

## Holly and Ivy

Mason grinned as he looked at the text message his mate just sent him. He didn't know even know there was a bra emoji until Judy sent it to him. It was followed by a bottle of wine and a bed and a heart. His inner gorilla beat his chest as he imagined the fun they ere going to have when their shift ended.

It was Christmas Eve, and while Mason didn't exactly want to be working, somebody had to do it. Both he and his rabbit shifter mate, Judy, worked for the Supernatural Enforcers Agency, and, to dust off an old chestnut, crime never took a break, so neither could the agency. Judy was kind of a workaholic, and since they didn't have kids, and they were saving up for a house, they decided to work. Things might be different next year thought his inner gorilla, who was keen on the idea of having either a gorilla infant or a rabbit kit soon. But for now, they were happy to work Christmas Eve and spend all Christmas Day morning in bed, celebrating in the dirtiest way possible.

On Christmas Day, usually the only people working were the vampires and zombies who didn't seem to care anything about Christmas. It wasn't true of all vampires and zombies, but there seemed to be a huge amount that didn't celebrate – perhaps you lost your holiday spirit when you died, it went away with your pulse and the need to breathe.

Just about all their friends were having a holiday party, and while Mason regretted not being there, he had to admit he wasn't a natural born party animal. In truth, he wasn't a very Christmassy person either. He could be very negative and dour and generally annoyed people with his pessimistic attitude, and so he wasn't a great loss to the party. He was content for him to only attend a party of two with Judy, who adored him in spite of his personality, and when she found him to be too negative, she told him to shut up and kiss her.

Our mate is perfect rumbled his gorilla. He couldn't deny that. He looked down at his phone as she sent him a kissy-faced emoji. Oh, midnight could not come soon enough.

For now, the agency had been called to a mall – something about a ruckus with a Santa. The police department had passed it to them and they had been sketchy on the details.

The mall was apparently staying open late, with Santa there until closing too. Mason thought that would just cause confusion for kids – for surely Santa should be at the North Pole making preparations right now. But then, perhaps kids weren't quite as logical as him. Mason had torn apart the whole Santa thing when he was four. In Mason's young, cynical mind, he just couldn't see how Santa could deliver presents to all kids on one night – even with magic. He had interrogated a Santa at a department store until the man burst into tears and admitted he wasn't real.

Mason glanced at his partner for this call and he shrugged. Carson had been at the Los Lobos SEA for over six months, and yet all that Mason knew about him was that he was a wolf shifter, and that his first name might be James or Jason or, according to one source, Titus. The male was standoffish and private to the extreme, and Mason respected that. Though, his aloofness had caused quite a lot of consternation amongst the single females who salivated at just the sight of him.

“Ah, there you are, at last,” trilled a harried looking man in an expensive suit.

“Agent Mason and Carson – SEA,” rumbled Mason, “what’s the problem?”

“I’m Julius Daly, the owner of the mall, and the problem is him!” he hissed pointing at Santa.

At that time of night there, although the mall was busy with last minute shoppers, there weren’t many kids about. So currently atop Santa’s knee was a teenage girl, and she was surrounded by a group of other teenage girls who were all giggling. Santa, to his credit, didn’t seem embarrassed or too happy at the fact that what appeared to be a sixteen-year-old was cuddling up to him. Mason gave him credit for that. Given the real beard and jolly laugh, he looked like a pretty authentic Santa – if there could be such a thing.

Mason looked at Carson who shrugged, not understanding the problem either.

“What exactly is the problem with him?” asked Mason.

Mr. Daly rolled his eyes furiously – as if it was obvious. “He’s giving away presents to everyone!”

“Isn’t that what Santa does?” asked Carson drolly.

“He’s not supposed to give them away!” exploded Mr. Daly. “The parents are supposed to buy a ticket – only thirty dollars...”

“Bargain,” muttered Carson.

“And when they give the ticket to the ticket elf,” he gestured at a small female with fake ears and an even faker smile – she wasn’t very authentic looking, “their child can then sit on Santa’s knee for a maximum of twenty seconds, and our gift elf will pick out a gift for them.”

“Of a thirty dollar value?” said Carson evenly.

Mr. Daly’s eye twitched and Mason had to press his lips together to stop himself from laughing.

“Of a comparable amount,” said Mr. Daly.

Carson snorted audibly. Yeah, they knew what that meant – thirty dollars for twenty seconds with Santa and a three-dollar gift at the most.

“And?” prompted Mason.

Mr. Daly was almost turning purple with rage. “But don’t you see – he’s giving them the wrong gifts. He’s giving them far more expensive gifts that I didn’t authorize!”

He pointed to the teenager who was walking away with a pretty expensive looking make up kit, and one of her friends appeared to have a set of wireless headphones that Mason knew cost at least a hundred bucks.

“So you’re saying he stole these items from one of your stores?”

“Well, ah, I, I don’t know about that,” he stammered. “No store has reported anything missing – and they are very careful at this time of year. He... he must have brought the gifts with him.”

Carson narrowed his eyes. "So, your Santa is giving away amazing gifts to your customers that you haven't had to pay for, and you want us to arrest him?"

Mr. Daly paused. "Well, he's ah... he is letting them sit on his knee for more than twenty seconds!"

"Yeah, lock him up," quipped Carson.

Mr. Daly gaped like a fish and Mason held out his hands in a placating way. "We'll have a word with him."

"And say what?" scoffed Carson.

Mason shot him a look before smiling reassuringly at Mr. Daly. "We'll make sure he isn't doing anything illegal."

"And if he isn't?" asked Mr. Daly waspishly.

"Then perhaps you could just be glad about how happy he's making all your customers."

He nodded over at the teenage girls who were virtually bouncing up and down. Mr. Daly pursed his lips and stalked away.

Carson let out a snort as soon as he was gone. "That guy has some holly up his ass."

Mason nodded in agreement. "But, we should probably check that all these items he's giving away aren't stolen. You go talk to Santa and I'll check and see if there has been any major thefts around the city recently."

"This time of year? You'll be on the phone all night."

Mason waved him away and started dialing. One good thing – he could pick up an extra gift for Judy while he was at the mall. He'd bought her a necklace, but a pair of matching earrings surely couldn't hurt.

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Ivy stroked her stomach and sighed. Her eyes were drooping, her fake elf ears were pinching, her feet were aching, and her back was killing her, she just wanted to go home and pretend like it wasn't Christmas. Seriously, she couldn't take anymore of this whole family togetherness crap. She wanted to go home, go to bed, and wake up on December 26<sup>th</sup> and for it all to be over. Thank goodness the mall was closing in fifteen minutes – twelve-hour shifts were a bit much for her.

The baby kicked and she patted her stomach. "Okay, honey bunny, we'll be getting something to eat soon."

Yes, before bed, she needed something to eat. Thankfully, even Mr. Daly – tightwad of the year – actually agreed to feed the employees he had working twelve hour shifts. He fed them with leftovers from the mall food court, but Ivy was grateful for anything, and when it struck midnight, Ivy was going to throw all the leftover food into a bag and run on home with it – it had to feed her until

her next job kicked in. There wasn't much call for one of Santa's elves in January, so when the mall closed up Santa's grotto, she would move on to stacking shelves at night.

Ivy sagged a little. No, this definitely wasn't where she saw her life heading. She had been in her final year of college, but one night with a drunken frat boy later, and she was hurtling toward midnight feedings and dirty diapers.

Her strict parents had not understood. They weren't sympathetic to her getting pregnant without being married. They immediately stopped paying her tuition and kicked her out. As for the father, well, he didn't even remember spending the night with her. She had crushed on him for nearly three years of college, and he still called her Katie – which wasn't even close to Ivy – and he certainly didn't want anything to do with her baby. She supposed she could get a paternity test after the baby was born, but given how awful things were, she was starting to think that keeping the baby wasn't...

"Hey, elfy, is the big man free?"

Ivy startled and looked up at an enormous and ruggedly handsome man. His eyes shifted between brown and yellow as he looked at her. He had to be a shifter – human males didn't have eyes like that, nor muscles quite that bulging... Ivy felt an immediate twinge inside and then immediately sobered. The last time she felt that kind of twinge, it resulted in two minutes of between the sheets awkwardness, and then homelessness.

"Do you have a ticket?" she asked weakly as those gorgeous eyes roamed all over her.

Oh, she twinged again, and Ivy bit her lip to stop herself from moaning out loud. She wasn't used to these kinds of feelings. Her parents had been super strict, and college was the one and only time she had ever crushed on a guy. But, even then, even though she recognized that she felt desire then, it was nothing compared to the instantaneous feeling she had for this man.

His polite smile didn't falter and he pulled out a badge. "SEA."

Ivy raised an eyebrow. "You're here for Santa? Are you going to arrest him?"

"Better not – I don't want to be the wolf who stole Christmas."

"You're a wolf shifter?" she breathed, imagining the beautiful animal lurking inside him.

"Sure am."

"That's amazing," she said with feeling. She had always been in awe of shifters.

"Thanks, so, Santa?" he prompted briskly.

"Oh, umm, you can go right on up, we're not very busy."

"Thanks, and ah, Merry Christmas."

"You too," she replied dully, imagining that he had wonderful wife and family to spend his Christmas with and feeling more jealous than she could ever remember being before.

Carson looked back at the female. There was a sad, almost wistful look on her face. Humph. She should be happy – she was having a baby, wasn't she? What did she have to be mopey about? He certainly didn't like that look on her face. She had such a sweet, pretty face, it should be smiling all the time. Maybe he should go back over there... no. No, not falling down that rabbit hole again.

His inner wolf growled at him and Carson hushed him. His inner wolf had rather liked her, actually, his inner wolf immediately howled in desire when he saw her – his inner wolf had no shame. Her scent had been enticing, alluring, and he couldn't help but admire her plump lips and luminous eyes. But, she was clearly expecting, and probably had some boyfriend at home who didn't deserve – so there was no way he was getting involved, no matter how much his wolf was pushing him to do it. Plus, Carson didn't really trust his animal's judgment when it came to females, so he ignored the whining of the beast and approached Santa.

"Santa," he rumbled.

"Ho, ho, ho!" boomed Santa. "Merry Christmas, young man, now, come here and tell Santa what you would like this year."

Santa patted his knee and Carson let out a bark of laughter. "No, offense, Santa, but I'd be afraid of crushing you."

"Nonsense, everyone is welcome on Santa's knee."

Carson wasn't even going to touch that comment, but if he insisted. He planted himself on the knee, ignored the guffaws around him, and was amazed that Santa didn't buckle in the least.

"Now then, have you been a good boy this year?"

Carson raised his eyebrows. "Not really."

Now that did surprise Santa. Most naughty kids probably had the decency to lie, but Carson didn't bother. He knew he'd acted like a dick all year, and he didn't care. His anger was still strong and he had acted out, annoying and irritating anyone and everyone around him. What did he care whether people liked him? He had nothing to lose.

"Well, what would you like this Christmas?"

Nothing he could have.

"Nothing."

"All boys and girls deserve to be happy at Christmas," said Santa. "Is there nothing you would like? You know many wish to have mates at Christmas," he suggested not very subtly.

Carson's eyes narrowed. "You know I'm only here because I'm supposed to be arresting you."

This didn't have the desired effect of scaring him and his wolf growled. Santa just nodded in understanding.

"I'm afraid that Mr. Daly's Christmas spirit doesn't reach past his bank balance. Are you going to arrest me?" he asked in mild curiosity, not out of any fear that it may happen.

"Only if we have proof that all the toys and gifts you've been giving away are stolen."

Santa nodded and smiled. "They aren't."

Carson lumbered to his feet, wondering what else he could do. Giving away gifts was not illegal, and he couldn't see that the guy was doing anything else wrong.

Santa started rummaging in his sack. "I'm afraid I don't have anything in here for you."

"That's okay, Santa, I'm good for stuffed bears and choo choo trains."

Santa paused and looked at him, his face lit up as he had a thought. "Could I ask something of you, though?"

Carson cocked his head to one side. "Okay."

"Could you give Ivy a ride?" Santa nodded at the pregnant elf, who looked sadder by the minute. "She really shouldn't be riding the bus at this time of night."

"Ah, sure."

Carson didn't really mind, but his wolf was virtually grinning. The wolf liked the female's sweet, cinnamon scent, and he couldn't deny that she had a sweet smile. Right, because sniffing young pregnant girls was going to end well.

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"This is good of you," said Ivy as she glanced at the profile of the wolf shifter.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't say no to Santa."

"Wouldn't want to be on the naughty list, right?" she joked weakly.

Carson grinned. "Oh, I'm sure I'm already on there. What about you?"

Ivy glanced down at her stomach. "Probably," she sighed and looked out of the window.

Los Lobos was experiencing some unseasonably cold weather, with snow and everything. Ivy hoped it could be combated by lots of layers and snuggling under duvets – because she wasn't sure she could afford her heating budget could take the hit.

"Your family working or something – they couldn't pick you up?"

"Or something," she muttered. "Umm, it's just over here."

Carson pulled over and peered at her building. A low growl sounded in his throat.

"This place doesn't look very safe."

"It's not that bad," she lied. She pushed as much furniture as she could in front of the door every night.

Carson looked at her and narrowed his eyes. "I'll walk you in."

"Oh there's no..."

But he was out of the car and already running around to help her out. She tried to climb out under her own steam, but that was a non-starter. Carson carefully took her arms and easily lifted her, and he slipped an arm around her waist as he led her inside. Ooh, if she weren't so exhausted she would probably be enjoying this more. Big, rugged men didn't generally go out of their way to help her – in fact, they never did.

But, as it was, she just wanted her bed. She just wanted...

"Oh, no, no, no!" murmured Ivy as she saw the pile of her belongings in front of her door.

"Sorry," said the landlord, not sounding particularly sorry at all as he changed the locks. "You're two months behind on rent, can't be helped."

Carson's arm tightened around her waist.

"But I have the money now!" she argued weakly.

Her landlord shrugged a shoulder. "Needed it by noon today. Can't be helped, and you can't have the security deposit back - the toilet's broken."

"But, that was broken when I moved in!"

"Can't be helped," he parroted.

"But... but... I've nowhere..." Tears prickled at her eyes.

Carson rubbed his hand up and down her back. "Go wait in the car," he said grimly.

"But..."

"Go wait in the car," he repeated and handed her the keys.

"My stuff... my security deposit?"

Carson raised an eyebrow and she nodded. "I'll go wait in the car."

He smiled coldly. "Good idea." He turned to the landlord. "Now, about this security deposit..."

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Carson started driving on autopilot as his wolf snarled. What kind of dick put out a pregnant woman on Christmas Eve? Did the whole Christmas story mean nothing to that guy? Jeez, even Carson wouldn't behave that way.

Still, he considered she was better off out of there. He'd visited prisons that were more pleasant and welcoming. He had, however, got her deposit back and even persuaded the guy to carry her stuff down to his car. It was least he could do – dick. Grrr.

A glance at her worried face told him that she didn't have a family or a boyfriend to turn to, which meant, she was on her own. She had to be at least eight months pregnant, and homeless. Crap. His wolf growled – why didn't she have anyone? Why wasn't anyone taking care of her?

His wolf urged him to do something. "You hungry?" he blurted. He wasn't any good at comforting people.

"A little," she admitted in a small voice. "Mostly just tired."

"Yeah, me too," he agreed, though truthfully he was feeling strangely wired at that moment. He pulled over in front of a seven eleven. "I'll grab some supplies and we'll go back to mine."

Her eyes widened slightly. "To your place?"

"Yeah, you can stay the night and then we'll... figure something out. Don't worry, it's just a bed for the night," he added hastily, lest she think he was hoping for something unsavory in return.

"Oh yes, it wouldn't be anything else," she sighed.

"Huh?" Did she sound disappointed.

"I mean thank you so much – that's so kind of you."

Carson nodded. "Wait here, stay warm, and I'll be right back."

He jogged into the store and started grabbing cereal and milk and then he spied the last turkey on the shelf, and the last can of cranberry jelly. Carson didn't have any Christmas food in; he hadn't planned on entertaining or celebrating in any way. He had actually offered to work, but sadly found that he wasn't needed. His plans had involved sitting at home, getting drunk, and staying drunk until December 26<sup>th</sup>.

As much as he didn't want to bother with Christmas, now he had an impromptu guest who was having a much tougher time than he was, so maybe he should... His wolf let out a roar of happiness. Yeah, maybe he should.

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Ivy worried her lip. Things could be worse. Right now, she definitely had a bed for the night, with a kind SEA agent. He could have left her there – he didn't owe her anything. Or he could have taken her to a shelter, but no, he had offered her somewhere to sleep and was even getting her something to eat. So far, he was outstripping both her parents and the father of her baby in the compassionate stakes. She hoped his girlfriend or wife wasn't too put out by her presence.

Everything was okay for now... until she trespassed on his hospitality and had to leave. But, she had two weeks wages in her pocket – she could find another apartment. Yes, things would be okay. The baby gave a dutiful, reassuring kick and she smiled.



“It’s okay – we’re okay,” she murmured reassuringly.

Ivy smiled as she saw him coming out of the store, laden with bags. Oh, she hoped he hadn’t gone to too much trouble for her, while her hungry stomach considered that anything he had in there had to be better than the stale donuts she was planning on swiping from the mall.

He saw her looking and smiled in return, and oh, that twinge returned. That was a dangerous twinge – certainly dangerous for her. For him, he’d probably just laugh at her.

Carson started hurrying toward and she watched, in horror, as he slipped on a patch of ice. He careened across the sidewalk and one of the bags flew through the air. Ivy started clambering out of the car as Carson righted himself and made a dash for the bag. Except, he was too late, for the number seventy-two bus drove right on over it.

By the time Ivy managed to get out, she was panting and Carson was wincing as he looked through the bag.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Carson nodded as he pulled something out of the bag. “Yep, but I can’t say the same about the turkey.”

He held up the flattened bird, now sporting tire marks.

Ivy let out a burst of laughter and slapped her hand over her mouth. “Sorry, it just reminds me of that joke – what sound does a limping turkey make?”

Carson raised his eyebrows.

“Wobble, wobble.”

He barked with laughter and she giggled.

Carson looked over the turkey and shrugged. “I guess it will still say the same. Come on, let’s get moving, it’s cold out here.”

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Ivy hesitated at the entrance to his apartment; Carson placed a hand on her back and gently directed her inside.

“Go on in, and I’ll turn the heating up,” he said.

His wolf prowled uneasily as Ivy took baby steps – which were nothing to do with her baby – into the apartment. Perhaps she was having second thoughts about staying there alone with him, and his wolf yowled in worry. He wanted her to be there... because he wanted her to be safe... obviously. If she wanted to leave, he wasn’t sure what to do. He supposed, at a push, he could ring around homeless shelters, and he was sure they would make room for a pregnant girl on Christmas Eve, but he’d still prefer to know firsthand she was safe.

Carson dumped his bags on the kitchen island, and viewed her as he might a startled deer, and, given his inner beast, he had plenty of experience seeing startled deer.

“Don’t you want to tell your... umm... girlfriend that I’m here?” she asked, her forehead creasing in worry as she rubbed her stomach almost vigorously.

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” he said dully as his wolf huffed. “I live alone.”

“Oh,” she breathed, and her lips twitched as if she was about to smile and thought better of it.

“You know, ah, if you’re worried about being here alone with me...”

Ivy shook her head. “I’m not worried. I’m worried about freezing to death on the streets.”

Carson folded his arms. “Where’s your family? Where’s the father?” he asked bluntly.

Ivy looked at her feet, or possibly just her bump that was probably blocking the sight of her feet. “My family kicked me out when I got pregnant, and the father,” she snorted, “he doesn’t even remember spending the night with me.”

Dick, snarled his inner beast, while also feeling a strange tingle of relief.

“I’m sorry.”

Ivy shrugged, and they were silent for a few beats until she said appreciatively, “You have a beautiful home.”

“It was already decorated and furnished when I rented it. It’s okay.”

“Well, it’s nice.”

Carson smiled slightly. “Mostly I chose it because it’s a good location, and the building’s pretty safe.”

Ivy nodded. “Those might be my favorite things about it.”

Yeah, after seeing where she was living up until an hour ago, he could believe that. How that landlord could dare charge her rent for that cold, damp, and broken toileted hovel he had no idea. Grrr.

They looked at one another for a few moments, uncertainly, and awkwardly, before Carson cleared his throat.

“You probably want to get changed,” he said, glancing down at the elf costume she was still sporting. “Your bedroom is through there, and the bathroom is second on the left – there are plenty of towels in there if you want to shower or to take a bath or anything...”

He didn’t want to sound like he was trying to get her naked in his apartment, though, his perverted mind wasn’t averse to it. His wolf yipped but Carson inwardly kicked himself. She was vulnerable young woman, and the last thing she needed or wanted was some bitter old perv leching over her.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I think I just want to go to sleep,” she admitted.

“Yeah, yeah, go ahead,” he said quickly. “The sheets are clean on the bed.”

She smiled, her rosy cheeks dimpling prettily, and he was struck by how lovely she was, and struck by just what a dick he was for thinking it.

“I’ll get your things from the car,” he said as he hurried out of the apartment.

He considered that the cold would do him good.

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Ivy smiled as she brushed her hair. She couldn’t believe it – she had slept for ten hours straight. Recently, her sleep had been fitful at best. Her neighbors back at her apartment had either been engaged in noisy arguments or noisy sex throughout most of the night. Then there had been the fear of someone breaking in constantly – given that the building had suffered from six burglaries over the past month alone. But, no, she had slept a comfortable bed, with feathery pillows, and buttery soft sheets. Then, when she woke up, she had a shower – with hot water! Oh the luxury! She hadn’t had anything but tepid water for the past six months. Hot water was mythical at her old apartment. Not to mention the heat in the apartment! It was constant and like living in a hot house. If she could, she would sure she would flower right about now.

Ivy pulled on an oversized sweater and tentatively made her way out of her room in search of food and her handsome wolf shifter.

She couldn’t believe he was single. Didn’t the female population have eyes? Couldn’t they see what a kind and generous guy he was? Though, she admitted to some relief about there not being a female in his life. She wasn’t sure how she’d feel if her husband brought home a pregnant woman – so she hadn’t expected a warm welcome from his hypothetical wife. But, she didn’t think the relief was only because she worried about being tossed out on her ass twice in one night. She also felt like she didn’t really want to share his attention. It was crazy because it wasn’t like she would ever have a change with him – it like getting upset when the movie start you had a crush on married a beautiful model – but she preferred him single and available.

Ivy rubbed her forehead. Jeez, maybe she needed a bit more sleep – she wasn’t making a whole lot of sense even to herself.

She walked into the living room/kitchen – it was all one big room with high windows along one wall and a small balcony to one side. It was a great apartment – like the kind you’d see on a sitcom where the characters were making minimum wage were living in an amazing place, instead of the more likely dump she had inhabited until ten past eleven last night.

Ivy was surprised at the lack of Christmas paraphernalia. It was as bare as her place had been. Maybe he was as alone as she was, and the thought gave her a stab of dismay. Such a kind guy didn’t deserve to be on his own.

She frowned as she looked around. Where actually was this kind guy? The apartment wasn’t huge, and his bedroom door was open, and the bathroom was free and...

Ivy yelped as the door to the balcony opened, and a huge figure in a giant coat bustled through it. The hood was pulled back to show it was Carson in the coat.

“Oh, hey, you’re up.”

“Uh, yeah, have you been mountaineering before breakfast?”

Carson grinned. “Technically before lunch.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed as she looked at the clock.

It was already one in the afternoon – she must have been in the bath for longer than she thought.

“And this is just my Christmas dinner chef’s uniform.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, the thing is my oven doesn’t seem to be working, so to cook the turkey, I’m kind of having to resort to desperate measures.”

Carson inclined his head to the balcony and she padded over to look. “Oh, way to improvise,” she said in amusement.

Their flattened, tire-marked turkey was atop a barbecue on the snow-laden balcony.

“Yeah, I hope you like food that’s burnt on the outside and freezing on the inside.”

“Well, I used to work at a Swifty Burger, so I’m kind of used to it.”

He grinned and looked her up and down. “You look a lot less... ah...”

“Hmmm?”

“I was going to say tired, but I wasn’t sure how well that would go down. I’m a bit out of practice at giving compliments.”

Ivy shook her head. “You don’t have to walk around on eggshells with me – say anything, I won’t get upset.”

“You say that now, but one throwaway comment about swollen ankles and you might lock yourself in the bathroom – trust me, I’ve been there.”

He took on an almost haunted look and she giggled. Though, she did wonder again why there wasn’t a girlfriend or wife on the scene. In the back of her mind she worried he had lost her and was grieving, but the lack of photos around his apartment didn’t suggest this might be the case.

“I’ll be fine,” she reassured him, “and yes, thank you, I feel so much better. You’ve no idea how much of a difference quiet neighbors and a non-lumpy bed makes.”

Carson sobered a little. “Yeah, well, you’re definitely not going back to that place. I don’t think even the roaches would live there.”

“Oh, trust me, they do,” she said with emphasis.

He grunted in annoyance and she decided to change the subject. “Umm, so Christmas dinner? This is a real treat. I wasn’t planning on celebrating at all.”

“Me neither,” he admitted, glancing around at his bare apartment. “But I reckon we can have a good time.”

Ivy nodded enthusiastically. “What can I do to help?”

“You could make a start on some vegetables.” He shrugged apologetically. “All I could get were frozen ones, and only sprouts and potatoes at that. Do you like sprouts?”

“Before the baby, no, but now, I’ll eat anything,” she said pushing her sleeves up.

“Great, I’ll go and check on the barbecued turkey.”

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Carson whistled a Christmas carol as he turned the turkey over. He wasn’t sure how well this barbecue turkey was going to be – he would definitely have to taste it before feeding it to Ivy, lest he poison the pregnant woman he’d lured into his apartment.

He wasn’t even aware he was whistling until his inner wolf started howling along with him – that was one of the great things about having an inner beast you always had someone willing to duet with you. It usually sounded terrible and you were the only one who could hear it, but still.

The point is that he was surprisingly happy, and feeling very much in the Christmas spirit. To say he had avoided everything Christmassy like the plague over the last month – even tearing down the decorations anyone dared to put up at work, and trying to cite various men dressed as Santa for loitering while collecting for charities on the street. Yeah, he hadn’t been feeling very merry, but that had changed.

“Hey.”

He turned to see Ivy peering out of the balcony door. His wolf immediately growled protectively.

“Hey, it’s cold go back inside,” he said, moving to her to usher her back into the warmth.

“I just wondered where you kept your can opener – for the cranberry.”

“Uhhh... I don’t know. I don’t use my kitchen much.”

In fact, he couldn’t recall seeing a can opened before. Hmmm.

“I supposed you could check in the...”

“Oh, Carson, no!”

Ivy gaped in horror and pointed over his shoulder. His beast snarled and Carson whipped around to see the housecat from his neighbor pawing at the turkey.

“Shoo, you horrible beast!” he snapped, stomping toward it. “Get away from it!”

This was an animal that delighted in peeing on his balcony – which is why he didn’t use the balcony much. The owner wasn’t much help; they couldn’t believe that their darling little Fluffy would ever do anything like that and challenged Carson to prove it was their cat’s pee. Oh, he wasn’t about to go forensic over some cat urine.

The cat, hissed and sank its teeth into the turkey. Before Carson could get to it, the beast pulled the turkey over to the ledge and lost its footing. The cat yowled in comic horror and toppled over the ledge with the turkey.

“Oh no!” cried Ivy.

Carson peered over the edge and both man and beast growled at the awful devastation below.

“Is it okay?” called Ivy.

“No, it’s... it’s gone,” he said mournfully.

The cat leaped back onto the ledge, sneered at him, and started ambling back over to his owner’s balcony.

“Oh, thank goodness,” exclaimed Ivy, “I thought you meant the cat was dead.”

“Humph.” Would have preferred it that way rumbled his unfeeling inner beast – cats were always bad news. “Nope, that little bastard landed on the fire escape. Our turkey, however, is definitely toast.”

“And to think, it survived getting run over by a bus only to be thrown off a building by a cat,” she said seriously.

He looked back at her and they both started chuckling.

“Okay, let’s see what we can rustle up.”

\*

Ivy perched on a stool as Carson rattled around his kitchen, seemingly surprised by everything he found there, and only cursing mildly every time something fell on his head. He didn’t need to tell her that he didn’t cook – he barely even knew he had a kitchen outside of the refrigerator.

“You really never knew you had a wine bottle opener?” she teased.

Every moment she spent with him, she relaxed a little more. In the back of her mind, she was aware her situation wasn’t great, but, with him, she felt safe, and happy.

Carson pinned her with a mock severe stare. “I don’t drink wine,” he deadpanned. “Do you? I mean, not right now, but do you?” he asked waving the opener around.

Ivy shook her head and he gave her an uncertain look. “You are... old enough to drink, right?”

She burst into laughter and nodded. “I’m twenty-four.”

Carson looked mightily relieved to hear it. “Good. I mean, I’m going to find that can opener.”

She watched, giggling and enjoying the show as he searched the rest of his cupboards and came up empty.

He scratched his jaw. “Okay, so no can opener. I guess I could ask my neighbor...” He winced.

“Would that be the owner of the cat who stole our turkey?” she rightly guessed.

“Yeah, he kind of hates me because I made a few suggestions about what he should do to that damn beast. Plus, the neighbors on the other side are on vacation, or they moved out or something.”

Ivy nodded. She hadn’t taken the time to get to know her neighbors either – mostly because they were scary.

“You know I could probably shoot it with my gun... but that’s probably not a good idea. Okay, maybe I’ll try a few of these knives in here – they’ve never been used before, so who knows?”

“Sounds like the best plan we’ve got,” said Ivy approvingly.

A couple of knives later, and they were still cranberry-less. He pulled out a cleaver. “Okay, I’ve got a good feeling about this one.”

Ten seconds later, and he was covered in cranberry jelly. Ivy almost couldn’t breathe from laughing so hard.

\*

Carson tossed his shirt into the hamper. His wolf growled encouragingly. Thing were... great. Well, the dinner wasn’t – that seemed to be going down the pan with everything they tried. But things with Ivy...

Carson groaned and chided his inner wolf. There was no thing with Ivy. He was just doing her a favor – he wasn’t trying to get anywhere with her. He wasn’t...

He stepped out of the bathroom and froze as he found Ivy hovering outside. Her eyes widened on seeing him shirtless. His inner wolf preened as he scented her arousal. Carson rumbled in response. Yeah, doesn’t want to get anywhere with her taunted the wolf.

“Umm, ah, I just, ah,” she babbled.

Carson raised an eyebrow, and may have flexed his muscles a little. Yes, he was probably going to hell.

“I ah...”

His wolf snarled. “Can you smell burning?”

Ivy snapped out of her embarrassment. “Oh, the sprouts and potatoes!”

Carson darted past her to the kitchen and found flames licking at a couple of pans. He grabbed a fire extinguisher and liberally doused them until the fire was well and truly out, and the extinguisher was well and truly empty.

“Um, yeah, I was going to say that I’d started cooking the vegetables,” said Ivy with a grimace.

Carson looked at his foam-covered kitchen, then at Ivy, then at the kitchen again, and both man and beast roared with laughter.

\*

“More cereal?” offered Carson as he shook the box of frosty flakes at her.

“Please,” she smirked, holding out her bowl. He liberally filled it and then smothered the flakes with milk. “You know cereal is my favorite food,” said Ivy sincerely.

It was cheap and filling and she’d practically been living off it for months. Though, even before that she loved it.

They were lounging on his couch, and there was a Christmas movie on the TV, though they weren’t paying it much mind.

“Yeah, it’s all I eat at home,” he said with a smile. “But I generally go out to eat dinner – wolf’s gotta have meat.”

She smiled as she thought of his inner animal. “I can imagine. How come you don’t have a pack?”

Ivy flinched as he dropped his spoon and it landed in his bowl with a clunk. He stared at her. “I mean, ah...” she stammered, blushing furiously. Oh, she hoped she hadn’t just made a stupid mistake.

Carson put the bowl down on the coffee table and chewed slowly. “No, it’s fine,” he said eventually. “I’m sorry, I don’t like talking about it.”

“Then please, you, you don’t have to,” she reassured him, and her hand immediately flew to her baby in worry.

Carson frowned at the action. “I won’t kick you out just for asking me an awkward question,” he said gently. “The truth is that I was mated, and then she found someone else and got pregnant by him...” His face hardened. “So rather than watching them together, I left.”

“She was crazy,” murmured Ivy, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

He cheek ticked. “It was a little more complicated than that, but that’s the long and the short of it.”

“That’s why you’re alone at Christmas,” she said, her heart whining for this man who had been nothing but good to her.

Carson’s face tightened. “She was the daughter of the alpha, so the pack all considered it was the right thing to do. We’d known each other since we were pups, planning our lives together, getting mated, having pups...” His eyes glazed over. “But things didn’t turn out as planned.”



“No, they don’t,” agreed Ivy, “but, since I met you, I’m starting to think that’s not always such a bad thing.”

She put a hand over his and turned his hand over, palm up, so their two hands were clasped. Their eyes met; his were dark and swirling with yellow. He leaned forward and so did she. Excitement coursed through her until doubts made her stop. She halted an inch from her lips and so did he, worry marring his brow.

“You stopped,” she breathed.

“So did you,” he rumbled.

“Why did you stop?”

His eyes darkened even more. “I was worried I was taking advantage of you,” he admitted grimly.

Ivy blinked. “That’s what I was worried about too!” she exclaimed.

Carson raised an eyebrow doubtfully. “How can you take advantage of me? I mean I don’t want you to think that because I’m letting you stay here that you owe me anything. You don’t – not money and certainly not anything more than that. I invited you to stay because I like you, because my wolf likes you, and because I couldn’t bear the idea of anything happening to you. You don’t have to do anything in return for that.”

“Oh,” she sighed happily, her heart melting even more for him.

“See – I’m the one taking advantage.”

Ivy wrinkled her nose in mild annoyance. “Nuh-uh, that’s not true. You invited me into your home, you fed me, and entertained me with your lack of kitchen prowess,” he groaned and rolled his eyes, “and I just don’t want you to think that I’m taking advantage of your hospitality. Look at me!” She gestured up and down her body. “I really don’t think you’re taking advantage of all this! Do you have any idea how gross pregnancy can be? Do not get me started on my ankles and the veins in my legs. See – I’m the one taking here, and I just don’t want you to think that I was only kissing you because I wanted even more from you.”

“Well, I never thought that for a second,” he argued stubbornly. “My cereal isn’t so great that it’s worth a kiss.”

“Yeah, well, I was only kissing you because I think you’re the most handsome and wonderful man I’ve ever met!” she retorted heatedly, then realized what she had said and blushed.

Carson smirked. “Handsome, huh?”

“Figures that’s all you heard.”

Carson moved a little closer on the couch, and used his free hand to cup her face. “You’re wrong.”

“About what?” she asked grumpily.

“Any man would want to be with you.”

“Humph.” She knew for a fact that wasn’t true.

“Any man worth a damn would want you.”

“Including you?” she whispered, hope soaring through her overheated body.

“Including me.”

Then he pressed his lips to hers and kissed her.

\*

Carson woke feeling pressure on his chest. His wolf growled smugly as he realized Ivy was sleeping on top of him, snoring lightly and drooling pretty heavily.

He chuckled and gently rubbed her back. They had kissed and cuddled while watching Christmas movies, and then must have fallen asleep in one another’s arms.

His wolf snarled as she shivered against him. Hmmm, he should have moved her to a bed, but for the first time in months, he had actually slept soundly. For the first time in months he hadn’t been bitter and angry when he went to sleep and even more so when he woke up.

Carefully, he lifted her off him, and jogged to his room for his duvet, which he spread over her and watched her for a few beats as she slept. Then his wolf prodded him again. Right, right. Soon she would be awake, and he needed to do a little better for her than cereal.

He should probably run down to the store, or, given his cooking skills, maybe he should just pick up some breakfast from a diner, or...

There was a sharp rap at the door, and he thundered over to it lest whoever was on the other side wake up Ivy. He was sure it was his neighbor – wanted to complain about the fact that Carson throw a barbecue spatula at his cat. But, it wasn’t his neighbor. Nope, it was much worse.

\*

Ivy yawned as she awoke. She wriggled uneasily as she realized she had fallen asleep on the couch, and then groaned as she realized she needed to pee. Ooh, five more minutes.

She snuggled under the duvet, and smiled as she remembered that last night they had been cuddling on the couch together. They must have fallen asleep, and while she was disappointed that he had clearly already awoken, she was pleased that he had covered her in what had to be his own duvet. Did his thoughtfulness know no ends?

She wrinkled her nose as she heard muffled arguing. A peek out from the duvet proved that it wasn’t the TV – that was switched off. But a look around the apartment showed the source.

Carson was talking at the front door with a pregnant woman. The woman was almost as rounded as Ivy, though, given that she was about seven inches taller than Ivy, she wore the extra weight well.

“Carson?” Ivy mumbled.

The woman looked over at her and growled. Ivy flinched; she had to be wolf shifter too. Carson snarled at the woman to hush and she immediately looked chastised, if a little resentful.

“Who is she?” she asked sullenly.

“She’s Ivy,” replied Ivy on his behalf, with much more bravado than her hammering heart suggested she possessed.

Carson turned to Ivy, and his angry expression abated. “It’s okay, Ivy. She was just leaving.”

“Carson, can’t we just talk...”

“No, Ellen, there’s nothing to talk about,” he said politely but firmly.

“But, but, I love you – doesn’t that mean anything?” pleaded Ellen.

Ivy realized uneasily that this had to be his ex – the one who cheated on him, and the one that he’s planned to be with his whole life. Maybe he still loved her. The idea that he did made her heart ache. No, no, she didn’t want him to be with her – he deserved so much better. Ivy wasn’t sure that she fell into that category, but still...

“I want us to be together and to raise a family together – just like we always planned.” Ellen grasped his hand and pressed it to her bump. “It’s a boy, you know – a son.”

Ivy wanted to vomit, and her baby – a girl based on the scan she had at the free clinic – gave a supportive kick of disapproval.

Carson withdrew his hand and folded his arms. “No, Ellen. I don’t want that.”

Ivy stood up and folded her arms, and Ellen’s jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

“Are you kidding me?” she hissed, pointing at Ivy. “You don’t want to have a baby with me – the love of your life, but you’re willing to raise a baby with some random... girl!” Ivy reflected that ‘girl’ could have been a much worse word. “I already know that baby isn’t yours!”

“Ellen,” he said in a calm, steely voice, “you should go.”

He held the door open, and Ellen tried pleading with him, but it didn’t work, so after one last accusing glare at Ivy, she stomped away.

Carson closed the door and sighed. “I’m sorry you had to see that?”

“Are you okay?” asked Ivy worriedly.

Carson shrugged. “Sure. That was my... ex.”

Ivy nodded. “I figured.”

“She ah... she found another guy after I found out I can’t have kids,” he said quietly.

Ivy didn’t say anything. It was something that she had thought to be the case – given the anger and sadness in his voice when he talked about her pregnancy and having kids the previous evening.

“We always wanted kids, and it was devastating when we found out we couldn’t have them.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re making excuses for her?” hissed Ivy as fury stole through her.

Because, frankly, it didn’t sound like she was too devastated when hopping into bed with another guy!

Carson frowned at her tone and moved over to her so he was right in front of her. “I’m not, but having kids is important to shifters. She said she was fine with it – fine with the idea of adopting or something like that, and I,” he sighed, “I believed her. We’d been together and planning our lives since we were eight; I thought we could weather anything. But a couple of months later, I found out she was sleeping with someone else, and then she was pregnant.”

Ivy took his hand. “Carson.”

“She said she wanted us to stay together, but I... I couldn’t.” Ivy breathed in, and he added, “Because of what she did – not the baby.” He smiled sadly. “I’ve always wanted kids, I’d be happy with any kid.”

“Do you still love her?” she breathed.

“No, not for a while now, but I don’t hate her anymore. I’ve been angrily grieving for this life I thought I was supposed to have for months, and finally, I’ve realized it wasn’t the life I was supposed to have anyway. Maybe, this is.”

“Oh,” she murmured as happy tears tracked down her cheeks.

Carson brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “You know, I can’t have more kids.”

“Easy, cowboy, we don’t even have one yet.”

The baby dutifully kicked, and as Carson was pressed so close to her, he felt it and gave her a wondrous look.

“It’s a girl, by the way.”

His grin widened even more.

“Let’s just see how things go,” she said slowly, “but just so you know, adopting is fine with me.”

He leaned down to kiss her and she held up a finger. “I really regret ruining this amazing moment we’re having, but I’ve needed to pee since I woke up, and I’m about ready to explode.”

Carson threw back his head and roared with laughter.

\*

Six weeks later

“Oh, no, we can’t be doing this – I have another two weeks left!” argued Ivy.

“Tell that to junior,” chuckled Carson, as he wheeled her through the hospital. His wolf pawed the ground worriedly, but Carson had no fears – everything was going to be fine.

Ivy shifted in the wheelchair and muttered to her stomach before groaning in pain.

“She’s not listening!” complained Ivy.

Carson laughed. “C’mon, babe, we’re here now, we came all the way to the hospital – we might as well leave with a baby.”

“Humph.”

He pushed her into the delivery ward and grabbed a random doctor. “Hey, my mate’s about to give birth.”

It probably wasn’t the man’s job, but given Carson’s don’t fudge with me expression, he hopped to it and found Ivy a room. She grumbled as she tried to settle and Carson was dispatched in search of ice chips.

“Ho ho ho!”

Carson frowned at the familiar ho-ing. He followed the sound to where a bearded, jolly, rotund man appeared to be entertaining a group of kids.

“Santa?”

He wasn’t wearing his red suit, but he was definitely Santa from the mall where he met Ivy. The man looked up and smiled, immediately recognizing Carson.

“Oh, it’s you again!” exclaimed Santa. “How are you? I hope you got everything you wanted for Christmas.”

Carson froze as the man twinkled at him. But before Carson could question him, a group of excitable kids dragged him away. He chuckled and waved at Carson as he left.

Slowly, he walked back to Ivy, who was wriggling and grouching – even more so when she saw his distracted expression.

“What’s up with you? Do you have an eight-pound baby trying to shoot out of your body?” she asked huffily.

Carson shook his head as his wolf mewled in sympathy. “I just saw the mall Santa – you know, from when we met.”

“Oh, Harry? How is he?”

“Harry?”

“Yeah, that’s his name. So?”

Carson shook his head. “Yeah, he seems fine, I just... for one second, I...”

For one second he crazily imagined that Harry was something more than a run-of-the mill Santa. When he'd sat on Santa's knee, he'd wished for his mate and a child – at the time, he thought that was Ellen, and the child was something he thought he would never have. But, that wasn't true – because now, he had Ivy and they were having a baby – that little girl was his, no matter what, as was Ivy. They were everything he'd ever wanted, and not even a crowbar could pry him away from them. He had found the biological father and had him sign away his rights to her. His wolf snarled. The dick didn't even think twice about it. But, Santa was the one who asked him to take Ivy home...

Ivy glared at him impatiently and he smiled.

"Nothing, babe. C'mon, let's get you settled."

He arranged her on the bed and made her comfortable while he rubbed her back. Ivy moaned and relaxed a little.

"Sorry; little nervous about the whole birth thing," she admitted.

"It's going to be fine, babe," he reassured soothingly. His wolf crooned in agreement.

"I love you," she cooed.

"Love you, too, babe."

"We haven't talked about names yet. What do you think we should call this little one?" she asked as she rubbed her stomach.

"Well, I was thinking about... Holly."

"Holly?" Ivy pursed her lips thoughtfully before grinning. "Yeah, I like it."

"Yeah, my girls, Holly and Ivy."

Rawr

The end