

New Year Break Down

Gwen glanced at the clock again. Three more minutes and she was free. Free from sweeping up hair. Free from the pampered, nit-infested children of Mrs. Cage's pompous clients. Free from pretending that a two-foot beehive really did suit every sniffy, stuck-up woman who came into the salon and treated Gwen with disdain. Free from walking Mrs. Cage's dog – the only creature on the planet who could match Mrs. Cage in the yappy stakes. But, also, thankfully, free of the overly tight, Barbie-pink smock she made all her employees wear. Ugh. Gwen had liked pink until forced to contort herself into the boob-busting uniform of the salon.

"Have you finished yet, Gwen?" sniffed Mrs. Cage disdainfully. Her tone suggested that Gwen should have been finished an hour ago – forty minutes before she started.

"Almost, Mrs. Cage," replied Gwen promptly, muzzling the inner wolf who would be more than happy to take a big bite out of Mrs. Cage's fleshy leg.

Mrs. Cage sniffed again. Gwen waited to see if she would say anything else, but, thankfully, she didn't. For the first month she worked there, Mrs. Cage had constantly lectured her on what a lady did and didn't do. Every other sentence out of Mrs. Cage's mouth started with 'Ladies always,' or 'Ladies never.' Gwen supposed that Mrs. Cage didn't consider her - Gwen - to be ladylike given that she was a wolf shifter. Though, in Gwen and her wolf's minds, if Mrs. Cage was the epitome of ladylike behavior, then she didn't mind not being ladylike at all.

Gwen finished arranging all the hair dyes and glanced at the clock again. Her wolf flashed excitedly, knowing that in a matter of moments, she would be out of there and in the arms of...

"Babe!"

Her wolf yipped as her boyfriend thundered his way into the salon. He grinned and Gwen smiled at him. Mrs. Cage clucked her tongue in disapproval, but Gwen doubted there was a man alive who would meet her approval – she dreaded to think what the fabled Mr. Cage was like.

"Ladies," purred Darryl as he glanced up and down the row of women in various stages of haircuts, dye jobs, and manicures.

The women were aged between forty-five and eighty, and not one of them didn't simper at having a huge, handsome wolf shifter twinkle at them. Gwen's wolf let out a jealous growl but Gwen hushed her. Seventy-six-year-old Mrs. Carr may have a gorgeous new lavender hairdo, but Darryl wasn't about to stray. For all the ups and downs they may have had, she'd never worried about him cheating.

"You ready to go?" he asked, striding over to her.

"She has not finished her daily working hours yet," replied Mrs. Cage haughtily.

Darryl glanced at the clock in confusion, and exaggeratedly slapped his head. "My mistake. A thousand apologies. I'll wait the thirty seconds and then ask if she's ready to go."

A few of the women duly tittered while Mrs. Cage fumed, and Britt tried not to smirk. Darryl counted down the seconds, not quite under his breath, until the clock finally hit five, and he repeated his question with even more gusto.

Gwen looked at Mrs. Cage innocently. "Is there anything else you need me to do today?"

Mrs. Cage's lips bowed in annoyance, clearly finding Gwen's politeness unacceptable, but in the face of that, and Darryl's grin, she gave in.

"No, Gwen, you may go. But make sure you're here on time tomorrow morning. You better not spend all night partying and be too... too..." She racked her brain for a ladylike way to say hammered before finally settling on, "Indisposed to work tomorrow. I find that kind of behavior unacceptable."

"Thank you and I'll be fine." Gwen grabbed her jacket. "Happy New Year, ladies!" she called on her way out, pulling Darryl with her.

They all chorused it back to her, and when Darryl said it to them too, they also chorused it back to him, but in much softer, adoring voices.

Gwen slipped into Darryl's car – his pride and joy classic car that he spent most of his free time working on. To Darryl, it was known as Lucille. To Gwen, it was known as a death trap. Still, it beat walking to and from work, though only just. Plus, she liked seeing Darryl rile Mrs. Cage.

Her wolf let out a long growl that she had been holding in all day, and Gwen let out a breath too. Maintaining a polite attitude to that woman wasn't easy. It went against her normally fiery nature, but, she was determined to do it, and it was probably good practice for when she opened her own salon.

Darryl tore out of the parking lot. She reached into the backseat and pulled her bag out, determined to change out of the smock as soon as possible.

"So, what are our New Year plans?" she asked excitedly. Darryl never disappointed when it came to parties.

"Well, my folks are spending it with Missy and her bunny family. All my brothers are going."

Gwen raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, my sister's going. I was also invited – weren't you?"

Darryl shrugged. "Sure, but my mom heavily suggested that I stay away."

"Trying to make a good impression is she?" Gwen snickered.

Darryl's younger brother was dating a bunny shifter, and while Gwen loved the bunny in question, her family were... skittish and, frankly, annoying. But Darryl's family wanted to make a good impression, so she didn't blame them for leaving him at home. Darryl was someone who needed to be introduced gently... in short bursts... over a month or two. Full-on Darryl could be quite alarming.

"Yeah, that's what my mom said," mused Darryl, oblivious as to how he wouldn't make a good impression. "Anyway, we have the house to ourselves."

He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

“Really?”

“Yeah. But Jake from school’s having a party. Let’s stop by for a couple of hours, prank a few people, grab some beer, and head back to mine.”

Gwen smiled wryly. “I’m fine with everything except the beer. Didn’t you hear Mrs. Cage? I have an early start tomorrow.”

Darryl humphed. “I don’t know why you put up with that dragon.”

“You know why; she’s my boss,” replied Gwen simply, ignoring her wolf who agreed with Darryl.

“We all have bosses – isn’t yours my brother?” she teased as she pulled the hated smock off.

Both Darryl and Gwen were members of the same wolf pack, and Darryl was in training to be a pack enforcer – wolves who were charged with the safety of the pack. The chief enforcer also happened to be one of Gwen’s older brothers.

Darryl chuckled and glanced at her in only her bra, his eyes a leering yellow shade. “Yeah, and he’s a complete tool to me – something to do with me defiling his sister.”

He started reaching out to her and she slapped his hand and pulled a shirt over her head.

“Well, there you are then.”

“Yeah, but, I have to put up with your brother; you could get a job somewhere else,” he said dismissively.

Gwen shook her head as she expertly pulled on some jeans – she’d had practice over the last month at changing in the car, and could easily change her clothes without accidentally slapping Darryl or flashing other drivers.

“Mrs. Cage is friends with my teacher at college – if I work for Mrs. Cage, I get course credit, which means I’ll get my certificates sooner. If I become a trained cosmetologist, if Mrs. Cage likes me enough, she might hire me full time, and then I can start earning real money.”

Darryl frowned. “You want to work for her, so you can qualify, so you can then work for her full time?”

He was talking slowly to her – like she was someone who was convinced the earth was flat.

Gwen grunted at him and her wolf sighed. “Yes.”

“Seriously, babe? I mean, you look hot in that uniform, but you also look hot out of it.”

He flashed her a leer and she rolled her eyes. “And that right there is the reason why both my brothers are complete tools to you.”

“Well, one of them’s a tool because he’s a psycho, but we’ll ignore that for now. But seriously, why not work somewhere else?”

“The money’s really good, and it’s a short drive from home.”

The money was really good. Mrs. Cage couldn’t hang onto staff members – probably something to do with all the lectures about what ladies do and don’t do. Plus, her salon was the closest to home. Her wolf loathed the woman, but well, it was important.

“Besides, it won’t be for long. I just need some money to put into a down payment on my salon in town.”

She smiled and her inner wolf grudgingly agreed it was worth it. Their pack alpha agreed he would help her out financially, but she had to prove she was in this for the long haul – that it wasn’t just something she would get bored off within a month – like piano, flute, karate, Spanish, and yoga lessons. She had to work and earn at least some of the money required, and Gwen was determined to do it. She wanted to open her own salon in their little town. Gwen wasn’t overly ambitious – she wanted to stay home with her family, as most wolf shifters did, but she wanted something of her own.

“Yeah, but why put yourself through all that aggro – what’s a year or two? So what if it takes longer?”

Gwen rolled a shoulder. “I just... don’t want to wait too long. I mean, it’s going to be a lot of work, and I figure I want the salon up and running by the time I’m ready to have pups. Ugh! What is that smell?” asked Gwen as her wolf snarled lowly. “Please tell me your car’s not on fire again.”

“She’ll be fine, won’t you Lucille?” he rumbled lovingly before inhaling sharply. “Did you just say pups?”

Gwen’s forehead creased. He sounded both surprised and horrified. “Well, yeah, obviously I want pups one day. And are you sure your car’s okay? I think that might be smoke coming out of the tape deck.”

“She’s fine. But, yeah, one day, but you’re talking about pups like you’re having them tomorrow.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, there’s no way I’m ready now, and I definitely smell burning. I want pups in maybe four or five years, but I want to make sure I have my business and a house before then. And seriously, babe, this car is on fire. Pull over!”

Darryl wrenched the car to the side of the road, lazily clambered out, retrieved a fire extinguisher from the trunk, popped the hood, and calmly put out the fire.

“You’ve done that more than once,” said Gwen sourly as her wolf huffed. “I told you this car was a death trap.”

“You sound like my mother,” he accused grumpily.

“Yeah, well, you’re starting to sound as stubborn as my brother – and the psycho one at that!” she snapped as she slammed the door.

He winced at the sound, fearing that his car had been damaged. Stupid Lucille grumbled Gwen’s inner beast.

Gwen folded her arms and glared at him. "I don't know why you're getting bent out of shape just because I want to work and get my own salon."

"I just... I just had no idea you were making all these plans for the future," he countered grouchy.

A few flames flickered in the engine and he gave it another dousing with the extinguisher.

Gwen toed a rock and hunched her shoulders. "I'm not making lots of plans. I just... I guess I just know what I want."

Darryl gave her a sheepish, uncertain look. "I thought you were, you know, happy - us goofing around and everything."

Gwen smiled warmly and slowly walked over to him. "I am happy. I love goofing around."

"Right now," he scoffed as she slipped her arms around him.

"Just because things are changing doesn't mean we have to stop having fun. Look at your parents..."

"Let's not," he grumbled.

"They still have fun. They can barely keep their hands off each other, and they're responsible adults." She thought about it for a few beats. "Well, at least, your mom's a responsible adult. But it's not like we can live at home forever, and spend all our money on pranking people and this heap of junk."

Gwen kicked the car and something clattered to the ground. Her inner beast snickered smugly.

Darryl growled. "Firstly, Lucille is a precision machine – there are dozens of wolves in our pack who would love to get their paws on her."

"Lucky Lucille," she muttered.

"And secondly..."

"Secondly?" she prompted as she tickled his stomach.

He let out a guffaw of laughter and then sobered. "Secondly, where exactly am I in this future you have planned?"

Her wolf was silent for once. Gwen leaned back and looked at him. "I guess that's up to you. You know what I want. What do you want?"

Darryl looked down at her in silence, and her wolf whined. He opened his mouth to say something, but a horn blared, cutting him off.

A truck pulled over in front of them, and out popped Darryl's older brother, grinning smugly.

"Hey, dummy, your hunk of junk break down again? That thing's broken down more times than I can count – certainly more times than you can count," chuckled Mal.

"Six times then?" quipped Gwen.

Darryl growled but Mal just chuckled even louder.

“Lucky I was passing. C’mon, dummy, I’ve got a rope, I’ll tow you back home. Gwen, you better ride up front with me.”

She thought Darryl would argue, but he didn’t. When they got home, Darryl begged off on their plans because he had to fix Lucille. So, to her wolf’s disappointment, Gwen ended up spending New Year with her mom, her two older brothers, and their mates.

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Darryl banged on the door of Gwen’s house and then sheepishly tried to straighten his shirt. It was a lost cause he was sure – clothes became ruffled on him ten seconds after he put them on, even if they had been fastidiously ironed for half an hour straight beforehand.

The door was flung open by the psycho brother – Hans. Darryl tried not to quail as his wolf stood firm. He was going to have to get used to being around Hans. Hans and his mate had their own house, but they were at the family house a lot.

“Do you know what time it is?” hissed Hans, eyes bulging.

“Sure, it’s seven in the morning,” replied Darryl cheerfully.

He was there to collect Gwen for work. Hans’ eyes bulged even more.

Some people said that Hans wasn’t a morning person. Darryl concurred, and added that there was no good time of day for Hans. Even in sleep he was terrifying. Darryl was once at the house when Hans fell asleep on the sofa, and Darryl was just trying to get a selfie of himself with Hans... you know... so he could post it with a funny caption.... and Hans sleep-punched him, making his nose bleed. Gwen swore he didn’t do it purpose, but Darryl had his doubts.

Darryl smiled ingratiatingly, which seemed to have the opposite effect on Hans.

“My mate is still asleep,” growled Hans quietly. “If you wake her up...”

Hans didn’t have to finish the sentence; Darryl’s imagination could do that. Besides, it was too late.

“I’m already awake,” called Melanie, Hans’ mate, from somewhere over his shoulder. “And leave him be, he didn’t wake me up. Gwen using the hairdryer on the highest setting for half an hour straight is enough to wake the dead.”

“Hair doesn’t get this bouncy without help,” said Gwen as she thundered downstairs.

Darryl’s inner wolf wagged his tail like a puppy and Darryl beamed at her. She looked at him uncertainly, and Hans, noticing the look, offered to slam the door in Darryl’s face.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Gwen.

Hans was about to suggest something else, probably something a lot more violent, when Melanie interrupted.

“Hans,” called Melanie, who always had excellent timing, “I need you.”

Hans glowered at Darryl, but he duly stomped away to find Melanie.

“Hey,” crooned Darryl.

His beautiful she-wolf smiled her beautiful smile in return. Her cheeks dimpled and her blue eyes sparkled. Damn she was gorgeous. Not just that, she was fun and amazing and everything to him.

“I ah, I’m sorry about last night,” he said awkwardly, leading her out onto the porch. He knew in the house Hans would undoubtedly be listening, and he didn’t want to be interrupted too soon.

Gwen shrugged a slender shoulder. “That’s okay. Watching Hans having a tantrum while playing Trivial Pursuit is always worth seeing.”

“Aww, man, tell me you videoed it?”

Gwen smirked. “Every second of it. I just want to add a few sound effects – you know, like a boiling kettle or something - and then I’m uploading it for the whole world to see.”

“Can’t wait. So, look, about last night...”

“No Lucille, huh?” she asked, nodding at his mom’s car. “Your precious darling beyond repair?” she asked, just a tad spitefully.

His inner wolf preened. God, he loved it when she got jealous and possessive over him – even if it was just over a car.

“Actually, I sold Lucille. Spent half the night fixing her, and then I sold her.”

“Yeah, right,” she scoffed.

Darryl rolled a shoulder and she blinked at him.

“You’re serious?” she murmured in disbelief.

“Yep. It was a wrench...” He put his hand on his heart and affected a tortured expression. “But I managed.”

Gwen frowned at him. “But you love that car. Why would you sell it?”

Darryl and his wolf growled softly. “Babe, I love you. Lucille and I,” he gave her a mock serious look, “we were only friends.” Gwen rolled her eyes. “So, I’d rather say goodbye to her than to you.”

Gwen shook her head at him. “You didn’t have to get rid of the car. I know I hated it, but I wouldn’t force you to get rid of it.”

“Yeah, well,” he pulled the check out of his back pocket, “this way we have the money for the salon now. So when you’re qualified, there’s no waiting, and no need for you to put up with crap from the dragon lady.”

"I can't believe you did this," she murmured. Her jaw dropped as she saw the check. "Holy cow! Some idiot paid you all that for that dumb old car!"

"No," Darryl said patiently, pushing the check into her hand, "some idiot paid me all this for my classic old car."

"But this is yours," she said, pushing it back at him.

"No, it's ours. You know, for the salon, and then for when we... have pups... although, maybe we should spend some of it on a mating celebration first."

Rawr! His wolf howled happily as Gwen gaped at him. Though, she wasn't silent for long.

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"I should go out there," growled Hans.

"Sit down," ordered Melanie softly with a gentle squeeze of his arm. "She's an adult; she clearly loves him."

"He's an idiot," groaned Hans.

"Well, she wouldn't be the first female to mate an idiot wolf in this pack."

Melanie gave him a significant look and he growled, making a grab for her. She danced away, giggling and patting her stomach.

"Hey, place nice, I'm teasing for two now, remember?"

Hans huffed and she giggled even louder. Though, as Gwen burst through the door, howling the fact that she and Darryl were getting mated, she couldn't be heard over Hans' roars.

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Gwen smiled smugly as she alternately fiddled with the heater and the air conditioning in his new car.

"You keep messing around and you will break them," chuckled Darryl.

"It's just a relief to be in a car that actually gets hot and cold."

"Lucille got hot."

"When on fire," she countered.

On announcing their intention to mate, Darryl's thrilled parents gave him some money to do with as he pleased. Gwen urged him to get Lucille back, but, he decided to get a newer, much more practical car instead, and she was glad he did. Plus they had a little money left over for stuff they were going to need when they moved in together. Gwen beamed at him. It was all so scary and daunting and unbelievably exciting, and she was glad she had Darryl to share it with. But also glad that she had someone to goof around with.

Since they missed out on New Year fun, they decided they would have a delayed celebration – by pranking the heck out of her sister and his brother. Since, the two of them were planning on watching movies all night, it seemed like a good time to make them think there was a deranged lunatic trying to get into the house.

“Ready, babe?” grinned Darryl.

“Definitely.”

They shared a quick kiss and set out to terrorize a couple of unsuspecting family members. Rawr.

The end