

Christmas KO

Lauren hummed as she grabbed the ringing phone.

“Hello, and Merry Christmas!” she trilled into the receiver.

Yes, Christmas was right around the corner and her good mood knew no bounds.

“Merry Christmas to you too!” replied an equally enthusiastic but unfamiliar voice. “Is Carrick there?”

Lauren frowned as her inner tiger stirred. The voice was also definitely female. Lauren glanced into the living room where Carrick was staring at the TV while their baby, Nora, dozed on his chest. The TV wasn’t switched on; he was just staring at it. She smiled slightly as her tiger purred. Most people found her mate to be odd and worrying, but there wasn’t a part of him that she didn’t adore.

“Ah, yes he is,” she said.

“Great!” came the bubbly reply.

Lauren hesitated. “Umm, who’s calling please?”

It was just phone call – it shouldn’t be surprising, yet neither she nor her tiger liked it one bit. The only people who ever called Carrick were her and their alpha, and she rarely called him because mostly he was by her side and she could just talk to him. He didn’t usually get phone calls from bouncy, attractive-sounding voices.

“Oh, sorry!” the mystery woman giggled. “I’m Keri – I’m a friend of Simone’s.”

“Oh.”

Right – that explained nothing! Simone was a former member of their tiger pride; she had joined a pack when she mated a wolf shifter. But, as to why a friend of Simone’s would be calling and asking to speak to Lauren’s mate was a complete mystery.

“I ah, I guess I’ll get him.”

“Thank you so much.”

Lauren paused, trying to tell if the female was being sarcastic, but she couldn’t detect anything. So, in spite of her inner tiger’s strenuous objections, she walked into the living room and passed her mate the phone.

Carrick looked up from his reverie on her approach and gave her his usual smile – the one that made both woman and tiger go weak at the knees. Though, it quickly turned to a frown when she pushed the phone at him.

“It’s for you. It’s a friend of Simone’s called Keri,” she said with a blank look.

“What?” grumbled Carrick. Pure annoyed surprise sparked on his face.

Lauren shrugged and waved the phone at him. Carrick grunted and reluctantly took it. Nora murmured in her sleep.

“Do you want me to take her?” offered Lauren.

Carrick shook his head, and easily clasped Nora with one hand while the other brought the phone to his ear.

“What?” he barked into the receiver. “Who? How did you get my number?”

Lauren relaxed a little and moved back to the kitchen to finish her holiday baking. For a second there she actually worried... Lauren shook her head and started mixing some dough for gingerbread tigers.

Carrick and Lauren were both tiger shifters. After a rocky beginning, they were now both very happy, thrilled at having Nora, and excited for the fact that Lauren was already pregnant with their second cub. Things were not always plain sailing for them. Carrick had enough issues to sink a ship, and Lauren could be too submissive for her own good, but they loved one another, and they were happy – incredibly happy.

Lauren meticulously went about making her cookies, and only glanced into the living room three times while he was on the phone. She was a little surprised that the phone call was still going on. Average conversations for Carrick lasted twenty seconds.

Finally grouched her inner tiger as Carrick eventually ended the call. He almost flinched as she erupted out of the kitchen.

“What was that about?” she asked, in what was supposed to be a nonchalant way. But even to her ears it sounded pretty manic.

Carrick rolled a shoulder nonchalantly. “She wants to talk to me about organizing some Christmas charity thing.”

Lauren’s forehead creased. “To you?” she said slowly. “She wants to talk to you about a charity event?”

No offense to her mate – he was the love of her life and she was besotted with him – but he was hardly the first person anyone would go to for charity. They were at the mall once and a man approached her, asking if she wanted to become a donor for the global wildlife fund. The man tried to shake her hand; Carrick got pissed, and chased him into the parking lot.

He nodded slightly and his attention returned to Nora who was starting to fuss.

“Yeah, some boxing match or something.”

Her tiger whined uneasily. “You said no, right?”

Carrick met her eyes, and instead of the storminess she expected, he seemed somewhat... unconcerned. Many years ago, he had been held captive, forced to fight, and forced to hurt people. Obviously, he wouldn’t want to fight again.

“I said I’d think about it.”

How could he even think about it? After all the pain, anger and scars he had obtained the last time he fought, did he really want to even consider doing it again?

“But, Carrick...”

Nora let out a wail and Carrick chuckled. “I think she’s hungry.”

He lifted her away from his chest and smiled. “She wants you.”

Lauren softened and took their little darling from his arms.

Before she could voice any other objections, he said, “I agreed we’d go talk to her tonight.”

He kissed her temple and walked away, whistling an unusually cheerful Christmas song – unusual for him at least.

Was he really considering it? Had that female really been that persuasive? Her tiger swished her tail unhappily.

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“Honey, wake up; it’s time to go.”

Carly patted her mate’s cheek and tried not to smirk. He was snoring like a chainsaw, dribbling drool down his chin, and clutching a blanket decorated with bunnies to his chest. He was a seven-foot bundle of cuteness.

Oh so slowly he started to wake. It was like watching a glacier – snow and somewhat majestic.

“Wha... what’s going on?” he rumbled. He looked around him suspiciously. “What happened? I was lifting weights and...”

Carly grinned as her inner wolf wagged her tail as her adorable mate. Though, it was possible that only she thought he was adorable. Everyone else saw something else when they looked at her massive seven-foot bear shifter mate.

“And you fell asleep, so I covered you in the blanket and let you get some rest.”

Cain looked down at the blanket with bleary eyes and then growled and pushed it away. Then he quickly remembered that it was his son’s baby blanket and carefully pulled it back and folded it reverentially.

Carly pressed her lips together to stop herself from laughing. He had been a tad grumpy over the last few days. She was positive she knew the reason why – it was hard for him to keep any secrets from her, particularly given that she was an omega who could sense feelings and they were bonded and she had an inside track to his emotional state. Plus, given the gossiping that went on in their pack, not much could stay a secret longer than seven minutes. But, she was going to wait for him to tell her.

She wiped the drool away from his mouth and kissed him, and that did cheer him up. Given the hunger of his kiss and the way his hands were already roaming all over her, she was sure she could have completely made him forget his troubles in the next half hour. But, someone else wanted and needed attention too.

Jax wailed and they parted, chuckling. Cain rose to his feet and ambled over to where their baby was currently stuffed into his car seat – and yes, it was stuffed. The seat was supposed to be big enough for up to six months. Jax was barely three months and he was already too big for it.

She watched her enormous mate making cooing noises, and when that didn't work, he offered him some food to hush him up. Jax was immediately quiet. Yep, just like his daddy.

"He wants feeding," said Cain with a distinct leer on his face.

"I'm sure he does."

Like his father, Jax was on the fourteen meals a day plan.

"So, uh," Cain cocked his head, "whip them out."

Carly smiled while her inner wolf rolled her eyes. "I hate to disappoint you, but there's a bottle ready for him."

Cain sagged in disappointment but he duly found the bottle and started feeding the little bundle of joy who never seemed to ever have enough to eat.

"We better get moving or we're going to be late."

Their pack mate Keri wanted to talk to them about some kind of charity event for Christmas. Carly had been too busy to listen to the details earlier, but she was all for charity. Their pack always donated money to charity, and so many of the younger members were always trying to raise money. But Carly was more than happy to help out.

Cain yawned as Jax finished the bottle in record time. "Yeah, sure."

"Oh, honey, maybe you should stay home and take a nap. You're so tired all the time. It's understandable that you need more rest now."

Her wolf yipped encouragingly. Her delicious bear mate was running himself ragged in trying to work full time and take care of both her and Jax.

Cain's eyes flashed. "I'm fine," he grouched. "I'm as fit as I ever was."

Carly raised an eyebrow at him and he grumbled and started stomping upstairs.

"I'm going to get changed."

"Oh, I bought you some new pants – I left them on the bed, since you..."

Carly pressed her lips together again. Since he split his last pair.

Cain growled but didn't say a word. Carly laughed silently and walked over to Jax.

“Isn’t Daddy funny?”

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“Carrick, it’s so nice to meet you! And you must be Lauren, and who are there little beauties?”

Lauren smiled in dismay on meeting Keri. She was just was bubbly and cute in person as her voice promised she would be.

Carrick gave her a chilly smile and tightened . “Nora. Lauren’s sister, Lois.”

Lois let out a shy, “Hi,” and then attached herself to one of Carrick’s legs.

Lauren had made noises about finding a sitter for Nora, but Carrick was still a bit too possessive to leave her with anyone else yet, and Lois was still far too young to be left alone – in spite of what she had started telling them.

“It’s wonderful to meet you all. Thank you so much for coming.”

Carrick grunted, unimpressed. He looked around the pack rec center and his expression dimmed even more. There were several pack members there that Lauren vaguely recognized – such as the alpha and Simone’s brother-in-law and his mate. She had called Simone earlier – who had profusely apologized for handing over their phone number, and for admitting that Carrick used to be a fighter. Apparently Keri could be very pushy.

There was also a couple she wasn’t sure she’d met before – a small wolf shifter, tiny compared to usual female wolves, and a huge mountain of a bear shifter. They had a baby with them too – and he was frankly enormous.

“Okay, everyone!”

Keri clapped her hands together. Lauren was sure she was the type of female who went around telling others to turn their frowns upside down. Her tiger chuffed but Lauren immediately felt like she was being petty – and she didn’t really know why she would be petty. All the female had done was call her mate on the telephone.

“As I’m sure you all know, we’re here to talk about a proposed charity boxing match, between Carrick and Cain.”

With dismay, Lauren realized that Cain was the huge bear shifter. He was taller than Carrick, and even broader too. Though the bear seemed beefier, while Carrick was all tight muscle. Lauren peeked up at her mate to see that he was watching the bear with a blank expression. The bear, however, puffed out his chest and smirked, making the tiny wolf shifter roll her eyes in amusement.

Lauren listened uneasily as Keri explained about how they would donate all the money made to a charity helping victims of domestic abuse, and ensuring that they had places in shelters over Christmas, and that the kids had presents to open. Oh, it was not going to be easy to say no, but...

“I’ll do it,” rumbled Carrick.

“You will?” breathed Lauren in shock.

“I’ll do it too,” declared the bear, not to be outdone.

“That’s amazing! Thank you so much, you guys!” squealed Keri as she jumped up and down.

Lauren was amazed to see that Carrick was smiling at her. Her tiger grunted. Humph.

“And, it’s just for fun and to raise money, right, guys? So it doesn’t matter who wins and who loses – right?” Keri looked between the two potential candidates.

They both looked into the other’s eyes. “Right.”

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“Cain?” called Carly as she walked into the garage.

Before now, it had just contained some weights, now it appeared that they were sporting a full-blown gym. Exercise equipment seemed to have sprouted overnight. He was taking this fight seriously. It had made her a little uneasy – mostly because the tiger he was due to fight looked like he chewed glass for fun, and the brief flash of emotions she felt from him had been pretty stormy. But, she wasn’t going to stand in Cain’s way. He used to love the fights, and he gave them up for her. This was just a one-off fight for a good cause, and also she had made sure that there would plenty of pack mates on hand to pull the tiger off Cain before he did any real damage.

Carly bit her lip on seeing her luscious mate flexing his enormous muscles. Her wolf growled lustily. Oh boy, that was a sight she could never tire of.

“Hey, babe,” he rumbled.

“Are you almost finished?”

“Lots more to do,” he said as he rhythmically lifted weights.

“You look pretty good to me,” she said appreciatively and let out a wolf whistle to let her know that her inner beast really meant it.

Cain grinned. “Thanks, babe.”

“I mean it. This is just a charity fight – there’s no need to go overboard.”

Cain grunted and she sighed inwardly. She knew back when he had been a fighter that he could be a tad bit competitive. Oh, he’d always been a pretty easygoing guy, but yeah, he also liked to win. However, after he quit fighting, she thought he was over that. Though, she did know he could get pretty aggressive whenever they played strip poker, but that seemed to be more about getting her naked than anything else.

“It’s nearly dinner, sweetie – I fried some chicken, and there’s mashed potatoes and German chocolate cake for dessert.”

Cain stopped and took on a glassy-eyed look. She could virtually hear his mouth watering. But, instead of his usual reaction – which was dropping what he was doing to run into the house and eat it all as fast as possible – he shook his head and continued with the weights.

“Just save me some. Maybe I’ll eat later.”

Carly and her wolf let out small howls of concern. It startled him enough to drop what he was doing and rush over to her.

“Babe, you okay?” he rumbled in sudden concern.

He took the opportunity to run his hands all over her – at least some things were the same as always.

“Am I okay?” she spluttered. “You’re the one who just said he wanted to skip dinner! Sweetie, are you ill?”

Carly felt his forehead but other than a little sweat he seemed fine.

“I’m fine. I just need to get in shape for this fight.”

“Aha.” Carly ran her hands over his chest admiringly and he growled lightly.

“Maybe we should take this workout inside?” he suggested as his eyes flicked to the black of his beast.

“Hmmm, maybe we should talk about what’s bothering you first.”

Cain’s face took on a guarded look. “Nothing’s bothering me.”

“Hmmm, so nothing to do with what happened at work last week?” she suggested gently.

His eyes flashed in anger. “Who told you?”

“Five different people told me,” she stated dryly. “I’m just not sure why you thought you shouldn’t.”

Cain pouted slightly. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “You were chasing after a pup who’s twenty years younger than you – so what if you had to sit down and get your breath back. It happens!”

Honestly, he really was making a mountain out of sugar cube. Carly was certain she wouldn’t have been able to keep up either – she’d never been very athletic. Cain worked as a sheriff’s deputy, and very occasionally had to chase after errant pups that had misbehaved. It was just that he got a little winded when he was chasing after one last week.

“Not just that. I had to get Ford to come and get me in the car – I couldn’t even walk back to the station.”

“Aww, honey,” she said soothingly, and sent him a wave of adoration.

He perked up a little though he was still a little moody. "I'm slowing down, getting old, and getting fat – just look at what happened to my pants?!"

Neither Carly nor her inner wolf bothered to stifle their laughter this time. He pouted grumpily and she sent him another wave of love. Yes, he had ripped the seat of his pants – bending over to pick up a donut that had rolled to the floor. He had shouted, "Four second rule," bent over and riipppppp!

"Firstly, sweetie, I don't think you're slowing down." She smiled saucily. "I think our nighttime shenanigans are a testament to that." He growled and her wolf yipped. "I do think that you're tired from trying to do too much. You're at work all day and then up most of the night with Jax – not to mention me tiring you out."

Again, she gave him another saucy look and he followed it up with another happy growl.

"You need your rest. Let me get up in the night more for Jax. Right now he mostly wants me anyway – right now all he cares about is me feeding him anyway."

Cain gave her breasts an appreciative leer. "Well, my boy's got his priorities right."

Carly playfully slapped his chest. "As for the pants, they were at least five years old, and I know you were skinnier back then. You must have put on at least thirty pounds of muscle since then. It's amazing they held out as long as they did. They've been a ticking time bomb for every time you bent over these past few years."

He flexed his arm and tried to appear indifferent, though it was obvious how pleased he was. "Well, I am pretty muscled."

"Definitely," she cooed. Her wolf growled. "And as for getting old – sweetie, we're all going to get old, we're all going to slow down," he looked quite panicky to hear it so she pushed on, "but just remember, we're going to grow old together, and no matter what, I will always love you. You've got nothing to prove to me – I'm already obsessed with you."

Cain smiled and leaned down and kissed her. His hands stated their usual roaming, but when they heard an attention-seeking wail on the baby monitor, they pulled apart and chuckled.

"I swear, he's interrupting us on purpose," grouched Cain, though without any heat.

"I'm sure he's ready for his dinner, and I'll leave it up to you whether you want your dinner. But just so you know, I cooked some maple glazed carrots."

"Tease."

Carly giggled and wiggled her ass as she left the garage. She was relieved that her mate was right behind her.

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Lauren chewed on her lip. It was the day of the fight. Carrick hadn't canceled. He was going ahead with it. Oh, surely this was not going to end well.

She had tried to talk to him about it, but he had always changed the subject. While she had been nervously worrying for the fight, he had been happily making plans for Nora's first Christmas. He was going overboard with presents for both Nora and Lois.

Right now, he was calm as a cucumber - icy as a snowman - while she was practically nibbling her fingernails down to the bone.

They were in the locker room and Carrick was ready to go. He was wearing a pair of shorts and nothing else.

"Five minutes, Carrick," called Keri as she flitted into the room, beaming.

Lauren's inner tiger mewled unhappily. Carrick nodded and she left. Oh, candy canes!

To his surprise, she dropped to the floor in front of him and took his hand. "Carrick, please don't do this. I'm really worried that this is going to end badly."

Carrick cupped her cheek. "I won't let him hurt me."

"No, I'm worried that you'll injure him!"

Carrick's eyes darkened and narrowed. "You're worried about that bear?"

Frankly, yes – the bear was a big guy, but she was certain that Carrick would pulverize him.

"I'm worried that you'll flashback to what it was like before when you used to fight, and I'm worried that you might... well..."

"Go nuts?" he supplied wryly.

Her eyes prickled with tears. "Carrick, please, you've been through so much, I just don't want you to have to relive it."

He made a soothing, hushing noise. "I'll be fine. It's for a good cause. It's the least I can do," he added almost angrily.

Lauren blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

Carrick grunted uneasily. "All the years I was in the pride before we mated, I never did anything to help anyone, and a lot of them needed helping. You needed help."

He gave her such a raw, guilty look that her heart and her tiger stuttered. It was true that life under the old alpha had been difficult at times – especially for females – but that wasn't Carrick's fault.

"I can't stop thinking about what you told me – Christmas when you were fourteen."

"Oh, Carrick," she cooed. Her tiger mewled.

That had been a particularly bad year. Her father had lost all the money supposed to go to presents on a horse. Then, feeling guilty, he got drunk and punched her mom when she ranted at him for losing the money. It had been a horrible, scary Christmas, but she had no idea how much it bothered Carrick – clearly more than it bothered her.

“I should have done something. I should have helped you. I should have known you were in pain.”

He gave her an angry, desperate look and her she almost burst into tears. Her inner tiger howled in sadness.

“I should have protected you. You’re my mate – I have to protect you.”

Lauren climbed onto his lap and murmured his name soothingly. “I wish I could have protected you from all the bad things that happened to you.”

Carrick snorted and buried his head in her hair. “You were a kid when they happened.”

“But, even though I couldn’t have protected you then, I just want to protect you now. Which is why I don’t want you to fight. Please don’t,” she pleaded.

“I have to. If I do, at least I can help some other families not go through the same thing as you.”

“Oh, honey.” Lauren rubbed her cheek against his and then she giggled softly. “And I thought you were doing this to impress that she-wolf!”

Carrick pulled back sharply and glared at her. “What?”

Lauren blushed profusely. “Well, she’s very pretty and persuasive...”

The stony look on his face could stop a charging rhino.

“Okay, I’m sorry! I lost my head for a moment there.”

Carrick grunted in a way that said, ‘you got that right.’

“But, as for the fight...”

“Carrick, it’s time!” called Keri.

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“Hi, we never really met – I’m Carly, and this is Jax,” said the small, smiling she-wolf as she bounced her enormous baby.

Lauren forced a smile on her face. “I’m Lauren, and this is Nora.”

Carly cooed at Nora. “How old?”

“Eight months. And Jax?” she replied politely.

“Oh, three.”

“Three?” repeated Lauren faintly.

Carly chuckled. “Yes, he’s very large for his age. He definitely takes after his daddy.”

She nodded over to Cain, who was indeed head and shoulder above nearly everyone there. The place was filled to the brim with pack and pride members, as well as people who just wanted to see a fight.

“I’m not sure I can watch,” murmured Lauren as her stomach churned uneasily.

“I know what you mean. The first time I saw a fight I nearly fainted – I had to leave. But, I think I might be a little tougher now.”

“I hope... I hope that Cain is okay at the end,” said Lauren lamely.

Carly raised an eyebrow. “You’re certain Carrick will win?”

Lauren blushed. “I’m sorry, but yes.”

In truth, there was no doubt in her mind he would; she just hoped that this pleasant she-wolf would have a whole bear to take home with her.

Carly didn’t seem to mind, she just smiled, and Lauren found herself relaxing around her. Another she-wolf would have howled at her for daring to suggest her mate would not win, but this she-wolf was sanguine.

They watched as Cain leaned toward Carrick and said a few words. Carrick’s eyes flashed, he looked mildly suspicious, and then he gave a half-nod.

Lauren gave Carly a questioning look, but she was too busy trying to calm Jax who had started wailing.

“Oh, he wants feeding – again,” she sighed. “When they’re finished, let Cain know I’m waiting in the locker room – it’s feeding time for this bear.”

Lauren nodded, and flinched as a bell dinged. The fight was starting. The two enormous men practically danced around the ring. Her tiger flexed her claws uneasily. The two males tried to hit one another a few times. The tension was starting to get to her, and just as Lauren wasn’t sure she could take anymore, the two males both threw punches, and then, at the same time, they fell the floor. It was KO for both of them.

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“Carly’s in the locker room,” said Lauren as the massive Cain approached.

“Thanks,” he winked at them and sauntered away.

Carrick smiled slightly and took Nora into his arms. She immediately nestled against his chest.

“That was an interesting fight,” she murmured as he pulled her against him with his spare arm.

He kissed her forehead. “In my experience, they’re a little longer,” he said mildly.

Members of the audience were varying shades of bemused and annoyed at the outcome, but at least they had made lots of money for charity.

“I take it this was Cain’s idea?”

“What was?” Carrick gave her an innocent look – an expression completely alien to his face, and he really couldn’t pull it off.

Lauren decided to leave it at that. “I’m proud of you.”

Carrick smiled in pleasure, and her beast sighed in happiness. Their mate really was wonderful.

“Now, let’s go home. We have lots of presents to wrap and cookies to make, and we haven’t even finished decorating our tree.”

They weren’t allowed unless Lois was there – she was currently on a sleepover and forbade them from finishing it without them.

Carrick grunted.

“And you know what, I way I see it is that we’ve both had our fair share of bad Christmases. So, instead of feeling guilty about things we can’t change, let’s just focus on having the best Christmas we can this year.”

He nodded. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The end