
TANGLED
IN HIS
BRANCHES
MORGAN LYSAND
Monsters and Mistletoe

TANGLED IN HIS BRANCHES

MM MONSTERS & MISTLETOE

MORGAN LYSAND

OceanofPDF.com

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CHAPTER ONE

ROWAN

FIVE YEARS AGO

Something's wrong with Grandmother Oak, and no matter how much energy I give her, she refuses to tell me what it is.

"Come on," I mutter, pushing my fingers deeper into the soil around her roots. "You know I can't help if you won't tell me what's bothering you."

Her branches rustle overhead, and a single leaf drifts down to land on my shoulder. I narrow my eyes at it. She's been doing that all morning, brushing off my questions and pretending everything is fine. But I know better. She's one of the oldest trees in Mother's forest, and she's been looking after me since I was a seedling. I know when something's bothering her.

"Is it your roots again? Because I can fix that." I send another little burst of energy into the soil, but she only gives a low creak in response. "You're being awfully difficult today."

"Rowan. My sweet baby sapling. We need to talk."

I look over my shoulder at Mother, who's standing a few feet away. She's tall, easily twice my height, with thick bark covering her body and branches stretching from her shoulders. Her hair is a mass of green leaves, and the vines winding around her arms shift whenever she moves. She's beautiful, although she's nowhere near as tall as the ancient oaks surrounding us.

I pull my fingers out of the dirt and stand, brushing the soil from my hands. "Is something wrong with Grandmother? She won't tell me what's bothering her."

Mother glances at the old oak, whose branches suddenly go very still.

“Grandmother is fine, sweetheart. There’s something else we need to discuss.”

I look between them. They’re both acting strange, and I’m beginning to suspect they’ve been talking about something without me. “Okay. What about?”

Mother settles a hand on my shoulder. “It’s time for you to find your own forest.”

My heart speeds in my chest, making an audible knock, knock, knock. At least it’s loud to me. “What?”

“You’re twenty. It’s time.”

“But—”

“Sweetheart, you’re the only one left. You must be lonely helping me tend my forest. You need one of your own. Spread your seed. Make your own saplings.”

I throw my head back. “Don’t say things like that. Spread your seed means something different to the humans.”

She cocks a stiff brow. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure?” Not that I go out among humans often. Mother says it’s better that they don’t know creatures like us exist. I don’t understand why, but I’ve never had much reason to question her. Everything I need is right here.

I’m a wood nymph, or dryad. We go by both names. And contrary to popular belief, we can be any gender, not just female. Although I’m not sure how many humans actually believe in us anymore. I don’t exactly look human up close. My skin has the texture of young bark, smooth in some places and rough in others, and my hair is moss green. Sometimes I sprout actual leaves. They change with the seasons, which is one of my favorite things about myself. It’s hard to explain those things away. Oh, and I have antlers. From a distance, I can *sometimes* pass for human, provided no one looks too closely. Mother says there are ways to disguise ourselves if we need to, but I’ve never bothered learning them. Why would I?

Mother sighs. “I just think it’ll be good for you to get out and explore the world. You’ve been with me all your life. I want you to have experiences. I want you to have your own forest.”

I look around and take everyone in. “But I already have a forest.”

“You help me tend mine.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that these trees were calling to me long before you were born. Somewhere out there, there’s a forest waiting for you.”

I glance around us. The huge southern live oaks dapple the forest floor with sunlight streaming through their leaves. Moss hangs from their branches, and the air smells like damp earth and growing things. I know every tree here. I know which ones like the morning sun, which ones complain when the rain doesn’t come often enough, and which ones enjoy having their roots scratched. I can’t imagine leaving.

“What about Grandmother Oak? She’s been having trouble with her roots again. And the little maple near the creek still needs help growing straight. If I leave, who’s going to take care of them?”

“I am.”

“But you already have so much to do.”

Mother gives me a patient look. “I tended this forest long before you came along, sapling. I think I can manage.”

“I know, but I don’t know how to live anywhere else.” I gesture vaguely toward the edge of the trees. “What am I supposed to do if I run into humans? I don’t know their rules. I don’t even know where I’m going.”

“You’ll learn.” She squeezes my shoulder. “I know it’s terrifying, but believe me, I’m holding you back. It’s time for you to uproot yourself and find your true forest.”

“But how will I know when I’ve found it?”

“You’ll know.”

“But *how*?”

She places a hand on the center of my chest. “You’ll feel it here. They’ll sing to you. You’ll *know*.”

I press my hand over hers. “What if they don’t?”

“Then you keep looking.”

I sigh. “You make it sound *so* easy.”

“Finding your forest isn’t always easy, sweetheart. But it’s worth it.”

Part of me wants to argue until she changes her mind, but another part is curious about what might be waiting beyond the trees. I’ve always wondered what the rest of the world looks like. I just never expected to see it alone.

I nod, although my stomach feels funny. “I’ll leave tomorrow morning. Let me say my goodbyes today.”

“That’s perfectly acceptable.” She scrubs a hand through my hair, making it sound like rustling leaves. “I love you so much, my sapling.”

I wrap my arms around her. She’s so thick I can’t touch my hands together behind her, but it doesn’t matter. Her rough bark hands cup my cheeks. “You’re going to do so well. I know it.”

Sap runs from my eyes and makes my cheeks sticky when I rub it away.

“Cheer up, my love. You’re getting ready to have the adventure of a lifetime.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I spend the rest of the day saying goodbye. The willow near the creek is upset, and I spend nearly an hour reassuring her that Mother will still come by to keep her company. The little maple doesn’t seem to understand. His leaves flutter excitedly when I tell him I’m going on an adventure. “You’re supposed to be sad,” I inform him. He shakes harder. “Fine. Be excited. See if I care.”

By the time I reach Grandmother Oak, the sun is starting to sink behind the trees. I settle against her enormous trunk and press my palm to the bark. “You knew, didn’t you? That’s why you’ve been acting strange all day.”

Her branches rustle.

“You could’ve warned me.”

A low creak travels through her trunk, and one of her branches dips until the leaves brush the top of my head. I lean against her and sigh. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Grandmother. What if the trees I find don’t like me?”

She sends a slow pulse of energy through the earth, carrying a memory of a much smaller version of myself curled between her roots. I’d been upset because a squirrel stole something shiny I’d found near the creek, and Grandmother dropped an acorn into my lap to make me feel better.

“I still have that acorn, you know. I was going to take it with me.”

She gives a sharp shake, dropping another acorn into my lap. I pick it up and laugh. “You want me to take this one, too?”

Her leaves rustle, and I tuck the acorn into my pouch. “Okay. I’ll take both.”

I stay with her until the last of the sunlight disappears. When I finally stand, I press both hands against her bark and send her one more pulse of energy. “I’ll come back and visit. I promise.” She wraps a thin root around my ankle for a moment before letting go.

That night, I root myself into the earth beneath my favorite oak. My skin thickens, as it does every night, and my leaves join the chorus of the forest. I listen to the familiar voices surrounding me, trying to memorize every one.

In the morning, I find Mother tending to Grandmother Oak. Silently, I settle beside her and sink my fingers into the soil to help.

"Good morning, my sapling." Mother wraps me in a thin branch and hugs me close. "I know I said you need to find your own forest, but I'm sad to see you go."

"I can stay."

Grandmother Oak shakes, raining leaves on both of us.

I look up. "You're supposed to be on my side."

Mother laughs. "She's spoken. She thinks you need to find your own way, too."

"Everyone seems very eager to get rid of me."

"Rowan." She cups my cheek. "You're my most talented sapling of this century. Follow your heart, and it'll lead you where you need to go."

I nod. I'll believe it when I see it.

We sit together for a while longer before Mother finally says it's time. I hug her as tightly as I can and promise to visit before turning toward the edge of the trees. I make it about ten steps before looking back. Mother is still standing beside Grandmother Oak, watching me. She raises one hand, and Grandmother's branches sway above her.

I wave, then turn around and keep walking. If I look back again, I might never leave.

❄

For days, I walk. And walk. And walk. *And walk. So much* walking. Mother neglected to mention how much walking there would be. I travel through forests that don't know my name, across fields where the grass reaches my waist, and along streams that lead nowhere useful. At least, nowhere useful to me.

The first night is the worst. I find a quiet patch of woods and sink my roots into the earth, expecting the familiar comfort of Mother's forest. Instead, the trees are strangers. They're friendly enough, but their voices are

unfamiliar, and one nosy pine wants to know why I'm traveling alone. "Because I'm an adult now," I tell him. He doesn't seem impressed. Neither am I.

By the fourth day, I'm beginning to wonder whether Mother was wrong. I've passed through several forests, but none of them feel right. Maybe there isn't a forest waiting for me. Maybe I'll spend the rest of my life wandering around, trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do.

I stop beside a stream and pull Grandmother's acorn from my pouch. "You could've given me directions," I tell it. The acorn doesn't answer. Of course it doesn't.

The following morning, something changes.

I'm crossing an open stretch of land when the breeze carries the scent of pine. And fir. And spruce. A faint song hangs in the air, low and melodic. Just a hint of something I remember from my seedling years, when Mother would hum to me while I rested among her roots.

I turn toward the sound, but it fades. "No, no, no. Come back." I take a few steps to the left. Nothing. I try the other direction, and there it is again. A tiny chorus of voices, so faint I can barely make them out.

My heart pounds. *Could this be it?*

I start walking faster, following the sound across the field. The singing grows louder, and I realize the voices are young. Really young. One is complaining about the wind, another wants more water, and a third is trying to convince the others that its branches are the tallest.

I laugh. "Oh, you're all babies."

I hurry toward the sound and crest a hill, stopping so suddenly I nearly tumble down the other side. Below me, row upon row of pines, firs, and spruces fill a wide stretch of land. They're planted in neat lines, with clear paths running between them. The soil is dark and freshly worked, and most of the trees are barely taller than I am.

I've never seen a forest arranged like this. Trees don't usually grow in such perfect rows. These have been planted deliberately. By humans.

There's a building in the distance and a narrow dirt road leading toward the trees, but I don't see anyone. The singing continues, drawing me down the hill until I reach the first row of saplings.

"Oh, sweet babies."

Immediately, the trees begin calling to me. Some are happy, others are nervous, and a few are lonely, calling out to their neighbors even though

their roots haven’t grown far enough to touch. I kneel beside a little spruce and press my fingers into the soil. Its roots are healthy, although it’s still getting used to being planted here. I send it a little energy, and its branches perk up.

“There you go.”

The pine beside it rustles impatiently. “I see you. Give me a minute.”

I move from tree to tree, giving each one a little attention, but the longer I wander through the rows, the more I notice something interesting. Someone has already been taking care of them. The soil around their roots has been carefully worked, and there’s mulch around each trunk. Several trees have wooden stakes beside them to help them grow straight.

I stop beside a young fir whose branches are tied loosely to a support. Whoever did this made sure there was enough room for the tree to move and grow without damaging its bark. That’s good. Very good.

Whoever planted these trees wants them to thrive. I like that. I just don’t understand why anyone would plant hundreds of them in such neat rows. Perhaps the human who owns this land simply loves trees. I can understand that.

I move farther into the little forest, listening to the voices around me. These saplings have someone looking after their physical needs, but they don’t have anyone who can hear them. They’ve been singing to one another, waiting for their roots to grow close enough to share more than a few faint whispers.

And somehow, they’ve been calling to me.

I press my palm against my chest. The feeling Mother described is there, warm and steady beneath my bark. *You’ll feel it here.*

I close my eyes and listen. Hundreds of little voices reach for me, and the earth beneath my feet welcomes my roots. There’s room for me here. I open my eyes and look around.

“Is this really it?”

The little spruce beside me shakes so hard that several needles fall onto my shoulder. I laugh. “I guess that’s a yes.”

Everywhere I look, there are babies. *My* babies. Sap fills my eyes, and I lift my arms and begin to sing. It’s an old song Mother taught me when I was barely more than a seedling myself. The words spill out as I dance between the rows, touching branches and brushing my fingers over their

needles. The saplings join in, their little voices growing stronger with every note.

I have to wonder if this is how parents feel when they hold their babies for the first time. I can't imagine how I lived without my forest. Even though I've only been here a short while, I already know in my heart that these are *my* trees.

I glance toward the distant building again. Whoever owns this land clearly cares about them, and I hope they keep doing whatever they've been doing. But now the saplings have me, too, and I'll do anything to make sure they're protected.

I settle between two rows and push my fingers into the earth, letting my roots reach toward the nearest saplings. Their voices rise around me, welcoming me into their little forest.

I smile. "Hello, babies. I'm Rowan."

The branches rustle overhead.

"I'm home."

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CHAPTER TWO

ROWAN

PRESENT DAY

Mornings are my favorite time of day. The forest is waking up, the birds are singing, and the sunlight is beginning to warm the earth. I spent the night with my roots buried beneath my favorite eastern white pine, and I'm feeling refreshed. She's one of the oldest trees here, and her roots reach deep enough that I can feel the steady movement of water through the soil when I rest beside her.

I visit each section of the forest every morning, checking on my babies and making sure everyone has what they need. Some are perfectly content to grow without much interference. Others require more attention. Clyde, for example, worries about everything. A few weeks ago, he was convinced a family of rabbits digging near his roots would cause him to fall over. It took nearly an hour to convince him otherwise.

I stop beside a young spruce and press my palm against his trunk. He's been struggling with a patch of stubborn soil, and I've been working on loosening it for him. His roots greet mine eagerly when I reach beneath the earth.

"Good morning, sweetling. How are we feeling today?"

"Much better!"

"Wonderful." I give his trunk a little pat. "Keep stretching those roots. There's plenty of room for you."

He hums happily, and I continue my rounds.

Sometimes, I miss my mother's forest. I miss my siblings and the way our roots would tangle together beneath the earth while we slept. I miss the enormous trees that watched me grow from a sapling into the wood nymph I am today. But this forest is mine. I've nurtured it, and I know every tree

growing here. Their happiness is my happiness, and I wouldn't trade them for anything.

By the time I finish visiting the western field, the sun has climbed higher, and the familiar rumble of the growling monster reaches me through the trees.

He's here.

I straighten immediately and brush a few stray leaves from my arms. Then I stop and frown at myself. Why am I bothering? It's not like he's going to see me. At least, he shouldn't.

I hurry toward the edge of the field and duck behind a rather bushy blue spruce. I have to thread my arms through the branches to make the tiniest opening to see through. Of course, it'd be much easier to simply look around the tree, but when do I ever do things the easy way?

The man who's been coming here every weekend for the last five years is back. I still don't know his name, despite all the time I've spent watching him. He seems okay, but I still don't trust him completely.

I quite like the way he looks, though.

He's muscular and tall, although I don't think he's as tall as I am. My mother grew *very* tall children. He also has long, pretty brown hair that makes me wonder whether it's as soft as it looks. His skin always has a golden tan, even in winter.

He pulls his hair into a ponytail, then rolls up the sleeves of his red flannel shirt. I bite back a whimper. His forearms are very attractive. They're nice and thick, like young trees. I swallow and look away before I embarrass myself further.

I still haven't figured out what to make of this man. He comes here almost every weekend, sometimes alone and sometimes with another man who looks enough like him that I'm pretty sure they're brothers. He walks through the fields, checks the trees, and spends hours doing things I don't entirely understand. He's rather peculiar.

He talks to my babies, which I appreciate. Most humans don't bother speaking to trees unless they're complaining about leaves falling on their lawns. This man greets them when he arrives and occasionally apologizes when he accidentally snaps a small branch. Once, he spent several minutes trying to straighten a young fir that had begun leaning to one side.

I could have fixed it in seconds, but he looked so pleased with himself when he finished that I didn't have the heart to interfere.

He also sings. *Badly.*

I don’t know most of the songs, but he seems to enjoy them. Sometimes he makes up words when he forgets the real ones, and I’ve caught myself humming along more than once. It’s rather irritating how much I look forward to his visits.

I always hide when he shows up, though. He can’t know I’m here.

Frisk, the squirrel, races up my arm and settles on my shoulder. His little mouth is so close to my ear that his whiskers tickle my cheek. His gray tail swishes against my neck.

“Squeak. Squeak. Squeak squeak. Squeak.”

“Ah.” I nod. “So the brother’s here, too.”

“Squeak.”

That one isn’t bad looking either, but I prefer the man who’s always here. He gets my branches swaying.

“Squeak. Squeak. Squeak squeak squeak squeak. Squeak!” Frisk throws his little hands into the air.

“No, he didn’t!” I gasp appropriately at his story about the rabbit who crossed his path on the way back to me.

It’s late summer, and there are so many sweet baby bunnies hopping around. Frisk has developed a particular interest in one of the lady squirrels, although his attempts to impress her haven’t been going well.

“Squeak. Squeak squeak.” Frisk sighs, and his little shoulders hunch.

I hold in a snort the best I can. “Well, you can’t expect her to just know you’re interested.”

He swishes his tail.

“I know. I know. It’s a very nice tail, but you have to talk to her.” I pat his little head.

Frisk nods and chitters before racing down my back and disappearing into the grass.

Perhaps I should take my own advice and talk to the long-haired man.

But *no*.

He’s human, and while I generally have no problems with humans, I’m still not entirely comfortable speaking their languages. They’re nowhere near as melodic as the languages of the forest. My tongue doesn’t always like wrapping around the words the way it should, although I’ve gotten much better at it I think

I do enjoy listening to humans talk, though.

There’s also the problem of clothing.

It’s rather difficult to find anything that accommodates my height, especially when one doesn’t have this thing called money. The forest barters or gives gifts. Humans seem attached to exchanging little pieces of paper for everything.

I peek through the spruce branches again.

The long-haired man laughs at something his brother said. His head tips back, and his smile makes my stomach do something funny.

I wonder what it would be like to make him laugh.

“Rowan! He’s doing something to my soil! I don’t know what it is. Is he poisoning me?” The frightened voice travels through the roots beneath my feet, and I straighten immediately.

Clyde.

He’s a beautiful Fraser fir in the western field, and he worries more than any other tree in my care. The fear in his voice is enough to send my heart pounding. So help me if someone is poisoning my baby!

I drop to my hands and feet, bringing myself closer to the earth, and race toward him. Running on all fours is much faster when I’m in a hurry, especially when I can use my roots to guide me around obstacles.

I reach the western field and duck behind a large Norway spruce.

There’s a man kneeling beside Clyde, poking something into the soil near his roots. I haven’t seen this human before. He’s carrying a strange little case full of tools, and every so often he removes a bit of dirt and examines it. So far, he hasn’t done anything harmful, but there’s always a chance. Especially with humans.

I press my hand against the grass and send soothing waves through the earth toward Clyde. *“I’m here, sweetling.”*

“I’m scared.”

“Shhhh. Everything is going to be okay.”

The unknown man hums to himself and examines another sample of soil before calling out, “Eli!”

The man I’ve been ogling strolls over. Eli. His name’s Eli. That’s a lovely name.

“Yeah?” Eli asks. “Anything we need to worry about?”

“Nah. These are some of the healthiest trees I’ve ever seen.”

I preen a little from my hiding place.

“Did you hear that, Clyde? He said you’re healthy.”

“What is he doing to my soil?”

I send thin tendrils of my roots through the earth and taste the soil around Clyde. Nothing feels unusual. There’s no poison, and the man hasn’t added anything that could hurt Clyde.

“Nothing harmful, sweetling. I think he’s testing it to make sure you’re healthy.”

“Are you certain?”

“Very certain.”

Clyde lets out a relieved breath. Yes, trees breathe. Perhaps not the same way animals do, but they have their own way of moving air through their bodies. His branches rustle even though there’s hardly any wind.

“Thank you, Rowan. I was so scared.”

“I know, my love. But you’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you, okay?”

His branches settle, and a soft hum travels through his roots.

“Rest for now, my sweet Clyde.”

I let out a sigh and withdraw my roots from the soil.

He’s safe. All of my babies are safe.

Eli crouches beside Clyde and runs a hand along his trunk.

“Looking good, buddy,” he murmurs.

My heart gives another funny little flutter.

He’s always doing things like that. Touching the trees gently, checking their branches, making sure they have enough water. He even brings buckets out when the weather gets too dry, although I usually make sure their roots can reach what they need long before he arrives. I suppose I should give him some credit for trying.

Eli stands and brushes the dirt from his hands. “So, what do you think? Will they be ready for Christmas?”

The stranger looks around the field before nodding. “I don’t know how you managed to get them ready so quickly, but everything looks good. You should be ready for business come winter.”

My heart drops to my toes. Business? Chris-mas? What in the world is Chris-mas? And what does it have to do with my trees?

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CHAPTER THREE
ELI

My brother Jordan grins over at me. “You did it. I don’t know how you managed it, but you did it.” He smacks me on the back hard enough to make me stumble. “Gramma and Gramps would be proud.”

“I didn’t do it alone. You and Henry helped.” I wave toward Henry, who’s standing a few feet away inspecting one of the trees. “I don’t know that I could have done it without your support.”

Henry waves me away as he joins us. “Pshh, I barely did anything. Just told you where to find information. Besides, I was happy to help.”

“Your research saved me at least two years of figuring things out on my own.”

“Then I guess you owe me a Christmas tree.”

“You can have anyone of them you want once we’re ready.”

Henry laughs and adjusts the ball cap on his head. He’s been helping me since I first decided to turn my grandparents’ old forgotten property into a Christmas tree farm. I knew plenty about growing things, thanks to Gramps, but keeping trees alive through multiple holiday seasons while families took them home and brought them back was an entirely different challenge. Henry had spent thirty years working in forestry before retiring, and he’d been more than happy to answer my endless questions.

I look around at the rows of trees stretching across the property and breathe in the familiar scent. Pine, spruce, fir. All the best kinds of trees for the holiday season, and every single one of them is still growing right where I planted it.

Five years.

That’s how long I’ve been working toward this moment. Planting saplings, hauling water, checking soil conditions, and worrying over every tree that looked less healthy than I think it should. I’ve spent more nights than I care to admit reading about root systems and transplanting techniques. And now I finally get to share them with people.

I walk over to the nearest spruce and brush my fingers across its needles. This particular tree was one of the first I planted, and it’s grown beautifully. By Christmas, it’ll be ready for a family to take home, decorate, and enjoy before bringing it back to spend another year growing on the farm.

Families can return year after year and visit the same tree, watching it grow alongside their children. When it eventually gets too big to comfortably move, they can choose somewhere permanent to plant it. Gramps would have loved this idea.

“When do the goats get here?” Jordan asks.

“Three days. I’ve already named some of them.”

“Of course, you have. How’s the pumpkin patch?”

“Growing well. I’ve got promotions starting in September, and the hayride wagon’s almost finished.”

“Finally,” Jordan says, earning himself an eye roll.

I grin and start walking toward the pumpkin patch, with Jordan and Henry following behind me. The vines have spread farther than I expected, and several pumpkins are already growing beneath the enormous leaves. By October, the whole field should be covered in orange.

I can already picture families wandering between the rows, searching for the perfect pumpkin. There’ll be hayrides around the property, hot cider from the bakery, and enough opportunities for pictures that people will hopefully start making this place part of their yearly traditions.

Grams always said the best memories came from the little things people did together.

I’m counting on her being right.

Henry pulls the ball cap from his head and wipes the sweat from his brow. “When do you plan on opening?”

“Soft opening mid-September. Hopefully, we’ll be fully operational by the end of September. That gives us time to work out any problems before the pumpkin season really gets going.” Plus gives me time to get the feel for things before it’s tree season.

Jordan shakes his head. “You’re going to take over the town. Everyone’s already so excited. They’ve been begging for you to open for years.”

“The trees had to grow up,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but you could’ve opened the other stuff sooner.”

“I didn’t know I wanted to have a bakery and goats and pumpkins until this year.”

“And when you decide, you always go big.” Jordan clamps a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “I’m so damn proud of you.”

“I’m proud of myself.” I pat his hand before squirming out of his hold when he lunges at me for a hug. “Don’t get all emotional on me. What about some lunch? My treat.”

“Now you’re speaking my language.”

Henry shakes his head. “I’d love to, but I have to head out. My wife’s expecting me home.”

“Tell her I said hello. And thanks again for coming out.”

“Anytime, Eli. I want to see this place succeed as much as you do.”

Henry heads toward his truck, and I take another look around the property. The pumpkin patch sits beyond the tree fields, while the old barn has been converted into a shelter for the goats. There’s a fenced pasture beside it, complete with climbing platforms Jordan helped me build last weekend.

The store sits closer to the road, where customers will be able to park before exploring the farm. I’ve spent the last six months renovating the building, and there isn’t much left to finish.

“Come on,” I tell Jordan. “I want to show you what I’ve done inside.”

From the corner of my vision, I catch something running through the trees.

I turn toward the movement. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Jordan quirks a brow at me.

A blur darts between two spruces before disappearing deeper into the forest.

“That!”

Jordan follows my gaze. “I don’t see anything.”

“Something just ran between those trees.”

“Probably a deer.”

I roll my eyes, but I keep watching the trees for another few seconds. Whatever it was, it’s gone now.

“Okay, maybe I imagined it.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

I shove him with my shoulder and head toward the store. Still, the feeling that someone’s watching me follows us all the way up the path. I’ve had that feeling before, especially when I’m working near the woods. It’s never bothered me enough to investigate, but today it’s noticeable.

Who would be watching us, though? The trees? That’s kind of silly.

“Did you hear anything I just said?” Jordan asks when I shove the key into the door.

“Sorry, no. I was wondering if the trees were watching us.”

He stares at me.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing. Just wondering whether you’ve finally spent too much time out here alone.”

“I have plenty of company.”

“Your trees don’t count.”

“That’s hurtful. I’ll make sure they know you said that.”

“Please do.”

I unlock the shop door and push it open. The little bell above us jingles, and I grin. I installed it yesterday, and I don’t think that sound will ever get old.

The shop is still a little rough around the edges. The walls are painted, the counters are installed, and most of the electrical work is finished. I’ve got a few more things to do before I can start moving in the displays and merchandise.

But, I already know exactly how I want it to look.

The front windows will have seasonal decorations, starting with pumpkins and scarecrows for autumn. Once November rolls around, I’ll replace everything with Christmas displays. I’m thinking garlands around the windows, wreaths on the doors, and a big Christmas tree right in the middle of the shop. Maybe two. There’s definitely room for two.

Jordan hops up onto the counter and looks around. “This place is going to look amazing once you get it all figured out.”

“It’s going to look amazing at Christmas.”

“Of course it is. You’d decorate the bathroom if you thought you could get away with it.”

“I already bought Christmas-themed soap dispensers.”

He groans. “Why am I not surprised?”

I ignore him and walk toward the bakery counter. The equipment is supposed to arrive next week, and I can hardly wait. I’ve already hired someone to handle the baking because, despite Grams spending years trying to teach me, I’m hopeless when it comes to making anything more complicated than cookies and basic pasta.

I can picture the display cases filled with gingerbread cookies, cinnamon rolls, and little Christmas cakes. The whole shop will smell like sugar and spices, and people can grab something warm to drink before heading outside to pick out their trees.

There’ll be tables near the windows, too. Somewhere parents can sit while their kids eat cookies and argue about which tree they want.

I want people to spend an entire afternoon here without running out of things to do.

“Remember how Grams used to make those enormous batches of sugar cookies?” I ask.

Jordan smiles. “The ones she’d let us decorate?”

“Yeah. And every single year you’d use so much frosting that nobody wanted to eat yours.”

“Excuse you. My cookies were masterpieces.”

“They were mostly frosting.”

“Which is the best part of a cookie.”

I laugh and lean against the bakery counter. Grams used to spend days preparing for Christmas, and the entire house would smell like cookies and cinnamon. She’d put Christmas music on the old radio in the kitchen and make us help decorate while Gramps pretended he had important work to do outside.

He always came back in when the cookies were ready.

Every Christmas Eve, we’d sit around their living room drinking hot chocolate while Gramps told us stories about Christmases when he was a kid. Grams would make us each open one present before bed, even as we got older. I haven’t had a Christmas like that since they died.

I glance toward the back wall, where I’ve already picked out a spot for Grams’ old wooden Christmas village. It’s been packed away in my house for years, but I finally have somewhere to display it properly. She collected the little buildings throughout her life, and every December, she’d arrange them across the mantel with cotton batting for snow.

I want to put them on a shelf behind the counter, where everyone can enjoy them.

“You really think Grams would’ve loved this?” I ask.

Jordan slides off the counter. “Of course, she would have. She’d be here every day, telling you what you’re doing wrong and sneaking cookies from the bakery.”

I chuckle. “She would.”

“And Gramps would be outside giving unsolicited advice about the trees. He’d have a clipboard.”x

I laugh harder because he’s right. Gramps was never one to do anything halfway.

“I just wish they could see it,” I admit.

Jordan comes to stand beside me, looking around the unfinished shop. “They knew what you wanted to do with this place. You talked about it enough before they passed. Gramps would’ve been out there helping you plant every single tree, and Grams would’ve claimed the bakery before you even finished building the counter.”

He’s probably right, and I grin. Grams and Gramps always told us to follow our dreams and this has been mine for so long.

“We gotta name one of the goats after Grams,” Jordan adds.

“Obviously.” I roll my eyes. “But someone else will have to milk her because it’d be too weird to milk the goat named after our grandma.”

Jordan snorts. “You’re the one who decided to get goats.”

I laugh and throw my arms out, turning slowly in the middle of the shop. “Seriously, though. Look at this place. Not too long ago it was an empty building with a leaking roof, and now it’s going to be a little market and a bakery. We’ve got the trees, the pumpkin patch, and the goats coming. It’s finally all happening.”

Jordan watches me for a moment before smiling. “She’d be so proud of you.”

“Of us,” I correct him.

He rolls his eyes.

“I’m not joking. You’ve put just as much work into this place as I have.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve done most of the work.”

“And you’ve spent how many weekends over here fixing things when you could’ve been doing literally anything else?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Besides, I wouldn’t have half this stuff built without you. I can grow trees, but you’re the one who knows how to make sure the buildings don’t fall down.”

Jordan’s been working in construction for years, and he’s the first person I call whenever something breaks or I come up with another project. Between his regular jobs and helping me renovate the farm, I’m surprised he has any free time left.

He moved to Briarport last year after I spent years convincing him he’d like it here. Now, he’s got his own little house closer to town. He even has a dog who thinks he’s royalty.

I turn on my heel and grab my jacket from the back room. When I return, Jordan’s staring at the floor.

“Okay,” he says, looking up. “I think you’re right. And before I get sappy, you owe me food.”

“That’s the plan.”

I lock up again, and we head toward my truck.

“There!” I stop beside the driver’s door and point toward the treeline. “Did you see it?”

Jordan squints. “Nope.”

“Something just ran past again.”

“Sure you’re not seeing things? It *is* a woods. Creatures live in places like that, you know. And Briarport has always been a little weird.”

“Briarport isn’t that weird.”

“Weird enough. I’m still wondering how you convinced me to move out here, too.”

“Don’t act like you don’t love the place now that you’re here.”

“Fine. Fine. I love it. I hate that it took me so long to be convinced. Max loves it too. He chases after the seagulls every morning.”

Wanna know who Max is named after? The dog in *The Little Mermaid*. It’s Jordan’s favorite Disney movie, and when we were kids he said he’d find a mermaid.

I climb into the truck and start the engine while he settles into the passenger seat. I reach for my seat belt, but movement catches my attention through the windshield. The blur rushes past again, closer this time. And whatever it is, it’s definitely not a deer.

“There!” I point toward the trees. “Did you see it?”

Jordan twists around in his seat. “See what?”

“Oh, come on!”

The blur disappears behind another row of spruces, and I make a decision. I’m going to figure out what’s been hanging around my trees. I throw my truck into gear before Jordan’s even buckled in. “What the hell?” He flails while I gun the gas to chase the blur.

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CHAPTER FOUR
ROWAN

Oh no, oh no, oh no. They've seen me! The big metal monster barreling toward me is a pretty good indication. I scramble out of sight and duck behind Beatrice, pressing myself against her trunk.

"What's going on, Rowan?" she whispers.

I peek around her. "They've spotted me!"

Her branches shake with laughter. *"You aren't exactly subtle when they show up."*

I sink a little farther into the soil. "What do you mean? I always hide."

"Not very well, dear one."

A few of my other babies giggle, their branches shaking in agreement. Traitors. Every last one of them.

"I know I saw something!" Eli calls as he runs toward the tree line. "Come out, come out, whoever you are! I'm not mad! I just want to know —oof!"

He trips over a root and nearly lands on his face. I peek around Beatrice just in time to catch him pushing himself upright and dusting off his bottom. His very shapely bottom. Maybe I should spend more time watching him from behind.

"Come on, I'm starving. There's no one here," his brother calls.

"I don't bite!" Eli shouts.

"Yes, he does!" his brother yells in a singsong voice.

Beatrice shimmies, sending a shower of needles onto my head.

"Shhh! Stop that!" I hiss.

"Do you see that?" Eli asks. He races toward us, and I sink deeper into the soil. By the time he reaches Beatrice, I'm buried up to my antlers. I pull

those down too, curling into a tight ball beneath her roots. I just wanted to get a better look at him. Was that really so much to ask?

“Where’d you go?” Eli mutters overhead.

His footsteps circle Beatrice. Once. Twice. He stops so close that I can feel the pressure of his boots through the soil. Something scrapes against the ground above me. Eli must be crouching because his voice comes from much closer when he speaks again.

“Probably an animal,” his brother calls from somewhere behind him.

“An animal with antlers would be too big to hide.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. He saw my antlers? How much of me did he see?

Eli walks around Beatrice again, and I hold perfectly still. One of his boots lands directly above my shoulder, pressing the soil against me. I don’t dare move, even when a worm decides my neck is the best place to explore.

“Hello?” Eli calls. “Seriously, I’m not going to hurt you.”

He’s never done anything to hurt my forest, and I’ve watched him carefully enough to know he takes good care of my babies. Still, meeting him means explaining what I am and why I’ve been living in his woods. No, *my* woods. But what if he tells me to leave?

“Come on, Eli!” his brother shouts. “I’m going to eat without you!”

“Fine!” Eli answers. “But I know I saw something.” His footsteps finally retreat.

“He’ll find you eventually,” Beatrice says.

“I’ve stayed hidden for this long. I can do it forever.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.” She strokes my cheek with one of her roots.

Who’s supposed to comfort whom? I’m her guardian, for goodness’ sake.

Maybe she’s right, though. Maybe I should introduce myself to Eli. I could explain that I’ve been caring for the forest and promise to stay out of his way. He might even let me keep living here.

But that’s a conversation for another day. Preferably one very far away.

There’s a metallic slam, followed by the familiar roar of the giant beast. I remain buried until its growl fades into the distance, then slowly push myself out of the soil.

Beatrice chuckles and brushes the dirt from my hair with a low-hanging branch. I give her trunk an affectionate pat before stepping away. My babies

are still giggling, but I ignore them. They can entertain themselves for a little while because I'm doing some exploring.

Everyone who comes here is always covered up, even when it's warm outside. I don't understand it. I'm perfectly comfortable naked no matter the weather. Clothes would only get in the way when I need to sink into the ground.

With no one around, I race toward the building Eli spends so much time working on. There's a fence around one side, and I remember hearing him talk about putting goats there. I've never met a goat before. I wonder if they'll be friendly.

And what's a bakery? Eli mentioned that too, but I haven't figured out what it means.

I tiptoe around the building and discover another field out back. It's nowhere near the size of my forest, but the pumpkin patch takes up quite a bit of room.

The pumpkins are strange little things. Some are round. Others are lumpy. A few hide beneath their leaves. Their vines spread across the dirt, tangling together in every direction. I glance around to make sure Eli hasn't returned before hurrying into the patch.

"Hello, little ones."

Their leaves rustle. I stop walking. That wasn't the wind. I know the difference between wind and a plant trying to communicate. Trees have been talking to me my entire life, but I've never listened to a pumpkin before.

I crouch beside one of the larger vines and rest my palm against its leaves. The plant is perfectly healthy, with strong roots and plenty of room to grow. I send it a little of my energy, anyway. There's no harm in helping it along.

A faint whisper brushes against my senses.

"Is that you?"

The leaves tremble again, and I grin. I move to the next vine, then another, checking their roots and giving each one a little attention. Their voices are much quieter than my trees', and I have to concentrate to make out anything at all.

I drop to my knees and press my ear against the soil. The whispers become a gentle song, flowing through the roots beneath me. It's different from anything I've ever heard. My trees have deep voices, filled with

memories of seasons long past. The pumpkins are younger, but they have their own stories to tell.

They're growing. Reaching. Drinking in the sunshine and waiting for whatever comes next. I close my eyes and listen.

I never thought about all the other plants growing beyond the borders of the trees I've claimed. Eli's been looking after these pumpkins while I've been busy with my trees. They've had someone to care for them all along.

"Perhaps I'll adopt you too," I whisper.

A vine curls against my ankle.

I laugh. "Or maybe you've already adopted me."

I settle at the edge of the patch, resting my head on my folded arms. My beautiful forest hums in the distance, and the woodland critters go about their business. Beneath me, the pumpkins continue their quiet song.

I think I'll visit them again tomorrow. Maybe I'll even explore the rest of Eli's farm. There could be all sorts of plants waiting to meet me.

For now, though, the sunshine is warm, and the soil feels wonderful against my skin. My eyelids grow heavy as I let myself sink into the earth.

A little nap won't hurt anything.

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CHAPTER FIVE
ELI

I may have adopted more goats than I originally planned, but in my defense, they're adorable. Four babies and their mama, all currently exploring their new home and making me question whether I should have gotten more. Five is plenty for a tiny petting zoo, though, especially when I've got a Christmas tree farm, a pumpkin patch, and a shop to get up and running.

I've already been researching everything I can make with goat milk. Cheese is definitely on the list, and I've hired someone to make soap for the shop once we have enough milk to spare. I figure I should probably get the hang of keeping the goats happy and healthy before I start worrying about turning them into another business venture.

"They're so cute." Jordan walks up beside me and leans against the fence. "Have you named them yet?"

"Not all of them. I think the one with the black patch is Goldie."

He studies the little goat currently trying to climb onto her mother's back.

"Wanna name one?" I ask.

"Boots." He points to the baby with dark markings on all four legs. Her little tail wiggles when she bleats at us.

"Perfect. I was gonna call her Socks, but Boots is cuter."

"We're not very good at naming goats."

"Or we're excellent at it." I bump my shoulder against his before hopping down from the fence. "Karla should be here soon. The goats got here earlier than we anticipated."

Jordan stays by the fence while I check the latch on the gate for the third time this morning. I've already walked the entire perimeter twice, looking

for gaps or anything sharp they might hurt themselves on. The fence is sturdy, the barn is ready, and I've got enough hay to feed a small army of goats. Probably. I might have gone overboard with the hay.

"When do the bakers start?" Jordan asks.

"Three weeks. We're doing a trial run before we officially open. I'll post something on social media once we've got treats ready to sell."

"And a newsletter."

"I can't wait until everything's ready. It's gonna be a wonderland. I've got a few event ideas, too. Maybe I'll plant sunflowers next year."

A horn honks behind us, startling me and sending all five goats scrambling toward the barn. Boots immediately changes her mind and runs back toward the fence.

"Sorry I'm late!" a woman calls from the truck.

"You're not late. The goats are early."

She parks and hops out, revealing hot pink hair braided beneath an honest-to-goodness cowboy hat. I never thought I'd see someone wearing one around here in Maine, but she looks completely comfortable in it. Her jeans are tucked into muddy boots, and she's already smiling at the goats before she reaches us.

"I'm Karla." She holds out her hand, giving mine a firm shake before turning to Jordan.

They give each other a quick once-over, but Karla's attention doesn't stay on my brother for long. The moment she gets a better look at the babies, she squeals.

"Oh, look at you!" She climbs over the fence and crouches beside Goldie. "Aren't you the sweetest little thing? Look at those wittle ears!"

Goldie immediately tries to eat her braid.

"Careful," I warn her. "She's been trying to eat everything since she got here."

"Sounds like a goat." Karla gently rescues her hair and scratches Goldie behind the ears. "What'd you name them?"

"Still working on that. Wanna help?"

I point out Goldie and Boots while Karla studies the others. Mama goat approaches her, gives her a thorough sniff, and decides she's worthy of attention.

"Eula," Karla announces, rubbing the goat's forehead.

"Interesting choice," Jordan says. "I approve."

“It’s cute in an old granny kind of way,” I add.

“Exactly.” Karla gives Eula one final scratch before standing. “Now, let’s see what you’ve got set up for these babies.”

I lead her toward the barn, explaining everything I’ve done so far. The goats have fresh water, hay, a mineral feeder, and plenty of room to move around. I’ve also made sure the barn has good ventilation without leaving them exposed to drafts. Karla checks everything while I follow her around, mentally comparing her observations to the notes I’ve been making for weeks.

She seems pleased until she reaches the water bucket.

“This needs to be secured better,” she says, giving it a little push. “They’ll knock it over the first chance they get.”

“I’ve got a bracket for it. Haven’t installed it yet.”

“Let’s get that done before somebody decides to go swimming.”

I retrieve the bracket and my tools from the storage area. Jordan offers to help, but Karla has already found something else for him to do.

I secure the bucket to the wall while Jordan does the task Karla set him on. It takes a few minutes, and by the time I’m finished, Eula has decided Jordan’s shirt is food.

“Eli, your goat is eating me.”

I turn around to find Eula tugging on the hem of his shirt while he holds both hands in the air.

Karla laughs and gently redirects Eula toward her hay. “You’ll get used to them. Goats have plenty of personality, and every single one of them is different.”

That’s one of the reasons I wanted them. I’ve spent so much time researching their care that I already know the basics, but actually having them here is different. They have their own preferences, and I’m going to have to learn what each one needs.

Karla checks the bedding and shows me a better way to arrange the feeding area so the babies aren’t constantly climbing into their mother’s food. I help her move a few things around, then refill the hay feeder while she explains what I should watch for during their first few weeks here.

By the time we finish, I’ve got hay in my hair and dirt on my knees. I couldn’t be happier.

“I can come by two or three times a week to check on your progress,” Karla offers. “At least until you’re comfortable handling everything

yourself.”

“That would be great. I’ve done a lot of research, but I don’t wanna miss something important. I want them to have the best life I can give them.”

“And I’m here to help with that.” She gives my shoulder a friendly slap. “You’ve got a good setup. Now, you know they need to be locked up at night, right?”

“They can’t just stay in the fenced area?” Jordan asks.

Karla and I turn toward him at the same time.

“Absolutely not!” she says. “You’ve got predators around here. Wolves, coyotes, and other critters that would love an easy meal.”

“Exactly.” I reach down to scratch Goldie’s head. “I’m not letting anything eat my sweet wittle babies.”

Jordan raises both hands. “It was a question. I didn’t know the fence wouldn’t be enough.”

“Well, now you know.” Karla crosses her arms. “You’re not in charge of the goats until I see some improvement in your goat education.”

“My apologies. I’ll study harder.”

I grin at him, earning myself a glare.

“Eli’s clearly done his homework,” Karla continues. “He read everything I sent him, and judging by this setup, he went looking for more information.”

My face warms, and I scratch the back of my neck. “I like knowing what I’m getting into.”

“Oh, he does,” Jordan says. “You should’ve seen the six-month research binge before he started this place. Then another three months figuring out how to add a market and bakery.”

Karla smiles. “You’ve got a good thing going here.” Her eyes go wide.

I turn toward the barn doors just in time to catch Boots squeezing through the gap Jordan left open when he left.

“Oh, no, you don’t!”

Boots takes off across the grass, her little legs moving much faster than I expect. I hurry after her while Jordan laughs behind me. He follows me out of the barn, but Boots has already reached the side of the fence. She stops to inspect a clump of grass before spotting something more interesting in front of her.

The trees.

“Boots, sweetheart, come back here.”

She ignores me. Of course, she does, she’s a goat.

Karla comes outside carrying a small container of feed. “Don’t chase her. You’ll turn it into a game.”

“She’s winning.”

“Just give her a reason to come to you.”

I take the container and shake it gently. Boots lifts her head, and for a second, I think she’s going to cooperate. Instead, she trots closer to the trees.

I follow at a slower pace, keeping my voice calm. “Come on, baby. I’ve got something tasty for you.”

Boots stops a few feet from the fence and stares into the woods. Her ears perk up. I shake the container again, but she doesn’t even glance at me. She’s focused on something beyond the fence, her little nose twitching while she watches the trees.

“What’s got your attention?”

A branch moves overhead. There’s barely any wind today, but the leaves rustle anyway. Boots gives a happy little bleat and takes another step forward. Then she wags her tail. At a tree.

Jordan catches up with me. “What’s she doing?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

He looks into the woods. “Probably a squirrel. There are a ton around here.”

I scan the trees, looking for whatever caught her attention. Nothing moves now. Boots bleats again. Something rustles deeper in the woods, and she immediately takes a few steps closer to the trees.

“Oh, no.” I crouch beside her and gently scoop her up. “You’re not going exploring.” But maybe I’ll invest in a harness or something to take her on little walks.

Boots squirms for a second before settling against my chest.

Jordan shakes his head. “You’re going to spoil those goats rotten.”

“Obviously.”

I carry her back toward the barn while Karla waits by the door, looking thoroughly entertained.

Karla takes another look around the enclosure before giving me a satisfied nod. “I think you’re going to do just fine, Eli. You’ve got the right

attitude, and you're willing to put in the work. That's half the battle right there."

I glance down at Boots, who's currently trying to chew on my sleeve.

"I hope so."

I've put years of planning into this farm, and every new addition makes it feel a little closer to what I've imagined. I want people to come here and make memories. There's still a lot of work ahead of me, but I'm getting there.

Before we head inside, I glance toward the woods one more time. The branches are moving again. I watch them for a moment, waiting for the breeze to reach the grass around us. It never does.

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CHAPTER SIX
ROWAN

Goats are weird. They make weird sounds, have weird eyes, and eat anything they can fit in their mouths. I want to pet one, though. They're little and adorable, and I bet their fur is soft. Maybe I can even learn to speak goat. I've never tried talking to one before, but how different can they be from deer? I'm sure we'll be friends in no time. Just as soon as the humans leave and I can introduce myself properly.

Greg's branches sway above me. "*Go talk to them.*"

"Nope. I'll stay right here and listen. Thank you *very* much." I settle against his trunk, making myself comfortable in the grass. The humans have been wandering around for most of the morning, and I've been following them from a safe distance. I still haven't figured out what Eli plans to do with all these goats, but at least they seem happy enough.

"You've been watching that human for years. You could try speaking to him."

"And say what? Hello, I've been spying on you for years. Lovely weather we're having?"

"You could start with hello."

"I could also stay right here where he can't see me."

Greg rustles his branches, which I'm pretty sure is his way of laughing at me. I ignore him and turn my attention back to the humans.

"So you're a Christmas tree farm?" Karla asks as the three humans eat sandwiches from the back of the beast Eli rides around in.

"Yep," Eli says. "Grams and Grampa loved Christmas and how it brought the community together for a few months. From November through January, there was always good cheer anytime they were near."

Jordan snorts, probably at the rhyme. “They’d always get the biggest trees for their front room. They even hired interior decorators to make the house look like a wonderland.”

I straighten. Their front room? What does that have to do with trees?

“How the heck did they get a tree in their house?” I ask Greg.

“Dunno. I think it’d be interesting to be in a house instead of the forest.”

I turn around and stare at him. “Excuse me?”

“Just for a change of scenery. I’d want to come back home afterward.”

“Why would you want to go inside a house? You have sunshine and rain and all your friends right here.” I pat his trunk, wondering where this strange idea came from. Greg has always been curious about humans, but I didn’t know he’d been thinking about living with them.

“I’ve been standing in the same place my entire life, Rowan. Sometimes I wonder what’s beyond the hill.”

“More trees,” I tell him. “And a road. I’ve already told you that.”

“Yes, but you’ve seen them. I haven’t.”

I open my mouth to argue, then close it again. I suppose he has a point. I can go wherever I please, while Greg has to rely on birds and squirrels to tell him what’s happening beyond his branches. Still, I don’t understand why he’d want to leave our forest when everything he needs is right here.

I sink farther into the soil until only my eyes, ears, and antlers remain above ground. Greg can dream about visiting houses all he wants. I’m much more interested in figuring out what these humans are talking about.

“It was fun going out to help pick the Christmas trees,” Jordan says.

Eli nods. “But getting them inside was always a whole production. Thank goodness the Johnsons helped. If they didn’t have a crew to chop down the trees and haul them to the house, I don’t know how we’d have managed.”

Chop down? I freeze beneath Greg’s branches, waiting for Eli to explain what he means. Surely, I misunderstood him. Humans cut branches sometimes, and while I don’t like it, the trees usually recover. Maybe he’s talking about that.

“Why would they chop down a tree to put it in a house? How would it keep growing?”

“Maybe they plant it inside?”

I want to believe him. I really really do. But I've seen what happens when humans cut down trees. There are stumps scattered throughout the older parts of the property, left behind long before I arrived. Nothing grows from most of them anymore.

I push myself out of the ground, dirt falling from my shoulders as I look toward the rows of young evergreens stretching across the farm. They're my babies and I've protected them the best I can.

And Eli has been raising them for Chris-mas. I don't even know what Chris-mas is.

I turn toward the younger trees, reaching for them through the roots connecting our forest. Most are too young to understand much about humans, but a few have been growing here longer than I've been their guardian. Surely someone knows something.

"Does anyone know what happens when humans pick a Chris-mas tree?"

Several voices answer at once, excited to have my attention. One wants to know whether it's going to rain tomorrow. Another complains that a squirrel buried an acorn too close to his roots. I promise to deal with both problems later and repeat my question.

"I'd like to be picked," a tree says. "*I want to see the lights.*"

"Lights?"

"The human talks about putting lights on the trees. He says they're beautiful."

I stare at the little fir, whose branches are barely tall enough to reach my chest. "You're already beautiful. You don't need humans putting things on you."

"But I want to see."

I don't know what to say to that. I've always thought my trees were happy here. They have good soil, plenty of sunlight, and each other. I've never considered that some of them might want something different.

Then Eli's voice carries across the field again.

"We'll have to figure out what to do with the older trees eventually. Some of them are getting too big for people to take home."

Jordan shrugs. "Could always cut a few down for the ones who want traditional trees."

My heart drops. "No," I whisper.

They’re going to chop down my babies and drag them into their houses! My eyes fill with tears, and I press my palm against Greg’s trunk to steady myself. I’ve spent years watching Eli care for this place. I thought he loved these trees as much as I do. How could someone who treats them so kindly even consider cutting them down?

I look toward the rows of evergreens again. Some are curious about the world beyond the farm. Others have never given it a thought. They’re all trusting me and Eli to take care of them, and they have no idea what he might do. I can’t let that happen.

He can’t murder my children for this Chris-mas thing. I wipe my cheeks and turn away from the humans before Eli notices me. Whatever they’re celebrating, they can do it without hurting my trees.

I drop to all fours and race toward the deeper woods, calling for the squirrels and chipmunks as I go. Birds take flight above me, carrying my summons through the forest. I need everyone who can climb, dig, or squeeze into places I can’t reach.

We aren’t going to hurt the humans. I won’t let anyone get injured, including Eli, no matter how angry I am with him right now. But if he thinks he’s going to chop down my babies, he’s got another thing coming.

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CHAPTER SEVEN
ELI

The morning sun streams through the camper window, waking me before my alarm. I stretch beneath the blankets, already thinking about everything I want to accomplish today. The goats are settling into their new barn, my pumpkins are growing beautifully, and the bakery should be ready to open before the holiday season. Even the house is coming along nicely. After working toward this, everything is finally falling into place.

There's only one thing missing. Someone to share it with.

I'd love to find someone who understands what I'm trying to build here. A place where families can celebrate the holidays without cutting down a perfectly healthy tree every year. They can rent one of mine, take it home for Christmas, and bring it back when they're finished. I want families to come back year after year.

Maybe someday I'll have a family of my own to enjoy it with.

I push the blankets aside and climb out of bed, heading straight for the coffeemaker. There aren't many luxuries in my camper, but I refuse to start my morning without coffee. While it brews, I pull on some clothes and tie my hair back. The camper is temporary until the builders finish my house farther up the property. I'm hoping to move in before our soft opening, although I've learned better than to trust construction timelines.

The coffeemaker beeps, and I pour myself a generous cup before adding cream and sugar. Armed with caffeine, I head outside to enjoy the morning. Except something's wrong.

I stop at the bottom of the camper steps and look around. Usually, the woods are full of birds singing and squirrels chattering at each other.

There’s always something rustling through the underbrush. Even the goats are being unusually quiet this morning.

I take a sip of coffee and glance toward the trees. A squirrel sits on a low branch, staring directly at me.

“Morning, little guy.”

Another squirrel appears beside him. Then a third. Within seconds, there are at least a dozen of them lined up along the branches and gathered at the base of the trees.

That’s a lot of squirrels.

“Uh, hi?” I give them a little wave, because that’s what normal people do when confronted by an audience of woodland creatures. “Everything okay out there?”

One of the squirrels makes a sharp chattering noise. The others immediately turn toward him, and I take a cautious step backward.

“Okay. Well, I’ve got work to do, so—”

The squirrels charge.

I nearly drop my coffee as the little furry critters race across the gravel toward me. I turn and run, heading around the side of the shop because it’s the closest building. Unfortunately, the squirrels follow, their claws scratching against the gravel behind me.

I round the corner, expecting them to scatter once I’m out of sight. Instead, two squirrels dart ahead of me while several others continue chasing me around the building. Are they herding me? That’s ridiculous. Squirrels don’t herd people. At least, I don’t think they do.

I make another turn and race back toward my camper, only to discover that several squirrels have already beaten me there.

And they’re going inside.

I hurry toward the open door, but a squirrel darts across my path, forcing me to stumble sideways. By the time I reach the steps, there’s an entire squirrel convention happening inside my camper.

One runs up the curtains while another launches himself onto my bed. Two more race across the counter, knocking over a box of crackers. Something crashes near the sink, and I wince.

“Hey! Get out of there!”

I wave my free hand at them, but they pay no attention to me. One squirrel stops on my pillow, looks directly at me, and chatters before diving off the bed.

Then, almost simultaneously, they all leave.

They pour out of the camper, race past my feet, and disappear into the woods.

I stand there with my mouth hanging open. “What the actual fuck?”

A bird calls overhead, and the usual sounds of the forest return.

I look down at my coffee. Despite everything, I’ve managed to save most of it. Small miracles, I guess.

“Well, that was weird.”

I lift the mug toward my mouth. Something swoops past my face. A bird. A very determined bird. Its wing clips my hand, sending coffee splashing across my shirt and down the front of my pants.

“Son of a—”

I jerk backward, staring at the mess. The bird lands on a nearby branch and squawks at me.

“Seriously? What did I ever do to you?”

Another bird flies overhead. Something warm and wet lands directly on top of my head. I freeze. Gross! A second glob slides down the back of my neck.

“You have got to be kidding me!”

The birds squawk from the trees, and I swear one of them sounds like it’s laughing.

“Yeah, hilarious. Glad you’re enjoying yourselves.”

I dump what’s left of my coffee onto the gravel and retreat into the camper, slamming the door behind me. I stand there listening to my own breathing. Then something scratches against the outside wall. I turn toward the sound. A tiny face appears in the window. A chipmunk.

It’s standing on the narrow ledge, its little paws pressed against the glass. Another chipmunk climbs up beside it, carrying something in its mouth. I lean closer, trying to figure out what they’re doing. The second chipmunk drops an acorn onto the ledge. It rolls off and hits the ground. Both chipmunks stare down after it.

“Weird.”

The first chipmunk chatters at the second, who promptly scurries away. A moment later, another acorn hits the side of the camper. Then another. I stare at the window while the chipmunks continue their assault, occasionally missing the camper entirely.

“Are you throwing acorns at me?”

One hits the glass with a little tap. They are! I close the curtains.

“That’s enough nature for today.” I survey the damage inside my camper. There are claw marks in the curtains, a couple of small holes in my bedsheets, and crackers scattered across the counter. Thankfully, nothing important appears broken. I can clean everything up in a few minutes, although the curtains might need replacing.

I reach up to push my hair away from my face and encounter something sticky. “Oh, ew!” I’d forgotten about the bird shit. I hurry to the sink and scrub my hands before attempting to wash the mess out of my hair. Unfortunately, the sink is tiny, and bending over it at this angle is doing terrible things to my neck. After several minutes of struggling, I give up. I’ll have to drive back to my apartment for a proper shower.

First, though, I want to make sure the animals are gone. I grab a towel, wipe down my neck, and cautiously open the camper door. The squirrels have disappeared, but I can still hear them chattering somewhere in the woods. I’m not the only one listening to them though, because there’s a man standing near the treeline.

A very attractive man. A *naked* man.

He’s tall, with short messy deep green and brown hair. A pair of antlers rise from his head. *Antlers?* He’s long limbed and has a nice bottom. He’s facing away from me, gesturing wildly at a squirrel perched on a stump. I can’t make out what he’s saying, but he seems awfully invested in the conversation.

“Uh, hello?” I call out.

The man whirls around so quickly that the squirrel nearly falls off its stump. For a moment, we stare at each other, and fuck, he’s *gorgeous*. It’s a bit funny to see a man standing around in a forest cupping his privates, but here we are. His green eyes seem to pierce my soul, and his face is so pretty it makes me forget what I was about to say. Which is unfortunate, considering there’s a *naked stranger* standing on my property arguing with the local wildlife.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

His gaze travels over me, stopping briefly on my chest, then my arms, before returning to my face. His cheeks turn pink. “No.”

“I’m Eli. And you are?”

“Rowan.” It comes out slow like he doesn’t really talk a lot and he’s testing the words.

“Nice to meet you, Rowan.”

He doesn’t return the sentiment. Instead, he cocks a hip and folds his arms, exposing himself. It takes everything in me to be a gentleman and not look down.

Thankfully he decides to add to the conversation. He looks toward the rows of trees. “What do you plan to do with the trees?” Again, it’s slow. Maybe he’s not used to talking.

“Grow them.” I smile, although he doesn’t seem all that interested in being friendly. “I’ve spent years getting everything ready to open the farm.”

“And what happens when you open?”

“All kinds of things. But the main event is Christmas trees this winter.”

His face turns downright murderous. He looks toward the trees again, his hands curling into fists. I’ve managed to offend him, although I can’t imagine how.

“Do you live around here?” I ask, hoping to steer the conversation toward something less confrontational.

“Nearby.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet a neighbor. I haven’t had much time to get to know everyone around here.”

“Clearly.”

A squirrel chatters from the stump, and Rowan shoots it a look. The squirrel immediately goes quiet, which is interesting considering how much trouble its friends have caused me this morning.

“Have you noticed anything strange happening around here lately?” I ask. “I just got attacked by about twenty squirrels, two birds, and a couple of chipmunks. They invaded my camper, ruined my coffee, and started throwing acorns at me.”

Rowan stares at me for a moment before his mouth twitches. He looks away, but not before I catch the smile he’s trying to hide.

“Glad my suffering amuses you.” I can’t help a smile myself.

“Sorry.” A laugh escapes him, and damn, he’s even prettier when he smiles. “I’ve never heard of squirrels doing that.”

“Neither have I, and I’ve been coming out here for years. They’ve always left me alone before.” I glance toward the woods. “I’m worried something might be wrong. Maybe the construction disturbed them, or they’re having trouble finding food. I don’t want them getting hurt because of something I’m doing.”

His smile fades, and he studies me for a moment. “What would you do if they were?”

“Try to fix it. I don’t know much about wild animals, but I can find someone who does. I want them to be happy here, too.”

Rowan looks toward the trees. “They were here first.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve tried to leave as much of the woods alone as possible. The farm doesn’t need every acre.” I follow his gaze, taking in the rows of trees I’ve spent years caring for. “I love this place. I want to make sure everything living here has a good home.”

When I turn back, Rowan wears an expression I can’t quite figure out. Before, I can say anything else, something lands on my shoulder.

I freeze. Rowan’s eyes widen, and a squirrel scrambles down my arm.

“Shit!” I flail, trying to get the furry little critter off me without hurting it. The squirrel leaps onto the ground and races toward Rowan, who catches it before it can climb up his leg.

“Frisk!” he snaps.

The squirrel chatters at him, and I stare as Rowan sets it on the ground. It immediately disappears into the woods, probably satisfied with causing one final bit of chaos.

“Did you just *scold* that squirrel?”

Rowan looks up. “No.” There’s another twitch of a smile.

“You said a name.”

“It’s his name.” He glances toward the woods. “I should leave.”

I should probably ask more questions, but I’m distracted by the fact that he’s already turning away. “Oh. Okay. Well, it was nice meeting you, Rowan. Maybe I’ll see you around?”

His gaze drops to my mouth for a moment before he looks away. “Maybe.”

Rowan heads into the woods, moving between the trees with surprising ease. Within seconds, he’s disappeared completely, leaving me standing outside my camper wondering what the hell just happened.

I glance toward the stump where the squirrel was sitting earlier. “Frisk,” I mutter. Who names a squirrel Frisk? The gorgeous naked antlered man I suspects lives somewhere in my woods.

I look down at my coffee-stained shirt, then reach up and carefully touch the mess still tangled in my hair. Wonderful. The first attractive man I’ve met in months, and I look like I’ve lost a fight with an entire forest.

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CHAPTER EIGHT
ROWAN

That *did not* go as planned. Eli *saw* me.

I turn to the chipmunks. “I’m not sure you understood the assignment.” I drop my hands to my hips and shake my head. “You were supposed to distract him while the rest of you made him decide to pack up and leave for good. He’s still here.”

And he *talked to me*. His voice was so gentle and soothing despite his obvious irritation. Of course, I was short with him, I don’t often speak human languages and wanted to make sure I formed my words right. I’m not sure if I did or not, but he seemed to understand me.

His eyes are brown. The prettiest brown, like tree bark. And his hair is so lovely, I just want to run my hands through it. I don’t usually let my hair grow so long because it gets irritating caught in my antlers or branches.

But no, he’s the enemy. We *will not* be friends.

“He’s going to chop down the trees. We have to show him the error of his ways.” I turn to the squirrels. “Tomorrow, chase him again, but break apart to flank him from the front, too. That will really scare him.” A coordinated attack two days in a row? Who wouldn’t be terrified?

I lift my hand to the birds. “Please poop in his morning liquid.” He seems to enjoy starting his day with the lovely scented drink. “He also doesn’t like poop in his hair.” Honestly, I don’t like poop in his pretty hair either, but he won’t have one day of rest until he’s gone.

“Chipmunks, your job is easier from here on out. Anytime he’s eating outside, steal his food. Please and thank you.”

Eli left after I retreated into the woods, he muttered something about an a-part-ment and shower. But the rumbling beast is back, kicking gravel

across the drive. I camouflage myself and step closer to the treeline. That was my mistake earlier, but Frisk can't see me when I'm blending in with the trees.

I really wasn't prepared to be perceived. *Completely naked*. Must have been a sight for him, but he didn't seem bothered by my nudity. Or maybe he was just shocked by it so he didn't mention it. Or my antlers. Hopefully, he doesn't gather humans to try and hunt me. I sigh. Mother told me to be careful about humans seeing me and I messed up big time.

If I'd planned on Eli or *anyone* seeing me, I'd wear my belt of leaves to keep him from seeing my nether regions. I'd wear my fanciest one. With a bit of moss. But now that he's seen me naked, I can't take it back. What a great first impression. Not that I was the friendliest. No, he doesn't get a warm welcome. He's a tree murderer.

I stamp my foot. Tree murderers do not get warm welcomes and animal friends.

Frisk runs up my body to whisper in my ear again. Eli's back.

Our war truly begins.

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CHAPTER NINE
ELI

Weeks of trying to enjoy my mornings has led to me staying at the apartment instead of camping on the farm. Whenever I'm at the farm, the animals other than my sweet goats rush me. They're not trying to hurt me, but I don't know the point of it after all this time. If I'd done something, I'd understand, but as far as I can recall I haven't changed my ways. Perhaps it has to do with the mysterious Rowan, though.

I asked around town if anyone knew of him. I looked a bit foolish holding my fingers up as antlers, but it's not every day I meet someone a head, head and a half taller than myself with antlers. I still can't decide if the height or the antlers were the most surprising part. Oh, actually the nudity. I kept that part to myself.

The older folk I chatted with mentioned the mysterious folk but wouldn't elaborate. They said to look into myths and legends to find Rowan, but that's absurd. The man did have antlers, though. Unless they were part of an elaborate costume.

Jordan was sure I made up the entire encounter. I sent him pictures of the state of my curtains and bedsheets with all the little claw marks. He wasn't convinced. But day three he was a witness to the animals acting strange.

Today, though, I'm determined to get shit done. I'm meeting the new bakers and they're doing a trial run of things. It would have been more convenient to spend the night, but I can't risk having to run back to the apartment before meeting my new employees.

I park my truck next to the market shop and search for signs of the animals. I'm sure they heard me drive up. I grab the clear golf umbrella I

bought to protect myself. Not to hurt anyone, but to give at least a layer of protection to the front of me, or the top of me, in case of birds.

I slide from the driver's seat with the umbrella out, ready to pop open. So far, so good.

The forest seems to come alive. I drop my free hand into my pocket full of bribes.

“I just need to get inside. Just leave me be and you won’t see me for hours.”

The squirrels start toward me first. I toss a handful of critter treats at them and lift my umbrella over my head just as the first splat lands. With the squirrels distracted, I race to the shop door and get it open.

I get inside before the chipmunks start tossing acorns at me. I slam the door closed and heave a sigh of relief. It’s the first day since meeting Rowan that I’ve been able to do anything without getting shit on or ran at.

Somehow, all the creatures have been coordinating their attacks. Not that they’re really attacking me. But I’ve learned and I’ve researched. I’ll find the snacks they like the best and win them over.

Karla’s been tending to the goats after I explained what’s been going on. Like Jordan, she didn’t believe me until she witnessed it herself. That’s not to say I haven’t been taking care of my goats, I have. I just stay inside the barn to keep from being bothered. They’re so sweet, and I love learning all of their personalities. Eula is such a sweet mommy goat, Goldie and Boots are so fun and bouncy. Then, Janice, named after Grams, and Toffee, are a little more reserved than their other siblings. I love them all dearly and hate that I’ve let the other critters stall my enjoyment.

I peek out the front window of the shop and, like usual, Rowan stands at the edge of the forest just watching me. He hasn’t been naked since that first day. I can’t tell what he’s wearing because it doesn’t look like clothes, but everything’s covered. I’m not sure if he was embarrassed to meet me naked. If he was, he didn’t act it.

Eli: He just stands there watching me.

Jordan doesn’t answer immediately, and I go back to the kitchen to pre-heat the ovens. All the ingredients we’ll need are already here and all the recipes are sorted. I’ve hired three bakers to work through a menu of sorts to see what they think will be good sellers. We’ll have plenty of pies, cookies, pastries.

Jordan: Have you found where he stays?

Eli: I’ve found a few giant nests I suspect are his.

Not that I’ve really gone looking. The animals have kept me away.

Jordan: Nests? Like Big Bird?

I snort. Instead of texting him back, I call.

“Who uses their phone to call people these days?” Jordan says by way of greeting.

“I do, apparently. But no, not like Big Bird. They’re more pine needles and some leaves. Some have a few piles of acorns and I don’t know if it’s decoration or artillery.”

Jordan barks a laugh. “Could be either.”

“I just assume they belong to Rowan. He attempts to be sneaky, but now that I’ve seen him, I’m sure he’s the blur I’ve seen from the corner of my vision.”

Rowan doesn’t move from the spot, so I choose to ignore him. There are a few ping ping pings as acorns hit the windows, no doubt the chipmunks with questionable aim.

The knock to the door makes me jump. “Got to go, my bakers are here.”

“Have fun. I wouldn’t mind a treat if you wanna swing by the old Reily place.”

“You got it.” I rush to the door and let my new bakers in.

“Hey, welcome, welcome. I hope the squirrels didn’t get you.”

Nervous laughter fills the air. I explain my predicament and none of them believe me.

I wave to the window, but Rowan’s not there anymore, probably doesn’t want anymore people seeing him. Who knows.

“I’m Roberta, she/her.” She holds out her hand and we all shake. She wears a white professional chef coat, which seems to make the other two nervous. She’s got close cropped blond hair.

“Leslie, she/her.” She wears a sundress, and rubber-soled shoes that don’t quite go with the dress. But who’s gonna judge her? Certainly not me. Her long dark hair’s tied up in a tight bun out of her face.

“Sage, they/them.” Their deep purple hair goes to their shoulders. They’re in a band tee and jeans. Wire-framed glasses frame their blue eyes.

“I’m so excited to have the three of you here. Your samples were all amazing. Have you ever worked together before?”

Roberta answers first. “I’ve worked in a kitchen with other people, but the three of us haven’t worked together.”

“Well, I hope the three of you are good to work together, you all said you were willing to try. I want to have the best bakery I can have. You’re allowed to use your own recipes or the ones in the binder. You’ve been doing this for longer than I have and I trust your intuition. Let’s go work on some ideas and see what we can come up with. I’ll show you around the kitchen and let me know if there’s anything I’ve missed that we need.”

Sage lifts their head. “This place is nicer than working in my home kitchen.”

Leslie nods. “Very nice. I was just working with my aunt, but she got tired of all the businessy stuff and went back to a real job.” She puts quotes around real job. “Baking is a real job. People need treats and comfort.”

“Exactly.” I think this is gonna work out just fine. “Pardon the shop itself being not done, but it’s close. The kitchen is nice and—” I stop in my tracks. “No. No. No. No. No.” I rush inside to find the army of squirrels running around, causing havoc. “How the heck did you get in?” I point to Leslie. “Open the door. I’ll herd them out.” And I start chasing the squirrels.

But they aren’t leaving. They’re just running around the room to get away from me. I must look ridiculous flapping my hands and trying to direct squirrels.

There’s a squawk from the front and more squirrels and chipmunks flood inside.

“No. No. Shit!” I fling the back door open. “Please leave!” Not that the animals can understand English, but at this point I’ll try anything.

I spot Rowan laughing from the tree line, until he catches my gaze. I stomp toward him, which causes the animals to follow me thank fuck.

“Call them off,” I demand.

“Call who off?” He speaks in that strangely adorable way of his.

I flail my hand back toward the shop. “The animals.”

Rowan crosses his arms. “I have no idea what you mean. I don’t control them.”

“Bullshit.”

Rowan wrinkles his nose, and it’s just so cute. “What does bullshit have to do with anything? There aren’t any bulls around here.”

“If there were, you’d send them to terrorize me too. Call them off, please.”

He lifts his nose in the air. “You deserve the chaos.”

I blink back at him. My shoulders drop. “Why?” I’ve tried so hard to do everything right.

Before he answers, the back door swings open and the rest of the squirrels, chipmunks, and Roberta, Leslie, and Sage all run from the building. My three new hires are laughing their asses off until they see me standing with Rowan.

His eyes go wide, he drops down to his hands and feet and bolts.

Sage sucks in a breath. “I haven’t seen a wood nymph since I was a kid.”

Leslie snorts. “They’re just myths. Briarport is filled with them.”

Roberta shakes her head. “You must be new. Most of the myths and legends around here are true.”

“Wood nymph?” I look after him, hoping to catch another glimpse. But why the hell does he say I deserve the chaos? I don’t understand. I know what to research now, though.

“Come on,” Roberta says. “Let’s clean up the mess and see what we can salvage.”

Bless this woman. There’s not as much damage as I thought there’d be thank goodness. After it’s all cleaned up, we set about making a plan and they get to work testing out the kitchen.

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CHAPTER TEN
ROWAN

There are *more* of them now. Every day for weeks, more and more people come and go, but now Eli says they're doing a soft open for treats. The birds are on standby as we wait for all the beasts to rumble down the driveway. The chipmunks have been banished from acorn attack because it's been fairly ineffective other than to confuse anyone that witnesses it. The squirrels have been instructed to steal the treats. But everyone's starting to question me.

"Please, it's for our protection and the good of the forest. Chris-mas will be here before we know it." Probably. I really don't have a clue, but it's what Eli constantly talks about. He still takes care of the trees and talks to the animals. He's very sweet with the goats. I'm fond of the goats and visit them at night, always making sure I lock them back in.

On the outside, Eli seems like a perfect human. But I know he plans to destroy the very forest he's been growing and I can't stand for it.

"You really should talk to him," Beatrice says.

I cross my arms. "I have and he's… human."

All of my babies giggle around me.

"You won't be laughing when he cuts you down." I fight off tears and turn my back to them. I don't want them to see the sap run down my face. I just don't know what to do about Eli and the Chris-mas business. If they didn't need trees they wouldn't need to tear my children down.

"I still think it'd be wonderful to see beyond the forest," Gregory says.

"If I could take you with me, I would. But I can't," I say.

"You don't go out all that often," Fabio says. "Perhaps you should see if more humans are as nice as Eli is."

“Eli’s just trying to make you feel good now before he rips you from the earth.”

Clyde trembles and starts to weep.

“No, my sweet, don’t cry. I’m not going to let some handsome evil human take you from me.”

Beatrice snickers. “*Handsome.*”

“You’ve seen him!”

The first rumble of monsters starts down the path. “Places everyone!” I clap, and we all scramble into our hiding places. It’s just Eli and Jordan, though. I want to give them a sense of security before I send over the masses. I lift a hand. “Hold. We’ll start the assault when others arrive.”

It’s not long before the other three humans that have been working inside the bakery show up. Then, it’s time. Monster upon monster growls up to the shop and stop.

Eli opens the door to the market and flips a sign over. I can’t read human languages so I have no idea what it says, but I raise my hand.

“Ready?”

The people leave their monsters and I wait. Perhaps the best time to hit them is after they have their treats. We wait. And wait. And wait so long.

But finally, a crowd starts to leave the shop. I drop my hand. The squirrels race towards the customers. The birds squawk overhead and fly past, dropping bombs of poo right on the heads of the very people that will try to still my babies during Chris-mas.

Screeches fill the air and it’s the sweetest sound. Eli rushes from the door and looks around. His eyes go wide, but the devastation on his face makes my heart sink.

“Rowan!” It’s Jordan that calls my name and I ignore him. “Get out here right now and put a stop to this!”

The other humans continue to run around, trying to get away from the squirrels and birds, but failing.

Eli tosses handfuls of birdseed from his pocket, which distracts the birds.

“Traitors!” I hiss loud enough that only the birds should hear.

The squirrels go for the birdseed too, and the humans race to their cars. The carnage of human treats litters the ground where they dropped them. I can’t help a smirk. The plan is working. The humans will tell other humans not to come and this Chris-mas business will go away.

Eli and Jordan clean up the mess while the animals are distracted.

“I really don’t know what I did.” Eli looks so sad. I don’t think I like it. But he’s still planning to murder my babies.

“Rowan!” Jordan calls again. “Come and explain yourself.” He’s watching the woods, but I know he can’t see me. I’m too camouflaged for it.

“Leave him alone.” Eli huffs out a sigh. “We don’t know it’s him.”

“Oh, it’s him, all right. I did my own research and wood nymphs will fuck up some shit if they think someone’s hurting their forest.”

Damn straight, I will! I raise an acorn to launch it at Eli.

But his shoulders slump. He runs a hand through his pretty long hair, and he glances over to my woods. “All I’ve ever done is take care of this place. I don’t plan on hurting it.”

I swallow. Maybe I took things too far? But do I trust him? Not anymore.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN
ELI

The soft opening wasn't a complete disaster, but it wasn't a complete success either. Mostly because that first batch of customers panicked. I get it. I really do. But I don't know why Rowan hates me.

I grab a left over cupcake from the counter. It's pumpkin spice with cream cheese icing and one of my favorites. Maybe a peace offering will help.

Jordan and the others left earlier, and it's just me. I grab a second cupcake and head out. And that's when the sky decides to open up. My shoulders drop even more. But it's fine. I grab my umbrella incase the birds decide to drop shit bombs. Thankfully, we got the carnage outside cleaned up fairly quickly after it happened, and the animals only showed up every couple of hours instead of constantly. Thank goodness for small miracles, I guess.

The second I step outside, I notice something's wrong. The goats scream, terrified, and there's growling coming from somewhere. I race to the goat pen, but I don't make it in time before a wolf jumps the fence.

"Fuck." I drop the cupcakes and my umbrella. I don't know what the hell I'm gonna do when I get to them, but I won't let my goats be wolf food.

A haunting howl comes from the woods, and I hope it's not more wolves to come take all of my goats or even try to fight me. But a huge blur runs on all fours and jumps the fence.

Rowan stands at full size and growls at the wolf that jumped the fence. The rest of the wolf pack seems to stay in the treeline. Rain pelts us all, and I just watch Rowan speak to the wolf. That's the best way to describe what

I'm witnessing. He puts his hands on his hips and shakes his head before pointing back to the woods. The wolf's tail droops and Rowan shakes his head again.

I can't believe my eyes, but Rowan sighs and lifts the wolf so gently like it's a baby. He carries it over the fence and places it back on the ground. Then, Rowan pats the wolf on the head, scratches behind its ears and gives the hind quarters a pat. The wolf just trots right off as if it wasn't about to eat one of my goats.

"Thank you," I say. "I don't think I could have done that."

Rowan glares at me and bares his teeth. "I didn't do it for you. The goats are my friends now. Unlike you." Rowan balls his hands and starts back towards the woods.

I jog after him. "Wait! *Please* wait."

"Why?"

"Would you like to dry off? I can grab you a towel." I wave toward the shop. "You can come inside. We can talk."

Rowan lifts his nose in the air. "Why would we talk?"

"Why not? I'd like to apologize for *whatever* it is that I've done to upset you and the critters. I want to fix whatever the problem is." I keep my mouth shut about the part that he's beautiful, and I want to get to know him. I'd like to watch his eyes light up.

"I'll pass."

My heart drops. "But what have I done?"

He turns to me with such an irritated look, and I brace myself for his response.

"You want to chop down my family." He doesn't even wait for my response and continues back towards the woods.

"No, I don't. That's not my intention at all."

He steps up to me and I realize how very tall he is and have to look up to meet his eyes.

Rowan pokes me in the chest. "Your grandparents chopped down the biggest trees for their house for Chris-mas. You have a Chris-mas tree farm."

I blink back at him. The rain gets harder, and I brush my hair from my face. Of course. He'd overheard a story and had no idea my true intent. "That's not how *my* farm works. Let me explain? Why don't I grab us both towels? I can tell you how my farm works? Please?"

He looks from me to the woods, and me again. He scrunches his face and shakes his head. “Okay.”

Thank fuck. I wave toward the back door of the shop. “You’ll have to duck through the door. But I have some towels inside.” After the incident with the animals, I brought in as many as I had.

Now that he’s agreed to come inside with me, I rush to the door. He stoops down and still almost knocks his antlers against the doorframe.

When he straightens up again, he looks around and seems so lost to be inside. He stands there and has to scoot out of the way before I can close the door.

He’s wearing an interesting outfit out of leaves and moss, and it seems to be melting off of him, exposing a hip. I look away and gather a few towels.

Rowan stares at the towel when I hand it to him. Water drips from his hair and the strange outfit.

“Have you used a towel before?”

He shakes his head. So I demonstrate, but my shirt’s soaked through.

I wrap my hair in a towel to get it out of the way. “I hope you don’t mind if I take off my shirt.”

Rowan shakes his head again and swallows. He watches me intensely as I unbutton the flannel, then hang it on a hook by the door.

“You just drag it down your body to dry off.”

He starts to copy me until he’s mostly dry, and half of his outfit has sloughed onto the floor. My jeans are still very damp, and the thought of sitting in wet pants annoys me. “How about I grab us some dry clothes? I don’t think I’ll have anything that’s really going to fit you, though. But I have a blanket that I’m sure will go around your waist if you want?”

Instead of staying put, Rowan follows me through the kitchen and into the shop. It’s like his head is on a swivel as he takes in everything.

“Have you ever been inside a building before?” I ask.

“No.”

I grab a shirt in my size off the rack and slide it on. I eyeball all the shirts and pull one that looks like it could fit him and hand it over, but he just looks at me.

“Have you worn a shirt before?”

“I don’t wear clothes.”

I just nod. “You must be cold, though. You can take off…” I wave at the rest of his outfit. “And wrap this around your waist.” I hold up a blanket with the farm logo on it.

He tips his head and starts unwrapping his skirt? Loincloth? I’m not sure what to call it. I face away from him, but keep my arm with the blanket out. He takes the blanket, and I turn when it sounds like he’s fully covered.

“Are you shy?” Rowan asks me. There’s a smirk on his lips when I meet his gaze again.

“Not in the slightest, but I thought I’d be a gentleman and not look.”

“I don’t know what a gentleman is, and I live naked.”

“Do you live in my woods?”

“You mean *my* woods.” Rowan crosses his arms over his chest.

“It sounds like there’s *a lot* we need to talk about.” I grab a pair of sweatpants and hold up a finger. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

I hope he stays. It won’t take me long to change out of my wet jeans into the sweatpants, but Rowan’s a bit wily and I don’t want him running out before I get the chance to explain everything. He’s sweet, but I don’t think he knows much about the world outside of the woods. Maybe I can take him out somewhere.

I tug off my boots and jeans and slide on the sweatpants. I leave my wet hair towel in the bathroom along with my clothes.

Rowan isn’t where I left him. “Rowan?”

I find him looking at the toys, and he holds up a stuffed goat. “What did you do to her?” There are tears in his eyes, and he holds the plushie close to his chest.

“She’s a toy, a stuffed animal. She’s made out of cloth, like all the rest of them here. She was never real.”

“Oh. Do humans make animals a lot?”

“Kids like them, and they’re cute. Would you like to keep her?”

He looks from me to the goat to the rest of the stuffed goats on the shelf and grabs all of them. “She can’t leave her family behind.”

Can’t argue with him about that, but now he’s distracted. “How about we come back for them? We need to have a serious discussion. I think you overheard a conversation without understanding everything.”

His jaw tightens. “I understood everything. You chop down trees for Chris-mas.”

I take a few of the plushies and place them back on the shelf. “But *I* don’t.”

He tightens his hold on the rest of the stuffed goats. I pat his hand, but let him keep them if he wants for now. It’s ridiculous and adorable at the same time.

I lead him to the seating by the bakery. “Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?”

He arranges the stuffed goats on the table. “No, thank you.”

“I’ll be right back.” There are still a few cupcakes left and I grab them. I still hope a sweet treat might woo him over to my side.

I place a plate in front of him, and he stares at it. “What is it?”

I settle across from him. “Pumpkin cupcakes with icing.”

He tips his head from one side to the other before looking to me again.

I lift mine and pull the paper off, then lick the swirl on top. “Have you had one before?”

“I don’t eat human food.” He lifts his cupcake and sniffs it, leaving icing on his nose.

I resist the laugh and reach over to wipe the tip of his nose with my napkin. His cheeks go red, and he turns away. He’s awkwardly seated in the chair. It’s too small for him. I should invest in at least one chair he’ll be comfortable in if I want to turn his hate into friendship.

He gives the icing a tentative lick and hums. His eyes widen. “Very sweet.” Then, he shoves the entire cupcake in his mouth. His cheeks puff out like a chipmunk, and this time the laugh. bubbles out. He smiles with a full mouth. A few crumbs tumble out and he tries to catch them.

Fuck, he’s adorable. And a little bit awkward. I want to know everything there is to know about him.

“So I think I owe you an explanation to put your mind at ease.”

Rowan immediately straightens.

“I don’t cut down trees. That’s not how my farm works.”

He crosses his arms and glares at me. “But that’s what you said happens to Chris-mas trees.”

“It is, yes, and a lot of Christmas tree farms work that way. People purchase a tree and cut it down.”

Rowan looks away from me. “That’s cruel. Every tree has a personality and a life. They get cut down, for what?”

I hadn’t really thought about the trees having personalities. “You can communicate with the trees?”

“Of course, I can. They’re my babies. You’ve been stomping around too much.”

“The land is mine, Rowan.”

“Well, the trees are mine.” He pushes to his feet.

Technically, the trees are mine as well, but I won’t argue with him. “I’ve taken care of the trees the entire time I’ve had the property. I’ve done everything I know to keep them healthy. But I think I have you to thank for that, too.”

He lifts his nose to the air again. “I helped them grow big and strong. You basically just poked them.”

“I don’t intend to cut them down. Ever.”

Slowly, he turns back to me. “You don’t?”

“I specifically designed my farm to be sustainable. Families will pick out a tree, we’ll pot it and deliver it to their house, they’ll admire it for the season, then we’ll pick it back up and replant it until the next year. Essentially, people will rent the tree until it gets too big. Then, we’ll plant it permanently somewhere.”

He blinks back at me. “You’re really not going to murder my family?” It’s a soft, slow whisper.

“No, I was never planning on murdering any of the trees.”

He starts pacing beside the table. “What have I done?” He looks at me and away and paces. “I’m so sorry.” He drops to his knees beside me and grabs my hands. “Please forgive me. I was only trying to run you out to protect my babies. I’ve raised them from little saplings to the beauties they are today, and I couldn’t bear to have them killed.”

“I’m sorry I scared you.” I squeeze his hands.

“Humans are usually cruel.”

My chest clenches. “Has a human hurt you?”

“Humans always hurt nature.” He pushes back to his feet. “But I shouldn’t have tried to hurt you. I know you’re kind. You always sing and talk to my babies. And you always try to do your best. I *know* that. But I was so afraid when I heard that you chop down Chris-mas trees. I don’t even know what Chris-mas is.”

I give him a soft smile. “In the most general explanation possible, it’s a human tradition for good tidings and cheer and to be with family. Some

people exchange gifts. Lots of gratitude. There's usually food involved. It's celebrating the light in the dark."

"Sounds lovely." He picks at the bottom of the blanket. "We celebrate the seasons when you're not around."

"Dancing around naked?" I ask.

He nods. "Clothes are weird. This is so soft." He rubs his hand down the blanket then fists his hands. "How can I make up for my bad behavior? What can I possibly do to make up for being so mean?"

"You saved my goats."

"They're my friends, and so are the wolves, but the wolves had to be reminded that we don't eat our friends."

I snort, remembering how Rowan just picked up the wolf like it were a puppy.

"So you're friends with all the woodland critters?"

He nods very seriously. "I try to befriend all the animals and the plants. The beavers tend to stick to themselves, though." He sucks in a breath. "But what about the pumpkins? Will—"

"I had intended for them to be picked and leave with families." Now, I'm wondering if the pumpkin patch should just be a photo opportunity. I don't want to upset Rowan, which seems ridiculous.

"But—" Rowan looks at me with his beautiful eyes.

"Can you hear the pumpkins too? What if we talk with them to see what they say?"

"You'll do that?"

"Yep. And I'd love to meet all the trees properly."

Rowan sucks in another breath. "You want to meet my babies?" He turns on the spot, and thunder booms out.

"Maybe not today, though."

"Why not?" He looks to the window where rain continues to pour from the sky.

"It's storming?"

"Yeah?"

I suppose storms don't bother Rowan. Why would they? "Do you have a shelter you stay in?"

"Because of rain? It's the best time to dance!" He spins, and the blanket falls to the floor. My eyes immediately go to his chest, and I keep from looking below the waist. He doesn't seem bothered or even notice his

sudden nudity. He grabs my hands, and we're dancing together. Spinning round and around. His laugh is joyous, and I want to hear it every day. This strange man has caught my curiosity since the first time I saw him, but now that we've cleared the air, I want to get to know him.

"Please let me know how I can help with the farm. I feel bad for trying to sabotage things and send you away."

"Don't worry about it as long as you don't plan on continuing to try." I lean away to look him in the eye, but he turns away, going redder.

"I'm done with my campaign."

"I appreciate it. Did you enjoy the cupcake?"

"Oh, yes, it was quite delicious. It was my first human food."

"Would you like to try more? Human food, that is. It's not a good idea to fill up on sweets."

He licks his lips and nods. "I'd like to try more food."

"Good. I can make some pasta for dinner? I'm still hungry after today."

"What is pos-ta?"

"Delicious." I wink. "Plus, I have everything I need to make it homemade right here in the shop."

This might be easier than I thought. Quick explanation of the farm, food, and Rowan's calm again.

I turn back to him. "You're not human, are you?"

He shakes his head. "Wood nymph."

Sage was right. I'll have to remember to let them know.

"Would you like to learn how to make pasta?"

"I'd love that."

I nod toward the forgotten blanket on the floor. "How do you feel about actual clothes? You're very distracting, in a good way." I swallow and hope he's not offended by my words.

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CHAPTER TWELVE
ROWAN

“Clothes are weird.” I tug at the shirt. My stomach’s exposed, and so are my calves. The pants stop at my knees, and I feel awkward, but it’s not so bad.

Eli looks me over. “I’ll take measurements and buy you some clothes that should fit better. But that’s if you don’t mind. I don’t want you to feel forced to wear clothes. However, I’ll have to ask you not to show up naked when customers are around.”

“People don’t walk around naked?” I can’t imagine wearing clothes all the time, but I’ll wear them for Eli when I have to.

“Not normally in public, no, but this is your home, and I don’t want you to feel forced into them.”

He’s so nice. Every time I remember how I acted, my face turns hot, and I can’t look at him.

“You said I was distracting in a good way. What does that mean?” It’s very confusing. How can a distraction be good?

He gives me a lopsided smile. “Rowan, do you have any idea how attractive you are?”

I blink back at him. “Wood nymphs are all very beautiful.” It’s our nature.

He snorts and shakes his head. “I suppose that’s probably true, but you’re the first wood nymph I’ve ever met. Most creatures out of myth and legend aren’t thought to be real, at least not anymore.”

I roll my eyes and drag a hand down my body. “I’m real. Wood nymphs have been around for millennia. At least, according to my mother. She said our family’s seed came over with people on ships hundreds of years ago, and we’ve been finding our heart woods on this continent ever since.”

“That’s fascinating. I’d love to know more about you and your family.”

“There’s not a lot to say. I have hundreds of siblings. We’ve all left the family woods to find our own. I’ve been watching you from afar because mother said to stay away from humans. But you’ve always seemed kind.”

“I try to be.” Eli nods towards the other room. “Come on, let me show you how to make pasta.”

Now, there’s flour on the counter, with eggs and we’re mixing it all together in a big ball. Eli was so nice and asked if I ate eggs before we began. I didn’t tell him I usually ate them raw. Seemed like something that might scare him away.

He separates the dough into balls and sets me on the task of rolling them flat. He tells me what everything is as we work with it. A rolling pin, cutter, and a bunch of other things. We drop the pos-ta into a pot of boiling water for just a few minutes to cook it.

Eli already made some kind of sauce with butter and garlic in a pan. My mouth waters, and I breathe deeply. I can’t wait to taste pos-ta.

Eli swipes at his forehead with the back of his hand. “Grab two plates if you don’t mind.” He points to what he calls a cabinet, and I’m glad there only seems to be plates because I have no idea what a plate is.

He adds pos-ta and sauce to the plates and we walk back to the table from earlier.

“One sec.” Eli rushes back to the kitchen and comes back with two silver things and two cups.

He hands me one of the silver things and places a cup beside my plate. I stare at the silver thing and watch as he twirls the pos-ta on it and brings it to his mouth. But he frowns.

“Oh. You probably don’t know how to use a fork.”

“Fork.” I lift the silver thing.

He goes about showing me how to hold it properly and how to use it, but it feels weird. I stab the pos-ta, but it doesn’t like staying on the fork.

Eli snorts. “We can use our fingers.” He grabs a long noodle and lifts it in the air to eat it.

I copy him and hum at the burst of flavor. “That’s much easier. And so so good. I like pos-ta.”

“Pasta’s my favorite. Grams taught me and Jordan, that’s my brother, how to make it. I don’t think he still makes pasta, but I do.”

“When you stay in the egg monster?” I ask as I eat another noodle.

He scrunches his brows. “Egg monster?”

I wave toward the back door. “The metal monster that stays here.”

“Oh! The camper. No, I don’t make pasta when I’m in the camper. I just don’t really have the space for it. But I do at the apartment.”

“A-part-ment?” I have to test the word out loud slowly.

“Where I live until the house is done. It’s a bunch of living spaces all together, like a neighborhood inside the same building.”

“Do you like your a-part-ment?”

“It’s fine, but I’m excited for the house. It’s just up the road and should be done by Halloween.”

“Hal-o-ween?”

“Another human tradition. Kids dress up and go house to house for candy. We call it trick or treating, but there’s not really any tricking in it anymore.”

“Humans seem to have fun traditions.”

“We do.” Eli gives me a soft smile and goes back to eating his pos-ta.

It’s a pleasant silence as we eat.

“I don’t usually eat with someone. Sometimes, Frisk will join me when I’m foraging, but more often than not, I’m alone.” And it gets lonely sometimes with just animals and my babies to talk to.

“Would you like to eat with me? I can bring food from the apartment or make food here and we can share the meal.”

“I can bring food, too,” I say. “I’m very good with hunting for mushrooms, and berries, and other things. I know it’s all safe for humans too.”

Eli nods. “I’d like that then. I can share human things with you and—”

“I can share nymph things with you!” Oh, I like this very much.

Eli leans closer to me. “Have you ever really talked with humans?”

“No, you’re the first. I’ve watched you and Jordan, then Karla, that tree guy, the people that came today. But Mother said to stay away from humans, so I have.”

“I wish I knew wood nymphs were real.”

“Now you do. So are fauns and satyrs, both are kind of mean sometimes. Dragons are nice depending on what kind you talk to. I’m fond of the forest dragons for obvious reasons. Most speak human languages, but I think English is weird. Squirrel and goat is easier to wrap my tongue around.”

“So you really do talk animal languages.”

“I speak the language of the forest, and each one has their own. My mother’s forest is a bit more melodic than mine. My trees are childlike. Though Mother’s forest is hundreds of years older than mine.” I press a hand to my chest. “I know each of my trees’s song as if it came from my own soul.”

“That’s beautiful.”

We finish our food, and I follow Eli back to the kitchen to clean up. He does what he needs with the left over pos-ta and I just watch. I like the simplicity of foraging. There’s no cleanup. I don’t have dishes to deal with or leftovers to pack up. I can just go about my day. But it does take a lot out of me to forage sometimes. Maybe human food can help with that.

“So the egg monster is a cam-per. What is the growling monster you ride in on?”

Eli snorts as he hands me a plate to dry. He had to show me what he meant before we got started.

“That’s my truck. It’s a vehicle. All the other growling monsters are vehicles.”

“Vee-hick-el.” Such a strange word. “I like the goats.”

Eli snorts again. “I do too. They’re adorable. And thank you again for saving them from the wolf.”

“The pack knows better. I had to sass Gilbert before he let me pick him up. He didn’t want to hop back over.”

Eli’s lips twitch, and he lets out a burst of laughter. “Gilbert? A wolf named Gilbert? Are you naming them?”

“I am.” But I’m not sure where the names come from. I hear them on the wind. “Every animal and tree I speak with has a name.”

“I love that. I named rocks when I was a kid.”

“Rocks have spirits too, but it takes a while to get answers. Sometimes, I’ll ask a stone a question, take a walk, then three days later I finally get the answer. They’re not as fun as animals, but I love them too.”

“Do you take care of everyone?” Eli asks.

“Everyone in my forest that needs it. I usually direct the wolves to other places if I can. I know they need to eat too, and I don’t blame them for their needs. I just don’t like watching them eat my friends, and the goats are my friends.”

“Mine, too.”

“They like you incase you were wondering,” I say. “The little one named Boots likes you quite a bit. She wants to sleep in your egg monster with you. She promises she’ll be good.”

“She said all that?”

I nod. “She wants adventure. Her siblings and mother are content to stay in the barn. They even wish her luck when she acts like she’s going to live with you or come with me. I can’t take her, though.”

“Maybe I’ll get her a little outfit, and she can stay inside with me.”

“Clothes are weird. I don’t know if she’d like that.” I tug on my shirt again. The cloth is soft, but I don’t think I’d want to wear something all the time. “Do I really have to wear clothes around humans?”

“I’d prefer it yes if you don’t mind. Most humans around here aren’t used to having people run around naked.”

“But I’ve been naked my entire life.”

“You can run around naked when no one’s around. But when the growling monsters come down the street, please wrap something around your waist. If you don’t mind. I know you’re not human, and I don’t expect you to follow human rules. But humans can be prudes.”

“Thank you. And truly, I’m so sorry for… everything.” I whisper the last word. I was so horrible to Eli. “You shouldn’t forgive me.”

“But I already have. We’ve cleared everything up, right? You understand I’m not chopping down the trees.”

“Yes. I’m so foolish.” My cheeks are so hot.

“You didn’t know. I suspect you don’t read?”

“I haven’t had any reason to know how to read human languages.”

“I understand that. It’s kind of like I don’t have a reason to learn French. But anyway, I have a sign with information on the type of farm this is. Lory Sustainable Christmas Tree Farm. You Pick It, We Pot It, Deliver, and Retrieve It. Repeat Again and Again.” Eli makes a funny face. “That is a whole mouthful.”

I guess it does explain things, but I’m not sure I would have understood even if I could read human languages.

“But the main takeaway, Rowan, is we don’t cut down the trees here. And I hope I can prove to be a human you can trust.”

“You’re starting to be.” I duck my head, but the action almost smacks Eli in the head with my antlers, and we both step back awkwardly. I trip

over something I hadn’t noticed before, and branches sprout from my shoulders and reach for the counters to help keep me from falling.

“Oh!” Eli’s eyes go so wide as he looks me over. I’ve torn the shirt he’d given me, and it slides down my chest.

“I’m sorry!” I say as I try to keep the shirt from falling.

“Don’t be. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. The branches sometimes happen when I’m excited or something.” Like falling in front of a handsome human. Slowly, the branches retreat into my flesh. “Are *you* okay?”

“Perfectly fine.” A yawn escapes him, and he shakes his head.

“Are you going to sleep in the egg monster tonight?”

“As long as you don’t plan on sending the squirrels after me again.” Eli gives me a bit of side eye, but the smile tells me he’s joking. Probably.

“No squirrels ever again, I promise.” Unless I think they can help with something.

“Perfect. Thank you for letting me clear things up. I hope we can be friends.”

“I’d like that,” I say. I can’t imagine what Mother will say to me about having a human friend.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN
ELI

For the last three days, Rowan's been waiting for me right outside my camper when I wake up. He wears a bedsheet I gave him, so he doesn't have to wear clothes that don't fit. I ordered a few outfits that should fit him, and will be here in a few more days. I'm not sure if he'll be excited or annoyed by them. But at least he won't scare any of the old folks that show up when I'm fully open. Or parents with their kids.

The coffee maker gurgles in the background as I dress, trying not to make the camper move too much.

I peek out the door window, and right now, Rowan sits in his usual spot. Frisk sits on his knee, and they're having an animated conversation about something. It's so fucking cute I can't help watching through the door until Rowan spots me. He waves as he pushes to his feet, and Frisk jumps up to Rowan's shoulder. I hold up a finger before turning back to the coffeemaker to make my cup of morning Joe. As much as I love waking up to Rowan right outside, I still need the pick-me-up.

I open the camper door and step outside. The rain didn't last long, thank goodness, but I haven't had time to go on any of the adventures Rowan has suggested over the last few days.

"Would you like to meet the trees today?" Rowan's bedsheet slips from his shoulder, and he frowns. "Can I take this off?"

I swallow. "Of course. I want you to be comfortable."

Rowan nods, but instead of stripping the bedsheet entirely off, he rearranges it so it just wraps around his waist. "I'm still trying to figure out how to fashion it so that it's not annoying."

“I’m sorry. I have more comfortable clothes coming for you. But when it’s just us, you really don’t have to wear anything.” I don’t know why I say it.

“But it’s just weird if I’m naked and you wear clothes.”

I choke on my sip of coffee. “You want me naked?”

Rowan tips his head, considering the question. “Yes? Why not?”

Why not indeed? “Not today.” But someday.

“Okay.” Rowan leans down and almost knocks me in the face with his antlers. “Oh, no! I’m sorry! I just wanted to sniff the cof-fee.”

I remove the lid of my travel mug and hold the drink in the air. “Sniff away, my friend. Would you like to try it this morning?”

Instead of answering, he takes the travel mug from my hand and brings it to his lips. He sniffs it a couple of times and narrows his eyes. “It smells good, but I don’t trust it.”

“I put a lot of cream and sugar in it, so it’s not bitter.”

He gives it another few sniffs, then takes a gulp. And another. And another. And another.

“Oh no, I drank it all. But it was so warm and felt good going down.” He looks horrified that he drank the entire mug.

“Don’t worry about it. I have plenty more. Would you like your own?”

“Can I?”

I hold up a finger. “One sec. I’ll go make some more.” I climb back into the camper and start a full pot of coffee. I should probably find a bigger travel mug because mine looked so small in his hand. He’s gotta be taller than seven feet, especially with those antlers. It’s not a full rack like a buck, but they aren’t super tiny either.

There’s a knock at my door right before Rowan tries to maneuver himself through. His head’s across the threshold, but he stops before entering entirely and kneels on the steps. His shoulders are wider than the opening. Frisk runs up his back and sits on top of Rowan’s head.

“I’d rather the woodland critters not come in again.” I waggle a finger at the squirrel, and Rowan snorts.

“He knows better. I told all the animals we’re friends now. The trees sassed me because they’ve been telling me to talk to you for weeks.” His skin flushes all the way down his chest and up to his pointed ears. “It’s so small in here.” He pouts, but it’s short-lived.

His attention shifts to the kitchen, where the coffee maker sputters through the last of its brewing cycle. Rowan leans farther inside, and I reach out to steady him when one of his antlers comes dangerously close to the doorframe.

“Careful. I don’t want you getting stuck.”

“I won’t get stuck.” He attempts to straighten, bumps his shoulder against the frame, and gives me an offended look. “Your home is very inconvenient.”

“It’s not designed for someone your size.” I grab another mug from the cabinet and fill it with coffee, adding plenty of cream and sugar. “Besides, I wasn’t expecting a wood nymph to come along and complain about my accommodations.”

Rowan smiles, and there’s something about the way his eyes crinkle that makes my stomach do a ridiculous little flip.

I hand him the mug, warning him that it’s hot. He accepts it with both hands, takes a cautious sip, and makes a pleased little humming noise. Frisk immediately stretches down from his head to investigate.

“No,” Rowan tells him, gently nudging the squirrel away. “You wouldn’t like it.”

Frisk chatters something that sounds suspiciously argumentative before disappearing over Rowan’s shoulder.

I finish preparing my own coffee and grab my jacket from the hook beside the door. Rowan backs away to let me out, his bare feet sinking into the damp grass as he steps off the gravel. The morning air carries the smell of wet earth and pine, and the clouds have finally broken enough to let a little sunshine through.

“So, these trees you want me to meet. Are they the ones who’ve been telling you to talk to me?”

“Some of them.” Rowan takes another drink, looking rather pleased with himself. “Beatrice has been very annoying about it.”

“Beatrice?” My lips twitch of their own accord. A tree named Beatrice?

“One of *your* trees. She’s very opinionated.”

Rowan starts toward the nearest row of evergreens, and I follow with my coffee. He’s barefoot, wearing nothing but a bedsheet around his waist, and somehow looks more comfortable walking through the chilly morning than I do bundled up in jeans and a jacket.

The farm is quiet this early. Henry won't be here for another hour, and the goats are still in their barn. I have plenty to do before we open, but Rowan has been asking me to meet the trees for days. It wouldn't hurt to spend a little time with him before work.

Besides, I want to know what my trees have been saying about me.

Rowan slows beside a full blue spruce and places his palm against its trunk. His face softens, and for a moment, he seems to forget I'm standing beside him.

"Good morning, Beatrice," he murmurs. "I brought Eli."

A breeze stirs the branches, even though the surrounding trees remain still. One of the lower boughs dips toward Rowan, brushing against his bare shoulder.

I stop walking.

"Did she just move?"

Rowan glances over his shoulder. "Of course. She's saying hello."

The branch moves again, this time toward me. I stare at it before cautiously reaching out to touch the needles. They're cool and slightly damp, and when my fingers brush them, the entire branch gives a little shiver.

"Holy shit."

Rowan laughs, the sound carrying through the quiet rows. "She likes you."

"She does?"

"Very much. She's been watching you care for everyone for years."

I look up at the tree. Beatrice is one of the older spruces on the property, and I've spent plenty of time tending her. She's grown beautifully, although I've never understood why she seems to thrive better than some of the others planted around the same time.

Now I have a pretty good idea.

"Is that because of you?" I ask Rowan. "The way everything grows here?"

He brushes his fingers along Beatrice's trunk. "I help when they need it. Sometimes the soil needs more nutrients, or their roots get tangled with something they don't like. But they do most of the growing themselves."

I think about all the years I've spent worrying over the trees, checking for disease, making sure they have enough water. The possibility that Rowan has been helping without my knowledge makes my chest tighten.

“You’ve been taking care of them this whole time.”

“They’re my family.” He says it so simply that I can’t help smiling.

Beatrice’s branches sway, and Rowan suddenly looks toward her with a frown.

“No, I’m not telling him that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Telling me what?”

“Nothing important.”

“Rowan.”

His cheeks turn pink. “She thinks you’re handsome.”

I blink. “The tree thinks I’m handsome?”

“She’s not the only one,” he mutters.

My heart gives a hard thump. Before I can figure out what to say, Rowan turns away and starts walking toward the next row.

Well, fuck me.

I hurry after him, trying to ignore the grin threatening to split my face.

For the next half hour, Rowan introduces me to trees I’ve spent years tending without knowing they had names, personalities, or opinions about how I run the farm. A spruce near the end of the row gets so excited when Rowan introduces us that she shakes her needles all over my jacket.

Rowan apologizes while trying not to laugh, and I find myself laughing right along with him.

It’s strange, realizing the trees have been aware of me all this time. I’ve talked to them plenty, usually while checking their branches or complaining about something going wrong around the farm. Now, I’m wondering how much they’ve understood.

We reach a clearing where several of the younger trees are growing, and Rowan stops beside a small pine. Its needles are a lighter green than the others, and its branches droop slightly toward the ground.

His smile fades.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Rowan kneels and presses both hands against the soil. His eyes close, and the air around us grows unusually still. I watch his fingers sink into the damp earth, followed by thin, delicate roots that emerge from beneath his skin. Watching him connect with a tree is magical.

After a few moments, the pine’s branches lift.

“There,” he whispers. “That should help.”

I crouch beside him. “What happened?”

“Her roots were having trouble getting enough water. The ground underneath is too compacted.” He brushes loose soil around the trunk. “I loosened it, but she might need some extra attention.”

“I can take care of that.” I study the little tree, already making a mental note to check the drainage in this section. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Rowan looks at me, his face uncertain. “I didn’t know I could.”

“You can now.” I rest a hand on his shoulder. His skin is warm beneath my palm, and he looks down at where I’m touching him. “If something’s wrong with any of them, tell me. We’ll figure it out together.”

His gaze returns to mine, and the smile he gives me is so sweet it makes my chest ache.

“Together,” he repeats.

I don’t move my hand right away. Neither does he.

Somewhere above us, Frisk starts chattering from a branch, breaking the moment. Rowan looks up and scowls.

“That’s enough out of you.”

“What’d he say?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m beginning to think everyone in these woods has something to say about me.”

“They do.” Rowan stands and offers me his hand. “*Most* of it’s good.”

I take it, and he pulls me to my feet with surprising ease. His fingers linger around mine before he reluctantly lets go.

We start back toward the camper, taking the longer path through the trees. Rowan points out a few more of his favorites, including one that complains whenever the goats wander too close to its branches. I promise to keep an eye on them, although I’m not sure how much influence I have over five goats determined to eat everything they can reach when I let them out to roam. Obviously they have supervision, I just feel bad keeping them cooped up in their pen or the barn.

When the camper comes into view, I check the time on my phone. Henry should be arriving soon, and I still have a list of things to accomplish before opening day.

Rowan notices me looking at the screen. “Do you have to work?”

“Unfortunately.” I tuck my phone away. “But I enjoyed meeting everyone.”

His face lights up. “We can visit more tomorrow.”

“I’d like that.”

He steps closer, and I tilt my head back to look at him. The sunlight catches the green-brown strands of his hair, and a few leaves have gotten tangled around the base of one antler. Without thinking, I reach up to remove them.

Rowan goes completely still.

“Sorry.” I lower my hand. “You had leaves in your hair.”

“You can touch me.”

The words come out so quietly I almost miss them.

Rowan’s cheeks are pink, but he doesn’t look away. His gaze drops briefly to my mouth before returning to my eyes.

My pulse picks up. I reach for his hand instead, curling my fingers around his much larger ones. His smile returns immediately, and he gives my hand a gentle squeeze.

“Would you like to have dinner again with me tonight?” I ask. “I was thinking we could eat together after I finish working.”

Rowan’s face brightens. “Can we have more coffee? And pos-ta?”

I laugh. “I think you’ve had enough coffee for one morning. But I’ll make you something good to eat.”

“Then yes.” He looks down at our joined hands, rubbing his thumb across my knuckles. “I’d like that very much.”

A car door slams somewhere near the barn, followed by Henry calling my name. I reluctantly release Rowan’s hand and turn toward the sound.

“I’d better go.”

Rowan nods, although he doesn’t move away immediately. His gaze drops to my hand before returning to my face, and a small smile tugs at his lips.

“Will I see you later?”

“Of course.” I smile back. “You still owe me dinner company.”

“I’ll be here.”

I watch him head toward the trees, Frisk racing along the branches above him. Just before Rowan disappears into the forest, he glances over his shoulder and gives me one last smile.

I stand there a moment longer than necessary, already looking forward to tonight.

Well, I’m definitely in trouble.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN
ROWAN

The problem with having a human friend is that I want to spend all my time with him. I've never had that problem before. My trees are always here, the animals come and go, and there's usually something in the forest that needs my attention. I've never had to wonder when I'll see someone again because I can reach out through the roots and find most of my loved ones whenever I please.

Eli is different. I can't hear him through the earth, and no matter how much I try, I can't tell what he's thinking. This morning, he held my hand, and now I keep remembering the warmth of his fingers wrapped around mine.

I look down at my hand and rub my thumb across my palm.

"You're doing it again," Beatrice says.

I stop walking and glare at her. "Doing what?"

"Thinking about Eli."

"I'm allowed to think about Eli. He's my friend."

Her branches sway overhead, scattering a few needles onto my shoulder. I brush them away and continue toward the younger trees, where Frisk is busy investigating a hole beneath an old stump.

I have work to do, and I've already spent too much of the morning thinking about Eli. Besides, I promised to meet him for dinner tonight. There's no reason to keep thinking about him when I know I'll see him again. Except I want to.

I sigh and press my hand against the nearest trunk. A gentle song rises through my palm, telling me the little spruce is healthy and content. I follow

the melody down into her roots, checking for anything that might need my attention. Everything is exactly how it should be.

I move on to the next tree, then the next, letting their songs settle around me. Usually, tending my forest leaves me feeling peaceful. Today, I keep losing track of what I'm doing whenever I hear a human voice in the distance. Eli's voice. I can recognize it even when I can't make out his words.

Frisk finally emerges from beneath the stump with dirt covering his whiskers. He scampers up my leg and settles on my shoulder, where he immediately begins cleaning his face.

"Did you find anything interesting?" I ask.

He chatters about a collection of acorns someone has hidden beneath the roots. He describes the discovery, although my attention wanders when I hear a loud clatter from the direction of the barn.

"Do you think Eli needs help?"

Frisk stops grooming himself and gives me a long look.

"What? He might."

The squirrel makes a sound that's suspiciously close to laughter before jumping onto a nearby branch.

Fine. Perhaps I am being a little ridiculous.

I return to my work, following a narrow trail toward the edge of the forest. The trees here are younger, planted in neat rows with enough space between them for the wagons Eli uses. I've never liked how straight everything is, but the saplings seem happy. Some even enjoy having their own space instead of competing with their neighbors for sunlight.

A small pine calls to me as I pass, complaining that something is scratching her trunk. I crouch beside her and discover a piece of wire half buried in the soil. One end has caught against her bark, and every time the wind moves her branches, it scrapes against the same spot.

"Oh, sweetheart. That doesn't look comfortable."

I work the wire loose, careful not to damage her roots, and carry it toward the edge of the path. Eli has containers for things humans don't want lying around, so I'll give it to him later.

The pine hums happily when I return. I smooth my fingers over the damaged bark and encourage the tender wood beneath to begin healing.

"There. That should feel better."

"Rowan?"

Eli stands several feet away, wearing a dark jacket and muddy boots. His long hair is a little messy, and there's a smudge of dirt across one cheek. He's holding a long measuring tape in one hand and a folded piece of paper in the other.

My chest does that strange fluttering thing again.

"Hello!" I straighten, nearly dropping the wire. "I thought you were working."

"I am." He smiles and lifts the measuring tape. "I was checking the paths before we get everything set up for customers. Jordan's helping near the barn, but I wanted to look at this section myself."

I glance at the paper. "Is something wrong?"

"Not really. I just need to make sure there's enough room for people to walk without getting in the way of the wagons." He notices the wire in my hand. "What's that?"

I explain where I found it.

"Damn. That must've been left over from when we put in the supports." He takes it carefully. "Thanks for finding it. I'll make sure Jordan and I check for anything else."

"She's going to be fine. I helped her heal."

"Thank you." Eli looks toward the little pine, then back at me. "Actually, since you're here, would you mind helping me with something?"

I don't even have to think about it. "I'd love to."

He laughs softly. "You haven't heard what it is yet."

"Doesn't matter."

Something about my answer makes him smile even wider. He folds the wire into his paper so he can dispose of it later, then leads me toward the main path.

Eli explains that he wants to put up signs directing customers through the farm. Some will tell them where to find the different kinds of trees, while others will remind them to stay on the paths. He's worried about people wandering into areas where the ground is uneven or where younger trees might get damaged.

"We can ask the trees where they'd like the signs," I say.

Eli stops and looks at me. "We can do that?"

"Of course. They know which places are comfortable for them."

He glances around at the rows of evergreens. "I suppose I've never thought about asking."

“Well, you couldn’t have asked before.” I reach for his sleeve, then hesitate. “Come on. I know where we should start.”

He looks down at my hand before offering me his. I take it. His hand is warm despite the chilly air, and his fingers fit comfortably between mine. I don’t want to let go when we reach the first tree, but Eli needs both hands to unfold his paper.

I settle for standing beside him while he shows me the places he’s marked.

The first sign is supposed to go near a large spruce at the beginning of the path. I press my palm against her trunk and explain what Eli wants to do. She considers the idea before telling me she’d rather have the sign on the other side, where the ground is firmer.

“She says you can put it over there.” I point toward a patch of grass. “But not too close to her roots.”

Eli examines the ground and nods. “That works. It’ll be easier to see from the wagon, too.”

He makes a mark on the paper, and we move on.

For the next little while, we work our way through the rows, checking the places Eli has chosen. Most of the trees don’t mind the signs, although one insists that a post would ruin the view of his branches. Eli agrees to move it several feet, and the tree immediately begins boasting to his neighbors about how important his opinion is.

I try not to laugh.

Eli catches me smiling. “What?”

“Nothing. He’s just very pleased with himself.”

“Glad somebody is.” Eli studies his paper, then looks toward a narrow section of the path. “This is the part I’m worried about.”

The ground slopes gently between two rows of trees, and the rain has left a muddy patch where water collects. It isn’t dangerous for me, but I can understand why Eli wouldn’t want humans slipping while carrying things.

He crouches and presses his fingers into the mud. “I thought this would drain better after we cleared the ditch, but it’s still holding water.”

I kneel beside him, gathering the bedsheet around my legs so it doesn’t drag through the mud. I’ve grown used to the fabric around my waist, although the knot keeps pressing against my hip whenever I bend.

“Can I try something?”

“Sure.”

I place my hands against the earth and let my roots slip beneath the surface. The soil is heavy with moisture, but deeper down, I find a layer of packed clay that prevents the water from moving where it should.

I could break through it, but the roots of several young trees are tangled nearby. I don’t want to disturb them.

Instead, I follow the natural slope until I find a place where the ground opens toward a shallow ditch. It takes a little effort to loosen the compacted earth without damaging anything, but eventually the water begins to seep away.

Eli watches the mud settle around my fingers.

“That’s incredible.”

I smile, pleased by his reaction. “It should help, but you’ll probably need to put something on top so humans don’t sink into it.”

“Gravel,” he says. “I have some left over near the barn. We can spread it over the path once the water drains.”

He rises and offers me a hand. I take it, and he helps me to my feet even though I’m much larger than he is. I don’t need assistance, but I enjoy the way he keeps hold of me until I’m steady.

“Want to help me bring some over?” he asks.

I nod, and we head toward the barn. The goats make their usual complaints about the injustice of not being fed every moment of the day.

Eli walks beside me. I like hearing him talk about his plans. His voice changes when he describes the things he’s excited about, and he uses his hands to show me where everything will go. I’ve watched him work for years, but I never knew how much thought he put into every little detail.

When we reach the barn, Jordan is stacking empty crates beside the door. He looks up, notices me, and nearly drops the one he’s carrying.

“Holy shit.”

I stop walking.

Eli sighs. “Jordan, this is Rowan. Rowan, Jordan.”

Jordan stares at me for another moment before setting the crate down. His eyes move over my antlers and the sheet tied around my waist.

“Uh. Nice to finally meet you. Eli says you’re not actually a menace, but I’m not sure yet. You caused a lot of trouble for him.”

Eli turns red. “We’ve cleared all that up. Rowan is an asset. He probably knows the property better than anyone.”

Jordan looks between us but doesn’t say anything else at first. “Okay, then. If my brother thinks you’re not trouble, then I trust him. But the second you go back to your sabotaging ways—”

I hold up my hands. “It was all a big misunderstanding. I promise I’ll only do good from here on out.” I plead with my eyes, hoping he believes me.

“Fine.” Jordan rolls his eyes. “But I’ve got my eyes on you. And that squirrel you’re always with.”

Eli snorts. “Will you calm down? We’re here for the leftover gravel. We’re fixing the muddy section on the east path.”

“Wheelbarrow’s free.” Jordan gestures toward it.

Eli thanks Jordan, and we load the wheelbarrow. Jordan raises his eyebrows when I pick up two bags at once.

“Remind me never to challenge you to arm wrestling.”

“What’s arm wrestling?”

Eli snorts, but Jordan only grins. Humans are strange.

I take the wheelbarrow handles, struggling a little with how low they are. Eli helps me balance it, and we set off with Frisk racing alongside us. Halfway there, the wheel catches in a rut, and the whole thing tips. Eli grabs one handle while I catch the other, but my sheet gets trapped beneath the support.

“Wait! My clothes!”

Eli looks at the fabric twisted around my legs and bursts out laughing. I glare at him until he sets the wheelbarrow down and frees my sheet.

“Sorry.” He helps me straighten it, still chuckling. “Hopefully, your new clothes arrive soon.”

“I hope so. This thing is a annoying.”

Eli laughs again, and we finish the trip without further trouble. We spread the gravel over the damp ground, and Eli shows me how to level it with a rake. I help settle the stones into the soil so they won’t shift when people walk over them.

By the time we’re finished, the path looks much better.

Eli tests it by walking back and forth several times. His boots leave only shallow impressions, and he gives me a satisfied smile.

“Perfect. That’ll make things a lot easier when we open.”

I look down at the path, pleased that I’ve helped him accomplish something. For years, I’ve been tending the forest while Eli worked around

me, neither of us knowing what the other was doing. Now, we're looking at something we fixed together. It's a lovely feeling.

"Thank you for letting me help," I tell him.

Eli rests the rake against a nearby tree. "You don't have to thank me, Rowan. I appreciate it."

I look toward the rows of evergreens stretching into the distance. "I've always wanted to help you. Well, before I thought you were hurting my babies."

He gives me a gentle smile. "I'm glad we cleared that up."

"Me too."

A breeze moves through the branches overhead, carrying the familiar songs of my forest. Beatrice sings in the distance, asking whether I'm going to spend the entire day following Eli around. I ignore her.

Eli brushes dirt from his hands and glances toward the barn. "I've got a few more things to finish before tonight. You still want to come over for dinner?"

My chest warms at the reminder. "Yes. Very much."

"Good." He reaches out and brushes a bit of gravel dust from my forearm. "I'll see you later, then." His fingers linger for a moment before he pulls away.

I watch him head back toward the barn, where Jordan waits with another stack of crates. Eli turns once and gives me a wave, and I return it before making my way toward the trees.

The forest welcomes me with its usual songs. Beatrice rustles her branches when I pass.

"Did you enjoy your afternoon?"

I rest my hand against her trunk and smile. "Very much."

She hums knowingly, this time I don't argue with her.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN
ELI

Rowan has become part of my daily routine quickly. He shows up every morning, usually with Frisk riding on his shoulder, and asks what he can do to help. We've had dinner together four times, and I've discovered that he loves garlic bread, mushrooms, and thinks coffee should be served with every meal. Maybe I created a coffee monster, but I can't deny him if I wanted to.

I've also learned that he has *no* concept of personal space. Not that I'm complaining. Yesterday, while I was repairing a section of fencing near the goat pen, he leaned over me to see what I was doing. His hair brushed my cheek, and he smelled faintly of pine and damp earth. I spent so long concentrating on how close he was that I nearly hammered my thumb instead of the nail. Rowan noticed, of course, and gently took the hammer from me, insisting he could finish the job while I rested. I didn't have the heart to tell him he was the reason I couldn't concentrate in the first place.

Today, he's standing beside me in the pumpkin patch, looking offended by his pants.

"I don't understand why they have to be so tight."

"They're not tight." I glance at him. "They're actually a little loose."

"They touch my legs." He hops around and dances, probably hoping the action will loosen the fabric.

It's so hard not to laugh. "That's generally what pants do."

He pulls at the fabric around his thighs and groans. At least, he doesn't complain about his shirts. Button-up shirts are much easier than t-shirts because of his antlers.

Today, we accidentally match. He's wearing a dark green flannel with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. The shirt hangs open at the throat, revealing a little of the bark-like pattern covering his chest. He looks comfortable enough, apart from his ongoing disagreement with the pants.

He also looks unfairly good. I turn my attention back to the pumpkins before he catches me staring.

"Anyway, Halloween is Saturday, and we're expecting a pretty big crowd. Jordan's handling the wagon rides and Karla's going to keep an eye on the goats."

Rowan glances toward the barn. "Can I help too?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you. We're setting up decorations today, and on Saturday, I could use another person handing out candy."

His face brightens. "Do I need a cos-tomb?"

I look him over, taking in his antlers, green-brown hair, and the skin visible above his collar. I remind myself he asked me a question. "I think you're already covered."

He glances down at his clothes. "Good. I don't want to wear anything else."

My mind helpfully supplies an image of him naked, and I turn toward the barn before he notices my face heating. "Come on. We've got decorations to put up."

He follows, tugging at his waistband again, completely unaware of what he's doing to me.

Inside, I open a plastic storage bin filled with decorations. Fake spiderwebs, plastic skeletons, strings of orange lights, and a ridiculous number of rubber bats. Rowan crouches beside me and picks up one of the bats, examining its wings before turning it over to inspect its face.

"This is a horrible bat. Whoever made it has never met one." He places it carefully on the floor, looking disappointed. "Bats are much, much cuter."

It takes everything in me not to laugh, so I grab one of the bags of candy from the stack of Halloween supplies beside the workbench. Rowan immediately abandons the bat and leans closer as I open the bag, revealing dozens of individually wrapped chocolates.

"This is some of the candy we'll pass out," I explain, unwrapping one and offering it to him.

He takes it between two fingers and pops it into his mouth. His eyes widen as he chews slowly. "That's wonderful." He grabs the bag and

clutches it to his chest.

“Yep. I have tons more, so we shouldn’t run out.” Rowan can have that bag if he wants it. “Don’t feed any of it to the animals. I know chocolate is bad for dogs, but I don’t know about other critters.”

His eyes go wide again, and he hands me back the bag. “I won’t chance it.”

I can’t help smiling and give him another chocolate before closing the bag. “Come on. We need to get the decorations set up before Jordan comes looking for me.”

We spend the next several hours hanging lights around the barn and arranging pumpkins near the entrance. Of course, only pumpkins that Rowan approved of . He’d talked to the entire pumpkin patch, and most of them were delighted to be part of Halloween, even after Rowan explained jack-o’-lanterns and pumpkin pies.

We’ve finished most of the decorating by late afternoon. Jordan wanders over to inspect our progress and immediately notices Rowan’s handiwork.

I give him a warning look before he can say anything. He’s been remarkably accepting of Rowan since their official introduction, although I still catch him staring at the antlers whenever he thinks Rowan isn’t paying attention.

“So,” Jordan says, turning toward me, “what are we doing about his costume?” Jordan looks him over. “You really don’t need a costume. You already look like some kind of forest spirit. People are going to love it.”

“I *am* a wood nymph.” Rowan crosses his arms across his chest and cocks out a hip.

Jordan chuckles, gives Rowan an amused shake of his head, and heads back toward the wagon shed. Rowan watches him go before turning to me, his fingers moving to one of his antlers.

“Will the children be scared of me?”

The question catches me off guard. “Why would they be?”

“I’m much bigger than they are. And I don’t really look human.”

I take in his worried face. “Some might be a little nervous at first. But I think the kids will love you.”

He studies the pumpkins arranged around the barn entrance. “I want to help. I just don’t want to scare anyone.”

I reach for his hand, and he takes it without hesitation. “Then, we’ll figure it out together. You can help me hand out candy, and if it gets overwhelming, we’ll take a break.”

His smile is small, but it makes my heart do something ridiculous. Neither of us moves. The barn is quiet except for the soft rustling of hay and the distant bleating of a goat wanting attention. Rowan stands close enough that I can see the delicate patterns in his skin, the way they curve along his neck and disappear beneath his shirt.

I wonder what it would feel like to trace them with my fingers. The thought makes my face warm.

Rowan tilts his head. “Eli? Are you all right?”

“Fine.” I clear my throat. “Just thinking about Saturday.”

He gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too.” And I am, although I’m beginning to suspect that the thing I’m looking forward to most has very little to do with Halloween.

❄

Saturday is bright with clear skies, and crisp air. There are so many visitors I’m glad we we hired extra help for the afternoon. By two o’clock, the pumpkin patch is crowded with families. Children race between the displays in costumes ranging from princesses to monsters, while their parents take pictures and try to keep everyone from wandering into the trees.

Rowan stands beside me near the barn, holding a large bowl of candy. He’s been watching the children for the past ten minutes, his face shifts between fascination and delight. A little girl dressed as a butterfly waves at him from her father’s shoulders, and Rowan waves back so enthusiastically that several pieces of candy tumble out of the bowl.

I catch the candy before it hits the ground, and Rowan grins at me. “She has wings!”

“I noticed.” I smile at his excitement just as a little boy dressed as a dinosaur approaches, staring up at Rowan’s antlers.

“Are those real?”

“Yes,” Rowan answers, touching one.

“They’re part of his costume,” I quickly add.

The boy grins, and Rowan crouches to offer him candy. When the child hesitantly takes one piece, Rowan encourages him to take more, dropping several chocolates into his little bucket.

“Rowan, we’re supposed to give them one or two pieces each.”

“But he was so polite.” Rowan watches the boy hurry back to his mother, then turns to me with a delighted smile. “Did you see how happy he was?”

I look at his beaming face and decide we can always open another bag.

He hands out candy and compliments every costume, asks children about their favorite animals, and becomes so excited when a little girl dressed as a tree approaches.

Her costume consists of a brown tunic covered in felt leaves and a headband with branches attached. Rowan kneels in front of her, examining the leaves with genuine admiration.

“You’re beautiful,” he tells her.

She giggles. “I’m a tree! What are you?”

“A wood nymph.”

“Like a fairy?” She reaches up to touch his antlers, but her mother quickly apologizes.

“It’s all right,” Rowan assures her, dropping several chocolates into the girl’s bucket. When she skips away, he turns to me with a delighted smile.

“She liked me.”

I squeeze his arm. “What’s not to like?”

He smiles so brightly that I forget what I was about to say.

“I like Halloween.”

I laugh. “I had a feeling you might.”

By the time the last families begin heading home, the sky has darkened, and the orange lights around the barn glow against the evening shadows. Jordan finishes the final wagon ride, and Karla settles the goats for the night.

Rowan and I sit on a hay bale, sharing the few pieces of candy left in the bowl. He’s finally stopped tugging at his pants.

“Did you have fun?” I ask.

He nods, unwrapping another chocolate. “The children were wonderful.” Rowan leans against me, his shoulder warm and solid against mine. I don’t move away.

For a while, we sit together, listening to the distant sounds of the farm settling down for the evening. A cool breeze moves through the trees, carrying the scent of fallen leaves and wood smoke from the firepit near the pumpkin patch.

“Thank you for letting me be part of this,” Rowan says quietly.

“You don’t have to keep thanking me.”

He looks at the glowing lights. “I could have sabotaged all of this without even knowing you. I’m sorry.”

Something tightens in my chest. “You don’t have to keep apologizing.”

He laughs softly, and his fingers find mine on the hay bale. I lace them together, content to sit beside him while the last of the Halloween lights glow around us.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN
ROWAN

Helping people choose Chris-mas trees is one of my favorite things ever. I used to dread the thought of people wandering among my babies, but now I look forward to meeting them. I helped Eli prepare a special section of the farm where families can choose their trees and arrange to return them after Chris-mas. The best part is that my babies get to choose, too.

We've been busy since Eli opened the Chris-mas tree section right after Halloween. The farm is decorated with twinkling lights, colorful ribbons, and wreaths made from fallen branches. The bakery smells wonderful, filling the crisp November air with cinnamon and freshly baked bread, and the goats love the attention they get and the treats Karla sells for them. I've even grown accustomed to people stopping to admire my antlers. Most think they're part of a cos-tomb, and Eli says there's no reason to correct them.

Today, a little boy in a red coat stands beside his parents, staring at the largest spruce on the farm. He bounces on his toes, his mittened hands clasped beneath his chin.

"That one!" he announces, pointing at her. "I want that one!"

I glance at the tree, who immediately begins complaining.

"No. That child looks exhausting."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. Clarice has been difficult this morning, insisting that she wants a quiet house with plenty of sunlight and no pets. Unfortunately, the little boy appears to have more energy than a puppy.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" I ask, crouching beside him.

He nods enthusiastically. "She's *huge*!"

“She certainly is.” I glance toward a smaller spruce a few feet away. Her branches are slightly uneven, and her trunk has a gentle curve near the bottom. She’s been singing excitedly ever since the family arrived, her needles trembling despite the absence of wind.

“Pick me! Pick me! I love children!” Rebecca chants.

“Would you like to see another one?” I ask, gesturing toward the smaller tree.

The boy looks doubtful, but his mother encourages him to follow me. I lead them along the gravel path and kneel beside the little spruce, brushing a few fallen leaves away.

“This one has a wonderful shape,” I tell him. “And look at these branches. They’re *perfect* for hanging ornaments.”

The boy examines her carefully, tilting his head to one side. “She’s crooked.”

“A little,” I admit, running my fingers along the gentle curve of her trunk. “But that makes her special.”

“Tell him I’m excellent at holding decorations!” Rebecca says to me.

I gently lift one of her branches, smiling at her enthusiasm. “I think she’ll look lovely with colorful lights.”

The boy considers this before reaching out to touch her needles. He strokes the branch again.

“She’s soft!” He turns toward his parents, who have been watching us with amused smiles. “Can we get this one instead?”

His mother steps closer and examines the little spruce. “If that’s the one you want, sweetheart.”

The tree bursts into song, filling my head with such delighted music that I can’t help grinning. The boy wraps his arms around his mom. His father laughs and promises they’ll take good care of the tree.

I help them find Eli so he can arrange the rental. Rebecca’s still singing when I return to the trees.

The afternoon settles into a steady rhythm, and I’ve matched three more families with trees, including a couple who couldn’t agree on anything until I introduced them to a cheerful fir. He was delighted to hear they had two cats and promised to be very patient with them. The couple left holding hands, already discussing where they’d put him in their living room.

Not all my babies are quite so cooperative.

“You keep showing everyone that ridiculous spruce,” Torrence complains when I pass him.

“Because she *wants* to go,” I whisper, pausing to straighten a branch that has become tangled with his neighbor’s.

“I want to go.”

“You told me yesterday that you didn’t want children touching your branches.”

“I changed my mind.”

I give his trunk an affectionate pat. “I’ll add you to the list of hopefuls then.”

He grumbles something about favoritism, and I continue toward the barn, smiling to myself. Torrence has always been particular about his surroundings, but I suspect he’ll be terribly lonely if all his neighbors leave before him.

A little girl in a pink coat spots me near the entrance and immediately starts waving. Her mother is carrying a basket of baked goods, and the girl nearly pulls free of her hand in her excitement.

“It’s him! Mommy, it’s the antler man!”

I recognize her from Halloween. She was dressed as a butterfly, and I remember how beautiful her wings looked. Today, she’s wearing a knitted hat with a fluffy pom-pom that bounces every time she moves.

Her mother smiles apologetically as the girl hurries toward me. “She’s been asking when we could come back to see you.”

My chest warms. “I’m glad you did.”

The girl stops in front of me and looks up at my antlers, her eyes wide with delight. “Are you helping the trees today?”

“Of course.” I crouch so we can speak more comfortably. “Would you like to meet some of them?”

She nods eagerly, and I spend the next several minutes showing her the smaller trees near the barn. She asks about their needles, their shapes, and whether they like being decorated. I answer as carefully as I can without revealing that the trees have been offering their own opinions the entire time.

Her mother eventually chooses a lovely pine who has been hoping for a family with children. When they leave, the little girl hugs my leg before running back to her mother, calling over her shoulder that she’ll come visit me again.

Eli’s standing near the store, talking to a customer while holding a clipboard. His cheeks are pink from the cold, and he’s wearing the dark green jacket I really like. A few strands of hair have escaped beneath his hat, and he keeps pushing them away from his forehead while trying to write something down.

When he notices me watching, he smiles and lifts a hand. I wave back, my stomach doing that strange fluttering thing it always does when he looks at me.

We’ve spent nearly every day together since Halloween. Sometimes, we work around the farm, and sometimes we share dinner in his camper. I’ve learned that Eli likes to read before bed, that he worries too much about things he can’t control, and that he always makes sure I’ve eaten before asking whether I need anything else.

I’ve also discovered that I like being near him more than I like being anywhere else. Even my forest. Well, maybe not more than my forest. But it’s a *very* close competition.

I slip my hand into my pocket, feeling the smooth stone I’ve been carrying since this morning. I found it beside the creek while checking on the younger trees. It’s a beautiful little thing, dark gray with a white streak running through the middle. When I turned it toward the sunlight, the white part sparkled, and I immediately thought of Eli. I’ve been waiting all day to show him.

Unfortunately, every time I get close, someone needs his attention. The farm is busy, and Eli barely has time to finish one task before another appears. I don’t mind waiting, but I find myself checking my pocket every so often, running my thumb over the smooth surface to make sure it’s still there.

By evening, the last customers have wandered out, and Eli finally escapes to his camper. I find him sitting on the steps with a mug of coffee, looking tired but pleased. The sun is beginning to sink behind the trees, casting long shadows across the gravel, and the air has grown cold enough that I can see his breath whenever he exhales.

“There you are,” he says when he sees me. He shifts his mug to one hand and pats the step beside him. “I was wondering where you’d disappeared to.”

I settle beside him, folding my long legs awkwardly to fit on the narrow step. I adjust my position, careful not to crowd him too much. I’ve learned

that humans prefer a little space, although Eli never seems bothered when I sit close. Sometimes, he even moves nearer. Today, he shifts until our shoulders touch.

“How was your day?” he asks, lifting his coffee to his lips.

“Wonderful. A little girl came back *just* to see me.” I smile at the memory. “She was the butterfly from Halloween.”

“You’re pretty popular around here.” Eli nudges my shoulder with his.

“I like helping them.” I watch a few fallen leaves tumble across the path, caught by a breeze that sends them skittering toward the barn. “And the trees are happy. Most of them, anyway.”

Eli laughs, the sound warm, and I reach into my pocket.

“Oh! I found something!” I straighten, nearly knocking my knee against the camper as I pull out the stone. “Look!”

I hold it out on my palm, turning it so the white streak is obvious. Eli sets his mug beside him and leans closer.

“That’s pretty.”

“Isn’t it?” I beam at him, delighted that he seems to like it. “I found it beside the creek this morning. The sunlight made it sparkle, and I thought you’d like it.”

He takes the stone, turning it over between his fingers. His thumb follows the pale line running through the center, and he tilts it toward the light streaming from his camper.

“It’s beautiful.” He looks at me, his fingers closing gently around the stone. “You brought this for me?”

“It made me think of you.” My cheeks go hot at the admission.

Eli goes quiet, his gaze moving from the stone to my face. His smile changes, becoming softer, and he looks at me for so long that I begin to worry I’ve done something wrong. Perhaps humans don’t like rocks.

“Do you not like it?” I ask, shifting nervously beside him.

His head snaps up. “What? Rowan, I love it.” He opens his hand again, looking down at the stone with a smile. “I really do.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

He laughs quietly and brushes his thumb across the stone once more. “You found something beautiful and thought of me.”

I don’t understand why that surprises him. “I think about you quite often.”

His cheeks turn pink, and he looks away for a moment before meeting my eyes again. I like when that happens.

He lets out a quiet laugh, shaking his head. “I do the same. Think of you. Quite often.”

Warmth spreads through my chest. I’ve wondered whether Eli feels the same strange excitement I do whenever we’re together. Sometimes, I catch him watching me, and other times, his eyes linger on my mouth before he quickly looks away. I’ve wanted to ask him about it, but I haven’t known how. I decide there’s no reason to keep wondering.

“Eli?” I turn toward him, resting one hand on the step between us.

“Yeah?” He sets the stone carefully beside his coffee, giving me his full attention.

“Do you want to kiss me?”

His eyes widen, and for the longest minute ever, I wonder whether I misunderstood everything. My fingers curl against the step, and I hold my breath while I wait for his answer. Then he smiles.

“I very much want to kiss you.”

Relief washes through me, followed by a sudden burst of excitement. I straighten, unable to stop smiling.

His face softens, and he shifts toward me, lifting one hand slowly. “Can I?”

I nod, although my heart beats so quickly that I’m surprised he can’t hear it.

Eli reaches up and rests his hand against my cheek. His fingers are warm against my skin, and I lean into his touch without thinking. He smiles, brushing his thumb along my cheekbone before moving closer. I lower my head to meet him.

His lips brush mine. Soft. Warm. The distant sounds of the farm fade, and all I can concentrate on is the gentle pressure of his mouth against mine. I close my eyes, my fingers curling around the edge of the step while I try to understand how something so simple can feel so extraordinary.

When he pulls back, I follow him without thinking, reluctant to lose the warmth of his lips.

Eli laughs softly, his forehead nearly touching mine. “You want another?”

“Yes, please.”

He kisses me again. This time I remember to kiss him back. My hand settles against his waist, drawing him a little closer, and his fingers slide into my hair, careful of my antlers. I make a small, pleased sound that seems to amuse him because he smiles against my mouth before kissing me once more.

When we finally separate, I rest my forehead against his. His hand remains against my cheek, and I can feel the warmth of his breath against my lips.

"Does this mean you like your present?"

Eli laughs and presses another quick kiss to my lips. "I love my present."

He picks up the stone and slips it into his jacket pocket before taking my hand. His fingers fit comfortably between mine like always, and he gives them a gentle squeeze.

"Come on. Let's get somewhere warm."

We walk toward his house, our hands swinging gently between us. The windows glow against the darkening sky. I've watched Eli work on this house for years, but now that it's finished, it looks even lovelier than I imagined.

When we reach the porch, Eli stops and turns toward me. "Would you like to come inside?"

I glance at the front door, then back at him. "Really?"

He brushes his thumb over my knuckles. "I'd love to show you around now that I have everything settled."

My heart gives another happy flutter. Eli is inviting me in, and I can barely contain my excitement. "I'd like that very much."

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
ELI

I've been living in my new house for less than two weeks, and I'm already questioning my decision to invite so many people over for Friendsgiving dinner.

The kitchen counters are covered in ingredients. The turkey is taking up most of the oven, and I have no idea where I put the serving spoons. I remember unpacking them, but considering I found my coffee mugs in a box labeled bathroom supplies, there's no telling where anything ended up.

At least the house smells wonderful. Butter, rosemary, and roasted turkey fill the kitchen, and the windows are fogged slightly from the heat. Outside, the November sky is gray, and a cold breeze sends fallen leaves skittering across my porch.

I check the time on the stove, wondering when Rowan will arrive. He told me he had something special to bring, but refused to give me even the smallest hint about what it might be. Considering the last gift he gave me was a beautiful rock he found beside the creek, I'm curious to see what he's come up with this time. He's so damn sweet he makes my teeth ache some days.

I glance toward the windowsill, where that very rock sits beside a small potted plant. I've kept it there since the day he gave it to me. Every time I see it, I remember the way he looked at me when he asked if I wanted to kiss him. And the way he smiled afterward. That beautiful smile.

I'm still grinning to myself when the front door opens.

"Please tell me you're not burning anything," Jordan calls from the entryway.

"Everything's fine!"

“That wasn’t a no.”

Jordan appears in the kitchen, carrying a casserole dish. He sets it on the counter before narrowing his eyes at me.

“Oh, that’s interesting.”

“What?”

“That smile on your face.” Jordan leans against the counter. “You and Rowan dating now?”

I turn back to the potatoes. “We’ve been spending time together.”

“Uh-huh. And kissing?”

My face heats, which is all the confirmation Jordan needs.

“Finally.” Jordan grins and reaches for a dinner roll.

I smack his hand away. “Those are for dinner.”

“You invite me over to help, and this is how you treat me?”

“You’re welcome to help peel potatoes.”

Jordan rolls his eyes but grabs a peeler from the drawer and joins me at the counter.

My thoughts drift back to Rowan. We’ve spent nearly every evening together since our first kiss, and I’ve discovered that kissing him is something I could happily do for hours. He’s affectionate, curious, and completely unashamed of asking for another kiss whenever the mood strikes him. Which is often. And I’m certainly not complaining. It’s all we’ve done and again, not complaining. I’m happy to take things slow.

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts.

Roberta arrives first, carrying a large covered dish and wearing a sweater instead of her usual chef’s coat. Her close-cropped blond hair has grown out a little since I hired her, and she looks more relaxed than she does during a busy morning at the bakery.

“Macaroni and cheese,” she announces, setting the dish on the counter.

“Yum.” I move a stack of bowls to make room.

Roberta surveys the crowded counters. “This is going to be a feast.”

Leslie follows her inside with two pies balanced carefully in her arms. Her long dark hair is pulled into its usual tight bun, and she’s wearing a thick cardigan over her dress. Sage trails behind with a container of cookies, their purple hair tucked beneath a knitted hat.

“Where do you want these?” Leslie asks.

“Anywhere you can find space.”

She looks around the kitchen, then laughs. “That might be a challenge.”

Sage sets the cookies beside the coffeemaker.

The three of them settle into the kitchen with surprising ease. Roberta takes over checking the turkey. Leslie begins arranging desserts, and Sage helps Jordan bring extra chairs from the garage.

Karla arrives shortly afterward, carrying a crockpot and wearing a bright orange scarf. Henry follows her through the door with another casserole dish, looking slightly overwhelmed by the amount of food already covering every available surface.

Henry laughs and places his dish beside hers. “I brought green beans.”

“Wonderful.” I gesture toward the dining room. “Could you help Jordan with the chairs? I think we’re still one short.”

“On it.”

The house is noisy now, filled with laughter, conversation, and the occasional clatter of dishes. I pause near the kitchen doorway and look around, taking it all in.

I’ve imagined hosting gatherings here since the day I started building this place. I just never expected my first one to involve quite so much chaos.

And Rowan hasn’t even arrived yet.

I hear the knock at the front door while I’m transferring the potatoes into a serving bowl. Before I can set it down, Jordan calls that he’ll get it.

A moment later, Rowan’s familiar voice carries through the entryway.

“Hello, Jordan! I brought something.”

“Holy shit. Did you make that?” my brother asks.

Now, I’m even more curious. I abandon the potatoes and head toward the front door.

Rowan stands on the porch, wearing his dark green flannel and the jeans he stopped complaining about. His antlers are decorated with a few tiny evergreen sprigs, and he’s holding a beautiful arrangement of pinecones, fallen branches, and bright red berries.

He’s woven everything together into a circular centerpiece, with small clusters of greenery arranged around the edges. The branches curve naturally around one another, creating something far more intricate than anything I could have bought.

“Rowan.” I step closer, admiring his work. “That’s beautiful.”

His face brightens. “You like it?”

“I love it.”

“I thought your table might enjoy having a little bit of the forest on it.” He looks past me toward the dining room. “If there’s room?”

“We’ll make room.”

I take the centerpiece from him, careful not to disturb the branches, and Jordan steps aside to let him inside.

Rowan ducks beneath the doorway, his antlers narrowly clearing the frame. He’s been inside the house several times since I first invited him in, but this is the first time he’s seen it filled with people.

His smile falters slightly when he hears the voices coming from the kitchen.

I notice the way his shoulders tense and how his hands settle awkwardly at his sides. He’s perfectly comfortable talking to families at the farm, but I guess being surrounded by people he knows is a different experience.

I reach for his hand. “Come help me with something.”

He looks down at our joined hands, and his shoulders relax. “Thank you,” he whispers.

I lead him into the dining room, where Jordan has managed to arrange enough chairs around the table. Rowan’s centerpiece fits perfectly in the middle, surrounded by the dishes we’ve already brought out.

“There.” I straighten one of the branches. “Perfect.”

Rowan smiles, looking pleased with himself.

“Now,” I say, turning toward him, “I need someone tall enough to reach the serving platter I put on the top shelf.”

His eyes brighten. “I can do that.”

“I had a feeling.” I wink.

We head into the kitchen, where Roberta opens the oven. Rowan stops beside the counter, taking in the collection of dishes with obvious fascination.

“There’s so much food.”

“And that’s before dessert,” Leslie tells him, carrying a pie toward the dining room.

Rowan’s eyes widen. “There’s more?”

Sage laughs. “You haven’t seen everything yet.”

I point toward the cabinet above the refrigerator. “The big white platter, please.”

Rowan reaches up and retrieves it without difficulty. He hands it to me, then looks toward Roberta, who’s struggling to lift the roasting pan onto the

counter.

“Would you like help?”

“Actually, yes.” She steps aside, and Rowan carefully lifts the heavy pan, setting it exactly where she directs.

By the time we sit down to eat, the table is crowded with dishes, glasses, and plenty of food to keep us all supplied with leftovers for days. Rowan sits in the chair beside me, and it’s a little awkward with his size, but he doesn’t seem uncomfortable. It’s a bit comical with him still towering over everyone despite sitting.

Henry passes around the rolls while Roberta begins carving the turkey. Conversation flows easily around us, with everyone discussing the farm, the upcoming Christmas rush, and the bakery’s holiday menu.

Rowan occasionally asks questions about dishes he’s never tried before. Karla encourages him to sample her stuffing, while Leslie insists he save room for pie.

Rowan fills his plate with mashed potatoes, stuffing, and macaroni and cheese, carefully avoiding the turkey. I’d asked him earlier in the week whether he’d be comfortable with everyone eating meat at Friendsgiving. He’d assured me he didn’t mind, although he wouldn’t be eating any himself. Considering he can have actual conversations with animals, I can’t blame him.

I watch him for a moment, enjoying how easily he’s fitting into the conversations. Months ago, he was hiding in the forest, convinced that I was a danger to his trees. Now, he’s sitting beside me at Friendsgiving dinner, happily accepting second helpings from people who adore him.

A sudden tapping at the window interrupts dinner. I glance over to find Frisk perched on the windowsill across from the table, his little paws pressed against the glass as he stares at our food.

“What the heck,” Jordan says.

Rowan turns toward the window, his face lighting up. “Frisk! What are you doing here?”

The squirrel chatters, and Rowan bursts out laughing. “He says it’s rude to have a feast and not invite him.”

I snort. “Tell him he can have some leftovers tomorrow.”

Rowan listens to another round of angry chattering before grinning at me. “He says he wants pie.”

“Get in line, buddy,” Henry says.

Everyone laughs as Frisk smacks one tiny paw against the glass in protest.

“I’ll make it up to you tomorrow,” Rowan says. He turns to us. “He’ll forget about this by then.”

Dinner stretches into the evening, followed by pie, cookies, and several cups of hot chocolate and coffee. Eventually, everyone migrates toward the living room.

I settle into an armchair with my coffee, watching Sage and Henry debate which Christmas decorations should go up around the bakery. Roberta has already started making plans for the holiday menu, while Leslie insists they need at least one afternoon off before December.

Karla sits on the couch beside Rowan, telling him about the first goats she ever raised. He listens with obvious fascination, occasionally asking questions that make her laugh. Jordan catches my eye from across the room and gives me a knowing smile. I ignore him, obviously.

My gaze returns to Rowan. He’s sitting comfortably on the couch, his long legs stretched out in front of him, laughing at something Karla has said. His hair falls around his shoulders, and the little evergreen sprigs tucked near his antlers have survived the entire evening. He looks so happy.

Rowan glances up and catches me watching him. His smile softens, and he lifts his hand in a small wave. I finally feel like everything is exactly where it belongs.

It’s almost nine when the last of our guests leave. Once the door closes behind them, the house falls quiet. I stand in the kitchen, surveying the aftermath of our first Friendsgiving.

Rowan appears beside me, rolling up his sleeves.

“Shall we clean?”

I laugh. “You don’t have to help.”

“I want to.”

He turns on the faucet and begins filling the sink with warm water while I start putting away the food. We’ve fallen into a comfortable rhythm over the past few weeks, working together without needing to discuss every little task.

I hand him a plate, and he carefully washes it before placing it in the drying rack.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” I ask after a while.

“I did.” Rowan smiles and reaches for another plate. His sleeves are pushed above his elbows, and a few droplets of water cling to the bark-like markings along his forearms.

I find myself watching his hands for a moment before remembering that I’m supposed to be helping.

He notices, of course. He dries his hands on a towel and steps closer, his eyes moving briefly toward the dining room.

“I liked having a place at your table.”

My chest tightens at the quiet sincerity in his voice. I reach for his hand, threading our fingers together. “You’ll always have one.”

He smiles, and I step closer, resting my free hand against his waist. I rise onto my toes as he bends toward me, meeting him halfway. His lips are familiar now, and he slides one arm around my waist, drawing me closer. I rest my hand against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my palm.

When we part, he brushes his nose gently against mine, smiling.

“Thank you for today,” he whispers.

I give him another quick kiss. “Thank you for being here.”

He wraps his arms around me, and I settle against him, perfectly content to leave the rest of the dishes until morning.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
ROWAN

I think Friendsgiving is one of my favorite human traditions. There's so much human food. I'm fond of the little rolls Jordan brought, although I suspect I ate more of them than anyone else. I also enjoyed listening to everyone talk, even when I didn't understand half the things they were discussing. But my favorite part was sitting beside Eli.

I liked watching him laugh with his brother, seeing how proud he was when everyone complimented his new house, and knowing he wanted me there. Every time our hands brushed beneath the table, he'd curl his fingers around mine and give them a gentle squeeze. He even kissed my cheek when nobody was paying attention, although I'm pretty sure Jordan saw us.

Now, everyone has gone home, and I'm standing in Eli's kitchen with his arms wrapped around me. There are still dishes in the sink, but he's decided they can wait until tomorrow. I'm beginning to understand why humans enjoy having houses. They're warm, and there are so many wonderful places to sit. Eli's is nice because he's in it.

He rests his cheek against my chest, and I tighten my arms around him. His hair tickles my chin, but I don't mind.

"You're quiet," he says, tilting his head to look at me. "Everything okay?"

"Everything is wonderful." I brush a strand of hair away from his forehead, enjoying the way he leans into my hand. Rather than say anything else, I pull him closer and rest my cheek against the top of his head. Eli wraps his arms around me, his hands moving slowly over my back, and I find myself wishing we could stay like this for the rest of the night. We've spent nearly every evening together since our first kiss, but somehow it

never feels like enough. Tonight, the thought of leaving him to return to my forest is annoyingly unappealing.

“Would you like me to walk you back to the forest?” Eli asks.

I look down at him. “Do you want me to leave?”

His eyebrows rise. “What? No. I just figured you might be getting tired.”

I glance toward the living room, where the fire has burned down to a soft orange glow. “Can I stay a little longer?”

“Of course you can.” His smile returns, and he reaches up to straighten the collar of my shirt. “We can watch a movie if you want.”

Eli has shown me several movies, and I’ve enjoyed most of them. I like the ones with animals, although I sometimes find myself arguing with the television when they do something that no sensible animal would ever do.

But there’s something I’d rather do tonight.

“Can we kiss instead?”

Eli’s cheeks turn pink as he laughs. “We can do that.”

I lower my head, and he meets me halfway, sliding his hands up my chest. His mouth tastes faintly of chocolate and coffee, a combination I rather enjoy. When I draw him closer, he makes a pleased sound against my lips, and I find myself reluctant to let him go.

“Come on,” he says when we finally part, taking my hand. “The couch is more comfortable than standing in the kitchen.”

I follow him into the living room, where he turns off the overhead light and adds another log to the fireplace. The flames cast a warm glow across the furniture, and the windows reflect the Chris-mas decorations he’s already put up outside. I settle onto the couch, and Eli sits beside me, turning toward me with a smile that makes my stomach flutter.

He reaches for me, slipping his fingers into my hair as our mouths meet again. I shift sideways to give him more room, and he moves closer until his thigh presses against mine. It’s much easier to hold him this way without having to bend so far, although I still have to be mindful of my antlers.

I’ve admired Eli for years, enjoying the sight of him working around the farm, but I never thought I’d be allowed to touch him. Now his hand is resting against the back of my neck, and I can feel his warmth through our clothes. I’ve experienced desire before, but never anything quite like this. I

want to be closer to him, to discover whether touching him in other ways will make him smile the way kissing does.

Eventually, Eli draws back and rests his forehead against my shoulder. His breathing is a little faster than before, and his fingers remain tangled in mine.

“Rowan.” He lifts his head, meeting my eyes. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever been with anyone before? Romantically?”

“You’re my first mate.”

Eli smiles. “Mate?”

“We’ve been courting for weeks. I thought we were already mates.”

“Shit, you’re right.” He laughs softly. “I guess we just never made it official.”

He gives my hand a squeeze, and I smile at him. I have a mate. I wonder what Mother will say when I tell her. She always said I’d know when I found someone worth sharing my forest with, although I doubt she expected that someone to be a human who owns a Chris-mas tree farm.

“Can I ask you something else?” Eli asks, his voice a little huskier now.

“Anything.”

“Have you ever had sex?”

“Nope. A faun propositioned me once, but we didn’t speak the same forest language, and he kept making hand gestures I couldn’t understand. When I told Mother, she said he should be ashamed of himself for propositioning a clueless sapling.” I shake my head. “I was nineteen!”

Eli snorts, his shoulders shaking. “Did she give you the birds and the bees talk?”

“What do birds and bees have to do with anything?” I tip my head, considering the question. Birds are usually rather obvious about their courtship, and bees have an entirely different way of reproducing.

“It’s just something humans say when they want to be discreet about the sex talk.”

“But why birds and bees?”

“I have no idea.” He laughs and brushes his thumb over my knuckles. “It’s just an expression.”

Humans have so many peculiar expressions. I’ve stopped trying to understand most of them, although this one seems strange.

“Have you had sex?” I ask.

“I have.” His eyes meet mine, and he seems to brace himself for some reason.

“Do humans mate the same way animals do?”

Eli makes a strangled sound before bursting into laughter. He covers his face with one hand, his shoulders shaking, while I wait for him to explain what’s so funny.

“Sorry.” He lowers his hand, still grinning. “I just wasn’t expecting that question.”

“Why not? I’ve watched animals mate hundreds of times.” I hold up my hands when I realize how that sounds. “Not on purpose, but animals don’t care if there’s a wood nymph sitting in the middle of a clearing. They just go at it.”

That only makes him laugh harder, and I can’t help smiling at how delighted he seems.

“Technically, yes,” he finally says. “But humans have a lot of different ways of being intimate, and not everything is about making babies.”

“Some animals are affectionate even when they’re not interested in reproducing.”

“Fair point.” He rubs a hand over his face, smiling. “You’re right.”

I study him, amused by the pink spreading across his cheeks. Humans seem to get embarrassed when discussing their bodies, which I’ve never entirely understood. Perhaps it’s because they spend so much time covering themselves with clothing.

“Does talking about mating make you uncomfortable?” I ask.

“Not really.” He gives my hand a squeeze.

“Good.” I shift closer, resting my hand against his waist. “Would you like to be intimate with me?”

He studies my face for a moment before answering.

“I would. Are you sure?”

“Very sure.” I smile and brush my fingers along his cheek. “I’ve been wondering what it would be like to be with you for quite some time.”

Eli’s smile widens, and he rises from the couch, offering me his hand. I take it and follow him down the hallway toward his bedroom, feeling a pleasant flutter of anticipation in my stomach.

His bed is enormous by human standards, although I’m still not entirely certain my feet will fit on it. Thick blankets are folded neatly at the end, and

two lamps cast a warm glow across the wooden furniture. I glance at the headboard, wondering whether I'll need to be careful with my antlers, then turn my attention back to Eli.

❄

I lift him, and Eli wraps his arms around my shoulders. His startled laugh fills the bedroom before he kisses me again.

"Rowan, your antlers. I don't want to explain to Jordan how you broke my ceiling fan while carrying me around the bedroom."

I stop and glance at the evil ceiling fan. I've knocked my head on the one in the living room enough times to know to duck *much* lower than I think I need to.

I carry him to the bed and lower him onto the mattress. Eli keeps his arms around my neck, drawing me down beside him.

For a while, neither of us speaks. We just explore each other with mouths and hands. I love how soft his skin is, and how his breath catches when I kiss his neck. I want to learn everything that makes him respond.

"Eli?" I nibble gently on his ear.

"Hmm?"

"I want more. I want you."

He pulls back to meet my eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Very. I may not have done this before, but I know what I want."

Eli strokes my cheek. "Then tell me if you want to stop."

"I will." I lean in to kiss him. "Now, where were we?"

I kiss him, taking my time as we settle against the pillows. His hands move over my shoulders, but I get impatient and pull him onto my lap. I love the weight of him and the heat of him. He's flushed all over and I want to strip his shirt from him.

"Is this all right?" I ask.

"More than all right." His face softens. "You have no idea what you do to me, do you?"

"Maybe a little bit. You make my chest sing. Now, take off your shirt." I tug at the soft t-shirt, and he laughs as he helps me pull it from him. He has a nice broad chest full of trimmed dark hair. "Oh! You have nipples hidden

in there.” I rub my thumb across one, and he makes such a lovely sound I do it to the other.

“Rowan.” My name comes out husky and my cock starts to get interested.

“Eli.” I lean up and lick his nipple, making his eyes flutter closed.

“Fuck, that feels good.”

“You taste good.” Under the taste of soap, anyway. I like the way he tastes, smells, sounds, kisses, everything.

“Help me out of my jeans.” Eli rolls from my lap and starts working on removing his pants while I flail around trying to get mine off.

“Why do I have to wear clothes again?”

“Fuck. I don’t remember now. I need you naked, Rowan.”

Don’t have to tell me twice. I rip off my clothes and toss them on the floor. I get an eyeful of Eli’s delicious backside as he rummages around in his nightstand.

“Lube.” He holds up a tube of clear liquid, and I blink back at him.

“What do we do with it?” I don’t actually know how human sex works. Animals don’t have lube, so I’m at a loss.

“It’ll make everything feel good. But I’ll tell ya.” He swallows as he looks right at my now naked dick. “There’s no way I can take something that big any time soon. I’ll have to work up to it. Or I can… do you. There are plenty of things we can do without rushing into anything.”

I blink back again. “I don’t care what we do as long as we’re touching. But I want to examine you first.”

I slide off the bed and tug him by the ankle to the edge. He spreads his legs for me.

“Is this okay?” I ask again and lick my lips. “Can I taste you?” Instincts drive the request.

“Yeah. Yes,” Eli croaks out. His hands go to my antlers when I lean down, and I maneuver my head so I don’t impale my soon to be lover.

I kiss his thighs, loving the soft fur there too. “You’re so pretty, Eli.” I press my nose to his groin and breathe deeply. “Mmmm.” I swipe my tongue across the underside of his dick.

“Oh, fuck.” His hands go to my hair, and I lean back on my heels.

“You like that?”

Eli pants. “I do so much.” I love how he’s turned into a man of few words.

I lick along his dick a few more times, and each time I do he spreads his legs more. The moan he lets out when I lick his ball sac makes me harder.

“You make lovely sounds.” I massage his thighs as I kiss up his chest, pulling more and more glorious sounds from this man.

“If you keep doing that, I’m going to come before I want to.”

I pull back and lick my lips. “That would be a tragedy, I think.”

“Lie on your back again. I wanna show you something.”

I stretch out across the mattress, my feet hanging off the end while I carefully angle my antlers away from the headboard.

He climbs back into my lap, but this time on my thighs so our dicks rub against each other. He dribbles the lube on both of our dicks before thrusting his hips. I let out a moan. My eyes close, and my breath picks up. But I don’t want to miss the show.

Eli’s flushed, and his long hair hangs down his chest in wavy curls. His lips are parted, and he’s beautiful. He reaches for my hand and directs me to take both of our dicks in hand, and when I do, pleasure rocks through me.

Of course, I’ve touched myself, but this type of something else.

“I like seeing you naked on top of me. We should always be naked.”

Eli chuckles as his breathing speeds up. “You might be able to convince me. Especially in the summer.”

“Don’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

“I might have underestimated how much faster we can get to touching each other if we’re both naked.”

That makes me snort. I continue to pump our dicks, letting pleasure wash over me.

“Fuck, Rowan, I’m gonna come.” Eli adds his hand to mine and picks up the speed. Another few breaths, and he coats us in cum. The sight is so hot I tumble after him, spurting ribbon after ribbon of cum over our joined hands.

Eli slides from on top of me and plops beside me. “Fuck.” He stares at the ceiling fan as he catches his breath.

“Good fuck or bad fuck?” Because there are different kinds of fuck.

“Good fuck.” He turns to me just as I start to lick my fingers clean. His cock pulses as if it’s trying to rally for another round.

“Perfect.” But I want him in my arms. I try to tug him back on me, but he resists.

“One sec. Let me grab a washcloth to clean us up with.”

The only reason I let him go is to watch his pretty ass as he leaves the room. But this man wanting to take care of me after coming together makes me want to melt. Once he tosses the washcloth across the room, I pull him against my chest. He settles there without hesitation. My trees quietly sing outside, and I have Eli in my arms. What more could I want right now?

"Stay the night," Eli mumbles.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN
ELI

It’s not even nine in the morning, and there are already six cars waiting outside the gate. We don’t open for another thirty minutes.

I stand beside the barn with a travel mug of coffee in one hand and my clipboard in the other, watching another vehicle turn into the driveway. The driver slows when he sees the line, then pulls in behind the others. At this rate, we’re going to run out of parking spaces before lunch.

Jordan comes up beside me. He surveys the growing line of cars. “If it gets any busier, I’m hiding in the bakery.”

“You’ll have to fight Sage for a place behind the counter.”

My brother takes a drink of coffee before heading toward the store to get the registers ready. I’m grateful he agreed to help today. We’ve spent weeks preparing the trees, organizing reservations, and making sure the loading area can accommodate everyone, but seeing the line of cars makes me wonder whether we’ve underestimated just how busy we’re going to be this weekend.

I glance toward the rows of evergreens. The smaller potted trees are closest to the loading area, with larger ones arranged farther back. Each has a numbered tag, so we can keep track of reservations and available inventory.

Rowan is already out in the field of his babies hyping everyone up.

I spot him between two rows of spruces, his bright red flannel standing out against the branches. He’s crouched beside a smaller tree, one hand resting against its trunk while he listens to something I can’t hear. After a moment, he nods solemnly and moves a little ribbon from one branch to another.

I have no idea what they're discussing, but he looks very serious about it.

It's hard to believe that not long ago, he was convinced I intended to murder every tree on the property. Now, he's helping me find them temporary homes for Christmas. And he's my partner. Or mate, depending on who's doing the talking.

I smile into my coffee, remembering Thursday night and waking up with Rowan sprawled across most of my bed. His antlers had somehow become tangled in one of the pillowcases, and he'd looked so offended by the situation that I'd nearly fallen out of bed laughing. I wouldn't mind waking up to that again.

A car horn sounds near the gate, pulling me back to the present. I check the time, finish my coffee, and head toward the entrance.

By ten, the farm is packed.

Families wander between the trees, children run toward the goat enclosure, and the smell of cinnamon rolls drifts from the bakery whenever someone opens the door.

Karla has her hands full with the goats, especially when a little girl discovers that one of them enjoys having her ears scratched. The girl refuses to leave, and her parents seem content to let her stay while they finish their coffee.

Inside the store, Jordan handles reservations and payments, occasionally stepping outside to direct customers toward the correct pickup area. Roberta, Leslie, and Sage have been busy in the bakery since opening, and we'll probably need more treats before long. So far, everything seems to be going according to plan. Well, almost everything.

"Eli!"

I turn toward Rowan's voice and find him standing beside a tall spruce, waving me over. A family of four waits nearby, looking slightly confused.

"Everything okay?" I ask when I reach them.

Rowan gives me a smile that's a little too innocent. "Clarice has some concerns," he whispers.

I glance at the tree, then at the family. Thankfully, they're examining the branches and haven't heard him.

"Concerns?" I repeat quietly.

"About their house." He thumbs toward the kids. "No kids. Or animals."

I understand now and turn toward the parents with my best customer-service smile. “Have you decided which tree you’d like?”

“We really love this one,” the woman says, gesturing toward Clarice. “It’s the perfect height for our living room.”

Rowan makes a sound beside me.

“Wonderful. Have you picked out a spot for her?”

“Right beside the fireplace,” the woman answers. “It’s a little dark in that corner, but it’ll look beautiful there.”

Rowan looks at me meaningfully.

I resist the urge to cave and tell them outright they can’t have this tree.

“Since these are living trees, you’ll want to keep them away from fireplaces and heating vents,” I explain. “The heat can dry them out, and they’ll do better in a cooler spot with some natural light. Do you have another place in mind?”

The woman considers that. “There’s a spot near our front window, but I don’t think this one would fit.”

“I know a lovely tree that would be perfect there,” Rowan offers.

He leads them toward another row before I can say anything else.

I glance at Clarice.

“You’re welcome,” I mutter.

A branch brushes against my shoulder despite the complete lack of wind. I choose to interpret that as gratitude.

By the time I catch up with Rowan, he’s helping the family examine a smaller fuller spruce. The children are delighted, and their parents seem pleased with the suggestion. I leave them to it and head toward the next group of customers.

A little later, I find Rowan beside Bart, who’s being admired by a couple. The spruce has been fussy all season, and when the man touches one of his branches, Bart shivers in protest.

“He’s handsome,” the woman says. “Our golden retriever would love sleeping beneath him.”

Bart immediately goes still, and Rowan rests a hand against his trunk.

“I think he’d be very happy in your home,” Rowan says, smiling.

As the couple examines the tree, Rowan leans toward me. “Bart hopes the dog is fluffy.”

I glance at Bart, whose branches now sway happily toward the couple.

Well, that’s one way to win him over.

The next hour passes in a blur of reservations, questions, and helping customers load their trees. I stop beside the loading area to check the inventory sheet when I hear a child's excited voice.

"She's perfect!"

A little boy stands in front of Emily, bouncing on his toes. His parents are beside him, examining her branches with uncertain expressions.

Emily is one of our smaller spruces, with a crooked trunk that makes her lean slightly to one side. I'd considered keeping her out of the rental program, but Rowan insisted she wanted to participate.

"Are you sure, sweetheart?" the boy's mother asks. "There are some bigger ones over there."

"*No!* I want this one." The boy gently touches one of Emily's branches. "I'm going to make you a pretty star for the top. And we have ornaments with pictures of our dog."

Emily's branches tremble, and Rowan looks ready to burst with happiness.

The boy's father crouches beside the pot, examining the trunk. "Well, if this is the one you want, I think we can make it work."

The boy throws his arms around his father's neck, and I catch Rowan smiling at Emily. Whatever she's saying to him must be wonderful.

I rest my hand against Rowan's back as the family heads toward the store to complete their reservation.

"Good match?"

"The very best," Rowan says, practically glowing. "Emily's wanted a family with kids and pets. She's going to be so loved."

I believe him. Seeing Rowan this happy makes the entire morning worth it.

The first real problem arrives shortly after lunch.

I'm checking a reservation when a woman approaches the counter with her husband and teenage daughter. They've come to collect a six-foot spruce they reserved earlier in the month, but when I look toward the holding area, I notice Rowan standing beside their tree with a worried expression. That's not a good sign.

"Give me just a moment," I tell them. "I want to make sure everything's ready."

I head toward Rowan, who's crouched beside the container with one hand pressed against the trunk.

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s not feeling well.”

I kneel beside him and examine the tree. A few of the lower branches have begun turning brown, and the soil feels wetter than it should. I check the drainage holes and notice water pooling beneath the container.

“Looks like she’s been sitting in too much water.”

Rowan nods. “Her roots are unhappy.”

We had rain earlier in the week, and although the trees are supposed to be kept where excess water can drain away, this one must have ended up in a low spot.

“She needs to stay outside,” Rowan says. “I can help her, but she’ll need time to recover.”

I look toward the waiting family. They’ve already paid their deposit, and the daughter is watching us with obvious concern. I hate disappointing customers, especially ones who’ve been looking forward to bringing their tree home.

But there’s no way I’m sending out a tree that isn’t healthy.

“Then she stays,” I tell him. “Let’s find them another one.”

Rowan’s shoulders relax, and he gives the tree’s trunk a gentle pat while I return to the family.

“Unfortunately, your tree isn’t doing as well as I’d like,” I explain. “She’s showing signs of excess moisture around her roots, and I don’t want to send her home until she’s healthy again.”

The woman’s face falls. “Oh, that’s disappointing. We’ve been looking forward to bringing her home.”

I hate disappointing her. “I understand, and I’m sorry. We have other beautiful trees still available, though. I’d be happy to help you choose one, or I can refund your deposit. Unless you’d like to wait and see if this one perks up?”

Her husband nods. “Let’s see what else you have.”

Rowan joins us, already looking toward the next row. “I know one you might like.”

He leads them toward a tall spruce near the end of the path. The daughter is the first to approach it, running her fingers gently along one of the branches.

“This one’s really pretty,” she says. “And it’s a little fuller than the other one.”

Her mother smiles. “You’re right.”

Within ten minutes, they’ve chosen their replacement, and I arrange to have it brought to the loading area.

When I return to the original tree, Rowan has moved her container onto a raised section of gravel where the excess water can drain. He’s carefully checking the soil, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s uncomfortable, but she’ll be all right if we take care of her.” He brushes a few loose needles from the rim of the pot. “I think she’d like somewhere quieter while she recovers.”

“We can move her into the sheltered holding area. I’ll keep an eye on the moisture and make sure nobody waters her until she needs it.”

Rowan looks up at me. “I’m glad you’re the one taking care of my babies.”

I think that’s one of the sweetest things he’s said to me.

“Come on,” I tell him. “Let’s get her somewhere comfortable.”

Together, we carefully move the container onto a handcart and wheel it toward the sheltered area. Rowan stays beside the tree, murmuring something under his breath, while I clear a space away from the other pots.

Once she’s settled, he rests his palm against her trunk and closes his eyes for a moment.

I leave him to it, knowing she’ll be in good hands.

By midafternoon, my feet hurt, my coffee has gone cold, and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve explained the difference between renting a live tree and buying a cut one.

The farm is still busy, although the rush has finally eased. I leave Jordan in charge of the store for a few minutes and head toward the bakery, where Sage hands me two cups of hot chocolate without my having to ask.

“One for you and one for your man.” they say, grinning.

I smile as I take the cups.

I find Rowan behind the storage barn, sitting on an overturned bucket with his elbows resting on his knees. There are pine needles tangled in his hair, and he looks more tired than I’ve ever seen him.

“Hey.”

He lifts his head, and his face brightens when he sees me.

“Eli!”

I hand him one of the cups and sit beside him on another bucket.

“Thought you could use a break.”

“Thank you.” He takes a careful sip, then closes his eyes with obvious pleasure. “So yummy.”

We sit quietly for a moment, listening to the distant sounds of customers and the occasional bleat from the goat enclosure. A cold breeze moves through the yard, carrying the scent of pine and woodsmoke.

“Long day?” I ask.

Rowan nods. “Everyone has so many opinions.”

“The customers?”

“The trees.” He takes another sip of hot chocolate. “Bobby has complained about six families, Tommy wants to know whether he can visit the dog after Christmas, and Sully has been singing about her new family for the past hour.”

I laugh. “Sounds exhausting.”

“It is.” He smiles into his cup. “But I like helping them.”

We’ve barely had a moment alone all day, and I hadn’t realized how much I missed having him close until now.

“Can I stay at your house again tonight?” he asks after a while.

I turn toward him, smiling. “I was hoping you would.”

He leans down to kiss my cheek before settling against me again. I take another sip of hot chocolate, enjoying the few quiet minutes we have before returning to work.

By closing time, the parking lot is finally empty, and Jordan helps me reconcile the day’s reservations. The store smells faintly of cinnamon and pine, and the counters are covered in paperwork.

I finish checking the last payment and look at the numbers. Then I check them again.

“Well?” Jordan asks.

“We’ve rented a boatload of trees.” I lean back against the counter, unable to stop smiling.

People are driving from neighboring towns to rent Christmas trees, visit the goats, and buy pastries from the bakery that was only a dream not long ago. I can finally see just how far we’ve come.

But the numbers also bring a problem. I flip through the remaining reservations, comparing them with the inventory list. We have enough trees to cover the bookings already made, but if demand continues at this pace,

we'll run out of available rentals well before Christmas. And I don't want to start sending out trees that aren't ready.

"What's wrong?" Jordan asks.

"We might need to stop accepting new reservations sooner than I expected."

He studies the numbers. "Could we add more trees?"

"Not without making sure they're ready."

"Then don't." He shrugs. "People will understand."

He's right. I just hate turning away customers, especially when the farm is finally up and running.

After Jordan leaves, I head outside to find Rowan. He's standing near the rows of younger trees, his hand resting against the trunk of a small spruce.

I explain the reservation numbers and how quickly we're running through our available inventory. Rowan listens carefully, occasionally glancing toward the trees around us.

"Some of the younger ones want to go," he says when I finish. "But they're not all ready."

"That's what I figured."

He looks toward a row of taller spruces farther down the path. "And some of the older ones don't want to leave at all."

"Then they won't."

Rowan smiles, but there's something thoughtful in his expression.

He rests his hand against the little spruce beside him. I watch him for a moment, remembering the first time I saw him standing among my trees. Back then, I had no idea who he was or why he seemed so determined to protect them. Now, I can't imagine running this place without him.

Rowan straightens and comes back to my side. Together, we start toward the house, leaving the rows of evergreens behind us.

There's still plenty to do before Christmas, and tomorrow promises to be just as busy.

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CHAPTER TWENTY
ROWAN

Eli’s planning something. He’s been smiling at me ever since he asked me to meet him in the barn, and now he’s standing beside a workbench covered in Chris-mas lights, a little container of bright green paint, and several paintbrushes. There’s also an old tree stump in the middle of the floor, which wasn’t there yesterday.

I examine the supplies before turning my attention to him. “What are you painting?”

“Your antlers.”

I reach up and touch one of them. “What’s wrong with my antlers?”

“Nothing. They’re perfect.” He comes closer, gently running a finger along one of the points. “I thought we could decorate them for tonight’s event. Make you look a little more festive.”

Humans seem determined to decorate everything during Chris-mas. They’ve wrapped lights around the barn, hung greenery from the porch, and tied enormous red bows to the fences. Yesterday, Jordan even put a wreath on the goat enclosure, although one of the goats promptly tried to eat it. I suppose my antlers shouldn’t be excluded.

“All right. You can paint them.”

Eli looks delighted. “Really?”

“Of course. But I don’t want paint on my clothes.”

“I figured.” He reaches beneath the workbench and pulls out a familiar bedsheet. “Thought you might need this again.”

I take it from him, and strip from my clothes while he watches with hungry eyes. We haven’t done anything else sexual since Friendsgiving, but we’ve been exhausted with the farm.

Once I’ve wrapped the sheet around my waist, I settle onto the old stump. It’s wide enough to accommodate me comfortably, and sitting here puts my antlers within easy reach of Eli’s hands.

“Alrighty, hold still.”

The first stroke of paint tickles, and I twitch before I can stop myself. Eli apologizes, but I assure him it doesn’t hurt. The paint is cool against my antlers, and I can feel the brush moving carefully around each little point while he works.

When he comes around to face me, he concentrates so intently that his tongue pokes out between his lips. He’s so cute.

He gives me a look that makes me want to kiss him, but I behave myself while he finishes painting the second antler. Once he’s satisfied, he steps away to inspect his work, then cleans the brush and sets the paint aside.

“We have to let them dry before I add the lights.”

I reach up, but he catches my wrist before I can touch the paint.

“Nope. You’ll get green all over your fingers.”

I lower my hand reluctantly.

While we wait, Eli gathers the tiny lights he’s chosen. They’re much smaller than the ones hanging around the barn, with little colored bulbs attached to a thin wire. He explains that they run on batteries, so there’s no need for a cord trailing behind me. I’m relieved to hear that. I’ve already tripped over enough Chris-mas decorations this week.

Once the paint is dry, he carefully winds the wire around my antlers, looping it between the little points and checking that nothing catches in my hair. He tucks the small battery pack into the collar of the shirt I’ll be wearing tonight, then steps back to admire his work.

He switches on the lights, and tiny bulbs glow above my head, casting little spots of brightness across the barn wall. I hurry toward the nearest window, where the dark glass reflects my face and the decorations above it.

My antlers are bright green, and they’re glowing.

“Oh, Eli!”

I turn my head from side to side, admiring how the lights shine against the paint. They look like little branches covered in stars, and I can’t believe something so simple could make me feel so pretty.

Eli comes up behind me, resting his hands against my waist while I continue studying my reflection.

“Well?” he asks.

“I love it.” I wrap my arms around him and kiss his cheek, careful not to knock my newly decorated antlers against his head. He returns the affection with a kiss of his own before reminding me that we still need to get dressed for the evening.

I reluctantly leave the window, although I make sure to admire my reflection one more time on the way out.

By the time the sun disappears behind the trees, the farm looks entirely different.

Hundreds of little lights glow along paths we drew up during the day, wrapped around fence posts and hanging from the barn. The wagon has been decorated with greenery and red ribbons, while the bakery windows shine warmly against the darkening sky. Even the younger evergreens have strings of lights nearby, carefully arranged so their branches won’t be damaged.

Eli calls tonight’s event Chris-mas After Dark, and he’s been preparing for it all week. Since it’s our first Chris-mas season, he wanted to try something special for families who couldn’t visit during regular business hours. There are evening wagon rides, hot chocolate, fresh pastries, and a walking path through the illuminated trees.

The goats are participating too, although Karla already warned everyone that they aren’t allowed to feed them Chris-mas cookies. One of the goats hates this rule, but I think she’s eaten enough things she wasn’t supposed to this week.

I stand near the entrance with Eli while the first families arrive. He’s wearing a thick winter coat and a red scarf, and I keep catching him glancing at my antlers with a smile so bright that it makes me glad I agreed to let him decorate them.

A little girl notices me immediately.

“Mommy, look!”

She stops in front of us, pointing at my head with such excitement that her mother nearly walks into her.

“Are you one of Santa’s reindeer?”

I blink at her. “No.” Who is Santa? But I keep that to myself.

Her mother laughs. “I think he’s wearing a costume, sweetheart.”

I consider correcting her, but Eli gives me a warning look. Right. My antlers are supposed to be part of my Chris-mas outfit. I’m dressed in a fluffy green coat Eli had made especially for me. As well as the softest

pants he’s ever given me. As always I’m barefoot, but no one seems to notice.

The little girl studies them my antlers another moment. “Are they real?”

“He’s helping us with the woodland decorations tonight,” Eli explains before I can answer. “Do you like his lights?”

She nods enthusiastically, and I tell her that Eli painted them himself. Her mother compliments his work, which seems to please him, before leading her daughter toward the bakery.

Once they’re out of earshot, I lean closer to him.

“Reindeer have much larger antlers than I do, and they’re shaped differently. And the males lose their antlers this time of year.”

“I know.” He slips his hand into mine. “She thought you looked magical.”

“I *am* magical.”

“Exactly.”

I suppose that makes sense, although I still don’t understand why anyone would mistake me for a reindeer.

As more families arrive, I help direct them toward the wagon rides and the walking path. The trees are excited about having visitors after dark, and several of the younger ones have been practicing their songs since Eli finished hanging the decorations.

Their voices rising beneath the sounds of human conversation. A little fir near the entrance keeps asking whether anyone has noticed her lights, while a spruce farther along the path is convinced his decorations are prettier than everyone else’s.

I assure them they’re both beautiful before continuing toward the barn.

The evening passes quickly. Families wander beneath the lights, children laugh as the wagon carries them around the property, and the bakery stays busy serving hot chocolate and pastries. I spend most of my time helping visitors find their way around, although I occasionally stop to listen when one of my babies has something important to say. Usually, it’s about the decorations.

I enjoy seeing the farm this way. During the day, people are busy choosing trees and making arrangements to take them home, but tonight they’re simply enjoying themselves. Some families linger beneath the lights, taking pictures together, while others sit near the barn with cups of hot chocolate or other treats.

One couple even stops beside a little spruce to admire her decorations, and she sings so happily that I have to turn away to hide my smile. I think Eli was right to plan this.

By the time the last wagon ride returns, the evening has grown colder, and frost gathers along the edges of the paths. Most of the families have already left, although a few are still finishing their drinks near the bakery.

I find Eli beside the barn, helping Jordan put away the extra chairs.

“Need some help?”

“Actually, could you check the walking path one more time? Make sure nobody left anything behind.”

“Of course.”

I head toward the trees, following the little lights that mark the path. The farm is quieter now, and without so many human voices, I can hear my babies discussing the evening. They’ve enjoyed themselves so much.

A few are already asking whether Eli plans to do this again, while others are wondering why humans insist on taking so many pictures of them. I explain that people like having something to remember happy occasions, which starts an entirely new conversation about whether trees can be photographed from their best side.

I leave them to debate that while I continue along the path.

Near the far end, I find a small red mitten lying beside one of the benches. I pick it up, brushing away the pine needles that have gathered around it, and tuck it into my pocket. Hopefully, whoever lost it will come back looking for it.

When I return to the barn, Eli has finished putting away the chairs and stands beside Jordan, looking at something on his phone.

“There you are,” he says when he sees me. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. I found a mitten.”

“Another one?” Jordan laughs. “That’s the third one somebody’s lost tonight.”

I hand it over, and Eli places it with the other belongings they’ve collected. He tells me several visitors have already asked whether there will be another Chris-mas After Dark event before the holiday, which seems to make him happy.

“Do you think we should?” he asks.

“The trees would love it.”

“What about you?”

“I would too.” I glance at his undecorated head. “Although next time, I think we should put lights on you too.”

Jordan laughs so loudly that Eli turns toward him.

“I’m not saying a word,” his brother says, although he’s still laughing when he heads toward the store.

Eli shakes his head, but I can tell he’s amused. I decide to give him a few days before suggesting ribbons.

Once the others have gone home and the buildings are locked, Eli turns off the brighter lights around the barn, leaving the smaller strings glowing along the walking path.

The farm grows quiet and I want to stay by his side.

“Want to take one more walk?” he asks.

“I’d like that very much.”

We follow the path through the evergreens, taking our time now that there’s no one waiting for directions or asking questions. The lights shine against the dark branches, and the ground glitters faintly where frost has begun to form.

Eli slips his hand into mine as we walk, and I move closer to him.

“I think tonight went well,” he says.

“Everyone seemed happy.”

“They did. I wasn’t sure whether people would want to come out after dark, but we had a good turnout.” Eli’s thumb moves slowly across the back of my hand as we walk, and I find myself watching him instead of the lights. He’s been so busy preparing for tonight that we’ve barely had a moment alone, but now there’s nothing competing for his attention. When he catches me looking, he draws me closer and kisses me beneath the branches of a tall spruce.

I slip my arms around his waist, enjoying the warmth of his body against mine. His lips are cold from the evening air, but that changes quickly when I deepen the kiss. Eli makes a pleased little sound and slides his hands beneath my coat, resting them against my back. I would happily stay here kissing him until morning, but he eventually pulls away.

“Come here,” he murmurs, taking my hand.

I follow him into a little clearing where several strands of lights hang between the trees. There’s a bench nearby, and beyond it, the path curves back toward the barn. Eli stops beneath the lights and takes my other hand,

gently guiding one of them to his shoulder while he settles his own against my waist.

“What are we doing?”

“Dancing.”

I glance around the clearing. “There’s no music.” We’ll none he can hear anyway.

“We don’t need any.”

He begins moving, guiding me through a few slow steps while I try to figure out what my feet are supposed to do. Eli doesn’t seem concerned when I step too far to one side and nearly knock him off balance. He simply adjusts his hold and encourages me to follow him.

It takes me a few tries to find the rhythm, but once I do, I discover that dancing with Eli is much more fun than dancing alone. He fits against me comfortably, his cheek resting against my chest while I hold him close. We move slowly beneath the lights, turning in a little circle while the trees whisper around us.

A soft melody rises from the evergreens, beginning with the spruce nearest the clearing before spreading through the surrounding forest. Their voices weave together, creating a song unlike any I’ve heard before. It’s gentle and sweet, and I recognize several of my babies joining in, their happiness filling the cold evening air.

“The trees are giving us music,” I whisper.

His gaze moves toward the evergreens before returning to me. “Then we’d better keep dancing.”

I draw him closer, resting my cheek against his hair while we sway together. He can’t hear their song, but that doesn’t seem to matter. His fingers move gently against my back, and every so often he tilts his head to press a kiss against my neck. I return the affection whenever he looks up, loving the way he rises onto his toes to reach me.

Eventually, Eli stops trying to guide our steps and simply holds me. I tuck him against my chest, wrapping both arms around him while the lights shine above us. His hands slip beneath my coat again, and he presses his face into the warmth of my neck.

When I left my mother’s forest, I wanted somewhere I could belong. I found my babies, and I thought they were everything I needed. Then Eli came into my life. I love waking up beside him, sharing meals at his table, and listening to him talk about whatever happened while we were apart.

And now I get to dance with him beneath the stars while my forest sings.

I’m not cold, but his nose has turned pink, and I can feel him shivering beneath his coat. I take his hand and lead him back toward the barn, listening as the trees finish their song and settle down for the night.

Inside, Eli brings the old stump over for me to sit on before carefully unwinding the tiny lights from my antlers. His fingers brush through my hair as he works, occasionally pausing to free a strand of wire that’s caught around one of the little points. I watch him concentrate, enjoying the gentle attention and the way he occasionally leans forward to kiss my forehead.

When he finishes, he switches off the battery pack and sets the lights on the workbench. My antlers are still bright green, although they no longer glow.

“Can we do this again next year?” I ask.

Eli steps between my knees, resting his hands against my shoulders. “Of course.”

I slide my arms around his waist and pull him closer. There are so many things I want us to do together, and I haven’t even experienced an entire holiday season with him yet.

“We’ll need more paint.”

He laughs and kisses me. “I’ll put it on the shopping list.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
ELI

Living with a wood nymph means finding pinecones in places I've never seen pinecones before. There's one on my bedroom windowsill, three lined up beside the television, and another sitting in the bathroom next to my toothbrush. I found that one this morning and spent several minutes trying to figure out how it got there before remembering that Rowan had taken a bath last night. Now, I'm standing in my bedroom, holding a small branch covered in dried leaves, wondering whether I should be concerned about the collection growing on my dresser.

"Rowan?"

"In the kitchen!"

I carry the branch downstairs, where I find him standing at the counter with a wooden bowl full of nuts, berries, and what looks a lot like a handful of moss. He's wearing one of the oversized shirts I ordered for him, along with a pair of soft pants that have become his favorite. His hair is damp, and his antlers have finally returned to their usual color after last week's Christmas After Dark event.

I hold up the branch. "What's this?"

"That's from Beatrice."

"Okay. Why was is it on the dresser?"

"She gave it to me."

I wait for an explanation, but he returns to arranging the contents of his bowl. I guess that's all the information I'm getting.

I set the branch on the counter and peer into the bowl. "Whatcha making?"

"A present for Frisk."

I study the collection of nuts and berries. “What’s the moss for?”

“Decoration.”

I can’t argue with that, although I do wonder whether Frisk will appreciate the effort. Rowan seems pleased with his arrangement, so I leave him to it and start making coffee.

It’s been two weeks since the farm opened, and we’re already halfway through December. Business has been better than I dared hope, which means I’ve spent most of my days answering questions, checking reservations, and making sure the trees that have gone home with families are being cared for properly. I’ve also been trying to spend as much time with Rowan as possible, which hasn’t been easy when we’re both exhausted by the end of the day.

Still, waking up beside him has become my favorite part of the morning. He’s been staying here almost every night since Friendsgiving, and along the way, my house has begun looking like ours instead of just mine. There’s a collection of Rowan’s clothes in the bedroom, and enough pinecones scattered around to suggest a squirrel has moved into the house. Rowan even has a favorite mug now, it’s green with a smiling Christmas tree on the side.

“Are you working today?” Rowan asks.

“Just a few things. I’ve got to check on the deliveries and make sure we’re good for the weekend.” I pour coffee into my mug before turning toward him. “What about you?”

“Not much.”

He gives me a look that makes me laugh before carrying his present toward the back door. A moment later, he’s calling for Frisk.

I shake my head and return to my coffee. Life has gotten weird, and I wouldn’t change a thing.

I’ve finished most of my paperwork my lunch time and managed to avoid three separate phone calls from customers wanting to know whether they can keep their rented trees until February. I keep that to myself because I don’t want Rowan to go into a panic.

Rowan returns from the forest carrying a small wooden box beneath one arm and a bundle of folded fabric in the other. There’s dirt on his knees and a leaf caught in his hair, which tells me he’s been spending time underground again. He sets everything on the kitchen table.

“What’s all this?”

“My things.” He opens the box, revealing several smooth stones, a little carved wooden figure, and a collection of objects I don’t recognize. Some look like pieces of bark, while others appear to be seeds or dried flowers wrapped in leaves. “I thought I could keep them here.”

“Of course.” I pick up the wooden figure, turning it carefully in my hands. It’s shaped like a small animal, although the details have worn smooth with age. “Did you make this?”

“My mother did. She gave it to me before I left.”

There’s something in his voice that makes me handle it more carefully. Rowan rarely talks about his mother unless I ask, and I know leaving her forest wasn’t easy for him. I study the little animal, noticing its pointed ears and the tail curled around its body.

“It’s beautiful. A fox?”

He nods and takes it from me, rubbing his thumb along the little animal’s back. “I used to carry it everywhere when I was young.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Sometimes. I miss the trees too, but I like my forest here.”

I move closer and rest a hand against his back. “You can visit her whenever you want.”

“I know.” He leans into me for a moment before reaching for the folded fabric. “She made this too.”

He unfolds it across the table, revealing a soft green blanket with a pattern of leaves woven into the material. It’s unlike anything I’ve seen before, and the fabric feels almost weightless beneath my fingers. Rowan tells me it used to cover his nest when he was little, and I can tell by the care he takes smoothing it across the table that it means so much to him.

“Want to put it upstairs?”

“Would that be okay?”

“Yes. I want you to feel at home here.”

We carry everything upstairs together, and I help him find places for his belongings. The little fox goes on the dresser beside a photograph of Jordan and me, while the stones and other treasures find a home on one of the shelves. Rowan spreads the blanket across the foot of the bed, smoothing it with both hands before stepping back to admire it.

I love having him here, in my room, my house. I didn’t have anyone in mind when I built the house, but now I want hints of him in ever corner.

That afternoon, Jordan stops by with a box of supplies for the store and finds Rowan sitting on the living room floor, carefully arranging his collection of pinecones along the bottom shelf of the bookcase. My brother takes one look at the display and turns toward me.

“Are you opening a nature museum?”

“Don’t give him ideas.”

Rowan looks up. “They’re from different trees.”

Jordan crouches beside him, examining the collection. “What’s special about this one?”

“That one’s from Beatrice.”

Jordan picks up another. “And this one?”

“Greg.”

Jordan returns the pinecone to its place and joins me in the kitchen a few minutes later.

“He’s settling in,” he says, leaning against the counter. “You gonna ask him to move in?”

“I’ve been thinking about it.”

“So what’s stopping you?”

I set the box on the counter and start unpacking it, buying myself a few seconds to think. The truth is, I don’t know how to ask. Rowan already spends most of his nights here, and we’ve fallen into a routine that feels comfortable for both of us. But living together permanently is different. It’s a commitment, and I don’t want him agreeing to something because he thinks it’ll make me happy.

“He has his forest,” I finally say. “I don’t want him to feel like he has to choose between that and me.”

Jordan thinks for a moment. “Has he ever acted like he thinks those things are separate?”

I open my mouth, then close it again, because no, he hasn’t. Rowan talks about the trees constantly, but he also talks about what we’re going to do tomorrow, what he’d like to eat for dinner, and whether we can spend another evening watching Christmas movies. He moves between the forest and the house without treating either one like somewhere he doesn’t belong.

Maybe I’m the only one making this complicated.

Jordan pats my shoulder. “Talk to him.”

He heads back toward the living room, leaving me with a half-unpacked box and a growing certainty that I need to have a conversation with Rowan.

That evening, I find Rowan making tea while snow falls outside the kitchen window. He pours me a cup, and we settle at the table with the cookies Sage sent home.

“I was thinking we could go shopping tomorrow,” I tell him. “Get you a dresser and some shelves for your things.”

His face brightens. “I’d like that.”

I reach across the table for his hand. “Actually, there’s something else I wanted to ask you. How would you feel about moving in with me?”

Rowan tilts his head. “Don’t I already live here?”

I laugh. “Well, yeah, I guess you do. But I mean officially. I want this to be your home too, sweetheart.”

His face brightens, and before I can say anything else, he’s pulling me out of my chair and into his arms. “I’d love that, Eli.”

I wrap my arms around him, laughing when he lifts me off my feet to kiss me. When he finally sets me down, he glances toward the living room.

“Does that mean I can bring the rest of my pinecones?”

I bury my face against his chest. “What have I gotten myself into?”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
ROWAN

Frisk currently hangs upside down from one of the upper branches of the Chris-mas tree Eli brought into our house.

“Frisk, get out of there,” Eli says.

Frisk chatters at him and reaches for a red glass ornament.

“Don’t you dare.”

I stand in the doorway, watching my mate argue with a squirrel who has no intention of listening. Frisk has been fascinated by our Chris-mas tree ever since Eli brought it inside. He doesn’t understand why we’ve put a perfectly good tree in the living room.

“Rowan, can you please tell your friend to get down before he breaks something?”

I approach the tree and hold out my hand. “Come on, Frisk. You’ve had your fun.”

He protests, reaching toward another ornament.

“Those belong to Eli. You have lots of shiny things in your nest.”

Frisk makes an offended noise but climbs onto my arm. I carry him toward the back door while Eli follows, muttering something about never imagining he’d have to squirrel-proof his house.

“Our house,” I remind him.

He stops behind me, and when I glance over my shoulder, he’s smiling.

“You’re right. Our house.”

I open the door and let Frisk scramble onto the porch railing. He pauses long enough to chatter at me before disappearing into the snow-covered branches of the nearest tree.

When I turn around, Eli waits with a mug of something warm. He hands it to me and reaches past my shoulder to close the door.

“Hot chocolate,” he says. “Figured you’d like some.”

I take a sip. It’s sweet and rich, with little white things floating on top that begin melting against my lips.

“What’s this?”

“Marshmallows.”

I fish one out with my finger and eat it. “Can I have more?”

“There’s a whole bag in the pantry.”

I head toward the kitchen, and Eli catches my shirt before I get very far.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks.

“To get marshmallows.”

Eli laughs and tugs me back toward him. “They can wait.”

I look down at his hand curled into my shirt. His fingers loosen, but he doesn’t let go. Instead, he steps closer until his chest brushes against my stomach, and I forget about the marshmallows.

“Is there something you want?” I ask.

“Yeah.” His gaze travels over my face before settling on my mouth. “You.”

Warmth spreads through me, and I set my mug on the little table beside the door. Eli watches as I bend toward him, careful not to bump my antlers against the hanging decorations. He rises onto his toes, his hands sliding up my chest, and meets me halfway.

His lips taste faintly of chocolate. I slip an arm around his waist and draw him closer, enjoying the weight of his body against mine. Eli curls his fingers into my hair while his other hand slips beneath my shirt, tracing the bark-like markings along my stomach. A shiver travels through me, and I tighten my hold on him.

Eli pulls back enough to look at me. His cheeks are pink, and his lips are slightly swollen.

“Too cold?” he asks.

“No.” I cover his hand with mine. “I like when you touch me.”

His expression softens, and he rests his cheek against my chest. I wrap both arms around him while the wind rattles the branches outside. The house is warm, filled with the scent of pine and the sweetness of our forgotten drinks.x

His smile fades into something softer, and he reaches for my hand. He brings my fingers to his lips before guiding my palm against his chest. His heart beats beneath my touch, quick and steady.

“I love you,” he whispers.

The words fill me with wonder. Love? Eli loves me!

“I love you too, Eli.” More than I can say. I never knew the love of a man would fill my chest to bursting, but every day with Eli is like finding my forest all over again. He’s kind, and sweet, and patient. I’m the luckiest wood nymph in all the land.

Eli takes my hand and pulls me away from the door toward the stairs. I follow willingly, watching him climb ahead of me. Halfway up, he glances back, making warmth gather low in my stomach.

In our bedroom, the little lamp beside the bed casts a golden glow across the blankets. My mother’s woven blanket lies folded at the foot, and the stones I’ve collected from the creek sit along the windowsill. Outside, snow continues falling, coating the branches that reach toward the house.

Eli turns to face me. For a moment, neither of us speaks. Then I can’t help it and have to kiss him again. And again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
ROWAN

It’s Chris-mas Eve! After breakfast, Eli takes a picture of us in front of Lyra, our Chris-mas tree. I bend down to fit into the frame, but when he tells me to smile, I look at him instead. He laughs, and I kiss his temple just as he takes another picture. I like that one best.

Midday, snow falls again. Eli’s delighted because he wanted a white Chris-mas, although I’m not sure why the color of the ground matters. When I return from checking on my trees, I tell him Beatrice wants more decorations.

“She’s already covered in lights,” he says.

“She wants a star.”

Eli glances out the window. “How am I supposed to put a star on a tree that tall?”

“I can do it.”

“You know what? Let’s do it.” He grabs his coat, and we’re out the door.

We find a large wooden star in the storage shed and carry it to Beatrice, who begins humming the moment she sees us. Eli laughs when I translate her complaint that most trees lack taste, and I climb into her branches to secure the star on her top. She keeps her limbs steady beneath me, and rustles with happiness when Eli declares the star’s perfect.

“There,” Eli says, slipping his hand into mine. “Now, she’s officially ready for Christmas.”

“I was ready before,” Beatrice informs me, but I decide not to translate that.

Eli brushes snow from my hair before pulling me close. I kiss him beneath Beatrice's branches while she sings overhead.

Back at the house, Eli presents me with a green sweater covered in white snowflakes. It's so soft and actually fits. His sweater is red with a reindeer across the front, although its antlers are much bigger than mine. I tell him mine are better, and he laughs.

Once we're dressed, I find Eli standing beneath the mistletoe. I know what that means, so I pull him into my arms and kiss him until he's clinging to my sweater.

"Best Christmas tradition ever," he murmurs.

I agree. We should celebrate this one more often.

While Eli finishes preparing dinner, I arrange the presents beneath our Chris-mas tree. There are packages for Jordan, Karla, Sage, Henry, Leslie, and me. I pick up one with my name written in Eli's handwriting, admiring it before carefully placing it with the others. I still can't read human languages, but I know what my name looks like.

Jordan arrives first, carrying presents and a dish that smells like chocolate. He looks around the living room before noticing the shelf beside the fireplace.

"More pinecones?"

"I brought in the rest."

He snorts and places his gifts beneath the tree. "Got something for you too."

"For me?"

"Well, yeah. You're family now."

He says it so easily. I have my mother, Frisk, and the trees and animals who have shared my life for years. And I have Eli. Is it really that easy to be integrated into their family?

Soon, Karla, Sage, Henry, and Leslie arrive with more food. We gather around the table, passing dishes and sharing stories. Karla tells us about a goat who escaped its enclosure only to fall asleep inside an empty feed bin.

Leslie asks what Chris-mas was like in my mother's forest. I explain that we celebrated the changing seasons rather than human holidays, and that the longest night was important because it meant the days would begin growing longer again. When she asks about our traditions, I tell her about the songs my mother taught me to hear.

“That’s beautiful,” Sage says, and Leslie asks if I’ll tell them more sometime.

“I’d like that.”

Eli rests his hand on my knee beneath the table. For so long, my world was the forest, and although I loved it, there were times when I wondered what it would be like to share my days with someone who could hold me. Now, I’m surrounded by people who want to hear about my life.

After dinner, everyone gathers in the living room to exchange presents. Jordan hands me a small box, and I carefully peel away the wrapping paper. Inside is a wooden ornament shaped like a squirrel, complete with a bushy tail and tiny paws.

“Figured Frisk deserved a place on the tree,” Jordan explains.

“You made this?”

“Had a little help from a woodworking kit, but yeah.”

I thank him and carry the ornament to the tree, where Eli helps me find the perfect branch. When I step back, everyone is watching me, and I tell them how much I love it.

Eli hands me another package wrapped in green paper. Inside is a thick knitted blanket in several shades of green, large enough to cover me from antlers to toes.

“I had it made,” he says. “You could use a blanket that actually fits.”

I run my fingers over the soft fabric, marveling that he thought to have something made just for me. Beneath the blanket is a photograph of us dancing in the clearing during Chris-mas After Dark. Eli’s arms are around my waist, and I’m looking down at him while lights glow among the snowy branches.

“I asked Jordan to take it,” Eli says. “Thought you might want to remember that night.”

“I remember everything about that night.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

I pull him into my arms and kiss him, ignoring the teasing comments from the others. I’m too busy loving my mate.

The rest of the evening passes with cookies, games, and Jordan arguing that his drawing of a snowman was perfectly acceptable. It wasn’t.

Eventually, everyone gathers their coats and leftovers. Jordan is the last to leave. He hugs Eli before turning toward me and wrapping his arms

around me. I return the embrace carefully, still learning how much pressure humans can tolerate.

“Merry Christmas Eve, Rowan,” he says. “Take care of my brother.”

“I plan on it.”

Jordan gives my shoulder a squeeze before heading into the snowy night.

The house is quiet again. Wrapping paper covers part of the floor, empty mugs sit on the coffee table, and our Chris-mas tree glows beside the fireplace. I walk over to the little squirrel ornament and touch its wooden tail.

Eli comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. “You okay?”

“Yes. Jordan said I’m family.”

Eli turns me toward him and brushes a strand of hair from my cheek. “You are, sweetheart.”

“I like being part of your family.”

He pulls me down for a kiss. “*Our* family,” he corrects gently.

Our family. I like that so much.

After we’ve cleaned the kitchen, we curl up together on the couch. I’m wrapped in my new blanket, and Eli rests against my chest while snow falls beyond the windows. Beatrice is humming outside, accompanied by several of the younger trees.

“Did you have a good Christmas Eve?” Eli murmurs.

“The best.”

He settles closer, and I rest my cheek against his hair. I have a home among the trees, a brother who gives me squirrel ornaments, friends who want to hear about my life, and a mate who makes room for all of it.

Outside, the trees begin another song. I close my eyes and listen, wishing Eli could hear them too. They’re singing about being home.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
ELI

I wake to the lovely scent of pine. When I open my eyes, Rowan's lying beside me, propped on one elbow, watching me. He's probably been awake for a while.

"Merry Chris-mas," he whispers, brushing the hair away from my face.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart." I reach for him beneath the blankets and pull him closer. "What time is it?"

"Time doesn't exist."

I groan and bury my face against his chest. "We're supposed to sleep in on Christmas."

"We did. The sun's been up for a while. So have the birds, squirrels, and chipmunks."

I slide my leg between his and settle against him. His skin is warm beneath my palm. "Nobody needs us today. We can stay right here."

Rowan tucks the blankets around us, pulling me against his chest. I'm nearly asleep again when his fingers begin tracing my shoulder.

"Something on your mind?" I mumble.

"The presents."

I lift my head, finding him watching me with barely contained excitement. "You opened presents last night."

"Those were from everyone. You said we had our own."

I laugh and kiss him, letting myself enjoy his warmth for another moment before he nudges his nose against mine.

"Can we get up now?"

I steal another kiss before climbing out of bed.

Downstairs, the house is quiet and warm. Colored lights from the Christmas tree spill across the floor, illuminating another pinecone Rowan hung beside Jordan's wooden squirrel ornament. I head into the kitchen to start coffee while Rowan investigates the presents beneath the tree.

By the time the coffee finishes brewing, Rowan is settled on the living room rug with his legs stretched out in front of him. His hair is still tousled from sleep, and he looks up eagerly when I enter carrying our mugs.

"Presents now?"

"After breakfast." I hand him his coffee, earning a disappointed look. "They aren't going anywhere, sweetheart."

He takes a sip, then glances toward the tree again before following me into the kitchen.

Breakfast is supposed to be simple, but Rowan has other plans. He wants to help, which means I end up with a seven-foot-tall wood nymph standing beside me at the stove, insisting he can manage the eggs while I prepare the mushrooms and butter the toast.

I hand him the spatula and show him how to move the eggs around the pan. He watches carefully, his brow furrowed in concentration, and follows my instructions without any trouble. Beside him, the mushrooms sizzle in melted butter, filling the kitchen with the smell of garlic and herbs.

Rowan glances into my pan. "That smell wonderful."

"They're almost ready." I stir the mushrooms before adding another pinch of seasoning. "Want to taste one?"

He leans toward the fork I offer him, closing his eyes while he chews. His face tells me everything I need to know.

"More garlic," he decides.

I laugh and reach for the jar. "I knew you'd say that."

While I finish the mushrooms, Rowan separates the eggs onto two plates and carries them to the table. I add the toast and mushrooms, then follow him with our coffee.

We eat at the kitchen table while snow drifts past the windows.

The farm made it through its first Christmas season, and I couldn't be happier with how things turned out. Most of our trees are spending the holidays with their families, Sage can barely keep the bakery stocked, and we've already had people asking about next year's pumpkin patch. There's still plenty of work ahead of me, but right now, I'm more interested in spending Christmas with Rowan than thinking about any of it.

Instead, I’m watching Rowan carefully arrange the remaining mushrooms on a piece of toast, making certain none of them fall off when he picks it up.

He catches me looking and raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing. Just enjoying the view.”

He glances toward the window. “The snow is pretty.”

“Wasn’t talking about the snow.”

He gives me a warm smile before returning to his breakfast. I reach across the table and rest my hand over his, enjoying the familiar texture of his bark-like markings beneath my fingers.

Eventually, Rowan straightens and glances toward the living room. “Should we open presents?”

I chuckle and push back my chair. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s see what’s under that tree.”

We settle on the rug in front of the fireplace with fresh coffee warming our hands. Rowan has wrapped himself in the blanket I gave him last night, the green fabric drapes over his shoulders while he examines the packages beneath the tree.

I hand him a rectangular box wrapped in silver paper. “This one’s yours.”

He carefully removes the ribbon and unfolds the paper, revealing a small dark wooden box with a hinged lid. Leaves and curling vines have been carved along the edges, and the inside is divided into small compartments lined with soft fabric.

Rowan runs his fingers over the carvings, then opens the lid to examine the compartments. “What do I put in it?”

“Whatever you want. Your stones, the little things you collect, anything that’s special to you.” I move closer and point out the different sections. “I thought it’d be nice to have somewhere to keep your treasures.”

He lifts one of the small stones from his pocket and places it inside, testing the size of the compartment. Then he closes the lid and turns the chest over to admire the carvings again.

“It’s beautiful, Eli.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

He leans forward and kisses me before reaching beneath the tree for a package wrapped in brown paper. A piece of green twine holds it together, with a few dried leaves tucked beneath the knot.

“This is for you.”

I take it from him, surprised by its weight. “You wrapped this yourself?”

“Sage helped me find the paper. And Frisk helped me find the best leaves.”

I untie the twine and unfold the wrapping, revealing a small wooden carving. At first, I can only stare at it, trying to take in the details. It’s our house.

The porch railing, the windows, and even the little chimney have been carved into the wood.

“Rowan.” I turn it carefully in my hands. “You made this?”

He nods, watching me examine the carving. “I’ve been working on it when you were busy.”

I run my thumb along the tiny porch railing. “This must’ve taken forever.”

“A while.” He shifts closer and points toward the front of the house. “Look underneath.”

I tilt the carving and discover two little figures standing together beneath the porch roof. One is taller than the other, with a pair of small antlers rising from its head. The shorter figure has an arm around the taller one’s waist, and their heads are turned toward each other.

My throat tightens as I study them. “That’s us.”

Rowan touches the edge of the carving. “I wanted you to have something that shows what you’ve built.”

I look from the little house to the nymph sitting beside me. He’s watching me with an expression so open and hopeful that I have to set the carving aside before I drop it.

“Come here.”

He moves closer, and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him into a kiss. My eyes sting, but I don’t bother trying to hide it. Rowan made this gift with his own talented hands and it’s perfect.

When I finally draw away, I keep my hands against his cheeks. “I love it. Thank you.”

His fingers brush beneath one of my eyes. “You’re crying.”

“Happy tears, sweetheart.” I kiss his palm before reaching for the carving again. “I want to put this somewhere everyone can see it.”

He follows me to the mantel, where I clear a space beside a framed photograph of Jordan and me. I set the little house in the center, adjusting it

until the porch faces the room. Rowan stands behind me, his arms settling around my waist while we admire it together.

“It looks good there,” he murmurs.

“It does.” I turn in his embrace and look up at him. “You know what else looks good?”

He raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to continue.

“You. Standing right here in our house, looking all handsome.”

Rowan bends to kiss me, and I slide my arms around his neck. I can taste the coffee from earlier. I draw him closer, enjoying the solid weight of his body and the way his fingers spread across my lower back.

He pulls away long enough to brush his lips against my cheek. “I have another present for you.”

I smile against his skin. “You do?”

“Yes.” He takes my hand and presses it against his chest. “Me.”

I laugh, but the sound fades when he kisses me again. His hands settle at my hips, and he lifts me just enough that I can wrap my legs around his waist. I catch his shoulders, mindful of his antlers as he carries me away from the fireplace.

“You’re already mine,” I murmur against his mouth.

“And you’re mine.”

He kisses the corner of my jaw, then trails his lips along my neck. I tilt my head to give him room, my fingers sliding into his hair while he holds me securely against him. The house is warm. The farm is quiet, and we have nowhere to be until tomorrow.

I pull back far enough to look at him. “Bedroom?”

Rowan’s answer is another kiss. He adjusts his hold on me and heads toward the stairs, carrying me with the same easy strength that still manages to make my stomach flutter.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ROWAN

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Bart is home, and he's making sure everyone knows it. I hear him before Eli finishes unloading his pot from the wagon, his familiar voice rising above the other trees.

"Finally! Do you know what I've been through?"

I approach the wagon, where Eli is securing the ramp. Bart's branches sway when he sees me, sending a shower of needles onto the wooden boards. "Welcome home, Bart."

"They put ornaments on me. Heavy ones. But I liked the dog."

I examine his needles and the soil around his roots. He's a little dry, but otherwise healthy. Eli spent plenty of time explaining proper care to every family, and Bart seems to have been well looked after.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I ask, brushing snow from one of his branches.

"The dog tried to drink my water."

"But did you enjoy yourself?"

His branches settle. "*It was lovely. Do I get to see them again?"*

"Next Chris-mas, if they decide to rent you again." I help Eli guide Bart's pot down the ramp, keeping his branches from catching on the sides. We've prepared a sheltered area for the returned trees, where they can rest until the ground is ready for replanting.

Bart is the third tree to return today. Two other families brought theirs back this morning, and Eli has several more scheduled for the coming week. Most will stay with their families until after New Year's Day, so we have plenty of time to get everyone settled.

Eli pushes the empty wagon aside and joins me. His cheeks are pink from the cold, and there's a smear of dirt across his sleeve. "How's he doing?"

"A little thirsty, but otherwise healthy. He liked his family."

"Good. I'll get him some water."

While Eli fills the watering can, Bart begins telling the neighboring trees about his holiday. He describes a little dog who slept beneath his branches, the bright ornaments hanging from his limbs, and a family who gathered around him every evening. His complaints gradually disappear beneath the excitement of sharing everything he's experienced.

All three early arrivals have returned safely, and each has stories to tell. I still miss the others, but knowing they'll be coming home soon makes it easier.

❄

Later, Eli's sliding on his coat when something scratches at the front door. Before either of us can investigate, Frisk appears in the window, his little paws pressed against the glass. There's a bright red ribbon tied around his neck, and he's squeaking so loudly I can hear him through the door.

Eli laughs and opens it. "Somebody's excited."

Frisk races inside, climbs up my pant leg, and settles on my shoulder. He immediately begins squeaking in my ear, waving his little paws toward the forest.

"Slow down, Frisk. What's happening?"

He squeaks again, then tugs at my hair.

"Oh, your lady friend's waiting for you?"

Frisk bounces on my shoulder, his tail brushing against my cheek. He squeaks several more times, explaining that tonight is very important, and he needs everyone to hurry.

Eli pulls on his gloves. "What's all the excitement about?"

"Frisk says there's a celebration, and his lady friend's waiting for him."

"A celebration?"

"That's what he says."

Frisk gives another impatient squeak and points toward the door.

“Yes, we’re coming.” I adjust the ribbon around his neck before following Eli outside.

We head into the forest, following the familiar path toward the clearing. Eli carries a lantern, and Frisk rides on my shoulder, occasionally standing on his hind legs to look ahead. Every few minutes, he squeaks at us to walk faster.

When we reach the clearing, there are animals everywhere. Squirrels occupy the lower branches and the surrounding trees. Rabbits sit together near a fallen log, while several deer stand beneath the evergreens. A pair of foxes watches us from the edge of the clearing, and birds have gathered overhead.

I stare at the little gathering before looking at Frisk. “What have you done?”

He squeaks proudly, waving both paws toward the animals.

“You organized a party?”

Frisk nods so enthusiastically that his ribbon slips sideways.

Eli stops beside me. “Rowan?”

“Frisk invited everyone.”

Eli looks around the clearing, taking in the animals. “Including our goats?”

I find Boots and Toffee immediately. They’ve escaped their enclosure before, although I thought Karla found every place they could squeeze through. Boots bleats and trots toward us, stopping long enough to sniff Eli’s knee before wandering away again.

Eli shakes his head, laughing. “Well, this is one way to celebrate New Year’s Eve.”

Frisk leaps from my shoulder and races toward the trees. Halfway there, he stops and turns around, squeaking loudly to announce our arrival. The squirrels begin chattering, and several birds flutter from one branch to another. Beatrice’s song rises above the commotion, joined by the other trees surrounding the clearing.

I can barely hear myself think. This is the best night of my life. With my forest, animal friends, and best of all, Eli. He makes me feel seen when I was taught to hide. I can play in the woods and go back to him whenever I want. We have a song all our own, I can feel it in my heart as clear as the songs of my babies.

A rabbit hops between Eli’s boots, and he laughs before holding out his hand. “May I have this dance, Rowan?”

I take his hand and pull him into my arms. He follows my movements easily, resting his hands against my waist while I guide him through the snow. I hum the song bursting to come forth.

“What is that?” Eli asks.

“Our song.” I press a hand to his chest. “Can you feel it? Here?”

“I think I do.” We sway in the clearing with the animals frolicking around us.

For a little while, they behave themselves. Frisk appears beside us with a smaller squirrel following close behind. She’s a lovely little critter with gray fur and a fluffy tail. Frisk circles her, occasionally stopping to show off his ribbon. He squeaks excitedly, wanting her to watch him. She sits on her hind legs and gives a soft chirp.

Eli watches the two squirrels for a moment before looking at me.

“Is that his girlfriend?”

“He’s been trying to win her over.”

“Looks like it’s working.”

Frisk puffs out his chest and gives an approving squeak.

We return to our dancing. The rabbits begin hopping around one another, and the deer move slowly between the trees. One of the foxes chases its companion through the snow, sending both of them skidding around a fallen log.

The goats aren’t graceful at all. Boots decides Eli’s coat looks delicious and catches the hem between her teeth.

“Hey!” Eli looks down. “That’s not food, sweetie.”

Boots pulls harder. I reach down and pet her head while gently remove the fabric from her mouth.

“There are plenty of things to eat in the barn.”

She bleats at me. Eli laughs so hard he has to lean against me. I hold him steady while the goat wanders away to investigate the lantern.

I find myself laughing along with Eli as the animals celebrate around us. None of the forest gatherings have been quite like this since I’ve been here. Sure we’ve always had fun, but nothing like this with everyone carefree.

I kiss the top of Eli’s head, smiling when he tilts his face toward mine. I bend to kiss him properly, keeping my arms around him while the snow begins falling again.

Somewhere nearby, Frisk lets out an excited squeak. I glance over Eli's shoulder and find his lady squirrel curled up beside him on a branch, their tails resting together. He gives a few delighted squeaks, announcing that she likes him.

Eli turns to me. "Almost midnight. Ready for another year together?"

"Yes." I pull him closer. "And every year after that."

He tugs me down for another kiss. I pull him into my arms, and he has to straddle my waist.

Somewhere beyond the forest, fireworks crackle against the night sky. The sudden noise sends several birds fluttering from their branches. Toffee startles and jumps sideways, bumping into Boots, while Frisk dives behind his lady friend.

I look toward the distant lights, concerned that the animals might be frightened, but Beatrice begins a soothing song. The other trees join her, and the forest gradually settles again.

Eli glances at his watch before smiling up at me. "Happy New Year, Rowan."

I cup his cheeks and kiss him. "Happy New Year, Eli."

Frisk begins chattering from his branch, and the other squirrels answer him. The goats add their voices, followed by a chorus of birds. I laugh and pull Eli closer while the trees sing around us. What a wonderful way to begin another year.

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EPILOGUE

ELI - ONE YEAR LATER

“Greg, your family’s here.” Rowan stands beside the spruce, one hand resting against its trunk while a little girl in a purple coat hurries toward them. Her parents follow at a more reasonable pace, laughing as their daughter abandons the path and plunges through the shallow snow.

“Greg!” she calls, throwing her arms around the tree.

I stop beside Rowan and watch the spruce’s branches tremble. Greg has grown several inches since last Christmas, and his needles are fuller than ever.

“He remembers you,” Rowan tells the girl, crouching beside her. “He’s been looking forward to taking him home again.”

She beams at him before turning to her mother. “Can we take him home now?”

“Once we finish the paperwork, honey.” Her mother gives me an apologetic look, but I wave it away. Watching children reunite with the trees they picked out last year has become one of my favorite parts of the season.

Our second Christmas is turning out even better than the first. We’ve nearly doubled our reservations. The bakery has been busy since Halloween, and the new wagon has made keeping up with the hayrides so much easier. Jordan keeps reminding me that I need to hire another employee before next fall. I think he might be right, but I’ll never admit that to him out loud.

I leave Rowan with Greg and escort the family toward the store. Children gather around the goat enclosure, where Dasher, one of our newest goats, is attempting to steal a mitten through the fence.

This place is everything I wanted it to be.

By the time Greg's family finishes their paperwork, Rowan has him ready for transport. He helps me guide the pot onto the wagon, making certain the branches are secure before we move him toward the parking lot.

The little girl walks beside us, telling Greg about the ornaments she's saved for him. Rowan listens with pure delight, occasionally glancing at the tree when its branches move. I don't need to hear Greg's comments to know he's enjoying himself.

Once the family drives away, I slip my hand into Rowan's and lead him toward the next row of trees. Snow has begun falling again, dusting his brown-green hair and collecting along his antlers. He's wearing the thick coat we bought last winter, although he's managed to get pine needles stuck in the sleeves.

Rowan leans down and kisses my cheek before we return to work.

It's almost closing time when Rowan stops in the middle of the tree lot. We're carrying the last of the empty pots toward the storage shed, and he's been telling me which trees want to be moved closer to the creek in spring. His words trail off, and he turns toward the forest, his attention fixed on something beyond the rows of trees.

"Rowan?" I set my pot down. "Everything okay?"

He pauses, listening, before his face brightens. "Mother's here."

I glance toward the forest. "Already? I thought she wasn't coming until tomorrow."

"She wanted to surprise us." Rowan sets his pot beside mine and reaches for my hand. "Come on. She's waiting."

I follow him toward the tree line, fully aware that I'm covered in dirt and wearing the same old work jacket I've had for years. Rowan's been talking about his mother's visit for weeks, and although they've stayed in regular contact since he left her forest, this will be the first time I've met her in person.

He's told me plenty about her. I know she loves the ancient trees in her care, that she taught him to carve when he was young, and that she's responsible for his habit of bringing half the forest into our house. She's also heard more about me than I probably want to know.

We reach the clearing, and I stop so suddenly that Rowan takes another step before noticing. His mother is *enormous*.

I knew wood nymphs could grow much larger than humans, but I hadn't expected someone who makes Rowan look small. She towers over him, her

broad shoulders are draped in a cloak of deep green fabric that falls almost to her bare feet. Long strands of emerald hair cascade down her back, threaded with tiny white flowers and delicate vines. Her antlers rise high above her head, branching outward like the limbs of a young tree, and bark-like markings curl across her arms and throat. She's magnificent.

And she's looking directly at me.

"There you are," she says, her deep voice carries through the clearing.

Rowan releases my hand and hurries toward her. She opens her arms, and he disappears into her embrace. She bends to kiss the top of his head before pulling back to examine him.

"You look well, my sapling."

"Mother." Rowan laughs, reaching up to straighten one of the flowers caught in her hair. "You saw me in spring."

"You've been busy since then."

She brushes snow from his shoulders, then looks toward me with a warm expression. Rowan turns and gestures for me to join them.

I approach, trying not to stare at the sheer size of her. Rowan slips an arm around my waist, and I find myself standing between two wood nymphs who could probably lift me with one hand.

"Mother, this is Eli. Eli, this is my mother."

Her expression softens as she studies me. "It's wonderful to finally meet you. Rowan has told me so much about you."

"All good things, I hope." I offer my hand, hoping she understands the gesture.

She takes it carefully between her enormous fingers. Her skin is warm despite the cold, and the markings along her wrist resemble delicate vines.

"Nothing but good things," she assures me. "Although I understand you had some disagreements about the trees when you first met." She grins, so I'm hoping she's not mad at me.

I glance at Rowan, who seems to finds the snow-covered ground fascinating at the moment.

"We worked through those," I say.

"So I've heard." She releases my hand and turns toward the surrounding forest. "He's told me about your farm and the families who take the trees home for Christmas. I've been looking forward to seeing it."

Rowan brightens. "Then we should show you everything."

She studies us for a moment. "You two look very happy."

“We are,” Rowan answers, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

I look up at him, taking in the familiar green eyes and the little antlers rising from his hair. There’s a pine needle caught near his temple, and I reach up to remove it before resting my hand against his cheek.

Rowan lifts his face to the sky. “They’re singing.”

She smiles at him, and whatever passes between them makes his expression soften. He reaches for my hand, threading our fingers together. I can’t hear the music, but I don’t need to. Rowan sings to my heart in a way I never thought possible.

The End

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MM MONSTERS AND MISTLETOE



My Christmas with the Krampus

Tangled In His Branches

Elixirs with the Vampire King

The Changeling and the Gargoyle

A Cup of Cheer and a Dash of Djinn

Dragon Worth Fighting For

His Yuletide Basilisk

Satyrs and other Secrets

Advent of the Siren's Heart

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan’s always been a reader and a daydreamer. Their writer origin story is embarrassing now they think about it. But also kinda funny, maybe. One day they might share. If people ask nicely. It involves a psychic.

They share an apartment with their sister in Southern Indiana where they keep the AC on year round and try to keep each other entertained.

- Visit them online: morganlysand.com
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