

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*The Twelve Quickies of Christmas*



Book 3

*Make Me Believe*  
Shiloh Walker

MAKE ME BELIEVE

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# **MAKE ME BELIEVE**

**Shiloh Walker**

## Chapter One

"Nikolai."

The gleaming black head didn't so much as lift in acknowledgment.

But the leader knew he was aware. In nearly nine hundred years of walking the earth, those large green eyes had rarely missed anything

"You did not come to our meeting." The boss's voice was grim, aggravated, and firm. Nikolai should have been intimidated.

Nik's soft sigh filled the room. He closed his heavily lashed eyes, a thick lock of black, silken hair falling into his eyes as his long-fingered, graceful hands stilled on the small sculpture he held. *The Council can go fuck themselves.* He didn't say it out loud, but he suspected his captain heard him all the same.

"How many times must I tell you? 'Tis bad enough in the eyes of the Council that I have chosen an unmated man as my successor—"

"One of three."

The low, deep timbre of his voice still held the rich hints of Russia, the echoes of his homeland from centuries past.

"It doesn't matter if you are one of a thousand. You are unmated, you shirk our traditions, you do not act as one of us, dress as one of us."

"Renounce me," Nikolai suggested pithily as he continued to carve an angel from a piece of crystal. Dreamy blue eyes narrowed in concentration, though he was fully aware of the concerns of his mentor—once his master, now his friend. But Nikolai had more important concerns on his mind than whether or not the North Council chose him.

Once, it had been the most important thing to him.

Once...

\* \* \* \* \*

Chelly lowered herself gently down onto the couch, afraid her body was going to shatter. The papers in her hand sealed her fate.

The bastard was trying to take Bryan from her, saying she was unfit, losing her mind, dreaming of places, men, worlds that didn't exist. Certainly not fit to take care of a normal boy, much less a handicapped child, one with special needs.

"Our son isn't handicapped, you cold-ass son of a bitch," she hissed. Then her emerald green eyes narrowed. He couldn't hear. That didn't mean he was less of a person. *Damn him!* "My son. My son." Drawing her knees to her chest, she rested her cheek on them and sighed shakily. "*Nikolai...this is all your fault.*"

*Of course...what good does it do blaming it on you?*

*You aren't real.*

*I am going crazy.*

She had first had dreams of him when she was small, just five. Right after the death of her parents, on Christmas Eve. They had been out doing some last minute shopping. A desperate druggie, looking for money, needing that next fix and her parents had been wealthy-looking targets. He hadn't cared he had robbed a child of her parents, her focus, and on Christmas Eve, the most magical day of the year.

It would have stopped being so magical that day.

But a gentle, smiling man with kind, caring eyes had come to her in her tear-filled dreams and whispered soothing things, promised her that her parents were well and together and she would see them again, she just must be good and patient...and she mustn't cry so...Christmas was coming. A man who made magical things happen as he spun snowflakes from his hands, and made rainbows come alive in midair while she watched.

A man who had eyes that glowed in the dimness of the room, and curving, pointed ears.

*Damn Christmas!*

He had laughed at her outburst and picked her up, cuddled her, stroked her downy, golden curls. *Da, da, you feel this way now, I know. But not for always. Sleep, little one. Sleep.*

That was the first time he had come to her, though not the last. Her imaginary friend wasn't the typical one. Hers was a tall, handsome man, with hair that billowed down to his waist, impossibly blue eyes, and curved pointing ears...*elf* ears. A handsome, fairy tale prince. And as she went from girl to teen, he became the focus of all her daydreams, her first teenage crush, a man who didn't exist.

This imaginary friend who never went away, who knew her better than she knew herself.

Nikolai who had guided her through her teenaged crisis and turbulent college years with his infrequent visits in her dreams, with his wry smile and dry wit, his low, husky laughter and that exotic voice that sent shivers rushing down her spine even thinking of it. Anytime life had gotten to tough, Nikolai had crept out of her subconscious and guided her through the toughest times – was it any wonder she had fallen in love with her fantasy?

It wouldn't have been so bad if she had kept the knowledge completely to herself. If she hadn't taken to writing her daydreams down in journals, or letters to him. Which was how Nate had found out about Nikolai. He had found the journals inside the wooden chest in her home office, filled with years of lovingly written words – page upon page of thoughts, letters, and sketches of the man who wasn't real.

Chelly had laughed it off.

She didn't realize how very real Nikolai was to her. It was written all over her face, in the way her eyes softened, her mouth, the way her entire body seemed to relax and

go into preparation for his touch. Nate had seen it—and hated the man whose image was vaguely similar to his own.

*Idiot...why did you ever write to him?* Slamming her head back against the wall, she stared outside, tears streaming down her face. Chelly could have explained away the sketches. But the letters...how could she explain away years and years of letters?

And she should have listened when Nikolai had warned her, hell, threatened her about marrying Nate when she found out she was carrying Bryan. She had fully intended to take care of the baby on her own, but Nate had talked her into it, lulled her into thinking he truly loved her, the pompous bastard.

Nikolai had warned her —

“Damn it,” Chelly hissed, clapping her hand over her mouth in horror. “I’m doing it again.”

Maybe Nate was right, maybe she was crazy.

## Chapter Two

"I am real, you contrary little minx," he murmured into the mirror, narrowing his eyes, frowning as she buried her face against her knees. Why was she so sad now, his little angel? His time with her was bitterly short, and it had been nearly six months since he had seen her and the little one last, just a few days after she had broken her union with that bastard who was so unworthy of her.

Nik waited, waited for her to whisper to him, the words that would bring him to her. But they never came. A thick, bitter swell of disappointment rose in his chest and he clenched his fists as she rose from the window seat, *alone*, scrubbing her tears away, and squaring her shoulders.

There was a determined look on her face, a look he didn't like.

What was his little minx up to?

Nikolai shook his head and pulled himself away from the mirror, away from the woman who had called to him for years. So much to be done. Christmas was only a month away, and he had much to do, they all did.

He did not have the time to sit around and yearn for the sloe-eyed minx who had haunted him for years.

Rhys would love to see him now, yearning and sighing after a young mortal he could never have. Just another thing to make him even more melancholy, another mark against him, in the eyes of the Council. Rhys was unmated as well, but at least he was not a somber, unsmiling bastard, as he so often pointed out to Nikolai.

With a grim sigh, Nikolai turned away from the mirror and focused on the task at hand. Work. There was work to be done.

He would worry about Chelly after Christmas.



Or when she called him.

When she needed him, she'd call.

But the call never came.

Even after a year of waiting, the call never came.

\* \* \* \* \*

One Year Later

*Gone...*

*Missing...*

Every mother's worst nightmare, and Chelly was living it. Nate hadn't returned Bryan from his visitation. Had, in fact, absconded with him—along with his new fiancée—clearing out their house, and fleeing the state. Chelly paced the living room as cops and federal people surrounded her, talking around her and through her, but rarely to her.

Chelly jumped every time the phone rang, and slept only in stops and starts. Last week, with shaking hands, she had flushed her medicines down the toilet. Medicines she hadn't needed—she wasn't depressed and she wasn't suffering from hallucinations or delusions. Her headaches still plagued her and would take a while to go away, but she would no longer pretend that she was delusional and needed medicine just to keep her ex-husband happy. Hell, he had taken Bryan away from her anyway.

As she paced the room on the eighth day of Bryan's kidnapping, she grew aware of how quiet the room had fallen. Slowly, she turned and met Agent McKiernan's faded gray eyes, his tired face. He gazed at her from across the room as he started toward her and she realized he held his cell phone. Cell phone...

Tearing her gaze from it, Chelly started to back away.

*No.*

"Chelly...they've found your ex-husband and his fiancée. And your son..."

\* \* \* \* \*

After nearly a year without it, he felt her. Nikolai jerked up in the middle of a vast lake of silken sheets, the midnight blue comforter falling to his waist, his chest heaving raggedly as he struggled to breathe beyond it.

Her pain was tearing at him.

Nikolai felt it in his heart like a great ripping beast.

It was her need that pulled him, her hunger, her wishes. More often than not, she merely pulled his consciousness into her dreams, and he would try to soothe whatever troubled her.

Oft times, her misery was great—she took on much and she did too little for herself, ignored her own heart, her desires, her needs. He made his way to the darkened bathroom and threw on the light, staring at his eyes, his faintly glowing eyes pulsing almost feverishly, before the mirrored reflection dissolved away and revealed Chantelle—for the first time in almost twelve months.

A hospital room, darkened, lights and machines pulsing and beeping, small plastic tubes going to and from the child.

*Heaven above, what has happened?* Nikolai's hands gripped the edge of the counter and his vision blurred for a brief moment. Swallowing convulsively, he reached out and pressed his hand to the mirror and flexed it, watching as Chantelle's body flinched as he slid inside her mind, probing and seeking...

Ahh, there would be no simple soothing this time, Nikolai knew. Staring through the mirror, he studied the child. Bryan was a happy, rather astounding child, he knew. And he lay fighting for his life. Mortal bodies were so frail. An old scar, very old, low on his belly, was proof of that. Nikolai had been mortal...once.

A wounded child, grievously wounded, in Russia nearly a thousand years ago, he had been hunting with his father at the age of nine. His father hadn't survived the

thieves attack on their camp. Nikolai wouldn't have. But Alisdair had come upon them that wintry, frozen night as he lay bleeding to death from the ragged knife wound low in his belly. He still clutched the knife he had used on one of the thieves as he tried to protect his father's fallen body.

*Da... Mortal bodies were frail.*

Chantelle lay with her head against the bed linens on the narrow hospital bed sobbing.

*The boy was still young enough...he could be made elf-kin.*

But the mother...that option simply wasn't there. But he would have her, nonetheless.

*And she wasn't likely to forgive him easily either.*

He waited until she had fallen asleep. She was weary—once sleep held her in its bond, there was no waking her, but he brushed his mind to hers and whispered of sleep just to be certain. Then Nikolai went to the boy and hunkered down beside him, cupping his face and easing inside his mind. *Ahhh...the pain...so young to feel such pain...*

He felt the boy's sudden jerk, his startlement as he recognized a phantom touch in his mind. Then his fear... "Do not be afraid, boy, I come to give you a good thing," he whispered. "To take this kind of pain away forever and ever."

*"Nonononononono...Mama!"*

In reality, all the boy did was whimper, but it was enough. Wrapping his arms tight around the child, Nikolai opened his eyes, a flash of moonlight falling across them as he stared at Chelly just as she woke. "No more pain, Bryan, I promise."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chelly awoke to see a familiar, glowing pair of eyes—dreamy, soft, and blue—awash with light, the face in shadow, as a man lifted Bryan, still hooked up to various

machines and monitors. And they were gone, before she could even draw in the breath to ask who in the hell he was.

But she didn't need to.

Chelly knew those eyes. They haunted her dreams, both sleeping and waking.

*Nikolai...*

The soft, husky voice rolled through her mind even as she opened her mouth to scream as nurses came running in. Shooting up out of her chair, she flipped on the lights and whirled around, staring at the room. He was gone. Well and truly gone. Not out the window, or the door, just *gone*. Her breath left her lungs in a shuddering gasp and her teeth were chattering as she stared at the nurses who started to ask where the boy had gone.

And she had to whisper, "I don't know..."

But she did. Chelly knew.

He was with Nikolai, a fey creature who shouldn't exist, a man who had eyes that glowed, and exotically curved ears, a smile that turned her insides to mush, her knees to jelly, and made her heart flip over in her chest.

And that fey, magical being had her son.

Gritting her teeth, Chelly felt the anger start to build in her gut.

*Nik had her son.*

## Chapter Three

"Where is my son?"

That low, furious female whisper rasped through Nikolai's rooms and he lifted his gaze away from the still child who lay on his bed. Ganessa looked up from Bryan and smiled sympathetically. "She will be so angry."

"Angry is better than heartbroken, *da*? He would not have survived such grievous injuries, Ganessa." Long, silken hair spilled like an ebony cape around his broad shoulders as he knelt beside the bed, stroking one hand over the boy's downy, golden locks. Nikolai lifted his gaze to study the healer who had come to assist him and he shrugged. "Her anger I can handle. Her broken heart I cannot. And the boy—I love this child. He has a hold on my heart, and has had since his birth. First because he came from her, but then because of who he is."

Ganessa smiled at Nikolai, shaking her head. "I wish you luck. A woman's wrath is a terrible thing. And mortal anger..."

Nikolai arched a brow at her. "I was mortal, Ganessa. Once." Lowering his eyes back to the boy, he asked, "How is he faring?"

"Well. He is younger than most that are brought into the kin-bond. Elf-kin isn't a pleasant journey to make, but he is taking it better than the older children. He will sleep through it all and wake with no memory of the accident that nearly killed him. But his mama needs to be here when he wakes. Hadn't you best bring her here now?" Ganessa asked as she ran mental hands through the boy's spirit and psychic self and her physical hands over his healing body. Lastly, she cupped her hands over his ears, lingering, wondering.

Nikolai grimaced. "*Da*. And what a pleasant task I go to."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Nikolai hadn't possibly just come in here and taken my son...*

*But that means he is real.*

*But a man doesn't just appear and disappear.*

*He did! The cameras didn't record anybody entering or leaving this floor – Chelly was almost ready to put a pillow over her ears to drown out the voices in her head. But she was pretty damn certain it wouldn't work.*

It had been Nik. Which meant he was real.

Slowly, Chelly turned her head and looked at the security guards and various administrative staff and nurses who had gathered in her room. Chelly smiled a brittle, false smile, her eyes wild and bright as she said in a high, nearly hysterical voice, "Excuse me. I need a minute alone."

Once in the bathroom, she leaned over and splashed water on her face, leaving it running as she straightened to stare into the mirror. Her soft green eyes were snapping and glinting, harsh and full of threat as she rasped quietly, "Nikolai...where is my son?"

There was no answer for a long moment.

Then the mirror started to fog...maybe it was the heat from her breath. Maybe she was nuts. Would that explain why the surface rippled like water?

When Nikolai's face appeared in the mirror, Chelly had to stifle a scream. She'd hoped he would answer. Had prayed. But so quickly? Long, glossy black hair spilled around broad proud shoulders, two thick braids at each temple keeping the hair from his face, displaying the fine, arrogant bones of his handsome face, the high arch of his brows, and a polite, quizzical smile.

Polite? Quizzical? Like he hadn't just kidnapped her son.

"Where is my son?"

Like a voice from a well, Nikolai's voice came echoing and rippling, caressing her ears. *"Here...with me...healing. Your mortal doctors cannot save him. We can."*

"Bring him back." Her voice was a furious, snapping hiss and Chelly's hands clenched in fury as rage coursed through her. He had just taken him, like Nate. Even to save him...*why didn't you take me, too?* A soft little voice whispered inside her head. And the more rational part of her added, Nikolai is nothing like Nate.

But she had been separated from her son for too long, and rationality had never been one of her finer points.

Nikolai smiled. *"There is no coming back. He is here – here he stays. Come and join him or stay there, but he will live, know that, Chantelle."*

*No coming back?*

"Um, excuse me, ma'am, are you all right in there?" a soft voice asked from outside.

"I'm *fine!*" Chelly bellowed, tossing the door a dirty look before glaring at Nik.

He smiled beatifically.

Chelly could have throttled him. From one kidnapper to another. "You can't just take a woman's child, Nikolai, without... well, period. You just don't do it!"

"You would prefer I wait and ask and waste his time? He had precious little, Chantelle. His body was broken, and he was fading. *Da*, you know this is true. You felt it."

Chelly's heart stuttered and her mouth quivered before she firmed it. Yes, she had...frustration went shrieking through her and she reached out, intending to slam her fist against the mirror before demanding he take her to Bryan. She'd find a way back, damn it, from wherever *here* was. But darkness swarmed up and caught her, and she fell screaming into it, feeling warm, strong arms come around her and hold her.

And that familiar voice purring in her ear, *"At last...you are here. At last. And you will not be finding a way back."*

\* \* \* \* \*

Chelly could smell Bryan, the familiar scent of baby lotion, flannel pajamas and fabric softener. And pine, musk, the rich, delicious scent of male – familiar. Nikolai.

Her eyes flew open.

Nikolai sat in a chair across from her, staring at her with dark, brooding eyes. *Hungry* eyes. A small smile curved his mouth as he studied her, watching her as she pushed up on to one elbow, staring at him with wide eyes. His gaze moved from hers down to her mouth, the line of her neck, to linger on the curve of her breasts, following the covered lines of her body beneath the silk blankets. Chelly felt a hot, slow pulse in her loins and a sigh shuddered through her, her nipples stiffening as her sex started to heat.

A soft, muffled sighing sound came to her ears and Chelly tore her eyes away from Nikolai. With a cry, Chelly threw back the blankets and stared down at Bryan, who lay in the bed beside her, curled up on his side, knees drawn up to his chest, his face cuddled into the pillow as he sighed in his sleep. And he held his beloved bear, a ragged, much repaired little stuffed creature she had received from her mother when she was born. The bear she had left at home. “Bryan...” she whispered raggedly.

Though he couldn’t hear her, it never stopped her from talking to him, even as he slept. Bryan had been born deaf, and he would die deaf, but he was a smart, precocious little boy and he was learning at the same rate as other kids his age, he just needed other tools to help him learn. Chelly started to reach for him and pull him to her, but her hands faltered and slowed and she settled for just stroking his brow after she remembered his injuries. “You can’t keep him here. He needs –”

“Your boy is fine, healing quite well. Pick him up, hold him. You need it.” Nikolai rose in a slow, fluid motion from his sprawl and lifted Bryan in strong, gentle arms, placing him in her lap even as Chelly stared at him, sputtering blankly.

“He is fine.” He covered her lips with two fingers and whispered, “*Da*, he is fine. Look at him, as he is now, not what you last saw.” As Chelly watched, Nikolai



unbuttoned the small one's pajama top, revealing his plump little body, free of all bruises, scrapes and scars. Which was impossible.

Bryan had a punctured lung, broken ribs, a broken leg, a concussion, internal bleeding, so many cuts and lacerations, and bruises, so much trauma on such a small body...*how?*

They were all gone.

"*How?*" Chelly asked, running her hands over Bryan's smooth skin, reaching back to probe the back of his scalp where a four-inch gash had been sutured closed. No sutures. No gash. No *scar*. Nothing. Like it had never happened. "This isn't possible. What in the hell is going on?"

"We healed him. Well, Ganessa did. She is a Healer among us." Nikolai's gaze lingered on Bryan's face, a soft, loving look, and then it fell away and Chelly felt her belly sink to her knees. Something wasn't right.

But then, a soft, muffled little voice whispered against her neck, "Mama?"

"Oh, baby..."

"Mama, I can hear, they fixed me all better," and Bryan lifted his head away from her neck and smiled up at her with eyes that glowed, just barely.

## Chapter Four

Chantelle stood staring woodenly at Nikolai and Bryan as they played in the middle of the room. It was too opulent to call it a living room, a sea of golden gleaming wood, covered with jewel-colored rugs and white furniture that hugged and cuddled your body as you sat down. Her little boy could hear, for the first time in his life. She should have been ecstatic. She was, in a way. But he wasn't just Bryan anymore...was he? His eyes gleamed at her in the dark, and he had asked Nikolai if he'd learned how to make magic rainbows. Bryan knew about the magic rainbows. Nikolai had been paying visits to her son. It brought a bittersweet smile to her mouth before she recalled the man's answer.

"*Da*. Magic rainbows and more. You will be able to bring much joy to many, many people."

Chelly had little doubt of that. Bryan had a gift for bringing joy to all around him. But he wouldn't be going home with her. How could she take home a boy whose eyes glowed in the dark? A boy who would learn how to make magic rainbows and spin little snowstorms in his hands...a boy who would grow into a man that would never age. So she was staying here—with *Nik*. If he had asked her, or if she had asked to come here, or anything other than having her choice taken away...

Chelly hated not having the choice.

The traitor. A little voice whispered in her head, *He saved Bryan*.

*I know that...* She felt like a petulant child, but she also felt as though she was losing her son as she watched Nikolai patiently draw a lacy pattern of ice in the air, only to have it disintegrate the minute Bryan touched it. And then they started all over again.

Jeans clung lovingly to Nikolai's muscled thighs and cupped the bulge at his crotch, while the cotton of his shirt stretched over his flat belly and the taut wall of his chest as

he laughed at Bryan's squeals of delight. The masculine laughter faded as Bryan launched himself through the misty wall of pseudo-ice and wrapped his arms around Nikolai's neck, laughing and chortling with glee. Nikolai's face softened and his lids lowered as he wrapped his arms around the boy's little body, cuddling him close.

And the picture hit Chelly right in the solar plexus, bringing tears to her eyes, and knot to her throat. Bryan had never thrown himself, like that, at his father. Not once. And from the look of sheer awe on Nikolai's face, it was a rare pleasure for this man, and one he realized he liked too much.

*He kidnapped us. He didn't give me a chance to say yes or no to any of this.*

This bizarre change had been forced on Bryan, and Chelly would have welcomed it. All he would have had to have done was say it before he had done it. But he had done it, and left her in the dark.

Turning on her heel, she walked away.

"So Bryan is what now? Magic?"

"Elf-kin." Nikolai entered the room slowly, feeling the tension in the air, tempted to reach out and touch her mind, but refusing to trespass. He had already taken her away from her home, her life. Even though he knew she would have gladly come to save her son, he had not asked. He wouldn't take anything else.

He knew, *da*, he knew good and well why she was so angry with him. And truly, Nikolai couldn't blame her. But what was he to do?

"Elf-kin," she repeated drolly, rolling the words over her tongue, then pursing her lips and staring at him over the rim of her coffee cup. French vanilla cappuccino. He had recreated it just for her, like the recipe for French onion soup and guacamole. And he had learned to make grilled cheese sandwiches for Bryan. And chocolate chip cookies. Of course, those were rather tasty—no wonder Alisdair was so fond of them. "Exactly what is elf-kin?"

"A mortal with an open mind, a gifted channel, that we choose to make a blood bond with. Our blood mingles, mixes with his, reproduces with his, and in time, changes his. And since he is so young the changes will be quite...thorough. The younger a child is when he is made kin, the more complete the change.

"He would have had some gifts anyway, Chantelle. You already knew he is a special boy. How special, I cannot even begin to tell you. A deaf child who can already speak, and he is only three years old? But the gifted channels in his mind are wide open now and his potential is unknown, vast, limitless. He—"

"You look the same as you did twenty years ago," she spoke softly, interrupting him, staring pensively over his shoulder. "Elves...they really exist. And they don't age. At least not the way humans do, huh?"

"*Da*, not the way humans do." Nikolai moved closer, cupping her face in his hand, stroking his thumb over the curve of her bottom lip. Threading his hand through her golden brown curls, he stared down into her eyes, absorbing the feel of her skin, the scent of her. "So pretty, so soft. Been wanting you, I have, for several years. How long will you stay angry with me?" His lids drooped, lashes hanging low over his eyes, as he studied her mouth. His other hand, big and warm, came up to rest on the curve of her hip.

Chelly's eyes widened. Her mouth was dry. Other parts were...not. She could feel the hard swell of his cock against her belly, throbbing and pulsing. A deep, aching need opened inside her as her heart started racing a mile a minute, and her nerve endings began sizzling. Blankly, she said the one thing that came to mind. "Are there elves in Russia?"

"Hmmm. Elves, elf-kin and elf-mate as well." He cocked his head as he responded and a ribbon of hair fell over one muscled shoulder, thick, black and shining. His eyes moved from her mouth down the line of her neck to focus on the movement of her chest as she sucked a breath in and tried to remember how to breathe again.

Chelly followed the gleaming lock of hair as it curled over his chest, her mouth watering. The rippling muscles of his belly almost vibrated and as she stared at him, a hungry growl rumbled out of his chest.

Slowly, unable to keep from touching him as he moved closer, nudging her belly with his sex, she rested her hands on the rock hard, warm wall of his chest, flexing her fingers against the smooth skin there and smiling a cat's smile as a shudder vibrated through him. Hypnotized, her eyes slid further downward, staring at the bulging swell of his sex under the blue fabric of his jeans.

*Jeans? "Elves wear jeans?"*

"Would you prefer pointy shoes with bells?" he asked blandly, as his eyes started to glow brighter and hotter.

Her brow creased in confusion and she shook her head. "I always thought of elves wearing..." her hands roamed restlessly and settled on the swell of his biceps without her realizing it and she shrugged her shoulders as pictures of flowing gowns, tunics, and cloaks moved through her mind. "Ummm, bells? Why would you wear bells and pointy shoes?"

Just then, outside, a bell tolled. And Nikolai rolled his eyes. "*Eynou*, we know it. Five bleeding days, we have. We will get the work done, have we ever failed him yet?" he grumbled, stalking to the window and jerking the drapes closed.

*Five days...*

*What happens in five days?*

Chantelle's mental clock filled in that blank.

*Christmas.*

*"Da, Christmas."*

Her eyes widened and she swallowed the lump in her throat. She hadn't said anything out loud. She knew it. So how had he heard her anyway? Could he really read her thoughts the way it had always seemed?

Yes, he could. His lips curved up in a smile as he stared at her, his head cocked to the side, his black hair falling over his shoulder as he studied her face, following the trail of her thoughts. And as he followed them, the smile slowly fell away and his face grew pensive.

She turned her eyes back to the sparkling, crystalline vista outside one of the other windows, then back to the outrageously magical, beautiful man in front of her with his gently curved, pointed ears and eyes that glowed. The view reminded her of how, when she had been younger, he had carved little statues and sculptures from what looked and felt like ice. In a low hushed voice, she asked, "What is going on?"

"You are in my home, the Northern Reach. Mortals have called it the North Pole for many, many years."

"And the 'him' you haven't failed?" There was a hysterical giggle building in her throat. Oh, man. If Nate had any clue...

"You mortals know him as Santa Claus."

## **Chapter Five**

It took the little minx a very long while to stop her giggling.

A very long while.

Nikolai finally left her to it while he went about his job. As Head of Interworld Communications, he had many responsibilities. It was his job that had first led him to Chantelle a few short decades ago. Such a sad little child she had been, having her family taken at such a young age. It wasn't an unusual thing, alas, but it still broke his heart. But she had broken it even more, as she defiantly sobbed out her frustrations against Christmas. Her spunk had endeared her to him, so much so that even after those first few years, he had kept going back to check on her.

But then, she had grown up.

And he had fallen in love. The kindly, gentle guidance he had always felt compelled to give to her had turned into a burning, driving desire to own that green-eyed little wonder. Deep inside his soul he knew this woman was the only woman he would ever love. He ached and burned for her, like he had for none other, in all his many centuries.

Nearly nine centuries he had walked this earth, and so many ladies he had known—fleeting loves—some lasting a few years, others only nights.

And now he was in love with a mortal.

Who was even now smothering her laughter and trying to dry her tears while she struggled to accept the truths he had told her.

And her child—that wide-eyed little boy whose body was changing inside with every rapid beat of his heart—was playing with a toy that the mortal world would not see for another fifteen years.

Oh, what a wonderful life.

Nikolai smirked and settled down to work, his long-fingered hands playing over the grid in front of him, his psychic skills connecting him to the children of the world, and then he relayed the needs and wishes back to the workroom. Rhys was in control there, the lunatic. Who would want to be in control of all that chaos?

Five days.

*Da*, more than enough time. Time enough to fill the wishes of the children, but time enough to get his? Ah...that was the question, wasn't it?

As they stepped outside, Chantelle braced herself for what was certain to be biting, bracing cold. Though Nikolai assured her it was very mild, she didn't believe him. Or her mind didn't. Her heart did, otherwise, she wouldn't have let him carry her son out that door without a coat, blankets...

It felt like springtime.

"How?" she asked, turning around and staring into the distance at the snow-covered landscape outside Nikolai's house.

"Environance-dome. The technology for building it will be in your scientists' hands within a few more years. We keep the temperatures moderated to sixty-five degrees through the majority of the work season. Once December is over, we will allow nature to take its course, but for now, it is much easier for us to work if we do not have to bundle up like bears every time we cross the threshold." Nik pointed to the myriad reflective lights over each house and explained, "Those provide camouflage on the outside, making it seem as though we are not here, muffling our presence. It's quite advanced but it is —"

"No," she interrupted. "Please. Don't explain it to me."



He shrugged, smirking a little at the pained look on her face. She wasn't really interested in technology. Like some of the elves. Even Alisdair was not fond of technology, though his job required he have a decent understanding of it.

Nikolai smiled down at the little boy, who cuddled against his chest. Bryan stared around them with huge, wide eyes and a big smile. Unlike his mama, who stared with suspicion and a narrowed gaze, occasionally rolling her eyes at the garb many of the people wore.

Nik preferred the more comfortable clothing favored by mortals, and over the past few decades, it had disgusted the Northern Council to see some of the younger elves wearing similar clothing—jeans, sweaters. *T-shirts*. He grinned widely as he recalled the sheer horror in one Councilman's voice.

"We will see if he is available, since you continue to giggle and disbelieve," Nikolai told her drolly. "Do not be too disappointed when you see that he doesn't have the flowing white beard and hair."

Chelly ignored him as she stared with wide eyes at one lady who wore skintight velvet breeches in deep garnet red, a flowing white shirt, and a vest to match the breeches. The woman was lovely, with her upswept hair revealing the lovely arch of her ears, a higher, more curved point than Nikolai's, and her slightly slanted eyes that twinkled merrily as she caught sight of Nikolai.

"Are you looking for the boss?" Her lilting voice carried the music of Ireland as she stopped beside them, reaching out absently to caress Bryan's hair as she spoke to Nikolai. She smiled with friendly curiosity at Chantelle before turning her gaze to the boy and Nikolai, waiting for an answer.

"We are, *da*. Brenna, this is Chantelle, and her son, Bryan. They are going to be staying with me for a time," he said, not glancing at Chantelle as he spoke. He felt her resistance and urge to argue, and the equally strong need to stay some place where her son was safe, loved, able to live a normal life. Her husband hadn't really wanted the

boy—not really. He had just wanted to strike out and hurt her. She had given him a child who was less than perfect.

A growl of rage struggled to surface in Nik's chest and if the man wasn't already dead...Nikolai had to remind himself of what he was, and how wrong it was to wish ill on the dead. And it didn't work. Bryan was as perfect as any child could be. His hearing had mattered little. A gifted child, and his own father had shunned him, and then he had taken him away from his mother and endangered him—

"Bryan, aye, I know of you, little brother. Welcome. We will talk, you and I. I will tell you of the real elves, the sidhe, and fey and leprechauns and selkies as well. Don't be listening to this Russian brute too much," Brenna teased, ruffling Bryan's hair and chucking him under the chin.

"You talk pretty," Bryan said, looking up at her with a winsome smile.

Charmed, Brenna lapsed into Gaelic and lowered her head to kiss him on the nose as he giggled. "Welcome to the Northern Reach, little brother." Then she turned her eyes to Chelly.

"Welcome, Chantelle." Brenna gave her a broad smile. "Though I canna see how you will tolerate this bear's surly moods for more than a week. The boss is in his office. The Council is nagging him, telling him he should at least try to look more...rotund." She poked Nikolai's lean belly with one finger and said impishly, "Whatever will they do with you?"

Nikolai smiled and shrugged as she moved away.

"So we get to see him, huh? Santa Claus? I wonder if I'll find out why I never got that black cat I wanted when I was ten," Chantelle said. "You'll have to do something pretty impressive to make me believe."

Nikolai wisely didn't respond as they rounded the corner. He loved this walk. The hall was of golden oak, polished and gleaming, the windows of stained glass. Each one made to resemble the last reigning Claus. Soon, Alisdair McNeil of Scotland would join them as he retired back to his homeland. He had sat in the office at the end of this walk

for three centuries, the tenure for each Claus, and he was ready – very ready, and very tired, very sad, since his wife had died suddenly less than a decade ago.

Elvin folk tended to live well into their second millennia. And Brielle had only been eight-hundred-fifty-two years old. Alisdair had never quite recovered from the loss. He would retire, and quietly grieve.

And a new elf would take his place.

Nikolai knocked on the carved wood of the door and waited until the heavily accented Scots voice invited, “Enter, Nikolai. And ye’d better be in a better mood than you have been these past months. I’m in no mood to tolerate you after listening...”

Alisdair’s voice trailed away as he caught sight of Bryan and Chantelle. His eyes, twinkling blue, gentle and soft, settled first on Bryan. The boy, usually so nervous and shy with strangers, looked at the bearded man and smiled. Broadly and easily. And he said simply, “Hi, Santa.”

“Hello, Bryan. Did you like the trucks and trains you got last year?” Santa/Alisdair asked as Bryan squirmed out of Nik’s arms, trotted over to the chair and climbed up onto the older man’s lap.

Bryan nodded vigorously.

Alisdair laughed. “I thought you would. Especially since you played so hard one of them was broken by New Year’s Day. But your mama fixed it all up, didn’t she?”

Nik heard Chantelle’s soft gasp and he moved behind her, resting a strong hand on her waist as her body started to sag.

“And what of this year? What do you want for this year, lad?”

“I already gotted it—my ears are all fixed. And we never thought they could,” Bryan said, grinning hugely. His freckled nose wrinkled and he scratched it with a small hand. “The words sound funny, and sometimes people talk too fast. But I can hear, and Mama’s voice is so pretty.”

Chelly muffled a sob against her hand as Alisdair smiled gently at Bryan. "Your hearing isn't a gift we gave you for Christmas. That didna come from us – not exactly. It came from the Maker. The One who made Christmas possible. So it's not the present we needed to talk about. And we can talk nice and slow, and use some sign language as well."

Alisdair went on as he stroked Bryan's head, speaking slowly, staring into the boy's face, signing a few words from time to time as he said, "I remember your mama. Chelly, your grandparents called her when she was little. And she wanted a black cat when she was oh, ten, I think. But she's allergic to cats. She did not go finding that out until she was in high school, but we knew. Can't go getting her a present she wouldn't be able to keep."

*Make me believe.*

Nik heard the words circling around in her head and felt the impending dizziness just as she started to sway. He caught her against him and carried her out the door with a quick thought to Alisdair to occupy the boy. He was already doing it, with a pleased smile. Playing with children was something he never got enough of, and something he truly enjoyed.

Chelly awoke back in that wide, sumptuous bed, her heart racing, her mouth dry, and her head woozy.

She was in the North Pole.

She had seen Santa Claus.

He was real.

The presents last year...the ones she didn't think she had bought, and convinced herself she had. They had come from here, they had to have.

And Nik...Nikolai was one of his elves. Nikolai was truly an elf. Truly magic.

*"Da."*

She barely saw him move and then his mouth was against hers in the darkness of the room and his thoughts were filling her mind. *So many, many years I have ached to touch, to taste*, he told her as hard hot hands slid up her torso, around her ribcage and up her back, until he was cupping her neck and angling her lips up for his kiss, pushing his tongue deep inside her mouth, groaning greedily, hungrily.

Nikolai.

One of his hands fisted in her hair while the other went racing down her body, cupping and molding her breast, pinching her nipple until she was squirming against his body. Dropping to his knees and staring down at her, his electric blue eyes glowing hotly in the dim room as he watched her. Gripping the edges of her shirt he tore it open, and fastened his gaze on her breasts, hidden still by the lace of her bra.

“Lovely.” His voice was deep and guttural as he ran the roughened tip of his finger over the edge of the bra and smiled as she shivered, arching up. Sliding his forearm under her and lifting her up, arching her higher and taking one pebbled nipple into his mouth, drawing deep and suckling hard, he had her moaning and keening against his mouth. Her legs straddled one of his thighs, and she rocked against him, riding the muscled length of his thigh and whimpering.

Nik felt the throbbing of his cock and groaned as she rubbed her belly against him, her small soft hands roaming restlessly on his shoulders. They dipped in his hair and fisted as she clasped him against her breast and the frantic movement of her hips increased. Nostrils flaring, he caught the desperate, hungry scent of her body. She was close, very close to coming, and through the barriers of their clothing he could feel how hot she was, how wet she was. Hungry little moans rose and died in her throat as she pushed her tongue inside his mouth, her nails biting into his shoulders.

He moved his lips down her pointed little cat’s chin, and bit lightly before kissing a hot trail down her throat. Lifting her up and closing his mouth over the hot, erect point of one swollen nipple, he listened with sharp satisfaction to the little scream that filled the room. “*Scream again, Chantelle.*” His mental voice purred inside her mind, pushing

beyond the surprisingly tough shields so he could murmur inside her head. *"Come for me, let me feel it."* He tugged at the fastening of her jeans as he whispered to her, stroking the bud of her breast with his tongue and teeth, worrying it gently, then roughly as he worked her jeans down lower and lower. Palms on the firmly rounded cheeks of her ass, he caressed the crevice there before stripping away her jeans and silk panties and tumbling her onto her back—staring hungrily down at her, pushing her thighs wide.

Eynou, she had removed the hair from her mound, just a narrow little path of hair right at her pubic bone, leaving the lips of her sex smooth and bare. *"Hmmm, look at that,"* he purred roughly, sliding one finger through the cream gleaming in her folds. He slipped his finger into his mouth and groaned hungrily. *"What a taste you have, sweet. Oh, what a taste."* He sprawled between her thighs and opened her, plunging his tongue deep inside her as she arched up with a weak, wild cry, climaxing at once against his mouth.

He worked two fingers inside her, feeling her tighten around him and shudder as she twisted and whimpered under his hands and mouth. The sweet clasp of her cleft hugged his fingers and Nik swore as his cock pressed into his belly, burning him like a branding iron. He wanted, badly, so badly, to get inside her. The chaotic whirl of her thoughts filtered through his mind and he knew he could have her, but he didn't want her to regret it later.

She had to stay, had to want it.

As if she had been reading his mind as clearly as he had been reading hers, she whimpered, *"Nik, please. Damn it, you don't know how long I've wanted this with you."* She opened her eyes and stared up at him, her gaze gleaming with want, need, and tears of sheer frustration as she surged up and pressed her mouth hungrily to his. Eating at his mouth, sucking his lower lip into hers, she gasped when he caught her hands and pinned her to bed, crushing her body beneath his.

*"Know this."* His voice was a rough growl in her ear as he wedged her thighs apart with his and reached for the buttons at his fly. *"I want badly to take you, mark you as*

mine. And if I do, you *are* mine. I will never let you or the boy leave me. Mine to keep. I cannot leave the Northern Reach. My destiny, my life is here. Are you certain?"

In reply, Chantelle reached down and pushed his hands aside, sliding the buttons of his fly free and shoving the denim of his pants aside, catching his hard, heavy length in her hands and sending a rumbling growl through him as she stroked him with soft, cool hands. Nikolai shuddered, lowering his brow to press against hers. "Mine to keep, *da?*" he asked, staring with near desperation into her eyes, as he pressed the tip of his cock against the wet portal of her sex.

A slow feline curl of her lips had his heart leaping in his chest.

He used one big hand to tilt her hips up as he surged slowly forward, hot, wet tissues closing over the engorged head of his cock as he stared down into her eyes. Her lids lowered to half-mast and her tongue slid out to wet her lips as a sigh shimmered out of her. "Nik..."

At the sound of his name on her lips—in that heavy, sultry voice—his control snapped, and he pushed deep, driving hard and fast into her, until he was lodged hilt-deep. The head of his cock rested at the very mouth of her womb as her eyes opened in shock and she screamed out his name, her nails biting into his skin.

He moved higher on her body, shifting so that he was riding her clit with each stroke, and she started to convulse around him, the clasp of her pussy tightening around him with each deep, driving thrust as he caught her thrashing head, fisting the gleaming golden-brown locks around one hand and pushing his tongue deep into her mouth, feeding on her taste.

Chelly sobbed into his mouth as he caught one thigh in his other hand, pushing it high, draping it over his arm, opening her wide so he could fuck her deep and hard. She wailed, her head falling back, away from his hungry, greedy kiss. His avid, seeking mouth found one hard, pebbled nipple and fastened onto it, sucking it deep, until it was pressing against the roof of his mouth and throbbing.

*"Mine to keep..."*

His mental voice filled her mind, a soft, seductive caress, a sharp contrast to the thick, burning fullness of his cock invading her cleft. She screamed out his name as she started to come again, opening her eyes and staring up at him as he pushed onto his knees and caught her clit between his thumb and forefinger, staring down and watching the play of his fingers on her body.

She stared hypnotized at his body, the gleaming muscles of his chest, covered by a light film of sweat, the rhythmic play of his washboard belly as he pushed his thick cock inside her. Something odd...a twisted, puckered scar, old, low on his belly, between his hipbone and his navel caught her eye, but then his cock twitched, and her mouth went dry as she stared at his sex, ruddy, and gleaming wet with her cream—the sheer erotic sight sent her screaming into another orgasm, and this time she felt his cock jerk, and the hot flood of his come as he climaxed inside her.

He crushed her body into the soft mattress, his mouth coming down on hers as he pounded his hips against her, growling deep in his throat, biting her lower lip, his tongue seeking out hers and tangling with it hungrily as they both went flying into orgasm. A series of hot, rhythmic contractions from her drew out his climax until he finally collapsed atop her in exhaustion.

“Where’s Byran?” she asked numbly once she was able to breathe again. She still couldn’t feel her toes. Or her fingers. She wasn’t sure she could feel her hands or knees either. She was going to have to take stock in a few minutes. But first things first. Bryan.

“With Alisdair.” He had rolled onto his back, taking her with him and now he cuddled her slim body to his chest, smoothing one hand down her naked, gleaming back, sighing in contentment. One of her hands ran over his pecs, flattening over the pounding of his heart. He felt her smile slightly.

“Your heart is racing as fast as mine.” Then she lifted her head, her feathery brown bangs falling into her cloudy, sleepy green eyes. “Alisdair, you said? I don’t want my



son with somebody I don't know, somebody I've never met. Even if you know and trust him —"

"You have met him already. You were just in his office a while ago," he reminded her, reaching up and brushing her hair away from her eyes. "And Alisdair is more trustworthy than any man you will ever meet."

"I've only met Suh — hell. I can't even say it. It doesn't seem real."

"That is more a title, like Mr. President, or His Majesty. His given name is Alisdair, not Santa Claus. And Bryan is with him." Nik's lids drooped as she shifted and sat up atop him, staring down at him.

A dry laugh escaped her lips. "My son...my son is being babysat by Santa Claus. Oh, that's rich. That's a good one," she said, sighing and shaking her head.

"I'll be sure to let him know how amused you are."

Her nipples puckered and tightened in the cool air and she smiled as his eyes slid from her face down to her torso, darkening to cobalt, glowing in the dimness of the room, a palpable heat flowing from them to caress her. "So lovely. You like to tease me, *da?*"

The husky, low timbre of his voice flowed over her like a caress, tightening her flesh. "I like knowing you want me, knowing you are real. I've dreamed of you, for so long." His hands came up to rest on her waist, then stroke upward, until he was cupping her breasts in his hands, pinching and tweaking her nipples until she was shifting and rocking against the thick, hot length of his cock.

She braced her hands against the broad, golden expanse of his chest, staring down into his bewitching eyes. His black hair was spilled beneath him, like a silken, black cape, and the carved, exotic bones of his face captured her eye and made her chest hurt, he was so beautiful. And he kept staring at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"*Da*, you are," he murmured, reaching up, twining his hands in her hair and pulling her lips to meet his, shifting his hips and piercing her, sliding his cock inside

her, where she was wet from him. "Most beautiful, most lovely. And mine to keep. And I will make you believe that, Chantelle. You will see."

He breathed the words against her mouth before plunging his tongue deep inside, stroking her tongue, her palate, everywhere he could reach, as he slid his hands down and cupped her ass, moving her in a slow, steady rhythm and rocking his hips up and down, pushing his cock deep and high, piercing the very mouth of her womb.

As a long, shuddering contraction gripped his cock, Nik pulled his mouth from her and buried her face in his neck, gritting his teeth and holding onto his control. *Not yet...not yet.* He ran his fingers through the crevice of her bottom and felt her quiver. Shifting, he moved her body so that he could stoke her clit. The hot, silky cream of her sex coated him, and her cleft hugged him tightly, making him swear silently as she started to come around him.

With a rough groan, he threw control to the wind and drove his shaft inside and fucked her roughly, setting his teeth into her shoulder and listening to her scream out his name. Gripping her ass with one hand, he wet one finger with her cream and started to probe her rosette with the other. Feeling her shudder and sob and go into spasms around him the hot, silken little hole gripped his finger tightly even as his cock jerked and he pumped her full of his seed.

"Hmmm, sweet, sweet little Chantelle," he purred into her hair, cuddling her against his chest, rubbing his chin against her hair as she gasped for air. "Mine..."

A wave of bitterness washed up out of nowhere and she sighed against his chest. "You made certain of that, didn't you? I'm stuck here, aren't I? Bryan can't go back into the real world now, can he? My place is with my son."

And to that, Nikolai had no answer.

## Chapter Six

Christmas Eve in the North Pole.

*No, the Northern Reach.* Chelly stood watching as people hurried around her. She wasn't the only mortal. As she stood in her borrowed jeans and sweater, cuddling Bryan against her chest, she saw more mortals rushing by than she could count.

It was easy to pick them out.

The humans, including herself, were less...vibrant.

Lacking something. The elves had larger eyes, Bambi's eyes, Bryan had called them, almond-shaped, large and gleaming, in brilliant jewel-tone hues. And shimmering, gleaming hair. Even their skin seemed to glow with vitality and health and...*life*.

The humans were...human. Pretty, handsome, some more so, others plain.

But then her eyes started to pick out a human she thought at first was an elf. Eyes that gleamed, not quite as brightly as an elf's. But more than a mortal's, a human's would. Hair that shifted and swirled and gleamed with a life of its own. A fire inside.

Not wholly human.

But not elf either.

"Elf-touched, elf-mated," Nikolai murmured behind her, sliding one brawny arm around her waist.

He brushed his lips across her head as she jumped, and Bryan laughed at the look on his mama's face. "Nik fwighten Mama? Mama jump." The boy clapped and tugged, jerked and squirmed until she set him down and he made a beeline for the window to the workshop, trying to rise up on his toes and peer inside. "Can't see nothing...magic windows."

"The Northern Reach is full of magic." Nikolai was murmuring to her as they watched the small child pace back and forth, casting awed glances at the workshop. Such a frantic pace inside. Nik had taken a short, quick break to come see her, but then he must go back. Too much to do, too little time to do it in. Would she understand? "I want to share that with you. Chantelle, please..."

Chelly stood stiffly in his arms, folding her arms over her belly, rubbing her hands up and down against some inner chill. "Elf-touched? What do you mean?"

"They've mated with one of my kind." He gently turned her in his arms, taking her hands and lifting them to his mouth. "Joined souls, minds, life essence. Their bodies are mortal no longer. They are not truly elf, but not truly human, either. My mate...this is what you are to me, have always been. I've just been waiting for you. I could have taken the time to explain before bringing Bryan here, but he did not have the time, so I did what I knew you would have wanted, *da?*"

Chelly felt her breath leave her lungs in a hot, shuddering rush as Nik's lashes lifted, revealing the smoky, smoldering depths of his cobalt blue eyes. "I wish to share that with you, all of my long life, all of my heart. I have loved you since you were eighteen, Chantelle, and I shall love you for all the years that I walk upon this earth. I do not wish to spend those years without you. And I hate feeling your anger and helplessness."

*Helplessness...*a choice taken from her.

Yes, he had saved Bryan, and brought her here against her will.

Lifting her eyes, she met his and just mutely shook her head. And then she turned away from him.

She only heard his rough sigh, but she knew when he was gone. Chelly could feel his absence in her heart.

"You made the right choice."

The voice was friendly enough.

There was no reason for her to dislike the owner of it so intensely before she even saw the emerald-green eyes appraising her so thoroughly. None at all. But she did. Meeting that intent stare, she patted Bryan on the back and told him to keep playing. He studied the visitor with distrusting eyes before going back to the brightly colored picture in front of him, one hand gripped a chunky crayon tightly.

Then she rose in a fluid motion and met the man's eyes. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, lifting a dark brow. Her eyes, a softer green than the elf's, were blank and polite.

"Nikolai is infatuated, but you cannot truly believe he would love a mortal, can you?" He smiled as he said it, as if to take the sting away. "You are a sweet thing, I've no doubt. But surely, you can see this is not a fated thing."

Chelly studied him with curious eyes. He was a handsome, almost angelic man, with long golden blond hair that fell just below his shoulders, and those big green eyes. "You expect me to believe that Nikolai doesn't know his own heart?" She smiled in return, just as politely, sliding her hands into her pockets and cocking her head.

His eyes glinted, flashed, with what looked like *amusement* but it was gone so fast, she couldn't be sure. "Elfin men are quite captivated by mortal women—" He moved toward her in a smooth, stalking gait, muscles rippling and flexing under his clothes.

*A mountain lion.* Her head spun dizzily for a brief moment, then she shook it and threw off the odd, muffled feel inside it, the nagging sense of *fear* that resided inside her belly. It didn't feel right, didn't feel like her. And as soon as she thought that, the fear fell apart, and he was in front of her, glaring angrily at her. "Captivated by your stubbornness, your charm, the way you cling to your short, insignificant lives—"

Chelly narrowed her eyes and spat, "Insignificant? You pompous, self-righteous bastard. Insignificant? Because I won't live forever?"

He smirked at her. "No, because you could have. Because you could have had everything you had ever wanted...and you turned it down. Because you fear tomorrow. All mortals do. And that fear robs you of your joy of today."

He turned on his booted heel, an old-style boot, to match his old-style velvet breeches—that same impossible green of his eyes. He smiled at Bryan, who stared at him with a rather ambivalent stare now, instead of outright distrust, and left in smirking silence.

*That fear robs you of your joy of today...*

Oh, hell.

Chelly knelt beside Bryan and ran her fingers through his downy soft blond hair.  
“What have I done?”

## Chapter Seven

Alisdair's voice filled the chamber just as Rhys was closing the door behind him with a self-satisfied smirk. She was thinking hard now. And about time too. Rhys didn't know how much longer he could tolerate Nik's brooding.

"What exactly did ya hope t' accomplish by that, Rhys?" said a low, silky voice.

The room was empty.

Rhys turned around lazily, a whimsical smirk on his lips as the tall red-haired giant went from nothingness to a mist, to a solid, massive mountain of a man. His blue eyes were no longer twinkling, but snapping with anger, his full sensual mouth drawn tight with rage as he stared at one of his successors.

"An empath should know better than t' use his gifts to induce such fear on a person, a mortal. Such a sweet girl, she is, an' ye go causin' her fear and doubt and distrust. What is going on inside that head o' yours?" Dair demanded, his voice booming, his mouth grim and angry.

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Rhys said smoothly.

*That fear robs you of your joy of today...* Rhys grimaced as his voice echoed through the corridor. Alisdair snarled angrily, "I guess I should be thankin' ye. Chantelle has loved Nikolai for years and years. But her pride and fear is what keeps her from telling him. You just pushed her into acknowledging how foolish that is—"

Rhys smirked. "I know." His golden hair fell in a curtain around his face and he shoved it back behind with one hand, as he met the boss's eyes. "Why else would I have gone there? After all, Nikolai is my best friend." Then he turned on his heel and ambled down the hall, whistling under his breath tunelessly as Alisdair stared at him in bemusement.

Over his shoulder, Rhys called out, “Both of us being made Successor to the Line didn’t change that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Alisdair was weary when he returned to the Northern Reach at noon the next day. The last few children in Berea and Nome, Alaska, were opening their presents as his shiny black boots settled down on the polished wooden floors of the Great Hall. There was a dim echo in the back of his mind where he could hear their jubilant cries, some disappointed groans—those always made him smile—some bittersweet. Like Chelly’s had. She knew now that the black cat she had wanted would not have worked out.

But many children would never understand.

Ah, well.

One voice in particular drew him this morn...and it was close. It took only a thought and the rich red velvet he wore faded away and was replaced by a flannel shirt that hugged his massive shoulders and faded jeans that clung comfortably to long, muscled thighs. The Council had covered their eyes and all but whimpered when the boss had also started wearing the comfortable mortal clothing.

He ran a hand through his red hair and tucked it behind his pointed ears before knocking on the door to Nik’s apartment. Nikolai wasn’t there. Out sulking, Dair imagined. When Chelly opened the door, and he studied the soft, sweet-smelling mortal in front of him, he decided that was understandable.

But needless. She was as miserable as Nikolai, aching and yearning for him. It was there in the misery in her eyes, in the slump of her shoulders, all over her face, in every line of her body.

With a wide, brilliant smile, Dair held his arms out to the boy and then they were gone.

Chelly looked down at herself with a gasp.

Because so were her clothes.



Nikolai was in the process of chopping wood. A tedious, back-breaking job, guaranteed to leave him aching and sore, which was why he had chosen it. He had been at this task for more than four hours when suddenly the axe was gone and he was being flung through time and space as his clothes were stripped away.

"Damn it, Dair, what in the name of Hell are you doing?" he snarled as he battled against the superior elf's power.

He heard the distant echo of his friend's laughter as he landed bare-assed in his room. "You've a week, man. Don't be wastin' it," the Scot told him.

He lifted his eyes to see Chelly standing over him, her eyes wide and luminous with shock, need, and love.

He barely had time to stand before she flung herself at him.

Her mouth covered his, her tongue pushing its way into his mouth, hungrily, desperately as her hands raced over his body, squeezing each muscle, massaging and rubbing every body part she could reach as she urged him backwards. Nik growled and reached for her waist and rasped, "Now." The bed was too damn far away. Grabbing her slim hips, he lifted her and guided her legs around his waist, arching and using the muscles in his back and thighs to bury his cock in her cleft to the hilt.

"Nik..." His name fell from her lips on a ragged moan, her eyes wide, the pupils dilated and dark as she arched up against him.

"Do not turn away from me," he whispered, fisting one hand in her hair and pulling her mouth to meet his, staring into her eyes as he kissed her hungrily. He sucked her tongue into his mouth, and bit down, then he pulled away and nibbled hungrily on her lips before rasping out again, "Please. Do not."

"No. I won't." Her arms came up, winding around his neck. "I won't. I couldn't." His cock jerked inside her and she cried out, twisting against him, the slick swollen tissues of her pussy caressing him as she moved herself up and down.

Sweat gleamed on his powerful, nude body as he worked her up and down on his impaling sex. "Scream for me, *dushechka*...Come, let me feel it," he purred, one hand gliding down and pressing against the pink rosette. "I've a need to take you here, and soon. You're so tight...so hot. Push down for me."

Chelly shuddered and screamed as he pushed one finger past the tight ring of muscle, working it in and out slowly, gathering cream from her sex to ease his passage until he had seated his finger in fully. She arched up against the new invasion, feeling tightly stretched, invaded, and *hot*. Her womb contracted and she started to come, as Nikolai rumbled against her ear, "Ah, yes...that's it. Let me feel..."

Rhythmic, waving contractions caressed him and Nikolai's cock jerked, then he started to pulse and jet his seed deep inside her, seeking out her mouth and moaning as he kissed her, pushing his tongue inside her mouth, taking in more of her sweet, addictive taste. The silken walls of her pussy hugged and stroked him, tightening, relaxing, tightening, until he thought he'd go mad with it.

On legs that shook, he carried her to the bed, keeping his sex still buried inside her as her head slumped against his shoulder. Soft, weak little moans fell from her throat as he bent his head and kissed the exposed arch of her neck. "I love you, Chantelle."

"I love you, too, Nik. I'm sorry. I've got this pride thing...and I couldn't let it go, just being snatched away from everything I know and brought here." Chelly opened her eyes, blinked sleepily as he laid her on her back and started to surge over her, moving deeply. A low, rough keening sound came from her as he pushed her legs wide and pulled away, sprawling between her thighs and burying his face there, catching her clit between his teeth.

She fisted her hands in the black silk of his hair and screamed when he stabbed at the sensitive little bud with his tongue while he worked moisture from her cleft lower, easing his finger in and out of her ass, until she was lifting eagerly for that caress. Then he started to use two fingers on her and she shrieked out his name and came, waves of hot pleasure washing over her with each little biting thrust.

He mounted her and drove in with one deep thrust, feeling her silken wet pussy close greedily over his cock, the scent of her body rising up and filling his head, taunting him to near madness. Leaning down to her, Nik covered her mouth and caught her wrists, pinning them overhead. "Mine for always...you swear?" he rasped against her mouth.

"Yours always, I swear."

With a triumphant, savage grin, he rode her fast and rough, until they both went tumbling into bliss, Chelly screaming out his name, raking his arms and back with her nails, as he suckled one nipple deep and growled out her name, slamming his hips against her as he flooded her with a hot wash of come before they slid into sleep, gasping for breath, and holding tight to each other.

"Have you chosen your Successor?"

Dair smiled as he stroked the head of the boy who cuddled against his shoulder. The Council had not looked pleased when he strolled in carrying a mortal's child. Granted, this child was now elf-kin, with the glowing eyes and the bloom of magic already growing under his skin.

But the Council was stodgy and had always been so.

None but Council and Successor had ever breached these chambers.

Dair smirked inwardly.

But outwardly, he pasted on a polite smile and said, "Nikolai. As you know, he has always been the one I say is the ideal Chosen one."

A soft-spoken, sweet-tempered elf spoke up, shaking her head as she said, "The man is unmated. He is a grim, melancholy creature –"

Dair dropped one lid in a wink as he made sure the boy was still deep in slumber. A bit o' magic made sure he would stay that way as he pictured the looks on a few more faces... *"Hold onto your hats, my friends –"*

“Damn it, Dair, what are you doing?”

Chelly was on her hands and knees, a look of rapture on her heart-shaped face. Dair had fast eyes, but he caught no more than a glimpse of berry-colored nipples and a slim body, firm ass and thighs before Nik had his mate covered with bed linens as he rolled out of the bed, his cock wet and shining from her body as he glared angrily at both Dair and the Council.

Chelly was a bit slower to react, her eyes blinking sleepily as the last bit of climax rolled through her and her body shuddered with it.

“As you can see, Nikolai has a mate, and a very satisfied one at that,” Dair said with a smirk he didn’t bother to hide this time.

Chelly heard voices and squealed as Nik settled down on the bed, bringing her against his side and murmuring to her as the Council studied the grim, hard-as-iron man going as soft as a newborn snow rabbit’s fur as he cuddled his mate up against him and stroked her gently, murmuring into her hair.

She flushed red and he smiled, a smile as wide as Dair’s, and the Council fell silent.

Dair felt, under his magic, the boy trying to wake. He sent a silent thought to Nik and Nik blinked, used a bit of his magic to don some jeans before he looked up at the Council. “I had planned on a bit more formal meeting, but this lady has agreed to become my wife, my mate. My life,” Nik announced just as Dair allowed the boy to waken.

Bryan saw Nik and squirmed his way out of Dair’s arms, taking off toward him with a laugh.

Nik caught him with a smile, and added, “And this...this is my son.”

Not one Council member argued as Dair turned over the reigns of Leadership to Nikolai later that day.

They did, of course, wait until they were more formally dressed.

### **About the author:**

Shiloh was born in Kentucky and has been reading avidly since she was six. At twelve, she discovered how much fun it was to write when she took a book that didn't end the way she had wanted it to and rewrote the ending. She's been writing ever since.

Shiloh now lives in southern Indiana with her husband and two children. Between her job, her two adorable and demanding children, and equally adorable and demanding husband, she crams writing in between studying and reading and sleeps when time allows.

Shiloh welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.

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