“Scooch ovew, Momma!”

Bella wiggled her little butt between Eve and Lainey on the banquette in their spacious kitchen, reaching into a bowl and bringing out a handful of popcorn.

Eve bumped Bella’s shoulder lightly with hers. “If you don’t stop eating the popcorn, Bug, we won’t have enough for the tree.”

“But I hungwy, Momma!”

“Hungry? You just ate, you little bottomless pit.”

“I not a bottomwess pit, Momma!” Bella stuffed her mouth with more popcorn, glaring up at Eve, eyes narrowed. She chewed for a moment, then looked over at Lainey. “Mommy, wha’s a bottomwess pit?”

Lainey chuckled, glancing up just in time to see Eve pop a few popcorn kernels into her mouth. “Something you got from your momma, sweet girl.” She reached over, closing her hand around Eve’s wrist. “More stringing, less eating. This is literally our last bit of popcorn.”

Eve pouted. “I’m sure we can get some delivered. Or tell our incoming guests that we need more.”

Oh, seeing Eve Sumptor pout was quite the gift. Lainey couldn’t decide whether it was cute or sexy the way Eve stuck out her bottom lip. In any case, she couldn’t resist either of her girls. Lainey picked up her phone and sent a quick text. It didn’t take long for her cell to chime with an incoming response. She smiled as she read, typed out a thank you, and looked back at a curious Eve and mini Eve.

“There. More popcorn is on the way. Eat all the popcorn you want. We’ll just have to string Ellie’s famous butter toffee popcorn when she gets here,” she said with a slight shrug and continued her own string for the tree.

Two hands stopped in mid-air, daughter looked at mother and vice versa. Without taking another bite, Eve and Bella returned to the task at hand.

“Hey, Mom?” Darren called out. He shook his hand vigorously, trying to get the seeds

that stuck to his hand off. “Sticky,” he muttered good-naturedly.

“Hey, Darren?”

Darren’s brow furrowed as he looked up to see what his mom wanted. Then remembered he was the one that started this conversation. “We’re gonna need more of that sticky stuff for the birdseed.”

Kevin craned his neck and looked into the bowl between him and Darren. “Yep. I think we have enough for about one more of these things.”

‘These things’ were ornaments made from birdseed, flour, honey, and plain gelatin. The boys’ task was making the festive, bird-safe ornaments using their favorite cookie cutters. This and the popcorn garland were fun family activities the kids suggested after Darren learned about the many different Christmas traditions throughout the years. Bella liked it because it meant they would have two Christmas trees. An inside one and an outside one. ‘More Chwismas!”

“How many did we get out of that batch?” Lainey asked.

“Maybe, like, enough for one side of the tree,” Darren answered.

Lainey looked at their pile, then glanced at Eve, who pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. “Do you plan on seeing any of the tree?” Lainey asked with mirth. “I think we have enough. Don’t forget we have the peanut butter pinecones and another garland made of dried fruit. The animals will be well fed.”

Before any of the kids could argue, the doorbell rang.

“I get it!” Bella bellowed and ran for the door.

“Slow down, Bug,” Eve warned as she trailed after her daughter. “You know better than to open the door without someone with you.”

“But it’s my aunties, Momma. And Ezwa!”

“Do you know that for sure?”

Bella frowned. “No, ma’am.” She reached her arms up for Eve to pick her up. Together, they looked through the peephole that was only there because this was fun for Bella. She loved seeing the silly way people looked through that little thing. “See, Momma?” Bella giggled. “Wook at Auntie Huntew. She wooks wike an ewf!”

Eve peered out and saw the normally tall doctor wearing an elf hat, looking short and

squat through the concave lens. She snorted with laughter at her daughter's description.

"You're right, Bug. She sure does. Want to open the door for them?"

Bella nodded enthusiastically and wriggled out of Eve's arms. She stood on her tiptoes and grabbed the door handle. With an exaggerated grunt, she pulled open the heavy door (with Eve's help).

"Mewwy Chwismas Eeb!" Bella shouted as soon as the door was open.

Everyone echoed the sentiment as they filed inside, giving Bella hugs or high-fives. Ezra squealed, immediately wanting out of his mom's arms to run wild with his bestie.

"I got them," Grayson said, kissing Eve on the cheek as he passed by. "Merry Christmas Eve, Eve." He chuckled, proud of himself, as though he were the first one to ever say that to her. Then disappeared into the living room with the kids.

"Good thing he's sexy." Blaise rolled her eyes playfully. "Thank you for having us over tonight."

"Our pleasure," Eve said with a smile, marveling at how all of their friends were there at the same time. "Did you carpool?"

"We got a bus! Hey, Mrs. S." Dani fist-bumped Eve. "Thanks for inviting Claire and me."

"You're part of the family. The boys are in the kitchen with Lainey making ornaments if you want to join them."

Claire nodded when Dani looked at her questioningly. "That sounds fun," she said softly. Dani took off towards the kitchen, looking quite excited about the project. "Thank you for including us. I think Dani hearing you say we're part of the family does wonders for them this time of year. Especially after coming out as non-binary. They were worried they'd be looked at differently."

Eve hugged Claire. "We encourage people to be themselves in this house. Now, if you could please go in the kitchen and help Lainey stay sane while I welcome half the city of LA, I'd appreciate it."

Claire giggled. "The family keeps growing!" she called out as she made her way to the kitchen.

"Yeah, it…wait." Eve's head swiveled from Claire's retreating figure back to the small

army in front of her. Some were holding dishes. Some were holding wine - or two bottles if it was Blaise. “What did she mean by that? She’s not pregnant, is she?”

Ellie laughed. “Not yet.” She moved the pie boxes she was holding to the side so she could greet Eve with a quick kiss on the cheek. “But she and Dani are talking about it. Ready to be an aunt?”

“No.” There was no hesitation in Eve’s answer.

“See? Eve’s on my side!” Hunter chimed in. “I’m way too young to be a…”

“Grandma?” Mo said with a snicker. She started running toward the kitchen when Hunter came after her.

“If either of you drops those dishes, I’m letting Rebecca handle it,” Ellie called out. She nearly dropped the pies, laughing when they slowed abruptly, carefully walking the rest of the way. Ellie glanced over at Rebecca. “Works every time,” she said before following them.

“They don’t know what the hell they’re missing,” Cass teased. Her smile faded when Rebecca tilted her head and gave her a look. Cass pressed her lips together and dutifully followed her friends. She stealthily gave Eve a wink and a smirk as she passed.

“She thinks I don’t know she says these things on purpose.” Rebecca shook her head. “Hey, babe. Merry Christmas Eve.” She kissed Eve on the cheek. “You and Lainey are brave, inviting all of us over. Or insane.”

Eve laughed, looking past Rebecca to see even more people to greet. “Maybe a bit of both.” She leaned closer. “Did you really get a bus?”

Rebecca nodded. “Blaise’s idea. We all know how things can get when food and alcohol are involved. This way, if you and Lainey don’t want to find blankets and pillows for each of us, we have a safe way home.”

“And the driver? He’s just going to sit out there all night?”

“I don’t think he’ll mind.” Piper’s voice was so soft Eve barely heard her. Blaise’s daughter had yet to come out of her shell around Eve fully. Perhaps spending more time together doing these ‘family’ things - that Eve wasn’t used to - would change that.

“It’s a really posh bus,” Jessie agreed.

“No doubt.” This came from Jules, who stood close - very close - to Jessie. “That dude

is set up. The thing has a TV if he gets bored. Or he could take a nap on one of the seats. They're that comfortable!"

"Maybe we'll take him some food later," Aunt Wills suggested. "Speaking of which, I'm taking this to the kitchen." She held up her dish. "Whatever this is that Ellie made is making my stomach growl."

"And you're drooling," Rebecca joked. Though if she were honest, her mouth was watering as well. This was the problem with holiday meals. You spent all day cooking and inhaling the scents of delicious food but not taking the time to eat anything until later. It didn't matter that Rebecca didn't cook anything. They had all congregated over at Ellie and Hunter's, and Rebecca wouldn't allow herself to nibble on anything - except Cassidy. No, she was saving room for all the food.

"We're all drooling, Child," Patty said unashamedly. "So, can we get past the living room and into that wonderful kitchen and start setting up the food?"

"You heard the woman." Eve bowed, gesturing toward the kitchen. "Shall we?"

Willamena fell in step beside Eve. "No Kiara and Lauren tonight?"

Eve shook her head. "They went back to Germany to be with their families."

"Good for them. Family is important this time of year."

Eve slipped her arm around Aunt Wills's. "No truer words."

Chatter, dishes clinking, and kids' laughter filled the air around the food-filled table. Eve sat at the head of the table, taking it all in. They had had these dinners before, but it felt different for her tonight. It felt…as though her life had finally come full circle from those rare happy moments with her mother, through the heartache, and back to being incredibly fulfilled and joyful. It was the lightest she had ever felt.

Lainey leaned over, her voice low as she spoke to her wife. "Are you okay, my love?"

Eve smiled, kissing her gently on the lips. "I'm happy."

Two simple words. That's all they were. But to Lainey's ears, they meant the world. Even she could feel the shift in the air. Lainey looked around her. Bella and the boys were laughing and teasing each other. Jessie, Piper, Dani, Claire, and Jules had their heads together, whispering and snickering. Grayson bounced Ezra on his knee as Blaise blew raspberries at him to get him to look at her while she tried to take a picture. Patty slapped Mo's away from her plate, then offered a sweet kiss. Ellie gleefully tapped one of the bells on Hunter's elf hat while Hunter reminded her of the

mistletoe that was also there. Rebecca and Cass - separated by Aunt Wills - teasingly leaned around the front of Willamena to make exaggerated kissy noises.

Lainey squeezed Eve's hand as she mouthed, "I love you."

Eve winked at Lainey, taking strength from the warmth of Lainey's touch. She cleared her throat to get everyone's attention.

"I would like to say a few words if you don't mind," Eve announced.

All eyes - even little Bella's - fell on Eve. Having the attention of influential people in the boardroom wasn't as intimidating as this moment. You asked for it.

Eve took a breath and blew it out slowly. "I want to thank you all for being here tonight to celebrate Christmas with us. This year has been difficult, to say the least. But you all stood beside Lainey and our children. You stood beside me. There was no hesitation, no doubts." She took another breath, receiving another squeeze from Lainey. "I'm…not used to this. My life," she waved away the morose thoughts. "I couldn't imagine sitting here, married to the love of my life with three wonderful children, surrounded by friends who are more like family. Now, I can't imagine my life any other way. There's a peace in my life that I thought was unattainable. Something I began to dream of the moment I met Lainey. A peace you all helped me maintain after everything that happened this year. There's no amount of money in the world that could repay that debt."

"I think," Rebecca began softly, "I speak for everyone here when I say there is no debt. You both have been there for us and many, many others. And being family means we don't owe each other anything. We stand up for each other, and we're there for each other no matter what."

"Absolutely," Ellie agreed. She held up her drink. "To family."

When everyone raised a glass, Bella followed suit and raised her cup of milk. She had no clue what was happening, but it was fun being like the grown-ups.

"To family!" the table cheered in unison.

Bella struggled to tap as many glasses with her as she could after seeing the adults do it. "To famwy!" she called out with a giggle, then chugged her milk, wiping away the milk mustache with her sleeve when she was done. "We eat now."

Lainey joined the others as they laughed at her daughter. "Well, you heard the girl. We eat now!"

Delicious food was passed around, dinner rolls were playfully tossed to their rightful owners, and conversation ranged from silly to serious in the blink of an eye. It was an unspoken agreement that everyone avoid the one topic of Eve going to jail or anything related.

Happy, Eve thought again with a grateful smile.

“I’m surprised the two of you didn’t plan some elaborate getaway with the kids. After all you’ve been through, it’s well deserved.”

Eve accepted a glass of wine from Rebecca, thanking her before responding to her statement.

“I suppose with everything we’ve been through, we decided that home is the only place we wanted to be.” She took a sip of the pinot noir, savoring the complex flavors. “Christmas is a time for family. I’ve come to greatly appreciate the family I have. That includes you, you know.”

Rebecca tsked. “You’ve become so soft in your old age,” she teased.

Eve leaned close. “Do you really want to talk about age, Mistress?”

“You suck.”

Eve burst out laughing. “Have you been talking to my wife?”

Lainey chose that moment to take her place next to Eve on the couch. “What has Rebecca been talking to me about?” She plucked Eve’s glass of wine from her hand and took a sip. “Mmm. Good.”

“Nothing. Eve was just being a brat.”

Lainey chuckled. “She’s quite good at that.”

“Hey!” Eve snatched her wine back, a pout firmly planted on her beautiful lips. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Always, my love.” Lainey leaned over and kissed those pouty lips.

The adults lounged in the living room, laughing, talking, and drinking like families do. The kids - and Mo - sat around the TV watching Christmas movies and eating popcorn as though they hadn’t just stuffed their faces just moments before. The white Christmas tree - decorated in a rainbow of colors - twinkled, and a fire crackled softly as the group spoke about nothing and everything.

It still amazed Eve - an introvert on most days - how comfortable she was with these people. And how there was rarely a silent moment when they were around. No matter how many topics they discussed, there always seemed to be more. It really was odd how fast - and how much - life could change in an instant.

“Momma!” Bella’s little feet pitter-pattered across the floor as she ran up to Eve.

“Yes, Bug?”

“Why it no snow hewe?”

“Well, because it doesn’t get cold enough, sweetie.”

Bella wrinkled her nose as she thought about that. Without another word, she ran back to the TV.

“She’s…”

Eve held up her finger before Blaise could go any further. Two seconds later, Bella ran to Eve again.

“Momma!”

“Yes, Bug?”

“It cold outside. How cold does it haffa be fow snow?”

“Hmm.” Eve tapped her chin. “It has to be so cold that your nose turns red like Rudolph’s!”

Bella giggled when Eve tapped her nose. She nodded, then ran back to the TV.

Eve shook her head when the others looked at her. “She’s not done.” She heard Lainey chuckle softly beside her.

“Mommmma!” This time, Bella called for Eve as she was running.

“Yes, my sweet girl?” Eve held in her laughter better than the others around them. She and Lainey were used to Bella having these whirlwind thoughts that could last a good while.

“Is it too wate to ask Sanna fow somefing ewse?”

“Hmm. Well, Bug, it is Christmas Eve. He’s probably started his rounds by now.”

“But you knows him! Can you caww him, Momma?”

Eve handed Lainey her wine and picked Bella up. She sat the little girl on her lap and held her close. “What do you need, sweet girl? Is it something I can get you?”

“I don’t fink so, Momma. I wanna ask Sanna to make it snow.”

“Oh. Well, kiddo, as magical as Santa has to be to get presents to all the children of the world, I don’t think he can control the weather.”

“But why, Momma? I wanna make snow angews.”

Eve’s heart broke knowing she wouldn’t be able to make this wish come true for her daughter. Weather control was not one of her talents.

“How about we go down to the beach tomorrow morning and make sand angels?” Eve suggested, hoping that would be enough for Bella.

Bella’s little eyebrows furrowed. “It not the same, Momma. I wanna make snow angels fow Granmomma in heaven. I fink she can only see snow cuz it ‘parkles.”

“Oh, Bella.” Eve hugged her daughter tightly. “I think Grandmomma can see anything you want her to see.”

Bella’s pout looked exactly like her momma’s, but it quickly turned into a smile. “Where you phone, Momma?”

Eve shifted so she could get her phone from her back pocket.

“You caww, Sanna, pwease? Teww him I wiww give up two toys if he make it snow.” Bella paused. “But pwease teww him it’s okay if he too busy, kay, Momma?”

Well. Eve certainly couldn’t say no to that, could she? All eyes were on her as everyone waited to hear how she would handle this one.

“Yeah, Bug. I’ll call him,” she promised. “However, you have to pinky swear that there will be no tears if the snow doesn’t come, okay? I promise that we’ll have a wonderful Christmas no matter what happens. And if we have to go down to the beach and make sand angels for Grandmomma, that’s what we’ll do.” Eve held her hand up, pinky out. “Deal?”

There was only a slight hesitation on Bella’s part. Eve was sure Bella wanted to

negotiate harder for the snow but ended up wrapping her little pinky around Eve's.

"Pinky sweaw, Momma." Bella peeked behind Eve, seeing the sparkle of the pool through the sliding glass doors. It was chilly out, but not Rudolph red nose chilly. Still, she would hold onto the fantastical hope only a child possessed. Bella rubbed her nose and wondered how cold it had to be to get a Rudolph nose. "Can I go watch Wudoph now?"

Eve lifted her off her lap, patting her on the tush as she ran away. "Ask your brother to put it on for you, young lady, do not order him to do it."

"Yes, ma'am!" Bella giggled.

"Somehow, with that laugh, I don't think that's the route she's going to take," Hunter chuckled. Ellie was sitting on the floor between her legs, and Hunter worried about the hardness of that floor on Ellie's hip. But since Ellie got annoyed when being questioned, Hunter stayed quiet and gently rubbed her wife's shoulders.

"Somehow, I think you're right," Lainey agreed, shaking her head at her daughter when she heard her tell Kevin to change the channel as though he were Alexa. If that little girl didn't grow up to rule the world, Lainey would be very surprised. "So," she addressed her group again. "Are we set for brunch, presents, and Christmas dinner?"

When the Sumptors invited their tight-knit group over for Christmas, they also wanted to respect their time with their own families as well. But it was a unanimous decision to spend the day together this year as one big family. Both Lainey and Eve knew everyone was overcompensating for Bella's sake. Perhaps for Eve and Lainey's, too. But, after the year they've had, they'll take it, especially since it seems to be doing the trick for Bella's happiness. The… loss of her father hits her hard on some days. On other days, it's as though she knows he's still out there somewhere but doesn't care. Since both of those reactions were on the extreme side, Eve asked both Willamena and Lexie to keep the lines of communication open with the young girl.

"Will there be mimosas?" Blaise asked, dipping her hand into the community bowl for more butter toffee popcorn.

Everyone except Ellie groaned as they each brought out twenty bucks and handed it over to the gloating diner owner.

"Pay up, Eve," Ellie grinned. "You and Lainey both said whiskey." She wiggled her fingers until Eve slapped a twenty dollar bill into the palm of her hand, muttering something about Ellie being a hustler.

"May I ask what is going on here?" Blaise said, her eyes narrowed as she stared at her

best friend.

“Nothing,” Ellie answered innocently. “We made a friendly bet on when you’d bring up alcohol for tomorrow and what your drink of choice would be first.”

“I can’t believe you’d make bets like that! Like I’m some kind of sot…” Blaise stopped talking and smiled widely when Ellie handed her half of the winnings. “That’s my girl. As I was saying, I can’t believe you all would bet against Ellie. She knows me better than anyone.”

Greyson cleared his throat.

“Even better than you, Stud.” Blaise patted his thigh. “Don’t feel bad. She has fourteen years on you. You’ll get there eventually.” She inclined her head and kissed Greyson soundly on the lips as everyone laughed.

“Okay, back to the original discussion,” Lainey snickered. “Yes, Blaise, there will be mimosas. Right, Rebecca?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Rebecca saw Lainey blush slightly and gave her a quick wink. “I’m bringing a couple of bottles of champagne from the club. Since I’m not great in the kitchen, that’s my contribution.”

Cass tilted her head back and looked up at her wife. “I beg to differ, babe. You’re fantastic in the…” Cass’s words were stopped abruptly when Rebecca’s lips found hers.

“That deserves a punishment, Cassidy,” Rebecca whispered close to Cassidy’s ear.

Cass merely grinned widely and started counting down the minutes to when they could leave. She loved being with friends. But she loved being alone with her wife even more.

“Is this how you are on those girls’ nights you all have?” Greyson asked, slightly wide-eyed. He had wondered what the ladies did when they got together. The more time he spent with the group together, the less he thought he should wonder. My damn brain may explode.

“Do you really want to know?” Mo asked with a shiver. She had been to exactly one girls’ night. And, though she’d never admit to liking the facials, everything else had been hard to keep up with. Poker with the guys was a mindless activity. Of course, maybe if she put her mind to it, she would stop losing so much damn money.

Greyson held up his hand, effectively retracting his question. “How about I just say I’m

down for brunch? Mimosa's and all. However, I will be bringing some beer as well."

"My man!" Mo called out, giving Greyson a high-five.

Eve smiled, loving the camaraderie in the room. "Well, we look forward to spending the day with you all." She sighed. "I hope you don't think I'm trying to get rid of you, but if we don't get that little giggly girl in there to bed, none of you will want to come over with Bellazilla on the loose."

"Oh, she can't be that bad," Willamena laughed.

Eve's eyebrows shot up. "No?" Her mouth curled into a mischievous smile. "Would you like to bet?"

"Um, I don't want anything to do with that bet." Rebecca patted her wife on the shoulder. Not much scared Mistress. But unhappy kids were high on the list of things that did. "We should get going."

"Yeah, it's definitely bedtime," Cass said, scrambling to get up. When Mo snorted, Cass looked at her innocently. "What? Santa can't come if we're not in bed!"

Hunter stood, helping Ellie up. "M'kay, Santa," she muttered playfully, earning a slight slap on the tummy from her wife.

"Naughty!" Jessie called out from the other side of the room. When all the adults looked her way, she could tell they forgot she and the other 'kids' were there, too. "All of you are going on the naughty list!" She rolled her eyes dramatically when Cass wiggled her eyebrows with a roguish grin.

Ellie doubled over with laughter. "Are you sure you want us here all day?"

Eve and Lainey exchanged a look before turning back to their friends. "Absolutely," they said together.

"Momma, Momma, Momma!"

Bella bound into Eve and Lainey's bedroom, launching herself onto the bed with all the exuberance of a kid on Christmas morning.

Eve managed to open tired eyes and was greeted with chubby little cheeks and excited eyes an inch from her face.

"Bella, that's not how you wake people up," Eve grumbled. She tried reining in her annoyance. It was Christmas day, after all. Though she'd never had the kind of

happiness Bella was exhibiting right now, seeing it through her daughter's eyes made the rude awakening worth it.

"I sowwy, Momma, but you haffa get up! Mommy, come on!"

Lainey stirred awake, trying to drag her brain out of the sleep fog. "It's so early, sweet girl," she yawned. "I thought we were sleeping in since we're waiting for everyone to come over before we open gifts."

"I know, Mommy, but…"

"Bug, why don't you lay down with us and try to get a little more sleep?" Eve reluctantly moved away from her wife to give Bella room.

"No, Momma, you haffa get up! He did it, Momma!"

"Who did what, Bug?"

"Sanna!"

Eve scrubbed her face, hoping it would help wake her up enough to understand what on earth her daughter was going on about.

"I don't…"

"Eve."

The amazement in Lainey's voice had Eve turning her head toward her. "Baby? What is it?"

Lainey used her fingers to push Eve's head the other way gently. Toward the window. "It's…snowing."

Eve quickly sat up, nearly causing Bella to topple off the bed. The little girl squealed with laughter, yelling 'Whoa!' as she grabbed onto Eve's pajamas.

"It's…"

"Snowing," Lainey repeated, her voice still filled with awe.

"How?" Eve reached over to get her phone and looked at the weather. It was cold, but it certainly wasn't Rudolph nose cold. And not cold enough for - she peered out the window again, seeing at least two feet of snow surrounding the pool - snow. And it was still falling.

“Sanna did it, Momma! He made my wish come twue! We can make snow angelws fow Granmomma! Get up, Momma! Come on, Mommy! Pwease?” Bella bounced energetically on the bed, begging her moms to hurry up.

“Okay, sweet girl.” Lainey wiped sentimental tears from her eyes. “You need to put on some warm clothes and some boots. Maybe the ones we got you last week? And a coat.”

“‘Kay, Mommy. You got boots, too?” Bella hopped down and ran out of the room. “Kevin! I need my gwoves!”

Lainey and Eve lay there for a full minute, staring out the window.

“I don’t understand. It’s forty degrees outside. To a New Yorker, that’s downright warm.” Eve looked at Lainey. “How is this possible?”

“A Christmas miracle?” Lainey shrugged, not having a better explanation. Did they believe in miracles? Before marrying Eve, Lainey would have said no. But her life with Eve felt like a miracle to her.

Eve rolled over on top of Lainey. “Next, you’re going to tell me ‘Sanna’ is real.”

Lainey smiled. “Can you tell me he’s not?” She nodded at the proof outside. She reached up and cupped Eve’s cheek. “Whatever this is, Bella is happy. Our boys are happy. You’re happy. To me, that’s all the miracle I need.”

“I love you, Mrs. Sumptor,” Eve declared softly.

“I love you, too, Mrs. Sumptor,” Lainey winked. “Now, let’s get up before Bella comes back in here and pulls us outside in our jammies.”

Eve snickered. “She would, too.” She lowered her head and gave Lainey a quick kiss. “Do I even have gloves?”

Bella was a bouncing bundle of excitement as she impatiently waited for her family to hurry up and get dressed. She knew better than to go outside by herself, but it was hard being a good girl when there was snow out there. Being from New York, she had seen snow before, but she was very young at the time, unlike now. In her mind, she was a big girl who could reach the doorknob…

“Where are you going, Bug?”

Bella snatched her hand away from the door. “Nowhewe, Momma! I wait fow you!”

She lifted her hands to show her momma. “See my gwoves? And I got my boots on. Can you hewp me zippew my jacket?”

“C’mere.” Eve kneeled. She zipped up Bella’s jacket, straightened her beanie, and flipped her hood up. “Can you move?”

“Nope!” Bella giggled as she walked around like an over-baked gingerbread man. “Can we go now, Momma?”

“Well, I’m ready,” Lainey called out by the door. “I don’t know what you two are waiting for.” She opened the door and felt the whoosh of cold air coming through. But it didn’t have the smell of LA. There was no salt in the air from the ocean. And the noise that greeted her was not the waves crashing on the shore, but a…generator?

Bella whipped past Lainey, jumping feet-first into the snow. She laughed exuberantly as she hopped like a bunny. She didn’t know - or care - about the weird sounds or the lack of a view. All she saw was snow.

Eve stepped up beside Lainey, getting out of the way when Kevin and Darren came barreling through. “Well. Now we know the how. Kind of.” She looked around them. The entire deck had been tented, with light coming through clear, plastic windows and a transparent roof. The rest of the white-walled tent was decorated in a Christmas motif. “I’m going to guess that you didn’t have anything to do with this?”

Lainey shook her head. “This is more up your alley than mine.” She peered over at her wife. “You were as shell-shocked as I was. So, if it wasn’t me and it wasn’t you, then who?”

“Merry Christmas!”

Their group of friends burst through the door just then, grinning ear to ear. The grown-ups surrounded the bewildered Sumptor women. The younger ones - and Mo - made their way into the snow to play with Bella and the boys.

Eve looked at her watch. Brunch was still hours away. Then it hit her. “You all did this, didn’t you?”

“As much as I would love to take full credit,” Blaise began, “I just threw money at the idea. Ellie found who we needed. Cass, Greyson, Hunter, and Mo helped set up, and Rebecca, Patty, and Aunt Wills supervised.”

“How did you pull this off without us knowing?” Lainey asked. She wanted to throw her arms around them all and hug them until she felt her gratitude was conveyed.

“Oh, we had help,” Ellie answered. She nodded toward Kevin and Darren. “This was their idea, not ours. They wanted their sister’s wishes to come true. We wanted to help them do that.”

“I - I don’t know how to thank you for this,” Eve said softly, a tear threatening to tumble down her cheek.

“You don’t need to, Eve.” Rebecca wrapped her arms around Eve, bringing Lainey into the hug. “You two are not alone anymore. I hear it takes a village to raise happy children.” She let go and spread her arms, indicating everyone standing next to her. “Here’s your village.”

Cass and Hunter looked at each other, each gulping down the warning of tears.

“Uh, Mo looks like she’s outnumbered over there in the snowball war. We should…” Hunter took off.

“Yep,” Cass sniffled. She quickly kissed Rebecca and trotted away.

Rebecca laughed. “Big babies. Oh! Speaking of babies!”

“Do not tell me Cass is pregnant,” Eve said. She knew Rebecca was unable to have children herself. But the thought of Cass carrying a baby was too much for Eve’s overly stimulated brain at the moment. “I think I’ve had enough of a shock today to last me the rest of the year.”

“Ha! Bite your tongue, woman.” Rebecca shivered. “I love kids, don’t get me wrong. But I love giving them back to their owners when I’ve had my fill of them.”

“Owners,” Ellie snorted. “We usually call ourselves parents.”

“Potato, potahto,” Rebecca winked. “Anyway, no one is pregnant, but…wait right there.” She jogged into the house. After a quick minute, she returned with a chocolate lab puppy. “This is Mocha! It’s my Christmas gift from Cassidy!”

The light in Lainey’s eyes perked up, and her smile was a mile wide. “Oh my god, look at her! Gimme!” She reached out, wiggling her fingers. The puppy was passed to her, and the coos began. “You’re just the goodest girl, aren’t you? Yes, you are.”

“Oh boy.” Eve watched with amusement as her wife fell in love with a puppy she had just met. “Thanks for this. Not only will my wife want one, but so will the kids. I’ll be outnumbered.”

Lainey glanced up, turning the puppy toward Eve. “You know you want one, too, my

love. Just look at this face!”

Eve was looking but not at the puppy. As cute as the little pup was, nothing outshined the happiness on Lainey’s face. Yeah, there was definitely a dog in their future.

“Momma! Come make snow angews wif me!” Mocha barked, and Bella’s attention turned to the sound. She squealed with absolute delight. “Puppy! Can I see da puppy, Mommy?”

“Annnd, I’m forgotten,” Eve grumbled good-naturedly.

Willamena patted Eve’s arm. “I give it five minutes. Then she’ll be calling for you again. This is good for her, Eve. Even at a young age, Bella knows life is a series of ups and downs. But throwing in a sprinkling of magic will help keep her hopes and imagination alive.”

Eve watched her family playing with the puppy and the snow. She bent down and scooped up a handful. It was cold to the touch, melting in the heat of her hand. “This is real snow?”

“From what I understood, they’re using the same technology that ski resorts use for their indoor ski slopes.”

Eve waited for more, but it never came. “That’s it? That’s all you got, Dr. Woodrow?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Eve, I’m a psychiatrist, not a snowblower.”

Eve barked out a laugh full of joy. “Oh my god, please go say that to your niece. I dare you!” She heard the doorbell ring and groaned. “But wait until I get back. I want to see her reaction!”

She was still laughing when she pulled open the door and was greeted by a beaming Reghan.

“Merry Christmas, Eve.” Reghan held out a folder.

“Merry Christmas, Reghan,” Eve smiled, glancing down at the folder. “What is this?”

“Oh, right. You don’t like folders and envelopes,” Reghan snickered. “Let me just tell you what’s in it, then.”

“I would appreciate it. Come on in.” Eve stood back, but Reghan didn’t move.

“Hold on because I have a couple of gifts for you. Number one is this.” Reghan

indicated the item she held. “Dunne has been found guilty of every heinous crime he’s been accused of. His gift is a one-way ticket to prison. Inside a cell this time.”

Relief washed over Eve. At her request, Reghan had been drumming up a case - and victims - against the abusive correctional officer. Knowing that it paid off gave Eve a sense of peace and allowed her to release another part of that horrible time.

“Two,” Reghan continued. “The art room at the prison has been gifted with supplies in an anonymous donor’s name. Now, some regulations have to be met, but I think you’ll be happy with what they got.”

Another piece was released.

“And three.” Reghan stepped aside, motioning for someone to come forth. Milly shuffled into view. Her eyes rimmed red from crying.

“Merry Christmas, Eve.”

Eve’s eyes widened. “Milly! You’re here!” In an uncharacteristic move, Eve enveloped Milly in an emotional hug. This woman saved Eve’s sanity - and pride - more than once in their short time together. She couldn’t wait to introduce her to Lainey. “Merry Christmas.”

“God bless you, child,” Milly whispered. She ain’t never had anyone fighting for her before. When the Irish lady with the expensive suit came to see her, telling Milly she would represent Milly in a bid for release, Milly didn’t know what to think. Then she was told Eve wanted to repay her, to have her back like Milly had Eve’s. Being an old woman out in a world she’d never known was scary. But Milly was up for the challenge.

“Please, please, come in. Both of you. We’re just out back playing in the snow.”

Reghan stopped in her tracks. “I’m sorry, snow? Just how powerful are you, Eve Sumptor?”

Eve laughed. “I had nothing to do with it. But I’m going to enjoy it with my family. Come on.”

“Momma?” Bella lay beside Eve and looked up at the sky. They were poised to make snow angels in the snow, but Eve’s mini-me had questions.

“Yes, Bug?”

“Is da snow weal?”

Eve grabbed a handful and plopped it onto Bella's face. The little girl giggled, shrieking at how cold it was. "Does it feel real, Bug?"

"Yes, Momma!" Bella laughed.

"Then it's real, Bug. Sometimes, logic overshadows feelings, and we lose sight of how magical life can be. I think your brothers - and our friends - wanted to show us that anything is possible when you allow your imagination and logic to intertwine. Do you understand, Bug?"

Bella thought about it for a moment. "I fink so. Momma?"

"Mmmhmm?"

"Is Miss Milly my granmomma?"

Eve laughed. "No, Baby Girl, she's just a friend that was really good to Momma when others tried to hurt me." Following Dr. Woodrow and Lexie's advice, she had been trying out the truth method with Bella. But even the truth was tempered by omissions if Eve thought it was too much information for such a little girl.

"Momma?"

"Yes, my sweet girl?"

"My tushy is gettin wet! Wet's make some snow angews for granmomma then go eat!"

"You're going to make a wonderful CEO one day," Eve teased, sending her daughter into fits of confused but joyful laughter. "Ready?"

"Weady!"

"Set?"

"Set!"

Eve waited a beat. "Go!"

"Gow!!" Bella swished her little arms and legs the best she could. "I doin it, Momma!"

"You sure are, Bug! Keep going! We're going to have the best snow angels in the history of snow angels!"

Eve’s laughter rang out, reaching Lainey’s ears. God, what a difference a few weeks can make. Hell, her life had vastly changed the moment she laid eyes on Eve Sumptor. One day, Lainey Stanton woke up and wondered what her life had become. Happiness eluded her. When she was married to Jack, Lainey had wondered more than once if she’d ever be happy - be her - again. Her fateful decision to work again set up everything she was witnessing right now, and Lainey would never make a more important decision again in her life.

“What a beautiful smile,” Ellie complimented as she took a chair beside Lainey, following Lainey’s gaze.

Kevin and Darren were laughing heartily, snow flying as they made their own snow angels. Eve held Bella in her arms as they looked up to the sky and pointed at their masterpieces in the snow. Bella was showing her granmomma - a woman she would never have a chance to meet but loved anyway - the ‘sparkly’ snow angels.

“What are you feeling?”

Lainey glanced at Ellie and then at everyone else. “Joy, because all of you are here celebrating with us.”

Reghan caught her eye and lifted her mimosa in a salute. Milly stood beside her, laughing and enjoying freedom for the first time in decades. Eve had also told her about Dunne and how he would be spending the rest of his life behind bars.

“Peace,” Lainey continued.

The intense sound of pure joy surrounded them. This was the beginning of the life - and love - Lainey had yearned for. This was the day she never imagined would get here.

“Happiness.”