

The Christmas Wolf  
A Pack of Dawn and Destiny Christmas Story  
By K. M. Shea

“Pip?”

I fought back a sneeze as a branch of fake pine scratched my nose. “Hey, Scarlett.”

I stepped back from the artificial Christmas tree I was wrestling into place—Shania was fetching two trees at a time with her werewolf strength from our storage area. Since I’d been waiting for the hunter siblings to arrive and had to pause my previous task, I’d offered to fluff the trees and scoot them into the right spot.

The Pack used real trees to decorate their homes and the lodge, but inside businesses we needed to put the trees up weeks earlier, so artificial it was.

I brushed my hands off on my pants as I turned to face my new recruits—and unknowing victims.

Scarlett Ward and Radcliff Sabre were giving me the smile of blessed ignorance that all the uninitiated did around this time of year. They had just gotten off a shift at Howl-In Café, so they were wearing their hunter uniforms and smelled like coffee.

“You wanted to talk with us?” Radcliff asked as Scarlett eyed the bare Christmas tree.

“Yes.” I adjusted a branch, tweaking it into place as I considered the best plan of attack. “Since this will be your first official Christmas in Timber Ridge, I figured I should give you a debriefing on the holiday, and tell you all the necessary warnings.”

Scarlett frowned. “But we were here for Christmas last year.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “But that was a weird year since we had all those visiting Alphas so we weren’t comfortable hosting our usual activities with strange wolves around. And even before that the Pack had already been planning to decrease activities because of everything that happened with Aspen. We ended up holding a fraction of the usual events and holiday fun. Since the Pack is now safe—”

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t worry for the Pack, but worry for *you* that had Greyson keeping things low profile,” Radcliff said.

I chose to ignore the annoyingly correct observation. “*Since the Pack is safe*, we’re returning to our usual offerings. We’re actually expanding since our fae tourist industry has grown and we’re hoping they’ll be an untapped holiday market.”

“Huh,” Radcliff said. “I thought last year was busy, but okay. I’m sure we can handle it.”

Scarlett tilted her head. “If you’re worried about rude customers, I promise we can deal with angry customers without resorting to using our hunter weapons.”

“Customers can get impatient,” I said. “But most of them know better—Northern Lakes werewolves don’t take kindly to anyone upsetting our employees.” I casually scratched my jaw. “It’s really just overwhelmingly, mind-bogglingly busy.”

“We had crazy shifts in December last year,” Radcliff said. “I thought there was going to be a stampede downtown the day we started serving homemade apple cider and eggnog at the café.”

I made a noise in the back of my throat that Greyson would have told me was close to being a proper werewolf whine, but was really me trying to figure out how to explain what was going to happen without flattening their spirits.

“The holiday flavors are popular,” I said. “The Sweets Shoppe limited time flavors are always a draw. The gingerbread truffles and candy cane fudge are my favorite, but if you want to

try the Christmas cookie ice cream you better get over to the shop first thing in the morning as they sell out frequently. Some of the human owned local businesses really get into the spirit, too. There's a restaurant that has Christmas waffles that you have *got* to try—they sprinkle chunks of freshly made cake donuts and chocolate frosting on top with red and green sprinkles for color," I said. "We also get a lot of new merchandise here at the Welcome Center. We just got a couple shipments today. Come on, I'll show you."

I beckoned for the pair to follow me before I ducked around another artificial Christmas tree, stepping into the souvenir shop.

Radcliff dubiously followed behind me. "Isn't it a little early to be discussing Christmas? It's barely November."

"All our public events begin the day after Thanksgiving," I said. "But we have *by-invitation-only* events for our most loyal customers in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving."

"What events could you possibly be holding before Thanksgiving that people want to see?" Radcliff asked.

"It's almost exclusively our specialty photos," I said.

"Photos?" Scarlett asked.

"Here we go." I stepped around the four racks of magnets and keychains we'd arranged to create a wall in the souvenir shop, dividing off the Christmas section from the rest of the store.

This corner of the store was covered in original paintings—some of snowy landscapes, a few of snow dusted wolves, and multiple holiday-themed works—carvings of animals, manger scenes, and some pretty fierce looking Santas—beautiful stockings—hand sewn and embroidered with everything from wolves to birds—pottery, and racks and racks of ornaments made of everything from wood to plastic to a few soft types that were made of felted wolf fur.

"Woah," Radcliff said. "Okay, you're right, this is way more than last year."

"It's beautiful." Scarlett turned in a circle, a smile settling on her lips.

"Just wait until you see what happens to the city on the weekends," I said.

Scarlett's eyes were practically sparkling. "There's more?"

"Yeah. We practically have mini-Christmas markets every weekend. The Pack sells Christmas trees, wreaths, and hot mulled wine. Greyson had to fight tooth and claw to get a liquor license to sell that stuff two years ago."

"That sounds wonderful," Scarlett gushed.

Radcliff wandered closer to the shelves of goods. "Is this all handmade?"

"We get some of it manufactured," I said. "But the wood carvings, pottery, some of the more elaborate stockings, and all the paintings are made by werewolves. Most of them come from the fringe members of the Northern Lakes Pack—the ones that belong to the Pack but don't want to do as much with humans as the members who live here in Timber Ridge," I said.

Radcliff squinted as he studied our offerings. "What is this?" He pointed to a gorgeous watercolor of a Saint-Nick styled Santa, standing with a team of enormous reindeer.

"That's Santa and his reindeer," I said.

"No, *this*." Radcliff stabbed his finger at the furry form of a wolf sitting in Santa's gleaming red sleigh.

"A wolf," I said as I privately wondered if I needed to make sure Pack was subsidizing the pair's insurance like they were supposed to. Radcliff, apparently, needed to get his eyes checked.

"I know it's a wolf, but that's not what I was asking. *Why* is there a wolf hanging out with Santa? Wait—is that a wolf, too?"

He stalked up to a display that showcased a hand carved manger scene and its expertly crafted figurines. He pointed to a wooden wolf, positioned between the wooden donkey and camel that were arranged behind the Mary and Joseph.

“Yes,” I said.

“And this is a wolf!” Radcliff descended on a quilted tree skirt that depicted bright red poinsettias, green Christmas trees, and gray wolves.

“Yes,” I repeated.

Radcliff finally settled into one place. “This is Christmas stuff. Why are there wolves everywhere?”

“For branding purposes, obviously,” I said. “There are cities all over Wisconsin that have Christmas markets, but Timber Ridge is the only werewolf run town. People come here because of the werewolves, so we’re going to make sure they remember what they bought from us and what makes us special.”

“That’s good marketing,” Scarlett said.

“Yep,” I agreed. “It also pushes everyone back to the Christmas Wolf.”

Radcliff stared blankly at me. “The what?”

“The Christmas Wolf,” I said. “When the Pack first started to focus on Christmas, we developed the idea of the Christmas Wolf. We say it’s a legend, but there’s a print up we give away at all our stores that has the basic story.”

“I get the merchandising, but why the story?” Scarlett asked.

“To sell more photos.” I beckoned for them to follow me back into the welcome center, leading them over to the photo stand. “We have special edition backgrounds, and more timeslots for werewolf photos in December, though it will begin today—this weekend—for our most loyal customers.”

“This is the *invitation-only* event you were referring to?” Scarlett guessed.

“Yep,” I said. “We had to start early because lots of people use these photos for their Christmas cards.”

I tugged on one of the backdrops we used for the photos, unrolling it so it covered the wall with a depiction of a snowy forest. I gestured to it, then pulled a new backdrop down—this one an illustration of a candy cottage. There was also a fireplace backdrop, a rustic barn door and old truck backdrop, and a white shiplap backdrop.

“We have a couple more, but these are traditionally the most popular.” I folded my arms across my chest as I took a step back to admire the set up. “We also have a few extra props that we allow—pine branches, wrapped packages, that kind of thing.”

“So you and Shania run this?” Radcliff asked.

“Nope. On the weekends the photo packages are so popular, that I work on them full time. Shania and Moira run the souvenir shop—you need two working because it gets crazy in there. Original Jack and some of the other humans from the Pack take shifts running the welcome center desk.”

Scarlett rubbed her wrists. “I’m starting to realize why you thought warning us was necessary.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said. “Like I mentioned, we don’t really get angry customers. Anyone who tries to be pushy gets to find out what a werewolf growl sounds like, which takes the fire out of the orneriest humans. It’s just crazy.”

“Okay, then,” Radcliff said. “In that case can we get a summary of the Christmas Wolf story?”

“Sure. I’ll get you the printout so you can read up on it, but I can give you the highlights.” Feeling a tug in my heart, I turned expectantly to the backdoor.

Greyson, in his wolf form, nudged the door open and padded into the center.

His fur was blindingly white and looked wondrously soft. He was carrying a red slicker brush—biting the handle—and his golden eyes seemed to glow in the low light of the Welcome Center.

Scarlett and Radcliff immediately stood taller, their shoulders squared. “Alpha Greyson,” they chorused together.

Greyson nodded to them as he picked his way across the wooden floor, which was cluttered with cardboard boxes and plastic tubs of the store’s Christmas decorations.

When he reached me he spat the brush out on my feet, then looked straight up at me and planted his head on my stomach. He waited until the warmth from our mate bond started flowing before he made a low huffing noise.

“Didn’t I brush you enough already?” I asked.

Greyson narrowed his eyes at me.

“Fine.” I sighed as I picked up the slicker brush. “I need to finish changing, and I still haven’t placed the last artificial tree, but heaven forbid you don’t feel adequately *fluffed* for your photoshoot.

“Wait, photoshoot?” Scarlett’s eyes grew wider. “Alpha *Greyson* is taking photos?”

“Yeah. Greyson is the preferred Christmas Wolf—it’s his white fur—so he does all our pre-season photos and the first weekend we’re open.” I crouched down next to Greyson and began brushing his coat—which really was as soft as it looked.

Greyson crowded me, resting his chin on my shoulder as he relaxed under the attention.

“So, are you one of Santa’s elves when you run the photobooth?” Radcliff asked.

“No,” I scoffed. “I’m the Christmas Hunter.”

“The what now?” Scarlett asked.

“I’m the Christmas Hunter,” I repeated. “When we first started this, we said I spied on children for Santa to verify who was good and who was bad, but that freaked out the kids we told the story to, so we adapted it to I spied on werewolves for Santa, but that didn’t test well with older generations, so now I just travel with Santa and the Christmas Wolf to give gifts to good little werewolves. Greyson, pick your head up. I need to get your chest.”

Scarlett and Radcliff exchanged looks but were too well mannered to criticize the admittedly hokey tale.

I tried to hide a smile as I fixed Greyson’s fur. *They still haven’t seen the real danger in all of this...*

Greyson obligingly backed up, lifting his head off my shoulder so I could brush his chest. I gave it a few brush strokes, then tossed the brush aside and picked up a massive red bow.

“Wait—you’re not going to...” Radcliff trailed off in horror as he stared at the bow.

“Oh yes.” I cheerfully said before I tied the bow around Greyson’s neck, fluffing his fur over it so it was more comfortable.

“Is this really okay?” Scarlett asked. “Won’t other werewolf Packs think this is undignified?”

“They do,” I assured the pair as Greyson curled up on the mound of snowy white pillows I’d prepared for him. “But it makes *so much money*, the Northern Lakes Pack doesn’t care.”

“But the other Packs...”

“Are broke.” I ducked behind my hexagonal desk to grab the last of my Christmas Hunter gear. “Dead broke. And the Northern Lakes wolves have stated they’d rather be rich Christmas Wolves than care what other broke wolves think.” I strapped my twin daggers into place, then grabbed a rifle that had a massive green bow around its barrel and was painted like a candy cane. “And before you fret about gun safety, don’t worry, this is a model one of our packmates made me. It’s actually wood!”

Scarlett admired the gun while Radcliff’s expression turned suspiciously blank. “Are you telling us all of this because you’re hoping *we* can pose as Christmas hunters?” he asked.

I laughed.

“That’s not a good sign,” Radcliff whispered.

I tapped my thigh with my toy rifle as I grinned. “Well, all the shifts do get tiring...”

“Does Wyatt ever pose as the Christmas Wolf?” Scarlett asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Shania won’t because we need her in the store, same with Moira, but even Hector and Ember take turns.”

Radcliff rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m guessing things will be better for me if I just willingly surrender to this?”

“Look at it this way,” I coached. “We’re asking you for help because you’re not just part of my hunter family, but our Pack as well.”

Scarlett and Radcliff both swiveled to peer down at Greyson, lounging on his pillows.

Greyson gave them a kingly nod, that had the siblings looking at each other with beaming smiles so they entirely missed the very slight wag of his tail that gave away his utter glee.

I didn’t mind the craziness of our Christmas season or working the photobooth. It was tons of fun, particularly since I got to be the mouthpiece of whatever wolf was on duty—a fun opportunity whenever I was working with Rio, Wyatt, or Aeric.

It was *Greyson*, actually, who’d decided I needed help when he realized between our hectic schedules we’d only see each other late at night before collapsing into sleep.

Greyson’s smug delight rolled through our bond that his idea had worked.

“Can Teresa join us?” Scarlett asked. “She’s really coming along with her hunter training.”

“Legally she can’t work the booth alone, and she can’t close—there are labor laws to think of given her age. But she could absolutely help out with the afternoon shift,” I said.

There was a knock on the door.

Radcliff peered at the door with a frown. “Are you expecting a delivery? I thought the welcome center is closed for the day?”

“It is,” I confirmed. “But today we start our invitation only photo sessions. Would one of you get the door?”

Radcliff trotted over to the front door. He started to open it, then was almost squashed when a black umbrella was applied to the door, slamming it open.

Mayor Pearl, carrying her black umbrella in one hand and her trembling, seven-pound Chihuahua in the other, stepped into the welcome center.

She was wearing a black pantsuit with the waist of her pants hiked halfway up her chest, but she’d adorned the black jacket with a green Christmas tree pin and had a red fashion scarf draped around her neck.

Her husband, the Timber Ridge Police Chief, shuffled in behind her, his moth-like eyebrows flapping up and down. He was dressed in a striped red sweater that had clumps of evergreen trees on it. “Hello, Pip, oh, and Scarlett, too!”

“Hello, sir,” Scarlett respectfully said.

“You two are our first customers of the year!” I brandished my rifle with a flourish.

“Naturally,” Mayor Pearl sniffed. “It takes you long enough to email us the photos, we need to get them taken now in order to print them out in time for our Christmas card. Henry, take Coco.” Mayor Pearl passed the trembling Chihuahua off to Police Chief Henry.

“Yes, dear.” He took the pint-sized pup and straightened the green sweater the short haired dog was wearing for the occasion.

Greyson stood up and stretched, making room for the mayor as she barreled over.

“Did you get any new backgrounds this year?” Mayor Pearl demanded.

“Nope,” I said.

Mayor Pearl made a tisking noise. “Then we will use the forest background. Although I’d like Coco’s annual photo with Alpha Greyson to use the candy cottage background. And you, Alpha Greyson, will be sitting over here.” She gestured with her umbrella, herding the bemused Alpha into the spot she wanted.

Coco—the Chihuahua—caught sight and started whining, making Police Chief Henry fuss over her. “Oh, my sweet little baby. It’s fine! You remember Greyson—you see him every year.”

Radcliff had recovered enough to nudge the door shut, but he stared at the chaos in disbelief.

I laughed as I started to put my rifle down. “Let me fetch the camera, unless you’d like me to take a photo with your phone, first?”

“Get the camera, but don’t lose track of your rifle.” Mayor Pearl demanded. “You’re going to be in our picture this year, too.”

I’d been in the process of retrieving the expensive DSLR camera from the desk, and I almost dropped it at Mayor Pearl’s words. “You what?”

“You’re mates.” Mayor Pearl gestured from me to Greyson. “It’s only right.”

“Um...”

“I’ll take the picture!” Scarlett volunteered.

“Good,” Mayor Pearl said. “It’s about time you get some help around here. You stand right here.”

I reluctantly passed the camera off to Scarlett before I picked up my rifle and meekly stood where Mayor Pearl directed.

I must have been good enough, because the fierce mayor had moved on to other targets. “Alpha Greyson, stop looking at Coco, or those bat ears of hers are never going to peel off her skull. Stand up straight, Henry.”

Scarlett made a few changes to the camera tripod before turning the camera on. “We should take a test shot. Everyone say *Christmas Wolf!*”

“How did this happen?” I asked.

Greyson raised his nose up and howled for the pose.

“Christmas Wolf!” Mayor Pearl and Police Chief Henry said.

The End