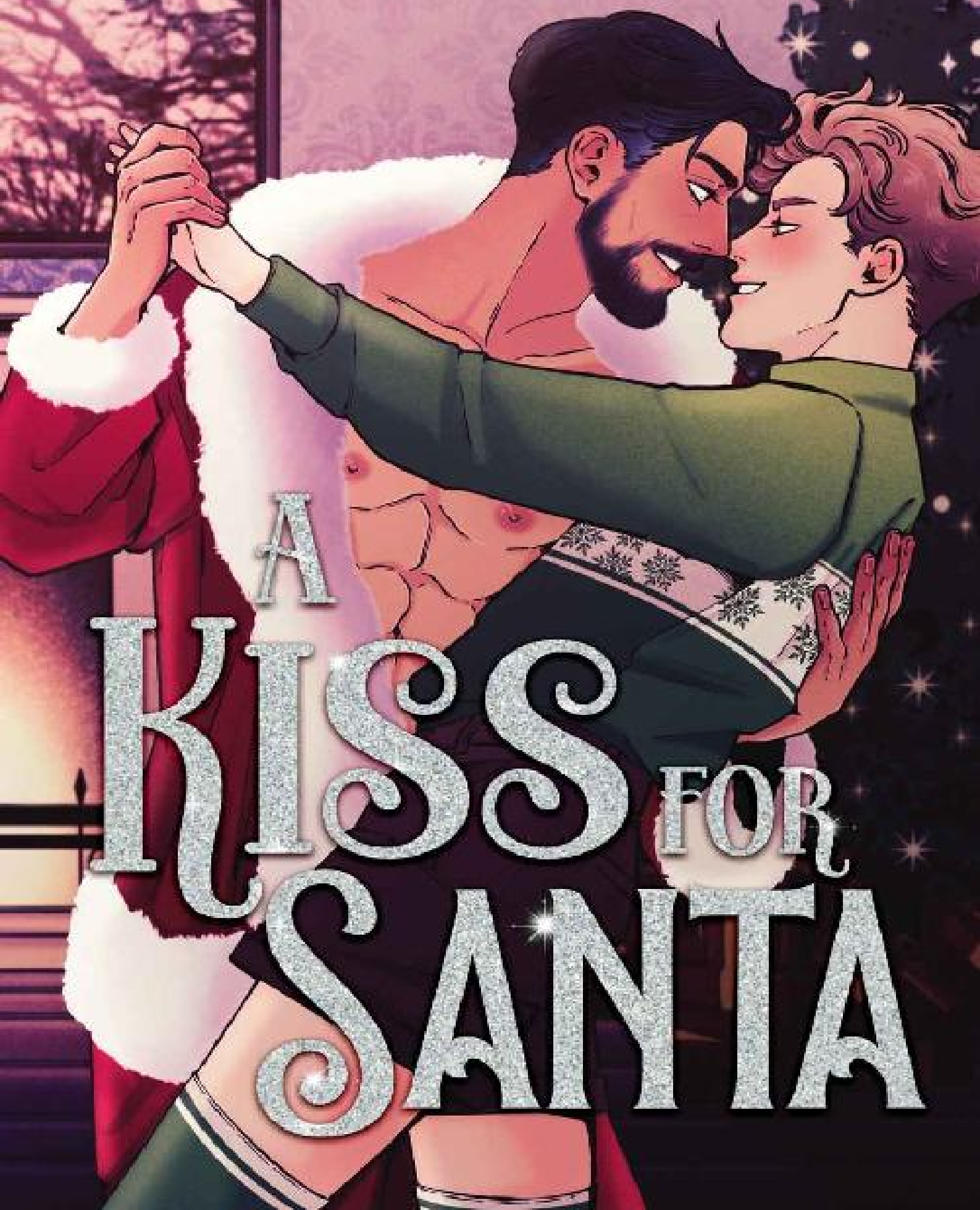


MIA MONROE



A  
KISS FOR  
SANTA

# A KISS FOR SANTA

MIA MONROE

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# PROLOGUE

Luca

Ten years ago

Unable to sleep, I descend the stairs on my way to the kitchen for a glass of water. Passing through the living room, my gaze lingers on the plate of cookies and milk we left out for Santa. I smile. Mom refuses to give up the tradition even though I'm almost twenty-two. If it makes her happy, I'll never complain.

In the kitchen, I decide on leftover wine from dinner instead of water. Gazing out the large window over the sink, I watch the snow flurries fall. It's a perfect Christmas Eve. On Monday I start my new job back in Phoenix, but there's nothing like being in Boston for the holidays.

I finish my wine then decide to try to sleep again, so I head back to the stairs. As I pass the tree again, taking in the decorations and lights, I plop on the couch for a few minutes to soak in the holiday feeling as much as possible. Under the tree are piles of packages, but only a few are for us. When the sun rises, Mom, my stepdad Richard, and I will pack these up and take them to the children's hospital. After all, what is Christmas about if not giving?

My eyes feel heavy soon enough, teasing me with the hope of sleep again. As an adult, I shouldn't be so keyed up for the holiday still, but Mom has a way of bringing out the kid in me. I allow my eyes to close, remembering holidays of the past.

Staying up late to catch a glimpse of Santa or his reindeer. Baking cookies to make sure he has a nice snack to refuel. Writing lists of all the things I wanted and mailing them in a big red mailbox.

A shuffling sound pulls my eyelids open again, and I blink trying to focus on the blurry Christmas tree. When I do, I'm about to rise but I'm stunned motionless. A man, dressed in full Santa regalia, stands next to the plate of cookies, eating one.

The logical part of my brain is trying to reason why and how someone dressed as Santa would break into someone's house to eat cookies, but then I notice the several new packages under the tree, wrapped in different paper.

The man turns his head sharply, meeting my eyes. He looks alarmed for a moment, but then he smiles.

“Luca.”

My name on his lips startles me. His voice is deep and robust, exactly how I imagined Santa would sound, but that's where my imagination ends and reality takes over. He's not old. Not fat. Not looking like someone's grandpa. The man before me is fit. Taller than average, his presence fills the space. His eyes, twinkling blue, focus on me as I take in his appearance. His beard is trimmed close to his face, mostly black with a bit of gray sprinkled in. He's not wearing the iconic hat, revealing thick black hair styled like something out of a swanky sixties magazine. Damn. Santa is hot.

“My, how you've grown into a fine man.”

“Who are you? How do you know my name?”

The man chuckles, placing a hand on his non-existent belly as he does. “You know who I am. As for how I know your name, I know everyone's name.”

I sit up slowly, taking him in. There's nothing unpleasant or threatening about him, but there's no way it's really Santa. For one thing, this guy doesn't fit the bill, and for another, Santa doesn't exist. Right?

The man steps toward me, bringing a rush of warmth with him, and kneels before me. He lifts his hand, exposing his palm, and I watch as a package materializes. I gape at him.

“How did... What?”

The man smiles again, his eyes crinkling and white teeth showing beneath his salt and pepper beard. “I have something special for you, Luca. Whenever you look upon it, the joy of Christmas will fill your heart.”

I take the box, holding it in my lap, but unable to tear my gaze away from the striking stranger.

“Tell Louisa the cookies were perfect as always.” He stands, moving toward the fireplace. “Merry Christmas, Luca.”

With that, he flicks his wrist and a whoosh of red shoots up the fireplace. I scramble across the room, clutching my package as I look up the flue. There’s nothing there, but the sound of scraping hooves above settles over me.

Standing, I walk slowly back to the couch, eyeing my empty wine glass. I’m not drunk, but there’s no way that just happened. But then where did I get this package?

I sit on the couch again, staring at it before tearing into the paper. As I rip open the box, I move tissue paper out of the way to find a snow globe. I lift it, staring at the scene inside. It’s a perfect replica of this house, right down to the plaque on the house, The Vincents.

Instead of shock, warmth spreads through my chest and belly. He’s real.

Santa is real.

Four years ago

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, Luca. See you next year!”

I snort a laugh, waving to my coworkers as we empty the office the day before Christmas Eve. I’m heading straight to Sky Harbor airport to catch a flight to Boston. Two weeks off



to spend with the folks is my idea of a great vacation. I can't wait to see them.

Two hours later, I'm settled on the plane. A holiday movie plays on the screen in front of me, but all I can think of is seeing *him* again in a few hours. Since the first night six years ago, I always wait up for a glimpse of the man. He usually appears ten minutes before midnight and leaves just before the clock turns over to officially begin Christmas Day. Nine minutes over random years, but I yearn for the possibility.

He never ages, never looks any different, but he always has a smile for me. Do I have a crush on Santa Claus? I guess I do.

Which is ridiculous, of course. He's gotta be married if what we grew up learning is true. He never talks about his life, only questions me about mine. I also get the feeling he's a bit envious of my world, but he's never said it. When I'm not in his presence I have a million questions for him, but something about his warm gaze always leaves me stumbling for words.

When we finally land, it's nearly eight at night. The winter sky is dark and cloudy over New England, the chilly air hitting me straight in the chest as I adjust from my months in the desert. I pull the collar of my coat up around my ears as I search for Richard's SUV. I spot my mom waving to me, and with a smile, I walk in her direction.

After hugs and greetings, I slide into the back seat, ready for two weeks of happiness.

"How was London?" Mom asks, slightly turned in her seat as Richard navigates Logan airport traffic.

"London was cool. My coworkers were really nice and took me out every day to see some of the sights."

"Wonderful." Then her smile fades. "Are you still considering the move there?"

"I am. It's a good career opportunity to work abroad."

"I know." She forces a smile. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm only two hours further away than I am in Phoenix. I'll still make it for the holidays."

“Good.”

Richard smiles at me from the rear-view mirror. “How are things with Lad?”

I crinkle my nose. “Over.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, hon,” Mom says. “He seemed so suited for you.”

“He was. We ended on good terms. We’re both just in a career growth phase and it makes spending time together impossible. In fact, he has an opportunity to move out to LA. I’ll be clear across the globe from him.”

Mom rubs my knee. “You’ll find your soulmate when the time is right.”

“Worth holding out for,” Richard says, glancing lovingly at my mom.

“I’m not worried about it. I’m still young. Besides, if I can’t have what you two have, I don’t want it.”

Mom squeezes my knee gently before shifting forward in her seat. “You’ll get it. You’re a wonderful soul.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I lean back in my seat as happiness fills my chest. Boston is home, but I’m lucky to have such amazing opportunities. Pretty soon I’ll be making big money, and I’ll be able to give back to the two people who gave me so much.

I never knew my dad, since he bailed as soon as he found out my mom was pregnant, but she did her best for the three years before she met Richard. He’s the only father I know, but I can’t imagine a better one. Witnessing their love gives me hope of finding my own someday.

Immediately, Santa seeps back into my mind. I’ve never told anyone, not even my folks, about our visits. For the umpteenth time I remind myself that the mystical man is not an option, but I wish my heart would get the message.

Later that evening, after plenty of food and catching up, I watch Mom set the cookies out. This year she made

snickerdoodles—my favorite.

“How do you decide which cookies to make for him?”

Mom looks at me with a warm smile. “I just make what my heart tells me to.”

“He must like them. They’re always gone in the morning.”

She studies me for a moment before nodding. “Yes.”

“Is something up, Mom?”

“No.” She walks over to me, carding her fingers through my hair. “Promise me something, Luca.”

“Anything.”

“You’ll always hold on to the magic of Christmas. No matter how far you travel, no matter how old you get, you’ll always keep it in your heart.”

“I will. I have a great example.”

“Good.” Leaning in, she kisses my forehead. “I’m off to bed.”

“I’m close too. Just want to enjoy the tree a little longer.”

She nods, waving as she ascends the stairs. I settle back on the sofa, scrolling on my phone but anxiously awaiting his arrival. Sadly, it’s not every year. I’ve seen him three times in total, but knowing it’s possible keeps me rooted here.

Hours pass and as the clock hits ten to midnight, I turn sleepy eyes to the fireplace. He’ll be here. I just know it. I can feel it.

I fight sleep as long as I can, finally falling under, but knowing he’ll wake me. At least I hope he will.

When I open my eyes again, I don’t know how long it’s been, but it feels like only minutes. My heart sinks, however, when I glance at the clock to see that it’s almost two in the morning. I missed him. Or maybe he didn’t come.

I check the plate of cookies. It’s empty. Rising from the couch, I notice the box at my feet. A big tag with my name in a fancy font on it hangs from the bow. I open the box, digging

through the tissue paper. Inside is a beautiful scarf. The material is unbelievably soft, and the colors—a deep navy with thin gold lines—are my favorite. A note sits on top.

*You'll need this in London.*

*~Santa*

A smile spreads across my lips. He was here. I wish I had seen him again, but the personal nature of the gift is almost good enough. He cares about me.

I shake my head at the thought. Of course he does. He's Santa. He literally cares about every person on the planet. I'm sure I'm not special. He probably pays lots of people visits. That's why he can't always be with me.

I may have a lot going for me—a wonderful family, great friends, a thriving career—but when it comes to love, things are bleak. The sad fact is, my heart is stuck on someone completely unavailable.

Dammit. I'm in love with Santa Claus.

## Magnus

PERCHED on the roof of Louisa's house, I use my magic to peer through the thick material to watch Luca open my gift. Snow piles on my shoulders, but I can't move. I couldn't bear to wake him earlier, but thankfully, I've returned in time to see him. My patience pays off as he wraps the scarf, made from the finest cashmere available, around his neck, rubbing it over his stubbled cheek.

Prancer nuzzles my cheek. "Sir, we should go."

I wave the reindeer's concern away. "Soon."

Luca stands, twirling in a small circle with his scarf wrapped around him. He's so beautiful when he's happy, which is almost always. With dark, wavy hair, large hazel eyes, an elegant nose, and a perfect pout, his face is perfection, but it's his spirit that draws me ever closer year after year. So few adults even believe in me, losing themselves to the

commercialism of the season, but Luca and his family hold on to the magic.

“Sir,” Prancer continues. “The sun rises soon.”

With a huffed breath, I nod, tearing my eyes away from the stunning mortal. “I’m ready.”

An elf walks up behind me, patting my shoulder before I stand. “You’ll see him again. Soon.”

“Three hundred and sixty-four days is not soon, Morlad.” I force a smile. “Onward. Home awaits and much-deserved rest.”

Climbing into my sleigh, I glance at the man one more time as he resettles on the sofa, curled up and gazing at the tree. It’ll be another year before I can see him again. We ran late this year due to some extra needs in the Northern Hemisphere. As much as I’d like to spend the entire evening with Luca, I have a job to do.

“Until next year, Luca,” I whisper, waving my magic away. I lift the reins as Morlad settles in next to me. “To Sinter.”

Rudolph’s nose lights up, and with hooves tapping on the roof, we take off into the night air.

Every year since...

I WATCH from my discreet location as Luca leaves his London workplace. A smile tugs at my lips as he wraps the cashmere scarf I gave him around his neck. I know his route as well as I know my own face, following at a safe distance as he walks down the busy sidewalk. He moves slowly, gazing into store windows, listening to carolers, and even watching the ice skaters in the park.

Following Luca on Christmas Eve has become part of my routine. Even though I try to make an effort to see him in person, I can’t always with my schedule. But I can make his holiday a little brighter.

When he arrives home to his humble flat, I peer around a corner watching as he discovers the large red box on his doorstep. It's covered in magic preventing anyone but Luca from opening it. He looks around for someone, a huge smile on his face as he tugs the bow. Lifting the lid, he peeks into the box, moving tissue paper out of the way.

Inside is the book he's been eyeing at the vintage bookshop across from his work. Nearly every day, he stops in and gazes at it, but doesn't buy it. I'm not sure why. He surely can afford it. I've wondered if maybe he doesn't think he deserves it, but he does. It's an early edition of *A Christmas Carol*.

Luca holds it to his chest, then looks at it again, carefully brushing his fingers over the cover. He kneels, peeking into the box again until he finds the card. I recall the smile on my face as I wrote it out.

*A rare book for a rare man. Merry Christmas, Luca.*

*~Santa*

Luca's smile beams brightly enough for me to see it from my cloaked position. Snow flurries start to fall while he bundles the package up again, his cheeks rosy from the cold and happiness. There could be no better gift than seeing what he looks like happy. It'll be enough to get me through the night.

I blow a kiss in his direction, before wiggling my nose and disappearing into the evening.

## CHAPTER I

# MAGNUS

## Present Day

Walking through the marbled halls of the Sinterborg Council building, the only sound my heavy boots on the polished floors, foreboding grips me. I already know what this is about. I had hoped to avoid it, but here we are.

I enter the main hall, surrounded by imposing marble columns gleaming ivory white. Sunlight floods the space, giving the illusion of warmth. Up ahead, the Council waits for me, stationed behind a huge mahogany table at least twenty feet long. There, all the Santas of Christmas Past await. Before them, my parents and younger brother stand, heads bowed in respect.

As I approach, I pause to kneel.

“You may rise,” Elder Malthe’s voice booms over me.

I stand with a respectful head bow. Once a Santa’s tenure is over, he is relegated to the Council to provide guidance and ensure the continuation of Christmas magic. My father, Viggo, is part of the Council, but unable to preside over this issue since it’s about me.

I meet my mother’s eyes. She smiles but I see the nerves all over her face. Theodor, my brother, gazes upon me with the same pleading look I’ve been getting from him for five years.



“Today we are here to discuss the impending Fortieth Year Commemoration,” Elder Malthe says.

He’s the first Santa, who reigned for over two hundred years before implementing the FYC in an effort to provide balance to our immortal lives.

“Do you have an intended mate for the event, Magnus?”

Averting my eyes, I shake my head, feeling the crushing wave of disappointment from my family and the council members.

“I will remind you, young Magnus, the consequences of not choosing a mate are twofold. Either accept an appointed mate selected by the Council or relinquish your position to Theodor. You have little time left. When the clock strikes midnight here in Sinterborgon Christmas Eve, you must have a mate or accept the outcome.”

“Yes, Elder Malthe. I am aware of both the time and the consequences. I am doing my best.”

“Are you?” Elder Pelle asks, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “I have yet to see you entertain any guests. My son would make an ideal mate for you.”

A shiver of disgust rolls through me. Pelle’s son Lauge is the worst option I could imagine. I’d rather marry a stranger than him. His predatory behavior and obvious lust for the mansion are apparent with every interaction.

“I will keep Lauge in mind should my other options not work out.”

“He has a mate in mind,” Theodor blurts out, drawing all eyes to him. “He’s mortal, of course. Living in the northern hemisphere. London, right, Magnus?”

I nod, even though the deceit makes my stomach sour. “Yes.”

“A mortal?” Elder Asgar asks. He married a mortal, so at least I know I will have support there. “Why have you not mentioned him?”

“I…”

“He is courting him slowly,” Theodor speaks for me. “Mortals take time.”

“Well your time is running out,” Elder Malthe reminds me as he motions to the massive clock on the wall. “You have one week left before the commemoration. You will produce a mate, marry Lauge, or pass your duties to Theodor. Any questions?”

“No.”

“This ends the Council meeting.”

I walk out of the hall, followed by my family. Once we’re outside again, standing under the winter sun, I finally exhale.

“I cannot marry Lauge.”

“All the gods, no,” Theodor says. “A leech would be more desirable.”

“One and the same,” I mutter.

Mother grabs my arm. “Is it true, son? Do you have a mortal in mind?”

My eyes shift to Theodor. He is the only one other than my own workers who knows about Luca, but things haven’t been going smoothly.

“Yes. I admire a mortal man. We have spoken many times.”

“But?” Father asks.

“I want to court him properly. As a man.”

“Why have you not?” Father asks.

“I have not had time. Cleaning up the recent messes of mortals has taken more time than expected. We have so many in need.”

My father’s expression softens. “The weight of carrying Christmas magic is a heavy one, but you are well suited. I would hate to see it end prematurely.”

“I don’t want the job,” Theodor implores.

“A fact I’m well aware of, brother.” My mind swirls with ideas. “I didn’t mean for it to come down to the wire. I lost track of time.”

“Is your mortal still an option?” Mother asks.

“I will visit him and find out. I won’t fail you.” I turn my gaze to my brother. “Any of you.”

“Do not fail yourself,” Father says. “Your happiness is important too. Your mate is irrevocable and eternal. Do not make a hasty choice.”

The idea of spending my days with Lauge by my side is enough to harden my spirit. “I will make the right choice.”

After leaving my family, I enter my workshop and walk directly to my office. Once there, I conjure Luca in my seeing glass, waving my hands over it until his image is clear. I find him sitting in a dark apartment on his couch, holding a beer and staring blankly at the television. There’s no tree in his space, and he looks tired. So tired.

I’ve followed his life over the years, watching as he rose in his career. Constant promotions and traveling around the world—he seemed so happy for years, but the last six months or so I’ve seen his light begin to dim.

I had already planned to visit this year no matter what, but now I’m even more determined. Not only does Luca need a wisp of magic in his life, but I need to convince him to be my mate. Somehow.

Shaking off the weight of my decision, I stand and walk out to the workshop where my elves diligently work to fill Christmas wishes. Long gone are the days when we made handmade toys for good kids around the world. Now, we have a sophisticated fulfillment system working with vendors from across the globe. But of course, we still have our magic when needed.

Years ago, just before I took over from my father, we expanded our services to ensure other needs were met. Now, not a soul on Earth worries about food, clean water, clothing,

or shelter. Unless they've been naughty. We let Goddess Karma deal with them.

I turn and look at the digital board that keeps track of how many people are in our good category, the naughty category, and the worst one—the lost category. That category is for people who used to feel the magic of the season but have lost their love for it. Sometimes, we can help, but other times the wound is too deep. For all my magic, I cannot stop wars, death, or people hurting each other. But I try.

While I'm focused on the category, it flips over, adding one to the count. I twist around to the computer to look up the name of the person we lost. Oh no. Luca Vincent. Not him.

Hurrying back to my office, I peek into my seeing glass again. He's on the phone.

"I can't come this year, Mom." Luca's distant voice meets my ears. "Things are too crazy at work."

He slouches on his sofa, dragging his hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry. I'm sad about it too, but I'll do my best to be there next year."

The call ends and my heart twists in my chest as I watch Luca angrily wipe a tear from his face. I can't let this happen. Not to him.

As I sit back in my seat, the magnitude of what I must accomplish grips me. Not only do I have to restore Luca's Christmas spirit, I need to convince him to join me here in Sinterborg and give up his life. If he won't give it up for the parents he loves so much, would he even consider me? All I know right now is, I have to try.

The future of Christmas literally depends on it.

## CHAPTER 2

# LUCA

“Are you coming to happy hour, Luca?”

I force my gaze up from my computer, blurry eyes focusing on my coworker. I need a beer badly, but I’ve got to finish this report first.

“Can’t. James is waiting for this report.”

Elizabeth tilts her head, leaning on the doorjamb. “Luca. You’ve been working too many hours. You need a break.”

“Promise to take one as soon as this report is done.”

She shakes her head, walking off. I hear the chatter of my coworkers discussing me and my “workaholic” ways in the hallway before their voices trail off. She’s right, but you don’t get promoted to VP of your division in under a year by taking breaks. If I push just a little harder, I’ll be bumped to president when James retires in two years. I can do this.

A thought comes to me that makes me slump in my chair.  
*And then what?*

I pinch the bridge of my nose before shaking the thought away. I’ll figure out what’s next when I get there.

Hours later, long after the sun has set, I stumble down the sidewalk, blocking out the cheerful sounds of the holiday around me. Christmas used to light me up in a way nothing else could. I spent all year looking forward to seeing my folks, the traditions we shared, and hoping for another glimpse of Santa.

He hasn't come around in two years, but he always leaves a personal gift. I just wish he knew I don't need his gifts. I need him. For once, I don't even have my hopes up this year. It's better than being disappointed come Christmas morning.

I pop into a shop to grab a takeaway kebab and then finish my walk to my flat. I pass pubs filled with happy people, shops with twinkling lights, shoppers walking past with arms full of bags, but none of it helps my mood. It's the first time in my thirty-two years I won't be with my mom on Christmas, and that sucks.

As I approach my flat, my neighbors are leaving, both dressed to the nines in party attire. The woman, Bethany, waves at me. "Luca. What are you doing going home on a Friday evening?"

I lift my dinner bag. "Eating."

"You could come out with us," Paul, her husband, says. "We're going to a pub having a party for the anniversary of their opening. Should be a good time."

"Thanks, but I've had a long week."

"You sure?" Bethany asks. "I've got some pretty girls coming."

I chuckle. "Not my type, I'm afraid."

"Ah. Well my rugby mates are coming," Paul offers.

I laugh again, twisting my key in the lock. "Thanks, but not this time."

"We'll ask again," Bethany says. "You're too young and dapper to spend all your time alone."

I nod, hearing the truth in her statement. I can't explain that I'm in love with someone she probably thinks is a fictional character.

"I'll keep it in mind. Have fun."

I wave them off as I enter my darkened flat. In some ways, London feels like home. I've adopted their sayings and other rituals, easily assimilating in the busy city, but it's not actually

home. Flicking the light on, I kick off my shoes and hang my coat on the rack before walking up the small staircase to the main floor. There, I turn on more lights and crank the heat up a bit. It's been dreary all week, but it's fitting for my mood.

An hour after finishing my meal and zoning out to some TV show, I pull myself up and head to the kitchen for a beer. When I return, a knock on the door startles me into nearly dropping the bottle in my hand. Who could be here at this hour?

I set the beer down then hustle down the stairs to answer the door. When I do, my mouth drops. He's standing there in a gorgeous red wool coat, a cream scarf wrapped around his neck.

"Hello, Luca. May I come in?"

"Is it...is it really you?"

The man nods. "It's really me. I was hoping we could talk."

I stand back, still aghast. "Yes. Of course. Come in."

He passes me, pausing in the foyer as I shut the door. He looks just as I remembered, but somehow different. More... modern and normal.

"Santa?"

He chuckles. "That's what they call me, but that's just my job."

"Huh?"

"Could we chat?"

"Um, yeah." I rub my forehead. "You can hang your coat."

He peels out of it, hanging it up along with his scarf. He's wearing black pants tucked into black boots and a cream sweater that looks like cashmere. His beard is trimmed close to his face, and his hair is darker, styled nicely, but still in that slightly retro manner. He exhales slowly, smiling brightly.

"Hi."



“Hi.” Clearing my throat, I gesture up the stairs. “Please.”

I follow him up, definitely not staring at his ass. He is not the Santa of my childhood stories. As he stands in the middle of my dark living room, I flinch. He doesn't fit here. He's too beautiful and bright and Christmassy.

Our eyes meet and he smiles again. “It's good to see you when I'm not working.”

“Working? It's like a job? Not, um, not who you are?”

“Well, perhaps career, calling, or chosen destiny are better terms. I certainly can't just quit.”

I laugh softly, but the butterflies in my stomach are having a party. “Do you want a drink?”

“Sure. Whatever you're having.”

“Be right back. Please make yourself comfortable.”

In the kitchen, I pace in a small circle, trying to process his presence. He's here. Really here. It's only the twentieth too. Not Christmas Eve. Beer doesn't feel adequate, so I grab the bottle of red I keep around and pour two glasses.

When I return, he's seated on my sofa, one leg crossed over the other. He looks like a model or some shit. At least I still have my work clothes on and not my normal weekend attire of beat-up gym shorts and a tee.

“Here we go.”

I hand him a glass and he takes it, but his eyes never leave me. “Thank you, Luca.”

“What a surprise. A pleasant one.”

“Good. I took a chance.”

“Um, so you can leave...uh, the North Pole?”

He chuckles. “I have a lot to tell you, but in a nutshell, much of what you're told as children isn't accurate anymore. It's the stuff of fables, but it brings people comfort.”

“It does.”

“Which is one reason why I’m here, Luca. To bring you comfort.”

“What do you mean?”

He glances around the space. “It’s almost Christmas, but there’s no tree. No lights. No joy. What happened to you? You’ve lost your spirit.”

“Ho-how did you know that?”

“Comes with the job. Besides, obviously I keep an eye on you.”

My chest warms, but embarrassment quickly takes over. “I’m doing great though. My job is amazing.”

“Is that why you were sad when you told Louisa you can’t go home for the holidays?”

“You saw that?”

“Forgive me for spying, Luca. It’s my only joy to see your face.”

My eyes go wide. “Do you mean that?”

“Have I not been obvious?”

I shrug. “I wanted to think... But you’re Santa, and I don’t know. Isn’t there a Mrs. Claus?”

His bellowing laugh fills the space, drawing a smile to my lips. “No. More fables. You may have also noticed I’m not an elderly, overweight, overgrown cherub.”

I laugh at that. “I’ve noticed, yeah.”

He reaches for my hand, and when I give it to him, I feel tingles shoot up my arm. It’s nice though. Warm.

“I have so many things I want to tell you, Luca, and so many things I want to learn. Do you have time?”

“Yes,” I answer, already shoving work from my mind. “You’re really here.”

“I’m really here. Let’s start with the basics. My name is Magnus.”

“Magnus. That’s nice. Not Kris Kringle then?”

“More lore, I’m afraid.”

“That’s okay. Magnus is way cooler.”

He gently squeezes my hand. “I’ll start at the beginning.”

I nod, my eyes still taking in every detail and trying to convince my mind this isn’t some weird fever dream. He’s unbelievably handsome. There isn’t a single blemish or unattractive quality about him.

“As I said, my name is Magnus. My surname is Sinter. I live in a village called Sinterborg, located in what you know as Denmark.”

“Not the North Pole then?”

“Not the North Pole. Who could live there?”

I laugh. “Right. Why Denmark?”

“It is where my people originate. Humans have many interesting tales of how Santa came to be, but the truth is, we were born from the Goddess Beiwe on the winter solstice and charged with bringing the world joy. Over the years it has evolved, as humans do, to what it is now.” He smiles. “Which, of course, differs by culture.”

“So you’re Danish?”

“No. I am Beiwean. We belong to no country or culture. In fact, our land cannot be seen by the human eye unless we wish it. We are tucked away in an undeveloped village hidden by a veil of magic.”

“This should sound totally apeshit to me, but it doesn’t.”

Magnus chuckles, gently shaking the sofa with his laughter. “Because you already believe.”

A silent moment passes as we gaze into each other’s eyes.

“Luca. Are you up for an adventure?”

Nodding, I find myself leaning closer. “With you, yes.”

His smile beams. “Can you put on something comfortable?”

“Where are we going?”

“Out.”

## CHAPTER 3

# MAGNUS

While Luca is in his bedroom, I explore his space. It's not at all fitting for a man so full of light and kindness, but like so many before him, the weight of the world has replaced his joy for the holiday season.

I drag my finger across the titles on his bookshelf. Mostly classics and some sci-fi, but the book I gave him sits on a shelf alone at the top, protected by glass. I knew he would treasure it. Beside it, the globe I gave him so many years ago.

"I'm ready."

I spin around at the sound of Luca's voice. He's wearing a navy-blue sweater that suits his complexion and dark jeans with black boots.

"Is this okay for what we're doing?"

"Yes."

Luca approaches me, a curious expression on his face. "Okay, so what *are* we doing?"

"We're going out and returning the joy of Christmas to you."

"Lead the way."

Luca follows me to the foyer where we wrap ourselves in our winter gear before heading outside.

"How did you get here?" Luca asks.

"Magic."

He chuckles. “Fair. Is walking okay? Otherwise I can call a ride.”

“Walking is fine. You aren’t far from the town center.”

“I’m not.”

As we walk, I can almost feel Luca’s mind racing with questions. “Ask me anything you desire.”

Luca laughs softly, lifting his chin to glance at my face. “Why do you look so...young?”

I chuckle again. “I am young. Not to mortals, but in my world, I’m barely an adult.”

“Really? You look forty-ish.”

“Yes. Aging is slower in Sinterborg. My actual time of existence, in terms you can understand, is roughly four hundred.”

“Years?”

“Yes, years. My people, we are immortal. We will never die, but the reign of Christmas magic passes through the generations so that we may experience life outside of responsibilities.”

Luca blinks rapidly. “Um...okay. So you’re not always Santa?”

“Not at all. My father was before me, his father before him. His father’s brother before that. It will always follow my lineage.”

“Oh. So you need to have a son?”

“No. It’s not like mortal lineage.” I kick at a stone in our path. “It follows all the males in our family. After me, it will pass to another in my line.” The impending deadline rattles around my mind, but I push it down for now. I’m here to enjoy Luca.

“Interesting.”

“Yes. I’ve been Santa for nearly forty years.”

“How long is your tenure?”

“Centuries.”

His brow crinkles at that point. “That’s a long time.”

“Yes, but it is an honor I deeply value. What could be better than bringing joy and happiness to all the people around the world? You know the feeling you have when you give a gift and the person’s face lights up?”

“Yes.”

“Imagine that by the billions.”

“It must be kind of amazing.”

“It is. The challenge is...” I pause, unsure of how much I want to reveal.

Luca nudges my arm with his as we walk. “What?”

“Finding a life partner is difficult. There are limited choices in my village.”

He frowns again. “Yeah, and a regular person probably isn’t allowed.”

“It’s allowed.”

He shifts his pretty eyes up to me. “How?”

“Magic, Luca. If I were to fall for a mortal man, I could take him with me.”

Luca nods, obviously thinking over my reply. “Have you before? Fallen for a mortal man?”

“No. No one has captured my attention.”

My answer shifts his energy in such a strong way I feel the jolt through me. I must fix it. I reach for his hand, pulling him to a stop. “Until meeting you.”

Luca searches my eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“Do you think I visit with many men across the globe, or only you? Do you think I pick out the perfect gift for everyone, or just for you?”

“I wanted to believe...” He pauses, his teeth teasing his bottom lip for a moment. “I wanted to believe it was only for



me.”

“You should, because it is.”

As Luca graces me with a shy smile, I wonder if it would be enough to live on. I think it might.

“So you’re immortal. What would happen if you met a regular man? He would die eventually.”

“We have a process for that. Any man who chose me would give up his mortality.”

“You can do that? Like a vampire?”

I laugh at that. “Not at all like a vampire. I will not bite you nor drink your blood.”

Luca chuckles. “That’s all I have as a comparison.”

“We are like the mighty gods of legend. We are less children’s fairy tales and more mythology.”

“Ah. Like the Greek gods and goddesses.”

“Exactly like that. There are many realms and kingdoms humans know nothing about.”

“So you’re a god?”

“I am the servant of a goddess. Consider me more a king than a god.”

Luca nods. “King of Christmas.”

“Exactly.”

We turn a corner, entering the section of Luca’s neighborhood where the shops and eateries are. As I sneak a glance at him, his head is bowed, the glimpse of his face appearing deep in thought. Could he be imagining himself beside me for eternity? Even with the little I know of him, I can confidently say he would make a far better choice than Lauge.

We stop at a vendor serving cups of hot chocolate. “We should get one, yes?”

Luca nods, smiling. “Yes. It’s cold tonight.”

“Two please,” I ask the man.

“Right away, sir.” After handing me the cups, he says, “Six quid.”

“Money. Right.” I hand the cups to Luca then, after a subtle flick of my wrist, reach into my pocket to produce the desired currency. I hand him ten. “Keep the rest.”

“Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas to you.”

“To you as well.” I flick my wrist again, filling his money box to nearly overflowing. I hear his gasp as he adds my payment to it, smiling as we walk away.

“What did you do?” Luca asks.

“Spread a little Christmas cheer to a hardworking man.”

He sips his drink for a moment before gazing up at me. “It must be amazing to bring people so much happiness.”

“It is, but we all have the power to do it. With every interaction, with our very existence, we can spread joy in a world desperately in need.”

“True.” We walk on a bit more before he continues. “We lose our way sometimes, don’t we?”

“Yes, but do not be hard on yourself. Your world consists of many distractions, while mine consists only of Christmas.”

“But we obviously need you.”

“Oh yes. There is much unhappiness, but we do our best to help. How I wish mortals would see the benefit of choosing peace and equality for everyone, but power is more attractive, I suppose.”

Luca’s brow furrows. “Power, money, position. It’s easy to fall prey to it.”

I put my hand on his back. “That is why I’m here.” Looking ahead, I see the skating rink. “Shall we?”

He shakes his head. “I haven’t been on skates since I was a kid.”

“It’s been many years for me too. Let’s do it together. After we finish our drink.”

A smile brightens his face, and for just a moment, I’m lost in his beauty. His cheeks and nose red from the cold, eyes bright and focused on me. The tiredness seeping through him just hours ago is all but gone, replaced by the Luca I’ve spent years wrapped up in.

“Okay,” he says softly.

We find a bench to sit on, watching the other skaters. There’s a huge, lit tree just beyond the rink, twinkling bright on a dreary night, like a beacon to remind us all that Christmas is near. Luca sits close to me, his heat noticeable even through our clothes. I want to hold his hand, gaze into his eyes, feel his heart beat in time with mine. Most of all, I want to kiss him, keep him in my bed worshipping his body, tell him all the dreams I’ve had since we first met. I want him to be mine.

He sets the cup down on the bench and shakes out his shoulders. “Are you ready to fall on our asses?”

I chuckle. “Indeed, I am.”

## CHAPTER 4

# LUCA

I still haven't decided if this is one spectacular dream, or if I'm actually awake and Santa freaking Claus is sitting next to me. Except he doesn't look like Santa at all. He looks like a regular man, albeit a gorgeous one.

Rising from the bench, it takes me a moment to follow him as his large form towers over me. I'm rarely at a loss for words, but Magnus makes me speechless. He offers his hand and I take it, smiling as that warm tingle moves through me again.

We walk over to the stand where you can rent skates, and even though I'm nervous about embarrassing myself, I think it's going to be fun.

Magnus takes the lead, ordering our skates and paying for everything just like a real date. I'm still reeling from the idea. We manage to get ourselves laced up and, like an awkward baby giraffe, I get myself on the ice, gripping his hand with all my strength. It's funny how many times I've watched the people skating here on my way home from work, but never thought to try it myself.

Magnus holds my hands, my arms extended between us. Of course, he's already good at it.

"You said you haven't skated in a long time," I say with narrowed eyes.

Magnus laughs, that joyful bellowing sound filling the air between us, squeezing my chest in the best way. "It's true, but perhaps it is a natural activity for me."

“Not fair.”

His smile warms as he pulls me closer. “Forgive me.”

“We’ll see.” I wink at him.

We spend another hour moving slowly around the rink. It’s nice, and definitely romantic. The rink glows in the soft lighting, and as snow starts to fall, I feel like I’m in the middle of a holiday movie.

A group of kids skates by, accidentally bumping my arm, which causes me to lose my balance. Just as I’m about to eat it, Magnus’s strong arm wraps around my waist, pulling me to him until our chests are pressed together. I grip his shoulders, gazing into the twinkling blue of his eyes, feeling as though time has stopped and the world is paused.

Magnus returns my gaze, his lips slightly parted, heating my cheeks with his warm breath.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

Nodding, I slide my hands down his arms. “I am.”

“How about a break?”

“Yes, please.”

We skate back to the benches, plopping down and watching the other skaters for a few minutes.

“Do you have to go home tonight?”

Magnus turns his head sharply to face me. “That is up to you, Luca.”

Swallowing hard, I nod again, trying to find the words. Do I tell him I have an insane crush on him? Can I admit I want to know what his kiss feels like? Or even what his body would feel like pressed to mine?

“Um...”

“Let’s go away from here,” Magnus says softly. “I know just the place.”

“Okay.”

We turn in our skates, and I take Magnus's offered hand as we walk through the busy London streets. I don't know where we're going, but I don't really care as long as I'm with him. He leads me away from the town center to an open green space I've never noticed before. I glance up at him, smiling when I see his joyful expression, but my steps falter when a strange sensation comes over me. It felt like the air thickened for a moment, but now it's normal again. Weird.

When I tear my gaze away from the man next to me, my mouth drops as my breath hitches. "What the..."

"Welcome to Christmas past," Magnus says.

My childhood home is before me—Richard setting up the inflatable snowman in the yard, my mom standing on the steps watching with a cup of hot chocolate in her hand...and me. I'm a little guy still, bundled up in my winter gear, lying in the snow making snow angels.

My eyes tear up. It's our first Christmas together after my mom married Richard. I was too little to remember it directly, but I've seen the pictures.

"This is amazing, Magnus."

"Watch this." He flicks his wrist and the scene before me swirls away, replaced by another one.

This time, we're inside the house. Me and Mom are decorating cookies at the island while Richard is singing along to Christmas music and wrapping garlands around the staircase railing. I'm much older here, probably around ten or so. The look on my mom's face makes my stomach flutter. She loves Christmas so much. Longing to be with her again grips my chest.

"I'll tell you a secret," Magnus says.

"What?"

"Louisa's cookies are in my top ten favorites."

"Really?"

He nods. "Out of everyone in the world."

“She’d be very proud of that fact.”

He smiles, then flicks his wrist again. This time we’re at the Children’s Hospital delivering gifts. I’m leaning forward talking to a small boy named Christopher. He had been hurt in a sledding accident and was spending the holiday in the hospital. I can’t hear us, but I can see his face as it lights up when I hand him a gift. He opens it, shrieking with joy when he finds the superhero toy inside. He throws his arms around my neck as tears stream down my cheek.

I wipe away the tears building now as I watch the scene again. Magnus squeezes my hand, and I shift my gaze to him. He smiles, flicking his wrist.

When I look back, we’re back to my parents’ home. This time the house is quiet and I see myself lying asleep on the couch. Magnus appears from the fireplace, opening his bag and placing gifts beneath it. He doesn’t notice me right away, too busy doing his work.

“This was the first time I saw you as an adult,” Magnus says softly. “I thought you were the most incredible man I’d ever seen. I still think that.”

I gaze up at him, my lips parted as if to speak, but no words come.

“Thus began my fascination with you. I loved checking in over the years and watching you grow in your career. It made me so happy to see you with Richard and Louisa spreading so much love and cheer over the season. I was sad seeing it slip away.”

“You watch me?”

“Not constantly. I do have other things I have to do.” He smiles, but he looks slightly embarrassed. “I hope you don’t find that idea unpleasant.”

“No,” I gush, finding my voice. “Not at all. It’s...really cool.”

His hand moves to my cheek, warming me immediately. “I am fond of you, Luca. I don’t know if you would consider me



as an option for you, but if you would, I would very much like to court you.”

I can hardly believe his words. “You want to date me?”

Magnus nods. “Desperately.”

“I would love to. I’m...fond of you too, Magnus.”

“Wonderful.” His face lights up. “I need to tell you some things first though.”

“I’m listening.”

“Let’s go back to your place?”

“Sure.” Before he can erase the scene, I grab his wrist. “Thank you for this experience. It was incredible.”

“I’m glad.”

Magnus waves his hand and we’re back in the park again. Weird. Holding hands, we walk back to my apartment, soaking in the holiday merriment around us. Just as we arrive at my door, Magnus halts abruptly, tilting his head as if listening to something I can’t hear.

“Oh no,” he whispers, his jaw tightening. He turns to me, disappointment written all over his face. “I’m sorry, Luca. There’s an emergency at home I must attend to. I have to go.”

My heart sinks. “Go?”

He nods. “Sadly, yes. Christmas is on the line.” He holds my hands to his chest. “I will return as soon as possible.”

“Could I help?” The words are out of my mouth before I have a chance to think about what I’m saying.

Magnus tilts his head. “What do you mean? You would... you would come with me?”

“Is it possible?”

“Yes, but...I don’t know when I could get you back.”

As the idea settles over me, I offer a nervous smile. “What better place to find my Christmas spirit than by your side?”

A slow smile pulls at his lips. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Well then, hold on. We’re going for a ride.”

## CHAPTER 5

# MAGNUS

I had planned to spend a few days wooing Luca before inviting him to come home with me, but there was no way I would say no to his eager offer. He might as well see what life is like for me at this time of year.

With his hand tucked in mine, I hurry down the alley where I parked my ride, hidden by magic. To non-magical eyes, it looks like we're heading straight for a brick wall. Luca hesitates but continues to follow me, stepping through the barrier with me.

"Whoa," he says. "That's a trippy feeling."

I chuckle. "I'm used to it."

My gaze follows Luca's as he looks at my vehicle with confusion. "I guess I was expecting a sleigh."

With a flick of my wrist, I open his car door for him, sliding into the driver's seat. "Expect the unexpected with me, Luca."

What he doesn't know is that I only use the sleigh when delivering gifts. The rest of the year, it's my favorite sports car. Holly red, of course.

"Fasten your seatbelt," I say, winking at my passenger. "And trust me."

Luca nods. "I do."

I push the button and the car rises straight up, slowly as we clear buildings, but once we meet the open sky, I shift into travel mode and lean back. We spin around in the opposite

direction, then the motor kicks in and we shoot off into the sky.

“Ahhhhh!” Luca grips the seat on both sides with wide eyes. “Holy shit.”

I squeeze his hand to remind him that I’m here. He turns to face me abruptly, panic written all over his face.

“Trust me, remember? You’re safe.”

He nods, exhaling, before peering out the window at the earth below us. “Whoa. It’s like an airplane.”

“It is. Lower your window.”

“Are you sure I can breathe up here?”

“Very sure. You’ll enjoy it.”

Nodding, Luca presses the button to lower the window. The air that swirls around us is pleasantly cool, not at all as cold as it would be to everyone else this high up. A tentative smile pulls at his lips as he puts his hand out to catch the breeze.

“This shouldn’t be possible.”

“It’s not. Not unless you have magic.”

“This is how you travel the world in one night?”

“Something like that.”

His eyebrow rises in question.

“Don’t worry. I’ll show you all my secrets.”

After a moment of silence, Luca turns his head toward me. “Aren’t you worried I could tell people?”

“No, for a few reasons. One, I trust you. Two, no one would believe you.”

Luca laughs softly. “And three?”

“With a flick of my wrist, I can make it all feel like a dream.”

He nods, twisting his lips. “But it’s not, right? I’m awake?”

“Very much so.” I look ahead as Sinterborg comes into view. “Look.”

Luca leans forward, gazing down at the twinkling lights before us. “So pretty.”

“Wait until you get a closer look.”

As the car begins to descend, Luca leans back against the seat. “Did we just travel from London to Denmark in about ten minutes?”

“We did.” I offer my hand and he takes it. “I’m used to it, but passing through the shield might be a bit jarring for you.”

“Okay.”

Sure enough, as the car breaches the shield Luca looks ill, his face going pale as he squeezes my hand. Fortunately, it only lasts a few seconds before the car touches down softly in front of my workshop.

Luca looks around with wide eyes. “Holy shit.” Then he flinches. “I’m sorry I cussed.”

I chuckle. “It’s perfectly fine, Luca. That doesn’t put you on the naughty list.”

I get a nervous laugh in response.

“I’d love to show you around, but I need to tend to the emergency first.”

“Of course. Can I go with you?”

“Yes. Come along.”

We exit the car and walk down the snowy sidewalk to the workshop. When I enter, the elves are gathered in a large group watching our board malfunction as names and numbers scramble across the digital board. My parents and brother hover nearby, looking concerned. Theodor sees me and huffs in relief.

“Thank Christmas, you’re back.”

“What’s happened?”

No one answers me as all eyes settle on my guest. Luca instinctively leans closer to me.

“Uh, everyone this is Luca Vincent. Luca, this is... everyone. Can we do proper introductions after you brief me on the incident?”

Theodor’s face lights up. “Of course, brother. It seems there’s a bug infecting the system.”

“A bug?” I ask. “What kind of bug gets inside electronics?”

“Do you mean like a virus?” Luca asks, drawing everyone’s attention to him again.

“Well, I suppose we could characterize the system as sick,” Theodor says, with his pompous tone.

“No, I mean...” Luca frowns. “Has this happened before?”

“No,” I answer. “Never.”

“Well I’m really good at computers if it’s, um, something I’m familiar with. I mean, something regular people might be able to understand.”

I look to my parents and Theodor. My father nods subtly. “Worth a try,” he says.

Taking Luca’s hand, I lead him to the backroom where the system is housed. Luca stops in the doorway, his eyes wide as he looks at all the equipment.

“Who installed this?” he asks, peering at the bank of machines.

“Our technician. Over the years, he’s upgraded it from a simple system of parchment and books to automation.”

“And where is he?”

“Here!” Faugor pops up from behind a machine, black smudges across his face. “I can’t find the problem, sir.”

“Do you have a main server?” Luca asks.

Faugor hurries down the steps and stops in front of us. He’s an elf, standing about three feet tall as he gazes up at

Luca. “And you are?”

“My guest,” I reply. “Luca has some knowledge of computers. Would it be alright if he assisted you?”

Faugor’s face lights up. “Yes. Come.” He waddles across the large room filled with machines clicking and spitting out data. “Up there on the ledge. The master machine.”

Luca gazes up and up and up. “Fuck,” he whispers.

“I’ll get you up there.” Hooking my arm around his waist, I flick my wrist and we touch down on the landing in front of the device.

Luca clears his throat as he unbuttons his coat. He peeks behind the machine, checking out all the connections, then pauses as Faugor arrives. We watch as the elf unlocks the computer screen, explaining a bunch of commands that seem to make sense to Luca.

Luca takes over at that point, clicking the keyboard and dragging his finger across the screen as a series of letters and numbers fill the screen.

“Ah ha!”

“What is it?” Faugor asks, hopping on his step stool to see the screen.

“There’s a random character in the code that doesn’t belong. Is it okay if I fix it?” he asks, gazing down at Faugor.

“Yes, please.”

With just a few clicks, Luca makes a change. The machines flicker then the chaotic noises smooth out, sounding more like what I’m used to.

Faugor’s face lights up. “You did it. How did you notice it?”

“I had to build a new network at my job. To do it, I had to learn some other languages I wasn’t as familiar with. Yours is unique, but it’s similar to one I’ve used before.”

“Thank you, Luca,” I say. “But what I really want to know is how this happened. Is it random?”



Luca shakes his head. “Nope. Code doesn’t just self-destruct. Either it was designed to do that, which is unlikely, or someone messed with it.”

“Impossible,” Faugor says with a frown. “No one has access to this machine except me.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

Faugor taps his chin. “Well the room is always open, but no one can unlock the machine but me. I’m the only one who knows the passcode.”

“Hmm.” With my hands on my hips, I glance around the room. “I trust all the workers. I just wonder if somehow someone else got in here and figured out how to unlock it.”

Faugor frowns. “I don’t know who it could be, but I’ll keep thinking on it.”

“Great. Thank you, Faugor.” Hooking an arm around Luca, I carry us back to ground level. When we enter the working room again, the elves are cheering as the boards work correctly again.

“Luca Vincent saved Christmas,” Faugor announces over the speaker system.

The elves erupt in applause and song, and Luca looks at me with such pure surprise, my heart flutters in my chest.

“Is this really happening?” he whispers. “Am I in a holiday movie?”

Chuckling, I wrap my arm around his shoulders. “Where do you think holiday movies get their inspiration?”

He waves at all the workers, his cheeks blushing beautifully.

“Come. Let me show you my world.”

Luca nods, following me out. Now is my chance to make him fall in love with my home. Maybe then I can ask him to stay.

## CHAPTER 6

# LUCA

Magnus leads me outside while hundreds of elves sing Christmas songs in my honor. I feel a bit like Alice falling down a rabbit hole. Everything is curiouser and curiouser.

Outside, I glance up at the night sky. It's pitch black, dotted with tons of twinkling stars—like nothing I've ever seen before. As if hearing my thoughts, Magnus puts his hands on my shoulders from behind me.

“There is no light pollution here. No pollution at all.”

“It's breathtaking.”

“Yes,” he says, but his eyes are fixed on me. “A tour?”

“Please.”

He offers his hand and I take it, delighting in how much bigger he is than me.

“So this building is what we call the workshop. It's hundreds of years old and has evolved with the times. Like the machine you saw today. We've only had that upgrade for a few years.”

“What does it do?”

“It keeps track of everyone. Come.”

We walk a bit further down the sidewalk while I wonder why I'm not freezing. Snow and ice cover every surface, and while the air is crisp, it feels more like Autumn than winter.

“You will never be too cold or too hot here,” Magnus says.

“How do you keep doing that? Can you read my mind?”

He chuckles. “Unfortunately no. It’s obvious you’re testing the air, blowing your breath out like that.”

“Right,” I say sheepishly.

We stop in front of a huge billboard, the lights so bright it almost looks like daytime. “This is the public view for all the villagers to see how close we are to Christmas.”

The sign has a countdown to Christmas Eve at the top in big numbers. Below it are four columns: Good, Naughty, and then two sets of numbers that say Need and Have.

“What do those columns mean?”

“We keep track of all the people in the world and which category they fall into. The numbers show how many people fall into each category, and then how many gifts we need and how many we’ve completed.”

“So you really do keep track of good boys and girls.”

“It’s much more than that,” Magnus says. “We keep track of people, rather than girls and boys since we’ve learned that’s an archaic concept.”

I smile at that. Santa is hip to gender constructs. Cool.

“During my tenure,” he continues, “we’ve expanded our offerings to include basic needs. A bike under the tree is nice but not if you don’t have a tree because you’re living on the street. Or you don’t have food to feed your family or shoes to keep your toes warm.”

“You provide all that?”

“We do. If it were up to me, not a single deserving person on Earth would suffer, but not even my magic is strong enough to prevent war or disease.”

It takes a moment to sink in. “Wait. The recent improvements in the reduction of homeless and food-insecure people, that’s you?”

He puffs his chest out. “Yes. Did you see the story about the grocery store tycoon who opened up chains in food-poor

areas all around the US?”

“Yes.”

“That was a Christmas wish granted by me. His wife asked for her husband to remember why he wanted to run grocery stores in the first place. He’d lost his way worrying about profits and shareholders. He woke up Christmas morning with a renewed desire and started a non-profit. Now he provides jobs and revitalizes neighborhoods without gentrification.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It was already in his heart. All I did was show it to him again.”

I ponder his answer for a moment. “Is that why you visit me? Because it was in my heart?”

Magnus stops walking, turning to face me. He takes my hands in his. “I visit you because it’s in my heart.”

I smile as my stomach does somersaults.

“There’s more,” he says, leading me down the snow-covered path. We pass shops lit up with warm lights. Music plays from each store front, but it’s all the same song. The air is scented with gingerbread, cinnamon, and other spices. Snow flurries fall all around us. It’s like standing in the middle of a snow globe.

As we pass each shop, the people inside stop what they’re doing to greet Magnus and eye me curiously.

“Do they know I’m, um, regular?”

“They do. Everyone knows everyone here, but since you are with me, you are a valued guest amongst us.”

“How often do outsiders come here?”

“Almost never.” He glances at me, his cheeks turning rosy. “I want to show you my home.”

“I’d love to see it.” As I try to process it all, another question comes to mind. “Does it ever change?”

“Change?”

“Yeah. I guess, is it Christmas all the time?”

“Oh. Yes.”

“Hmm. You don’t get tired of it?”

He chuckles. “Tired of it? I’m Santa Claus.”

I laugh too. “I know. I guess the reason why the Christmas season is amazing is because it only comes once a year. It’s something to look forward to.”

“Yes, because your lives are filled with many responsibilities, stressful events, sometimes sadness. You need the season to lift your hearts. Here, we have nothing sad. We’re just happy. Sure, we have the occasional disruption, but most of the time, we just spend it spreading joy.”

“What do you do the rest of the year?”

“All sorts of things. We plan for the next holiday, work with our vendors to get a supply of in-demand items, and we rest. We eat and spend time together. It keeps us very busy, but we like it that way.”

“I guess that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“I promise it’s much better than ‘not bad.’”

We turn a corner away from the bustling center and past some trees until a cottage comes into view. It’s about the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.

“Is this your home?”

Magnus glances over. “Oh no. That’s where my parents live.” We walk on a bit further as another, slightly larger house appears through the trees. “This is Theodor’s house—my younger brother.”

The path winds through some trees and up a slight incline before another house appears. My jaw drops when I see it.

“Whoa.” I’m finally able to glance at Magnus, smiling with pride. “This is your house?”

“It is. Built for me the year before I took on my duties as Santa.” His smile could light up all of London, I swear. “It’s a

tradition. When it's time for a new Santa to take the reins, the entire village comes together to construct a home based on how that person makes them feel."

"What?"

"They all get together, headed up by the current Santa, and make a plan, each adding their own elements. In the end, I got this."

"It looks like it's straight out of..." I pause, laughing. "It looks like it comes from Christmas village, which I guess it does."

Magnus's bellowing laugh vibrates through me. "I'm so glad you like it. Come inside."

I nod, slowly following him while still taking in the house. It's at least twice as big as his brother's house. It's white, and lights twinkle in every window, casting a warm glow on the snow around it. It has a European feeling to it with large windows and columns in the front. A deck lines the upper floor, wrapping around the house, with even more lights. There's green garland and lights wrapped around the columns as you approach. The house seems to lure you in. If it could speak, I would expect a soft, comforting voice telling you to come in and sit a spell.

Magnus opens the door and stands to the side to let me pass. A smile fills my face as soon as I enter the foyer. It's grand and opulent with wood floors, chandeliers, and a massive staircase. But that's not what makes me smile. It's the warmth permeating the space. It is, indeed, inviting me in.

I turn and look at Magnus. "Go on in," he says.

I follow the hall down to a living room filled with large, plush furniture in deep colors—like Christmas lights, but darker. The couch is so massive that twenty people could cuddle there to watch a movie. Pillows and soft blankets are strewn about.

"This is incredible. Why so big though?"

"Oh, I often host the elves for movie nights and dinner. They are a close-knit bunch and like to curl up together."

“That’s sweet.”

“Yes. Come.”

I take his offered hand as he leads me down a different hallway. He opens the double doors to a smaller room filled with beanbags, more pillows, and more blankets. I step inside, sinking down onto the first beanbag as if I’ve been compelled to do it.

“Do you like it?” Magnus asks.

“It’s wonderful.”

“This is my private space. When I want to be alone with my thoughts, read a book, or drink some cider. The living room is nice and very comfortable, but as you noticed, it’s rather large for one person.”

“It is.”

Magnus sinks into the beanbag beside me. It’s so big, another person could easily join us. We sit silently together for a moment, gazing up at the beamed ceiling.

“Do you like it here?” he asks softly.

“I love it here, Magnus.”

He turns to the side, smiling. “Good. Would you like to see my bedroom?”

My stomach flutters. “Yes, please.”

Magnus stands, offering a hand to help me. I struggle a bit to get my body out of the beanbag, but with a gentle tug, I’m up and crashing right into Magnus. He gazes down at me, eyes warm and twinkling. His lips part, and I wonder if he’s going to kiss me. He doesn’t though.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” he says softly, which is almost better than a kiss. Almost.

“Come.”

I follow him through the house, noting all his art and sculptures. “Where do you get all of this stuff?”

“Stuff?” he says.



“Like art and sculptures. Do you shop like a regular person?”

He chuckles softly. “No. Most of the art and finer objects are gifts given to me over the years from grateful people.”

“People give you gifts?”

“Often. Some cultures make cookies, others make gifts.”

“So you’re getting pretty shafted by the cookie cultures.”

He laughs louder this time, bringing a smile to my face. “I am happy for all of it. My greatest joy is to see the different traditions every family has. Even the ones who claim I don’t exist still partake in seasonal activities. They decorate trees and help their children believe. They put my name on gift tags and bite cookies on my behalf. It warms my heart.” He pauses, turning toward me at the foot of the stairs. “The best part for me though, is when I add my own gifts and gobble the cookies. The adult confusion in the morning is priceless.”

I smile at that. “I bet.”

We walk up the winding staircase and stop on a landing at the top. It’s decorated with more art and life-size sculptures. Down the hall is another set of double doors. As we approach, the doors seem to open on their own, but I catch it when Magnus flicks his wrist.

We enter and I stop in my tracks, overwhelmed by what I see. I expected it to be large and grand, like the rest of the house, but it’s the opposite of that. It’s a smallish room, but the bed dominates the space with only a few feet around it. It’s a tall bed, piled high with pillows and plush comforters. It looks like you could burrow yourself into it and never leave.

The rest of the room is sparsely furnished. There’s just a velvet bench at the foot of the bed, an armoire, and some bookshelves.

“This is my sanctuary,” Magnus says. “It’s where I come the day after Christmas and stay for at least a week. It’s the only room that requires an invitation to enter. It’s private, quiet, and sacred.”

“It’s amazing.”

“Thank you.”

I walk over to the bed, dragging my hand across the soft bedding, just wanting to feel it under my fingertips. “Dumb questions incoming.”

Magnus chuckles. “Go ahead.”

“Do you sleep like regular people?”

“Yes. Sleep is how we restore our magic after months of expending it for the season.”

I nod, squeezing a pillow. “And eat?”

“Lots of eating.” I feel his presence behind me, almost touching but not quite. “I’m just like you in most ways. I just have some extra magic and I never die.”

“Yeah, just like me.”

His large hands land on my shoulders, slowly sliding down my arms. “Are we too different?”

I twist around to face him. “To who?”

“You.”

I shake my head. “No.”

The obvious relief on his face makes me smile. “But...if you choose a regular person, what happens then? Earlier you said you had a process.”

Magnus nods. “Yes. It’s a ritual performed by the council. There are some downsides, of course.”

“Like?”

“Well, you’d have to leave your life behind. Your job and friends, your family. It’s a lot to ask of someone.”

I nod, thinking over his words. “Is it immediate?”

“Yes.” His face flickers with some emotion I can’t process before he blinks it away. “Should we get to that point, I’ll explain more.”

My brow crinkles. “Okay, one last question though.”

“Absolutely.”

“Um...” I exhale slowly. “Earlier tonight you said you wanted to date me.”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean... Are you, um...” I rub my forehead. “Are you considering me for something long term?”

“Oh yes, Luca. Definitely.”

## CHAPTER 7

# MAGNUS

The look on Luca's face is like every dream I've ever had coming true at once. This is a lot to process though. He turns to the window as I approach him from behind, running my hands down his arms.

"I would never pressure you, Luca." My heart rate speeds up with the knowledge of my impending deadline, but that's my problem. Not his.

"I don't feel pressured." He puts one of his hands over mine, warming me completely. "I'm just thinking."

"Do you want to talk?"

He's silent for a moment before turning around to face me, his backside resting on the windowsill. "I like you, Magnus. I have for many years. A relationship with you..." He smiles with a breathy laugh. "It's like a dream coming true."

"For me as well."

"But it's a lot." His face falls, taking my hope with it. "I never thought this was a possibility, so, of course, I never considered what it would entail."

"Of course." I clear my throat, putting space between us. "It's a selfish desire."

"Come on, Magnus. You don't have a selfish bone in you. You're freaking Santa Claus."

"I have plenty of selfish desires, all of them with you at the center."

Luca's mouth drops. "Magnus..."

"It's fine. You're probably hungry, right? We could eat and \_\_\_"

My words cut off as Luca launches himself into my arms, slamming our mouths together. After the initial shock, I wrap my arms around him, sinking into his kiss. He opens to me, our tongues tangling together. The contact heats my skin, waking up all my underused senses and ignored libido. My body tingles, awakening magic long buried that swirls up and wraps around us.

Luca muffles a gasp of surprise before deepening the kiss, his hands moving from my back to my hair, tangling in my tresses, his legs attempting to crawl up my taller frame. I grip his ass and lift him from the floor, and he groans, sending shivers through me.

When his hardness bumps into mine, we both moan, and I tear my mouth from his lips to taste the skin of his neck.

"Mag..." he moans, throwing his head back in invitation.

Gently, I suckle his skin, delighting in his sweet taste. I'd give up all the gingerbread in the world just to kiss this man.

"Need you," he whispers against my lips. "Please."

"Luca."

"Say yes, Mag."

I pull back enough to meet his eyes, my heart fluttering when I see lust reflected back. "I..." Squeezing my eyes closed, I exhale slowly.

"What's wrong?" Luca asks, his hand slipping to the back of my neck and rubbing softly.

"I don't have casual sex. I can't."

His brow pinches. "You can't? What does that mean?"

"I had hoped to share this information further into our relationship, but it's only fair that you know." Taking his hand, I lead him to the bed, where we both sit. My cock throbs painfully, so it takes me a moment to compose myself. "Sex

with me is a covenant. It's a bond. It's the way I choose my mate."

He nods, studying my face, his eyes slowly going wide as the words sink in. "Wait. Do you mean it's like the equivalent of marriage in my world?"

"Exactly."

"Oh. So..." His mouth drops. "Have you bonded before?"

I shake my head. "No. If I had I would not be available to you."

Luca slides off the bed, pacing before me and rubbing his forehead. "That means...you haven't had sex."

"Correct."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

He leans against a wall. "Oh."

"Are you disappointed?"

Shaking his head, he answers, "No. Just, um, processing. You don't kiss like a man who hasn't had sex."

"Thank you. It is my desire for you." I stand, closing the distance between us. "If you're worried I won't be a good lover, that is impossible. I can only be what my chosen mate wants."

"Really?"

"I'm Santa, remember? I know everyone's truest wishes. I know every want, every desire, every need. I would be your perfect mate, if you chose to spend your life with me."

"Whoa. You already know what I like in bed?"

I chuckle. "Not exactly. I would find out as our bodies came together. Your kiss is my guide."

He swallows thickly, searching my eyes as his well with tears. "You want to have sex with me then?"

I nod. "It would be my honor, but you had to know what it entailed."

Luca walks over to an armchair and plops down. I stay where I am, giving him space. When he looks up, his pained expression makes my stomach turn. Perhaps it's too much. He can't say yes, and I'll have to accept Lauge as a mate.

"Do you know my history?" Luca asks softly. "He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake." His voice trembles, reciting the children's song.

"If you mean, do I stand and watch every detail of your life, no. I've checked in over the years, but I've never once peeked into your bedroom."

He nods, exhaling slowly. "I feel...conflicted about my past in relation to yours."

"Please don't." I move quickly to him, kneeling where he sits. "Our situations are different. I would expect that someone as wonderful as you has had many lovers. You are not restricted as I am."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Not in the slightest. I care nothing about your past. I'm simply interested in your future." I take his hand in mine as he gazes down at me. "As much as I desire you, you have so much more to learn before you decide if I'm the one for you."

Luca nods. "I want to say yes so badly."

"I want that too. You have no idea how much."

His stomach rumbles loudly and we both laugh.

"Dinner?"

He nods. "Yes."



## CHAPTER 8

# LUCA

Santa is a virgin. Things I never thought I'd know. At least he's not judgy about the very x-rated lifestyle I've been enjoying for a few years. Sex equals marriage in his world. That's heavy. I like him—a *lot*—but going from pining for him every year to moving in and becoming his spouse is a big shift.

Am I the kind of man who could give up a career I've worked so hard for to be by someone else's side? What about my parents? Could I ever see them again?

Magnus leads me out of his house and down the snowy slope, back to the main area of town.

"We have a restaurant here that is always open and will always have what you want to eat."

"Okay, now, that's pretty badass."

Magnus chuckles. "It is."

With his hand on my back, he ushers me inside and we sit. It's filled with, um... I'll go with people for lack of a better word. The people inside vary in skin tone, height, and features. It's like stepping into one of those bars in a sci-fi movie and encountering all the different beings.

A food server shows up, dressed very much like one of those fifties waitresses I've seen in movies, with her bright red bouffant hair, garish makeup, and pink aproned dress. Except that her skin is green and she's about four feet tall. Oh, and her feet aren't touching the floor.

Magnus doesn't even blink as he greets the hovering woman. Her eyes are on me, of course, clearly the outsider among them.

“Any idea what you'd like to eat, Luca?”

“Um...” My gaze shifts around as everyone suddenly looks in my direction. “Chili?”

“Red or green, honey?” the server asks, popping her gum.

“Red. Um, American style chili?” I ask, hoping that means something to her.

“You got it. Sir?”

“The usual. Thanks, Sally.”

She leaves, but almost before I can blink, she's back and setting our meals down. “Anything else, just holler.” Then she's gone again.

Magnus smiles, pouring syrup on a stack of pancakes. “Like I said, anything you want, we can get.”

The bowl of chili in front of me smells amazing, complete with shredded cheese and a dollop of sour cream. On a plate beside it are crackers and cornbread. It's steaming hot too.

“Okay, it's some kind of magic, right?”

“Right. Everything here is.” He leans closer. “Do you want to know a secret?”

“Yes.”

“What makes this place run and keeps our magic strong year after year is the belief that I exist.”

I tilt my head. “Really?”

“Yes. I exist in some form in every culture across the planet. Parents teach their children and keep me alive. The very spirit of the season renews me.”

“If everyone stopped believing...?”

“I would cease to exist along with everyone here. Fortunately, no matter how bad things get, people still believe.”

They *need* to believe, Luca. Humans need hope to push forward when life is bleak.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It is.”

I dig into my chili, and no lie, it’s the best I’ve ever tasted. “This is incredible.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

After we eat, Magnus takes my hand in his. “I have something to show you.”

“Okay.”

He scoops me off my feet, making me laugh as he flicks a wrist and snow swirls around us. When I blink, we’re far from where we were, high atop a small mountain, gazing down at the twinkling lights of Sinterborg.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes,” he says, setting me on my feet. He gently tugs my hand, and we walk up a little further and stop at a small wood building, painted red with lights in the window. We step inside, and my jaw drops. It’s warm and cozy—a tiny space, but a fire roars in the fireplace. Where a ceiling should be, it’s open to the sky above.

Magnus gestures to a chaise longue and I lie down, gazing up at the sky. Magnus joins me, entwining our hands.

“It’s one of my favorite places,” he says. “I love gazing at the stars.”

“Me too.”

“I know. I gave you a telescope when you were ten.”

I smile as the memory rushes over me. “I still have it. I gave away most of my toys when I got tired of them, but I couldn’t let that one go.”

“What happened, Luca? As a child you had grand plans to grow up and be an astrophysicist, all the way into your teens, but then you changed.”

I exhale slowly. “I took some courses in high school that were prep for the college program. I hated it. Once I looked at it from more of an academic view, it lost some of its appeal. At that point I had no idea what to do, so I went the standard business route. I fell into my career shortly after graduating, and it took off, so I just went with it.”

“Does it make you happy?”

His pointed question hits me square in the chest. “It used to. Lately...” I shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve started wondering what I’m pushing so hard to get. Sometimes I think...” I exhale as unexpected emotion clogs my throat. Magnus squeezes my hand gently but remains quiet.

After a moment, I continue. “I’ve wondered if I’m using my job to fill other spaces in my life. Like love.”

When he doesn’t say anything in reply, I turn my head to see his face. He’s staring up at the stars. “Look.”

My gaze shifts up as a star shoots across the sky, leaving a trail of twinkling light like a bursting firework. “Beautiful.”

“Luca.” He pulls my hand to his chest. “Do not be ashamed. The human experience is hard sometimes. It’s easy to get caught up in life’s demands, its losses and victories, its promise of better and more if you just work a little harder. If you give up one more weekend, one more vacation, one more holiday, then it will all get easier.”

“That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it’s not your fault. It’s just the story you’ve been sold. Every culture has their own version.”

“It’s not like that here?”

Magnus lifts his free hand, moving the stars around like a symphony conductor. I watch in awe as he shows me the building where I work made of stars. With a flick of his wrist, the busy city comes to life high in the sky above.

“Everyone has their role in Sinterborg. Our life is one of simplicity and order. We have no unfulfilled needs and most wants are met.”

As I watch the sky, he shows me my childhood home, my mom and Richard decorating the tree. My heart fills with longing.

“Before you think it’s boring, it’s not. It is filled with joy and magic. We fulfill a much-needed service to the world and we find immense worth and value in our duty.”

“But...” I exhale as he erases the scene, filling the sky with stars again. “What would I do here? I have no purpose or duty.”

“Perhaps you do. Still to be discovered. Tell me, Luca, what would you do if you could do anything?”

Releasing my hand, he uses both hands to rearrange the stars. An outline of a man begins to appear. He’s sitting at a desk with what looks like a typewriter in front of him.

“Would you rediscover your love of writing?”

I gasp. The desk becomes a telescope, the man kneeling to peer into it.

“Or would you study the stars?”

He moves the stars around again. Now the man is standing over a machine, and I realize it’s me in the workshop earlier.

“Maybe you have a skill that helps continue the magic of Christmas.”

The image shifts again to Magnus. I’m lying in his bed, wrapped in the glorious bedding.

“Whatever you choose, you would be my most treasured joy.”

I roll to my side, climbing on top of the large man and cupping his face. “You are beyond words, Magnus.”

“Staying with me means giving up the life you know, but I promise, I would fill a new one with everything and anything you desire. What is magic for, if not to make those we love happy?”

“Love?”

“Yes, Luca. I admit I am hopelessly in love with you. I have been for many years.”

My bottom lip quivers. “Why didn’t you try sooner?”

“Fear. Duty. Honestly, I felt it was selfish to pursue you.”

“What changed?”

His brow creases. “I gave you space to build your life and find love. It would have been hard to see it, but your happiness mattered above all else. And then...”

I nod in understanding. “You saw my life going in the wrong direction. You saw work taking over and me falling prey to it.”

“Yes. I couldn’t stay away anymore. I didn’t want to.”

“I’m glad.” I press a kiss to his lips. “I haven’t found love because my heart already belongs to you.”

His eyes widen. “Really?”

“I realized it a while ago. I wished for you to show up every year. Then slowly, my interest in dating died. I only wanted to see you. I thought it was a foolish wish.”

“You...you love me?”

I nod, smiling and looking at him through damp lashes. “I do.”

Magnus wraps his arms around me and I lay my head on his chest, listening to his beating heart. After a moment, he says, “I won’t pressure you, Luca, but if you’d consider it, I would be honored to be your mate.”

He rubs my back, coaxing me to sleep as his words of love swirl like a soft breeze in my chest. Could I stay? At this point, I don’t know how I could ever leave.



WHEN I OPEN my eyes next, it takes me a moment to realize where I am. Magnus’s bedroom. The drapes are drawn,

creating a cozy den. I'm nestled in luxurious bedding with the fire warming the space, a cup of coffee on the nightstand, and steam rising from the mug. A note lies on the pillow next to me.

*Good morning, my sweet Luca,*

*I had business to attend to. Please make yourself at home and come find me at the workshop when you're ready.*

*Love, Magnus*

*PS. What a treat seeing you in my bed.*

WITH A SMILE ON MY FACE, I stretch before rising from the bed, quickly realizing I'm wearing a pair of pajamas. Cute. I shuffle over to the window, pulling the drape back to peer outside. The sky is clear and the sun bright, reflecting off the fresh snow.

Everything Magnus told me last night flashes through my mind. It's tempting but also kind of scary. I guess I have more questions, but knowing my feelings aren't one-sided is a good start.

I head to the bathroom to wash up, finding my clothes washed and neatly folded on a bench. After a quick shower, I dress and return to the bedroom where the coffee is still hot. Wild.

I sip it, lost in thought, until the urge to see Magnus again becomes too strong to ignore. I set out to find him, walking through town, peering into all the shops. I'm met with a lot of looks, but none of them are more than curiosity. I almost feel...welcomed. That probably comes along with being connected to the main man in town.

When I get to the workshop, I step inside, wandering the halls until I see Magnus in a room with several other people. Instead of interrupting, I spot a chair nearby and have a seat, giving myself a little more time to think.

I have some serious decisions to make.



## CHAPTER 9

# MAGNUS

“Did you ask him yet?” Theodor asks.  
“Last night.”

“And?” Mother asks. “What did he say?”

“He has to think about it. He shares my feelings, but as we all know, it’s a big step to leave his realm for ours.”

Father tsks, crossing his arm over his chest. “You do realize the impending deadline, yes?”

“Of course I do. I won’t rush him though.”

“Not to be a complete downer,” Theodor begins, “but you need to rush him or you’re going to be saying ‘I do’ to Lauge.”

A shiver of disgust runs down my back. “Maybe the council will extend the deadline given that I’ve found my desired mate.”

“It’s never been moved in thousands of years,” Father says. “Make it happen.”

Leaning on the edge of my desk, I nod. “I will talk to Luca.”

“I heard from Faugor that the workers took well to him,” Mother says, her tone filled with hope.

“Yes. Luca is very kind and respectful. He didn’t gawk or seem uncomfortable. In fact, he was able to find the issue with the tracker.”

“Dear brother, about that. Have you considered that your system may have been intentionally compromised?”

“By whom?”

“Let’s see.” His eyes flicker to our father. “Who has the technical ability as well as a vested interest in being deemed useful to you?”

My eyes widen with realization. “How did Lauge get past the elves?”

Theodor shrugs. “That, I don’t know. But in hundreds of years the system has never so much as glitched, much less gone haywire. What a coincidence, no?”

Shaking my head, I scratch my beard. “I never considered it was intentional.”

“Because you only see the good in people,” Mother says, stepping forward to squeeze my hand. “But your brother is right.”

“Yes. I agree. There must be a consequence.”

“If we can prove it, there will be,” Father says. “What are your plans for today?”

“I have to check in with the elves. Other than that, I planned to continue wooing Luca.”

“Come for dinner,” Mother says. “We need to meet him properly.”

“Yes, of course.”

My family members exit my office just as Luca is finding a place to sit. He pops back up, gazing nervously at them.

My father studies him for a moment before giving a polite nod.

“Sir,” Luca says.

Mother rubs his arm. “Good morning, Luca.”

“Ma’am.”

Theodor puts a brilliant smile on his face in welcome. “You make my brother very happy.”

Luca's cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink. "He does the same for me."

My family leaves while I move beside my love. "You must be starving."

He nods. "A little, yeah."

"Let's go eat. We have a few things to discuss."

"Okay."

As we step outside, Luca pauses, gazing up at the bright sky. "Is it always sunny?"

"No. We cycle through the weather in our little microclimate. Our magic affects the general climate around us. If you prefer sun, you'll have plenty, but we get our overcast days too."

"Overcast days are great for staying in bed."

The tone of his delivery makes my stomach flutter. "That does sound nice."

"Do you get days off after Christmas is over? I mean, what is it like when it's not the season?"

"I mentioned earlier the week after is my time to myself."

Luca nods.

"During the off season, we begin planning for the next season." I hold the door to the diner open, taking the opportunity to touch Luca's arm as he passes me. Once we're seated, I continue. "First, we update all the tracking sites that keep us informed of trends and needs around the world."

"That's so cool."

"Yes. Next are our volunteers. Each season, we hold a ceremony to elect those who wish to spend a year in your realm."

Luca tilts his head. "What do they do there?"

"Listen. Watch. Experience. It's how we stay connected so we can provide the best season ever."

"That's amazing."

Sally arrives and sets coffee mugs down on the table. Luca glances at his menu then orders the cheeseburger, while I ask for my usual.

“Did you sleep well?”

Luca nods, his face lighting up. “Fantastic. I feel so rested.”

“Good.” I reach across the table to hold his hands in mine. “I cannot tell you how happy it makes me that you like it here.”

“How could I not like it? It’s incredible, plus...” He dips his chin down before gazing back up at me. “You’re here.”

My chest swells with hope.

“Seeing you every day instead of hoping for ten minutes on Christmas Eve is pretty tempting.”

“I won’t pressure you.”

“I know.”

As we eat, my father’s words replay in my head. I’ve got three days and twelve hours left before the deadline. As we’re finishing up, I gather my confidence. I have to tell him. Maybe this isn’t the right place though. At the house would be better. Yes.

“Can you come back home with me after we eat to chat a bit?”

Luca smiles. “Of course, Magnus.”

I know Luca is the man for me. I just have to hope he feels the same.

## CHAPTER 10

# LUCA

Walking through town holding Magnus's hand feels like a dream. People clear out of our way, as if royalty is passing through. I guess in a way that's what Magnus is here.

"I have a weird question."

Magnus smiles. "Ask away."

"What do you do for money? I noticed we didn't pay for our food."

"Oh, we don't use currency here since every need is provided for."

I nod. "Cool. What about the stuff you get from my world?"

"We have small amounts of currency from around the world. As far as the items we procure, we have our methods." He winks, reminding me for just a moment of the jolly man who delivers gifts around the world.

Before we can make it back to the hill leading to his home, Faugor and the other elves come barreling out of the workshop, their faces covered in soot, their hands waving away smoke as they cough.

We, along with most of the town, hurry in that direction.

"What has happened?" Magnus asks, clearly alarmed.

Faugor coughs, glancing at the building with smoke billowing from the windows. "The workshop is on fire, sir."

Magnus runs toward it, and I'm right behind him. When we enter, it's easy to see there is no fire, but there is smoke coming from an unknown source. I follow Magnus as he takes the stairs two at a time. We split up at the top, each checking the machines, until I find the problem.

"Magnus."

He rushes over to me, staring down at the quickly dissipating smoke. "What the..." His eyes narrow as he kneels. "This is magic." His expression hardens. "Luca, my darling, would you please go to my home and wait for me? I have something to take care of."

"You know who did this?"

"I have a suspicion. The good news is there is no fire. The elves can get back to work."

He stands, towering over me, and I step closer. "You don't have to do anything alone, Magnus. I'm here if you need me."

His features soften, his eyes twinkling. "I do need you. Desperately." He cups my face. "But this is something I have to handle myself."

"I understand."

Magnus leans in and kisses me softly before pulling me closer and deepening the kiss. His size envelops me, and for once in my adult life, I feel small and protected. I also feel like falling to my knees and getting him out of those clothes.

Magnus breaks the kiss, pressing our foreheads together as we share breath. "I will return to you as soon as possible."

"I'll be waiting."

I make my way back to his home, wondering what he's going to do about the smoke magic. It seems more than a little odd that two things have gone wrong since I've been here. I'm no detective, but if I was a betting man, I'd say they're related.

Inside the house, I wander through it, taking in all of Magnus's treasures, from art pieces to sculptures to jewels. In my world this stuff would be priceless. Speaking of... I plop down on the sofa and pull my phone out of my pocket,



wondering if I have reception wherever I'm at. Full bars display at the top of the phone, along with a few missed calls and texts. One of the messages is from work, another from a guy I hooked up with a few times, and the last one from my mom.

I read over her words wishing me well as longing grows in my chest. How could I accept a life where I would never get to see her again? There has to be some kind loophole for that. What would I tell her? I'm in love with Santa? Gah.

With a deep breath, I dial her number, realizing too late that I have no idea what time it is in Boston.

"Luca?" she answers with a slightly sleepy voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry, Mom. What time is it?"

"Uh, seven. What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to hear your voice."

I hear a bit of shuffling. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I am. Definitely. I mean, bummed I won't be there for Christmas."

"I understand, honey. We'll be here next year."

"I know. It's just..." What if I can't ever come again?

"Luca?"

"Yeah." I exhale slowly, rubbing my forehead. "I'll call in a few days."

"Okay. Don't work yourself too hard. No one ever wishes they spent more time at work on their deathbed."

Blinking away the tears that cloud my eyes, I nod. "You're right. Thanks for the reminder. Love you guys."

"We love you too, Luca."

After hanging up, I lean my head back, staring up at the ceiling. It's no use driving myself crazy over this. I just have to talk to Magnus.



DAY STARTS to turn to night while I pace the living room, wondering where Magnus is. I know he said he'd come back to me, but I can't just sit here and do nothing. I grab my coat and leave the house to head back to town. It's unusually quiet, as if everyone closed up shop early. I walk toward the workshop, but then I hear my name.

Magnus is jogging toward me. When we meet, he pulls me into his arms.

"I am so sorry, Luca."

"What happened?"

"I decided to report the incidents to the Sinterborg Council. They had a lot of questions for me."

"Oh."

"I also wanted them to know about your presence here to ensure you weren't implicated in anything."

"So you do think someone is purposely sabotaging things. Is there a reason someone would do that?"

Magnus pinches his brows for a moment. "I plan to find out. Are you hungry?"

"Not really. Sorry I came out. I was getting worried."

"My fault entirely." Hooking his arm through mine, he walks in the opposite direction from his home. "It's a lovely night, isn't it?"

"Yes."

We pass a few shops until we stop at a restaurant, different from the one we've eaten at before. "Ah. My family. I meant for us to have dinner with them but the day got away from me. Shall we go say hello?"

"Sure."

We step inside and the smell of something amazing wafts around me. My stomach rumbles all of a sudden, and I laugh. Magnus glances at me, smiling.

“I wasn’t hungry until I smelled whatever they’re making here.”

“Our specialty. It’s a dessert. Would you like to try it?”

“Definitely.”

We approach the table where Magnus’s brother and parents sit. They immediately invite us to join them, so we do.

While I’m aware of their not-so-subtle glances, I also feel welcomed here.

“Tell us about your life,” Magnus’s mother says.

“Um, well, I work for a big international company and we manage the law departments for Fortune 500 companies. I’m the manager of a division.”

Three faces gaze pleasantly at me as if my words have no meaning to them.

“Is it difficult work?” Theodor asks.

“Um, kind of. It’s demanding and there’s a lot of responsibility.” I glance at Magnus. “I...maybe work too much.”

“Almost all humans do in one way or another,” Magnus’s father says. “That is why my son felt compelled to rescue you. You’re one of the believers.”

“Believers?”

“In Christmas,” his mother says in a sweet tone. “It saddens us how the ordinary world loses its way. It’s important to us to nurture those who still believe.”

“Although, Magnus here might have some other motives in your particular case,” Theodor says, earning a look from Magnus.

“Christmas has always been important to my family. My mom made a big deal of it every year, even when we didn’t

have much. My happiest memories happened during the holiday season.”

“But you lost your way,” his father notes.

“Not entirely. I just got busy.”

“That’s how it starts,” his mother says, pausing as a server places a monstrosity of a dish in front of me.

“What is this?”

“Our version of dessert waffles,” Magnus explains. “None of it exists where you are, but if you taste it, I’m sure you’ll like it.”

I dig into the pastries piled high with what looks kind of like whipped cream and fruit, but none of it is recognizable to me. When it hits my tongue, I moan in pleasure. It’s warm and nearly melts, tasting of tangy berries, sweet caramel, and marshmallow.

“Delicious.”

Magnus beams.

“As I was saying,” his mother continues. “It starts with being busy. Then the years go by and you haven’t seen your family and your wife leaves you and your kids hate you. Suddenly, you’re a scrooge.”

I pull back. “Um…”

“A bit harsh, Mother,” Magnus says, stroking my back. “But there is truth to what she says.”

I nod, still scarfing down whatever this is. “I get it. I’m glad for the intervention.” Magnus holds my gaze for a moment. “Really glad.”

“Well, what a scene.”

The expressions of the whole family fall as a man appears beside our table. He looks young, and he’s attractive in a nerdy kind of way. He pulls black gloves from his hands before unbuttoning his coat. Everything he’s wearing is black, which sets off his red hair and pale skin.

“We have a visitor to Sinterborg?” the man asks, his eyes fixed on me.

Magnus stiffens next to me. “Yes. This is my guest, Luca. Luca...” He pauses. “This is Lauge.”

I almost extend my hand, but the look of disgust on Lauge’s face stops me.

“A human. How quaint. I’m surprised you haven’t brought him to me sooner, Magnus.”

“Why would I?”

“Don’t you think it would be fitting for him to meet your betrothed?”

I reel back as all four people speak at the same time, inundating Lauge. I say nothing while I try to process what he said.

Lauge chuckles. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Lauge,” Magnus says in a threatening tone. “This is not your concern.”

“Are you sure about that?” He looks at his watch, tapping the glass. “Time is ticking. There haven’t been any announcements, and unless you plan to relinquish your position to your charming brother, I’m your best option.”

“What is he talking about, Magnus?”

Lauge offers a pitying smile. “Poor human. You have no idea you’re just being used so Magnus can keep being Santa.”

Magnus launches from his seat at that point, reaching to grab Lauge, who doesn’t even move. It’s like an invisible wall is between them.

“You know your Santa magic doesn’t allow you to hurt me.”

“But I can,” Theodor says, twisting a fist in Lauge’s sweater.

Pure fear shows in Lauge’s eyes. “Let me go.”

“Happily,” Theodor says with a shove. “I suggest you find a different place to eat tonight.”

Magnus’s father stands as well. “Now, Lauge.”

Lauge haughtily flicks non-existent hair from his shoulder. “I’ll go, but just remember, you might need me sooner than you think.”

Magnus growls as Lauge slinks out of the restaurant. Magnus is seething as his family gather their things.

“We’ll leave you two alone,” his father says.

“No,” Magnus says, raising his hand. “We’ll go. I owe Luca an explanation.”

I stand, taking my coat from the back of the chair. I don’t speak, just smile weakly at his family as we leave the restaurant. We’re only a few steps away when my thoughts finally settle enough to form a sentence.

“Are you using me, Magnus?”

He stops walking, turning to face me with his hands on my shoulders. “No. Definitely not. I had a reason for not sharing my predicament with you sooner, but I’m afraid Lauge has forced my hand. Will you please come home with me?”

“Where else am I gonna go?”

“I know I’m asking a lot of you, but if you could keep an open mind just a bit longer, I think I can help you understand.”

I nod, feeling a sense of comfort and warmth as I gaze into his twinkling eyes. “I’m all ears.”

## CHAPTER II

# LUCA

We enter the house again and with a flick of his wrist the fireplace lights up and a tray with steaming mugs appears on the coffee table. We hang our coats and kick off our shoes in the foyer before settling on the sofa.

Magnus turns to his side to face me. “Let me see. Where do I start?”

I shrug, trying hard to keep my defenses up when all they want to do is melt away. Magnus hands me a mug, smiling.

“Hot chocolate.”

“Thanks.”

He stands, pacing in front of the fireplace for a moment before meeting my gaze. “As I shared before, the role of Santa is passed down through my lineage and is determined upon birth.”

I nod to show I’m listening.

“When the magic is shared with us, it changes everything. Our aging process slows, and we learn all the secrets that make Christmas what it is. It’s an honor to be Santa Claus, one none of us take lightly.”

“I can only imagine.”

“It’s also a position of power and freedom. I can make anything happen with the flick of my wrist. I can travel the world and come and go as I wish. The only thing I can’t magically create is a mate of my own.”



My chest tightens in anticipation.

“What I told you before is true, Luca. I fell in love with you and wanted desperately for you to fall in love with me too, but I wanted it to be organic and based on our connection, with no magic or pressure involved.”

I sip my chocolate simply to stop trembling.

Magnus rubs his forehead. “I have a deadline approaching. That’s what Lauge was speaking of. After forty years of service, each Santa must choose a mate or hand the title to the next in line. That person is my brother, who does not want the position. Nor do I wish to relinquish it. My other choice would be to accept an arranged marriage chosen by the council. They’ve chosen Lauge.”

Magnus visibly shivers with disgust when the words leave his mouth.

“I would rather give the title away than marry Lauge. He doesn’t love me, he just wants the position of authority and the prestige of being my mate. I detest him.”

“Wait.” I set my mug down as my brain processes this information. “Lauge has a motive to mess with Christmas. To distract you from me.”

“Yes. It’s not the first time we’ve wondered if he’s behind the sabotage. It’s almost a certainty now but we need proof.”

“It would make sense. You said these problems have never happened before.”

“Right,” Magnus nods. “I just don’t know how he’s doing all of it.”

“Didn’t you say the fire was just a magic illusion?”

Magnus smiles. “Right. He’s summoned magic. I have to expose him.”

“Yes, but back to this deadline. When is it?”

Magnus frowns. “Midnight on Christmas Eve.”

I pull my head back. “This Christmas Eve?”

“Yes.”

I jump from my seat. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I had hoped to tell you tonight or tomorrow. That’s why I stopped our lovemaking.”

I rub my forehead and turn away, trying to absorb this information. “You mean to tell me in less than two days you have to marry someone or hand over being Santa to your brother?”

“Yes.”

I turn to face him. “And...what do you want to happen, Magnus?”

“I want to marry you, Luca. I’ve wanted that for a long time.”

“Why didn’t you try sooner?”

“I told you before. I tried to stay away and let you live a normal life. Being with me comes with many compromises. It’s selfish of me, but I want you, desperately. More than anything I’ve ever wanted other than being Santa.”

Our earlier conversations flood my mind. Immortality, leaving my family, leaving everything behind to live in this magical world with an amazing man. Could I do this? Am I ready?

“Luca.”

I shift my eyes up.

“I still refuse to pressure you. Yes, I want you, but not by force. I only want you to be here if you also want that.”

“But if I say no...” I shake my head. “Everything is ruined.”

“I won’t marry Lauge.” His voice shakes. “Theodor will adjust.”

The weight of this decision nearly brings me to my knees. “Can I have a few minutes alone please?”

“Of course.” He bows his head and leaves the room.

I stand in front of the windows, watching snow fall softly outside. Since there's not a cloud in the sky, it must be more magic. Recalling the advice a mentor of mine gave me years ago, I focus on the decision at hand, imagining the outcome of both choices. I close my eyes and imagine myself married to Magnus and living in this magical town. Waking in his bed every morning, the lovemaking, his family. Even the elves and helping around the workshop. The fantasy brings a smile to my face.

Then I imagine the alternative. Saying goodbye, seeing the sadness in his eyes as he drops me off in front of my dark, undecorated flat in a dreary wintery London. Knowing that while I push through my mundane life, working to earn more money and status and spending my nights alone, Magnus is here, watching his brother take over his position. I imagine Theodor's face, his disappointed parents, even the elves. I see Lauge with his puffed chest, trying to get Theodor to marry him before his own deadline arrives.

What am I stuck on? Maybe it's just the foreign aspect of all this. I don't know what life is like here, but then I didn't know what it was like in Phoenix or London either until I lived there. Unlike those places, I wouldn't be able to just move. Would there ever be a time I wanted to leave this place?

I sit in an armchair, letting the fire warm my toes. I love Magnus. Maybe, for once, I should choose happiness over money. Maybe I could choose love.

If I do, how do I tell my parents?

## CHAPTER 12

# MAGNUS

I pace in the sunroom, wringing my hands while I wait for Luca. It's very likely he'll decline and choose to return to his regular life. While I can give him a lot, I can't give him normalcy.

I desperately want to return to him, pull him into my arms, and kiss him until the sun rises again. If he says no, he'll take my heart and any hope of finding love with him. I'll just have to get Theodor to understand that I can't marry Lauge. I would never share my body and home with a man like him, especially now that I know how wonderful true love feels. No one could fill the hole that Luca would leave.

"Magnus?"

I swing around to face him. "Hi."

"Hi." He smiles softly, walking further into the room. "Are you ready to talk?"

"Yes, of course. Would you like to return to the living room?"

He shakes his head. "This is fine."

I brace for his rejection, doing my best not to break down and beg him to stay.

"I thought about everything that's happened since you showed up...um, was that just yesterday?"

I nod. "Yes. Time feels different here."

“Right. Um, anyway, I thought of all the times I saw you, mere glimpses and stolen moments over the years. I remembered how much I thought of you in between, and how excited I got when December rolled around again, hoping I’d have another chance to see you.”

I nod, stepping closer as tentative hope blooms in my chest.

“I’ve known I love you for a long time. Maybe it’s why I threw myself into work. I knew I couldn’t date. Not knowing you existed.”

“Luca…”

“Please.” He raises his hand. “I need to get this out.”

“Of course.”

“This decision scares me,” Luca continues. “It means giving up everything I know and stepping into an unknown world and future. It means not seeing my parents.” He frowns as he shakes his head. “But it also means being with you, the man I love. And maybe, deep down inside, I never wanted the life I built. Maybe I built it because there was nothing else to do.”

I nod, forcing myself to stay silent when all I want to do is pull him into my arms.

“I imagined both scenarios,” Luca says. “One where I went back to my life and the other where I stayed here with you. The choice was incredibly easy after that.”

My heart rate speeds up. Here it is. His decision.

“There’s no way I’m leaving you, Magnus.”

I swear time just stopped. “Wh-what did you say?”

His bottom lip quivers as he steps closer. “I’m saying, if the offer stands, I want to stay here with you. I want to marry you and do whatever it is to support you. I love you, Magnus, and at the end of the day, love is the only thing that really matters. Everything else can be sorted.”

I hear him, but it's like I'm afraid to believe it. "I'm not dreaming, right?"

Luca smiles as a tear slides down his cheek. "You're definitely awake. What do you think?"

Snapping out of my fear-induced stupor, I swoop him up into my arms, swinging him around as our lips meet in a heated kiss. We kiss and laugh and cry together for several minutes before I pull back enough to meet his eyes.

"You've just made me the happiest man alive."

Luca tickles his fingers through my beard. "You deserve it. Now what do we do?"

"I wish I could take you to my bed and make love until morning, but we have to follow a process for it to be official."

"What kind of process?"

I set him down on the floor, gripping his hands in mine. "Go to the council. Announce our betrothal and intention to commit. They will provide their sacred approval and then we will go to the sanctuary and seal our commitment."

"Does that mean we're having sex somewhere different than here?"

I nod. "It's rumored to be the most magnificent of all buildings. I've only heard rumors, of course, from my parents."

"Is someone going to watch us?"

"Oh no. We'll be alone. The reason it's done at the sanctuary is because of the magic in the room. It will seal us forever."

Luca exhales slowly. "Okay. That's cool. Um, do we do that now?"

"Time is of the essence. I will send word to my father to alert the council." I smile. "Then get ready, my love, for the town of Sinterborg will rejoice in our union. We will feast for days after Christmas, then you and I will spend a month strengthening our bond."

“You look so happy. Joy is radiating off of you.”

“I am *so* happy. I waited for love, and you came. I will do everything in my power to make you happy for the rest of our days.”

Luca wipes away another tear. “One thing.”

“Anything.”

“Can I see my parents before it all happens? I want to say goodbye.”

Smiling, I brush my fingers across his cheek. “About that. I have a little surprise for you, Luca.”

“Okay.”

“You can invite your parents to visit us here. Just once for our ceremony.”

“Really?” His smile grows. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. We’ll let your parents decide what happens after that.”

Luca looks confused. “What does that mean?”

Wrapping my arm around his waist, I pull him close until his chest is pressed against mine. “Call them. I’ll go inform my father.” He nods, gazing up at me with so much love in his eyes that my heart flutters. He was so worth waiting for.

I watch as Luca finds his phone, unlocking it with shaking fingers, but as much as I just want to sit here with him, I can’t. I have a wedding to plan. Hurrying across the house to my study, my mind filled with visions of a future I had only hoped for, I take a few deep breaths to stay focused.

Dialing my father, my foot taps with anticipation until he answers.

“Magnus. Is all well with Luca?”

“Better than well, Father. He’s accepted my proposal.”

There’s silence for a moment until my father huffs a surprised laugh. “Has he? You’re really marrying?”



“Yes. Just in time. I told him everything and why I didn’t share the deadline sooner.”

“You wanted him to love you for you.”

“Yes. Lauge forced my hand, but honestly, I can’t even be mad. Luca is staying.”

“Oh, my son. This is wonderful. I will alert the council immediately. Are you ready?”

“As soon as you say the word. It’s happening. The man I love is here.”

“I am so happy for you. I will tell your mother and Theodor and get back to you as soon as we hear from the council.”

“We’ll be ready.”

After ending the call, I take a moment just to sit with this unbelievable happiness welling and overflowing in my chest. Everything I’ve ever wanted is mine.

## CHAPTER 13

# LUCA

“Hello,” my mom answers.

“Hi, Mom. It’s Luca. Uh, what time is it there?”

“Mid-morning. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Definitely. Um, are you sitting down?”

“Yes. What’s going on?”

“You might not believe what I’m about to tell you, but I promise I’m telling the truth.”

“Okay.”

“I’m, um, I’m getting married.”

Not surprisingly, she’s stunned silent, so I continue. “Uh, today, actually. I think. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, so yeah, I think it has to be today.” I huff a laugh to clear my shaky voice. “And I want you and Richard to come.”

“Luca James Vincent. What are you talking about?”

I rub my forehead, wishing I had asked Magnus how much I can tell her over the phone. I decide to be as vague as possible.

“It’s someone I’ve known for a while and we unexpectedly connected. Both of us have had feelings for a long time, and we finally had an opportunity to share them.”

“Okay, that sounds wonderful, but why the rush to marriage?”

“He has to. For his, um, his inheritance. I know it seems really sudden to you, but it’s not for me. His name is Magnus.”

“Magnus,” she repeats softly. “What does he do? Where does he live? Are you moving again?”

“Mom, this is one of those times I have to ask you just to trust me. I’ll answer everything when you get here.” I glance up just as Magnus enters the room. “How will my parents get here?” I ask.

“I’ll send someone for them.”

“Magnus will arrange your transportation. Can you come?”

“Well of course, Luca. we’re not going to miss your wedding.”

I exhale, as relief spreads through me. “Great. Be ready in...” I glance up at Magnus.

“Two hours?”

“Two hours.”

“Oh my goodness, Luca. What kind of clothing do we need?”

“Winter clothes. Same as Boston. I’ll see you soon, Mom.”

She laughs softly. “See you soon.”

I end the call and lean back on the sofa, almost in shock. “What do we need to do to prepare?”

Magnus sits next to me, pressing his hand to my chest as he gazes into my eyes. “We need new suits. We’ll go visit the tailor to get them made. My parents will handle preparations for everything else. Right now, I should check on the workshop. Christmas Eve is tomorrow.”

I swallow with that reminder. “What will I do while you’re gone?”

“I was hoping you would come with me.”

My eyes go wide. “To deliver gifts?”

“Yes. Would you like that?”

“Definitely.”

As I gaze into his eyes, they shift from affection to pure heat. “I cannot wait to make love to you, Luca. The anticipation is overwhelming.”

I graze my bottom lip with my teeth. “Uh, does all sex count?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can you do other types of sex before marriage?”

His features soften with understanding. “Only penetrative sex counts towards the bond.”

“Excellent.”

I slide off the sofa onto my knees, gazing at his face as I unbuckle his belt. Magnus’s cheeks flush as his breath becomes heavy in his chest.

“Are you going to do what I think you’re going to do?”

“If you’re thinking I’m going to suck your soul out through your cock, then you’re correct.”

His breath rattles. “Fuck.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you could swear.”

He huffs an amused sound. “The only thing I can’t do is cause someone harm.”

“Good to know.”

I get his pants open and rub the growing bulge behind the soft material of his briefs. Tugging them down, I smile as his cock pops free, jutting out from his hips. It’s in proportion to the big man himself, with a slight curve to the left—thick and veiny and already leaking. His scent wafts around me, both musky and sweet, and my mouth waters.

“Gorgeous,” I whisper. “Ever had your cock sucked?”

Magnus shakes his head. “You’re my first everything, Luca.”

Pure joy explodes deep within me as I reach up to touch him for the first time. He shivers as soon as my hand makes

contact, his breath coming out in a whoosh.

“Feels good, right?”

Magnus nods. “So good. Not the same as when I touch it.”

“No.” Leaning forward, I lick a stripe along his shaft, swirling over his slit and lapping up delicious precum. Holy fuck. He tastes like sugar.

He arches his back as his breath catches and he buries his fingers in my hair. “Luca.”

I push gently on his stomach. “Just relax, lover. I’ve got you.”

He nods, exhaling slowly as he sinks back into the sofa. Time for me to worship at the altar of amazing cocks I didn’t know existed.

I lick him again, moaning at his taste, before rising on my knees and attempting to swallow as much of his length as I can. Soon enough, I lose myself in him, sucking, licking, and pulling out every trick I have to blow his mind. He deserves it.

As I suck, I fumble with my own pants to get my dick out, stroking slowly, my hand becoming sticky with precum. I’m so turned on that I know I could come too fast, so I slow myself down to make it last.

Magnus, however, has no self-control yet, slowly pumping his hips as he fucks my mouth. He keeps his eyes open and fixed on me, his mouth agape in awe. I focus on his head, sucking and lapping at his slit before moving down and gently nibbling at his balls.

His moans fill the space around us, beautifully soft and lustful, my name an occasional whisper on his lips. His cock thickens and swells on my tongue and I know he’s close, so I prepare myself. A random thought about condoms passes through my mind, but I’m too far gone to stop this. I have a feeling human rules don’t apply here.

Magnus digs his fingers into my shoulders as his entire body tenses and the first warm, sticky stream hits my tongue. Like his precum, he tastes sweet like cotton candy. His body

twitches as his cock pulses rope after rope down my throat. It takes several seconds for it to subside, with me sucking gently on his head until he flinches from sensitivity. I lay my head on his thigh, catching my breath.

“I want...” Magnus pauses, exhaling slowly. “I want to do that for you.”

“You don’t have to. I’m happy.”

“I want to. I want to taste you. I want to make you feel the way you just flipped my world upside now. I won’t be as good as you, but I have to start somewhere.”

“Only if you want—” He cuts my words off with a searing kiss as he pulls me up from the floor and attacks my mouth, pressing me into the cushions, his heavy body a delicious weight on me.

He might be inexperienced, but he’s not lacking enthusiasm as he kisses his way down my body, shoving my shirt up to suckle my nipples. I tangle my fingers in his thick hair, bucking against him in pleasure.

Magnus moves down to my stomach, swirling his tongue in my belly button before lifting his head to gaze at my dick, barely exposed with my jeans open. He tugs them down and off, spreading my legs as he takes up residence between my knees.

Stroking me gently, he gazes up at me with vulnerable eyes. “Tell me if I do anything wrong.”

“I will, but you won’t.”

He nods, returning his attention to my cock like it’s one of the wonders of the world. He flicks his tongue out to meet the tip and I moan. Magnus smiles, doing it again.

“You taste good.”

All I can do is nod in reply as Magnus finds his confidence and swallows me whole. I’ve always thought I was a bit above average in the girth department, but Magnus doesn’t even struggle with it. His fingers dig into my thighs as he bobs his head up and down my shaft.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, watching his every move, that feeling of being in a dream washing over me again. The man I've wanted, fantasized about for years, is between my legs sucking me like it's his job. Out of all the people on earth, he chose me. Wild.

Magnus seems lost in his own world, all his focus on my pleasure. He massages my balls, adding to my delight and pushing me quickly to the edge. His mouth is hot and eager, his eyes filled with love and desire. I'm going to marry this man. He's mine.

The thought heightens my pleasure, my orgasm peaking and barreling through me until my back arches and I cry out, unable to warn Magnus. He moans as I empty into his mouth, my head thrown back as white light floods my vision. I fuck his throat through it, until every last drop is out and I'm spent.

Magnus crawls up my body, claiming my mouth in a passionate kiss, our bodies warm and half dressed as we make out on the sofa. After several minutes, he breaks the kiss, burying his face in the crook of my neck. I hold him close, stroking his back. No words are needed right now. We both know how special this was, but the best part is knowing that I get to keep this. Forever.



AFTER A WHIRLWIND AFTERNOON of visiting the tailor and being stopped every five minutes by someone needing Magnus's attention, I'm finally back at the house, pacing nervously while I wait for my parents to arrive.

Magnus is at the workshop tending to business. It makes me wonder why the deadline is so close to the busy season, but it is what it is. Just as I walk to the patio door to look outside, a loud, blaring siren sounds, ringing throughout the town.

I run outside and down the hill where I can see the town. The siren is coming from the workshop. I hurry in that direction as panic fills me. When I get close, I see the large tracking sign completely dark, but flickering every few



seconds. All the citizens of town spill out of their shops, concerned chatter filling the air.

I step inside the workshop, heading for the main work area only to find absolute chaos. The elves panic as machines shoot out paper, conveyor belts jerk, knocking products to the floor, and smoke fills the air. I find Magnus in the madness, talking with Faugor over a computer.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

Magnus swings around to face me, his face a mask of tension. “I...I don’t know. We’ve all been here so no one snuck in, but everything is falling apart. If we don’t get it fixed soon, Christmas won’t happen.”

I gasp. “That’s impossible.”

“Sadly, it’s not. Without me, the magic of Christmas can’t spread around the world. It will be a bleak morning.”

“We have time. We’ll figure it out.”

“How?” Faugor asks, his voice filled with tension. “This has never happened before. It’s not the main computer this time. They’ve all gone bonkers!”

Magnus flicks his wrist, and suddenly I’m in front of the main computer, clicking keys to find the code. Faugor is right. Nothing is wrong with it this time. Rubbing my forehead, I turn to look at the other machines. The place is a mess. “Okay,” I whisper. “First, we need to calm everyone down. Can we get them out of here?”

Magnus nods. “Yes. Everyone,” he bellows, his voice rising above the din of panicked elf voices. “Please exit the building and take a break while we figure this out.”

“But...Christmas,” one of them says, a short female-looking elf with purple hair and large ears.

“Trust me, Megala, we know what’s on the line.”

With sad eyes, she nods, leaving with the others. Magnus turns to me. “What now?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I wish Richard was here. This is what he does for a living. Cyber security.”

Magnus’s face lights up. “They just landed.”

We rush outside to see my parents stepping out of Magnus’s red sports car, their faces dazed until my mom spots me. “Luca.” She rushes over, hugging me. Then her eyes focus on Magnus, widening as she releases me. “Oh my.”

“Hello, Louisa,” Magnus says. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Again?”

Richard and I exchange confused looks.

“You’re...” Mom looks at me. “You’re marrying Santa?”

I nod, smiling. “Crazy, right? Um, we’d love to welcome you properly, but as you can see behind me, we have a little problem. Richard, can I borrow your computer skills?”

“Of course.”

The four of us hurry inside while I quickly catch Richard up on the problem.

“Sounds like a virus,” he says. “Planned to launch an attack at a specific time.”

“Lauge,” Magnus and I say at the same time, receiving confused looks from my parents.

“Can you fix it?” I ask.

“I’ll do my best.”

While Richard starts clacking away at the keyboard, Magnus’s parents and several other people enter the building, looking concerned. Magnus hurries down the stairs to talk to them while I assist Richard.

“Find anything?”

He nods. “I think so. This code is very sophisticated, but that also makes it easier to find an anomaly. I’m just worried that if I eradicate the virus, I won’t know if anything else is affected.”

“I was able to find a problem in the code before on my own. We think someone is purposely sabotaging the system.”

“Oh, definitely. Viruses like this don’t happen randomly. I imagine this server isn’t on any known networks.”

“Probably not.”

A commotion from below pulls our attention as Theodor bursts through the door holding Lauge by the arm. Two other people, a man and a woman, are behind them, looking distraught. Everyone starts arguing but I bump Richard’s arm.

“Right,” he says. “Okay, I think I’ve isolated it.” He points to a file with the name `implode.exe`. “Not the most creative name.”

“I don’t think he thought anyone here would have the skills to fix it.”

“He might have been right.” His finger hovers over the Delete key. “Ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

Richard hits the keys and all the machines come to a sudden stop. The arguing group of people below us also quiet, their attention shifting to us. Richard and I decide to reboot the server, both of us holding our breath as the system cycles. After a very long three minutes, the computers flicker back to life, quietly humming. The conveyor belts turn on, flowing smoothly. Richard exhales, grasping my shoulder.

“We did it.”

“You did it. Thank you.”

When we look down, Lauge’s face is bright red as he snarls. “Damn you. Why are you even here?”

Everyone in the group turns to look at the angry man.

“Care to explain your reaction, Lauge?” Magnus says, glaring.

Lauge’s expression shifts then as he backs away slowly, straight into a corner. “I... Nothing. I know nothing.”

A delicate, graceful woman steps toward him. “Lauge. Did you have something to do with this?” Her voice is soft and sounds how I imagine angels do.

He flinches, his face scrunching up like he smells something bad. “Mother...”

“Lauge.” A man who looks remarkably like Lauge steps up. “Answer your mother.”

Lauge hangs his head, wringing his hands. Theodor nudges his arm. “Fine. Perhaps I know something about this... incident.”

Magnus actually growls. “Explain.”

Backed into a literal corner, Lauge’s shoulders slouch. “I had to do something. Magnus is fixated on this...” His gaze shifts up to me. “This *human*.” He says it like it’s a bad word. “When I’m the one he should notice. I’m like him. I understand this world. When I saw that he left Sinterborg to woo the human, I had to get his attention.”

“You almost ruined Christmas for attention?” Magnus asks. “How did you think that would work out?”

“I had planned to offer my assistance in the eleventh hour to save the day. You would be grateful enough to see what has been in front of your face all along and marry me. I deserve you, Magnus.”

“Why do you believe that?”

His face hardens. “You’re missing the point. You can’t see the bigger picture. A compatible partnership. I could be that. I would do anything you ask of me. What can he offer you that I can’t?”

“Love,” Magnus says softly. “He offers me love in the truest of forms. He wants nothing from me but my heart. And what is Christmas about, if not love? It took me this long to find a mate because I knew in my heart it had to be about love. It had to be Luca. So you see, Lauge, nothing you could have done, no malice or chaos, or manipulation or threats, would have made me choose you. Quite the opposite. I would have sooner given my position to my brother than married you.”

Quiet gasps fill the space. Everyone knows how dedicated Magnus is to his role.

One of the men standing behind Magnus's parents steps forward. "Lauge Nielsen, you are under arrest by the Council of Sint for crimes against Christmas. You will be exiled until the Council sees fit to pardon you."

Lauge's face falls. "This is all the human's fault," he mutters.

"It's not," his mother says. "It is yours, Lauge. You made these terrible decisions and put all of us at risk. How could you?" Her husband offers her a handkerchief as she dabs her eyes. "I am so disappointed."

Lauge looks truly heartbroken. "I did it for us. To improve our status."

His father scoffs. "Our status?" He shakes his head. "Oh, Lauge. Where did I go wrong?"

"You told me marrying Magnus would be good for me."

"It would. Magnus is a fine man. I thought, maybe, his joy would rub off on you and you would be happy."

"Happy?" Lauge questions. "This was about happiness?"

His father nods. "I didn't know you thought it was something else. I've never understood why your heart is so bitter. I had hoped maybe Magnus could find the source of your hidden joy. If anyone could, it would be him."

Lauge huffs in disbelief. "I did all this for happiness?"

"That was my hope for you," his father says.

Two members of what appear to be a police force enter the building, wearing colorful suits similar to the Swiss Guards at the Vatican. They each take one of Lauge's arms and drag him from the building while he calls out for his father to help him. Lauge's father turns to Magnus and his family, bowing his head slightly.

"My deepest apologies. I had no idea he was so misguided."

Magnus's dad nods. "It was not your fault."

With his head still bowed, he gathers his wife and they leave, his wife sniffing into her hanky. Another man steps forward, while Richard and I make our way to the group.

"Given the unusual events that occurred today, the Council moves to postpone your ceremony to Christmas morning at ten am."

Magnus's eyes go wide. "You mean it?"

The man nods. "You have found your mate. Christmas must be saved first."

Magnus bows his head. "Thank you."

They all exit, leaving a room full of people in awkward silence. "Well," I say. "That was...something."

Magnus nods. "I'd love to do proper introductions, but I need to get the elves back here and working."

As soon as he opens the door to outside, Faugor and the others file in, quickly resuming their posts. My parents stare in shocked awe as preparations for Christmas begin again.

Magnus wraps his arm around my shoulders. "How about we get a warm drink and talk. We have a lot of explaining to do."

## CHAPTER 14

# MAGNUS

Luca's parents follow mine to the diner across the way. I'm agitated, not only about Christmas being behind schedule, but facing Luca's parents after such a scene. I don't want them to be concerned that Luca is not safe here.

After we settle into a large booth, I speak first. "My presence here will be short. I must return to the workshop in preparation."

"How can we help?" Luca asks, immediately calming my nerves.

"Do not fear, Magnus," my father says, placing his hand over mine. "It's nothing a little magic can't solve. Enjoy this break from the madness."

I nod, smiling. "You're right, Father. This has never happened, but we'll catch up quickly." I reach for Luca's hand, squeezing it gently.

"We're so pleased the two of you could come," I say to Luca's parents.

Louisa is still gazing at me in pure awe. "How did this happen?"

Luca gazes up at me, encouraging me to explain. "I've been watching over Luca for many years. When I saw his face again as an adult, I was enraptured. I would try to time my visits so that I could spend at least a few minutes talking with him."

"You've visited Luca?" Richard asks.



I nod. “Many times. I couldn’t always make it, but I knew he had wonderful holidays with his family.” I glance at my love. “Until recently. He got caught up in life and lost sight of what truly matters.”

Louisa gasps softly. “He did. You knew that?”

“I know everything, Louisa.”

Luca’s brow creases. “Why do you address my mom like you know her? I mean, I know you know everyone, but you act like you actually know her.”

“He does,” Louisa says. “He was there for me when I was a struggling single mother. One night, just months before I met Richard, I sat in our living room, crying over the sad little tree I found and the lack of presents. The only thing I could manage was my mom’s snickerdoodle recipe. I set them out, hoping to create some semblance of joy.”

Richard and Luca both hang on her words while my parents look on. I flick my wrist, calling forth the scene. We watch as Louisa continues.

“Then the room warmed and filled with twinkling light. Santa appeared, his hands filled with gifts for my boy.”

Luca watches the scene unfold, leaning into me.

“He told me the only gift my son needed was the magic of Christmas in his heart. He would take care of the rest.”

Louisa brushes a tear from her face as she watches the scene, me transforming her tree and leaving wrapped gifts below it.

“Then he sat with me, enjoying the cookies I baked and telling me that relief was on its way. A man, one who exceeded my limited imagination, would enter my life soon. I met Richard shortly after.”

“Wow,” Luca whispers.

“That visit,” Louisa continues, “changed everything. My heart was bursting with joy and gratitude. I held on to the message, making sure Luca always felt the magic of the

season and knew that it wasn't about gifts. It was about family and taking a break from the madness of the world."

"And I fell away from that," Luca whispers. "Magnus rescued me. He came to show me what I was missing, but..." Luca turns to meet my gaze. "He didn't know I was madly in love with him."

My chest flutters with joy. "Luca didn't know I was also in love. I whisked him away from his world to mine, hoping somehow he could imagine himself here with me."

Luca clears his throat, facing his parents. "Which brings us to this moment. We're getting married and it has to be now. There's a deadline."

My father speaks up. "All Santas have forty years of service before a mate must be chosen. Magnus is running out of time, because he's been trying to woo Luca."

"I wanted him to love me for me, not because of a deadline," I explain.

"Well, it's wonderful," Richard says. "Why does it seem like there is tension here?"

"Staying with Magnus means leaving my world behind," Luca says. "Which is fine, really, except..." He reaches for his mother's hand. "I have to leave you too."

Louisa's expression saddens. "Oh."

"We could drop in sometimes," I offer, but it does little to lift her spirits.

"Luca would be loved here," my mother says to Louisa. "And safe."

Louisa nods, but her gaze is on her hands. "I see."

"It was the sticking point that made the decision hard for me," Luca says. "But I can't imagine leaving Magnus."

Louisa looks at her son, her eyes filled with tears. "You should stay. Love is really one of the only things that makes life tolerable. I'll just miss you."

“You don’t have to miss him,” my father says, all eyes shifting to him. “You could stay.”

“What do you mean?” Luca asks.

“Just as I said. They could stay. As Luca’s parents, you are given a choice.”

I smile as Luca’s face brightens with hope. “Surprise.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I had to make sure. It doesn’t come up often. We rarely choose human mates.”

Richard’s brow furrows. “You’re not human?”

“Not entirely,” Father answers. “We’re part of the Fae world. As such, we are immortal. No one dies in Sinterborg. Luca will never die. Should you stay, you will never die.”

“We would just live here where it’s always Christmas?” Richard questions.

My father nods. “Just as we do.”

Louisa abruptly stands from the table and hurries outside. Luca stands to go, but Richard nods. “I’ll go to her, Luca. I have a feeling I understand what she’s feeling.”

The four of us who remain sit quietly for a few moments, watching Louisa and Richard through the glass windows. Tension pours off of Luca, and I know he’s concerned he’s hurt his mother. I want to offer him comfort, but I have no idea what to say.

Louisa’s face lights up as she steps into her husband’s embrace. A moment later, they return to our table.

“We’d like to stay,” Louisa says.

Luca gasps. “Really?”

“What could be more wonderful than a place filled with the joys of Christmas?” Richard asks. “We’re retired. Sure, we have friends, but you know how much family means to us, Luca. You are that family.”

Luca's eyes well with tears as he clutches my arm. "They can stay?"

"Father?"

He nods. "Yes. At the wedding ceremony, we'll just add on an extra feature."

My mother squeezes Louisa's hand. "Welcome to our family. You will make friends here too."

Luca leans his head against my shoulder. "You really are magic."

"Well, this is wonderful," I gush, pressing a kiss to Luca's forehead. "It's the one thing I couldn't give Luca."

"Do we have a place to live?" Louisa asks.

"Oh yes. We'll have your home packed up and all your things transported here," my father says. "All we need are any specific needs you have for your home and it will be built."

"Where will we stay until it's finished?" Richard asks.

My father tilts his head in confusion as I chuckle. "It will be built before you're back from getting your things," I answer.

Luca laughs softly. "You'll both have to get used to the magic around here."

All of us leave the diner and return to the workshop. I push my sleeves up to my elbows. "Luca, you can give your parents a tour of town while I get to work."

He shakes his head. "No way. Put me to work."

"We can help too," Richard says, earning a smile from my father.

"It's a family affair," my mother says, just as Theodor walks through the door.

"I'm here to help," he says.

With a smile on my face and joy in my heart, I give everyone a task. Christmas is safe.

## CHAPTER 15

# LUCA

The workshop is an incredible place. Hundreds of elves fill the room, each of them working in teams over conveyor belts, assembling toys. In another area, more sophisticated gifts pass by—electronics, jewelry, and popular toys. Magnus explains that the toys and gifts are organized by regions of the world and are tailored to different cultures.

In an upstairs area, feasts of food are packaged up, ranging from your traditional American dinners to things I've never seen before. Another area has elves working on wrapping. My mom is assigned to that area, her face filled with joy.

Richard joins the area where bikes and other large items are assembled. Magnus's parents supervise some of the other areas, his mother intent on every detail. Theodor jumps in too, bouncing to different sections to help out.

I stand next to Magnus while he works through the large list of items, separated by regions.

"We'll start in the Southern Hemisphere," he says. "Australia and the surrounding areas."

"Do you visit every country?"

"Not me specifically." He smiles. "I have help now, but I still need to assign the territories. What do you prefer?"

"What do you mean?"

"We could choose the Northern Hemisphere where America is or go anywhere else."

"You choose."

Magnus smiles. “Happily.”

As day turns to night, we finish getting everything ready for tomorrow, quickly catching up after the minor setback caused by Lauge. We say goodnight to our families and walk hand in hand back to Magnus’s house.

“I can’t believe this is my life now and my family is staying. Is it weird that I’m kind of glad my life went to shit?”

Magnus chuckles. “Not weird at all. I cannot express how happy I am that you’re here with me now. Watching from afar was difficult.”

“All I wanted was you.”

He lifts my hand and kisses it as we enter the home. “Do you need a warm drink?”

“No.” I turn to face him, pressing our chests together as I tilt my head back so I can still see his face. “I want to go upstairs and spend the night naked cuddling with you.”

“That, I can manage.”



SUN STREAMING through the curtains stirs me from sleep. I blink myself awake slowly as awareness settles over me. What a nice way to wake up instead of having a blaring alarm startling me.

I roll over to find Magnus sitting up next to me, gazing down at the laptop on his lap. He’s shirtless but has pajama bottoms on, and I’ve honestly never seen a more attractive sight in my life.

Realizing I’m awake, he turns his head and a smile fills his face. “Good morning, my love.”

“Morning.” I smile, stretching as I pull myself upright. “It’s Christmas Eve.”

“It is. The culmination of almost a year’s work. Are you ready to experience this?”

“As far as I can tell.”

Magnus reaches over, brushing my hair from my face. “I already have the best gift. Tomorrow, we’ll be married.”

“At least our anniversary will be easy to remember.”

He laughs softly, setting the laptop aside and sinking back into the bedding with me. I sigh as he wraps his warm arms around me, nuzzling his neck and relaxing into his embrace.

“As if I could ever forget it.” Magnus kisses the top of my head. “Once the ceremony is over, we’ll have nothing to do but each other for an entire month.”

I cup his cheek, enjoying the soft scruff of his beard. “Sounds like paradise.”

“It will be.” His eyes search mine. “I want to be everything you need, Luca. I never want you to regret your decision to stay with me.”

“You’re already a hundred times better than anyone I’ve ever met. We’re off to a good start.”

He kisses me sweetly, then his expression turns more seriously. “I have to get up now. Duty calls.”

“Right behind you.”

Thirty minutes later, we’re dressed and entering the workshop. The rest of the day is an absolute blur of activity, from packing gifts to checking lists to seeing my parents off to get their things settled back in Boston.

Gotta say, watching Magnus in boss-mode is hot as fuck. He’s so commanding, but kind at the same time, respectfully addressing his workers and making sure they are doing well amidst the chaos. He’s the kind of boss I had hoped to be one day, but I was always too busy drowning in tasks to even think about it when my next promotion came along.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper.

Magnus hears me somehow and swings around. “What’s wrong?”



“It just hit me. I didn’t quit my job. My lease. So many things.”

Magnus frowns. “Ah yes. We have until Monday before everyone is back to work, yes?”

“Yeah. It’ll just be a shock to them for me to quit out of the blue.”

“How long is a suitable notice?”

“Two weeks is standard, but with my responsibilities, a month would probably be better.”

“A month,” he whispers, frowning. “Whatever it takes.”

My heart falls. “I’ll figure it out. Maybe they’ll let me work remotely. I can do that here, right? You have wi-fi?”

“We have anything you need.” He rubs my arms. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“Right.”

“The sleigh is ready, sir,” two elves say from behind Magnus.

His face lights up. “Come, Luca. You must see it.”

Magnus grips my hand, leading me through the workshop, past the offices and out through a back door. I stumble on my own feet for a second when the massive hangar comes into view. The doors are open and where one would expect airplanes, there are rows of bright red sleighs with a team of reindeer attached to each. Elves are busy around each one, piling the backs of them with bags of gifts. Faugor walks each row, checking his clipboard and chatting with the workers. If I’m not mistaken, the reindeer are speaking some kind of language.

“Whoa,” I whisper. “They can talk?”

“Of course we can talk,” one of them says. The collar around his neck says Dancer. I look at Magnus in shock.

Magnus beams. “It’s quite a show, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

He leads me to the largest sleigh in the first bay. “This is mine.”

“This is so amazing. All these teams go out and deliver gifts too?”

“Yes. While I could manage it all alone through magic, the Council decided a few years ago that there was value in delegating and training teams to handle distribution. It gives the elves a lot of satisfaction and allows a quicker recovery for me. I still have to expend quite a bit of magic to pull this off, but much less than when I delivered it all myself.”

“Smart.”

He turns to face me, smiling bright. “All we have to do now is bundle up and head out for North America. I thought you might enjoy seeing the country from high above.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

His eyes heat as he steps closer, pulling my hands to his chest. “And then, my love, we’ll spend one last night together before our lives are forever bound.”

“I’m all in, Magnus.”

Bending his head, he squeezes me sweetly, but as he attempts to back away, I lock my arms around his neck and deepen the kiss. Magnus moans against my mouth, both of us ignoring all the people around us.

We break apart seconds later, and I don’t know about Magnus, but my body is tingling. Tomorrow is going to be awesome.

## CHAPTER 16

# MAGNUS

Helping Luca climb into my sleigh, his face lit up with excitement, is like a dream coming true. I'm almost afraid it really is a dream, and any minute now, I'll wake to find myself standing on a corner in London, watching my love from afar like I have for so many years.

But as Luca's bright smile fills his face, his nose and cheeks rosy from the cool breeze and his excitement, I allow myself to believe that it's real. This is really happening.

"It might be a little scary for you at first," I explain, "but I promise you're safe beside me."

Luca nods. "I'm not scared. Just excited."

Faugor approaches my sleigh, smiling up at me. "Safe journey, sir." His eyes shift to Luca. "Enjoy your first delivery, Sir Luca."

"Thank you, Faugor," Luca says, still grinning like, well, like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Onward," I shout to my reindeer.

They clomp out of the stall, grunting in their secret language, then with a trotting start, they take off into the air. Luca releases a sound of surprised joy as we take flight. It's a much different experience in the sleigh from the car, and I hope so much that he likes it.

Luca leans over the side, gazing down as the land below us fades from view. "Why don't people ever see you?" he asks,

glancing briefly at me. “With smartphones and people staying up late, how come you’re never caught?”

“Oh, I am, and often. It’s only by magic that my secret stays safe. I can erase any memory of me at any time. As far as photographing or taking video of me, it will never come out clearly. I’m just a blur.” Luca leans back against his seat, and I wrap my arm around his shoulders. “But honestly, most people aren’t looking for me. They just accept the magic of Christmas without looking for how it happens.”

“Cool.” He’s quiet for a moment, his hand extending to feel the air passing by us. “What about cultures that don’t celebrate Christmas? Do you just pass them by?”

“No. I can be translated in most cultures and gift-giving holidays.”

He laughs softly. “Amazing.”

“Here we go. We’re approaching the east coast of America.”

Luca leans over the side again, gazing down at the vast ocean beneath us. “I should be scared, but I’m not.”

“Good. You’re very safe.”

The sleigh begins to descend as houses that were tiny dots seconds ago come into view. I land on the roof of the first house, a large estate with orphaned children inside. Hopping out, I hoist the biggest bag of gifts over my shoulder.

“Ready, Luca?”

He nods. “Ready.”

## CHAPTER 17

# LUCA

I watch in awe as Magnus crosses the roof toward the chimney. He's all decked out in his traditional Santa gear, which makes me smile, knowing how rarely he's actually seen by anyone.

"Come here," he says, gesturing with his hand for me to approach. "This is an orphanage. There are over fifty kids inside."

"Wow."

Magnus wraps his arm around my waist, flicking his wrist, and suddenly, we slide down the chimney chute into a grand living room. Magnus sets me down, then gazes around the dark room. With another flick of his wrist, a tree appears, decorated in twinkling lights, popcorn garland, and simple red and green silk ornaments.

"Would you like to set the gifts under the tree?" he asks.

"Oh yes."

I open the bag, my mouth gaping as gifts spill out. Obviously there's some magic happening here. This bag wasn't that full. While I pull out each wrapped gift, noting how the tags all have a child's name on them, I watch Magnus out of the corner of my eye as he fills the dining table with a holiday feast good enough for royalty.

The dining room corners fill with other items like linens, coats, shoes, and socks. Magnus is making sure the children and staff here have everything they need. Hearing a gasp, I

turn toward the stairs to see a tiny child standing there, her eyes lit up with joyful surprise.

“Uh, Santa?”

Magnus turns to me, and upon seeing the child, he smiles sweetly. “Hello, little one,” he says, approaching the child

“San-ta,” she murmurs, obviously very young.

“Yes, it’s Santa. How are you, Juliette?”

She beams. “I am three.”

Magnus chuckles. “Yes, I know, and you’ve been such a good girl this year.”

She nods, clutching a stuffed animal to her chest. “Good girl,” she repeats.

“You have to go back to sleep now so you can have a fun day tomorrow.” He brushes his fingers over her face and she immediately closes her eyes, falling limp in his arms. “I’ll take her upstairs.”

“Okay.”

I watch him disappear up the stairs, my heart fluttering with love for him. He’s so gentle and sweet with kids. By the time I finish lining up the gifts, he’s back, lifting two cookies off the plate left out for him and handing me one of them.

“Next stop.”

We whisk through the night, stopping at houses, but it all becomes a blur. Magnus is so fast, obviously thanks to magic, and just as the sun rises gently over the east coast, we fly by on our way back to Sinterborg.

“Amazing,” I whisper as we pull into one of the bays. Several other sleighs are already back, some landing shortly behind us.

“And that’s it,” Magnus says. “Now it’s our turn to celebrate.”



## CHAPTER 18

# MAGNUS

I walk back to my house, hand in hand with an awe-struck Luca. I don't think our whirlwind trip around North America has sunk in yet, but it will in time. Once we get inside, I lead him to my bedroom, where we strip down and slip beneath cozy blankets.

“In a few hours, we'll be bound together forever.”

Luca murmurs, planting soft kisses along my side. “I can't wait.”

“I've waited forty long years for you.”

He laughs softly. “That sounds so strange when you look barely forty now.”

I kiss his forehead. “You'll look like you do now for a very long time.”

“Preserve me in my prime, I like it.”

As he cozies up next to me, our body heat creating a cocoon, my fingers trace his back and I think about how my life will change today.

“Are you nervous?” Luca asks.

“Not in the slightest. You?”

“Nope. I should be, right?”

“I don't think so. When you know you're making the right decision, what's to be nervous about?”

He tilts his head to meet my gaze. “I do have a question though.”

I nod.

“Do you think you want to top, or bottom, or both?”

I chuckle, holding him closer. “What is your preference?”

“I like to think of myself as a solid power bottom, but I can be persuaded to top.”

My core heats like an inferno simply listening to his words, imagining sinking into him later. My cock swells with interest, and the sensation delights me.

“I don’t think I truly understood desire until I met you.”

Luca puts his hand over my growing erection, squeezing gently. “It’s a whole new world, Santa.”



MY BUZZING PHONE pulls me from a peaceful rest. Luca stirs in my arms while I twist to answer it. I barely register Theodor’s name.

“Hello?”

“Hello, brother. Are you ready for your big day? Our parents are at the council hall, hyped up for a wedding.”

I laugh softly as Luca blinks awake. “We took a nap. We’ll be up soon.”

“Good, because you have an hour.”

“An hour! Oh goodness. Thanks for the call.”

“You got it.”

Luca sits up. “An hour?”

“We need to shower and dress quickly.”

Luca nods and we both hop out of bed and hurry to the bathroom. I turn on the water while Luca brushes his teeth then joins me. As much as I’d like to linger over his luscious

body, we have no time, and I remind myself that in just a few hours he's mine forever.

Out of the shower and dry, I put my hands on Luca's shoulders. "Before the chaos begins, I just want you to know how special you are and how much this means to me. I love you with all my soul."

Luca smiles, dragging his fingers over my beard. "I know. I can feel your love. I'll do my best to match it."

"Your existence is enough."

We kiss quickly before I tear myself away. "Clothes."

"Right."

We dress in the suits we got yesterday and pull ourselves together in record time. When we step outside, there's a reindeer-drawn carriage in white and gold waiting for us. Luca grins, taking my hand as I lead him inside.

We're led slowly through town as the residents line the streets, singing and tossing confetti as we pass. Luca's smile is wider than I've ever seen.

"Who will be at the ceremony with us?"

"It's a private affair, so just our parents."

"Not Theodor?"

"No. No one else. Our parents will greet us at the hall, then we'll enter a private sanctuary where a member of the council will preside over us. Everyone else waits outside, but then we'll join the celebration. The entire town will participate."

"Neat. When do we have sex?"

I chuckle. "After the ritual, before the celebration."

He exhales slowly, twisting his hand around mine. "Amazing."

We stop in front of the council hall. Luca peers out the carriage window at the extravagant building, allowing me to help him out. As he steps down, he waves and smiles at the townsfolk who are gathered around us, shouting well wishes.

“They’re truly happy for you, aren’t they?”

“Yes, very. It is a momentous occasion for a Santa to choose his mate.”

“So has there ever been a Mrs. Claus?”

I laugh. “My mother. There have been same-sex unions before, centuries ago. It’s not the norm, but it’s not rare either.”

“So cool.”

Two ushers open the large gold doors to the hall as we approach, bowing their heads in reverence as we pass, arm in arm. Our parents wait for us just outside the sanctuary door. Louisa rushes to her son, fussing over his hair.

“You look so handsome,” she says, her eyes glossy with unshed tears.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Richard claps his shoulder. “We’re excited for you.”

“I’m so glad you’re both here.” Luca’s voice cracks with emotion, making my stomach flutter. “It means a lot.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Louisa says.

My own parents watch on with smiles. “You picked a good one,” my father says.

“I sure did.”

## CHAPTER 19

# LUCA

This is it. I'm merging my entire life with Magnus's.

The doors to the sanctuary open and we walk inside. The light is dim, the space so cavernous the only sound is the echo of our footsteps. Massive columns line the path we walk, and then finally an altar of sorts comes into view. I squeeze Magnus's hand to ground myself.

Magnus smiles, his whole face displaying the love he feels for me. I was nervous about messing this up, but just looking at him somehow calms my nerves.

A man appears wearing a long cream robe with red and green embroidery along the hem. With his long white beard and rosy cheeks, he actually does look like the Santa of lore. When we reach him, stopping at the bottom of a small set of stairs, he bows his head toward us.

"Magnus," the man says. "What an honor this is for me."

"Kantaar," Magnus says. "The honor is mine."

The man's bright blue eyes turn to me. "Luca. Welcome to our world."

"Thank you, sir."

"You may call me Kantaar."

I nod.

"Let's begin," Kantaar says.

He busies himself opening a chest that contains a gold chalice and containers he opens and pours into the cup. It

looks like powder and glitter and I'm hoping we're not supposed to drink it, but as he works, the cup begins to glow and the contents bubble.

Magnus watches me instead of watching Kantaar, bringing a smile to my face, but both of us face the man when he begins chanting over the chalice, his arms outstretched. The air temperature around us cools noticeably as a breeze passes over us.

"Magnus, your hand please," Kantaar says.

Magnus offers his free hand, watching as Kantaar lifts a scalpel-like tool and pricks his finger. We watch as his blood falls in droplets into the chalice.

"Your hand, Luca," Kantaar says.

I nod, offering my hand. He repeats the process he did to Magnus. When my blood drips into the chalice, the contents shift from a bland white color to a bright red.

Kantaar chants some more words that I don't understand. When he finishes, a wave of unseen energy washes over us, thick enough to feel, like a gentle ocean current. My chest fills with warmth as my hands begin to tingle.

The contents of the cup churn, slowly rising out of their confines and drifting up toward the ceiling. We watch it swirl over us like a cloud filling with rain, until it releases, falling over us like thick snowflakes.

As it lands on me, I feel something inside me shift and change. It's not painful, but it's definitely noticeable. I look at Magnus, who, judging by his face, seems to be feeling the same thing I am. Then the vibration starts at my feet, moving through me like lava crawling over rocks until every part of me feels full of whatever this energy is.

"Turn to each other," Kantaar says.

We do, facing each other, and then that strange feeling seems to shoot from my chest just as the same thing happens to Magnus. It combines before us, changing in color again to a deep gold before seeping back into us. The lights around us flicker as the chandeliers rattle and then there's silence.



I can tell it's over without being told. Magnus smiles, his eyes glassy with tears.

“Magnus and Luca,” Kantaar says, his voice reverent. “Your bonding ritual is complete. Please follow me.”

We trail him down another hall, stopping before double doors. He opens them, stepping to the side to let us pass, and when I see the room, my mouth drops open. To call it opulent is a gross understatement. The room is gold and cream with a roaring fireplace and a massive bed dominating the space. Near the back sits a large bathtub. The entire room is decked out in marble and lush furnishings.

When I turn back, Kantaar is gone and the door is closed. Magnus walks slowly toward me, his eyes heating. “We don't have to hold ourselves back anymore.”

My stomach flutters with excitement. “Finally.”

## CHAPTER 20

# MAGNUS

Unable to restrain myself a second longer, I wrap my arms around Luca and pull him into a kiss that feels like I waited my entire life to receive it. In a way, I did.

The man of my dreams. He's finally mine.

I wasn't sure if we would slowly undress, but Luca makes it clear he's just as ready for me as I am for him as he practically tears his clothes from his body. I join him, our mouths still connected, only breaking apart to assist in clothing removal.

We fall backward when his legs reach the bed, both of us crawling to the center. His flesh, warm and pliant, sears me as his need entwines with mine. The kiss though, the way his tongue completely owns me, his heavy breaths competing with mine for oxygen, the soft moans filling the space... It's almost enough, but no, we need to see this through.

"We need lube," Luca pants, bucking his hips into mine.

"I have what we need, love," I whisper, moving my kisses to his neck as he drags his fingers through my hair. I flick my wrist to produce the needed element. "Tell me what to do."

Luca's breath rattles. "Use your fingers on me."

"May I look at you?"

"Of course."

I sit back on my heels, gazing down at my gorgeous mate. He spreads his legs as the desire to touch him everywhere

nearly drowns me. Where do I start? His throbbing erection, his tight pink hole, or that mouth that kisses me so deeply I feel it in my soul?

“What’s wrong?” Luca asks.

“Nothing. I’m just overwhelmed with everything I want to do.”

Luca pulls himself up, cupping my face. “Hey. We have eternity. We’ll do it all.”

I nod, stealing another kiss. “Right. This is about completing our bond.”

“Yes. Make me yours, Magnus. Take me.”

His words renew my purpose. I gently push him back and then spread his ass cheeks so I can gaze at his beautiful body. “You are a work of art, Luca.”

He only smiles, encouraging me with his eyes. I slip my fingers inside him, pausing as he hisses, then his brow creases.

“Huh.”

“What?”

“I expected pain, but it’s not that. It’s different.”

“Good or bad?”

“Good. Try another finger.”

I add a third and Luca’s eyes flutter.

“Oh, yes. This is good. The magic must be involved.”

“Perhaps.” I move my fingers back and forth, completely enraptured with the tight heat surrounding them. “My gods, you feel amazing.”

“Wait until it’s your dick.”

I laugh softly. “I might explode.”

“You’re supposed to. I think I’m ready.”

“I don’t want to pull my fingers away.”

“You can put them there whenever you want. We have a whole month for our honeymoon, remember?”

“I do.”

Luca sits up again, wrapping his arms around my neck and kissing me, his body seemingly melting into mine. “I need you inside me,” he whispers against my lips before gripping the base of my cock and guiding it into his entrance.

My breath is held hostage in my throat by the sensation of my cock entering his body. I thought my fingers felt nice, but he was right. This is infinitely better.

As Luca straddles my hips, he begins to grind himself on my erection, arms still hooked around my neck, our gazes locked.

“I love you, Magnus,” he says softly. “You’ve made me so happy.”

Searching his eyes, I simply nod, unable to find my words.

“This feels good, doesn’t it?” Luca questions. “Your cock is huge. I’m so full.”

“Is it...” I swallow hard. “Is it good for you?”

“Better than good. It’s perfect.”

“I only want your pleasure.”

“I know.” He kisses me briefly before leaning back, fucking himself on my cock as I hold his hips. With his back on the bed and his legs wrapped around me, he bucks his hips, getting everything he needs from me.

I guess this is what a power bottom is.

I explore every inch of his body with my hands, pausing at his throbbing erection, jutting out from his body. Slicking my hands, I begin to stroke him, drawing sensual moans from his lips. His hands move to his hair, tangling in the tresses, his heated gaze still on mine as he bites down on his bottom lip.

Sensation, tight and hot, grows deep within me. I try to will it back, even though it’s needed to consummate our bond,

but I don't want this feeling to end. I don't want to pull out of his body. I want to live inside him.

“Luca...”

“I know, baby,” he whispers. “I know it's too much. We won't last long, but it's okay. We'll do it again and again and ag—”

I cut off his words with a kiss as I pull him up and against my chest, attacking his mouth as I move deep within him, assisted by his own ministrations. Mere seconds later, a sound like nothing I've ever heard bursts from somewhere deep inside me, and I let go, releasing inside my mate.

Luca cries out, his own cock spilling between us as he goes lax in my arms. I manage to lay him down while staying inside him. Our bodies seem locked together as we ride out epically long orgasms. My body shakes as tears stream from my eyes, and Luca buries his face in the crook of my neck.

When it finally subsides, we lie in silence, our bodies sweaty and slick, but the pure happiness between us is palpable.

“We did it,” Luca whispers after several minutes. “We bonded.”

“Yes, my love. We did it.” Where there was insecurity before, now there's only satisfaction. I worried I wouldn't be enough for him, but now I know I had nothing to be concerned about. We are everything the other needs and always will be.

“We have to go make an appearance now, right?”

I nod, holding him close to me. “Soon.”

“So weird that they're all out there waiting for us knowing we just banged.”

A surprised laugh escapes me. “It's not like that. It's just a huge celebration. No one is implicitly waiting for us.”

“Oh. I thought it was like a wedding reception where we'd be announced and everyone is just waiting around.”

“I’m sorry. I should have explained it better. My parents tell me the whole town will celebrate with food and drink. We’ll just show up when we do and everyone will greet us as they see us. They’ll give you gifts to welcome you to Sinterborg and honor you as my mate.”

“That sounds nice.” He exhales slowly. “But so does staying in this bed and going another round.”

“I think we can make the time.”

# EPILOGUE

Luca

One year later

“Is everything ready to go?”

“Yes, Sir Luca,” Faugor says. “Sleighs are packed, lists at the ready. Sir Magnus will be so surprised.”

“That’s the idea, Faugor.”

I’ve spent the last several hours dodging my love and keeping him distracted while the elves assisted me in getting the deliveries ready for tonight. The last year has been completely amazing, and Magnus has worked so hard, so I forced him to go spend time with his parents for a few hours before we set off.

Now, with everything ready to go, he can spend the evening doing what he does best—delivering magic around the world.

Turns out, my project management skills have come in handy. I’ve made several process improvements in the areas that don’t rely on magic, and we’re even more efficient than before I got here.

“What is this?”

I twist around at the sound of my love’s booming voice. The look of surprise on his face is well worth the hustle to pull this off.



“Hi, love. It’s my surprise for you. Everything is ready to go with hours to spare before takeoff.”

His eyes soften as he gazes at me. “This is why you forced me to have lunch with my family?”

I laugh softly. “Yes. I just wanted to do something for you. You work so hard all year. The least I could do is get the deliveries ready.”

Magnus wraps his large arms around me, gazing into my eyes. “You spoil me.”

“You deserve it. You give everything to the world, but who gives to you?”

“I need nothing more than what I have. You are the best gift.”

“Well, there’s still something waiting for you at the house.”

He tilts his head, but his face lights up. “Let’s go see.”

We practically run up the hill to our home, Magnus bursting in the door and rushing to the tree in the living room, but finding nothing there. We decided that giving each other material gifts was unnecessary and we would instead spend the holiday making our own traditions. He turns to me with a confused expression, finding me holding a piece of mistletoe above my head.

His smile grows. “A kiss.”

I nod. “That’s right. A kiss for Santa. Even though we’ve shared a lot of kisses, and we’ll have many more, I couldn’t think of a better way to kick off Christmas Eve than a steamy make-out session.”

“Oh, my darling Luca, you do know the way to my heart, don’t you?”

“Memorized it.”

Magnus slinks toward me, pulling me into his arms, and as his lips close in on mine, he whispers, “Merry Christmas, my love.”

“Merry Christmas, Santa.”



I HOPE you enjoyed Magnus and Luca’s magical love story. If you did, please consider a [review on Amazon](#) to help other readers find it.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mia is a USA Today Bestselling author of queer paranormal and contemporary romance. She's obsessed with vampires, mermaids, and tattoos, all of which make regular appearances in her books. She's fluent in sarcasm, addicted to caffeine, and easily amused by memes. She may or may not be a witch.

Her books are low to mid-angst, high heat, and celebrate the many ways people of all types can fall in love- even the paranormal kind. After all, love is love.



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