Chapter One

“NO! STOP! Please!”

Donner’s head shot up, and he snapped his book shut. Was that Cupid? There was another shriek, and Donner took off, book in hand as he sped out of the vast library. He was running so fast he almost hit the wall at the end of the corridor, his boots slipping on the pristine white marble floor when he tried to make a sharp turn. Plum pudding! Was it really necessary to shine the blasted thing so thoroughly? Just because they were in Jack Frost’s palace didn’t mean the floor had to feel as if he were gliding on ice. He’d have a word with Rudy about this.

“Mercy! I beg of you!”

A chill swept through Donner. It was Cupid. His friend was in trouble. Donner’s heart beat furiously, and he was all but winded by the time he reached the room from which the shouting came. Donner barged in, gasping when he saw the huge brute bent over his sweet friend, who was curled onto his side on the chaise lounge. The brute’s size eclipsed Cupid’s smaller frame. The breadth of his shoulders was expansive, and long white hair fell over a weathered leather tunic, the sleeves of which struggled to retain bulging biceps. His charcoal gray skin revealed his nefarious nature.

“Release him, Dockalfar!” Panicked and uncertain of what to do against a creature possessing dark magic, Donner did the only thing he could think of. He hurled his book at the elf. It conked him on the head.

“Ouch! Son of a nutcracker!” The beastly elf straightened and rubbed the back of his head. He turned and narrowed his near-black eyes at Donner. “Did you pitch a book at my head?”

Donner swallowed hard as the dark elf frowned at him. For a slip of a moment, he had forgotten how big and imposing the elf was. There was also the tiny matter of the dark magic Calder possessed. Perhaps launching reading material at the fellow’s head had not been his brightest idea. Especially when the reading material in question was a hefty volume with sharp corners. Still, Donner straightened to his full height, which sadly came up rather short where the dark elf was concerned, but Donner wasn’t about to cower in front of this menace.

“Step away from my friend, you fiend!”

“Donner!” Cupid scolded. He hopped off the chaise lounge and folded his arms over his chest. “That’s an awfully mean thing to say.”

Donner gaped, looking from Cupid to the dark elf and back. “But… he was attacking you!”

Cupid’s expression softened as he approached Donner. “Oh, Donner. You thought I was in danger, so you came to my rescue?”

Donner nodded, his bottom lip jutting out pathetically. “That’s what friends do, isn’t it?” Granted, now that he realized the danger he could have put himself in, he felt rather weak at the knees.

“Of course.” Cupid threw his arms around Donner and hugged him tight. “Thank you, my dear friend.” He pulled back, smiling warmly. “But I wasn’t in any danger. Calder was simply being a mischievous brother. We were teasing each other, and he launched a terribly effective tickle assault. He’s very good at those.”

“Oh.” Donner was relieved. Then the reality of what he’d done set in. He had just pummeled a dark elf with a book. Oh dear. He looked up at Calder, who watched him in amusement. Well, at least the elf hadn’t turned him into a frog. Donner held back a gasp. What if he was biding his time? Dockalfar were tricksters and spiteful creatures. Perhaps Calder was waiting until Cupid turned his back. Then with a snap of his fingers he’d turn Donner into a toad or gnat to be crushed in his large hands. Donner took a wary step back when Calder approached.

“I suppose I should thank you for the fierce defense of my brother.”

Donner simply nodded. He gave a start when Calder reached out to him, then noticed the book in his hand.

“Your weapon.”

He had no idea what the elf found so amusing. With a sniff, Donner swiped his book. He took Cupid’s arm and turned him away from Calder.

“You should be more careful. What if it had been Jack who’d overheard you and come to your rescue?”

Cupid’s eyes went wide.

Jack wouldn’t have hesitated in turning Calder into an oversized ice cube. What the

Prince of Frost thought of Dockalfar was no secret, and it mattered very little that Calder was Cupid's brother, or that Calder supposedly was unlike their treacherous brother Gunne, who'd brought such misery and heartache mere weeks ago.

"I know you disagree, Cupid, but this is a terrible idea. Having a Dockal—"

"Calder," Cupid corrected politely. "His name is Calder."

Donner summoned patience. How could Cupid not see? "Very well. Having Calder under the same roof as Jack Frost is a terrible idea."

Cupid blinked up at him innocently. "Jack was the one who offered his home for my training."

"Yes." Donner lowered his voice. "So that he could keep a close eye on Calder."

"Excuse me, but I can hear you," Calder stated, his smooth voice a deep rumble. "Turning away from me doesn't stop me from still being in the room."

Donner spun on his heels and glowered at the ridiculously tall elf. Honestly. What elf needed to be so blasted tall? Or wide. Or… square jawed. "Then stop listening to a conversation that doesn't concern you."

Calder arched an eyebrow at him. "You're speaking about me, so it concerns me. Greatly. This whole encounter concerns me greatly."

Donner bristled. "Just what are you implying?"

"You're a perplexing elf."

"And you're… you're very… tall. And irritating." Donner wanted to smack the amusement right off the infuriating elf's face. His eyes were also very unsettling. As if staring into them for too long might cost Donner his immortal soul.

Calder nodded slowly. "I see."

"No, I don't think you do." Donner marched up to Calder, then jabbed a finger against his chest. Plum pudding, that hurt! He discreetly pulled his hand behind his back to shake it off. Was the elf made of granite? "Mayor Kringle might have thought it a jolly good idea for you to train Cupid, but you shouldn't be here. And I don't mean here in Jack's palace—though you clearly shouldn't be here either—but in North Pole City. No good can come of it."

Instead of getting angry, Calder leaned forward, his smile wicked. "It would seem, my

little dear, that you could use some bad in your pristine and perfect life."

Donner's jaw dropped. He sputtered madly. "How dare—what did you call me?" He turned to Cupid. "Did you hear what he called me?"

Cupid bit down on his bottom lip and nodded. Was that amusement in his eyes? The traitor! Donner spun back to Calder, unaware the elf had moved closer. They were practically nose to nose. Donner retreated swiftly, tripping over his own feet and letting out a squeak as he fell. A strong arm caught him midway, and Donner stared up at Calder.

"Everything all right in here?" Rudy asked as he walked into the room, Jack at his side.

Donner gasped. Trust the Prince of Frost to catch him in a compromising position with a Dockalfar. Not that he would ever do anything remotely compromising with this beast. Of course Jack and Rudy didn't know that. Oh, the gossip would be terrible!

"Take your hands off me, you cad!" Donner swung his book, letting out a yelp when the arm around him disappeared, and he hit the carpet with a thud.

"Donner!" Cupid ran over to help him up. "Are you all right?"

"No thanks to him," Donner seethed.

Calder shrugged. "You asked me to release you."

"Have you no manners at all?" Donner scrambled to his feet and quickly straightened his clothes before running a hand through his hair. He glared at the smug Dockalfar. "Perhaps treating others in such a manner is acceptable in whatever dark cave you crawled out of, but out here, where elves are civilized, we do not go about manhandling others and dropping them on their backsides."

"Oh?" A wicked smile spread across Calder's face. "I'm intrigued. What do you do with their backsides?"

Donner's jaw went slack. "You… you…." He waved his book at Calder. "You, sir, are reprehensible!"

"Better reprehensible than a prude," Calder replied pleasantly.

"All right, that's enough," Jack reproached them. "What's going on in here?"

Cupid stepped in front of Calder, as if his tiny elf frame was any match for Jack Frost. His trust in his brother was admirable, if not sadly misplaced. The Dockalfar was

deplorable.

“Nothing. Just a misunderstanding. Isn’t that right, Donner?”

Oh, for Kringle’s sake. “Yes,” Donner replied with a sniff. “Misunderstanding.” There was no sense causing trouble for poor Cupid. It was hardly his fault he was part dark elf or that his brother was intolerable, and…. Why was Calder smiling at Donner? The elf was mad. How Calder and Cupid were brothers was beyond comprehension. Cupid was the sweetest, kindest elf Donner had ever known. He was fair, with wispy blond hair and bright blue eyes. He was the only Rein Dear who was part winter faery. Unlike Calder and Gunne, who were born full Dockalfar like their father, Cupid was born part winter faery like their mother, though he still possessed Dockalfar magic. Thankfully, he seemed to have also inherited his mother’s gentle faery nature.

“Very well.” Jack gave Cupid a nod, but not before casting Calder a warning glance. “We have a rehearsal coming up. It will be held in the ballroom. The rest of the Rein Dears have been informed. Everyone has either been partnered up with their sweethearts, or their choice of sugarplum faery from my father’s court, or toy soldier of the highest regard chosen by Vale himself.” Jack turned to Donner. “Please let Rudy know as soon as possible who you’d like as a partner, Donner. We’ll have someone picked in time for rehearsal.”

Donner cleared his throat, aware of Calder watching him closely. Why, he had no idea. “Toy soldier, please.” Who wouldn’t wish to dance with a dashing toy soldier? Besides, he doubted he could keep up with a sugarplum faery’s gracefulness. Prancer and Comet could easily sweep their faery partners off their feet, but Donner much preferred being the one swept off his feet. Heavens knew, it had been so blasted long.

“Very well. I’ll pass that on to Vale. You’ll be notified of the exact time and place of the rehearsal within the next few days.”

Donner nodded. He was very much looking forward to it. Jack and Rudy’s upcoming wedding was the talk of the North Pole, and preparations were still underway. Being invited to be a part of Jack and Rudy’s court, not to mention taking part in the wedding dance numbers, was the greatest honor he could have been given.

Jack gave them all a bow before turning and leaving. Rudy smiled and waved, then joined his sweetheart.

Calder gently patted Cupid’s shoulder. His smile was warm, and it softened his features. “Why don’t we continue tomorrow?”

Cupid nodded. “Bright and early?”

“Bright and early.” Calder headed for the door, and Donner made sure to keep his distance. He didn’t trust the elf one bit.

“See you tomorrow, little dear.”

“Not likely,” Donner fumed. He didn’t know what it was about Calder that infuriated him so, but oh, he had the urge to throw his book at the elf. Again. “And stop calling me that!”

Calder simply chuckled, a deep rumble of a sound that only irked Donner further. The moment he was gone, Donner turned to Cupid. “How do you put up with him? He’s exhausting.”

“Actually, he’s very sweet.” Cupid laughed. No doubt at Donner’s scandalized expression.

“You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t swoon at his gigantic boots.” With a huff, Donner headed out the door with Cupid at his heels.

“Donner, about tomorrow….”

Plum pudding. Please don’t say it. Please don’t say it.

“I would really appreciate it if you would be here for my training. Blitzen has some repairs he needs to make to his biplane, and I could use the help.”

“Me?”

The last thing Donner wanted was to spend any more time around that brute, but how could he say no to his dear friend? Besides, if it was just the three of them, no one would see him spending so much time with a Dockalfar. After all, Donner had a reputation to maintain. North Pole City was overrun with gossips.

Cupid’s big blue eyes watched him closely as he waited for his reply.

“Yes, of course I’ll be here.” Donner held up his book. “There’s no shortage of books in Jack’s library. I can read while you two do whatever it is you’ve been doing.”

“Magic,” Cupid said excitedly.

“You mean dark magic.” Donner hadn’t meant to sound so harsh when he said it. His friend’s smile fell. Plum pudding. “But in your hands, I bet you do good things.”

Cupid’s bright smile returned, and he nodded as he followed Donner through the

corridor. “Calder has been teaching me how to use our magic for good. Just because it’s dark magic doesn’t mean the wielder must use it to do bad things. For instance, Calder is teaching me how to manipulate light.” He waved a hand and the flames in the wall sconce to their right went out.

Donner stopped in his tracks, a lump forming in his throat. “Please don’t do that.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Cupid said sincerely, his expression troubled. “You don’t need to be afraid.”

Donner frowned at him. “Afraid? Who said I was afraid? Afraid of what?”

“Of the magic. Calder’s been teaching me all sorts, but especially how to control it.”

“Well, then, I expect him to know what he’s doing.” Just what he needed, to be spending time with a Dockalfar who wielded great darkness. Sounded like a jolly old time.

Chapter Two

THE NORTH Pole was in a tizzy.

Was it the upcoming marriage of Jack Frost to his beloved Rudy Rein Dear that had North Pole City and neighboring Winter Wonderland in such a frenzied state?

No.

Had the Mouse King or his underlings somehow escaped their icy prison cells in the Mountain Fortress to wreak havoc and destruction upon the land?

No.

All the fuss was due to the displacement of one elf. Sadly, Calder was that elf.

Calder’s frown deepened, and his near-black eyes narrowed. Quiet gasps and murmurs met his ears. This was all getting to be a tad ridiculous. With a sigh, he finished his mulled wine, then stood. The place stilled. Every Christmas elf and sugarplum faery in the tavern held their breaths, wide eyes on him. What exactly did they believe he was going to do to them? If he’d wanted to do whatever it was they believed, he would have done so by now.

He stretched his arms over his head, the wide breadth of his solid chest expanding with his deep breaths. His back ached from being hunched over the small table, and the muscles in his arms and legs were faring no better. His backside just about fit in

the wooden chair that was too close to the floor for his great height. It forced his knees into a somewhat uncomfortable angle. For breakfast, it had taken four meals to satisfy him, the portions far too small for him to get his fill with one alone. Why were Christmas elves so blasted small? His boots alone probably weighed more than any elf in this room.

Then there was the staring. By now he'd grown accustomed to it, but he still disliked it. Greatly. It wasn't their fault. They had every right to fear him, and even loathe him. Christmas elves were loving and kindhearted by nature, but even they were not so good as to forget or forgive such vileness inflicted upon them. Every enchanted creature had its limit, and the Dockalfar had pushed Christmas elves over theirs some time ago. In their eyes, Calder might as well have struck the blow himself. The thought made him feel sick to his stomach.

Regardless, he smiled warmly and gave them a little salute before heading for the door. The tiny bell above it jingled, and Calder didn't move out of the way quick enough. A Christmas elf ran into him, bounced off, and landed on the snowy sidewalk. He stared up, and up, and up, at Calder.

"Eeep!"

The poor fellow scrambled to his feet and darted down the street as if someone had set fire to his striped stockings. Calder shook his head. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea. Knowing the elves of North Pole City would fear him was one thing. Coming face-to-face with that fear was another. Unlike most Dockalfar elves, Calder did not wish to be feared. In fact, from a very early age, all he'd wanted was to be loved. It sounded rather silly to his own ears, but it was the truth. Not that it mattered. Love was a gift he would never be entrusted with. For one, Dockalfar males did not couple with other Dockalfar males, and what creature outside of his own kind could possibly love him? Hundreds of years on this earth had proven it, and so he'd resigned himself to a life without love. Instead, he tried to find joy in other ways.

By the time Calder had checked into the Pine Needle Inn, rumors of him being in North Pole City had spread like jelly on toast. Not one cranny of the city had been left uncovered. Everyone knew he was here, and those who didn't come to see for themselves, stared or gaped whenever they saw him anywhere in the city. Some didn't bother, too scared to wait around to see if he was going to turn them into frogs or snap his fingers and make them disappear in a burst of black smoke. He was, after all, brother to the Dockalfar who had tricked Major Hollis Frost into using black magic on Rudy Rein Dear's plane, nearly ending the beloved pilot's immortal life.

Calder of the Dockalfar was a giant among elves, wicked, dangerous, and not to be trusted. His kind was deplorable, and at times Calder agreed. The Dockalfar had started the Frost War hundreds of years ago, and as a fierce warrior, Calder had had

little choice but to fight. Much to his relief, his strength and skill landed him a position fighting the monstrous ice beasts conjured by the King of Frost rather than the toy soldiers. No lives were taken by Calder during the war. None of that mattered. The Dockalfar had slaughtered the Queen of Frost.

Calder swallowed hard. He deserved their distrust, their anger, their loathing. Yet as he walked down the snow-covered street, he did his best to smile and lose himself in his surroundings. North Pole City was truly extraordinary. The twinkling lights that decorated the beautifully ornate shop fronts sparkled like tiny stars. More of the same lights draped from lamppost to lamppost on both sides of the street, forming a glittering path of enchantment. The snow was always white and pure. Sumptuous scents teased his nostrils—vanilla, roasted chestnuts, freshly baked cookies, and cinnamon. His senses were alive with wonder. In the distance, he heard the merry jingling of bells from the sleighs transporting elves about town. A door opened from a shop close by, and the melodious sound of carols lightened his heart. He loved music.

With a silly grin, he hurried over to the shop. Oh, and what a shop! It was filled with tantalizing treats. Music and anything sweet was not permitted back home. It hadn't kept his mother—bless her soul—from spoiling him rotten with delicious cakes and cookies. His father would scowl and remind her how such things were frowned upon, but he could never deny her. His father was many things, most exceedingly frightful, but he had loved Calder's mother fiercely.

Mindful of the low door, Calder entered the shop. He had never seen so many colors.

"Hello," Calder said pleasantly.

The gray-haired sugarplum faery behind the glass counter gasped and took a step back, fear in her wide silver eyes. Calder did his best to appear friendly, which was no small feat, considering his size. He remained still, so as not to knock over anything with his sword's scabbard, which hung from the wide leather belt fastened around his waist.

"I would like to purchase a box of your delicious goods." He read the faery's name embroidered on her colorful apron. "Honey Blossom. That's a beautiful name."

"Th-Thank you. Are you…? You're Cupid's brother."

"Yes." Calder smiled brightly as he surveyed the many delicacies. There were small cakes, cookies, pastries, some with fruit, others with cream, all clearly made with love. "I'm here visiting him. I saw your lovely treats, and my brother has such a sweet tooth." Not to say anything of his own. "He'll love these."

Honey Blossom nodded and quickly went about preparing a pretty

red-and-white-striped box. She was nervous, and her tiny hands shook. Calder pretended not to notice.

“Which would you like?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“I’ll take a dozen. Whatever you choose will be fine.” Then he noticed a pretty cupcake with lavender frosting and a glittering purple star nestled on top. It reminded him of Donner’s eyes. Violet eyes were rare among elves, especially Christmas elves. “I’ll take that lovely purple delight as well.”

“Of course.”

Calder looked around the shop, hoping it might help the faery feel less anxious. It would be a terrible shame if she dropped one of those scrumptious cakes on the floor. When she was done, she cleared her throat. He turned to her with a smile.

“Thank you.” He reached for his belt and the coin purse holding his gold pieces. Honey Blossom let out a squeak. “It’s all right,” he assured her. “I only wish to pay for the goods.” Her eyes went wide, as if he’d suggested something nefarious.

“Oh no, please. No payment needed.”

Calder frowned. “Nonsense. I’m certain you work very hard at your craft.” He removed two gold pieces from his purse, then placed them on the counter. She shook her head vigorously.

“That’s far too much.”

“Very well.” He returned one of the pieces to his pouch. She was about to say something else when the bell above the door jingled. Calder took his box, wrapped beautifully in a big red bow, and then he turned. Five Christmas elves stood in his path. He motioned toward the door.

“Excuse me.”

One of the taller elves—who still only reached Calder’s chest—stepped forward. His fists shook, but he looked determined.

“You’re not welcome here, Dockalfar.”

“Calder. My name is Calder.”

“We don’t care who you are,” the elf replied with a huff. “You should go home to your own kind.”

Poor fellow. Calder could tell he was trying to be intimidating. He came off as more of an angry bunny, twitching ears and all. “And I will, once my visit has ended.” Calder took a step forward, and as expected, they all took several steps back.

“Go home,” another elf squeaked.

Calder let out a heavy sigh. “I will, but I made a promise to my brother Cupid and Mayor Kringle.”

At the mention of Mayor Kringle, their eyes widened and they fled from the shop. With a chuckle, Calder left. He figured that would do the trick. Mayor Kringle was the very spirit of Christmas. The last thing any Christmas elf wanted to do was upset him.

The walk to Jack Frost’s palace in North Pole City was refreshing. Calder enjoyed walking. He was never in much of a hurry, preferring to admire the beauty of the world around him. Jack’s palace was at the far end of the city, and beyond it lay miles and miles of forests and snowy fields. The palace itself was a glorious testament to the Prince of Frost. Calder had never seen such opulence. He could only imagine what the King of Frost’s palace looked like. Calder had heard stories of its magnificence, but he’d never set foot in Winter Wonderland. The laws set forth in the treaty created by the King of Frost and signed by the Council of the Dockalfar, including Calder’s father, Bard, prevented him. It saddened him that such a treaty existed, but he understood.

The guards knew who he was even from a distance. The first day they had surrounded him with their weapons. It had been awkward, to say the least.

Cupid’s lessons were going better than expected. He was a natural at wielding his magic, and with his faery mother’s traits, using his magic for good came naturally to Cupid. Being of pure Dockalfar blood, it was not in Calder’s nature to use his magic for good, but Calder refused to be a pawn of his powers or his people.

Was he heading down the right corridor? This palace was so blasted big, and every corridor looked the same to him. All silver-and-white marble with grand arches. The décor was silver, white, and pale blue except for the occasional splash of color. Calder would guess the bouquets of fiery red flowers were Rudy’s influence.

Where could Cupid be? In the kitchen, pilfering treats from the cook? The library? No, that was where Donner would most likely be. The elf perplexed him.

A haunting melody of a violin met his ears, and he stopped in his tracks. What an incredibly beautiful yet melancholy sound. The notes called to him, taking hold of his body and propelling him to move forward as if by some ethereal force. He followed the melody until he found a large, intricately decorated music room filled with all manner

of instruments. By the window, a familiar figure sat playing an ornate violin. It was Donner.

Calder remained exceptionally still, not wanting to alert Donner to his presence and stop him from creating such wondrous sounds. The music slowed before picking up as Donner moved the bow across the strings. His brows were drawn together as he played, but he appeared to be immersed in the music. He sat with his ankles crossed, his back slightly arched, and his lips parted. Calder had never seen anything more beautiful. Donner's hair was as black as the darkest night, his eyes a radiant violet the likes of which Calder had never seen. His skin was fair, a sharp contrast to Calder's own charcoal gray complexion. Donner seemed to be the opposite of Calder in every way, from his outward appearance, to the beauty he produced. Calder could never hope to conjure up such enchantment.

"There you are."

Donner gave a start, the music screeching to a halt. His head shot up, and he stared wide-eyed at Calder.

With a sigh, Calder turned to frown at Jack. "That was very rude."

Jack gaped at him before seeming to shake himself out of it. "A Dockalfar calling me rude? Well, now I've heard everything. You're here to help Cupid with his powers, not supervise Donner's recital. Move along."

With a roll of his eyes, Calder followed Jack Frost out of the room, though not before turning back to Donner, who sat in silence, his violin on his lap. "That was beautiful."

"Thank you," Donner replied, his cheeks flushed.

"I would very much like to hear more sometime."

Donner nodded.

With a bright smile, Calder bowed his head, then left the room, following an impatient Jack down the corridor. Quite frankly, he was surprised to see the Prince of Frost.

"Shouldn't you be preparing for your wedding?" Calder asked, amused at the way Jack narrowed his eyes.

"If one more elf shoves another color palette at me, I'm going to lose my bloody mind."

Calder chuckled. He could just imagine Jack Frost surrounded by dozens of Christmas elves, all vying for his attention, asking questions about flower arrangements,

rehearsals, seating layouts, and the hundreds of other decisions requiring his input. Astonishingly the Prince of Frost hadn't lost it, brought on a blizzard, and snowed them all in. Jack wasn't exactly the most patient of winter spirits.

"I'm sure Rudy appreciates your efforts."

Jack came to a halt, forcing Calder to do the same. Had he said something wrong? Jack turned to him, eyes frosting over as he drew closer. His pitch-black hair drained itself of color, turning white from the roots to the tips, and his voice was a low growl when he spoke.

"You do not speak his name, Dockalfar. Not after what your brother did."

Calder frowned at Jack. "Correct. After what my brother did. His actions are his alone. I had nothing to do with it."

"Let's get one thing straight. I am merely tolerating your presence here out of respect for Mayor Kringle. However," Jack spat as he held one hand to his side, causing a blustering winter wind to sweep around Calder, its chill seeping into his bones. "You hurt anyone I care about, and not even Kringle will be able to save you from my wrath."

The ice prickled Calder's skin, and despite Jack's somewhat smaller stature compared to his own, he knew his magic could not rival that of the Prince of Frost, especially when the prince could summon the King of Frost's power should he wish.

"I suppose all I can do is show you I mean no harm to you or anyone else. I am not my brother, nor am I defined by my Dockalfar blood. In time, I hope you will come to see that for yourself."

The wind and ice vanished as if never summoned, and Jack's hair and eyes returned to their former colors.

"I trust you won't remain here long enough. Finish your training of Cupid, and go back to your kind. The treaty between our kingdoms ensures peace for the sake of our people. It doesn't change what you are or what I think of you. Cupid is in the room at the far end."

With that, Jack stormed down the corridor in the opposite direction.

Well, that was… enlightening.

Calder continued down the corridor until he found the room in question. Cupid was inside, concentrating exceptionally hard on pushing a cup across the small round table

with his powers. Every time he moved his finger, the cup fell over. With a smile, Calder walked over and set the cup upright again.

“Stop trying to push it, and instead allow your powers to surround it and glide it forward.”

Cupid bit down on his bottom lip and held his hand out before the cup, his gaze focused. A small black trail of smoke left his hand. It encircled the intricate little teacup and gently pulled. The teacup moved.

“I did it!” Cupid bounced excitedly.

“Wonderful! Soon you’ll be able to do it with larger objects and then living creatures.” The moment Calder put the box of sweets down, Cupid’s eyes widened, his mouth all but watering. Calder held a hand up with a chuckle. “These treats are for after you’ve practiced.”

Cupid’s bottom lip jutted out. “Humbug.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” Donner teased as he walked into the room. “You ate your weight in sugar cookies this morning.”

Cupid’s cheeks went bright pink. “Practicing magic makes me hungry.”

“Of course it does.” Donner took a seat at the table, his violet eyes sparkling with mischief. Calder was reminded of the cupcake he’d purchased.

“I brought you something.”

Donner straightened. “Me?”

“Yes.” Calder very gently opened the box to remove the lavender cupcake. He placed it on a small plate in front of Donner. “It reminded me of your eyes.”

Donner stared at him. “You… you brought me a cupcake because it reminded you of my eyes?”

Calder nodded. He pointed to the little star on top. “The color, but mostly the way it sparkles.”

Donner opened his mouth to reply but said nothing. He closed his mouth, his cheeks growing pink. Calder quite liked to see that particular hue on his fair skin.

“Thank you,” Donner replied quietly.

“We should get started,” Cupid said cheerfully, his gaze on the box of treats.

“Of course.” Calder walked to the end of the room. It might have been a ballroom at one point, but looked somewhat abandoned. At the moment, it seemed to be where random objects came to rest. Chests, old gilded mirrors, chairs, and even a battered old sleigh. Calder waited patiently as Cupid stood at the opposite end.

“Ready?” Calder asked, his voice projecting through the room.

Cupid nodded. “Yes.”

For days Calder had been teaching Cupid how to manipulate the darkness with his magic. Now it was time he learned to deflect it. Blitzen hadn’t been the least bit happy about the idea, but it was necessary. With the world knowing Cupid had Dockalfar blood, there was no telling when a challenge might come, and Calder intended for his little brother to be ready to protect himself. At least he and Blitzen had agreed on that much.

Calder closed his eyes, summoning the darkness within him. It filled his soul, wrapping around his heart before spreading through his body like a rolling fog. He thought of what he wanted to do and then snapped his wrist. It was only a small pulse, and he didn’t hurl it across the room as he normally would have against a foe. He sent it off in a small wave. Cupid threw his hands out, but not in time. The pulse knocked him over. With a huff, his sweet brother pushed himself to his feet, calling out across the room.

“I don’t know what I did wrong.”

“You waited too long to protect yourself,” Calder replied. “Let’s try again.”

Again and again Cupid was knocked off his feet. He could see Calder’s magic, but he couldn’t seem to find the right moment to deflect.

“Why don’t I demonstrate? You send a blast at me, and I’ll deflect,” Calder stated.

“But….” Cupid wrung his hands. “I still don’t know how to control it. What if I hurt you?”

“You won’t. I’ll deflect it. Come now.” Calder readied himself.

Reluctantly, Cupid agreed. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, summoning the darkness. With a fierce cry, he sent out a blast of dark magic.

“Ouch!”

Calder snapped his attention to the table where Donner sat, his finger bleeding.

“Calder!”

Cupid’s cry came moments before Calder’s world went black.

Chapter Three

“OF ALL the foolish, irresponsible, cotton-headed things to do!” Donner fumed, pacing the room.

“Would you please stop yelling at him?” Cupid huffed before he turned his attention back to Calder. “Calder, please wake up.”

“He should have been paying attention,” Donner replied through his teeth. “You had just attacked him, and he left himself wide open! What kind of a lesson is that? A lesson in what not to do, that’s what!”

Donner couldn’t believe Calder’s recklessness. How could he look away at the exact moment his brother had launched an attack on him?

Because he was worried about you, you silly moose!

Poppycock. Why would a Dockalfar care that he’d cut his finger? It was only a little cut. He hadn’t been paying attention when slicing his cupcake. Nor had he expected the knife to be so sharp. Next thing he knew, he was bleeding, and Calder had been slammed into the wall so hard he was out before he hit the floor.

“I thought you were learning to control your powers,” Donner said, turning to Cupid.

“I am. It takes time. Calder’s been mastering his powers for hundreds of years. I’ve been doing it for mere weeks.”

“Then he should know better than to have you attack him!” Donner went back to pacing. Maybe they should call Jack. No, he might put an end to this and send Calder off. Not that Donner cared if he did. He didn’t. But Cupid would be disappointed and all pouty. He was doing it for Cupid. Obviously.

“He would have deflected it if he’d been paying attention,” Cupid replied crossly as he brushed Calder’s hair away from his brow. Donner came to a halt. He spun on his heels.

“What are you insinuating?”

Cupid opened his mouth to reply when Calder groaned. His eyes fluttered open, and he frowned.

“You pack quite a punch, little brother.”

“Oh, Calder, are you all right?” Cupid helped Calder sit up.

“I’m fine. That was rather impressive.”

Cupid’s bottom lip trembled, and he threw himself into his brother’s huge arms. “I’m so sorry, Calder.”

“Hush now,” Calder assured him, one large hand on Cupid’s blond head. “It’d take a lot more than that to hurt me.”

Donner hadn’t expected such tenderness from a Dockalfar. Calder seemed aware of his size and strength as he comforted his much smaller sibling. His smile was genuine and warm. After assuring Cupid he was just fine, Calder released him and stood, towering over both Donner and Cupid. That might intimidate other Christmas elves, but not Donner.

“What were you thinking? Turning away during an attack?” Donner scolded, poking Calder in the chest, more gently this time to save himself a broken finger.

Something suddenly occurred to Calder, and his expression became concerned. He took Donner’s hand in his, drawing a gasp from him.

“What are you doing?” Donner tugged at his hand, but it was no use. Calder inspected his finger and the thin red line of blood.

“You cut yourself,” Calder stated with a frown. Before Donner could reply that it was nothing, and it truly was, Calder put his finger to Donner’s. A heat seared his skin, and Donner winced.

“What are you doing?”

Just as quickly as the heat came, it was gone. When Calder removed his finger, Donner noticed the thin red line running across it. Wait. Donner’s finger didn’t hurt. His head shot up, and he stared at Calder.

“What did you do?”

Calder smiled warmly. “Dockalfar can’t heal, but we can transfer wounds, transfer the

pain elsewhere.”

And he’d chosen to transfer Donner’s pain to himself? Donner didn’t know what to make of that. Why? Why would he do such a thing? Donner didn’t ask. He was too afraid of what Calder might reply.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.” Rudy entered the room, his face flushed and almost as red as his hair. Donner couldn’t imagine putting together a wedding the scale of Rudy and Jack’s. Two kingdoms were being united through marriage, the Frost Kingdom and North Pole City, which meant everything was twice as big and twice as challenging. Donner felt for Rudy. He hoped Rudy and Jack survived the wedding plans long enough to enjoy their big day.

“Is everything all right?” Donner asked.

“I’m afraid the rehearsal has been moved up to tonight. The King of Frost arranged for soldiers from the toy soldier army to perform at the wedding. Unfortunately, their rehearsal clashed with ours. I’m so sorry.”

Donner walked over and patted Rudy’s arm. “Just breathe. It’s all right. You know we’re here to help any way we can.”

Rudy looked relieved. “Thank you, my friend. If you would all make your way to the grand ballroom, Jack and I will be in there shortly. We’re just rounding everyone up.”

“I can fetch Blitzen,” Cupid volunteered cheerfully.

“Thank you, Cupid. That would be a great help. You can finish your training after rehearsal if you like. I’ll see you all shortly.” Rudy left, and Cupid sprinted off, calling out behind him.

“I’ll be back soon, Donner!”

Before Donner could reply, Cupid disappeared around the corner, leaving Donner all alone with Calder.

“Perhaps you should wait in the library,” Donner suggested, hoping Calder would do just that. Besides feeling foolishly nervous at having Calder watching him dance, he could imagine what his brethren might think at seeing Calder there. He doubted any of them would be impolite, if nothing else than for Cupid’s sake, but there would be toy soldiers there, and they weren’t so timid.

Calder seemed to think about it. “Will there be music?”

“It’s a dance rehearsal, so I imagine so.”

“Wonderful. Then I’ll stay.”

Donner suppressed a groan. What could he say? The elf had brought him a cupcake and then healed his finger. It was not as if Donner had any say in where Calder should or shouldn’t go.

They arrived at the grand ballroom. Donner had been in it several times, but he still found it breathtaking. Its silver-and-white marble pillars stood regally supporting grand arches intricately decorated in pale blue and silver. The orchestra arrived, arranging themselves at the very end in their place, all dressed in white with white instruments.

Where was everyone?

“Perhaps we can find a way to amuse ourselves until the others arrive.”

Donner’s cheeks burned, and his heart fluttered most awfully. He spun on his heels and found himself face-to-chest with Calder. Swallowing hard, he lifted his chin. It wasn’t right for an elf to be so tall, or so… broad and muscular. Calder smiled, and Donner’s heart fluttered again. How very annoying.

Calder moved his arm, and Donner took a quick step back. He was surprised when Calder held out his hand.

Donner blinked up at him. “What are you doing?”

Calder nodded toward the empty ballroom floor.

“I’m not dancing with you.” The very nerve. As if Donner would do such a thing. It would require him holding Calder’s hand and getting… close.

Calder shrugged. He put one hand to his chest and held the other out before he began to dance and sway. Plum pudding. The elf had gone mad. Calder smiled as he danced, his large stature not impeding his easy grace in the least. Donner would never have suspected the elf to possess such flair. It was difficult not to watch him, and even more so to appear indifferent. Not when Calder waltzed around him. The orchestra began to play a soft melody, and Donner cursed under his breath. Were they trying to be droll?

“Join me,” Calder said.

“No.” Donner folded his arms over his chest. Absolutely not. Dance with a Dockalfar? Absurd. He could just hear the gossip now.

Seemingly unperturbed by Donner's refusal, Calder began to sing.

Oh for the love of holly. He sings too? Calder sang in a smooth baritone that did the strangest thing to Donner's skin. He didn't like it one bit. He especially didn't like it when Calder sang about Donner's eyes and the stars.

Calder danced closer, his voice low and dripping with honey. "Dance with me."

"I'll do no such thing."

"Afraid I'll sully your reputation?" He stopped behind Donner and murmured in his ear. "Or afraid you might like it?"

A gasp escaped Donner, his face burning crimson. He spun, bringing his hand with him. To his chagrin, Calder caught his wrist. His grin and eyes were filled with mischief.

"Careful, little dear, or someone might get the wrong idea."

"Release me this instant," Donner demanded, his temper rising. The audacity!

Calder chuckled and twirled him around. Donner released the most unflattering yelp. He lost his balance and fell against Calder, his hand on Calder's chest as he looked up into his eyes.

"Well, now, what's this?"

Donner swiftly pushed himself away from Calder. Of all the elves who could have caught him, why did it have to be Vixen? He was a terrible gossip.

Vixen looked from Donner to Calder and back. "Did we interrupt something?"

Donner felt his cheeks burn. "Don't be ridiculous. I tripped."

"Of course." A mischievous smile spread across Vixen's handsome face. "I always land in the arms of big, strong elves when I trip."

Donner was so scandalized, he had no reply. Beside Vixen, Vale Frost studied him curiously. Plum pudding! When had Lieutenant Frost come in? What if he got the wrong idea? What if he told Jack that Donner was… was…? What was he doing? Nothing! He hadn't done anything. But Vale didn't know that. What if he told Jack that Donner and Calder were—which they weren't! Crabapples.

Luckily, in a matter of minutes, everyone was in attendance, and Jack was addressing the room. “All right, everyone. I have some bad news. Thistle, the toy soldier who was chosen to dance with Donner, has had an unfortunate sleighing accident. He’s well, but I’m afraid he won’t be doing any dancing for some time. Not until his leg is healed.”

Rudy turned to whisper in Jack’s ear. Whatever he said, it was clear Jack wasn’t happy about it. The two turned from the crowd, and Jack shook his head as Rudy gently argued his case. Donner had no idea what was going on. Jack seemed ready to deny Rudy’s request until their captain placed his hand to Jack’s cheek. It would seem the Prince of Frost could only say no to his love for so long, and the tender caress was his downfall. He let out a heavy sigh and nodded. With a bright smile, Rudy turned to address Calder.

“Would you mind standing in for Thistle? At least until we find the right partner for Donner.”

Donner gasped, and the room broke off into whispers and murmurs. Pair him with a Dockalfar? How could Rudy ask such a thing? Even if it was just for rehearsals, it was likely the press would be in at some point to take pictures. The whole of North Pole City couldn’t get enough of Jack and Rudy’s wedding preparations. What if someone were to snap a picture of him dancing with a Dockalfar?

“If Donner accepts, I would be honored,” Calder replied.

“Do we really have time to teach a Dockalfar to waltz?” Dasher asked, his narrowed gaze on Calder.

Dasher had been gone for days, chasing a quarry he could never hope to catch, and here he was passing judgment on Calder. The nerve. Donner supposed he should be grateful the King of Frost hadn’t turned Dasher into an ice sculpture for his insolence. Honestly, as if Dasher stood a chance with the frosty monarch.

“I know how to dance,” Calder replied, resulting in several surprised expressions.

Donner worried his bottom lip with his teeth. Blasted Calder. Now everyone was looking to Donner. If he said no, he would be disappointing his captain and dear friend. If he said yes, he was exposing his reputation. Resigned, he gave a nod, and even attempted a smile.

“Of course, Rudy.”

“Wonderful! Everyone, please split into two even groups, lining up on either side of the floor.”

Donner swept past Calder, growling at him. “If the press appears, you must make absolutely certain I’m not photographed dancing with you.”

“Would it be so terrible?”

“Yes, it would be. Everyone would think you and I are… that we’re…. I can’t be seen with a Dockalfar!”

Calder took hold of Donner’s arm and turned him; his hand on Donner’s cheek stilled him.

“Easy, my little dear. Your reputation won’t suffer on my account.”

Donner was relieved, yet annoyed at being addressed once again as Calder’s “little dear.”

“Thank you,” Donner managed, letting the endearment go. Calder was being cooperative, so it was best Donner not tempt him into changing his mind.

“Everyone, take your positions.”

Calder towered above the rest, his great height even surpassing Jack’s. He stood before Donner and held out a hand. Clearing his throat, Donner accepted. He couldn’t believe he was doing this. He must have gone mad. His hand was enveloped in Calder’s much larger one, and when Calder placed his right hand to Donner’s side, Donner did his best not to fidget.

“Your hand,” Calder prompted with a mischievous smile.

“I beg your pardon?” Donner blinked at him dumbly.

“Your hand. Place it on my arm.”

“Oh! Right. Yes.” Positions and all that. Oh dear. Doing as instructed, Donner placed his left hand on Calder’s arm.

Rudy and Jack took their positions in the center between both rows of dancers. “All right everyone,” Rudy said cheerfully. “Follow our lead, and remember to listen to the music.”

The orchestra began to play a beautiful waltz, and when Rudy and Jack began to move, everyone followed suit. Donner had danced the waltz countless times, but he’d never felt as self-conscious about it as he did now. Before he could give it any more thought,

he was whirled around. Donner did his best not to smile.

Calder took hold of his waist and lifted him at the same time as the others lifted their partners. Donner held on to his strong arms. “Admit it,” Calder said. “You’re enjoying yourself.” He turned, then placed Donner gently on his feet.

“You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“No. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Poppycock. What you see is my ever-growing frustration. Why are you so blasted tall?” It was like dancing with a tree!

“Why are you so grumpy? Not very natural for a Christmas elf. Well, unless you’re Blitzen, but from what I hear, he’s always been like that.”

Donner glowered at him. “I’m not grumpy.”

“Oh? That frown says otherwise.” He leaned in close. Too close for Donner’s liking. “What’s the matter? Afraid you might like me?”

Donner let out an indelicate snort. “Hardly.” The music picked up, and Donner was pleasantly surprised at how well Calder kept up. The elf certainly did know how to dance. Donner was picked up again. Calder turned and placed him on his feet. Donner supposed he wasn’t having a terrible time.

“I’m curious. What happened to your brother Gunne?” Donner asked as they followed Rudy and Jack’s lead, returning to their positions for more waltzing.

“He broke many laws when he decided to carry out his petty vengeance. It was foolish of him to believe he could meddle in the affairs of the Frost monarchy and not face the repercussions. But what he did to Cupid was unforgiveable.” Calder shook his head, his frown deep. “He caused so much pain.”

“What will happen to him?”

“He’s awaiting trial by the Council. My father and the other council members will decide how he’s to be punished.”

“I thought Dockalfar hated the Frost Kingdom.”

“There’s no love lost between the Frost Kingdom and the Dockalfar, but the Council is as eager to remain at peace as the King of Frost. War brings only pain and death. The Dockalfar regret what happened to the Queen of Frost. It’s haunted our kingdom for

centuries.”

Donner nodded sadly. “It’s haunted the King of Frost as well. The poor king. Locked away in his palace, all alone. I can’t imagine how lonely he must be.”

“I can,” Calder replied quietly.

Before Donner could ask what he meant, a toy soldier ran into the ballroom. He spotted Jack and hurried over, then spoke quietly. Rudy let out a low gasp, his words quiet, but Donner and Calder were close enough to hear.

“Jack, we have to do something.” Rudy looked up at Jack, his expression concerned.

“We’ll take care of it, darling. I promise.” He kissed Rudy’s cheek before turning to Vale. “Notify Hollis. We need as many toy soldiers as possible to head to the Rock Candy Mountains.”

“Jack, what’s going on?” Blitzen asked. “We’ve been relocating elves from there to the newly built gingerbread houses for months.”

Jack’s determined gaze melted into concern. It had to be serious to worry Jack Frost. “The Rock Candy Mountain’s highest peak has melted enough to crumble. There could be an avalanche at any moment.”

Donner gasped. “But… we’ve not finished the houses. We still have a dozen or more families to build houses for. They’re at the base of the mountain near the mine.”

“They’ll be crushed in their homes if there’s an avalanche,” Dasher said. He looked as stricken as the rest of them.

“That’s why we’re going to gather up everyone we can, relocate those families, and get those homes built,” Jack replied, his expression determined.

Donner looked up at Calder. He was bigger than any of them. He could carry twice the gingerbread even Blitzen could carry, and Blitzen was the biggest of the Rein Dear.

“You should come.”

Calder looked surprised. “You want me to help?”

“You’re stronger than any of us, and you have magic. There must be something you can do.”

“Absolutely not,” Jack growled. “No Dockalfar is going near that village. Those elves

are terrified enough."

"They won't be scared once they see Calder is there to help," Cupid chipped in. "Donner's right. Calder is stronger than most of us. And he knows how to use his magic to do good. We could get so much more done quicker if he's there."

"No," Jack snapped. "I forbid it. He can't be trusted."

Calder stepped forward, his hands balled into fists at his sides. "Get off your high sleigh, Frost. Elves are in danger. Elflings too. You would put your pride before their safety?"

"It's exactly their safety I'm thinking of," Jack bellowed, the room dropping in temperature.

"If that were true, then you would let me help. You know Donner and Cupid are right. I can help. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. Have one of your soldiers watching me if it makes you feel better, but we're wasting time arguing."

"Jack, please." Rudy took hold of Jack's hand.

With a frustrated growl, Jack put a hand up. "Fine. But I swear to you, if you—"

"Yes, yes. Hurt someone you care about and your wrath will be unyielding. I heard you the first time. Now let's go." Calder turned and headed for the door. Cupid quickly followed with Blitzen right behind him. Donner joined them, telling himself he had no idea where that sudden burst of faith in Calder had come from. He hoped he hadn't just made a terrible mistake.

Chapter Four

THE CALL for help had been carried on the wind by Jack Frost, and everyone was eager to offer their services. The King of Frost sent dozens of toy soldiers to lend a hand, and Donner was pleased to see all of his Rein Dear brethren in attendance. The elves from the village at the base of the Rock Candy Mountains came out to greet them. Over the last several months, Donner and the rest of the Rein Dear had been constructing new sturdy homes away from the mountain, near Cinnamon Square, where the surrounding villages went for their food and shopping. It was a bit of a trek from the old village near the Rock Candy Mountain mine to the new village, but the villagers knew it was necessary to keep their families safe. The mine was the village's only source of income, which meant if it was destroyed by an avalanche, the villagers would have to search elsewhere for work.

Donner helped Cupid out of their sleigh when Calder stepped out of his. The villagers

broke into a panic. They fled into their homes, slamming their doors and shutting their windows. Well, that was new.

Jack arched an eyebrow at Calder. “You’ll have to teach me how you do that.”

Calder chuckled. “Why? Planning on scaring away some wedding planners?”

Rudy turned to Jack with an amused smile. “Something you want to share, darling?”

“Um, no.” Jack cleared his throat before pointing toward the barricaded homes. “You should probably go speak to them. They’re less likely to cower.”

“Of course,” Rudy replied sweetly. He turned to the rest of the Rein Dears. “Vixen, Cupid, will you accompany me, please?”

The three headed off, and Donner discreetly glanced over at Calder. He didn’t seem the least bit concerned about the runaway villagers. Donner couldn’t help his frown. How awful it must be to incite such a reaction wherever one went. How did it not hurt Calder’s feelings? He supposed Calder was accustomed to it, but still. Donner couldn’t imagine living his life being feared in such a manner. Many magical creatures feared Jack, but mostly his temper. They never truly feared for their lives, especially lately, thanks to Rudy’s influence. With Calder it was different. Those who encountered him truly believed he would harm them. You were one of them. Donner promptly told his thoughts to go fly a kite. Perhaps he was, but not anymore.

It didn’t take long before the villagers emerged with Rudy, Vixen, and Cupid. They kept their distance from Calder, but thanked Jack for coming to help. Soon everyone had a task to perform.

The snow at the base of the mountain had hoarfrost, the crystals sparkling like diamonds. It was a beautiful day with the sun shining in the sky. The perfect setting for an avalanche. They went to work quickly. Everyone pitched in, whether carrying slabs of gingerbread from the sleighs over to the foundations, as Calder was doing, or helping the elves move their belongings out of their old homes, as Donner and Cupid were doing.

In the afternoon, Donner and Cupid volunteered to go to Cinnamon Square to bring back lunch for everyone. They brought plenty of tasty treats, along with hot drinks, which they distributed. Donner left Calder for last. As he suspected, everyone split off into little groups to eat, none of which included Calder. Not that Calder seemed put off. He sat on a large fallen tree, a smile on his face as he watched a couple of foxes frolicking in the snow nearby. Donner felt his cheeks warm as he handed Calder a large paper bag.

“Your lunch.”

Calder’s smile reached his eyes. “Thank you.” He took the bag from Donner.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked, so it’s mostly savory.” He imagined Dockalfar were less likely to eat as much sugar and sweets as Christmas elves did, but he also remembered the box of cakes and cupcakes Calder had brought him and Cupid. “But there’s a cake too.” He’d made certain Calder’s lunch was properly portioned. The elf was quite strapping, to say the least.

“Sounds perfect.”

Donner stood there dumbly, his own lunch in a smaller bag in his hand. Should he ask to join Calder? Should he merely invite himself to sit?

Calder lifted his head and cocked it. “Would you like to join me? I won’t feel offended if you would rather sit with your brethren.”

With a smile, Donner handed his lunch to Calder. “Would you hold this for me? Some of us aren’t so tall,” he teased.

Calder placed both lunches on the tree beside him, then stood. Before Donner could ask what he was doing, Calder took hold of his waist. He easily lifted Donner and placed him gently on the tree.

“There you go.” Calder took a seat beside him, then handed Donner his lunch.

“Thank you.” Donner smiled, though he was somewhat annoyed at himself for blushing all the blasted time. When he looked up, his Rein Dear brothers were all gaping at him. Honestly. Sometimes they behaved like elflings. Donner stuck out his tongue at them, and Cupid giggled. Beside Donner, Calder laughed softly.

“What about your reputation?” Calder asked.

“Yes, well, their reputations aren’t flawless. Vixen almost single-handedly destroyed the Frost Kingdom by revealing one of its secrets to a corrupt toy soldier. Rudy and Jack hid their relationship for centuries. Jack lost his heart to the ice and became a monster. Major Hollis almost killed Rudy. Cupid hid the truth about his Dockalfar blood, and Dasher has this silly notion that the King of Frost needs a new sweetheart, namely him. Frankly, I think my decision to eat lunch with a Dockalfar pales in comparison to my brethren’s past indiscretions.”

Calder blinked at him before he threw his head back and laughed. The sound was rich and warm, and Donner couldn’t help but join in. He didn’t care that everyone looked at

him as if he'd lost his marbles. He was enjoying himself.

The two of them talked and teased as they ate lunch. Soon it was time to get back to work, and Donner was in good spirits. When he returned to one of the homes to retrieve the last of the family's belongings, he overheard a group of toy soldiers talking.

"The audacity. How can Jack not see that elf is merely pretending, waiting for the right moment to strike? After what his brother did? How could Jack allow him to even go near his home?"

Another toy soldier joined in. "He'll betray Jack the moment his back is turned. That creature is vile and sinister, capable of terrible destruction. We should do something."

Donner's anger boiled over, and he marched up to the toy soldiers. "You'll do no such thing. You should be ashamed of yourselves. The king's great army plotting against an elf who has done nothing but show kindness. Yes, he may be a Dockalfar, but he's not like his brother, or his kind. He's good."

One of the toy soldiers scoffed. "There's no such thing."

"Cupid is good, and he's of Dockalfar blood," Donner reminded them.

"Cupid is part winter faery," another toy soldier argued. "He chose the light. Calder chose the dark. He's a monster and needs to be shown his place is with his own kind."

Donner balled his hands into fists at his side. "How dare you! You so much as lift a finger against Calder, and you'll regret it."

The toy soldiers laughed, their leader speaking up. "You're a Rein Dear. Nothing but a pretty little puppet for Mayor Kringle. You think we're afraid of you?"

"How about me?" Calder stepped up beside Donner, giving him a start. Where the holly berries had he come from? Had he heard everything they'd said? "Apologize to him," Calder ordered, his tone icy.

"We don't answer to you, Dockalfar," the leader growled, his hand going to the baton on his belt.

"No, but you answer to me."

The fierce growl took them all by surprise, and the toy soldiers scrambled to stand in formation, their gazes stern and straight ahead. Jack stopped before them, his eyes narrowed. "If I hear such talk again, know that I will not hesitate to put you in your

place. You bring shame to your position and my family's name. Now get to work."

The toy soldiers nodded and took off, leaving nothing but a flurry of snow behind. Jack didn't so much as look at Calder as he walked by, but his tone softened. "Get back to work. We still have a lot to do."

Calder nodded. He turned to Donner and gave him a bow. "Thank you."

With that, he walked away, and Donner continued on his previous path to one of the homes, his heart beating wildly. Had he just defended a Dockalfar? He had no idea what the matter was with him. Yet all he could think about was Calder's smile and wonderful laughter. He hadn't intended to leap to Calder's defense, but hearing those toy soldiers saying such things about Calder had infuriated him.

"Hello."

Donner came to a halt and looked down to find the source of the soft voice. He smiled at the tiny elfling standing in front of the door to the house. She was sweet, with a shy smile, big brown eyes, and unruly brown hair, dressed in a plum-colored dress with white-and-purple-striped stockings, and pink boots.

"Hello, little one." Donner kneeled before her. "And what's your name?"

"Tulip." She looked him up and down. "You're a Rein Dear."

"I am," he stated proudly. He loved being a Rein Dear, loved the way her eyes filled with wonder because of it.

She studied him before seeming to come to some kind of conclusion. "Is he your friend?"

"Who?" Donner asked.

She pointed behind him, and he craned his neck to see Calder lifting a hefty slab of gingerbread onto his shoulder. Donner turned back to Tulip, unsure how to respond.

She leaned in close and whispered hoarsely, "Mama says Dockalfar are evil."

"Well, to be honest, I thought so too, but then I met Calder, and he's not evil at all."

"He's not?"

Donner shook his head. "He's very kind and gentle. He's been very good to me."

Her little face lit up, and she clapped her hands before whispering loudly again. “Is he your sweetheart?”

Donner gaped at her. Of all the things to say! Where did these elflings learn these things? Perhaps if he pretended he hadn’t heard her….

“Well?” She planted her tiny fists on her hips, her brows drawn together. Insistent little thing.

“We’re friends,” Donner said, standing. He held out his hand, and she took it, her small fingers curling around his. Together they walked inside. “Why don’t you help me?”

“Okay!” She skipped alongside him as he headed into the bedroom, which had only a small chest and several knickknacks. He handed her a bright yellow candle.

“Here you go. You can light our way in case it gets dark. Now stay close to me.” He headed for the front door with Tulip cheerfully accompanying him. “Where are your parents?”

“My mommy’s in the garden. She’s taking her special flowers that Grandma left her.”

“All right. Why don’t we go tell her you’re going to help me?”

Tulip nodded and carried the candle very dutifully. Outside they found Tulip’s mother, who thanked Donner for his help. She was incredibly grateful for everything they were doing. It was just her and her daughter, and Tulip couldn’t wait for them to move into their new home. As they chatted outside in the snow, Donner caught movement from the corner of his eye. He turned, his heart leaping into his throat when he spotted the gray rabbit bounding off toward the mine’s entrance, with Tulip running after him.

Oh, no. No.

“Tulip!” Donner dropped everything and took off after Tulip. “Stop! Tulip, stop!” Behind, he heard Tulip’s mother calling out to her, but the elfling didn’t acknowledge them. She ran gleefully at full speed after the rabbit. The rabbit, and soon after, Tulip, disappeared into the darkness of the mine. Donner stopped just inside the mine’s entrance, the floor rumbling beneath him.

“Tulip!” Oh, Goddess. Only darkness stretched ahead of him. Pitch blackness. His brow beaded with sweat, and his heart pounded in his ears. He was paralyzed from fear, thinking back to that awful day. Tulip…. She needed him, and he couldn’t move. He had to do something. Taking a deep breath, he called out as loud as he could.

“Calder, help!”

In seconds Calder was at his side, his eyes filled with concern. He took hold of Donner’s shoulders. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Tulip! She’s a tiny elfling. She ran into the mine after a rabbit. You have to find her!”

Calder didn’t hesitate. He sped off into the blackness. Donner could hear him calling for Tulip, and he hoped Calder found her quickly. He stood pressed against the stone wall, feeling helpless and useless. Where the holly had that elfling gone? She couldn’t have wandered too far. Dust snowed down from the ceiling, falling on Donner’s head. He looked up, puzzled. Was it snowing inside the mine? That couldn’t be right. It happened again, and Donner’s eyes widened before the ground vibrated beneath his feet once more. He ran outside and looked past the mine at the mountain just as he heard Blitzen shout.

“Avalanche!”

Donner shook his head. Oh no. It couldn’t be. “Calder!” Donner tried to run for the mine, but Blitzen caught hold of his arm. Dasher came up beside him.

“Are you mad? You can’t go in there.”

“Calder and Tulip are still in there!” Donner tried to get away from his brethren who held him. He didn’t know what he could do, but he knew he had to do something. He couldn’t just leave them in there. Calder had run in because of him, because he’d asked him to. The snow was tumbling down the mountain, and tears welled in Donner’s eyes.

“No! We can’t leave him in there! Calder!”

Jack came running, his eyes wide. “What happened?”

“The snow is collapsing. There are still villagers in some of the houses, and Calder’s inside the mine,” Dasher explained.

“Calder!” Cupid came running, only to be restrained by Blitzen. “Jack, you have to do something!”

“Everyone stand back!” Jack’s eyes frosted over, his hair turning white from the roots to the tips. The snow cascaded down, hitting the mine as Jack summoned his powers, sending a bluster of wind against the falling snow, but there was too much of it. The remaining villagers fled from their homes at the base of the mountain, and Jack’s attention was divided between keeping them safe and the snow hurtling toward the

mine.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Blitzen replied somberly.

“No! Calder!” Donner tried to push away from Dasher, but his friend threw his arms around him and lifted him off his feet, carrying him away from the mine. The snow barreled down the mountain, and as much as Jack tried, there was too much snow and not enough time. Calder would be crushed.

“There’s too much snow. Everyone fall back!” Blitzen picked up a distraught Cupid, and everyone pulled back as far away from the base of the mountain as they could.

“There must be something we can do,” Cupid cried, clutching onto Blitzen. When no reply was forthcoming, Cupid buried his face in Blitzen’s coat.

Given no choice, Donner was dragged away to a safe distance as the ground rumbled and shook with the incoming ocean of snow. It rolled down the mountain, crashing into the mine like a colossal wave, swallowing everything in its path. Jack was forced to release the hold on the snow over the mountain to protect the villagers who had yet to make it to safety. The wood of the mine splintered and catapulted in various directions. What wasn’t covered was destroyed. Who knew the damage that had been caused inside?

When it was over, stillness spread for miles. No birds chirped, not even the wind blew. Donner’s heart shattered.

Chapter Five

DONNER DROPPED to his knees, awash with regret. If only he’d done something, spoken up when he had the chance. He had so much he wanted to share with Calder.

“I said such terrible things,” Donner murmured to no one in particular.

“You defended him when no one else would,” Cupid said with a sniff. He hugged Donner tight. “He liked you.”

Donner swallowed hard. “I liked him too.” So very much.

“What in the name of Kringle creation is that?” Dasher helped Donner to his feet, and they all took a step back.

Donner watched in stunned silence as something large and shiny surfaced from the snow. It looked like a giant lump of rock candy from inside the mine. The sun’s rays reflected off the sharp candy edges. It rolled closer to them, and when it came to a

stop, everyone edged closer, gathering around it. Donner stood with his heart in his throat as he carefully approached the giant ball of rock candy. Hesitantly, he put his hand to its cold hard surface.

A crack appeared, splintering into another and then another. The crowd gasped as the hard candy cracked until it burst into hundreds of candy crystals that rained down on them from the sky. On the snow, wrapped protectively around Tulip, was Calder. With bated breath, Donner kneeled beside Tulip, astonished to find the fluffy bunny alive and well in her embrace. He put his hand to her head. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled up at him.

“Oh thank goodness!” Tulip’s mother fell to her knees, crying, as the tiny elfling bounded into her arms, bunny and all.

Dasher stared down at Calder. “He… he risked his life to save her.”

“Of course he did,” Donner replied softly. He placed his hand to Calder’s cheek before moving it to stroke his hair, brushing it away from his face. He looked peaceful. As if he were asleep. Cupid was at his side, his fingers to Calder’s neck.

“He’s alive.” Cupid looked up at Donner with a wobbly smile. “He’ll be okay.”

Donner nodded. He stood and turned to his Rein Dear brethren. “We should take him inside and get him warm.” His brethren nodded, and they all pitched in, helping to carry the larger, heavier elf toward one of the nearby sleighs. Donner sat in the backseat against the far corner, and he asked his brethren to lay Calder across the seat. He’d hold him. Thankfully, no one questioned him, and they did as he’d asked. They laid Calder with his head in Donner’s lap. Calder was too tall, his legs bent at the knees, but it would do.

Dasher climbed behind the reins and set them on the road back to town. On the ride there, Calder stirred with a groan. His eyes slowly opened, and he blinked a few times before he focused on Donner. A beautiful smile came onto his face.

“Hello, little dear.”

Donner let out a huff, pretending to be put off by the endearment. “You scared the holly out of me.”

“I’m sorry.” Calder placed his hand to Donner’s cheek, and Donner leaned into the touch. He didn’t care that Dasher sat in front of him and could hear them. “Are you all right?”

“Am I—” Donner shook his head and tried his best to keep his emotions at bay. “How

can you ask me that after what I did? You could have been killed."

Calder frowned at him. "Don't you dare blame yourself. Out of everyone you could have asked for help, you chose me. You trusted me enough to help Tulip. I'm touched and honored. Thank you."

"What would I have done if you'd—"

Calder put his finger to Donner's lips. "That's enough of that now. I'll be just fine. Tulip is safe. That's all that matters." He closed his eyes and carefully turned to nuzzle his face against Donner's stomach. "I wouldn't trade this moment for anything."

Donner sighed and ran his fingers through Calder's hair, comforting him. He smiled warmly, feeling when Calder fell asleep.

"So… you and Calder."

Donner glared at the back of Dasher's head. "Whatever you're going to say, I suggest you don't."

"I was just going to say he's not what I expected."

"We judged him before knowing him. What does that make us?" Donner asked quietly.

"Don't listen to what anyone says. Follow your heart."

Donner was surprised. His friend had never been one to spout such tender words. Dasher led a fast-paced life filled with festive cocktails, late nights, and lots of frolicking in the snow with whatever toy soldier or pretty elf caught his eye. He'd only ever been concerned with having fun and being as scandalous as possible. When Donner heard his Rein Dear brother had set his sights on the King of Frost, he truly believed Dasher had gone mad.

"How is the king?" Donner asked cautiously.

There was a long pause before Dasher replied. "Locked up in his icy ivory tower, as always. He had his guards escort me out, and now refuses to see me. I suppose I should be grateful he didn't freeze me and place me in his garden as a lawn ornament."

Donner thought about that. "What are you going to do?"

Dasher shrugged. "What can I do?"

“Not give up.”

Dasher turned in his seat. “What are you talking about? He’s cast me out.”

“Why do you think that is?” Donner really shouldn’t encourage Dasher. For all he knew, they could end up with one less Rein Dear. The King of Frost was not to be trifled with. Then again…. Donner looked down at Calder.

“If the king felt indifferent toward you, why cast you out? Why spend so much energy keeping you away?” Donner lifted his gaze to Dasher’s and smiled. “He’s the King of Frost. Why should he care about one little Christmas elf?”

“Sounds to me like he’s purposefully pushing you away,” Calder murmured.

Dasher rolled his eyes and turned back to face the front. “Now I’m taking romantic advice from a Dockalfar?”

Calder smiled, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he gazed up at Donner. “Well, if you’re going to go out in a snowy blaze of glory, why not do it for love?”

Donner inhaled sharply. Calder couldn’t possibly be implying what Donner thought he was. As if sensing his uncertainty, Calder gave him a wink, then closed his eyes, snuggling against Donner. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had been so affectionate toward him. His Rein Dear brethren were affectionate, but not in the same way. They roughhoused and teased each other, but Calder’s touch sent shivers through Donner. His heart beat fiercely, and his stomach filled with butterflies. He didn’t dare think about what that might mean.

Once they arrived at the village, Donner and Dasher helped Calder into one of the small homes. It was empty at the moment, with the elves visiting family in North Pole City until construction was completed in their town, but it had food, firewood, and enough supplies to keep Calder in comfort.

There was no point in putting Calder in the bedroom or on the couch. As sturdy as the furniture might be, they would be far too small for Calder. For now, Donner and Dasher helped Calder onto one of the stools by the fireplace in the living room.

“Do you need anything?” Dasher asked Donner, his gaze shooting over to Calder, who had his eyes closed and his head in his hand.

“I’ll be fine, thank you. Would you please make sure we’re not disturbed? He could use a good night’s rest. I’ll make sure he’s comfortable.”

Dasher studied Donner, a small smile spreading across his handsome face. For a

moment, Donner thought his friend might tease him, but he was relieved when Dasher simply nodded and walked out, then closed the front door behind him. Donner quickly went to work warming the small home, stoking the fire and then grabbing every blanket and fur he could find. He brought pillows and arranged everything near the fire. When he was satisfied Calder would be comfortable and warm, he turned but halted when he found Calder watching him, a soft smile on his face.

“You needn’t go through so much trouble for me.”

“Nonsense. You need to rest after the stunt you pulled today.” The more Donner thought about it, the more frustrated he became. He went to Calder’s side and slipped an arm around him. “Come on now.”

“Yes, sir,” Calder teased, his voice a low growl that sent a tingle through Donner. Carefully Donner helped lower Calder onto the floor and got him comfortable. As Calder fluffed his pillow, Donner couldn’t help pacing. So many things could have gone wrong.

“Why are you trying to wear a hole in the floor of this lovely cabin?”

“You could have been killed!” Donner stilled and put his hand to his lips, taken aback by his outburst.

Calder sat up slowly and stared at him. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be! Do you have any idea what it felt like to watch you run in there, knowing I could do nothing to help you? It was awful.” He resumed his pacing. “All I could do was stand there, frozen to the spot. It was horribly dark. No lighting at all. I wanted to go, I really did, but the darkness….”

Calder patted the fur-lined floor beside him. “Please.”

Donner was tempted not to, just on principle, but he feared if he didn’t sit, his legs might give out at any moment. He dropped down onto the blanket beside Calder, his heart hammering in his ears when Calder slipped an arm around him and pulled him close. Calder’s body was strong, but soft, and so very warm.

“How long have you been afraid of the dark?”

Donner swallowed hard. “The others don’t know,” he replied quietly. Calder nodded, and Donner took that to mean he wouldn’t reveal Donner’s secret. “I was a tiny elfling, no older than Tulip. I was at a winter festival with my parents. It was such a beautiful day, the snow falling, just days until Kringle’s Big Flight. I was so excited. Couldn’t stop from running around, bouncing. We were on the outskirts of North Pole City near

the Enchanted Woods. I can't even remember what festivities we were taking part in. I just remember turning around and seeing the prettiest, most magical little snow bunny I had ever seen." He wrapped his arms around himself, aware of Calder hugging him close.

"I was so happy, running after it, mesmerized by how fluffy it was. I wasn't aware of how far I'd run, squealing in delight as it hopped. Before I knew it, I'd followed it into a cave. The darkness had never bothered me before. As I went farther into the dark, I grew apprehensive. The bunny suddenly disappeared in a cloud of black smoke." Donner felt Calder stiffen beside him. Undoubtedly he knew where this story was going.

"It was so dark, and suddenly so cold. I was all alone. I couldn't find my way out no matter which way I turned. Then faceless creatures, like malnourished hounds, emerged from the shadows, talons on their clawed feet. They poked and nipped at me, scratched my skin. I was terrified, screaming and crying for my mother. I had never been so scared in all my life. Darkness surrounded me, and all I could see was the red of their eyes. I heard laughter, sinister and mean. It felt as if I'd been there for hours, but when my father finally found me and the creatures vanished, he assured me it had been only minutes. They said the bunny had been an illusion used merely to lure me into a cruel sport. It had been created by a… a…."

"Dockalfar," Calder finished gently. He rubbed his big hand up and down Donner's back, soothing. "I'm sorry."

"Ever since that night, I've been terrified, not of the dark, but what may be lurking there."

Calder took hold of Donner's chin, with fingers far gentler than should have been possible for his great size. He turned Donner's head toward him, his eyes filled with sadness.

"I'm so very sorry for what happened to you. It was unforgivable."

"It's not your fault. You're not at all like the rest of them."

"We're not all so terrible. The majority live up to their reputations, but not all."

Donner swallowed hard. They were so close. Calder's lips were but a hairsbreadth away. What might his lips taste like? And those eyes. Donner could easily get lost in them.

"I was worried for you," Donner confessed shyly, his hand coming to rest on Calder's chest. "What you did, risking your life to save Tulip…. That was… so very brave."

“I simply did what had to be done, but it was worth it, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“Why?”

“To have you look at me the way you are now.”

“Oh, I—” The rest of Donner’s sentence never made it past his lips as Calder stole his voice and breath with a passionate kiss. At first it stunned Donner. He was being kissed by a Dockalfar. No, he was being kissed by a sweet, selfless elf who’d risked his life for another. Donner threw his arms around Calder’s thick neck and returned his kiss with equal fervor. Donner let Calder pull him into an embrace, Calder’s muscular arms feeling wonderfully strong. He felt safe.

Calder deepened their kiss, his mouth warm and soft against Donner’s. He smelled of the forest, of a bright winter’s day. His gentleness enveloped Donner. How could an elf of such strength and size, possessing such dark magic, be so wonderfully tender?

Donner moved his hands up and slipped them into Calder’s hair. It was white as the purest snow, fine and soft, falling in silky strands through his fingers, over Calder’s shoulders and halfway down his back. Usually he had it bound in its leather strap at his back, but Donner loved to see it loose. Such a stunning creature.

Calder pressed his lips to Donner’s skin just behind his ear, and fire spread through Donner’s body, threatening to set him ablaze from the inside out. His whole body shivered. Never had he felt such heat. It consumed him, flooding through him, burning his skin. He wanted Calder desperately, wanted to feel his smooth skin against his own, feel his hard body against his.

“Calder,” Donner pleaded, not entirely sure what he was asking. All he knew was he needed more of what Calder was offering.

Calder laid Donner gently on the fur blankets. He quickly yet carefully removed Donner’s clothing piece by piece, and Donner had never felt more exposed. The roaring fire cast dancing shadows across the room and a glow around Calder as he moved. He sat back on his heels, and Donner watched with mounting desire as Calder removed his tunic’s belt and dropped it on the floor to one side. Next he removed his tunic and undershirt, leaving him bare to the waist. Donner inhaled sharply at the sight of Calder’s expansive, solid chest.

“You’re beautiful.”

Calder stilled, his expression softening. “No one has ever called me that.”

“Then they’re foolish for not seeing what’s right in front of them.” Donner had no idea where his bold words came from, but it was the truth.

Calder’s eyes turned smoldering, and he leaned in to kiss Donner within an inch of his life. Donner ran his fingers over Calder’s smooth charcoal skin, eagerly exploring his finely sculpted torso and arms. Calder caressed his hip, his lips leaving a trail of kisses down Donner’s neck, over his chest, and low onto his stomach. His tongue poked out to lick the tip of Donner’s shaft, and Donner gasped, arching his back. Urged on by his reaction, Calder swallowed Donner’s shaft down to the root.

“Oh, dear Goddess!” Donner’s skin was on fire, his toes curling as Calder sucked, licked, and nipped at his most sensitive spots. Donner had never felt so sinfully good. Calder moaned around Donner, making him tremble.

“Calder, please.”

Calder pulled back, and Donner mourned the loss. His face grew hot as Calder bent Donner’s knees. Donner’s eyes widened when Calder removed his trousers, exposing his length and girth. As if sensing his apprehension, Calder placed a kiss to the inside of Donner’s thigh before meeting his gaze, his voice steady and comforting.

“I won’t hurt you, I promise. I would never hurt you.”

Donner nodded fervently. He believed Calder. It was madness, really, but it was as if he could see into those near-black eyes to Calder’s soul, and it wasn’t made of darkness like everyone said. There was so much more to Calder than his Dockalfar blood. It might be a trait of his kind to be wicked and cruel, but it wasn’t in Calder’s nature.

A finger slicked with Donner’s precome pressed to his entrance, and Donner gasped. His body shuddered with anticipation, and he grabbed fistfuls of the fur blankets. Calder prepared Donner with his fingers as his mouth continued to drive Donner to the brink of madness. Donner wasn’t going to last long if Calder continued with this sweet torture. Just as the thought crossed his mind, Calder replaced his fingers with the tip of his shaft.

“Breathe. Relax.”

Donner nodded. He closed his eyes and breathed, wincing at the initial burn. Soon it gave way to a wonderful stretching, and slowly, inch by inch, Calder buried himself inside Donner. He felt so full, he was afraid to move. Gently, Calder pulled out partway and then pushed in.

“Oh!” Yes, he liked that very much. He nodded and Calder repeated the motion. With incredible patience, Calder moved in and out, and Donner writhed beneath him with need. “Faster, please.”

Calder obliged, picking up his pace. He kissed Donner deeply as his hips moved against Donner, the pleasure lighting Donner up from the inside out. Donner dug his fingers into Calder’s arms and wrapped his legs around Calder. Then Calder changed his angle, and Donner cried out.

“Oh! Oh my, yes. Please, Calder.”

Calder quickened his pace, the muscles in his arms straining as he seemed to be doing his best to control himself. Seeing such restraint had Donner losing what little of his discipline remained.

“Don’t hold back,” Donner demanded.

Calder shook his head. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I promise.” He was hardly a novice at this. It might have been a while, but he knew his limits. Right now he wanted all of Calder. Wanted everything Calder could give him. “Please, I need you to.”

Calder snapped his hips, and a strangled cry escaped Donner. Goddess above, that felt so blasted good! “Yes, please! Again.”

Calder chuckled, sweat beading his brow. He lowered himself on top of Donner, his fingers slipping into Donner’s hair as he snapped his hips again. Donner cried out, and Calder covered Donner’s mouth with his own, his kisses drowning out Donner’s cries as Calder pounded into him over and over.

Sweet release bubbled up inside Donner, and he thought he might lose his sanity. His muscles tensed, and he gasped as he came over his and Calder’s stomachs. Calder’s hips lost all rhythm, and he kissed Donner fiercely. He held Donner tight, the muscles in his neck straining as he gritted his teeth, his body going rigid as Donner felt Calder’s release coat his insides. Calder pumped himself into Donner several more times before collapsing onto his side to catch his breath. He pulled Donner into his arms, kissing the top of his head. With a contented sigh, Donner snuggled close to Calder, his kiss-swollen lips curling into a smile.

“Are you all right?” Calder asked quietly, his sleepy voice laced with concern.

Donner nodded and gave him a reassuring squeeze. “I’m wonderful.” And he absolutely was. As he drifted off, Calder covered them in blankets, and all Donner

could think about was how much he hoped they could do this again, very soon.

Chapter Six

HOPE WAS something Calder never thought very much about. As a Dockalfar, hope wasn't a word often spoken among his kind. Neither was "love." Yet as he sat in the too-small chair sipping mint hot cocoa, the snow falling outside the window of the cozy cabin, he couldn't help his happy heart. A yawn caught his attention, and he stood, smiling at Donner as he walked into the kitchen. He was fully dressed, his black hair neatly combed. His vibrant, paisley lavender vest brought out his beautiful eyes.

"I made breakfast," Calder said, pulling out a chair for Donner.

"Thank you." Donner smiled sweetly, watching as Calder placed a plate of cinnamon french toast with plenty of powdered sugar on top in front of Donner, followed by a small pitcher of warm maple syrup. He poured Donner a generous mugful of hot cocoa with marshmallows, and Donner promptly dug in, letting out a little moan through his mouthful of toast. "This is so good."

Calder chuckled. "I'm glad you like it." He resumed his seat, sipping his cocoa as Donner happily ate his breakfast. They were quiet, but it was a peaceful silence. Outside the sun was shining as a light snow fell. The forest stretched on for miles, and Calder realized how much he would enjoy having a cozy cabin in the woods. Perhaps just outside of North Pole City.

As the oldest, it was Calder who was meant to carry on his father's legacy, to inherit his seat at the Council. However, until that day came, where perhaps Calder could do good from the inside out, he would lead his life in peace, away from the affairs of the Dockalfar. His father had given up long ago trying to mold Calder to his own image. Instead of getting angry, he simply chuckled and stated that perhaps Calder had some of his mother in him after all.

As soon as breakfast was over, where he and Donner chatted about anything and everything, it was time to face the world outside. But first.…

"I have something for you." Calder had woken up hours before Donner and had used his magic and the silver from several spoons—which he would have to remember to leave a few gold pieces for—to create his gift.

"Oh?"

"Yes." Calder reached into his pouch and removed the silver chain holding a silver filigree locket. Inside was a purple stone the same shade as Donner's eyes, and it sparkled like the stars. He held it out to Donner. "Here."

Donner’s lips parted, but no sound made it past his lips. He hesitantly reached out before tracing the star pattern with his finger. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s enchanted.” Calder took Donner’s hand and placed the locket in the center. “Not only will it allow you to see through any illusion fabricated by magic, but it will light your way. You’ll never have to face the darkness again.”

Donner’s smile took Calder’s breath away. “How do I do that?”

“Simply will it.”

Donner closed his fist around the locket, then held it close to his heart. Rays of light shone through his fingers, and when he opened his hand, the entire room was awash in a warm lavender glow. The look of wonder on Donner’s face made Calder’s heart swell. The light faded, and tears welled in Donner’s eyes despite his wide smile.

“This is the most wonderful gift anyone has ever given me.” He looped the necklace around his neck and tucked the pendant safely under his shirt before he threw his arms around Calder. “Thank you. I’ll cherish it.”

Calder held him close. No matter what the future might bring, Calder would never forget this moment. “You’re welcome,” he replied softly, then placed a tender kiss to the top of Donner’s head. Reluctantly, Calder pulled back. It was time to go.

“Your brethren must be wondering why you stayed. I’ll be sure to let them know we slept in separate rooms. Your reputation will remain intact. I promise. I’ll let them know you cared for me, but that was all.”

Donner worried his bottom lip. He placed his hand to his chest where the pendant lay under his clothing. After a moment of hesitation, he shook his head. “Let them think what they will.”

“But—”

Donner put his fingers to Calder’s lips, his smile sweet. “I’m not ashamed. You’re a good elf. Kind and gentle, with a big heart. They should be honored to know you. I certainly am.” His cheeks turned pink, and he averted his gaze. “Besides, it will save us the explanation next time.”

Next time.

Calder had no words. He smiled and nodded before kissing Donner. A soft moan escaped Donner as he melted against Calder. Donner’s lips tasted sweeter than any of

Honey Blossom's decadent treats, and his body responded to Calder as if he were made for Calder's touch. Donner pulled back with a soft sigh, his violet eyes filled with affection. No one had ever looked at Calder in such a way. He told himself he shouldn't get used to it because it couldn't last. A Dockalfar and a Christmas elf? Unheard of.

"Come." Donner took Calder's hand and led him to the door. He gave Calder a shy smile, then took a deep breath before opening the door, his hand still in Calder's. They walked through the village and stopped at the small gathering of villagers in the center. When the villagers all turned to look at them, Donner squeezed Calder's hand but he didn't let go.

The villagers exchanged glances before erupting into cheers. They crowded around Calder, all talking at once, thanking him for his bravery, telling him how grateful they were, how helpful he'd been. Calder bowed his head, uncertain of how to take such compliments. This was all so very new for him. They asked if he was well, and he promised he was. The villagers had been evacuated in time, so thankfully no one had been hurt, and the last of the gingerbread houses would be completed by Jack's toy soldiers.

Jack, Rudy, and the rest of the Rein Dears, along with Jack's toy soldiers, approached. The villagers quickly dispersed. Jack dropped his gaze to Donner's hand in Calder's. When Jack looked up at him, Calder saw no anger or judgment there.

"We may have underestimated you." Jack's jaw muscles tightened, and Calder could only imagine how much this was costing Jack, but Calder truly appreciated it. "I apologize for my harsh words to you."

"I humbly accept, Your Highness. Though you had every right to feel as you did. I cannot speak for the whole of my kind, but I can assure you that I only wish to live my life in peace, and perhaps one day be lucky enough to have found what you have."

Jack blinked at him, as if Calder's response surprised him. When Rudy slipped his arm around Jack's waist, Jack's expression softened. The blustering winter spirit actually smiled.

"I wish you luck, then." Jack cleared his throat, his usual grumpy expression returning. "We're having a small get-together at my palace tomorrow night, and we would like for you to be the guest of honor."

"Thank you. That's incredibly generous of you. As I can't imagine when such an invitation might be extended again, I will happily accept."

"Wonderful!" Rudy smiled brightly. "We'll send a sleigh to the Pine Needle Inn to pick you up."

Everyone chatted excitedly about tomorrow's party, and Calder couldn't help his own growing enthusiasm, especially since he'd be spending more time with Donner, who was currently surrounded by some of his Rein Dear brethren. Judging by his shy smile and blushing cheeks, Calder would hazard a guess that Donner was being questioned about his relationship with Calder. At one point, Donner looked up and met his gaze. His full lips parted slightly, and he lowered his lashes as he spoke to Cupid. Cupid bounced gleefully and threw his arms around Donner, hugging him tight.

Not wishing to impose on Donner's conversation with his brethren, Calder turned, a cheerful squeal meeting his ears.

"Calder!" Tulip ran for him, and he kneeled down, laughing when she launched herself into his arms.

"Well, hello." Calder smiled at Tulip as she settled against him and petted his hair.

"Your hair is pretty," she stated, very matter-of-fact.

"Thank you. Your hair is pretty too." He made to stand, when half a dozen elflings approached him. They seemed uncertain about getting closer until Tulip smiled brightly at them.

"It's okay. He's a good elf."

At Tulip's declaration, the rest of the elflings rushed him, knocking him onto his backside. He laughed as they climbed all over him, another settling on his lap, one hanging off his bicep, another braiding a part of his hair. They asked him all sorts of questions, from why he was so big, to why his hair was white, why his eyes were so dark, was his magic dangerous, was Donner his sweetheart?

"All right, now," Donner said as he approached, his dazzling smile reaching his lavender eyes. "Calder is a very busy elf. Go on and play."

The elflings squealed and ran circles around Donner, one of them bumping into the back of his legs. He lost his balance and landed in Calder's lap. The elflings giggled and cheered.

Donner gaped at them as they took off. "Those little imps. They did that on purpose."

"They seem convinced you're my sweetheart." Calder carefully helped Donner to his feet before getting up. He was brushing the snow off his tunic when he noticed Donner had gone quiet. "It doesn't mean it's true. They're just elflings."

Donner gazed up at him. “What if… I’d like it to be true?”

“Oh.” Calder’s heart pounded fiercely. “Then that would make me the happiest and luckiest elf around.”

Donner laughed and threw his arms around Calder, standing on his toes and pulling Calder down to kiss him. He didn’t seem to care that everyone was watching them. Calder wrapped his arms around Donner and lifted him off his feet, kissing him. The elflings returned, cheering and bouncing, running circles around them. Donner laughed against Calder’s lips.

“Perhaps you should put me down before they knock us over again.”

Calder chuckled and put Donner down. His feet might be on the ground, but Calder felt as though he were soaring. Never would he have imagined himself so happy or so filled with hope. Tomorrow night, with Donner as his sweetheart, Calder would be the guest of honor in Jack Frost’s palace. He couldn’t wait.

THE NEXT evening, Calder dressed in his best tunic, one he’d been reserving for a special occasion. Black with delicate silver embroidery on the hem, sleeve cuffs, and high collar, the tunic hugged his form comfortably. His wide black leather belt was new, his heavy black boots shined, and his hair was neatly braided at his back. His heart fluttered, and all he could think about was seeing Donner again. He could hardly believe it. When Mayor Kringle had requested Calder train Cupid, he’d jumped at the opportunity. Calder agreed Cupid needed to be trained, but he also relished the time he could spend with his little brother. Over the years, seeing Cupid in the newspapers always left Calder with a heavy heart. He’d missed Cupid very much, but he’d respected his brother’s decision to be a Rein Dear. And now, not only had he reconnected with his youngest brother, but he’d found Donner.

Calder chuckled as he smoothed down the long white sleeves of his undershirt. He remembered his first encounter with the enchanting elf. He’d mentioned Donner’s eyes, and Donner’s hackles immediately went up. Calder proceeded to tease him, and Donner flushed that wonderful shade of pink he’d come to love.

“Disgraceful.”

Calder stilled. It couldn’t be.

“I never thought I’d see the day my brother would become pet to a bunch of Christmas elves.”

Calder turned, his worst fear lounging in the armchair beside the fireplace. “How did you escape?”

Gunne put a hand to his heart, looking hurt. Calder knew better. “And here I thought my brother would be pleased to see me.”

“After what you did? How dare you—”

“How dare I?” Gunne launched from the chair, his eyes blazing with fury. “How dare you! You betrayed me! Look at you. Dressing in finery, putting on airs for elves who are beneath you. Jumping through hoops for a treat. It’s pathetic!”

“Does Father know?” Calder would guess not. His father had been furious at Gunne’s actions. The Dockalfar, for all their sinister ways, were very serious when it came to honoring their oaths.

“Father is growing weak. All this talk about maintaining peace between kingdoms, the King of Frost being a powerful ally, blah, blah, blah. It’s sickening. He actually believed that pathetic excuse for a cell would hold me? A Dockalfar as powerful as me?”

“He trusted you to be honorable,” Calder replied through his teeth.

“Honorable? Honorable! We’re Dockalfar! We are not honorable!” Gunne paced, and Calder readied himself. He couldn’t let Gunne leave this room. Who knew what he had planned in that deplorable head of his. Calder hated the idea of hurting his brother, but he couldn’t allow Gunne to wreak havoc in North Pole City. He couldn’t risk Cupid and Donner’s safety.

As Gunne paced, going on about how far the Dockalfar had fallen, Calder waited for the right opportunity. Gunne spun to face him.

“I’ll show them all!”

Calder thrust out his hands and released a blast of magic powerful enough to lift Gunne off his feet. Except it didn’t hit Gunne. It went through him. Calder’s eyes widened when he realized his grave error. He spun around and was struck by a paralyzing gust of dark magic. He hit the floor with a heavy thud, his body feeling as though it were made of lead. Gunne rolled him onto his back and grinned down at him.

“You’re like a giant paperweight.”

Calder fought fiercely against the enchantment gripping his body, but it was a slow process. Gunne had tricked him.

“Please, Brother. Don’t harm them.”

Gunne blinked innocently at him. “Me? Why, my dear Calder. I’m not going to do anything.” He patted Calder’s cheek hard enough to leave a sting behind.

Calder didn’t understand, but the truly sinister look that came over his brother’s face caused a lump to form in his throat. Oh, Goddess! No.

“You’re the one they should fear.”

Calder’s eyes widened. “You can’t. Please.”

“Hush now. When you wake up, we’ll be on the brink of a glorious war, and the Dockalfar will rule. Cupid will see the error of his ways and come back to us. Our family will be restored. All thanks to you.” Gunne stood, then headed for the door while Calder’s pleas fell on deaf ears. He couldn’t let Gunne get away with this. He closed his eyes, summoning the powers of his ancestors. He prayed he wouldn’t be too late.

Chapter Seven

WHERE COULD he be?

Donner made his way through the crowded ballroom, looking for Calder. So many elves were in attendance. Intimate dinner his left foot. Donner should have known where the Frost family was concerned, “intimate” was a relative term.

There were dignitaries, royalty from various kingdoms, Donner’s Rein Dear brethren, Lieutenant Vale Frost, Major Hollis Frost, several dozen toy soldiers, sugarplum faeries, and anyone else who was able to coax an invitation out of Rudy. The poor fellow was dreadful at saying no. Donner spotted Cupid giggling at something his sweetheart whispered in his ear, and it made Donner smile. It wasn’t long ago that he’d wondered how two elves who were as different as night and day could fall so hopelessly in love. It made perfect sense. Now that he thought of it, those of his Rein Dear brethren with sweethearts had ended up with elves surprisingly opposite in nature, yet their differences complemented each other, and their love appeared all the stronger for it.

Not wishing to interrupt the lovebirds, Donner indulged in another peppermint julip. The butterflies in his stomach fluttered wildly, and his heart beat fiercely. Why was he so nervous? He supposed he shouldn’t be all that surprised. It had been a long time since he’d had a sweetheart. From the moment he’d arrived, he’d been asked all manner of questions regarding Calder. News of his heroic deeds had spread through the Frost Kingdom and North Pole City like wildfire. All the guests were eager to meet the brave, good-hearted Dockalfar.

The trumpets blared, and Donner couldn't help his excitement. He moved through the crowd, coming to a halt when he saw Calder. Oh, but he looked so handsome! The crowd cheered and clapped, happily making a path for Donner as he approached Calder. He was so excited to see him. He hurried the rest of the way, ready to throw his arms around Calder. When he reached Calder, he took a quick step back. Something was wrong.

"Calder?"

His eyes were cold, his expression hard. Something in Donner's gut twisted.

"Are you all right?"

Calder grinned, a wide sinister smile that had Donner swallowing hard. This was not the elf he'd lost his heart to. Had he…. Could Donner have made a mistake? No, Calder was sweet and kind. The elf looking back at him was wicked.

"Where's Jack?"

"He's not arrived yet." Donner tried not to let his apprehension show, but it was clear something was wrong. The guests were whispering and murmuring among themselves, everyone watching Calder warily. "Calder, you're frightening me."

Calder turned and leaned into Donner. "Good." He straightened, and with a fierce cry, he thrust out his hand. A blast of black smoke slammed into one of the chandeliers, snapping its chain. Donner gasped, startled, as everyone screamed and threw themselves out of the way as the chandelier crashed to the floor, bursting into millions of tiny crystal shards and spraying in all directions.

Donner turned to stare at Calder. "What are you doing?"

"Showing my true colors." Another blast hit the next chandelier, then the next. The guests screamed and ran in a panic when the doors slammed shut, trapping everyone inside.

"Please, stop this. This isn't you!" After everything they'd been through together? This couldn't be happening.

"Calder!" Cupid came running, gasping when Calder snarled at him.

"Stay out of this, brother! This doesn't concern you or your insufferable sweetheart." Calder swept his arm to one side, creating a gust of wind that picked up Cupid and Blitzen. The wind carried them across the room, where one of the doors opened. It

tossed them out, then slammed the door shut.

Calder continued to wreak havoc and cause destruction. Black magic flowed from his hands, creating foul creatures reeking of death and decay. The creatures hunted the guests, and Donner couldn't take it anymore.

"Please!" He grabbed Calder's arm. "Did our night in the cabin mean nothing to you?"

Calder froze, and Donner hoped he was getting through to him. The look of disgust that came onto his face broke Donner's heart. How could he have been so foolish?

"With you?" Calder shook his head. "Filthy creature! How dare you speak such lies!" Calder lashed out and gripped Donner by the throat. His eyes held no remorse when he lifted Donner off his feet, only pure loathing. Donner scratched at Calder's hand as he gasped for air.

The doors slammed open, and a gust of icy wind swept through the room.

"Put him down!" Jack ordered, his eyes frosting over along with his hair. Calder ignored him. He narrowed his eyes at Donner.

"Do you love him?"

Donner's brows drew together in confusion. Him?

"Do you love Calder?"

Donner didn't know what was happening, but he nodded. He did love Calder. A thought struck him, and his eyes widened. He slipped his hand under his shirt and gripped the locket. A halo of light surrounded Calder, and Donner saw through the dark magic.

"You blasted Christmas elves took one brother from me. I won't let you take another."

"Jack, it's Gunne!" Donner called out as a sharp fire pierced his gut. Blood bubbled past his lips, and he was released, hitting the floor in a heap. Donner heard his Rein Dear brothers yell, but he couldn't move. He held on to his bleeding stomach and the dagger protruding from it. When he looked at his shaky hand, it was covered in blood, but it was the spreading black vines under his skin that terrified him the most. Pain exploded through him, and he arched his back up violently, a sharp cry escaping him.

In the distance, Jack battled Gunne. Then a warm hand touched Donner's cheek.

"Hold on, my darling." Calder placed his hand over Donner's wound. He smiled down

at him, tears in his eyes. “You’ll be all right. I promise. This will hurt, but not for long.”

“I’m dying, aren’t I?” Donner’s words were garbled, and he clutched weakly at Calder’s arm.

“The dagger is poisonous. I need you to be strong for me, all right?” His handsome face was filled with worry. He took hold of the dagger’s hilt and gave Donner a nod. “Ready?”

Donner nodded and braced himself. An agonized whimper escaped him when Calder pulled the dagger from his body. Calder quickly covered the wound with his hand, his other hand beneath Donner’s head.

“Hold on.”

“No, Calder, please.” Donner gasped for breath, a tear rolling down his cheek. He knew what Calder was doing. “Please, don’t.” The heat spread through his body, but the vines began to recede. They retreated from Donner’s body only to travel up Calder’s hand, disappearing beneath his sleeve.

“I love you,” Calder said softly. He pressed his lips to Donner’s, and already they were devoid of warmth. His beautiful charcoal skin took on a pale hue, and Donner felt his strength returning.

“I love you too,” Donner choked out, wishing he could stop Calder. “There must be another way.”

Several feet away, Gunne snapped at his brother. “What are you doing?”

“It’ll be all right,” Calder promised Donner. “Almost… almost done.”

The black vines spread just under the surface of Calder’s skin, up his neck and jawline. Gunne sent a blast at Jack, then spat furiously at Calder.

“Stop it, you fool! You’ll die!”

“I know.” Calder’s words were barely a whisper, but somehow Gunne heard. He thwarted another of Jack’s icy blasts and released a wall of dark smoke that sent Jack soaring across the room. Donner’s wound was no more, and he kneeled over Calder, who lay on his back gasping for breath.

“No, Calder.” There was nothing Donner could do, and it broke his heart.

Gunne ran over, and Donner held on to Calder’s hand, refusing to go. He wouldn’t

leave Calder. Gunne dropped to his knees beside Calder.

“Why? Why would you do that?”

Calder smiled fondly at Donner, his tearful eyes filled with so much affection. “Because I love him.”

“You can’t.” Gunne shook his head. “First Cupid, now you? How could you betray us? Betray me? You were all I had left! You weren’t supposed to fall in love, you bastard!”

Calder smiled at his brother. He reached up and placed a hand to Gunne’s cheek. “I… forgive you.”

“You self-righteous jackanapes. I won’t let you.” Gunner grabbed Calder’s head, making Calder cry out.

Donner couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The temperature in the room plummeted, and Donner wrapped an arm around himself, his free hand holding on to Calder’s. Jack stormed over, and Donner threw a hand out.

“Wait, Jack, please!”

Jack let out a low growl as he turned his attention to Gunne. “What’s he doing?”

“He’s… saving Calder,” Donner replied, wincing at the painful cries the brothers were releasing. The poison slowly retreated from Calder, and Donner held on tight to his hand.

Jack stared at them in disbelief. “But that means….”

“Stop, Gunne.” Calder tried to push his brother away, but Gunne refused.

“No.” The tears broke free from Gunne’s eyes as the poison flowed beneath his skin. “You weren’t supposed to leave me.” He forced himself upright, and Donner followed as Calder scrambled to his feet.

Gunne hit his hands against Calder, and the blast sent Calder into Jack. “Frost, I know… I have no right to ask you for… anything. But please… don’t let him touch me. He’s not like me. He’s… always been good.” Gunne gasped for air, his body twisting before he hit the floor.

“No, Gunne!” Calder tried to free himself from Jack’s hold, but it was no use. Jack was clearly summoning his father’s power. A snowstorm swirled around them, the room so cold it made Donner’s teeth chatter. Jack sent a flurry of snow to surround Gunne,

concealing him from Calder's view. In seconds the storm subsided, and Gunne lay on the floor, motionless. Only then did Jack release Calder.

Calder ran to his brother and dropped to his knees to cradle him in his arms. Gently, Donner placed his hand on Calder's shoulder, letting him know he was there. Gunne was a deplorable elf, but he and Calder were brothers, and it would seem that in the end, that bond could not be broken, not even by Gunne's malice. Brothers….

Donner turned, a lump forming in his throat at the sight of Cupid standing there watching Gunne and Calder. Thank goodness he wasn't hurt, though he looked heartbroken and uncertain. Donner could only imagine what must be going through his head. Donner whispered in Calder's ear, and Calder turned. His smile trembled as he held out his hand to Cupid. Without hesitation, Cupid ran to Calder's side and threw his arms around him. The two hugged as they mourned the loss of their brother.

Jack ushered those who'd remained in the room outside, and Donner reluctantly joined them. This moment was for Calder and his family. Donner didn't stray far. He remained, sitting on the floor outside with his back against the wall, and waited, his heart going out to Calder and Cupid. Donner let his arms rest on his drawn-up knees before lowering his head. He lost track of the time he'd sat there until he felt someone place a kiss to his head.

Donner looked up at Calder. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Calder let out a heavy sigh. "He chose his path. No matter what anyone said to him, he welcomed the darkness into his heart. He was my brother, and I loved him. But he almost killed you, and that I can't forgive."

"What about your father?" Donner asked worriedly. He'd never met the elf, but he'd heard rumors. Bard was feared among many. He was a powerful dark elf who sat on the Dockalfar Council.

"He'll mourn my brother, but my father has been aware of Gunne's growing ire for some time now. Gunne's inability to be reasoned with is why my father was forced to imprison him. Not that it did any good. The Council will be concerned that relations between the Dockalfar and the Frost Kingdom will have been damaged by Gunne, but I've spoken with Jack. He assures me he and his father view this as an unfortunate incident. They don't hold the Dockalfar responsible for my brother's actions, and for that I'm grateful. I'm certain my father will be as well."

Donner nodded. He snuggled against Calder when Calder embraced him. He had no idea what would happen next, but he would be at Calder's side. No matter what anyone said of him, Calder, or their love, in his heart he knew their love was no different from anyone else's. Dockalfar, Christmas elf—it didn't matter. Only their love

mattered.

Chapter Eight

DONNER'S HEART skipped a beat as he opened his door. "Hi."

"Hello." Calder stood on the other side looking as imposing and handsome as ever. He smiled warmly and handed Donner the most beautiful bouquet of frosted lavender roses.

"They're stunning."

"No more than you." Calder bent down to give Donner a kiss. How Donner had missed him.

It had been weeks since that ill-fated day. Calder and Cupid had mourned the loss of their brother before doing their best to honor what good had been in him. Calder had needed some time on his own while the whole of North Pole City and Winter Wonderland was awash with news of the incident. Donner had kissed Calder, and promised he would wait for him for however long it took. Never once did Donner believe Calder wouldn't return to him. It had only been a few weeks, but it felt like a lifetime.

"I thought of you every day," Donner admitted, his cheeks growing warm. He took the flowers and headed into his kitchen to place them in a vase with water. Calder followed, mindful of his height as he ducked through the doorway. As grand as the Rein Dear estate was, it had been constructed with Christmas elves in mind.

Once the flowers were in water, Donner turned to Calder, feeling somewhat timid. "How are you?"

Calder stepped in front of him and slipped his arms around Donner's waist to pull him close against him.

"I missed you terribly."

Donner's heart swelled. He couldn't help his dopey grin. "I missed you too."

"I have something I'd like to show you."

Donner nodded excitedly. Calder's black-and-silver sleigh was parked outside on the curb in front of the Rein Dear estates, a huge black stag harnessed to it. Donner approached carefully.

“Oh, he’s beautiful.”

“His name is Orion.” Calder smiled as he patted Orion’s neck. He motioned for Donner to join him. Donner was thrilled when Orion allowed Donner to pet him. Orion’s eyes were a glowing amber, and his fur a sharp contrast against the pure white snow.

Calder helped Donner onto the sleigh. “Close your eyes, and don’t peek until I say.”

“All right.” Donner closed his eyes. He was awfully tempted to sneak a peek, but resisted. Where were they going? The bells on Orion’s harness jingled as he trotted through the city. Soon the ride got a little bumpier. They’d clearly left the city, but it wasn’t a long ride out. The sleigh stopped, and Donner felt Calder get down.

“Give me your hand.”

Donner did as he was asked, his eyes still closed as he carefully edged toward the side of the sleigh. Calder took hold of his waist, lifted him down, and carefully placed him on his feet.

“Okay, open them.”

Donner opened his eyes, a gasp escaping him. Before him was an expansive log cabin with twinkling lights lining the windows. Constructed of stone and wood, it had a roomy front porch housing a swinging love seat.

“It’s beautiful, Calder!” He turned to Calder, who was smiling, his eyes filled with pride.

“It’s my new home.” His expression turned bashful, and he looked down at his boots. “And perhaps one day, if you so wish, it might be yours too.”

Donner could barely contain his glee. He threw his arms around Calder and squeezed him tight. “I would love that. Perhaps….” He worried his bottom lip with his teeth, feeling awfully bold. “Perhaps after Jack and Rudy’s wedding?” It was only a few months away, but it would allow them to spend more time together.

Calder wrapped him up in his strong arms, his smile reaching his amazing eyes. “I would love that.” He kissed Donner, his lips warm and familiar. Donner loved being kissed by Calder, and he loved returning his kiss.

As Calder showed him around the cabin, Donner’s heart swelled with love. Standing before the roaring fire, the snow falling serenely outside the windows and Calder’s arms wrapped around him, Donner realized he’d never been more at peace in his life. He was happy. Calder made him happy. And that was all that mattered.