



Claiming the Shifter's Heart (The Macconwood Pack Tales #16)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Shes offering a family Christmas. But he wants to claim her heart.

Della Connors is just trying to do right by her two children, Sean and Janie. Especially with Christmas right around the corner.

She escaped her former Murder and the poisonous bond shed had with her abusive ex, and now, this single-mother Crow Shifter is determined to give her children a better life.

But when little Sean asks Santa for a Daddy, Della has no idea what to do.

Especially when the sexy Santa in question offers to fill the role himself.

Will love be lovelier the second time around? Find out in this fated mates holiday romance.

Total Pages (Source): 20

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L ate October.

“What the fuck do you mean, bitch? Where is it? I know you took it!”

Pain erupted like an angry tea kettle spouting boiling water across her face. The feeling was shocking and sharp. Enough to force tears to spring to her eyes.

That was how it always felt when her soon to be ex-husband and former mate hit her. And he'd done that a lot in their five years together.

Della winced, but she didn't cry out. She refused to give him the satisfaction. He grabbed her face, looking for it, wanting to see her fear. His black eyes narrowed, anger rising as she hid her emotions.

God, he was so messed up. A Shifter junky who liked to beat on women.

But what did that make her? After all, she'd stayed with him for years.

Not anymore. I found courage. I left , she told herself.

She'd heard them right before they landed, cutting through the night sky like the angry nightmare they were.

The first thing she did was grab Janie and Sean from where they'd been relaxing in the wide space of their new living room. Della didn't recall a whole helluva lot about the uncle who'd left her his house, but she was so thankful to him for helping her out of the mess she'd made of her life.

After safely tucking her children under the back stairs, Della went to face her worst fears head on. She only prayed her precious babies would be safe.

There just wasn't enough time to see them safely across the yard to her neighbor's house, and she would never risk their father getting his hands on them.

Cade had a few of his buddies with him.

Of course he did.

The coward always needed an audience when he was wreaking havoc on Della with his brutal treatment.

Oh, he liked to hit.

Not slaps or shoves, either.

Cade was a fan of closed fists and hard kicks. He enjoyed seeing the bruises he'd caused across her flesh, and breaking skin was just as likely to make him hard as when he visited the titty bar with his pals.

Real fucking ladies' men these guys were. Not.

Della knew deep down she was not to blame, but that did not stop her from feeling responsible. She'd been young and naive when she'd met Cade, eating up everything he said about them being mates and her needing to accept her place in the Murder where he was ranked at the bottom of the barrel.

Those Shifters were real pieces of shit. But by the time Della realized that she was already pregnant with Sean. Stupidly, she thought that would change Cade.

It did. But not in the way she'd hoped.

He'd only gotten meaner with the birth of her son. Calling her all sorts of names, his favorite of which was 'fat slob'.

Della was never skinny, but women gained weight during pregnancy. It was natural.

Hoping he would leave her alone if she kept the weight on, Della didn't even try to lose it after Sean was born. But it wasn't enough to keep him away.

She went to the Crow King and begged for him to dissolve their mating, but Cade protested.

Oh, he was a good liar.

He'd pretended to be broken up over how he'd treated her. In front of the entire Murder, Cade had come, sobbing, and begging for her forgiveness.

He was good at that. At the con. The King believed him, and the others, too. Cade swore to her he'd changed, making promises her poor broken heart was desperate to believe.

Janie was born early. Seven months after his declaration, and promise to treat Della right.

Instead, he'd treated her like a punching bag for the last three months of their lives together right up until she stole away in the dead of night.

Della couldn't take it anymore, and she had to protect her children. They were the most important things in her life.

“Fucking whore! Stole my kids! Stole my drugs. Now I want them back, Della,” Cade screamed at her.

“You will never get your filthy hands on my kids!” Della shouted back.

“Don’t want them bastards. Want my drugs, damn you,” Cade said, black eyes blazing as he hit her one more time.

He was going to kill her. She saw it plain as day. It’d been a long time coming, but she always thought Cade would be the one to do it.

No, she didn’t want to die. Had two very good reasons to go on living. But if it stopped him from chasing them, she’d gladly lay down her life.

There was nothing she wouldn’t do to save her sweet babies.

Della stood up to him, shoulders back. She’d already seen her neighbor, Samantha, rounding the back, towards Sean and Janie.

She knew the normal was a good woman, mated to a Werewolf, and together, they would protect her young. That was all Della needed to know.

She braced herself for the end, refusing to cry as he came towards her like the mean motherfucker he was.

Only at the last minute, Cade stopped. That was when she saw a pair of enormous lupine jaws closing around his forearm. His eyes went wide as the big, ferocious beast tightened his hold and shook him like a rag doll.

Gunshots sounded and the splat of Crows hitting the ground echoed in the night sky. She could hardly comprehend what was happening. Then again, she didn’t have to

understand. She just needed Sean and Janie to be safe.

Della panted, pain echoing throughout her body from Cade's abuse. She didn't remember falling, but she was on her hands and knees, quickly moving towards the back stairs. Remembering Samantha had taken them, she switched directions and headed for her neighbor's house.

The sounds of Wolves howling and a single Crow's crying, the only one still alive she imagined, filled the air. Della was almost at Samantha's steps when she stopped.

In her path was a giant Wolf with red fur and stunning bottle-green eyes. Air got caught in her lungs as he stood, head canted, just staring at her.

Oh, he was a monster, Enormous and muscled his big fangs visible from his slightly open maw. He could easily tear her limb from limb, and she would be stupid to tempt him by getting too close.

She waited, half stunned, half desperate, just frozen in place. Her babies were just behind him, safe inside Samantha's house. She knew that and needed to get to them. But she couldn't move a limb. At least, not until she heard her sweet son's voice call out for her.

"Mommy!" Sean's voice called from Samantha's back porch and her gaze flicked to her little boy.

"Sean? Oh, Sean!" Della cried and ran for him.

Forgetting all about her misgivings, she raced right in front of the Wolf, who stood just as still as she'd been a moment ago, following her movements with keen eyes.

"Kristoff! Let's go," someone called, but Della was already inside, kissing her

children and crying softly against their downy hair.

They're safe. We're all safe.

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Kris stalked through the forest lining the property's edge in Wolf form. He'd been doing that every single night for the past six weeks. He couldn't help himself.

It was a biological imperative that he keep watch over the beautiful woman and her precious young.

Mine.

When in his fur, it was difficult to keep notions like that from filling his mind. Dual-natured creatures such as him were always learning to balance their beast and human sides.

He couldn't stop thinking about her. The first night they met, she'd been attacked by her ex. A nasty motherfucker, Kris still wished he'd killed. But he'd been given an order and the soldier in him obeyed.

Life had been long and hard for Kristoff in ways he'd never expected or imagined. First as a soldier, then as a cop. Violence was a common enough occurrence in both his chosen professions, and he had seen enough of it for two lifetimes.

Maybe more.

He'd recently relocated to Maccon City, hoping to find some peace. The pleasant Jersey Shore town was scenic and quiet. And it had the added bonus of being the base of operations for the Macconwood Pack.

When the Alpha, Rafe Maccon, invited him to the Manor, he'd been expecting it. An

invitation to work as an Enforcer, the Wolf Pack's version of private security, was something he'd been proud to get. And thank fuck for that.

Pushing forty, he never expected to find his mate at all, much less on the job. But he had. Only his scruples and overdeveloped moral compass had stopped him from pursuing her right away.

That didn't stop him from seeking every tidbit of information he could find on the woman. She was fascinating and the Wolf in him was hooked.

What had he learned from all his research? Unfortunately, just the basics.

Della O'Neil Connors was a Crow Shifter from down south. A little place not even on the map deep inside Georgia called Dawn Valley.

Her people were closed off and kept to themselves. Apparently, Crows didn't like strangers snooping into their lives and his inquiries had been shut down hard.

Still, they were supes on US soil and that meant they had to obey the Shifter Council and High Council alike. The Macconwood Pack lawyers were working to help Della on legal fronts, and he was being kept up to date by her lawyer after he'd explained to the man what he was.

Dib Lowell was an honest man and a member of one of the Alpha's own Wolf Guard. Still, he would only tell Kris the basics. That he was still in discussions with the attorney representing the Dawn Valley Murder. And that they were stalling.

The fuckers.

His Wolf was so on edge, it was all he could do to stop himself from traipsing down there and ridding the world of the entire fucking lot of them.

Instead, he kept coming back to her place, making sure Della and her sweet babes were safe. They were so precious. So perfect.

Mine , his Wolf growled again.

Kris could only hope the beast was right and that someday she would, indeed, belong to him in every way.

Some day.

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“O h my God, Sam! Where on earth would I wear that?”

“I don’t know. Beneath some silky little dress or a pair of blue jeans. Heck, you could wear this under those godawful plaid pajama bottoms you like so much, and you’d still have enough confidence to draw the eye of a dozen men. Della! You’d have them lined up around the corner for your attention.”

“Just what I need,” she muttered, rolling her eyes and serving her impatient Janie her bowl of pea mush.

“Della Connors, oops , I mean, O’Neil —is it O’Neil yet? Um, anyway, sorry about that,” Sam said when Della turned with her eyebrows raised.

With the help of the Macconwood Pack’s excellent legal team, she’d managed to finalize her divorce and started proceedings to change hers, and her children’s names to her maiden name.

After Samantha and her mate, Michael, who also happened to be a Wolf Shifter, had saved her, his Pack had offered sanctuary to the small Crow Shifter family.

Crow babies weren’t like Wolves. They could change almost as soon as they took a notion to do it, whereas in most cases Wolf pups needed to wait until after puberty.

Little Sean had had two shifts already, and Della was just so darn proud of him.

“Seriously though, when are you going to let your hair down and go have some fun,” Samantha said, fluffing out the naughty little nighty she’d brought over for her

neighbor.

“It’s only been six weeks since that whole thing with Cade,” Della hissed.

“Six weeks is a long time. And I know you Shifters do everything faster than us normals, so don’t pretend you haven’t been thinking about getting back in the saddle again,” Samantha told her.

Della ignored her and prepared Sean’s dinner plate, having already agreed to let him watch TV while he ate since it was a special night and he and Janie were staying at Auntie Sam’s and Uncle Michael’s house.

Ever since that night they’d saved them, her neighbors had been upgraded to instant family. She added some whole peas next to the carefully cut chicken breast and homemade mac and cheese before grabbing a juice box.

“Watch her a sec, please?” she asked and went to deliver the food.

“Hey Buddy, what are you doing by the window?” she asked, ruffling his hair and squatting down next to him.

“Just saying hi to my Wolf!” Sean squealed and giggled.

“Your Wolf? Honey, are you telling stories again?”

“Nope. It’s the truth! He comes by every day, Mommy, and he protects me and Janie and you!” Sean nodded enthusiastically.

“Well, what does your Wolf look like?”

“He’s got big fangs and claws, and he has red fur like a fox!”

Della searched the tree line but saw nothing unusual. Her sweet Sean had a great imagination, though, and she smiled indulgently.

“Okay, well, it looks like your Wolf went home for dinner. Now, you eat every bite or none of Aunt Eileen’s cookies,” Della told her son, mentioning Michael’s aunt who loved to spoil her kids with tons of home baked goodies.

“Okay, Mommy,” Sean said, nodding sagely.

Such a good boy , she thought and kissed his head before returning to the kitchen.

“Okay, I am sorry if I’m pushing. It’s just, well, rumor has it you caught someone’s eye at work,” Sam hedged.

Della closed her eyes. She knew exactly who Sam was talking about—a certain six and a half foot tall, muscled, bearded, tatted up, monster of a man who also happened to be playing Santa Claus at Manning Farms.

“Who said that?” she said, spoon feeding Janie and pointedly ignoring Samantha.

Della had picked up a night job working as a Christmas Elf there while she tried to finish her teaching degree during the day when her kids were at school and daycare.

The Macconwood Alpha had managed to find an available scholarship for her, and she had never been so happy. Becoming a teacher was just something she’d always wanted to do.

She’d almost had her degree and license when she met Cade.

It was just one more thing her ex had stolen from her, along with her youthful innocence and naivete. But she’d gotten something from him, hadn’t she?

Her two blessed babies.

That was something she and her therapist had spent hours pouring over the last few weeks. Her guilt at staying with him so long, and her relief that he was no longer a part of her life.

Della was learning to accept that she could not change the past, but she could be angry, and sad, and happy now that it was in her past. She had a whole future to look forward to, being a mom and providing her little family with the best life she could.

Yes, Kristoff Varg was playing Santa Claus at Manning Farms. And yes, Della was working there, too. But that was all. There was nothing going on between them.

Okay, so sometimes her gaze roamed in his direction to find his stunning green eyes already locked on her. And maybe sometimes, whenever she was walking a child over to sit on the bench beside Santa for a photo, or passing out cookies to the people in line, Della caught a whiff of his delicious alpine scent.

“Is it true?” her nosy neighbor asked, taking the spoon from her so she could finish feeding Janie, who was drooling and clapping happily as she made a mess of her dinner.

“Nothing is going on with anyone at work,” she clarified.

“Oh well, it’s early days yet. Anyway, go put that on under your Elf costume tonight. Who knows, maybe you’ll get inspired?” Sam said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Woman, you are insane. I can’t keep this, it’s too expensive,” Della replied, giggling as she caught the bright red teddy.

“I am not! But seriously, you’d be doing me a favor. Lingerie is final sale, and I knew

before I tried it on it wasn't going to work out on me. I have too long a torso for that thing. But it will fit perfectly on you. I say keep it and wear it!"

Della sighed and shook her head, a mixture of frustration and resignation settling over her as she made her way to her bedroom and adjoining bathroom.

She had about fifteen minutes to get ready, and there was still the small matter of a shower. Time was slipping away quickly.

Being a mother prepares you for many things—patience, chaos, the occasional broken heart. But moving her fluffy ass at lightning speed to get dressed? That was a skill she had honed over the years, with a sense of urgency that could rival any Olympic sprinter.

She stepped into the shower, the hot water soothing her stiff muscles, and scrubbed herself down with practiced efficiency. Shampoo, rinse, and done. No time for lingering under the warm cascade.

In under seven minutes, she was out, towel drying her hair while eyeing the ridiculous piece of lingerie where she'd dropped it on the bed.

Samantha meant well, but she'd never been the kind of woman to wear something like that.

For one thing, there was never money for that kind of flippancy. For another, she was short and chubby. Not exactly runway model material.

And yet, she had to admit she was curious.

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Kris worried his lower lip and checked his watch. She was late. Snow was falling. Maybe there was trouble on the road.

He stood up, ready to tell Cassie Evangelos, Dr. David's mate, that he was going to take a quick drive in his truck to check when he finally saw her tiny, battered little sedan enter the employee parking lot.

Thank fuck.

He walked back to the ornately carved bench that was Santa's designated sitting place. It was quite something with its high back, so it resembled a throne but could easily fit two adults or three children. The wood was trimmed in gold paint, and the cushioned seat was covered in bright red, texturized vinyl, so it looked and felt like leather, but was a heck of a lot easier to clean.

Stephanie Winters owned the farm and ran it with her mate, Nicholas, who happened to be one of Kristoff's first partners on the job.

Nick was a good guy. He'd been a good cop, too. As had Kristoff.

That was before he'd been forced into taking early retirement from his last post with the NYPD. He'd been feeling pretty raw about it until lately.

But keeping the supernatural secret was important to all Shifterkind, and after getting shot up on the job in an ambush, Kris couldn't do that and explain why he was in tiptop shape just a month later.

When Nick invited him down to Maccon City, Kris was doubtful. But after he'd visited with the Pack Alpha, where he landed a job as one of the Pack's Enforcers, he finally had hope.

Maybe here I'd find my place in the world.

Maybe here I could belong.

A few days in Maccon City had changed his whole perspective on life. Kris wasn't on a decline. In fact, he felt at peace for the first time in months, maybe even years.

But that had more to do with the gorgeous as fuck woman he was currently pretending not to stare at as she headed his way.

Well, not his way, but rather, to fill her position as Santa's First Elf at the front of the line.

Mate , his beast growled.

Kris cleared his throat to cover up the fact his Wolf was growling.

Nick hadn't just found a new life for himself and his daughter—he'd built one.

A real one. A family, a future, and a place to belong.

His old friend had found his fated mate. And for some reason, he'd managed to pull Kris down here, into this near perfect world he'd discovered, too.

When Nick had asked Kris to step in as Santa, to fill the boots for a few days while he whisked his family away on a much-needed vacation, it had felt like an odd request at first. But Nick had always known how to make things work, how to make the

impossible seem effortless.

The moment Nick had handed over the reins, he'd shown Kris everything: the sleigh, the reindeer he kept in a paddock for visitors to pet and feed, and the small army of Elves who helped run Manning Farms' Christmas operation.

Now, Kris was a part of all that. He was connected to the cheer and holiday spirit that seemed to float around like it was something tangible.

Maybe it was.

Either way, he'd never felt anything like it. So positive and full of joy.

All Kris had to do was fill Nick's boots and his big velvet suit for a short while, which included keeping up with several of the magnificent wooden structures and pieces that were all part of the Christmas experience at Manning Farms.

Like the custom bench and sleigh Santa would spend most of his time on. He could do that. No problem.

Kris was an expert carpenter, after all. And a bit of a tinkerer, too.

His custom tables and chairs were legendary—sent all over the world, earning him a small fortune. But Kristoff never cared about money. It was nice to have, of course. But it was never the why.

She can be my why.

He thought about his accomplishments and whether it would matter to Della. After all, the New York Times had even called his furniture "art," and some pieces had sold for astronomical prices, pieces that were more sculpture than seating.

He was proud of what he'd created over the years. But after making enough money to sustain him for multiple lifetimes, he only created now for the joy of it.

The things he would make for her and the kids, good God, he could not wait.

As for moving to South Jersey and leaving his job on the force, it wasn't as bad as it sounded. Maccon City was absolutely beautiful, and the Atlantic was so close, he could smell the icy salt water from his apartment.

There was peace here, a quiet that his city life had never provided. But the real treasure, the one he hadn't expected, was ten feet away from him, hiding in plain sight.

She was curvy, stunning in a way that felt both effortless and captivating. And yet, she had no idea.

Della Connors had captured his attention, and that of his Wolf ever since the first time he'd spied her that night in her neighbor's yard.

He'd been there as an Enforcer. The Beta had ordered him to tie up the one Crow still breathing, but every instinct he had said he should kill the fucker.

Oh, he would have enjoyed snapping the neck of that prick who'd dared touch her. But he'd only just met her, and he didn't get enough of a scent to be sure she was his.

Besides, been given an order, and his Wolf was too good a soldier to disobey.

Now though, well now he'd gotten her scent under his skin and his animal knew exactly what she was.

Mate.

But she was clueless, and Kris just didn't understand. She seemed to have no idea how he watched her from the corner of his eye. How he longed for her when she wasn't looking.

Every time she passed him, every time she smiled his way with that innocent warmth, he could feel his heart ache just a little more.

She was everything he wanted. Everything he needed. Yet she remained blissfully unaware that he yearned for her with every inch of his mortal soul.

Fire burned in his veins for this female. His Wolf howled, the enormous animal scratching at his insides, demanding he do something.

But he was doing something. He was working. Keeping an eye on her and her sweet babies. Kris had gotten a look at them a few times, and both he and his beast were already completely taken by the cheerful little boy and beautiful baby girl.

He wanted to claim all three of them as his own, but all he could do was wait for a sign or signal, any hint that she felt the same.

What else did he have to do?

The idea of spending another lonely holiday was unbearable. But Kris couldn't help but feel that maybe, just maybe, this Christmas, the real magic wouldn't come from a sleigh ride or a perfectly crafted piece of furniture, but from her. From the woman he could never seem to stop wanting.

Please Santa, if you're real, let me get what I want this Christmas.

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When did the clock start moving so dang slowly?

Della was beginning to think everyone must have it out for her, including Father Time himself.

Her measly four hour shift seemed to take forever tonight. It could have been for any number of reasons she supposed.

For example, her car had stalled this afternoon on the way to pick up Sean from his last day of daycare. Dinner had taken longer than usual because the door to the old pantry had gotten stuck again.

All that resulted in her being later than usual to start getting ready for her job at Manning Farms.

It wasn't easy being Santa's First Elf. Especially not when the Santa in question gave her all kinds of tingly feelings inside. She'd worked hard to avoid Kristoff Varg. But it was basically impossible.

For one thing, he was playing Santa to her First Elf. The job required her to placate the crowd with samples of cookies and cocoa while they waited for their pictures to be taken.

Then, she walked the families to and from Santa's chair. That was fine. Only every single time her eyes met his she started hearing things. Mainly Rick Astley's hit song Never Gonna Give You Up .

Her first car had been an old junker with a tape deck, and inside the cassette player was that hit single. She swore when the car died, she would never listen to that particular jingle again, even though it had grown on her.

Of course, she never expected to hear the tune every time she came face to face with a hotter than sin Werewolf. But she did.

Every. Single. Time.

Sigh.

As if that wasn't enough, every time she walked past him, she caught his woodsy fragrance, making her Crow perk up and take notice in ways her animal absolutely should not.

Then there was the fact his crystalline eyes seemed to follow her no matter where she was. But she couldn't get involved. Della knew better than that!

Truthfully, she'd thought she had enough of men to last a lifetime. But Kristoff was proving her wrong.

He was kind and thoughtful in the way he tended to the children in his role as Santa. The moms often swooned while watching him chat with their young. She couldn't blame them, but that didn't make her feel any better.

Della had no right to be proprietary over him. Kris was not hers. And her Crow took issue with that. As did her libido. She took this job to make ends meet, but the man was simply wreaking havoc on her emotions.

He was just so big. And Della didn't mean his body—though, truthfully, he was taller and wider, harder than any man she'd ever seen. He certainly put those Crows in her

old Murder to shame.

She frowned not wanting to think about them. Two had died the night Cade came for her, and he'd barely gotten out alive.

Dib Lowell, one of the Macconwood Pack's Wolf Guard and a renowned lawyer, had been acting as her go between with the Crow King, Emmet Lidl, to oversee the dissolution of her membership to the Murder.

She was never a big earner for the small Shifter group, anyway, and couldn't imagine them raising a fuss about her leaving. Her children though, that was another story.

There weren't many Crow Shifters in the world, and they would want to lay claim to her babies. She'd been so nervous worrying about it, but there was nothing she could do until the Murder made a statement one way or other.

"Hi there, you're next in line to meet Santa. Right this way," Della said to an eager-looking boy who looked a bit older than her Sean, and two adults she assumed were his parents.

"Thank you. I'm Rachel and this is Tom, and our son, Tom Junior," the pretty blonde woman said. "Can we all be in the picture?"

"Sure," Della replied with a gentle smile. "Santa? We have a group photo request," Della said, trying to play off the breathless quality her voice had suddenly adopted.

"Sure thing, Peaches," he said, giving her a wink.

Peaches was the ridiculous name she went by as First Elf. It said so right on her candy cane striped name tag that had glowing lights all around it.

As if she needed that to look any dumber in front of the sexy Wolfman. Her costume included glittery red and white striped tights, a super short emerald-green ruffled skirt that only managed to just cover her fluffy bottom, and a tight green velvet top that strangled her boobs.

And that wasn't all! Nope.

The entire red and green disaster was completed by a green velvet hat with a jingle bell hanging over one side, and a large black belt with a shiny gold buckle. And of course her green elf shoes, which were worn over her regular shoes, but they curled in the front and had jingle bells that rang every time she took a step.

Good Lord, just make a black hole come and swallow me up now.

Sigh.

Despite all of this insanity, Della had been working for over a week at the farm by now. So, none of this was new. And none of it should bother her.

“Okay Tommy, big smile!” Della said, giving her attention to the merry trio taking their picture with Santa.

This was all on Samantha! Della frowned. Her nosy next door neighbor had jinxed her by giving her the sexy little negligee she wore beneath her costume tonight.

Every time she moved, she felt the soft lace and silk confection rub across her skin, sending sparks of desire zipping through her. Or maybe that was just him. Either way, she felt overheated and very aware of Kris every time she brought a new child over for him to greet.

“Is there something different about your costume tonight, Peaches?” he asked during

a temporary lull.

“What?”

“Your costume. You look different ,” he said, pausing slightly before the last word.

“Um, no, of course not,” she replied, clearing her throat.

She stepped away from the big man, nervous that she’d somehow given away the fact she wore something outrageous beneath her clothes.

“You don’t have to run, Peaches. You look perfect to me,” he rumbled, closer now than before.

How did he do that?

Oh yeah. Wolf. Duh, Della.

“Yeah, right,” she replied with a snort, waving at people shopping for their holiday decorations and Christmas trees.

“There’s no line now. How about a picture?” Della called out to passersby.

“What are you doing later?” he asked, clearly not taking the hint that she didn’t want to talk to him.

“None of your business,” she said tartly.

“Damn, I love your accent,” he said roughly.

“My accent? I grew up in Georgia, and this is how most folks talk. You should worry

more about your accent. Really, I don't know how folks up here can understand each other."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, one eyebrow quirked.

"What do y'all have against the letter r? I mean every other word you seem to just forget it."

"Like what?"

"Okay, say car, or park, or better yet, say four."

"You making fun of me, Peaches?" he said, frowning.

"Who me? Nah ," Della replied, clearly teasing the big man.

"Fine. Cahr. Pahk. And faw," he replied, grinning and exaggerating that delicious Jersey accent she couldn't get enough of.

"I rest my case," she said, turning her head.

Della gasped, not realizing just how close Kristoff really was to her. Her Crow would have gone batshit crazy at any other man who tried to get near her. But the animal trusted him.

Maybe I should too?

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“Hey everyone, don’t forget tonight is our staff party in the barn after close!” Cassie said as everyone cleaned up Santa Land for the night.

Kristoff hadn’t planned on staying, but he’d overheard Della on the phone with her babysitter. She was going to be there, so he’d readjusted his evening plans.

Not like he had much going on, anyway. With no family or close friends in his life, he was a completely free agent.

And wasn’t that depressing?

With any luck, though, Kris wouldn’t be alone much longer. His Wolf howled inside his mind’s eye, desperate to be with the one the beast had already claimed as his own.

Kris’ chest squeezed uncomfortably. It felt like there was a rope tied tightly around him. The muscle behind his ribs thumped erratically as he watched her walk towards the barn with a few of the younger women who worked at the farm selling treats. Flurries started to fall, and he felt that band pull even tighter, and he could hardly breathe.

A few of those women had tried catching his eye, but Kris was not interested. Oh no. There was only one woman for him. His journey had one final destination and that was her.

He craved Della like he craved his next breath. She was necessary to his existence. The little Crow Shifter didn’t know it yet, but she was going to be his.

“Hey Santa, have you officially met my husband? This is David,” Cassie said, approaching with a tall man at her side.

“Pleasure. It’s Kris,” he offered and shook the man’s hand distractedly.

They said something else, but he was too busy watching the sway of Della’s hips in that ridiculously sexy outfit she wore. Okay. So it wasn’t the outfit that was sexy. Rather, it was her.

Other Bird Shifters he’d met tended to be pencil thin and slight. In other words, breakable, too, or so his Wolf always thought.

Kris was a big man. He needed a woman who could handle the beast inside of him. And Della looked suited to the task. She was deliciously curvy, with rounded hips and full breasts, thick thighs he was dying to dive between.

His cock started to thicken, and he cursed roughly. This was not the time or place.

“Hello. Earth to Kris. You coming to the party or what?” Cassie asked, waving her small hand in Kris’ eyeballs.

“Huh? Oh yeah,” he murmured, running a hand across his face and beard.

“Oh boy, he’s got it bad,” David said to his mate, grinning like the cat that got the canary.

Lucky fucker had his mate. He couldn’t understand Kris’ turmoil.

“Sure does,” Cassie agreed.

“Look, I’m sorry I checked out for a moment. But uh, yeah, you’re both right. I got a

thing for Della,” he confessed.

“You are aware she’s been through a lot,” David said quietly.

His hackles rose, and Kris nodded curtly in response. Oh, he was aware alright. And it still grated on his nerves that he hadn’t killed that motherfucker when he had the chance.

He’d followed Pack protocol and procedure and to that day it was his one regret about being a police officer.

Countless times since that night, after he’d realized she was his fated mate, Kris had wished he could go back in time to hunt that loser down. He’d even tried, but the alpha had issued an order, and the Murder had hidden the sleazeball.

No matter.

Cade Connors would get what was coming to him. If it took the rest of Kris’ life.

“Come on, Santa. Loosen up. It’s the holidays. Besides, a little of Stephie’s spiked eggnog should have everyone feeling in a festive mood in no time,” Cassie replied and winked.

Kris nodded and followed the happy couple. He didn’t know nothing about eggnog, but he did know he wanted to be near Della. And if this was his only opportunity, he was going to take it.

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“O kay, my babies, goodnight! Mama loves you,” Della semi-shouted into the phone.

She stood off to the side, a smile on her face at the festive lights and décor the staff had managed to put up in the barn during their breaks today.

Christmas carols were blasting from a couple of speakers and someone’s cell phone, and the mock dance floor they’d set up was getting a helluva workout.

She grinned like a loon, watching the younger staff members show up all the adults with their social media reel worthy moves.

“Wanna try it out?” a voice said beside her, and she gasped as she spun and came face to face with Kris.

“Um, I’m not a real good dancer,” she said, and felt her cheek grow hot.

“Me either. Let’s do it anyway,” he urged gently, offering his hand.

Her insides warmed. It was a slow, steady heat that spread through her chest and up to her face.

Kris was nothing like the men she’d known in the past. He wasn’t pushy or demanding. He didn’t rush her, didn’t pressure her. Certainly didn’t rage at her for taking a moment.

No. He simply asked for her consent, and then he waited—patiently, respectfully—while she made up her own mind.

That was something she wasn't used to. Something that felt like a breath of fresh air.

It meant more to her than she could say. The fact that Kris trusted her enough to let her decide— to allow her to take her time. Oh, this man stirred something deep inside of her.

He made her feel strong.

Powerful.

Capable.

Too many times in the past few weeks, Della had felt like she was walking on glass. Surrounded by fake smiles and sympathetic eyes.

People always seemed to think they knew best. But they often overstepped. Like they tried to take over or told her how she should feel about it the second they knew her situation.

Then they'd get weird and start hiding stuff from her. Like they thought one wrong move would shatter her into a million tiny pieces. And she hated it.

Della hated the way some folks tiptoed around her, never treating her like an adult. Like they thought her weak for what she'd been through, or even worse, culpable.

Couldn't they see? She was the only one who got her and her kids out of that bad situation. No one helped or stepped in.

Not her estranged family.

Not the rest of the Murder.

But Della was fine. She could manage her own choices. The people of Maccon City had been great, truly. But some of them were still so— so careful around her .

It wasn't that she couldn't appreciate their concern, but it felt suffocating. Worse, it felt patronizing.

Everyone seemed to expect her to just crack. They thought she would just fall apart at the slightest provocation.

And they didn't just expect her to break not teeny, tiny little things. They expected those pieces to float away, to disappear into nothingness as though she wasn't strong or worthy enough of keeping herself together.

Oh, they tried to hide it. They thought Della couldn't see the pity in their eyes. The way they allowed an exchange of hellos at the daycare drop off to linger a little too long, as if they were waiting for her to collapse.

But she knew. She saw it on their faces every damn time.

The doubt.

The concern.

The silent but ever present judgment.

It made her want to scream at them. Scream until her lungs burned, until they could hear how suffocating it all was. How tired she was of being treated like some fragile thing that could never be whole again. She wasn't broken.

She was whole. It might be an affront to other people's sensitivities, to their delicate view of what a woman, a mother, was supposed to be after everything she'd endured.

They expected her to be broken, to wear her scars like a permanent, painful mark. They wanted to see her crumble, to be weighed down by her past. But she had survived—and more than that, she had flourished.

Della had found a way to keep going, to build a life for her children and herself that was more than just existing.

It wasn't perfect. It wasn't always easy. But it was hers. And that, to her, was something incredible. Something worth holding onto.

She didn't need anyone's pity, least of all Kris's. But he didn't seem to offer any, and maybe that was her kryptonite. She wouldn't have let anyone else in so quickly.

But Kris saw her strength, not her fragility. And that, in itself, was worth more than anything.

“Okay. I'll dance with you.”

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Kris took Della's hand and pulled her close, hissing a breath when her soft, warm curves pressed against his taut body.

Twinkle lights hung from the rafters, glittering like the stars outside and casting a million shadows across Della's sweetheart of a face. He couldn't say what song was playing, whether it was fast or slow. He seemed to hear a symphony inside his brain when he looked at her.

Her pretty brown eyes looked like warm velvet as she stared up at him, mesmerizing Kris with hardly any effort at all. Her blonde hair had grown since the first night he'd seen her in her neighbor's backyard.

It brushed her shoulders now in soft waves, making Kris want to bury his nose just there to breathe her in. She always smelled so good. Like peaches and cream. Fitting, he supposed, since she was a real live Georgia peach.

They didn't talk. Hell, they didn't have to. Whatever magic was in the atmosphere either from it being so close to Christmas or the fact Kris knew they were fated mates, he wasn't sure.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was how she melted into him, allowing him to press his forehead to hers as he swayed with her gently back and forth.

He didn't get a lot of perfect moments in his life, but if anyone asked him to name his top one, then that right there would be it. Kris was simply captivated by her.

The entire night, the two of them were inseparable. Della seemed content to remain at

his side. A few people seemed to tread lightly around her, confusing him.

Like when the official Manning Farms Reindeer Games began.

“Gather around everyone! It is time for some holiday shenanigans!” Cassie had shouted.

The games kicked off with a three-legged relay race across the barn. There were three teams, and they wound up competing against each other with Della being picked next to last. He’d wondered why that was until he heard his team’s captain, a young Shifter named Eden whisper loudly that she was sure glad she didn’t get stuck with the ‘chubby sad mom’.

What the fuck?

Kris wanted to say something, knowing damn well that Della could hear the woman’s snide comments from where she stood.

They were all Shifters, for fuck’s sake. And no amount of spiked eggnog was any excuse to behave that way. Besides, any Shifter would have needed a gallon to be even a little bit tipsy.

He opened his mouth to say something and caught Della’s eye before he did. She shook her head, silently asking him to let it go. He bit his tongue, even though it made him angry. But Kris saw something else besides the tired resignation in her eyes. He saw determination.

Fifteen minutes later, the game was done, and he hoisted Della onto his shoulders so she could show off the trophy she won for her team.

“And Della wins it for team Jingle Jangle!” Cassie yelled to a chorus of yays and

awesomes .

“Oh my God! Kris put me down,” she giggled after a few minutes, and he did, slowly, waiting for the moment the others were preoccupied with the next game.

“I can’t believe we won,” she said, smiling at him.

Her joy was so damn sexy. So real. It was palpable, and it made him want.

“You won, I saw you hauling ass faster than anyone else in the barn, swift-footed little bird,” he said, pride blazing in his eyes.

God, she was pretty. Her peaches and cream scent smelled even sweeter when she was happy. And it was tempting him to sin.

“Kris?”

“Yeah,” he murmured his head bending slowly, close, and closer to hers.

“I-I think we should get out of here.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, jaw tight.

His body heated, and he thought he imagined it, but he swore he saw carnal lust glowing in her eyes.

Kris’ whole chest vibrated with his Wolf’s growl, the creature making itself known. The seconds ticked by, but finally, she answered, and what she said made his beast howl.

“I’m sure, Kris. I don’t want to go home yet. I want to leave. With you.”

Kris paused then, wondering what he should do first. He couldn't believe it. The woman of his dreams asked him to take her home. And it was everything he'd wanted.

But while he was processing, his sweet little Peaches was doubting. Della bit her lip, looking worried, and he knew he had to say something. But he was frozen.

Kris didn't want to fuck this up. His whole life was at stake,

“Look, I'm sorry if I misread—” Della began, and he could not let her finish that sentence.

“No, Sweet Girl, you haven't misread a damn thing. I want you so damn much, I can't even tell if you're real sometimes or if I just wished you into existence,” he growled, capturing her lips in a hard kiss.

Then he pounced.

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All night Della had been toying with the idea of asking Kristoff to take her home with him, stripping to her skin, and seducing the unsuspecting man.

And why not?

She'd never done anything like that.

Well, not the sex part. Obviously, Della was not a virgin. But she'd also never tried to entice a man into bed. And suddenly, she wanted to try.

With him.

Her inner Crow cooed and clicked, all abuzz with yearning for this strangely quiet and powerful Wolf. Oh, she felt his strength, but her animal didn't fear it.

No, her inner Bird seemed to crave it. Odd considering she'd spent years trying to hide from the callous men of her former Murder.

But here she was. Shivering with awareness and need. Her sex clenched on air, and moisture gathered between her thighs, She licked her lips, breathing in the scent of his earthy musk.

Della was surprised she wasn't more nervous. After all, Kristoff had a body like a warrior, and she was twice over a mom and very obviously so. Her belly was soft, lined with stretch marks her Shifter healing couldn't get rid of. Her nipples were larger, the breasts they tipped heavier than they used to be.

But even with her jiggly thighs and plump butt, she wanted to take her clothes off for him. She was dying to let him see her in that barely there negligee.

Still, she had no idea he'd pick her up and toss her over his shoulder the second she whispered in his ear, alluding to all that. But he had. And she was so turned on, she could scent her own desire dancing on air inside his super nice SUV.

Della bit her lower lip, excitement racing in her veins as he sped down some little back road she'd never even seen, like a bat out of hell.

"Um, Kris?"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe you should slow down," she squeaked when he took a turn onto a snow-covered street, making the whole dang SUV swerve on the icy road.

"What? Oh! Sorry," he growled, eyes bright with his beast.

Dear Lord, the man was hot.

A second later, he pulled into the parking lot behind one of the newer apartment buildings on the main strip near Ocean Drive.

"Wait for me," he growled.

Stunned, she watched as Kris rounded the car, opened her door, and reached for her. He fused his mouth to hers, backing her up against the side of the truck and kissing the hell out of her.

His lips were hard and hungry. His searching tongue plundered her mouth, leaving no

corner untouched as he licked into her with slow, deliberate strokes.

Snow fell all around them, and Della's heart was beating so quickly, she thought it might rip right out of her chest. Need and desire rose inside like hot magma, all pent up and ready to explode.

"Are you still sure you want this, Sweet Girl?" he asked, and Della looked up at him with lust-glazed eyes.

This was already nothing like her prior experience with sex. It was so much better.

"Yes, I'm sure," she said, jumping up and wrapping her legs around his waist, loving how easily he caught her. "Now, are you gonna take me to your apartment or what, Big Guy?"

"Fuck yes I am," he growled, his voice barely even human.

"Good boy."

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I t'd been years since Kris had popped his cherry in the back of an old Ford, but three minutes inside an elevator making out with the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen in his entire life, and he was that close to shooting off in his pants.

Fuck. Me.

Della panted and moaned into his mouth, pressing her hot little body against his.

“Hang on. Keys,” he grunted, patting his pockets while searching with one hand.

He felt her tiny ones go into his back pocket, squeezing his ass as she went. Kris loosed a long, slow growl. His cock was so hard, he figured his boxers had holes in them from all the freaking thumping and pulsing the thing was doing.

And was it doing it to the beat of Jingle Bells? What the actual fuck?

He scrubbed his hand over his face harder this time. But it was no good. He wanted Della to be his, officially speaking.

Mine. Mine. MINE.

His Wolf chanted like a prayer, the animal desperate to claim the little bird. Hell, he needed to rein in the beast. Kris couldn't just bite her without asking.

He wouldn't do that. Would never take her choice. Even though he'd never wanted anyone like this in his life, Kris knew she had to be with him every step of the way.

Oh, he planned on mating her. Was dying of love for her. Desperate to make her love him, too.

But first things first, get her addicted to his dick and maybe her heart would follow.

It was fucked up as far as plans went, but he was a carpenter, not a fucking philosopher. Besides, Shifters were physical creatures, and he knew this was going to be the best sex of both their lives.

The sound of jingling broke through his sex fogged brain, and he lifted his head from where he'd been licking and nibbling at her neck.

“Found ‘em,” she whispered, mischief dancing in her brown eyes as she wiggled the keys in her hand and her ass in his, asking without words to be let down.

He obliged, hands on her hips as she turned and unlocked his door. Fuck, she was so damn beautiful.

Once the door was closed and locked, Kris led the way to his bedroom. His chest rose and fell, his breathing heavy like his Wolf's after a long, fierce chase.

And wasn't this the same? Hadn't he been pining for this woman for weeks now?

Kris sucked at small talk. He didn't believe in saying a whole lot of nothing to try to get to know a person. He was quiet by nature, preferring to speak only when he had something to say.

Doing this Santa gig had helped get him out of his shell. He liked kids, but the biggest bonus was getting to spend time with her.

Della was so sweet and kind. He'd watched her talk to children and parents alike. She

spoke with everyone, all the families who came to the farm to visit to take a picture with Santa Claus.

The woman was a natural. She was fantastic, and he was so proud of her. He'd heard rumors among the Pack of the poor abused mother. But she didn't seem that way to him.

Della wasn't weak or broken. She wasn't something to be pitied. She was brave, a fighter. Absolutely fucking glorious. Beast and man, both sides coveted her. And tonight he was going to show her.

"W-where do you want me?" she asked, swallowing her nerves, or so he assumed.

"Right over here, Mama," he murmured, dragging her to him.

"We can go as slow or as fast as you like," he said, cupping her neck and squeezing gently to reassure as her gaze lifted to his.

"Okay."

"Anytime you wanna stop, you just tell me, Sweet Girl. But for the record, I've been dying to do this since the first time I saw you," he breathed the last few words as he pulled her in for a kiss.

She was so earthy and vibrant. Kris felt like a green pup, tugging at her clothes and his, so desperate to feel her skin.

"Lay back, Big Guy., I got this part," she said, smiling against his mouth and pushing his chest.

He scooted up the bed still in his boxers. The lights were off, but Kris had no problem

seeing in the dark. Outside his window, snow fell, and the Atlantic crashed against the surf in the near distance.

Winter at the beach was something he'd always wanted to experience. But there might as well have been a brick wall outside the glass for all the attention he paid to it.

Kris had something much better to look at, anyway. He sat up. Fingers itching to help as Della stood on the bed and shimmied out of her Elf costume.

"Holy fuck," he whispered, eyes wide as she rid herself of the gaudy velvet dress and the striped stockings.

Della straightened, standing tall, biting her lip as she walked closer, standing between his splayed legs. Kris' heart went wild at the sight of her.

"What do you think?" she whispered, and he heard more than the question.

"What do I think? How can I think is more like it?"

His eyes ate her up. Every glorious inch. That goddamn naughty scrap of lace she had on that barely covered her sweet pussy and big tits had him almost coming just looking at her.

"So, you like it?"

"Like it? Sweet Girl, you look good enough to eat. In fact," he growled, sliding his palms up her curvy legs, around to her ass and dragging her closer.

"Goddamn. You smell like fucking peaches and cream, Mama, and I gotta have a taste."

Kris had never been so grateful for being tall as he was right then. She was standing on the bed, her pussy the perfect height for his face. And that was just what he wanted.

He slid one hand between her legs, giving her cunt a good squeeze before tapping on her inner thigh. She reacted instinctually, parting her legs, her brown eyes wide. He hooked a finger around the elastic, pulling the material aside to reveal her glistening lips.

“Oh, but I never,” she said, gulping as he slid his fingers over her fold.

“Good, I get to be the first. Now, hold on,” he said, not letting her finish before closing his mouth over her sweet sex.

Mine.

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“O h my Lord,” Della moaned, clutching at Kristoff’s head.

His hair was shaved in some sort of Viking faux hawk with designs buzzed along the sides of his scalp. It was too short for her to find any purchase, but the things he was doing.

Hell, she was likely to collapse from sheer shock, never mind pleasure. The man seemed insatiable and for her of all people. She was too far gone to question it, and besides, part of her new self-affirmation process was to take the good things that came at face value. And this was definitely one of the good things.

“Get on, Mama,” he growled, hoisting one thigh, then the other over his broad shoulders.

He moaned, cupping her ass with his large hands and pushing her needy sex more firmly against his hungry, searching mouth. Della could not keep up with the sensations battering against her like wave after wave of pleasure.

Every second of his lusty attentions brought her higher and higher until she exploded with a shout as her release washed over her. She was too exhausted to move, but also embarrassed by her, er , shortcomings.

Was that a thing? Could women come too soon?

She didn’t really know. Her ex had only been interested in his pleasure, and the truth was Della never orgasmed with another person in the room. Self-exploration had been frowned upon in her Murder, but she was part human, for fuck’s sake.

She didn't know how to handle what had just happened. This big, sexy Wolf made her see stars, playing her body like a fine instrument. Hoping she didn't do anything wrong, she tried to control her breathing while Kris brought her down from his shoulders, gently kissing his way up her soft belly and breasts.

The man was not in a rush, and she was still tingling from his kisses and the magic he'd already conjured between her legs.

"Um, I'm sorry if I ruined it by going too fast," she blurted. "It's just, uh, never been like that," Della whispered, exhaling a sharp breath as she wrestled with embarrassment.

"Hey, no, no, no, Sweet Girl, you look at me now," Kris murmured, taking her face between his long-fingered hands.

"I mean, I just don't want this to be over and if I ruined it?—"

"Ruined it? Don't apologize, Della," he scoffed, smiling at her. "That was the single sexiest experience of my life, and we've only just started."

"Really?" she whispered, almost afraid to ask.

"Hell yeah, Baby. Your pleasure tastes like fucking ambrosia, and I'm proud I could do that for you. My Wolf wants to howl to the world that I made you come for me, but that's only for us, Sweet Girl. No more apologies."

"So, you don't want me to go?"

"Go? Are you out of your mind? We're not done by a long shot, and I can't wait to see what you can do."

Relief flooded her system, and arousal pooled between her legs. Della might be out of her mind at that, but only where he was concerned.

Lord, she burned for him. A whimper escaped her lips as she ran her hands over his bulging biceps to his smooth, broad shoulders. He was so fit, so fine, with the perfect amount of body hair and gorgeous symbols inked across his muscular torso.

Della wanted to lick them. She wanted to see if he tasted like forest everywhere, and she moaned as he pulled her in for a deep, hot, wet kiss.

Holy hell. Can this man kiss!

Then he was laying her down, peeling her out of that slinky underwear. He kissed and praised her as he revealed her most secret treasures inch by inch.

Della clutched at him. Eager for everything he was doing to her, while wanting and needing more at the same time. In her almost thirty years on this planet, Della had seen good and bad. She'd seen beauty and horror.

But this right here, this was pure magic. Kristoff was light years beyond her in looks. But he made her feel like a goddess.

She moaned and panted, scratched her nails up his back as he paid attention to her stretch marks, kissing each one like they were something beautiful.

“Every inch. Every goddamn inch. So fucking soft. So goddamn warm. Fuck Sweet Girl, I knew you were going to be beautiful,” he moaned reverently as he slid his hard, hot body on top of hers, positioning his hard cock at her entrance.

There was something empowering in the way he reacted to her, and Della felt it down to her toes. This man was dangerous. He was changing things, and she wasn't sure

she was ready for that.

Heck. She didn't know what to do with it, either. Yes, she'd seen him looking. Knew he was interested. But what if it was all just sex for him?

Her Crow clicked and cawed, the animal inside her was pushing at her for something. Della wasn't sure what. She never got along with her animal. The creature was always too skittish and timid for her.

Oh, she wanted to be strong, but her animal side had been treated as nothing for so long, she was afraid she'd started to believe it. Those thoughts were too heavy for what was happening between her and Kristoff.

Her body felt warm and swollen, and so damn good under the weight of his. And if Della had learned anything about life, it was to take the good when you could get it.

And this felt good.

So good.

If tonight was all she was going to get from a strong, gorgeous Shifter like Kristoff, then she was so there for it. Hell, she was going to seize it with both hands and hold on for dear life.

The man had been living rent free in her brain for weeks now. Tonight was the culmination of all her secret dirty fantasies she'd been having.

Their coming together was the realization of those sweaty dreams that had been keeping her up late for weeks now.

"Last chance, Mama. Once I sink into this perfect body, I'm not stopping until you

come at least twice,” he growled, green eyes blazing with promise.

Emboldened by the desire she saw shining there, Della wrapped her hands around the back of his neck. She’d already come, but her body ached. She needed him, was desperate to have his thick dick deep inside her. Never had she ever felt such wild and wanton abandon.

“No more talk. Show me.”

Then she pulled him down, claiming his mouth in a kiss she’d never have the guts to try in the light of day.

Kris didn’t hesitate. His hands clenched on her hips, and he thrust forward, pushing his thick cock deep inside her, stretching her walls and ruining her for anyone else.

“Oh, God!”

“Kristoff or Kris. But you say my name when I’m fucking you. Hell, I want you to scream it,” he growled.

She moaned, back arching, pressing her aching breasts against his chest. A fresh wave of desire pooled between them at his rough commands.

Della didn’t like being told what to do. But maybe she did. In bed. With him.

“Kris! Oh, Kristoff, it feels so good,” she yelled and whimpered.

Her body moved in tandem with his. Both of them rising and falling and flowing into one another, driving towards the same goal.

It felt so good, so right. He angled her hips, driving home even deeper. Kris held still

for a moment, allowing her body to adjust to his massive invasion.

She moaned, touching him everywhere she could reach, kissing his arms, his chest and stomach. Della reveled in the care he took and his consideration of her feelings and her body.

He cupped her face, lifting until she looked at him. Then, holding her stare, he started to move. Kris slid out of her slowly until just the tip of his cock sat inside her needy slit.

Mouth open, eyes locked on hers, Wolf shining brightly, he rammed all the way in. Crowding every inch of his dick into her tight, wet sheath until his balls were slapping against her ass.

Then he did it again.

And again.

Faster and harder, Kristoff rutted into her, and fuck, she loved it. She held onto his hips, never wanting him to stop. He pounded her body, knowing exactly what she needed, what she could take. And she adored him for it.

“What do you need, Mama? Need me to touch this clit? That what you want?” he asked, head canted.

The Wolf glowed in his eyes as he reached between them. Strumming her tight little nubbin in small circles. He pumped his cock, adding more pressure with his hand. And Della exploded around him, squeezing his dick tight with her muscles.

“That’s it, Sweet Girl. Come for me. Flutter that pussy all around my cock. Show me how much you like the way I fuck you.”

Oh my fucking God.

His filthy words were so raw, so dirty. Della loved the way they sounded spilling from his lips. In fact, she liked them so much, they pushed her from one precipice to another.

“Fuck, Mama. You coming again already? Good girl. That’s a good girl,” he growled.

Kris reared up, bucking into her soft body harder and harder, until he roared her name. Hot jets of come filled her as he followed her into carnal bliss.

Having him come like that filled her with pleasure so intense, she clawed at his back like a wild thing with her sharp nails, needing him to anchor her.

Kristoff crushed her with his body, rocking his hips, drawing out every inch of their orgasms. He was in no hurry to roll off her and leave, as had been her prior experience.

Oh no. Not him.

Kristoff seemed to covet her. He made her feel special, worthy, delicious as he moaned and kissed her neck, her chin, her mouth, holding her tight as their bodies tried to come down from the high.

Della kissed him back, not wanting to break the connection just yet. This felt so good. So perfect.

She’d definitely enjoyed it. And she wanted to remember it that way for always. Her Crow cooed sadly, and Della hushed the animal inside her mind’s eye.

Building castles in the sky was dangerous, Della knew that better than most. This had

been nice. But it was time to go.

Nice things don't last forever.

Kris tightened his arms around her, his whole body rumbling steadily and somehow it soothed both woman and Crow. He'd flipped them over, hugging her tight to his body, and rubbed circles on her lower back.

Good mate, the Crow whispered.

Della didn't even notice as she nodded off.

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Della's eyes flew open suddenly, and she realized two things. She wasn't home, and she wasn't alone.

Oh shit.

The big man wrapped around her was sleeping soundly, smelling, and looking better than any man had the right to. She frowned, sliding out from under him as stealthily as she could.

Okay, so Della was butt ass naked, and had no car with her. But she couldn't stay there. She had responsibilities, dammit! And damn him for making her forget them.

Okay. She was panicking. Freaking out, really. And maybe she was blaming him for something—what? She didn't even know.

It was still dark out, though. The snow had stopped, and she had her phone. She grabbed it and sent a text to Samantha who replied immediately.

Della

Sorry, I got stuck.

Sam

Della, I hope that's a euphemism for laid.

Della

OMG! Sam, I am not telling you that. Now, I need a ride.

Sam

Oh! Okay, want me to come get you?

Della

No! I am just gonna get a rideshare.

Sam

Fine, But I am tracking you. Oh, and the kids are safe and sound asleep.

Della

Okay, good. See you soon.

“You finished in there, Sweet Girl?” Kris’ voice came through the door, startling Della into dropping her phone.

“Shit! You scared the crap out of me,” she said, scrambling for something to wear.

There was a sweatshirt hanging on the hook and she grabbed it and put it on, ignoring how it smelled delicious.

Just like him.

She eased the door open, pretending a sophistication she didn’t have and a calm she did not feel.

“Hey,” he said, offering a slow grin and pulling her close. He kissed her temple.

“I know you’re wanting to get back to the kids. Let me use the bathroom and I’ll drive you. Oh, and they’ll be too big, but help yourself to my sweats. Third drawer,” he told her, kissing her temple once more before he nudged her gently out of the way.

And didn’t that just take the wind right out of her sails?

She’d been all ready to have an argument or something, and there he went, being all sweet. Della did not know what to do with a man who looked at her with adoration instead of scorn.

What the actual heck?

Trusting someone, especially a man, was always going to be a problem for her after she’d left the Murder. She knew that. Her therapist knew that. And they were working on it.

But that didn’t mean she was ready to discuss any of it with Kris. They’d had sex, but so what? Sex did not a relationship make.

But maybe the part where your Crow claimed him did?

Fuck.

She’d almost forgotten about the part where she’d clawed his back. See, Crow Shifters seldom bit to claim their mates. No, they scratched, but only when the moment was right.

Della stayed quiet during the seventeen minute ride home. She thought he would get angry or snarky or something. But maybe Kris chalked it up to her being tired. Or

maybe he just wasn't interested in conversation.

The point was, he didn't question or push her, he just let her be. And she had no idea what to make of it. So she sat and stewed.

Her younger self might have felt ashamed for what she'd done tonight. Having sex with a virtual stranger. And even worse, having the audacity to enjoy it.

Della had been raised by very strict parents. Crows were not like Wolves. They had very harsh views about the proper roles of males and females within their community.

The Murder she'd been born to was the opposite of modern or enlightened. And that was putting it mildly.

They believed women had one function. To obey men and be bred by them. Sex was for procreation only. Women were not to enjoy it.

Oh, it was backwards as fuck.

Hell, that was why she left when she was eighteen and didn't look back. She wanted more than to be someone's broodmare.

But the second Murder she found was almost as bad. The males there treated women like property. It was awful, but better than where she'd come from.

It was not long before Della knew something was wrong with the whole situation. She'd been going to school and reading a lot, and well, when she questioned it—that was the first time Cade had hit her.

She was embarrassing him, he'd said. He apologized and begged her not to leave. He said he wouldn't do it again, and stupidly, she believed him.

Stop , she told herself firmly.

It did no one any good to dwell on the past where things could not be changed. Yes, she could be pissed about it. Had every right to be mad as hell. But the best way forward was to learn from her mistakes and move on.

Della understood that all the way down to her soul. The most important things in her life were taking care of her babies and making a good life for them. For the first time ever, she was on her way.

But where did Kris fit in? And did he even want to?

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:31 am

The early morning sky was dark gray, but the snow had stopped falling at some point during the night. Della was quiet. Too quiet for Kris' liking, but he respected her need to process what they'd just done.

No, he hadn't claimed her yet, but he'd sure as fuck wanted to.

Before he broached the subject, he needed to give her some space. To convince her, he would be a good, kind, loyal, and protective mate.

Waiting would be hard, but Kris wasn't going anywhere. They had all the time in the world. The rest of their lives. She just had to learn to trust him.

He pulled into the driveway slowly and shifted the SUV into park. Della made to grab the door handle, but he placed his hand on hers, stilling her with her body still turned away from him.

"I know you're having all kinds of thoughts, Sweet Girl, and I am not trying to push or rush you in any way. I just want you to know how special tonight was to me. And I need you to know, this is not a one and done thing. Not for me."

"W-what are you saying?" her voice filtered through to him, and he sucked in a breath of her peaches and cream fragrance.

After swallowing it down from the source, Kris knew just how sweet it really was. Della was perfect for him from head to toe. She was his match in every way, and he was dying to make it official. But patience was a virtue.

At least, that was what they said. Kris sometimes thought they were just a bunch of assholes. But he could be patient for her, if that was what she needed.

Hell. He could be anything if it meant she'd give him the right to claim her.

God, she was so perfect.

"I'm saying I am in it for the long haul, Della. It might be soon to confess my intentions, but just so you know, I am yours. One hundred percent yours. Whenever you need me. However you want me. You got me, Sweet Girl," he said, his voice a deep growl heavy with his Wolf.

Della turned her head, looking over her shoulder. She looked gorgeous with her velvet eyes big and glossy with feeling, her pink lips swollen from his kisses, and her blonde locks tousled from his hands.

She looks like mine , the Wolf insisted. Kris leaned forward, pressing one hard kiss on her pliant lips.

"I. Would. Do. Anything. For. You."

He cupped her cheek gently, then he moved back against his seat not trusting himself to be able to let her go if he kept on touching her.

The cabin of the SUV felt charged with emotion. She turned her face back towards the passenger door. His heart stuttered inside his chest.

Had he messed up? Had he pushed too hard?

Whatever anxiety she'd been feeling during the drive had dissipated some. There was something else there now. Something that struck him as poignant. A mix of curiosity,

hope, and arousal.

“Good,” she said after a minute. Then she slid out of his truck.

Kris couldn’t breathe. He wanted to follow her up the stairs to her house. He wanted to have the right to go inside. It was too soon. He couldn’t just bully his way inside.

But it was a near thing.

Tonight, he’d had his mate in his arms. He’d been surrounded by her sweet, warm body. Never before had he felt a sense of such rightness. Like she was made for him, and he for her.

He wasn’t finished staking his claim yet. But he was going to. This was just step one.

She’d walked away without looking back, but that was not necessarily bad. Kris had to look on the bright side.

Good. She said good.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:31 am

“Y ou slept with him!” Sam squealed.

“Oh my God, Sam. Be quiet!” Della hissed.

Her friend was such a loudmouth sometimes. She snorted and shook her head, continuing to fold clothes as she did. It was such a relief, having her own washer and dryer now. The way Sean and Janie were constantly dirtying their things, it was like a dream come true.

“Ooh, Michael just texted. He should be back in a bit to take us to the tree lot and drop you off to work, you know, since you left your car there so you could bang your big bad Wolf,” Samantha snarked.

She wiggled her eyebrows up and down and looked at Della expectantly.

“What?”

“Is he big?”

“I’m not discussing this with you?—”

“Come on! If you can’t dick-scuss this with me, who then? See what I did there? Dick-scuss!”

She clutched her stomach and laughed out loud at her own joke, while Della silently prayed for patience.

Della walked through the house, Sam on her heels, dropping off clothes in the kids' rooms and finally, her own.

"It was just one night. I am sure a Wolf like him does that kind of thing all the time," Della said, trying to downplay what was without a doubt the best sex she had ever had.

"No way! Wolves are loyal when it is the one," Sam said.

"But that's just it, he's not my one, and I am not his!" Della whispered emphatically.

"Come on Della. I know you don't sleep with every guy who asks. He is special—" she started.

"Sam, I can't afford for any man to be special. The kids come first."

"Oh, honey, you can take care of your kids and still believe in love," she murmured sympathetically.

"He does not love me, Sam. And I don't love him. I barely know him," Della said, grateful Samantha could not hear the tremor in her voice.

"Fine. Just answer me this, do you hear Puccini when he kisses you?" Sam asked.

"Um, I hate to tell you this, Samantha, but some of us don't listen to opera," Della said with a snort.

"Ugh. Fine. If not Puccini, then what?"

"What what ?"

“What music do you hear when you’re with Kristoff?”

Della closed her eyes. How the heck did Sam know that?

“This is dumb,” she started.

“No, it’s urgent. Tell me!”

“Fine. So, the first time we, um, kissed, I kind of heard Rick Astley.”

Samantha’s jaw dropped open.

“Rick. Astley. The singer of the eighties nightmare that won’t go away Never Gonna Give You Up ? That Rick Astley?”

“Shut up! He is an icon, I’ll have you know,” Della defended her music choices.

Samantha doubled over with laughter this time, clutching her stomach as she wheezed.

“Stop making fun, heifer,” Della snapped.

“I’m not, I promise. This is perfect!”

Della tossed a pair of socks at her and gave her a dirty look as she started gathering her Elf costume.

“Sam? Della? Should I get Maya and the babies in their coats now?” Aunt Eileen shouted from the kitchen.

“Um, yeah, thank you. I just have to change,” Della replied.

“We’ll be right there Aunt Eileen, we’re just having a dick-scussion!” Samantha said, and Della slapped a hand over the woman’s mouth.

“A what?” the older woman shouted back.

“Nothing! Go ahead and get the kids in their coats, thanks,” Della replied, shaking her head at Sam.

“What? It slipped! OMG—that’s what he said!”

Samantha followed Della into her bedroom, shaking with laughter. Della just snorted.

“Good Lord, I can’t believe it, Sam. Your inner child is a twelve year old boy!”

“Yeah, well, this twelve year old boy wants partial credit for getting you two together. After all, it was my lingerie that did it!”

T wenty minutes later, Della arrived at Manning Farms an hour early for her shift along with Aunt Eileen, Samantha, Michael, his daughter Maya, Sean, and Janie. She didn’t know how she got so lucky to be adopted into this wonderful family, but she was grateful.

They’d readily welcomed Della and her children with open arms from the very first day she’d arrived in Maccon City. Ever since, they’d gone out of their way to include her and the kids in every family adventure they had.

Della’s own family had never treated her kindly. In fact, many of the Crows she knew seemed devoid of emotion, and made her feel like there was something wrong with her for being so needy for attention whenever she’d craved hugs or praises as both child and adult.

Della had always been a hugger. She feared her children would grow up without love, like she did. But that was a momentary panic.

Della loved her children with all her heart. She hugged and kissed them at every opportunity and told them constantly how important and special they were to her.

Some children didn't like affection, but hers did. Thank the Lord. It didn't hurt at all that Janie and Sean seemed to love being cuddled by their mama.

Della grinned as she followed the kids as they darted from one tree to the next in one of the cut your own fields. Manning Farms was truly a winter wonderland, and this was perfect.

She and Samantha already planned for the kids to help with her tree decorating tonight while Della worked, and tomorrow afternoon, they would tackle theirs. She would bring their Christmas tree home on the top of her car tonight.

"Ooh! Mommy, I like this one!" Sean said, stopping in front of a whopper of a tree.

"Um, I don't think we can fit that one in the car, Buddy," she said, smiling at her boy.

Maya had already picked one for their house and Michael was cutting it down with a handsaw—the only kind allowed on any of the Manning Farms lots.

Made sense. No one wanted a chainsaw massacre at Christmas time, and Della had already seen a number of accidents with these during her stint there as First Elf.

"But Mommy, the roof is so high in the living room, and I really want it. Janie does too," Sean said, and his lower lip quivered adorably.

Her heart squeezed as she looked down at her boy. NO was hard to hear, but

sometimes, it was necessary.

Della squatted in front of him, aware of her Elf costume, and not wanting to bend over. She figured flashing her butt was not exactly the family friendly environment the farm was going for.

“Sean, I really want to get you that tree, but Mommy’s car is too small to hold it. How about we show Janie some others?”

He nodded, and ten minutes later, they found the perfect Douglas Fir. The only problem was cutting it down.

“I can do that for you,” a familiar voice said behind her.

Della’s eyes opened wide as she turned to find Kris standing in jeans and a flannel, holding his Santa suit, which was on a hanger inside a plastic garment bag, in one hand.

“Are you Santa?!” Sean asked the big man, his head tilted back so he could gaze at Kris.

“Sometimes, Bud. Here, can you make sure your Mom and sister stay behind this line here so I can cut this down safely for you?” Kris knelt as he spoke to Sean, drawing a line in the snow with his finger.

“Yes! I can do that!” Sean said exuberantly, pushing Della and Janie back behind the line.

“Hold this for me?” Kris asked, handing her the Santa suit.

“What are you doing?” she whisper-screamed the question.

“Cutting down your tree. Thanks, Sweet Girl,” he added when she took the hanger from him with numb fingers.

Della watched in complete and utter shock as Kris got down on the cold, hard ground and started cutting down a tree for her family. And the big man didn’t stop there.

Of course, he didn’t.

The big hairy Wolf insisted he carry it too!

“I could do that,” she muttered as Sean pulled Janie ahead of them.

Baby Janie was sitting in her wagon, buckled in place. It was the kind that fit two children, but her boy would rather pull the thing than sit in it.

“Sean, be careful,” Della called out.

“He’s a strong boy,” Kris said, and she swore she heard a note of pride in his voice as he watched her son and daughter move ahead of them.

Della’s heart squeezed, and she wondered if it was possible to pass out after hearing one seemingly nice compliment about her son?

God, was she being foolish?

Hope was contagious, and right now, it was spreading like wildfire through her veins as she watched Sean turn back and shout something at Kris who answered her son readily, and jogged over, tree in hand, to help the boy lift the wagon over a small snowy bump in the road.

Kris listened to everything her boy said about the snow and the tree with an

appropriate amount of attention. He replied to her child's curious little questions with honesty and patience, both of which her Crow could easily discern.

Kristoff was just a really good man. She'd seen him be kind to the children who visited him when he was taking pictures with them in his Santa costume.

But what did that mean for them? Was she special or was he simply polite to everyone? And was she a moron for even thinking about this?

Adults had sex all the time, right? She shouldn't read too much into what had happened last night, or the things he'd said to her earlier that morning.

"I. Would. Do. Anything. For. You."

His words echoed in her brain and her battered heart sputtered, desperate to believe in something. Desperate to believe in him.

Shit.

She had to be smarter this time around. Della could not afford to get involved. Her kids came first, and there was nothing more important.

Was she wrong for wanting to believe him?

"You alright?" he asked, stopping beside her, head canted as he looked at her with his stunning bottle-green eyes.

"Yep. Everything is fine," she replied with a tight smile.

He nodded and kept pace beside her, touching her back now and then, taking her hand to help her over an icy patch, laughing and smiling, and just being awesome.

The jerk!

By the time they joined Samantha and her family a few minutes later, Della was practically panting.

“How you doin’?” Kris said, shaking Michael’s hand and nodding at Samantha and the rest of the group.

“We’re gonna get some cookies and meet you at the line for Santa!” Aunt Eileen called out. She and Maya started walking, the latter took over pulling the wagon with Sean safely buckled inside.

“Let me get this over to the guys to trim the base and prep the tree. I’ll get it tied up after shift, but I wanna get changed so the kids don’t have to wait long in the cold,” Kris said to Della.

“Okay. Um, I’ll see you there,” she said, watching him turn.

He nodded his face unreadable as he waited a moment before turning to walk off. Almost like he was reluctant to leave her.

“Kris?”

“Yeah?” he asked, turning back to face her.

“Thank you.”

“It’s a privilege and a pleasure, Sweet Girl,” he whispered, smiling at her before turning away once more.

Della stood watching him walk and dammit, she practically swooned.

“Good God, woman, that is one fine man,” Sam whispered, oblivious to Michael’s growling.

Or maybe not so oblivious since she turned and kissed him, patting his cheek as he followed Kris to where the trees were prepped for travel.

“You shouldn’t say things like that in front of him,” Della chided gently.

“Please, he knows no one holds a candle to him as far as I’m concerned. But for you? That big Viking Santa looks pretty perfect, Della. I have one question, though.”

“No, I am not telling you the size of his dick,” Della whispered.

“Not that,” Sam replied with a grin.

“Okay then, what?”

“Well, I was wondering if you like him as much as I think you do, and if he likes you like I definitely know he does after the way he’s been following you around for forty-five minutes through snow and mud like a puppy dog, then, what are you waiting for?”

Sam raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips before following after her mate. Normally, Della ignored her nosy neighbor’s commentaries, even though they were hilarious. But this time, Della wasn’t so sure that would work.

Because for the first time, Sam made a good point.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:31 am

Kris had been so amped up after last night, he did not sleep a wink. After standing sentinel in the woods outside her place for most of the night and morning, he went home to grab a bite, shower, and change.

His apartment was okay for now, but he longed for the day he could be with Della and the kids in her house. The old house had plenty of woodwork that needed repairing. It called to his artistic nature, and he'd already started planning what projects he would assume first, with her approval first.

His Wolf was just as obsessed as he was with the idea of protecting what he saw as his family. Fixing their house was just one way he could do that.

Christmas carols started playing through the speakers as he took his place on Santa's throne, waving at the children in line as he walked past them. It didn't miss his attention that Della's perfect brood were first.

Emotion flooded Kris' system as Della approached, pretty as a picture in her First Elf getup, Sean, and Janie in tow. His throat constricted, and it was hard to swallow.

God, they were perfect. The perfect little family. His Wolf had already staked a claim, the beast already bonded. He could deny it all he wanted, but why would he ever want that? Kris had nothing to hide. He was head over heels for Della and he loved her children so much already.

For weeks he'd stood guard, watching over them from afar. Oh, he'd talked to them a time or two, but that was mostly in passing. But today, well, he'd just lucked out.

“Hello Santa!” Sean shouted, pulling against his mother’s hand.

“Hey there, Bud,” Kris said, smiling widely.

“I knew you was real! Some big kids at school said there was no Santa, but I still believe in you,” he said.

“I’m so glad, Sean, because I believe in you too.”

“Okay! Let’s get set up for the photo,” Della said too brightly.

Kris frowned. She looked strange. Not worried, but there was something going on. He hated her distress. Everything in him demanded he fix it for her. Thank goodness he’d been reading up on relationships and dating a single parent.

Of course, that wasn’t what they were doing. And Shifters were far different from humans. Still, the ebooks he’d been checking out from the library app he had downloaded had some sage advice.

He understood that Della did not need a man to fix her life. Fact was, it wasn’t broken. She had built herself back up after everything life had thrown her way, and now she stood strong on her own two feet, fiercely independent and self-sufficient.

She wasn’t some damsel waiting to be saved—she was a woman who had learned to rely on herself. He admired that about her, respected it deeply.

But he also knew something else. Though she might need time to adjust to the idea, she did have one man she could rely on. Him.

He was going to show her that she could lean on him without fear of being let down. He could not imagine all she’d suffered.

His Sweet Girl had carried so much weight alone for so long, the thought of sharing that burden with anyone could feel like a leap into the unknown.

Kris was okay with going slow. What mattered most was that she understood the truth—the absolute truth, one that he was sure of in his soul.

Della was destined for him. He was her match, her partner, in every sense of the word. And he wasn't going anywhere.

Not now, not ever.

He would never hurt her, never bring harm to her or her children in any way, shape, or form. That was a promise he would die keeping.

Sure, he might mess up now and then. He was only human. He was imperfect, like everyone else, and he knew that. But where Della and her babies were concerned, his heart was pure.

Every decision he made would be with their well-being at the forefront of his mind. He might stumble, but he would always strive to do better, to be better for them.

If she needed time to trust that, to believe in him, he would give it to her. He wouldn't rush her or push her—he would wait. That was something he could give her, and not just because it was Christmas.

Kindness, attention, protection, trust, patience, and most of all, his heart. These would be his gifts to her.

He understood that the foundation of their bond needed to be built on trust, and that couldn't be rushed. Kris thought he proved he was willing to take the time, go at her pace, until she saw that he was more than just a man who loved her—he was the man

who would never leave, never fail, and always have her back.

And when she was ready to accept that, he'd be waiting.

"How about a family picture? Mama too?" he asked, his eyes softening as he looked at her.

"Yeah, Mommy. You sit, too!" Sean agreed.

"Oh, um, okay," she murmured.

She bit her lip, trying to figure out how to sit down since Sean insisted he was too big for Santa's lap. God help him, his mind kept wandering to dirty things every time he looked at her soft, plump lips.

Like Della's sweet kisses and the sexy little sounds she made in bed last night.

"I know it's against the rules for anyone else, but you can sit right here, Little Mama. You sit on me, and put Janie right here," he said, trying to keep his growling to a minimum.

The line was building fast, and kids were whining they were taking long. Kris knew that was the only reason Della sat down abruptly.

The feel of her soft ass on his lap was almost too much, but he was just so damn happy she'd listened he couldn't help himself. He wrapped one gloved hand around her hip, squeezing her as they smiled for the photographer like one big happy family.

It was his most fervent wish. And even if just for a moment, Kris' heart sang with the possibility it could be his.

“Santa? Can I tell you what I want for Christmas?” Sean said, turning to face him before walking away.

“Sean, it’s someone else’s turn now,” Della chided, but the little boy was insistent.

“Sure, Bud. Go ahead,” he said, not seeing the harm.

He figured she was on a budget, but if there was a toy or trinket the little boy wanted that was beyond her spending limit for the holidays, he’d be happy to buy it for him.

“I want a real Daddy for Christmas.”

“Sean!” Della gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

Startled velvet eyes met his and Kris knew without a doubt his Wolf was visible in his gaze.

“Can you do it Santa?”

“Sean, you can’t ask Santa for a Daddy,” Della replied anxiously.

“Yes, I can, Mom. He can come for dinner on Christmas, and he can carve the turkey, and we can have a family like we’re s’pposed to! Like the cartoons have, Mommy,” he begged.

Sean wiggled out of his mother’s grasp and ran right up to Kris. His big brown eyes were so much like hers. But he knew Della wouldn’t approve of him just saying yes. Even if it was killing him not to.

“Sean,” he said, glancing at her and begging her to trust him with that one look before he dropped his gaze to Sean’s, “that’s a very serious thing you’re asking for, and we

can talk about it a little bit later. I'd be happy to come to Christmas dinner, but that is for your Mom to decide. She needs you to listen to her now, Bud, and you should, like a good boy."

"It's okay. Maybe you're not the real Santa," he said, ducking his head down sadly.

Kris' heart squeezed and his Wolf howled sorrowfully. He did not like letting down the child. Not one bit.

"Hey Sean," Kris added, unable to stop himself. "I can promise you're gonna have a good Christmas. Okay, Bud?"

"Okay," he said and nodded.

"Come on, Sean."

Kris tried to get her to look at him again, but she refused. In fact, she pretty much ignored him for the rest of the night.

When he'd gone to see about her tree, she'd already had one of the teenagers tie it to her car. His Wolf confirmed later on that she'd set it up inside the house with no help.

He called her the next day but was greeted by a message saying her voicemail was full. His texts went unanswered, too.

Fuck.

Finally, when he couldn't take it anymore, Kris took off for the farm early. One of the larger kids who'd come to take pictures with Santa the night before had kicked one of the supporting legs of the bench and wound up cracking it.

It wasn't the girls' fault. She was part of a class trip to Manning Farms from a school for children with special needs. One of the teacher's aides had stepped away to use the restroom, and the little girl had run right past the line all the way to Kris and Santa's throne. In her excitement, she acted out, and well, she got a little carried away.

She'd even gotten him right in the shin in her exuberance. But he was a Werewolf, so it was all good as far as he was concerned. As for the bench, not so much.

Della though, she was a gem. She'd managed to settle the child down with some gentle words and breathing exercises. The school was mortified and apologized profusely, but that was unnecessary. Kris was just glad the girl was okay.

Still, the leg needed mending, and he was not doing himself any good waiting for her to answer. So, he went in early and hoped to maybe run into her before shift.

The barn was empty save for the sleigh, and he wondered if there would be a lot of requests today since Christmas Eve was tomorrow. People liked to get their rides in before the big day, even though the high temperature was expected to be in the low twenties all weekend.

His mind wandered as he worked, falling into the rhythm of gluing, sanding, stripping, and painting. He used high quality, fast acting agents with little to no fragrance. His Wolf would allow for no less.

By the time he was finished, he stood up, looking over his work for a full thirty seconds before he realized he was not alone. He turned around swiftly, catching Della just standing there, watching him like he was something she craved.

“Della, I need to apologize?—”

But he didn't get to finish before she was pressed against him, her hungry mouth plundered his.

Mmm. So good. So mine.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:31 am

Della's head was reeling. It was the day before Christmas Eve and that douche-canoë decided to make an appearance!

She sat inside the offices of Macconwood Law Associates for two hours before she received the bad news that her ex's brother, Blayne, and his mate, Cynthia, were in Maccon City, seeking visitation with the children.

Worse than that, the bastards were filing for custody! They claimed she was unfit, and they were better since they were a mated pair.

"They can't do this! They never bothered to see Sean or Janie when we lived ten minutes away from them," she sputtered.

"I understand, Della, and I think it's despicable what they are trying to do," her lawyer told her.

"So, does their case carry water?" she asked.

"It's tricky whenever it comes to the safety of a child," he began.

"Mr. Lowell, I will do anything to keep my babies safe."

"Good. I am glad to hear it. We're fortunate they decided to go through the Shifter courts first. Human ones are much more unpredictable. Now, because they haven't given us much time before the holidays to bring their claims forward, I have to be forward in what I am going to say next."

“Okay,” she replied, bracing herself for whatever it was he was going to say.

Della’s mind overflowed with images of the past and the Murder.

The cold indifference.

The role females played.

The outright abuse.

“Your brother-in-law and his mate claim they can offer structure and security. What I am asking you, Della, is are you aware of any prospects for a mate for yourself here in Maccon City?”

“What? Why does that matter?”

“Because, if you were mated to someone, let’s say a Wolf, then you and your young would be safe under the protection of the Macconwood Pack. Just think about it. I will keep working on other ways, of course.”

“Thank you,” she said, and left the office in a daze.

There was simply no way her children were going back to that awful, hateful place. Her Crow cawed, the animal desperate to go to the one man she felt safe with.

But how could she bring him into this mess? No, she could not do that to him.

He was so kind, and he deserved much more than her.

It was better for Kris if she ignored his phone calls and messages. Better for him if she just stayed away from the tall, sexy man.

Her Crow pecked at her from where the animal rested in that metaphysical realm until they swapped skin. She was adamant now that Kris was her mate. The crazy Bird had already claimed him when she'd given him her body and clawed his back. But he didn't know that. And he didn't know anything about this either.

How could she go to him now and tell him how she felt? He would assume she was using him, and that was something she never wanted.

The Fates really liked to mess with her. After all she'd been through. Now this?

"I'm home!" Della called, having driven like mad to get back in time to have a meal with the kids before work started.

"Mommy! Did you talk to Santa? Is he gonna be here for Christmas?" Sean asked.

She hugged her son and kissed Janie's cheek, nodding at Aunt Eileen who winked before going back to stir something delicious smelling on the stove.

"Um, I haven't seen him yet," she hedged, setting the baby on the floor.

She loved this time of day when the kids wanted to play, and Sean entertained her with adventures from his day at the Pack run daycare in town where she hoped to work one day.

There were plenty of schools for normals, but this was a Pack run private school that offered extra care to supernaturally gifted children who were learning to control their gifts.

To normals it was all aboveboard, which was why she had to finish her college education and teaching certification before she could apply. But Della couldn't wait for that day.

After dinner, Della dressed quickly, the urgency of the moment pushing her to move faster than usual.

She left earlier than normal, hoping to catch a glimpse of Kris before they had to put their work faces on.

She had promised Sean she'd talk to him about Christmas dinner, and she would never break that promise to her boy.

Della always kept her word to him, no matter what. As she stepped outside, a strange prickling sensation crawled up her spine.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, and Della instinctively scanned her surroundings. The road was quiet. Shadows stretched long in the fading light, but there was nothing out of place.

No figures lurking in the corners, no signs of movement from the copse of trees. Everything seemed perfectly normal.

Probably just my nerves, she thought, shaking it off as her mind playing tricks on her. The stress of the holidays, of everything going on, was starting to wear on her.

Della had learned to trust her instincts, and they were as sharp as ever. Something about the stillness didn't sit right. Just in case, she pulled out her phone and quickly typed out messages to Michael, Eileen, and Samantha.

She instructed them to lock all the doors and make sure the alarm systems were engaged, her fingers moving quickly over the keys. She hated to sound paranoid, but it never hurt to be cautious. Not with everything that had been happening lately.

The wind picked up, slicing through her winter coat like an icy knife. She pulled the

collar up around her neck, but the chill seemed to seep into her bones.

The thought of working in her silly costume at Santa's photo op crossed her mind. Would they even get many visitors tonight, with the cold biting so fiercely?

It was likely people would stay home to escape the chill. Still, she had to push those thoughts aside for now. There were bigger things to worry about—like her promise to Sean, and the conversation she needed to have with Kris.

But as she walked toward her car, the uneasy feeling lingered, like a shadow that wouldn't let go.

Della's instincts were driving her hard as she neared the farm. She didn't stop or talk to anyone. It was an hour till her shift started, but she'd scented him the second she exited her vehicle.

Following her nose to the second barn where the sleigh was kept, Della found Kris inside. He was looking down at something, Santa's bench, and she could tell he'd been working on repairing it after a mishap the night before.

Her breathing was labored, heart racing as she approached him. It was crazy, feeling this way about someone she barely knew.

We know him. Mate.

Della startled, her Crow rarely spoke so clearly to her, and she was stunned the animal was being so adamant about him. She should run right now.

Della should leave this place. She should pack up the house, take the kids, and go somewhere the Murder would never find her.

But Maccon City was her home now. It had taken time, but Della had come to realize that this place, with its asphalt streets and the familiar hum of life, was where she and her kids truly belonged.

The journey hadn't been easy—there had been a lot of uncertainty, a lot of challenges along the way—but she had settled in, carving out a space for herself amidst the chaos of her past.

It wasn't just about finding a roof over their heads anymore. She had started to build a life. Her kids were thriving here—Sean had friends, and Janie was growing by leaps and bounds.

This wasn't just a temporary place they were staying. Maccon City and the adjoining Pack lands, Macconwood, were one solid community.

It was a safe haven where she and the children were no longer just existing but living, growing, and becoming part of something bigger.

She'd made connections with neighbors, found local places where she could feel at home. There were people here who cared, people who offered a hand, expecting nothing in return.

People like Aunt Eileen and Maya. Like Sam and Michael. Cassie and David. Stephanie and her husband Nick. People she would miss. Like him. Like Kristoff.

This was more than just a place to live. And fuck Cade's horrible brother for trying to take it from her. She shouldn't let him get away with that. He had no right. No right at all to her babies.

Shifter law was so messed up, though. Her lawyer showed her where they favored mated pairs over single parents. But that was no reason for her to drag some guy

she'd only slept with into all her crazy mess.

Dammit. It sounded terrible when she said it like that. And it wasn't the truth. Her heart squeezed sadly inside her.

But he was more than just some guy she slept with. Kristoff made Della feel seen. Somehow, the big Wolf knew exactly what she needed. He'd silently acknowledged her efforts and her struggles. He didn't dismiss her and seemed to have a real sense of what she needed.

Lord, he was perfect. Handsome and strong, too.

Everything about him appealed to her. For the first time in a long while, Della didn't feel alone.

But she was so afraid to take a wrong step. Not because she thought he would hurt her physically. He wasn't the type of man to do that. She knew that down to her marrow.

Still, Kris could hurt her. This man had that power. All because she'd gone and fallen in love with him.

She stepped forward, bringing his startled sapphire gaze to hers. She could no more stop her progress than she could stop the moon coming out at night.

Need and desire vibrated throughout her entire body. It was like a magnetic pull, dragging her forward, and nothing could make her alter her course.

She wanted him. Plain and simple.

"Della," he seemed to breathe her name, and her whole body shivered. "I need to

apologize?—”

But she didn't let him finish. Need washed through her, overwhelming all sense of propriety, and Della just about jumped on the man. He was so big, and ready, he caught her easily.

The man growled hungrily when she plastered her mouth to his, licking into him and savoring all his rich forest flavors. Della thanked her lucky stars when he joined in just as enthusiastically.

“Fuck,” he cursed, his chest vibrating with the strength of his Wolf.

Last night he'd taken care of her, cherished her body, and made her feel desired, wanted. She needed that again. Needed to feel the connection only he could bring to her.

It was more than physical, but Della couldn't acknowledge that right now. She needed this, needed him to make her feel some more of that which only he could deliver.

She needed to feel alive.

“Need you,” she said.

He growled again, his eyes glittering dangerously with his Wolf. Big hands roamed her body, cupping her tits over her clothes as he kissed her deeply, hungrily, lighting fires inside of her.

“Need you, Kristoff,” she begged as he cupped her hot pussy beneath her skirt.

“I got you, Sweet Girl. I got what you need right here,” he grunted, backing her up

until she felt the barn door beneath her back.

“Turn around,” he commanded and shocked, Della listened.

His words were short and whispered low as he licked her neck and worked on her fastenings. It felt as though a weight was lifted off her shoulders, a chain unlocked around her heart the more he told her what to do.

“Hands in front of you. Arch your back, Baby. Now, can you be quiet for me?”

She nodded. Della loved the way it felt to simply let go and follow his instruction. Shivers raced through her as clothing got pushed aside. She felt him there, the thick, swollen head of his cock, pushing into her from behind.

“Fuck. So hot and wet for me. So fucking perfect,” he growled softly.

Then he started moving. And all coherent thought left Della’s brain. She couldn’t think. She could only feel.

Kris’ hands were everywhere, cupping, kneading, plucking at her overheated flesh. His cock felt so good, stretching her walls as he rocked into her, stroking her in all her secret, sacred places.

He was so deep. She reached behind her with one hand, clutching at his jean-clad thigh, anchoring him to her. She never wanted him to stop. She wanted to feel just like this. Full of him forever.

“I got you, Sweet Girl. Hold on,” he growled, moving faster and harder, just like she never knew she liked it.

Tension built inside her, rising to impossible levels until she thought she’d explode.

“Fuck,” Kris cursed, and she felt his hand sliding around to her aching clit.

“Come for me, Della. Now,” he grunted, squeezing the tiny nubbin.

Della exploded like a rocket beneath his touch. Stuck in the thrall of her own ecstasy, she felt heat pour into her from his body, felt him roll his hips, dragging out every inch of pleasure for the two of them until she had no strength left.

“I got you, baby,” he murmured, kissing her neck and head as he straightened and used a clean cloth to clean them both up.

She sighed and let him hold her as she tried to make sense of it all.

He said he had her, but he didn’t know. He couldn’t know the truth of that statement. Kristoff had her alright, he held her heart and her future in his hands.

Now she just had to decide if it was right for her to tell him.

Do I drag him into my mess? Or do I let him go?

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:31 am

The thing about the human brain was it could find a way to justify almost anything. Take sex, for instance.

Sex was a natural thing to do. Add in a couple of dual-natured creatures powered by magic and blessed by the Fates, and this sex against a barn door at your place of business was what happened.

Not that the farm was his forever job. Volunteering as Santa was a Pack thing, after all.

It brought him closer to his mate, and after what they just did together, Kristoff was certain she was almost ready to admit it. A wind howled through a crack in the barn door, and Kris hugged Della tightly, noting the shiver that raced through her sweet body.

“Cold?”

“A little.”

She nodded, still catching her breath, and a sense of purely masculine pride rolled through him.

A minute later, he heard someone coming. He tucked Della into his side and opened the door as Cassie came running in.

“Kris? Della?! Oh my God, I am so glad I found you. You must have left your phone in the car. Look your neighbor called?—”

“What is it, Cassie?”

“There’s an emergency. Y-your kids, someone took your kids,” the human woman cried.

“No!” Della screamed, clutching at me.

“Let’s go,” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her towards his truck.

He unlocked and tossed his phone onto her lap gently as he pulled onto the road. Kris was driving as fast as he could down the icy roads, they’d had some precipitation earlier and it had frozen over with the drop in temperatures.

Black ice was a killer in the Garden State.

“Call Samantha.”

“Sam, what happened?” Della said.

The knuckles of her left hand were white where it gripped his, and he squeezed back, letting her know he was there for her. His Wolf was scratching at his skin. The beast demanding to be let out.

Not yet.

First, he needed to get back to her place and pick up a scent, then he could track them. The second she ended the call with Sam, he asked what happened.

“What happened, Baby?”

“S-someone broke in through the upstairs window. Aunt Eileen had just put down

Janie, and Sean was on the bed reading a book when she went to get a glass of water for him. When she got back, they were gone,” she said, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Fuck. We’re gonna get them back. I swear it,” he said.

“I-it’s Cade’s brother and his mate. I-I had to see the lawyer today, and he told me they were trying to get custody of my babies,” she whimpered.

“Never gonna happen, Della. Hear me? I won’t ever let that happen. Now, I will apologize for this later, but let’s bring the kids home first, okay?”

He tapped the console, and a moment later, he had Dib Lowell on speaker.

“Kris? What’s going on?”

“You should have fucking told me someone was here for the kids,” Kris growled, ignoring Della’s shocked stare.

“How did you know he was my lawyer?” she asked, mouth gaping.

“Because I asked. Dib, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m fucking here. What’s going on? Oh, and sorry Della. It’s a Pack thing.”

“I asked a question, Dib. Now, what do you know about this Crow couple?”

“Blayne and Cynthia Connors, members in good standing of the Dawn Valley Murder. They are making an appeal to the Shifter Council for custody, stating they can provide a stable, secure two parent home. Now, I’ve been busy working to stop it. Why don’t you just claim the woman already, for fuck’s sake, Kris?”

“Fuck,” Kris growled, “You know where they were staying?”

“No, but ? —”

“Wait, what does he mean claim me already ?” Della asked.

“I’ll send out notices to the Pack Guard and the other Enforcers. Della, I am truly sorry about this. We will find them.”

Kris took a rough inhale and squeezed Della’s thigh. He was encouraged by the fact she hadn’t pushed him off yet. So he just kept right on holding her while he took a hard right turn, trying to find the right words to explain.

“Okay, this is not how I envisioned telling you this, but I’ve known it since the first time I laid eyes on you,” he said, turning to look at her as he pulled into her driveway.

“You’re my fated mate, Della. My Wolf knows it. I know it. And now you know it.”

“What? Are you joking?”

“It’s no joke. No lie. I am completely and totally yours, Sweet Girl. As for the kids, hell, I love them like my own already and my Wolf already claimed them as ours. I have every intention of giving you my bite, but only when you’re ready. And I don’t want you to feel pressured. I’m gonna get the kids back regardless of your answer, but Baby, you should know. I don’t give up easy.”

He cupped her neck, kissed her forehead, and got out of the truck. She hopped out after him, racing up the stairs to meet a frazzled Sam and a weeping Eileen.

“I’m so sorry!” the older woman cried.

“It’s all my fault.”

“No, this has Cade’s stink all over it,” Della said.

“What? He was banished,” Kris said, turning her to face him.

“You don’t understand,” she said, running to the room where the kids were last seen.

“Della, please explain.”

“Crows don’t follow Shifter law. They do what they want. I should have guessed earlier, but Blayne hates kids. He would only come here to pretend he was interested if Cade was already planning to come back. Goddamn him!” she raged at the last.

“Shit,” he growled. “It’s okay. Come on. Let’s try to catch his scent.”

“Crows have better eyesight than sense of smell,” she whispered, fat tears dragging down her cheeks.

“Then you can be my eyes, Della. Come on. There has to be a clue here somewhere,” he said and went to work sifting through the room.

“Here! He must have snagged it on that nail,” she said, holding up a piece of torn cloth.

“Perfect,” Kris said and kissed her head, racing downstairs to where Michael had just arrived and was holding his mate.

“Got a scent?” he asked.

“Yeah, looks like he climbed in the window. Fucker needed his arms to carry Janie,”

Kris growled.

“There were no other tire treads, I checked. And I called reinforcements. They’re on their way,” Michael said.

“Footprints!” Della hollered, pointing towards the edge of the yard. “His brother likely carried them to right there. Cade and the kids would be too heavy even for an adult Crow to lift while shifted into his animal form.”

“Smart to stick to the tree line,” Michael said, already kicking off his shoes.

“Not smart enough.”

Kris’s eyes glowed as he joined the other male, shucking clothing. Rage raced through his veins. But he wasn’t lost to it. He turned, shocked to see Della right there beside him, stripping off her clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to look for them, too. They’re my kids, Kris.” she said.

He inhaled and nodded. Of course, she was going to do that. She was an excellent mother and the bravest woman he’d ever met.

“Stay in the sky and call out when you see something. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you,” he said, cupping her cheek and kissing her before he let the Wolf take his skin.

The frosty air was nothing against his thick winter coat. Michael’s beast trotted ahead, sniffing for clues, but Kristoff’s Wolf stilled, mesmerized by the beautiful black Crow staring at him with velvet eyes before she took off straight into the sky

like an arrow.

God, she was beautiful with glossy feathers and a fan-shaped tail. Shifters were larger than their wild cousins, and that went for Crows as well. Della's Crow was enormous compared to them.

Her wingspan was easily six feet across, and her black beak looked powerful. She had a lithe and sleek body, aerodynamically designed for speed and flight, with fierce looking talons at the end of her sturdy legs.

She cawed, and he took off like a crimson bullet, cutting a path through the snowy forest floor and diving between trees. God, she was fast, too. Urgently she flew, and he loosed a short howl to tell Michael where he was headed.

Following her was instinctual. He trusted her to know what she was doing. If only he had bitten her. Then he might be able to hear her through a telepathic link some mated pairs shared.

He knew they had a matebond already. It was light and weak, but to form one without a bite was extremely rare. It spoke of how much he loved her already and how strong destiny was on their side.

The sound of a baby crying caught his ears, followed by Della's fierce caw. Kris pushed harder. He didn't want his mate entering danger alone. Michael was behind them, but he was too far, having veered off in the beginning to check out the footprints. Turned out those were a decoy.

Kris was close now, he could smell the soft baby smells of Janie and Sean, followed by the scents of their fear.

Both children were crying earnestly now, begging their father to stop. It was the

single worst sound he could remember hearing in his entire adult life.

Then he heard something just as frightening for the big Werewolf.

He heard his mate hitting the ground and swapping feathers for skin.

Fuck.

He had to hurry.

“Sean! Janie!” Della yelled.

“What have you done now, bitch? You brought wolves. Always knew you were nothing but a slut,” the male sneered.

“Let go of them, Cade,” Della said, and pride rang through Kris at how strong she sounded.

No fear. Just pure grit.

“I can hear them, man. Come on, Cade, just leave the brats and that bitch. Let’s just go before those monsters get to us,” another male said, sounding scared.

“Nah, I ain’t leaving. This is my family. I’ll end you, bitch. Should kill you right now in front of them,” the first male, Cade, sneered.

Kris caught sight of the pathetic male as he dropped both Sean and a sobbing Janie on the ground. Della moved to shield them, but the weak prick had a gun in his hand. He raised his arm, spittle flying from his lips as he made a sound not quite human.

But his weak ass war cry turned into a scream of sheer terror as Kris vaulted over

some thick, snow-covered brush.

His monster Wolf hit Cade with so much force, he didn't even have to bite the man to kill him. He just snapped his neck using his front paws and body weight.

The same couldn't be said for the other male. After Kris ensured Della had the children in hand and was checking them over while soothing them, he turned to face the sniveling male who'd come into his town, to his Pack, and tried to hurt his family, his mate.

"No, no, no, man! He made me! Please, I'm sorry!"

Kris didn't doubt it for a minute that the man was sorry. He might even forgive him someday, but definitely not before he finished tearing out his throat.

Kidnapping piece of shit.

"Oh shit. Man, did you do all this?"

Michael stood beside three enormous men, Wolves from the Pack. He had a blanket around his waist, at least, to cover his nudity.

Still, Kris snarled, jumping in front of Della and the kids. He trembled when her soft hand found his back, both kids held tight to her body.

"Here," one male said, averting his gaze and tossing her a couple of blankets.

She covered the children first then wrapped the other one around her like a cape. His Wolf felt better now that she was covered in front of males he didn't necessarily know.

“Change back. We need to talk,” Dib, the Wolf he knew, said.

Kris did and stood in front of his family, still feeling raw. He turned and gathered Della and the kids to him kissing downy heads and nuzzling cheeks.

Sean turned in his mother’s arms and raised them towards Kris. He looked at Della, who nodded, fat tears glistening in her eyes.

“Come here,” he murmured soothingly.

“My dad was a bad man. He hurt Mommy a lot, and he stoled me and Janie.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Buddy.”

Sean shrugged and sniffed, clutching him tight.

“Will you be my Dad now, Santa?” he whispered, and tilted his head back to look at Kris with big, trusting eyes.

Kris inhaled deeply, aware of the several ears listening to this very personal conversation. Della gasped, and he thought he saw hope flicker inside the depths of her warm, velvety eyes.

She nodded. And his heart soared.

“Yeah, Bud. I’m gonna be your Dad now,” he said, sniffing and kissing his little boy’s head, then pulling Della and Janie in for kisses of their own.

“I love you so much. All of you,” he told them.

“I love you too,” Della said, and dammit, he didn’t think his heart could feel any

fuller.

Which was, of course, when the other shoe dropped.

“Sorry guys, um, Kris is going to have to come with me,” Dib said when they arrived back at the house.

“What? Why?” Della asked, stepping in front of him.

Both children were in a bath with Aunt Eileen watching over them, and Kris had shrugged back on his jeans, so he didn’t have to stand there like a princess in a blanket skirt. Dib eyed him and he sighed, knowing damn well why he had to go.

He took her hand and pulled her into the hallway with him. Her house was truly beautiful and old enough to have been built with integrity. It needed some repairs, and he could do that.

Hell. There was so much he wanted to do to it, for her, but first he had to pay the piper for his deed.

“Della, I know I said I would never leave you, but we have laws. I’m a former cop, believe me I know all about them.”

“You were a cop? I thought you made furniture?”

“Yeah. I do that, too,” he said.

“You ready?” Dib asked, knocking before stepping into the small hallway.

“One second, man. I am trying to explain.”

“Della, Kris acted in your defense with Cade, and because the threat to you was imminent, he was justified. I am certain I can get that charge wiped. But the Council is investigating this because of how Blayne went out. The way Kris killed him, well, the threat was not imminent.”

“But stuff like that happens all the time in the Shifter world!” she snapped.

“Yes, but usually that kind of threat is to a mate, and therefore justified. That kind of rage is acceptable when one of a claimed pair is put at risk.”

“But I am his mate! You said so!”

“I know, but neither of you has claimed the other, and the law is clear?—”

“I’m so sorry, Della. I know this makes me a liar, but I swear I will make it back to you,” Kris said, shaking with emotion.

“No, wait, stop!” Della shouted, following after the two men. “I claimed him!”

“What?” Dib asked.

“What? When did you bite me?” Kris echoed.

“I’m a Crow, not a Wolf,” she said, mischief sparkling in her brown eyes. “We don’t claim with bites. We scratch. And if you turn around, mate dear, you can show Mr. Lowell the scars I left on you the first night we were together,” she whispered, her cheeks heating prettily.

Kristoff turned around, trying to see them for himself. He couldn’t of course. Not without a mirror. But that didn’t stop him from trying.

“Stop, for fuck’s sake, you look like a dog chasing his tail. Okay, yep. You have been claimed, Kris. Congrats. Now, I’m going to spend Christmas with my family. I suggest you do the same!”

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:31 am

Blood surged through Della's veins and her heart was beating out of control as the other Wolves all filed out. She'd finally admitted the thing she'd been too scared to face for the past couple of days.

Della had, in fact, claimed Kristoff their first night together. Her Crow cooed inside her, the big Bird desperate for his mark. She shivered as he approached, not with fear, but with pure desire, recognizing the gleam in his verdant gaze.

Kris faced Della, his heart dancing in his eyes. He licked his lips and stroked his beard once, stalking her until her butt rested against the wall.

"You claimed me?" he asked, canting his head to the side.

"Is that okay?" she asked, tilting her head to match his.

"Yeah, that's okay, Mama. I just have one question."

"What's that?" she asked, her breath hitching in her throat.

"When do I get to claim you back?"

His voice was deep and growly, and her insides were aching for him. Just as he closed the distance, his lips a hair's breadth away from hers, the sound of little feet running towards them caught their attention.

Kris just smiled and kissed her lips quick, then he spun around and caught Sean just as the little boy hurled himself at him.

“Come on! Come on! I want you to tuck me in!”

“Okay, Champ. Let’s go,” Kris opened his hand to the side, like he was waiting for her to join them. And she did, feeling lighter than air as she followed Kris up the stairs to the children’s room.

“I’ll be going now. Oh, I left some sandwiches for you in the fridge,” Aunt Eileen said, waving goodbye.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, dear. You be happy now,” Aunt Eileen said.

“Story, please,” Sean asked as Kris settled him on his bed.

His green gaze met hers, and she nodded, changing Janie’s diaper. Della sat in the rocking chair by the bed and listened to Kristoff’s deep, soothing voice as he read from one of the many Christmas books Sean enjoyed.

Della stood when Janie was fast asleep, tucking the baby into her crib. She heard Kris’ whispered goodnight as he did the same for Sean. And she joined him, kissing her baby boy’s sweet smelling skin.

For one brief moment, she dropped her head and let all the fear and exhaustion from the day just roll off her like water from a duck’s back. She shivered and took a fortifying breath, thanking God for her babies’ safe return, but what helped even more was having Kris there right beside her.

He placed a large hand on her shoulder, the other on her back, allowing her to have the moment she needed. But also letting her know he was there for her to.

How did she get so lucky to have a man like this in her life?

It was a question she'd ask herself often in the future, she was sure of it.

She took his hand and quietly led him across the hall to the bedroom she hoped he would share with her. Della had no idea if everything would always be sunshine and rainbows, but she knew her life was better with Kristoff in it. And she wanted to start their life together as soon as possible.

Now , her Crow said. Right now.

He turned her towards him, taking her face in his hands and bending to kiss her sweetly. She moaned, letting her body's natural reaction to his touch take over.

There was no point in hiding now. She'd already said she loved him. Plus, she admitted to claiming him without his knowledge or consent.

Kris growled, eyes glowing as he nipped her lip and smoothed away their clothes. He nudged her onto the bed, and she obliged, scooting backwards until she was right in the middle.

"Always so damn pretty," he said, and she felt the compliment all the way to her toes.

Della's body heated beneath his gaze, and arousal pulsed between her legs until it dripped down her thighs.

"Want you, mate," she murmured, flexing her hips and sucking in a breath that made her breasts bounce.

"I am a very lucky, Wolf," Kris said and grinned, crawling over her and sliding his tongue into her mouth.

He kissed her thoroughly, slowly, licking into her like she was delicious.

“You taste so good, Sweet Girl. My very own Georgia peach,” he whispered and kissed his way down her body, paying attention to her swollen breasts and hard nipples.

“Where are you going?” she whined at the loss of his body atop hers.

Her whine stalled, turning into a gasp as he settled between her thighs, holding them wide open.

“Gonna have some of my cream, Baby. Now open up and give it to me,” he growled, then dove right in headfirst.

He ate her ferociously, just like the big bad wolf he was. And Della couldn’t get enough. She clutched at his shoulders and pulled him closer to her, chasing that slice of heaven only he could bring.

Her orgasm hit hard, and he raised his head. But she should have known Kris wasn’t going to cheat her out of anything. Oh no, he slid up her body, pushing his thick dick inside her with zero resistance at all.

Della’s eyes were wide open, and she watched their bodies become one. Kris’ eyes rolled back, a look of pure, perfect ecstasy— so fierce it was closer to anguish— crossed his handsome face as he slid deeper and deeper still.

“Fuck. S’good.”

He started to move, swirling, rolling his hips, keeping his thrusts shallow, so he put the perfect amount of pressure on her still throbbing clit. Oh, he milked her pleasure good. Kept it going until she was moaning and gasping, scratching at him like a wild

thing.

Her back arched and a keening moan left her lips, and that was when he moved again. On his knees, Kris positioned her, taking one leg and draping it over his shoulder. He held her hips and drove into her, pounding away as he fucked her right into a third orgasm.

“Good girl. Your pussy loves my dick, doesn’t it? Gonna let me have it, aren’t you, Baby? Gonna let me fuck your tight little hole whenever I want,” he growled, flipping her onto her belly.

He climbed on top of her legs, keeping them between his. She gasped as she felt his hands pull her cheeks apart and moaned when he licked her there. Then she felt him place his cock at her entrance, still holding her legs close together as he pushed inside her pussy.

“You’re so fucking good, Della. So mine,” he growled, his finger teasing her ass while he pumped into her already contracting sheath.

“Kris! Oh God! So full,” she moaned, biting the pillow to stifle her grunts as he fucked her even harder in that position.

Her body shattered, exploding into a million pieces. Della reached behind her, claws scratching at his hips as she claimed him again, needing that connection.

She felt him opening her legs and sliding between them, covering her whole body with his as he filled her with come, then he sank his teeth into her shoulder, claiming her as his own, and driving her pleasure higher than ever before.

His roar echoed in her ears, and she couldn’t tell how much time had passed before he collapsed on top of her, his breathing just as rough as hers. She couldn’t move.

Couldn't think. Or even speak.

Della could hardly breathe for the tightness in her chest. It went white hot, burning for just a moment. She gasped, eyes wide as ethereal green and white lights circled the two of them.

Kristoff lifted his head, meeting her gaze. Surprise, adoration, and something else swam in his eyes as he lowered his head and kissed her softly. That was how she knew he'd felt it, too.

"I love you, mate."

"I love you so fucking much, Della. And I vow to never ever give you a reason to doubt me, not for a single minute for the rest of our days. To love, protect, cherish, and honor you and our children always."

"Mmm. And I vow to hold you to that, mate."

Della smiled as he rolled to the side and brought her into the cradle of his embrace.

Mine.

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Christmas Eve was a whirlwind of activity. Snow was expected to start at nightfall, and dinner was a big mishmash of southern and northern dishes, which required two emergency trips to the market.

But if asked, Kristoff would have told anyone and everyone that he enjoyed every single minute of it.

Since Della and the kids kind of missed their decorating of the tree party, they'd decided to hold it today and spent all morning baking edible ornaments. Most of which he and Sean ate.

She was forgiving though, his mate. She even let him lick the bowl after she put another batch of cookies in the oven.

Michael, Samantha, Maya, and Aunt Eileen invited them over, and they'd just finished eating when the kids all raced to the living room to watch some famous somebody read aloud from 'Twas the Night Before Christmas .

"Whiskey? I have a bottle of Bite somewhere around here," Michael asked, and Kris nodded.

"Sure. Thanks."

"Ooh, and how about music?" Samantha said, she winked at Della then used her cell phone to connect to one of the several wireless speakers in the room.

"Uh, what the heck is this?" Kris murmured as the sounds of opera came streaming

through.

“It’s Puccini! The music of love,” Samantha said, mouth open and grin on her face.

“Well, for some, it might be. But here, let me see that,” Kris said, and took her offered phone.

Smiling as he perused the selection, he hit play and turned to Della as a familiar tune began. She gasped, her cheeks turned pink as her gaze raced to all the adults in the room.

“You told him!” Della accused Samantha, who was shaking her head and giggling so hard she actually snorted.

“Told who what?” Michael asked, returning to the room with a bottle of Holiday Bite , the red label, and four squat glasses. “Oh my fuck, is this Rick Astley? I love this song!”

Della and Samantha both stopped their play fighting and stood stunned as Kris and Michael started belting out Together Forever at the top of their lungs.

“Someone make it stop!” Maya shouted, grinning from her position in the doorway.

Della noticed the teenager was recording both idiot males on her smartphone. Would serve them right if she used it later on as blackmail.

“That’s not Christmas music, Dad! This is,” Sean said.

Her sweet little boy smirked mischievously as he took Samantha’s phone and played his favorite carol, I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.

Later that night, as they tucked the kids in bed, Kris stopped by Sean's bed last. But the little boy wasn't sleeping yet.

"Dad?" he asked, and Kris' heart squeezed like it did every time he called him that. "What's up, Buddy?"

"I'm worried about Janie."

"What are you worried about?" he asked, aware of his mate standing behind him.

"I used both our letters to Santa to ask for a dad for Christmas. Now I think she'll be sad if there are no gifts under the tree," he whispered and clutched his hands together.

"Hey, don't you worry about that. I'm one of Santa's helpers, remember? And I promised you a good Christmas."

"Okay! Goodnight, Mommy and Daddy!"

Kris guided a worried-looking Della out of the room, and she shook her head.

"Kris, you shouldn't have said that to him. I was only able to get them a few things this year with the move and all," she said frantically now as she thought about how disappointed Sean was going to be in the morning.

"Do you trust me, mate?" Kris asked, pulling her down the hall.

"Yeah, but— oh my God! I didn't even notice when we walked in. But when, how did you do this?" she asked, covering her gasp as he pulled on a dark blanket that had been hiding a pile of presents beneath their cookie decorated tree.

"When you sent me out to the store twice. Oh, and there's something there for you

too, Mama,” he said, biting his lip and pointing to the tiny box on top.

“Kristoff,” she whispered, sounding breathless and sexy as hell.

“You claimed my heart the second I saw you. It took a while, but I’ve given you my bite. Now, I want to give you my name,” he said, dropping to his knees and opening the box.

“Oh, Kris.”

“Is it a yes, Sweet Girl? Will you marry me?”

Tears dripped down Della’s beloved face, but she nodded, dropping to her knees and launching herself at him.

Good thing for Wolf reflexes.

He caught her easily, crushing her against him as he found her lips with his.

If there was a reason he was born, it was to do just that. To love this woman. To be there for her. To be a father to their children. To lift her up and watch her rise like the queen she was.

“You make me the happiest man alive,” he said, burying his nose against her throat.

“Good. Now lay down and let me show you how much I love you.”

“I can do that, Sweet Girl,” he said eyebrows raised as he did as he was told.

Watching his sweet mate strip slowly and helping her take off his clothes between kisses, nibbles, touches, and caresses was one of the sexiest damn things he’d ever

experienced.

God, he loved her like this. Confident and beautiful, embracing her sexuality and trusting him to have her.

Della slid her wet slit over his cock, lifting as she took him in hand and placed him at her entrance. She sat down, taking him deep, and he growled, squeezing her plump cheeks and holding her just right.

“You’re so beautiful, mate.”

“You feel incredible,” she told him, tilting her head as he licked a trail from her earlobe to her fantastic tits.

Della was a goddess like this, working him over, rocking her hips, and stroking him just right. He gloried in her beauty, dazzled by the miracle that was his mate.

“Look at you, Baby. Fuck me, you’re so perfect.”

“Wanna come with you, Kris? Please,” she moaned.

Kristoff nodded, taking some control back, guiding her hips and thrusting up to meet her rolling sex.

Fire built inside him. An inferno of pleasure about to burst. Their eyes locked, sweat coated their skin and Kris nodded, kissing her hard and they pushed each other into beautiful oblivion.

After that there were slow, deep kisses, and feelings of their incredible matebond, that impossible connection pulsating through their veins.

Kris helped her tidy up, finding their clothes and tossing them in a hamper. He picked her up, princess style, and had the blanket he'd used to cover the gifts wrapped around both of them when he stopped suddenly on the stairs.

“What are you doing?” she whispered as he bent his head.

“Mistletoe,” he replied mischievously.

This kiss was different. It was slow and sexy and full of affection and adoration, and Della simply melted against him.

“Mommy? Are you kissing Santa Claus,” a tired sounding Sean asked from the top of the stairs.

Both adults laughed as they went to bring their boy back to bed. She smiled as she left him snoring softly and happily tucked in.

Kris was waiting in the hallway for her. His life had taken one helluva left turn, but he was glad for it, and so damn thankful. He watched her closely as she stepped into him.

“What is it, Sweet Girl?”

“I was just thinking, it took a long time to get here to this moment, and it wasn't easy. But Kris?”

“Yeah?” he asked, concerned.

“It was worth it. All of it was worth it so I could be here with them,” she said nodding towards the kids' room, “and with you, my mate, my love , right now.”

“Woman, you know you own me, right? You gave me everything. Made me a father. Accepted my claim. I love you so fucking much,” he growled.

She made him so grateful. Made him feel so much.

“I love you too,” she said, tears of joy streaming down her face, “and well, I just wanted to say Merry Christmas before anyone else could.”

“Merry Christmas, mate. Come here.”

Kristoff pulled her close and kissed her just as a shadow fell across the moon outside the window where they stood. A distinct laugh could be heard, and the jingling of sleigh bells sounded off somewhere in the distance, getting further away by the second.

“Was that?” Della asked, lifting her head, and staring at him with those velvet eyes he adored.

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly, completely smitten with this woman and happy to bask in the magic of the season with her.

The two of them stood there together, looking at snow falling from the night sky. Hope filled them both as promises for a brighter future were already being kept.

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After the dozens of presents Kris had somehow managed to buy and wrap the night before were opened and Christmas breakfast eaten and served, the new family camped out in the living room, putting toys together and laughing out loud at the silly antics of Sean and Janie.

Della smiled content for the first time in ages when her cell phone buzzed. She frowned, seeing it was from her lawyer.

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Dib Lowell. Is your mate there?”

“Yes, let me get him,” Della said, but Kris was already there beside her.

“Go head, Dib. I can hear you fine,” Kris said.

“Good. I just thought you should both know, the Murder has dropped all claims to your children. After Cade and Blayne’s demise, the latter’s wife, Cynthia, decided she wanted nothing to do with children. The Crow King immediately withdrew all complaints.”

“That’s great!” Della cheered.

“That it is. Oh, and Rafe said come by next week to sign documents welcoming you and your children as official Pack. Merry Christmas!”

“Are you okay with all of this? Me being part of the family so quickly? Sean calling

me Dad?" Kris asked, after she clicked end.

"Of course, why are you even asking me that?"

"Because I want you to be happy, Della. I want you to have everything you have ever wanted," Kris said.

Sincerity filled his voice, and she hummed, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Looks like you have everything you wanted then," she replied and smiled.

"Damn right I do. Come here, mate," he growled low, and claimed her lips just as quickly as he'd claimed her heart.

Della sighed, feeling their matebond pulse around them. Life was so much better now. In fact, it was as close to perfect as it could come.

Oh, she knew there would be skirmishes and silliness that would happen from time to time over stuff like what to make for dinner and what color curtains to buy. Dirty laundry and messy garages to fuss over.

But that was nothing to worry about. Heck. That was the good stuff. That was the stuff that made life interesting and worthwhile. Della knew as long as she lived her heart would belong to Kristoff. No one had ever made her feel quite so loved or special.

Oh, he was a keeper alright. Her very own Christmas miracle. He settled his arms around her, just holding her and letting her bask in the sunshine of their love. The kids chuckled in the background and the sounds of their new toys beeping and making noises played in the background of their home.

Wrapping paper and empty plates were everywhere. The living room was cluttered

and loud.

It was perfect.

And very, very cherished.

“Love you.”

“Me too,” she said and believed him with all her soul.

Just like she believed the next line with every inch of her being:

As long as they had each other, they had everything.

The end.