



REBEL WITHOUT A CLAUS

THE KINGS:
A TREEMENDOUS



BOOK FOUR
CHRISTMAS

CHARLIE COCHET

REBEL WITHOUT A CLAUS

THE KINGS: A TREEMENDOUS CHRISTMAS

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Edited by Stacy Sirkel

FOUR KINGS SECURITY UNIVERSE



Welcome to the Four Kings Security Universe! The current reading order for the universe is as follows:

FOUR KINGS SECURITY UNIVERSE

STANDALONES

[Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts](#) - Standalone

(Spencer and Quinn. Quinn is Ace and Lucky's cousin.) Can be read any time before *In the Cards*.

FOUR KINGS SECURITY

[Love in Spades](#) - Book 1 (Ace and Colton)

[Ante Up](#) - Book 1.5 (Seth and Kit)

Free short story

[Be Still My Heart](#) - Book 2 (Red and Laz)

[Join the Club](#) - Book 3 (Lucky and Mason)

[Diamond in the Rough](#) - Book 4 (King and Leo)

[In the Cards](#) - Book 4.5 (Spencer and Quinn's wedding.)

FOUR KINGS SECURITY BOXED SET

[Boxed Set](#) includes all 4 main Four Kings Security novels: Love in Spades, Be Still My Heart, Join the Club, and Diamond in the Rough.

BLACK OPS: OPERATION ORION'S BELT

[Kept in the Dark](#) - Book 1 (Standalone series can be read anytime)

THE KINGS: WILD CARDS

[Stacking the Deck](#) - Book 1 (Jack and Fitz).

[Raising the Ante](#) - Book 2 (Frank and Joshua)

[Sleight of Hand](#) - Book 3 (Joker and Gio)

THE KINGS: WILD CARDS BOXED SET

[Boxed Set](#) includes all 3 main The Kings: Wild Cards books: Stacking the Deck, Raising the Ante, Sleight of Hand, and bonus story In the Cards.

RUNAWAY GROOMS SERIES

[Aisle Be There](#)

[To Have and Witthold](#)

THE KINGS: ROYAL FLUSH

[Dealing Him In](#)

[Calling His Bluff](#)

THE KINGS: A TREEMENDOUS CHRISTMAS

[Not So Silent Night](#)

[Sleigh it Ain't So](#)

[Home for the Howlidays](#)

Rebel Without a Claus

CHAPTER ONE

Why was life filled with so many difficult decisions? What if he made the wrong choice and immediately regretted it? It would be too late to undo what he'd done. He could never go back and make the right choice. *Was* there a right choice?

When Red had told him he had a surprise waiting for him at Colton and Ace's house, Leo never expected *this*. So much hung in the balance!

King wrapped his arms around Leo and rested his head on Leo's shoulders. "Sweetheart, do you need help?"

Leo frowned. "I'm at an impasse, King. I've weighed the pros and cons, and can't guarantee I won't regret the decision I make, and then what? I know it's not as if the fabric of the universe itself will unravel should I choose poorly, but I'll have regrets, King. Serious regrets that could haunt me for the rest of time!"

The rumbling of King's laugh against his back told Leo that perhaps he was overthinking.

"Yeah, okay. Do I want to eat the Goldfish cracker-shaped Christmas cookie with the Santa hat and scarf? Or the one with the red nose and reindeer antlers?"

"Well, the Santa one is cute," King said. "But you chuckle every time you see the reindeer one, so maybe eat the Santa one and save the reindeer one for later?"

Leo turned his head and kissed King's cheek. "That's a logical decision. Thanks."

“My pleasure.” King stood and kissed Leo’s cheek, then eyed him. “How many of those have you had?”

Leo slipped the reindeer cookie into his cardigan’s front breast pocket. He blinked at King as he took a bite of the other cookie. “Um....”

“Leo.” King arched an eyebrow at him.

Uh oh. The eyebrow was up. It was a very sexy eyebrow, but when it was up, King meant business. Still.... Leo glanced at the cookie plate on the counter filled with Goldfish cracker-shaped Christmas sugar cookies. “But King, Red baked these just for me, and then Laz painstakingly decorated each one, just for me. I can’t let their hard work go to waste. Think of the children!”

“What?”

“Oh, the humanity!” Leo gasped and pointed behind King. “Is that Ace rappelling down the side of the house?”

“*What?*” King turned, and Leo swiped a couple more cookies before darting off. “Hey!”

Dang! He should have known he wouldn’t make it far. He’d just made it to the hall when King grabbed him around the waist and lifted him off his feet. Leo flailed. Why did his boyfriend have to be so big and strong? Mm, big and strong. *No! Focus! Cookies are at stake!*

“But it’s Christmas,” Leo said. “It’s a time when you get to eat all the things, and there are no consequences! It’s science!”

King put Leo on his feet, turning him so he could slip his arms around Leo. He nodded, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. “Oh, really? Science, huh? And what did science do the last time you had too much sugar?”

Double dang. “Betrayed by science,” Leo grumbled, his eyes narrowed. He huffed. “I might have gotten a little hyperactive. Only a tiny bit, barely noticeable.”

“Hm. Barely noticeable. I’m pretty sure when you ran through the park with your shirt off screaming, ‘Murderous snails! Run for your life!’ people noticed.”

Not his proudest moment. “But was I wrong? Freshwater snails have caused more deaths than sharks, lions, and bears *combined*, King. Two hundred thousand a year!” He narrowed his eyes. “They’re silent, tiny killers.” A terrifying thought occurred to him. “What if the government decides to weaponize them?”

King held out his hand. “The cookies.”

“Eight.”

King barked out a laugh. “No way. Four.”

“Six,” Leo countered.

“Four.”

“Five and a tail?”

“Four.”

“I don’t think you understand how negotiation works,” Leo grumbled, handing over the extra cookies. “Fine. But I was doing those families a favor. Not my fault some of them couldn’t handle the truth.”

“You mean the children?” King’s smile was wicked. “Oh, the humanity.”

Leo gasped, and King laughed on his way back to the kitchen to return the fishy cookies to whence they came. And that’s why he was going to marry that man. He had no idea when or how, but he’d figure it out.

The rest of the guys arrived, and Leo smiled when Fitz hurried over to hug him. Fitz gave the best hugs. After King, anyway. Once he’d hugged Fitz, he gave Duchess lots of pets and ear scratches. When she decided she’d had an appropriate amount of pets, she trotted off to greet everyone else.

“Where are they?” Jack asked, sitting on the couch and pulling his laptop out of his backpack.

“Joker and Gio are in the garage with Ace, Colton, and the dogs,” Leo replied, leaning over the back of the couch. “I don’t think Ace’s logic is sound.”

Lucky snorted as he walked to the kitchen. “This is Ace we’re talking about. Logic happens very rarely.”

“Who else would cancel the team of professional decorators and decide to decorate his *mansion* himself?” Fitz asked, as he settled on the couch next to Jack. He drew up his legs, and Duchess bounded over. She hopped up and snuggled against Fitz.

The sliding door opened, and Gio stepped inside with Cookie. He closed the door behind them and greeted everyone before taking a seat on the couch opposite Jack and Fitz.

King sat next to Gio and gave him a knowing look. “How’s the decorating going?”

Gio huffed out a laugh. “I’m not sure how Ace and Sacha manage to turn something like untangling Christmas lights into a competitive sport, but there you go.”

“Sounds about right,” Jack muttered.

Red and Laz sang along to Christmas songs in the kitchen while Lucky told Mason about the evils of tinsel. A short time later, Ace, Colton, and Joker came inside.

Chip saw Leo and lost his furry mind. He ran straight for Leo, and Leo scratched him all over before starting their game of tag. Joker joined in, and then Cookie and Duchess. Good thing there was plenty of room! Leo had just tagged Chip when Ace called out across the room.

“Everyone shut your pie holes!”

Well, that was certainly one way to get everyone’s attention. Leo snickered and walked back to the couch, standing to one side, and leaning against it.

Colton sighed. “Not what I had in mind, love, but thank you. I wanted to let you all know how thankful I am to have you in my life. You’ve been more of a family to me than my own blood, but you already knew that. I love you all so much.”

Aw, that gave Leo warm and fuzzy feelings all over.

“We love you too, Colt,” Fitz called out.

Leo nodded his agreement.

“Okay, so I’ve been thinking about having a white Christmas for the longest time.”

Wouldn’t that be something? Leo had never had a white Christmas. Had he? Not that he could remember. Did frost on the lawn count as snow? Probably not. *Pay attention.* Right. Colton was talking.

“Something Ace said gave me an idea. I thought having a special holiday season might be nice for our new family. With that in mind, I have a surprise for everyone.” Colton tapped at his phone, and everyone’s phone pinged. “Check your emails.”

Leo took his phone out of his pocket and checked his email. He tapped on what looked like a reservation confirmation for a luxury family cabin in...Winterhaven? Where was that?

“What’s Winterhaven?” Lucky asked.

Leo pulled up his browser and did a quick search. Loads of information popped up on the picturesque mountain town. So many photos. That was a lot of nature. Leo wasn’t very outdoorsy. Mostly because he questioned his survival skills. Unlike King, who could probably build a raft out of twigs and dental floss.

“We’re going to have a white Christmas!” Colton said excitedly.

Then again, the cabin looked fancy. And huge! He went back to his search, and all kinds of information came up about the town’s yearly festivities, the biggest and best being their Christmas holiday season. Clicking on one of the websites, he smiled. It was so pretty! So many lights and decorations and all that snow. The market square looked amazing.

King frowned. “This schedule says from tomorrow until the end of December. Colton, we can’t take that much time off.”

While King and Ace discussed whether they could take the time off, Leo did some quick research on Winterhaven. Leo wasn’t great at coming up with gift ideas, and usually, he

turned to the guys to help him. But this year was different. He wanted to give King something *really* special.

In a few weeks, it would be five years since they started dating. Maybe Leo could find what he was looking for in Winterhaven? He clicked on a link about the town's mayor.

Leo gasped. "Santa's there." He lifted his gaze to King. "I want to go."

Everyone looked to King, who smiled warmly. "Sweetheart, he's not—"

"Actually, Santa," Leo said. "I know that. He's the mayor. But he *looks* like Santa, and according to my online search results, Winterhaven is *the* perfect small-town Christmas destination. It's famous for its holiday festivities." If anyone could help him come up with the perfect Christmas gift for King, it was Santa! Or, at the very least, the mayor of a town known for its Christmas celebrations.

Joker snorted. "Damn. The mayor does look like Santa. That's an impressive beard."

"So beautiful," Laz said.

Leo continued to click around several websites. The more he saw of the town, the more excited he got. This was perfect!

"What do you guys say?"

At Ace's words, Leo lifted his gaze. The guys had never been away from the office for any length of time. Not all of them at once, anyway. But it wasn't like they didn't have anyone who could run the place.

"How about it, big guy?" Ace asked King. "Ready for the perfect Christmas?"

King looked at Leo, who smiled brightly.

Please, please, please, Ward!

As if reading his thoughts, King let out a sigh and smiled. "You're right. We have a great team. They'll be okay without us for a few weeks."

Leo cheered and ran to King, throwing his arms around him and kissing him. With a chuckle, King returned his kiss.

“You’re really excited about this, huh?” King asked.

Leo nodded fervently. “This is going to be awesome.”

As soon as he was able, he’d find Santa and figure out the perfect Christmas present for King, something that showed him a glimpse of how much Leo loved him. Time to launch Operation King’s Christmas! All he had to do now was get packed for an extended Christmas vacation, and tomorrow, they’d be on their way to Winterhaven! Easy peasy.

At least that’s what he thought before boarding the jet, and Colton told them how long the flight was. Almost *four* hours? What was he supposed to do on a flight that long? He’d been so focused on everything else that he hadn’t given any thought to the flight itself.

Ace was, of course, being Ace, and Joker was threatening Ace for being Ace. Maybe if Leo kept his mind occupied....
Hmm.

Fitz’s faux fur coat reminded Leo of Chewbacca. That thought promptly led him to thoughts of *Star Wars*, which led him to thoughts of *The Mandalorian*, which led to Pedro Pascal—who Leo had a little crush on—which led to that weird Nicholas Cage movie he’d watched with Ace, which led to—

“Sweetheart?”

Leo blinked at King. “Yeah?”

“We’re here.”

“Huh?” Leo noticed everyone getting up and putting on their coats. Wait, what? “How...?”

“You were kinda lost in your head, but since you were smiling, I figured you’d jumped on one of your thought trains.”

“Thought train” was the term Leo had come up with to best describe what happened to him when he got lost in his thoughts. It was like hopping on a train and moving from one

train car to the next to the next until someone or something snapped him out of it.

King stood and helped Leo get into his puffy coat. It was weird wearing a scarf, hat, and mittens. The most he got to wear in the winter back home was a sweater and a light jacket. Outside, an Airbus helicopter waited for them. The helicopter ride to Winterhaven was thankfully much quicker.

As soon as they landed and the blades stopped, the doors opened. Chip shot out, plopping into the snow, which made Leo laugh. He got out as the dogs lost their furry minds, bouncing, hopping, jumping, rolling around, and chomping at the falling snow. They were too darn cute.

They stood in front of the cabin, and Leo gasped. Holy cow, it was *huge!* And so beautiful. He turned to King, his smile wide. "It looks like it's from a Christmas movie."

King wrapped his arms around Leo and kissed the top of his head. "It does."

Colton thought it would be a good idea to check out the town before they got settled for the night, and Leo wondered if they'd bump into Santa. He'd have to figure out a way to talk to him without King. Hmm, probably without the others as well. If he was going to surprise King, no one else could know what he was up to. He loved his family, but they kinda sucked at keeping secrets.

After a short car ride and a weird discussion about jaw-breaking candy, they reached the town and parked. Leo got out, and he couldn't help his huge smile. It was *so* cold, but he didn't care. This place was amazing! Like one of those little European villages from one of his fantasy movies.

All down the main street, the shops were decorated, though Leo noticed it looked different from the photos of previous years. It was pretty, but...there were decorations missing. Also, the stalls lining the street weren't supposed to be there, they were supposed to be in the market square. Maybe he'd ask Santa about it.

Jack gasped. "Holy Hallmark movies, Batman."

That's what it reminded Leo of. Those small-town Christmas movies that Colton *loved*. He made Ace watch them with him every year. Leo didn't mind them, though he often ended up with lots of unanswered questions.

"Oh my Chanel, *look* at those *sweaters!*" Fitz squealed. "I need them!"

Leo was about to follow Fitz when something sparkly caught his eye in the stall across from the sweaters. He gasped. "That stall has a Goldfish cracker ornament!" It had a little Santa hat on it! He ran to the stall and stared at it in awe. It was the most amazing ornament he'd ever seen in his life!

Very carefully, he removed the ornament from the display hook and held it in his mittened hands. "You're coming home with me, little buddy. Look at you and your little smiley fishy face."

"I have to admit, that's pretty cute," King said. "What are the odds?"

"Right? It's like Winterhaven knew I would be here." Leo handed the ornament over to the lovely lady, thankful it had a secure, foam-padded box to protect it from breaking. He'd just taken the little gift bag from her and thanked her when he heard Colton.

Something was wrong.

Everyone seemed to sense the same thing and joined Colton, Ace, and Gio at the hot cocoa stand.

"Oh no," Colton said. "The Ice Castle is closed?"

What? That's where Santa and his reindeer would be. Leo lifted his gaze to Colton. "No Santa?" But...he had to find Santa. He needed help with Operation King's Christmas.

Fitz wrapped his arm around Leo's shoulder, his expression troubled. The other woman told Colton to find Clara at the Ice Castle, so they headed in that direction. When they arrived, it looked...dark. The doors weren't locked, so they all went in and almost immediately found the hospitality manager, Clara. She looked just like her online photo.

After introductions, Clara explained what had happened, how a terrible snowstorm had blown through, damaging the Ice Castle's roof and electrical panel. If that wasn't bad enough, the vendors had canceled the town's deliveries.

"Poor Santa." Leo shook his head. "I mean, the mayor, obviously, but this sounds bad." He cocked his head to one side. There had to be something they could do. Wait! He jumped, and everyone else did the same. Oops.

"Every time," Joker grumbled. "Why do you have to scare the life out of us every time you get a bright idea?"

"Sorry. It's just my brain and body coming to the same conclusion." Leo turned to King. "We need to help Santa."

King blinked at him. "Help Santa?"

"The mayor. And the town," Leo replied. "We're kind of the best people equipped for the job. Jack can work on the electrical issues, and Lucky and Mason on the roof."

"I can't fix it without new panels," Jack said. "Something that specialized will take longer to ship than we have time for."

"Not to mention the town's entire Christmas shipment is non-existent," Fitz added.

Leo blinked at them, then turned to Colton. "You own a shipping company. It's more of a shipping empire," he corrected. "I mean, if anyone can get the town what they need in no time, it's you. Right?"

Clara shook her head. "As much as I appreciate the thought, our town simply doesn't have the connections or the funds to take on a shipment of that magnitude."

But Colton does.

With Ace's encouragement, Colton offered to help under the guise of giving his family the perfect Christmas. Though Leo was certain a part of that was true, Colton also loved to help people. Clara seemed uncertain, which was understandable. They were a bunch of strangers offering to

spend loads of money and time helping a town they'd only just arrived in.

Clara looked at Leo, who smiled brightly, and her face softened.

“I would love to help you give your family the perfect Christmas.” She turned back to face Colton. “If it isn't too much, I would love the help. I'm sure the mayor will be thrilled as well.”

“Wonderful! My family and I will return to our cabin, and as soon as we receive all the information, we'll get started on a plan.”

“It all sounds too good to be true,” Clara said before throwing her arms around Colton and squeezing him tight.

They said their goodbyes and headed out. The guys discussed the magnitude of the project ahead, but Leo didn't doubt his family could do it. He would do his part as well, and at the same time, find Santa and the perfect gift for his amazing fiancé.

Time to activate stealth mode. Operation King's Christmas was back on!

CHAPTER TWO

After almost five years together, Leo still managed to surprise and amaze him. Sometimes, King marveled at the turn his life had taken. To think, if he'd remained firm in refusing General de Loughrey, he never would have ended up in that bunker falling for an adorable genius with a penchant for fish-shaped snacks.

The thought alone made King smile. How had he gone from believing he'd never find love to being engaged to a man he cherished and wanted to spend the rest of his life with?

King dropped the debris he'd picked up into the large trash bin. This morning, waking up with Leo snuggled up to him and a snowy mountain landscape outside their window confirmed he'd made the right decision.

Maybe he needed to rethink how much time he spent at the office. Seeing Leo's excitement had warmed King all over. It also made him realize that maybe they needed to take more vacations together. Maybe once he finished here, he'd call Leo and—

“King!”

Uh oh. That couldn't be good. King poked his head out of the room. “Yeah? Everything okay?” Judging by Colton's expression, everything was definitely *not* okay.

“My husband is in the woods halfway up a twenty-foot tree he intends to chop down *with an ax*, and Laz is the only one there to keep an eye on him *and* Leo.”

King's eyes went wide. "Son of a nutcracker." He pulled off the work gloves, chucked them on the table, and took off. Outside, he pulled his winter gloves on as he ran for the tree farm. Ace and the Boyfriends had started there, which meant if they'd gone into the woods, they wouldn't be far. Not even Ace was that reckless.

What the hell was Ace thinking? An even better question would be, why was he surprised? Ace never could do anything the way everyone else did. He had to go bigger and better.

In the distance, he spotted Laz looking up at a huge tree, which meant Ace was up there. Fucking hell. Wait. Where was Leo? By the time he got to the base of the tree, Laz had run off. Wonderful. King looked up, and yep, there was his ridiculous brother.

"Ace, get your ass down here," King growled. "Where's Leo?"

"Here's the thing," Ace said as he missed a tree branch. He cursed loudly before he caught himself.

"Damn it, Ace, get out of there."

"That's what I'm trying to do. And your fiancé ran off to see Santa. What is up with that?"

Of course, he did. Leo woke up determined to find Santa, only he wouldn't say why, and when King offered to go with him, Leo politely turned him down. "I have no idea. He's being very secretive. It's not like him."

"Where's Laz?" Ace asked.

King squinted and pointed off in the distance. "Almost to town."

"How are they so fast?" Ace stepped down onto another branch. "Shit."

"What?" Did everyone else have that one friend who got stuck up trees, or was he just lucky?

"I think I'm stuck."

Sweet merciful— "On what?"

“I don’t know. I think my coat is stuck on something. Um...King.”

“What is it?” *Patience*. Christmas was a time for comfort and joy.

“There’s a squirrel. It’s one of those red pointy-eared ones. He looks like he’s on steroids. There’s intent in his eyes, King. I think he’s about to body-slam me.”

Comfort and joy, my ass. “Ace,” King growled. “Get out of the damn tree.” He was very tempted to go up there and get him, but unlike Ace, he had more sense.

“I can’t! I’m stuck. What do I do? He’s staring into my soul. I think he might be their leader. He’s plotting how to end me.”

Funny, King’s thoughts were running along similar lines. “It’s a squirrel.”

“The hell it is. He’s about to go all Bane on me.”

“Who?” Was he really standing here in the middle of the freaking woods, in winter, in several inches of snow, having a conversation with his brother, who was *in a tree*?

“Are you serious? Bane. The Batman villain on steroids? Kris Kringle on a cookie, watch a movie!”

A bark caught King’s attention, and he groaned. Even better.

“Please tell me that’s not—”

“Chip and Joker?” King replied. “Okay, I won’t tell you.”

“I have to get out of this tree!”

No shit. Before King could say a word, Chip slammed into the trunk, shaking the entire tree because *that’s* what the situation needed. The furry torpedo losing his mind.

Ace yelped. “Chip, no!”

Did Ace really think Chip was going to listen to him over chasing a squirrel? Chip’s barking sent the squirrel jumping... right onto Ace’s head.

This was his life.

King turned to Joker and thrust a hand in Chip's direction. *Seriously? He's your dog.* His asshole friend responded by bursting into peals of laughter. Like most events that involved Ace, the situation had escalated into chaos.

"King! Chop down the tree!"

"I am not chopping down the tree."

"Then glare the squirrels into submission!"

King opened his mouth to reply when a cracking sound filled the air, and Ace fell, hitting every branch on his way down before he plopped into the snow on his back. Chip took the opportunity to bathe Ace's face with his tongue.

Sighing, King pulled Ace to his feet. "Did Leo say where he was going? Other than to find the mayor?"

"Nope. Just took off." As Ace brushed off the snow, he looked around. "Where's the ax?"

Joker handed it to King.

"Good idea. King should chop the tree," Ace said, nodding.

Was he serious? What was King thinking, of course, he was. "We are not chopping the tree." He took the ax in one hand and reached into his coat with the other. He sent off a group text to the others about Leo, and after some more nonsense from Ace and another movie reference, Joker pointed to a somewhat smaller tree that was the size Colton had actually asked for.

King did the chopping. Once he finished, they planted a new tree nearby to replace it, and headed back to the Christmas tree farm, all three of them carrying the tree. Soon, they were on their way back to the cabin. King ignored Ace's complaining and his bickering with Joker.

Leaving the tree for Ace and Colton to deal with, King climbed back into the SUV. He sent Leo another text before driving back into town. By the time he got there, he still hadn't

received a reply from Leo, which wasn't like him at all. Where the hell could he be?

With Leo nowhere to be found, King called in reinforcements. Normally, it wouldn't take six former Green Berets to find one man in a small town, but when that man was a genius who didn't want to be found, it took six former Green Berets and their boyfriends.

They devised a plan and split into pairs, with Ace and King taking the woods surrounding the tree farm in case Leo returned. When they didn't find him there, they moved on to the woods. They continued to search when King's phone buzzed. Several townspeople had seen Leo earlier that afternoon, and he'd even been to the café.

"It looks like he's been to several shops throughout the day. Why wouldn't he have checked in?" Another buzz, and King frowned down at his phone. "Colton says Leo was at the reindeer farm earlier but left a little over two hours ago. He didn't say where he was going."

Ace hummed. "Okay, so he had a snack because he got hungry, then went around town visiting shops for whatever reason. He might have come back here, seen we were gone. So where would he have gone after?"

They put away their flashlights and headed back to the tree farm.

"Logically," King replied. "He would have gone home, but he would have needed a ride."

Ace suggested the Ice Castle, and he was right. Logically, that was where Leo would have gone looking for one of them. Unfortunately, Lucky and Mason hadn't found him there either. They all reconvened at the Ice Castle. No one had seen Leo.

King ran a hand through his hair when Colton's phone rang. His friend's visible sigh of relief said they'd found Leo. Oh, thank goodness.

"Thank you so much, Clara. I will." Colton hung up and put a hand on his chest. "Clara says her husband just got

home. Leo had asked him for a ride back to the cabin.”

Joker gaped at him. “What? When?”

“Two hours ago.”

What? How was that possible? No one had seen him. King frowned. “He wasn’t in our room. It was the first place I looked.”

“But we didn’t check the rest of the house,” Fitz replied with a sigh. “We just assumed he was still out here.”

“Because no one saw him enter the house,” Joker said. “And some of us were in the main living room. He did not walk through that door. The dogs would have lost their furry minds.”

That was true. If Leo was anywhere in the vicinity of the dogs, especially Chip, they were trying to get to him. King turned and headed for the door. “Let’s get back and figure this out.”

As soon as they were back at the cabin, King was out of the SUV and running up the stairs. “Everyone split up. Colt, Ace, Gio, Joker, Fitz, and I will take the downstairs. Everyone else checks upstairs.” He’d just turned the corner when Ace put up a hand.

“You hear that?”

King frowned. “Sounds like....” Damn it, how had he not thought of that? He spun around and ran to the movie room at the end of the hall. Hurrying inside, he stopped suddenly, his heart ready to burst. He’d never seen anything more beautiful.

Leo was asleep on the floor, sweetly snuggled under a cozy blanket and surrounded by pillows. One of his favorite Marvel movies played quietly in the background.

“You just melted into a puddle of goo, didn’t you?” Ace whispered.

King couldn’t even respond. He maneuvered his way around the many pillows and moved one to the side so he could sit. Ace was right. Everything King had been feeling

before he saw Leo melted away, leaving only an overwhelming need to have Leo in his arms.

“Sweetheart?”

Leo opened his eyes, and when he realized King was there, he smiled that gorgeous smile of his, stealing King’s breath away. Leo scrambled to straddle King’s lap, wrapping himself around King as if he hadn’t seen him in months, making him chuckle.

“Hey,” King said softly. “We were worried about you.”

Leo leaned back. “Why?”

“Because we couldn’t find you.”

Leo blinked at him. “But I was right here.”

How very logical. King smiled warmly. “We never saw you come in.”

“Oh. I didn’t come in through the front.” Leo worried his bottom lip. “I peeped a lot today, and I knew everyone was home, so I came in through the mudroom. I thought I would decompress before going downstairs, and I was going to text you, but I guess I fell asleep.” He looked up at Ace and everyone else who’d materialized behind him. “I’m sorry if I worried everyone.”

Fitz stepped forward. “It sounds like you had quite the day. Don’t worry about it. We’ll be downstairs. Red made his delicious Southern comfort food.” He turned and ushered everyone out of the room. As soon as they were out, he closed the door behind him.

“I really worried you?” Leo asked quietly, his eyes filled with concern.

King brushed Leo’s hair away from his face. “Yeah, but what matters is that you’re here and safe.”

“I’m sorry.” Leo brushed his lips over King’s. “I missed you, you know.”

“Yeah?” King hummed, slipping his hands under Leo’s sweater to feel his soft skin. Leo nodded. “How much did you

miss me?” he asked, his voice low and growly as his pants tightened.

Leo’s smile was wicked as he slipped his fingers into King’s hair and brought their lips together. Damn, he tasted good. Of something sweet. King returned Leo’s kiss, their tongues tangling as heat flared between them.

Five years and King still couldn’t get enough of Leo, of his body, the softness of his skin, the taste of his lips. The way he fit against King was delicious, and the desire that coursed through Leo was sinful. Now, more than ever, he had the power to bring King to his knees.

Knowing none of their brethren was about to interrupt, he gave himself over to his beautiful man, letting Leo pull him to his feet. Leo opened a small drawer in the side table and pulled out a packet of lube. King wasn’t about to think about how that stash got there.

They pulled off their sweaters, dropping them to the floor, before Leo pushed King back to sit on the couch. He plopped down, his hard cock straining against his pants as Leo stepped between his spread legs. Handing King the lube, Leo kicked off his shoes, shoved his pants down, and then stepped out of them, remaining in his festive green and red boxer briefs.

King groaned. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” He unzipped his pants, pulling out his painfully hard erection as Leo pushed down his underwear, his leaking cock bouncing up against his stomach. “Fuck.”

“Oh yes, please.” Leo straddled King’s lap, took the lube from him, and ripped the packet open. “Give me your hand.”

King did as he was told, holding out his hand so Leo could pour some lube onto his fingers.

“Make it fast because I want you inside me.”

“So bossy,” King teased.

Leo leaned forward, his back arched, ass out. He nipped at King’s jawline. “You love it.”

“You bet I do.” King cupped the back of Leo’s neck and brought him in for a deep, fiery kiss while he prepped Leo’s hole as quickly and gently as possible. Leo palmed their cocks, his slow glide up and down sweet torture.

King finished prepping Leo and growled. With a chuckle, Leo sat up. He bit down on his bottom lip as he slowly sank down until King was buried deep inside him, and he was seated against King’s groin.

“I love you,” Leo murmured against King’s lips.

“I love you too, baby,” King replied as he took hold of Leo’s slender waist. “You ready for this ride?”

Leo smiled wickedly. “Bring it, soldier.”

As much as Leo tried to keep quiet, the way King was pounding his ass made it impossible. Leo threw his head back as he met each one of King’s thrusts, his fingers digging into King’s shoulders. The sound of their bodies smacking together filled the air, along with their moans, groans, and curses.

Sweat dripped down the side of King’s face as he thrust up into Leo. “Fuck, baby. Oh, god, I’m gonna come.”

“Yes,” Leo gasped, palming his erection and jerking himself off as he bounced on King’s lap, his fair skin flushed pink. King couldn’t resist those wet, kiss-swollen lips, and he pulled Leo close for another kiss as his orgasm slammed into him. His muscles tensed, and he pumped into Leo, his toes curling as he emptied himself inside Leo’s tight heat. Leo cried out as ribbons of come hit King’s chest.

Leo collapsed against him as King finished thrusting, then slowly let himself slip out of Leo. He wrapped his arms around his sweet, beautiful man.

“Thank you, Ward,” Leo murmured, his head on King’s shoulder.

“For what?” King asked, confused.

“For being you, and you’re not allowed to reply anything other than, ‘You’re welcome, sweetheart. I know I’m

awesome,” Leo said, mimicking King’s deep grumble and making King chuckle.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” King said. “I know I’m awesome. You’re awesome, too.”

Leo snickered. He went quiet, and for a moment, King wondered if Leo had fallen asleep.

“My butt’s cold.”

Nope, not asleep.

Leo sat back suddenly and sniffed. “I smell cornbread.”

Definitely not asleep.

King laughed and patted Leo’s hip. “Okay, let’s get cleaned up and get you fed.” Thank goodness the movie room had its own bathroom. Leo grabbed King’s hand and pulled at him, so King planted his feet, not budging. He held back a laugh at Leo’s gasp.

“No! You can’t pull your soldier statue thing. I need you to move before Ace eats all the cornbread.” Leo grabbed King’s hand with both of his and pulled. “King, it’s *Red’s* honey cornbread that he makes in that iron skillet thing, so it’s both crunchy on the edges and soft in the middle. Men have killed for less!”

King chuckled. “Oh, I’m sorry. You want me to move?”

“Yes!” Leo ran around and pushed King from behind. “Why are you a wall of muscle?”

“I thought you loved my muscle.”

“Not when it’s used for evil! Use your powers for good, King. Use it for cornbread!”

King moved suddenly, spinning as Leo yelped and fell forward. He caught Leo under his arms, holding him up to kiss the tip of his nose. “You’re so cute.” He pulled Leo the rest of the way up until he was on his feet. Leo blinked at him. “So you *don’t* want any cornbread?”

Leo squeaked and darted for the bathroom, his cute butt on display. King laughed as he joined him. As Leo cleaned up,

eager to get downstairs, King had a different meal in mind for tonight, and it had nothing to do with cornbread.

CHAPTER THREE

With Santa's help, Leo would give King the best Christmas gift ever! It was a bit of a challenge maneuvering around Jack, what with him at the Ice Castle pretty much all day, every day, but Leo and Santa were making it work.

Jack tended to get lost in what he was doing, and Lucky and Mason were busy fixing the roof, so none of them had any idea Leo was in the Blue Ballroom getting ready for the big day.

"You're doing a lot of thinking in there."

At King's sleepy rumble, Leo poked his face out of the duvet. He'd wrapped himself up in a cocoon sometime before he woke and had just stayed like that because he was all warm and snug. King had his own duvet because they'd learned a long time ago that Leo had a habit of stealing *all* the covers in his sleep and not giving them back. King had tried one night and ended up on the floor.

"Just thinking about Jack," Leo said, which was true.

King opened his eyes and rolled over to face Leo, chuckling. "You look like you're about to emerge a butterfly."

"I'd like to think I have better manners. Caterpillars are very loud eaters. Also, did you know butterflies taste with their feet?"

"That's...weird."

"Right?" Leo snickered. "Not as weird as bush crickets, though. They have ears on their knees."

King blinked at him. “You were saying something about Jack?”

“I’m kinda worried about him.” Leo shimmied over until he was pressed against King, then opened his duvet enough for him to wrap a leg around King’s and lay an arm over King’s chest. *Mmm, comfy.*

“Yeah, we’re all a little worried about him,” King said with a sigh. He covered Leo’s hand with his. “Jack doesn’t see it, but we do. Ever since that mess with Emmett, he’s been working himself into exhaustion, sleeping at the office again, and not taking care of himself.”

Leo frowned. “He’s making Fitz sad, and I don’t like it.”

“I know, baby, but there’s only so much we can do. Jack has to realize what he’s doing, no one can do that for him. I just hope he comes to his senses before it’s too late.”

Too late? “I don’t want to think about that,” Leo murmured. He sniffed, and his eyes watered.

“Leo?”

“I’m fine.”

King gently pushed Leo away enough to look at him, concern in his eyes. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“It never occurred to me that any of the guys could break up. I know that’s silly, but I didn’t think about it until now. What if Fitz and Jack break up?”

“What scares you about that?”

“That Fitz will leave. I don’t want him to leave, King.” Leo loved Jack too, but Jack wasn’t going anywhere, Leo was certain of that, but Fitz?

King ran his fingers through Leo’s hair. “Sweetheart, Jack and Fitz love each other very much, and yeah, sometimes that’s not enough to keep two people together, but you know that Fitz would never leave *you*, right?”

Leo had thought that about a lot of people in his life, but they’d left anyway.

“Leo, look at me.”

How was King so sure? Leo lifted his chin and met King’s gaze.

“Fitz loves you, and he’s a good man. He would never abandon you. None of them would. You mean too much to everyone. Would you abandon any of them?”

Leo stared at him. “What? Of course not! Never ever. I’d sooner give up my fish-shaped snacks for all time!”

“See? That’s how they feel about you.”

Leo smiled and kissed King, his heart feeling better. “Thank you.”

“Any time. Now, do you want to go downstairs for breakfast, or do you want breakfast in bed?”

“I want to go downstairs.” Today was a good day, and he was excited. Plus, there was a new puppy! Ace had been wanting a dog for so long, Leo was glad things had settled down enough for him and Colton to finally bring one into the family.

They got dressed and headed downstairs. Jack had already left, and Lucky and Mason were on their way out. Everyone greeted him when he came into the kitchen, and he smiled brightly. Walking over to Fitz, he threw his arms around him and hugged him. Then he stepped back and smiled up at him.

“I appreciate you.”

Fitz laughed softly. “Aw, thank you, sweetie. I appreciate you, too.”

After playing with Cocoa for a few minutes—those ears!—and having some of Red’s yummy French toast, it was time to get to it. Leo had a lot to do today, but first, he had to help decorate Winterhaven.

Leo grabbed his knitted pom-pom hat and pulled it on. He couldn’t believe Santa had made it. It was awesome, and he loved the giant fluffy ball on top.

They parked across the street from the Ice Castle, which made carrying all the bags easier. The dogs had almost as many bags as Bibi did when she traveled with the girls.

“See you later, sweetheart,” King said, kissing him before he went off to help the others work on the main street. Leo joined Fitz and Merry by one of the market stalls. Clara was super organized, thank goodness, so all the decor was sorted in labeled containers. He’d been worried they wouldn’t know what went where.

Festive music played from the speakers on the lampposts around the town square, and everyone got to work. There were a lot of stalls to decorate, but in front of each stall was its corresponding container filled with decor. Fitz fixed Duchess a place in the stall Clara had set up with heaters so she’d be nice and cozy.

“Okay, boys,” Fitz said as he looked through the folder Clara had given him. “It looks like each stall gets one decorated garland along the top of the roof.” He glanced at Leo and Merry. “Why don’t you two hold the garland for me since it’s pretty thick and long.” Fitz gasped. “Oh no!” He scanned the area around him.

Uh oh. Fitz knew exactly what he’d done. There was nothing to do now but wait. It wouldn’t be long.

“What are you looking for?” Merry whispered.

Fitz opened his mouth to reply when Ace popped up from behind the stall, scaring the life out of him.

“That’s what he said!”

Fitz closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “*He* is what I was looking for.” Fitz opened his eyes and glared at Ace. “Anston Sharpe, I am going to wrap this garland around your neck and strangle you with it!”

Ace’s laugh filled the air as he ran off.

Merry looked to Leo. “Where did he come from? Was he hiding back there waiting for someone to say that?”

“It’s Ace. We don’t ask questions,” Leo said, shaking his head. “He defies logic and science.” In the beginning, Leo had tried to figure out how Ace did a lot of what he did, but the more he got to know Ace, the more he realized logic could not be applied, so he decided it was best to accept the anomaly that was Anston Sharpe.

“Now that he’s gone, we can get to work,” Fitz muttered. Ladder set up, Fitz took hold of one end of the garland and started attaching it to the special hooks on the wood. “What are you up to?” he asked Leo.

Leo blinked up at him. He lifted the garland in his hand. “Holding garland. Also, did you know there’s a city in Texas called Garland? I wonder if it gets confusing at Christmastime.” Though probably not as confusing as the town named Santa Claus. His favorite so far was Boar Tush. Someone must have really liked the look of a pig’s butt. Or they disapproved of Boars, but why name a whole town after someone’s opinion of Boars?

Fitz glanced down at him. “Good question. However, I was referring to your recent escapades.”

“I can’t tell you.” Leo’s cheeks flushed. He really wanted to tell Fitz because out of everyone in their family, Fitz would be the most excited. Fitz loved love. But then Ace would suspect something and find a way to get it out of Fitz, who would then feel bad about spilling the jelly beans, and Leo didn’t want to put Fitz in that kind of position. “I’m sorry. It’s a secret.”

“Does it have to do with King?”

“Yes.” In fact, without King, it couldn’t happen.

“Well, just ask for help if you need it, okay?”

“Of course,” Leo replied, beaming brightly. Speaking of marriage.... “So Colton told Ace, who told Lucky, who told Mason, who told Red, who told Laz, who told Gio, who told Joker, who told me that Colton asked Jack if he ever thought of proposing.”

“*What?*” Fitz turned quickly and lost his balance. He yelped and flailed his arms as he fell back, but Leo didn’t intervene because Noel was already there. “Noel?”

“Careful, Fitz.” Noel placed Fitz on his feet. He handed Fitz his fallen hat and earmuffs. “Here.”

The two of them talked about something, but Leo got distracted by the garland. It was really pretty. He’d made the right choice with the white frosted flower garland. Hmm, he’d need to pick up some white hooks from the hardware store. It had taken him some time to choose the color scheme, but in the end, he’d gone with winter white and a blue that reminded Leo of King’s eyes.

Merry moving caught Leo’s attention, and he looked up just as Fitz turned around, jumping with a start. He put a hand to his chest.

“Merry, you scared me.”

“You’re having dinner with him?” Merry asked.

Dinner? Fitz was having dinner with Noel? Weird.

“Yes, but we’re—”

“I need to go.” Merry ran off before Fitz could say anything else.

“What just happened?” Fitz asked, confused.

Leo frowned. “You accepted dinner with the man he has a crush on.” He turned to Fitz, puzzled. “Why?”

“I accepted because I’m fairly certain Noel wants to talk about Merry, and from the looks of it, I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

Oh, that made sense. Leo liked Merry. He was really nice. The other day, he’d brought Leo a fish-shaped chocolate chip cookie the size of his head, and it was *delicious*. He hoped things worked out for Merry and Noel. They seemed to really like each other. Leo understood the whole short-circuiting around your crush thing. He’d done that a lot when he’d first met King. Well, if anyone could help them, it was Fitz.

Leo sent a quick text to Santa to confirm they were still on for later. He got a thumbs up and a Santa emoji in return, which made Leo snicker. As soon as they'd finished for the day, Leo hurried off to the Ice Castle.

Santa had told him to use the back entrance of the Ice Castle so no one would see him coming and going. Good thing, too, because he could hear several of the guys talking. Leo was very careful when he closed the door and made sure to take a peek down the hall before he snuck toward the Blue Ballroom. Leo tapped on the door, it quickly cracked open, and he darted inside.

“Hi, Santa,” Leo said cheerfully. “Operation King’s Christmas continues.”

Santa—or rather Christopher—chuckled quietly, his blue eyes sparkling. Leo had called him Santa the first time they met by mistake, but Christopher said he was so used to it that he didn’t mind if Leo continued to call him Santa. At this time of year especially, he kind of was Santa.

“Are you sure Clara doesn’t mind you helping me like this?” Leo asked. “When we came up with the idea, I didn’t think you would spend so much of your time helping me.”

“Clara and I are so excited for you. She doesn’t mind my helping at all. In fact, she wishes she could be here to help.” He winked at Leo. “Christmas gifts are my specialty.”

Leo laughed softly. “I guess they are.” He removed his mittens, hat, and scarf. “There’s still so much to do, and the tech equipment hasn’t come in. Do you think we’ll get it done in time?” He placed his coat on the chair by the wall. He’d never put together a wedding before, and if it hadn’t been for Clara and Santa’s help, he doubted he would have been able to pull it off, at least not without bringing his family in on the secret.

Clara had helped him with a color scheme. She also helped him pick out all the garland, flowers, and decor. Some of it had come from the next town over, and since not everything was Christmas decor and they didn’t require bulk quantities, it

meant everything was in stock. Santa just had to drive over to pick it up.

So far, Santa had managed to avoid Leo's family. Clara had suggested it. According to her, her husband was terrible at keeping secrets. Mostly because he got so excited that he'd forget it was a secret.

"Oh, Clara sent over some snacks for us," Santa said, removing Tupperware from a large bag.

Leo hurried over and gasped. "She made more fish-shaped Rice Krispies Treats!" He took one and bit into the gooey, chewy yumminess. Clara had found out about his love of fish-shaped snacks, and since he and Santa had started working in the Blue Ballroom, she made and packed lots of delicious snacks for them—all cut, shaped, or decorated to look like certain cute smiley fishes. "She's so awesome."

"She is," Santa agreed with a smile. "Now, where will the screens go?" he asked as he picked up a fish-shaped sugar cookie.

"On the outside of the aisles along the walls so no one will trip. We'll angle them toward the front."

"Have you told them?"

"Sort of? I told them that on Christmas Eve something really special and important was going to happen, and that I needed them to be available for a video call."

Santa smiled at him. "And I bet they'll all be there."

"I hope so."

"They will," Santa assured him. "Something tells me you mean a lot to them."

Leo couldn't help his big smile. "King said something similar earlier. Do you think he's going to like it? He's not the kind of person to get mad, but what if he's disappointed I did everything without his input? Or that I picked the time and place?"

"Leo, from what you've told me about King, and from what Clara has seen of him with you, he's clearly a good man

who loves you. I think your gift is going to make him very happy. Don't second guess yourself."

Santa was right. Leo needed to stop doubting himself when it came to King. They'd been together almost five years now. He was so very lucky to have found someone like King. Well, more like King had found him.

"Did I tell you how we met?" Leo asked as he helped Santa finish setting up the chairs. Santa shook his head. "Oh, you'll like this. It involves a top-secret underground government black site—which is about all I can tell you about that part—my favorite fishy crackers, chaos, betrayal, bad guys, and King kicking butt."

Santa blinked at him. "Sounds...intense."

"And that was all *before* a helicopter landed on the roof of my apartment building! So, buckle up, Santa. You're about to find out what happens when you fall in love with one of the Kings."

CHAPTER FOUR

“This amuses you, doesn’t it?” Leo asked as he hung the wreath on the lamppost hook. “You know, most people just use a ladder.”

King chuckled and lowered Leo back down onto his feet, the double pom-poms on his red knitted hat tickled King’s nose on the way down. Where was he getting these hats from? A new one seemed to appear every day. The only logical explanation was “Santa”. King turned Leo so he could kiss him. It was quick and sweet.

“It does amuse me, yes. Also, this way is much quicker. We’re saving time. The math says so.” He laughed at Leo’s arched eyebrow. “Am I wrong?”

“Don’t be smug,” Leo said, making King laugh. He was so damned cute, and King loved Leo’s reactions when he teased him. No one was as expressive, whether he was simply muttering something to himself or running through a park shouting about killer snails.

“You two make my teeth hurt,” Joker said as he grabbed another roll of lights from the large plastic bin.

Red snorted. “Please. We’ve all noticed the way you are with Gio when you think no one sees you.”

Joker was not impressed. “First, I’m disturbed you all watch me. Second, you’re supposed to be the nice one.”

They laughed, and King handed Leo another wreath, lifting him so he could hang it before they moved on to the next lamppost. Fitz appeared, looking far more cheerful and

lighter than he had in a while. He even had a little spring in his step, and King was glad. From what he'd surmised, it looked like Fitz and Jack had finally worked things out.

"I don't know what you did," Joker said as he wrapped lights around the garland on the lamppost. "But Jack wasn't an asshole this morning. He was all smiley and in a good mood. He even apologized for being a dick yesterday."

King frowned at the reminder. The two often argued and rough-housed like brothers, but they rarely got into a real fight. From what he'd heard, Jack had been out of line, so it surprised no one that Joker had lost his shit. Not that Joker needed an excuse to kick someone's ass, but these days he was somewhat calmer, a lot of it down to Gio's influence. The man had a calming way about him.

King wasn't thrilled the fight between Jack and Joker happened, but at least it had been enough to snap Jack out of his self-destructive spiral, making him realize what he'd been doing to his family and to the man he loved.

Ace snorted. "Duh, what do you think Fitz did?"

Fitz smacked Ace on the back of the head, and King had to hold back a laugh. Anyone who messed with Fitz did so at their own risk. He might be sweet and cheerful, but he took no nonsense from anyone, not even his family.

"Ow! What? You think we didn't *hear* what you did?"

King hadn't, but then he'd been a little busy himself last night. He squeezed Leo, who looked up at him, eyes wide; if Leo's cheeks hadn't already been pink from the cold, they would have been from blushing.

"We talked," Fitz growled. "And yes, we had sex, but we had a really good talk. He promised to take better care of himself and even talked about making some changes at work so he could work fewer hours."

"Really?" That was news to King. He handed Leo another wreath and lifted him so he could hang it off the hook on the lamppost. "What kind of changes?" He'd been having conversations with the guys about opening a Tampa branch of

Four Kings Security and then pulling back on their schedules once things settled down. They'd worked damned hard to build something amazing, it was time to enjoy the lives they'd created for themselves.

"Promoting Maury," Fitz replied, fixing Leo's hat when King put him down. "And hiring another person for the team."

That was great news! King had been after Jack for so long to bring someone else in, and Maury deserved the promotion. He'd been at Jack's side since they'd opened Four Kings Security. Next to Jack, no one was as skilled as Maury. It was about time.

"Finally," Joker said, shaking his head. He climbed back down the ladder. "Stubborn asshole."

Red nodded. "I'm glad he's finally listening to reason. We were all real worried."

King nodded, wrapping an arm around Leo. His sweetheart was probably relieved. Leo had gotten really close to Fitz over the years, and it broke King's heart knowing deep down Leo feared his dear friend would leave him like so many others had. Those people hadn't deserved Leo.

"Well, I need to go," Fitz chirped. "Jack asked me to help him fix the Ice Castle."

"He did?" Joker gaped at him. "Seriously? He...asked for help?"

What? Jack? Their Jack? Well, damn. Usually, the only person Jack asked for help was Leo. Then again, Leo's skills where computers were concerned were so above everyone else's that it probably didn't even seem like asking for help as far as Jack was concerned, which made more sense. Yeah, his brothers were stubborn.

"Yep." Fitz kissed Joker's cheek. "See you later."

Ace stared after Fitz. "Holy shit." He turned back to them. "Did you hear that? You all heard what I did?"

"Wow." Red smiled warmly. "Fitz has been a good influence on him."

Joker snorted. “Tell me about it. He’s been such a grump lately.”

King moved his gaze to Ace and shook his head. *Don’t do it, man.* Of course, this was Ace, so knowing what came next, King just sighed and turned to Leo when Ace opened his mouth.

“If he’s the grump, what does that make you?”

Ace might be fast, but Joker was faster, which was why Ace was on the floor hog-tied in Christmas lights before Leo finished hanging the next wreath.

Joker stood over Ace, his hands planted on his hips and a big grin on his face. “I think he would fit right in at the ornament shop. Maybe someone will take him home and put him on their lawn.”

“Ha ha,” Ace said. “You can let me up now.”

It’s like he didn’t know Joker.

King’s phone buzzed, and he removed it from his pocket. It was a text from Mason. “Great news. Looks like Lucky and Mason finished fixing the roof.”

Everyone cheered. They picked up the plastic bins and headed for the next lamppost. Just a few more to go, and they were done.

“Hey! You can’t leave me here,” Ace called out. “It’s cold!”

King put the wreath bin on the ground just as Ace yelped.

“He’s back! King, he’s returned to finish me off!”

What the—? King turned, and sure enough, there was a red squirrel perched on the wreath hung from the lamppost above Ace. It wasn’t the same squirrel from the tree incident, but a red squirrel nonetheless. Only Ace.

Leo blinked at King. “What is it with Ace and squirrels?”

“Oh, it’s not just squirrels,” King replied with a sigh. If only.

Red nodded somberly. “We were doing a gig at a county fair one year, and he got chased by an alpaca and a rabbit.”

“The alpaca I get, but a rabbit?” Leo frowned. “How do you get chased by a rabbit? Can’t you just pick it up?”

Joker snickered. “Every time he tried, the rabbit bit and kicked at him. Wherever he went, there was the rabbit. Funniest shit I’ve ever seen.”

“He’s coming closer,” Ace shrieked. “Tell Colton I died valiantly! I fought until my last breath! Leo, you tell Chip to avenge me!”

King turned to Joker, who met his gaze. *Oh boy. Here we go.* Despite his deadpan expression, the wicked twinkle in Joker’s eyes told King a squirrel showing up was not a coincidence. “What did you do?”

“Who says I did anything?”

King arched an eyebrow at him, and the corner of Joker’s lips twitched. Oh, good god.

“I might have put a few peanuts in his coat pockets.”

Leo eyed him. “I don’t think that would be enough to get a squirrel to show up and follow him.”

Joker blinked. “I might have also been dropping peanuts since we left the SUV by the tree lot. You know, where the squirrel feeders are.”

“You asshole,” Ace shouted. “This is your doing? If I wasn’t tied up, I would be over there kicking your ass!”

Joker snorted. “I’m so scared. Oh, wait. No, I’m not. Because, unlike you, I’ve never been bested by a small woodland creature.”

“Okay, it’s freezing out here,” King said. “Let’s get this finished. I want to take my fiancé for some hot cocoa and cookies at the café. Go untie him.”

“Ooh, that sounds perfect!” Leo joined a grumbling Joker in freeing Ace. He also removed all the nuts from Ace’s pockets and dropped them into the snow for the squirrel.

Ace scrambled to his feet and glared at Joker. “Next time, I’m going to tie *you* up in lights and put you out on the curb with a sign that says, ‘free Christmas tree topper.’ I hear gnomes are very popular this Christmas.”

As Joker and Ace did whatever it was they did, King and Leo finished the last of the wreaths. Not long after they’d finished, Jack texted to let them know the power had been restored to the Ice Castle.

“That’s great news,” Leo said excitedly. “That means once the interior is done, the town can have its festivities as planned. I bet Clara will want to get started right away. We’re so close to being done! I can’t believe how amazing everything looks.”

Red was heading back to the cabin, so he took the empty bins with him while Joker and Ace went off to find their men. King walked down the street toward Mugs and Kisses, Leo’s mittened hand in his. It might be cold as hell, but Leo was right. Everything looked beautiful. The sky was blue, the sound of faint Christmas music filled the air, and all around them, the town was bursting with Christmas decorations.

“I’m glad you wanted to come here,” King said. “You know, I was thinking that with all the guys pulling back on their hours, maybe I should do the same.”

Leo stopped walking and blinked up at him. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah. I mean, being here with you, with our family, it’s been memorable. I’m sorry we haven’t taken more trips together. Maybe Jack isn’t the only one who had his head where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Leo started walking again. “The thing about us and the kind of work we do is that we can use it as a means to escape, a way to avoid facing the hard stuff.”

“How so?” He knew how easy it was for Leo and Jack to get lost in their programming, but the rest of them? They were usually out in the field.

“I think when you first opened Four Kings Security, you used it as a way to avoid the pain you felt from having lost your brothers-in-arms and your parents.”

This time, King was the one who stopped walking. “What?”

Leo turned to him, his eyes filled with heartache for King. “You all were still healing when you started the company, and on top of having lost your brothers, you had lost your parents as well. I know you got help, just like the rest of the guys, but I think throwing yourself into your work made it easier to deal with the hurt. But things are different now. You smile when you talk about them. And since we’ve been living together, you try really hard not to work too many hours if you can help it.”

“Because I want to be home with you. I had no idea you’d been thinking about this.”

“I spend most of my time thinking,” Leo said, smiling warmly at King.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” King asked as they started walking again.

“Because I’m not going to tell you how to do your job, Ward. If I miss you, I tell you, don’t I?”

“True.” And he had on several occasions. “I guess I never thought about it like that. Before I met you, I didn’t really have a reason not to work extra hours. I enjoy what I do, and there’s always work to be done. I’ve always liked to keep busy. Now, I like to be busy with you.” He smiled and kissed the back of Leo’s mitten, making him chuckle.

“I like this idea,” Leo said. “I’d like to come back to Winterhaven at some point.”

“You really like it here, don’t you?”

“Everyone’s been so welcoming.”

“Like Santa?” King teased.

Leo playfully pushed King. “No need to be jealous. You’re the only daddy for me.”

King gasped. “You little shit! I can’t believe you just called me that.”

Leo laughed so hard he had tears in his eyes. The sound was music to King’s ears. He took hold of Leo’s arm and pulled him close.

“You know you’re the only one who can get away with that.”

Leo hummed as he leaned against King. “With great power comes great responsibility.”

“That’s right. You must never use your power for evil.” King wrapped his arms around Leo.

“What if I use it to get cookies?” Leo asked, hopeful.

“Okay. But if you’re too full of sugar to eat Red’s dinner, I’m sure Ace would be all too happy to—”

Leo covered King’s mouth with his mittened hand. “Don’t you speak those words. I will *never* not have enough room for Red’s dinner.” Leo narrowed his eyes. “If Ace lays one finger on my honey cornbread, he shall feel my wrath!” He thrust a fist in the air and shook it. “Khaaan!”

“Is that from *Star Wars*?”

Leo dropped his arm and hung his head. “We talked about this.”

“Did we?” King pursed his lips. “Oh yeah. *Star Wars* is the one with Indiana Jones.” He held back a laugh as Leo raised his head.

“Really?”

“But am I wrong?”

They both stood there looking at each other before Leo bent over and grabbed a bunch of snow.

“Shit!” King turned and ran down the side of the street—since it had snow—rather than the wet sidewalk. A snowball smacked him in the back of the head. He skidded to a halt and turned. “You little shit!”

Leo thrust a mittened hand out. “Ha! Who says nerds can’t play sports.”

“Oh, so that’s how you want to play it?” King scooped up a handful of snow and started patting it into a ball.

Leo’s eyes went huge. “I don’t think I thought this through.” He grabbed some more snow and quickly made another snowball.

The battle was fierce, yet somehow, Leo ended up hitting King more than King hit Leo, so King decided to take the direct approach. He grabbed some snow and grabbed Leo, only to have Leo accidentally smack his arm. The snow flew right into King’s face. He promptly released Leo.

“Oops.” Leo brushed the snow off King’s face with his mitten, his lips pressed together.

“Go ahead. Laugh. I know you’re about to burst.”

So he did. He laughed. A lot. He was still laughing when they walked into the café.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Everything looks so magical,” Leo said, his mittened hand in King’s as they headed to the small stage at the base of the huge Christmas tree where the rest of their family waited.

There was something about nighttime that made everything feel extra Christmassy. It was weird. No matter how decorated it was during the day, it didn’t feel as Christmassy to him as it did at night. Probably because of all the twinkling lights. Well, that and the smell of popcorn, cookies, cinnamon, peppermint, and roasted chestnuts. He’d always wondered what the whole roasting chestnut thing was about. They smelled amazing. He might not want to eat them, but they smelled fantastic!

“It does,” King replied, wrapping his arm around Leo and squeezing him close. “You warm enough?”

“Yep.” It was really cold tonight, but Leo was bundled up nice and toasty. His face was another matter, but he’d manage. He didn’t like the feel of anything covering his face.

The decorating was finished on the main street and in the market square, all that was left was the Ice Castle. With power having been restored, Leo had to be extra careful not to be seen by the others, especially since his family would be there decorating.

Although Leo had been confident Jack could fix the electrical problems, a tiny part of him had been worried. Not because they wouldn’t have been able to have their special day—what with Clara having a fire hazard’s worth of candles at

the ready—but because it would mean their family that wasn't in Winterhaven wouldn't be able to attend, and Leo didn't want that. Now, all he had to do was get the equipment in, set up, and the final step of his plan executed.

“You're really not going to tell me what you've been up to?” King asked, eyeing him.

Leo blinked up at him. “Um...no.”

“Can I at least have a hint?”

“No.”

“Wow. You didn't even think about it.” King shook his head and chuckled.

If only King knew. It was *all* Leo thought about. They were so close to the big day, and with every passing hour, his brain wanted to send him flailing and running around screaming about killer snails. Instead, he kept his thoughts busy with whatever was going on at the moment. It was the only way.

Clara walked onto the stage, and everyone quieted down. She thanked the crowd for joining them at the unveiling to officially kick off the Winterhaven holiday season.

Leo cheered and applauded with everyone else. Then “Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree” came from the speakers lining the stage as the lights on the Christmas tree and everywhere else turned on.

“Wow!” It was beautiful. A thought occurred to him, and he jumped. He spun to face King. “I want to go to New York City.”

King blinked at him. “You do?”

“Not right now, obviously, but one Christmas, we should go to New York City. I want to see the big tree at Rockefeller Center and take a carriage ride through Central Park. I've always seen it in movies, but I've never gone there myself.”

King smiled warmly and kissed him. “Then we'll make it happen.”

“Thank you.” Leo wrapped his arms around King and kissed him as snow flurries started to fall. “It’s snowing.” His smile couldn’t get any bigger, and his heart was so happy and full. This was already the best Christmas he’d ever had, and he hadn’t even married the man of his dreams yet.

“What do you want to do first?” King asked.

Leo looked around. Some of their family were already in line to get ice skates. Fitz had just joined the line, but he looked sad. Scanning the area, Leo spotted Jack on his phone. Oh no. He hoped everything was okay.

“Why do you look like you’re trying to make Jack spontaneously combust?” King murmured.

“No reason.” Leo smiled up at King. “Let’s doggy-sit so everyone can go ice skate, then we’ll get some yummy snacks from the stalls.”

“Lead the way.”

They walked to their family, and Leo stepped up next to Fitz. He smiled brightly. “Let’s hope the squirrels don’t follow Ace onto the ice.”

Fitz smiled, but he was still sad, and Leo wanted to hit Jack in the face with a snowball.

“I’m sorry,” Laz said, wrapping an arm around Fitz and squeezing.

“We can watch Duchess for you while you ice skate,” Leo offered. “We’re doggy-sitting.”

“You don’t want to skate?” Fitz asked Leo.

Leo’s eyes went wide. “Me? On razor-sharp metal blades? No thanks. I’d rather play with Duchess, Chip, Cookie, and Cocoa in the snow. That way, if I fall, I’ll hit something soft.” Spotting Ace and Colton, he ran off, King following him a short time later. They collected the pups and headed to a part of the open field where the snow wasn’t as deep so they could play, especially since Cocoa was all gangly legs he couldn’t seem to control.

Chip and Cookie chased each other, and Duchess wanted none of their shenanigans. She pranced over to Leo and sat with a huff.

“Aw, you don’t want to play?” Leo asked her. Her epic side-eye told him that, no, she did not want to play with those silly boys. “Would you like a . . .” He darted a glance at Cookie and Chip, who were jumping all over each other a good distance away. Cocoa was close by but was currently being outmatched by his own tail. “Treat,” he whispered, barely making a sound.

She jumped to her paws and wagged her fluffy tail, making him chuckle. He reached into his coat pocket when King started laughing.

“Um, Leo.”

“Huh?” Something black moved to his left, and he jumped with a squeak, his heart trying to make a break for it. “Holy crap!”

Chip sat staring at the treat in his hand.

“Where did you come from?” Leo gaped at Chip. “How did you even hear that?”

King motioned to Chip’s ears. “Have you seen the size of those?”

Leo snickered. “Yeah, okay.” He remembered what Joker said, how he should always ask them to do something for their treats, so Leo told them to sit. Chip was already sitting because that was his default setting, thanks to Joker’s training. Then he told them “down,” and all four dropped to the ground, some more delicately than others. Leo praised them and gave them each a treat.

When Leo turned, he looked off in the distance toward the ice rink to check on Fitz, and his heart was happy to see Jack holding Fitz’s hand as they skated. King turned to see what he was looking at.

“Looks like Jack has changed after all.” King turned back to Leo. “You don’t have to set him on fire with your mind.”

Leo snorted. “I would never do such a thing. I might lock him out of his computer though.”

King chuckled and greeted Mason and Lucky as they approached. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey, fellas,” Mason said. “There’s a stall over there called Jingle Paws. They got all kinds of fun stuff for the furry critters here.”

“Ooh! I bet they’ll have extra special tr—Uh, you know.” Spelling treats was out of the question because it didn’t matter how a treat was described, Chip knew. Same with bacon. Oh! He turned to Lucky. “Can you teach me that word in Spanish?”

“I can, but just so you know, he understands it in Spanish, too. That dog understands more languages than most people, especially when you’re talking about something he wants.”

“Curses. Foiled again.”

King opened his mouth, and Leo thrust a finger at him.

“It is not *Star Wars*.” Leo spun and marched off, ignoring his fiancé’s laughter. One of these days, he was going to tie King to the couch and make him watch every pop culture film ever made! Though he was almost certain King had watched some of them and was just messing with him. He had no proof, but one of these days, he’d find out.

The Jingle Paws stall was even more amazing than he’d imagined. The dog puns were real, and he *loved* it. He gasped and showed King a stuffed dog toy of a dachshund dressed like Han Solo. “Look! His shirt says ‘Han So Low.’” He grinned and waited.

And waited.

King blinked at him. “What?”

“Oh my god, *Ward!*”

King threw back his head and laughed.

“You’re so evil!” Leo smacked him with the dachshund, jumping when it squeaked. That only made King laugh harder,

and the dogs crowded them. He promptly put it back, then glared at King over his shoulder. “Evil.”

Ignoring his handsome, pop-culture-averse fiancé, Leo turned back to the stall and picked out some treats for the dogs. He turned and laughed at the four excited wiggly butts lined up in a row in front of him, tails wagging. Leo held out his palm, and three of them sat back on their haunches and waved their front paws. With a laugh, Leo gave each of them a treat. Cocoa was still learning, so Leo told him “Down,” praising him and giving him a treat when he did.

After some more training and treats, Red and Laz picked up Duchess. A short time later, everyone else collected their fur babies, leaving King and Leo to stroll through the market square. He was about to tell King that he was ready to go back to the cabin when he spotted something amazing at one of the stalls. Spinning, he pointed behind King.

“I need you to go look at the Gnome for the Holidays stall and not turn around for approximately three minutes.”

King eyed him. “That’s a very specific length of time.”

“No peeking.” His fiancé tried to be sneaky by lifting his gaze, and Leo quickly covered King’s eyes. “No cheating by looking at what stalls are around us.”

King’s lips twitched in the corners. “Okay.” He turned, his eyes closed, and Leo held back a dreamy sigh.

“I love you, Ward.”

“I love you, too,” King replied as he headed for the Gnome for the Holidays stall.

Leo darted over to the stall where he’d spotted the perfect addition to his big surprise. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure King wasn’t looking. Not that he thought King would peek. Quickly, he made his purchase, asking the nice gentleman to wrap up the two items for him so King wouldn’t accidentally catch a glimpse. Once he had his purchase, he hurried over to King and beamed brightly.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Leo kissed King’s cheek. “You’re the best.”

King opened his mouth, and Leo narrowed his gaze. Clearing his throat, King nodded. “You’re welcome, sweetheart. I know I’m awesome.”

“That’s right.” Leo wanted King to see himself the way Leo saw him; that he was an amazing man worthy of all the love. Sometimes, they both needed reminding, but they’d gotten a lot better at it over the years. Something caught Leo’s attention and he gasped. He looked up at King, eyes wide. “King, look.” He pointed to one of the gnomes. “It’s dressed like a joker.”

King stared at it, then moved his gaze to Leo. “You wouldn’t.”

“Text Ace to let him know?” Leo blinked innocently. “I would never do such a thing.”

“Yes, you would.”

Leo couldn’t hold his laughter back anymore. He so would.

“You’re such an instigator!” King grabbed him around the waist and lifted him, making him laugh. He carried him a few steps away from the stall before putting him down, shaking his head at Leo.

The temperature dropped, and Leo couldn’t feel his nose anymore. “Okay, I’m ready to go home.”

“Sounds good.” King texted one of the others to let them know they were leaving and taking one of the SUVs. When they got back to the cabin, they were the first ones in.

“It’s so warm!” Leo shoved his hat, gloves, and mittens into his coat pockets and hung it up. His face felt so good! “I can feel my nose again.”

King wrapped his arms around Leo and pressed against him from behind with a hum. “What else can you feel?”

Oh! Oh my. Leo shivered. “I feel something I need to unwrap.”

“Then I suggest you get upstairs before I unwrap you right here.”

With a laugh, Leo darted upstairs, King on his heels. They'd just reached the door when King scooped Leo up, carrying him into the room and kicking the door closed behind him.

"I think you have a carrying fetish," Leo said, his arms around King's neck.

"Is that a thing?" King walked to the bed and dropped Leo onto it, making him laugh when he bounced.

"Wait! I need to put my bag away." Leo opened his nightstand drawer and placed his secret purchase in there. He promptly closed the drawer and lay back down. "Okay."

Wasting no time, King crawled over him and kissed him, his mouth warm and delicious. Leo was so revved up he was practically vibrating.

"I need you inside me, Ward. Like, right now."

They quickly undressed each other, and King grabbed the lube from his nightstand drawer. When he turned back to Leo, Leo turned onto his stomach, and King groaned. Leo loved to feel King's weight on him, his chest pressed to Leo's back as he pounded into him. Oh man, he was so hard.

King poured some lube on his fingers, and Leo spread his legs, his back arched. He fisted the covers as King prepped him. It took forever, and Leo was about to lose it. Okay, it wasn't really taking forever, but he was desperate for his gorgeous fiancé's cock.

"Ward," Leo pleaded, squirming on the bed.

King kneaded Leo's ass before spreading his cheeks, and Leo braced himself. He hissed at the initial breach, his eyes shut tight until King was buried to the hilt, his body covering Leo's.

"You okay, baby?" King asked, kissing Leo's cheek.

"I will be once you start moving."

"So bossy." King chuckled. He wrapped his strong arms around Leo, and Leo held on, his body thrumming with anticipation as King slowly pulled out and then drove back in.

Leo cried out and begged for more. The sound of their bodies smacking together joined Leo's curses and loud moans. He wasn't even attempting to be quiet, and the louder he was, the harder and deeper King fucked him.

"Oh fuck, yes!" Leo dug his fingers into King's arms, his brow beaded with sweat as he panted heavily. "Fuck."

The bed moved beneath them, and Leo thought he might come apart. Come was certainly about to happen.

King nipped Leo's ear, his hips moving wildly as he cursed. "I fucking love you so damned much."

"I love you too, so much," Leo said breathlessly, and it took everything he had not to tell King what he'd been up to. He wanted to marry Ward right now. Maybe not right this second because—"Holy fuck!" King hit that special spot, and Leo saw stars. His toes curled, and he came so hard he thought he might pass out.

King's hoarse cry followed as liquid heat filled Leo. He pumped himself into Leo a few more times before slowly pulling out. Leo felt the wetness between his legs, and he groaned when King slipped a finger between his cheeks, pressing the tip to his wet hole. He cursed under his breath before moving, and Leo felt the gentle kiss on his left butt cheek. Then, King disappeared and returned a heartbeat later to clean him up.

The bed dipped, and Leo opened one eye to find King sitting there holding Leo's pajamas because he knew Leo didn't like to sleep naked. Leo smiled at him.

"You know what the best Christmas present I ever got was?" Leo asked him quietly as he sat up.

"What?" King handed him his pajama bottoms, and Leo pulled them on.

"You."

King's smile stole Leo's breath away. "We did kind of unofficially get together around Christmas, didn't we?"

“We did.” Leo would never forget that day. “You asked me to come home with you for Christmas, and then we had lots of sex. Like, so much sex. *Amazing* sex. In bed, against the wall...” Leo worried his bottom lip and took his shirt from King. “I’d kind of fallen in love with you by then.”

King leaned in and brushed his lips over Leo’s. “Funny, same here.”

“Really?” Leo couldn’t help his dopey grin.

“Yep. I might have been in denial, and it was Ace, of all people, who helped me see through the fog of my own doubts. He takes full credit for our getting together, by the way.” King stood and got dressed in his own pajamas.

Leo snickered. “Of course he does. And how often does he bring it up?”

“Oh, at least once a month.”

“Wait.” Leo barked out a laugh. “Oh, my god, it makes sense now!”

“What does?”

“All the times I’ve heard him say to you, ‘I did that.’ I kept wondering what that was about.”

“Yep.” King climbed into bed under the covers, and Leo did the same. “That’s him taking credit for this.” He turned and pulled Leo close, kissing him.

Leo snickered. His friend was such a dork, and Leo wouldn’t change a thing. As he snuggled close to King, loving the feel of King’s arms around him, the warmth and strength of his body, he knew more than ever that he was making the right decision.

Leopold Kingston.

He really liked the sound of that.

CHAPTER SIX

The next few days were filled with all manner of Winterhaven festivities, from a cookie decorating contest, which, of course, led to Leo attempting to eat his weight in cookies, to decorating Christmas ornaments and cards. By the time they got to the card decorating, Leo had consumed so much sugar that his Christmas card consisted of a round rainbow with a white chocolate button in the middle in place of the moon, followed by him providing a lengthy rambling dissertation of rainbows in space.

Leo disappeared several times to see “Santa,” which Bibi had thought was both adorable and hilarious when King had told her about it during their video call one night. King considered himself a patient man, but this was the first time he’d had to share Leo with a mysterious bearded man while they got up to whatever secret hijinks. Leo had never orchestrated anything so complex, especially without the input of his family. And how had his nosey family not meddled enough to find out what Leo was up to? It was frustrating. But King trusted Leo, and whatever Leo was doing, it clearly meant a lot to him. King would never do anything to ruin that, so he’d have to just suck it up and wait.

Maybe he was just feeling a little grumpy because of what he’d been forced to wear after their Secret Santa gift exchange that morning. Ace was cheating. There was no way he wasn’t. King dropped his gaze to his Christmas sweater and sighed.

“Why is he so weird?”

“Who? Nicolas Cage?” Leo asked. “I don’t know. Aren’t all actors a little weird? Though I guess you could say that about anyone, really.”

“No...I mean, yes, that’s true, but I was referring to Ace. Ace is weird.”

“Oh!” Leo laughed. “Well, that’s not news. He’s also obviously cheating somehow. I mean, it’s not impossible for him to pull your name two years in a row, but it’s statistically unlikely. Can you take this box of garland over to Lucky and Mason?”

“Sure.” King grabbed the box. At least he wasn’t the only one forced to wear his Secret Santa Christmas sweater. He headed across the large ballroom. The place was starting to really come together, and he had to admit, it looked fantastic. The ballroom itself was impressive. They were so close to being done, which meant a big party to celebrate, especially since the town actually had guests, thanks to Gio.

Ace, Gio, Cookie, and Joker walked into the room, and King chuckled when Cookie joined Chip, and the two darted off to play with Leo, who sat on the floor with his laptop. Leo was their favorite person, and King understood. Leo was his favorite person, too.

“Again, I’m going to say I didn’t agree to this,” King grumbled as he walked by. He should have known better than to say anything. Why had he opened his mouth? *Are you new here? What’s wrong with you?* Ace laughed and ran after him. Great. *You brought this on yourself.*

“Hey, King. Nice sweater.”

“Go away,” King growled.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling *Caged in?*”

“If you don’t go away, I’m going to take this sweater off and strangle you with it.” King dropped the box of decor by the pillar Lucky and Mason were working on.

“But, King, the man is a *National Treasure!*”

“I need you to go away.” King turned and narrowed his eyes at Ace. “Now.”

“Right. Going.” Ace hurried off, and King shook his head. How was this the same man who’d taken out a target at twenty-three hundred meters? He headed back to Leo. “How are things looking?”

Leo beamed up at him. “We’re doing great! I sent Colton the updated spreadsheet, and he’s got Joker and Gio working on the rest of the pillars. All that’s left are the windows. Clara’s already making arrangements for the celebration.”

King opened his mouth to reply when Gio yelled. He spun in time to hear the loud crash and see Joker on the floor, tangled in his ladder. Shit! He’d been about to run over when the amount of cursing that came out of Joker’s mouth had him instead turning to gather up anyone who wasn’t family.

“Don’t worry. He’ll be okay. We’ll take care of it,” King promised as he quickly ushered everyone out of the ballroom. They did not need to hear the words coming from his brother. When he was done assuring them everything would be okay, he ran back to his family.

“Don’t say it,” Joker gritted through his teeth.

Shit. Judging from Red’s expression, Joker was about to be on his way to Urgent Care.

“Son of a bitch!”

“What is it?” Gio asked.

“We need to get him to Urgent Care,” Red said gently. “He’s fractured his leg.” He carefully pulled up Joker’s pant leg. “It’s already swelling.”

Leo nodded and ran off, quickly returning with Joker’s coat, scarf, hat, and gloves. He handed the coat to Mason, who handed it to Colton, who slipped one of Joker’s arms into a sleeve while Laz slipped Joker’s other arm into the opposite sleeve. Uh oh. The Boyfriends were about to go into mothering mode.

Leo wrapped Joker's scarf around him, and Fitz put Joker's hat on his head. Maybe King should step in because Joker looked like he was trying really hard not to lose his shit. Thankfully, Gio was all over it, talking quietly to Colton, who nodded and corralled the other Boyfriends, ushering them away from Joker.

King walked to Leo's side and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "He's going to be okay, sweetheart."

Leo nodded, but that didn't mean he'd stop worrying.

"What do you want to do?" Depending on how bad the fracture was, the next step was either arranging surgery, which would mean going to the next town since that's where the hospital was, or the best-case scenario, Joker would get a cast put on his leg.

"We should keep going," Leo said. "If we go back to the cabin, my brain's going to start catastrophizing, and that could spiral into panic attacks, and I'd like to avoid that. Decorating will keep my brain busy until Joker's back at the cabin."

"Sounds good." King kissed the top of Leo's head. "Just tell me what to do. I am at your service." He purposefully lowered his voice, making it sound husky.

Leo blinked up at him. "Oh, you're good. Or should that be evil?" He narrowed his eyes. "I can't decide."

King chuckled. "Well, until you decide, how about you and I finish those pillars?"

"What if you fall?" Leo asked worriedly.

"We'll make sure there's no cord wrapped around the ladder. How about that?"

"Okay. But you'll be extra careful?"

"I promise." He took Leo's hand and led him to the pillar Joker and Gio had been working on. Picking up the garland, he frowned at the metal loop. "This must be why Gio wasn't there with Joker. The hook is bent. I'll grab the pliers." He jogged over to the toolbox and returned a moment later.

Leo still looked worried, which was why King needed to climb the ladder. It would go a long way to putting Leo's mind at ease and showing him that everything with Joker had just been an unfortunate accident. King set the ladder back up, giving it a little shake so Leo could see it was stable. Then he fixed the bent loop and tossed the pliers on the floor next to the pillar.

Climbing the rungs, he fastened the loop over the hook at the top of the pillar and then looked down at Leo, who was watching intently. "Okay, start wrapping it around."

Seeming to snap himself out of the beginnings of an anxiety spiral, Leo grabbed the garland and started walking around the pillar with it. King descended the ladder, then moved it out of the way so they could finish wrapping the garland and fixing the spacing. The way Leo's shoulders visibly relaxed had King breathing a sigh of relief. His sweetheart was such a worrier.

They continued to work on the pillars until a group text came through from Red. "It's good news," King told Leo. "No surgery needed. There is a fracture, so he'll have to be in a cast for a few weeks. They're on the way back to the cabin."

"Should we go?" Leo asked.

"We can, but if you're wanting to see Joker, Gio will probably talk him into spending the night resting in their room."

"You're right." Leo let out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad he's okay. Let's finish up." He had a determined look on his face, so King followed his lead, and by dinner, they were done. The ballroom looked incredible and just in time. Christmas Eve was almost upon them.

That night, Leo had been bursting to check in on Joker, but considering the number of times Ace came running back downstairs, he decided that maybe it was best to wait until tomorrow.

With the Ice Castle main ballroom decorated and the town filled with guests, Clara had sent out invites announcing a big Christmas party to celebrate. Everything was now in full swing, and not a single member of the family was surprised that everyone at the party wanted to talk to Gio.

King had worked with plenty of wealthy people over the years, and although a select few had been down to earth, none of them came close to Gio and Colton. King couldn't have been happier for his brothers to have found such good men, even if he had been furious with Ace at the time. He took a sip of his drink and glanced down at Leo, expecting him to be on his phone, considering how quiet he was. Nope. Not on his phone.

"You have that look on your face again," King said, holding back a smile. His sweetheart was so cute when he was trying to disintegrate someone with his mind.

"Don't get me wrong, I think it's amazing that Gio was able to both help Winterhaven and thank his volunteers, but I'm pretty sure the invite didn't include an offer of getting into his pants, which is clearly what she's trying to do."

From the moment Mariam had walked into the ballroom, spotted Gio, squealed, and threw herself at him so he could catch her, Leo had bristled and hissed like a feral kitten ready to sink his claws into her.

"Maybe she's just being affectionate?"

Leo turned, his eyebrows up near his hairline. It took a lot for King not to laugh. "Affectionate? Really? I'm affectionate with Fitz, but you don't see me jiggling my assets in his face, do you?"

King barked out a laugh. Okay, he couldn't anymore. "Jiggling your assets?"

Leo thrust his hands down at his crotch and moved his hips. "My assets. Though I suppose my bum is also an asset." He looked over his shoulder at his butt. "It's a cute and perky asset, too."

King hummed. "Oh yes, it is."

“My point is, if she thinks she can tempt Gio away from the love of his life, she is poorly mistaken.” He narrowed his eyes again. “I wonder what her credit score is.”

“Leo,” King warned. “You are not messing with her credit score.”

“But King, look at the way she’s grabbing onto his arm! She can bounce back from a three-fifty. She’s young.”

“Wow, a whole three-fifty? Why not three hundred?”

“Well, I mean, I could, but I was trying to be the bigger person.”

King laughed. “Yeah, no.”

With a huff, Leo folded his arms over his chest. “Fine.” He eyed King and opened his mouth, but King shook his head.

“You’re not messing with her tax returns either.”

“Ugh, fine. Can I at least change her online status to ‘In a complicated relationship with my bra’?”

King had to put a fist to his mouth so he wouldn’t laugh. Damn, he loved Leo so much. When he was confident he wouldn’t burst into laughter, he addressed Leo. “How about we let Gio and Joker manage their own relationship?”

Leo stared at him and then started laughing. He doubled over and wiped a tear from his eye. “Ooh, boy. That’s a good one, King. Let them manage their own relationship.” He snickered.

King was about to tell Leo he was serious when Joker stormed out of the room. Well, not stormed, because he was on crutches, but he left as quickly as he was capable of at the moment. He’d looked really upset, which rarely happened with their explosive brother.

“Oh no.” Leo looked up at King. “We have to do something, King.”

“Gio will go after him, sweetheart. You’ll see.” Just as he said the words, Gio said something to Mariam—he clearly was *not* happy—and ran off after Joker. Leo let out a sigh of relief.

“I have a feeling Mariam’s not going to be trying anything else with Gio.”

“Good. She knew he was in a relationship. Who does that?”

“I have an idea,” King said, bringing Leo into his arms.

“All I Want for Christmas,” sung by Michael Bublé, came through the speakers, and King smiled.

“How about you dance with me?”

Leo blinked up at him, and a sweet smile spread across his face. “Really?”

“Yep. Because you’re definitely all *I* want for Christmas.”

Leo threw his arms around King’s neck and kissed him. It was quick and sweet, but King felt it down to his soul. He took Leo’s hand and led him to the floor, pulling him into his arms as he started to sway. Leo’s smile was the most beautiful he’d ever seen, and the lyrics to the song couldn’t be more spot on. With Leo here in his arms, he was the happiest, luckiest man in the world.

Leo rested his head against King’s chest, and King closed his eyes as he let his cheek rest against Leo’s tousled hair. He didn’t know what he’d done in his life to deserve this amazing man, but he was grateful.

As they danced, Gio and Joker returned, and soon after, the two were on the dance floor in each other’s arms.

“See?” King said softly. “We have to have faith in the ones we love.”

Leo smiled warmly at him. “You’re right. I always have faith in you, Ward.”

The words meant everything to King because he knew Leo meant them. He might not say the words, but Leo was *his* Christmas wish come true, which was why this time of year was even more special. Some day soon, he’d be dancing like this with his husband, and King couldn’t wait. Maybe when they got back, he’d sit down with Leo and work out a date.

For now, nothing could beat this moment right here.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Don't be nervous. It was fine. Everything was *fine*. So he was getting married tomorrow. Nothing to see here. Okay, everything to see here, but no need to freak out. At least, that's what he kept telling himself as he loaded the equipment into the SUV. This was it, the final step. Once the equipment was set up, the Blue Ballroom would be ready.

From the moment Leo woke this morning, King knew something was up, and because Leo was off, King was off, but because King was amazing and trusted Leo, he didn't push. It went a long way to easing Leo's nerves.

"This is the last of it," Jack said.

"Perfect." They headed back in, and Leo couldn't help but smile at Gio's uncontrollable laughter.

"You shit! You're enjoying this," Joker said, and Leo could tell Joker was trying hard not to laugh.

In the time Leo had been loading the SUV, a blanket had appeared on Joker's lap, a pillow under his leg, and a cup of hot cocoa in his hand. Ah, so that's what Gio was laughing about. The Boyfriend Collective struck again. Hmm, now that he thought about it, the name didn't really fit anymore. They weren't all boyfriends. But then The Boyfriend and Husband Collective wasn't exactly catchy. *Annnnd* he was back to thinking about the wedding. He really needed to *not* think about the wedding but also finish setting up for the wedding. A conundrum indeed.

“Unbelievable,” Joker grumbled. “And this is the man I plan to marry one day. Ass.”

Whaaaaaat? Leo’s jaw all but hit the floor. Had Joker just said he planned to *marry* Gio?

“Um,” Ace looked around the room. “You all heard it, right? It wasn’t a hallucination?” He grabbed Colton’s hand and put it to his forehead. “Baby, do I have a fever?”

Did Leo have a fever? He touched his neck under his jaw, then his forehead, just in case. Nope. He was good. Maybe it was nerves. Then again, everyone else seemed to have heard what he did. It wasn’t just him with marriage on the brain.

“Eellogofusciouhipoppokunurious!”

Leo gaped at Ace. Where the hell had *that* come from? More importantly, how did Ace know how to pronounce it?

Joker gasped. “What the fuck just came out of your mouth, Anston? Are you speaking in tongues? Should we call a priest?”

“It’s his newest Scrabble word,” Colton replied calmly. “It means very good.”

Okay, *that* made sense. Ace Googled the weirdest stuff. But then, so did Leo.

Joker put his mug on the coffee table and shifted so he could check on Gio. “Baby? What’s wrong?”

“We should go,” Colton said.

“But—” Ace was shoved toward the kitchen, everyone hurrying after them, including Leo. Just then, they heard Joker shout.

“Holy fucking shitballs!”

Had Joker not realized what he’d said? *Interesting.*

“You know,” Leo said. “Statistically speaking, it makes sense that we’ll have several weddings in the upcoming years, given the length of time in your relationships and the fact you’re all over the median age for men getting married in the US.”

Everyone stared at him.

“What? We’re all over thirty. Well, most of you are over forty, so—”

“Thank you,” Lucky grumbled. “You do not need to remind me. I get enough of that when my mother and tía call.”

“Oh. Right.” Leo moved his gaze to Mason. “Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

Mason grabbed the dish towel off the counter to fan himself. He shook his head. “Good biscuits and gravy. Is it gettin’ hot in here? Red, you leave the oven on?”

“Easy, Cowboy,” Lucky said with a chuckle as he patted Mason’s arm. “No one’s getting—what’s the word? Hitched. No one is getting hitched just yet.”

Well, someone was. Leo.

“Sorry, boy,” Joker said from the living room. “Daddy’s about to get some, so you need to stay.”

“Ugh, I did not need to hear that,” Ace called out.

“Then you shouldn’t have been eavesdropping!”

They left the kitchen as Joker and Gio hurried upstairs. Their days were always off to an interesting start when the family stayed under the same roof.

Leo turned to King. “Can you drive me to the Ice Castle?”

King nodded. “Let me grab my coat.”

They both bundled up and headed to the SUV. The doors were still unlocked, so Leo climbed into the passenger seat while King slid in behind the wheel. On the drive down, King was unusually quiet, a frown on his face.

“Is everything okay?” Leo asked. The last thing he wanted was to upset King or worry him.

King seemed to snap out of it and smiled. “Yeah, sorry. Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. Are you excited?”

“Yep. Nervous too.” *Oops.* Leo swallowed hard. Dang. He hadn’t meant to say that. *Get it together. Not long now.*

King frowned again. “Nervous? Why are you nervous?”

“Well, what if you don’t like what I got you?” Not a lie. Leo was really, *really* nervous about that. It wasn’t every day he got his fiancé a wedding for Christmas.

“Oh, sweetheart, you don’t need to worry about that. I will love whatever you gift me.” King took hold of Leo’s hand and squeezed. “When have I ever not loved what you’ve given me?”

“Even the slingshot monkey?”

King laughed softly. “I got Ace in the back of the head with it. What do you think?”

Leo snorted. “That was an impressive shot. Their living room is big.” The best part was that he’d managed to capture the whole thing on video. “That monkey soared.”

King laughed. “Ace was so confused.”

It had taken Ace several minutes to realize King had been the one wielding the plastic primate projectile. In Ace’s defense, it could have been any one of his brothers, and King was the least likely culprit, especially since he was an expert at keeping a straight face.

“I’m going to be gone most of the day,” Leo said carefully. “Can I call you when I’m done?”

“Of course.” King glanced at Leo. “You’ll call me before if you need me, right?”

Leo smiled warmly. “You know I will.”

“Okay then.”

King seemed to relax, so Leo felt better. He hated to keep anything from King, and a part of him would be relieved when tomorrow rolled around so he didn’t have to have any more secrets from the man he loved.

They pulled up to the Ice Castle, and Noel stood on the sidewalk, his arm around Merry. Leo was so happy the two had finally gotten together.

“They’re going to help me take all the equipment inside,” Leo informed King.

“I’m guessing that means I stay in the car?” King asked.

“Yes.” Leo leaned over the console and kissed King’s cheek. “I love you. Thank you for being so patient.”

“I love you, too, baby,” King replied, taking hold of Leo’s chin and meeting his gaze. “And I will always do the best I can for you.” He kissed Leo, and Leo couldn’t help but melt. With a dreamy sigh, he pulled back and got over the car.

Opening the back of the SUV, Noel and Merry helped him carry everything inside. It took them three trips each because there were so many boxes to carry in. Leo had been extra sneaky and hid the monitors securely inside large, unmarked boxes.

As soon as everything was inside, Leo said goodbye to King. He turned and smiled brightly at Noel and Merry. “Thanks so much, guys. Don’t forget about tomorrow night.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Merry replied cheerfully. “I can’t believe you’ve managed to keep whatever it is you’re doing a secret from everyone. I only knew you were up to something yesterday, and I’m so excited to see what it is!”

Noel nodded his agreement. “Looking forward to it.”

After expressing his thanks again, the two headed off, and Leo hurried back inside. At his knock, Clara opened the doors of the Blue Ballroom. She squealed and clapped her hands.

“Oh, honey. I can’t believe it’s almost time.”

“I’m so nervous,” Leo confided as they started opening boxes and removing all the equipment. He stopped to look around the room, taking it all in, his gaze pausing on the arch at the back of the room. Tears welled in his eyes. “It looks so beautiful.”

Clara wrapped her arm around him and squeezed. “He’s going to be speechless when he sees all this.”

“Hopefully not too speechless,” Leo said with a sniff and a laugh. “I need him to say ‘I do.’”

Clara laughed and patted his cheek. “Let’s get to it then. You tell us what you want us to do. Christopher and I are ready.”

For the next several hours, they carefully moved around the decorated room, setting up four white monitor floor stands on the left side of the room and four on the right.

“Let’s see. One screen for Bibi, Nash, and the girls; one for Saint and Val; one for Ryden; one for Jay; one for Dad; one for Becky and David; one for the Cuban Mama Mafia; and one for Quinn and Spencer. That’s eight screens in total. Yep, they’re all here.”

Leo could hardly get married without the rest of their family. Although he hadn’t told them ahead of time that they’d be attending a wedding, he had told them that he needed them to be ready for a very important event on Christmas Eve night that they wouldn’t want to miss. Thankfully, since it was Christmas Eve, the Cuban Mama Mafia moms were going to be together anyway, making it easier for Leo. He wouldn’t have had enough monitor space otherwise.

They’d just mounted the fourth screen when Leo got a text. He checked his phone and gasped. “Oh no. Juniper is missing.”

“That’s terrible,” Clara said. “Poor Luz must be beside herself.”

“The guys have all gone out to look for her.” He sighed with relief. “Joker’s taking Chip. If anyone can find her, Chip can.” Leo texted King to ask if they needed his help, but King told him not to worry, so he didn’t. He was confident the guys and Chip would find Juniper.

Once the monitors were mounted, he connected all the cables while Clara wrapped them in white so they wouldn’t ruin the whole Winter Wonderland effect. The monitors themselves were white, so by the time everything was set up, all you could see was the screens. It looked great.

It didn’t take Leo long to set up the laptop and the control center tucked behind the giant white reindeer in the corner

near the door. He tested it out, and everything was good to go. Holy cow!

They...they were done!

Leo turned to tell Clara and Santa the good news when his phone rang. "It's King. I bet they found Juniper." He answered and put the phone to his ear. "Hi, King."

"Hey, baby. I was just calling to let you know that there was a bit of an incident after we found Juniper, but everything is okay now."

"What kind of incident?" Leo asked, his pulse picking up.

"Lucky and Mason were on one of the snowmobiles looking for Juniper when a deer jumped in front of them. Mason swerved to avoid hitting it, and they ended up on an ice pond. The weight of the snowmobile caused the ice to crack, and Lucky fell in."

Leo gasped. Oh god, he was going to be sick.

"But he's okay now," King said quickly. "Cowboy went in after him, and we pulled them out. They went to Urgent Care, and now they're back at the cabin, warm and sleeping off the scare. It's okay, everyone's okay."

Leo nodded, despite knowing King couldn't see him. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing.

"Baby, I'm outside. I thought you might need me."

"Yes," Leo murmured. "I'll be right there." He hung up, and Clara came to stand next to him. She rubbed circles on his back.

"What happened, sweetie?"

Leo told her what happened, and she gasped. "Oh, goodness! That's terrible! Those poor boys. I'm so sorry. I'm so happy they're safe now. Listen, you've already set up everything, and it's good to go. Christopher and I will double-check to make sure it's perfect for tomorrow night. You go home and be with your family."

“Thank you.” Leo hugged her and Santa, who smiled warmly at him. “Thank you so much for everything.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Leo nodded, then hurried outside. King stood on the sidewalk. He’d come knowing Leo would need him. Feeling emotional, Leo didn’t say anything. He just walked up to King and threw his arms around him, burying his face against King’s chest.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” King wrapped his arms around Leo, his cheek against Leo’s hair as he held him tight. “They’re okay.”

“What if they hadn’t been?” Leo said with a sniff, his eyes shut tight in the hopes he wouldn’t cry. He was just tired and anxious, that was all. A thought occurred to him, and he started shaking. “What if *you* had fallen in while pulling them out?”

“Hey, look at me.” King gently moved Leo away. “Open your eyes, sweetheart. Look at me.”

Leo did, his bottom lip trembling.

“I’m here. Right here. There’s no sense in thinking about what could have happened because it didn’t happen, and I’m proof. Right?” King motioned down to himself. “I’m standing right here in front of you. The past is gone. It can’t be changed.”

Logically, Leo knew that, but his heart was in charge right now, and it was all over the place. King cupped Leo’s face and smiled warmly.

“I can’t wait to see what you’ve been working on.”

Leo blinked up at him. “What?”

“Your surprise. I’m looking forward to it. I bet it’s great.”

King was right. The past was gone, it had already happened, and it couldn’t be changed, so he had to think of the future. Tomorrow was the future, their future. Leo smiled. “I think so.”

“Do you need to go back in?” King asked.

Leo shook his head. “Nope. Not tonight. Can we go back to the cabin?” Now more than ever, he was determined to pull off his surprise. First, he wanted to check in on his family and make sure they were okay. “Oh! Poor Ace, he must have been so scared.”

“Something tells me that come tomorrow, when Lucky wakes up, Lucky’s going to be the one who’s scared,” King said, taking Leo’s hand and walking with him to the SUV parked a few feet away.

Leo snickered. Forget the Boyfriend Collective. Ace was about to channel his mother. “Oh no. What are they going to tell their moms?”

“Something tells me they’re either not going to, or they’re going to majorly play down the incident.”

Leo didn’t blame them. Lucky’s and Ace’s moms worried about them enough as it was.

When they got home, Lucky and Mason were in their room, sleeping. Ace lay on the couch with his head in Colton’s lap, asleep as well. The whole ordeal must have really taken it out of him.

By the next morning, everything was back to normal in their family, with the exception of Ace literally hanging onto his cousin in an attempt to take care of him. Leo did his best to act normal.

Tonight was the night.

Oh, sweet Spock. He was getting married.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Leo was nervous. So very, very nervous.

Well, kind of. Maybe he wasn't nervous? This was Ward, after all. Then again, this was a big deal. A huge deal. Not the getting married to Ward part. That part was easy. He loved Ward.

Leo paced across the floor in front of the white arch decorated in snowy garland and white flowers. The reindeer sculptures sparkled like snow, and they made Leo smile. It really did look like a magical Winter Wonderland. Would Ward think so?

“What if he's not ready? What if he was thinking this was going to happen later, like in months or years? What if he gets mad that I picked Christmas Eve? What if he gets upset that you all couldn't be here in person.”

“Leo,” Bibi said from the monitor to his right.

Leo looked up at her, her smile making his heart happy.

“Ward is my brother, and trust me when I tell you, you don't have anything to be worried about. He's going to be so happy.”

“Agreed,” Saint said from one of the other monitors. “We're talking about the guy who made my life flash before my eyes when you got hurt.”

Leo cringed. “Yeah, that's probably not the best example.” King had sort of been at his most rage-y, which was a rare occurrence. Poor Saint.

Val chuckled and kissed Saint's cheek. "I think what Saint is trying to say is that you mean the world to King. It's going to be okay."

Jay sniffed. He fanned his face. "Ugh, I'm already a mess, and the wedding hasn't even started."

Ryden opened his mouth, and Jay narrowed his gaze.

"Zip it, Marine."

"How?" Ryden whispered. "He can't even see me."

Leo chuckled and shook his head. These two. Fitz needed to work his matchmaking magic on them before Jay ended up pushing Ryden off the St. Johns County Ocean Pier.

"Hey, kiddo."

Leo turned to face his dad and sniffed. "Hi, Dad. I'm sorry you guys couldn't be here in person," he said, looking from his dad to his sister and her husband.

"We're here," Becky said, wiping a tear from her eye. "Doesn't matter how. I can't believe my baby brother's about to get married."

David chuckled and ran a hand over Becky's head. "She's been crying since you called to give us the news."

Leo couldn't help his soft laugh. His sister was not a crier, so it said a lot.

"You couldn't have fallen in love with a better man," his father said, making Leo teary all over again. "You two take care of each other."

"We will," Leo promised.

Clara hurried into the room from the back door. "They're outside. Everyone quiet now." She patted Leo's back. "They just figured out none of them sent the texts."

Oooh boy. "Good." He'd worried someone would have said something back at the cabin and the jig would have been up, but they'd been too busy getting ready for what they believed were family photos at the Ice Castle.

When they'd arrived, Leo had snuck off at the first opportunity. Oh! He'd almost forgotten! He spun to Santa. "In my backpack is a little gift bag. There are two tiny figures. Can you pop those onto the top of the cake?"

"You got it." Santa went off to do that, and Leo took his place in front of the arch. He took a quick look around. Had he forgotten anything? Nope. He even remembered the dog beds. There were four fluffy white dog beds in place of four chairs. Okay. Good. They were good.

As soon as Santa had placed the two figures on top of the white and blue three-tiered cake on the table by the wall, Leo took a deep breath and gave Clara a nod.

Here we go.

Was this really happening? Oh boy. Okay. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

Clara opened the door, and Leo smiled. To say Ward was surprised would be an understatement. But it was the tears that appeared in his beautiful man's eyes and his warm laugh that sent Leo's heart pounding.

The dogs ran, darting to him and making him laugh. Their tails wagged so hard their butts were flying. The guys called the dogs, and his furry friends each took a seat in a bed near their humans.

Everyone moved to their seats, which was when they noticed the screens and who was on them. They cheered and waved, greeting their friends and family. The music started, and the room quieted down.

At the end of the aisle stood Ward, looking as handsome as ever in a black suit and royal blue dress shirt. Clara came to stand next to him and held her arm out. King laughed softly, kissed her cheek, and looped her arm with his. Several of their family members were already crying, but Leo did his best to keep it together.

As Clara walked King down the aisle accompanied by slow, instrumental Christmas music, outside the snow started to fall, and Leo's Winter Wonderland wedding was complete.

After all the work putting it together, Leo couldn't believe the time had come. This was really happening.

King reached the arch. He thanked Clara and turned to face Leo. "I can't believe you did all this. For us," he said quietly. "You really are a gift, Leo. *My* gift."

Leo sniffed and took King's hands in his. "I can't wait to be your husband, Ward." He nodded to Santa, who smiled softly.

"Welcome, friends and family. Tonight, we have gathered here to celebrate the union of two remarkable individuals, Leopold de Loughrey and Ward Kingston. Not only are we here to witness the joining of two hearts, but to celebrate the love and support that surrounds Leo and Ward. Today is a testament to the power of love." Santa turned to Leo. "Do you have something you would like to say to Ward?"

Leo nodded. He took a deep breath and met King's gaze. "Ward, from the moment we met, we set off on an incredible adventure together. You started off as my protector and ended up as so much more. Today, in front of the people we love the most, I'm here to make you some promises. I promise to always be your partner in crime, to make you laugh and love you the way you deserve to be loved. Ward, you're not just my hero but the keeper of my heart. Will you join me on this new adventure?" He took a black and silver band from Santa and slipped it onto King's left ring finger.

"Yes," King replied, tears in his eyes.

"Ward?" Santa asked.

King took the matching ring from Santa. "Leo, from the moment we met, I knew in that instant that my life had been forever changed. I promise to love you always, no matter what's going on in our lives. Not just through the good times but through the difficult and messy times. I promise to always be there for you.

"To be your protector, your confidant, your partner in crime, and a shoulder to lean on. I'll continue to cherish the unique quirks that make you Leo. Not just for today but for

every day for the rest of our lives, no matter where this adventure leads us. Leo, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my husband?"

Leo nodded fervently, laughing through a sniff as King slipped the ring onto his finger.

"I now declare you husband and husband. You may kiss."

Everyone jumped to their feet and cheered as Leo threw himself into King's arms, making him laugh before they kissed. Leo's heart was all but ready to burst out of his chest. *They were married!* He kissed King with everything he had until they were forced to come up for air.

King placed Leo on his feet, and they turned to their family, white flower petals showering them as they walked back down the aisle to hug everyone. Fitz hugged Leo tight, his cheeks wet from tears. He whispered in Leo's ear.

"You're amazing. Never forget that. If you do, I'll be there to remind you."

Leo swallowed hard. He hugged Fitz back. It was difficult not to let the tears loose as everyone congratulated him and said such wonderful things. This was his family, and they loved him, all of him. Whether he was having a good day or a terrible day, they loved him and would never leave him. He understood that now.

Once everyone had hugged and congratulated them, Leo and King approached the table with the cake. There would be time for a big party later. He'd discuss it with King. For now, they had cake, champagne, and non-alcoholic sparkling wine for those among them who didn't drink alcohol.

When they got close enough, King let out a bark of laughter. He'd spotted the cake toppers. With joy sparkling in his eyes, he pointed to one.

"Han Solo."

Then the other.

"Spock."

Leo gasped. "You *do* know them!"

“Of course I do, baby. Anything that’s important to you is important to me. I’ve watched all your favorite movies.”

Leo narrowed his eyes. “Evil.” Then he melted. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.” King cocked his head. “What’s that?” He reached over to pick up the picture frame, a soft gasp escaping him. “Where do you get this?”

Leo worried his bottom lip. “I hope it’s okay. I asked Bibi to send me a photo of your parents. That way, they could be here with us.” He pointed to the other frame. “My mom. Dad sent me a picture of her so she could be here, too.”

King carefully placed the frame back on the table, then grabbed Leo and pulled him into a tight embrace. His voice was full of emotion when he whispered, “You never cease to amaze me. Thank you.”

After they cut the cake and everyone had a chance to chat, they said goodnight to their family and friends on screen. Then Leo turned to King.

“I have one more surprise for you. But we have to go outside.”

“Okay.”

Everyone bundled up, and when they got outside the Ice Castle, a big red and gold sleigh with four giant reindeer waited. Two bags sat in the back above an elegantly scripted “Just Married” sign. Leo squeezed King’s hands.

“I know tomorrow is Christmas Day, and we’ll want to be with our family, but tonight, Clara and Christopher have lent us their guest cabin. It’s a short sleigh ride from the lodge.” He stood on his toes and whispered in King’s ear. “We can get an early start on our honeymoon.”

King waved at everyone. “Thanks for coming. See ya tomorrow!”

Everyone laughed, and King helped Leo up into the sleigh. They got under the warm blankets while Santa climbed up

onto the driver's bench. He turned to them and held out a piece of paper and pen.

“Just one more step.”

Leo took the pen and signed the marriage license before handing it to King, who signed it and stilled. He stared at the paper and then looked at Leo.

“You're taking my name?”

Leo beamed brightly at him. “I'm a Kingston now.”

“You're just determined to make me cry, aren't you?” With a laugh, he handed the document back to Santa. With a wink, Santa turned around and got the sleigh moving. Leo waved at their cheering family as the jingling of bells filled the night air.

“I did that,” Ace called out.

Leo and King both laughed. His heart couldn't get any fuller. “Holy cow, we're married!”

King chuckled. “We are.”

They snuggled close together under the warm blankets, kissing and enjoying the ride. It took no time at all to reach the cabin, and when the sleigh stopped outside of it, Leo gasped.

“This is incredible.” It looked like something out of a fairytale or a scene from a Christmas card. He turned to Santa. “Thank you for helping make Operation King's Christmas a success.”

Santa smiled warmly. “You're very welcome. And Congratulations. If you need anything at all, you just let me know.”

“Thank you,” King said, shaking Santa's hand. “I really appreciate everything you've done for us.”

“It was my pleasure.”

As soon as they'd taken their bags and stepped off the sleigh, Santa took the reins and was off, bells jingling. Leo pulled the key to the cabin out of his pocket. The cozy cabin lit up the night with its many Christmas lights lining the roof and

windows. Lush green garland decorated the wood banister, and a wreath with a big red bow hung from the door.

A soft glow came from the windows, and they'd arrive just in time because it started snowing again. Leo unlocked the door when King scooped him up into his arms. He laughed and wrapped his arms around King's neck.

"Good thing I've had lots of practice," King teased, carrying Leo over the threshold. He placed Leo on his feet, grabbed their bags, and locked the door behind them.

They removed all their winterwear, and Leo couldn't help but be in awe of the cozy cabin. It was much smaller than the one their family was staying in, but it was absolutely perfect. Especially since he was here with his husband. He turned, and King lifted him into his arms again.

"Oh my god, Ward," Leo laughed. "Seriously. It's a kink you have, I just know it."

King carried him into a hall that only had three doors, one of which was open and clearly a linen closet, so it was pretty easy to find the master bedroom. Inside, King put Leo down on the bed and kissed him so sweetly that Leo was practically floating. He groaned in protest when King pulled away.

"I'll be right back, just going to get our bags."

While King was grabbing their bags, Leo took the opportunity to get naked and under the covers. When King returned, he placed the bags on the bench at the end of the bed and stilled.

"Are you naked?"

Leo blinked at him. "Are you not?"

With a laugh, King scrambled to get undressed as quickly as possible, then grabbed a packet of lube and got under the covers with him. He pulled Leo close, tickling him in the process.

"Noooo! No tickling," Leo said through a laugh. "I'm trying to be all sexy and smoldering." He tried to look serious and pursed his lips.

King snickered. “Is that what that is? Because you look like you’ve smelled something funny.”

“Well, we can’t all have deep, rumbling, sexy voices that make all the men drop their pants.”

“There’s only one man whose pants I’m interested in dropping, and I just married him.”

“Aw, you say the sweetest things.” Leo chuckled and leaned in, kissing King. It was sweet and slow, and Leo let himself sink into this moment. King rolled him onto his back and followed, their lips still locked together as they caressed each other, touching, feeling, squeezing.

King moved his lips to Leo’s neck, peppering kisses across his skin, and Leo arched his head back, his legs tangled with King’s as they took their time making love, every kiss, every breath, every word made to express how deep their love went.

Leo slipped his fingers into King’s hair, a small gasp escaping him at the feel of the slick lube between his cheeks. They didn’t speak because they didn’t have to. King readied him, and when Leo thought he might break apart from everything he was feeling at that moment, King gently pushed inside him.

“Ward.” The name was a whisper on Leo’s lips as he held King close to him. With every controlled thrust of King’s hips, Leo lost himself in his amazing husband. As the snow fell and the lights twinkled outside the window, and surrounded by the warm glow of the cabin lamps, Leo had never felt so happy.

King palmed Leo’s erection, his strong hand and calloused fingers using Leo’s precome to ease the delicious friction. His hand moved in time with his thrusts, and soon Leo was gasping as he came. King brushed his lips over Leo’s temple, his hoarse cry muffled by Leo’s hair a heartbeat later. Wet heat filled Leo, and he groaned as he held King through his orgasm. When he finished, King stayed where he was, and Leo stroked his fingers through King’s hair, admiring the way his dark wedding band looked in contrast to the blond strands.

With a contented sigh, King lifted his head. He ran his thumb over Leo's cheek and kissed him. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Kingston."

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Kingston," Leo said, returning his kiss. A thought occurred to him. "I've really set the bar high for next Christmas, huh?" King's laugh filled the room, and Leo cherished the sound. He had to remember to thank Colton.

This really had turned out to be the perfect Christmas.



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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *Rebel without a Claus*, the final book in The Kings: A Tremendous Christmas series. I hope you enjoyed Leo and King's holiday hijinks, and if you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon.

Reviews can have a significant impact on a book's visibility on Amazon, so any support you show these fellas would be amazing.



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Thank you again for visiting the Kings Universe. We hope to see you soon!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Cochet is the international bestselling author of the THIRDS series. Born in Cuba and raised in the US, Charlie enjoys the best of both worlds, from her daily Cuban latte to her passion for classic rock.

Currently residing in Central Florida, Charlie is at the beck and call of a highly opinionated sable German Shepherd and a rascally Doxiepoo bent on world domination. When she isn't writing, she can usually be found devouring a book, releasing her creativity through art, or binge watching a new TV series. She runs on coffee, thrives on music, and loves to hear from readers.

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