelling had gone down a few weeks ago under Oxford’s care, the bones no doubt knit even stronger than they were before.

Thatcher moved a chair over so she could sit in it. At her grateful look, he nodded and slipped from the room.

“I’ll keep watch,” he called quietly over his shoulder.

“Take your time.”

Chrissy stared at Grisham’s face. He looked pale and worn. The proof of all the night had taken out of him showed in the deep lines under his eyes and the hollows of his cheeks. She missed his smile. For all she knew, she would never see it again.

“Grish, you should have taken the out.” She shook her head as tears trickled down her cheeks at all the words meant. “You wouldn’t be here unconscious and hurt. I can’t imagine what you went through. You were shot. You could have saved yourself.” Her voice dropped to almost a whisper and she said, “I’m not worth all of that.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Chrissy nearly jumped out of her chair.

Grisham’s hand closed around hers. He tipped his head toward her and opened his eyes. “I hope you don’t mean that,” he said, his voice gruff and tired.

Chrissy swallowed against the knot of emotion in her throat. “If it means you survived, I do.”

“I’m fine.” Grisham forced a smile to his lips. He tried to shift to a more comfortable position on the bed and his smile turned into a grimace of pain. “I’ll be fine,” he said, quieter.

“Jax and Franklin told me what you did,” Chrissy said.  
“You could’ve died.”

He nodded, acknowledging the fact without any outward showing of what it meant to him. Instead, he kept his gaze locked on her face. “I couldn’t risk never seeing you again.” He lifted his good hand and cupped her cheek.

When she felt his fingers tremble at the strength the simple movement took, she supported his hand with her own to keep it in place.

“You almost risked it anyway,” she said. “You have your orders. They’re to protect you.”

He gave a slow blink, his dark gaze showing both his pain and a tenderness that nearly undid her. “But who would be left to protect you?”

“From what?” she asked, unable to look away.

“From yourself, Chrissy,” he replied. “You were as lost as I was when you found me.”

She closed her eyes, accepting the truth of his words with a sigh. It was true. It was all true. Had he always seen through her so easily?

Her voice was quiet as she admitted, “When I saw you there in the alley, I could see so much of myself in your anger and frustration.” She opened her eyes and met his gaze again. “If I had turned away, you wouldn’t have had to live through this.”

He shook his head slowly. “If you had turned away, I wouldn’t have lived.”

She leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips.

His hand rested gently along the back of her neck, holding her close. She felt her tears fall onto his cheeks as they kissed.

By the time she sat back, she was filled with a determination to do whatever was in her power to heal him and see to his safe recovery.

“If I can get you back home, you’ll get better faster. Oxford’s salves are enchanted, and we both know how quickly it speeds up healing,” she suggested.

“Home sounds good,” Grisham said. He sat up slowly. A grunt escaped him at the pain. “More than good.”

“I don’t know if you should be moving so quickly,” she protested. She didn’t know whether to support his sitting up or try to get him to lay back down.

“I’d rather go there now than stay here,” Grisham said. “Besides, if you brought the reindeer, their enchantments won’t last.”

“I only brought one reindeer,” she admitted.

Grisham gave her a surprised look.

“The team was spent,” she explained. “But Freesia offered.”

A fond smile lifted his lips. “Dasher was right to fall for her. She’s a sweetheart.”

Chrissy knew he was right about the enchantment fading, but she wasn’t convinced leaving so soon after surgery would be good for him.

He stood slowly without giving her a choice.

“Whoa!” Thatcher said from the door. He hurried inside. “Uh, Mr. Claus, Sir, you really shouldn’t be up,” the man protested.

“I’m leaving,” Grisham told him simply. “Can you detach me from the equipment?”

Thatcher looked as though he wanted to protest, but then his gaze strayed to Grisham's Santa suit and boots that waited on the chair. It was clear the young man didn't want to disappoint Santa Claus.

"You can have the coat," Grisham offered. "Though it probably needs drycleaning."

"Whoa, thanks!" Thatcher replied.

He hurriedly removed the electrodes followed by the IV in Grisham's arm. He pressed a bandage to where the IV had been before stepping back.

He hesitated before asking, "Are you sure you're alright? I mean, that wasn't a simple surgery you had."

"I'll be fine," Grisham replied. He gave the young man a warm smile and winked when he said, "Christmas magic."

Thatcher's eyes went so wide Chrissy had to smother a laugh. She slipped Grisham's boots on his feet as he held onto Thatcher for support.

Grisham picked up the hat and stuck it on his head. "You can have the coat, but this is mine," he said.

The look he gave Chrissy sent tingles all the way through her.



She couldn't help but smile. He looked ridiculous in only his hospital gown, boots, and the hat, but he didn't appear to relish the thought of her helping him with his pants. She pretended to be interested in the monitor and kept her gaze averted as he managed to pull them on with one hand and Thatcher's help.

When he was ready, she shrugged out of the coat she wore.

"Here you go," she offered.

Grisham slid his good arm inside. She wrapped the rest of the coat over his bandaged shoulder and then belted it in place. A quick survey made her nod. It would work to get him home.

Thatcher led the way to the door of the hospital room.

"I just need to distract Emmaline," he said. "Hold on."

He pulled out a cellphone and hit a number on speed dial. A moment later, Chrissy heard the woman at the desk answer the ringing telephone.

"Thatcher, you're supposed to be scrubbing Surgery Two."

"I know," he said. He threw Chrissy a grin. "But Dr. Renard wanted coffee and you know he prefers it from the Flaky Pastry. Do you want me to bring you back a donut?"

They could hear Emmaline sigh. “Fine, but make it a maple bar.”

“You got it,” Thatcher replied. “Thanks for covering.”

“You owe me one,” Emmaline said.

They heard her rise from her seat and head toward the operating room.

“Clear,” Thatcher whispered. “Let’s go.”

He helped Grisham past the desk. The glass doors to the parking lot slid open to admit a chilly breeze.

“How do you plan on—oh!” Thatcher’s voice took on even more excitement. “Is that a reindeer?”

Chrissy smiled at the sight of Freesia trotting over to meet them. She reached up and removed the blanket wrapped around the animal’s antlers. When she lowered the blanket, she was relieved to see that the reindeer’s antlers were still glowing.

“Which one is it?” Thatcher pressed. “Dasher? No, I thought he was a boy. Prancer? Vixen? Vixen could be a girl’s name.”

Chrissy finished strapping the blanket over the animal’s back and chest before she answered, “This is Freesia.”

“Freesia?” Thatcher replied. He shook his head. “I don’t remember a reindeer named Freesia in the song.”

She chuckled. “Maybe she deserves her own song.” She gave Grisham a warm look. “Ready to go home?”

“More than ready,” Grisham said.

Chrissy eyed the animal, wondering how they would get Grisham onto her back without messing up his shoulder. To her surprise, Freesia lowered down to her belly. Chrissy helped Grisham ease on, then settled in front of him. The feeling of his arm wrapped securely around her waist sent warmth rushing up and down her body.

Freesia rose easily and grunted, eager to be gone. Chrissy knew the feeling.

“Thanks for everything,” she told Thatcher. “I hope you don’t get in trouble.”

He shrugged. “I’ll just say the patient left against medical advice. There’s nothing I could do.”

“You’re a good man,” Grisham replied.

Thatcher’s expression changed. The giddiness faded to be replaced by something emotional and happy to the point of tears.

“I’ve waited my entire life to hear that from someone,” he said. He rubbed his eyes. “I honestly didn’t think it would be Santa Claus, but it means so much more coming from you. Because you really know, don’t you?”

Grisham nodded with a warm expression. “I do know. Thank you. Continue being the very best you.”

The tears leaked free. “I will,” Thatcher promised.

Chrissy felt Grisham’s arm tighten around her waist.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Let’s go,” Grisham replied.

## Chapter Twenty

### Grisham

Grisham opened his eyes and was relieved to see the painting above his bed of a cabin nestled in the snow. At the corner of the cabin stood a man in a red and white coat with his arm in a sling. Grisham never thought he would be so happy to see the picture that mirrored him in real life. The knowledge that the elves' enchantments were tied into the entire North Pole comforted instead of alarmed him now. He knew he could trust the elves with his life, and they could do the same.

His door opened and a familiar pair of striking blue eyes peered through.

"You're awake," she said, opening the door wide enough to let her pass before she shut it against the cold.

She turned back and hesitated as if reluctant to impose on his space.

She had been conspicuously absent the past several days. He wondered if it was because of their kisses, seeing him injured again, or both. Husbands were supposed to be strong

protectors, unbreakable, stalwart, and dependable. Fears that she was beginning to doubt his ability to be what she needed in both a boyfriend and a Santa had nagged at the back of his mind many times during his convalescence in bed. If it hadn't been for Oxford's urging that he rest to give his shoulder the best chance to heal, he would have gone looking for her.

“Chrissy, talk to me,” he implored.

She lowered her gaze and walked to the chair beside his bed. He remembered awakening the first night to see her sitting there with her head pillowed against his blankets. Her pale hair had brushed her cheek in sleep; it was only through the sheerest of willpower and the want to not wake her that he had kept from tucking it behind her ear. Just the same, he had watched her until the utter exhaustion that came from a near-death experience pulled him back into the deepest of slumbers.

He brought up the elephant in the room without preamble. “You've been avoiding me.”

She didn't deny it. Instead, she toyed with the hem of her shirt sleeve before she said, “You went through this because of me.”

His chest ached at the heartache in her words. “I chose this,” he replied. “I wanted this.”

She gave an incredulous snort. “You wanted to get shot?”

He smiled but shook his head. “No, but after getting shot, I wanted nothing more in the world than to wake up here in this bed. Do you know why?”

She studied him a moment before saying, “No.”

“Because it would mean seeing you again,” he replied.

She bit her lip and turned away.

He caught her hand so she wouldn’t get up and leave.

“Chrissy, I meant what I said before. You are the reason I’m alive. Since Brylee’s death, I’ve been merely surviving, going through the motions.” His voice lowered and he said, “Much like you, here.”

Her eyes turned back to his.

“This purpose, this life,” he continued. “It’s so much more than putting presents under Christmas trees. I understand it now. I know why you love it and why it’s important to keep going.” He stressed the next words. “And I want to keep being a part of it; a part of you, and a part of this place. I have no regrets.”

Her eyebrows pulled together as she watched him as if she was weighing the honesty of his words. He held her gaze until

she nodded. “Alright. I want to show you something.”

A lightness lifted him at the realization that she had come to his room with a purpose. He sat up with more strength than he had felt in days.

The sheet fell away, leaving him with his bare, bandaged chest and pajama pants.

She blushed prettily and turned away.

He fought back a chuckle and walked to the closet with hardly any lightheadedness. She was right when she said he would heal faster at the North Pole. Whatever enchantments Oxford used in his salves were powerful. His shoulder barely hurt until he slid his arm out of the sling and attempted to put the red tee-shirt over his head.

He tried to cover the grunt of pain that escaped him with a cough.

“Are you alright?” she asked, her voice closer than he expected it.

He turned to see her standing in the doorway to the closet. Her cheeks were still pink, but a half-smile touched her lips as well.

“I thought you might need some help,” she offered.



“I should be able to dress myself,” he replied with wry frustration at his limitations.

She held out her hand without a word.

He placed the tee-shirt in it.

With sure movements as though she dressed invalid Santa Clauses who had been shot every day, she slipped the tee-shirt over his bad arm, helped him ease it over the bandages on his shoulder, then tucked it over his head. He was able to push his good arm into the hole before pulling it down. She helped him fasten the sling back in place and then eased his arm inside with a care that spoke far more than a simple gesture.

She stepped back with a teasing twinkle to her blue eyes that sent butterflies through his stomach.

“Need help with your pants?”

He fought back a blush of his own and said, “I think I’ll just wear these. Nice, right?”

She laughed when he turned a knee to model the white pants complete with red Santa hats.

“They are nice,” she admitted. She selected a pair of soft black boots with fur on the inside. “Try these. We have a bit of a trek.”

He stepped into them without question and wiggled his bare toes inside. “Nice,” he admitted.

She pulled a thick flannel coat from the hangers and held it up so he could work his good arm into it. She slid the other shoulder over his sling so that the arm hung empty.

She ran her hands down the lapels, smoothing them. It felt like she was finding reasons to keep near him. He didn’t mind at all. Stepping forward, he slipped his arm around her waist.

“I haven’t thanked you properly for going back for me,” he said.

He stared down into her eyes, losing himself in the blue and gold flecks within.

“I’m ready to be thanked,” she replied, her voice soft.

A smile crossed his lips and he bent his head.

Her head lifted and her lips touched his.

He kissed her long and thoroughly. The passion with which she returned the kiss made him back her against one of the shelves. Her hands toyed through his hair in a way that nearly drove him mad. He moved against her, holding her to him so that her body was flush with his. He felt her respond in kind, leaning into him and opening her mouth so he could

explore inside. When his tongue brushed hers, a small sound of approval escaped her. He chuckled deep in his throat. Kissing her was his favorite thing in the entire world.

She finally eased him back. “I did have something to show you,” she said, her voice breathless.

“I thought it was just an excuse for you to see me,” he replied as he drew in one calming breath after another.

“Maybe next time,” she replied with a wink. She held out her hand. “Come on.”

He would follow her smile to the ends of the earth if that’s where she led him. Instead, he found himself walking down a snowy pathway lit by the soft light of the full moon.

When his steps faltered with an embarrassing display of lightheadedness from the blood loss, she ducked under his arm.

“Lean on me,” she said. “If it’s too much, we can always go back.”

As much as he hated to admit it, having her beside him helped a great deal. The excuse it gave to enjoy being next to her and be enveloped by her soft scent of cedar and cinnamon

was one he wouldn't deny himself after all he had been through.

She took him past her cabin and the huge one that housed the toy factory. Continuing on, he found himself following her through a glade of evergreens along a path that appeared to have been made by the reindeer.

The deeper they walked through the trees, the more the reaching branches of the entwined pine needles overhead began to block out the light of the moon and stars. It wasn't until they were in near darkness that Grisham realized the area around them glowed.

"What is that?" he whispered against the stillness of the evening.

"Purple Saxifrage," she whispered back. "It's highly susceptible to elfish magic. Look."

He followed where she pointed and his heart slowed.

The grove ahead contained a small open space amid a circle of pines. Each branch of the trees had been hung with the flowers Chrissy mentioned. They glowed in soft purple clumps, illuminating the snow of the clearing in an otherworldly light.

A sound caught his ear. As they drew closer, Grisham realized it was singing in the high, beautiful voices of the elves. A glance around showed elves sitting on the patches of flowers as if they were seats in a theater. The elves sang a wordless tune that rose and fell like the swell of the ocean tides. Their voices wrapped around the clearing void of other animal sounds. The flick of an ear caught Grisham's attention. He made out the forms of the reindeer standing on the other side of the clearing. Interspersed between them were smaller deer, foxes, wolves, even a polar bear and several rabbits as though every creature of the forest looked on the way Chrissy and Grisham did.

Grisham took in a raised platform carved of ice and intricately worked with vines and flowers captured in frozen beauty in the middle of the clearing. On top, two elves stood bathed in moonlight and aglow in outfits of silver silk as though made from the moonlight itself.

“Is that Oxford?” Grisham whispered in amazement.

Chrissy nodded with a look of pure adoration and happiness. “And Vera,” she said. “They’re getting married and wanted to share it with us.”

Grisham couldn't voice how touched he felt at the invitation to such a private event.

When Vera's gaze swept the audience and lingered on both him and Chrissy, he mouthed, 'thank you.' She smiled prettily and turned back to Oxford.

The elf held out a single closed yellow flower. He spoke several quiet words to it, and it opened with a glow that warmed their faces.

"I, Oxford Pennyworth, offer you this totem of my love, my adoration, and my never-ending devotion."

Vera's eyes sparkled in the light of the flower when she replied, "And I accept this totem as I accept your heart." She took the flower and held it gently in her palm.

Happy whispers ran around the clearing.

Vera withdrew a bud of her own and raised it into the air with her other hand. At her words, it opened with a blue glow.

"I, Vera Fernhold, offer you this totem of my love, my adoration, and my never-ending devotion."

Oxford took the flower with reverence, its blue glow reflected in his dark eyes.

The two elves then clasped hands, joining the flowers together. The blue and yellow lights combined in a dramatic swirl of separate colors before they entwined as one white flame that swirled around the couple's hands and then vanished back inside.

Pearl, the Marm from the kitchen, lifted her voice from the bough closest to them. "Just as the life of an elf is filled with ups and downs, joys and trials, happiness and sorrow, birth and death, these flowers of fire and ice join in a flame of pure love to remind us that no matter what life brings, it is best when shared with the one we choose to give our heart. Oxford, Vera, I now pronounce you one heart, one soul, one love."

Oxford stared at Vera as if at a loss about what to do next. She grinned at him and threw her arms around him, kissing the elf soundly enough to make everyone watching laugh. It didn't take Oxford long to return the kiss. Cheers went up from the onlookers.

Grisham walked back to the cabin with Chrissy under his arm supporting him more than he wanted to admit he needed. All the while, a whirlwind of emotions tangled his thoughts. He felt happy for the elves who had wed, and also thrilled to

have watched it with Chrissy at his side, but he couldn't stop hearing her voice in his head.

“You should have taken the out. You could have saved yourself. I'm not worth all of that.”

The words tormented him to the point that despair circled his steps and chased away his happiness at the wedding.

It was no wonder Chrissy felt that way. She had to. Every person she had loved, every Santa she had trusted, had eventually left her, Nicholas included. She had to be her own lighthouse, her own fire, and her own fortress in order to survive being left alone again and again. He couldn't do that to her, yet he very nearly had. It didn't matter that he hadn't said the words and returned to his old life. He had almost died. Either way, it was a lose-lose situation for Chrissy. Somehow, he knew that when he left as the Santas inevitably did one way or another, it would break the rest of her heart that had managed to keep beating after all these years. He couldn't do that to her.

“What did you think?”

Chrissy's voice snapped him out of his melancholic musings. He watched his boots crunch on the fine layer of snow that had begun to fall and cover their trail.



“It was beautiful,” he replied. “I’m happy for them. I’ve never seen something so symbolic in my life.”

“The flowers were more than symbolic,” Chrissy said. At his look, she explained, “Each flower contains their magic, their enchantment, everything that makes them what they are. It’s a totem in its own way, and when they’re combined, they can’t be separated again.”

“A totem,” Grisham replied.

An idea struck him so hard he felt his breath leave him in a rush.

“Are you alright?” Chrissy asked immediately.

He nodded, but could tell she didn’t believe him.

He was saved from coming up with an excuse when she said, “You need to rest. This is the most you’ve been up since we got back. You’ve probably pushed yourself too far.”

He didn’t complain when she helped him back to his cabin. Several elves who had already returned from the ceremony were busy stoking his fire and straightening his bed.

“Don’t worry about the bed,” Chrissy told them with a warm smile as she helped Grisham sit down. “He’s got to get

more rest. Will you bring some soup and one of Oxford's healing teas?"

The elves gave a quick salute with a hand to their heart before they left through the small door in the wall.

Chrissy gave him a musing look. "Do you need help undressing?"

"I'm fine," he replied even as his chest warmed at the thought. "I can take care of it. You don't need to worry."

"Are you sure?" she asked with a hint of playful teasing.

As much as he wanted to play along, the thing he had on his mind demanded attention. "I'm sure," he replied. He settled onto his back on the bed. "I'll get some sleep and I'm sure I'll be feeling better tomorrow."

Disappointment flashed across her features so quickly he might have missed it before she agreed. "You'd better rest. You know what Oxford says, 'If you don't sleep, you die.'"

"It's a beautiful sentiment," Grisham replied with a chuckle.

"We should have it cross-stitched onto a pillow," she agreed with her normal smile back in place.

“It might make a good holiday sweater for next year,” he suggested.

She laughed at the thought.

“Get some sleep, Grisham,” she told him. “I have some other holiday ideas we can work on.”

She stepped through the door and left him wondering whether she was talking about toys or something else entirely. The woman made his mind spin and he had to admit that he liked it very much.

It took far too long for the elves to return, even though in truth it was probably only minutes. As soon as they arrived, he sent them to find Jax. It took longer for them to locate the elf so soon after the ceremony. By the time he appeared at the tiny door next to the fireplace, Grisham was pacing from the closet to the bathroom door.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” Jax asked.

Grisham spun to face the elf and had to catch himself against the mantle when dizziness swept over him. “I need some help.”

Jax regarded him steadily. “I don’t doubt that, but what does it have to do with me?”

Grisham lowered to the floor so that he was closer to the elf and safer for both of them before he laid out his idea.

It took a few minutes for him to convey exactly what he wanted and why, but by the end, the elf's standoffish expression had changed entirely.

"Do you think that would work?" Grisham asked.

"I don't think it could hurt to try," the elf replied, his tone thoughtful. "I'm sure it wouldn't be hard to get some of the others involved. Vicker from design has the steadiest hand, and I'd trust Mallorie with colors above anyone else. The rest is a bit tricky, but if we get enough minds in the process, I'm sure we'll figure it out."

"Good," Grisham said. "Let's get started."

"Now?" the elf asked in surprise.

Grisham nodded, his voice firm. "Now is all we have."

Jax gave him a closer look. Whatever he saw must have answered his unspoken question, because he replied, "Right. I'll get the others."

## Chapter Twenty-one

Chrissy

Chrissy hadn't been aware of just how much attending the wedding a few nights after Grisham's surgery would take out of him, but his need to sleep and heal had far outweighed anything else required of a Santa at the toy factory. He was drained to the point of not being able to get back out of bed for a few days, sleeping more than awake until Oxford's salves and teas began to work. She had started to regret asking him to join her, but it had meant a lot to Vera and Oxford to have him present. The healing elf reassured her that everything would be fine, though she read the worry in Oxford's gaze when he thought she wasn't looking.

Chrissy visited Grisham every evening and started bringing Christmas stories to read at his request. They enjoyed the fables of Santa from all over the world. One, a tale of a monk that gave away all of his inheritance and traveled the countryside helping others was similar enough to Nicholas' story that she had to set it aside. Grisham had handled it sweetly and didn't pressure her about it, telling her instead stories of his childhood to chase away her melancholy until

she smiled again. A Dutch Sint Nikolaas and a patron saint of New York intrigued Grisham and made her search deeper for similar stories. They read about a pirate Santa who brought gifts to children living on the Caribbean islands, and a Kringle toymaker who gave away his toys over the holiday instead of selling them so that every child had a toy for Christmas.

The stories inevitably ended in kissing, which Chrissy looked forward to the most. Grisham hadn't seemed to mind in the least, to the point that their stories got shorter so they could spend more time cuddling.

They developed a code that began when either of them yawned.

"Oh, better call it a night," Chrissy would say.

"We both need our strength," Grisham answered.

"It's pretty cold out there," Chrissy replied.

"You might need to stay longer and warm up," came Grisham's inevitable suggestion.

Chrissy responded with a hand to his cheek, her lips close to his. "I won't complain about that," she would reply.

The first time, a look of such tender warmth had passed over Grisham that Chrissy felt her insides melt. Their kiss had

been magical, the stuff of storybooks and the love stories she used to devour on cold winter evenings by the light of the fire in her fireplace. As much as she had pictured the loving embraces between the pages, nothing could hold a candle to the hot and cold that raced through her in waves, sending tingles along her lips and fingertips, his fingers tracing circles across the small of her back, obliging her as long as she wanted to kiss him.

Each time she visited, she could tell Grisham was getting stronger. Oxford had never let her down with his knowledge of healing, and the enchantments added to the teas and tinctures he made helped greatly. The elf had appeared in great spirits and was often to be found hanging out in Grisham's room when Vera was busy with her duties. Oxford was always attentive and found excuses to leave the room when Chrissy visited. Even though his reasons were transparent, neither Chrissy nor Grisham called him out on it because they secretly appreciated the time together without anyone else.

Though he kept his shoulder bound and his arm wrapped where the IV had been, Grisham held her closer and tighter, showing her just how much he wanted her there. She looked forward to it every day, her mind abuzz with thoughts of him,

his scent tangled in her hair and clinging to her skin, distracting her as she went about her tasks attempting to keep her mind on her work. She knew she was slipping and wasn't sure how long she could keep up the double life.

The wave of relief that filled her when Grisham walked into the cafeteria chased away all other thoughts. She had been in a conversation with Misty about a new suit design when cheers caught her attention. She looked up to see Grisham making his way through the room greeting the elves table by table.

Choruses of, "Hi, Mr. Santa, Sir!" rang through the air.

Instead of denying the title, Grisham appeared to enjoy it as he addressed elves by name and asked for updates on their current projects.

"He's looking good," Misty noted. "A bit skinny with all he's gone through, but we'll have him shipshape in no time."

Chrissy barely heard what the elf said. "Shipshape," she repeated. She turned her attention back to the seamstress.

"What are we talking about?"

Misty gave her a fond look and patted her on the hand. "I'll leave you to it, sweetheart." She winked and then said,



“Or to him. We can talk shop later. You two have a good dinner.”

“Thank you, Misty,” Chrissy replied with embarrassment at being caught ogling instead of focusing on work.

By the time he reached the table, Grisham appeared tired but happy. She had to fight back the urge to give him a big hug, reminding herself that his shoulder probably wouldn't appreciate it. Instead, she pulled out the chair next to her and watched him settle into it.

He reached out and took her hand without hesitation. She caught a glimpse of smiles running through the room as the elves noticed the gesture.

“Shouldn't you still be in bed?” Chrissy asked.

“Oxford said he would look the other way just this once because my cabin fever was making him nervous. He said as long as I keep my arm immobilized, I shouldn't do much damage.”

“Much damage,” Chrissy repeated. “That's positive.”

“That's what I told him,” Grisham said. “I don't think the man understands sarcasm.”

She laughed at that.

The door of the conveyor belt opened and an identical plate to Chrissy's chicken potpie with a side of corn on the cob and a glass of apple cider slid out followed by a drove of kitchen elves.

"We heard a rumor you were back to eating here," Pearl said with a satisfied expression. "The cafeteria's not been the same without you."

"It's good to have you back," the elves behind her said in unison.

"It's great to be back," Grisham told them all. "I've missed it here, both the food and the company."

That sent giggles through the group.

Pearl shot them a fond look before shooing them back up the conveyor belt. She flipped the switch for it to go in the other direction and waved as she disappeared dramatically into the darkness.

"She loves the theatrics," Chrissy said.

"I do, too," Grisham admitted. "What's dinner without theatrics?"

"Just a normal, boring dinner," Chrissy replied. "Who wants that?"

“No one,” Grisham said.

He cut into the potpie and stabbed a piece of chicken with his fork. She watched him raise it in the air.

“To theatrics,” he said.

She grinned, stabbed a piece of potpie, and touched it to his in a toast.

The siren sounded.

Chrissy’s breath caught.

Grisham looked at their forks. “It was just chicken.”

“That means there’s danger,” she replied.

Elves jumped up from their tables and scrambled for the exits.

“Help each other,” Chrissy directed. “No elf left behind. Get to the safe houses.”

“Safe houses,” Grisham repeated. “Why do you have safe houses?”

“They must have found us,” she said, her thoughts racing. “They’ve been wanting to stop us for years.”

“Who?” When she didn’t answer, he took her arm and turned her to face him. “Who are you talking about?”

“The Anti-Santa Agency,” she said, wide-eyed. “They’ve tried to find us for years, but the security team keeps them at bay and destroys any evidence of our presence. They must have found something.”

Gunshots sounded followed by an explosion.

Grisham’s face washed white. “My cellphone,” he said. “Could they have traced it?”

“Possibly,” Chrissy replied. The thought made her sick to her stomach. “I should have thought of that.”

Shouts sounded from the down the hallway.

“Run!” Chrissy shouted to the elves. “Get to the bunk houses! Seal the doors!”

Vera reappeared in one of the doorways. “They’re too far! We’re cut off!” the elf said.

Determination filled Chrissy with the resolve of a mother bear protecting her cubs. “Not if I can help it,” she replied. She ran for the door.

“Where are you going?” Grisham demanded.

“To fight back and create a diversion so they can get to safety,” she replied. “Stay here! It’ll be safer.”

“I’m not leaving you,” he said.

She wanted to tell him not to follow her. There wasn’t a lot he could do with his arm in a sling. Maybe once he saw the sense in that, he would concede. But when she threw open the door to the training room and grabbed two pistols in a holster, he was right behind her.

She heard his grunt of pain when he unclipped his sling and threw it aside.

“Shotguns,” he said. “Snipers for distance, handguns for outside, and shotguns in the halls.”

She held out one of the weapons. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Protect my home and the woman I love?” he replied, taking the gun. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Professing his love for her for the first time while taking the gun she held out might have been one of the manliest things she had ever seen in her life. It was only the sound of explosions in the distance that kept her from kissing him then and there.

She clipped on a vest, helped him do the same, and ensured that both were filled with clips and shotgun shells before she approached the door.

The sound of shouting met her ears. She glanced back at Grisham. “Ready?”

“Ready,” he replied.

She threw open the door and met the full force of an explosion.

Chrissy and Grisham were thrown backwards into the wall of the training room. Chrissy tried to suck in a breath, but her ribs were either bruised or broken and her lungs responded sluggishly. She blinked to clear her vision. A wide-open hole where the hallway should have been revealed smoke, debris, and the open night air beyond. A helicopter fired at the toy factory. Explosions and tiny screams sounded. The shadows of men racing by armed with guns and grenades silhouetted against the opening before they vanished further inside.

“Chrissy.”

The pain in Grisham’s voice made her turn.

Blood trickled from the corner of Grisham’s mouth. She looked down to where his hands held a pipe protruding from

his stomach.

“No,” she said, her voice ragged.

“Chrissy, I’m sorry,” he told her, his voice catching.

“No, don’t be sorry,” she said. Tears filled her eyes, blurring the sight of him. She put a hand to his cheek. “Don’t be sorry. This was the best time of my life. I love you, Grisham.”

“I love you, Chrissy.” His tears made her heart ache.

She wanted to fix it. She needed to. It couldn’t end like this. Everything she had ever worked for was going up in flames all around her. Just when she found the best balance and happiness of her life, it was all torn apart.

She drew in another ragged breath. It felt like she was suffocating. She knew one of her broken ribs must have punctured a lung.

“Put your hands up!”

Footsteps stormed into the room.

“Step away from him and put up your hands,” another voice commanded.

Chrissy grabbed a grenade from her vest.

Shouting filled the air.

Chrissy was about to turn when Grisham caught her hand.

“No, Chrissy. Don’t.” The last word came out as a cough that brought more blood to his lips.

“Drop the weapons! Now!”

“I love you,” Grisham whispered.

He held her gaze, his eyes filled with overwhelming love for her, love that made her feel safe, cared for, and protected. How could she be anything but that when he looked at her the way he did? How was the entire world falling apart around her, and all she wanted to do was look at him and feel like things were going to be alright?

A gunshot sounded and blood blossomed high across Grisham’s chest.

“No!” Chrissy shouted.

Bullets struck her and she fell against Grisham. He held her closer.

“Don’t forget me,” he whispered.

It was a strange thing to say. She didn’t know why he wanted those words to be his last to her. She tried to reply, but



the bullet wounds hurt too badly to say anything. She clung to him, her gaze on him because he was the last thing she wanted to see. It took all of her strength to lift her hand and touch his cheek.

Hands ripped her away from him. She shrieked, her eyes on him as his strength faded and he hung from the bar through his stomach. Just before she was pulled from the room, he lifted his head and met her gaze one last time.

“Ho, ho, ho.”

His words had a strange ring to them. Time slowed around her. She felt the hands give way. She pitched forward and darkness stole across the world.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Grisham

Grisham sat in his usual seat, his head low and a half-empty glass in his hand. His chin felt scratchy with the stubble that grew there longer than he usually allowed it. He should have stunk. He knew it was expected; yet, he wouldn't let himself go that far, not again.

The bell over the door jingled. Footsteps heralded a lighter person than himself taking a seat at the bar.

“What can I get you?” Charlie asked amiably.

“An amber,” she replied.

Charlie ran through the list.

“Dark Naut,” she said, choosing one on tap.

“Good choice,” he said before he turned away to fill her order.

Grisham could listen to that voice forever. It was musical and light with just the right mixture of sincerity so that the person speaking to her knew she cared. How did she do it? It was an art, for sure.

He made a show of rising partially to his feet and then stumbling against the table. He apologized to the table, as one should, and made his way tripping and stumbling to the door.

“Grish, take care of yourself tonight,” Charlie called out from the door to the kitchen.

Grisham raised a hand before pushing through the door to the waiting darkness outside lit in puddles of light from the streetlamps. He had made certain to slide enough money to cover his tab for the year plus double. Charlie would be shocked to find it. The man deserved it. He was the best of them. Maybe the man would finally go on the vacation he always talked about. Charlie deserved it for putting up with Grisham on the many bad nights he’d had.

He leaned against the door and listened.

“How many drinks did he have?”

“None,” Charlie said, surprise evident in his voice. “It’s the first time he’s ever ordered half a dozen club sodas. Especially tonight.”

“The anniversary of when Brylee was killed.”

“How did you know that?” Charlie asked.

“I’m a friend,” she replied vaguely as if her mind was on other matters. “You said he only ordered club sodas? There’s no alcohol in club sodas, right?”

“Last I checked,” Charlie replied.

The sound of money being set on the bar was followed by a stool sliding back.

“You haven’t had your drink,” Charlie pointed out.

“Something came up,” she replied.

She pushed through the door at a run. The bell chimed when it closed behind her.

“Chrissy.”

Chrissy stopped short. She turned slowly, her brow furrowed and eyes peering into the darkness beside the bar.

“Grish?” she said; worry colored her tone as if she wasn’t sure what she would find.

He pushed away from the wall and stepped into the light of the streetlamp.

“You...you’re...you aren’t fighting those guys in the alley?”

“I’m tired of fighting,” he replied.

She watched him with confusion clear in her expression.

“Do-do you know me?”

He made a show of scrunching up his forehead and rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. The knowledge that the hand he used had been recently immobilized by a sling made him appreciate the lack of pain.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her. “I wouldn’t mind spending more time with you.”

An exasperated look came into her eyes.

He took a step forward into the heart of the lamplight. When she made no move to run or talk or do anything but stare at him in uncertainty, he lowered to one knee.

“Chrissy Claus, I almost lost you once. Promise me we will never leave each other again,” he said.

Aware of how large her eyes had become, he pulled the small velvet box from his pocket and opened it. A blue sapphire the exact color of her eyes sat in between two diamonds in a setting of white gold holly leaves. The stones caught in the light and sparkled.

“Chrissy, marry me and make me the happiest man in this world and the North Pole.”

“North Pole,” she repeated in a whisper. Her hand pressed to her chest as if to calm her heart and she said in an incredulous voice, “You remember?”

He nodded.

“But-but how?” she asked.

He should have known to address that part before proposing. He unbuttoned the sleeve of his tattered shirt and pulled it up to reveal the tattoo on his forearm.

Chrissy stared at it. “Purple Saxifrage,” she said with uncertainty in her voice. “But how? We haven’t been there yet. It’s all just memories of a different time.”

“I’ve lived it,” Grisham said. “And I will again. I want to be everything you need, and I promise not to leave you ever again.” He lifted the ring box. “I, Grisham Berg, offer you this totem of my love, my adoration, and my never-ending devotion.”

Chrissy looked as though she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Her gaze went from the ring back to Grisham’s face. Whatever she saw in his expression made the tears pool in her eyes.

“But how?” she asked just above a whisper. A tear slipped free to trail down her cheek. “You shouldn’t even know those words. It should all be gone.”

Grisham felt his own eyes fill with tears and smiled through them. “The tattoo,” he explained. “It’s a totem. I asked Jax to make it.” He shook his head. “I thought it would be easy, but it wasn’t. It took enchantments from a dozen elves and nearly killed me in the process.” He gave a self-deprecating chuckle. “You probably thought I was such a wimp after I was shot. I was really just attempting not to die as the elves’ magic tried to find a balance and not destroy my entire lifeforce.” He gave her a half-smile. “Did you know humans weren’t meant to be marked with enchanted totems?”

She shook her head wordlessly.

He gave her a warm smile. “When we watched Vera and Oxford marry, you told me about the totem they exchanged fused with their enchantments. I thought that if something like that could work for the elves, maybe I could get Jax and the others to design one that would keep me from forgetting. I didn’t want you all to be left with the memories and my mind to be wiped clean.” He flexed his forearm, starting down at the

purple flowers emblazoned there. “I had to keep it hidden from you in case it didn’t work; I hope you can forgive me.”

She ran her fingers over it. “You could’ve been killed,” she said softly as if by speaking the words too loud, it would happen.

A visible shiver ran over his skin.

Unable to keep from touching her any longer, he took her hand in his. “Chrissy, I couldn’t forget you. You’re everything I love in this world.” He held up the ring with his other hand. “I am yours, one heart, one soul, and one love, if you want me.”

She nodded.

He stared at her, hoping he wasn’t imagining things. “Are you sure?” he asked.

She smiled. “Did you think I’d say no?”

He kept watching her, afraid she would vanish if he so much as blinked. “I thought you’d be mad I kept the tattoo from you.”

She set her hand on his arm over the purple flowers she loved. “I would’ve been mad if you didn’t try,” she said softly. “Thank you for trying.”



“You deserve to have someone who will try.”

She rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him. Grisham kissed her back with such passion he felt her laugh against his lips.

He stepped back. “Too much?”

She held out her hand. “Never, but let’s make this official, shall we?”

His fingers shook as he took the ring from the box and slid it over her finger. He kept his gaze on her hand, aware he was babbling when he said, “The store manager told me the two diamonds represent yesterday and tomorrow, and the sapphire is for today. The ring shows all the time I want to spend with you.”

“That’s forever,” she said.

“Exactly,” he replied. “Chrissy, will you be my forever?”

Her smile outshone the ring in its brightness.

“I will,” she said.

He slipped his hand into hers, warmth running up and down his arm at the thought of their life together, finally, without the fear of separation.

A thought struck him and he paused before they reached the alley where he knew she had hidden the reindeer.

“What is it?” she asked. Her eyebrows formed a worried furrow between them. “You aren’t going to fight those men, are you?”

He shook his head. “I told Charlie to call the police about them. I’m sure they’re on their way to a nice jail cell about now.” He pulled the cell phone from his pocket. “I just need to send a quick text.”

*Izzy, I am engaged. See you for Thanksgiving dinner.  
Going off the grid for a bit. Love you.*

He tossed the cell phone down and stepped on it.

“You sure Isabelle won’t worry?” Chrissy asked.

“She’ll always worry,” Grisham replied. “But this time, she truly won’t have anything to worry about.”

He picked up the phone and tossed it in the garbage can near the Portly Pig, then held out a hand to Chrissy.

“Let’s go home, my love.”

“My love,” she replied with a warm smile. “I could get used to the sound of that.”

Grisham pulled her close and walked beside the woman that would be so much more than his wife. She would be his heart, his soul, his love, forever.

Thank you for reading Save Me, Mrs. Claus. I hope you enjoyed it. It was so fun to write and I am entertaining the thought of another story about Chrissy and Grisham for the future.

For those who haven't read The Silver Series, that is one of my most popular series and a great place to start if you want to follow other stories I have written. Click here to find the story of Jaze and his werewolves:

[Amazon Link for The Complete Silver Series](#)

Find more books by Cheree Alsop here: [Cheree Alsop's Website](#)

If you would like to join Cheree Alsop's newsletter mailing list for new book releases and giveaways, please do so here:  
[Newsletter Signup](#)

Reviews are greatly appreciated as the best way for readers to find new books. If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review so that others can find it as well!

## About the Author

Cheree Alsop is an award-winning, best-selling author who has published over 65 books. She is the mother of a beautiful, talented daughter and amazing twin sons who fill every day with joy and laughter. She is married to her best friend, Michael, the light of her life and her soulmate who shares her dreams and inspires her. Cheree works as a fulltime author and mother, which is more play than work! She enjoys reading, traveling to tropical beaches, riding motorcycles, playing the bass for their family garage band Alien Landslide, spending time with her wonderful children, and going on family adventures. Cheree and Michael live in Utah where they rock out, enjoy the outdoors, plan great quests, and never stop dreaming.