

The Reindeer's Fourth of July Fun

"Hey."

"Gah!" Marion nearly jumped a foot in the air as Jax appeared out of nowhere and scared the life out of her with his murmured 'hey.' "You scared the hell out of me!" she groused accusingly, and then immediately felt guilty as Jax blushed. Seeing a huge, six-foot-seven reindeer shifter blush really was a sight to behold – the blush seemed to take an age to cover the sheer acres of his massive body.

Jax was one of her husband - Tank's cousins, and by far the sweetest out of a large bunch of enormous reindeer shifters. He didn't talk much, was infinitely tongue-tied around women and flushed at the drop of the hat. He was also the only one of her Tank's cousins who could play horsey with Marion's exuberant twins without ever getting bored or needing to take a break.

"I'm sorry, you just startled me," she added quickly, trying to put the shy, young shifter at ease.

Honestly, it wasn't his fault, she was already a little jumpy because she was doing something she shouldn't have been doing.

Jax shrugged his giant shoulder and it was like watching a tidal wave at play. "No problem," he murmured with a shy smile.

In spite of her nerves, Marion couldn't help but smile back. There was something so disarming about the young male. According to Tank, the females of the reindeer shifter herd sneered at him because of his bashfulness, because they took it for him being stupid and submissive. Things reindeer cows scoffed at in future mates. Of course he couldn't hold a candle to her Tank – no man on earth could – but she wished she could make those shallow women see him for the sweetie he was.

"What are you doing?" he asked almost apologetically.

"Oh nothing," she lied, trying to affect a look of innocence. "Just stretching my legs."

"Were you leaving the center?"

"No, of course not."

His eyes flickered to where her hand rested on the handle of the emergency fire exit. Yes, okay, she had been trying to sneak out. She thought she could have been out the door – with the broken alarm – to the drug store and back within ten minutes with no one any the wiser. Alas...

Marion followed his line of vision and looked at her hand as if she had never seen it before. "Oh my, I must have got turned around."

"Tank says you're not supposed to leave the center without an enforcer."

Again, it was said in apology, but he didn't need to apologize. It was her who was in the wrong. Tank took her and their kids' security seriously after their previous run-ins with her wolf shifter ex-father-in-law. He didn't want his new wife or kids going anywhere without a herd enforcer, and usually she was more than happy with that arrangement. After years of being a single parent, and constantly worrying about the safety of her family, it was wonderful to be loved and cherished and to know that they were safe. However, she had wanted to do something a little private.

"I'm sorry," she sighed, dropping her hand. "I just needed to buy something... personal."

Jax's huge brow furrowed as he tried to imagine something she would want to hide from Tank.

"A feminine product," she whispered.

Jax immediately went bright red and Marion considered that maybe she was going to hell.

"Oh ah... oh..."

"I'll be quick, I swear," raising her hand again to the door, trying to put the male out of his misery.

"No!" he blurted quickly and Marion raised her eyebrows. "I mean, ah, the alarm on the door was fixed yesterday. If you go through it then..."

"Oh." Her heart thudded a little erratically. Jeez, that was a close call. If she had gone through, Tank would have come running and there was no way she could have lied to him.

"I'll umm, I'll drive you," offered Jax.

Marion chewed her lip. "It's not that I'm not grateful, but it is kind of private."

"I'll wait by the door. I won't look at all." He thought about it for a few moments. "I'll close my eyes."

She considered it was probably the best offer she was going to get. If she went with Tank or one of his other cousins they would have hovered behind her. Dozer would have watched her like a hawk because of that one time that he was supposed to be watching her and she ran off – not far, but still. Or if it were Dex – Jax's twin – the incorrigible beast would have made all manner of comment about Tank's virility. While Tank... he would have had a million questions.

Marion nodded shortly. "Okay, but we can't tell Tank we're going." Otherwise he would definitely want to go with them.

"I'm not sure I can lie..." said Jax slowly.

"We don't have to lie, we just have to slip out before he sees."

Marion took Jax's arm and he allowed himself to be maneuvered through the center. He even ducked when she said duck, and soon enough they were in the SUV driving the short distance to the drug store.

While Tank was a reindeer shifter, Marion was human. But thanks to a previous marriage to a wolf shifter, she had three gorgeous wolf shifter daughters and had known all about shifters before even meeting Tank.

Marion's boss, Temp, at the charity center she worked at had mated into the reindeer shifter herd, and since Temp's mate wanted her to be safe, he had insisted herd enforcers be posted at the center. Which is how Tank came into Marion's life, and how he protected her from her crazy ex-father-in-law and how they came to be married. Now, Tank, as second in command of the reindeer shifter herd enforcers was assigned full-time to the center security so that not only could he watch Temp, he could also be there for his own mate. Other enforcers were there, like Tank's three cousins, but only Tank was always there and she was pleased he was.

Marion had never imagined she would get married again, never mind to someone as incredible as Tank – who was devoted to not only her but her three kids whole-heartedly. She loved him to the point that her heart would burst and she adored his three crazy sisters, outrageous mother and seemingly never-ending supply of cousins. Which was why she felt so bad about trying to keep this from him, even if she knew it was just temporary. But she wanted to be sure that her suspicions were correct before she sprang this on him, because, she was going to buy some pregnancy tests.

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Tank frowned on entering his home. He took a long sniff and his frown deepened even more. The usual scents that assailed him when he came home were all there. Delicious smelling mate – check. Delicious smelling dinner being cooked – check. The scents of his three gorgeous kids – a mixture of wolf shifter, jelly and soap – check. Whatever noxious facemask his sisters were trying out this week – check. But there was something else too, and if he didn't know any better he would swear it was a feline scent.

For a moment he scowled, wondering if one of his sweet, innocent sisters had brought home some cat shifter determined to defile her and in turn earn a swift and painful death. But no, he quickly realized the scent was more of a pet scent than that of a shifter. Plus, his sisters were hardly sweet or innocent. They'd be more likely to lure some poor,

unsuspecting cat shifter into the house and then refuse to let him go. Poor guy would be scared shitless and probably be forced to climb out the window... like the time they invited in the cute new mail guy.

But a cat scent? His girls had a pet fish who they inexplicably adored, but other than that they had no pets. He put it to the back of his mind for the moment.

"I'm home!" he called, smiling as he waited for his usual greeting.

His mom called out hello from the kitchen followed by an estimated time for dinner. His three sisters weren't in residence yet as usual. They would still be at work or school or out terrorizing some boy or other until dinner. However...

His smile dimmed as neither his sexy mate came out to kiss him and three little wolves didn't throw themselves at him for kisses and cuddles. Huh.

Tank had gone to see his boss, Mal to give him his usual report after he finished at the center, so Jax had driven Marion home, while his mom had been looking after the girls all day. Were they miffed at him or something?

Feeling a little unloved, he went in search of everyone. He tapped on the girls' bedroom door and pushed it open. They were currently sharing a bedroom. His sister Trini had moved into the attic to make room for them. Their house was big with five bedrooms, but currently the house did have nine occupants, and three of them were sisters who couldn't go ten minutes without starting an argument, and no he didn't mean the three little darlings who were currently running toward him with excited looks on their adorable faces.

Penny, the eldest got to him first and he gave her a firm squeeze and a kiss on the top of her head. While the twins, Sophie and Izzy wrapped themselves around his legs with naughty glee.

"Daddy giant!" squealed Izzy happily, bouncing up and down.

"Missed you, Daddy," added Sophie, bashfully hiding her head against his shin.

His momentary grouchiness at being ignored quickly evaporated in the face of such adoration.

He chucked Penny's chin while she beamed at him. "How are my girls?" he asked proudly.

Some of his herd mates had balked when they heard he was taking on not only three kids, but three wolf shifter kids. Wolves were the natural enemy of reindeer. But looking at these three beauties, how could he ever not want to be their dad? How could any male not want them?

They chorused that they were happy, although Izzy said ‘freaking happy.’ She used the word freaking a lot since she heard Auntie Teena using it. It wasn’t technically a swear word, so he wasn’t technically angry, but his sister had been using it with the same gusto she would use a swear word. He supposed it could have been worse.

“Did you have fun with Grandma today?”

“Yes,” said Izzy excitably, “we went to the freaking movies, and then we got freaking pizza, and then we went to see the freaking fishies, and then we went to the freaking park!”

“Freaking!” added Sophie amid a fit of giggles.

“You shouldn’t say freaking,” admonished Penny in her usual disapproving older sister way.

“You’re not the boss of me!” declared Izzy with a sniff.

That was another thing she said a lot, and something she had heard from Auntie Tamra. She said it a lot to Tank.

“Freaking!” agreed Sophie.

“Mommy and Daddy both say you shouldn’t say it,” declared Penny folding her arms.

Izzy scrunched up her face and looked up at Tank. He looked down at her and smiled.

“Me and Mommy don’t like you girls saying it,” he said gently.

Penny gave her a triumphant look. Izzy stuck out her tongue at her sister but she was slightly mollified. She would stop saying it, for the rest of the night at least, and would then start all over again the next day.

“So you had fun, huh?” said Tank, walking over to Sophie’s bed, while being careful not to dislodge either twin.

He wouldn’t sit on Izzy’s bed, because frankly it was a disaster zone and anyone who sat on it was liable to find something sticky on their rear. Honestly, both him and Marion were stumped about how Izzy managed it. Izzy’s bedding was washed and changed at the same time as her sisters,’ and yet it always seemed to be sticky.

Penny’s bed, however, always seemed to be made up with military precision. Honestly, she was a tiny, little girl and she was able to make her bed with hospital corners. She was the most organized and tidy person Tank had ever met in his life. Penny didn’t necessarily mind him sitting on her bed, but she couldn’t wait for him to get off so that she could make it tidy again.

Which left Sophie's bed, which was usually tidy enough, but a little rumpled because Sophie secretly jumped on it every chance she got. They were getting her a trampoline for her birthday.

The twins climbed up on his lap while Penny snuggled beside him. The girls chatted about how much they liked the movie – some kind of princess animated thing that no doubt his mom had loved as much as the girls. His mom was loving the chance to spend time with the girls, especially given that her own three girls were currently at the hormonal monster stage of their lives.

Izzy waxed lyrical about how many toppings she had on her pizza, which pretty much sounded like she had insisted on all the toppings. Penny rolled her eyes and told him how Izzy had hated the anchovies and made his mom pick them off. That earned her a raspberry from Izzy. Then, Sophie bashfully told him how they had seen clownfish at the aquarium and how much she loved dolphins.

After that however, the three of them went strangely quiet. Not so strange for Penny and Sophie, but Izzy was rarely ever quiet.

"What did you do at the park?" he prompted.

"Nothing," replied Penny quickly.

Izzy opened her mouth and quickly looked at Penny. Her older sister gave her a censorious look and instead of sticking out her tongue, or giving her a raspberry, or even telling Penny that she was not her boss, Izzy just shut her mouth and remained silent.

Penny's eyes were shifting around the room while Sophie was hiding her head. Alarm bells started going off and even his inner reindeer was warily stomping his hooves.

"What happened?" he asked immediately on alert.

"Nothing," blurted Penny. "We went on the slide and we ran around and played. We had a nice time, didn't we?"

The twins nodded furiously and he was about to probe them further when Marion appeared at the door. His heart thudded and his reindeer hooted in happiness at the sight of his lovely mate.

"There you are," she purred, beaming at him.

"Here I am," he agreed huskily, as his eyes roamed all over her body.

She was in loungewear, some shorty shorts and a baggy sweatshirt that gaped over one shoulder displaying a delectable amount of brown skin. Damn, he was one lucky son a reindeer shifter.

“Sorry, I was in the bathroom when you got home.”

“No problem,” he murmured.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Do you want to get changed? I laid out some sweats for you.”

Tank grinned. “Thanks, babe.”

“Everything okay, girls?” she asked, her brow furrowing at the unexpected silence from them.

They nodded in unison but didn’t say anything. Tank hesitated, looking at his girls. If something terrible had happened his mom would have been there and would have already reported it to him. He wasn’t too worried, particularly given the slight scratching sound that he just heard coming from the closet.

“Okay, girls,” he said, “you better wash up for dinner.”

Again, they nodded without saying anything, which was certainly unusual for Izzy who always claimed that she had already washed up no matter what. He deposited the girls on the bed, making them bounce and giggle, and he maneuvered Marion out of the room, shutting the door behind him. She opened her mouth to object but he held a finger to his lips and listened carefully. Sure enough, there were some whispered admonishments from Penny, some complaining from Izzy and some endearments from Sophie. The endearments were probably directed at the creature that had been making the scratching noises.

Marion looked at him curiously as he led them to their bedroom.

“I think the girls have got a cat in their bedroom,” he said, half concerned and half amused.

Marion blinked at him. “You’re kidding?”

He told her about the scent, the scratching and the fact that they were acting so skittish the moment he mentioned the park.

“They must have found it at the park.”

“Oh crikey,” muttered Marion moving to the door.

Tank caught her in his arms and pulled her flush against him. She frowned before relaxing against him and snuggling.

“Would a cat be so bad?”

“If it’s a wild cat, yes. It’s not safe. It might carry disease or it might attack them.”

Tank chuckled and cupped her head, amused and endeared by the worry on her face. “Babe, our kids are wolf shifters – they can’t catch diseases because of their immune systems, and as for attacking them, again, babe – wolf shifters! I’ve seen what Izzy can do to a steak – she is in no danger from a cat.”

Marion looked at him thoughtfully. “I guess you’re right. Though I’m not thrilled about them bringing an animal in the house and not telling us about it. But, I guess I just never know what to expect from them as shifters.”

“Well, it’s lucky you have me then,” he said smugly.

“Its one of the reasons I’m lucky I have you,” she murmured with feeling.

Tank chuckled. “Does this mean I get my kiss hello?”

“How remiss of me,” she teased smoothing her hands up his chest. “I think you deserve two – given how late I am in giving you the first one.”

“I think you may be right,” he whispered before his lips descended on hers and bliss overtook him.

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“You okay, babe?”

Tank gave her a mildly concerned look as she downed another glass of water.

“Yep, no problem,” Marion said, forcefully smiling.

In truth she was trying to down enough liquid to need to pee. She had been drinking all day and had tried for an hour when she got home but nothing happened. She tried looking at pictures of Niagara Falls but still nothing, nada, zip! Maybe she was a little worried about what would happen if she were pregnant.

She had bought twelve pregnancy tests. It had been quite a few years since she needed one and had no idea which one would be the best brand, so she bought all of them. Jax had been true to his word and had stood at the entrance to the store with his eyes firmly closed, in spite of all the laughter directed his way. However, it didn’t help that when she was walking to the car she stumbled and dropped her bag of purchases. In helping her retrieve them, Jax got an eyeful of her tests and turned a very charming shade of puce. So yeah, now he knew she might be pregnant and had been sworn to secrecy.

Their three girls were a little quiet during dinner, whispering amongst themselves. At intervals Penny would run out of the room ostensibly to use the bathroom, but she had a piece of meat folded into a napkin, so both she and Tank knew that she was merely feeding the cat. Luckily, Tank’s sisters and mom were as vivacious as ever, so the lull caused by the

girls' quietness wasn't really noticed. Trini and Tamra were currently arguing over a herd male and to which one of them he had been giving the 'eye.' Teena was trying to find out who had used up her new papaya shampoo.

"Are you girls all looking forward to the Fourth of July Barbecue?" asked Tank's mom.

Penny, Izzy and Sophie all looked up guiltily before nodding and beaming. They quickly recovered their usual energy.

"I'm going to eat this many freaking hot dogs!" declared Izzy, throwing her arms wide open.

Teena looked a little embarrassed by the use of 'freaking.' Marion just giggled inwardly. It could honestly be a lot worse, and Tank's sisters were very good about not saying anything worse than 'freaking' around the girls.

"What are you making for the barbecue?" asked Marion to her mother-in-law, changing the subject. Everyone in the herd had some part to play in the upcoming barbecue.

"Pineapple upside down cake," she proclaimed proudly.

Tank grunted, and almost drooled. "Sounds delicious." He squeezed Marion's thigh under the table. "What about you, babe?"

"I'm in total charge of bringing napkins," she laughed.

She was an okay cook, but not excellent, and given that she had three young kids, she wasn't expected to spend a lot of time cooking or baking. So, she just had to make sure they had enough napkins for an army of hungry reindeer.

"Me and Trini are doing face painting for the kids," said Tamra.

"We'll need some little girls to practice on," teased Trini.

The girls' faces all lit up and everyone chuckled.

"I'm in charge of the salad table," declared Teena, before smiling smugly and adding, "along with Roger."

Roger was the aforementioned herd bull whom Trini and Tamra were fighting over. Tank groaned, knowing what was coming.

Marion would have dearly liked to watch what was about to unfold, but all her glasses of water had finally caught up to her. She leaped up from the table, startling everyone, and crying that she needed to use the bathroom. She raced upstairs and just made it to the bathroom... and realized that she had stashed the pregnancy tests in her bedroom.

She thundered out of the bathroom, grabbing the tests and ran back out to collide with Teena, who was sporting an irritated expression and whose sweater was now covered in spaghetti sauce.

“Marion!” she exclaimed.

“Oh lord, no time!”

Lest she suffer an accident, Marion had to relieve her aching bladder and didn’t have time to do the pregnancy tests. She came out of the bathroom, relaxed but annoyed at herself, and to find Teena jiggling the boxes of pregnancy tests with an enormous smile on her face.

“Are you... are you...” she squeaked.

“I don’t know yet,” Marion admitted, “but I’m pretty sure I am.”

She had the warm feeling inside her when she was pregnant with Penny and the twins.

Teena squealed excitedly and Marion quickly hushed her. Teena then squealed no less excitedly but much more quietly.

“You can’t tell anyone,” whispered Marion, “I want Tank to be the first to know when I’m sure. Okay?”

Teena nodded. “Oh this is so exciting! Can I be godmother?”

“Of course,” murmured Marion, knowing full well that it was a title she would need to share with Tamra and Trini.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” gushed Teena, giving her a crushing hug – those kinds of hugs seemed to run in Tank’s family. “I’m so freaking happy Tank met you!”

“Me too,” giggled Marion.

Marion quickly stowed the tests away in the plastic drug store bag as Penny approached, holding another napkin of meat behind her back.

“What are you doing, hunny bunny?” asked Marion.

Penny’s eyes widened to indecently innocent proportions. “Just going to the bathroom.”

She scuttled past them and Teena shrugged before fingering her sauce-laden shirt, and muttering that she needed to get changed.

Marion sighed. She supposed she ought to drink more water.

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Marion wiggled into her pajamas as Tank set about stripping their bed. She was someone who liked fresh linen as often as possible – plus Izzy had a penchant for jumping on their bed to wake them up, and she left a sticky trail in her wake, so it was also necessary. Was there anything as delicious as snuggling into a freshly made bed where the sheets were still warm and fragrant from the dryer? Well, there were a few things, and they all involved the huge man currently stuffing a pillow into its case, and for all those things he would be naked. But those things combined with a freshly made bed... now that was just indecently delicious.

They both looked up as something crashed overhead.

“I hope Trini hasn’t snuck the grocery boy up there again.” He came to deliver groceries to the house, and the next thing he knew he was practically a hostage in Trini’s attic.

Tank grinned. “Nah, he’s too afraid to come back to our house. They send the manager now. He’s sixty, wears a rug and his sweat smells like meatballs.”

Marion giggled as she ran a brush through her unruly hair. Tank smiled at his pretty mate. He thought of all the women that had made it to this room before her – which admittedly wasn’t many – and how many of them had run screaming into the night because of his exhausting family. Yet this gorgeous, patient creature, not only loved him, she loved his family too.

There was some scraping overhead and Marion’s eyes swiveled upwards. “I think she may actually be moving her bed again.”

Trini suffered from insomnia, and when it was at its worst she moved her bed around, trying to both tire herself out and because a different position sometimes helped her. She could be quite restless and often liked to rearrange everything in the house – from her own bedroom to the spice rack.

Marion looked over at him, biting her lip in concern. “Maybe you should go help her.”

Tank nodded, his smile widening. He would. He always would, because in spite of their craziness, he loved his sisters. It just made his heart swell that his mate wasn’t irritated with Trini, or him for indulging her, as so many of his previous girlfriends would have been.

“What’s wrong with you?” she laughed. “You look like the cat who got the cream... or reindeer that got the...” She frowned. “Reindeer chow?”

He chuckled. “Just happy.”

“Mmm, me too,” she murmured as she folded her clothes into the hamper.

He told her not to bother folding them into the hamper – given that they were going to be washed, but she still did it. He figured this was where Penny got it from, not that he minded, he liked a nice tidy house too, he just rarely had one before Marion.

“Do you remember when we got married,” she started.

“It rings a bell,” he crooned, walking up behind her and leaning down to press a kiss to her neck.

Marion batted his away. “You said that you wanted us to get our own place.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Yeah, he had said that. He figured that they would need to get a place of their own eventually, but... eventually did seem like quite a way away. Yes, space was at a premium in the house, and his sisters were now fully grown but still...

“Have you been thinking about that?”

Marion turned and gave him a searching look, then they heard another scrape from above, following by a thump and a muffled curse.

“Not important right now, you should go help Trini,” she said in a rush.

Tank nodded and tugged a lock of her hair, eliciting a smile from her before he made his way to the attic.

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Marion pushed her way into the bathroom, squeaking as she found Tamra in the tub. Tank’s sisters weren’t great with locking the bathroom door – mostly because they had no issue with anyone coming into the bathroom while they were using it. Marion, on the other hand, did kind of have an issue with that.

“I’m so sorry,” said Marion, trying to look away, although Tamra did have a nice plethora of bubbles around her.

“Don’t be,” said Tamra, waving her hand. “You see worse at the herd runs.”

Marion reflected that she didn’t see anything at the herd runs, because while most other herd members were stripping down to shift into their reindeer, Tank had his hands over her eyes, refusing to let her look at any other male. Possessive, maybe, but she adored him for it. Besides, it was totally unnecessary. As if any other male could compare to her behemoth of a mate.

“Oh, oh, oh!” squealed Tamra, making the water and bubbles slosh as she tried to bounce around. “Are you pregnant?”

Marion's eyes flickered down to the boxes in her arms. Crud. "I... think so," she admitted. "I just want to be sure before I tell Tank."

"This is amazing!" she gushed, starting to stand.

"Don't get up," said Marion quickly, "we'll hug later when you're dry... and clothed."

Tamra nodded happily. "Can I be godmother?"

"Sure," chuckled Marion.

"Oh hey, go ahead and pee, don't be shy." Tamra pointed at the toilet. "I'm not squeamish."

"I am a bit squeamish," admitted Marion. "Thank you, but I don't think I can pee right now. I'll just have to try again later."

Tamra sagged a little in disappointment but murmured that she understood. "You know, I'm so glad you and Tank got together. Having you and the girls here is so awesome," she said, her voice laced with affection.

Marion's heart warmed. "Thanks, I feel the same way about you guys."

"Liar," scoffed Tamra.

"I'm not," giggled Marion. "I always wanted a sister growing up."

"Me too."

"You have two."

Tamra rolled her eyes. "I meant a nice sister."

She shook her head in amusement. "I'll let you get back to your bath. Night, honey."

Tamra waved the loofah cheerfully. "Night."

Marion went back to her room to find Tank waiting and naked and well, all rational thought just evaporated at the sight of so much naked flesh.

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Tank woke early. He gave his mate a kiss and left her curled in their bed as he went to check on the girls. Unsurprisingly, they were already awake. The three of them never seemed to stop all day and yet only seemed to need a handful of hours sleep.

He sighed as he heard them muttering sweet nothings to the cat. At least it better be the cat. He flung the door open, as if expecting a pre-pubescent Romeo to be there. No, it was

the cat. They were far, far, far too young for boyfriends, and would be until they reached the age of twenty-five.

The three of them looked up guiltily. Or at least Sophie and Penny did. Tank wasn't sure Izzy had been born with the guilt gene. She was shaping up to be either a wonderfully outgoing and vivacious person or an evil genius.

"Girls," he admonished gently as he spied the small black cat sprawling in and clawing at what appeared to be his favorite sweater.

"We found him in the park," said Penny somewhat defiantly. "He was hurt so we had to save him."

She jutted her chin as if daring him to disagree with her. She was so like Marion sometimes it was downright eerie.

"I don't know if you can keep him or her."

"It's a little boy cat called Sprinkles!" cried Izzy, unable to hide her glee any longer. He was amazed she had managed to keep the secret this long.

"We're calling him Harry Potter," said Penny with an eye roll.

"He's called Gus," said Sophie in a surprisingly firm voice for his shy little cub.

He was probably most surprised by Gus – he could see where Sprinkles and Harry Potter came from, but who the heck was Gus?

Tank groaned at the mixture of defiant, hopeful, stubborn and sweet expressions on their faces. He also saw that Sprinkles/Harry Potter/Gus was purring and that he had a small bandage on one leg.

"Well, you girls do seem to be taking good care of him," he admitted. He wasn't that surprised. They were very good with Fluffy the fish. Though what Fluffy would make of this feline addition to the household he had no idea.

"We put him in the bath," said Izzy proudly.

Ah, the cat smelled of papaya – that would certainly explain the missing shampoo and the cause of the long argument the previous night between his sisters.

"Please, Daddy, we'll take care of him," pleaded Penny using those damn huge eyes of hers that never failed to win him over. Again, Marion was the same.

"We'll take him for freaking walks," added Izzy.

"Cats don't need walking, honey," he murmured, trying not to grin.

Izzy frowned down at the feline. "This one will," she replied with a determined look on her small face.

"I, ah, sure."

Maybe he should be a little worried for Sprinkles/Harry Potter/Gus, but he knew his girls didn't have a cruel bone in their bodies. Their biological father and grandfather had been cruel, heartless wolves, but every single good thing about them was down to Marion.

"But I'm taking him to the vets today to make sure he had all his shots..."

"Yay!"

"And to make sure he doesn't have a chip in him, because if he does then he needs to go back to his owner..."

"Yay!"

His warnings were drowned out as his girls jumped on him excitedly. He just hoped Marion would be okay with that.

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When Marion woke up, Tank was already out of bed. A cursory search of the house showed that he was in the basement working out. All his workout gear had been moved down there when she and the girls moved in.

So, with Tank otherwise occupied, she once again attempted to make it to the bathroom and take the tests. One bathroom was locked while Teena showered along to a jaunty tune and this time it was Trini who got in her way.

Diverting to the other bathroom she found Trini staring at her reflection with a critical gaze. Marion squeaked in alarm and the tests popped out of her arms. The usually beautiful reindeer shifter was covered in zit cream and had a slather of bleach cream over her upper lip.

"Sorry you, ah, startled me," she admitted, not wanting it to sound too much like Trini was a horrifying sight at that time of the morning. Even if she was.

Trini shrugged a shapely shoulder, completely unconcerned.

"No problem, unfortunately we all inherited our dad's mustache and I want to look my best for the barbecue tomorrow." She noticed the boxes on the floor. "Here let me."

"Oh no, ah..."

Trini's eyes lit up. "Pregnancy tests?"

“Yes, ah...”

“That’s so amazing!” squealed Trini bouncing on her feet.

“Thanks,” murmured Marion. At this rate Tank would be the last to know!

“Can I be godmother?”

“Of course,” she sighed with a chuckle.

“I won’t hug you right now,” said Trini, pointing to her face, and instead blew her a kiss before bouncing again. “Oh Marion, this is amazing! Tank must be thrilled.”

“He doesn’t know anything yet so we have to keep it quiet,” said Marion, making a shushing motion, and knowing it was like asking a chainsaw to not make any noise.

“Of course, of course,” she muttered, probably not listening anyway.

She took Marion’s hands and jumped up and down. “This is so wonderful, I’m so glad Tank brought you home, you know you make us all so happy that we are never letting you go!”

“I know,” said Marion, though it was nice to hear it.

“Never,” insisted Trini seriously while her eyes flashed to the darkness of her inner reindeer.

Marion snickered. “You sounded dangerously like Tank when you said that.”

He said the same thing to her over and over and it delighted her more than she could ever admit.

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Lord, don’t tell him I said that – my big brother should never think he’s ever right about anything.” Trini looked at the tests thoughtfully before inclining her head at the toilet. “You want to pee? You can go ahead.”

Marion’s nervous bladder quailed. “Ah, I’m actually okay at the moment.”

“Okay, let me know if you change your mind – I’m gonna be a while, I need to wax my legs – leg hair was another thing we got from dad. I’m starting to look like a yeti.”

“I will,” said Marion, trying not to laugh.

*

“Tanky, what are you doing?”

Tank looked up as his mom climbed down the basements stairs. His tape measure snapped shut.

“Just ah, just wondering whether we could fit Tamra’s water bed down here.”

“Oh?” She looked around the basement curiously. Currently it housed the washer and dryer and Tank’s workout gear, but those things could be moved to the garage.

“Yeah, I was wondering if she’d be okay down here so we could give Penny her own room.”

“I expect Tamra would be fine with it, especially given that the basement has its own entrance.” She nodded to the door that led up to the garage.

His reindeer stamped his hoofs at that. Yeah, she might want to sneak males down there. Hmm. Maybe that wasn’t a great idea after all, but who could go down here rather than her? Teena was just as boy mad, and he couldn’t stick his kids down here. Marion might get too cold, given that she was human, and he was too much of a good son to send his mom down there.

“Hey, ah, would you do me a favor?” he asked and explained about the cat.

His mom laughed. “I thought there was a strange scent but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It’s a lot better than when your sisters decided to bring a skunk home.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” It took a year for the house to smell right. “You don’t mind about the girls keeping the cat, right?”

“Not at all – though we will have to keep him away from Fluffy. But I thought Marion worried about the girls taking care of a pet.”

“She does, they’ve got it stashed in their room. Marion knows, but they don’t know she knows. I kind of told them they could keep him without asking her.”

His mom shrugged. “I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“I’m not sure I should be making decisions about the kids without asking her,” he said voicing his sliver of unease. Part of him still thought that Marion would turn around and chastise him for daring to interfere with her children, that a wonderful woman and three darling kids like them deserved better. Even if that was completely out of character for Marion.

“You’re their father now.”

“Yeah, but still.” He sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t be thinking about moving Penny into her own room either without talking to Marion.”

“I thought Penny didn’t mind sharing with the twins.”

“I don’t think she does now, but that will change as they get older.” Or as Izzy got messier.

His mom crossed her arms and her bottom lip wobbled dangerously. “I thought you’d move out before that became a problem.”

“Mom.”

He was kind of trying to find solutions to put that off as long as possible. He wanted to make Marion happy, but his mom and sisters were important to him too.

“No, no,” she sniffled, trying to hide her emotions and failing catastrophically. “It’s about time you did. You’ve stayed with us for so long taking care of us but your new family needs you now.”

“Mom,” he murmured.

“I knew it would happen one day, it’s just that now I’m going to miss Marion and the girls too.”

Tears threatened to fall.

“Mom.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, waving her hand and making her escape. “I’ll take the cat to the vet, no problem.”

Tank sighed, feeling like a total heel. It was what guys did right? They moved out, particularly when they were married and had kids, but a part of him still felt uneasy.

*

“Aren’t you a fluffy little hairball, yes you are?”

Marion paused at the entrance to the living room, perhaps fearing that she was interrupting something.

Her mother-in-law looked up from cuddling the cat to blink at Marion. “What are you doing here?”

She had snuck home in the middle of the day to finally take her pregnancy tests. She couldn’t take them at work – the center was far too busy to allow her to pee in peace. Instead, thinking that the house would be empty, she had enlisted Jax to drive her so she could pee in privacy. He was currently waiting in the car. Not that she would actually get the time she needed now.

“Is that the infamous cat the kids brought home?” she asked pointing at the hairball currently batting at a piece of string.

“Ah, yes.” There was no denying it – it was definitely a cat. “I’m not sure how they managed to smuggle him home – perhaps up Izzy’s sweater. She’s always so squirmy, that’s probably why I didn’t notice.”

“How do you know about it?” asked Marion.

“Well, Tank asked me to take him to the vet,” she admitted mildly uncomfortable. “He said the girls could keep him.”

Marion snickered. “You realize we will have to take care of him. I never really wanted a high maintenance pet before because I never had the time for them.”

His mom waved her hand airily. “Oh I don’t mind. I like cats but my late mate was allergic so I never bothered with one. I’m happy to look after him.”

No wonder thought Marion as she smiled; she was already besotted.

She looked up at Marion. “You don’t mind that Tank told the girls they could keep him?”

“No, not at all.”

“He was worried you would.”

Marion raised an eyebrow. “Really? He shouldn’t be, I kind of figured it would go this way.”

As if anyone other than a robot could say no to all her girls and the cutie cat. He was little more than a kitten, and so damn fluffy.

“He just worries he shouldn’t make decisions about the girls without you, and he worries you aren’t happy living here with all of us.”

“I’m very happy here.” She didn’t know why Tank would worry; she told him how happy she was often enough.

Her mother-in-law looked up uncertainly. “Really?”

“Of course, I love being here,” said Marion with feeling only a moment before she was swept into a reindeer-sized hug.

“Thank you for saying that.” The older woman pulled back and dabbed at her eyes. “What are you doing home in the day anyway?”

“Well, actually...”

Marion told her the truth and she was thrilled, until she sagged in sadness.

“Oh, now you really will be moving out.”

“Not necessarily,” said Marion.

She didn’t look convinced by this.

“I don’t know for certain yet anyway,” said Marion, “and please don’t tell anyone, I want Tank to be the first to know.”

Or at least the first to know officially at this point – because she was fairly certain that her sisters-in-law had already told a buttload of people.

“Of course dear,” she sniffled.

“Oh, please don’t cry!”

Yep, it was unlikely she would be taking those tests now.

*

Gus/Sprinkles/Harry Potter yawned and stretched in his new basket.

Tank reflected that his mom may have gone a little overboard when buying treats for the cat. The cat was fine. He didn’t have any kind of chip in him, so as far as the vet was concerned they could keep him. His leg was healing, and he had been given his shots and he seemed content enough to allow the rough petting of the three young girls.

“Okay, girls you take good care of... whatshisname here.”

They nodded happily.

“He’s going to sleep in my bed with me,” declared Izzy.

She was so thrilled she had actually forgotten about saying freaking. Perhaps a cat wasn’t a bad thing.

“He can’t sleep in your bed, he has his own bed,” said Penny disdainfully.

“I want him in my bed,” pouted Izzy.

“We’ll never see him again, he’ll get stuck in there!” argued Penny.

Tank reflected this was probably true. He knew his mom had changed their bedding earlier that day and yet it was already a sticky mess.

“Yeah,” he murmured, “the cat’s still healing, so maybe let him sleep on his own – we wouldn’t want to hurt him.”

Izzy pursed her lips but nodded shortly.

“Can we take him to the barbecue?” asked Sophie shyly.

“Sorry, baby, he needs to stay here.”

The twins let out matching sounds of dismay, and even sensible Penny was disappointed. He tweaked a lock of Sophie’s hair.

“Who will look after him while you’re on the jumping castle?”

Her little face lit up. "There's a jumping castle?"

"Auntie Martha hired one special when she heard you liked them." The alpha's mother was nothing if not indulgent to the herd children.

His shyest girl clapped her hands and squealed excitedly at the news, dancing around the bedroom.

"We could take it in turns to watch Harry Potter," suggested Penny.

"No honey, let's let him rest here while we have fun."

Izzy gave him a determined little pout that dissolved when he tickled her and she screamed with laughter.

"Okay, my angels," he groaned as he lumbered to his feet. "Wash up for dinner."

"I already did," lied Izzy.

He gave her a look and the pout returned.

"I know you didn't, and remember you don't eat until you wash up – me and Mommy always know."

"I'll make her wash up," said Penny casting a disapproving look at Izzy, who wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue.

"Careful, one day it will get stuck like that," teased Tank.

Sophie giggled, and soon both Izzy and Penny joined in before their attention returned to whatshisname and they were chattering about their new pet.

He made his way out into the hall and snagged Marion who was just passing him. "Hey," he murmured as he pulled her in for a kiss.

"Hey, yourself," she cooed.

"Where you been?"

He was always concerned about his mate's safety but as long as he knew she was with an enforcer, he didn't worry too much. After work, she had left in a hurry to run an errand, but he knew Jax was with her, and he was one of his more sensible cousins, so he had been okay with that.

"Costco – getting the napkins, Jax loaded them into your SUV, would you mind taking them when you go tomorrow?"

“Course not,” he murmured, fluttering kisses over her face. He was leaving early to help with the jumping castle. “Hey, I wanted to talk to you about something..”

“Umm, do you mind if we talk later? I’m dying for a pee.”

She wriggled in his arms as if to prove her point.

“Sure.”

He frowned as he released her and she danced away to the bathroom. She appeared to be taking a huge bag in there with her. But hey, his uncle always took a newspaper into the bathroom with him. It was why he never touched any newspaper in his uncle’s house.

Tank shrugged and then sighed as his sisters careened through the front door, already arguing about Roger.

*

“Do you want some help with your bag?” said Marion to Penny.

Her eldest was lugging a rather large tote bag with her, and she seemed to be struggling with it. Penny said they were books that she wanted to read for school. Marion hadn’t argued with her, Penny was never an exuberant girl, and if she wanted to read at the barbecue, she wouldn’t stop her. Though she would encourage her to have at least a little play time.

“No,” replied Izzy vehemently before Penny could say anything.

Marion’s eyebrows raised.

“No, thank you, Mommy,” replied Penny before glaring daggers at Izzy.

“Okay,” she said slowly and suspiciously. “Oh hey look, there’s Daddy!”

She waved at Tank and he grinned and loped over to them in a few long, easy strides. She bit her lip to stop the moan that wanted to escape. It was no wonder she was pregnant – she couldn’t keep her salacious thoughts off her sexy man – never mind her hands!

Yep, she finally managed to take the tests and it was confirmed. Not too long from now she would give birth to a mini-Tank.

The twins gave his legs their usual hugs and Penny blew him a kiss before their attention was taken away by the jumping castle, and both parents were completely forgotten in the face of that.

The girls raced off towards the castle and were quickly bouncing to their hearts’ content.

“Good lord, is that a cat on the bouncing castle?” she exclaimed.

Tank groaned.

Yep, that was what Penny had in her tote bag and the poor feline was now awkwardly trying to make his way to safety.

“Yeah, that’s the cat that I kind of said the girls could keep,” he admitted wearily. “I better go rescue him.”

“Yeah, better make it quick before PETA calls,” she giggled, giving him a pat on the rear for good luck.

Tank took off and as she watched her huge husband clambering over the castle, trying to rescue him, she couldn’t help the guffaw of laughter that escaped.

*

The cat was starting to look a little less traumatized now, though being crushed up against Teena’s ample bosom wasn’t exactly helping matters. He had been scared and running around with Tank chasing him for a while, but he was settling now. His mad dash across the dessert table was a particular highlight.

Marion had given the girls a talking to about potentially hurting the cat, and they had been suitably chastised that they needed to be more careful with him. Though they loved him, he wasn’t a toy, he was an animal and they needed to be gentle with him. All of Tank’s sisters immediately adored the cat, and were adamant that they would help teach the girls how to take care of him.

The barbecue had been great – other than the great cat chase – they had eaten and enjoyed themselves and now that it was getting dark, they were sprawled on a blanket waiting for the fireworks to start.

She glanced around to see her boss Temp, and her mate, Harlan snuggled on a blanket and smooching. Not to mention the herd alpha and his mate Mira. She wanted to snuggle with Tank – but she also wanted to talk to him, before someone else found out she was pregnant. Tank’s mom and sisters, and Jax, had been giving her funny looks all day, and it really was about time that the father of her baby knew the truth.

She made sure the girls were wrapped up warm. Izzy wriggled while she did the buttons, but finally relented when she said only good girls could get a turn cuddling the cat.

“I’m just going to find Tank.”

His mom and sisters beamed at her excitedly and she tried to ignore them as they giggled conspiratorially.

Tank was in charge of some of the fireworks and she found him fiddling with the display.

“Hey, honey.”

“Babe,” he frowned, “what are you doing over here? The fireworks are about to start.”

“I need to talk to you.”

He winced. “I’m sorry about the cat, I said they could keep it...”

“Oh it’s not that. I already knew. Your mom told me.”

Tank eyed her uncertainly. “You don’t mind that I didn’t discuss it with you first?”

“No, not about this. I probably would have done the same thing, though we need to give them a few lessons about taking care of a pet.”

“Agreed,” he said with a haunted look. He was probably thinking of the moment he dove into the enormous bowl of pudding his Aunt Rita had provided.

“Otherwise,” she continued, struggling to contain her excited smile, “who knows what they’ll do when their baby brother or sister arrives.”

“Yeah who... what?”

Marion smirked as he stared at her. “I’m pregnant.”

He gaped like a fish. “Babe? Really?”

“Yep. Not too long from now there’ll be a little Tank running around. Or more likely a big Tank.”

He chuckled and swept her into his arms. “Babe, that’s incredible.”

“I’m glad you think so,” she breathed, relaxing into his embrace.

“Was there any doubt?”

“Well, we haven’t been together long and the house is kind of crowded...” Not that either of those things bothered her particularly.

“Oh ah, yeah.”

Tank put her back on her feet and looked uncomfortable. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. I was actually, ah looking at a few houses for us. Went to talk to a realtor...”

Marion scrunched her nose in confusion. “You were? Before you knew about the baby?”

“Yeah, I mean, you mentioned that I did say we would move out...”

“I was just trying to talk to you before I told you about the baby. I didn’t want you to freak out when you found out about him or her and run out and buy a house or something.”

They were quiet for a few moments until someone shouted, “Yo, Tank, what’s happening with those fireworks?”

“Motherfudge!” he exclaimed and let go of Marion to light up the fireworks.

They fizzed, burst and exploded around them but neither Marion nor Tank noticed.

Tank took Marion’s hands in his and they smiled at one another before both yelling, “I don’t want to move out of the house! Wait, what? You don’t want to move?”

They could barely hear each other and Tank pulled her into his arms and jogged away from the noise of the fireworks. She settled her legs around his waist, mighty comfortable in the arms of her huge, loving husband.

“You don’t want to move, babe?” he asked, almost incredulously.

“No,” she murmured, nestling against him. “Growing up I never had a family, it was always just me and my mom who I didn’t see much. I love having three sisters and a mother-in-law around. Okay, yeah, we don’t get much privacy, but come on, with our girls, privacy was never an option anyway.”

Tank chuckled warmly. No, locked doors never seemed to get in Izzy’s way. Neither Tank nor Marion could take a bath without the inquisitive young girl finding her way into the bathroom and insisting on sitting on the toilet and singing to them while they bathed.

“Besides,” she cooed, “didn’t stop us from making Tank Jr., did it?”

His inner reindeer rumbled proudly. “No it did not.”

She pulled back slightly to look at his face. “What about you? You don’t want to move out.”

“No,” he admitted half-embarrassed. “I like living with my family, I like being there in case they need me. Reindeer are social creatures, but if you wanted to move out I would.”

“I don’t want that. Besides, you know, eventually I figure that your sisters will want to move out anyway. Only a matter of time before they get mated.”

Tank huffed in amusement. “Babe, I’ve met my sisters, it could take years to find willing males, and if any of them mate, it will probably be to some bum who comes to live and sponge off us.”

Marion tinkled with laughter. “As long as it isn’t that Roger guy – ugh, he’s a dick. He flirts with anything female and unmated. Total manwhore... or should that be reindeer whore?”

He beamed at her. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I’m the lucky one,” she said with feeling. What other guy would so readily become a dad to her kids, and who would so readily take on all her problems without the bat of an eyelid? He was amazing.

“Let’s compromise and say we both are.”

“Deal!”

She kissed him and sighed as he started carrying her back to their family. “The girls are going to be thrilled.”

“So will my sisters and Mom.”

“Oh they already know – I’ve had a hard time getting privacy to pee over the last couple of days. Not that I mind,” she added quickly.

Tank snickered as he caught sight of all their special ladies fighting over who got to pet the poor cat.

“You know,” he said, “maybe the cat will be good practice for them for when they have a baby brother or sister.”

“As long as they don’t put the actual baby on the jumping castle, I’ll be fine. Though you were pretty cute jumping after him.”

“Yeah, apparently I broke the castle, so we’re going to have to pay for it – and it won’t be cheap.”

Marion shrugged lightly. “If you can patch it up we could have it in the garden.”

“Even better than the trampoline we wanted for Sophie,” he agreed.

Marion beamed into his neck. Her husband and mate really was perfect. So kind, so warm, so generous, and so hers.

“I love you.”

“Love you too,” he murmured and squeezed her affectionately as they made their way back to their huge family.

The end