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Between
Elves

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Between Elves
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Book Blurb

When Blake Toximmo lost her husband and infant son she nearly lost herself as well. But she's back among the living, fighting to start her life again and find happiness. Her plans for reconstructing her world are drastically changed when she is abducted by Arden Woods, a sexy, sweet climber who she befriends during a mountain climb. In a whole new world, Blake finds herself not only surrounded by new things, but also by people who aren't quite human.

Arden and Quin are elves living in a world that's not giving them everything they need. They are happy as a couple, but they are missing something and long for a family only a human woman can give. Even with the best intentions at heart, Arden and Quin don't quite know how to make Blake happy. To make them the family all three need, they'll have to learn what exactly that means to each of them.

Chapter One

"What are we doing?"

"Same thing we did last night, my lively, lovely Blake."

Blake Toximo sighed as she looked up at her new lover. What was she thinking? She barely knew the man, but something about Arden pulled her tighter than a harp string.

He offered his hand as they moved away from the fire. Their climb to the top of Mount McKinley was more than halfway done, and the other four couples had paired off and already gone to their tents for the night. Arden was the only other single person on the climb, and it was Blake's good luck they got along so well.

He wrapped his mittened hand around hers, and, just like the first time they met over tin cups of coffee, she couldn't help but notice how right it felt to be near him. It was why they'd started sharing their tent the first night and had done, well, more than sleep. It was so out of character for her, but as Arden tugged her slightly off balance so she would lean into him, she just didn't care.

"How are the hands feeling after the climb?" he asked once they neared the tent.

For reasons she didn't want pointed out, he'd pitched their pup tent out of the circle with the other tents. She'd seen one of the guides chatting with Arden that morning after an especially fun night, and it was probably better for everyone that they have a little more room.

"They're okay." She flexed her scarred hands within her mittens and only winced a little. "Better than I expected considering how cold it's been."

"Good, good. You can leave the mittens on tonight too. I like the texture when you rub them all over me. It's your own design on them I feel, isn't it?"

"Um, yeah." She was surprised that he noticed, but then he seemed to notice everything. He'd asked about her hands immediately after she'd flexed them their first day out, even though she'd worn gloves all day. And he knew not to press her about removing them. When she was tired, he always seemed to be at her side, cheering her

on to the next stop. They'd had four days together, but she felt more taken care of than she ever had in her life.

"I knew that texture had to be something special." Arden unzipped the tent. "Did you get enough to eat earlier, love? I have a few chocolates and snacks I'd be willing to share."

"Am I going to need them to keep my strength up?" She was only partly teasing. The past few nights had been just as exhausting as the days. Different, delicious exhaustion, but still, she needed to sleep.

"Or we could just cuddle up and talk."

"I think you've said that a few times, but we haven't quite made it yet," she replied, feeling the familiar tingle as they settled into their zipped-together sleeping bags.

The second his hands touched her, she was lost. That was the way of it with Arden. His strong fingers roamed freely beneath her sweater. If he noticed any imperfections, he didn't say anything or act as if they deterred him. He just rubbed and stroked until she arched into his hands. Her fingers were stiff from being in the cold all day, but she managed to unbutton and unzip his fly, gaining immediate access to his cock. He didn't wear underclothes or thermals, as she did, and just knowing he was bare during their climbs made her hot.

"Ah, hell Blake, that's good." He moaned as she cupped his silky balls. They weren't shaved, but the hair was so fine and smooth that her attention was always drawn to them.

"I'm so glad you like it," she said, pressing her mouth to his.

His lips were a bit thick for a man and she'd teased him about needing gloss on them, but he'd just smiled. Not a single thing deterred her from Ayden's wonderful body and sweet personality.

"Your pants," Ayden ordered as she continued to play with his balls and stroke his incredibly hard, long length.

He had her pants around her ankles after what she was sure was some unattractive wiggling. She smiled as he settled the best he could between her legs, his hot, hard cock just slipping between her outer lips and driving her crazy. He was so good at teasing, pressing the head of his penis against her clit with just the right amount of pressure and stopping when she wanted him to do more.

"Arden," she growled when again it seemed like he would finally dive in, but instead just broke the surface.

"Aw, patience little Blake."

He usually was one to tease, but this time his tone was strained. She lifted her hips, giving his little play less room to retreat.

"Hell, sweetheart. Let me"

She gasped as he finally gave her at least half of what she wanted. "If I just 'let' you we'll never . . . oh man."

He sank deep and hard before she could finish her accusation. He might like to tease, but once he started, Blake could only hold on and hope she didn't black out during the ride. So much precision, so much power in his tall, lanky body, and all of it was focused between her legs. She couldn't move much with her pants locking her legs at her knees, but she plastered her front to him, touching everywhere as orgasm after orgasm crested, until his finishing thrusts were nearly painful to her oversexed body.

"Arden, Arden."

His chest heaved against her; both struggled to catch their breath in the thinner mountain air.

"I like hearing my name on your lips," he mumbled after a long moment.

She wanted to cry foul when he pulled away and re-zipped himself, but all good things had to end eventually. An immediate sadness overwhelmed her at the thought of no more Arden. They still had a week left and then she didn't know where they'd be, but she wasn't going to borrow trouble or time.

"Lift up, love."

Blake obeyed the order, allowing Arden to put her pants back on. He even zipped and buttoned them for her. She found it so sweet that he took as much care in dressing her as he did *undressing* her. He lay down beside her and tucked her close with a happy sigh that matched her own.

"Now, that was a good talk," she teased.

"Och, little one." Sometimes he sounded so foreign, but he said he was from the East Coast and she always chocked up his silliness to that. "I try to talk, I really do, but your sweet body beside mine" He shuddered in pleasure as he pulled her even closer. "It distracts me every damn time, and even our lack of bathing isn't deterring me."

She giggled in unexpected pleasure. She knew they weren't done for the night and could already feel his erection growing again near her back, but maybe they could talk some. "Talk, Arden."

"Fine," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, I know. I want to hear Blake Toximo's deepest, darkest secret."

"Secrets, huh?" She thought for a moment and smiled into the darkness. "I used to hide Hershey bars in my cash register at work. It added extra incentive for me to try to sell my pieces."

"I love chocolate," Arden said happily. "Not the bitter nonsense, but the very sweet and smooth kind. Oh and chilled in milk. Mmm."

"Oh yeah, frozen chocolate bars or ice cold chocolate milk. But hot chocolate right now would be really good, especially with tons of marshmallows. Oh, and animal crackers. I love hot chocolate with animal crackers."

"Hot, I don't believe I've had it that way. Like chocolate coffee?" Arden sounded genuinely curious, but how could that be? Who didn't know about hot chocolate?

"I'll make you some when we're done here," she promised, snuggling her butt closer to his front. Arden always seemed to be just the right temperature, and when she touched him, she was too. "Okay, your turn to spill a secret or two."

"I find you absolutely fascinating," he said without hesitation, his baritone timbre a sweet comfort that made her want to listen to him for days and days.

"Well yeah, I mean, of course you do. I am fairly awesome."

"And cannot accept an honest observation. You should be accepting of yourself, the good parts right along with the bad."

Blake squirmed at his words. He chuckled lightly and ran his fingers through her hair, as if he knew her discomfort. "Okay, we'll leave it for now, sweet Blake. Tell me another secret?"

"Hmm." She coughed a little through the suddenly awkward moment. She didn't understand this side of Arden. The sexy and playful sides, yes, but even though his words had been light, she knew the question was real. "Well, I had a weird dream last night."

"Really? Let's hear it," he encouraged, back to gently petting through her hair, tugging a dark curl from behind her ear. "So pretty, Blake."

"Thanks. The dream. My favorite imaginary person is back. I call her my Noni Sophie. Well, she's not really *my* Noni, but she's really grandmotherly. She's been visiting my dreams for years, since I was . . . well since my mom died, actually, so almost ten years now," she explained, loving the memory of Noni. Over the last decade of tragedy, even in the darkest moments Blake hadn't felt alone because Noni was always with her.

"And?" The playing and teasing she'd expected from Arden was replaced with nearly a solemn tone.

"And she said, well, it was a version of what she's told me from the very start, you know, just my imagination giving me a pep talk. She said I'll be fine and life's changes are good. That I'm strong enough for whatever is next. She always stops by before or after something . . . unpleasant, so I don't always love that, but the dreams have made me wonder if I've got a little psychic in me. It's silly but . . . when my Noni Sophie comes, I know change is coming and maybe heartbreak, but that things will eventually be okay."

"Noni Sophie is never wrong, you know," Arden told her, sending a chill up her spine. "According to legend, she's an old watcher from some of the tales, especially around Alaska."

"Oh, that's why I must have put that name on her." Unnerved by the turn in the conversation, Blake waited for Arden to speak. By now she'd expected to be riding Arden or maybe doing some heavy licking, not discussing folklore.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "Goodnight, Blake."

"Just goodnight?" she asked, but really, any desire to be intimate had been replaced by uncertainty. What was supposed to be a chance to get to know him better had only led to her knowing about his love of chocolate. Again, she had more questions than answers about Arden Lakes.

"For now, yes." He leaned closer and brushed his mouth across her forehead. "I will wake you later, though, and you'll smile for me again."

Smile for me. Sudden fatigue drained her of any other protest, but left her thinking about that phrase. She loved how he said it and that he meant it was even sweeter.

* * * * *

What an odd dream. Blake hadn't really thought of her mother in years let alone the time they'd spent on rocking boats in her childhood. All the fresh air and exercise must have jarred a few memories loose. She smiled at the thought and wiggled her nose when she felt a tickle. She tried to reach her hand up to scratch but found her arm stuck. She attempted to move and began to struggle in earnest when she realized a blanket had been wrapped so tightly around her that she couldn't budge.

"Arden?" Blake called, trying not to panic.

A mittened hand covered her mouth and her heartbeat exploded in her chest.

"Relax, my Blake." Arden's voice sounded normal enough, and she realized they were moving.

She shook her head to dislodge his hand. "Where are we?"

"On our way to my home," Arden explained, walking firmly on through the snow, she assumed, but it was dark and she couldn't see beyond the blankets he'd wrapped her in. "You'll come home with me and Quin, and we'll be your family. We'll make each other happy. Noni Sophie said."

"My Noni Sophie? She's just a dream. We need to go back to the campsite right now, Arden. Take me back."

"Your Noni is more than just a dream." Even with the familiar name, Arden's reply didn't ease Blake's fears. "Don't be scared, sweet. I would never, ever hurt you. Good things are ahead, Blake Toximo, keep that in mind and trust me if you can."

Trust? How could he even ask that?

"I ask because in the last five days we've been at each other's side climbing a bloody mountain, and I've never let you fall or backtrack. Let that mean something, Blake, and I promise I'll make up for my behavior, including this unplanned exit."

"How . . . ?"

"Sweeting, if someone stole me away I'd think they were crazy to ask for my trust," he told her, his usual light humor returning. "We'll be there soon."

She opened her mouth to scream again but his hand gently covered it, muting any more rants or fears. She started to fight against both her wrapping and Arden. Wherever they were going, she hadn't said she wanted to go. Even if part of her trusted him with her life, the rest of her screamed kidnapping.

His hand moved and she thought she'd get her say, but instead the world fell out from beneath them. The sensation of weightlessness filled her and then she did scream. The only thing keeping her from a complete freefall was Arden. His arms were strong, and though she couldn't hold onto him, she burrowed in as close as she could.

They were going to die, she knew it, and maybe that wasn't the worst thing in the world. She'd started her life again after all her heartbreak, but that life hadn't been anything special. She hadn't added to the world in three years, not even peripherally. It was probably for the best that she be done. Noni Sophie had given her the assurance

that whatever was next would be good. Since she believed in heaven and believed in something more after life, Blake found peace in the long fall.

Once she hit bottom – well everything would be okay.

Chapter Two

It was cool and dark when Blake awoke. Awake? She sat up slowly. She had to be dead. She couldn't remember the crash after the fall and hoped she never did. The impacts she'd taken before in car accidents and minor falls assured her she didn't want to know what the hit felt like after that distance. She was warm, still dirty, but sudden realization filled her.

She was dead. That meant those she loved had to be with her. Her mother. Jason. Their baby, Jonathan. After years of not having a single person whom she loved or who loved her, they would finally all be together again in death. She pushed out of the bed and shivered when her feet hit an ice-cold floor, but she didn't care. All she could think of was finding them as she had in her dreams a hundred times before.

The little house or whatever she was in was odd, but just right. She and Jason had loved their loft – filled with her handmade textiles and the wood and brass sculptures he created. They always spoke of leaving the city and being hippies. It made sense that heaven would have their imagined cottage. The door was open and she could smell a fire burning. They'd loved roasting marshmallows on their balcony when their landlord was away. Her heart bursting with joy, she raced through the door and down a narrow hall.

She gasped when her toe hit a floorboard and ceased her progress.

"Blake?"

She hopped on one foot, blood pouring out of her poor pinky toe where the nail had cracked. She looked up, but the man wasn't Jason. She realized there was no scent of baby in the air, nothing in the room before her that supported her earlier belief. She

wasn't dead, at least not the way she'd hoped. Crushed. And suddenly afraid, she sank to the floor.

"Ach, little one."

"Don't touch me." Blake cringed away from the hands that had given her so much pleasure and peace. "Please, this can't be real. If I'm dead, it's supposed to be different."

She should have known. She'd lost that life, the one that was fulfilling and sweet and made waking up every morning worth the effort. Of course she couldn't have her son and husband back. They were dead, and whatever the hell was running the show didn't want her to have them back. Noni Sophie had lied. Nothing was right.

"Blake, sweetie, you aren't dead," Arden said.

His stomach turned as he stared down at Blake. Noni Sophie swore she was the one who would complete his and Quin's life, and from the moment he met Blake, Arden believed. To see her so crushed, crying out names that were unfamiliar to him, broke his heart.

"Blake, dear one." He gently lifted her in his arms. She wasn't small by most standards, but compared to him she was tiny and fragile, and he felt like he'd just broken her. "I'm going to get you off this cold floor and see to your toe. Quin will have to fix that board so you don't hurt your poor feet again."

"They aren't here," she sobbed. "I must be in hell. I deserve it."

"Darling, you're far from dead and nowhere near hell," he cooed, trying to soothe her out of her hysterics. If they continued, he'd have to call Noni Sophie to help. Blood continued to seep from her toe after he laid her on the daybed in the main room.

As he washed and wrapped Blake's toe, her tears began to turn to those of misery instead of panic, and he found those were even more heart wrenching. He didn't know who Jason and Jonathan were, but wished like hell he could find them for her. He'd talk to Noni. Perhaps she could tell him how to get Blake what she needed.

"What is this place?" she asked as he wrapped cloth around her toe.

"This place is – it's a place of dreams for most humans," he explained. "You've dreamed here a time or two with Noni Sophie, I'm sure."

"What's that mean?"

"It means . . . what it means." He blew out a frustrated sigh. "I'm not helpful on this, Blake, but I'm not meaning to be evasive. This place is outside human influence."

"Not human?" She flinched away, but he held firm to her ankle.

He looked up and smiled. "We're elves."

"Elves?"

"Yep," he replied, returning his attention to her foot. "I'd show you my ears, but I'm afraid you'd pull your foot away, and then you'd be in pain longer than necessary."

She was quiet as he finished up, and he worried she might be in shock, but Blake was a strong woman. She'd had a scare and something more, but she was already turning back into the feisty woman he'd come to adore on the mountainside.

"I'm with elves. How do I know I'm not dead?"

"Blake, love, have you been dead before?" he asked.

"No."

"But you've been alive?" he continued, looking up into her gorgeous, though confused, blue eyes. When she nodded, he did too. "Right, been alive. Is this what pain feels like?"

He squeezed her wounded toe and she jumped. "That's right, love, you know what life feels like. The pain" – he leaned down and pressed a light kiss above the bandage in apology – "and the pleasure."

"Why?"

"The why of it all isn't so important now." He was a bit abrupt, but he wasn't going to overwhelm her any more than she already was. Something had set her off, and he needed to understand it before he could tell her everything. "How about some food?"

"I'm not hungry. I want to know what's going on."

Arden sighed. "Oh, Blake. I knew you'd be this way. Obstinate and insistent."

"I'm not some gullible fool," she spat. "Tell me, you crazy elf-thing!"

"Oh, insults," he said, not at all perturbed. He was actually surprised she hadn't begun cursing. That would come, he knew. "My Blake, I bet you're exhausted again, aren't you?"

He watched her fight a yawn. The transition into the elven world was especially hard on humans the first few days, and he understood why. It was better for them to learn about their new world in small doses, and Blake was no different in that respect.

"What did you do to me?" Her voice raised slightly, the exhaustion bringing her fear back to the surface.

"Nothing, sweetheart." He lifted her in his arms again. "I promise I will never hurt you. The reason you are here is so that we can all make each other happy. It might not be clear now, but when you sleep and dream, think of what would make you the very happiest, Blake. I guarantee we'll make it happen."

"We?" she asked, nearly asleep.

"Me and my man, Quin. We'll make you happy." There was promise in his words and he hoped Blake heard it too.

"That's impossible," she said with a sigh. "Haven't been happy in years. My happy died on a Thursday night."

That sounded odd, but before he could ask more she was asleep in his arms. He laid her down back in the bed he and Quin had shared for nearly two hundred years. Her skin was pale, making her freckles stand out. The dark curls on her head were haphazard and showing signs of neglect, as it had been several days since she'd had the opportunity to bathe. He crinkled his nose as he realized he didn't smell much better. He'd have Quin fetch Noni Sophie to get Blake settled, so when she awoke, she'd feel more like herself and they could talk.

Chapter Three

The smell of too much deodorant had been replaced with something sweet, and the dirty feeling she'd endured for days was gone. How in the world had that

happened? Blake opened her eyes and remembered. So much for it all being a crazy dream. She slowly sat up, bringing the blankets with her. The fabrics were amazing; dull in color, but in weave they were of a quality she rarely saw. That's not what she had to worry over, she scolded herself. Arden. He was the one behind all this, he and Noni Sophie. She knew she should have been more afraid than she was, but Noni Sophie, apparently *not* a figment of her imagination, had comforted her through her hardest times, and she couldn't put that aside.

Arden's familiar shadow came from the open door across the cool bedroom. "Ah, you're awake. How do you feel, love? How's the toe?"

She wiggled her feet and felt mild pain from her stubbed toe, but other than that she was fine. "I'm all right. Why am I here, Arden? What's going on?"

"Right to the point," Arden said, and since he'd come in farther she could see the smile on his handsome face. "There is a robe across the foot of the bed, and the bathroom is to your left. Join us for breakfast when you're ready and we'll talk."

"We? But —"

"We'll discuss everything over a meal," Arden said, his tone firm.

Before she had a chance to argue further, he left the room, closing the door and leaving her alone.

"Well, fine," Blake said to no one as she scowled at where Arden had stood.

She wanted to stay in bed until he came looking for her again and demand her answers, but nature's call was too strong. Her curiosity, as well, but she blamed natural function for her weakness. When she finished, she looked around the room for her things, but found nothing. Not even her gloves. She flexed her hands against the stiffness in them and wished she had the hand-covers that were her comfort.

Ten minutes later, gloveless, she walked down the hall, taking her time so she didn't trip, but this time she noticed no uneven floorboards. She remembered her previous conversation with Arden and knew she was supposed to be in a different world, and from what she'd seen so far, she believed him. She'd traveled to Europe and

other countries for her weaving and had seen some primitive plumbing and construction, but what she saw all around her wasn't quite the same.

There'd been no hot water in the bathroom, only a basin and pump and an odd toilet that flushed in a manner she had yet to figure out. She was sure she needed a shower, but she wore a dress that smelled clean and fresh and when she ran her hands through her hair, she realized it had somehow been washed. Nothing made sense. She could hear a fire crackling and nature noises from beyond the house's walls, and whatever it was made her nervous. The disquieting feeling made her feet move faster.

The house looked like a colonial something or other, but too much was different to believe she was in some old-school American farm house like the ones she'd seen on visits to Williamsburg. The carvings were wrong for the time period, ornate, but not of the classic styles. There were birds and animals depicted, but she couldn't name a single one. When she leaned closer to the log walls, she realized the color was unlike anything she'd seen either. There were too many colors in the wood, melding together in a mix of purples, reds and browns. Pretty, but with the time she'd spent studying history for textiles, she'd never found anything like it.

She stopped short at the doorway of the main room, where many things were familiar from those historical tours. All except for the two men locked in a passionate embrace. No, she thought, she'd never seen that at Williamsburg.

One of the men was Arden, but that made no sense at all. She felt a little naughty watching what was obviously a private moment between lovers. And the way they held each other told Blake they were more than just having fun. Arden stroked his partner's face as they kissed, in a gesture that showed he loved him loud and clear. The other man, whose face she couldn't see, for he had his back to her, held Arden like he was his last lifeline. Suddenly, she did feel ashamed for watching, for even being in the house, and for everything she'd done with Arden.

"Good morning." Blake's greeting was much louder than she'd intended. If they noticed, it didn't show as they continued their kiss. It was a long few moments before they finally pulled apart, the man taking an extra second to stroke Arden's cheek.

"Good morning, there, Blake." Arden stood and held out a chair for her. "Come and join us for a meal, sweet lady."

She hugged the flannel dress she'd found herself wearing close to her body. When new, the gown may have been warm, but now it didn't do much against the chill of the air, nor offer much protection against their eyes in the firelight. She'd noticed the flannel was thin from washings, but didn't realize how thin until she looked down and saw her dark nipple shadowed under the gray. "Um. Arden, what's going on? Seriously, this is all getting weird . . . well, weirder. Who is this?"

"This is my man, Quin."

Quin, who was slightly in the shadows, wouldn't have been any clearer in broad daylight. His long black hair draped over his face completely and he was dressed all in black. She didn't appreciate the mystery and was getting impatient for answers.

There had been no missing the pride in Arden's voice when he'd introduced Quin, but Blake couldn't see his face, either, as he fussed over the pot hanging over the fire. Whatever he was cooking smelled wonderful. Blake's stomach rumbled in hunger, announcing it'd been much too long since she had eaten. Both elves turned to her and she fought not to blush. Arden's expression was apologetic, but she couldn't tell with Quin.

"Food will be ready soon, sweets."

"Thanks." Her reply was automatic, though her mind echoed she was acting crazy. It had to be Stockholm Syndrome. She shook the thought away. "Quin, can *you* tell me what I'm doing here?" If Arden wouldn't explain things, maybe his lover would.

But he was silent, and the quiet infuriated her.

"You do know Arden fucked me, right? A lot. He didn't mention you, didn't say a thing about having a partner or being gay while we screwed three and four times a night." Frustration led her to be more crude and cruel than she usually was, but Quin didn't react.

"Only three or four, Arden?" Finally he spoke, and when he did, the words only pissed her off more. "You could have shown the girl a better time than that."

"What the hell is going on here?" She slammed her hand on the table and pain sliced through her scarred skin. "Shit."

"Quin, love, get Noni Sophie, please." Arden sprang into action and took her abused hand, gently cradling it in his.

Quin was already out the door before tears began to fall down Blake's cheeks. The old scars were more sensitive than normal flesh, the nerve-endings riding near the surface. The pain from her careless move still radiated through her.

"Easy, little one," Arden cooed. "Noni Sophie will be here soon and fix you up. I promise. You shouldn't hurt yourself like that, Blake."

"I didn't do it on purpose." Her voice rose on a particularly sharp, jagged pain. "Arden . . . tell me now. What am I doing here?"

"It's best to wait until you're clearheaded, love," he said, stroking her arm from wrist to elbow. The soothing touch helped take her mind off the pain in her hand.

"No. Tell me now. You love him—what were you doing with me?"

He sighed heavily, keeping his focus on her hand a long moment before he finally looked up, his golden eyes damp with tears. "You're right, Blake. I love Quin. He's my man and has been most of my life. He means everything to me. But we aren't in the human world, Blake. Here, children are scarce, to the point that we elves are dying out. Even among the strongest, healthiest elves, babies aren't being born anymore."

"So, what? You steal women?" Her shock distracted her from her hand.

"In a sense. It's been our way for hundreds of years, and the humans who come through are very special. They are only brought over with the consent of those with more power than either you or I could ever hope to possess."

"Noni Sophie?" The comfort she'd always felt around that name ebbed when Arden nodded.

"Yes, she's the one who found you for Quin and me," he replied. "We've waited for you for years, Blake. Once you've had time to get used to this world, we hope you'll learn to love us and have a family with us."

"So you wanted a breeding cow?" she snapped, and then groaned when she involuntarily jerked her hand as well.

"No, no, lovely," he promised, resuming his calming caresses. His serene demeanor, like always, made her listen again. "Never that, Blake. Family. Quin and I are warriors, protectors against some frightening beasts and peoples. We've fought for years and will continue, but we need more, and for Noni Sophie to choose you makes me believe you needed something your own world couldn't give you. You don't have to make any decisions right now or even understand, but please listen and learn with an open heart. If you'll let us, we'll be your family and love you."

"If I want, can I go home right now?"

"Home to what, Blake?" His words weren't unkind, but they hit her like a brick. "Who do you have at home waiting for you? You said yourself on the mountain that you've got no family left, no friends you'd trust enough to go climbing with. I'm not trying to be cruel, but I want you to think hard about what you're wishing for. I understand your fear. You're in a new place with new people, but you already know, deep down in your soul, that we won't hurt you. We're worth the chance, Blake. I promise you, we *are* worth the chance."

"This is . . . this is beyond insane. You can't just expect me to stay here without knowing more or — or —"

"Blake, there's not a way back to the human world for you. The Nonis are in charge of finding women. They know our hearts and minds more than we do ourselves. Noni Sophie chose you for Quin and me for a reason. We can give you something your world couldn't. What that is, I'm not sure yet, but when we discover exactly what it is you're needing, you'll never want for it again. But Blake, once you're here, there's no going back."

"I can't leave? Just like that, the choice is out of my control? What a highhanded, illegal, presumptuous, stupid —"

"Shh." Arden lifted his finger to her lips when she continued to stumble over the angry words that only left her feeling drained rather than furious. "You're right, love.

It's not a fair system, but it's the one we use because we trust the Nonis and know that only good comes from them. You don't have to accept it yet and for that matter, if you really don't think you can accept Quin and me, then we'll see that you have your own home. The choices are limited, yes, but you aren't a prisoner to us. Just think on it for a while after you've had a chance to clear your head. There's no rush for your decisions, none at all. Ah, and I hear my Quin coming now."

"Noni wasn't able to come," the dark man said, and Blake saw he wasn't as tall as Arden but was broader, stronger looking. "Brenda is having her baby and needs her. She sent this and said she'd be along within a few days to visit."

Tears dripped down her cheeks, but with Arden holding her hands she couldn't brush them away. Quin stepped closer, a bottle of something in his hands. He knelt so he was shoulder to shoulder with Arden. The differences were so stark, dark to light, beautiful to mysterious.

Quin quickly tipped the bottle and poured a drop of red-brown liquid on the back of her hand. She cried out in surprise more than in pain. She'd felt worse during the many surgeries and skin grafts after her car accident.

She strove to focus on something, anything, and found that instead of dwelling on the terms of her new existence, the thing she found distraction in was Quin. He was fuller, but still similar to Arden. They smelled the same, that woodsy, clean scent that had driven her nuts on the mountain clung to Quin, and the hair that blocked his features from view was clean and shiny.

"I'm sorry about before. I shouldn't have been so flippant when you needed answers." Even his voice was a deeper version of Arden's with the same slight accent. His sincerity wasn't in question, because to her ears it sounded like he wanted to cut his own hands off for even inadvertently hurting her.

"I know. So am I. I'm sorry I was rude," she whispered, her throat tight with pain that was ebbing but still strong.

She thought she caught a moment of eye contact when he looked up, but before she could be sure the hair wall was back. "I believe we'll be making apologies and

begging forgiveness a lot in the next weeks and months as we all learn what life could be like for the three of us. We can be patient, Blake, if you can keep an open mind."

That didn't sound unreasonable. If this whole experience wasn't a dream and she couldn't go home, she'd have to find a way to get along. She'd never been one to fight for fighting's sake. It took too much energy, and she always lost anyway. Quin sounded so sure, and so much like Arden, that even though she was still hesitant it was just like Arden had said earlier. She was safe with them, knew it like some kind of instinct she'd never exercised before.

"No promises now," Arden broke in when she opened her mouth to speak. "For now, just be here with us and learn about us. We'll all know when things are ready to progress and you've had time to decide what is best for you, Blake. Neither Quin nor I have it in us to keep you with us if you don't want to stay. We've been captives, and we won't do that to another person, but if you think you can try, we'll make you happy."

As she looked at the . . . elves . . . she remembered the request Arden had made before she fell asleep last. He'd asked her to dream about happiness. For the last few years, those happy dreams had been absent, and she'd thought she'd never find them again. Then last night . . . she still remembered and it put everything in perspective. Noni Sophie hadn't been in her dreams, but Blake had been in her world.

There'd been music and flowers and sun, and the part she'd forgotten was now bright in her mind; there had been children. The healthy children she'd been too afraid to try to have after she lost Jonathan. Some had been infants, but others had been older and strong. They'd laughed, and though for the life of her she couldn't remember seeing Arden or Quin or any man, she could remember the smiling, robust faces of those children that looked up at her with eyes she only saw when she looked in the mirror.

"Okay. We can try," she said. Her voice, raw from tears, sounded scratchy and rough. Her hand still throbbed and her head had begun to pound, so she decided to bide her time. Sooner or later, she'd figure out what was really going on here and get some answers.

* * * * *

She'd done her best to fight sleep so she could demand answers the night before, but between the exhaustion from hiking and the transfer in worlds, Blake hadn't been able to stay awake long enough. Arden had promised the fatigue would fade as she became more accustomed to their world and she hoped it was true. She was having a hard time processing everything when she conked out every twenty minutes.

Comfortable in her bed, she still sat up and rubbed her eyes, determined to get ready for the day and finally get real answers.

"Oh, you're waking up."

That voice.

So familiar, and accompanied by the musical twinkling she'd only ever heard before in her dreams. Blake pulled her hands from her eyes and froze at the new surroundings. She was getting pretty damn tired of falling asleep one place and waking in another. This time, though, was different.

"Noni Sophie."

"Yes, child. Noni Sophie," the old woman said with glee. Her hair was as white and wispy as clouds and tied in a bun, just like in the dreams. The dress and pinafore she wore were dove gray, basic and simple, but on Noni Sophie they were amazing because they helped make her Noni real. "How are you feeling, Blake?"

"I'm . . . not sure." She took mental inventory of her body. "I'm confused, but I think I'm okay."

"Quin said you've hurt your toe and your poor hand already since being here," Noni said with a fussing cluck. "The toe will mend and he said he already fixed the floor, but for your hands I've made you something special."

"Oh?" Blake pushed herself up and looked around the room. The space was much like Quin and Arden's, and she'd been asleep on a daybed. She'd always wanted one of those in her apartment, but with just her it had seemed frivolous to buy any more furniture.

"Yes, dear, and you can have the boys make you any kind of furniture you like. They're quite handy," Noni said.

Blake froze, wondering if she'd spoken aloud unintentionally or if Noni could — well there was no way she could read her mind.

"Would it make you feel better not knowing I can read your mind, dear?"

Blake looked up at the little woman who had been a supreme comfort to her during the hardest times in her life. "Is there any way I could possibly forget now?"

"How about we just ignore that? I promise you I don't know any more than I should. Now, I'd like for you to sit at the table and have some dinner and look through some yarn with me. I've been having a heck of a time getting my dyes right lately, and the result has been absolutely boring."

Two hours later they were laughing and talking like old friends, and in a manner of speaking, despite having never officially met outside her dreams, Blake decided they were. She'd been afraid, she wouldn't lie to herself about that, but with Noni Sophie, talking about things she enjoyed and loved, the world didn't seem so different. There was no sign of Arden or Quin, and Blake wasn't sure she wanted to know exactly what they were doing. Maybe it was better if they didn't return for her.

"Well love, your men are on their way back right now," Noni Sophie said, handing her a fresh batch of natural-fiber yarn, similar to cotton, but shinier.

"Really?" Blake wasn't sure she wanted to see them.

"Yes, and don't you worry."

"Don't worry?" Blake demanded and gave a laugh that sounded harsh to even her own ears. "How can you say that with a straight face? I'm in a parallel universe with two gay men who want a breed cow. How does that not deserve some worry?"

"Well, aren't you just high and mighty today," Noni said, unperturbed. "Just who are you to look a gift horse in the mouth? You, who has begged for miracles and children for years. You, who have always wanted a family and a man — men. I know your mind, young lady, and there's not a shameful thing in there, but you being so shortsighted doesn't do you justice."

Blake shrank inside at Noni's words. The woman was right, of course, and maybe that was part of the problem. Things were a little too close to what she'd pictured during her long nights at the hospital after her accident and at home when surrounded by Jonathan's and Jason's things. That's why she was having such a hard time trusting the elves and their proposed scenario, and the situation she found herself in now; she'd dreamed it – right down to the men with pointed ears – too often to believe it might now actually be real.

"And who do you suppose gave you those dreams?" Noni asked. "The desires were in your imagination, Blake, but adding the elf bent was something humans don't do on their own. I saw those dreams – those desires of yours – long before your Jason even came into your life. You were happy with him, and that made me more than willing to put off my plans for you, dear one, but then . . . Blake, you'll never know how sorry I am that I wasn't able to prevent those deaths or help you more."

"I-I know nothing could have been done," Blake said, trying to process what Noni Sophie had said. "So, do you mean to say if I hadn't met Jason I'd have been brought over . . . *here* sooner?"

She nodded. "Yes, dear. At twenty-three you were more than ready to come over, but then you said 'yes' to that silly Jason. I was shocked, to say the least, but then when I visited you through your years with him, you were so happy, and that made me happy even though I knew it wouldn't last." Noni shook her head and the old sadness of losing Jason too soon filled her. "Yes, it was too soon, but his heart and the poor baby . . . after you endured all of that I knew it was best to give you some time to heal before bringing you over. But then the accident – I was not happy about that, young lady."

"I know." Blake felt the same shame and regret she'd had the instant after she'd pressed the accelerator and driven too fast three nights after she'd buried her husband and son. "I'm not proud of that night either, Noni."

"I know, dear."

Blake looked up and found Noni's hand on top of hers. So far, the older woman hadn't touched her much, but now that she did, peace settled in, replacing the sadness and shame.

"And though I wasn't thrilled, I understood in the ways anyone can comprehend another's pain. After you healed from that, I knew the time had come. Even though you might think you're broken, Blake, you are more complete and stronger than you've ever been. As much as the heartbreak hurt, it did something in a few short years that it takes most beings a lifetime to accomplish. You learned patience and had time to realize what was important to you. Some things really are out of our hands, but most young people feel they have to control everything, but through your journeys you've become willing to listen and understand. Now, this place, those elves, the possibilities, these are your reward and ease for those times, if you'll accept them."

"So I had to bury my family to finally get one?" Blake asked, though the bitterness she'd intended for the challenge was lost in hope. "I don't even know what I mean anymore, Noni. This is all so crazy."

"No, it really isn't, love." Noni's tone was gentle, even if her words were ones Blake wasn't sure she was ready to hear. "Love and family aren't crazy. Even humans are starting to pull back on the traditions they've held sacred for so long in regards to those two basic norms. You don't have to know your mind right this minute, but I know your mind and there's nothing to change, not in that respect. Just give them time, sweetness."

"Time has never been kind, Noni."

"Then you need to work on believing that this time will be different. If you believe, especially here, it will be," Noni said, the mystic quality of her voice trapping Blake in a sphere of hope, a hope she'd never felt so strongly. "Good, Blake. Cling to that feeling, remember it, and when you dream, picture the future and it will be, if you'll allow it."

A hard knock came at the door and just that fast the feeling was broken and Noni went back to her normal, grandmotherly self. Blake wasn't sure what she'd just

witnessed, but she thought it was something out of her world. Arden and Quin entered, both handsome and hesitant when they looked to Blake with hope-filled eyes. Out of her world or not, Blake realized it was time to make a decision for her future.

* * * * *

They left her alone that night, and Blake wasn't sure why. She wanted to trust Noni Sophie, and as Blake dressed the following morning, she realized she did. The two men could be her men if she allowed it. They could be her family. She sat heavily on the bed, holding the dress to her bare front. How wild would that be? To finally have a family of her own that was nearly guaranteed? With Jason, she'd loved him despite knowing their days were numbered because of his health. But this time it didn't have to be that way. There wasn't an expiration date here, and Noni had promised the men would be hers for a good, long while.

Living with and loving two men had been a fantasy of hers since the first time she had sex. Entertaining the mental pictures and reading naughty stories had only made the idea that much more intriguing. She'd always held back from those desires because she knew she got too deeply involved with any partner not to feel jealousy if things weren't balanced. Taking the time to find men out for a good time to accommodate her desires after Jason died had never appealed. With Arden and Quin, she could have more than just a good time. She'd have partners who were just as committed to making things work as she was. They would be there to talk to and laugh with. That appealed to her as much as the sexual side of things.

They could be a family. She could have adopted or tried dozens of different ways to have children in her world, but fear had held her back from finishing even a single application in the past year. Fear of burying another child. She didn't think she could do that again and survive the heartache. Noni Sophie had promised her healthy children, and that was something no one in her own world could do. Healthy babies she could

raise with two men who could be her mates if she chose. But first she had to take the first step.

"Blake?" she heard Arden call from the hall. "We need to go out on patrol, sweetheart. Would you like to stay here or go to Noni Sophie's?"

"Noni's, please." Blake threw on her dress and carelessly wrapped her misbehaving hair in one of the scarves Noni had given her. She left her gloves at the bedside. She opened the door and nearly swallowed her tongue. Arden. He was so handsome, how could she have forgotten how much so? Something about him made her want to do things her head was sure her heart wasn't quite ready for, but even her logic was starting to play catch-up in the situation. Soon, she thought, soon.

"You look nice." Arden's warm gaze traveled up and down her body as it had on the mountain countless times, and she felt pretty. "You wish to be with Noni Sophie?"

"Yes," she replied. "But what are you going to do? You said something about being warriors and protectors, but who exactly are you fighting and protecting?"

She followed Arden through the narrow hall and into the kitchen, where Quin already waited by the door, a giant sword in each hand.

"Wow, I hope those mean we are having a giant cake."

The elves gave her a puzzled look, and she fought a blush. Her wonky humor fell flat just as easily in elf land as it did among humans, apparently.

"Um, I mean, what are those for?"

"For the beasts," Arden explained. "We have very little in the way of intelligent enemies. For a time we were at war with Trolls, but in the last decade, even that fighting has ebbed. Now we fight our natural predators in the darkness to protect our fellow elves."

"What are they?" Blake accepted her cloak from Arden but kept her eyes on the swords.

"They are . . ." Arden paused and thought a moment. "Well, I'd say they are similar to bears, only faster, and their talons make bears' claws look like toys. They're

beasts that aren't mean or anything of the like, just mindlessly violent and cause a bit of trouble."

"A bit of trouble?" Blake's stomach turned just thinking of what a lot of trouble would require if only a bit needed giant swords.

"Well, they're nocturnal, so the dark times make them bold and they attack anything that moves, be that little bunnies, or elves minding their own business off to see their mothers.

"What are the dark times you keep talking about? Does the sun ever shine here?" For a few days she'd been able to assume it was the weather keeping things dim, but now she wasn't sure.

"The Darkness is actually a season for us," Quin explained. "The Lightness lasts for half the year. We grow our food and enjoy outside activities for those months. Then the Darkness comes, and we must live on our provisions and be extra cautious of the beasts."

"That's where warriors like Quin and I come into play. We help keep the folks safe, especially while traveling during the Darkness. The lot of us are too social to go a full half-year without company."

"Okay, so I'm in good hands," she said, trying to be positive. There were scarier things than 'beasts' and darkness in Seattle, and she'd survived there for most of her life. "Are we going to go?"

"Yes," Arden said and leaned down, offering his lips for a kiss.

She thought about it a moment. She'd kissed him before, and she'd had a very long night to think. She hesitated, but he waited patiently and when she reached up for the kiss, his lips turn up in a smile.

"That's my girl," he muttered quietly. "Come along, sweetheart, and stay between Quin and me. I can slay a beast without a problem, but my man, he's a master of his sword. Or cake cutter, if you prefer."

She laughed and tugged him lightly toward her for another kiss. "Thank you. I'm ready to go."

* * * * *

After another long day learning about the elven world, but mostly playing with yarn and fabrics, Blake was exhausted. The novelty of living in a world without electricity was still strong, but there was no doubt it took a lot more work to manually draw water and keep fires and candles burning than flipping switches. Her excitement at seeing her elves, the two men she'd spent the day trying not to think about, but had inevitably devoted most of her mind power to, was off the charts. She kept looking toward the door of Noni's cottage, waiting. Arden's words about the beasts played in her mind, and she worried about them both.

"Now, they are fine," Noni said, tsking her attention. "But I'm very pleased to see the change beginning already. It will be so good for you to love your elves. You'll never be lonely again when an elf loves you, mark my words."

Three hours later, Noni still wasn't worried, but Blake was pacing the floor. She was tired and wanted to go to bed, but she couldn't without knowing for certain that Arden and Quin were safe. Blake scowled when she realized she'd chewed her thumbnail to the quick—something she hadn't done in years.

"See how easy it is to start falling in love? There can be anger and frustration, even while the bonds are being made."

Blake tripped over her feet but caught herself before she fell. "Falling in love? Noni, that's impossible."

"You're right, I'm sure you paced the floor back in your world all the time for men you'd known only days. Now, sit Blake. Your men are fine. That's a promise."

Noni's words should have reassured her, but Blake continued to pace with the added preposterous thoughts about love.

"They aren't here." Blake hated the helpless, desperate feeling that was welling and could feel her stomach cramp. "They said they'd be here."

"And so we are." Arden strode in, his handsome head held high. "Now you weren't worried about us, were you, Blake?"

The fear she'd harbored turned to anger quickly, and suddenly she was so pissed she thought she would spew fire. "Worried? Why would I be worried about you? You and your man were out fighting with giant, evil, bear things and just left me here to knit. Do I look like the little woman to sit at home and worry? You know what? I want to go to bed right now."

Arden looked shocked, but it was impossible to tell Quin's thoughts with his hair covering his face.

"Go on now, boys," Noni Sophie said sweetly, and passed Blake a bag full of yarn and a large set of knitting needles. "Here you go, dear. These will help keep those hands busy. Use your cream every night, and keep the skin limber in between, and you'll be up to peak functioning in no time. That's what the racecar drivers say, you know, peak functioning. Take care, dear, and I'll see you soon."

Blake thought Arden would argue or say something, but she didn't want to listen to his excuses, so she fixed him with a stern look, and he immediately shut his mouth. She thought Quin might have snorted, but she just couldn't tell. That was next, she decided, as they walked the short, but cold and dark path; Quin needed a haircut as soon as possible.

The forest surrounding them was like any other she'd been in, and it didn't bother her. Knowing there were beasts out where she couldn't see them did. She hoped she went a good long time before she became acquainted with the species.

"Home," Arden announced hesitantly once they arrived at the cottage.

Blake thought his trepidation was for the best. He should be worried.

"Are you hungry, Blake? Can I get you anything?"

"No, Arden. Goodnight, guys. Sleep well, and could you not be so damn loud tonight?" She stomped off to her room after having the final word, her anger and irritation growing with every step. She slammed her door and felt better once bed was in sight. She tugged off her clothes and tossed them to the floor before crawling

between the sheets. With all the angst and bitterness she was feeling she was shocked when fatigue instantly had her eyeballs burning. Sleep, she thought . . . she'd be in a much better mood after she slept.

Chapter Four

Blake wasn't surprised when she felt horrible the next morning. She sighed as she looked up at the cracked and patched ceiling. Since she was thirteen, menstruation had been a nightmare fact of life that a stressful time could bring on at any moment. She should have known it was coming when she'd been so bitchy to Arden.

It was in moments such as these that Blake missed Jason most. He'd had a foolproof routine for her PMS, one he'd found in their second month of dating and hadn't ventured away from. A long, hot bath with indulgent, fruity body salts followed by a big glass of red wine no matter the time of day. He'd taken care of her in his own doofey way.

As a metal sculptor, he'd been admittedly average, but as a husband he'd been a superstar. Sentimental tears poured down her face. She didn't miss him like she used to or feel like her soul had been ripped away, but she still thought of him. She curled around her pillow and cried harder. She wanted that feeling of being the center of someone's world again. Arden and Quin had each other, but with more time she hoped they could make room for her and a baby.

Lying in the dark gray light that would constitute the brightest part of the day, she decided to embrace her new world with both arms and give and get all she could. If it was a dream, well, she'd make it memorable, and if it was real then she wanted as close to happily ever after as she could get being the third wheel in a homosexual relationship.

She snorted at the thought, but the decision felt right, and things would be fine. She would *make* them fine. In three days, after her uterus stopped trying to escape through her belly button, she would throw herself into making a life with Arden and

Quin, because the truth was, there was nothing on earth waiting for her and she wanted to stay.

"Beautiful Blake, we need to be on our way," Arden announced from the hall.

"Go to hell."

There was surprised silence from beyond the door. In her current mood, Blake couldn't care less. She even hoped the pointy-eared abductor cried a little. Would serve him right. She tried to shake the feeling, but it was locked in deep, making it for the best that the door stay closed.

"Blake, are you ill?" Arden's voice squeaked a little and she liked that he was nervous, even if the question was idiotic.

"Ill?" Blake snuggled deeper into the blankets. She'd already done the arduous task of changing the sheets and her nightgown and had no intention of getting out of bed again.

"Blake?"

"Yes, 'ill'," she scoffed. "That's the nice way of putting bleeding to death."

The door burst open, and she jumped at the unexpected invasion. "Bleeding? Are you hurt?" Arden demanded, rushing to the bed with Quin at his heels.

"Oh, get a fucking grip." She swatted away their exploring hands before struggling out of bed. "Bleeding as in period, as in cranky, mean PMS avenger. Leave me alone unless either of you has a magic elf cure for menstruation."

She was being horrible and forced herself to stop. Both elves had taken steps away from the bed, and Arden especially looked shocked.

"I'm sorry. Neither of you deserved that from me, and I'm going to try to do better."

She thought that sounded better, but knew the faux reasonableness was not going to last. Instead of pushing herself into staying civilized, she pushed out of bed and walked backward to the bathroom. Forcing a smile, she tried for a reassuring expression.

"Blake, are you sure you're all right, love?" Arden asked.

It was on the tip of her tongue to snap at him again, but she only smiled wider and prayed for patience. "Oh, I'm sure. I just think I need a few minutes alone. You boys go ahead and chase some beasts or whatever you had planned. In fact, go now, and I hope you have just a fantastic day.

She slammed the door, murdering the sincerity of her last words. Quin should have known their new human would have a flair for theatrics, but at least she was making an effort to get along. Beside him, Arden jumped and looked confused and concerned.

"Poor Arden," Quin said, sliding his arm around his lover and leading him out of Blake's bedroom. "I don't imagine you ever learned the full magic of a woman's body. Once a month these usually mild, glorious creatures become what we just witnessed."

"We can't possibly leave her like this, even though she said . . . Is there any way we can help her?"

Arden looked a bit pale as he was not one for confrontation. His poor mate, willing to take on a human female even though Quin could see he was far from ready. "The help often depends on the female," Quin mused, and began rummaging through a kitchen cupboard. "But I think for our little hellcat we'll try this first."

"Wine?" Arden eyed the bottle with doubt.

"Yes, lots of it as soon as possible," he agreed, wiping off a layer of dust from the top and cork.

"And after the wine?"

"We'll play it by ear, love. Hopefully this will help her get past the worst of the pain and irritation. There's always warm baths and treats." Quin began looking for the stash of chocolate bars Arden had brought home when he'd brought Blake. Chocolate and wine—he'd have Blake smiling in no time. Or at least have her less elficidal.

There was a long silence from Arden, and when he spoke again his words were barely a whisper. "But . . . the blood. Will she be all right?"

Quin peeked over his shoulder and saw his lover give a little shiver.

He smiled and shrugged. "I forget how young you are sometimes. It's just part of being with a female, love. They have different equipment and all of that. She's not feeling well, so we'll just do our best to spoil her until she is."

"She didn't want me last night. I wouldn't have minded spoiling her then," Arden replied, not looking at all pleased.

"Pah." Quin grabbed two chocolate bars before standing beside his mate again and wrapping his arms around his hard frame. "It was just PMS crankiness. No reasonable person could ever refuse you."

* * * * *

After her bath, Blake found a full, open bottle with a goblet beside it. It only took a sniff for her to recognize the heady aroma of wine—a heavy, warm, spiced red. She poured herself a healthy dose and drank it quickly. With the heat working its way throughout her system, she poured a second glass to enjoy much more slowly.

On her bed were books—big, hand-written tomes about elf history and illustrated fairy tales. Not exactly her typical reading fare, but it was something to keep her mind busy, since Arden had seemed to disappear. Now that the wine had settled and she didn't feel quite so mean, she would have liked to see him. To be fair, when he'd brought the books in she had thrown a washcloth at him, so she really didn't expect him back.

She lay back down on the bed, the books left alone for a moment, the wine swimming delightfully in her head. She wondered as she fell fast asleep, if Quin had put something other than cinnamon in the wine.

* * * * *

A light knock awoke her, how much later, she wasn't sure, but the wine had worn off and she was starting to feel uncomfortable. The knock came again, and Blake

smiled. Someone had balls of steel, and that was fortuitous because, feeling ugly or not, she wanted some company.

"Blake?" Quin peeked in. "Up for a visitor who bears dinner?"

"Sure." Her stomach growled at the scent of bread, ham and cheese as he came forward to set the tray on the mattress. She thought he might leave, but instead he sat down at the foot of the bed, the closest he'd ever been to her. He didn't seem as affected by her mood as Arden did, and she wondered if he had more experience with women. There was so much she didn't know about Arden, but the lack of overall knowledge was compounded in Quin.

"So, I've been wondering," she said when he pulled the cork of another bottle of wine.

"Yes, love?"

"Hmm, thank you." She accepted the wine, warmed again with a touch of cinnamon, and it made her wonder if that was just the way they made it. "Yum. Okay, so I was wondering if you're scarred, ugly or other."

He tilted his head to the side. "Other?"

"Um, you know, a Cyclops or maybe you have tusks?" She felt a little silly as the words actually came out, but she had to know, and the only way to find the answer was to ask the question.

"Tusks would be interesting, but I'm afraid only scarred," Quin answered.

"So?"

"So what?" He looked up, the waterfall of hair still covering everything.

"Let's see, big guy," Blake commanded as she leaned forward. She reached slowly so Quin could move away if he chose, but when he remained still, she gently brushed the hair aside. "Jeez."

It wasn't as bad as it could have been, Blake reasoned, but it was a very complete sort of scarring. It looked like someone had skinned him in thin strips almost in a pattern of stripes. It must have been torture having each piece removed, torture over time as they all looked well-healed, and some were older than others.

She looked away from his cheeks, up to his eyes, and found they were the lightest pastel green she'd ever seen, so contradictory to the mysterious, gruff man in black she'd known so far. She gently turned his head in her hands to see how far the scarring went and gasped then she saw his ears. They should have been delicately pointed on top and bottom like Arden's, but were instead pinched short as if they'd been banded until they'd fallen off.

"Oh Quin," Blake whispered, tracing the otherwise smooth edge of his ear. Noni Sophie had laughingly told her to nibble on an elf's ear for a little attention because it was a major erogenous zone. To have them so damaged had been torture itself.

"Trolls," he told her before she could ask how it had happened. "They caught me nearly twenty lights past and garnered a great deal of pleasure torturing me for the rest of the season. Now, we are at peace, and old hurts are forgiven, even if the damage remains."

"Oh, Quin." She gently kissed the pucker of his deformed ear. "I'm so sorry you were injured."

He took a tight hold on her hand when she tried to pull away. "This is why we need you. When this happened to me, I eventually escaped, but when I made it home, Arden was fading. It's what happens when one of us chooses to stop drinking the water here and dies. I was dead, you see, and he didn't have anyone else to hold him. For a family, he would fight on after I was no more. For another mate he would as well."

"That's a lot of pressure, Quin." The weight of his words and their implications settled on her shoulders. "And not foolproof. I could be bad for Arden. I've already shown I'm a shrew, and there are hundreds of other things that can go wrong."

"True, but Noni Sophie wouldn't have had us find you if she didn't believe you would be what we needed and vice versa," Quin replied.

"What else did she say?"

"She said" He remained silent for so long, Blake thought he might not answer, and then he turned to her with solemn eyes. "She said you would love us both

if we let you. The idea of sharing Arden's love was something I had to accustom myself to, but now that you are here, well, you're right, and I want you happy."

"That's – I'm glad to hear that." She blew out a big breath and looked at Quin again, not sure what was next. "Okay, now what? We all agree we want each other to be happy. What's that mean tonight?"

"Well," he said, pouring her more wine. "That means I am at your service. If that means drawing you a bath and leaving you to soak, that's fine. Or I do have plenty more wine and a few more bars of chocolate, set aside for an occasion such as this."

She spied the candy in his vest pocket and smiled. Maybe he and Arden weren't as clueless as she'd first thought.

"All of those sound really good."

He smiled, his lips pulling in a way that looked uncomfortable, but the pleasure there was what made him look handsome. He took out one of the candy bars and handed it to her. She recognized the brand as Arden's favorite when they'd been on the mountain. After unwrapping it, Blake broke it in half and offered a piece to Quin.

"I've also got some lavender bubble bath," he said, not taking the candy.

"Well, I just had a bath, and I'm feeling pretty good right now, so how about we get tipsy and eat chocolate while we get to know one another?"

Quin looked suspiciously at the offering, and Blake couldn't blame him. She had been all over the place with her moods and they would most likely turn again before long, but when he took it, she was genuinely glad.

"All right, then," she said and snuggled back against her pillow, wine goblet in one hand, chocolate in the other. "Tell me more about yourself, Mr. Elf."

Chapter Five

She was spending too much time in her bedroom, but at least the space was finally starting to feel like her own. If the magical elf land was really her home, she couldn't spend the rest of her days surrounded by log walls and bare windows. Now

she had doilies and new curtains and a quilt in the works. Before much longer, the guestroom would be a welcoming retreat.

"Blake?"

She smiled. Quin wasn't nearly as timid about knocking at her door as Arden. Her sweet elf from the mountain had become a little wary in the last week. To be fair, the PMS had only just begun to fade, and only this morning had she started to feel more herself.

"Come on in," she called, surveying her latest addition.

"Well now, isn't that a pretty thing. I like what you've done in here. All the little touches make it homier."

"So you don't mind? I guess I should have asked before—"

"Of course we don't mind, and you've got no need to ask before making your home your own. We want you happy."

Blake couldn't remember the last time someone had wanted her happy. Of course the elves wanted something from her, but how far were their goals away from her own? While she'd been knitting and quilting with Noni Sophie, it hadn't just been herself on her mind. The elves' offer weighed on her thoughts all the time. Family. It could be hers.

"I brought you something."

Blake startled out of her thoughts. She'd spent far too much time doing that lately too. Getting lost in her head wasn't going to help her figure out where she wanted to be. Spending time with Arden and Quin was the only thing that was going to help her get more comfortable.

"*Oh*, books? That's so romantic."

Quin laughed and sat on the bed. "Well now, they aren't roses, but I know you've been wondering on the history around here and what not. I thought you'd enjoy a little stroll down memory lane."

"Really? Whose memory?"

"Come on over here and I'll show you."

Quin settled deeper on the bed, scooting until his back was against the headboard. The heavy tome on his lap was intriguing. So far, she'd only found history books, but taking a stroll with him sounded like the perfect way to spend the evening. She grabbed a candle from the windowsill and added it to the ones already on her nightstand. A little electricity would go a long way in making life easier, but snuggling beside Quin aglow in candlelight had a charm immeasurable in watts.

He opened the book and she immediately laughed. "Is that you?"

The little boy in the picture was naked from the waist up and flexing his muscles. Blake could see his ears were intact, and while that didn't match the man beside her, the mischievous grin was one she'd seen before.

"That is me. My mum always said I was a right handsome little feller."

"She was right," Blake said and looked up at him. He'd stopped constantly wearing his hair over his face, and the more she saw of him, the more dear he became. "And you know? You aren't so bad looking now, either. Are your parents nearby?"

He shook his head, a wash of sadness covering his features. "No. Both my parents and Arden's died during the wars with the trolls. It was a bad time; many elves lost family members."

She abandoned the page she held and took his hand instead. "I'm so sorry, Quin."

"Thank you. It's been many years, but we remember them and the others we lost in a Light festival. I'm sure you'll enjoy it when the time comes."

The subject obviously made him uncomfortable, and she well understood that. She didn't like talking about her mother's death any more than she enjoyed revisiting the times when she'd lost her husband and son. Some things didn't need to be remembered constantly.

She smiled up at him and focused her attention back at the book. "Okay, turn the page, handsome. I can't wait to see what's next."

Page after page, Blake watched Arden and Quin grow up. Already an adult when Arden was born, Quin made different life choices than Arden did. There were

pictures of him with other people, other lifetimes that each brought smiles to Quin's face as he described them.

"So when did you two finally meet?" she asked.

"Oh, we'd known each other for years. It's a small community and we'd always had contact. It wasn't until, oh, nearly three hundred years ago that we started seeing each other differently. We fought the trolls together, and I think that initially brought us closer. Then we just found we couldn't be without each other."

Blake felt a stab of envy at the amount of amused affection in his tone. She knew just what he meant and missed that element of loving someone. She'd already decided to stay with the elves and build a family with them. With time, she hoped she would be included with that amazing love.

Quin turned another page, and Blake gasped.

"Are you kidding me? Oh, Quin, what in the world did you let him do to you?"

Quin laughed. "Well, you've met Arden. When there is something on his mind, it's impossible to tell him no."

"But, it's a leisure suit, Quin. A green, polyester leisure suit. That's just wrong."

"He was so proud when he brought it home. They were all the rage a few decades back, you know. Unfortunately, shortly after this picture was taken the suits were left too close to the fire. They were a smelly mix of orange and lime green when we awoke in the morning. Tragic, really."

She snorted. "Oh I bet."

Though the suits were ridiculous, Blake had to admit if anyone could pull them off, it was her elves. Arden was tall and slim and even covered in citrus orange, he looked handsome. The lime green could have made Quin look odd, but instead he made it look good. She preferred him in the monochromatic slacks, shirts and vests he wore, but maybe she could make him something in green to brighten up his usual brown and black.

Quin turned another page and again the two elves held each other. They always looked so happy. Back in their normal clothes, the distractions gone, their love was

more apparent than ever. Blake reached over and flipped a page, curious to see how much more they had documented in their amazing amount of time together.

"Aww, that's it? I was hoping for some zooba pants and Mohawks."

He laughed and gently stroked the blank page. "Somehow, I dodged those two things, though Arden did mention the pants on more than one occasion. The last picture was taken the week before Arden went to get you. From then on, you became part of our family. The next chapter in our book will include you, Blake, and I couldn't be happier."

Blake rested her head on Quin's shoulder and stared at the blank page. There were dozens, maybe even a hundred pages left in the book just waiting for memories. And Arden and Quin wanted to make them with her.

"So I'm wondering if you'd like to start making those memories tonight."

Blake tilted her head, still keeping it close to Quin, but looking at his face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean would you like to get things started between the two of us. Maybe get working on a baby as well."

She laughed and rested her head back on his shoulder. "So I take it you're not the subtle one?"

"You'd be right on that. Arden is much better with tact and seduction than I could ever hope to be. I just know what I feel right now."

"Oh? What do you feel?"

She waited when he stayed quiet a long moment. Quin didn't seem like the kind of male to really share his feelings. He was the strong, stoic type, and from his offer, she also saw he was very practical. Wasting time with explanations didn't seem to fit.

"Just, warm. With Arden I know I'm where I need to be and I've never thought to find that feeling again. But with you . . . it's there as well. The more time I spend with you, the closer we get, the more I know that we're going to have something very special."

What was it about a strong man showing his soft side that made women of every generation melt? Blake was no different in that respect, and getting closer to Quin was the only place she wanted to be.

She closed the book and set it aside before straddling Quin's lap. The more often she examined the scarring on his face, the more she liked it. Just like the leisure suit, Quin had taken something ugly and made it his own. Now that he no longer wore his hair constantly over his face, she saw even more to the man she wanted very much to love.

"You know, there hasn't been nearly enough special in my life in the last few years. I'd really like to change that and get a start on us."

He gently tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "If you need more time and romance, I can do those things, Blake."

She kissed him. There was a time and a place for flowers and chocolate, but there was also a time for scrapbooks and sharing. In this case, Quin had done just right. His hands moved higher on her back, pulling her closer, and she was only too happy to oblige. Strong muscles hid beneath his plain clothes and though his body was different from Arden's, she still felt the same thrill she'd experienced the first time she'd touched him on the mountain.

Where Arden had been sweetly hesitant, Quin didn't seem to have a hesitant bone in his body. He broke their kiss and stripped her shirt away, tossing it to the floor. The carnal look in his eyes when he surveyed her newly exposed skin was more than flattering. She'd been willing to start her relationship with Quin, but the glance alone triggered something new in her, and suddenly, she was ripping at his clothes.

Too many layers, she thought, as piece by piece, he finally was exposed to her. In her haste to remove his clothes, she'd barely noticed he'd done the same to her until they were both naked and rolling around on the bed. She would have liked to get a better look at him, maybe have him stand in the candlelight and get a full visual, but his lips covered her nipple and all thoughts of separating vanished.

His teeth scraped along her breast as he moved to give the second one the same attention. She grabbed tight to his hips, the strong muscles there thrilling her. So much power and strength and tonight it was just for her.

She wrapped her legs around his thighs. She loved the attention to her breasts, but she couldn't wait any longer. Curiosity and lust pounded at her, demanding she have him as deep as he could go.

"We'll go slower next time," Quin growled, his voice thick with passion.

She bit his lower lip as he delayed above her. "I want you. Now."

He didn't make her wait a moment longer. With the strength his hips and ass promised, he drove in, making her gasp at the sudden invasion. He froze, but only for a second before pumping in and out. She wrapped her legs around his waist and twined her arms around his neck, holding on for dear life.

So strong, so big . . . all she could do was take everything he gave so generously. He braced his hands beside her head, and she winced when he inadvertently pulled her hair. A moment later, he drew back.

"But— oh man."

He'd moved only long enough to reposition her legs until they were braced at the knees against his chest. The different position put him deeper inside her and gave him added leverage, making each thrust harder and giving them devastating accuracy.

"Quin, harder, please."

"I like hearing my name from you," he said, his tone strained.

"Then harder, Quin. Harder."

He followed directions perfectly, and Blake bit back a scream. Her body was breaking apart, piece by piece, wiped out with pleasure until above her, Quin cursed and moved faster. She dug her fingers into his thighs, trying to bring him closer, and demanding every ounce of mutual satisfaction possible.

Her body shook when moments later he pulled away and fell beside her. While he was no longer part of her, he was still close, and she turned to be closer. He wrapped his strong arms around her middle, drawing her into his embrace.

"That . . . that demands repeating in about an hour."

She laughed at his labored declaration and kissed a drop of sweat from his chest.

"I think that could certainly be arranged."

* * * * *

The candles were gutted beside the bed, but still glowed when Blake awoke to find Quin leaving her bed. He'd been amazing – no, they'd been amazing together – but now he was leaving. He gathered his clothes, but didn't dress, and his white backside was just as pretty in the candlelight as it had felt under her hands.

"Where are you going?" she asked, but didn't move from her cocoon of blankets.

Quin started and turned back, keeping himself covered with his clothes. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I was just going back to my bed before Arden came looking for me."

"You could stay here," she offered, the thought of spending the night in Quin's arms the perfect end to the night, in her mind.

"Another night, sweets. You need your rest, and I don't think I'm in the position to give it to you." He smiled as he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Just sleep for now, darling Blake. In the morning I'll make you a big breakfast and tomorrow night, Arden will do his best to send you to dreamland with a smile."

"Oh." Too sleepy and content to protest, Blake snuggled deeper as Quin blew out her candles. "Thanks, Quin."

"No, Blake. Thank you. Sleep well."

The bedroom door opened and closed a moment later, and as tired as she was, Blake lay in bed and stared into the darkness. She wondered just what she was missing with both of her elves in another room.

Chapter Six

Between Quin and Arden, Blake was nearly asleep at Noni Sophie's kitchen table every morning. They just never quit. The thought made her smile into her arms. It had been Arden's turn at making babies the night before, and while he wasn't nearly as intense as Quin, he was so much fun, and they'd spent the night playing and loving each other.

Even though she was sore and tired, there was never a thought in her mind to turn them away when one knocked on her door. It wasn't the most ideal situation, with her still in the second bedroom, but she knew they were trying to give her privacy as she acclimated to her new surroundings. By the time they needed the spare room for a baby, she'd be more than ready to take her place in their room.

And that time was probably sooner than they thought. She didn't know if it was wishful thinking, but for the past week she'd felt different. It was almost as if she could feel a new life growing, which made no sense. Other than missing her period, Blake wouldn't have known she was pregnant with Jonathan because she felt perfectly normal. Now though . . . something was different.

Noni Sophie sat by the fire knitting again. This time the yarn was bright from the dying they'd been trying lately. She was using a red from a dried berry and it looked fantastic. Blake just wished she had the energy to move to go sit by the fire. Arden had pretty much ridden her all night, and Quin had taken a turn in the morning, so not moving sounded best.

"Feeling okay, little love?" Noni Sophie asked, looking toward her though her hands continued to knit.

"Yep, just tired. I think I need to start putting some elf repellent around my bed."

Noni chuckled, accustomed and comfortable with Blake's brand of humor, which was nice. Since the old elf was her only companion so far, it was good that they got along so well.

"Well, don't you worry, little one. All that elf attention has done its job. Perhaps the boys will cut down to half time now that things are progressing." Noni Sophie's sweet words were made more soothing with the clicking of her knitting needles.

Blake looked up, not sure she'd heard Noni right. "Huh?"

"What 'huh' dear? You know you're pregnant. You can already feel those two beautiful girls growing. One for each of their fathers. I'm surprised Quin hasn't noticed. He's got a nose for those sorts of things."

"Gross," Blake said lamely, the sudden confirmation doing very little for her conflicting and nervous feelings.

"What's the matter?" Noni Sophie implored.

She read her so well, Blake knew fibbing or being evasive wasn't going to work. She didn't let herself believe Noni could actually read her mind, yet readily accepted that the older woman would know if she lied.

"Do you remember how I was when I was pregnant with Jonathan?"

"Of course." Noni smiled. "You and Jason were so happy, so affectionate. It was a very sweet thing to witness and a memory you should always keep close."

"Yeah, well Jason knew everything about me. I never had to ask or tell him things, he just . . . did them."

"Because he loved you and you loved him," Noni finished when Blake let her thought trail off.

"We were crazy about each other," she agreed. The memories of those times had been bitter for too long; now she could look back and see the sweetness in it all and miss it enough to want it again, even if it were to fail again.

"Arden and Quin have come to care for you very much, Blake, and it's only going to increase with time."

"Yeah, I know and I care too, but . . ." Blake let her words drop again, staring into the fire for a long moment before she could confess what was weighing on her heart. "I'm the outsider, Noni. They had each other; I'm just the sperm collector at this point. Sex is fun, it's sweet, but I know when we're done they'll go back to each other for the night. It's each other they talk to before sleeping and when they first wake up. They get the other for the cuddling and the softness. I'm alone."

"And if you're pregnant things will change." Noni nodded in understanding.

"Exactly. Then their involvement is done and I'll be a houseguest until they want another baby. That's what I worry about anyway. I could be wrong."

"But if you feel that way, then there's something wrong." Noni pushed to her feet, her light gray skirt swishing with her moves. "That's not right, Blake, and not at all what I had in mind for you, dear. I'll speak with them and make sure they understand everything."

"No." The very notion of someone telling her men to love her made Blake squirm. "I don't want them to be ordered to care. Either I'll figure out a way to make them want me like that or I'll do without."

"But—"

"I mean it, Noni," Blake insisted. "It's important."

"Oh, my girl, I do understand the principle behind your conviction, but you see, they probably don't realize they're hurting your feelings." Noni's voice softened as she explained, "They are sweet, strong, thoughtful elves, but still only males, and many of the adages apply to both species."

"Yeah, I know and that's why I'm going to be patient. I can be...I just." Blake sighed, fatigue weighing her down even more than before. "I just wish, you know?"

Noni Sophie looked at her softly and Blake felt her love, just like always, and it helped soothe her worries. "I do understand, darling."

Blake shrugged hard and tried to break away from the melancholy and fatigue. If she dwelled on the problem, she'd make herself miserable. Instead, she forced herself to find her feet and plastered on a smile. "I've only been here six weeks. They've had each other for two hundred years. I can be patient and understanding. Now, what can we work on today, Noni?"

Noni smiled and nodded. "Good girl. How about we work on diluting those berries? For your little ones, I think we'll need some pink. Oh, and I want you to show me that slip stitch again. You humans So tricky."

* * * * *

Someone had put fresh sheets on her bed, but Blake didn't notice until her head was on the pillow. Arden and Quin had been late again and had awakened her from a nap at Noni's house. Now after dinner, she just wanted to sleep. Beautiful sleep.

Warm hands moved up and down her back and sides, but Blake had no intentions of waking up for those hands. No, she snuggled deeper into her covers, swatting the hands when they started playing with her sensitive nipples. Sleep, not play.

"Blake," Arden whispered into her ear, tugging her lobe with his teeth. Any other day that might have gotten a response, but she just didn't want to. "Wake up for me, my beautiful Blake. I've been looking forward to you all day. I love the way your sweet body tugs me close and cushions my every move, and I love the way you scream my name in pleasure. Your pleasure, that's what's been on my mind. All for you."

"Go away," she mumbled, annoyance growing as he continued to stroke her belly and breasts.

"Come now, sweet." He made no signs of pulling away, just moved closer. "Open your pretty eyes and luscious legs for me. We'll go as long or as brief as you'd like if you're so sleepy, but what if this is your fertile time? We don't want to miss even one chance."

"Already pregnant," she said with a sleepy sigh, smacking away his hand like it was a bothersome fly. "Noni said."

"Quin!"

Arden's shout startled Blake out of her dragging sleep and scared her to tears. She gasped and cried out as she instinctively tried to get away from Arden, but he held her tightly.

A naked Quin ran into the room and hurried to her side. Blake flew at him, wrapping herself around his compact, strong body. "Ah, little one, what's wrong? You're safe here, I promise. Why are you so upset?"

"Arden scared me," Blake panted, trying to stop the tears that kept trickling down her cheeks.

"Check her," Arden said, his voice full of excitement. "Noni Sophie says she's breeding."

"Breeding? Jeez I'm not a horse —"

"Shh." Arden gently placed a finger over her lips after Quin laid her back on the bed. Quin put his ear near her stomach and Noni's words about Quin smelling made her flinch. "Well?"

Blake waited in silence, waiting not for news, but for their reaction. She trusted Noni, so it was just Quin and Arden who would be in for the surprise.

"Two pretty girls," Quin said, and across her belly, the two men clamped hands. "One for each of us, Arden, barely started but beautiful beyond words. Just like their pretty mother."

Blake smiled at the bliss that crossed both their faces even though it wasn't directed at her. It was never bad to be the one bearing such sweet news, but as the two men embraced and took turns reverently kissing her belly, she had to force her smile. She was on the outside of the celebration. It wasn't their bliss as a group, but two different joys, and Blake's was hers alone. Finally, Arden pulled her blankets high, his heart in his eyes as he looked to Quin. Blake felt she might as well be invisible.

"Thank you so much, Blake." Tears ran down Arden's cheeks as he spoke, though his eyes were on Quin, who also cried in joy. "We're so happy."

"Good." Blake smiled, but turned to her side because she couldn't face their happiness anymore, not when she knew they weren't really for her. If either of them noticed her tears, it didn't show as they patted her back once and left the room, quietly closing the door behind them.

It was too soon to love them or expect them to love her, she counseled herself as a sob tore loose from her throat. If that was true, though, then why were the tears falling, and why did her heart already feel like it was broken?

* * * * *

Blake didn't think she could go through even another week without letting her bitterness show. Disappointment, irritation and probably the most frustrating, *desire*, filled her every moment of the day, and none of those things were ever alleviated. There were times she sincerely hated being right. Just as she'd predicted, she'd become an incubating houseguest. Quin and Arden were happy, so happy, and told her every morning just how happy they were when they brought her a breakfast tray.

They didn't even eat together anymore, she lamented, though she kept the smile on her face for Noni and her company. When Blake awoke from her morning nap, a necessity now, there had been a lovely couple with a newborn baby to visit.

"Brenda, dear, tell Blake things will get easier," Noni Sophie said, pouring tea for everyone. "She's in early days and is always sleeping."

The shy-looking redhead smiled and patted her spouse's arm. "The sleepiness does get better, Blake, and elves are such wonderful mates and fathers . . . they make carrying their babies a joy."

"How long have you been here?" Blake asked, forcefully ignoring their happiness.

"Hmm, forty-eight years," Brenda replied. "This little one is our tenth."

"What?" Blake demanded, looking from the little boy to Brenda, who had to be in her seventies but didn't look a day over thirty.

"They haven't told you?" Brenda asked. "Shame on you, Noni."

"Oh, that's right," she said and looked sheepishly to Blake. "As long as you drink the water, you will not age. Hence, our dear, human Brenda is alive and well and young of flesh at seventy-five years."

"And beautiful, Noni Sophie," Ewan said, nibbling his wife's ear in a way that made Blake want to cry in envy. "Never a more beautiful or wonderful wife."

Brenda giggled like a young bride. The woman seemed so happy, Blake wanted to crawl under the table.

"Blake is Quin and Arden's, so she's your new neighbor," Noni Sophie continued.

The other woman was happy to share stories, and during the rest of the afternoon Blake learned more about her new home. She held little Robert and helped when she could, fighting fatigue with every moment. The temptation to lie down and cry a river was high, but she kept going and smiling because she needed to learn, and Brenda was a perfect example of a human in the elf world.

The rest of Ewan and Brenda's family congregated at Noni Sophie's house and soon, though Blake was still feeling the bite of envy, she was also having a wonderful time. Ranging in age from their late teens to near forty, all the sons were handsome, and if the younger ones weren't quite adult-sized, they were nearing it quickly. They were all intrigued about her human life and about the two girls she carried. Hybrids had good fertility rates too, she learned, and all the boys, men really, hoped to have mates one day.

When Blake started yawning, Noni Sophie suggested she ride home with Brenda's family. Trusting them to keep the beasts at bay, Blake went along and laughed the entire ride, feeling lighter and happier than she had the entire time in the elven world. At the cottage, Max and Eduard, Brenda's eldest sons, stayed to help her get settled.

"Any cakes there, Blake?" Eduard asked, both men having walked her in the house while their parents continued home with the younger sons. Max stoked the fire and Eduard put the kettle on the stove.

"In the cupboard," she said, and a few minutes later all three sat on one bench, Blake between them. The young men had no sense of personal space, but she wasn't about to complain about the first genuine and completely sweet contact she'd had in weeks.

"Nice home." Eduard licked icing from his fingertip in an absolutely filthy way, and although there were napkins, Blake didn't offer him one. "Though, it needs more of your touches, like the knits and such I saw at Noni Sophie's house. Those would be good here."

"Maybe." Blake nibbled her cake. She didn't want to think about how uncomfortable she was about changing anything in the house when she still felt like a guest.

"And what of your hands, dear Blake?" Max asked, tracing his finger down one of the deep scars on the back of her hand.

Noni's cream had helped tremendously, but even she admitted the scars would always remain.

"Ah, a car accident," she replied, flexing them without pain. She hadn't worn her gloves in weeks. "I was driving too fast and spun out of control. I broke my leg, too, but my hands got the worst of it."

"Dangerous things, cars are," Eduard said solemnly. "Our grandfather on mother's side was killed in one. He was hit by a fearsome thing called a train. Combustion and steam engines, you know."

"Actually, I do. I helped my mom in her mechanic shop when I was a kid so I learned all about the power of steam and combustion."

"You know engines?" they asked together. "Can you build them?"

"Ah, with the right tools, I guess," she replied, not sure where the thought was going.

"Da's going to love you. He's got a pump in mind for the well but can't get his brain around the mechanics," Max explained. "And Ma was a nurse, so she doesn't know the first thing about motors."

"Huh, yeah I could probably help." The feeling of being useful and wanted filled Blake and it was glaringly sweet. "I'm sure we could come up with something."

"Good, good. So are you missing your home, Blake?" Eduard asked. "Ma wanted to visit sooner, but with Robert being born and all, she had to postpone."

"That's fine. I'm not missing things as much as I'd have thought," she admitted. "I'd already lost my family before Arden found me, and I couldn't do my job anymore because of my hands, so I guess the timing was perfect."

"Ma said that too," Max said, his shy grin incredibly charming. "She said three years earlier she'd have been a green, backwoods girl, but the war had taught her nursing and given her an open mind, things she needed to acclimate here."

"World War Two," Blake mused. "Yep, I suppose that would have made her more open to this. Three years ago, I'd have been pregnant and happy with my husband . . . so yeah, I can understand the timing."

Both elves looked at her with sad eyes, compassion at the ready. "Och, what happened, lass?" Max asked, his accent far deeper than before.

"Why would you think something happened?" Blake fidgeted with what was left of her cake. It always made her especially uncomfortable when people seemed to see right through her.

"Noni Sophie wouldn't have let Arden and Quin take you from a happy life. It's not our way. So if three years ago you were wed and pregnant, that says something tragic happened in those years," Eduard explained, taking hold of her spastic hand with a gentle touch.

"Well, you're right. Our son, Jonathan, was born with a heart defect and died before he was strong enough for the surgeons to consider operating. Then a few weeks later, Jason, my husband, died in his sleep. He had the same defect as Jonathan."

Max took her other hand. Comfort like none she'd experienced filled her. Two near-strangers were being so good to her. So good. She leaned her head against Max's shoulder and that felt wonderful. On her other side, Eduard slid his arm around her middle in a half hug.

"Did Noni Sophie tell you we don't have those kinds of problems here?" Max asked, his voice deep and soothing, a lot like Quin's.

"Yes, she did." Only the knowledge that her babies would be born healthy was helping Blake stay sane through the rest of the relationship troubles. Even if Quin and Arden didn't love her, her daughters would be born healthy and strong and she could love them.

"And as you can see," Eduard said, pulling away slightly. "Hybrids are quite the fine specimens. Go ahead and give a touch, Blake. I don't mind."

She laughed as he pulled up the side of his shirt, revealing an abdomen that would put most to shame. Because Eduard was trying to lighten the mood, and because he looked fantastic, she reached out and ran her finger across the smooth patch of skin. No sparks though, not even a flicker.

"*Oh*," she said. "*Very* impressive."

"And let's not forget me." Max stood beside her and pulled the front of his shirt up to reveal side-by-side rows of rock-hard abdominals.

"Goodness, boys," she murmured as she stroked her hand over Max's tummy.

"And just what the hell is going on here?"

Arden and Quin stood at the door, both looking very displeased. Blake looked to Eduard, who only rolled his eyes. Max winked at her and they righted themselves.

"I do believe I hear Ma calling, Eduard," Max said. "We'd best get home, but we'll be in touch about the pump, Blake. After a few months, of course."

"Of course," she said, fighting to keep the amusement out of her voice at the very fussy tone Max had employed.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, Blake," Eduard said and kissed her cheek, Max following on that note as well. "Take care."

"Thanks for seeing me home," she called after them, and both waved as they walked between Arden and Quin. "Be careful."

Blake smiled, feeling lighter and happier than she had since she'd told her boys she was pregnant. She looked at Quin and Arden, still standing by the door with their swords and scowls, but even those didn't bother her.

"I'm hungry for French toast, how about you guys?" She ignored their ugly looks because she was hungry and in much too good of a mood to let them ruin it. "Hmm, the honey is really good – we could put that on top. Interested?"

She started bopping around the kitchen; both elves remained by the door but they were finally undressing.

"Why didn't you wait for us?" Quin demanded.

"Ewan and Brenda offered me a ride," she explained, cracking an egg into a bowl. "I was going to nap at Noni Sophie's, but she said I'd be more comfortable at home. Max and Eduard just stayed for a bit for a snack. Nice guys."

"You should have waited," Quin insisted. "And you definitely shouldn't have entertained them alone."

"They aren't dangerous." She leaned down eye to eye with the cup, measuring out milk.

"No, but it's unseemly," Arden told her. "You are ours and pregnant. Those boys should not have been flirting with you."

She slammed the stone bowl to the counter as she understood their protests. Both elves jumped, but she didn't care. "Oh, I get it. I'm your property, right? I go to bed alone every night while you two sleep together, talk, fuck, whatever, and I just have to be quiet and take what you two butts have left over. Now, two perfectly nice men actually want to talk and visit and treat me like a person and I can't have that either? I'm not a fucking plaything to just be put away until you want me or until someone else does. I need someone who cares about me, at least sometimes, and you know what? I liked playing with Eduard and Max. Touching their abs was the highlight of my week. How shitty is that when I live with two gorgeous men. You know what? Screw you two; I'm going to bed."

Blake shouted the last and stormed down the hall. Her appetite and good mood were long forgotten, replaced by anger and that crippling hurt and disappointment she swore to herself she wouldn't indulge in. But she did, and her heart cried for her words not to be true, for Arden and Quin to prove her wrong. The anger had also taken the last of her energy, and by the time she reached her bed, the only thing left was to sleep.

Chapter Seven

It was late when the creak of the bedroom door awoke Blake. Her internal clock had gotten accustomed to the dark hours on end, but from the way her stomach cramped and growled at the scent of fried bread, she knew she'd been asleep a while.

She turned in her bed and sat up so she could see both men. Quin held a candle and lit the room's light, and by it she could see both of their faces. Their sad, contrite, miserable faces. She didn't really want to, but she felt like a shrew for yelling at them. The relationship was new to them, too. As Quin had said, Arden had never been with a woman, and Quin hadn't in hundreds of years, and never with a pregnant one.

"I'm so sorry," she said, tears burning her eyes.

Arden put down the tray and both men were instantly at her side. Arden hugged her first, and Quin wrapped them both in his arms. They whispered and pressed kisses along her cheeks, neck and shoulders. Their sincerity was so deep, and just as Noni Sophie had thought, neither had had any notion of what other needs she had. Arden's voice cracked as he told her their excuses and begged she accept their apology.

"We thought you needed time and space to get accustomed to everything. Leaving you alone wasn't what we were trying to do, but we didn't want to smother you either. We care so much," Quin told her, his voice thick with emotion when Arden couldn't speak anymore. "You make our family and you make it beautiful as well."

"We love you, Blake." Arden's pledge ended with a slight hiccup, but he pushed on. "We want you to be happy and have friends. We will try not to be, ah . . . butts anymore. Just please tell us what you require and it will be yours."

"I'm not very good at that." She sighed hard, her own emotions as ragged as her elves', and she rested her head against Quin's shoulder.

"We'll try harder too, so you won't need to tell us every little thing," Quin promised. "And if you want to touch a man, I am always of service. There is no need to touch Eduard or Max."

Blake laughed and rubbed her hand over his hard stomach. It was just as strong as the younger elves', but unlike with Eduard and Max, touching Quin felt right.

"Mine too," Arden protested.

"Of course," she agreed sweetly, and rubbed him too. "I've missed you guys so much. It's hard for me to say stuff, like, like feelings and needs. It's easier to pout and yell."

"Perhaps," Arden said as she let her fingers wander lower, past his hard abdominals and over his hips. Between his hipbones, another hardness pointed straight up, demanding attention she so wanted to indulge but wasn't sure was welcome until he nudged his penis higher. "Ah, yes. It may be easier to hold things inside, love, but I promise the reward for being honest and brave is one we'll all enjoy very much. Our strong, beautiful Blake. You're our heart, you know. Already in our soul."

She sighed when Arden pulled her into his arms for another hug, mostly because the action dislodged her grip on his penis. Quin snuggled close behind her and the comfort was amazing, even if she was the slightest bit turned on. Not so much that she wouldn't sleep, but definitely enough to have her ready and willing.

"Hmm." Quin disengaged from behind her and though she couldn't see his face, the way Arden looked up told her they were talking to each other somehow. "My Arden, I believe we should give our Blake a taste of that reward. I would also like a taste."

"Ah," Arden said, and his strength still surprised her when he turned and lifted her until she lounged against his lap, her knees draped open across his, leaving her completely exposed. "How's this, Quin?"

"This looks fantastic."

"Um, what happened to 'how's this Blake?'" she asked, though she made no move to close her legs or move away.

"Feel free to tell me to stop," Quin said between kissing up her exposed leg. The inside flesh was soft and warm from sleep and completely sensitive. She shivered as he laved his tongue around the back of her knee. "What's the decision, dear Blake? Am I to stop before I reach your reward?"

She could only moan because Arden's hands had moved to her breasts. She thought her knee was sensitive, but in Arden's firm hold her breasts came alive with

feeling. He was careful, but not too much, as he rolled her nipples between his fingers. Even with her nightgown in place, as thin as it was, she was on fire with pleasure.

One of Arden's hands moved from her nipple, and she pouted, ready to beg for it back when his forearm locked across her hips, holding her still. Confusion clouded her lust-filled mind right before Quin flicked his tongue hard over her clit. Immediately, her hips wanted to thrust closer, but with Arden holding her tight, there was no way she was going to be demanding more.

"Oh, please," she said with a heavy sigh.

"I will, love. You've got that promise." Quin's lusty chuckle did nearly as much as the licks.

Over and over, without division or difference, Quin licked the same spot. His long hair tickled her thighs in the process. The combination drove her crazy because it wasn't enough or the exact right place. Just a breath to the left, but when she said it he didn't make any motion to move, and Arden adjusted slightly so his lips settled on hers, very effectively keeping her quiet.

Quin's plan made sense to her frazzled mind a moment later when that little place that wanted so much to have attention began to throb. She could feel the pleasure widen until that one focus point of bliss became her entire body. Arden no longer played with her nipple, but stroked her rib cage and even that was inflaming. Quin changed his lick to include her lips and inner thighs, each and every contact tightening her to the point that she was afraid of what the next touch would bring. She'd never been so high or so actively close to a climax that held for so long.

Then Quin's finger, his long, thick finger, slipped between her weeping pussy lips. She thought that would be the thing to push her over the edge, but at the same time, Arden's bracing arm moved so his hand laid against the lowest flat of her stomach. Each move and contact was more than she could handle, but it wasn't until Arden pushed down gently and Quin's finger turned up, hitting her deepest, sweetest spot in a way she'd only read about, that she finally lost it. She moaned, she screamed, but in the end, ran out of breath.

* * * * *

She awoke alone, and that pissed her off. Immediately after the climax of her life, Arden and Quin had tucked in close and snuggled her to sleep, but now in the dead of night, she was alone. Crying sounded reasonable, but instead, she wrapped up in her blanket and went to find them. Really, it did make sense that they would go to their room for the night. Her bed was short and not nearly as large as theirs. She turned into their room, a small lamp illuminating it gently. She could see the big bed and her two elves lying back to back with plenty of room for her in the middle. She smiled and crawled between them. Perfect, she thought, just enough room.

Strong hands were kneading her butt the next time she awoke. Her bare butt. Warm oil was pressed high to her back for a moment, making her push out toward the comfort, but the hands went south again. Then they went farther and deeper until they massaged into the crevice between her cheeks in a relentless rhythm that had her pressing back.

Quin chuckled, and she realized her head was cradled to his chest and his hands were in her hair. "Arden enjoys morning visitation."

"Mmm, so you wake to this every morning?" She moaned as the scent of sandalwood and rosemary permeated the room.

"Often," Quin answered, his hard sex pressed to her stomach. "Do you like it, or would you rather I woke him up?"

"He can do this in his sleep?" Blake gasped as impossibly warm fingers penetrated her ass.

"And make me come screaming," Quin confirmed. "You like anal? He's not as thick as I am so you should be fine."

"I like—I like this," she panted as Quin's finger flicked across her clit, quickly sending her to climax. As she fell over her unexpected peak, Arden slipped in with little resistance from her oiled and relaxed pucker.

"Next time," Quin whispered, holding her tightly as Arden had the night before. "I'll be inside your beautiful pussy as well. When Arden and I work together, nothing is too challenging. Picture it, the two of us moving in and out until you are screaming for both of us to stop, but begging us not to. You will come over and over until your body has given all it can. Then, when you're exhausted, we'll bathe you and do it all again until – ah, again? Good girl, Blake, come again."

She whimpered and cried against his chest. The discomfort should have made her want to stop, but it seemed a part of Arden had found a place directly connected to her clit, making the organ throb and her pussy weep. Quin seemed to know and played freely with the barest of touches, prolonging and intensifying the feelings. Arden finished, hot and hard, deep in her backside, and she fought herself not to feel let down. She was more than halfway to another orgasm, but two was more than –

"My turn." Quin eased her from Arden's hold and flipped her to her back, wasting no time in sinking his cock into her wet pussy.

Blake screamed, exploding without ceremony as her over-stimulated body erupted. She ran out of breath again, and a moment later light taps on her face woke her.

"There she is," Arden said, kissing the flesh where he'd tapped. "All right there, love?"

Blake moaned in response, but added a nod so they wouldn't ask again. She only wanted to sleep.

"I knew your ass would be nice," Arden continued, still kissing and soothing her cheeks and neck. "So giving, so lovely, expressive and sexy. There's nothing like loving you."

Blake grunted and closed her eyes and listening to Quin's heavy breathing beside them. Her body was covered in sweat and fluids, not a bad thing, but as she cooled and it dried she felt skuzzy. Someone must have read her mind, because they removed her gown and then strong arms lifted her. She heard the bath running and a moment later

was deposited in a sweet-smelling, deliciously warm bath. Loving hands rubbed rose soap all over, even giving her scalp a massage when they washed her hair.

Over the rose, Blake could smell fried bread, cinnamon, apples and vanilla, and she smiled. Quin, her bather, she realized when she opened her eyes and saw his hands, lifted her out of the bath and wrapped her in a flannel. He rubbed her all over, and though she missed the big, fluffy towels from her home, she wouldn't have traded Quin's rubdown for all the solo ones in her old apartment.

Dressed in her softest underwear and dress, she didn't complain when Quin carried her down the hall to the kitchen. How could she complain when she had no muscles left? Her feet barely touched the floor, and she didn't even sit on the wooden bench: instead she was in Quin's lap while Arden fed her bites of toast and honey.

"Hmm, I say we start every day just like this." Blake was stuffed full, warm, snuggled, and ready for a nap. There was no way the day could get better. "I even like the warm honey. Jason always made raspberry syrup with waffles, but this was fantastic. Do you guys have a waffle iron?"

"Something of the like," Arden answered.

"What else did your Jason do that made you happy?" Quin asked, stroking her temple, the gentle touch assuring her the question was just that and held no jealousy or discontent.

"Lots of stuff, but there's no comparing. You two are horses of completely different colors. Jason asked me to marry him eight times before I said yes. In our four years together he drove me nuts, but he loved me and always made sure I knew. After our baby died, I knew in my heart Jason wouldn't live much longer either. After everything, we just loved each other more, I think."

"Blake, you must know how much we lov – "

"No," she broke in, cutting Quin's words short. "No. I know none of us has been in a relationship like this before, and it's going to take time we haven't had yet. We all know what love feels like, and I know we've got great chances to get there, but for now,

let's just keep moving forward, okay? I can't have Jason back, and God willing, you two won't be alone again. So, we've got time and things are okay. Right?"

"More than okay," Arden assured her as Quin nodded, his mouth still covered by her hand because she really didn't think she could handle hearing that he loved her. Not yet.

Quin gently moved her hand aside and kissed her palm. "So wise you are, Blake, but even if there isn't full love yet, please know how much we respect and care for you and how much pleasure you've brought us, just in your company. Know how happy we are that you've chosen to stay with us and build a family."

"Thanks, and I feel the same. Now that the other stuff is cleared up, I already feel better." She kissed them both, their lips sweet from the honey, but she couldn't indulge again, not without some sleep first. "Okay boys, I'm thinking a nap is in order. Anyone else want to join me?"

Chapter Eight

The Darkness was ebbing, only a week left, according to Noni Sophie. Not that Blake cared other than the passing weeks meaning she was that much closer to delivery. Hybrid babies took less gestation than human ones, but for Blake, that just meant she was a lot bigger than she'd have thought before she'd had time to accustom herself to pregnancy. She was also more emotional, more exhausted and, damn, she'd just never cried so much in her life.

"Blake, dear heart, just seven more days," Arden comforted as he eased the blankets away from her swollen body. She knew he wanted her up and about so they could go to work, but she just didn't want to. "After the week, Quin and I will be home every day to pamper you as we should, but for today, it's time to get up and walk to Noni Sophie's."

Blake didn't even feel mean, just pitiful, tired and sore. She'd been up four times the night before to pee, Quin had stolen her blanket, and she didn't want to get up. She

whimpered and turned her face into her pillow, not even wanting to argue or explain. Her tears started helplessly, slowly building until they exploded into sobs she couldn't control.

"What's wrong?" she heard Quin demand.

"She's pouting," Arden replied sourly, and she couldn't even protest.

She was being a big pouter and didn't have any plans to stop.

"She's crying. Is she ill?" Once again Quin played the part of her elf in shining armor. The bed dipped and his hand stroked up and down her back. "What's wrong, sweetheart? What hurts?"

She had no answer, but turned into his side and kept crying. Quin lay beside her and snuggled her close and that helped. There were still tears, but she felt loved and that always was a good thing.

"Quin, we have patrol," Arden protested as she heard Quin begin to softly sing a song she'd never heard.

"She's more important." Quin's whisper was so soft she thought Arden might not hear.

"Of course she is," Arden snapped, and Blake flinched when the sharp sound of his boot against the wooden floor rang. "But we've got responsibilities. Blake understands that when she's not letting the babies rule her head. We need to go."

Blake whimpered, not sure she could make herself get out of bed. Quin only shushed her and kissed her forehead. "There now, relax love. We'll stay here with you for the day if you need it."

"No, we're going to drop her at Noni Sophie's so we can patrol for beasts," Arden corrected, and guilt was starting to set into Blake's heart with his every sharp reply.

"Don't worry, my sweetness. Arden's just grumpy from the long Darkness. I promise he'll be sweet next week."

"Fine, you stay with her the twenty minutes it'll take her to work out of her funk," Arden said hotly. "Waste the day. I will be out, doing my duty and protecting the village."

When the door slammed, Blake opened her mouth to say she would at least try to get out of bed and start the day, but Quin pulled the blankets higher.

"You know, maybe he needs to start his day with more fiber," Quin mused.

The tears turned into liquid giggles and she pushed her face deeper into Quin's embrace as they lay together in the silence.

* * * * *

It was hours later when the pounding started. Quin bolted upright, jarring a gasp out of Blake before she could figure out what the sound was. He put a hand to her arm for a moment, but ran to the door before apologizing. Blake tried to run behind him, but her bulk and lingering aches made it slow going.

By the time she was to the door, she felt worse than before and things only got blacker when she saw Arden lying on the kitchen table.

"Oh my God. What happened?" Blake grabbed towels from the cabinet when she saw blood, not waiting for a reply.

"It was a big bastard," Max explained to Quin, who was already pressing cloths into Arden's wounds. "Da's off to get Noni Sophie but he bound the worst of the wounds first, so he's fine. Oh, even awake now. Arden, smile for Quin, you scared the hell out of him."

Blake had to shimmy between Eduard and Max to see Arden's face, and relief filled her when she saw he was indeed awake and did smile for Quin.

"I'm okay," Arden mumbled weakly.

"Let's get him to bed," Eduard said, taking hold of Arden's legs while Quin held his shoulders.

Blake started to hurry ahead to open the door but the world spun around her. She stumbled, but Max caught her.

"Sit down, right now," he commanded, helping her to the cold floor.

She didn't even mind the inhospitable seat because guilt and fear were assaulting her. If she hadn't been such a selfish bitch, Quin would have been with Arden and her gentle, blond elf wouldn't have been hurt.

"Good, she's sitting."

Blake heard Noni Sophie, but she didn't look up, the vision of Arden, bloody and hurt, and Quin so crushed, too heavy in her mind.

"Ewan, please take her to the second bedroom. All this is bound to knock her right out."

"No, I need to help Arden." She tried to push to her feet, but her limbs wouldn't cooperate.

Above her, she heard a chuckle before strong arms lifted her off the floor. "Just relax, Blake."

"It's all my fault. I made Quin stay home with me."

"No one makes Quin do anything," Ewan said with another light chuckle. "And on patrol, no one is alone. Arden had Max and myself, but these things happen. The beasts are unpredictable and vicious creatures, which is why the strong protect the others. Arden will be fine. It's you and those babies that you need to worry about. Noni Sophie will be in to check you after she's done with Arden."

"I'm fine," she mumbled as Ewan laid her in the bed she hadn't occupied in months. "Take care of Arden."

"He's fine. You just sleep, Blake. Just sleep."

Chapter Nine

It was best that she was at Brenda's house, Blake told herself. It kept her out of Quin's way, which was good, because Arden needed him. When she was around, she split Quin's focus, and it was more important that Quin help Arden, especially since she was the reason Arden had gotten hurt in the first place.

"Hey there, Blake," Eduard said, snapping Blake out of her guilt-filled doze. "Oh, I'm sorry, didn't mean to wake you. Holding my little brother is better than a sleeping potion. A person might as well grab a pillow and blanket the moment he's cuddled in. You two looked mighty peaceful, but if I don't change him, the sweet little lad is liable to pee all over your pretty dress."

"Oh, okay." Blake wouldn't have minded the pee, but handed over baby Robert anyway. Eduard didn't need to know that she had done nothing but sleep in the past few days, which was one of the reasons Quin was also trying to see to her. She'd accepted Noni Sophie and Brenda's invitation for the visit without a second thought, just so Quin could have time with Arden. Alone.

She closed her eyes and fought back tears. She must have done something to deserve it all. Somewhere along the line, she'd screwed up big time to lose not only one wonderful man, but two others as well. She obviously didn't need to be around good men. Exhaustion trickled in once more with every negative thought. She was poison, lethal, and even in a new world she was breaking men.

"Blake."

She jerked, suddenly aware of someone patting her face, sensation she hadn't known she was missing rushing back. "Mom, she's waking up."

"Oh, thank goodness," Brenda said, her face and Max's above Blake's when she opened her eyes. "Don't you worry, honey. Ewan ran to fetch Noni Sophie and Quin. Max, sweetie, help her up and into bed. There now, we'll have you fine in no time."

"Can you catch Ewan? I don't want Quin to be bothered. Arden needs him." Blake held tightly to Max as he deftly lifted her to the daybed against the wall.

"Damn it, Blake, quit putting yourself last."

Quin's harsh voice startled Blake so badly she started shaking.

"Hey now," Max said gently. "You're okay."

"What's going on here?" Quin demanded.

"Well, most currently you scared the daylights out of her," Brenda scolded as Blake held her belly and tried to calm down. "There now, Max, set her down with a blanket, and I'll go make some tea for everyone before the boys take you home."

Blake immediately wanted to sleep, but Arden was suddenly at her side, sitting on the floor. His hand was on her stomach, and when she looked, he rested his head to her bump.

"Ah hell, I've been selfish, little love. I'm all healed now, no more injury or pain. We'll take you all home and take care of you. Our daughters are upset with their fathers and are taking their displeasure out on you."

Quin was there a moment later, kneeling as well so she could see them both eye to eye. "We'll get their room together and hold you at night. I promise."

The way he spoke made her wonder if the babies were yelling at him. Noni Sophie said if anyone could smell or hear the babies, it would be Quin.

Before she could ask what the babies were saying, Brenda returned with the tea, one of her younger sons carrying a tray heavy with cake and treats. "Thank you, David. Now, Blake, drink your tea. I swear you elves need to wake the heck up. This selfishness must stop if you want to continue such a complicated relationship. If there is only room for two, then I know any of my sons would jump at a chance to love Blake. It's a damn shame when such a beautiful, vibrant, caring woman feels so guilty and alone, especially when she's pregnant. She should be happy right now, boys, and she's not."

"Brenda —"

"No, Blake, it's true and needs to be said. You love them both, but we can all see you eating your heart out in guilt over something you had nothing to do with. Instead of reassuring you and being sweet as they should have, Arden was acting like a big baby and Quin was letting him."

Blake pushed herself up and stood, frustration and anger fueling her. "Brenda, I know you want to help because you're a kind woman, but these two elves are mine and they do care and they'll love me eventually and you don't get to yell at them. I'll do that

when I'm ready and it wasn't time yet. Quin shouldn't feel bad about helping Arden and Arden shouldn't be put down because he was hurt."

Blake gulped and glanced at each of those watching her like she was crazy. Max and Eduard, along with the other kids were around, looking at her. Brenda was a little pale, and both Arden and Quin looked nervous. "You know, maybe today isn't the day for me to help Ewan with his pump. I think we're all just tired and need some sleep. Don't you think so, Brenda?"

The older woman quickly overcame her surprise, and when she nodded enthusiastically, relief filled Blake. She didn't want to alienate Brenda, but there was no way to take back the words, and it was up to Brenda to make things okay. "Absolutely, Blake. There's nothing like a good rest to balance the humors. Max and Eduard will accompany you home so Quin can carry you, sweetheart. And you just let us know how we can help, all right, Blake?"

"Right," Blake said and smiled at Brenda, sharing a moment of friendship she hoped to grow. She turned to Quin and held up her arms. "Please take me home."

Chapter Ten

"You're so beautiful," Arden murmured, bussing his lips across her temple as they rocked lazily.

Blake smiled, the lazy rhythm easing her out of the peak excitement of the evening's excess the sweetest way she knew. Behind her, Quin kissed and cuddled, but made no move to do more than rub and cuddle. She just didn't have the stamina anymore for the full play, but she had enjoyed watching him and Arden only a few minutes before, and it made her feel good that they were all satisfied.

In the last week, since Arden and Quin had picked her up, she'd grown even more, and by general unspoken agreement, the blazing hotness had ebbed to a delicious simmer.

"You'll love us every day, won't you, Blake?" Quin whispered as he stroked her, breast to belly.

Arden continued, taking his time, slowly bringing her to a second sweet climax.

"Every day." Blake turned so her lips could connect with Quin's.

"I love you, Blake." Cradling her close between his thighs, enveloping her from behind as Arden did her front, Quin made her feel surrounded by love. "Every day and forever."

"Forever," Arden added, his voice strained as he moved only slightly faster, tripping her into completion.

Blake whimpered again, disbelieving of how over and over with no end in sight her men could please her and learn so quickly. They loved her; she knew it and saw it in the way they didn't make the same mistakes twice. Arden pulled away, but Quin remained and drew the blanket over them both as Arden went into the bathroom. A moment later he returned with a nice, warm washcloth. He cleaned them all up, smoothed her gown back to her ankles and settled her in bed. She sighed, so happy in her place.

"Will you love us tomorrow, Blake?" Arden asked, stroking Quin's side.

"Yep." She yawned so hard her jaw cracked before she finished the word. With Arden's warm legs under her feet and Quin's nose rubbing hers she couldn't imagine any other answer.

"You're sure?" Quin asked.

"Huh? That I'll love you? Of course." She closed her eyes and cuddled closer to her men. "I'm keeping you both, tomorrow, the next day, the one after . . . infinity days."

On either side of her, her elves relaxed. Quin brushed a kiss across her nose and she smiled as she fell asleep.

* * * * *

The first day of the Light season was a magical time of rebirth and celebration. Or at least that's what Blake had heard. Considering the way she felt, she didn't care if dragons flew by and dropped diamonds; she wasn't moving.

She'd awakened when Quin and Arden had made love again, the sexy, sweet picture they made always a treat, but when they invited her to join, she'd declined. The blinds were drawn, but from her bed, she could see the lightness through the window and that did nothing for her either. Sleep, she thought, flipping her pillow to the cool side. Her elves were letting her sleep, which meant she needed it, which meant while she slept she wouldn't bite anyone's head off.

"Oh dear, you're still in bed?"

Blake jumped and frustrated, angry tears burned her eyes. "Can I help you, Brenda?"

"That's why I'm here, to help you. Noni Sophie and I are going to get you ready for the ceremony," Brenda said, cheerful as ever, even if she sounded a bit confused.

"Ceremony? Never mind, just leave me alone." Blake covered her head, refusing to listen or answer when Brenda tried to get her attention again.

She must have fallen back asleep because when the bed moved she awoke again. When two sets of strong arms wrapped around her, she cried in earnest at the interruption.

"I-I don't feel well," she whispered, rubbing her nose on Arden's chest.

"So you still love us?" Quin asked, sounding so unsure that she paused.

"Quin was worried when Brenda said you wouldn't come for the ceremony." Arden sounded as worried as he said Quin was. "But we can do it another day."

"Of course I love you." Blake wiggled from beneath her blankets. "What ceremony?"

"You said you'd love us forever today," Quin reminded her, but while it sounded important, she didn't understand. "But tomorrow works if our babies are uncomfortable, but they seem fine."

"That's good," she replied, still confused.

"The ceremony is like a marriage," Arden explained, rubbing her hips and lower back. "Everyone comes to celebrate a new family in the Light. It's a lucky time."

"Oh." Understanding dawned and Blake was horrified. "Oh, I'm such a bitch! I stood you both up at the altar, didn't I? Damn, I suck."

"No, no," Quin assured her, tugging her back in place when she tried to sit up. "We weren't clear, and you don't feel well. We couldn't expect anything and we're not upset."

"Is there still time?" she asked, sitting up slowly, and this time the elves let her.

"Yes," Arden said hesitantly. "But only if you feel up to it."

"Oh, sure." Blake wiggled to the end of the bed, wardrobe options already flooding her mind. "I'd be happy to marry you, especially if you're willing to claim a cow like me –"

"Hush," Quin commanded and tugged her back to lie beside him. "You are beautiful big with our daughters, and we have shown you how much we desire you and how much we want you in and out of bed. Come with us only if you believe we love you and you love us back. Time is something we have if you need more to see the honesty of those words."

Chills ran all over her, his beautiful claim more than she could have expected, more than she deserved, but everything she'd ever wanted. "Oh Quin," she cried and tugged both her elves to her side. "I believe you, and I love you both. I want to be with you two and for everyone to know it."

"I even have some of the chocolate left that I brought over with you." Arden kissed her hard when she laughed. "Now, we'll help you dress and today we celebrate. We'll celebrate together, love each other and dance in the Light."

~The End~

About the Author

When Stephanie Beck's mother told her to quit whining about less than perfect endings and write her own neither of them could have guessed what would happen. Ten years later that advice has become a fulltime passion and occupation. With a wonderful husband and two beautiful girls, the fulltime status makes for very long days, but she breaks up the romance and steamy scenes with knitting, walking, sewing and reading. Find more about Stephanie at www.stephaniebeck.net and also on Facebook
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