

The Reindeer's Christmas Wedding

Ariel Connors dodged into an empty office and held her breath. She wouldn't normally consider herself to be the cowardly type, but this was one person she could not face at that moment.

Nope, not one of the many 'mean girls' of her herd – who called her 'Saint Ariel' also sometimes Mary Poppins. Not one of the many females who scoffed at the fact that the sexiest reindeer in the whole herd was about to be wedded to her. Even Ariel had to pinch herself about that, no matter how many times her lovely man insisted he was the lucky one who didn't deserve. Her inner reindeer sighed – he was too dreamy for words.

No, the person she just spotted down the other end of the corridor was her best friend, Teena - or, her wedding planner.

Teena was normally a very in-your-face personality, and, oddly, putting her in charge of a wedding hadn't changed that one iota. Nope, now she was bossy and unbearable and sporting a to do list a mile long. It was Teena's idea to get married on Christmas Eve, and while Ariel agreed that was a cute idea, she hadn't really thought that her wedding would snowball into... into this. At that moment in time, Teena was trying to ram the twelve days of Christmas into the wedding – currently, she was figuring out six geese a laying. Ariel didn't want to think about what that was going to look like. As it was, she was sure that Teena would have her wearing five golden rings.

Ariel was a reindeer shifter, the only sister to the alpha of her reindeer herd, and she was engaged to the head enforcer of their herd – fellow reindeer shifter, Mal Jones, the sexiest male ever to walk on two legs. Or four thought her smitten inner reindeer. Ariel smiled to herself. Or four, she inwardly agreed. They were due to wed on Christmas Eve, but things were starting to get a little out of hand.

What had started as a small, tiny ceremony with just close family members and a few friends had ballooned into a three-hundred-plus guest list, with talk about doves and Cinderella-style coaches.

Yes, Ariel had always wanted to mate since she was small, but she wasn't someone who had ever envisioned her wedding day, or wearing five acres of white satin – which seemed to be the cards at the moment. She was too practical for that. She had far too many things to do other than sit around daydreaming about centerpieces and flower arrangements or what color the bridesmaids were wearing. Cheese and crackers, she hadn't even wanted bridesmaids – no matter how much her best friend, Teena insisted that she needed to catch the bouquet in order to kick start her boyfriend into proposing.

No, Ariel just wanted to be with Mal. She had adored him for years, and was thrilled to find that he felt the same about her. They were already together – nothing could break her away from him – not even a pack of lions or a crowbar. But, she couldn't wait to be married to him, and she was just starting to feel a little overwhelmed by the huge wedding preparations. For one thing, she rarely seemed to see him anymore. They were living together – in spite of both her brothers' objections – and yet, they rarely seemed to cross one another's path. The only time was when they were in bed, sleeping next to one another, but, recently, inevitably, either she or he would fall asleep before the other came home, and then one or the other would be up and out of bed before the other woke.

Before the full swing of the marriage preparations, they managed to find a good balance between his long hours and her many commitments, but since 'Wedding Mania' started, things had gone off the rails. Not to mention all the Christmas parties, the Secret Santa, and the million other things that needed to be done at Christmas. There weren't enough hours in the day – or at least, there weren't enough hours in the day for any alone time with her man.

Her phone chirruped. It was from Teena; it was usually from Teena. She got texts from Mal checking up on her throughout the day, but they were nothing compared to the five hundred that usually came from Teena demanding to know where she was or pitching some new, crazy idea for the wedding.

Yep, it was from Teena, and yes, she wanted to know where she was. Apparently, they were supposed to be meeting to discuss napkins. Oh, boy. This was followed by another three texts in quick succession. The first very similar to the last. The second asking her whether she thought Dalmatians were cute...? The third, again, asking her where she was.

Ariel breathed in and out and slipped her phone into her pocket. She would talk to Teena later. For now, she needed to see Mal – her rock. She needed to see him, to talk to him, to hug him, and remind herself that the only thing that mattered was that they were finally together. Yes, he could make everything better with just a hint of a smile.

She darted out of the office and ran to the elevator. Desperately, she pressed the button over and over, but the elevator was floors away, and so she made a run for the stairs, whipping past many a herd mate. People were staring at her in wonder, but, if asked, she would just say it was urgent wedding business.

Ariel ran all the way down to the first floor, took a moment to catch her breath, and then ran to the enforcers' office. Her reindeer stamped her hooves in excitement as she tore into the room. Ordinarily, she was rather shy about entering, but desperation had made her bold.

"Mal?" she called.

Half a dozen enforcers who had been lounging all stood to attention, as they always did when the sister of the alpha appeared. Most of the herd were always watchful around her; Mal was one of the few who wasn't scared of her brother, and oh, it was another reason she loved him so much. He would risk the wrath of the alpha for her. She'd never been great friends with any of the other males in her herd. Oh, they were nice to her – treating her as a big or little sister, or sometimes like an auntie, but she'd never been as easy in their company as she was with Mal. They were deferential to her, wary that upsetting her might get them in trouble with their alpha, or just plain disinterested because they couldn't possibly see her as anything even remotely approaching a sexual object. Mal was her first and only and she knew she was doing the right thing in marrying him, she just wasn't sure about the circus that was happening around her wedding.

She looked around expectantly, waiting for him to come out of his small office. But, her honey didn't immediately show himself, and that was a bad sign. Normally he was there within seconds.

"Mal?"

Her reindeer sagged in disappointment.

“He’s not here,” said Dozer, one of the enforcers stepping forward.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Okay, thanks, no problem. See you later.”

She left before they really could see how sad she was. Ariel got her phone out, momentarily ignored the twelve new messages from Teena, and tried to call him. There was no answer, so she left him a message to call her.

Her reindeer chuffed at her. She couldn’t wait until this wedding was over.

*

“This is what Ariel wants?” asked Mal drolly.

His inner reindeer snickered and Mal growled at him to hush. He stared at himself in the full-length mirror and tried not to groan. Hey, he had no problem with kilts. He was just very much of the opinion that they belonged on Scottish men in Scotland, not on a reindeer shifter in Chicago.

“That’s what Teena said,” replied Burke piously.

He preened in front of the mirror, and then did a twirl. Clearly, Burke liked himself in a kilt much more than Mal did.

Mal slanted the younger mal a look, wondering again how this bozo had inveigled his way into a starring role in his wedding. But then, he already knew how. Teena – Ariel’s lunatic best friend – was, for reasons unknown, besotted with him, and since Teena was more steamroller than woman, Ariel had agreed that Burke could be a groomsman. Or at least, that’s what Teena suggested had happened, though Mal doubted it. He was sure, if asked, Ariel would say yes. She was kind hearted through and through and happy to do anything for a friend. It was one of the many, many, many things he loved about his beautiful reindeer mate. But, he also knew Teena, and doubt she had bothered asking.

On the one hand, he liked Teena, because she was incredibly protective of Ariel, and very often stopped Ariel from being steamrolled by other people. Ariel was so generous that she didn’t always say no to a request when she should – she always wanted to help people. Again, that’s why he loved her so much. But if everyone else in the herd had their way, they would run Ariel into the ground with all the things they expected her to do on a daily basis – and her brothers were no exception. Teena though, was very apt to intervene when she thought people really were taking advantage of Ariel. The intervention usually involved Teena telling people to shove it – much to Ariel’s horror – but it worked. That was why Mal liked her being around.

However, her interference in their wedding was seriously testing his tolerance – of which he usually had a limitless reserve. Mal used to be a hunter, chasing after shifter criminals and bringing them to justice, and had an incredible amount of patience, but not right now.

Burke did another twirl and Mal rolled his eyes. Tank ambled over and sneered at the young male. Tank was his second in the enforcers, and his best man. He also happened to be Teena’s older

brother, and while he wasn't oblivious to the boisterousness of Teena, and their two other sisters, as she was his little sister, he believed she needed protecting from all males. Usually, it was the other way around.

Though, he seemed to be thawing somewhat to Burke, but only a little. Mostly because, although he was exceedingly annoying, Burke did seem to worship Teena. Plus, he was suitably scared of Tank enough not to do anything crazy like hurt her. Mal didn't blame him there – Tank was, as his nickname suggested, huge, and the largest in the herd. While his mate and three daughters considered him to be the reindeer equivalent of a pussycat, everyone else was appropriately cautious of him.

Tank smiled a little as he looked at Mal, who was stiffly staring at his reflection and trying to drown out his inner reindeer's laughter.

"At least you have the legs for it," quipped Hank.

Well, yes... that wasn't the point!

"You certainly do," agreed Burke enthusiastically.

Mal and Tank glared at him, though, it didn't seem to do much good. In general, Burke wasn't very good at reading cues. Nor was Teena for that matter. Though, she probably wished he was, since she had been throwing out lots of very unsubtle intimations about the fact that she would very much like to get married too.

"I'm going to see if they have a pocket square to match my kilt," Burke eventually declared, and loped off to interrogate the storeowner.

Mal raised an eyebrow. "Pocket square?"

Tank humphed. "Teena's rubbing off on him."

Mal raised his other eyebrow as well. A pocket square sounded a bit fancy for a female who could burp the first verse of *Up Where We Belong*. But, he didn't say anything. Tank had a soft eye where his sisters were concerned, and Tank was a friend.

Instead, Mal tried to come to terms with the kilted sight in front of him. He was all for making Ariel happy...

"It's just one day," rumbled Tank mildly.

"Yeah," he agreed, recalling that Tank married his mate in a pair of jeans and t-shirt.

Their mating had been a low-key affair after attending their daughters' Easter play. Tank had never been faced with the prospect of having his bride walking down the aisle followed by seven swans and six geese. Yeah, he's heard about the twelve days of Christmas baloney and he was not amused.

But, Ariel was everything to him. She was the sweetest, sexiest and most generous woman on the planet, and he didn't deserve to breathe the same air as her, but, for some reason, she wanted to be with him. So, he was going to shut up and nut up and get on with it.

He was just relieved that the wedding was only a week and a half away. Only ten more days of Bridezilla – and by that, he meant Teena. Plus, he had barely seen Ariel for the last couple of weeks. Yep, they were the ones getting married and yet he barely seemed to see his bride. Sure, they slept next to one another, which was a slight comfort, but their conflicting schedules, and the apparently constant demands of planning a wedding meant that they barely saw one another. Things were always a bit hectic, but they had exploded over the last couple of weeks.

He just needed to grit his teeth and soon this would all be at an end, and then he would have Ariel, and nothing else would matter. His reindeer honked in agreement, and Mal let out a long breath. At least Tank was right, he did have the legs for this.

*

“Ummm, Teena, I’m not sure about this.”

Teena beamed in a way that suggested Ariel’s opinion was not needed or correct, and that she was sure she could change her mind. Her hair was tightly wound in curls and sporting a lot of glitter, while she was wearing a light-up sweater that almost blinded anyone in its path – and since it was motion activated, and Teena could barely stand still for more than two seconds together, it was lighting up a lot.

“That’s because you’re not using your imagination.”

Ariel tried not to let her doubt show too much as she shielded her eyes from the sweater. “Well, maybe I could think about.”

“What’s there to think about?!” cried Teena, throwing her arms in the air, eliciting a flurry of bright lights from her sweater. “You’re a reindeer, and you’re getting married at Christmas – what’s more natural than for reindeer to pull you down the aisle in a Santa sleigh?”

“More natural than that?” asked Ariel faintly. “I really couldn’t say.”

“Exactly!”

Teena’s eyes flashed in excitement almost as brilliantly as the sweater. Ariel, on the other hand, was trying her best to be polite and supportive, not to mention appreciative that Teena had taken on this huge task of organizing a wedding, while inside her reindeer sank to the ground in misery. Though, the misery wasn’t down to Teena. Nope, it was down to missing Mal.

With regard to her future groom, the most she had managed over the past couple of days was a quick, syrupy kiss while eating breakfast. Then he had to run off to work, and she had to run off and help out with one of the older herd members. They had been trying to move him into his son’s house as he couldn’t live alone anymore, and since he refused to go, it had been a wee bit of a struggle.

Oh, how she wished Mal was here to give Teena a hard look. To tell her it was unnecessary. To tell her it was over the top. To laugh with her at how crazy everything was, and to reassure her that they didn’t need all of this nonsense.

Ariel squared her shoulders. Nope, she was not going to mope. Moping got you nowhere. She was a doer not a moper. Her reindeer hooted in support.

“Teena, the sleigh is unnecessary and over the top.”

Teena waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, you’ll change your mind when you see it attached to some actual reindeer.”

Ariel sighed. Arguing with Teena was like arguing with your own reflection – pointless.

Teena checked her to do list. “Right then, we have cake tasting, then we have to choose the napkins, and we’re auditioning flower girls this afternoon.”

“Auditioning? I thought all your nieces were going to be doing that.”

Teena’s brother had mated with a charming woman called Marion and adopted her three adorable girls. Ariel hadn’t particularly planned on having flower girls, but when all three of them came at her on masse and pouted, she couldn’t say no.

Teena nodded. “Yes, but we’ve got to keep them on their toes. They were very sloppy during practice last night.”

“Practice?” repeated Ariel.

She had thought that Marion was going to give each a basket of flowers and just let them go nuts over the aisle. Though, if they were having reindeer running up and down that aisle, then they would really need to watch where they stepped.

“Yes, absolutely,” said Teena firmly. “This wedding has to be absolutely perfect.”

“Yes,” agreed Ariel.

Her reindeer whined at her. I know, she thought. I know.

*

Mal stared at the tiny bits of cake in front of him, glared at Tank who was wolfing down his, glanced at the other happy couples around them, and then looked at Ariel’s mother in a mildly accusing way. His reindeer grunted in annoyance.

“I thought Ariel would be here.”

Mal would be the first to admit he didn’t know that much about weddings. All he knew were the things he’d seen in the multitude of romantic comedies both Ariel and his sister, Carrie loved to watch. But wasn’t the cake tasting supposed to be done by the couple who were about to get married? So they could decide which cake they wanted to smush over each other’s mouths?

Martha looked a little chagrined. “I’m sorry, dear. Teena had me come here. She has Ariel tasting cakes on the other side of town. She said she wanted to make sure the cake was perfect, and so wanted us to taste as many as possible. She said you could cover more ground if you split up, and I

believe she wanted as many opinions as possible,” she added when he gave a questioning look at Tank.

Mal groaned as his reindeer stamped his hooves.

Martha patted his hand. “Weddings can be stressful.”

Only those organized by Teena he thought sourly.

Tank finished licking the crumbs off his own plate and stared pointedly at Mal’s plate. He pushed it across the table to him, and Tank demolished them in seconds.

“Don’t you want to try any?” asked Martha.

“Not big on sweet things.”

Except Ariel added his lasciviously minded reindeer. Yes, except her thought Mal in pleasure. Course, the fact that he hadn’t been able to taste her sweetness in a couple of weeks just made him all irritable again.

“I like the red velvet,” declared Tank. “But then the lemon’s good too. Wouldn’t say not to more carrot either.” He stared at his empty plate thoughtfully.

“Maybe you should get some samples to take home to Marion and the girls,” suggested Martha gently.

Tank lit up. “Yeah, good idea. Marion will love it and the girls eat anything.”

He lumbered to his feet and went off to talk the owner of the bakery into giving him more free samples. It was unlikely he would be denied. Not because he was a belligerent, angry male, or because he was good at cajoling. Mostly, Tank just had to stand there and people did what he wanted. Mal just had give them a hard stare.

“Not long to go now,” said Martha. “Soon, you’ll be married and all this will be forgotten.”

Mal grunted and smiled slightly. “Sure. As long as Ariel’s happy.”

That was all that mattered.

Martha beamed. “You make her very happy.”

“Yeah, the feeling’s mutual.”

They exchanged a look of mutual adoration for Ariel and he relaxed a little. Okay, so he was disappointed Ariel wasn’t there, but he’d get over it. His reindeer huffed in disagreement and Mal ignored him.

Tank returned a moment later carrying an impressively large box.

“Oh my,” exclaimed Martha, “they gave you all that for free?”

Tank shrugged his massive shoulders. “Kinda. This was for a wedding that cancelled. She gave me a good deal on it.”

“You’re going to eat a whole wedding cake?” asked Mal drolly.

Tank snorted. “Have you met my sisters? I’ll be lucky if I get a slice. You pick a cake yet?”

“Whatever Ariel wants will be fine.”

“Good answer,” chuckled Tank. “My sisters have had their wedding cakes picked out for years. They buy bridal magazines and cut out pictures from them – they have this massive scrapbook of ideas. They’ve pretty much been planning their weddings since they were like eight.”

Mal believed that their future mates would need to be very brave or very stupid or both.

“That’s very cute,” declared Martha in the face of the evidence. “I remember when the girls were young and they would play at getting married, and their stuffed bears were the guests. Your sisters would always fight over who got to be the bride, and Ariel was always the bridesmaid.”

Tank laughed. “Never the bride?”

Martha pursed her lips thoughtfully. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t believe Ariel was ever really obsessed with getting married.” She paused and quickly said, for Mal’s benefit, “Though she’s thrilled that she is getting married now.”

Mal nodded as Tank and Martha laughed over the antics of his sisters. But he was thinking about what Martha said. No, he doubted Ariel ever would be wedding crazy; she was very down to earth.

Mal pulled out his phone and looked at the texts Ariel sent him earlier. I love you. I miss you. Yeah, he agreed with those sentiments whole-heartedly. His reindeer hooted.

He really was wondering why they were bothering with this huge wedding when neither of them really wanted it.

*

Ariel groaned as Teena held up another thong. Maris pressed her lips together to stop herself from laughing.

“I like this one,” declared Teena, “but I think Mal would prefer it in pink, don’t you? I’m going to see if they do it in pink.”

Ariel blushed as red as Santa’s suit. She didn’t wait for a reply, and as soon as she was gone, Maris let out a snort of un-ladylike laughter.

“It’s not that funny,” said Ariel, though she couldn’t help but smile.

“No, no, of course not,” soothed Maris as she tried not to hiccup. She gave Ariel an innocent look.

“So, will Mal prefer it in pink?”

Ariel buried her head in her hands and giggled with embarrassed mirth. They were currently picking out lingerie for the wedding night. Yep, that had been on Teena's to do list too. Maris was a fellow herd member, and also her uncle Clay's mate – though that word was in contention between them. But, they were living together and expecting babies, so yeah, they were mates. She also used to be a lingerie model, and had a good eye for what was flattering.

"You really don't need me, you'll look lovely in any of this stuff," said Maris reassuringly.

"Did you say that to Teena?"

"Yes."

"Did she listen?"

Maris smiled. "Not at all. But, I thought that as I was out buying lingerie for my niece, I might as well get a little something for me. What do you think? Will Clay flip for this?" She held up an impossibly skimpy baby-doll against her still lithe figure.

Ariel winced. "Please don't make me pick out that kind of thing for my uncle. It's bad enough you're here to help pick out my wedding night underwear. Though, maybe this couldn't hurt."

She held up a pretty red set. It was a tad racy compared to her usual underwear, but maybe she should try something a little different.

"Oh, la, la, I like it," said Maris approvingly. "Forget the wedding night, get it and wear it tonight."

Ariel was going to laugh and put it back, but a nudge from her inner animal made her hold onto it. "Yeah, you think?"

Maris nodded enthusiastically. "Definitely. You said earlier that you and Mal have barely seen each other recently, right?"

Ariel bit her lip and nodded. They hadn't been together that long, but most of it felt like they'd been apart.

"Then make time for him tonight. Show him your sexy underwear, and remind him that you're worth all this wedding drama."

"But I have to..."

Maris put a hand on her arm. "No, you don't. Whatever it is, I'll do it. You're allowed a few hours to yourself." She beamed and then faltered. "I mean unless it's like an appointment for a root canal, because I won't do that. I'm not allowed back at the dentist, not since I bit her."

Ariel giggled. "Thank you."

They hugged and separated just as Teena returned, declaring that they could dye the underwear pink for her, and that Teena had chosen a color she was sure Mal would love. Ariel and her reindeer decided they weren't going to say anything to that.

The moment Mal set foot in his house he grabbed his phone. He was going to get Ariel home and they were going to talk.

They were living with his sister and his baby nephew, but, at his request, Carrie had made herself scarce for the evening. He thought she had gone over to Tank's house to hang out with his sisters and daughters. Carrie would be lucky to get her baby back at the end of the night from that mob.

Mal was also supposed to be guarding his alpha's mate, but Tank had agreed to do it for him. So, now he had at least a few free hours with his mate, as long as he could pry her away from the huge amount of tasks she did on a daily basis.

She wasn't answering, but she could be driving. Ariel was far too sensible to do anything like answer a cell phone while operating a vehicle. Damn, how he loved her.

He started typing out a text when his reindeer pawed the ground impatiently. Soon reassured Mal, we will see our mate soon. But that didn't seem to appease the beast. No, he seemed edgy for a different reason.

He stood up straighter as a sliver of worry assailed him. This was a feeling he was used to – back when he was a hunter. It was a sense of foreboding, as if something bad was about to happen. Usually, it meant someone was about to attack him, about to shoot at him.

His head whipped up as he heard footfalls in the garden. His reindeer roared and he prepared to fight as the back door to his house flew open.

"Hey!" rumbled Riker.

Both man and reindeer gaped as Riker, his mentor from his hunting days, burst into his house followed by half a dozen other hunters he had worked with at one time or another.

"What are you doing here?" asked Mal, still a little shocked to see him.

Riker grinned wolfishly – well, he was a wolf shifter. "Here for your bachelor party."

The other hunters growled and brayed in agreement.

"My what?"

"Bachelor party," repeated Riker as he gave Mal a stinging slap to the back. "Hunter tradition."

Not that many hunters married; it wasn't a career which was particularly conducive to all the things that couples did – like see each other more than a couple of times a year. So when they did get married, they went all out for bachelor parties – with the last one starting in Florida and ending in Alaska.

Mal groaned inwardly as his reindeer grunted in worry. "Guys, I appreciate it..."

The rest of his sentence was muffled. Too late, he remembered how the last bachelor party started – with the prospective groom being kidnapped. Now, he had a bag that smelled of cinnamon over

his head and he was being manhandled into a vehicle by three bear shifters. Obviously, he would give them the slip as soon as possible – but how soon could he get back to Ariel?

Hoot!

*

“Okay, be bold,” Ariel muttered to herself. Her reindeer hooted.

She had changed into the new underwear at Maris’ house when she dropped her off, and as soon as she got in the house, she was going to strip and show Mal exactly what he had been missing. Carrie had texted and told her Mal was planning something for her – he had virtually kicked Carrie out of the house. Oh, he was such a sweetie!

She got inside and quickly shimmied out of her clothes before she changed her mind. The underwear was virtually see through, and she couldn’t wait to see Mal’s reaction to seeing her dressing so sexily.

“Mal? Where are you? I’ve got a surprise for you!”

Ariel ran into the living and squealed on seeing Teena, her mother, the herd historian, Alden, and her brother, the alpha, sitting there.

“Ariel,” breathed her mother in surprise.

Her brother, Branch just gaped at her. Alden’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“Oh, good, you’re here,” declared Teena, completely oblivious as usual. “We’re here to talk about the ceremony. Of course Branch will be performing it as alpha, but the actual wording of the vows is up to you.”

Ariel grabbed a throw from the couch and pulled it around her. “I... uh... I...”

Every part of Ariel blushed, and unfortunately, everyone could see that. It shouldn’t be a big deal – they were reindeer shifters who stripped off and shifted to their beasts once a month. But, somehow, the skimpy underwear made her feel more naked.

“We’ll come back later,” said her mother.

Teena looked like she was going to argue, and her mother quickly started wheeling her out of the house. Branch grunted at her disapprovingly while Alden couldn’t look at her as he left – which is why he stumbled over a coffee table and walked into the door.

Ariel sighed as the front door closed. She sank to the couch and started giggling nervously. Oh, jingle bells! She couldn’t wait for this darn wedding to be over!

*

Mal smiled as Ariel slowly blinked awake. “Morning, baby.”

She licked her lips and gasped as she saw him hovering over her. “Mal! It’s you!”

She bolted upright and flung her arms around him.

He chuckled and folded her into his arms, reveling in the feel of his mate against him. "Who else would you expect to find in our bed?"

"I was expecting it to be empty," she admitted a little sadly.

"I know, baby."

"I miss you."

"Me too, baby," he murmured with feeling. His reindeer grunted in agreement.

By the time he finally escaped his friends last night and got home, Ariel was already asleep. But, he was kind of glad, as it gave him time to make a few plans.

There was a banging downstairs followed by shouts. Ariel pulled back to look at him.

"Is that Carrie?"

"No." He frowned in concentration. "That sounded more like your sister in law, and maybe your mom."

Her cute little nose scrunched in confusion. "They're here?"

"Yep, here for our wedding."

It scrunched even more on hearing that. "What?"

Mal smiled and his reindeer almost swooned at her loveliness. "Baby, this whole giant wedding – it isn't us. This whole thing is making us both miserable, and it made me wonder why we were bothering when neither of us wanted it. All I care about is being with you. I don't want swans and kilts and six tier wedding cakes. I only want the most beautiful woman in the world to tell me that she's mine. That's all I want out of my wedding day."

Ariel stared at him.

"Unless, I'm wrong..." he started uncertainly. His reindeer whined worriedly.

"You're not wrong," she murmured before smiling beatifically. "You're all I want. You're everything to me."

Mal dragged her in for a kiss and he almost cried at how wonderful it was. Being with Ariel somehow felt like coming home, like this was where he was supposed to be – always. She was his love, his best friend, and she was his life.

They parted, resting their foreheads together and smiling dreamily.

"We're really getting married right now?" she asked wondrously.

"Well, as soon as you get some clothes on. Too many people have already seen you in your underwear."

He was teasing, but his reindeer was kind of peeved about that. He could excuse her mother, brother and even Teena, but Alden had seen her in sexy underwear – unacceptable!

Ariel cringed. “Oh, you heard. I was trying to surprise you and gave my brother an eyeful – ugh!”

Mal laughed and brushed his lips over hers. “Forget it, baby, please.” He would also tell Alden to forget it immediately. “Right now, we’ve got a bunch of people downstairs waiting to see us get married.”

He wanted it to be as small as possible, but he had to have his sister and nephew, her mom and brother, and their mates, plus Tank and all his family – mom, mate, sisters and daughters – and, somehow Burke had managed to horn his way in.

“And frankly, baby, I can’t stand to go another moment without being married to you.”

Ariel’s eyes moistened. “I love you so much,” she said with feeling.

“I love you, too.”

“Just one thing...” Her eyes took on a wary glint. “Does Teena know?”

*

They were married within half an hour. Everyone was thrilled for them. Well, almost, Teena had been a mite annoyed by the turn of events. That is until Ariel made it clear that a dream wedding was up for grabs – and it would be a shame if all that planning went to waste.

Teena actually managed to pick up on that and realized what it meant. Burke wasn’t so quick on the uptake, and only got it when Tank slapped him around the head and told him to propose. At that point, Tank was resolved to having him in his family, and couldn’t fight it any longer.

Burke had then made a clumsy proposal, stumbling over his words until he finally got out, “Marry me, will you?”

Teena had then launched herself at him and shouted, “Well, duh!”

So they were engaged, and married in an incredibly lavish affair on Christmas Eve. Everyone agreed it was the most incredible wedding ever. Well, almost everyone. Mal and Ariel considered their own wedding to be the most incredible – because it was just what they wanted.

The end