

The Polar Bear's Christmas Bounty

Thor snorted as he watched his quarry dart into a homeless shelter. Hey, if ducking into the ladies' bathroom hadn't kept Thor out, then ducking in there wouldn't either. Did the guy think that Thor had the decency to stay out of a charity-run shelter? Then, he definitely did not know the polar bear shifter at all. Well, given that they had met less than two hours ago when Thor was trying to slap a pair of handcuffs on him for missing his court appointment, then yeah, it was probably a given.

His inner bear rumbled excitedly as he leaped up the steps to the shelter and threw back the door. Most bounty hunters tended to prefer blending in. Thor liked it when his quarry saw him coming. Hey, he was part blood-thirsty predator – why wouldn't he enjoy moving in for the kill? Polar bears were the largest predators in the world. At least on land, but who cared what happened in the ocean. They were top of the food chain, and everyone else bowed to them.

He roared out loud as he spotted his guy. He was trying to blend in. He was cowering under a blanket and trying to use a bunch of homeless people as a shield. Grrr, snarled his inner bear – even Thor wouldn't sink so low.

The people around him started and let out sounds of terror. Thor ignored them completely and strode toward his bounty. People darted out of the way; he knew he would, which is why he didn't bother to go around anyone. He just walked at them, knowing they would move for him. He was seven feet tall and built like a tank; there was no way they weren't going to move. Except...

Rawr! The polar bear warned him just in time as a diminutive human purposefully stepped into his path, folded her arms, and pouted up at him. Thor managed to slam on the brakes just in time before he collided with her, but he only managed to stop an inch from her, and found himself towering over her. She didn't flinch to find herself under his gaze, but rather, her chin seemed to jut in a very obstinate way.

"Move," he snapped, when a scowl didn't work.

Lesser men quailed under the look. She didn't even recoil at his harsh tone.

"No. What do you want here?"

His nose prickled at her fresh floral scent and his bear let out a strange little whine.

"I'm here for him," rumbled Thor, nodding at the very pale looking man, who appeared to be trying to edge his way to the emergency exit.

"This is supposed to be a safe place," she chastised in a firm voice. "How dare you come barging in here like this, frightening everybody."

Thor huffed and noticed that her violet eyes flashed as she talked. Or at least, they flashed as she told him off. They were pretty unusual for a human, and she was definitely human. His bear let out another strange whine.

"Yeah, well, he's about to be a guest of the cops," argued Thor. "So get out of my way, and let me drag that pitiful excuse of a fox shifter back to them so they can lock him up where he belongs."

“I’m innocent!” cried the aforementioned pitiful excuse.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” she said.

“You heard her, we’re leaving!” cried Thor at the fox shifter.

“I meant you!” she snapped in exasperation.

Thor goggled at her. Was she actually throwing him out? Was she doing what no one in his life had ever had the courage to do – was she standing up to him?

She bit her lip and his eyes were drawn to her plump lips. They were very rounded and pink. She wasn’t even wearing lipstick. They were just naturally rosy. His bear did the whine again and Thor snarled at him to stop whatever he was doing.

“Look, I got a job to do. He tried to murder his wife so he could marry his secretary...”

“Lies, all lies!” cried the fox, with very little conviction. Some of the ire of the sparky human in front of him seemed to disappear to be replaced by doubt.

“And he’s on trial for it. He missed his court date, so I hunted him down, and I’m taking him to the cops. Stay out of it.”

“You’re a bounty hunter?” she asked, in a much softer voice.

It had a very pleasing timbre. Gentle and wistful and hard to believe anyone could ever say no to it. His bear let out a sigh. At least it was better than the whine.

“Yeah, and he’s coming with me.”

Thor didn’t wait for a reply from her. He strode over to the guy and grabbed him in one paw. The fox had been a slippery little bugger, but the fight appeared to have left him. He half-expected her to grab his arm and try and stop him. She didn’t, and he was a little disappointed about that.

Pulling the fox, he walked back over to her, and gave her a cold smile. He pulled one of his cards out of his wallet and pressed it into her hand.

“You ever need someone found, I’m your guy. Call me.”

He winked at her and strode out of there as everyone jumped out of his way to let him.

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Two months later

Thor glanced at his watch and closed the book he was reading. It was almost time to get to the Buy ‘n’ Pay. After that, he wasn’t so sure what he would do. Maybe he could swing by the bail bond office and see if any new skips had come in.

For the most part, Thor had earned his living in finding people for a fellow polar bear shifter called Gunne. The male was, for the most part, an importer of caviar, but he also lent people money at often incredibly high interest rates. Gunne always wanted people found – so many seemed to want

to avoid his company, and Thor had a talent for it. But, over the last two months, he hadn't taken the work Gunne offered him, he had found himself somewhat disinterested in the jobs Gunne gave him, and had, instead, been asking for more work from the bail bond agency.

Now, though, he had somewhere to be. He carefully put the book back on its shelf – it was a first edition, and deserved to be treated kindly – and ambled over to the door. In spite of his bear's urgings to hurry, he didn't need to - he had plenty of time. He just wanted to get there early and get himself a good spot.

Thor pulled his door open and blinked at the frowning woman in front of him. His bear inhaled the floral scent and groaned.

"Oh, you're here!" she exclaimed, flustering and almost dropping the coffee she was carrying.

It was her. The female from the shelter. The one who had stood up to him. The one who had been haunting his dreams for the past couple of months.

He looked her up and down, drinking in every detail, from the worn sneakers, the rounded hips, heavy well of her breasts, and those damn lavender eyes. Yep, she was still the same. Except now, she appeared nervous. The fire was gone from her eyes and Thor found himself angry at whomever had done that.

"You're here to see me?" he asked slowly.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, some of her old determination returning. "You probably don't remember me..."

"Oh, I remember you," he chuckled. He'd remembered her every night since he met her, plus also twice in the shower every day.

"Yes, well, we didn't exactly get off to a good start. Maybe we should remedy that."

Thor relaxed a little and leaned against the doorframe. When he saw her, he worried why she was there – worried that he hadn't been subtle enough in his stalking efforts over the last two months. When she appeared at his door, he had been about to go to the grocery store so he could follow her around for her weekly shop. She was someone who kept a very strict schedule, and he liked that from his stalker point of view. He also liked the fact that she never seemed to date anyone.

"Hmmm?"

She cleared her throat. "My name's Holly Davies."

She held out a tiny hand and Thor looked at it for a moment. She didn't waver, and he grasped it in his. His bear growled sharply at the feel of her soft skin against his. It may have been his imagination, but he did think that she gasped when they touched.

"And you're Thor," she added when he didn't say anything.

She already knew his name – he gave her his card. Though, it didn't have his address on, just his number. For a week after he gave it to her, he was hoping she'd call, but it never happened. Good

girls like her weren't interested in guys like him. Well, maybe physically, because his smug inner bear could smell her burgeoning arousal, but they were too sensible to want to get involved.

"How'd you find me?" he asked.

She wriggled her hand and, reluctantly, he dropped it.

"A friend of mine found your address?"

"A friend?" he repeated lowly. His jealous inner bear was already prowling as he imagined a boyfriend.

Holly looked a little shifty. "She, ah, works for the DMV, she kind of found your address," she admitted uneasily.

Thor relaxed again. No boyfriend – just some mildly illegal activity which he didn't give a figgy pudding about.

"So, you wanted to find me?"

Huh, maybe he'd been wrong about her not being interested.

"Yes, I remembered you saying that if I ever needed someone found, you'd be my guy."

Yes, he was certainly her guy. Rawr!

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"Just a coffee," Holly said to the waitress.

"My usual," rumbled the enormous man sitting across from her, "and bring her some of those gingerbread pancakes."

"Oh, you don't have to..." she started to protest, but Thor waved a hand to shush her.

He must have seen the way she virtually salivated when the waitress brought pancakes to the table next to there's. But, well, she certainly couldn't afford any luxuries at that moment.

"Thank you," she said.

When he said he was hungry and they would talk over breakfast, she didn't really expect him to buy her anything. The polar bear shifter didn't exactly have a reputation for being kind hearted. Yes, after he left her that card she might have asked around about it. The reports she heard were invariable peppered with, 'ruthless,' 'brutish' and 'scary as hell.' But, that may be what she needed at that moment, and none of the things she heard had put a dent in the giant crush she was currently carrying around for him.

Until Thor crashed into her life, she had been enjoying a tentative flirtation with one of the volunteers at the shelter, but after that, all she could think of was the larger than life polar bear, and couldn't even bring herself to do any half-hearted flirting. When it became clear she wasn't going to date him, he stopped volunteering. But, how could she date anyone when just the thought of the

polar bear shifter made her go weak at knees – not to mention what happened further north of the knees, and boy, she certainly thought of him a lot. How many times over the past two months had one of the volunteers thought she was having a hot flush because she was lost in a daydream about Thor? She had to tell everyone she was going through early menopause.

But, her crazy attraction was not the reason she was there.

“I need you to find this man.” She pulled a photo out of her purse and slid it across the table. “His name is Harold Taylor.”

Thor flicked a quick look at the photo, but nothing more. “Why?” he asked.

Holly hesitated, considering lying to him, but as he stared at her with those impossibly blur eyes, she knew there was no way she could. Nothing was safe from those eyes. Not even that time at school when she forgot her gym shorts and was forced to take gym in her underwear and she split the elastic on her pants.

“He stole money from the shelter.”

Thor raised an eyebrow; he actually seemed surprised by her answer. “How much?”

“A little over five thousand dollars,” she admitted, closing her eyes.

“Surprised the shelter had that much,” he commented evenly.

Holly rubbed her temples as the headache she’d been suffering since this happened worsened. “At Christmas we tend to get a lot more donations – a lot of people are more generous at Christmas.”

Or want to be seen to be more generous she added silently.

“Or want people to think they are,” he said with a gruff laugh.

She thought to chastise him, but just nodded – she knew it was the truth too. For the rest of the year, most people didn’t want to know that the homeless population existed, but at Christmas, they wanted to be seen giving money to those less fortunate.

“Some of the money was already in the safe because it was regular donations that we get from volunteers around the city. But, most of it was what I withdrew from the bank.”

Oh, she could just kick herself.

“You withdrew it in cash?”

Holly nodded glumly. “The shelter needs a lot of structural repairs, so I wanted to pay to get it fixed and if I pay in cash...”

They’d give her a discount.

“Ah.”

“The same goes for my suppliers of food. We were planning on having a huge Christmas meal with turkey, gravy, cranberry sauce – all the trimmings, but now...”

She wallowed in her misery for a few moments as the waitress dropped off their food, and almost didn't eat her pancakes – feeling like she didn't deserve them, but she would never waste food.

“How'd this guy get the money out of the safe?” he asked in between his own triple portion of pancakes.

“One of the volunteers didn't lock it properly, and I allowed him into my office to wait for me so we could talk, and when I came to find him, he was gone and the money was gone.”

“You're sure it was him?” asked Thor as he moved onto his plate of bacon. “Maybe it was the volunteer.”

“I doubt that,” scoffed Holly, remembering how devastated Emmy had been when she found out. The poor girl nearly had to be sedated. “Besides,” she added wearily, “it's not the first time he's stolen from... the shelter.”

She looked up into his gaze, worrying he would probe her on that, but he didn't. He just nodded, and she breathed out in relief.

Thor gave her a hard look, making her tingle in some very intimate places. “I don't work for free, you know.”

Holly nodded, wishing she was ballsy enough to flirt with him and ask him what he wanted in return. But no, she could stand up to bullies, but she couldn't bring herself to offer herself up to a guy as some kind of sex object. She could be considered cute, but she was too ‘Mary Poppins’ to be sexy. That was a direct quote from an ex boyfriend.

“Yes, I'd be willing to pay you five hundred dollars from the recovered funds if you find him.”

“Really?”

He didn't sound impressed. Nor did he believe that she would recover the funds, but she was sure that if she could just reason with Harold that she could get it back.

“Don't you need all that money for your... turkeys?”

“It would be a stretch, but I'm sure I could make it work.”

Plus, she may have to persuade Emmy to go out on a date with her contractor to get a further discount. But as predatory as it sounded, she was sure she could guilt Emmy into doing it.

Thor stared at her for a while longer, and almost seemed to sigh in disappointment before he said, “Eat up. We've got a thief to catch.”

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Holly made a list of all the places she thought he might go. She was surprisingly familiar with all the illegal gambling joints and card games in the city. Apparently, their bounty had a little bit of a gambling problem. Sadly, no one in any of the places she knew about had seen him in at least a month, and when Thor asked, they told the truth.

Holly chewed on her plump lip and he watched in fascination. He'd been attracted to women before, but he couldn't say he had ever found any of them quite so mesmerizing. His bear yowled contentedly.

Five hundred dollars was small change, but then, she could have said fifty and he would have agreed to it. The money was irrelevant, and he wasn't planning on taking it anyway – he rather let her keep it and let her think he had good guy tendencies hidden inside. He didn't, but he wouldn't mind her thinking that. He'd have preferred she offered another type of payment – one to which he wouldn't have said – but, he supposed she didn't have a dirty mind like him.

"I don't know where to go now," she admitted sadly. "I was so sure we could find him at one of these places and just pull him out of there and get the remainder of the money from him."

"He ever stole this much from you before?"

Holly shook her head. "No, nothing more than a hundred or so before."

"Hmmm. Then he's probably somewhere that he doesn't think you know about. Let's try a few of the places I know."

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Thor gave her an almost concerned look. "Maybe you should stay outside."

"Why?"

"This place..." he winced, "it's not for someone like you."

Holly frowned and she could have sworn he groaned. "Why not?"

Thor stared at her for a few moments. "It's a sex club."

Holly wasn't really shocked about that – she knew places like this existed, but she was surprised as to why he wanted to look here. "And you think my... uh, he'll be in there?"

"The owner runs poker games in the back – to get to them, you have to go through the club. I can go in alone."

"I'm coming," she said firmly.

Thor growled lowly, his chest rippling. For a second, she almost thought he was going to shift – she'd seen plenty of the people in the shelter shift before – but he just exhaled.

"Fine, but you don't go anywhere without me. Anyone asks, you're with me."

"Okay," she breathed, just a little too happy at the prospect.

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"Hey, Thor."

He grunted at one of the waitresses.

“Who was that?” hissed Holly.

“Female that used to date a guy I know,” he muttered absently.

He tightened his arm around Holly. Too many people were looking at her. Too many were getting interested. Plus, his pervy inner polar bear was happy to use any excuse to hold onto her. Her body was all soft curves and warm flesh. Unfortunately, a lot of the other patrons seemed interested in her flesh. They didn’t get many humans in this place, and, as he damn well knew, Holly was an enticing one.

His polar bear snarled. He was enjoying having her pressed against him, but he needed to get her out of there as soon as possible.

“C’mon, this way,” he grumbled as a camel shifter licked his lips at her.

He virtually carried her into the back room, slamming the door behind him. It was dark and murky in there, and his sudden presence caused quite a ruckus as several of the players recognized him and assumed he was there for them – sent on behalf of Gunne.

There was a lot of swearing and a couple of guys threw chairs at him. He didn’t really mind, but one of the chairs almost hit Holly, and so Thor had the guy pinned to the wall as his inner animal brayed for blood.

He almost missed Holly calling to him, “There he is!”

Sure enough, the guy they were looking for was bolting from the room like his butt was on fire. Thor dropped the guy he had pinned and tore after him, hurling the poker table out of the way.

As far as chases went, it wasn’t overly satisfying. The man he was chasing was human, unfit, reeked of smoke and alcohol, and looked like he hadn’t eaten a decent meal in twenty years. Within ten seconds, Thor roared and leaped on him, tackling him to the ground of the club as about twenty or so patrons looked on with interest, wondering if this was some kind of show.

A few seconds later, Holly joined them, panting a little. He was distracted by the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest until he snapped to attention when she said, “Dad, what have you done?”

“It’s not my fault,” whined the slight human struggling underneath him.

Thor patted his pocket, searching for his handcuffs, but he must have dropped them in the kerfuffle.

“Anyone got any spare cuffs?” he called.

Nine hands shot forward holding a variety of handcuffs. He certainly had his pick.

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“I’m sorry!” she blurted, as soon as they had her dad locked in Thor’s truck.

Thor growled and banged on the window as he dad started kicking the door. “Don’t you dare damage my truck!” he roared.

He turned to her and softened marginally. "It's fine."

It was a bad time to choose, but she found her insides fluttering. He was delicious when he was angry or when he was sympathetic.

"It's not fine, I should have told you who he was. Maybe I should have gone to the cops. He's just going to keep letting me down."

Holly scrunched up her face and stared at her shoes, trying not to cry. Thor placed a finger under her chin, and gently raised it so she was looking at him. She couldn't help the stray tears that flowed down her cheeks.

"It's fine," he repeated in a molten chocolate voice. "Let me guess, he came to you to beg for money, crying about how people he owed money to were going to break his legs or something, and then he helped himself to what little you had."

"Yes," she sighed. "Usually, he's happy with a hundred, but I suppose he couldn't help himself when he saw all that money. He's... he's been sick a long time. He's an addict, he can't help it."

Thor grunted but didn't say anything.

"When I was eleven, because of his gambling, we got kicked out of our house. My dad took off, and my mom and me had to go into a shelter. Thanks to the people at the shelter, my mom got a job, got an apartment, then she got remarried, and she's happy, and now, I run the shelter. Without that place, I don't know where we'd be. I just everyone to have the chance we did. I want him to have that chance too, but I'm sure he wants it."

A couple of fresh, but happier tears tracked down her cheeks.

"You're really something," he murmured, stroking his fingers over the stray tears.

Her heart thudded and her breath hitched. The air around them changed - became charged with... something. For a second, she thought he was going to kiss her. Or at least, she wished he would kiss her. Sadly, she didn't get to find out which, as at that moment, her dad slammed on the door again with his feet and begged them to let him out.

Holly sighed and rolled her eyes. Thor growled at him again to hush.

Strangely, Thor didn't seem half as surprised as he should have been. "Did you guess he was my dad?"

His eye flickered. "Not exactly."

"Then, how..."

"Not important," he said gruffly. "Right now, we need to get your money back."

Holly nodded and scrubbed at her cheeks. "Damn right we do," she said determinedly.

“Money?” snarled Thor.

Her dad flinched, looking to her for help. Holly glared at him, and Thor had to stifle a smile. It was the same look she gave him when they first met - such a sexy little glare. His bear growled a little goofily, before the whines of the dick getting between him and his gorgeous human interrupted him.

“Where is it?” demanded Thor.

The sooner he got this sorted, the sooner he could figure out if he really did have a chance with this female. For a second, he thought she was going to let him kiss her. Her – a selfless, adorable, little human, who should seriously be considered for sainthood almost let him kiss her. Him! A ruthless son of a bitch who had hunted down and handed over dozens of people to an even more ruthless loan shark without a care as to what would happen to them. Did he deserve even a kiss? No, but he damn well wanted it.

Her dad looked between the two of them, and finding no sympathy, wailed, “How could you be so cruel to me? At Christmas?”

Those beautiful violet eyes flashed and he had to stifle a grin as his bear sighed.

“You stole money from a charity!” she snapped.

He shuffled a bit, as much as he could given that his hands were still cuffed behind his back – no way was Thor letting him out of those.

“I needed the money,” he whined.

“For a card game in a sex club?!” she said waspishly.

“I owe money to baaaad people.”

And yes, he gave bad four ‘a’s.

Holly pursed her lips as she pretended to think about that. “So, let me get this straight, you owe money to people, so you stole money donated to charity to help the homeless, and you’re paying it back by betting it all in a card game in a sleazy club? Something doesn’t add up here.”

Her dad looked a little irritated. Or, a lot irritated. “Well, you didn’t have enough money,” he grouched. “I needed to double my money.”

Thor grunted as his bear snarled in fury. He was actually chastising her for not having enough money for his to steal to pay off his gambling debts!

Holly rubbed her temples and sighed.

“Enough,” rumbled Thor, as he soothed his inner beast.

He would like nothing more to tenderize the pathetic moron in his back seat, but he was Holly’s father... Yeah, neither man nor beast saw that as an excuse to stop himself, but he had a feeling Holly wouldn’t be very impressed if he put her dad in the hospital, so he stopped himself. Huh –

look at that, he could be a good guy! Admittedly, in order to impress a woman he was hoping to get into bed and more, but still.

“Where’s the money?”

Her dad quailed and swallowed. “I... I need...”

“No.”

“But...”

“No.”

“I...”

“No.”

The older man sagged and his bottom lip wobbled. Yeah, he could cry all he wanted – that never worked on Thor. Though, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Holly’s bottom lip was wobbling too. Uh oh. He didn’t like how it made him feel when he saw tears falling out of her eyes. His bear growled, danger, danger! Seeing tears from her made him want to roar, punch someone and destroy everything and everyone that upset her to make it right.

“Money!” he howled urgently.

Her dad sagged as he realized that crying would have no effect. Though, Thor was kind of impressed by how good he was. This guy probably got out of a lot of speeding tickets that way.

“It’s in my money belt,” admitted her dad.

Thor and Holly exchanged looks of concern. Thor reached over to him, ripping his shirt, and pulling the money belt off. He squirmed and whined and Thor grunted at him to shut it.

They dove through the belt, checking it twice, lest they missed anything. She counted all the bills twice, in the hope that she might have missed anything. But, in the end, there was just under two thousand dollars. It was actually more than Thor thought there would be given that it was squeezed into the belt – most of the money was in hundred dollar bills. But, clearly by the expression on Holly’s face, there was a lot less than which she hoped.

Holly bit her lip and he inwardly moaned, warning his bear that now was not the time to go all gooey.

“I can work with this,” she said determinedly. “Apart from your five hundred...”

“Hey, uh, don’t...”

He was about to say don’t worry about that, but something else caught his eye.

“What’s wrong?” she murmured before following his gaze. “Oh.”

There were two polar bear shifters standing in front of his car. They both topped seven feet tall, wider than some compact cars and were decked out in at least five cows worth of black leather each, and were both glaring at them. Oh yeah, they also both work as 'muscle' for Gunne.

Thor had worked with them plenty of times, but he didn't think they were there to say hi. No, because their attention appeared to be directed at Holly's dad. Crap.

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"Stay here," ordered Thor as the two enormous men started pulling her dad out of the truck - the fact that the truck doors were locked didn't seem to slow them down for a second.

"Uh-uh."

Thor groaned as she hopped out, folded her arms, and pursed her lips.

"What do you think you're doing? How dare you?"

"That won't work on them," murmured Thor as he came to stand beside her. He placed a hand on her neck proprietarily - or at least, she thought so - and leaned down. "They're not pushovers like me."

Holly looked at him in surprise, and something in her expression made him chuckle, but only for a second. The next moment he was straightening, though still with his hand on her neck, and facing the two goons.

"Hey," he rumbled menacingly.

It was amazing how much threat he could put into a one-syllable word. The two goons paused on hearing that word, though they recovered quickly.

"Thor," one of them replied.

She should have been surprised they knew him, but she wasn't, it was almost a relief. It was a relief altogether to have Thor by her side.

"What do you want with him?"

Thor jutted his chin at her dad.

"Owes Gunne money," said one.

"Owes Gunne a lot of money," clarified the second.

"I don't have any money," whined her dad. "She has it! She has all the money, get it from her!"

He tried to gesture in her direction, though it wasn't easy as he was still cuffed.

Thor snarled and his hand tightened on her neck. Holly sighed and started to reach into her purse for the few bills they had managed to wrestle from her dad. Thor stilled her hand and gave a slight shake of his head.

“I’ll come with you and talk to Gunne.”

The two goons stared at him, and then they took a long look at Holly before smirking. She blushed profusely.

“Fine,” said one.

“More than fine,” clarified the other.

“Stay here,” rumbled Thor.

“But...”

“No arguments this time,” he murmured before brushing a kiss across her temple. “Let me handle this.”

“Oh!” she breathed, and watched as Thor climbed into a black SUV and disappeared from view.

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Dejectedly, Holly dragged herself out of her battered old compact. Not even her light-up, musical holiday brooch could make her feel better. She must have tried calling Thor twenty times. Well, thirty-five actually according to her call log. She also went by his apartment too, but he hadn’t been there. She was starting to turn into a stalker.

Oh, why had she let him go off with those two shady looking guys?

“Excuse me,” said a cheerful looking guy carrying a tray of turkeys into the shelter.

“Oh, sorry,” she muttered automatically as she stepped out of his way.

She had dragged Thor into her problem and who knew what was currently happening to him.

“Coming through,” boomed a loud voice.

Holly let out an eep and narrowly avoided getting brained by a nine-foot Christmas tree.

Who knew... ah... What was happening? Holly blinked as she watched everyone bustling around. There were people carrying trays of food and decorations into the shelter. Were they lost?

Emmy spotted her and ran over with a huge smile on her face – she obviously didn’t know that Holly had unfortunate plans to force her into a date with the contractor.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” gushed Emmy.

“Ah, yes, what’s happening? Where did all this come from?” Holly asked as a guy carrying bread strode past her whistling God rest ye merry gentlemen.

“I don’t know!” squealed Emmy in delight. “But look at this stuff! It’s even better than what we were going to buy – the bread actually looks like it was freshly made, and none of it has freezer burn!”

A frozen bread company gave them a good deal on old stock – they had to make economies where they could.

“That’s amazing,” breathed Holly as she watched a guy unloading what appeared to be a vat of gravy.

“It’s a Christmas miracle! And also, there’s some guy waiting in your office,” she added as an afterthought as she skipped off to enjoy their good fortune.

“My dad?” Holly called after her, but she was no longer interested.

Feeling a surge of anger, Holly damn near ran to her office, determined to give her dad an earful for putting Thor in danger with his loan shark. But as she ran in, determined to vent her fury, she stopped short on finding an enormous polar bear snoozing in her chair.

“Thor!” she cried as she lit up in happiness and relief.

Forgetting herself, she dove on top of him, immediately waking him.

“Thor, you’re okay!”

“Apart from just being elbowed in the stomach, sure,” he murmured as he yawned awake.

“Oh, sorry.”

She tried to clamber off him, but he held her on his lap, and feeling too pleased to be self-conscious, she let him.

“I was so worried about you.”

Thor actually looked confused by that. “Why?”

“Why?! Because the last I saw of you, you were driving away with a couple of... of gorillas...”

“Polar bear shifters,” he corrected mildly.

“I didn’t know what was going to happen to you.”

Thor shrugged in a maddeningly cute way. “They were never going to do anything to me - your dad, however.”

Holly sobered a little. “What happened?”

“Nothing, really. I asked Gunne how much he wanted and I paid him.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. I used to work for Gunne, but not anymore,” he added hurriedly, “that life is way behind me now. But he was happy to take any money.”

“My dad...”

Thor’s eyes narrowed and he growled. “I told him to stay the hell away from you, or else...”

“Or else?”

“Or else,” Thor repeated with a growl, but the fierce expression quickly melted into a grin. “Hey, were you actually worried about me?”

“Of course I was!”

Holly slapped his chest and he caught her hand in his, toying with her fingers.

“Why weren’t you answering your phone?” she asked only a tad grumpily.

“I was a little busy,” he said, trying for modest but failing miserably.

Holly jumped as there was a crash from below, and loads of yells. She assumed it was a giant Christmas tree mishap. Thor’s smile widened and the penny dropped.

“You did all this? You paid for all this?”

“Maybe,” he replied, but his smug smile told her the answer.

“But... but... how could you afford to pay for all this? How could you afford to pay his debt?” she spluttered.

Thor chuckled and pulled her a little closer. “I’ve been well paid for years, and I never spent much. I had some pretty good savings.”

Holly stared at him. “Which you just wasted on my dad and donated to the shelter.”

“It’s only money.” He smiled, and it was such a beautiful, sincere smile that she wanted to cry at its sweetness. “Uh-uh, no tears, baby.”

“They’re happy tears,” she reassured him, but he didn’t seem convinced that it was a good thing. “How can I ever repay you? I should at the very least pay you for the money you spent bailing my dad out of trouble – I dread to think how much it was! I’m not sure I’ll ever earn enough.”

“Well, there’s only one thing for it.”

“There is?”

“Yeah, if you can’t pay me back with money, you’re gonna have to date me.”

Holly gaped at his beaming countenance. “I am, am I?”

“Yeah, you’ve got no choice now.”

“No kidding!” she giggled.

Thor pulled her a little closer and pressed his lips to her, and oh, it was divine. The warmth and sweetness of his kiss was magical. She clutched at him and reveled in every second, and lamenting it wasn’t longer when it ended. Though, if they were dating, then surely there were more to come...

He ran a thumb down her cheek. “I’ve never been a good person. But I want to be better.”

“With everything you’ve done for the shelter, you’ve made a good start.”

“I only did that for you,” he said earnestly. His beautiful blue eyes sparkled. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since we met. I just can’t believe someone like you would be interested in me.”

“More than interested, we are dating after all.”

Thor rumbled with laughter.

“And you’re all I thought about since we first met. You wouldn’t believe the amount of times I thought about calling you!” she admitted, cringing slightly.

“Yeah?” He grinned. “I’ve been following you around since we first met.”

“Wait, what?”

“Virtually stalking you – well, actually stalking you.”

“Stalking?!”

But anything else she wanted to say was lost as he kissed her again, and she soon forgot what she was saying... until he brought it up again later, but that usually ended with a kiss too.

*

Christmas came and went, and within weeks, Holly and Thor were living together, and within months, they were mated.

Thor tried his best to care about others, but mostly he just cared about Holly, and since she cared about everyone, he, therefore, kind of cared about everyone by proxy.

He took on a few bounties every now and again – well, he was a hunter – but only when Holly didn’t really feel up to being chased around. But mostly, he helped out with the shelter – he was in charge of donations. Few people could say no to donating a couple of bucks when a giant polar bear shifter was breathing down their neck. No one wanted to stand up to him... well, except his mate, of course, and given that by the time next Christmas rolled around she was expecting an extra special little present, he really couldn’t deny her anything.

The end

