



SLEIGHT IT AIN'T SO

THE KINGS:
A TREEMENDOUS



BOOK TWO
CHRISTMAS

CHARLIE COCHET

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THE KINGS: A TREEMENDOUS CHRISTMAS

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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

“Incoming!”

Fitz yelped and jumped out of the way just as Cocoa bounded by, his human quickly following in a far less adorable manner. Everyone darted out of the way as Ace slid across the kitchen’s polished wood floor, missing Cocoa’s indoor leash by a hair.

“Someone grab him!”

Since Red had a dish of French toast casserole in his oven-mitted hands and Laz carried multiple bowls of fruits and toppings, Fitz hurried to the other side of the counter and scooped up the two-month-old sable German Shepherd puppy.

“Aw, are you giving your daddy a hard time?” Fitz asked, laughing at Cocoa’s little bark before he licked Fitz’s nose. Hearing Cocoa, Duchess—Fitz’s black standard poodle—came prancing into the kitchen and up to Fitz. She wagged her poufy tail and sniffed at Cocoa. “The baby’s okay,” Fitz promised as he petted his bestest girl.

Duchess’s momma instincts had kicked in from the moment she’d met the sweet puppy. When Cocoa was loose, she followed him around to ensure he didn’t get into mischief, which he always did. He was most certainly Ace’s dog.

The jingling bells of “All I Want for Christmas” filled the kitchen, and Fitz danced with Cocoa in his arms. Duchess barked and pranced around them, drawing Chip’s attention. He darted into the kitchen and bounced around like a giant black bunny, his impressive Belgian Malinois ears completing the

look. Gio walked in, and Cookie, his Golden Retriever, joined the fun. Good thing the luxury cabin's kitchen was huge.

"You're like the Pied Piper of puppies," Ace said, brushing himself off.

Fitz handed Cocoa to his daddy and turned to dance with Duchess, who jumped onto her hind legs and gave him her front paws. She bounced happily with him as he sang along, his heart filled with joy.

During Fitz's time in the fashion industry, the holidays had been about fancy parties, drinking too much, and showing off expensive gifts. It wasn't until he'd become part of this amazing family that he'd understood the holidays were about celebrating with the people he loved who loved him in return just as he was. People who accepted all his sashaying, hair-flipping, and lip-gloss-wearing fabulousness.

There was just one thing missing.

As if conjured by his thoughts, Jack stepped through the kitchen doorway, and Fitz's heart did a happy dance. His boyfriend's black hair was tousled from sleep, his jaw sporting a short beard since he hadn't shaved in a couple of days. Dressed simply in black jeans and a charcoal gray Henley, he was the sexiest thing Fitz had ever seen. Speaking of eyes... Jack's smile reached those gorgeous gray eyes, and they were filled with so much love for Fitz.

Duchess darted over to her other daddy, jumping excitedly as if she hadn't seen Jack in years and not just this morning when they'd left Jack in bed sleeping. Jack gave Duchess lots of love and pets, and Fitz danced his way over, shimmying his shoulders and drawing that sexy, throaty laugh from him.

"Good morning, handsome." Fitz reached for Jack, laughing when Jack took his hand and spun him. He danced with Fitz, ignoring the catcalls from his brothers. The dogs lost their furry minds, running around and barking. When the song ended, Jack dipped Fitz and kissed him. It was sweet and amazing, and Fitz would have jumped his bones if they hadn't had an audience.

“Good morning, sweetheart. I missed waking up to you this morning.” Jack lifted Fitz back onto his feet, and Fitz slipped his arms around Jack’s waist.

“You looked so warm and cozy; I didn’t want to wake you.” He’d been very tempted to stay and snuggle, especially since Jack had gotten in late last night after a long day of trying to fix the shambled mess that was the Ice Castle’s electrics. “Hold on. I’ll make you your latte.”

“Thanks, baby.”

Fitz made Jack his latte like he did every morning. He’d gotten into the routine of making their morning coffees when Jack had moved in with him. Before they’d gotten together, Jack had touched Fitz’s toaster, and it caught fire. Fitz decided not to take any chances with his precious espresso machine.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Red asked as he started serving up breakfast.

“Ooh!” Joker threw his arms up excitedly. “Decorating!”

Gio eyed his boyfriend suspiciously before turning to his best friend. “Colton. Why is he excited about decorating?”

Colton chuckled. “Because today is the day he gets to operate the knuckle boom.”

Well, *that* sounded dirty. Fitz looked to Jack. “What’s a knuckle boom, and should we cover Cocoa’s ears?”

Jack laughed and walked over to kiss Fitz’s cheek. “It’s a boom lift. Like what they use to fix power lines.”

“Oh.” Fitz glanced at Joker, who was far too excited for his own good. “And you think letting your best friend operate said heavy machinery is a good idea?”

Joker snorted. “Better me than Ace.”

Everyone nodded and murmured their agreement.

“Thanks,” Ace grumbled, popping a blueberry in his mouth. “Assholes.” He plucked another from the bowl and handed it to Cocoa, who excitedly munched it.

Joker bounced a blueberry off Ace's head. "Keep saying that word around him, and he's gonna think that's someone's name."

Ace snickered. "It is. *Yours.*"

"I'm helping you train your puppy for free, and that's the thanks I get?" Joker said something in German, and Chip darted over to Ace. He lifted his leg, and Ace yelped, making everyone laugh.

"I'm sorry!" Ace sighed with relief when Joker called Chip off. He narrowed his eyes at his friend. "You will not teach my precious furry boy to pee on someone on command." He seemed to think about it. "Never mind. I retract that request. Might come in handy."

"On that note," Jack said, taking a travel mug from Fitz. "I'm off."

Fitz handed Jack the insulated food bag he'd put together. "Breakfast and snacks."

Everyone *aw'd*, and Jack flipped them off. He kissed Fitz's cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too. Make sure you eat. I'll come by at lunch and bring you food."

Jack waved goodbye to everyone, and Fitz sighed. There went one sexy Italian.

Like every other instance when they were all together, the kitchen was filled with talk and laughter. When they finished breakfast, Lucky and Mason headed to the Ice Castle. Now that the roof supplies and the techy electrical stuff Jack needed had arrived, the guys were working hard to get the building up and running. Without it, Winterhaven was in danger of canceling their holiday festivities.

When Colton had surprised their family with a luxury cabin in the picturesque town of Winterhaven—the perfect Christmas destination—he'd known about the town hall being out of commission due to a terrible snowstorm. He'd had no idea the town hall was the same building as the Ice Castle, where all the town's festivities were held.

“I know I’ve said it before, Colton,” Fitz said, motioning for Duchess to jump into the SUV before him. She looked fabulous in her hooded pink winter coat and matching winter booties. “But what you’re doing is amazing.”

Next to Gio, Colton was one of the most selfless, generous men Fitz had ever known. Colton might not be a philanthropist like Gio, but like his best friend, Colton didn’t hoard his wealth. He loved helping people and, in this instance, was determined to help Winterhaven pull off another successful holiday season, starting with getting all the supplies the town needed shipped in.

“Just doing what I can to help,” Colton replied. “We’re meeting Clara and the rest of the helpers in the town square. We will start there while the lights go up down the main street. Then we’ll all move on to the main street and hopefully the Ice Castle.”

They parked off the town square across the street from the Ice Castle. It made unpacking all the fur baby stuff easier. Each dog had a bag with everything from treats and food to water bowls and blankets.

All of the festivities were held in the Ice Castle, while the townspeople sold their holiday goodies from the market square stalls, all of which had yet to be set up or decorated because who were they going to sell to? All the guests had canceled when told the Ice Castle was out of commission.

“What’s the plan?” Fitz asked as they started walking.

“Joker, Gio, Laz, and King will work on the main streetlights. Noel and some of the other townspeople will be there to help. Ace and I will drop off Cocoa with Amara and Dotty, who are puppy-sitting for us, and then we’ll join Leo, Fitz, Merry, Clara, and some of the other townspeople in decorating the town square and market stalls.”

“How will we know what goes where?” Leo asked worriedly, the giant pom-pom on his red knitted hat making Fitz snicker. It was almost the size of his head. Leo was too freaking adorable.

“All the decor has been sorted and separated into labeled containers. Clara will have folders for everyone with photos of each stall from the previous year and a list of decor for each stall. Each one will be labeled with the corresponding containers’ numbers, making decorating quick and easy.”

When they reached the snow-covered cobblestone square—which was actually round—it was lined with rows and rows of containers, all clearly and neatly labeled. Clara greeted them and handed out folders.

“That stall over there has been set up with drinks and snacks for everyone,” she said. “There are also heaters to warm yourselves and your pups.” She looked at Fitz, who laughed.

“Thank you.”

Considering he wore sweaters in Florida because he ran cold, this weather was a whole other level of frosty for him, despite wearing a thick cashmere sweater, faux fur coat, gloves, a scarf, hat, and earmuffs. There was only so much winter chill he could take. He was already looking forward to decorating inside the Ice Castle once the heating was fixed.

“We’ll break for lunch at noon,” Clara said.

Festive music started playing from the speakers on the lampposts around the town square, and everyone got to work. Fitz set Duchess up in the stall with the heaters where she’d be nice and cozy. If she got too warm, she’d wander to where he was.

Fitz had his folder and his assistant decorators. They had quite the task ahead of them. There were two dozen stalls, all arranged in rows around the giant Christmas tree in the center, which also had to be decorated.

“Okay, boys, it looks like each stall gets one decorated garland along the top of the roof.” He glanced at Leo and Merry. Hmm. Adorable, but if Fitz intended to get through this with as few injuries as possible, it was best he not put either of them up on a ladder. He’d have to do it himself. “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.

"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 Fitz.

"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 took off with a howl of laughter.

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."

"Now that he's gone, we can get to work," Fitz muttered. Thankfully, since the stalls were decorated for various holidays and festivities throughout the year, they were already equipped with hooks and clamps. 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?" Fitz 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."

Fitz glanced down at him. "Good question. However, I was referring to your recent escapades." Over the last few days, Leo had been very cagey. It wasn't like him.

Leo might get lost in his head quite often, but he was never secretive. He'd even disappeared last night and hadn't replied to their texts or answered their calls. After realizing no one in their family had heard from him for hours, they went out in search of him, only to find he'd been sound asleep at the cabin the whole time.

“I can’t tell you.” Leo’s cheeks flushed. “I’m sorry. It’s a secret.”

Fitz paused. Since when did Leo keep secrets? “Does it have to do with King?”

“Yes.”

Interesting. Considering Leo’s interest in “Santa” or rather the town mayor who looked like Santa, Fitz guessed it had something to do with King’s Christmas present. Usually, Leo asked for help. Matters of the heart either came easy, depending on the logic, or didn’t.

Gift-giving was challenging for Leo because it was one of the few times he was conflicted. His head wanted to gift something practical, while his heart wanted something special that would make the other person happy.

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

“Of course,” Leo replied, beaming brightly. “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 so quickly that he lost his balance on the ladder. He yelped and flailed his arms as he fell back, but instead of hitting the snow-covered cobblestone, he stared up at a bearded face. “Noel?”

“Careful, Fitz.” Noel placed Fitz on his feet and, with a sweet smile, handed Fitz his fallen hat and earmuffs. “Here.”

“Thank you.” Fitz fixed his hair, then secured the earmuffs and hat back on his head. “Is everything okay? I thought you were helping with the lights on the main street.”

“I am. I was picking up one of the boxes of lights that went astray. Would you, um....” He glanced at Merry, who stood there unmoving, eyes wide. Merry quickly turned and pretended to inspect the garland in his hands. This had to be one of the most challenging matches Fitz had ever faced. He followed Noel when he motioned to the side.

“Would you have dinner with me tonight?”

Surely, Fitz had heard wrong. “Noel, I’m sorry, I’m—”

Noel took hold of Fitz’s hands. “Please, it’s really important. I want to talk to you about something.”

Oh! Noel probably wanted to talk about a certain cute little blond who had a crush on him but seemed incapable of even making eye contact. Maybe between the two of them, they could devise a way to help ease Merry’s nerves around his handsome lumberjack.

“Um, yes. Okay.”

“Perfect. I’ll meet you at The Jolly Stag at six-thirty?”

“Sure.” Fitz watched Noel walk away. Well, that was certainly an interesting development. He turned and jumped with a start. Why was everyone trying to scare the daylights out of him today? He put a hand to his chest. “Merry, you scared me.”

“You’re having dinner with him?” Merry asked, his eyes filled with hurt.

“Yes, but we’re—”

“I need to go.” Merry spun around and took off before Fitz could utter another word.

“What just happened?” Fitz murmured, confused. Surely Merry didn’t think that Fitz was interested in Noel? Granted, he and Merry had only known each other a short time, and Merry didn’t know Fitz all that well, but still....

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.”

CHAPTER TWO

What a mess.

Jack sighed and pulled out a handful of wires. Thanks to the huge snowstorm that blew through Winterhaven a few weeks ago, the main and sub-panels in the Ice Castle had to be replaced. At first, he'd worried all the wiring needed replacing, but upon further inspection, he was relieved to find that wasn't necessary. He hadn't known what to expect when he'd volunteered to fix the Ice Castle.

It helped that the Ice Castle wasn't a real castle. The building had been constructed of pale gray stone to resemble a castle, but the inside was modern. He wouldn't have been able to fix it otherwise. Restoration of historical properties was not in his skill set, and it would have taken far longer than they had time for with Christmas fast approaching.

The job might not be complicated, but it certainly took time, especially since he'd had to wait for all the replacement parts to be delivered. Thankfully, Colton had managed to call in some favors and get everything shipped quickly. Jack had to get the Ice Castle up and running so the decorating could start. There was only so much that could be done during the short daylight hours, especially without heating.

Jack started with the wires that were capped off already, wrapping red electrical tape around them. That way, when he hooked the wires back up, he didn't accidentally reenergize those when it came time to turn the new panels on. He taped the white 220s black and started unhooking the wires and the mains one at a time. There were *a lot* of cables because the Ice

Castle wasn't simply a building. It had a huge ballroom where the small town hosted all its big events, which meant all kinds of lighting and sound systems were in place.

“Jaaaaack. Hello? Do you even hear me?”

Jack blinked and turned, frowning at Lucky waving from the doorway. How long had he been standing there? “What?”

“I have been calling your name.”

“Sorry, I was focused.”

“I can tell.” Lucky motioned to the long wood table to the side of the room. It was a scrambled mess of wires, fuses, electrical tape, tools, and replacement parts. “Bro, you haven't touched your lunch.”

Shit. How had he not realized Fitz had dropped off his lunch? Surely, Fitz would have said something to him. Then again, Lucky had been calling his name for a while, and he hadn't been aware, so.... “It's fine. I'll take a late lunch.”

Lucky frowned. “Um, it's almost four-thirty.”

“What?” Jack blinked at him. That couldn't be right. He checked his watch. “Holy shit, it is.” Where the hell had the time gone? With the power being off and no heating in the Ice Castle, his lunch was a popsicle. “Guess I'll just wait for dinner then.”

“Speaking of dinner,” Lucky said, rocking on his heels, his hands shoved in his pockets. “I heard Fitz was having dinner with Noel tonight.”

“Is he? That's nice.” Jack grabbed his torque wrench and went back to the panel. Ugh, some of these lugs were rusted. “He's been making friends all over town.” His beautiful and very extroverted boyfriend was an expert at making friends.

“And...this doesn't worry you?”

“Why would it worry me?”

Lucky hummed.

“What? You expect me to be jealous?” Jack snorted. “I don't get jealous.”

“Bullshit,” Lucky said through a scoff. “Everyone gets jealous. It’s a human emotion.” He seemed to recall something. “Didn’t you get jealous when you saw those photos of Fitz and Joker together on the beach? Sí. I remember.”

“You mean the photos a stalker sent me hoping I wouldn’t pursue a relationship with Fitz? There’s no forgetting. I was an asshole for about five seconds, Sacha called me out on it, and it was done. I trust Fitz.” And that incident was ages ago when Fitz had first reentered Jack’s life.

“Fitz is a good man. He would never do anything so awful. What I meant is, are you not worried Noel might try to sweep him off his feet? Noel is handsome. Big. Very rugged. And single.”

Jack fastened the torque wrench to the rusted lug nut and jerked it down. Nothing happened. Damn. “I’m not worried,” he said through his teeth as he gave it another pull. Nope, that wasn’t budging. He hammered it with the butt of the wrench, then gave it another yank. It finally moved. “Ah ha! Wait.” Jack narrowed his gaze at Lucky. “Why are you telling me this?”

Lucky shrugged. “If my boyfriend accepted dinner with another man, I would at least be curious.”

“Are you saying Mason isn’t allowed to eat with anyone other than you?”

Lucky rolled his eyes. “And they say I am dramatic. ¡Santo Cielo! Mason can eat with whoever he wants, but if he were to have *dinner* with a good-looking gay man who is not attached, a man I do not know, then yes, I would be *curious* as to what that man wants. I trust Mason. I do not trust this strange man.”

“Fair point,” Jack muttered.

“So, you are not worried?”

Jack sighed. “No, but clearly you are.” Granted, as Ace would say, his friends had always been meddling meddlers who meddled, but Lucky didn’t usually get involved in Jack’s relationships. Except for that one time Jack’s ex-boyfriend,

Lang, pushed Lucky's motorcycle over, which had marked the end of their relationship. But Lucky got his revenge by hiding a can of sardines under the driver's seat of Lang's Tesla on a ninety-eight-degree day. It sat there for *eight* hours. "What's going on?"

Lucky shrugged. "Nothing."

So believable. "Now who's bullshitting?" Jack slipped the wrench into one of the empty loops on his tool belt and crossed his arms over his chest. "Spit it out, Lucky."

"Okay, so some of us, maybe, are a little worried. Just a little."

"Worried about what? Noel?" Jack tried to think about what his friends could possibly be worried about.

"About you. That maybe you've been...working too much."

This was news to him. "I work the same as everyone else."

"Oh no, you do not. Yes, we work overtime, but you..." Lucky shook his head, his concern catching Jack by surprise. "You work way more hours than we do, Jack. You leave your house super early, and many times, you get home very late. It's been getting worse."

"My job isn't like yours. I can't just stop in the middle of coding something or setting up a new client's security system because my shift is over. You know that." Jack was the head of the Cybersecurity Department at Four Kings Security. His job required him to be behind a computer screen most of the time, working on coding that could take hours. Even when he was out in the field, he was usually inside his surveillance van. Building security systems was not a nine-to-five job. This was nothing new.

"Jack, it's been over *three* years since that mess with your stalker, and instead of hiring someone new, you took all the extra work on yourself. Why? King has told you over and over to hire someone for your team."

"We don't need anyone new. We're fine." His team was fine the way it was. He trusted them. None of them were

secretly psychopaths waiting to kidnap him and kill him and his boyfriend. Besides, he'd gone to therapy for that. He was *fine*.

"You're not fine. And what about Fitz? You think he's fine?" Lucky asked, folding his arms over his chest.

"Fitz is fine," Jack replied through his teeth. "If he wasn't, he would have told me." What the hell? Why was Lucky bringing all this up now? As he'd said, it had been over three years ago. They'd all moved on.

"Maybe he doesn't tell you because he's afraid."

Jack stilled. "Of what? Me?" His mind went back to that horrible night shortly after they'd gotten together when the abusive husband of one of Fitz's clients had shown up at Fitz's house looking for his wife.

The asshole had attacked Fitz, but Jack arrived just in time. He'd dragged the bastard off Fitz and punched him in the face, bloodying him. When the mess was over, Jack had reached for Fitz to help him up, only to have Fitz flinch and recoil from him. It had hurt Jack deeply, seeing Fitz afraid of him simply because of his military history, as if Jack would *ever* hurt him. But they'd talked and worked things out. It didn't mean Jack had forgotten.

Lucky frowned. "What? No. Why would he be afraid of you?"

"He's not." At least, that's what Fitz had assured Jack. He and Fitz had great communication. They talked about everything. If Fitz had any concerns about anything, he would have brought it up. His boyfriend was not one to suffer in silence, and for that, Jack was grateful.

"I'm confused," Lucky said. "Maybe he's afraid of telling you? I don't know. He loves you."

"I know that, and I love him too. This isn't a problem. I appreciate your concern, but my relationship is none of your business."

Lucky threw his arms up. "Fine. Be stubborn. Cabrón. You keep doing what you're doing, and you're going to lose that

amazing man, and he is the best thing that's ever happened to you."

"Don't you have a roof to fix?"

Lucky marched off, cursing in Spanish, fully aware that Jack understood him. Spanish was one of the seven languages Jack spoke fluently. What the hell had gotten into Lucky? He and Fitz were fine. They'd been dating for over three years. One dinner with a guy Fitz had just met wouldn't change that.

Jack returned to the main panel and removed the torque wrench from his belt. Now, all he could think about was Fitz and whether he was fucking things up. Damn it. Freaking Lucky. He removed his phone from his pocket and texted Fitz a heart emoji to let him know Jack was thinking of him. Usually, he quickly received a reply.

Nothing.

"Ridiculous." Jack shook his head at himself. Just because Fitz hadn't responded the second after Jack texted him didn't mean anything. Fitz was busy decorating with the others, and there was a lot to do. Jack would text him again later. Besides, Fitz had promised to bring him dinner. Jack could mention *Lucky's* concerns then.

Jack had most of the wires in the old panel removed when someone walked into the room. He smiled and turned, finding Joker instead of Fitz. His best friend placed a bag on the table.

"Your boyfriend asked me to drop this off."

Jack frowned. "Where's Fitz?"

"On his date," Joker replied.

"Really? You too?" Unbelievable. "Fitz and I are fine. Just because he goes to dinner with a new friend does not mean my relationship is in jeopardy."

"Yeah, no. Of course not."

Jack was not impressed. "Wow. Maybe next time, try and sound like you mean it."

“What do you want me to say? We’ve all noticed. Hell, from the moment you agreed to fix the Ice Castle, you haven’t taken a damned break. We’re supposed to be on vacation.”

Jack motioned to the panel. “So you’re saying I should go have a snowball fight instead of fixing this? I’m pretty sure the whole reason this town is on the verge of canceling Christmas is because of this building and the fact that it has no electricity or heating. Isn’t that why all the guests canceled?”

“Is that why?” Joker asked through a gasp. “I would never have guessed.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Asshole.”

“Whatever. I need to finish this, okay? Thanks for your concern.” Jack returned to work on the panel, unaware of when Joker left. It was *fine*. All he had to do was finish this job, and he’d enjoy the rest of his holiday vacation.

Jack spent the next several hours removing the wires from the old main panel and preparing everything so it was ready for him to install the new one, which meant carefully putting back all the cables where they belonged. He’d just sorted out one set when Ace walked in. Jack hung his head and sighed. For fuck’s sake.

“What?” Jack grumbled.

Ace arched an eyebrow at him. “It’s so lovely to see you too. I just came to tell you that Clara made us eggnog, which, according to the townspeople, is magic. I thought you might want to take a little break and join us.”

“Thanks, but I need to finish this,” Jack replied, returning to the panel. “I’d also get it done faster if you guys stopped interrupting.”

“Okay, Ebenezer. Geez. What is with you lately?”

Jack whirled around and threw his arms up. “What is everyone’s deal? I mean, did you all have a meeting and decide today was the day you were all going to get on my ass?”

“You need food,” Ace said, his frown deep.

“I need to be left alone,” Jack retorted.

Ace held his hands up. “Okay. If that’s what you want.” He turned and headed back to the door. “But don’t forget the reason we’re here to begin with, Jack. Family.”

Jack pressed his lips together and shook his head. He let out a heavy sigh. “Yeah. Okay. Thanks for the invite.” He turned back to the panel, reminding himself that his brothers were concerned because they loved him. “I appreciate it. Really. As soon as I get this done, I’ll be out there with you all, okay?”

“Okay. If you need anything, just let one of us know.” With that, Ace left, and Jack stood there.

Were things really that bad? Had he been losing himself in his work to the point that his brothers all needed to intervene? With a frown, he went back to work. He’d worry about it later. Right now, he had a job to do.

CHAPTER THREE

“Thanks for joining me.”

“You’re welcome.” Fitz smiled at Noel and thanked the waiter for filling his wine glass. He took a sip and hummed. “Oh, this is delicious.” Once the waiter was gone, Fitz picked up his menu. “I’ll be honest, I wasn’t sure what to expect when you asked me to meet you at the pub, but this is beautiful.”

“Clarence, the owner—”

Fitz arched an eyebrow. “Clarence? His name is Clarence?”

Noel chuckled. “He was named after the angel from *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It was his grandmother’s favorite movie.”

“Of course it was,” Fitz snickered. Winterhaven was just full of surprises, one of them being The Jolly Stag. It was a beautiful British-style pub with polished wood, rich tufted seating, and brass accents with windows showcasing stunning gold leaf lettering. Clarence had the interior ready for Christmas with gorgeous garlands and twinkling lights. Classic Christmas songs floated softly from the speakers. “Everything on the menu looks so delicious.”

“You and your boyfriend haven’t eaten here yet? The guys come in pretty regularly.”

Fitz shook his head. “Jack’s been working late trying to get the Ice Castle up and running.”

“Oh.” Noel frowned. “But surely he’s taken breaks?”

Fitz sighed. "I'm lucky if he remembers to eat at all. Jack tends to get lost in his job and has a terrible habit of forgetting everything around him."

"Clara said he was there until after midnight last night."

"That's the thing about Jack. When there's a problem, one he believes is his to solve, he will work on it until it's fixed." To the point of obsession sometimes. It was just the way Jack's mind worked. He *had* to fix the thing, even if it was detrimental to his health. It was the one thing they argued about.

"I'm sorry. That must be difficult."

Fitz shrugged. "I wish we could spend more time together, but I also know what he does is important. It's not something just anyone can do. When he talks to me about what he's been working on, I rarely understand any of it, but I love how smart and talented he is, how passionate he is about what he does." He waved his hand. "Anyway, we're not here to talk about my man. We're here to talk about yours."

Noel's face flushed, and Fitz did a little shimmy, making Noel laugh.

"I was talking to Ace, and—"

"Oh no, honey. That was your first mistake."

Noel laughed. "He's an interesting guy."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Fitz hummed. "Okay." He patted Noel's hand. "What did he say?"

"He said that I should talk to you about a certain someone. That you can help me, and I desperately need your help."

Fitz knew it! Noel's invitation to dinner was about their sweet friend. Speaking of their friend.... "He's avoiding me at the moment."

"What? Why?"

"Because he thinks I'm trying to steal his crush away."

Noel let his head fall back with a groan. He shook his head. "See? Everything I do or say ends with him running

away.”

“I don’t think he runs away because of what you say,” Fitz said, putting in his order for fish and chips with the waiter. “He runs because he’s so smitten with you that he panics.” It was sweet, though Fitz was certain Merry didn’t think so—poor guy.

Noel’s smile was wide. “Really?”

“Yep. So the problem isn’t whether he has feelings for you—he very clearly does—it’s how to help him so he doesn’t short-circuit the second you look at him.” Fitz gave Merry’s dilemma some thought. “I have a few ideas.”

“I’m all ears,” Noel replied. He took a sip of his beer. “From the moment he arrived in town, I was just....” He shook his head, his smile warm. “I was swept away. He’s so beautiful and amazing. But like you said, any time I so much as look at him, he runs off.”

Something occurred to Fitz. “Where have you mostly tried to approach him?”

“Um, around town.”

“What about at the café?” Fitz asked.

Noel cringed. “Well, the last time I was in there, he tripped over something behind the counter and fell. I’m afraid if I go back in there while he’s working a shift, he might hurt himself.”

“How about I talk to him first, then you go in there for coffee. I’ll let you know when. How’s that sound?”

Noel beamed at him. “That would be amazing. Thank you.”

They spent the next couple of hours chatting about the town and how the decorating was going. When they were done, Fitz thanked Noel for inviting him and promised he’d get in touch about Operation Merry Noel.

That night, Fitz had intended to spend some time with Jack, but he fell asleep sometime after eleven, and when he woke the next morning, Jack had already left. After breakfast,

Fitz decided to drop in on his love. Sadly, his boyfriend not taking care of his health while obsessed with a job was not something new. Before he and Fitz got together, the Kings and Joker often had to force Jack to come up for air, including sending him home, especially when he slept in his office or stopped getting enough sleep altogether. Fitz feared Jack was spiraling again.

So far, Jack seemed to be on that path with all the long hours he'd been putting in at work. This time, it felt different, but Jack hadn't mentioned anything, and they talked about everything. Maybe he'd gently bring it up.

Fitz headed down the main street toward the Ice Castle, loving how it looked. They'd managed to get all the garland and lights up, and later, they'd add all the finishing touches. Flurries of snow fell, and somewhere in the distance, Christmas music played. It was such a contrast to Christmas time at home.

Arriving at the Ice Castle, he let himself in through the front door when he heard it.

"I'm fine!"

"You're not fine, asshole!"

Uh-oh. It sounded like Jack and Joker were getting into it. Not an uncommon occurrence. The two fought all the time. They were like brothers, having known each other since high school. They quickly forgot what they'd been fighting about most of the time and carried on as if nothing had happened. Fitz could tell those fights from the serious ones. Those were usually reserved for when one of them was really worried about the other. Heaven forbid they *say* they were worried.

"I bet he doesn't know. You haven't told him, have you."

"It's not a big deal. He doesn't need to know."

Fitz frowned. He and Jack did *not* keep things from each other. There had to be an explanation for whatever Joker was referring to.

"He's your boyfriend and he loves you, you fuck. Of course, he needs to know."

Fitz walked into the room, one eyebrow arched. “What don’t I need to know?”

Jack groaned. “Nothing.”

“Hmm, considering I can hear you two from down the hall, I’d say it sounds like something.”

Joker thrust a hand at Jack. “Your asshole boyfriend hasn’t eaten anything since breakfast yesterday.”

Fitz blinked at Joker. “That can’t be right.” He turned to Jack. “Yesterday, I brought you lunch and an afternoon snack and gave Joker your dinner to bring to you.” He’d taken great care to ensure Jack had three balanced meals, snacks, and plenty of water. The guilty look on Jack’s face said it all. “You didn’t eat any of it?” Fitz noticed the growing stash of untouched water bottles. “Are you not hydrating either?”

“Of course, he isn’t,” Joker growled. “Yesterday, he lost track of the time like he always does, and by the time he came up for air, the food was inedible, so he threw it away. And then *lied* about it.”

“Fuck off, Sacha. Your boyfriend might need constant babysitting, but I don’t.”

Fitz gasped but didn’t have time to intervene because Joker lunged at Jack, the two of them hitting the floor.

“You fuck!” Joker straddled Jack and punched him in the face. “He has a medical condition, asshole! I can’t believe you!”

“Get the fuck off me,” Jack growled, swinging at Joker only to have Joker smack his arm away.

Oh no. There was no way Fitz could break up a fight between two former Green Berets. Especially two hotheaded, stubborn Green Berets. He ran out into the hall.

“Lucky! Mason!”

“What’s wrong?” Mason asked, poking his head out of the kitchen.

“Jack and Joker are fighting.”

“They’re always fighting,” Lucky replied as he walked into the hall. “It’s what they do. That and annoy people.”

“No, I mean, they’re *fighting*. Jack said something about Gio.” What the hell was his boyfriend thinking? He wasn’t. This wasn’t like Jack at all.

Lucky’s eyes went huge, and he cursed in Spanish. He and Mason bolted toward him, running into the room.

“You’re a dick, Constantino,” Joker spat as Lucky grabbed him and dragged him off Jack while Mason pulled Jack to his feet, a hand against his chest to keep him back.

Jack snorted. “That’s funny, coming from you.”

“What the hell’s got your tails up,” Mason demanded in his thick Texas accent.

“Ask him.” Jack thrust a hand in Joker’s direction. “He’s been on my ass since yesterday.”

“You know what? End up in a hospital, asshole! See if I care.” Joker stormed out of the room, and Fitz glowered at Jack.

“What? Now you’re going to get on my case too?”

Mason cringed and quickly grabbed Lucky’s arm. The two of them hauled ass out of there.

“*Excuse me?*” Fitz planted his hands on his hips. What the hell had gotten into him?

“I don’t need you nagging me too.”

Fitz’s eyebrows shot up. “Nagging? *Nagging.*” *Oh no, he did not.* He put up a finger and met Jack’s gaze. “I suggest you check that tone and think about what you said. Now, I’m going to talk to your best friend, a man who is like a brother to you, who did not deserve your hostility for doing nothing more than care about you, and when I come back, you better have a sincere apology ready.”

Jack narrowed his eyes, but Fitz crossed his arms over his chest before he could speak up.

“Do you want to go there, Jack?”

Jack dropped into one of the empty chairs with a grunt, and Fitz hurried out after Joker, catching up with him outside on the sidewalk. The temperature had dropped—and not just outside. Fitz was ready to return to his room in front of the fire with his princess and a cozy blanket.

“Your boyfriend is a fucking asshole.”

Fitz stepped in front of Joker and sighed. “He can be. Yes. Thank you for looking out for him. I should have known he wasn’t taking care of himself. He’s been too quiet.”

“It’s not your fault,” Joker grumbled. “He’s so fucking stubborn.”

“A trait we all share,” Fitz teased. He kissed Joker’s cheek. “He didn’t mean what he said. You know that.”

Joker grunted. “I know.” He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. “I just *hate* when he gets like this. It’s infuriating. He’s supposed to be smart.”

“He is. And sometimes that big brain of his works against him.” It was one of the traits Jack shared with Leo. The two were so smart and hyper-focused that the world around them disappeared when they got lost in their heads doing something.

“I know,” Joker muttered.

“I’ll talk to him,” Fitz promised.

Joker seemed to mull something over when he spoke up. “He needs to treat you better.”

Fitz was thrown for a loop by Joker’s words. So much so that he didn’t have a reply. With a squeeze to his arm, Joker walked off. What was going on? With a frown, Fitz returned to the Ice Castle, jumping when a loud crash resonated through the empty building. Fitz hurried to the storage room where Jack was, coming to an abrupt halt at the sight of the table on its side, tools scattered all over the floor.

“Jack?” Fitz said softly. “Talk to me. What’s going on?” He walked over to Jack and cupped his face. “Baby?”

Jack let out a heavy sigh. He pulled Fitz into his arms and buried his face against Fitz’s neck. “I’m sorry,” Jack

murmured. He pulled back and dropped into the empty chair, his gaze lowered. “Sacha’s right. I don’t deserve you.”

“Let’s not go that far.” Fitz draped his coat on the chair, then walked over and straddled Jack’s lap. “Baby, what’s going on?” He ran his fingers through Jack’s hair, his heart squeezing in his chest. He’d been fooling himself. He missed Jack. So much. Fitz basked in his sweet man’s warmth and softness. Mm, he smelled so good.

Jack closed his eyes and wrapped his arms tight around Fitz. He buried his head in Fitz’s neck. “I’m so sorry. I’m just....”

“Exhausted? Hungry? Missing me?”

“Yes?”

Fitz chuckled. “Well, I’m here. As for the third, how about you finish up for the day and come back to the cabin with me?” Ever since Jack took on fixing the Ice Castle, they hadn’t had any time to themselves. No cuddling, no getting cozy in front of the fire and no getting frisky or making love.

Jack sighed. “I can’t. I have to finish this. I can’t afford time off.”

“Time off?” Fitz gently pushed Jack’s shoulders, so he sat back. He cupped Jack’s face. “Baby, sleeping is not time off, and I *know* you’re not getting enough sleep.” Now that he sat so close, he could see the dark circles around Jack’s eyes. “What time did you leave the cabin this morning?”

Jack averted his gaze. This was not good.

“Jack.”

“Four.”

Fitz straightened. Wait. Jack had been getting in very late every night. “What time did you get in last night?”

“I don’t want to say,” Jack murmured. Fitz gave him a pointed look, and Jack groaned. “One-thirty.”

Fitz gasped. *Two-and-a-half hours* of sleep, if that. He pushed himself off Jack’s lap, hands on his hips. Jack’s cringe

told Fitz his boyfriend knew how mad he was. But instead of arguing, the back of Fitz's eyes stung. He was not going to do this. Certainly not here or now. Fitz whirled around, snatched up his coat, and put it on as he marched out of the room.

"Fitz, wait!" Jack ran after him and took hold of his arm. Fitz stopped but didn't turn around.

"If this had been a one-time thing, or if it scarcely happened, it would be one thing, Jack, but I can't remember the last time you took any time off. This has been happening more often than not lately, and I'm terrified." The tears welled in his eyes. "I love you, Jack. And I understand how passionate you are about your job. But barely getting any sleep and skipping meals is not passion. Something is wrong, and you won't talk to me about it. I just...I need to go."

Jack released him, and Fitz hurried off. He sent a quick text to Joker, asking him for a ride back to the cabin. When the SUV rolled to a stop next to him, and he climbed in, Joker took one look at him and got them moving without a word.

Chip sensed Fitz's sadness and jumped onto the back seat. He put his head on Fitz's lap and gazed up at him with those irresistible puppy eyes, making Fitz smile. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Jack would come around.

At least Fitz hoped so.

CHAPTER FOUR

You don't deserve him.

Jack stared down at the text on his phone from his best friend. Joker was right. He was an asshole. His heart pounded in his ears as he dropped into the chair. Fitz was the best thing to ever happen to him, and he'd just been such an asshole. Jack let his head fall in his hands.

“Fuck.”

“Far be it from me to tell you how to run your life,” Mason said from the doorway, making Jack lift his head. “I know you’re dancing like hot grease on a skillet right now, but I suggest you go after your man. You wanna fix something, Jack? Fix what you just did. You are worrying him to death, and that ain’t right.”

“Mason—”

“You wanna mess things up with Fitz?” Mason growled.

“No, of course not.”

“Then move your ass.” He turned and grumbled something about needing to be saved from stubborn men.

Jack quickly pulled on his coat and hurried outside. He had to make it up to Fitz. They had a lot to talk about. It took him longer than he'd hoped to find a ride because the guys had taken both SUVs back to the cabin, which meant he had to ask someone for a ride. Unfortunately, that someone turned out to be Noel.

“Thanks for the ride,” Jack said, climbing into the passenger side of Noel’s red pickup truck. He’d noticed that a lot of the vehicles in Winterhaven were red. Weird.

“No problem.” Noel got them moving, and as Jack expected, they sat in awkward silence for a good part of the ride. Finally, Jack couldn’t take it anymore.

“How was your dinner with Fitz?”

“Great. I had a really good time. You have one hell of a guy.”

Jack sighed and shook his head at himself. “Yeah.”

“He adores you, you know.”

“Oh?” Jack’s heart skipped a beat.

“Yeah, the way his face lit up when he talked about you. How smart and talented you were, how passionate you are about your work.” Noel paused, seeming to consider something. “I know it’s none of my business, and I don’t know you two very well, but your boyfriend misses you.”

Jack swallowed hard. “I messed up.”

“Fitz is easy to talk to. I’m sure you’ll be able to work things out.”

“Thanks.” What did it say about him that even someone they’d just met was concerned about his relationship with Fitz, and he hadn’t even known something was wrong?

“And I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression of me. I would never go after a guy I knew was attached. Fitz is helping me with, um, someone else.”

“Oh!” Jack laughed. “You’re the matchmaking emergency.”

Noel chuckled. “Yeah.”

“That makes perfect sense,” Jack said, his heart full at the thought of his beautiful boyfriend. “Fitz loves love. He has a unique way of seeing things, and somehow, he can sense when two people are right for each other.” His smile dimmed. “Don’t be as stubborn and shortsighted as me. I spent two

years thinking about Fitz, hoping for more, and after all the heartache and danger we faced to be together, I'm risking it all because I'm too stubborn to lean on him or anyone else."

"Hey, at least you're seeing it before it's too late." Noel pulled up to the cabin and smiled. "Good luck."

"Thanks. You too." Jack hopped out and hurried up the steps to the front door. Inside, the house was filled with the sound of his brothers, many of who were gathered in the kitchen. Ace was in the living room with Colton and their new fur baby, Cocoa.

Ace turned Cocoa to face Jack. "Look, Cocoa. It's Uncle Jack. That's right. *The* Uncle Jack who made Uncle Fitz sad."

"Are you seriously using your puppy to make me feel even worse?" Jack asked as he hung up his coat.

"You bet." Ace pointed to Cocoa's furry head. "Look at that face. That's the face of disappointment."

Jack arched an eyebrow. "That's the face of someone who eats his own poop."

Colton snickered, and Ace scrunched his nose. "We're working on that," Ace murmured.

"Have you seen Fitz?" Jack asked.

"No. Sorry," Colton said. "We didn't see him when we got in, and he hasn't come downstairs."

"Thanks." Jack went upstairs to their bedroom at the end of the hall. He stood outside the door and paused. He didn't hear anything. Was Fitz asleep? Jack cracked open the door, but when a fluffy bouncing poodle didn't meet him, he knew Fitz wasn't in their room. With a sigh, he took a quick shower and dressed in sweatpants, a black t-shirt, and thick socks. He left their room in search of his boyfriend.

Fitz hadn't been in the kitchen because Jack would have seen or heard him when he walked through the front door. The house had several gathering rooms, a library, and a billiard room with a bar. Fitz was in none of those. Then he

remembered the most likely place Fitz would be. He should have started there.

Heading to the movie room, he stopped in the doorway. Fitz sat with his legs pulled up on the plush couch, wrapped up to his neck in a fluffy blanket with Duchess curled up against him. *While You Were Sleeping* played on the giant screen.

“That bad, huh?” Jack asked softly as he walked into the room. Sandra Bullock rom-coms were Fitz’s go-to comfort movies. Duchess hopped off the couch and bounced excitedly, her butt wiggling fiercely, making him chuckle. Before walking farther into the room, he gave her lots of pets and love. He spotted the box of tissues and doubted those were for the movie. Fitz’s eyes were red, and Jack’s heart hurt. He hated knowing he was the cause of his sweet boyfriend’s tears, that he’d made Fitz worry like this.

Jack sat next to Fitz, who side-eyed him warily. “Baby, I am so sorry. You’re right about everything. I’m sorry I worried you. I’m an ass.”

Fitz sniffed and pulled his arm out from beneath the blanket. He patted his lap, and with a relieved sigh, Jack lay down, his head on Fitz’s lap. Duchess resumed her spot on the couch to Fitz’s other side and curled up.

“Talk to me,” Fitz said softly as he ran his fingers through Jack’s hair.

“I’ve been avoiding hiring someone, and at first, I told myself it was because we didn’t need to fill that position, so I took on all the extra work. I convinced myself it was no big deal and let myself get lost in the work, not realizing how much I’d taken on. If I hadn’t wanted to give the work to the rest of the team, taking it on myself was not the right answer.”

“Is it because of him?” Fitz asked. “Is that why you don’t want to hire someone new?”

Jack nodded. He met Fitz’s gaze. “I have so much to lose now. Not that I didn’t before, but...I have you now, and after almost losing you because of that psychopath....”

Fitz let out a heavy sigh. “I understand that, but if we never get to be together, it’s kind of the same thing, isn’t it?”

“I hadn’t looked at it that way.” Mostly because he hadn’t wanted to. “I guess I hadn’t worked through as much of what happened as I thought. I should have trusted my family to have my back. They always have and always will.” He cupped Fitz’s face and stroked his cheek with his thumb. “As soon as we get back, I’ll hire someone. I promise you, I’ll do better.”

“I’ve missed you so much.” Fitz turned his face and kissed the palm of Jack’s hand. “I love you, Jack.”

“I love you too, baby.” Jack sat up and turned, smiling when Fitz straddled his lap, his blanket still around him.

Fitz slipped his arms around Jack’s neck and kissed him. “You smell so good.”

“I took a quick shower when I got in.” Jack ran his hands up Fitz’s thighs and under his sweater to stroke his soft skin.

“Is that a candy cane in your pocket,” Fitz purred, rolling his hips against Jack’s growing erection. “Or are you just happy to see me?”

With a laugh, Jack patted Fitz’s butt. “How about you let me jingle your bells back in our room?”

Fitz snickered. “We’ve been spending way too much time around Ace.” He stood and took hold of Jack’s hand. “Duchess, go find Uncle Joker.”

Duchess trotted off to find her uncle while Fitz led Jack back to their room. The second the door closed behind them, the blanket was on the floor, and Fitz was all over Jack. They scrambled to undress each other, and when they were naked, Jack walked Fitz back to the bed, their tongues tangling as they kissed. Heat flared through Jack; he couldn’t believe he’d almost messed this up.

Determined to show Fitz how much he loved and needed him, Jack swept Fitz off his feet, making him throw his head back with a laugh. God, how he loved that sound. The joy and adoration in Fitz’s eyes squeezed at Jack’s heart. He’d once

promised Fitz to spend every day showing him how much he was loved. He wasn't going to forget again.

With Fitz lying on the bed, his gorgeous hair wild around his face, Jack grabbed the lube from the nightstand drawer and climbed onto the bed covered in soft blankets. He lay between Fitz's legs, one arm around each of Fitz's thighs as he swallowed Fitz down to the root.

"Jack!" Fitz gasped and threw his head back, his plump lips parted, and his eyes closed as he grabbed fistfuls of the blankets. He arched his back, and Jack couldn't take his eyes off his stunningly beautiful man. Jack was so damned lucky. He sucked and licked, nipped at Fitz's inner thigh, and reveled in the way Fitz writhed and pleaded. His fair skin was flushed, and his brow beaded with sweat, one hand going to Jack's head.

When it looked like Fitz was on the verge of coming, Jack pulled back. He lubed up his finger, and as he leaned in to kiss Fitz, he placed the tip of his finger to Fitz's hole and gently pushed, loving the sound of Fitz's moan. Fitz thrust up against him, and Jack did his best to quickly but carefully prepare Fitz.

"Jack," Fitz gasped. He tapped Jack's flank, and Jack knew what that meant. He pulled his fingers out of Fitz and rolled them so Jack was on his back and Fitz was on top. Turning, Fitz lined Jack's cock up and slowly sank back down, riding Jack reverse cowboy style. Jack gripped Fitz's hips, cursing under his breath as Fitz started moving, his ass smacking against Jack's groin as he rode him hard.

The air filled with the sounds of their gasps and panting. When Jack thought he might lose it, he sat up, grabbed Fitz, and turned them, Fitz on his hands and knees with Jack kneeling behind him. He pounded into Fitz, urged on by Fitz's pleas for more, faster, harder. Jack took hold of Fitz's shoulder and thrust in deep, over and over.

Fitz whimpered as he jerked himself off. When he couldn't hold himself up, he slid onto his stomach with Jack following him. He spread Fitz's legs and buried his face in Fitz's hair.

"I love you so fucking much," Jack said, breathless.

“I love you too, baby.” Fitz turned his head, and Jack kissed him as best he could from his position, his hips losing their rhythm as his orgasm exploded through him. He cried out as he emptied himself inside Fitz, a gasp escaping him when Fitz’s hole tightened around him.

Fitz cried out as he came, and Jack pumped into him a few more times before pulling out. He lay on Fitz for a heartbeat as he caught his breath. With a sigh, he nuzzled Fitz’s hair, then moved off him, rolling onto his side facing Fitz. Jack smiled at him, his beautiful face flushed pink, his hair stuck to his brow.

“You mean the world to me,” Jack whispered, brushing Fitz’s hair away from his eyes. “I’m so sorry. For everything.”

“You mean the world to me, too,” Fitz replied quietly. He rolled onto his side, facing Jack. “That’s why I worry so much when you don’t take care of yourself.”

“I know.” Jack ran his thumb over Fitz’s bottom lip. “I’ll do better. I promise.” He wasn’t one to make idle promises. Fitz knew that. His father had taught him that if he was going to give his word, he needed to follow through, and Jack always did. Except in this case when it mattered most. A thought occurred to him. “What if you help me tomorrow?”

“Really?”

Jack nodded. “You’re good with your hands, and your fingers are slender and long.” Fitz snickered, and Jack booped the tip of Fitz’s nose with his finger, making him laugh. “Not like that, you perv.”

Fitz laughed. He worried his bottom lip between his teeth. “You really think I can help you?”

“If I show you what you need to do, I know you can do it. That way, we can finish faster, and then I’m all yours.”

Fitz blinked at him. “Really? But you brought your laptop. You said you might need to get some work done. If you need to work, Jack, I understand.”

“No. This is our Christmas vacation. Maury can handle anything that comes up. We’ve all been talking about promoting some of the guys at work so we could step back a

little. Maury's been on my team since we opened Four Kings Security. He's more than qualified to manage the Cybersecurity Department."

Fitz sat up, his eyes wide. "You...you're going to work fewer hours?"

Jack followed, sitting up. He leaned in and kissed Fitz. "I should have been taking better care of myself and our relationship." He nodded. "I want to spend more time with you, sweetheart."

Fitz squealed and tackled Jack, making him laugh, his heart ready to implode from how happy Fitz was. He'd been so foolish, risking what he had with this amazing man, a man who, with each day, he could see himself with in a forever kind of way. Thankfully, he'd come to his senses before he ruined the beautiful thing they had together.

Hmm, maybe there *was* a little something magical about Winterhaven.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Can we talk?”

Mugs and Kisses had just opened, so Fitz was the only one inside. Merry didn't look at him as he slid a tray of decorated gingerbread men into the glass case. One had a little sad face, and Fitz had to try hard not to smile. Merry was too darned cute.

“Is that one for me?” Fitz asked, pointing at the glum gingerbread man.

Merry sighed. He turned to Fitz, hurt in his big blue eyes. “I knew my chances with him were slim, but how can I compete with you?”

“You don't,” Fitz replied, removing his gloves and shoving them in his coat pocket. “Merry, the reason Noel asked me to dinner was—”

“Because you're beautiful? Because you're so pretty, one hunky boyfriend is not enough, you need one for each arm?”

Fitz opened his mouth to reply, but Merry thrust his hands in Fitz's direction.

“Look at you! Look at your hair! I mean, do you wash it with the tears of angels? Do birds come to your window every morning to wake you with their song? Who has cheekbones like that? And why do you always smell like flowers and sunshine? It's not normal!”

No one had ever angrily shouted compliments at him before.

Fitz smiled warmly at Merry. “Honey, he wanted to talk about you.”

Merry opened his mouth as if to argue, then closed it. “Wait, what?”

With a chuckle, Fitz started to remove his coat. “Why don’t you make us a couple of those amazing Christmas-in-a-cup mochaccinos, and we can talk about it.”

Since Jack was making good on his promise to take care of himself, he’d slept in this morning, and Fitz woke up to his man’s sweet kisses. They’d fooled around a little, and afterward, Fitz told Jack about Merry and Noel and how when Fitz saw how hopeless Merry was around Noel, he’d decided to do everything in his matchmaking power to help Merry snag himself an early Christmas present. They’d agreed Fitz would meet Jack at the Ice Castle afterward.

Fitz draped his coat over the back of a chair, thanking Merry for his heavenly drink. They sat at the small table. “Noel asked me to dinner because he wanted to talk about you. He’s been smitten with you since you arrived but doesn’t quite know how to approach you.”

Merry scrunched his nose. “You mean because every time he so much as looks at me, I freak out?” His expression softened. “He’s really interested in me?”

Fitz nodded. “He asked for my help.”

“He did?” Merry’s face lit up, and his cheeks flushed pink. He inhaled deep through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. “Okay. Just tell me what to do. I can do this.”

“That’s the spirit!” Fitz checked his watch. “Noel is going to walk through that door in ten minutes.”

Merry’s eyes went huge, and he let out a squeak. “*What?*”

“He’s going to walk up to the counter and order a black coffee. You’re going to pour him that coffee and hand it over. Let’s go practice.” He got up and motioned for Merry to stand behind the counter. Fitz told Merry exactly what to say, and Merry practiced over and over. The time came, and Fitz hid in

the kitchen behind the counter. The little bell above the café door rang, and Fitz turned to Merry.

“Ready?”

Merry shook his head. “I can’t do this.”

“Sure you can,” Fitz whispered. “We practiced. Remember?”

“I can’t. I’m going to mess it up.”

Fitz took hold of Merry’s shoulders and met his gaze. “You can do this. I know you can. Just go out there, and when he steps up to the counter, you say exactly what I told you to say.”

“Um, hello? Merry?” A deep, rumbling voice asked.

“That’s your cue,” Fitz said, gently shoving Merry. He bit his bottom lip and watched through the small window in the door as Merry’s big, tall, handsome lumberjack crush stood at the counter, waiting for his coffee, as planned.

They were starting small. Simple.

Merry stood on his side of the counter looking adorable with his tousled blond hair, big blue eyes, and flushed cheeks. He forced a big smile, and Fitz cringed. Not exactly like they practiced. Merry looked a little unhinged, but they’d work on that later—one step at a time. Merry opened his mouth, and no sound came out.

You can do this.

Merry promptly closed his mouth, seemed to gather himself, then opened his mouth to speak. “Haaaaooooo.”

One word. That was all Merry had to say.

Merry spun on his heels and power-walked back into the kitchen.

Oh dear. Fitz might have underestimated the severity of the situation.

“Can you give him his coffee?” Merry pleaded as he paced the small kitchen. “It’s next to the espresso machine.”

“Of course, hon. Just take deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth, okay?” Fitz walked out and smiled warmly. “Good morning, Noel.”

“Fitz.” Noel sighed. “Is Merry okay?” He craned his neck to see around Fitz, but the swinging door to the small kitchen was closed. At least he couldn’t see poor Merry hyperventilating in the back.

“He’ll be fine.” He winked at Noel. “He just realized he left the oven on. We might have some extra crispy cookies on our hands.” Fitz grabbed Noel’s coffee cup and handed it to him. Noel reached for his wallet, and Fitz waved a hand in dismissal. “On the house. For the, um, inconvenience.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

Noel leaned in to whisper. “Now what?”

“Does he have your number?”

Noel nodded. “Yeah.” His cheeks got a little red. “I, um, gave it to him when he first moved here. I was called out to replace his garbage disposal.”

Interesting.

“Wait, did he talk to you then?”

“Not really. He murmured something that sounded like a ‘thank you.’ But he didn’t run away, which was good. Though he didn’t have anywhere to run to since we were in his house.”

Very interesting. “I’ll think of something.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Noel left, and Fitz sighed.

“It’s safe to come out now. He’s gone.”

Merry groaned as he walked through the swinging door. “I can’t believe I messed that up. It was one word. *Hi*. Who can’t say *hi*? Me, apparently.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. We’ll figure something else out.”

Merry shook his head. "I'm not like you, all beautiful, confident, and perfect."

"Oh, honey. That's sweet, but don't let this fool you," Fitz said, motioning to himself. "It took a lot of heartache, therapy, and ice cream to be this confident, and even then, I have days when I'm feeling so crappy, all I want to do is curl up on the couch under a cozy blanket with Duchess and a cup of tea and watch re-runs of *The Great British Bake Off*."

"Really?"

Fitz nodded as he walked to the couch and sat, Merry sat beside him. "When I met Jack, I was a hot mess. I'd just gotten out of a ten-year relationship with a man I thought I was going to marry, only to discover it would never happen because he was *already* married. Had been for years."

Merry's eyes went huge. "While you were together?"

"Yep."

"That's awful!"

"It was, but it was also a blessing in disguise. The moment I saw Jack, I knew he was someone special. Of course, nothing happened when we first met. It wouldn't have been fair to either of us to start something with someone like Jack when I was still picking up the pieces."

Merry cocked his head to one side. "What do you mean, someone like Jack?"

"Jack is different from any guy I've ever dated. He's a genuinely nice person. Sweet, adorkable, and incredibly smart. He's also a former soldier with a lot of baggage from his military days. Not that I don't have plenty of my own baggage. Talk about daddy issues. Anyway, when Jack put his arm around me, I knew he was the kind of man you built a life with. I wasn't ready for that."

"So what happened?"

"I got help. Went to therapy. Got my life together. Did something I had never done before. I focused on myself. Then, I retired from the fashion industry and opened my own salon."

By then, it had been two years, and I hadn't answered any of Jack's messages. He was so sweet, checking up on me. We had no idea we were checking on each other through mutual friends. After two years of not talking to him, I figured he probably thought I was a jerk. But thanks to our meddling friends, we got together. Then someone kidnapped him and tried to kill us. More therapy ensued. It was a whole thing."

Merry blinked at him. "What?"

"That's a story for another day. My point is, I'm far from perfect."

"I've seen the way Jack looks at you." Merry let out a dreamy sigh. "I wish I had someone who looked at me that way. Like I hung the stars in the sky."

"You could."

"I've never had a serious relationship. I've dated, but it always ended the moment I didn't...you know." He leaned forward to whisper. "Have sex." His cheeks flushed pink as he sat back.

"Then those guys weren't for you," Fitz said.

"Even if I could manage to get it together long enough to form sentences and speak to Noel, what if he wants to, you know, and it's a disaster?"

"Does that mean you want to have sex with him?"

Merry's face flushed bright red. "Um..."

"Have you thought about having sex with him?"

Fitz hadn't thought Merry's face could get any redder, but nope. He'd been wrong.

"Are you okay?" Noel asked.

They'd been so engrossed in their conversation that neither of them heard the bell above the door jingle.

Merry squeaked and jumped. "Yep! Not thinking about sex!"

Fitz slapped a hand over his mouth to cover his gasp. Oh, sweet Dolly Parton.

Noel blinked at Merry. “Um, okay?” He pointed to the counter. “I forgot to get a stirrer. I’ll, um, grab one and go.”

Merry nodded, his face looking like it was about to burst into flames at any moment. As soon as Noel had his stirrer, he was out of there.

With a groan, Merry let his head fall into his hands. “I’m hopeless.”

“We’re going to get through this,” Fitz promised. “I’d better get to the Ice Castle to help Jack, but as soon as I’m done, we’re going to devise a new plan.”

Merry nodded, and Fitz left. Maybe he could get Jack to help him.

The rest of the guys and several of the townspeople were back to decorating, and Fitz stopped by to say hello. Leo beamed brightly at him, and Fitz couldn’t take the cute. Today, he had on a double pom-pom knitted hat.

“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.”

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

Fitz smacked Ace in the back of the head.

“Ow! What? You think we didn’t *hear* what you did?”

“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?” King handed Leo one of the wreaths and lifted him like he didn’t weigh a thing so Leo could hang it off the hook on the lamppost. “What kind of changes?”

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

“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.”

“Well, I need to go. Jack asked me to help him fix the Ice Castle.”

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

“Yep.” Fitz kissed Joker’s cheek. “See you later.” He said goodbye and headed for the Ice Castle. Lucky and Mason were heading out, toolboxes in their hands.

“Guess what?” Lucky asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Fitz gasped. “You finished fixing the roof?”

“You betcha,” Mason replied. He threw an arm around Lucky. “Now, if you’ll excuse us. We’re gonna take a little break and...celebrate.”

Lucky hummed. “Ooh, I like this kind of celebration.”

Fitz shook his head at them. “Have fun.” He waved them off and searched for his man, finding him inside the storage room. Fitz whistled and catcalled at Jack, who was on all fours looking for something. Jack laughed and sat back on his heels. “That’s a good look for you,” Fitz purred as he came to stand in front of Jack.

Jack gazed up at him, his gray eyes twinkling. He ran his hands up Fitz’s legs. “Like seeing me on my knees, do you?”

“Oh yes.”

Jack stood and drew Fitz against him. “Well then, how about we get this done, and then you tell me what a bad boy I’ve been.” He nipped at Fitz’s neck, making Fitz laugh. He hummed and started unzipping his coat.

“In that case, let’s get to work.”

Jack playfully kissed Fitz’s cheek, then pulled back so Fitz could remove his many layers of winter wear.

“Okay, where do you want me?” Fitz asked, receiving a very heated and naughty look in response. “Work first. I’ll get you on your knees later.”

Jack groaned. “Not fair.”

“Think of me as your prize for getting the job done.”

With a moan, Jack took a step forward and then stopped himself. “No. Nope. Work first. Okay, come here,” he commanded, his voice low and sexy. He crooked his finger, laughing when Fitz crossed his arms over his chest.

“Well, we’re never going to get anywhere with you talking to me like that.”

“Like what?” Jack asked, his wicked smile telling Fitz he knew exactly what he was doing. If that’s the way he wanted to play, Fitz could play.

Fitz sauntered over and stopped in front of Jack. He ran his fingers down Jack’s chest to his tool belt, his fingers brushing the bulge in Jack’s pants. “So, which of these *hard* tools will I be handling?”

Jack groaned and dropped his head onto Fitz’s shoulder. “I brought this on myself, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Okay, focus. Focus, focus, focus.” Jack motioned Fitz over to the wall and an open panel. He handed Fitz a flathead screwdriver. “Okay, see all these screws?”

Fitz eyed him, and Jack laughed.

“No, this is not dirty talk. I need you to loosen each one and pull out the wire.”

“I can’t get electrocuted?” Fitz asked, glaring at the wires in case they got any ideas.

“The power has been turned off, but see that big one up there? Don’t touch that. Only touch what I tell you, okay?”

“Okay.” Fitz started with the first screw as Jack went back to the bigger of the panels on his left. He paused and turned. Fitz held up a finger. “If the next words out of your mouth

include the word screw, the only tools you're going to be handling are your own."

Jack spun back to face his panel, and Fitz did his best not to laugh. If they were going to get this job done, they couldn't afford distractions, not when Fitz knew Jack was all his after this. Just the thought sent a shiver through him.

Nope. Focus. He could do this. How hard could it be? Ugh, *hard*. He was doomed.

CHAPTER SIX

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. It was a good idea in certain ways, but also not a good one because Jack's pants were uncomfortably tight, and he had to finish installing the new main panel. But how could he when Fitz stood next to him looking so damned good? His long legs were encased in white pants with white, faux-fur-lined boots, and his soft, white fluffy sweater fell just above his gorgeous ass.

Jack finished installing the new panel on the wall and pulling all the wires through. By this point, he couldn't take it anymore. Not with Fitz grunting and huffing as he tried to loosen screws, his tongue poking out from between his lips and his hair falling over his face. He stepped up behind Fitz, wrapped his arms around his slender waist, and pressed his hard bulge against Fitz's ass.

Fitz groaned. He thrust a finger at the main panel. "Get back to your box."

"I can't. It hurts." He took Fitz's free hand and pulled it behind his back so he could feel how hard Jack was.

"Ooh, you're playing dirty. Damn it! Jack, we need to finish this."

"Baby, I can't. Not with you looking so good, and—"

Fitz marched off, and for a moment, Jack worried he'd annoyed his boyfriend until Fitz closed the door to the room and locked it. When he turned, the heat and desire in his eyes took Jack's breath away.

“Chair,” Fitz ordered, and Jack’s ass hit the chair so fast he almost toppled over. “Pants.”

Jack quickly unbuckled his belt and raised up to shove his black jeans to his ankles. He watched Fitz grab an old towel from the table, bringing it over to drop on the floor. Fitz got down on his knees.

“I thought you wanted to see *me* on my knees,” Jack murmured, sucking in a sharp breath when he reached into Jack’s boxer briefs and pulled out his rock-hard length. “But this good. *So* good.”

“Oh, you on your knees is going to happen,” Fitz promised. “Later, you’re all mine. But first, I need you focused.” He looked up at Jack from behind long lashes and flicked his tongue across the head of Jack’s cock, lapping up the pearl of precome.

“Fuck.” Jack wanted to close his eyes. His whole body thrummed with need, but he couldn’t take his eyes off his beautiful man. Fitz’s sweeping bangs fell over one eye, his glossy lips wrapped around Jack. How had he gotten so lucky?

Jack gripped the chair tight as Fitz used his talented mouth to bring him to the edge and push him over until he was screaming Fitz’s name.

Fitz pulled off Jack and kissed him so he could taste himself on Fitz’s tongue, making Jack moan. Then Fitz pulled back with a self-satisfied smile and flipped his hair back.

“What about you?” Jack asked, breathless.

“What do you think the towel was for?” Fitz wiggled his fingers, and Jack groaned. He’d been so mesmerized by Fitz’s beautiful face and his mouth that he hadn’t even noticed Fitz jerking himself off.

Jack stood and pulled his pants and underwear back up. He caught Fitz’s wrist and pulled him close, kissing him sweetly. How could he have been so foolish as to put his job before this man who loved him so completely?

“You’re so amazing,” Jack said, nuzzling the side of Fitz’s temple, inhaling Fitz’s scent. He always smelled so damned

good.

“Maybe you just bring out the best in me,” Fitz replied softly.

Jack shook his head. “Nope, you’re just amazing.”

Fitz laughed and pulled away to open the door back up. “We don’t need Ace—”

“Too late,” Ace chirped from the doorway.

Fitz screeched and punched, catching Ace solidly across in face and sending him reeling back.

“Son of a nutcracker!” Ace held his cheek, his eyes huge. “What the hell, Fitz?”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know it was you!” Fitz smacked Ace on the arm.

“What was *that* for? You can’t say you didn’t know it was me that time!”

“That was for scaring the crap out of me!”

Ace moved his jaw around. “Damn. When did you learn to punch like that?”

“Jack’s been teaching me self-defense,” Fitz said, returning to the panel he’d been working on.

Jack preened proudly. “He’s a natural.”

“I noticed,” Ace grumbled. “Anyway, before your boyfriend tried to rearrange my face, I came here to let you know that we’re going ice skating tonight after the big Christmas lights unveiling in the town square. I would ask how things are going, but from the noises I heard coming from here, I’m going to say you’re still working on it.”

Jack snickered and returned to the main panel. “We’ll be finished by tonight.”

“We will?” Fitz asked, sounding surprised.

“Yep,” Jack replied, filled with renewed determination. “I’m feeling inspired.”

“Ah, the magic peen. Does it every time,” Ace said with a sigh.

Fitz turned, and Ace bolted, calling out over his shoulder. “I regret nothing!”

“He’s your friend,” Fitz grumbled.

“Oh, so when he’s being an ass, he’s *my* friend, but when he’s holding a cute puppy, he’s *your* friend.”

Fitz snickered. “Well, obviously. I mean, puppy.”

They got back to work, and this time, Jack didn’t let himself get distracted, no matter how tempting Fitz was. Jack was ready to get this damned job done so he could spend time with his boyfriend and his family. As the afternoon went on, Jack showed Fitz what to do, and Fitz did it. They took a quick lunch break after Laz dropped off some lunch for them, then got back to work.

Jack double- and triple-checked everything, then stood back, stunned. “I think we’re finished.”

“Really?”

“It all looks good.”

“Don’t tease me, Jack. Are we really done?” Fitz asked hopefully.

“Only one way to find out.” Jack sent a message out to Lucky to let him know he was going to turn the power on. When he received confirmation from Lucky that there was no one in the Ice Castle working on anything that might get them hurt by everything coming online, Jack stopped in front of the safety switch panel and took hold of the red lever. “First, we turn on the main power.” Jack pushed the lever up, restoring power to the main and sub-panels. He returned to the main panel and *the* switch. “Ready?”

Fitz nodded and crossed the fingers on both hands. Taking a deep breath, Jack flipped the switch, and the lights turned on. Fitz ran over to Jack with a squeal and threw himself into Jack’s arms.

“You did it!” Fitz kissed Jack soundly. “My hero.”

Jack shook his head. “*We* did, and if anyone’s the hero, it’s you. You helped me get it done and without me being a miserable asshole about it.” He hummed against Fitz’s lips. “Maybe *you* bring out the best in *me*.”

“Come on. Let’s get some dinner, then go meet everyone in the town square.”

They bundled up and headed outside, only to find a big crowd gathered. Everyone cheered and congratulated Jack. He held a hand up.

“I couldn’t have done it without the help of this amazing, beautiful man.” Jack kissed Fitz’s cheek, and everyone erupted into more cheers. Clara came up to them and gave them each a big hug.

“Thank you both so much.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You already did,” Jack promised. “The main street looks fantastic.”

It was like Christmas had exploded all over town, but in a tasteful, small-town way. All the storefronts and lampposts were decorated with garland, wreaths, and twinkling lights. It looked like something out of one of Colton’s favorite holiday movies. According to Colton, the finishing touches had been added to the market stalls throughout the day, so all that was left was decorating the Ice Castle both inside and out.

After a quick call to Laz to check on Duchess and ask if he wouldn’t mind bringing her tonight, Fitz took Jack to The Jolly Stag pub, where he’d had dinner the night before, and Fitz was right. The place was impressive.

“You know,” Jack said. “I’ve been thinking about Winterhaven and how it looks just like it did in the pictures from previous years, but what good will that do if there are no guests besides us? And it’s only two weeks until Christmas.”

Guests had canceled after being informed of the Ice Castle’s closure due to electrical issues. Even if the town had managed to get some decor, it wouldn’t have helped without their main attraction. No decorations and no Ice Castle meant

no Christmas in Winterhaven. Thanks to Colton, they'd managed to get everything they needed.

Except for the guests.

"I've been thinking about that, too," Fitz replied. He took a sip of his wine and hummed. "I have an idea."

"Oh?"

"It involves a certain billionaire."

"Colton?"

Fitz shook his head. "Colton is the shipping billionaire. The other billionaire. The people gathering billionaire."

"Gio? You think he can do something?"

"If anyone can bring large groups of people together, it's him."

"Taking a Christmas vacation in a small mountain town isn't exactly charity work."

"I'll talk to Gio about it tonight. Right now, I have a different challenge on my hands." He sighed and took another sip of wine.

"Can I help?" Jack asked.

"Not unless you know how to get Merry in the same room as Noel without blowing a fuse."

"Well, you may have noticed, but I know a thing or two about fuses." Jack waggled his eyebrows, and Fitz laughed.

"The only time Merry didn't run off or fall over was when he first moved in, and Noel was called in to fix his garbage disposal."

Jack thanked the waiter for his food and popped a perfectly crisp french fry in his mouth. "I think I have an idea. But it'll mean asking Ace for help." He tried not to laugh when Fitz stilled, his glass halfway to his mouth.

"Is that really our only option?"

Jack shrugged. "How desperate are you?"

“Ugh, very.” Fitz swallowed the contents of his glass in three gulps. He put his glass down. “Okay. Do it.”

“Great. I’ll talk to him about it.”

They ate dinner, talking and laughing. Jack couldn’t remember the last time they’d gone out to dinner or had a date night. What did it say about how he’d been treating Fitz that he couldn’t remember them spending any time together?

When dessert came, Jack reached across the table and took Fitz’s hand. “Baby, I am so sorry.”

Fitz smiled warmly, love in his eyes. “You don’t need to keep apologizing, Jack.”

“But I do. I took what we had for granted. Took *you* for granted.”

Fitz squeezed his hand. “You can make it up to me tonight with a hot cocoa.”

“Deal.” However, he intended to make it up to Fitz in more significant ways, like making good on his word about working fewer hours.

They finished dessert and were soon on their way to the market square. Jack had been so busy with the Ice Castle that this was the first he’d seen of it. He hadn’t even known the town had a town square or market. It was decently sized for a town as small as Winterhaven, with dozens of red-roofed wood stalls decorated beautifully.

Everyone gathered before the small stage at the base of the giant Christmas tree, waiting for the big event. Jack and Fitz joined their family, thanking Laz for bringing Duchess. She was so happy to see them it looked like her poufy tail might fly off her butt. While everyone waited, Jack tugged at Joker’s coat sleeve and pulled him to one side.

“I’m sorry I was such a dick,” Jack said. “You were right about everything, and I was an ass. I know you were worried.” He smiled wickedly. “Because you love me.”

Joker snorted. “I tolerate you at best.”

“I’ll apologize to Gio. He must think I’m such an asshole.” Jack knew his best friend. He would have talked to Gio about what happened, and Jack didn’t blame him.

“First of all, Gio knows us all very well by now. Secondly, you know he’s more worried about you than whatever you said in the heat of the moment. He’s been worried about you, too.”

That was true. Gio was such a genuine guy. Sweet, honest, and selfless. Even if, at times, he was about as great at taking care of himself as Jack. At least he had Joker to help him work on it.

Clara walked onto the stage, and everyone quieted down. “Thank you all so much for joining us tonight for the unveiling. Just a short time ago, our small town had been forced to cancel its most joyous celebration of the year. But thanks to our new friends and all of you, I’m proud to announce the commencement of this year’s Winterhaven holiday season!”

Everyone cheered and applauded. Clara pulled a two-way radio from her coat pocket and said something. “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” burst from the speakers just as the lights turned on all around them. The crowd gasped and cheered. It was incredible.

Fitz hugged Jack’s arm tightly, his expression one of awe. He leaned in. “Oh, Jack. It’s beautiful!”

“You helped make this happen,” Jack said, turning to bring Fitz into his arms and kiss him. The night was perfect, with the twinkling stars blanketing the sky almost as bright as the Christmas lights twinkling around them. Snow flurries had started to fall, completing the magical feeling of the holidays in Winterhaven. Then his phone buzzed and rang. Pulling it out, he sighed. “It’s Maury.”

“Oh.” Fitz nodded and dropped his gaze to his gloved hands. He pasted a smile on his face. “You should see what he needs.”

Jack hated how the delight and joy faded from Fitz’s expression. “I’ll just be a minute,” Jack promised. He noticed

some of the guys had started making their way to the stall renting ice skates. “Why don’t you get in line for ice skates?”

“Okay.” Fitz kissed Jack’s cheek and joined the others, Duchess on his heels. Leo said something to Fitz that made him smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Obviously, he didn’t expect Jack to return, especially when he asked for only one pair of skates. With a heavy sigh, Jack answered his phone.

“Hey, Maury. What’s up?”

“I’m so sorry to bug you on your vacation, but we have a problem.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had been nice while it lasted.

“I’m sorry,” Laz said quietly as he wrapped an arm around Fitz and squeezed, offering him comfort as he had countless times. His best friend was always there for him, often including him in his plans when Jack was away for several days or when something had come up and Jack had to cancel their plans.

Fitz shrugged and tried to smile, even if his heart hurt. He understood, he did, and he should have known better than to get his hopes up. It wasn’t Jack’s fault. He’d been working in cybersecurity long before he’d met Fitz.

Even if Jack planned on making changes, it wouldn’t happen overnight. What Jack did was important. His clients and his department needed him. Some jobs required a level of security clearance only Jack had access to. Four Kings Security didn’t just offer security to individuals and small businesses but to giant multi-million and multi-billion-dollar corporations.

“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.” He ran off with the dogs, the pom-pom dangling off his hat bouncing.

“Where’s he getting all those hats?” Fitz asked King.

King shrugged. “I don’t know. He didn’t bring them with him. Is there a pom-pom hat store on the main street? He has a new one on every time we leave the house.”

“Maybe it’s Santa,” Fitz teased.

King chuckled. “I’m starting to wonder if the mayor really is Santa. No one has seen him. Except Leo, but he still won’t tell me what he’s been up to.” Leo waved excitedly at King with both mittened hands. “Excuse me. He’s discovered the cookie stall, and by his excitement, I’m guessing there’s something of the fish-shaped variety.” He walked off, and Fitz couldn’t help his sigh. Those two were so darn sweet.

Fitz sat on the bench on the edge of the ice rink and tightened the laces on his pristine white skates when a pair of black skates skidded to a halt in front of him. He lifted his gaze, eyes wide.

Jack held out a hand, a big smile on his handsome face. “Ready to get your skate on?”

“But...I thought you had to work.”

“I’d rather go ice skating with you.”

Fitz’s heart did a flip, and he stood, happiness bubbling up inside him. “Are you sure?”

“I have a great team, and Maury is more than capable of taking care of things. He was excited when I told him we had a lot of good things to talk about when I got back, and he was in charge until I return to the office. Right now, I’m on vacation with my beautiful boyfriend.”

Forgetting they were on skates, Fitz threw himself at Jack, who caught him but lost his balance. Fitz yelped as the two of them crashed onto the ice, Fitz landing Jack.

“Ouch.”

“I’m so sorry,” Fitz said through a gasp. “Are you okay? Did you hit your head?”

Jack blinked up at him and started laughing, the sound filling Fitz with so much happiness. How was it possible to love someone this much? He thought he'd known what love was, then Jack had come along. Even with Jack away working long hours, Fitz never questioned whether Jack loved him.

"You two are dorks," Joker said as he skated by with Gio, who shook his head, amused.

Carefully, Fitz got himself to his feet, and Jack did the same. Scanning the area, Fitz spotted the Four Kings pups with King, Leo, Lucky, and Mason over by the Jingle Paws market stall. The four dogs sat in a row before Leo, tails wagging as they waited expectantly. Leo held his palm out, and all three sat back on their haunches, lifted, and waved their front paws. With a laugh, Leo gave each of them a treat.

"He spoils them rotten," Fitz said, smiling as he took Jack's hands.

"And you're going to ask him not to?" Jack asked, knowing perfectly well Fitz would do no such thing. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

They'd been ice skating during the holidays several years ago but skating in a faux ice rink in Florida was a far cry from a snowy ice rink in the mountains. For one, it was *freezing*, but Fitz was managing with the lights, the portable heaters, his many layers of water-repellent clothing, and Jack to keep him warm. His propensity for always feeling cold had him overly cautious about his exposure to the frosty air for long periods. He'd also taken enough Vitamin C to turn his blood into orange juice.

"There's a reason I moved to Florida and not the Arctic," Colton grumbled, waving his arms as he attempted to keep his balance. He was still getting the hang of ice skating, but Ace was with him every cautious step of the way. As new puppy parents, they wouldn't be staying out long. The two were in for some sleepless nights.

It was cute seeing a half-asleep Ace taking Cocoa outside to potty. Fitz had gone down to the kitchen in the middle of the night for some water, and Ace had been coming in from the

cold with Cocoa, his hair sticking up all over, boots and coat on haphazardly over his pajamas. He'd grunted a greeting as he lumbered by.

Laz and Red didn't stay on the ice long. Once it got crowded, Laz pulled Red along, knowing his boyfriend was uncomfortable. They huddled on one of the many benches scattered around the market square, talking, and drinking hot chocolate.

As Fitz and Jack skated around the large ice rink, their family scattered about, having fun and enjoying one another's company, Fitz had never been happier. The thought of spending more time with Jack, of making even more memories together, filled Fitz with so much joy.

When Fitz's cheeks started to go numb from the winter chill nipping at his face, they left the ice and handed in their skates. Fitz wrapped his arm around Jack's and led him to the market stalls, soaking in the warmth from the heaters. That and he *had* to browse. Not that Jack minded. He was happy walking with Fitz and drinking his hot cider while Fitz sipped his hot cocoa. They spotted Clara, and Fitz hurried over to her.

"It all turned out so magical," Fitz said in awe of how wonderful everything looked.

"It's a dream," Clara said. "Christopher is over the moon."

"Where *is* your husband?" Jack asked. "None of us have run into him."

Which was impressive considering the size of Winterhaven. How had they *all* missed seeing him since their arrival? Well, all of them except Leo, who was being very hush-hush about it.

"He's busy getting everything ready for the big day."

Fitz and Jack exchanged glances. "Big day?" Fitz asked.

Clara blinked, her eyes going wide. She waved a hand and laughed. "You know, Christmas Day. Lots to celebrate here in Winterhaven. Speaking of celebration." She handed Fitz a flyer. "Tomorrow, we're kicking off Winterhaven's Festival of Fun with our big cookie-baking contest. There will be

gingerbread house decorating and cookie decorating afterward.”

“Have you managed to get back any of the guests who’d canceled?” Jack asked.

Clara sighed. “Only a few, but I suppose that’s to be expected considering how close it is to Christmas. They most likely made other plans. But we’ll get some folks from the neighboring towns, so we can’t complain. Thank you both again. We would never have been able to do all this without the help of you and your family. See you tomorrow?”

“You bet,” Fitz promised.

Clara gave out more flyers, and Fitz turned to Jack. “I need to find Gio. Oh, and Red. He *has* to enter the cookie-baking contest.”

Jack chuckled. “I think he’d enjoy that. And we would enjoy eating the entries.”

They strolled through the market square, and Fitz made a mental note of everything he wanted to buy, including a few things for Jack. Fitz never bought Jack anything techy. It was like buying a chef a knife when you had no clue how to cook. In a way, it made shopping for Jack easier and less stressful for Fitz. He spotted Gio and Joker by one of the stalls near the end of the row.

Fitz gasped, throwing out a hand to stop Jack. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“When Gio turned to give Cookie a treat, Joker glanced at the stall next to the one they’re in front of.”

The silence had Fitz turning to face Jack. Honestly, how could his boyfriend have no clue? Fitz could barely contain himself. “Babe, it’s a *jewelry* stall.”

Jack’s brows furrowed together. “Um, okay?”

“A *men’s* jewelry stall.”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe he’s thinking of getting Gio jewelry for Christmas.” He seemed puzzled by this. “Weird. Sacha’s not the jewelry type.”

“Maybe he’s the buying-his-boyfriend-an-engagement-ring type?”

“No way.” Jack shook his head. “If Sacha’s brain had gone anywhere in the vicinity of that thought, he’d have told me. He’d also be freaking the fuck out.”

“You mean like that?” Fitz asked, pointing to Joker off in the distance, running.

“He’s just chasing Chip,” Jack replied. “Chip probably got something in his mouth he shouldn’t because that’s life with a dog.”

“True. Except your boy is now outrunning his dog.”

“Oh shit.” Jack kissed Fitz’s cheek. “I’ll be back!” He darted off, and Fitz called out after him.

“Good luck!” His boyfriend was going to need it. Joker was *fast*. Ooh, this gave Fitz the perfect opportunity to talk to Gio. He went to the stall where Gio had bought a little pink bag of treats from Rin-Tin-Tinsel. Ugh, Fitz couldn’t with these adorable stalls.

“Perfect timing,” Gio said, holding out the pink bag with candy cane-striped bows. “For your princess. They’re amazing. Cookie and Chip went wild over them. Organic, home-baked dog treats.”

“Aw, thank you. She’s going to love them.” Fitz placed the bag in his coat pocket. “Where did Joker go?”

“He said Chip had something in his mouth.” Gio chuckled. “It’s the most said phrase in our house. ‘What are you eating?’ Don’t know who’s worse, Chip or Cookie.” He cocked his head, and both he and Fitz replied at the same time.

“Chip.”

Fitz laughed. He could attest to that. However, it was more likely that Joker took off and Chip followed, thinking they were playing, rather than Joker taking off after Chip.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” Fitz started walking, and Gio joined him. “Winterhaven finally has everything it needs for a successful holiday season. Except for guests.”

“I was thinking that, too. It won’t do the town much good to look beautiful if we’re the only ones here to see it.”

“Clara mentioned some people coming in from the neighboring towns and a few of the guests who’d canceled rebooked, but that’s not enough to save Winterhaven’s holiday season. I was wondering if maybe there was something you could do?”

Gio seemed to think about it. His face lit up. “Why didn’t I think of that sooner? I have the perfect solution!”

“You do? That was fast.” Fitz winked at him. “That’s why you’re the brains of the operation.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gio said with a laugh. “But thank you. First, I need to speak to Clara and find out how much lodging is available, then make a few calls. It’ll be perfect.” He looked so excited. Glancing around, there was no sign of Joker, Jack, or Chip. “I don’t see Sacha. I’ll text him and let him know I’m looking for Clara.”

“Keep me posted, and let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.” Fitz smiled as Gio hurried off to do what he did best. Help people. Fitz had no doubt Gio had the perfect solution, a way to help Winterhaven and, most likely, whoever ended up being a guest.

Now, to find his princess. He texted Leo, who said that Duchess was with Red and Laz building a snowman, or rather snow dog. With a laugh, Fitz headed for the clearing just behind the market square. Fewer people were there, but a number of families with children were spread out, building snowmen or making snow angels.

When Duchess saw him, she barked and bounded over to him, her tail wagging excitedly, her black floof covered in snow like she’d been digging or rolling around. He gave her

lots of scratches before she bounded off again to play. Ace and Colton appeared with Chip, Cookie, and Cocoa on their heels.

“We’re heading back and taking the furry beasts with us,” Ace said. “Want us to take her royal fluffness?”

Fitz chuckled. “Thanks, that would be great.” He scanned the market square. “I’m guessing you saw Joker and Jack?”

“Jack sent Chip to us,” Colton said. “He ran off, saying something about helping Joker?” He shrugged. “Who knows with those two? See you later.” They left with the dogs, and Fitz joined Red and Laz. He hoped Joker was okay. Considering he’d been the most relationship averse from all of them, worried Fitz. Yes, Joker adored Gio, but who knew what went on in that mercurial brain of his?

“Hey, guys. Whatcha making?” Fitz asked.

“A snow poodle,” Laz replied with a laugh. “Maybe now we can finish it since the model isn’t here to bite the tail off her likeness. For the third time.”

Fitz snorted. “My girl is very fussy about her appearance.”

“Don’t I know it,” Laz replied, shaking his head. “Remember when she kept pulling the bow off her head, and it was because she’d wanted you to put the tiara on her instead?”

Fitz laughed at the memory. His girl had definite opinions about fashion. He removed the flyer Clara had given him from his coat pocket and showed it to Red. “Did you hear about the cookie-baking contest tomorrow?”

Red smiled wide. “You bet! Sounds like a lot of fun. I have a couple of family recipes I can’t wait to try out.”

“Red’s going to make his dad’s famous gingerbread cookies. *And...*” He batted his lashes at Red, making his boyfriend chuckle.

“And Laz’s favorite raspberry and almond shortbread thumbprints.”

Just the sound of them made Fitz’s mouth water. “I need those in my life. Just make sure you hide some because if you blink, they’ll all be in Ace’s stomach. Cookie thief.”

Laz seemed to notice Jack wasn't with Fitz. "Did Jack have to work?"

As he shook his head, Fitz picked up some snow and started adding to their tailless snow poodle. "Jack put Maury in charge while he's gone."

"Really?" Red straightened. He was a big guy, but in his thick winter coat, scarf, and hat, he looked even bigger, towering over them like the gentle giant he was. "Jack passed work on to someone else? So it's true? Jack's going to work fewer hours?"

"That's what he said." Fitz's cell phone buzzed a heartbeat later, and he removed it from his pocket. He gaped at the text. "What the hell? How does he know!" He showed Laz and Red his text from Ace. It said, "Ha! That's what he said."

Laz shook his head, his eyes wide. "Like Leo says, he defies science."

"One of these days, I'm going to find out how he does it," Fitz grumbled. "Or better yet, I'm going to get the jump on Ace for a change."

"That way lies madness," Red warned.

Red wasn't wrong.

"When you do, I need to be there for it," Laz said.

Fitz wasn't the only one Ace jumped out at and scared the crap out of. He removed the ribbon from the pink treat bag Gio had bought Duchess and fashioned it into a bow for their snow poodle, his thoughts on Joker. Whatever was going on, Fitz hoped Jack could help.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“**W**ould you stop!”

Jack forgot how hard it was to run in the snow. How the hell did his best friend do it? It seemed like no matter how hard Jack tried, he couldn't catch up. His face was all but numb from the icy chill. It was a good thing he had the thick knitted scarf Fitz had bought him. How was Joker so fast? Then again, when Sacha Wilder was motivated, nothing could stop him.

“You're not going to outrun your thoughts if that's what you're trying to do,” Jack shouted. Where the hell were they? He paused long enough to look around. Okay, they hadn't gone too far. The market stalls were still visible.

Joker stopped.

Thank you.

Jack tried to catch his breath from behind his scarf, his hot breath puffing against the soft woven fabric. As he caught up, he shook his head. “Did we have to do this?”

“I can't get married.” Joker turned to face Jack and grabbed his shoulders. “Gio knows too many people. Do you realize how big the wedding would be? I can't pick out napkins or colors like Drake's Neck. You know how I know what the fuck color that is or that it's named after a particular blue found on the neck of a male duck? Ace! Because that's the kind of crazy shit he had to deal with when planning his wedding. I can't be asked to research duck colors, Jack!”

“First of all, no one says you have to get married. Second, even if you two decide to get married, the size of the wedding is up to you both. Thirdly, Gio is not Colton. He would never ask you to research duck colors, so breathe.”

Joker nodded fervently and breathed in deep through his nose, then let it out through his mouth, little puffs of air coming out from behind his scarf. “Fuck. I only glanced at it. I glanced at the stupid ring, and I could see it on his finger, and oh, man.” Joker doubled over, his hands on his knees. “Is this how you felt when Colton mentioned you marrying Fitz?”

Jack threw his arms up. “Does *everyone* know about that?”

“Yep.”

“I didn’t freak out,” Jack grumbled. “I was just caught off guard by it, that’s all.”

“So you’ve thought about it?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I want to build a life with him. But that doesn’t mean we *have* to get married. Not everyone does, you know.”

“But you want to.”

Jack thought about it and smiled, warmth filling him. “Yeah, I do.”

“I don’t like this trend,” Joker growled, folding his arms over his chest, quite the challenge considering how puffy his winter coat was.

“What trend? And can we maybe start walking back toward civilization?”

Joker rolled his eyes and started walking. “The trend of one of us doing something so everyone else has to fucking do it. First, Ace got a boyfriend, then everyone else got a boyfriend. Then he got married, and now everyone else is getting married.”

“Are you saying that we’re all following *Ace’s* example? Because that’s terrifying.”

Joker threw his arms up. “I don’t know. I need to blame someone, and he’s the most qualified for the job.”

Jack snorted. He’d known Joker a long time, and his friend had always hated change. More than most. Especially when things were going well in his life. It was a childhood trauma response he’d never really healed from.

“No one’s going anywhere,” Jack replied quietly.

Joker frowned. “I know that. I mean, deep down, I do, but...there’s always that part of me that fears I could lose it all.” He stopped and met Jack’s gaze. “I have so much to lose, Jack.”

“Hey, you’re never going to lose us. Hell, our family went from us two, to six, to the freaking Brady Bunch. With our track record, we’re more in danger of gaining annoying family members than losing.” The fact remained that Jack knew neither of them would change a thing. They were fortunate to have their, at times, overly dramatic family.

Joker laughed softly. “Yeah. Good thing Colton and Ace have a mansion, or we’d have to move our family barbecues to a damned stadium.” He playfully bumped into Jack’s arm. “Thanks.”

“No problem. I guess we could both use a good kick in the ass sometimes.”

“You really going to promote Maury?” Joker asked as they finally made it back to the market square.

Jack wasn’t surprised his friend had heard, which meant everyone else had. “Yep. King mentioned having a meeting when we got back. I think he’s on board with all of us stepping back a bit. We’ve all been working non-stop since opening Four Kings Security. Then there’s the whole Tampa branch thing.”

Joker nodded. His phone dinged, and he checked his messages. “Looks like Gio’s talking to Clara. See you back at the cabin.” He went off searching for Gio while Jack went to find Fitz, who’d texted him to let him know he was in the field behind the stalls with Red and Laz building a snow poodle.

On his way to Fitz, something caught Jack's eye, and he doubled back to one of the stalls. "Excuse me. Would that take long to personalize?"

"Not at all," the young woman chirped.

"Perfect." He told her what he wanted, and a few minutes later, he had his little gift. Jack laughed as he neared Fitz, Red, Laz, and the snow poodle with a pink bow on its head. "Gee, I wonder who that is?"

"Just in time," Fitz replied. "Our snow poodle is complete, and I'm ready to be warm again."

"We'll head back with you," Laz said, taking Red's hand. "I'm all snowed out."

They returned to the cabin, where Red and Laz joined King and Leo in the kitchen. Jack followed Fitz upstairs, where they shed their layers, or in Fitz's case, many, *many* layers.

Jack tucked his small gift box in his nightstand drawer and followed Fitz into the bathroom. They took their time in the shower, kissing and caressing. How long had it been since they'd done something as simple as shower together? With Jack coming in at all hours, sometimes they barely saw each other.

Not anymore. Things were going to change.

When they dressed in their pajamas and climbed into bed, Duchess curled up in her fluffy princess bed near the window, the snow falling outside creating the perfect ambiance, Jack pulled the box from the nightstand drawer. He turned and held it out.

"I got you a little something."

Fitz gasped. "Aw! You're so sweet." He kissed Jack's cheek and opened the box, his expression softening at the glass ornament.

It was heart-shaped with two candy canes making a heart, with the words, "I love you to the North Pole and back"

painted above their engraved names and, of course, Duchess's name beneath theirs.

"Oh, baby, I love it." Fitz ran a finger lovingly over their names. He gently placed it back in the box and tucked it in his nightstand drawer, then he proceeded to show Jack just how much he loved it, and Jack.

The following day, at breakfast, everyone was talking about the cookie-baking competition, which was a testament to Winterhaven's magical holiday influence because, since when did Joker care about cookies?

"*You* are looking forward to decorating cookies?" Jack asked, eyeing Joker.

Joker stared at him like he'd grown antlers. "What? No. I'm looking forward to *eating* the cookies everyone decorates. Didn't you read the flyer? The cookies the contestants bake will be handed out to members of the audience who want them. *Hello*. Free cookies."

That made more sense.

After breakfast, Red started his practice cookies, as if they would be anything other than delicious. With Fitz, Leo, and Laz helping with the baking, this was the perfect opportunity for Jack to pull Ace to one side.

"Hey, I have a favor to ask."

Ace gasped, "*You* need *my* help? Does it involve decorating King's office with dozens of Christmas ornaments of Nick Cage wearing a Santa hat?"

"What? No. Definitely no."

Ace stared at him. "What? Oh, yeah, no, did I say decorate King's office with dozens of ornaments with Nick Cage wearing a Santa hat? Because that's not happening. What I meant to say was, how can I help?"

Jack eyed Ace. "You are so weird."

"Hm, this coming from a man wearing a Christmas sweater that says 'Tech Support, I'm here to delete your cookies.'"

“Hey!” Jack dropped his gaze to his black knit sweater with pixelated Christmas trees and gingerbread cookies across the chest. “This sweater is awesome. Fitz got me this sweater.”

“And it is indeed awesome. What do you need, bro? I have a puppy about ready to pee on the carpet.” Ace scooped Cocoa up off the floor and nuzzled him. “Why are you so cute? Because you’re my puppy, that’s why. It’s in our genes.”

“You realize he’s a dog and, therefore, does not share your genes.”

Ace narrowed his eyes at Jack. “Don’t science me. Who are you? Leo? What do you need, Jacopo?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It’s your name.”

“Fine. *Anston*.”

“Touché. Continue.” Ace rubbed Cocoa’s belly and waited.

“Right. Sorry. So you know about Merry and Noel, right?”

“Cute little blond who short-circuits every time his beardy crush tries to talk to him? Yes. I am aware.”

“Okay, good. Fitz has asked for my help, and I think I know something that might get them in the same room together and help Merry overcome his inability to talk to Noel.”

“I’m all ears.”

Perfect. Jack told Ace his plan. Eight words. That’s all it entailed. Ace looked at him like he was nuts but shrugged and agreed.

“When do you want me to do it?”

“How about after the cookie-baking competition? Merry should be back at the café then.”

“And you’re sure Merry will agree?”

“I’m pretty confident,” Jack said. “Thanks. Also, your puppy is peeing.”

“Shit!” Ace took off, grabbed his coat, and darted out the front door.

“Everything okay?” Fitz asked. “Where was Ace off to in such a hurry?”

“Puppy pee emergency.”

“Ah. Is Operation Merry Noel a go?”

“Yep. Ace is on it,” Jack said, wrapping his arm around Fitz and kissing his cheek.

“Should I be concerned?”

“It’ll be fine. Come on. We have a cookie-baking contest to prepare for.” Because any competition or contest was a family affair. Luckily, it was Red competing, so there was no competition. Red was happy just to be a part of the fun. He didn’t care about winning. Had it been Ace, Joker, or Lucky, there would have been bloodshed and, most likely, something catching fire.

After a few hours of Red baking cookies, which everyone else happily ate and gave their thumbs up to, they helped him pack up all his ingredients and baking tools. Since the cookie-baking event was being held under a big tent in the town square near the market, they brought the dogs along, including Cocoa, who’d be asleep a good portion of the time.

The tent was bigger than Jack expected, not to mention more people were in attendance than he thought there would be. Winterhaven sure liked their baking contests. The baking area was also decked out with multiple ovens, tables, and refrigerators.

“It’s like a small *Great British Bake Off*,” Fitz said excitedly, sitting at the other end of the row so Duchess could lay on the floor next to him.

There were only four contestants and three judges. Clara stood behind one of the tables, a wireless mic in her hand.

“Welcome to Winterhaven’s holiday cookie-baking contest!”

Everyone clapped and cheered, then settled down as Clara continued.

“There will be three rounds of cookie baking, each round taste-tested by our lovely panel of judges.” She motioned to the three judges, who waved cheerfully at the crowd. He recognized them from different market stalls he and Fitz had visited yesterday. Good choice for judges. Their holiday treats had been delicious. “Let’s get baking!”

The contest commenced, and the crowd cheered the bakers on. Two of the bakers rushed around, getting their ingredients and supplies ready. Red did what he always did and lost himself in the baking. His friend always got this far-off look and a soft smile when he baked.

When they first got together, Fitz told Jack that cooking and baking were Red’s love language. How putting love into the food he was making for people made him happy. It also soothed him, which Red’s therapist agreed was good for his anxiety.

The contest went by much quicker than Jack expected and was fun to watch. At least, he thought so. Then again, he was used to watching all manner of baking shows. His boyfriend was a tad obsessed with them. That and period dramas. Jack could be dancing completely naked in the living room, and Fitz wouldn’t even know it because he was so enthralled in whether Lady What’s-her-name and Lord What’s-his-face managed to escape scandal.

Fitz leaned into Jack to whisper. “Your best friend is falling asleep.”

Jack glanced over at Joker, sitting at the end of the row. He was most definitely dozing. “Do you still have those dog treats in your pocket?”

Fitz nodded. He handed Jack a mini bone biscuit. Jack took it, made sure no one was watching, then flicked it. The mini bone whizzed down the aisle, smacking Joker in the face, then bouncing off where it landed in Chip’s mouth because the moment Chip sniffed that a treat was nearby, he was sitting up and ready.

Joker jumped with a start, and everyone in their row held back their snickers and laughs as Joker looked around, trying to figure out what had hit him. Edible evidence resulted in the perfect crime.

“And...time,” Clara announced. “Bakers, present your cookies.”

Each contestant chose a different shape for their gingerbread cookies. The crowd laughed and cheered when the judges held up Red’s cookies. It surprised no one that Red’s gingerbread men weren’t men but gingerbread dogs with little winter hats and scarves. One was a poodle, which Fitz loved.

Contestant number two made gingerbread reindeer, contestant three made gingerbread bears with little Santa hats, and contestant four made gingerbread Christmas sweaters. They all looked way better than anything Jack could have conjured up. Cooking was *not* his forte, and who knew what disaster would strike the kitchen if he so much as attempted baking. He’d already murdered two toasters just by touching them.

Jack sent a text to Ace as the contest was nearing the final judging. He leaned into Fitz and whispered, “Operation Merry Noel is about to strike.”

Fitz blinked at him. His gaze went to Ace, sneaking away in an overly suspicious way that said he was clearly up to something. The man was not subtle. With a gasp, Fitz moved his wide eyes to Jack.

“What did you do?”

Jack wagged his eyebrows. “I sent Ace to the café.”

“To do what?” Fitz held his breath at Jack’s wicked grin. Something told him he should have asked Jack what he had planned before giving him the go-ahead. “Jack?”

“I sent him to fix the water pressure.”

CHAPTER NINE

O h, sweet, merciful Mariah Carey!

“And this year’s Winterhaven holiday cookie-baking contest winner is Red McKinley!”

Everyone jumped to their feet with a cheer, and Fitz did the same, clapping excitedly as Clara handed Red what looked like an etched glass cooking spoon. Red thanked her, made a little bow, and then shook hands with the other contestants, who congratulated him, all looking genuinely pleased for him. And oh, holy night, Jack had sent Ace off to fix the water pressure at the café. Ace was talented at fixing many things. Plumping was not one of those things.

Fitz whirled to face his boyfriend. “We need to go.” He leaned over Jack to whisper at Mason.

“Could you watch Duchess for a while?”

“Sure,” Mason replied. “Come ’ere, princess.”

Duchess jumped to her feet and pushed past everyone to get to Mason, her tail smacking everyone’s legs as she went.

“Let’s go, Jack.”

“But...cookies,” Jack said, pouting as people started flocking to the tables to congratulate all the contestants and eat the free cookies. “Don’t you want Red’s raspberry, thumb-whatever yummy things?”

“I want to make sure no one ends up in the hospital.”

Jack waved a hand in dismissal. “It’ll be fine. Ace will be the one turning on the faucet once he’s finished.”

Fitz groaned. *Fine* was not a word he would use to describe a man incapable of fixing anything connected to water without something shooting out of the wall. “Did you tell Colton?” Judging by Jack’s blank stare, Fitz would say he had not. “Jack! You didn’t think Colton would want to know that his husband might be about to knock himself out with a kitchen faucet?”

Jack seemed to think about it and shrugged. “He’ll be fine.”

“Ugh!” Fitz pulled Jack out of the aisle with him. They had to help before someone got attacked by a kitchen sink or the café ended up underwater. Thankfully, the walls and floors of the kitchen in the café consisted of tile designed for spillage. Fitz was sure he’d seen a small round drain in the floor.

“How about a cookie for the road?” Jack asked, his smile wide.

Fitz was not impressed and was certain his facial expression said so.

“Fine,” Jack huffed. “Let’s go.”

As they headed toward the side of the tent, Fitz texted Colton, who immediately checked his phone. His eyes went huge, and his head shot up. He sprinted after them as they discreetly walked away. Fitz would apologize to Red later, but Red would understand. He was well aware of what kind of mischief his brothers could get into and the type of injuries that could ensue, which explained why he always had a medical bag ready.

“Really, Jack?” Fitz said, shaking his head. “That’s the best solution you could come up with?”

“What’s the big deal? He ducked last time. He’ll be ready for it.”

Colton sighed. “Not when he’s convinced he fixed the damn water pressure and the shower head flying off was a

flake. This is Ace we're talking about. He has no concept of what he can't do. I've told him several times that it's okay. He doesn't *have* to know how to fix everything. Of course, it's Ace, so instead of conceding, he takes it as a challenge."

Jack snorted. "Of course he does."

They went from walking briskly to awkwardly jogging. At least the shop owners had shoveled and salted the sidewalks. Thankfully, Mugs and Kisses wasn't very far. With the majority of the townspeople attending the festivities, the café was empty, which was probably why Jack had picked now to carry out his evil plan.

The moment they stepped inside the café, they were met with shouting and rushing water.

"How do we make it stop?" Merry yelled from somewhere inside the kitchen.

The bell above the door jingled, and Noel came rushing in. "What's going on? Merry texted me in a panic, saying he needed my help."

"I barely touched it! Why is there so much water?"

And that was Ace. At least he was conscious and hadn't knocked himself out.

They ran into the kitchen, and Fitz jumped to the side with a squeal before he was drenched by the shower of water spewing from the sink. Ace had somehow shoved himself inside the cabinet under the sink, or at least half his body.

Poor Merry was drenched, and at least half an inch of water was on the floor. It looked like the drain appeared to be clogged. Although Fitz knew it wasn't Ace's fault that the drain was clogged, Fitz still blamed Ace.

Noel rushed over to Merry, took hold of his arms, and checked him over. He ran a hand over Merry's soaking head, moving his hair away from his face. "Are you okay?"

Merry nodded. "I don't know how to turn the water off. The valve under the sink is stuck."

If Fitz wasn't so busy grabbing towels to hand out, he would have been jumping for joy. The plan worked! Fitz could have used a little less water and a little more romance, but he'd take it. Merry had talked to Noel without running away! Colton hurried over to Ace, who was still wedged under the sink.

"Love? Are you okay? Can I help?"

"Hey, baby. Can you find me a wrench? This stupid valve is stuck."

"The main water valve is outside," Noel said, heading for the kitchen door only to have Merry grab his arm.

"What? You can't go out there like that. You'll catch a cold or worse!"

"I'll be fine," Noel said, his smile wide. "It'll just take a second." He hurried out, and in no time at all, the water stopped gushing out. Thank goodness. There had to be a plunger around here somewhere.

"Oh, thank goodness." Colton let out a sigh of relief just as Noel hurried back in.

Merry handed Noel some towels. "Remove your coat and dry off before you catch a cold. I can't believe you went out there like that. Honestly." Merry huffed and started towel drying Noel's hair, which was adorable because Noel had to bend over so Merry could reach his head.

"Love," Colton said gently. "You need to get out of there and dry off. We'll worry about the valve later."

"Right." Ace pulled himself out from under the sink. He made to stand, slipped, and threw out a hand to catch himself, smacking an open bag of flour on the steel counter next to the sink. The bag exploded, flour raining down on everyone. "Shit!" He turned and slipped again, and this time, Colton made the mistake of grabbing onto his husband. They both crashed to the floor, the splash hitting everyone.

"Ow," Colton groaned.

“Colton!” Fitz carefully hurried over, Jack right behind him. “Are you okay?”

“What about me?” Ace grumbled. “I’m the one who fixed the sink.”

Fitz and Jack helped Colton up onto his feet.

“But did you?” Jack asked, turning to help Ace, which meant both he and Ace ended up on the floor. Jack glanced up at Fitz and sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

Noel cringed. “Are you two okay?”

Did Merry realize Noel had his arms around him? Merry looked up at Noel and smiled, his cheeks pink when Noel smiled warmly. *Oh, they just had a moment! Squee!*

“We should go,” Fitz said. “Jack, stop playing around.”

Jack sat up and arched an eyebrow at Fitz. “Right. Because falling on my ass in freezing water is fun.”

Fitz widened his eyes and discreetly tilted his head to Noel and Merry. Noel was helping Merry get dry. They were drying each other and standing *very* close.

“Oh, um, right. Yeah, we should get going,” Jack said, carefully standing. “Those cookies aren’t going to decorate themselves.”

“We should also get some dry clothes,” Colton muttered. “I texted Gio and asked him if he wouldn’t mind bringing us some clothing.”

Ace groaned as he got to his feet. “Really, babe? Out of everyone, you had to send the guy who’s dating Joker? I’m never going to hear the end of this.”

Jack grinned wickedly. “It could have been worse. It could have been squirrels.”

The laughter followed Ace out of the kitchen. As they waited for Gio and Joker inside the café, Merry made them all hot drinks and then disappeared into the kitchen. A short time later, Gio and Joker arrived with dry clothes and coats. Joker

handed Ace what looked like a Christmas sweater, or at least a winter sweater because it was multiple shades of brown.

“What the—” Ace held up the sweater, and everyone laughed. It had squirrels all over it. “Haha. Very funny. Laugh all you want, but when that pointy-eared villain sends his army of furry beasts to eradicate us, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He tugged the sweater over his head; his eyes narrowed at Joker. “I hope they come for you first.”

Joker laughed as he left the café.

Noel and Merry walked out of the kitchen, and Fitz did his best to pretend he hadn’t noticed how Merry’s skin was flushed to the tips of his ears. His lips were glossy, and he had a dazed, dreamy look. Seeming to shake himself out of it, he pulled Fitz to one side.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” Fitz asked, blinking innocently.

Merry gave him a knowing look. “This was your idea to get me and Noel together, wasn’t it.”

“Honey, it is *never* my idea to send Ace to fix anything. That was all Jack’s idea, but I *did* ask him for help, so I suppose part of the credit goes to me.” He hummed. “Or blame? Let’s go with credit.”

Merry laughed softly. “Noel said he would stay with me and help me clean up the kitchen.” He worried his bottom lip, then leaned in to whisper. “We kissed!”

Fitz was so excited for Merry that he could barely contain it, but he did. “Well then, we’ll make ourselves scarce. Have fun...cleaning.”

Merry’s cheeks flushed an even brighter pink. “I’ll see you all later.”

All bundled up in warm, dry clothes, they left the café, returning to the tent where the cookie decorating had commenced. Fitz thanked Mason for puppy-sitting and called Duchess. She pranced over excitedly, and he pulled a treat from his pocket. No matter what item of clothing Fitz wore, he

usually had a small treat bag inside a pocket. That and an empty poop bag. Spotting Clara, Fitz made his way over to her.

“Are we all set to decorate the Ice Castle?”

“Absolutely! We’ve moved all the decor and remaining containers into the Enchanted Ballroom and started on the smaller rooms, so you can join us after the gingerbread house decorating event if you’d like.”

“Great! We’ll be there.” Fitz was looking forward to it. Once the Ice Castle was finished, the parties and bigger events could finally occur. Of course, they could still use more guests. He hoped whatever Gio was working on would help. Winterhaven’s holiday season would be in full swing with the Ice Castle back in business.

Fitz found Red inside the tent and hugged him. “Congratulations! I knew you’d win. I’m sorry we had to rush out. There was an Ace-mergency.”

“Do I need my medical bag?” Red asked worriedly. “It’s back at the cabin.”

Fitz chuckled. “No, it’s fine. He managed not to knock himself out.”

“Oh good.” Red shook his head. “I don’t even want to know what he was up to.” He looked around. “Have you seen Leo? Joker was looking for him.”

“I haven’t seen him since we sat down for the contest. You think he’s off on his secret-not-so-secret Christmas mission?”

Red shrugged. “Could be. I wonder what would take this long to sort out. I mean, he’s been at it for *days*.”

Jack stepped up to Fitz and kissed his cheek. “Hey, I’m going to have to miss the gingerbread house decorating.”

“Oh.” Fitz tried not to sound disappointed. “Work?”

“No, actually. Leo.”

“Leo?” Fitz was confused. “Wait, you know where he is?”

“He texted me, asking me to meet him at the Ice Castle. Something about helping Santa set with some equipment? I don’t know. He needs my help carrying some tech stuff. I’ll text you once I’m done.”

“Does King know?” Red asked Jack. “I haven’t seen him around either.”

“Leo said something about King returning to the cabin for a video call with Bibi and the kids,” Jack replied. “I’ll let you know if I find out anything else. Better go. See you in a bit.”

Fitz waved Jack goodbye and joined the gingerbread house decorating that was about to start. Thankfully, the large tent was heated. Hard to decorate with frozen fingers. Duchess made herself comfortable beneath the table Fitz had picked. He stood next to Joker and playfully bumped him with his hip.

“You’re just full of surprises,” Fitz teased, receiving a side-eye that made him laugh.

“Don’t go getting any funny ideas,” Joker grumbled. “I’m only here because Gio wants one.”

“Where is Gio?”

“Back at the cabin making calls. He’s all excited about his big idea.”

“I hope he can help,” Fitz said with a sigh. “The town could use more guests.”

“If anyone can do it, Gio can.” Joker removed all the pieces from the sealed box in front of him. He narrowed his eyes as Ace came to stand to the other side of him. “Go stand somewhere else.”

Ace laughed. “Why?”

“Because you’re shady as shit,” Joker replied. “If you touch my house, I’m going to teach your puppy to take a shit in your shoes.”

“I’m starting to question your training methods. Also, I’m not going to touch your house. I have my own awesome abode to decorate. It’s going to be my gingerbread mansion.”

Fitz held back a laugh at Joker's unimpressed expression.

"Your house has all the same size pieces ours does, you moose."

Ace snickered. "If I'm Moose, does that make you Squirrel?"

Joker turned to Fitz. "Trade places with me."

"I love you, but no." Fitz was not about to put himself in the middle of these two. That way indeed lay madness. They all started piecing together their gingerbread houses using the sticky icing, and Fitz noticed Ace was breaking up some of his pieces. "What are you doing?"

"Remodeling my house."

Fitz glanced at Joker, who shook his head as he carefully joined two of his house's walls. "Don't engage. Trust me. Pretend he's a bear. Stand very still and quiet, and he won't engage."

Ace snorted. "Yeah, that doesn't work on me, Squirrel."

Fitz stood very still and didn't make a sound. A heartbeat later, Ace was working quietly on his house. Fitz carefully turned to Joker with wide eyes and mouthed, "It worked."

Joker snickered, and everyone got lost in decorating their houses. This was probably the quietest Fitz had ever seen Ace. At least until Ace started quietly singing "Carol of the Bells." Wait.

Fitz turned to Ace. "Did you make up your own lyrics to Carol of the Bells?" It was only then that he noticed Ace's gingerbread house. "Sweet Saint Nick, *what?*"

"What the hell?" Joker gaped at Ace. "How did you...?" He shook his head in disbelief.

Fitz looked from Ace's house to his, then back. He gasped. "Well, jingle my bells. Leo's right. You do defy science." How else would Ace have built a *two-story gingerbread Victorian house* out of the same pieces the rest of them had? It made no logical sense. It was intricately decorated with multiple sloped

roofs and arched cathedral-style windows. Fitz leaned in. “Is that...?”

“A tiny gingerbread puppy?” Ace asked proudly. “Why yes. Yes, it is.”

“How?” Joker demanded. He turned to Fitz. “Explain this to me. This is the guy who stapled his shirt to the floor while replacing a carpet.”

Fitz burst into laughter. He could just picture it. His phone jingled, and Fitz removed it from his pocket. “Oh, I need to go.”

“Everything okay?” Joker asked.

Fitz nodded. “It’s just Jack. He wants me to meet him at the Christmas tree lot. He needs my help with something.” He patted his leg and told Duchess to come with him as they left the tent and headed toward the end of town.

“What do you suppose your daddy needs?” Fitz asked Duchess as she trotted down the street next to him. She looked up at him, then ahead as if shrugging. Fitz laughed. “Yeah, your guess is as good as mine.”

The sun was setting, the sky turning a stunning purple that blended into orange and pink. When they walked into the tree lot, no one was there. What the heck was going on?

“Back here,” Jack called out.

Curious, Fitz hurried toward Jack’s voice, Duchess on his heels. They ended up at the side of the lot. They maneuvered through all the Christmas trees and ended up at a red wooden fence. What on earth was his boyfriend up to?

“Jack?”

A door in the fence opened, and Jack popped his head out. “Hey, gorgeous.” He laughed when Duchess bounded over to him. He let her inside and then turned back to Fitz, motioning behind him. “Come on.”

“What is it?” Fitz murmured as he met Jack at the door. Jack took his hand and pulled Fitz inside, closing the door behind them. When Fitz turned, he gasped. “What...?”

Christmas trees decorated with twinkling white lights surrounded the small fenced-in area, and more lights were strung up from one side to the other, creating a canopy of sorts. At one end was a white screen, and a few feet away, a fire pit. There were heaters and, in the center, what looked like a reclined sofa without the base. It was covered in pillows and big, cozy blankets. Duchess had already made herself comfortable on one of the blankets.

“Oh, Jack.”

Next to the couch was a bucket with ice, a wine bottle, and two glasses. There was even a big bucket of popcorn and another bucket with movie snacks. Fitz whirled to face Jack.

“You did all this? For me?”

Jack brought Fitz into his arms. “I’m constantly in awe of you and everything you are. I am so damned lucky to be loved by you. You are my whole world. I love you so much, sweetheart, and I promise to never take what we have for granted. Merry Christmas.” He pulled a small remote from his pocket and pressed a button. The screen lit up, and *The Holiday* started playing.

“My favorite Christmas movie.” Fitz turned to Jack, tears of joy welling in his eyes. “Thank you. I love you too, Jack. So very much.” Jack led him to the couch, sitting down first so Fitz could sit between his legs, his back to Jack’s chest. He snuggled close, and Jack wrapped them in warm, fuzzy blankets. Duchess got up and, after a couple of turns, curled up in a fluffy ball against them.

Jack kissed the side of Fitz’s head. “This is the beginning of lots of moments like this for us.”

Fitz’s phone jingled, and he pulled it out to check the text. He gaped at the screen, unable to believe what he was seeing. “He did it!”

“Who did what?” Jack asked, puzzled.

“Gio.” Fitz sat up and turned. He showed Jack his phone screen and the screenshot Joker had sent him of Winterhaven’s travel website. “Sold out.”

“Holy shit, he did it!”

They cheered, and Fitz cupped Jack’s face, his heart overflowing with joy and love. Not only had they helped Winterhaven launch their holiday season, but the small town was about to be inundated with guests, saving Christmas.

As Fitz kissed Jack, love pouring out of them, he couldn’t help but wonder if maybe there was a little something magical in the air around them. Whatever the reason, Fitz would always treasure this moment and the amazing man in his arms.



The Kings and Wild Cards holiday shenanigans continue with
Home for the Howlidays, book 3 in The Kings: A
Tremendous Christmas series.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *Sleigh It Ain't So*, the second book in The Kings: A Tremendous Christmas series. I hope you enjoyed Fitz and Jack's holiday hijinks, and if you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon.

Continue the adventure in *Home for the Howlidays*, Book 3 in The Kings: A Tremendous Christmas series (Gio and Joker's holiday story).

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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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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