

Chapter 1

In The Collider

Everybody loves somebody
sometimes.
Everybody falls in love somehow.

Dean Martin

“What a mess of a Christmas!”

This depressing thought had lingered in the back of Samantha’s mind since the staff meeting early this morning, not helping to lift up her already dark mood in any way. Not because of professional reasons, she had volunteered to take the night shift position over the Christmas holidays for her team after all. The reasons were of personal nature.

Dr. Samantha Williams, 33-year-old post-doc in physics, postdoctoral research fellow from UC Berkeley (California), as number four of the ten best Ph. D. candidates of 2018. It was words along those lines that Professor Leitner had used to introduce her to her new team, one of many working on theoretical physics research with the LHC (Large Hadron Collider). Professor Hansen, her Ph. D. supervisor, had meant well as he had recommended her for a prestigious post-doc position at CERN, one of very few advertised every year. Her uncanny talent for mathematics and the backing of her supervisor had gotten her a four-year tenure, an ideal start for a promising career in theoretical particle physics.

Sure, he had meant well. But Switzerland, of all places? Far away from the few friends and acquaintances she had made during her studies and the subsequent posting at Berkeley. She had never left North America before, until she had moved to a small village near Geneva not entirely one month before.

Despite being surrounded by fellow scientists and personnel from all over the world, she couldn’t help but to feel alone and isolated. Far from everything and the few mammals she had come to call close friends in her life, it was difficult not to feel sad and alone when focusing on her research didn’t help to distract her wandering mind.

Moving to a country almost half-way around the world in late November didn’t help her mood either. Winter had already come, changing the Swiss countryside into a picturesque winter wonder land. Needless to say, this was not exactly the climate (and temperature range) that a coyotess like her would consider pleasant to live in.

To make the cold winter temperatures at least somewhat bearable, she had resorted to a set of extra-thick winter clothes, including a parka with a large hood draped over her head to protect her ears from the biting winter winds, and a long scarf she had wrapped around her neck and snout (to protect her nosepad from frostbite).

It was this set of garments she literally peeled herself out of in the locker room when she heard someone approach from the left. Her ear twitched in the direction of the approach paw steps just in time to hear them stop. As her head swiveled in the same direction, she came face-to-chest with a T-shirt and hoody combination, the hoodie obscuring parts of the slogan on the T-shirt underneath: *“OU AR HER”*.

“You are here.”

Now this should be interesting. She tilted her head upwards to bring the head accompanying the hoodie and T-shirt into view.

“Uh ... Dr. Williams? Hi. I’m Thomas ... uh ... Thomas Richter. I’ll be the on-site support technician for the next three days. Which ... err ... which means we’ll be working ... erm ... together for the next few days, I I mean ... nights.”

The next few nights? That referred to the Christmas holidays, starting today, December 23th.

The efforts of her new colleagues to make her feel welcome ranged from polite to cordial, in two cases even to condescending. As much as she had appreciated the team-building exercise, her heart wasn’t really in for it, at least not yet. Old habits died hard; so she had politely extricated herself from any attempts to socialize beyond superficial small talk and had instead focused on her work. When the subject of Christmas holiday shifts was addressed during one of the last team meetings and a short-term replacement was needed for the night shifts, she had gladly volunteered.

On top of just having started a new chapter in her career and moving halfway across the globe to a country that might as well have been on another planet, there still were way too many ghosts from her past who would incessantly demand attention in quiet times like Christmas. Having some alone time where she could focus on work was a welcome opportunity. Or it had been until now.

Fixing her gaze on the “Christmas crasher”, she looked into the face of a European grey wolf roughly two heads larger than herself. A first glance at his stature confirmed his choice of wardrobe. Of lanky build, it almost seemed as if he hadn’t been fed properly as a pup, and had failed to acquire some muscle mass that she came to expect on males of his kind. Adding a sheepish smile, occasionally breaking eye contact, slightly twitching whiskers and ears folded half-way down, his appearance literally screamed *“nerd”*.

Doing her best not to let too much bared teeth show in the smile she forced onto her muzzle, she ignored Thomas’ offered paw and addressed him curtly: *“Then I suggest we get to it, Mr. Richter. Just because it will only be the two of us on site doesn’t mean we should start slacking on the job.”*

As she walked away briskly towards the locker room exit, opening the door towards the hallway without waiting for the wolf to catch up, Thomas remained frozen on the spot for a few more seconds before setting off to catch up with the coyotess.

“Uh, yeah ... I mean, sure. Let’s get started.”

While the pair was on its way towards the particle accelerator's main control center, the premises were already largely deserted as most of the day time shift staff had already left.

Thomas tagged along, doing his best to match Samantha's rapid stride. Being at a loss as to why she had reacted so brusque to his greeting, he made another attempt at small talk: *"I've seen you a few times in the cantina during lunch time before. You've started working here recently, right?"*

When Samantha failed to answer immediately, he didn't let her silence deter him: *"I'm working with CERN for four years now, since the last refit of the LHCb accelerator. This is my first time working during Christmas; I got unlucky when my team drew straws on who would have to take the shifts over the holidays. Literally draw the shortest one!"*

Thomas' last comment made Samantha stop in her track in front of the main entry of the accelerator's control room. She fixed the wolf with an angry glare, making him cringe on the spot, ears splaying as the smaller canid stared him down: *"I'm really sorry you have to be here, of all things forced to share the next three night shifts with me."*

A clawed finger poking his chest every few words, Samantha continued considerably louder than fit for polite conversation: *"Listen closely, Mr. Richter: I haven't asked for your company, and I would prefer to be left alone during our shared shifts. If you stick to your own tasks and stay out of my way, we will get along just fine!"*

With that, she swiped her key card over the electronic lock, shoved the unlocked doors open and slammed them shut before Thomas had time to follow her through. With a frustrated sigh, the wolf signed in for access to the control room himself, making his way around the rows of computer terminals around the opposite side of the room, avoiding to pass by the workstation Samantha was busy logging into. Not keen on drawing the coyotess' attention after her stern warning, he was relieved to see that Samantha was soon greeted by what seemed to be three of her own co-workers for what seemed to be a briefing on the state of the currently running experiment.

Thomas chose one of the side exits of the control room that led into the tunnel system of the particle accelerator. Though he could have started his own work routine from the main control room, it seemed by far preferable to use one of the smaller secondary control rooms, considering how clearly his graveyard shift companion had expressed her desire to be left alone.

While the wolf was busy working through his diagnostic check lists, Samantha had bid farewell to her team mates after they had brought her up-to-date on the currently running experiment. The particle accelerator's configuration for this particular experiment was a "low-yield" one; the two graveyard shift members were only supposed to monitor the remainder of the current run and shut down the accelerator afterwards, before the next day shift would set up and start the next batch of experiments. So there would be sufficient time to make some progress on her own work, an experiment setup involving some finer points of the decomposition of baryons colliding at 96 percent of light speed, which was scheduled for a slot on the LHCb ring in a few weeks to come.

Roughly two uneventful hours had passed when Samantha's smartphone began to ring, the ring tone indicating an incoming video call.

Startled from her deep state of concentration, the coyotess retrieved the phone from her pocket, realizing by the melody who was calling her even before

the display came into view. *Mom and Dad.* Mentally kicking herself for not remembering to call her parents earlier the day, she took the call. An elderly Collie female appeared on the screen, a soft smile on her slightly graying muzzle.

"Hi, Mom!"

"Good evening, love! How are you?"

Talking to her mom made it easier for her to bring herself to smile, but the stress and worries of the past weeks did their part in her heart not really being behind it.

"Saying I'm fine won't really cut it, huh?"

A well-meant chuckle accompanied the answer: *"No, Sam, it won't. I know it must be difficult, being this far away from home, all alone. But you will do fine, you always have. You know I'm proud of you, Sam."*

"So am I. How is my little cactus butt?" A second face appeared in the camera's field of vision on the other end. A Collie male, merle fur pattern a startling contrast to her step mother's black-and-white.

Cactus butt referred to a desert trip many years ago, while Samantha had still been a pup, not long after she had been adopted by the Collie pair. The nickname aptly summed up how that excursion had ended for her.

"Hey, Dad!"

"Good evening, honey!" Her dad's face filled more of the picture as he seemed to look closer at the remote device's display. His ears drooped, and his smile vanished a little. *"Sam ... this doesn't look like your apartment. Are you ... are you working?"*

Silently chiding herself for not obscuring the background in her own phone's camera field of view better, she sighed.

"Yeah."

"Sam, I know how important your work is to you. But working over Christmas? Don't tell me you didn't find the time to socialize. Don't tell me that a handsome coyote lady like you didn't turn a few heads!"

"Daaad!"

"Sam, your Dad is right. It's not good for you to be alone all the time. Promise you'll look for friends over there."

Touching the display with her little paw finger, the coyotess tilted her head to the side: *"Coyote pinky swear!"*

Her mother mimicked the gesture: *"Coyote pinky swear, little one!"*

"I miss you guys, really. I wish I could be there with you!"

"So do we, but your research grant doesn't cover weekly trans-atlantic flights back and forth. You'll be here again next summer, that will have to do."

Ears drooping, the coyotess briefly touched her phone's display with her nose. She felt her composure starting to falter, as technology could never replace the real embrace of her mom and dad. *"If only it was summer already! I love you, guys. I'll ... I better get back to work."*

Parental intuition did its part in not prompting her parents to pry further into Samantha's emotional state of disarray. *"We love you too, darling! Be safe, and take care. Talk to you tomorrow!"*

With that, her parents ended the call, leaving the coyotess alone with her own thoughts. Unbidden, her emotions got the best of her. The first tear still flowed in silence, but its brethren brought on a few soft sobs, before the coyotess finally began to cry in earnest. While she let the emotional turmoil that she had suppressed over weeks run its course, she couldn't help but wonder why

she suddenly had become so susceptible to emotional extremes. She usually was way more focused and all business, only rarely prone to emotional outbreaks like the one she was currently going through.

The realization hit her almost instantly: It was the time of the month when her body's needs demanded attention. This hadn't been an issue most of the time in the past, and nothing she could have taken care of with the help of some medication or more ... physical means. In case that had not been enough to satisfy her needs, Las Vegas was a three hour drive by car away. But; what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. But in her current situation, her own body added insult to injury by making her already precarious emotional state even worse. Perfect Christmas, indeed.

Thomas had not meant to walk into the quite obviously private phone conversation, and couldn't help but feel bad about the unintended eavesdropping. While he had missed the beginning of the call, he had overheard enough to figure out the reason for the coyotess' earlier aggression towards him might have a more complex cause than simple antipathy towards him.

He had finished his routine inspection and performance monitoring round a bit earlier than usual. When returning to the main control room to compile the gathered results into a routine report, he had not been looking forward to another possible confrontation with his co-worker. But after inadvertently listening in on the ongoing conversation, his impression of the coyotess had begun to change. Witnessing the coyotess crying bitterly had finally prompted him to act. He had retrieved his late-night snack from his locker, a sour-cream flat-cake made of yeast dough, seasoned with onions and Tyrolean bacon, and had re-heated it in the microwave oven of a nearby kitchenette. By the time he returned to the control room, the worst of the crying seemed to have subsided, but the coyotess still looked outright miserable, her head cradled in her paws, ears folded back, occasional sobs still making her quiver.

Taking a deep breath, he approached the coyotess who had so far failed to register his presence.

The wolf cleared his throat to get the coyotess' attention. Samantha turned around to look at him, wiping some stray tears from her muzzle. Before she had the chance to say something, Thomas took courage and addressed her first:

"Dr. Williams? I'm ... sorry to intrude, you have made it quite clear you wanted to be alone. But ... it's Christmas in about an hour and ... and nobody should have a reason to cry on Christmas. I have no right to pry, and honestly I wasn't sure what to do to help, so..."

He fumbled with the plate that held the sour-cream flat cake, which exuded an enticing smell even after being reheated.

"I thought I could get you ... something to eat? These here have always made me feel better when I felt sad. Maybe this will help you, too. So ... here, please take it. It's yours."

As the wolf offered the plate to the coyotess, she literally was at a loss of words. Looking at the plate for a few moments, she then fixed her at the wolf's face, whose friendly smile was about to falter when the coyotess had failed to react to his offer immediately. Finally, Samantha broke her silence: *"I ... uh ... thank you. That is very kind of you."*

Thomas visibly relaxed as he heard Samantha's words. *"So ... do you want to try? It tastes best while it's still warm."*

"Oh ... right, sure!" Sniffing back some more tears, she reached for the

plate, picking up the offered food and taking a first bite. From the way her ears perked up, she enjoyed what she was tasting.

Thomas passed a paper tissue to the coyotess in addition to the plate. *"Here, that should help with the tears."*

When Samantha had finished chewing and swallowing the first bite, she put down her snack to accept the paper tissue and wiped her eyes clean. Her tears had finally subsided.

"I ... what I said to you before was uncalled for. I'm ... sorry for snapping out at you like this. It's just ... I'm going through a difficult time at the moment. But you were kind enough to try and cheer me up anyway. That ... that is very sweet of you."

She offered a paw to the wolf as a smile returned to her muzzle: *"I'm Samantha. Call me Sam if you like."*

"I'm Thomas. But, well... you knew that already."

The wolf realized only then that the coyotess hadn't let go his paw yet. Before he could release his hold on hers, Samantha pulled him into a hug, pressing her snout against his chest, her ears tickling his chin.

"Thank you, Thomas!"

Samantha noticed the wolf shifting from one foot paw to the other as she let him go again.

"Uh ... you're welcome. I ... er ... I guess I get back to my rounds then?" Before he managed to walk away, the coyotess grasped his hoodie, preventing him from walking away.

"Please, stay. I'm sure you can spare the time?"

Indeed he could, though his latent social awkwardness made him briefly consider if he should.

"Oh, and I have this amazing sour-cream cake here. I wonder if you might want to try some? It tastes amazing!"

That did the trick; instead of leaving Samantha to her own, he took a seat next to her and began to eat half of the sour cream cake the coyotess had offered him back.

As early night turned into late night and eventually early morning, the pair spent hours talking, sometimes one listening to the other, sometimes in lively debate. Their obligations regarding work were not completely discarded, but were limited to short distractions from their conversations.

While in the beginning the topics they talked about were non-committal and more suited for small-talk between professionals, they slowly started drifting towards more personal matters as the hours passed.

The two night shift attendees learned the other had found their respective passion in their fields of work, Samantha learning in the process that Thomas held his own Ph. D. in electrical engineering (*"I'm more of a glorified electrician."*). The wolf in turn was listening intently to the coyotess' recount of the events that led up to her moving halfway around the world in pursuit of a once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity, and how she had struggled with adapting to her new home without any friends or relatives to rely on. At that point, the wolf started shifting around in his chair uncomfortably. Since honesty is the better part of valor, he told her about how he had accidentally walked in on the phone call with her parents earlier in the evening, and how he had seen emotions getting the better of her.

As she just looked at him with a genuine smile, he asked: *"You're not mad at me for eavesdropping?"*

"You could have walked away, doing nothing. But you decided to cheer me up, despite the way I treated you before. You bothered to look twice. That makes me a lucky coyote, don't you think?"

Once more at a loss of words (and with the insides of his ears turning to a bright red), Thomas was not objecting as the coyotess moved her office chair next to his, sitting down to rest her head against his left shoulder.

"There aren't many people who know my life's story, and I haven't told it in a long time. But it's yours to hear if you like."

For a few heartbeats, the two looked into each other's eyes.

"I'd love to."

And so the coyotess recounted how she was born in Los Angeles South Central, never knowing her father, who perished as one of many victims of gang warfare before she was born. How she grew up as single pup of a mother who struggled with drug abuse, neither able to get over the death of her life's love nor the devastating influence narcotics had over her. How she struggled to care for her daughter, but ultimately lost the battle against her addiction. About the day she found her mother dead in their apartment, not long after her sixth birthday. The four years she spent in public orphanages, her life threatening to take a turn for the worse before she would even reach the age of ten. How her foster parents had taken her in where many others had considered her a lost cause: *"Coyote trash."*

How she had denied the affection of her foster parents at first, often running away for days at a time, rebelling against their attempts to get through to her at every turn. About patience and gentleness slowly overcoming her distrust, how her talent for mathematics revealed itself, how her foster parents promoted and supported it. The fond memories of a sheltered home and a loving mother and father, learning years later that her mother was unable to conceive pups of her own. Of the good and bad things in life she experienced as she grew from an angry ten year old to a young adult, and from a young adult to a coyote lady. Where the nick name *"cactus butt"* had come from. Of the few close friends she had made over the years, and the two non-committal relationships she had had. How she had struggled and failed to overcome the inability to truly open up to anyone except for her foster parents, earning her the nickname *"Solo Sam"* in high school, how it hurt each time she heard it whispered behind her back.

All this was told in a sometimes happy, sometimes melancholic, sometimes distant mood. There were no more tears, no more sadness. Instead, the coyotess felt like a great weight was taken off of her, as recollections of the events in her life that had left her emotionally scarred and shaken passed before her inner while she narrated them for Thomas.

Sometime during the her monologue, on an emotionally taxing memory, her right paw had found Thomas's right paw, while his left paw came to rest on her shoulder. Softly hugging her, she had used the opportunity to snuggle into the surprisingly soft winter pelt around the scruff of his neck that was not covered by his garments. Her smile grew a little wider each time she felt the wolf squirm a little as her ears tickled his chin or cheek. As her sense of smell became more attuned to the wolf's distinct scent, she was surprised to find the musky note male canines of his kind was not as pronounced as she had expected it to be. It was complemented by an earthy undertone, the smell of an autumn forest in

the early morning laden with tree resin, dew-covered moss and the heavy aroma of moist soil. Complemented by the aroma of cured bacon and what seemed to have been some freshly baked Christmas pastry, this mix of scents made her co-worker's side the perfect place to be.

While she spoke of her past, Thomas had largely remained silent, only occasionally asking a question. She had noticed his heartbeat and breathing had gradually become quicker, the longer she had remained at his side. She knew pretty well what was prompting the wolf next to her to react like that, but she did not dare ruin the peaceful aura of this night. There would still be three more graveyard shifts to spend together, who could tell what was still bound to happen? She was obliged to him, in more ways than just the fact he had shown her kindness and compassion at a time when she had needed it the most. He had managed to change her mood from depression to delight in a matter of less than three hours, allowing her to enjoy a state of emotional relief she was rarely able to experience. She had to reciprocate, and she already knew how she would try to make the shy canine open up towards her. If it was her hormones toying with her, the fact she had found a kindred spirit at the most unexpected of times, or the trickster in her, she wasn't have able to tell. In approved coyote fashion, she decided to just roll with it.

"Well, you know the rest of the story. You're an excellent listener, Thomas. What about you, though?"

He regarded her with a confused expression: *"Dr. Thomas Richter, glorified electrician at the world's largest particle accelerator. What else would there be to tell?"*

Thomas had been delighted to see the coyotess' mood and demeanor brighten and relax during her narrations. The way she had started to snug up against him, not minding his gentle hugs in the slightest, was something he freely admitted to be a marvelous experience. Her initially distant attitude towards him had changed to the almost exact opposite after she had (so it seemed to him at least) been able to lighten a burden she had been carrying for a long time and that had finally brought her to a breaking point with her moving to Europe. He couldn't put a paw on why he had so few inhibitions around the coyotess, but it seemed to be more than just the way she had started to unwind and the story of her life which had shown her to be somewhat of a kindred soul. Maybe it was her lithe, tan-colored form he had had ample opportunity to ponder while she was close to him. Maybe her (to him) exotic scent, one he imagined as the scent of the desert after one of its rare rainfalls, as long-dormant seeds of flowers would take root and blossom, a multitude of sweet and intoxicating aromas carrying on the dry winds. He knew the coyotess was getting to him somehow, in a way that left him feeling energetic, if not giddy. So he didn't mind in the slightest.

On that, the coyotess uttered a playful growl and poked his nosepad with a claw: *"So you are going to make me pull the story of the wolf behind the glorified electrician out of this cute nose of yours? Fine, we'll have to do it my way then!"*

The definition of *"her way"* included tickling ears, plucking at strands of fur to make him twitch and quiver, occasionally even nibbling along his neck scruff until he would yield and answer Samantha's questions. She learned he was 36, hailed from southern Germany (a small village in Bavaria close to Munich), and had a younger sister, amongst other things. After an especially effective

tickling and nibbling attack, the wolf finally yielded and agreed to tell her his own story on his own accord. So she learned about his small pack of four, his upbringing in a happy childhood with many cherished memories alongside his sibling. How he had developed his passion for tinkering with all things electric and electronic. How quite not unlike herself, he had always been a bookworm, more contemplative and reserved than most of his peers, be it in school or later in university. How tragedy struck the family as his mother perished when he was 19, how he struggled with the grief while trying to be strong for his father and sister. When as the worst of the tragedy lay behind the family, he began his studies in electrical engineering that would continue with a subsequent Ph. D. thesis, and eventually lead his current tenure at CERN. Samantha notice that though his tales included a fair share of anecdotes and antics, they were oddly lacking any mention of past or present love affairs. Deciding not to inquire further into that topic, she was content listening to the larger canine's voice until it the early morning, when the time came to wrap up their remaining shift duties. This was done with some reluctance on both their part, and after they had briefed their day-shift co-workers on the uneventful proceedings of the night, it was time for them to head for their respective homes.

Bidding farewell to each other on their way out of the CERN compounds, Samantha turned back to Thomas just as he was about to head for his car: *"Thank you so much for listening. You really helped me there, a lot."* Unsure how to react to the compliment, it didn't take Thomas long to find a way to get back to more firm conversational territory. As he noticed that the coyotess had forgotten to put on her scarf and was already busy rubbing her snout to keep it warm, he quickly unwrapped his own scarf, pulling it over the coyotess' parka and offering her the two ends to don it as she saw fit.

"Uh ... you seemed cold. Here you go?"

Before she wrapped the scarf around her neck and snout, she promptly wrapped her arms around the stunned wolf's neck, pulling him into a loose embrace and softly kissing him on the bridge of his snout.

"You are my hero, Mr. Glorified Electrician!"

Letting him go and setting off for the catching her next ride with public transportation, she winked back at the wolf: *"I need to catch my bus back into town! See you this evening, Dr. Richter!"*

And around the next corner she went. Had you asked the stunned wolf how he made his way home, only paying attention to traffic slightly about sub-conscious level as he drove back to his own apartment, he would not have been able to remember. All he could have been able to describe was that his entire body was tingling like he had just been touching the wrong spot in the cabling of one of the LHC's magnets, and that he was feeling much hotter than was feasible regarding the chilling temperatures of the Swiss winter. Back in his apartment, tiredness was barely able to overcome the wolf's restless state of mind. But needs must, so he undressed and laid down to sleep, which thankfully managed to overtake him swiftly.

For the coyotess, the experience on her way back home was very much the same. Apart from missing the bus station next to her apartment by two stops, the only thing she could consciously recall was absentmindedly toying with the scarf around her neck while breathing way deeper than normal through her nose trying to catch the wolf's lingering scent. As for the wolf, she soon felt the toll of the night spent awake (even if it had turned out to be an exceptionally pleasant

one), only stripping out of her thick winter garments to get to bed. No sooner than she had snuggled into her set of blankets and pillows, she fell asleep.

Would there have been a way for an external observer to watch the dreams of the two, they would have found the scenery the respective sleeping mind conjured up to be surprisingly similar in nature.

Thomas found himself in a recollection of the only time he had had to fear for his life as a pup. During a school trip to an alpine hut (he must have been 11 or 12 years old at the time), his class had only been left superficially supervised on one of their hikes through the mountain landscape. The young wolf had obviously used that opportunity to sneak away from the main group of students to venture into the surrounding nature by himself. While he was out on his own, a sudden change in the weather had brought on a violent thunderstorm and strong rain. As Thomas raced back towards the location where he had separated from his classmates, he scrambled over a leftover snow bank that had covered a small crevice in the hillside he was scrambling down. Unable to bear the pup's weight, he had broken through the loose cover of snow, falling several meters into the gap. Luckily, the fall had only left him dazed and badly bruised, but his fall had set loose several pieces of rock, one of which managed to trap his left leg underneath it, preventing an easy escape. While the young wolf had struggled to free himself, water from the heavy rainfall during the thunderstorm had begun to flow downhill on a path of least resistance: The very gap Thomas had been trapped in. In the real past, his increasingly desperate cries for help had been subdued by the thunderstorm above. So he had been fighting a desperate fight against the rising water, where sheer desperation had finally given him enough strength to push the rock off his leg and to climb to safety on his own.

In his dream however, things played out differently. Instead of the craggy granite rock of the Alps, the walls of the rock gap were made of smooth sand stone, bearing the ochre and red hues of desert sand. While he was stuck under a sizable boulder like he had been in his memories as well, he was not a young wolf pup, but the adult he knew from the waking world. Just as in his puphood memories, he heard the downpour of rain somewhere above him, though it was a soft and soothing sound, not the raging thunderstorm he had been trapped in all those years ago. Nevertheless, water began to flow through the gap, its level gradually rising. Realizing the danger he was in, he began to call for help, while at the same time beginning a futile struggle to free his trapped leg from underneath the boulder.

Only this time, his call for help was heeded and answered. In an opening above him, the outline of a canine head appeared. Upon spotting him and his predicament, the lithe figure (covered with fur of varying shades of tan where her garments didn't obscure it) dexterously climbed down towards him. As soon as she was next to him, Thomas indicated the large boulder that had him trapped, he resumed his still futile attempts to dislodge it. His female companion gently put her paws on his shoulders, prompting him to calm down. She moved alongside him, starting to dig out some loose rubble underneath his trapped leg. Quickly making progress in clearing out an opening, she embraced him from behind, her arms lodged under his shoulders and paws coming together on his chest. With a sudden yank, she pulled him backwards, freeing him. Making sure he was not injured, she indicated him to follow her, letting him climb towards the opening she had climbed down from ahead of her.

As the two emerged from the subterranean chamber, the rainfall had sub-

sided, replaced by the trademark cloudless sky and bright sunshine deserts were usually featuring. A warm breeze swept over the vast landscape dominated by a sandy plain dotted with sand stone rock formations of varying shapes and sizes. As by the surreal nature of dreams, flowers started to grow and blossom following the life-giving rain within seconds, changing the ochre and red colours of the desert sand to a vibrant, many-colored carpet of vegetation. Not a word had been spoken so far; the wolf silently marvelled at his smaller companion, who didn't take long to take the initiative. She embraced him, prompting him to bow down his head. As she planted a soft kiss on the bridge of his snout, he moved away quickly almost as if by reflex, bringing both paws to the spot she had kissed, crossing his eyes in an attempt to focus both his snout and the smaller canine standing in front of him. This sight must have been hilarious enough to make his companion smile widely, then burst out in laughter.

Her laughter was pure as the rain that had brought life to the desert, clear as the vast blue sky above them, soft like the dry wind that caressed him. It made his heart jump, sparking pure joy deep inside him. Deeply inhaling the sweet, gentle scent on the wind, he tried to return the embrace of the smaller canid. She however broke the hold, poking his nose with an outstretched paw finger, before she turned around and took off running, beckoning him to follow, her laughter still rang across the vast plain. He obeyed, giving chase ... when his dream gradually began to fade away into a half-remembered imagination. His brain had decided it was time for him to wake up, exactly at the point when he tumbled over the side of his bed, experiencing a couple of milliseconds of free fall before hitting the ground with a startled "*Ooof!*". The sight of the female canine from his rudely interrupted dream being simultaneously the last memory of his sleeping mind and the first thought that captured his waking mind after he had registered he had fallen out of his bed, he realized he had in fact dreamt of Samantha. The sound of her laughter still echoed through his mind; it was then that he realized that while he had seen her smile during the last night, he had not actually seen or heard her laugh. Fueled by the vivid dream and invigorated by the pure joy the Samantha in his dream had infected him with, he knew deep down he had to change that. While getting his bearings after his sudden awakening, a look at his clock radio confirmed that he still had a few hours before their second common night shift would start. An idea already starting to form in his mind, he set out to prepare his Christmas surprise for the coyotess that had even somehow managed to slip into his dreams.

Meanwhile, the coyotess' dreams took her to a redwood forest she might have visited with her foster parents during a hiking trip in her puphood, a little more a year after she had been adopted, on a weekend some time in September. Only she wasn't a teenager any more, but rather her adult self. During this camping trip, she had got lost while roaming the woods around the camp site, unable to find her way back before nightfall. It had been one of the first times she did not run away intentionally. She had spent the entire night wandering through the dark woods, fear of alienating her foster parents to the point they might lose their patience driving her on. The reunion with her parents the following morning, when a small search party of campers organized by her parents had found her not too far from the camp site, was one of the first genuinely happy moments she had spent together with them, a memory she cherished to the present day. There dream played out with one key difference however: Where she had wandered through the night alone in the real world, she wasn't alone in

her dream. She sensed the presence of another canine nearby, a presence stayed close by during the course of the night. It stayed ahead of her, never leaving the extent of her acoustic and olfactory perception, waiting for her to catch up when she failed to match its pace, purposefully leading her on a straight path through the woods. When darkness receded to give way to the first traces of the new day's light, she could finally make out voices in the distance, voices who were calling her name. Her mysterious protector revealed finally itself being a feral wolf, approaching her carefully. Curiously, it was not of a breed native to the Americas, but a specimen bearing the fur markings of European wolves. As it heard the voices calling in the distance, it nudged her towards the approaching sounds. Recognizing the voices of her foster parents amongst the group calling out for her, she turned back towards her feral kin before setting off to join them, kneeling down to embrace it, softly kissing it on the bridge of its snout. The first semi-conscious memory she could recall as she woke up from her slumber was the smell of an autumn forest in the early morning laden with tree resin, dew-covered moss and the heavy aroma of moist soil, as her dream faded into nothingness.

As she opened her eyes, she discovered she had wiggled herself free from her blankets, tightly hugging one of her pillows, and her snout entangled in a now very familiar scarf that she had somehow forgotten to take off before falling asleep.

As she glanced at her smartphone, she gasped: Failing to hear the alarm she had set as default wake-up time for days to come, she had slept over almost two hours! Leaving her with a little more than half an hour to get ready for work, she rushed through her wake-up routine, only taking the time to call her parents to wish them a *"Merry Christmas"* before rushing out of the door to catch the next bus that would take her to the CERN compound. After entering the premises and changing into her work attire, she was heading directly into the main control room, as she had done the evening before. This time however, Thomas seemed to have beaten her to the shift change, just seeming to have finished the handover with the supervising technicians of the day shift. After wrapping up the briefing with her own peers, they both saw off the remaining day shift with a couple of friendly *"Merry Christmas"* wishes.

When the two of them were alone in the large main control room, Thomas greeted the coyotess with a broad smile: *"Pleasure to meet you again, Dr. Williams! What do you think: Shall we have a better night than yesterday?"*

His joyous attitude notwithstanding and sensing that the wish to spend more time together was most definitely mutual, she couldn't resist to tease him regardless. With her best *all business* expression, she answered: *"Well, Dr. Richter, last night was pleasant, I will admit that. But isn't Christmas a time of peace and contemplation? I would love to enjoy exactly that. On my own, I mean."*

As she saw his ears droop and his beaming smile falter, she only managed to see him suffering for about three seconds. Even with evident misery attenuating his enthusiasm, he still looked adorable as he tilted his head, as to make sure he had understood her words correctly.

Seamlessly changing countenance from *all business* to a heartfelt smile, another poke found its mark on the hapless wolf's nose pad: *"Just kidding! So, what'd you come up with? ... Thomas?"*

The wolf violently shook his head, as if to get water out of his fur. *"Ah ... uh*

... I ... I thought, since I'm supposed to do my rounds at the beginning of each shift ... maybe you could join me? I mean, you must have seen the accelerator tunnel on the tour they give for new employees, but ... the really cool stuff you only get to see" - pointing at himself, lopsided grin - "in company of a certified technician!"

"Well, go on then, Mr. Certified Technician! Lead the way!"

And so he did. Arriving a good hour ahead of the coyotess, Thomas had been busy preparing a little Christmas surprise for her. First, he had scavenged the small pantry in his apartment for delicacies he thought she might enjoy based on last day's experience with the sour-cream cake they shared. Then he had spent the better part of an hour tinkering with the setup for a Christmas decorative installation that now adorned the small workshop area he had spent the first hours of yesterday's shift in. This and a set of cozy blankets and pillows had been added to the workshop before the night shift had begun, in preparation of a secluded impromptu Christmas dinner.

As the pair made their way from the control room into the catacombs that housed the particle accelerator, Thomas kept Samantha engaged in idle conversation. He led her through a portion of the tunnel that was usually off limits to anyone but the technical service personnel, pointing out interesting facts on the huge electro-magnets, cooling systems, electrical power supply and monitoring equipment that encased the actual particle accelerator mechanism.

When they finally approached the workshop area after a couple of minutes of unhurried walking, he asked the coyotess to wait for a moment before entering. After all, he had to switch on the Christmas decorations first.

All the coyotess heard in the following moments was the wolf rummaging around, and a subdued oath as he bumped into something, as he bid her to enter.

What had first seemed like an unremarkable workshop area to her came to life with the bright colors of several fairy lights that adorned some carefully arranged Christmas decorations (including a small Christmas tree that had been borrowed from the leftovers of a Christmas party a week past). A blanket had been spread on the floor, adorned with a few items of food and beverages and two pillows to recline on. "*Wonderful Christmas*" was playing from a pair of small speakers, quiet enough as not to disturb conversation. And in the middle of it all stood the wolf, having slipped out of one of his trademark hooded sweaters, revealing a t-shirt fitted with what seemed to be a LED display and another chain of fairy lights, head adorned with a Santa hat. He took two steps back towards the back wall of the workshop, where a part of the accelerator casing was running by. When the wolf came to a stop, the fairy lights and LED display he wore on him suddenly becoming active.

On the display, matching the colors the Christmas decorations spread across the room, an animated text scrolled by in sync to the wolf saying: "*Merry Christmas, Samantha!*"

She took in the sight in awestruck silence, words momentarily failing her as she contemplated what Thomas had been preparing for her as a Christmas surprise.

Once again, the wolf was at a loss for what to do as he mistook her awestruck complexion.

"You seemed to miss your folks pretty badly, so ... uh ... I ... I thought you ... might appreciate a ... a small Christmas dinner???"

When she still failed to answer, he decided to play the ace up his sleeve. Taking one more step towards the accelerator casing, he placed a paw on the surface of the metal tube. Upon contact, the electric currents running through the particle accelerator did their part in pretty instantly fluffing up his fur, making each single strand of hair stand on end, including his whiskers. As he had programmed a small microcontroller to do when an attached voltmeter would measure an increasing current, the text on the display changed to:

"Fluffy Christmas, Samantha!"

And as if on cue, the tilted head posture returned.

That finally snapped the coyotess out of her silence. The sight of the fluffed-up wolf and the accompanying Christmas wish made her burst out with laughter. A heartfelt, genuine laughter that made her whiskers tingle and her ears itch, a laughter that made her gasp for air.

To the wolf, it was the sound of rain drops falling on the sands of a desert, as if his dream had never ended and continued right at the last memory he had of it.

It was his turn to be awestruck as the coyotess practically pounced him, pulling him in a tight hug after she had regained some of her composure.

Snuggling against his chest, the top of her head caressing his chin, she finally found words: *"This is the sweetest thing anyone except for my parents has done for me. Thank you. Thank you so much!"*

As she hugged him closely, her own fur fluffed out, as the weak current running through the wolf now also ran its course through her own body.

Just in that moment, she realized she had completely failed to consider what she might give to the wolf she currently held in an intimate embrace for Christmas.

Thankfully, the trickstress in her quickly came up with a simple and effective solution.

Momentarily letting the wolf go, she retrieved the scarf she had carried with her with the intention to return it to Thomas. And so she did. Wrapping it around the back of his neck, she held on to both ends of the scarf and gave them a sharp tug. With a startled yelp, the wolf lost his balance, dropping to his knees. Samantha used the momentum of the wolf to twist him around her and have him drop to the ground completely, guiding his fall to have him come to rest on the blanket with his head propped up on one of the pillows he had brought with him.

Before the startled wolf could react, Samantha had him pinned underneath her, her hips straddling his lap. He only had a brief moment to register the predatory gleam that the coyotess eyed him with before she embraced him once again, pulling him up towards her only to lock their muzzles in a deep, hungry kiss. The moment their lips touched, the wolf went rigid. His brain was busy processing the coyotess caressing his lips and lightly grinding against his thighs at the same time, while his conscious mind was practically in a deadlock. Which was fine for the female canine who was savouring the taste of the wolf's lips, which matched the smell she had grown familiar with in an exquisite way. When she noticed the wolf did not return her kiss, she pressed her lips a bit tighter to his, bringing her own nose pad in direct contact with his, obstructing his nostrils and making it almost impossible for him to breathe. She pressed a paw to the back of his head to prevent him from breaking away from the kiss. After some more of the still one-sided intimate exchange, she noticed the wolf starting to

squirm, eyes going a bit wider than they had already been to begin with. Sensing it was time for some more trickster slyness, she loosened her grip on his head a bit to allow him some space to move. Which he promptly used to open his maw to draw a breath, tongue lolling out as he panted.

"I —"

He was cut off almost instantly when the coyotess literally saw her opening. She swiftly pushed back his snout against hers. Before the wolf could close his maw again, slipping her tongue past his teeth, locking their muzzles tightly. Unlike the first kiss, the second kiss was much more to her liking. As she let her tongue slowly slide around Thomas' teeth and maw, she was finally able to experience the full spectrum of the wolf's smell and taste. While definitely not an experienced kisser, Thomas finally relaxed enough to lean into the kiss on his own accord. She saw his eyes roll back and close in the brief moments she hadn't her own eyes closed, noticing how his tongue started to battle hers in his attempt to return the kiss more actively.

While the male seemed content with the state of affairs, this wouldn't do for the coyotess for much longer. Satisfying as the unbroken passionate kiss was, marvelling each other's respective aroma and taste, hot breaths exchanged as they inhaled and exhaled back and forth through their locked muzzles, she wanted more. More of him!

So she guided his right paw behind her back to rest between her shoulder blades, and his left paw to the small of her back. Since she no longer needed to hold Thomas' head in place for sharing the kiss, she mirrored the grip on the wolf and stood up from where she had been sitting on the wolf's lap, pulling him upwards with her. Once she was confident both of them were standing firm, she began to explore the wolf's backside with both her paws, squeezing and massaging his backside. As she roamed towards his lower back, she realized his tail was wagging, her own tail mimicking the motion on its own accord.

As she ventured low enough to give his butt a firm squeeze, the wolf reflexively tensed up again, pushing firmly against her hips. Both their eyes went wide on the sudden and intense physical contact between the most sensitive parts of their respective anatomies.

Conveniently, it was time to break their second kiss to replenish their oxygen supply.

For a few moments, an unspoken question hung between them, before the coyotess grabbed the lower edge of the wolf's t-shirt and began pulling it upwards.

He had meanwhile gotten a clue where this was heading, so he moved his paws to grab her wrists in a gentle hold.

"Sam, what ... are you doing?"

She didn't answer with words, but with a growl that was decisively more than playful. Nipping at his right ear, which drew a yelp from the wolf for the bite was not exactly gentle, she wriggled free of his hold, one paw moving to pinch his left butt cheek *hard*, the other coming to rest between his legs, getting hold of his most precious parts and squeezing (thankfully not as hard as the paw on his backside).

"I am unwrapping my Christmas present! Less talking, more action, pup!!!"

She kissed him again, a mounting sense of urgency backing up the already thriving passion. Before Thomas managed to protest again, she had pulled the t-shirt over his head, leaving him standing bare-chested in front of the coyotess.

As she began to unbuckle the belt of his pants, he briefly managed to separate from the coyotess again.

"Sam ... Samantha ... are you sure about this?"

This drew a strange mix between growl and yip from her, as she grabbed his snout by the chin, forcing him to look her straight in the eyes. Another soft kiss on his nose pad.

"What about you? Don't you want to unwrap your own present?"

On that question, she saw him avert his eyes, ears and whiskers drooping. She suddenly realized what kind of reason his hesitation might have. Her features softening, she softly asked him: *"Am I your first time?"*

When the wolf didn't react, she softly scratched his ear with her free paw, Thomas once more looking back at her.

"Then I should better make this a night to remember. Do you trust me?"

Nodding his consent, the coyotess' smile widened to show her array of needle-sharp teeth.

"Then let me take the lead!"

She guided the wolf's paws to the hem of her blouse, leaving her own paws on top of his while pulling it over her head, not bothering to unbutton it. She left pulling the garment off her arms to the wolf, again taking hold of his wrists to guide him towards the lower end of her shoulder blades, where he would need to unclasp her bra. Taking the opportunity to softly nibble along his neckside and down his neck scruff, she smiled inwardly as he lost concentration while blindly trying to open the clasp that held her bra in place. When he finally managed to unclasp the offending piece of underwear, she stepped back. The laces of the underwear still being held in the wolf's paws, the bra slipped off her chest, allowing her to pull back her arms through the shoulder straps, giving Thomas an unobstructed view of her breasts. Jaw slightly ajar, the wolf's focus of view was moving back between the coyotess' face and her chest. Just as it was supposed to!

She renewed the intimate contact between their bodies, again guiding the wolf's paws towards her breasts. She let his paw pads softly massage her mammarys as she moved his paws for him in a few circular motions before he understood the message, carefully continuing the massage, gradually gaining more confidence. He quickly figured out by himself that her nipples were an especially sensitive area, subsequently donating more of his ministrations to them. Meanwhile, the coyotess returned the favour by resuming her ministrations of his butt cheeks and his back, tensing and scratching along the fur of his backside each time the tendance of his rough paw or toe pads sent an electric shiver through her, two times even leaving welts under the wolf's pelt. She began to alternate between panting, licking and nipping at the wolf's neck, ears and snout.

After a while, she let her paws wander to the front side of his pants again, this time not trying to unbuckle his belt directly, but rather sliding one paw beneath his underwear. She carefully slid over his sheath, until she felt the pair of soft-furred orbs underneath, squeezing them without two layers of cloth in between. She instantly had the attention of her partenaire-en-amour, who in turn moved one of his paws towards the waistband of the coyotess' pair of trousers. As he ventured further down between her legs into uncharted territory, he was mesmerized by the intense heat he began to feel. The silky fur he slid over felt slightly humid, the sensation increasing as he suddenly heard the coyotess utter a high-pitched yowl, tensing and shuddering against him.

Urgency turned into hunger as the smaller canine felt her need reach new, fever-pitched heights. She refocused her attention on Thomas' belt, unbuckling his belt-buckle with nimble fingers. Before the wolf had even realized, button and zipper of his jeans had been opened, and both trouser and underwear were pulled down towards his knees, exposing him to the ravenous gaze of the coyotess. She in turn would not tolerate any more delay as she guided his paws to her own pair of trousers plus accompanying underwear, unceremoniously leaving them resting against her ankles.

She was impressed by the wolf's ability to retain at least a certain amount of rational thought while sight, sound, smell and touch of her played her part in the more primal parts of his mind taking control of his actions. Thomas quickly bowed down to grab the blanket and pillows that still lay on the floor. Holding them against his stomach with one arm, he wasted no time in using his other arm to clear away tools and electronic parts on a nearby work bench area that was just large enough to accommodate Samantha. Propping up the collected pillows and blanket on the table, he swiftly returned his attention to the coyotess. She in turn wrapped her arms around his neck. Starting another kiss, she hoisted her legs around the wolf's hips, their hips joining without obstructing garments for the first time. She let him take his brief turn in leading on as she allowed herself to be carried to the table and to be laid down on the provided padding. Twitching and squirming against the wolf made her legs kick, which were still constrained by her only partially taken-off legwear.

Thomas, on this occasion particularly happy to help, continued to caress the coyotess' inner thighs with one paw, while using the other trying to untie the shoelaces of Samantha's footwear. Precious seconds passed as the coyotess shuddered and squirmed under the unceasing touch of the wolf's paw. With a frustrated growl due to a lack of progress, Thomas made short work of the shoe laces by simply biting through them and removing the now easily removable paw-shoes and socks underneath. The coyotess' crumpled trousers followed suit. Barely noticing his own trousers were still tangled around his ankles, he discarded both his pair of sneakers and pants. There was a lot to be said in favour Velcro strip and flex jeans in case nature called.

Able to focus his attention fully back on his female, nostrils flaring to catch the tantalizing scent emanating from her nether regions, the wolf virtually pounced her. The coyotess however would not allow him to satisfy her the way he obviously intended. Swiftly sitting up and Nimbly deflecting his attempt to get a hold of her, she dug her fingers into his cheek fluff. Yelping more in surprise than actual pain, the wolf's advance came to a sudden halt. Having gotten him where she wanted him, she pushed his head downwards, nudging him between her legs.

As she felt his snout brush along her inner thighs, his whiskers tickling the thin white fur there, her breathing first shook, then arrested as his cold nose pad touched her spade. The alternating sensations of his cold nose pad touching her most intimate spot, and the hot blasts of his breath as he exhaled between sucking deep breaths to sample her scent, made her shudder and kick her legs even more, holding on to his cheek fluff for dear life.

She approached the edge of a first climax as the wolf's tongue started caressing her sweet spot with lavish licks. What he lacked in finesse and experience, he most certainly made up with enthusiasm. Her resolve almost breaking then and there, she still managed to push Thomas' head away far enough to prevent

him from stimulating her even further.

His eyes refocused as some coherent thought returned, uncertain why she had denied him further access to this heavenly spot between her legs.

Wordlessly, she slid off the work bench's top and pulled him to his feet. Resolved to grant him the same kind of pleasure he had granted her, she knelt down in front of him. Delighted to see Seargent Thomas junior already stood at ease, it would take little effort to get him to full attention. Kissing the tip of his canine member, then giving it a long lick from base to tip, the wolf whined loudly, starting to thrust upwards reflexively as his knot started to swell. She refrained from pleasuring him further this way, as she knew he would lack the endurance to fully enjoy the pleasure muzzle, teeth and tongue could bring on top of what was to be the climax of this very special Christmas present. She wanted him to experience a proper tie as much as she desired for him to properly pleasure her.

The thought alone turned hunger into craving. However, discretion was the better part of valor. So before she would abandon any modicum of self-control, one last safeguard would be needed. She had kept a condom close at hand; tearing open the packaging with her sharp teeth, she provided Thomas junior with a proper attire with expert flicks of her wrist. What happened in Vegas might have stayed in Vegas, but what she had learned in Vegas, she had taken with her.

The wolf himself was in heaven; the coyotess' attention to his most sensitive organ had left him panting heavily, his thick winter fur in disarray. He jolted as if having received an electrical shock as she hugged him once more, sharing another deeply passionate kiss with the wolf.

In a span of less than a day, the coyotess had fallen for the wolf head over snout, as the wolf had fallen for her. Just a day ago, the coyotess could not have imagined she would feel the breathtaking thrill of need, mixed with the deep affection she had developed for the wolf, who had turned out to be the very factor she had needed to mend her broken heart.

To the wolf, Samantha had become his trickstress, the one being in his life who had managed to snatch away his heart and become the very embodiment of his deepest and most intense yearnings. A raging flood of hormones and pheromones had swept over him, making his blood boil and his heart beat like a drum. She was temptation, she was desire. She was the fire that set his world ablaze, consuming him in a raging tempest of lust and heat.

When she led him back to their makeshift bedding on the work bench, he followed willingly. She lay down on her belly, legs spread apart, tail raised high. It was all the incentive he needed to step behind her, his member brushing lightly against her spade. Bowing over her back, he kissed her on the top of her muzzle as he rolled his hips forward, slowly entering her. Heat, tightness, her inner walls squeezing around him. Both cried out almost simultaneously, her cry of passion a yip, his a throaty growl. He slowly pulled back, only to roll his hips forward again. Pure bliss engulfed both as he pushed deeper and deeper into her with each thrust, the rhythm of his movements becoming quicker with each cycle. His paws found her breasts, caressing her as much as holding on to her for leverage. She felt him nibble at her ears, kiss the small of her back, lick the nape of her neck. Soon she felt his knot pushing against her already strained entrance, knowing instinctively that it would not be long now until one single desire that would overwhelm the wolf: To make her his, to claim her in

the deepest, most intimate and wholesome union two canines were able to share.

His thrusts became more intense, the rhythm of his motions quickened even more. Breathing raggedly, snarling. Then it was his turn to bite down on her neck scruff. She desperately pushed into his thrusts, the intense feeling of being filled to the brink pushed her to new heights of pleasure, the telltale signs of an impending orgasm shaking her body.

With one final, mighty thrust, he tied her. The heat and pressure her inner walls exerted on his member drove the wolf over the edge. With what little room he still had left to move, his thrusts became frantic, overcoming the last remnants of self-control in both the coyotess and the wolf himself.

They climaxed almost simultaneously, the coyotess high-pitched yowl and the wolf's trademark howl forming an intense cacophony that carried far through the tunnel system of the particle accelerator.