



THE
ALPHA WOLF'S
HUMAN MATE

THE WOLVES OF ANCHORAGE

BRITTANY WHITE

THE ALPHA WOLF'S HUMAN MATE

THE WOLVES OF ANCHORAGE SERIES

BRITTANY WHITE

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CONTENTS

1. [Jen](#)
2. [Knox](#)
3. [Jen](#)
4. [Knox](#)
5. [Jen](#)
6. [Knox](#)
7. [Jen](#)
8. [Knox](#)
9. [Jen](#)
10. [Knox](#)
11. [Jen](#)
12. [Knox](#)
13. [Jen](#)
14. [Knox](#)
15. [Jen](#)
16. [Knox](#)
17. [Jen](#)
18. [Knox](#)
19. [Jen](#)
20. [Knox](#)
21. [Jen](#)
22. [Knox](#)
23. [Jen](#)
24. [Knox](#)
25. [Jen](#)
26. [Knox](#)
27. [Jen](#)
28. [Knox](#)
29. [Jen](#)
30. [Knox](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank you for reading!](#)

[The Alpha Wolf's Shattered Mate](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Also by Brittany White](#)

[About the Author](#)

Exclusive Offer

JEN

“Are you okay?”

Jen Jackson lifted her head off the table. She had laid face-down on her bag, and it hadn't made the best pillow. She could already feel the ache in her neck from the weird angle. She was only twenty-five, but she felt like she was one hundred.

“Yes. I just finished a twelve-hour shift in the ER,” she said. She rubbed her temples, sitting up straighter when she realized it was Dr. Montgomery. He regularly worked long shifts, much longer than the other doctors, so she wasn't sure why she was complaining to him, of all people.

“Go on home and get some sleep,” he said.

She stood up, but caught her leg in the chair, stumbling forward. She would have busted her face, except he grabbed her arm.

“Okay, you can't drive like this,” he said.

In a daze, she just nodded.

“You can sleep in here. Is there anyone you need to call?”

She shook her head. “I just moved here. I don't know anyone.”

“Never mind,” he said. “I'm taking you home.” He handed her a bottle of water and a muffin. It smelled like cinnamon. “Eat that,” he said.

He led her out of the building, and she followed him, not protesting at all. It wasn't like her to get in a car with a man she barely knew, but everyone at the hospital adored him. So surely it was fine.

“Eat,” he said. “You look shaky.”

She didn't want to get crumbs in his car, but he kept insisting that she needed to eat. Speaking of, he drove a very practical looking truck, instead of

some of the fancier cars the other doctors drove. Of course, living in Alaska, a practical truck was the smarter decision.

She bit into the muffin and closed her eyes, chewing carefully.

“Hey,” he said as he pulled out of the parking lot. “The elementary school where my son attends needs a nurse. I shouldn’t be telling you that, when we have the same employer, but if you need a change of pace, I’ll give you a reference.”

An elementary school? She had plenty of experience working in pediatrics. “Thank you,” she said. She’d done her best to cope with the hours in her schedule, but the unpredictable schedule of the ER shifts was punishing her body. “I’ll apply as soon as I wake up.”

“I can’t say much, but there are kids there who need an RN, and they haven’t found one yet,” he said.

She was needed at the ER, of course. But it would be nice to develop a real relationship with the kids. At the ER, the goal was to send the patient home, and in more serious cases, admit them. But she rarely saw them again.

As a school nurse, she imagined she’d get to know the students and the rest of the staff. At the ER, she didn’t always work with the same people day in and day out. Having co-workers that she got to hang out with sounded pretty nice. It would be an easy, uneventful job.

She finished her muffin and fell asleep in his truck, despite doing her best to stay awake. Once she was home and tucked into bed, she dreamed about her potential new job and how much fun she’d have once the hardest part of her job involved choosing which unicorn band aids to stock.

KNOX

“**H**ow much for the boat?” Knox Hudson asked. “And what about the jet skis?”

The salesman named a price, but Knox wasn't listening. He wanted to go boating, and he was tired of waiting for his cousins to be free, so he was going to buy his own. Never mind that he wasn't supposed to be spending any money.

“I'll take them both,” Knox said.

His parents had threatened to put a limit on their credit card, but they hadn't done it yet. He was tired of his motorcycle, so a boat seemed like the perfect solution to keep him entertained. Next he was going to get his pilot's license.

He chuckled, imagining the look on his parents' faces when he bought a prop plane. They'd lose their shit.

Serves them right. All of them.

Knox had wanted to join the Navy when he turned eighteen. He'd wanted to go on to become a Marine. Then, he'd changed his mind and wanted to join the CIA or the FBI. But his parents had said it wasn't a good idea, and his Alpha, Roman, backed them up.

It had been a real blow.

All three of them said he wasn't self-disciplined enough. A wolf shifter who went into the armed forces, or some kind of high-level law enforcement, had to be 'on' all the time, they said. He could not falter or get sloppy.

“What if you got shot? What if you're supposed to be injured? Do you have what it takes to learn how to react?” Roman had asked him that question

several times. “Our firefighters and smokejumpers do. Every decision they make has to be carefully considered. They have to weigh revealing their abilities against saving the lives of humans, every second. You can never let your guard down.”

“You’re saying I don’t have what it takes,” Knox had said.

“I’m saying that you’re twenty-two years old, and you need to grow up.”

That had been six years ago. Now, Knox was twenty-eight, and he’d given Roman and his parents the middle finger, both literally and metaphorically. They didn’t think he had what it took to be in the military part of the United States government? Fine. Fuck them.

He proceeded to go do exactly what he wanted, when he wanted.

And maybe Knox hadn’t reacted in the most mature way. Instead of buckling down and showing them he *could* be rigid and disciplined, just like they wanted, he’d given them a mental ‘fuck you’ and gone on to do exactly as he pleased.

He was sick of them not trusting him. So, he quit trying to make them happy. He partied with witches and wizards. He drank, he did drugs – the more magic included in the drugs, the better. He stayed out all night. He slept with any female that was willing, shifter or human. He refused to get a job. And most fun of all, he spent his family’s money.

“We’ll deliver the boat in about an hour,” the salesperson said.

Knox grinned. He could go home, sleep, and still have time to go out on the water in time for the sunset. There was a witch he’d been sleeping with and she wanted to go out for a “romantic sunset dinner.”

She was under no illusions that they were serious, or even dating, but she knew Knox had money, and she was happy to exploit that fact. And he was happy to allow it.

After he got the boat delivery squared away, he headed out to a human nightclub. He stayed there half the night, then went to an underground fighting ring – as a fighter, not a spectator. That probably wasn’t what his parents or his Alpha had in mind when they said he needed self-control, but so far it had been an excellent way to practice.

In the ring, he had to pull his punches. He had to make sure he never harmed a human.

He’d had to learn how to fall, and how to make it look like a hit from a human had an impact on him. And it was fun. He’d been pulling off this particular subterfuge for six months, and no one in his pack had a clue.

Take that, Alpha!

Sure, he was a little bit resentful. Who wouldn't be? For most people who applied to the CIA, it was the agency that ejected them, not their family or their pack. He never even had a chance to try.

Every so often, Knox considered going to live with humans. Roman would not stop him. And his parents would only make a halfhearted attempt. But he could go if he wanted to. He had not completely ruled it out.

Once he was home, the sun was beginning to rise. He pulled his blackout curtains closed and went to bed. Sometime later, he woke to the sound of really loud voices and an insistent banging on his door. He ignored it.

A few minutes later, there was a buzzing sound, and then sunlight streamed into his room.

He pulled the covers off his head. Both of his parents stood in the doorway. He'd bolted his door shut, but they must've removed the entire lock.

Yep. His father was holding a drill.

"What?" he said.

"Get up." His dad kicked the frame of his bed.

"Now," his mother said.

Shit. He checked his watch. It was 2:15 in the afternoon. If they were both home in the middle of the day, this was bad news for him.

His father was waving a piece of paper. "Did you buy a boat?"

"Yeah."

"We're done, Knox. We're out of patience. We love you, and we always will. You're welcome to live here for as long as you'd like, but the money is done."

"You're cutting me off?"

"Yes," his mother said. "It's something we should have done a long time ago."

He rubbed his eyes and stared at the plush rug on the floor in front of him. He was having trouble focusing. "Why?"

"Because we are not doing you any favors. You're twenty-eight years old. You'll be thirty before you know it. And you've done nothing with your life."

He pushed himself up. He had to grab onto the dresser, which didn't help his case. "I tried!"

"Not hard enough!" his father roared. He slammed his fist against the doorframe. "You said you wanted to do something, and when you met the

first moment of resistance, you gave up. You rebelled like a teenager.”

Knox held his hand up, showing them both his middle finger. Childish? Maybe. But he was past caring.

“Look, we didn’t come in here to berate you,” his dad said, “or go over what happened in the past. We’re here to talk about right now.”

Sure. They’d been down this road before. Something had to give. Knox couldn’t keep living under their thumb like this.

JEN

Three days later, Jen had a new job.

She had a great time setting up her new office. At the hospital, she hadn't had her own space, but at the school, she had an entire room to herself. Sure, it was small, and it would be filled with children at times, but it was hers. She even had a desk with her own computer.

She soon learned that decorating an elementary office was fun, but it took some creativity. She didn't have much of a budget, and she'd taken a pay cut to be there, but she made big bright flowers with tissue paper. She hung them from the ceiling and taped them to the walls. Then, she hung a bright strip of blue paper on the door, ready for the children to draw on.

From her training, she'd learned that most of her patients would come in with scraped knees and elbows, but a few would have to get their blood sugar checked. And several would have to swallow pills. She hoped the bright decor would help distract them. The principal told her that someone broke an arm or a leg every few months, but in that case, they'd call for an ambulance.

She went to each class and met every kid. There was no way she'd remember all their names at first, but the principal did, so she knew it was possible. She called all the parents of the children who needed daily motoring and medication to try and get to know how she could best serve their children.

The staff had also been so kind and helpful. During the hour before school started on her first day, at least five teachers brought her a welcome gift of flowers or candy.

The children ran out for their first recess, shrieking all the way. She

checked the schedule. This was when the youngest children went out, the kindergarten and first graders.

She sat down at her computer and started updating her paperwork. She could see most of the playground and was glad she had such a nice view. Part of her would miss the bustle of the hospital, but most of her was glad to be settled in such a nice place.

She happened to glance up, just in time to see a commotion. Then, the walk-talkies crackled to life, and she heard one of the teachers report what had happened.

Apparently, one of the children had thrown a rock. But no one had been hit, so the teacher stayed put and called her students to her. Most of her class was bunched into a crowd, listening to the teacher. The other teacher went toward the slide, trying to round up a few stragglers who weren't listening.

A movement caught her eyes. It was a child. In a place he shouldn't be.

Oh no. The bottom fell out of Jen's stomach. It was *Jonathon* climbing to the top of the swing set. He was Dr. Montgomery's son. All of the children were equally wonderful, but Dr. Montgomery had gotten her this job. And his wife was a teacher at the school, although she was out on maternity leave. It seemed particularly wrong that their child should be injured on Jen's watch.

The little boy was nimble and was climbing quickly. Jen looked around, but both teachers were still dealing with the rock-throwing incident.

She pressed the button on her walkie-talkie, but no one answered. She tapped on the glass. Too quiet. She stood up. If she took time to call the principal, it would be too late.

She raced from her office outside. She didn't scream his name. She didn't want to spook him.

"Jonathon," she said quietly.

His sister Lexi had spotted him now. "Jonathon! Get down right now!" his sister shouted. "You know better."

His head whirled toward Lexi. He stuck his tongue out at her, and that's when it happened.

He fell.

Jen screamed and ran forward. She wanted to catch him, but it happened too quickly.

He hit the ground. His head hit the metal edge of the pole with an audible crack.

Jen ran. She went through the checklist in her head of what to do first.

He could be bleeding excessively. He could have a spinal cord injury. His skull could be fractured. He might need CPR.

She reached his side, prepared for the worst.

But he was already rolling over. “Don’t move,” she said, hands hovering. “Jonathon. Stay still.”

It was too late. He rolled away from her and sat up, rubbing the back of his head. He gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry, Nurse Jen.”

His sister knelt beside them. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Um. Yes. Sorry for climbing to the top.”

Jen was baffled. She was beyond grateful that he appeared fine. She would not have relished taking Dr. and Mrs. Montgomery’s son to the ER on her first day at the school. But he shouldn’t be coherent. He should have a concussion, at the very least.

Had she misunderstood? Had her eyesight gotten bad? This child should be badly injured.

“Jonathon. Hey. Sit down for just a second.”

He looked panicked for a moment, then his sister plopped down next to him. “He really is sorry,” she said.

The little girl kept glancing at him, as if she was afraid he was going to get into trouble. “Is he going to get a time out? Or miss the treasure box?”

“That’s not up to me,” she said. “The important thing is that Jonathon is okay. But I will have to talk to his teacher about not climbing again.” He looked like he was about to cry, so she tapped his shoe. “Hey. No one is upset with you. I was just worried.”

He nodded and wiped his grimy face with his sleeve.

“Can you tell me your teacher’s name?” Concussion protocol for kids was quite different from the protocol for adults.

“It’s usually my mom, but right now it’s Mrs. Banks.”

“Good.”

“Let me look at your eyes,” Jen said.

They seemed totally normal. But how? “Now I’m going to touch the back of your head.” She pulled out the gloves she kept in her apron and pulled them on.

A few pieces of bark fell from his hair as she touched his scalp, but there was no blood. There wasn’t even a laceration. Or a bump.

“Okay. Let’s go into my office now.” She pulled her gloves off and tucked them into her pocket. She stood up and held her hand out to him. He

didn't seem to need it, but she wanted to reassure him that he wasn't in trouble.

"But I'm supposed to go to music class," he said. "We're playing drums."

"I'll let your teacher know. Besides, drums might hurt your head."

He made a face but didn't argue. His hand was sticky as he took hers. When he stood up, he didn't seem shaky at all.

His sister gave him a tight hug. "See you," she said.

Once Jen was inside her office, she had Jonathon sit on the bed reserved for her sick students and gave him a peppermint and a can of playdoh. She needed a minute to recover.

He could have died.

But he didn't, she reminded herself. She still had to call his father. Anytime a student was injured, she was supposed to write up an incident report. It didn't matter if the injury was a scratch or a bug bite. If the student was in her care, then she documented it.

She pulled out the necessary form and laid it aside. Her hands were shaking too much to write or type. She stuck her head in the principal's office and filled him in on what happened. He agreed that she should absolutely send Jonathon home, even if she couldn't find any evidence of injury.

"Let his dad decide," the principal said. "He's the doctor."

She pulled up Jonathon's file and picked up the school phone to call his father.

"Nurse Jen, who are you calling?" Jonathon asked.

"Your father. If I don't reach him, I'll call your mother."

"She's about to have a baby," Jonathon said.

"I know."

"Please don't call them."

"I have to. It's part of my job."

His little face crumpled.

Why was he scared? Most students this age loved to call their parents if they weren't in trouble. They loved the idea of getting out of school early. She handed him a sheet of stickers and a piece of paper. "Take it easy. It won't take long for me to call. You can work on some art in the meantime."

He didn't peel the stickers off but sat there dejectedly.

She called his father's cell phone first. "May I speak to Dr. Montgomery?"

"This is he."

“Hi. This is Nurse Jen, at the school. Jonathon climbed to the top of the swing set and fell off. He seems uninjured, but after something that potentially involves a head injury, I would feel better if he went home for the day, and the principal agrees.”

There was a long pause, and then he cleared his throat. “I’ll be right there.”

Jonathon continued to sit there and stare at the floor, making no effort to play. He seemed to grow more tense as each minute went on. Maybe he felt worse than he let on. Or maybe he didn’t relish going home for some reason. But why?

She worked on the incident report, and not long after Ian arrived.

He went straight to Jonathon. She kept a close eye on Jonathon’s reaction.

Ian knelt in front of his son, but she was certain she saw a look of irritation on his face instead of worry. But in a flash, it was gone, and he was hugging Jonathon. “Why don’t we stop by the ER, and we can get a kid’s doctor to check your head, okay?”

“Okay,” Jonathon said.

He lifted Jonathon into his arms and smiled. “Thanks, Jen. I knew you would be perfect for this job.”

“Wait,” she said. “I know you’re the doctor, but sometimes we’re too close to see a problem...” Shit. Was she trying to lecture him on how to parent? That never ended well. She really dreaded bringing this up, but she had no choice. As a healthcare professional, she had to point this out to Jonathon’s father.

“Um. I saw Jonathon fall. I cannot stress enough that he should be injured. I’m beyond grateful that he’s not, but it’s possible he has a condition. Something genetic maybe? I’m not sure he’s feeling any pain either.”

Ian stared at her while she spoke and nodded along. He didn’t seem angry or offended, which was good, but instead he looked blank. Most parents, especially a doctor in this situation, would have a strong reaction. Whether it was panic at the idea that his child might have a problem, or anger at her for the suggestion that he’d missed his son’s health problems.

But Ian looked blank. Then he recovered. “Thank you. I’m going to take him to the ER right now. And I’ll call one of my friends who’s a geneticist and talk to her about what could cause this issue.” Then he was gone.

Jen sat back down and stared at her computer screen. That had gone better than it could have. She’d hadn’t expected Ian to fly into a rage, but she

had expected him to be able to discuss the situation with her. Apparently, that wasn't going to happen.

Well. That was a great way to start your new job, Jen. Maybe her hands would stop shaking by the end of the day.

KNOX

At his parents' request, the Alpha showed up to berate Knox. But as far as Alphas went, Roman wasn't so bad. But that didn't mean Knox wanted to listen to his lecture. Again.

He'd heard it all before. He could name the high points Roman would cover: the responsibilities of living in a pack, not being wasteful, setting a good example, doing his part, blah blah blah.

As Roman went through each part of his mindless lecture, Knox nodded his head and tried to look interested.

"Don't you want to be taken seriously?" Roman asked.

That was a new one.

He was about to answer when Roman's phone rang.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm getting an emergency call."

Roman left the house and marched out into the woods. Knox guessed it was to ensure they wouldn't overhear the panicking shifter on the other end of the line. Roman was the Alpha, but everyone liked him. The pack members treated him like a combination of surrogate father, older brother, pastor, confessor, mentor, and therapist. It had to be an absolute drag.

Roman came back about fifteen minutes later. "I have an idea," he said. "About your situation."

"What situation?" Knox asked.

"Shh. First, let me tell you about that phone call. I have the caller's permission."

Okay, now that did sound kind of interesting. Knox put his phone down

and nodded.

“It was Dr. Montgomery,” Roman said. “His son attends the private school right outside of Anchorage. His daughter goes there too, and his mate teaches there.”

Knox nodded. He was vaguely aware that Ian’s mate was a teacher. She was a hot lion shifter. That was the important part in his mind.

“Well, there was an incident. As you know, we train our pups to be discreet. But little Jonathon climbed to the very top of a high swing set. And then he fell off. Of course, he was fine, but now the nurse is alarmed and she’s asking questions.”

“Did she see a security recording of it?” Knox asked.

“No. She saw it with her own eyes.”

“Damn.” He went to the refrigerator and got a beer. He offered Roman a beer, but he refused. “So why are you telling me all of this?” Knox asked.

Roman grinned at him. “Because you’re going to smooth this over.”

“Me?” They didn’t trust him to do anything worthwhile. Why in the hell would they trust him with this school nurse?

“Yes, you. You wanted responsibility. Well, this is your chance. I’m busy, and Ian and Nova are about to have a baby. Can you handle this? If you can, then you can start having more responsibilities in the pack. If we can trust you with this school nurse, then we can let you do more and more, until you’re ready to finally branch out and try law enforcement.”

He’d all but given up on his old dreams. He wasn’t sure he still wanted any of that. But the truth was that he was tired of being considered a fuck up. He was tired of being treated like a child.

His parents were cutting him off financially, but if he made the Alpha happy, then maybe he could get back in their good graces.

And if he cleaned up his act at the same time, then that was a bonus.

It was his chance. To prove himself. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

JEN

Jen trusted Dr. Montgomery and his wife, but something was off. She was a mandated reporter, and she had to make sure Jonathon was okay.

He was her first priority. Upsetting his dad, a local doctor, and his mother, a fellow staff member, was secondary.

She made a vow to herself. *I'll keep an eye on him.*

She decided she needed a peek at his home life, but that was complicated. She and his father weren't friends, exactly, and she'd only met his mother once, at a hospital function, since she was already out on maternity leave.

But stopping by his house would give her a good idea of the situation.

Ah. She had an idea. She'd take a baby gift to Mrs. Montgomery. The school had held a baby shower a week before she started working there, so Jen had missed it. She could buy a gift and drop it off at their house. That was a totally normal thing for a coworker to do. And after the baby was born, she'd make them dinner and drop it off, just to check up.

But when she went to look up Nova's address in the staff directory, it was on a road she'd never heard of.

She went to a department store anyway and selected a gift off the registry. She'd never had a baby, but she'd had plenty of friends who had. Most of the gifts were practical instead of whimsical, and she chose a sling-style baby carrier made from all-natural fabrics. Nova seemed kind of earthy, and Jen could see her using the carrier.

She wrapped it carefully at home with mint-green paper and tied it up with a big yellow bow. She wrote a nice card about how she looked forward

to working with Nova in the future. Jen genuinely meant what she wrote, even if the reason behind the sentiment was a bit devious. She wasn't a person who would ever want to manipulate anyone, but she *was* worried. She could not shake the feeling that something was weird. If she didn't act, and something happened to Jonathon, she would never forgive herself.

Once she knew he was safe, then she'd move on.

"Do you know where Mrs. Montgomery lives?" she asked the principal. "I have a baby gift for her."

"No. I've never been there." He shrugged. "She's invited us all out for dinner, but we always go to a restaurant."

Jen put the address in her GPS, but nothing came up. Jen would just have to go looking for it. She followed the map toward the area where it was supposed to be but found a dead end. On the other side of the dead end, there was a gate, complete with a "private property" sign and a "no trespassing" sign.

There was also a video camera. Underneath, it said, "twenty-four-hour surveillance." Jen had never known anyone who lived behind a gate like this.

Were they rich? As a doctor, Ian would make a good salary, and teachers were paid well in Anchorage, but not this level of wealth. Unless they were just paranoid. Were they part of some kind of northern mafia? A crime ring? Why would they hide themselves away?

Shit. Now they'd see that she was here, thanks to the cameras. She wondered if it was monitored by guards, but there was no intercom button to push, not like rich people had in the movies. She considered getting out and speaking to the camera but thought that might be weird.

She'd have to settle for texting Ian and Nova.

She'd do it now. She had no doubt they'd see her on the camera. Maybe they even had some kind of alert system for when a car drove up.

Hi, Ian and Nova. It's Jen from school. I have a gift for your new little one. I was going to drop it by, but your gate is locked. I'll drop it off at the hospital tomorrow. Can't wait to meet your new baby!

Hopefully, that was sufficient to make them think she'd really only come for the baby gift. She drove away, glancing over her shoulder, but no one was there.

KNOX

Before he had a chance to get out the door to pick Jonathon and Lexi up for school, Roman was knocking at his door.

Knox checked the time. He wasn't late. He'd actually be early, if he left right now. So what was the problem?

He'd even gotten up in time to make coffee, and the scent of roasted coffee beans filled his house. It was actually a nice way to start the day. It had been a long time since he'd gotten up this early. Usually, he was still awake when the sun was coming up.

"Jen, the nurse that you're going to be meeting, drove up to our gate last night around 7:00 p.m.," Roman said.

Knox put his coffee cup down. "What? Why?"

"Her story was that she wanted to deliver a baby gift to Ian and Nova."

"But that wasn't true?"

"We don't know. She *did* deliver a gift to the hospital this morning. She left it with the front desk, and Ian picked it up. It's a legit gift, something they registered for at the store."

"How'd she find us?"

"The school directory."

"It has our address listed?" Now that shocked Knox. He thought they stayed off the grid, as much as they could.

"Everyone who works gives the main road address on their work forms. We've tried other ways, and it's better to have a private road than a fake address," Roman explained.

That made sense to Knox and once again it was a testament to Roman's

willingness to join the modern world. Some Alphas would just say, “Nope, we are not doing this,” and eliminate the threat and complications by not allowing them to participate in the larger world. For the first time, Knox truly understood why having a modern pack was so freaking complex.

“Do we think she’s a hunter? Or are we sure she’s not a shifter hiding her true self?” Knox asked.

“Both good questions. She’s definitely not a shifter. Spells are only effective if another shifter isn’t close, and Ian talked to her quite a bit, and he couldn’t detect any subterfuge.” Roman clapped him on the back. “I have to go. I just wanted you to know that she’s perceptive, and she’s persistent. More so than we knew.”

Great, Knox thought. What could possibly go wrong?



“UNCLE KNOX!” Jonathon yelled as Knox walked into Ian’s yard. He was still on time, even after the unscheduled visit from Roman.

Jonathon ran up and hugged Knox like he did it every day, repeating the “uncle” part.

Had his parents spent the entire night grilling the poor kid? Sure, it was Jonathon’s fault they were in this mess. But he was only six years old. Knox felt for him; Knox knew all too well what it was like to be the family screwup. He’d been quite successful at screwing up since he was just Jonathon’s age.

The plan was that Knox would pose as Jonathon and Lexi’s uncle, and find a way to get to know the nurse who was suspicious. He’d rarely spent time with kids, so Knox wasn’t sure how well this plan was going to work.

Knox reached down and ruffled the kid’s mop of hair. “Hey, kiddo.” Knox had practiced too, making sure he wasn’t going to say “pup” or anything weird like that. He put the kid in the backseat of his Jeep and buckled him in while his sister crawled in the other side.

No doubt the kid could buckle himself, but Knox needed to practice being an uncle. His own nephew was an infant and so far, his older brother had not trusted him with the child yet. Maybe this would improve their opinion of Knox’s caretaking abilities.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” the kid said. He was well spoken and

easier to understand than most of the small kids in the pack.

"I know you didn't mean to, but we have to keep our secret. And you know what? When something happens, like a mistake, we can all work together to fix it. Right?" He hoped to God that sounded sufficiently adult-like. Knox usually ignored his problems or threw money at them. He wasn't really used to trying to solve them.

Lexi piped up, leaning forward in her seat. "I had more practice tricking humans because I went to human school since I was very small," she announced. "Since I was four!"

"Wow," Knox said. Before this assignment, Knox had vaguely remembered a crazy story about her mom running from some family members.

"Yep," Lexi said. "My mom and I lived with a lot of humans before we met dad and Jonathon."

When Knox had met with Ian the night before, the doctor had filled him in on his mate's complicated history, including the part where Nova had been on the run from her first mate's family. For four freaking years. It was kind of nice to realize he wasn't the only one in the pack that didn't have a picture-perfect life. Of course, his father would say that his problems were self-induced, but he wasn't going to think about that right then. He carefully followed the GPS to the school, not wanting the kids to be late.

Ian had driven Knox over the night before and showed him the playground. The kids apparently were going to try to act like Knox had been to this campus before. They told him not to lie outright, but to be casual, and to appear as though he knew where he was going. So, Ian walked him through how to handle the drop off line and the pickup line and where to park if he was going to walk them in. That was his assignment on the first day: walk them in and speak to the nurse.

"She has to think we're taking this seriously," Ian said. "I was so flabbergasted when she called that I didn't react appropriately. I sort of froze, and I know I probably looked like I was mad at Jonathon when I got there. I was also afraid that Nova was going into labor, and I was distracted. It was not my best work. If you could smooth that over, I would be grateful. If you can't, we'll probably have to pull him out of the school. And that could raise more questions. The last thing we need is for her to decide to call the child protection services. We want to stay off her radar, as much as possible."

No pressure, right?

Knox could not believe his new status in the pack. He had gone from pack pariah to the person who was supposed to smooth over the human's suspicions.

This seemed like a really big deal. If things deteriorated, the whole pack would have to move. It had happened before to other packs. Which was why some traditional packs insisted that none of their members mix with humans regularly. The more comfortable you got around humans, the more likely you were to let your guard down. And then humans started asking questions. Humans wanted to know what was going on. They got nosy. They wanted answers.

And modern technology had taught them that they had the right to those answers. Humans loved surveillance cameras; they loved recording on their cell phones. Hell, he liked it too. Their pack had finally joined the modern age and gotten some high-tech equipment, something Roman's father never would have done.

But one little pup's slipup could put an entire pack in jeopardy. Not that anyone was telling the little boy that. Everyone felt bad for him. He'd just gotten a new mother and sister, who he adored, but it was still a big change, and now he was about to get a new baby in the family. This baby would be a hybrid wolf-lion shifter, and everyone was on edge in their family.

The kid just wanted to climb and play like anyone else. Technically, when he fell, he should have acted addled, like he was hurt. But then that would lead to more issues. The school could have called an ambulance and taken him to the ER. And if his father hadn't been there, a human doctor would've realized there was nothing wrong with the pup. It finally made Knox understand why Roman was so uptight about any of them joining sports teams, the military, or law enforcement. The consequences could be really great.

They also wanted to stay off the radar of human hunters. Hunters got *really* worked up when other humans discovered their existence. The hunters felt like it put the humans in jeopardy.

All in all, this was a big-ass deal for Knox. If he failed, guess whose ass was going to be held responsible? Yep. Knox's. But that was okay. He was ready. He wanted his parents to be proud. They drove him crazy, but he could tell they were thrilled that he had gotten this assignment, straight from the Alpha himself.

Now, he just had to go in and meet this nurse. What could go wrong,

right? That had become his mantra.

When he imagined this Nurse Jen, he pictured a stern woman in a white coat, someone around his mother's age. Maybe with glasses on a chain. Maybe she'd scold him too, like she'd apparently scolded Ian. Knox's own tutors in the pack had scolded him quite a bit, so he was used to it. Maybe this one would give him a lecture about how to keep Jonathon from climbing on things he shouldn't.

"Out you go, both of you," he said, once he'd parked the car. He took Jonathon's hand on one side, and Lexi's on the other. He made sure to look both ways at the crosswalk.

He'd spent zero time worrying about being hit by a car, but now he had to act the part of a human who would die if hit by a car, and also an adult who was in charge of young children.

He marched them into the school. Several kids peered up at him. There weren't many parents walking in; most of them were circling through the drop off line.

He hugged Lexi goodbye and then walked Jonathon toward the nurse's office. He was glad Roman had made him prepare ahead of time.

The door was open, but he didn't see anyone inside.

"Nurse Jen? I'm here with Jonathon Montgomery. I'm his uncle, and I—" He trailed off as the nurse came into sight.

Oh, holy shit. This was no stern old lady.

This was the hottest woman he'd ever seen.

She wore navy blue scrubs with little kites all over them, and white clogs, but that did nothing to take away from her beauty. Her hair was a dark golden color, and under her glasses, her eyes were a vivid green.

She wore very little makeup, but her cheeks and her lips were a rosy pink. She was turned to the side, and he could easily see the outline of her firm bottom and her pert breasts under that thick cotton.

He cleared his throat and took a second to compose himself. "I'm Knox. I'm Jonathon's uncle. He and Lexi are going to stay with me when his new baby brother arrives, so I'm practicing."

She smiled. "I'm Nurse Jen. It's nice to meet you." She looked down at Jonathon. "How are you feeling?"

"Good." He scrunched his face up. "My head doesn't hurt much now."

"Let me know if that changes, okay?"

Knox gave him a half-hug. "Go on to class. I'll see you this afternoon."

She turned her green eyes toward Knox, and his stomach rolled over with lust.

Shit. His job was to reassure this woman they were normal, not hit on her.

He kept his eyes glued to hers and definitely did not look down to look at her round breasts. He could control his body's reaction, but his wolf was acting up now too. His wolf *liked* her. He liked the way she smelled, like honey and cherries.

But what his wolf wanted didn't matter. There were plenty of humans for him to sleep with. She was off-limits.

This is for Roman. And for Ian and Nova. This is to increase your standing in the pack. Don't fuck it up.

"Thank you for taking such good care of him," Knox said. This part was easy. He'd always been good at making small talk with humans. He'd spent enough time around them after all, although usually it was in a dark club, not a well-lit elementary school.

And good God, they were rarely this pretty. He just couldn't tear his eyes away from her delicate features. Suddenly, this mission seemed a lot more exciting. Knox just wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

JEN

So this is Jonathon's uncle?

Jen inhaled, doing her best to center herself.

She'd handled high-stress situations all the time at the hospital, so there was no reason for a handsome man to throw her off.

Being attracted to a man was not a problem she'd ever encountered at work. She could tell that Ian was handsome, but she was not attracted to him. Usually at work, she was able to turn off her personal desires. Good looking men came into the hospital all the time, as staff and as patients, and it didn't register in her mind.

This man, Jonathon's uncle, was different.

This man was gorgeous, and there was something about him that set her off. She couldn't think. Her tongue was thick. Her throat was dry. She coughed, trying to clear her throat so she could continue talking.

He'd said he was Jonathon's uncle, and she hadn't asked for clarification. She'd learned during her nursing career that "uncle" could be a nebulous term, and the exact relationship wasn't her business.

Knox was tall like Ian, with equally broad shoulders. But he was younger, and his jawline was sharper. His eyes were a sparkling green, full of mirth. Her own eyes were green, but his were brighter. He wore tailored jeans that fit him perfectly and a fitted polo that showed off his sculpted physique.

Her mouth got even drier. Desperate, she reached for her water bottle and took a sip. Why the hell was she reacting like this? She was a grown woman, with a serious job and a home of her own. She'd been engaged and broken it off. There was no reason for her to act like a teenager. "Have they left for the

hospital?” she managed to ask.

“No. She’s having a home birth. That’s why the kids are staying with me.”

Ah. A home birth. That wasn’t unheard of, but Jen had never known anyone who’d done it. Her husband was a doctor. But she really hoped the home birth wasn’t a sign that Dr. Montgomery was controlling. No. That made no sense. His wife was a teacher at this very school. It wasn’t like she was locked up at home and isolated away from the world.

“She’s not in labor yet?” Jen asked. She needed to continue this conversation, to get a better idea of what Jonathon’s home life was like. But she also couldn’t deny that she enjoyed looking at Knox.

“Not yet. But it could be any time now. Since the kids are going to be staying with me, we just got started early.” He grinned. “I’m a bachelor, so I have plenty of free time.”

He’s single.

Which made no difference to her. She had sworn off dating.

“So you’re the fun uncle,” she said.

God, why did that sound flirtatious. She hadn’t meant for it to, had she? She did not want to be unprofessional and signal him that she was interested.

“Yep. This will be my first time to try and make them have a bedtime, and to do boring stuff like eat a real dinner.”

“I’m sure you can sneak in some treats,” she said. She pressed her lips together, trying desperately to regain her equilibrium. “Have you noticed any changes in Jonathon’s behavior?” she asked. “Since he fell yesterday?”

Maybe her question was overstepping, since he wasn’t Jonathon’s parent, but if Knox was taking care of him, then it was legitimate. And it would help her get to know Knox.

“Not at all. He doesn’t like getting into trouble, so he hasn’t talked about it much.”

“It’s a fine line,” she said. “With kids that young, they tend to shut down if we push them.”

She took a deep breath and touched her cheek, which was burning hot. Her face was flushed, simply from being in such close proximity to Knox. This was terribly unprofessional, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself from being pulled into his sphere.

A student appeared, clutching a paper towel over her elbow. “Nurse Jen!” she wailed. “I fell down.”

“Ah. It looks like I’m needed,” she said to Knox.

“I’ll see you soon,” Knox said with a grin. “If you need anything, let me know. I have a flexible schedule.”

“Really?” She helped the little girl sit down and went to get her supply of disinfectant and bandages. “If you mean that, come back tomorrow. We’re having our flu shot clinic.”

He gave her a half grin. “I’ll see you then.”

She took a few deep breaths while she helped her student rinse her elbow off. Then, they got it cleaned up and bandaged. “What color tape do you want over the gauze?” she asked.

Jen had learned during her time working in the ER, that getting to do something, like choose a band aid or a bandage color went a long way to help young kids deal with their injuries. This was a minor scrape, but the little girl would be proud to go back to glass and show off her new bandage.

The girl spent a few long seconds perusing the colors. “Neon green!” she said.

Jen focused on wrapping the tape around the girl’s arm, but her mind was on Knox.

Had he been serious when he said he’d volunteer for the flu clinic? It was a tough job, and not one most parents or guardians looked forward to.

She wanted him to come back; she really did need the help. The secretary told her they were always slow to get volunteers for certain events. But if he came, would Jen be able to stand it? Jen was in charge tomorrow. She'd have to ignore him, so she wouldn't get distracted.

She sighed. She’d come all the way up to Alaska to get away from a guy and all the bad memories associated with him. Now she had a brand new job, and she was already panting over a guy, one who was connected to a student.

Get a grip, Jen. Focus on your job.

She’d get her head back in the game. She had no choice.

KNOX

Volunteer at a flu clinic? What the hell? What was a flu clinic? He'd heard them mention shots, and he knew what that was. Not personally, because shifters didn't need immunizations, but he'd been around enough humans to know they sometimes got sick enough to need an injection with a needle.

But a clinic? He thought that was the same as a doctor's office.

Oh well. He'd find out soon enough. Roman had told him to offer to help out, and Knox supposed it didn't matter what the task was. He said the school often needed things done, like painting a wall, setting up a basketball goal, or power washing a sidewalk. He was free during the day, so he could do any number of tasks and do them quickly.

They'd decided he'd say he was a landscaper, if Jen asked what he did for a job. He'd helped with landscaping the pack lands enough to know the basics.

But now he'd somehow gotten himself roped into helping kids get a flu shot at clinic school, whatever that meant.

As instructed, Knox picked the kids up from school that afternoon.

"Did you leap off any tall buildings today?" Knox asked Jonathon as they got into the car.

"Uncle Knox! No!" Jonathon yelled.

Lexi spread her arms out wide. "He would be in so much trouble." She leaned forward. "Can I ride up there with you?"

"No. Sorry. Your dad said we had to do what humans do, and they don't let six-year-olds ride up front."

“Darn,” she said. “We get to do it at home.”

“That’s because you’re on pack land at home, and there are no humans around.”

“Can we do it when we get on pack land?” she asked eagerly.

“Sure,” he said. These kids were intense, and he was pretty sure they were some of the easy ones.

“Yay!” Both of them shouted in unison. They both proceeded to chatter the entire way home.

He dropped them off at their house, already needing a break.

How do people do this all day?

He had no idea. He didn’t think he’d last long as a teacher. Not if all the kids talked that much. How did parents do it? That was the real mystery.

He knew from his own experience as a pup that Lexi and Jonathon truly were exceptional kids. Knox himself had been a little shit, which would come as a surprise to no one.

When he arrived at their house, both Ian and Nova met him at the door. “How was it?” Nova asked.

She was holding her swollen belly with one hand and gripping the doorframe with the other. He wondered if she should even be up walking around, but she already had one little lion cub, and she was mated to a doctor, so Knox kept his mouth shut.

“It went really well,” he said. “The nurse is really friendly.”

“Good,” Ian said. “She seemed to accept you as their uncle?”

“Yes. The kids were comfortable around me, so that helped.” He made a face. “I do have a question. What’s a flu clinic?”

“It’s a day the school sets aside to give all the kids their flu shots. Why?”

“Really? At school?” He hadn’t gone to school with humans, and it showed.

“Yes. It’s the best way to get them all done. It really cuts down on the spread.” Ian tilted his head. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m volunteering at the flu clinic tomorrow.”

Ian’s eyes widened. “How did that happen?”

“As you suggested, I offered to help with whatever the school needed.”

Nova was nodding at him and smiling, so at least she looked pleased with his commitment.

“So then, the nurse says she needs help and tells me I can volunteer at the flu clinic.” Knox grimaced. “I’m not going to be giving shots, am I?”

Humans were fragile and easily damaged. They were all in this mess because the school thought Jonathon was a delicate human whose skull would crack open after a little fall.

“No. Only trained medical staff will give those. Usually, a few parents help out. I normally volunteer but didn’t this year.” He smiled at his mate and let his hand join hers on top of her round belly.

It was sort of sweet, even though Knox had never wanted pups of his own. “Good. What will I be doing if I’m not giving shots?” he asked.

“You’ll be comforting the crying children,” Nova said.

“What? Who thought that was a good idea?” He pointed at his chest. “Me, in charge of screaming kids?”

Ian smirked. “Obviously, he made a good impression on the nurse.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

“What exactly did you say to her?” Nova asked.

“I was just friendly. And acted like an uncle,” Knox said.

“IT SOUNDS like a great opportunity to make a good impression. No one ever wants to help with the flu clinic because it’s not fun,” Nova said. “Parents want to go to the pumpkin patch, and they want to help with the holiday shop because all the kids are excited and no one’s crying.” Her eyes danced. “You’ll have to wipe their noses.”

She and Ian both laughed, and Knox recoiled. He didn’t relish the idea of crying. Or snot. Not even his own.

Ian patted him on the back. “It will be fine. It will be good for you.”

Knox wasn’t so sure about that

As he walked home, he was struck by an idea, a way to stay closer to Jen. Because sure, he was going to get to volunteer at the flu clinic. And like Nova mentioned, there would be a field trip and a holiday shop and a class party for Valentine’s Day, all things that Nova had described to him

Which was actually really far off, now that he thought about it. No matter how much he volunteered, it might not be enough to really get to know her. Yes, he could sign up to be a substitute teacher, but he wasn’t a glutton for punishment. That would be a last resort.

He could ask her out. He could date her. They wouldn’t have to get serious. Trying to make it a serious relationship seemed wrong, but he could keep it light and easy.

It wasn't like she was going to fall in love with him immediately. He pretty much drove everyone in his life crazy, and when he had hooked up with human women, they'd gotten pretty mad at him when he'd turned out to be a shit date who only wanted to have sex and then leave.

Jen was a responsible adult, so she'd get tired of him pretty fast. Breaking her heart didn't seem like much of a real risk at all.

He was pretty sure he'd seen a look of interest in her eyes. He had not mentioned that to Ian and Nova. They probably would not approve. If he was going to date her, he'd probably need to run it by Roman first and see what his Alpha thought about the plan.

Because honestly, Knox had no idea what he was doing. If he was going to date anyone, he was going to have to do a better job of making the woman like him. He never *dated* anyone. He fucked. He partied. He always preferred one-night stands.

But that wasn't going to fly with her. A relationship with Jen would be the best way to win her over, he just knew it.

And it would certainly be no hardship because she was gorgeous and nice.

Working in his favor was the fact that he could tell even from his limited interaction with her, that she wanted to get information about Jonathon's home life – she had asked question after question. Dating her would hopefully allow her curiosity to be satisfied and complete the mission for his Alpha.

The only issue was that they would never be able to come back to his house. Humans were not allowed on pack land, not for any reason.

That night he spent a few hours putting photos of Jonathon on his phone. Nova and Ian were happy to supply them. They showed Jonathon being a typical kid – a typical *human* kid. In the photos he was playing video games, riding a bike, and eating pizza. Sometimes he was at school in the photos, and sometimes he was at home.

Luckily, Nova and Ian did a lot of human stuff. Many of the wolves only had photos of their children running in the woods, wrestling with a sibling, or swimming in a creek. Now he'd have photos to show her. He wanted to impress Roman by doing a good job, but he'd like to impress her too, even though he was a fake uncle and this would be a fake relationship.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, there was an air of chaos in the school as soon as he walked in the door.

He saw dozens of grim-faced kids gripping a piece of paper. Others were already crying. One was openly sobbing. Another was smug. "I got my flu shot already. So I don't have to get it today."

That made the others cry harder.

"Why does second grade have to go first?" one kid wailed as they walked down the hall.

His teacher was unruffled. "Because of the schedule. We talked about this. You have music later, and then recess. This is the best time for us to visit the clinic."

Damn. They were already getting started? He'd thought he'd have some time to prepare.

"Does the whole school participate?" he asked the secretary, who was standing in the hallway.

"No. Just the kids of the parents who sign them up. But it usually ends up being about sixty percent of the student body."

Wow. That was a lot of upset kids. He knocked on Jen's door. She was pushing a cart full of small toys. Behind her, a woman with an ID tag that said "Alaska Health Department" was pushing a cart full of syringes. He hoped the kids didn't see those; they were already freaking out enough.

"I'm headed to the gym," Jen said. "That's where we have the clinic set up. Can you go check in with the office? They'll give you a name tag."

"Okay, sure." He went to the office where they scanned his driver's license and printed off a nametag.

"Thanks for helping, Mr. Hudson. I'm sure Nurse Jen has told you. Flu clinic volunteers are short on the ground." She smiled. "You can get yours today too."

"Uh. You're welcome." Shit. Should he get the shot? He'd ask if they had enough. The shot wouldn't affect him at all. He covertly ducked around the corner and texted Ian.

Jen offered me a flu shot. Should I get one?

No. Sometimes there are shortages. Tell her I'm giving you and the kids one.

That made sense. He walked quickly to the gym and found the third graders inside lined up in rows. There were several tables set up with nurses at each one, ready to go.

And there were a few parents and maybe a grandparent sitting at the end with a bucket of toys. Jen walked over. “Can you do crowd control? We need them to stay in these lines and then step up to the table and sit down in the chair. As soon as they’re done, they get a toy, and then they go sit on the bleachers.”

He could do that. “Yes, that’s what I’ll do.”

Once he got into a rhythm, it wasn’t so hard. Occasionally, a child tried to run. But at that point, his only job was to get them back in line or over to the bleachers. If a kid refused a shot, they didn’t hold them down. If a kid flipped out, or if they ran, then the shot did not happen.

“That’s not our role,” Jen said. He was glad.

He only had one runner, a little boy who bolted toward the gym doors. But when Knox brought him back, the little boy took a great big breath and said, “I can do it. I really can.” And then he marched right over and plopped himself in the chair and stuck his arm out.

Some of the kids were stoic and some were dramatic. It was funny to see how much they were like adults. The clinic only took two hours, and then thank God it was over. The rest of the volunteers accepted the flu shot, but no one seemed to think it was odd when Knox declined, claiming that Ian was giving him one.

“I wouldn’t mind Dr. Montgomery giving my shot either,” one of the volunteer moms said.

Her friend smacked her on the arm. “Janice! You’re married.”

The mom, who was called Janice, just laughed. “And so is he. Doesn’t mean I can’t look.”

They took a quick break, and he got a chance to show off his photos of Jonathon. The other parents were all women, and they wanted to know who Knox was and why they hadn’t seen him before. A few even seemed to hit on him.

He was nice to them, but he wasn’t swayed from his purpose. In the past, he’d have allowed himself to get distracted, and possibly tried to hook up with one of the moms. He wouldn’t have cared if she was married or not.

But if he was going to date Jen, as well as be a respected member of the pack, he had to change. And luckily, he had no desire to ever behave that way again. He was going to prove his worthiness to his pack.

Jen was now his focus.

Finally, every student who had signed up had been injected with their flu

vaccine.

“Oh wow, that was exhausting,” he said to one of the older teachers.

She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, honey. That was *nothing* compared to a holiday party. Just wait.”

Knox frowned. “But holiday parties are supposed to be fun. This was more like a doctor visit.”

“Yes, they’re supposed to be fun. But the parents insist on bringing far more cupcakes and cookies than any group of kids should have. They decorate cupcakes, and then it’s time to play a game like ‘toss the beanbag at a snowman’ or something like that. Something usually goes wrong. Like the beanbag hitting another child in the eye, or the snowman breaking and falling over, and then the entire class is crying. The parents usually get them home pretty quickly after that. And then thankfully there’s a two-week break.”

“No, nothing’s worse than Halloween,” another teacher said. “The kids are excited all week, and they talk about their costumes non-stop. They draw their costumes on the back of their paper. They think about trick-or-treating and candy, all day. They sneak into the candy stash their parents have bought. And then, often, the trick-or-treating falls on a school night. So, they stay out all bundled up in their costume, and then they eat candy all night and come to school the next day in the worst mood you’ve ever seen.”

The other teacher laughed, but Knox made a face. “Sounds like Halloween needs to be moved to a weekend.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be nice.” One of them sighed. “But still, Halloween is nothing compared to Valentine’s Day. It’s another classroom party, and the kids work so hard on their valentines. Usually, someone throws up because they get so much candy.”

“I don’t know how you all do it,” he said. “I admire you.”

They all patted him on the arm and then led their classes away.

“I’ll walk you out,” Jen said. “You have to sign out at the office.”

She was trying to push two carts, so he took one of them. This was going better than he had expected. She didn’t *have* to walk him out, but she was choosing to do so.

“Thanks for volunteering,” she said.

“I mean it when I said you could call me anytime. I’m better at lifting heavy things than managing small children, but I will do whatever I can.”

“I don’t know, you were pretty good when you sprinted after that child today.”

He shook his head. "I had no idea they would just take off like that."

"Yes. When they're nervous, they do all kinds of crazy stuff."

"It's understandable," he said.

They reached the office, and he helped her put her supplies away. He was reluctant to leave, but a student came in needing her medicine, and that was Knox's cue to leave.

Until next time, Nurse Jen.

JEN

Jen was unsettled by how much she liked Knox. His charming smile left her feeling off kilter.

He'd been such a good sport about helping at the school. The teachers had said it was hard getting parents to come help, and he wasn't even Jonathon and Lexi's father, but their uncle.

A few days passed, and during a staff meeting, the principal announced they'd received a donation of some treated lumber. "We want to build an outdoor classroom," he said at their weekly staff meeting. "We think it will be good to get the children outside for nature lessons, even in the winter."

Jen lifted her hand to get the principal's attention. "Jonathon Montgomery's uncle volunteered to help with anything needed. He's watching Mrs. Montgomery and Dr. Montgomery's children while she's out having the baby. He's a landscaper, so he has experience with outdoor projects, and he has taken some time off for the next few weeks. Would you like me to ask him if he's available?"

"Yes, please, that would be great. Ask if he has any experience in construction. I have a few parents who can help, but they prefer someone else to take the lead."

"I'll ask him as soon as the meeting's over," Jen said.

After discussion of a few more items, the principal adjourned the meeting. Jen pulled her phone out and texted Knox. She would message him so he wouldn't be caught off guard. She always preferred for someone to text her instead of calling her with a question, especially if she might want to say no to whatever request the caller was making.

We actually need you again. Do you have any experience in construction? The school needs an outdoor shelter built. It will consist of benches, a small stage, and a roof. We had the materials donated.

There. That should be enough information for him.

Yes. I've built several cabins. I should be able to handle an outdoor classroom. Who is the point person for the project? The principal?

Once she saw that he was interested, she stepped out into the hallway and called him.

"Hey," she said. "You're interested?"

"Yes. You can give the principal my number. I'm happy to help."

At the sound of his deep voice, her stomach fluttered.

They chatted for a few more minutes, and then she went back inside, where the principal was still talking to a few of the fifth-grade teachers. After the teachers left, she shared Knox's name and number with the principal.

That evening, she got another text from Knox. It said: ***Can I call you?***

Yes, she replied. She couldn't help it; she was eager to hear from him.

"I want to see you tomorrow, but I figured this question would not be appropriate, not while you were at the school."

What in the heck was he going to ask her? Her stomach jumped again, this time more of a twist than a flutter.

"I want you to go out with me. On a date. Say yes."

She put her hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle. Why was she already giddy? That wasn't like her at all. Did she like him that much?

SHE'D BEEN sure he was flirting with her during the flu clinic, and it wasn't like he had crossed any lines – he wasn't actually her coworker. She liked him, and she was very attracted to him. Her last relationship had ended so badly that she was a bit reluctant to try again. But she was young. And she didn't know that many people in Anchorage yet, so maybe this was a good opportunity.

They didn't work together. But she worked with Mrs. Montgomery, so she'd have to keep herself in check. Even though she had doubts, she was going to say yes. She'd regret it if she turned him down. He was so hot, and so sweet, and he was beyond good with kids.

"That wasn't a question," she said. "That was a statement." She couldn't help but flirt a little bit. But that was okay because he'd just asked her out.

At the sound of his deep laugh, her stomach twirled, rolling into a coil of *want*.

"Okay, excuse me. Will you go out with me? On a date? Is that a question that will meet your standards, Nurse Jen?"

"Yes, it does meet my exacting standards." She could imagine the smirk on his face.

"So, what's your answer?"

"Yes, I will go out with you."

That was all happening very quickly. But she was ready.

"I'm glad you didn't turn me down."

"Oh? Would I have regretted it?" she asked. She could hear the lilt in her voice, but she was helpless to stop it.

"Definitely," he said. "I can assure you of that."

"Big promises. I hope you can deliver," she said, and hung up.

She pulled her sun visor down and stared at herself in the mirror while she sat in the car. It had been so long since she'd been on a date. Her skin was dry from the colder air, and her lips were chapped. Her fingernails were in bad shape too.

He saw you in scrubs, with a bunch of kids around. You don't have to be fancy.

She knew that was true, but she still wanted to impress him.

Once she was home, she started a hot bath. After adding a bath bomb, she soaked in the tub first. She trimmed her nails and filed them. Her new salary didn't leave money for frequent salon visits, but she had a good haircut, and she washed her hair and conditioned it. Once it was dry, she tried curling it. It was bouncy now and full of body.

She was going to make more of an effort with her appearance. Not to please Knox, but for herself. She swung her head to the side, watching how silky her hair looked. Too bad she had to lie down and sleep.

Once she was in bed, her mind went straight to thinking about what Knox would look like naked – his broad shoulders, his firm ass, his muscular pecs.

Stop it. You are not ready for that!

But her mind did not cooperate. Dammit. Now she was never getting to sleep.

KNOX

This playfulness was a side of Jen he had not seen before. He liked it. And he wanted to see more of it. She'd ended the call before he was ready, but she'd been smiling; he was sure of it.

He'd wanted to leave right then and pick her up on the date. He wanted to wine and dine her for himself, and it had nothing to do with trying to coerce her to be his girlfriend for information.

He liked how she called him out for *telling* her they were going out and not asking. He'd never really had to ask a female for a date before. He usually just showed up and they responded to him. Most of the time they came after him. He wasn't used to pursuing women.

He was well aware that that was an egotistical thing to say. He had been called a dog before by his friends. But he never disrespected women, whether they were humans or the females in his pack. He never promised them something he could not deliver.

With him, they knew what they were getting into. Because they knew him. And they knew his reputation. But Jen did not. She wasn't part of the pack, and she didn't frequent the nightclubs in Anchorage.

He called her back the next morning.

She answered on the first ring.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow night at 6:00 p.m. Does that work for you?" he asked. "Was that a good enough question?"

"You're terrible. I'll see you then."

An hour later, the principal called, and they worked out the details for the outdoor classroom. He was going to come to the school every day for three

hours until it was done. He could've come to the school for seven hours, but he wanted to act like he still had a landscaping job.

He did know a few things about crops that grew in Alaska and what had to be done to them in the fall. He did a little research so that he'd be able to say what kind of projects he might attempt in the future, with his made-up company. He didn't want to lie, but he needed some kind of a backstory.

He went to the school to get a feel for what he'd be doing and met with the principal and other volunteers. When he was leaving for the day, Jen was busy with her students, so he only got to wave at her.

He did stop back by her office at lunch, hoping to see her. The secretary and the vice principal were sitting with her, eating their food as well. Not wanting to interrupt the only break they got all day, he just waved again. But the secretary, whose name was Maddie, called him back. "Hey, Knox."

He stuck his head back into Jen's office.

"Any sign of the baby yet?" the secretary asked.

"No sign yet. But look at this." He popped open his phone and showed them a picture of Jonathon and Lexi in the baby's room. Luckily, Nova liked human traditions, so there were a few things he could show off. Most shifters did not have cribs or baby toys, but Nova did.

One of the teachers had bought Nova a set of blocks, and Jonathon and Lexi had arranged for them to say, "welcome home, baby brother," and Knox had snapped a photo.

The vice principal's face went soft. "That is so sweet. They've told me how excited they are."

"Yes. They are very excited." And they were. They already loved their little sibling. But they were also excited because it was only the third hybrid baby in the pack. Lexi was impatient to have another lion shifter child nearby. And Eliza, Roman and Everleigh's daughter, was thrilled as well, because she was a hybrid bear-wolf shifter.

Shit. He should have talked to Roman before he asked Jen out. He'd have to do that now.

He texted and asked if he could visit with his Alpha. He did not want to have this conversation over the phone.

Roman was available, so he stopped by his office. "I had an idea."

"Yes?"

Knox fidgeted. "I already acted on it, a little bit. I realized I should have spoken to you first."

Roman only sighed. "Tell me your idea," he said.

"First, I have an update. The principal got a grant to build an outdoor classroom. They asked for some volunteers. Immediately, Jen said she thought of me. So, the principal told her to text me right then during the meeting. Of course, I said I'd help, and I spoke to the principal, and we got started today."

Roman waved his hand. "Whoa. Okay. When did all this happen?"

"Last night and today." Shit. Had he overstepped?

"Okay, keep going and good work. You obviously did a good job at the flu clinic if they want you back so soon."

Whew. His Alpha was pleased. That was a relief. "Thank you, I'm trying."

Roman got up and patted him on the back. "I know you are, and I appreciate it."

"Jen and I really hit it off."

"I bet you did," Roman muttered under his breath.

"Sir?" Knox asked. Of course, Knox had heard him perfectly well, and Roman knew that – wolf shifters could hear whispers. Even ones muttered under his breath.

"Nothing. Keep going." Of course, Roman had noticed that Nurse Jen was pretty. A growl rose up in Knox's chest. He did *not* like the idea of Roman noticing how pretty she was.

Roman raised both hands, palms up. "I can hear you growling. Do I ever need to remind you that I am mated?"

Flushing, Knox tried to take a deep breath. "No, Alpha, you do not."

Possessiveness was a very common trait for wolves. Everyone knew that, but it was not common for Knox. This was the first time it had ever happened to him.

"Well, you know I don't date. And I don't want a mate, at least not any time soon. But since Jen and I hit it off so well, I thought it might be a good idea for me to ask her out and for us to date. I can tell she's really curious about Jonathon. So, I thought this might be a way to reassure her."

"You're not worried about using her? Because I can't condone something unethical, not unless our lives are in danger," Roman said.

"No. I actually like her, and I'm going to be clear with her that I'm not looking for a relationship. She won't get led on."

"What if you get in too deep?"

“That’s never happened before,” Knox said.

Roman raised his eyebrows. “Famous last words. Quite a few of us felt that way at one point in our lives. Remember that your wolf can make decisions for you sometimes. Or at least influence you. I heard you growling. You all but bared your teeth at me.”

“Point taken. I don’t think there’s any danger in that, but I’ll be careful. I’m not going to forget that she’s a human.”

“See that you don’t. Her being human is what caused all this fuss.”

“I think she already feels better. Seeing the photos of Ian’s happy, loving home helped – a lot. I really think at first she thought there was something kooky going on with him and Nova. But now I’m not seeing as much suspicion now or hearing quite as many probing questions.”

“Good. If you reassure her for good, and make her happy, then we’ll owe you.”

“Having the trust of my pack Alpha is enough payment for me,” Knox said. He meant that. Sincerely. He’d never felt any type of loyalty before, but now that he wasn’t drinking and partying all the time, and he was actually sleeping, he felt a renewed sense of respect for both his pack and his Alpha.

“You have my permission to date her then,” Roman said. “Thank you for letting me know your plans. I feel like this is the kind of thing that can go sideways quickly, so come check in with me every other day, okay?”

Knox agreed, fairly certain that he could handle it.



KNOX WAS early to pick her up. He stopped and bought flowers. He wasn’t sure if that was cheesy or not, but he wanted to do something for her. Was that him – Knox the human? Or was his wolf somehow urging him along? He’d always been in tune with his wolf during hunts, but never when he spent time with the opposite sex. He’d always tried to push his wolf into the background, but now his wolf wasn’t allowing that to happen.

This is not a real relationship, he reminded himself.

But... It sort of felt like one.

Jen was delighted with the flowers and immediately put them in a vase on her kitchen counter.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

She wore a long-sleeved green dress that hugged every one of her curves. The green made her eyes stand out even more. His body reacted in a second. He really didn't want to sit through dinner with a hard cock, but he likely had no choice.

"It's nice to wear something besides scrubs," she said.

He escorted her to his car, holding the door open. He'd chosen a seafood restaurant for that night.

"I wanted to ask you to go skiing as our first real date, but I figured I'd better see if you're interested first," he said as he drove her toward the restaurant.

She pursed her pretty lips. "You're not going to just tell me I'm going skiing?"

He laughed. "I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"Not a chance."

"Tell me how you came to be in Alaska. We don't get that many people moving here."

"I wonder why not. So far it's been great."

"People are scared. They've heard stories. They imagine it's a tundra with bears roaming all over. And that's true. But that's farther north."

"I haven't been farther north yet," she said.

He parked the car and escorted her up the steps to the restaurant. "I'll take you anytime you want to go." Honestly, he'd feel better if she was with him. Anchorage might be perfectly safe, but it *was* dangerous out there in the wilderness, for a human.

"You asked me what brought me here," she said, once they were seated. "I had a bad breakup." She picked up her glass and swirled the water. "It sounds so cliché."

He bit back a growl. He didn't like thinking of her with any other men. It wasn't rational, but he couldn't stop the feeling. "Were you together long?"

"Yes. We were engaged."

Hmm. He didn't have anything to say about that. He was glad she'd told him, but he wasn't going to ask for details. They ordered their food and some merlot wine, and she told him about her day. He enjoyed just listening to her talk.

Once they were finished, he wasn't ready for the date to be over. "Are you interested in skiing?" he asked her.

"Yes. I've never been before."

“Oh, even better. I can teach you. The season is just starting. It will be better in January with more snow, but the lifts won’t be as crowded right now in November.”

“Won’t I need lessons?”

“Not unless you want to. I’ve taught several people to ski. But it won’t hurt my feelings if you want a professional.”

“I guess I’ll trust you,” she said. They kept talking, sharing mundane details of their lives with each other, and when they arrived back at her house, he walked her to her door.

“I’LL PICK you up at 8:00 a.m. on Saturday,” he said. He couldn't wait.

JEN

“**T**hat was intense,” Jen said, once she was fully outfitted in her ski clothes. Getting the right boots, skis, and poles had seemed to take forever. Luckily, Knox had bought their passes online ahead of time.

“It only gets better from here on out,” he said.

They trudged to a bunny hill, where rows of tiny children were sailing down a gentle slope.

“Don’t look at the kids,” Knox said. “It will only make you crazy.”

“It will?”

“Yes. It happens to everyone who learns as an adult. Adults are used to kids being disasters. They try to cook, they make a mess and splatter egg yolk everywhere. They try to ride a bike, and they fall off and cry. They dive, and they fall in on their stomach and make a giant splash all around.”

“It sounds like you have experience with this,” she said.

“Not really, with the exception of Lexi and Jonathon. But this is what I was told, in regard to children being better skiers than adults.” He guided her toward a conveyor belt that would take them up a small incline.

“Actually, I did learn first-hand, with Jonathon and Lexi, very recently. They wanted to make an apple pie. Biggest mistake ever. My house still smells like scorched butter.”

She laughed.

“But remember, unlike cooking, skiing is one thing little kids are good at. They adapt right away, and adults do not. So don’t look at them.” He pointed at her. “You’re thinking you can handle it because you’re a school nurse. No.

Don't fall into that trap. Nova thought so too," he said.

"You taught Nova?"

"I helped. Ian taught her, and I helped with Lexi. Guess who was the much better skier?" he asked.



THREE HOURS LATER, Jen and Knox were on the ski lift to the actual green run. Jen had to admit that the lift was a bit scary. Knox had been a good teacher. He was patient and never got frustrated. He was also strong and very athletic. He had obviously skied a lot and was at home on the snow.

Skiing did *not* come as easily to her. She'd played basketball in high school and was on the starting lineup, but the skills did not translate. She made it down the hill with only one mishap where her ski popped off and started sliding away. Of course, Knox was able to chase it down for her and help her get it back on.

An hour after that, she had made it down the green run two more times.

"Let's ride to the summit," he said. "I'm sure you're exhausted, but we could stop for hot chocolate. We can ride the ski lift down."

"Good, because I don't think I can ski all the way down from the summit at this point."

He patted her hand. "You'll get there."

"You say that with a lot more confidence than I feel."

"You did really well. Plenty of people give up during the first hour and you just kept right on going."

She loved the ride up. The bottom of the mountain had been chaotic, filled with adults and children. The air was biting, but she was warm, and there was a quiet stillness as they ascended toward the top of the mountain. It was very romantic, and also intimate, as if they were the last two people on earth.

Her ex-fiancé had never taken her on a date like this. Not even once. Not even when he'd proposed. Their relationship was an afterthought to him.

Knox had already put more thought into one date than her ex had into their entire relationship.

It was too soon to hope for more, but she really liked him, and as tired as she was, she never wanted this magical date to end.

KNOX

Jen loved the summit. She took dozens of photos of the landscape and of him, and of the two of them together. She even let him snap photos of her posing with her skis on.

She also loved the cafe at the top, and they sat inside, sipping hot chocolate until the sky grew dark.

Once the cafe closed, they walked out. The moon was bright overhead. His wolf wanted more – more of Jen. He wasn't used to his wolf asserting itself quite like this.

The mountain was offering sled rides around the top of the mountain, and he purchased one for the two of them. With the snow falling gently, he couldn't imagine a more romantic setting; they were outside in fresh snow under the stars, in a sled. Yes, the sled was pulled by a bulldozer of sorts, but it was still quaint and picturesque.

Maybe a walk on the beach or horse-drawn carriage might rival this level of romance, but he wasn't sure

Once they were snuggled under a wool blanket in the sled, Jen stared up at him. He could see her face so clearly with his enhanced eyesight. He put his hand on her cheek.

Remember, this is for Roman. This is for the pack. The proof that they can trust you. Don't get carried away. You are not falling for her, not really.

But that's not how it felt. Not completely. He brushed his thumb over her cheekbone, right under her eyes. A piece of her hair was showing under her hat, and he pushed it back behind her ear.

She didn't move forward, but she did tip her chin up. It was a signal he

could not have missed even if he wasn't a shifter. The air around them crackled with chemistry.

If he kissed her, she would like it.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. Even over the motor of the sled, he could hear her heart rate pick up. He deepened the kiss. She responded, but she was still hesitant – at first.

He kept kissing her and rubbed his hand over her shoulder. That sparked something inside her, and she opened her mouth for him, surging against him.

His entire body was a live wire; his cock was throbbing. He tilted his hips, trying to relieve the pressure. Her lithe body was pressed against his, he could not escape it. Nor did he want to.

He kept going until he was on a razor's edge, his cock ready to explode. He did not want that happening, so he slowed the kiss, finally pulling back. Her lips were parted, and her eyes were glassy. He'd never seen anyone look quite so good. He kissed her on the forehead and tucked her under his arm, cuddling her close.

They rode back down the mountain in a comfortable silence. When they were back down, they stood in the snow, just looking at each other.

Her cheeks were pink, and despite all the gear, she was shivering. He had to be careful with her. He couldn't forget that she was more delicate than a shifter.

He kissed her again. "I better get you home," he said. Roman wouldn't be too pleased if he ended up letting her get frostbite.

"I wasn't ready for this night to end," she said.

He wrapped his arm around her. "Neither was I. But your teeth are chattering."

Once they were in his truck, he put the heater on full blast. He could withstand very cold or very hot weather. He only wanted her to be comfortable.

"I didn't think to ask where you live. Do you have a long drive?" she asked.

Ah. She was digging for information. He'd learned to spot it. She had a particular inflection in her voice when she was being nosy.

Shit. Had he already told her something? He thought he'd said the kids were staying with him. "The kids missed their house, so I'm staying with Ian right now."

"I'm sure they were," she said, especially with such big changes coming

up. “Do you usually live alone?”

He couldn't tell her he lived with his parents. That was typical in shifter packs, but in the human world it would make her think he was lazy or taking advantage of his parents.

Which was funny because his parents actually might agree with her.

“No. I'm actually looking for a place in town,” he said. That was never going to happen, but she didn't have to know that. It made a good cover story.

“Oh yeah? What area?” she asked.

He named a street, grateful that he'd listened when Everleigh had been talking about her real estate job a few nights before, and Jen listened attentively, adding in her own experience of what it had been like to navigate the housing market in Anchorage when she moved there just a few months before.

Once they were back in town, he dropped her off and made sure she got into her house. He didn't follow her inside, because he'd be tempted to kiss her again, and he wouldn't be able to stop.

He pulled back on the road, still uncomfortable from his raging arousal. He planned to go home and take care of his cock, desperate for relief after hours of being turned on.

But a few minutes after he'd left her, he noticed a car following him closely. It looked like Jen's car. He checked his phone. Had he missed a call?

No. He hadn't missed a call. He slowed down and so did the other car. He sped up, and so did the other car. Was Jen following him?

She wasn't being very subtle about it. Ah. She had no idea he could see so well. For a human, maybe the visibility would be much lower. The air was hazy, and snow was falling. But for a wolf shifter, her car was clearly visible and fairly easy to spot.

He didn't relish the idea of her out driving this late when she wasn't used to the weather, but he also couldn't lead her to his home. What if she tried to follow him in through the gate?

She was persistent. That was a quality he admired, but it made his mission all the more difficult because she was not easy to fool. And he had to admire that she was still determined to make sure that Jonathon was okay.

He could go to the grocery store, but it closed soon. He saw the blinking light of the movie theater. They had a midnight showing on Saturdays. He pulled into the movie theater parking lot and parked. He'd head inside and

buy a digital ticket if he had to. But once he was inside, he saw her pull up behind his car. She idled there for a moment, then she turned and left.

He went ahead and bought the ticket. He was taking no chances, even though he wasn't in the mood to see a movie. He was full of energy after their date and then their passionate kiss.

He wasn't sure if a million dollars would have gotten him to sit down and sit still. He wasn't a big movie watcher to begin with, preferring to move. Thankfully, his rock-hard cock had settled down, but it left him restless.

He snuck out the back door and rushed to the woods. There he stripped off his clothes and tucked them into a branch.

He'd come back for them when he got his car. He shifted into his wolf form and ran, feeling much better as soon as he could race through the trees and jump over a few streams.

He made his way back to her house. He sniffed around. She was inside. He found her room and listened for her heartbeat. She was sound asleep. Good. He would rest easy knowing she was safe.

He was finally getting tired, so instead of going home on foot, he went back to his car. By then, it had been more than two hours, long enough for the movie to be over.

He sniffed around the pack land, but there was no trace of Jen. She had stayed at home and not ventured out while he was running.

This wasn't a problem worth waking Roman up in the middle of the night, but Knox would need to let him know that she hadn't given up on investigating Jonathon's parents.

Knox was grateful that he had a good Alpha. There were Alphas in the world that would absolutely not hesitate to eliminate a threat to their pack, either by killing them, threatening them, or scaring them away.

Roman would not hesitate to kill to protect them; Knox knew that. But he would not harm Jen, not for trying to do the right thing. He knew that he could tell Roman the truth and not worry for Jen's safety.

But if you had to choose, what would you pick? Jen or the pack?

It was a question he'd never thought he'd have to ask.

He knew the answer. Knox would pick Jen. Even over his pack.



“BACK AGAIN?” Roman asked as Knox stopped by on Sunday afternoon.

“Yep.”

“Something to report?”

“Yes. I took Jen out on a date. We went skiing. It was great. I actually like her a lot.” Honesty truly was the best policy for shifters. If your Alpha could hear your heartbeat, and you started lying, you were screwed. Yes, Knox knew this from firsthand experience. In his younger years, he’d thought he could outsmart his parents and his Alpha. He’d been wrong, of course.

“She tried to follow me home.”

Roman’s eyes widened. “She came here again?”

“Yes. She’s still not completely satisfied that Jonathon is okay. The more she gets to know us, the more little things show. But I think if I could take him out with us one day, if Nova and Ian are okay with that, then she’ll be satisfied.”

“You still don’t think she has another motivation?”

“No. I think she’s committed to her patients.”

“Alright. I’m trusting you on this,” Roman said.

He nodded. “I know, Alpha.”

“Can you be objective?”

“I asked myself that question this morning,” Knox said. “I will let you know the second her curiosity is a problem.” And he would. If Jen ever put his pack in danger, he’d warn Roman. He’d make sure his pack was safe.

But. There was a caveat. He would not allow her to be harmed either. He might have to convince her to leave, but he would protect her, even from his own pack.

Eventually, he’d have to end his connection to her. She was a human. He was a shifter. There was no future for the two of them, not if he wanted to remain a part of his pack. But he could think about that later.

“Thanks, Knox.” Roman squeezed his shoulder. “Good work.”

Knox couldn’t help but preen a bit at his Alpha’s praise. Having never had it, it was nice to receive it, even at the age of twenty-eight.

Tomorrow morning, Monday, he was supposed to be back at the school to help with the outdoor classroom. He’d get to see Jen again.

JEN

Why had Knox gone to the movie theater so late at night? Was he dating another woman?

She had no right to demand that they be exclusive, not yet. But the thought of him meeting another woman, and sitting with her in a dark theater... It made Jen's stomach roll.

She couldn't very well *ask* him. It would show that she'd followed him, like a crazy stalker.

She'd just been hoping that maybe he went a different way home, and she'd finally be able to see where Jonathon lived and put her mind to rest once and for all. But all she'd done was create more questions.

Her only options were to ask Knox how the rest of his weekend went and hope she got some answers.

God, the kiss they shared... It had been electric.

She'd been engaged before, but she'd never been that turned on in her life. She'd been tempted to invite Knox in, but she knew she wasn't ready for that. If he had asked to take her to bed, she probably would've said yes, because that's how much she wanted him.

She'd been sidetracked from her original goal, which was to see where Jonathon lived. It would be easy to convince herself that everything was fine with Jonathon's home life, but she owed it to him to be one hundred percent sure.

Ian and Nova, and Knox too, all seemed like great people. But people could be good actors. Her natural instinct was to trust, but as an ER nurse, she'd learned the hard way that wasn't always possible.

During her final year of school, she'd been working as an intern in a children's hospital ER.

A judge had brought his young son in for treatment. He claimed the little boy had fallen down the stairs. The story was even plausible. Multiple children, a sleepover, roughhousing, and using sleeping bags as sleds.

In the ER, she saw these kinds of incidents every weekend, especially in the summer. The children were staying up late, unsupervised, eating candy and drinking soda, and they came in with busted foreheads and broken arms and black eyes most of the time. Jen smiled at them and handed them a lollipop, kids would be kids, and playing rough was natural for many of them, but this one little boy, the judge's son, set off some protective instinct in Jen.

His broken arm and bruised ribs didn't fit in the pattern. He looked like he had been kicked by an adult. Jen tried asking him questions, but the father was very overbearing, and so was his mother, who was a doctor herself, a pulmonologist across town. Jen, having no real authority as a student, went to her supervisor.

Her supervisor questioned her thoroughly and arranged for a social worker to visit the boy. No accusations were made.

But then, the assistant administrator at the hospital paid Jen a visit.

"It would be unfortunate if the judge and his wife, or vice versa the doctor and her husband, were accused of child abuse," the administrator said. "It wouldn't be a good look for our small community hospital."

Jen's outrage had been incandescent. She couldn't believe that a medical professional would be willing to sacrifice a child for donations, or political status, or whatever the reasons were.

She vowed right there in the administrator's office that she would not give up. She might not be able to fight it through the normal channels, but she would do whatever she could to help that little boy.

Fortunately, she had her supervisor's support, so her faith in the nursing profession remained solid. A few weeks passed, and nothing else happened. Jen had begun to wonder if she'd imagined that the boy had suffered trauma at the hands of his father.

But then he was back. Two months later, the judge's son was back in the ER, this time for falling off his bike.

Jen could see the fear in his eyes when his father spoke to him. She tried once again to follow the correct protocol, but to no avail. So, she filed an

anonymous report with the state hotline.

Within forty-eight hours, the boy had been removed from the home and put into his aunt's care. The father lost his position on the judicial bench and was disbarred, with the condition that he could never practice law again in Louisiana.

Everyone in town suspected that Jen had been the one to call. They couldn't prove it, because the records were sealed, and she never admitted it. She held her head high, knowing she had done what she could. She would never be ashamed of helping a child. but surprisingly, her position was 'eliminated' very soon afterward.

Which was fine with her. She didn't want to work there anyway. Once she had secured a job at a clinic, she called the local newspaper and gave them all the information, taking care not to identify the child or the parents. They agreed to report anonymously, and the hospital administrator lost his job.

It was a dramatic story, and not one she told often. Jen was a low-key person who was mild-mannered and quiet. She didn't want a lot of attention. She didn't want anyone to call her a hero, and she didn't want her name plastered all over social media.

She'd always been nosy, and in this case, it had turned out to be a strength. While she felt a bit bad still investigating Jonathon's parents while she was dating his uncle, she didn't feel *that* bad. She would make no apologies for trying to do the right thing.

After their amazing date on the ski slopes, she didn't hear from Knox on Sunday. And she did not contact him. She was still a bit traditional when it came to dating and could not fathom asking a man out herself, even though she thought it was great that other women did.

On Monday morning, he showed up at the school with his work clothes on, ready to construct the outdoor classroom. He looked really hot in his jeans and tool belt and construction boots. He wore no coat, even though it was cold, and she took a moment to admire the way he looked in his fitted t-shirt.

He came straight to her office and said hello. He had already greeted the secretary and the principal, so his visit to her office was not so obvious.

"How was the rest of your weekend?" he asked.

"It was good," she said. "I slept in after all that exercise. I read a book, which was really nice and relaxing."

“That sounds nice. Are your muscles sore?”

“Yes.” She put her hands on her upper thighs. All of the strain from skiing had caught up with her the night before, and she’d soaked in the bath for an hour. “My legs are on fire.”

He grinned. “That means you played hard.”

He’d given her the perfect opening to inquire about what he did over the weekend. Maybe she could find out why he went to the movie theater. “What about you? How was the rest of your weekend?”

“It was good.” He sat down in one of the tiny chairs she kept for her students. She wasn’t sure it would hold his weight, but it was a funny sight. “I saw a movie Saturday night. After I dropped you off, I couldn’t sleep.”

Her chest warmed. He had told her about the movie theater. That meant he wasn’t seeing anyone else. “Oh yeah? What movie did you see?”

He named an action film that she’d noticed on ads. “How was it?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “As soon as it started, I fell asleep and slept until the end credits.”

She laughed along with him, already feeling much better.

God, why am I letting a guy affect my mood?

She had worked so hard to get over her ex. She could make decisions about her patients and feel confident, but when it came to a guy, she was a wreck. But that was the way she was wired, and ignoring it wasn’t going to help.

She’d fallen for her ex way too quickly. She didn’t want to make that same mistake with Knox.

He stood up. “I better get to work,” he said. “Before they fire me.”

He headed outside, and immediately the secretary and one of the kindergarten teachers were in her office.

“Are you guys dating?” the teacher asked.

“We’ve been out twice,” she said. She’d have preferred to keep their budding relationship to herself, but she couldn’t lie to them. Plus, Knox had made no secret of it, and she wasn’t going to ask him to start. He wanted to be seen with her, and she certainly didn’t want to keep him a secret.

“Ooh,” the secretary said. “He’s hot.” Maddie pretended to fan herself. “He likes you a lot.”

“How can you tell?” Jen asked.

“He came in and said hello to us, but it was very professional,” Maddie said.

The teacher interjected. “But!” She held up her hand. “But when he got to you, he had a very different demeanor!”

Jen wasn’t one for gossip, not because she wasn’t nosy – she was. But it had always backfired on her. But she wanted to hear about this. Every detail.

The phone rang, and Maddie had to go answer it, but Jen wasn’t done. “How so?” she asked the teacher. “How is his demeanor different with me?” She didn’t try to hide that she was eager.

“His voice gets deeper. His eyes go straight to you. He’s smitten!” the teacher said as she walked away.

“I don’t know,” she said, just as her phone buzzed. It was Knox.

Would it be inappropriate for me to bring you lunch?

Jen didn’t actually know, and she wasn’t going to assume. It would have been fine at the hospital, but at school it was different, especially an elementary school, and she appreciated that he didn’t want to break the rules or get her into trouble.

She was already blushing when she stepped into the office. “Is it okay if Knox brings me lunch here?”

As she’d expected, a huge grin showed up on the vice principal’s face. Her eyes danced. “Of course. As long as it’s during your break, and he’s not disrupting your work, you’re allowed.”

I asked. The vice principal says it’s fine, so it sounds good to me.

I’ll be there at noon. Any preferences? Knox typed back.

You pick.

He showed up with seafood. “I figured we should take advantage, being this close to the coast.”

He’d chosen shrimp for her and Atlantic salmon for himself.

They ate outside. She kept her coat on, but it was fun. “I guess I shouldn’t do this too often,” she said. “Everyone is already starting to talk. But not in a bad way.”

“They think I’m too much?” he asked. The corner of his mouth turned up on one side.

“No. They think you’re sweet. They said they like living vicariously through me. When they find out you brought me lunch, they’ll be impossible.”

As the days went on, Knox only got sweeter. The next day, he brought flowers to the office, but he didn’t stay long. The next day after that, he left a basket of gourmet coffee on her porch.

On that Thursday, he left loose-leaf tea and instructions on how to make it in her office at the school. The rest of the staff seemed to delight in their budding romance.

“What did you get today?” her coworkers asked each morning.

On Friday, he brought her a new book. She told them all about it. He’d gone to a bookstore and talked to the owner.

On the following Monday, she got a houseplant. He’d gone to a plant nursery and asked what would live inside in Anchorage in the winter.

Her coworkers swooned for her. “He’s perfect,” the vice principal said. “Don’t let him get away.”

“But can someone be *too* perfect?” she asked. Her last boyfriend had seemed perfect at first too. Then, he’d become her fiancé, and she’d caught him lying. He’d lied about so many things. He’d been married before. He had debt she didn’t know about. Debt from loans, and debt from gambling. And... he had been cheating on her.

It had shattered her trust.

Was Knox too good to be true? He was a great uncle, stepping in to help with his niece and nephew for weeks on end. He was spending all his free time building an outdoor classroom for their school. As a potential boyfriend, he was a charming gentleman, taking her on exciting dates and bringing her gifts each day.

The vice-principal made a shushing sound. “Don’t jinx yourself. Live a little. Have fun. I promise, the winter will be long enough up here. Having that guy around will make it a lot more fun.”

Jen’s coworkers all laughed uproariously. Jen still had a few reservations, but she was ready to let go of them and just have fun.

KNOX

Knox needed a wholesome activity idea. Something he could do with Jonathon, so that Jen could see that he was being well cared for, so she could put her mind to rest, and they could move on.

But the flip side was that if she was no longer suspicious, then he'd be done with the assignment. He'd have to quit seeing her. Because nothing real could ever come of a relationship with a human.

Oh, shifters had tried mating with humans. Some had even succeeded, he supposed. But if a child was conceived, the human had to be told the truth about the baby and its unique genetics. A pup with a human mother who was ignorant to their gifts was a disaster waiting to happen.

Everleigh would know what was going on in town. As a premier real estate agent, she kept up with the community activities that were popular with every income level.

"I need something Jonathon can attend. Something Ian and Nova would approve of."

She snapped her fingers. "I know just the thing." She went to a magnetic bulletin board and pulled a flyer off. "There's a snowman building contest on Saturday at the base of the mountain. They'll have hot chocolate and s'mores for everyone who pays the five-dollar entry fee."

That might work. It was best if they kept Jonathon from doing anything too physical, where Jen might notice his extra strength and agility, if he forgot himself again, like he had on the swing set.

Ian and Nova had been in daily contact with Jonathon's teacher, who claimed he hadn't had any more accidents, nor had he tried to climb any more

structures, but it was still best to play it safe.

Knox stopped by Ian and Nova's house that night.

"How's it going?" Ian asked.

"So far, so good." He hadn't told them he was dating Jen yet. "Can we talk outside?" Lexi and Jonathon both felt so comfortable with him now. He loved having a few pseudo-nieces and nephews in the pack, but it meant they wanted him to play instead of talk to their parents.

Once he was sure Lexi and Jonathon weren't listening, he filled them in from start to finish. When he told them how she'd tried to follow him home, Ian's face went white.

"I know she cares. I've seen it, and I know why. It's not my story to tell, but during her career, she's been witness to some horrific things that happened to kids, and she was the only adult who stood up for them. I admire her. But I can't let her concern affect my family and my pack," Ian said.

"Oh, that is just so sad. I hate that for her. Jen is a lovely woman," Nova said. "I hope she doesn't end up with a broken heart."

"Me too," Knox said. "But I'm doing my best."

"We know," Ian said. Ian grabbed him and hugged him tight. "Thank you." He leaned back. "I'm fine with you taking Jonathon."

Nova nodded. "Me too. I'll do something else with Lexi, so that Jen can focus on just Jonathon, since it's him that she's concerned about."

"Maybe I should drop him off to you both, so she can see us interact," Ian said, and they all agreed that was best.

That night he shifted into his wolf form and ran. Afterward, he felt better, but he was desperate to see Jen. He texted her, letting her know he was in her neighborhood, and that he'd been out for a jog.

She suggested that he stop by, and he was more than happy to do so. She came out on the front step in her pajamas. "You're out late," she said.

"I had a lot of energy to burn," he said.

She put her hands up, framing his face.

Now that was something he couldn't resist. He pressed his lips to hers and she kissed him back immediately.

His body lit up like a firecracker. His cock was hard, and his heart was pounding with need.

She opened her mouth, and pushed his tongue inside, which only made his cock throb more.

After about a minute, she pulled away. "I should probably go to bed."

“I really don’t want this to be over,” he said. He brushed his lips over her forehead. “I don’t want to say good night.” He leaned his forehead against her. “But I will.”

She grabbed the front of his shirt, tangling her fingers in the fabric. “No. Don’t go. Come inside. Stay with me.”

Fuck. He hadn’t expected that. But he wanted it. He wasn’t going to say no. He grabbed her hips and pulled her close. “You’re sure?” he asked.

JEN

God, the feel of his strong hands on her hips was sending her into orbit already and he'd barely touched her.

She'd been headed to bed when Knox texted. If she'd known he was coming, she'd have dressed in something cuter. But her polka-dot pajamas hadn't seemed to deter him.

And Jesus, Knox himself looked so damn hot. He had on athletic pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt, and his skin shone with exertion. She wanted to strip him naked, right then.

She hadn't been expecting anything to happen tonight. However, it looked like something *was* happening, and when it did, she was ready. She was on the pill, and she had condoms. She bought them weeks ago, in preparation for this moment.

"Stay," she whispered again. She wasn't going to beg, but she wanted him to know she was into this. He was clearly into it too; she could feel the press of his hard cock against her hip.

"You don't mind?"

"No. I want you to."

He pulled her into his arms. "Then yes. I'd love to stay." He pushed her door open, dragging her inside with him. "I should shower," he said. "I've been running."

She pressed her palms flat against his sculpted pecs. "No. I don't want to wait." She'd bathed earlier, and she was glad of it, but she liked Knox all flushed. He wasn't even really sweaty, thanks to the cold weather.

She yanked on his shirt, and he stripped it off, throwing it to the floor. He

came for her next, untying her robe belt. “I get to unwrap you,” he said. He flung her robe onto a chair and then went for her pajamas. She didn’t have on a bra, so when he pulled her top off, her breasts were bared to him. He bent down immediately, kissing her breasts and licking over her nipples.

“Knox!” she cried out. Her knees nearly buckled. He lifted her up and sat her on the bed, kneeling in front of her. He applied his attention back to her breasts, sucking on her nipples.

His focus was relentless as he laved one nipple with his mouth and squeezed her other one with his hand. Her pussy ached so much already, desperate to be touched. She’d never had anyone apply this level of attention to her body. Never.

He moved his hands down to the waistband of her pants and pulled on those. She wiggled her hips until he got them off, and then she was left in only her panties.

He pressed his hand over her mound. He inhaled. “God, I can feel how wet you are through the fabric.”

She flushed all over. She wasn’t embarrassed of her body’s reaction, but hearing it said so explicitly was new to her as well. She’d never had anyone talk dirty to her, and she found that when it was Knox, she liked it.

“You like that,” he said.

She blushed again at her transparency. “Nothing to hide,” he said. “I love that you’re responsive. I love that you want my hands on your hot little body.”

He laid her back on the bed and spread her legs open, so that his face was right in between her thighs. “I need to taste you,” he said. “But first I have to get these panties off.”

He slipped them off and tossed them aside. He pushed her legs open as wide as they would go, holding them apart. For a moment, he just gazed at her most private spot. Then he leaned in and licked over her clit.

She screamed, glad she didn’t live in an apartment. He let go of one leg and pushed his finger against her entrance, parting her slick folds. She hated to think of her awful ex, but he’d never liked going down on her, and she’d always felt deprived because of it.

Knox obviously didn’t have that problem. “You taste so good,” he said.

Being desired like that, well, it made her feel like a woman. It made her feel like she was hot because he wanted her so much. She hoped that when it was her turn, she’d be able to make him feel how much she wanted him.

He pushed a second finger into her pussy, stretching her walls. “You’re tight,” he said. “But we’ll get you ready.”

It had been awhile, for sure. Once again, her body sang as he worked his fingers into her pussy, while sucking on her clit.

“I’m so close,” she said.

“I want you to come on my cock,” he said. He leaned back and wiped his face, smiling down at her.

“I have condoms,” she said.

His face brightened. “Good. I didn’t. I didn’t know I’d end up here.” She watched while he stripped off his shorts, revealing his massive cock. He grabbed a condom from the side table and rolled it on quickly.

He crawled on top of her, taking time to kiss the side of her neck. He got into position over her, cock brushing over her slit.

She canted her hips up, eager to feel him inside her. He pushed the tip of his cock in, but it was a tight fit. She squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to show any discomfort, but of course, he noticed.

“Jen,” he whispered. “We’ll take it slow. Tell me to stop if it’s too much.”

“No. Don’t stop. I’m close,” she said.

He nodded and put his hand between her legs, pinching her clit. The stimulation shot straight to her brain and her body spasmed. Her pussy walls relaxed a bit, and he slid more of his cock inside her.

He kept going, but never too roughly, always careful. He kissed her ear, her neck, her jawline, as he slowly and carefully fucked his big cock into her body. Being speared by a large cock felt good because it was Knox’s large cock.

Finally, she spread her legs further and he was all the way in. After a moment he began to thrust, in and out. “You feel so good,” he said. “So wet and open for me.”

She panted in time with his thrusts. “Please,” she said. “I’m so close.”

She sank her teeth into his neck, not hard, just enough to worry the skin. That spurred him on, and he fucked her faster, increasing the rhythm of his thrusts.

“Come for me,” he said, circling his fingers over her swollen clit.

She did as he said, helpless against the onslaught of emotions as her pleasure washed over her. She came, climaxing with a sharp yell. Pinpricks of sensation tingled all over her skin.

She hadn't known Knox long, but this was the best sex she'd ever had, and it wasn't even over.

Her mind went a bit fuzzy after that. All she could focus on was his gorgeous face staring down at her as his cock filled her. He gazed at her, seemingly rapt as he went still and then came, emptying his seed inside her as his own orgasm took over his body.

He stayed buried inside her for a minute, then carefully pulled out. He lay beside her, just watching her as she caught her breath.

"That was amazing," he said. He pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I should let you get to sleep." He lingered, as if waiting for her to invite him to stay.

Part of her wanted him to, but she also needed some space. Her relationship with him was happening faster than she'd expected, and she needed to collect herself. She squeezed his hand. "That was amazing." She ran her hand through his thick hair. "I'm so glad you came by." She kissed him one more time. "I'll see you tomorrow, at the school."

KNOX

Knox *did* feel guilty. But this deception was necessary. It was either convince Jen that they were a safe family for Jonathon, or leave open doubt in Jen's mind. Doubt that could resurface. Doubt that could lead to trouble for them.

That morning after he dropped the kids off, he stopped by her office. He was empty-handed today, and the secretary teased him for it.

"Hey," he said, leaning in Jen's doorway.

She looked up from her computer and graced him with a smile.

He'd never enjoyed looking at someone's face as much as he enjoyed looking at hers. Especially after the night they'd shared.

"I'm taking Jonathon to a snowman making contest on Saturday. Would you like to join us?"

"That sounds like so much fun. He won't mind?"

"No. He loves you."

He and Ian and Nova made all the plans, and Knox bought the tickets for the contest and at 10:00 a.m., he picked Jen up. "Where is Jonathon?" She peeked in the back of his truck.

"Ian is dropping him off. He wanted to take the kids to breakfast." Hopefully, Ian's involvement would make a good impression.

"That's really sweet," she said.

He checked his texts. "It looks like they're running a little bit behind. Do you want to get some breakfast too?"

"Yes. I've only had coffee."

He turned toward one of the best breakfast cafés, and they found a

parking spot right away.

“You haven’t mentioned your own family,” he said as he pulled open the door for her. “Do they still live in your hometown?”

Was he overstepping? He knew next to nothing about her life before she moved to Alaska. She had not met his parents yet because he didn’t want her to get too close, and more importantly, because they absolutely would not tolerate meeting a human.

But he did mention them in conversation fairly often. He actually tried not to, but they were such a big part of his life. His entire pack was, so naturally, he spoke of them. At some point she was going to expect to meet them all: his parents, his friends, and the rest of his extended family. Hopefully, the situation with Jonathon would be resolved before that point came.

“They do.” She paused for a moment. Then, her voice cracked when she spoke. “Our relationship is strained. When I left my fiancé, they took his side.”

“How could they do that?” Jen was such a sweet and kind person. He couldn’t imagine her own family not protecting her.

“For one thing, they lived next-door to us, and our parents were all friends. My parents have attempted to maintain a friendship, but my ex’s parents are mad at them because of me.”

“What the hell? That is just wrong.”

“It feels that way to me too, but they think I overreacted. They think that we could’ve worked things out since we’ve been friends since we were children. They all had this grand plan for us where we got married and lived across the street from them, and they could see their grandchildren every day.”

“You weren’t on board with this plan?”

“Oh, I was. I bought into it more than anyone,” she said ruefully. “I was in, hook line and sinker.”

“You don’t have to tell me what happened if you don’t want to talk about it.” He’d never seen her this reluctant before.

“No, it’s fine. I just haven’t told anyone here what happened. It’s not that unique of a story. As I said, we’d known each other since we were small children, we were friends, and then in high school he asked me out. He was cute and he was nice, so I said yes. We went to college together, and he did engineering while I did nursing. Halfway through college he proposed. We

graduated, and we were planning the wedding when I happened upon a credit card bill. It was in a stack of papers on our countertop in the house that we were renovating. Our parents had given us the down payment to get started,” she said. She looked over at him. “And yes. It was across the street from theirs.”

“You didn’t know about this credit card bill?” His own parents had been angry enough at him over credit card bills. He understood the disruption they could cause. Or maybe he should say that he could understand the disruption they could cause, *if* you tried to hide the amount charged. For better or worse, he’d never tried to hide what he’d splurged on.

“No. I knew nothing about it. The balance was for thousands of dollars. And maybe it wouldn’t have mattered, if I hadn’t just asked him if he had any credit card debt.”

“I’m guessing he said no.”

“Correct. He lied to me over and over. He lied directly and indirectly. He had a loan I didn’t know about, as well as gambling debt. And then he cheated on me. So now I’ve got no stomach for half-truths, or mistruths, or outright lying.”

Damn. He’d like to pay this guy a visit and enact a little revenge on him for fucking up Jen’s life and ruining her trust in people. But was he any better? Knox wouldn’t cheat on her. But he *was* using her. He was lying to her.

It made him a liar, even if it was for the greater good. He doubted she’d see the distinction.

“I haven’t dated again. I haven’t wanted to.” She gave him a wobbly smile. “Until now.”

Shit. Now he felt like a major asshole. “So, I’m the first person you’ve dated?” he asked, just making sure he understood.

“Yes.” She put her hand on top of his. “I’m glad you asked me out. I might never have tried again.”

“Surely others have asked you out?” She was gorgeous and kind; he’d imagined she got offers constantly.

“When I was working at the hospital, I did. I got asked out by the other nurses, the doctors, the maintenance staff, and the volunteers, and even a few remarkable times a patient, which was always awkward because I had to explain to them that I’m not allowed to date someone I treat.” She laughed. “Some of them were quite persistent.”

He started growling. He did not like that and neither did his wolf. “Who was it? Did the hospital not take care of it?”

“Actually, the hospital has a fairly good policy. They are always willing to step in, but the last patient was eighty-five years old. I know that doesn’t always mean a person isn’t threatening, but he was very sweet.”

Knox didn’t care if he was one hundred and eighty. He didn’t want any guy bullying Jen. “If that happens again, and it’s a problem, you let me know.”

“I don’t think it would happen now. Schools are different. It’s the same people in and out, day after day. And besides, everyone knows we’re dating.” She put her hand on his bicep. “No one wants to cross you, Knox. I’m sure you know that.”

True. Even without knowing he was a wolf shifter, it would take an idiot to go up against him. He was taller and broader than most human men, and sometimes they seemed to sense that he could snap them like a twig.

A guilty pang hit him. He wouldn’t always be around to defend her from creeps. He was going to have to walk away, sooner or later. There was no other option. Not for them.

The pack had struggled enough when they’d been asked to accept Everleigh, the Alpha’s mate who was a bear shifter. It had almost broken them. And she had merely been a different type of shifter, not a human.

Even with cubs involved, her own bear pack had struggled too. If Roman had not been so committed to harmony, the pack might have broken into factions.

Now, a few years later, everyone adored Everleigh, but getting there had been a rough road. He couldn’t imagine what the road to admitting a human to the pack would be.

There was also the cautionary tale of Kyra, who was mated to one of Roman’s advisors. Kyra’s mother had been human. She’d been rejected by the pack, and then been killed by vampires. It was a devastating story, but it just reinforced the fact that humans were more fragile, and they were easy targets for a wolf shifter’s enemies.

Knox sighed. Dwelling on these facts implied that he wanted a relationship. He did not. He wasn’t sure of much, but he was still certain of that.

Wanting to lighten the mood, he lifted his arm and flexed his muscles. “Yes. I agree. No one should cross me.”

Jen leaned over and wrapped her small hand around his upper arm. “Yes. I don’t think anyone would want to mess with this,” she said, her voice low and sultry.

Instantly, his cock was rock hard. He panted, willing it to calm down.

You’re in public. Now is not the time.

His wolf was not helping. His wolf was panting and growling, in a lustful way.

He gulped down an entire glass of orange juice, trying to show his body he wasn’t in the right place for *any* type of passionate moment, and then they left for the base of the mountain.

Ian arrived at the snowman contest right as they did.

In preparation, Jonathon had been heavily coached. Knox felt for the kid; none of this was his fault. All he’d wanted was an adventurous climb on a swing set, and that had set all of this into motion.

Sometimes Knox thought the whole set up wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair to expect a young wolf shifter to behave like a human. A young shifter, of any type, was compelled to run, jump, and climb. It was in his or her nature.

He said that to Roman just a few days earlier. Roman had disagreed with him.

“Living in an old-school shifter pack is fine, but it creates a very small world. If you can’t learn to understand humans, you’ll never get to use public transportation, have a job in a city or fly on a plane. Our pack was very traditional when I was young. You’ve been back to the remote area where we all lived. Our members were going to leave because hardly anyone wanted to live that way. It’s very isolating, and the only allies you have are other traditional packs. And those old pack ideas are very outdated.”

Those were all valid points. “Did you ever want to stay traditional?” Knox asked. “Were you tempted?” In some ways it might be hard, but in others it would have to be far less complicated.

“There were a few times I questioned it. But Everleigh never would have lived that way. She grew up in a traditional bear pack and found it very oppressive. Her brother and her family spent all of their time trying to control her and influence her choices. She wanted to be a part of a bigger world,” he’d said.

So maybe Roman was right. Maybe being a modern pack was best. Knox certainly had enjoyed the fun parts, up until a month ago when his parents had finally threatened to cut him off.

Ian hugged Jonathon goodbye, and then it was just the three of them. One of the organizers led them to their spot and showed them the materials they could use to create their snowman.

Before they could get started, Jonathon grabbed Knox around the waist and held on, already giddy with the excitement of a six-year-old.

Shit. The pup was already getting carried away and they'd only just arrived. Knox hoped this hadn't been a terrible idea. "Watch your strength," Knox warned in a whisper that only shifters could hear. The pup must be going through a growth spurt to have this much extra energy, even after all the warning.

Jonathon nodded to show he'd heard.

"Hi, Nurse Jen!" He hugged her too, with Knox watching closely. Luckily, Jonathon controlled his strength when he hugged her.

The contest moderators gave the instructions for the contest and then held up a bell. He rang the bell and yelled, "Ready, set, go!"

Jonathon dove into the work like a madman. He rolled snow and was intense about making each of the balls a perfect sphere. They ran into a minor mishap when the head rolled off and splattered on the ground. But Jonathon recovered quickly, and got a new head shaped. He chose a plaid scarf to put around his neck, and a red beret for the hat.

Jen helped Jonathon, and Knox's job was taking photos.

Jonathon's cheeks were pink with exertion. He was hyper the entire time, and Ian and Nova were enjoying the constant updates.

But before they could announce a winner, Knox's phone buzzed. "It's time. The baby is on the way."

Jonathon dropped the carrot he'd picked up for the nose. "Let's go!"

Knox grabbed his arm before he ran off. "Not just yet. We're going to chill out until your dad tells us to come home."

Knox had thought Jonathon would be more interested in the snowman, but the prospect of the baby seemed more interesting to him.

Knox and Ian had already been over the plan of how to handle Nova going into labor. Despite being a shifter, Knox knew next to nothing about shifter labor and delivery. He was an only child, and when one of his family members or friends had a baby, he tended to avoid the details. They sounded messy and painful, even for a shifter.

There was no reason for a shifter to give birth in a hospital, which was a bit awkward for Ian, because his coworkers asked questions. However, he'd

made the excuse that he'd hired a doula and a midwife to come stay with them over the last two weeks, so no one really questioned it.

They knew Jen would want to see the baby, so they'd already planned for Nova and Ian to come to her house a few days after the birth. Ian had told Knox to mention that Lexi was born quickly, so Jen wouldn't be surprised when the baby arrived in just a few hours.

Moments later, the event organizer announced the winners. Sadly, their snowman didn't win, but they did get an honorable mention for "best shape," which prompted Jonathon to dance around in a circle with glee. Even better, the prize came with a bag of candy bars, which he probably ripped open.

Jonathon wrapped his arms around both Jen and Knox. "This was the best!"

Knox lifted him into the air, and the three of them took a photo together next to their snowman.

JEN

“**W**hat now?” Jonathon asked as they gathered their belongings.

“Your dad is already on his way back here with Lexi. He’s going to drop her off with us and we’ll hang out until the baby is born,” Knox said.

Jen was a bit nervous that Nova wasn’t going to the hospital, but this was her second child, and she was married to a doctor. This truly wasn’t any of Jen’s business.

“You can come to my house, and we can make homemade cookies,” Jen offered.

“Are you sure?” Knox asked.

“Yes. It will be a good distraction.”

Ian arrived a minute later. He hugged Lexi and Jonathon, and he was off.

“Hi, Nurse Jen!” Lexi shouted.

“Do you know what the baby’s going to be named?” Jen asked, once they’d gotten everyone into the vehicle and started driving.

“I don’t,” Jonathon said.

“Yes, you do!” Lexi kicked him.

“No, I don’t!”

Jen reminded herself they were probably worried about their mother and anxious about the arrival of a new child in their family, which was to be expected. She’d been around kids long enough that she knew how to redirect.

“Lexi, can you remind us of what the names might be?” Jen asked.

Knox was grinning at her. He mouthed the word, “Thanks.”

“Yes, Nurse Jen. Our parents have chosen Mateo Alexander if it’s a boy, and Maria Lenore if it’s a girl. But everyone is pretty sure it’s a boy, so he’ll be called Mateo.”

“Those are very nice names,” she said.

“You’re good at that,” Knox said. “Getting them back on track. I usually try to referee, and it devolves into madness.”

“I’ve had some practice. I did a round as a pediatric nurse, and I saw kids in the ER here. And of course, these last few weeks at the school.”

“Well, it shows,” he said. “I hope to be as good as you are one day in the future.”

She patted his hand. “You’ll get there.”

He parked the car. “We’re here.”

The next few hours were a madhouse of flour, eggs, sugar, and milk. They baked dozens of cookies, until finally Ian called.

Mateo Alexander had arrived, and Knox had to leave with them to go back home.

She was happy for them, truly, but it was a bit bittersweet, because it was clear that she wasn’t welcome to come with them.

“We can take some of these cookies to mama,” Lexi said.

“Great idea,” Jen said. She started packing the still warm cookies into a glass container and sealed it. “I am so happy for them. Did Ian say how it went?” she asked Knox.

“He said it was another easy birth.”

That was a relief. She hadn’t wanted to admit how nervous she had been about the home birth. “That’s great. I hope if I ever have kids, it’s that easy for me.”

Knox had a funny look on his face for just a moment, but surely he didn’t think she was implying that she was ready to have a baby yet? He should know her better than that. She did want kids, but that was still a while away for her.

Whether or not he wanted children wasn’t a question she had asked Knox. But she assumed that he would want to be a father, based on how good he was with Lexi and Jonathon. He was good with all the kids at school as well. They all liked when he came to the school, because he would always do outrageous things like pretend to spray them with a water hose or do a cartwheel or handstand. He could be the fun adult because he wasn’t in charge of the classroom.

Once the cookies were packaged up, she hugged them all bye, making them promise to send a photo of their new baby brother.



TO JEN'S RELIEF, Mateo was healthy, and Nova was reportedly doing great. She'd even texted Jen herself, thanking her for entertaining the kids during the birth. Nova said she planned to bring the baby by to meet her soon, and Jen looked forward to that.

As the days passed, Jen knew she was falling for Knox. She couldn't have stopped it if she tried. She had almost no complaints. He was an attentive boyfriend. He had told her weeks ago that he wanted to be exclusive. She hadn't even had to ask, and according to her friends, that was a huge deal these days.

He was almost finished with the additional work he was doing for the school, and she'd miss seeing him there. For the time being, he still brought her treats every day, just like he did the first week – gifts that included flowers, candy, and delicious lunch foods.

The only issue was that she had never seen his house.

He *said* he was looking for a house in town, but he hadn't mentioned it in the last few days. For most people, house hunting or apartment hunting took up a significant amount of brain power, and they talked about it all the time. However, Knox seemed unconcerned.

She also had not met any of his family, his parents, or his friends besides Ian, Nova, and their kids. When she inquired about meeting them, he responded by saying that his family was very private, and that they didn't have people over often.

She wondered if they were in some sort of cult. She had tried looking for them on social media, but there was nothing. She found Ian, who had a Twitter account linked to the hospital, and Nova had a page she ran for the parents of her students, but that was it.

Jen wasn't that into social media, but usually people her age had *something*. Even her parents had a few accounts, but as far as she could tell, Knox had nothing at all.

He had a distinct name, but she couldn't find anything about him online. Maybe his family really was part of a cult, one that didn't believe in

technology.

Another odd thing was that he never got calls from clients.

She'd asked how often he had to work, and he explained that this was the off-season. But she had known other landscapers. They worked in Louisiana, not Alaska, so the weather was milder and provided more opportunities to work outside, but the Louisiana landscapers had worked through the winter on other projects. It was the only way to keep a business going.

But when she tried to subtly ask Knox about his income, or lack thereof, he sheepishly admitted that his family had quite a bit of money.

"I'm just paranoid," she said. She'd started to wonder if she was overly observant. She'd been called nosy, but nosy implied something negative in the reasons that she was seeking out the information. There was nothing negative behind her motivation. She would never hold it against Knox. But history had taught her to be suspicious.

And thanks to that suspicion, she couldn't help but notice certain things.

They could be little things, inconsequential, or they could be glaring issues.

Her ex-fiancé had gone out of his way to hide his lies, but Knox didn't seem to be hiding anything. He just had an unusual life, with the hidden family, the inherited money, and the very part-time business.

She had no problem with him using inherited money. She just didn't ever want to get into another situation where she didn't know anything about her significant other's private life.

Her phone rang, startling her out of her thoughts.

"The kids are asleep, and I can't stop thinking about you."

"Do you want to come over?" They'd shared one great night in bed, and then life had interrupted. They hadn't had as much time together as she would have liked.

"I'd love that," he said.

Twenty minutes later, he was knocking on her door.

She yanked him inside. She didn't want to waste time with chit chat or small talk. She wanted to make him feel as good as he'd made her feel the first time they'd made love.

"Whoa," he said. "Whatever this is, I like it." He put his hands on her face and tilted her head, kissing her soundly. He tasted good, like spearmint, and she opened her mouth for him.

Once she'd kissed him to her satisfaction, she grabbed the button of his

jeans and yanked them open. “Wow. I *really* like this,” he said.

“I’ve been thinking about doing this since last time.”

He grabbed her and kissed her again. “In that case, I can’t wait to feel your lips on my cock.”

God, it was hot when he talked like that. Her nipples tingled with desire and her pussy clenched, ready to be filled once again with his big cock.

She dropped to her knees in front of him. It was important to her that she please him. He’d never implied she should reciprocate, but she wanted to. She tugged on his pants until they came down, along with his boxers, freeing his large erection.

It was right in front of her face, hard and leaking already. She leaned her head forward, sticking her tongue out to taste him. He was clean, and immediately she wanted more.

She opened her mouth and took him in. She had researched the methods, reading how-to articles online, wanting to make sure her lust matched her skill. Because her sex life with her ex hadn’t been great, she didn’t have much experience with giving oral sex either. Not that she would mention that to Knox.

She opened her mouth and moved forward, taking the head in between her lips. She made sure her teeth were covered, and then she went for it. She sucked, making a vacuum with her mouth, and Knox let out an unholy groan.

“Jesus, Jen. You’re killing me.”

He looked down at her with fire-hot eyes. His gaze burned her up, and her pussy clenched, hard. She needed to touch herself, but she was still dressed. In her haste to get to Knox’s cock, she’d left all of her clothes on.

He tangled his hands in her hair, not pulling, just holding. She went deeper, making a humming sound as she got her mouth on his cock.

He was groaning now, continuously and telling her over and over how hot she was.

She couldn't fight it any longer. She had to touch herself. She shoved her hand down into her pants, dipping into the front of her panties.

She nearly sagged in relief as her fingers brushed over her aching clit. She pushed farther back, rubbing over her dripping entrance, gathering slick. She undulated her hips, working herself as she sucked his cock.

“Christ, Jen,” Knox moaned. “Are you touching yourself?” He looked down between them, focusing on the sight of her hand in her pants.

“Mmm,” she moaned in response, unable to talk because her mouth was

full of his big cock.

With a sudden flurry of movement, Knox was pulling out of her mouth and bending down to lift her into his arms. “You’re so fucking hot, touching yourself like that. I can’t stand it.”

He laid her on the bed and began to strip her clothes off with frantic motions. His urgency fueled her own, and she writhed, trying to help him. Finally, she was naked and so was he. He dove toward her nightstand, grabbing another condom. She urged him on, and he had his cock sheathed in a few seconds.

He rolled onto his back and grabbed her, pulling her on top of him. She straddled him, grabbing his cock and positioning it. She struggled to stay upright, so he took over, holding his cock and guiding it into her pussy with one hand, while supporting her with the other.

She sank onto his thick cock, letting out a satisfied moan. He filled her up perfectly, and she rocked her hips, savoring the feeling of being stretched. This time the sensation was pleasant as he speared her. He began to thrust, and she let her head fall back.

He worked her clit again, rubbing it in circles, and she was close in just minutes.

“I’m about to come,” she said, a bit surprised even as the words left her mouth. However, she wanted him to know she enjoyed herself, so she didn’t try to censor her words.

“Come for me,” he said, commanding her. And she did. She let go, climaxing at the same time he did. She felt his cock spurt as it swelled inside her.

She collapsed forward onto his firm chest, and he held her, wrapping her up in his strong arms.

KNOX

Knox woke up the next morning warm and comfortable. He was snuggled up to Jen in her bed, and the sunlight was beginning to filter through the windows.

Knox was no longer “falling” for Jen. It had already happened, past tense.

Knox had fallen for her. It was too late to stop it. He would just have to manage the outcome as well as he could.

He considered getting up and making breakfast for her or running out to pick something up. But just as he was sitting up, he got a text – from Roman – telling him he needed to come home. Roman had never texted him to come home before, so Knox made up an excuse about Ian and Nova wanting a break from the older kids, and he left Jen snug in her bed.

When he got there, Roman called him to his office.

Roman was pacing the room, tension tight across his shoulders. “There’s a group of hunters on the move. I just got word from a neighboring pack.”

What? Of all the things Knox had expected, that wasn’t one of them. “Does this happen often? What do they want?”

“Not to us. Hunters usually keep to themselves, and they only become active when there’s a group of vampires killing people. They almost never confront shifters. These days, we’re so well integrated with humans, they no longer consider us a threat to humans.”

“I can’t remember a time when they’ve ever been a problem. Or at least I didn’t know about it if they were,” Knox said. But he’d been out of the loop on a lot of stuff and still had a lot to learn about pack life.

“Human hunters haven’t been a problem for us in decades. My father told

me about them, but the only time it's ever come up in Alaska was with vampires, because they kill humans. Wolf shifters don't hurt humans, ever, and hunters know that, so they leave us alone."

"What could have them alarmed enough to come here?"

"I don't know. I'm going to be making some phone calls, but I want everyone to be very careful. We're going to have a pack meeting so I can warn everyone; we're going to have to tighten up security a little bit. I want you to be careful when you're out with Jen. If a hunter sees a human out with a shifter, it might cause panic, and make them think she's in danger."

"How will they know that I'm a shifter?" Shifters had the ability to discern who was human and who wasn't, but Knox didn't think humans did.

"Some of the older hunter groups have records of our pack names, locations, and some have photos. They might know that we live here and that we are a part of the community. We can never assume anything."

The thought of someone attacking him while Jen was with him had his blood running cold. Was he exposing her to danger? He'd never had to consider watching out for a human before, not for more than a few hours. He'd been aware enough on the ski slopes, where accidents could happen, but a hunter was much more of a threat. It would take a silver knife to hurt Knox, but any type of weapon could harm Jen.

Knox went to the pack archives and spent the rest of the day researching.

That night, Roman held a meeting. They needed every pack member to understand what was at stake.

"Hunters are human," Roman reminded the pack. "We may not kill them. They must always be disarmed. Disarmed, they are no threat to us. If we kill humans, we will suffer grave consequences. We have methods to effectively restrain them. We will go over this tonight."

"Are there any hunters currently in Anchorage?" Jameson asked.

"Yes. We think there are at least three here in town. Hopefully, they are passing through. But we have to be prepared for them to see us out and about, mingling with humans and not hurting them. Luckily, our pack is modern enough that it looks like a gated suburban community. We all have electricity and water accounts with the city, so if they start looking at utility companies, the evidence will be there."

"They go that deep?" a female shifter asked.

Knox knew the answer to that. The archives had been illuminating. Hunters had been creative in the past about sniffing out shifters. They used

every resource available to look for any clues that might indicate someone wasn't human.

"Yes. Just like we do, some of them have access to police departments, fire departments, and school districts. Some have access to the FBI, the CIA and Interpol," Roman said.

Knox kept making notes, writing down everything Roman said. He checked his watch. It was early evening. He needed to check on Jen. With hunters in town, he wasn't going to leave her alone for too long.

If she was free on Sunday, maybe he could even take her out on a date again.



THANK God nothing happened with the hunters, and Knox was able to call Jen on Saturday night and arrange a date for them on Sunday. She'd let him pick their activity again, and he'd chosen ice skating.

Jen picked up ice-skating relatively easily, in Knox's opinion. It was harder than skiing, but she didn't think so.

"I grew up roller skating and rollerblading," she said as she glided along the ice, with her hair flying behind her. He loved her pink knitted hat, with her golden hair shining against her white coat.

"So I think that helps," she said, trying to turn. The turn caused a bit of a wobble, but he steadied her. "Water skiing did not give me any preparation for snow skiing whatsoever."

"Water skiing," he said, reaching for her hand. "That's something I haven't done." He hadn't traveled nearly as much as he liked.

"If we ever go down south, I can teach you."

Of course, he *could* water ski up here. Water temperature didn't bother him, but it wasn't a sport that most people enjoyed in frigid water even with wet suits on, so it wasn't popular in Alaska.

He let go of her hand and turned around, skating backward so he could watch her graceful movements.

"Show off," she said.

His phone buzzed, but he ignored it until it rang. Shit. It was Roman. "I have to take this. It's a client," he said.

Roman's text only said. ***Come home.***

This was getting to be a frequent occurrence, having a date interrupted. But Jen only smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Go take care of them. I’ll get my skates off.”

He thought she might be annoyed at having their time interrupted yet again, but instead she seemed surprised. She was a very understanding person.

He pretended to talk on the phone for a moment while she skated away. He chewed on his lip, trying to come up with a lie. He would have to tell her *something*.

Once he reached her, he’d come up with a story. “One of my clients had a tree fall on their garage roof, and their car’s stuck inside. They can’t get in touch with any of the tree removal services, so I’m going to go over there and take care of it for them,” he said, sitting down next to her so he could remove his own skates.

She frowned. “Oh, that’s dangerous, isn’t it?”

“It can be, but I’ve worked with trees before, and I know the process.”

He wished he could be truthful with her. He wished he could just explain to her that he didn’t matter if a few branches fell on him. That it would be fine, and he would probably lift the tree up with his bare hands. But he couldn’t tell her that. He wasn’t allowed. And besides, there was no tree, and there was no garage.

The truth was much worse.

Hunters. Who were apparently a threat to her as well, if they thought Knox was going to harm her.

“If you need to go now, I can get a ride from a friend,” Jen said. “One of the other teachers is shopping down the street.”

“No.” There was no way in hell he was leaving her there alone.

The skating rink was in the open air; anyone would be able to see her, or smell her, if they were a shifter.

It was too late for him to avoid her; his scent was tied to her now too. He took a deep breath. Humans did not track people using scent; they didn’t have the ability. And as far as he knew, there were currently no hunter groups that worked with shifters, but the archives had mentioned it. What if these hunters had a shifter working with them? It would expose Jen.

Knox could not imagine working with hunters himself, unless it was against a vampire. Maybe that would make sense, just as long as they weren’t working against their own kind.

A shifter working against his own kind would be unforgivable.

Unless that shifter truly was hurting humans. But rogue shifters would be handled by their packs, not by human hunters.

There were so many things about pack life that he had ignored in the past. Now he was beginning to understand why Roman had urged him to be a full participant in the pack. And why his parents had as well. There were so many complex issues to consider.

When he got to Roman, the Alpha was more agitated than Knox had seen him in years.

“More hunters have arrived in town. We think there are at least ten, which is a problem. A big one.”

“What will we do about it?” Knox asked as Roman’s advisors began walking into his office.

Roman had not called a full pack meeting as Knox had expected. It was just Roman, Tristan, Emerson, and Derek, his most trusted confidants and advisors.

“No offense, I’m glad to be included, but why am I here?” Knox asked.

“You have shown quite a bit of commitment to this pack lately. Not just with your task of convincing the nurse that we are safe guardians for Jonathon, but also you have delved into this pack’s history, our beliefs, and our way of life. I’ve seen you multiple times at the archives studying. And you learned the way that hunters could be insidious and infiltrate.”

Wow. Knox wasn’t expecting that level of compliment. He hadn’t realized Roman felt quite that strongly. But the Alpha wasn’t done.

“Forbidding humans to join a pack has been self-protective for many packs,” Roman said. “There is always the fear that any human is actually a hunter in disguise. It has been decades, but there was a time when hunters believed that shifters were inherently evil. They bought into the myth of the werewolf that couldn’t control himself, and they wanted to fully eradicate us.”

Knox nodded. “I came across all of that while reading.” He cleared his throat. “Thank you for including me. It means a lot.”

“Keep in mind that this information is not going to be shared with the rest of the pack, not today. Although they do know we need to be on high alert, they don’t know every detail. The knowledge is available to them, but they haven’t looked for it, and I don’t want to cause undue panic.”

Knox agreed. But there was one issue, and it was specific only to him. He needed to let them know the truth about Jen – about how he felt. Before this

went any further.

“I do have a quick confession,” Knox said. “It won’t change anything said during this meeting, but I do have feelings for Jen. It’s become more than just a mission for me.” He clasped his hands together. “I am willing to move away from Anchorage, if necessary. I’m not sure I can stay in Anchorage and not be a part of her life.”

He couldn’t imagine going to bed at night, knowing she was just a few miles away, and not going to her. His wolf would be in agony, and so would Knox.

Derek slung his arm around Knox’s shoulders. “Hey. None of us are made of stone. We all have feelings. It is understandable that you have developed feelings for a woman that you’ve spent this much time with, while caring for Jonathon and Lexi together.”

“Yes,” Roman said. “I agree with Derek. And thank you for telling us. It *could* be an issue, but we are going to put your relationship with Jen on the back burner until the hunter problem is solved. Just be aware that your connection to her could potentially put her in danger.”

“I know. I thought of that already,” Knox said. “Several times.”

“We’ll come up with some ideas of how to keep her safe. We have enough people in this pack who are used to guarding others. She will not be unprotected. She is a part of Nova and Ian’s life, and Jonathon and Lexi’s life as well. So that means she is important to this pack even if she is not a part of it.”

That was a relief. It wasn’t a solution but knowing that she would be safe could allow Knox to concentrate on the hunters.

He exhaled. Roman’s trust in him had overwhelmed Knox, and quite honestly, it was a shock. He had come to accept the fact that the pack would always view him as a fuck up. But apparently, that was not the case.

He had redeemed himself, at least to an extent. His chest filled with pride, but it was somewhat dampened by the fear for his pack, and his fear for Jen’s safety.

JEN

Ski trip overnight
Sex

KNOX

Knox was out on the school's playground, installing a new basketball goal when he heard someone say his name.

It was Ian. He was wearing scrubs as if he'd come from work, and he had Lexi and Jonathon with him.

"Get back to the pack. They're here," Ian said in a hushed voice.

Knox didn't have to ask what he meant.

Knox's eyes went right to the school building. Jen was still inside the school.

"We can't tell her anything. You know that."

"I know," Knox said.

"We have people watching her," Ian reminded him. Roman had been adamant that Jen would not be left unprotected while Knox was away from her. "They will guard her."

Knox knew they would. He just preferred to do it himself. He quickly cleaned up his tools.

"We knew they were in town," Ian said. "But we didn't know they knew where we lived." His eyes dropped to the ground. "One's been spotted near pack land."

"Shit."

"Follow me back," Ian said. "Roman's orders; he doesn't want us alone. He's called everyone back home. He wants everyone on pack land."

"Okay. But I'm going to say bye to Jen."

Ian nodded and left, going inside to check his kids out through the office so no one would be suspicious.

Jen was with a student, so Knox waved, hoping this wasn't the last time he ever saw her. He glanced over his shoulder as he walked away. He walked quickly to the parking lot and got in his Jeep, following Ian. They made it back home without incident, although he knew they'd both kept an eye out as they drove.

As soon as they were back on pack land, Roman called a meeting with just a small group.

Roman ran his hands through his hair. "One of them came to the gate earlier. He said he wants to talk."

"You're going to accept that?" Jameson asked.

"Yes. Diplomacy is the best way forward. However, I will not let them on our land. They somehow found us, and I want to know how that happened. How did a group of humans find us? How did they know where we were? I can't ask if I don't talk to them."

Tristan nodded. "I agree. We need to see what they want. We need to see if someone sent them. We need to see if there was an incident we missed."

"I've scanned all the headlines," Roman said. "Local, state, nationwide. Even international. But I didn't find any unusual animal attacks. I didn't find any human deaths that might be attributed to spells or magic, or shifter wounds of any kind."

Knox clasped his hands together. "The four of us are going to go out there. Knox, do you feel ready to go?"

"Yes," he said. This was what he'd always wanted. It wasn't with a law enforcement agency as he'd once dreamed, but it was for his pack, which was even more important. "Is there anything I should be watching for?"

"The number one thing is to make sure there are no shifters with them. Any time human hunters and shifters pair up, there could be trouble. Between the five of us, we should notice if they are truly human. Spells can only go so far. If you really concentrate you can get past the magic. Just be very aware and let your wolf speak to you."

"Yes, Ian told me about the spells that Nova used to evade her in-laws. They worked, but not for long. I know it can be done."

"You're right. I've already alerted Everleigh's family and their bear clan. Her brother is the Alpha. If the hunters pose a threat, we'll call them, and they will come down and help. They are fairly traditional, so we might have to make some accommodations. But they're very powerful in the shifter community, and they are brutal, when necessary."

“Good idea,” Tristan said. “They have a lot of connections.”

“I didn’t call them yet because they *might* be more likely to harm a human than one of us. And I don’t want to start trouble,” Roman said. Everyone nodded, and Roman handed Knox a knife and gun. “You completed your training with these, right?”

“Yes. I have.” They were all required to learn how to shoot. And how to use a knife. Knox had excelled in his combat training.

Roman patted the knife. “These weapons are the very last resort. Our bare hands are effective against humans. Don’t forget that.”

They all made sure everyone’s cell phones were charged and they all had their walkie-talkies to communicate.

“All right, let’s go,” Roman said.

“Thank you,” Knox said as they moved out. “For trusting me.”

Roman’s hand squeezed the back of Knox’s neck for a brief second. “You have more than proven yourself. You’re a valuable member of this pack. Don’t forget that.”

This was his first time to actually confront a potential enemy.

No, don’t think of them that way. Humans are not enemies; they must be spared.

Despite his eagerness to prove himself, Knox’s stomach swirled with nerves.

Roman and the others had done this before. Roman had had to deal with threats to their pack. Sometimes it had been a natural disaster, like the fire that killed Roman’s father, and sometimes it had been supernatural creatures, like vampires. He’d even had to confront Nova’s in-laws not that long ago, and a few other members of their lion shifter pride.

But Knox had lived a very placid life. With the possibility of conflict now present, he realized just how mundane it had been. How utterly *easy* he’d had it. He had been a child during the forest fire. Now that he was farther removed from his playboy lifestyle, he had more sympathy for his parents having been hard on him – they knew that hard times would come.

He didn’t blame Roman for agreeing with his parents either. Knox had needed a wakeup call; he couldn’t imagine the stress of running a pack, and now he could appreciate just how devoted Roman was to the safety of all his wolf shifters.

They walked to the gate in a group, trying to look casual so as not to alert any pack members more than necessary.

All throughout the pack there were adults guarding their homes, and all the pups had been sent inside. There were trained guards stationed along all the exterior points where someone could try and enter their land, just as a precaution.

Everyone was on edge, and everyone was ready.

“Usually, we would have a specific plan for who was to shift into a wolf and who was to remain in human form,” Roman told Knox. “It's the best way to confront our enemies. But since these are humans, we will all remain in human form unless the threat changes. However, that could change. If I say the word shift, then I will stay human and so will Derek. Emerson and Tristan will change into their wolf form.”

“Knox, which do you feel more comfortable doing?” Jameson asked.

Knox had to think about it. In the past, he would have immediately said human. But lately he had been more in touch with his wolf. The demands of lying to Jen, the woman he was falling in love with, plus trying to help with Jonathon and Lexi had meant he needed more of an outlet. That had led to him going for midnight runs nearly every night that he did not spend with Jen.

“I will shift if necessary,” he said. He felt confident in his decision.

As they approached, he got a funny feeling – it was fairly significant and impossible to ignore. As a shifter, he'd grown up being told never to ignore those feelings. He had to speak up, even though he was the novice in the group. “Something feels weird,” he said, glancing over at Roman.

“Yes,” Tristan said. “I feel it too.”

Roman stopped in the middle of their path. “Can you identify what it is you feel?”

Knox was grateful that his Alpha took him seriously. “I can't, not yet,” Knox said. “I don't feel anything but humans. But something has my wolf agitated; he's growling and clawing. He's trying to let me know there's a problem, but all I can feel are the four humans standing outside the gate.”

“I feel a sense of disquiet,” Roman said. “Thank you for telling me. We were already approaching with caution, but now we know there may be a potential issue. They may mean harm. And our wolves may be able to sense that – our wolves' intuition is powerful and often unexplainable.”

Knox was finally starting to understand the reverence that packs paid to their shifter selves. He felt remiss for having brushed it off for most of his life.

When they finally got close enough to see the humans, the four of them looked normal enough. But they were dressed in jeans and light weight coats. That in itself was odd. It was too cold for them to be out without a parka or a ski jacket.

Knox's feeling of wrong intensified.

"Hello," one of them called out.

The other shifters felt it too, Knox just knew it. Beside him, they were stiff. Tristan's neck was tight with tension. Jameson's shoulders were so relaxed that it looked wrong, probably because he was deliberately keeping them unclenched.

Roman was grinding his teeth together. "What do you need from us?" Roman called out.

So Roman had decided to skip the pleasantries.

"Is there somewhere we could go and talk? Inside?" one of the humans asked. He was a man, about forty. He was tall and slender with a smooth face.

Knox sniffed. He smelled nothing. No food, no aftershave, no deodorant. Humans usually smelled like something. They had candy and candles and breath mints. They had body spray and bath salts and toothpaste. It clung to them at all times.

The group smelled like soap, maybe. But nothing else.

"This is fine," Roman said.

Knox understood. A shifter would not allow himself to get trapped in a room. They always did better out in the open.

"I was hoping for more privacy," the hunter said.

"This is plenty private," Roman said, spreading his arms wide. "It's just the eight of us."

That was when Knox figured it out.

This was no human.

This waxy-looking bastard was a vampire.

And so were all three of his buddies.

JEN

Jen got home from school and headed for the bathtub. It was her ritual each day when she got home. She'd started it when she first began working with patients. People rarely came to see her when they were healthy, so she was exposed to non-stop germs.

Taking a bath probably didn't prevent any illnesses, but it made her feel better. She'd kept the ritual going once she started working at the school as well. Sometimes she felt even grimmer after working at the school than she had at the ER. She got sneezed on a lot more at the school than she ever had at the hospital.

She left her shoes by the door. She had a special basket where she dropped her scrubs. She filled the tub with hot water, adding lavender and eucalyptus scented salts. She made herself a hot peppermint tea while the tub filled. She put on some music on a low volume. She usually preferred her e-reader, but in the bath, she liked to read a paper copy.

Today's book was a post-apocalyptic thriller. She'd just gotten to the part where the hero's town was hit by an electromagnetic pulse that wiped out all electronics when she heard a noise.

She sat up and listened.

No one had knocked or rang the doorbell.

She checked her doorbell camera, but saw nothing, only a stray leaf skittering across the concrete.

There was another noise, a quiet scraping.

If someone broke in, it would be loud, right? There'd be the shattering of glass or loud banging if they kicked the door in. And if either happened, her

alarm would go off.

She had made it that happened.

Jen grabbed a towel and stood up, hastily wrapping it around her body. "Hello?" she called out.

She checked her phone again. There were no missed messages or calls. She grabbed a sweatshirt and yoga pants and pulled them on. She crept through the house. Maybe she could get to one of her large kitchen knives.

"Jen," a male voice said.

She screamed, just a quick sound, with a sharp intake of breath. Heart pounding, she clutched her phone to her chest.

A man stood in front of her.

It wasn't Knox.

"I'll take that," he said, reaching for her phone. "I don't want you calling the boyfriend. I don't need him and his kind sniffing around."

She had no choice but to let him take her phone.

He took it and stuck it in his own back pocket. He looked at her wrists. "You're not wearing a smartwatch. No other devices on you?"

"No."

"I've already disabled your alarm system. But don't try to call the authorities. I can't deal with any more humans right now." He gave her a sharp smile. "One is more than enough."

"Human? What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You know, for a long time we waited. We just sat around, useless, waiting for an opportunity. But your boyfriend's pack does not branch out much. Sure, they work with humans and they're friendly with them, but they don't get close to them. Not ever. And we've learned our lesson about taking on an entire pack. Part of my former coven got too cocky. They thought they were superior to the wolves. But they were wrong. Now they're suffering the consequences."

What? She heard the words he said, but none of them made sense. Had she been taken hostage by a madman? But weren't serial killers often delusional? Or he could be a sociopath. If he were truly that disturbed, she might not be able to appeal to his logic; he might not be rational at all. He clearly wasn't here to rob her. Because for one thing, she had no valuables, for another, he knew Knox.

Why was her boyfriend a target? Was he involved in something illegal? But what?

She looked at the guy, but he didn't appear to be armed at all.

What could Knox be into that involved her being a hostage, if that was what was happening? The mafia? Drugs? The black market?

None of that seemed like Knox. But she hadn't known Knox that long. Maybe she'd only seen the parts he wanted her to see – the good parts, like taking Jonathon and Lexi to school, and making snowmen with them, and patiently teaching Jen to ski.

She had known her fiancé for far longer than she'd known Knox – for her entire life – but that still hadn't been enough to discover his secrets.

Best case scenario, this was a mistake. That seemed unlikely. Or maybe Knox was an undercover law enforcement officer, and she'd gotten caught in the middle. That also seemed unlikely.

You've been reading too many spy novels in the bathtub.

This man was still just standing there, staring at her. It felt like an odd thing to notice, but he was quite striking looking. He wasn't hot, not in the same way that Knox was hot. His shoulders weren't broad, and his muscles weren't defined. But he was refined and polished, and a bit ethereal looking, like a model who'd been made up by stylists.

He was wearing jeans and a hoodie, but they looked out of place on him. He looked like he belonged on one of those artistic cologne ads from a men's fashion magazine. He was just missing the three-piece suit and the wool scarf.

She couldn't be fooled by his appearance. He'd broken into her home, so he was a threat, even if he looked more like a runway model than a violent mobster. "How did you get in here?" He said he'd disabled the alarm, but it was wireless. She always thought the alarm would work if someone got in. But it had failed, and she couldn't think past it.

"I watched you put the code in."

"But it's inside."

He smirked. "My eyesight is even better than Knox's."

"What does that mean?" There was no way someone could see inside her house. Not like that. Not even with binoculars. Had he set up a camera? Had he been *recording* her?

"Don't play coy." He studied her. "How do you want to do this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm going to make you one of us. It will be the best punishment for Roman that I can think of. One of his little pets, turned into a monster like

me.” The guy flashed her a grin, and that’s when she saw them.

Fangs.

He had sharp, white gleaming fangs.

Now she was freaking out. What the hell was going on? Okay. Those weren’t real. Halloween props were easy to get... And even if they were fake, it was possible to file your teeth into points. People did odd stuff all the time.

He moved toward her.

She backed away, not wanting to turn her back to him.

“This won’t be that bad,” he said. “I’ll drain you, and then you can drink from me. The whole process should only take about six hours. Then, you’ll join our coven, and life goes on.”

“Are you trying to say you’re a vampire?”

“I’m not *trying* to say it. I *am* a vampire. I have been for over a hundred years. Why do you look so shocked?”

For a second, she was no longer scared. “Vampire,” she whispered.

“Yes. And you’re going to be one soon.”

She held her hands out, as if that would do anything. “Prove it.”

He walked to the edge of her table and lifted it off the floor with one hand. “If that’s not impressive enough, you could run from me. Go hide. It will only take me a split second to find you.” His eyes gleamed.

She fought back the nausea. “What does Knox have to do with this?”

“Well, his kind *could* get along with my kind. Some do. But his pack is full of self-righteous assholes who have appointed themselves as rulers of the universe.”

“What? His pack?” she asked.

“Yes. His pack. They overreach.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

He leaned in and peered right into her eyes. “Are you serious?” He tapped his lip. “You are, aren’t you? You don’t know?”

“Know *what*?” she screamed. She couldn’t take any more of this bullshit.

“Your boyfriend is a wolf shifter. Like a werewolf, but he can do it at will.” He laughed. “Half man, half wolf.”

She pulled the chair out and sat down.

Was this true? She couldn’t accept it.

Then, she did as the vampire had asked.

She ran. She shoved the chair out of the way, letting it clatter behind her.

KNOX

Knox's hackles rose.

He had partied with a few vampires before because there were vampires out there who had no desire to kill people. They liked clubs and concerts just as much as a human or a shifter.

And sex. Nice, fun, consensual sex. Because God knows there were plenty of shifters whose kinks involved a little blood sucking, and they liked fucking vampires.

Knox had even slept with a vampire a long time ago. He'd given her permission to bite his neck and she had, but only for a few seconds. It had been hot, but he'd been more interested in fucking her than letting her feed off of him.

He had to let Roman know. But if he whispered, the vampires would hear it. Their hearing was just as refined as a wolf shifter's, maybe more so.

The rest of Roman's team had been working together a long time. Maybe they had secret ways of signaling each other or gestures that they all understood, but Knox didn't have those tools.

He didn't have long. The walkie-talkie was out. Could he text? He had to do *something*. He couldn't let his own people get ambushed. He was not going to allow a vampire to attack his Alpha. Not if he could help it.

He pretended his phone was buzzing. "Sorry. It's my wife," he said, hoping his reference to his non-existent wife would alert the others.

Immediately, Roman and the others were on guard, even more than they already had been.

Knox chuckled, speaking to the vampire. "She's out of town and wants to

know if she can buy a new car.” He laughed again, hoping it didn’t sound fake. He typed ‘fang’ to Roman, and immediately deleted it, pocketing his phone.

Roman’s phone didn’t vibrate, but he must’ve felt his watch buzz. He glanced down at his watch. He must have a lot of practice because his eyes did not even widen, at all. But his heart rate picked up, which a vampire would hear.

However, none of them mentioned it.

Now the vampires were starting to look a bit pissed off, but Roman got their attention back.

“Sorry for the interruption,” Roman said. “How can we help you? We’re always happy to work with other groups.”

So Roman was going to play it cool. He wasn’t going to let on that they knew the “hunters” were vampires. Was he going to alert anyone else? It didn’t appear so.

“We heard there were a few rogue wolves out here,” the lead vampire said.

Roman cocked his head to the side. “Really? I keep a close eye on our pack. And I monitor what’s going on in neighboring packs.”

Knox heard Derek's heart rate pick up.

Derek was standing slightly behind Roman, so Knox glanced back and realized Roman was casually moving his arms, and when his arm swung behind his back, he was spelling the word “fangs” in sign language.

Were the vampires using spells to conceal themselves? Knox wasn't sure. Then, he felt Jameson's heart rate pick up. Tristan’s was down, but now Knox understood that they were alerting each other, but doing it in a slow, subtle way, which would mean they were less likely to get caught.

“What exactly is it that you want?” Roman asked.

“To get to know you. To make sure you're telling the truth about not killing people.”

Oh, the irony, Knox thought.

“You want to keep an eye on us,” Roman said.

“Yes.”

“Are you asking permission, or are you informing me?” Roman asked.

“We’re informing you, as a courtesy. We’re going to be moving to Anchorage. If we could be on friendly terms, that would be ideal.”

“I’ll discuss it with the rest of my advisors.”

The shifters with Roman – Derek, Jameson, Tristan – those *were* his advisors. But the vampire likely didn't know that.

Knox knew there was a group of vampires being held captive in northern Canada, but he didn't know much more than the average pack member, possibly less because he had been drunk and high when all that happened. He'd hit a particularly wild streak during that phase, back when the vampires who'd raised Kyra had infiltrated their pack.

Knox would have to do the best he could with the information he had. If Roman had known they'd be dealing with vampires, he probably would have tried to educate Knox and get him up to speed. Instead, he was woefully unprepared.

“Well then. If you're staying, welcome to Anchorage. I'm glad you decided to say hi,” Roman said.

“You're not glad, but I can appreciate the manners,” the vampire said with a smirk. “We'll see you around.”

With that, the four vampires left. Derek and Tristan followed them to their cars, to make sure they actually left, while Roman, Knox, and Jameson walked back to the pack. They said nothing on the way back, afraid of being overheard.

“I don't want to panic anyone,” Roman said, as soon as they were inside his office. “And I don't know this for sure, but my assumption is these are vampires that are connected to the ones imprisoned in Canada. Now, we just need to figure out what to do. Do we confront them, do we fight them, or do we kill them? I don't want to start a war before we know the answers.”

“How do we find the connection?” Jameson asked.

They brainstormed, with Jameson taking notes.

About ten minutes later, Tristan and Derek arrived, certain that the vampires were gone. The five of them went to meet in a secure room. Kyra joined them because she had experience with the vampires from Canada.

As the meeting progressed, Knox began to get a bad feeling. He lost control over his heart rate and his breathing. The rest of them stared at him.

“What's wrong?” Jameson asked.

“I don't know. I'm panicking. I can't tell why.” Even as he said the words, he was thinking of Jen.

Jen, and Jen only.

But *why*?

His wolf was pushing at him, telling him what the reason was. But surely

it wasn't possible.

Could she be his mate? Could they have formed a bond?

No.

It couldn't be possible that he had formed a mating bond – she was human

“Could it be Jen?” Jameson asked.

“She's human,” Knox said out loud, not knowing what else to say.

Roman leaned in and crossed his arms. “There are plenty of packs who claim it's possible to form a bond with a human.”

Kyra nodded. “My father was a human. He was rejected by this pack, but my mother loved him. They had a strong bond. I was too young to know what it was like for them, but their love was intense.”

“You still have people guarding her right?” Knox asked.

“Yes. I'll call him now and check in,” Roman said.

“Report,” Roman said.

Even without a speaker, the rest of them could hear the guard's responses. “She's inside her apartment.”

“No visitors?”

“None.”

“Okay. This information stays between us right now,” Roman said.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“The hunters in town are not actually hunters. They are vampires disguising themselves as humans.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Proceed with caution. If the subject leaves her home, you follow her. If necessary to protect her, you may kill the vampire. I'm sending you two backup guards right now.”

“Yes, Alpha. I understand.”

Knox appreciated Roman's attention to Jen, but his nerves did not calm.

Something was wrong.

“I have to go,” he said. “I'm sorry.”

Roman stood up. “Be careful. Normally the four of us would come with you, but with so many vampires, we're needed here.”

“I understand.”

Knox debated shifting and running as a wolf. But he didn't want to scare people and have them call animal control. He jumped in his car and took off, driving only ten miles over the speed limit.

He tried calling Jen. She didn't answer. So he tried again. The feeling was getting stronger. His wolf was pushing at him, driving him forward, desperate to help her, desperate to get to her.

How could it be? The word held so much power in their pack, among their kind.

Mate.

It made no sense, none at all. A human could not be a wolf's mate. That was antithetical to anything he'd ever known. But yet his wolf was the one telling him to go to her, in no uncertain terms.

That primal instinct was bubbling up, clawing at him. He could not escape its grasp. He had been drawn to her right from the start.

But he had never imagined a feeling like this. It was one he could not ignore. It would have been impossible. He got to her house and nothing looked amiss. Sure enough, he could feel the three guards stationed around her home. Out of sight, but present. Roman had texted them to let them know Knox was coming and to not be alarmed.

He went to Jen's door, but she did not answer. He peered through the first window and saw nothing.

Then, he felt it.

She was not alone inside her house.

There was someone with her.

Fuck.

It was a vampire.

Every part of him was screaming to rip the door off the hinges and get to her, but he had to be smart. He didn't know if there were others nearby. Jen was the priority for him, and he might need backup.

He texted Roman.

Alpha, fangs at Jen's house. Inside with her. I'm going in. Tell the guards.

He didn't wait for a reply.

He ripped the door off the hinges in one violent motion.

The vampire had its fucking hand on Jen's shoulder. His wolf howled.

"Get away from her, bloodsucker."

He charged forward. He would not let this thing harm Jen. If it meant his death, then so be it. He would take this monster down with him.

Knox managed to knock Jen out of the way. As he went for the vampire's neck, his body took over. He transformed into his wolf, and with his greater

bulk, he managed to shove the vampire to the floor. Its skull hit the tile in the kitchen with a loud crack.

That skull crack would not be enough to stop one of them. Knox had to break its neck. There was more to ending them for good, but he could hardly behead a vampire and burn its body inside Jen's home.

He needed his hands, so he switched back to human.

The vampire lunged at him, baring its fangs. "I didn't expect to get a visit from you. But this is a nice surprise. I might end up with two new converts instead of the one."

"If you managed to turn me, I would be nothing like you," Knox sneered.

He could sense Jen, hovering nearby. He needed her to move away, to back up. He shouted through their link, hoping she could feel it too, hoping the bond wasn't one-sided since she was human.

Jen! Move! Get back!

She faltered and jumped away. At that moment, something sharp sliced right through his stomach.

Shit. The vampire had gotten him with an enchanted blade, one laced with silver as well. He could feel the spell work humming through his blood.

He did not fancy dying yet, especially not on Jen's kitchen floor. What would that do to her? She was already traumatized enough, most likely.

And if he survived, he had deceived her. His mate would probably never trust him again.

Focus.

None of that was important right then. Getting this vampire away from her was.

He got his hands around its neck and snapped.

With a creak, the creature's neck was broken.

He picked up the blade, hoping it would work on vampires.

The traces of silver, along with the enchantment, burned his hand.

He winced and grabbed a towel and wrapped it around the hilt.

If this didn't work, he'd have to resort to using one of her kitchen knives. "Jen. Do not come in here." He made his voice as foreboding as possible, hoping she would respond to it.

The knife worked, and he was able to slice the vampire's head from its body. Its blood seeped onto the white floor. He crawled back to the den and flopped onto her rug. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't tell you any of this." He had put her in danger without even realizing it. If he'd been one minute later,

his mate would now be a vampire, and she would belong to an evil coven.

“What do I need to do for you?” she asked, hovering over him.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I need a healer. The knife was enchanted. If it was a regular knife I’d already be healed.” His arms were getting cold.

“Knox. Knox! Stay with me!” she shouted, her hands grasping at his shoulders.

He wanted to live. But he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

Everything went black.

JEN

It had all happened so fast. One minute, the vampire was leaning over her, about to sink its teeth into her neck.

Then, Knox was jumping in front of her, transforming into a massive wolf. He tackled the vampire to the ground, then transformed back into a man.

Now, he was on the ground, bleeding profusely.

He was unconscious. Dammit to hell. She could feel the shock pressing in at the edges of her mind. But she couldn't afford to let that happen. She'd have to call on her nursing skills to get her through this.

She had to do something, something to save him.

Her training kicked in. She jumped up for supplies.

Most of his shirt was gone; it was in tatters from when he had transformed. She cut the rest of his shirt off. She grabbed a towel and pressed it against his wound, wrapping it tight with a thin sheet. She covered him with a blanket and elevated his feet.

His pulse was weak. He was breathing, but it was shallow. He needed help. But if he really was a wolf shifter, then maybe she shouldn't call an ambulance.

She picked up his phone. If she could open it, then she'd see who he called the most. She held his smartphone over his face. "Come on, Knox. Look at your phone!"

Finally, his eyes opened enough to focus, and the screen unlocked.

She'd just found the name "Roman" at the top of the list when the door flew open.

She tensed. The guy's eyes darted toward Knox, then to the dead vampire on her kitchen floor. "Can I come closer?" he asked

"Who are you?"

"I'm Roman," the guy said. "From his pack."

"Your name is in his phone." She held it up and Roman took it.

"We need to get him to a healer."

She nodded, and two other guys rushed in. Together they quickly picked Knox up and left.

She was still sitting there, next to his blood, which was all over her rug.

Roman said down beside her, but he didn't get too close.

"Jen, I'm truly sorry about all of this. You have no idea how much. We need to get you back to pack land. It's not safe here."

"Pack land," she said in a monotone.

"Yes, I know this must come as a shock, and I'm sorry you can't stay in your home, but it's not safe here. There are more of them. And while we think we've got them rounded up, we cannot be sure." Then, he hesitated for a second. "This breach was unexpected."

She did not want to go anywhere. She wanted to stay home alone and forget any of this ever happened. She wanted to get back in her hot bath with her book and her bath salts and relax. But as freaked out as she was, she did not want to encounter another vampire.

"Hey," he said. His hand landed next to her leg, but he didn't touch her. "Nova is there. You can talk with her if you'd like, since you two know each other."

"Right. Nova. She's a wolf too?" It was all starting to make sense. The home birth, the secret address, the way Nova looked so good, right after she'd had a baby.

His jaw tightened. "She is actually a lion shifter. But it's very similar."

Lion shifter. It was too much to process. What would this Roman person do if she refused to come with him? Would he kill her? Would he not force her to come with him?

"I understand why you don't trust me," he said. "I wouldn't trust me either. But these vampires caught us off guard, and I am concerned."

She blinked. "Can you tell me again why there was a vampire after me?"

He glanced at the door. "Nova and Ian will be able to tell you pretty much everything you want to know. But quickly, I can tell you the basics. Years ago, vampires tried to kidnap some of our pack members. They had a

scheme, and it was quite disturbing. To contain them, we had to imprison them in Northern Canada. There's a spell that keeps them there and they should not be able to escape. They should not be able to have visitors either, but somehow this group of vampires got in contact with them and decided to enact revenge.”

“And Knox knew about this?”

“No. Knox thought that these were human hunters that wanted to kill us. We had no idea until today they were vampires. Not until a few hours ago.”

“Human hunters?”

“That will be one of the things we have to explain later.”

“Right.”

Roman held out his hand. “Let me help you up.”

What could it possibly hurt now? She was already in deep. She allowed Roman to help her up. She swayed as soon as she was standing, but he caught her and steadied her. He guided her all the way to his truck where he helped her in, even buckling her seatbelt. Once they were on the road, he handed her a red Jolly Rancher. “Eat that. I don’t want you going into shock.”

She did as he asked, putting the candy in her mouth. She had so many questions, yet she could not articulate a single one of them. She just sat there and rode along in his truck as the sweet taste of artificial cherry filled her mouth.

“Thank you for saving Knox,” he said.

She bit down into the sliver of candy, feeling it crunch under her teeth. “I’m not sure I did much of anything.”

“You did. You treated the bleeding and gave him first aid. We could’ve lost him, if not for you. You could’ve run away too, but you didn’t. No one would’ve blamed you. But you stuck around when plenty of people, even shifters, would’ve taken off. I owe you one. We all do.”

“None of this makes sense to me.”

“I’ll try to explain as much as I can,” he said.

She listened in horror as he told her exactly why she had come to know Knox.

He hesitated when describing the beginning of their relationship, but it was becoming clear to her that Knox had been sent to pacify her. To keep her quiet. To make sure she minded her own business. Her hands and feet tingled. How was this happening to her?

“Please just tell me everything. Leave nothing out,” she begged.

“It's fairly delicate. I don't know that it will help to hear every detail,” he said.

“It will help me.” She had the sinking feeling this situation was like the one with her ex-fiancé, only far, far worse.

He kept talking, explaining how Knox came to be at the school, and she found out that she had been an *assignment*. Her concern for Jonathon and his potential health conditions had scared the pack. So, they had decided to manage her.

She could hardly blame them. She didn't expect Ian and Nova to allow anyone to consider them abusive parents. But the knowledge that she had been discussed and dissected for her motivation made her skin crawl. In rapid succession she felt hot from the inside out, flushing and then freezing on and off.

Inside, she was crying. But she would not shed a tear in front of this shifter.

“What will you do with me now?” Like an idiot she had hopped right into his truck. If they wanted to kill her, no one would ever find out. That much was clear. “If you try to kill me, I will put up a fight. As much as I can.”

“We would never hurt you. We are in your debt. Knox is the youngest child in his family, and his parents will be forever grateful.”

“That's great, but I've been fake dating this guy for weeks now. I'm a little bit pissed off right now and I do my best to control my emotions, but betrayed is not a strong enough word for how I feel. Yes, I saved Knox, or I did my best to try. But I would do that for anyone. Anyone who wasn't trying to kill me like that vampire anyway.”

“I am sorry. And I know Knox is too. Believe me, neither of us felt right about what we did. I can't speak for him, but I am fairly sure there's real feelings that developed. And you must understand that we were backed into a corner. We cannot allow ourselves to be exposed. Ian understood exactly why you were concerned. But he had to put a stop to it, or else our entire pack would have to relocate.”

“You couldn't just tell me the truth?”

“Our pack policy is to never involve humans.”

She spread her hands apart. “And yet here I am.”

He ducked his head as a flush of red spread over his cheeks. “You are quite right about that.”

They reached a gate deep in the woods and he pulled over, letting the

truck idle. “We’ve reached the edge of our pack lands. Before we cross the boundary, I must have your assurance that you will never tell anyone about our existence.”

“What happens if I do?”

“We move. We leave Alaska. As we both know, you were an innocent bystander in this entire fiasco. It started with one of our children doing something he’s not supposed to do. Jonathon knows better. But he’s six years old. However, we made the choice to allow him to attend school with human children. That’s on us. I’m asking you, out of the goodness of your heart, to keep our secret. We will owe you forever.”

She didn’t have to think about it twice. She wasn’t going to hurt their pack. “I promise.” She turned in her seat and held her hand out to him. “I don’t need to be owed. I don’t need anything dramatic. I just need the truth.”

With a pleased smile, he held his hand out to her. His skin was as warm as Knox’s.

His smile faded. “It’s possible that certain members may not react well to your presence.”

“What does *that* mean?” Was there no end to the unpleasant surprises in store for her?

He pulled the truck back onto the road and they moved toward the gate. It opened for his truck automatically, so he must have some kind of sensor. “We have never allowed a human into our midst. Many years ago, one of our female members married a human male, but he was not allowed into the pack.”

“I’m not sure if you didn’t notice, but I’m not asking to join your pack. In fact, I’d rather leave.”

“I realize that,” Roman said. His mouth twisted. “I’m going to speak to them. If anyone mistreats you, they’ll answer to me.”

She only lifted her eyebrows. “I don’t exactly have the most faith in your ideas. Your idea was for Knox to convince me that Jonathon was human. That didn’t work out so well, because now I know how very not-human you are.”

“And we allowed a vampire into your home.” He bowed his head. “I am so very sorry, Jen.”

She sighed. “How is Knox?” she asked. “Have you heard?” She didn’t want to care, but the truth was that she did care. Very much. She was furious with him, and she planned on never speaking to him again once this was

over, but she wanted him to survive.

Knox had been prepared to die for her. Yes, he'd brought her into this mess, and he'd lied to her and tricked her, but she still cared about him. Heck, she probably loved him. She had definitely been heading that way if she wasn't already there.

She had been looking forward to spending the holidays with him. But now that obviously was not going to happen.

"I know that he's alive, but I don't know his condition. Would you like to see him?" Roman asked.

"I thought you said no one wanted me here."

"There are plenty who would embrace you eagerly. But there *will* be resentment. There have been others who wanted to date a human, and the pack has not allowed it. So they might feel short changed."

She rubbed her face. "Great, so I just walked into a big, huge family drama."

"It's not quite that bad. When they hear that you're mates –" Roman stopped abruptly. "Shit."

"Mates? What does that mean?" she asked.

"It would probably be better if Knox explained the meaning to you himself," Roman said.

"What if he doesn't make it?" she asked.

Roman visibly flinched, and she felt a bit bad, but none of this was her fault, and she wanted answers. "Then it won't matter what 'mates' means if he's gone, and besides, I'm not sure I would trust him to tell me the truth." She crossed her arms. "Although from what you said, it doesn't sound like it was his idea to begin with. *You* sent him to lie to me, so I'm not really sure why I am asking you either." She lifted one shoulder. "I guess because you're the only source of information."

He sighed heavily. "You're right. And you're welcome to ask anyone here. But the only people who really knew about this situation were my top advisers, who you saw earlier when they came into your home, and Nova, Ian, and Knox."

"I *would* like to see Knox. And I would like to hear from you what a mate is." She had a fairly good idea, but she wanted confirmation.

There had been a few odd things that happened, such as when the vampire first broke into her home. She had the unshakable thought that Knox was coming for her. Which made no sense because they had not spoken that

afternoon.

It was as if she'd heard him speaking in her head, directly to her. Like telepathy. She always assumed that was impossible, but she now knew that shapeshifters and vampires existed.

Also, when the vampire had been attacking her, it had felt like Knox was speaking directly to her again.

Roman parked the truck, and they got out and started walking. She didn't have her coat, but he had one he gave to her. "I don't need it," he said.

Right. He wasn't human.

At this point, she could rule nothing out. She shivered, and Roman disappeared for a moment and came back with a wool blanket, which he wrapped around her shoulders, over the coat.

"Come on. Let's go to the healers' cabin." He walked with his hand protectively on her shoulder, taking quick steps. A few people stopped to stare at them, but no one said a word. At the healers' cabin, he knocked and then pushed the door open.

They walked toward the back where Knox lay in a bed. It looked nothing like a human hospital. The floors were wooden, and the walls were made of logs, and there were no artificial lights. A fire crackled in the corner, and a few candles were lit. She could smell herbs of several different kinds, jasmine maybe, lavender, and mint.

Even in the dim light, she could see Knox's face was pale.

"He lost a lot of blood," she whispered.

Roman spoke to one of the healers. "This is Jen. Yes, she is human. She is here as my guest. She is also likely Knox's mate. Can I trust you to keep this in confidence for now?"

The healer nodded. "Yes, Alpha. Of course."

"Can she visit with him?" Roman asked them.

"Yes. He is stable." The healer turned toward Jen. "You are a nurse. That's what Jameson said. The one who brought him in."

"Yes, I am."

"You did a good job. He would have died without your treatment," the healer said.

Jen was grateful for that at least. "How do you treat him now? If human medicine does not help?"

"We can heal from almost any wound, in general. But because the blade was partially made of silver, and it was enchanted, our herbs can only do so

much. Regular steel will not hurt us, but silver can cause permanent injury. However, there was some dark spell work woven into the blade. So, we brought in a local witch who is on good terms with our pack. We trade favors with her coven. She was able to reverse this spell for the most part, so now Knox will need about a week or two to heal.”

“Thank you for telling me.” Jen’s legs were a bit shaky.

Witches. Spell work. Covens.

It was so much to take in. Roman grabbed a chair from somewhere and put it beside Knox’s bed. “You stay here. I am going to go speak with the pack. If it goes well, I may introduce you. I promise that I will keep you safe. Just like Knox would want me to.”

She wasn’t sure what Knox wanted. Their relationship had been a lie. But she nodded and turned her head back toward Knox’s bed as Roman walked away.

KNOX

Knox lifted the little boy onto his shoulders as they walked down the rocky beach. “Hey, Dad, can we surf first? I want to practice before we eat. Please?”

“Sure, son. We can do that first.” Knox looked down and sure enough, there was a surfboard tucked under his arm and a backpack stuffed with snack foods on his back.

He swung his son down with one arm and looked at his little face. He looked just like his mother.

Jen was right behind them, carrying their infant daughter.

“Mommy! Take good pictures of me,” his son shouted.

She pointed to the long lens on her camera. “I’ve got the camera right here. It’s all charged up and ready to go.”

Surfing on the rocky beach in the cold weather still made Jen a bit nervous. Even though rationally she knew their son, being half shifter, could withstand the cold water easily, as well as the scrape of the rough rocks.

She’d certainly watched him do it enough times, cheering and clapping and videotaping it all. But their son had seen some still shots in a surfing magazine, and he wanted his own photograph to blow up and hang on the wall of his room.

Knox stuck the surfboard in the sand and spread a blanket out on the ground dropping the backpack on top of it. Jen settled the baby down with some toys and sat down beside her, getting the camera ready.

The early spring water was still chilly, but that didn’t matter. His son dove right in, and both of them paddled out on their boards.

Then suddenly, Knox was being pulled under. Waves crashed over his head. He couldn't tell which way was up or down.

Where were his children? His mate? Wait. His body slammed into a rock as the trees hit him. He had no children. He had no mate. At least not officially.

Was this a dream? A nightmare?

Jen.

Where was she? The vampire had tried to drain her. He was going to turn her.

He thrashed, pushing away from the rock, and then he heard a soft voice, saying his name. There were gentle hands on his arms.

"Knox. Knox, stop moving. You're going to fall out of the bed." The hands moved away. "I'm getting the healer."

No. He did not want her to leave. That was Jen. "Jen. Don't go."

The hands were back. "Knox? Can you hear me?"

He tried to open his eyes. Anything to see Jen again. To prove to himself that she had not been bitten. That she had not been killed by that monster or taken by him to his coven.

He got his eyes open, but he could not lift his arms to touch her face. She seemed to understand, and she put her hands in his face.

"You're going to be fine," she said.

He shook his head. He didn't care. "Jen..."

"What is it?"

He swallowed a few times. "He didn't bite you?" he managed to say roughly.

"No. You jumped in front of us. But he stabbed you." She looked down toward his stomach.

Yes, he remembered that now, and then he had broken the vampire's neck and cut his head off. Right in front of her. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I'm sorry you had to see me kill him. But I had no choice. He would not have given up. He would have pursued you until he got what he wanted."

He tried to sit up, but the pain pierced his stomach. He groaned.

"Lie down. Or I really will get the healer. She won't be happy with you." Jen pointed at him. "You're supposed to stay here for a few days, I heard her say so. So be a good patient."

"Yes, Nurse Jen." He sank back into the pillows and nodded. Anything to make Jen happy. Anything to make her life easier. His mind was muddled

and a bit sluggish. The knife had been cursed or enchanted, and they obviously had to use witchcraft on him. It seemed to have worked, but it left his brain cloudy.

He looked at Jen. His mate. How much did she know? She had seen the vampire, and then she had seen him transform into his wolf, right in front of her eyes. With no warning.

“What happened? How did you get here?” He had vague images of Roman and Jameson and Derek and Tristan, with Jen, but he could not be sure.

“Right after you killed the vampire, you passed out. So, I did what I could for first aid, and then I shocked you until you woke up long enough to open your phone. I was just about to call Roman for help when he showed up.”

“How did you know to call Roman?” he asked.

“I was planning to call the person that you called the most frequently.”

Huh. A really good idea. One he wouldn't have thought of.

“We had to be creative in the ER,” she said. “Ideally, everyone has ID, or their info is stored in their phone, but not always.”

“I'm sure you've encountered some awkward situations.”

“Yes, plenty. But back to what happened.”

Dammit. She was all business. She was handling this all so well. But she wasn't going to forgive him. He didn't even have the right to ask her to. Christ, he'd led a vampire right to her doorstep somehow.

He shuddered.

“Hey. Take a breath. Your heart rate is going up. They'll kick me out.”

He didn't want that. He wanted every second with her before she left him forever. He breathed in, inhaling the herbs in the air. His stomach ached, but it was tolerable.

She went on to describe exactly what had gone on after he passed out. He would have to thank Roman later. Roman had made sure Jen was safe, even as he was dealing with a pack-wide crisis, and he took her back to the pack. Which was highly problematic in many ways. But there was nothing he could do about it. If the Alpha said it was happening, then it was happening. And she was safest inside their walls.

“So now Roman is apparently addressing the pack. He's telling them about the vampires, and apparently, about me,” Jen said with a huff. “I may be thrown out of here any moment.”

He put his hand on hers. “No. Roman would never let that happen.

Everyone would understand that you were attacked. That you didn't ask for any of this. It's my fault. I'll take full responsibility and they know that." Even as he said the words, he hoped he was right. Could the pack accept Jen? Could his own parents move past their prejudice?

His parents would be happy to know that he had honored their family name by killing the vampire. But that was nothing compared to protecting Jen. He owed her so many apologies. He would start now.

"I'm sorry. For everything." He had to listen in horror as she described how she knew about the reason they were dating.

"Jen, you have no reason to believe me, but it was never fake to me. I liked you from the start. I think I made up the dating idea as an excuse to spend more time with you. My only task was to convince you that Jonathon was being taken care of properly. I could've done that by showing up to the school as his uncle and volunteering."

"So you're not his uncle?" she asked.

"We all consider ourselves family in the pack, but no. I'm not his biological uncle. We practiced with the kids. They know how important it is to protect their identity."

"Ah," she said. "That's why it all made so much sense. Jonathon's reaction when he fell. Ian's reaction. Or lack thereof. Now it's all coming together."

"I know I don't have the right to ask you to forgive me. But that's what I would choose. Your forgiveness."

Her jaw tightened. "It's the one thing I told you was a dealbreaker for me. Being lied to."

"I wish I'd thought of another way, but I didn't," he said.

She put her hand on his forehead. "Knox, I really liked you. I'm really glad you're going to recover. Someday, I hope I'm glad I met you."

Fuck. That hurt. Her rejection was worse than any stab wound could ever be.

"I would say I'd see you later, but I may not. Goodbye," she said. She leaned down and brushed a kiss over his cheek.

"Jen." He tried to get up, but not a single part of his body cooperated.

His mate had walked away from him. For good reason. He kept struggling, but eventually the exhaustion took over. He quit fighting sleep and let his eyes close.

JEN

When Jen left the healers' cabin, Nova was waiting on her. She was holding her new baby.

"This must be Mateo."

"It sure is," Nova said. "Would you like to hold him?"

"Yes," Jen said. It would feel good to hold a grudge, but it wouldn't last long. Besides, if she stayed in Alaska, which she wasn't sure she was going to do, she and Nova would be working together. She could never turn down a baby.

"Would you be willing to talk to me?" Nova asked. "I know I'm probably not who you want to see right now."

"Sure. We can talk." Jen had nothing else to do but hang around until Roman told her the vampires were gone.

"I'd like to invite you to my home. I'm sorry it wasn't done earlier. You've spent all this time with my children, and I wasn't allowed to invite you home."

"Thank you. You know after hearing from Roman, I don't blame you. I don't have children yet, but I've seen parents all over the spectrum. There are those that would do anything for their child and those that should never be allowed to have them. And I understand why you had to protect Jonathon."

Nova's hand landed on her forearm. "I'm still just so sorry that we put you through this." She stopped at a nicely sized cabin. "Come in. I've sent Jonathon and Lexi to play in the creek."

She opened the door. The cabin smelled like fresh cedarwood and pumpkin. It was homemade. Nova pointed her to a leather couch. "Would

you like something to drink? I have lemonade, tea, coffee, and wine.”

She was tempted to get a bottle of wine, but she should abstain. She needed all her mental faculties in place.

“Lemonade would be great. Thank you.”

Jen laid the baby on her lap and looked at his little face. He was a perfect combination of Ian and Nova. He had dark hair and dark eyes, but his little nose looked just like Jonathon’s. He looked at her and gurgled, waving his arms.

She couldn’t imagine how she was going to stay in Anchorage. So many of her happy memories here involved Knox. And their entire relationship had been built on a lie. Being in Nova’s cabin was finally bringing that home.

She accepted him so soon after moving here. And so soon after starting her job at the school. She shouldn’t make any decisions yet, but she should have kept an open mind. Maybe she would bounce back. After all, she had gotten over her fiancé and moved all the way across the country. She could start over if she had to. Even though that’s not what she wanted.

What she wanted was Knox. She wanted him to not have lied to her. She wanted him to have told her the truth, or at least told her that he was keeping something from her. Would she accept his apology?

Could she have dealt with the fact that he wasn’t entirely human? She wasn’t sure. But now she’d never know.

The decision had been made for her and yes, it was a bit humiliating that all these people, Knox as well as people that she considered friends, had been discussing her behind her back.

Ian had been a trusted coworker, as had Nova. And, of course, she had been falling in love with Knox. Now, she knew they had all been conspiring against her, managing her, trying to prevent her from a certain action.

She had meant it when she said she had sympathy for them, and that she understood why they did it, but it left her feeling alone and useless.

Nova returned with the lemonade. “How are you?” she asked. “You must be feeling pretty angry with us.”

“Angry is the wrong word. I’m just upset. I can rationally see why all of you made the choices you did, and yet I can’t get past them.”

“I think I’d feel the same way too,” Nova said. “I know you’ve probably heard that I’m here to get away from my in-laws, but it was much more sinister than that. We finally got into a decent place with them, but it took a lot of effort.”

Nova went on to describe how her in-laws had tried to steal her child from her, how now they allowed visitation, always supervised, of course.

“Why are you telling me this?” Jen asked.

“To give you hope, if you want any. If you don’t want any hope for a future with Knox, then I will back off. I’d like us to stay friends at work, but if you want me to keep my distance, I will do that too. And I understand if it’s too soon to even know *how* you feel.”

“Yes. It’s far too soon for me to know,” Jen said. She wasn’t sure she’d ever know.

“I did want to apologize,” Nova said. “But I also wanted to mention that you are Knox’s mate. Not to guilt you or pressure you, but just to let you know. It is something that should not be kept from you, no matter how well-meaning we are.”

“Roman mentioned that word. But I still don’t know what it means.”

“I can only speak to what I experience as a fellow shifter. Mates share a deep connection. I’ve heard that even humans and shifters can share a bond too. It’s a bond stronger than any that humans share.” Nova made a face. “I hope that doesn’t sound insulting.”

Jen recalled again the way she had felt Knox coming when the vampire was taunting her. “So there’s a telepathic link?”

“It depends on the couple. Some can speak in complete sentences to each other, even if they’re miles apart. Some can sense the other’s emotions. Some can only tell when the other is in danger. It always depends on the connection.”

“What happens if we don’t continue this relationship? Is it harmful?” Jen asked.

“Knox will mourn the end of your relationship. I’m not saying that to make you feel bad. Plenty of shifters move on and even meet new mates. But some only mate for life. I know you feel deceived, but you were Knox’s first girlfriend.”

Jen’s stomach swooped. She wasn’t even sure why. Was it guilt? Shame? Disgust?

Clinging to Knox, after everything that had transpired, just felt pathetic. She had played that role before. The role of a pathetic, desperate girlfriend, clinging to a man who didn’t value her.

She needed to be alone. She needed to get away from all these shifters. They might feel sorry for her, but they would protect each other – they were a

pack and a family.

She might not truly understand what that meant. But she could feel the way they would stick up for each other. It made her an outsider, and it always would. Roman had said himself that the members of their pack would not want her around because she was human.

Why would she want to set herself up for more heartache? Was she a glutton for punishment? She would be if she kept dating Knox now that she had all the information.

So they were mates, so what? It had not kept him from lying to her. It didn't mean she was welcome in the pack. As far as she could see, it only meant that he'd kept lying to her.

Jen looked at Nova's clock. "Have you heard from Roman or Ian? I'd like to go home."

"I haven't," Nova said. "But I'll check with Roman."

Nova texted him, and a few minutes later, Jen's phone rang. It was Roman. He quickly told her that he was almost certain they'd found every vampire. But he wanted her to stay the night on pack land, until her apartment was completely cleaned, and they'd made sure there was no other risk.

"I've already spoken to Nova," he said. "Since you know her the best, do you mind staying with her?"

It was either that or stay by herself or with a stranger. None sounded appealing. "Yes, if she doesn't mind."

"She is more than happy to."

After she was off the phone, Nova reached for the baby. "Thanks for holding him. I think he enjoyed seeing a new face. I'll show you your room."

She led Jen to the small guest room. It was clean and nice with a yellow bedspread and a small blue loveseat. There was also a bookcase of books. "Feel free to use the guest bathroom as well. It's right across the hall. There are clean towels, as well as shampoo and soap," Nova said.

The next morning, Roman showed up bright and early. "We believe it's safe for you to go home. However, if you are not ready, we will get you a cabin here. I'll find one where you can have some privacy."

"No, thank you," Jen said. "I want to go home." She really needed to be alone. Her emotions were swirling, and she was on the verge of tears every time she spoke. Her throat burned. And her eyes watered as Roman drove her straight home.

“We’ve cleaned your house until there are no traces left of what happened. And someone just checked it again. Would you put my number in your phone?” Roman asked. “Please call me if you need anything.”

She nodded.

“I mean that. You can’t know how sorry I am. We’ve disrupted your life and changed it forever.”

“How did it go telling your pack that I was on your land? And that I knew about you?” she asked.

“It went well. There were a few complaints, but once I explained what happened, they were mostly understanding. However, we did not mention that you were Knox’s mate. If you and he don’t reconcile, then it seems pointless to bring it up. But if you do, then we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“What’s their argument against it?” Jen asked out of curiosity.

“Safety. Exposure. Fear. Hunters have come after us before. That’s how we fell into the vampires’ trap. We met with them thinking that they were hunters. And we weren’t quite sharp enough. But those vampires have been hunted too. Sometimes for good reason, and they know what it does to our psyche.”

“I think I understand,” Jen said. What was curious to her was that Nova and Roman both seemed certain that Knox was going to beg her back now that his assignment was over. But she wasn’t sure of that at all. Yes, he’d been quite apologetic in the healers’ cabin, but he was also suffering from extreme blood loss.

Jen wasn’t sure of anything at all anymore.

KNOX

Jen. Where was his mate? He could still smell her scent somewhere in the room, but it was growing fainter by the minute.

Why was he lying down? His mate wasn't here, and he was just lying around, in the middle of the day. It made no sense. He'd stopped sleeping during the day, months ago, ever since he had turned over a new leaf with his assignment.

Assignment.

Fuck. It all came flooding back.

Jen. His mate.

Jen was his mate, and she'd nearly been killed by a vampire. And then he'd arrived, and he'd attacked that bloodsucker. Knox was still in the healers' cabin. He thrashed around for a minute, trapped in the sheets, and managed to find his phone plugged in on the bedside table.

That's when his parents walked in. "Knox! You're awake!"

"Be careful!" His mother rushed over. "You're all tangled up in the sheets."

"Son," his father said. His voice caught.

Was his father choked up? Because of him? Wow. Things had really changed.

His mother beamed down at him as she straightened his sheets. "What your father is trying to say is that we're proud of you."

They were proud of him, finally. Normally he would have savored this time with his parents, with them talking about how brave he had been, and how awesome he was, but at the moment all he wanted to do was get to his

mate. He fidgeted in bed, and finally just said, "It's really good to see you, but I think I need a nap."

His mom immediately began fussing. "Just let us know as soon as you'll be home, and I'll have your favorite food ready for you."

"She's right, son." His dad wrapped his arm around his mom. "She's already bought it. She bought steak, potatoes, and enough ingredients to make five chocolate cakes. We'll have everything ready for you."

It was very touching. And he'd have to make sure he showed his appreciation, because he definitely did not want to blow his parents off. Part of him felt like it was sad that it took him fighting a vampire and almost dying to earn his parents' approval. But he knew they'd always loved him. Now objectively, looking back, he could see why his past behavior had been so infuriating to them, and why it had been so difficult for them to watch and tolerate.

But he truly had grown. Not only had he met a mate, but he had felt what it was like to become part of a pack. An integral part of the pack that did his part.

His parents each hugged him carefully, and then finally they were gone.

His wolf was howling, desperate to get to Jen. He could not ignore it any longer.

He managed to text Roman, asking him to come by. Within ten minutes, Roman was there.

"How long has it been?" Knox asked. The way his parents had acted, he could tell it had been longer than a few hours. But he hadn't wanted to ask them and send them spiraling into a freak out because he'd lost some time.

"Three days," Roman said.

"Three days!"

"Yes, you lost more blood than the healers realized. They had to call another witch back in."

Shit. That was three days that his mate had been alone. "How's Jen?"

"She seems okay. I've been checking on her every day and she always asks about you."

"She does?"

"Yes. She stayed with Nova the first night, since we weren't sure if there were any vampires lingering."

"Thank you for looking out for her. She's my mate. I love her."

"I had no idea how serious it was between the two of you. I would've

tried to do something.” Roman shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know what. Now in retrospect, pushing you toward her seems like the wrong thing to do, and as your Alpha, I’m sorry for my role in it.”

“What choice did we have? It’s not your fault. You warned me. You told me I could be in over my head, but I thought I had it handled. I knew I was falling for her, but the mate thing did not click until she was in danger.”

“That’s how it happens for a lot of us wolf shifters.”

“I want to go see her.” Knox pushed himself up and this time he got upright. He swung his legs over, but when he tried to stand up, nothing happened.

“You’re still weak. You need to rest.”

“I can’t. I can’t lie here anymore and do nothing. And you can’t tell me you would lie here if Everleigh were out there alone, not sure how you felt, after getting her world turned upside down.”

Maybe that was a low blow. Knox was aware of Roman’s history with his mate. They’d had a very rough start, and a five-year breakup in which Everleigh hid a pregnancy and the birth of their oldest child from Roman. So if anyone could understand a tumultuous relationship, it was Roman.

“I’m the last person who needs to give out relationship advice. If you’re really determined, then I’ll take you.”

“Yes. I have to see her. I don’t remember what I said to her in the aftermath.” He’d tried calling her a few times, but her phone went straight to voicemail. His texts went unopened.

Roman had to halfway drag him to the truck. Right as they stepped onto the path outside the cabin, the healers caught them and gave both of them a long lecture about Knox overdoing it. They warned him that he could increase his recovery time. He just did not care. None of that compared to finding Jen and making sure she understood how he felt.

They got to her house, but there was no sign of her. Knox rang the doorbell and banged on the door, but she wasn’t there. In the past, he might’ve just climbed in through a window but after the vampire had broken into her house, he would not violate her privacy like that.

Okay, she’s your mate. You should be able to find her. Unless she had left town. But would Nova have told him if she had left?

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. There. She had headed to the northeast. “Go that way,” he said to Roman. He grinned over at Roman. “How exactly did I end up with the pack Alpha driving me around town like

a chauffeur?”

Roman inclined his head and gave a low laugh. “Because, despite you telling me I shouldn’t, I still feel responsible.”

Damn. Knox hadn’t been expecting that level of honesty. “You shouldn’t. I got myself into this mess.”

“You absolutely did not get yourself into this mess. But we can agree to disagree.”

“I’m the one who thought up the fake dating.”

“And I agreed to it. I agreed to let you court a human, knowing the consequences,” Roman insisted.

“Could you really have stopped me though?”

“No. I couldn’t have. If you’re truly mates, then it’s meant to be, and I’ll do everything in my power to make sure Jen is welcome in our clan.”

“If she’ll have me,” Knox added. “But what about the pack? How can we abruptly change a policy if it’s been around for centuries? It’s caused people a lot of heartache in the past, but we’ve ignored that to enforce the policy.”

“That’s something I’ve been giving a lot of thought,” Roman said as he drove. “For you specifically, I think we have a lot of leeway. We had an untenable situation with a school medical professional, who was suspicious of our pack and concerned enough about a child to alert the authorities. I asked you to handle her. I did not put any boundaries on how it would be handled, other than obviously, she would not be harmed. Had she discovered our way of life, well, we all understand that threat. And when you suggested fake dating, it seemed like a reasonable choice. What are the odds that the two of you could’ve been that compatible? But the universe thought otherwise.”

Knox leaned his head back against the seat. “I can sense her even now. She’s at the park. I’m getting images. Is that weird?”

“It’s not weird. But it does show that you have a very strong bond link.”

“Does it mean she’ll feel anything from me, via the link? I sent her messages when the vampires were coming, but I haven’t been able to talk to her to find out if she felt anything.”

“Nova talked to her about mates, but Jen gave nothing away. She’s playing everything very close to her chest. You’ll have to be the one to ask her.”

“She’s doing that because she doesn’t trust us anymore.”

Roman made a humming sound. “Overall, she’s been extremely

reasonable.”

“You’re right. I just want her back, and anything less than that is going to be awful for me.” Knox’s wolf grew restless, and he sat up straighter, ignoring the pain in his abdomen. “There.” Knox pointed. “She’s at that park.” He checked his watch. The school day had been over for a few hours.

There she was, sitting on a bench. Knox could feel her. He could also feel that she was upset. And her body language gave it away as well – her shoulders were slumped forward, and her hair was hiding her face.

“She’s all alone out here?” Knox asked.

“Derek is actually watching her, so he’ll be close by.”

Knox sighed in relief. “Thank you. Thank you for thinking of that.”

“We’re not going to abandon her, even if she stays angry with us.”

“Yes. I think you told me that before.” Knox rubbed his aching head. “I’m out of sorts.”

Roman’s hand landed on his shoulder. “Which is normal. You really shouldn’t be out of bed, but I understand why you are. Can you get to her by yourself? Or do you need help?”

“I can do it,” Knox insisted.

“Okay then, I’m going to sit here in the truck and wait for you.”

Knox felt about sixteen years old with someone escorting him to talk to his ex-girlfriend. He managed to get out of the truck. He stumbled once but stayed upright. It was nice to be outside and to feel the tiny flakes of snow on his face.

They had not had a big snowstorm yet in town. The ground had only a light dusting of snow, but that would change soon enough. He hoped he’d get to share it with Jen.

Thankfully, Jen was wrapped up in a big coat, along with some of the gear she’d bought to ski.

She didn’t seem to hear him coming. He did not want to startle her, so he said her name in his head, wondering if the bond would work again. Of course, it was possible that she’d just sense him anyway. He was close enough for that.

She looked up abruptly. “Knox!” She stood up. She looked beautiful.

Her cheeks were pink, and her lips were red. She had on a maroon scarf, wrapped around her neck, and matching maroon earmuffs and teal gloves. “What are you doing? Roman said you were still in bed.”

“I was.” He jerked his head in the direction of the truck. “But I told

Roman I had to come find you.”

He wanted to appear tough, like he had it all together, but the truth was he was swaying. She jumped up and grabbed his arm. “Here, sit down.”

He sat down, hoping she’d sit next to him. “It’s so good to see you,” he said.

“Knox, really, what are you doing here? You should be back at the healers’ cabin. As a nurse, I can’t let you stay here in good conscience – your skin is green, you look like you’re about to pass out.”

He didn’t care about any of that. “I had to see you.”

“Why? What is there to say?”

His heart plummeted at the finality of her words. “I wish I could find the perfect words, but those probably don’t exist. I confess that I don’t remember much of what I said right after the attack. I hope it wasn’t too obnoxious.”

“No. It was quite sweet.” She sat down next to him and took his hand. Her teal gloves wrapped around his bare fingers. He wished he could feel her skin, but she would be too cold without her hands covered.

She listened patiently. But at the end. He could see from her eyes that it was not enough. Feeling the bond had given him hope, but now that hope was dashed.

“I really do appreciate you telling me all of this. You didn’t have to. But you took full responsibility. I forgive you,” she said.

For a second his heart soared, but then she shook her head and pulled her hand away.

“I forgive you,” Jen said. “But I don’t want to see you again.”



JEN’S WORDS HAD HURT. So KNOX had to channel those feelings. Instead of partying or spending his parents’ money, this time he would do something productive.

He called a pack meeting.

“You’re probably wondering why Roman called you all here today. We just had the vampire attack and that was pretty scary. As you probably heard by now, I was dating a human. She was one of the vampires’ targets because of her connection to me.” He looked out at the sea of serious faces. Only Ian was smiling, but it was enough to keep Knox going.

“The human is my mate. I did not set out to mate with a human. All of you who know me would know that I’ve never even had a serious girlfriend before. But Jen is my mate. And she knows about us, as you know. Because a vampire targeted her, our world was revealed to her without our consent. But now it’s done and there’s no going back. She knows, and no one is going to try to erase her memories. Even if a spell like that worked, we wouldn’t do it. She’s also been to our pack land as you know because it was necessary to protect her. Again, she is my mate. And I would like permission from the pack – as a group – to continue to see her. At this point we are not together, but that may not always be the case. I’ll pray it’s not.”

A man stood up with his arms crossed. “Why should we make a special exception for you?”

“That’s a good question, and it’s the reason I reminded everyone that Jen found out about us because of a vampire. It was out of our control.”

“If you hadn’t been dating her, then she wouldn’t have been targeted!” a woman shouted.

At that point, Roman stood up. “Excuse me, we’ve already explained that he was there on an assignment from me, your Alpha.”

The woman said, “I’m sorry, Alpha. I forgot.”

Why did these meetings always have to be so excruciating? Knox had barely paid attention to them in the past, only going when required. He guessed it was good that people were engaged. Now that he was more involved, he found it so annoying when they didn’t listen.

He didn’t know how Roman put up with it.

“I have a proposal,” Knox said. “I would like to create a process for allowing humans into our pack. Obviously, it should not be treated lightly or casually in any way. I had no intention of ever revealing my true self to Jen. Had it not been done for me, I would not be here right now. But I think it’s a mistake for us to refuse any possibility of a human mate. So I would like to create a committee, a counsel of sorts, that can review any mate situation. It cannot be for friendship or other relationships, just mating. What the pack decides is up to the group, but I’m not asking for special consideration. This would allow everyone to be equal.”

When he was finished, several people clapped.

A few sneered in disgust. And Kyra, who was sitting close to the front, smiled at him.

“Thank you,” she mouthed.

He'd spoken to her several times. This issue was obviously close to her heart. Her parents, although long dead, had been a human and a wolf shifter. And they had been rejected. He should remind the pack of that. He looked at Kyra and she seemed to understand what he meant. She nodded.

"We don't want to create a situation like Kyra's family," Knox said.

A few people gasped and another nodded vigorously.

"Okay. I'm done. Thank you for listening. I appreciate it."

He stepped off the platform with his head held high. He'd done all that he could. He advocated for his relationship with his mate, and for any future humans. He would need a majority to listen and hear him for any difference to be made.

A few days later, Knox was home alone when someone knocked on his door. He could tell before he opened it that it was Roman. But Roman did not seem distressed. "Hello, Alpha."

His Alpha hugged him. "Good news. The pack is overwhelmingly in favor of allowing Jen to join us."

Knox's shoulder slumped in relief. He almost couldn't believe that it happened. He offered to do the talking and keep track of who was in favor and who was against, but Roman refused.

"That's my job as Alpha," he said. "It's what I signed up for when I took my father's title."

That was a fairly generous way of putting it, since Roman hadn't actually had a choice. The title had been pushed up on him when he was only eighteen, after his father had been killed in a forest fire.

Roman hugged him once more, tightly. "Congratulations," he said.

Now I just have to convince my mate that she wants to be with me.

JEN

The first day back at school was a nightmare for Jen.

Nova told her to pretend like nothing had happened. It wasn't like they could tell anyone that Knox had been attacked by vampires, or that her house had been broken into by a monster no less. A monster looking to turn her into one of their own as some sort of retribution against a wolf shifter.

She could tell her coworkers that her home had been broken into, but of course, there was no police record. The story of a break in would excuse her absent mindedness and her melancholy, but it would open up too many more questions.

She would have to tell everyone that she and Knox had broken up. They would definitely notice his absence. He'd become a fixture at the school and in her office.

That morning she put on her brightest scrubs, the ones with shooting stars. They were neon and practically glowed. She wasn't going to offer any information, but when asked, she would tell the truth. She practiced all the way to school, pretending that someone asked, "How is that boyfriend of yours?"

She would say, "We broke up."

Each time, the words hung in her throat. They did not get easier to say.

Someone would definitely ask why. They'd want to know what happened.

"We're just taking a break right now," she said out loud. She would keep it vague and casual.

She never had to go through this with her fiancé. She'd left town quickly after their breakup, once she realized that her parents were on his side and that no one was on hers.

As for Knox, her imagined scenario was not far off. She walked into the office and forced a smile on her face. "How was your night?" Maddie asked.

"Fairly uneventful." That was a lie. *I nearly got bitten by a vampire, and my boyfriend almost died saving me. No. My ex-boyfriend.*

"Where's that hunk of yours? Is he scheduled for a project this week? I guess with the snow on the ground it might be a little harder," Maddie said.

"Actually, we broke up, so I don't know if he'll be here or not."

The secretary gasped. "You broke up?" She got up from her chair and came around the counter. She peered into Jen's face. "Are you okay? Of course, you're not." She patted Jan on the arm. "Come on. Let's go to the break room. There are still a few minutes before school starts."

Of course, a few teachers had overheard and immediately crowded around her, hugging her and patting her on the back. She appreciated the well wishes, but she had a feeling some of them were just trying to get in on the gossip.

"What did he do, honey? Do we need to send out a strike team?" one of the fifth-grade teachers asked.

"No, definitely not." The last thing she wanted was for any of these women to harass Knox. "There's not much to tell. We just wanted different things, and I'm not going to say more because he's a really great person. So, remember that if you see him around the school with Jonathon or Lexi."

A few of them scoffed, but they all promised not to give him a hard time.

After that first day back, Jen's days began to blur together. She got up and she went to the school. She wore her brightly colored scrubs and even wore sparkly flashing necklaces now that the holidays were approaching. She had one featuring Rudolph and one featuring Santa Claus.

At night, she took a shower instead of a bath. She now associated soaking in the bath with the last time she had been happy. Yes, that sounded overly dramatic, but it was true.

She also realized that she could not stay in Anchorage. Or Alaska at all.

She had to move. But where? Not back home. Maybe somewhere completely different. She'd lived in the south before but maybe she could go to the desert. She spent her evenings surfing the Internet, looking for a job opening and a place to live. There were no shortages of hospital jobs

available to her.

She wasn't going to do school nursing again. She had loved it with every fiber of her being, but she'd gotten too close to the rest of the staff. Even the ones she had not spoken to personally gave her sympathetic looks.

Everyone there knew she'd been dating Knox, and they wanted to know details. When it was clear they were not immediately getting back together, the staff interest tapered off, with the exception of Maddie and Nova. A few of the teachers catered to her, trying to lift her spirits during an obviously gloomy time. They tried to fill the gap that Knox had left, bringing her little treats, like hot chocolate and peppermint sticks, but it only served to make her sadder.

She had so looked forward to spending Christmas with Knox. She had even ordered a stocking for him. She wasn't going to hang it on her mantle; that seemed a step too far. Before the vampire, she had already started gathering little gifts for him that she could stuff inside. She'd have to drop them off to a donation center soon, but she couldn't bring herself to part with them.

She would have to donate the stocking too. She didn't know anyone else named Knox, but maybe somebody could use it for their little boy if they found it in a thrift shop.

Before the vampire, she'd hoped she'd get to see his home during the holidays, but that was a moot point now. She hadn't seen his home specifically, but she had seen the pack land and she was on a first name basis with his Alpha now. In fact, she still heard from Roman every single day. She tried to get the other shifter to stop checking in on her, but he insisted.

She could refuse to answer his calls and texts, but that just seemed rude. She wasn't really mad at Roman, just frustrated with the whole situation. He continued to insist that it was his fault that Knox was even involved in the first place.

"But if you hadn't sent Knox to pretend to be Jonathon's uncle, then I never would've met him in the first place," Jen said, countering his arguments.

He had to concede that was true. She wasn't mad at Knox either. It was just impossible for them to be together.

But as the days went by, the ache for him got worse instead of better. It was the exact opposite from what happened with her ex-fiancé.

Instead of time healing all wounds, her wounds got worse. She began to

lose her appetite too, and she could only pick half-heartedly at the treats her coworkers brought for her.

This is ridiculous.

She told herself that *she* was the one who'd made this choice. Knox wanted to be with her, and she'd rejected him. It was time for her to move on, not grieve as if he had died.

To finally sever ties, she was going to move away from Anchorage in January so she could finally quit pining for him.

She was too close to him here – it was as if she could feel him every waking hour.

By looking online, she found a house in Tucson, Arizona. It was right in the middle of the desert. The current temperature was eight degrees Fahrenheit. It would never snow there.

There was a public school close enough for her to walk to. But she stuck with her decision to avoid working at a school.

She chose a clinic. The clinic hired her on the same day that she applied, with only a video interview. She would work Monday through Friday, business hours, and she could go in on Saturdays for overtime if she wanted. There would be very few emergencies and very little stress compared to the ER.

She would pack up her car and drive. She would take her time sightseeing along the way. One of the fifth-grade teachers advised her on the safest path south, where the roads would be the best maintained, even as the snow began across the states.

She told her principal immediately, so he could begin to find a new nurse.

“We really hate to see you go,” he said.

She hated to go too.

Her parents called and begged her to come home for Christmas. She dreaded seeing them, but it had been a long time, and they promised not to bring her ex-fiancé up. So that's what she would do. She would spend her two-week break with her family, and then she would fly back up and prepare for the journey to Arizona.

KNOX

Knox had a lot of explaining to do. First, he told his parents about Jen.

“She’s my mate and yes, she’s human. And I am going to make it my mission to allow humans to be a part of this pack – if they are mates.”

His parents sat there in stunned silence. “Are you sure?” his father asked.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” his mother said, wringing her hands.

“I had to decide what I was going to do first,” he explained. “It all took on a life of its own.”

“What will the Alpha think?” his father asked.

“Roman is on board. He’s behind me, and he’s going to do what he can. However, I know that might not be enough.”

His mother smiled but teared up at the same time. “In August you were up all night partying and doing drugs. Now, you’re advocating for the Alpha to change pack policies.” She dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “I can’t believe it.”

He asked for an official meeting with Roman, who scheduled him an appointment for the very next day.

“I want to make it so Jen could join the pack if she wanted to. I know I mentioned it before, but I’m serious. She isn’t coming back, but there might be others out there who meet a human. We have to have a plan for that,” Knox said. “I’ve given her over a month of space, and I’m going to go after her soon. I can feel her despair in our bond. Our bond is not getting any weaker. In fact, I think it’s getting stronger.”

“That’s a good way to make your case,” Roman said. “I can make a

decree that she's allowed, but if public sentiment is against it, it will be very difficult. The best thing to do is for us to win the pack members over."

"Yes, I agree. I don't want it to be forced either. I want people to think and change their minds. I want to show them what it's like."

"Well, you're very sincere, and they'll see that. They'll see how much you've grown up, and they will be moved when they hear about your bond." Roman's eyes grew intense as he peered at Knox. "I know I've told you before, but I really am proud of you. I've never seen someone change so much in a short amount of time. But it's a good look on you."

Touched, Knox leaned forward and hugged his Alpha.

Later that day, he started setting up meetings with the pack members. Many of them were supportive once they'd heard his story.

He only encountered a few who were bitterly against allowing a human to join, but even those agreed to hear him out and to think about it for a few days. He'd never thought of himself as persuasive, but it came to him naturally as he told his story. When talking about his mate, he couldn't help but be sincere.



FOR A MONTH, KNOX stayed away from Jen. He didn't contact Jen at all.

He kept working on the pack members, meeting with them, listening to their concerns and brainstorming ways to make it work to add a human. He took all of their misgivings seriously, which helped. Finally, every adult in the pack was willing to allow Jen to join – if that day ever came.

BUT AFTER THE pack agreed to accept her, he couldn't stand being away from her.

He had to tell her that there was a place for her. Jen didn't answer his calls or reply to his texts. He wondered if maybe she'd blocked him. If she had, the situation was worse than he'd imagined.

He went to her house. It looked dark inside. He peeked through the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He knew he was getting close to crossing a line, but if she wasn't home, he was going to leave. He wasn't going to turn into a crazed stalker.

Then, his eyes caught sight of something. Sitting on the sofa was a stocking. It had the word “Knox” stitched across it. His heart clenched.

At that moment, the bond spoke to him. She wasn't in Alaska at all. She was in Louisiana. She'd gone to see her family.

He wasn't going to sit around and languish. He was going after his mate.

He went home, shoved an outfit and his toothbrush into a backpack and went straight to the airport. He didn't have an address, but he could rely on his wolf to get him there.

JEN

Being back in Louisiana was torture. The air was too warm in Baton Rouge, and she missed the rows of evergreen trees and the sharp jagged mountains in the distance. She missed the cold, biting air and the wide-open skies.

Her parents had gone overboard with Christmas decorations. There was a tree in every room, but the air was soupy with moisture, and the temperature was seventy-nine degrees Fahrenheit. She was prepared for that in Arizona but for some reason, it felt weird at home. She immediately had to change out of her sweater into a t-shirt.

I should be with Knox.

The thought came to her unbidden.

Her parents were trying. She could tell that much. They started out, though, on the wrong foot.

“Guess what? Kevin is home,” her mother said. Kevin was her ex-fiancé’s name.

“Please don’t start. I will leave,” Jen threatened.

After that, her aunt arrived with her young son and daughter, who were five and seven. Jen hung out with them, but it only made her miss Jonathon and Lexi all the more.

They aren’t even Knox’s niece and nephew. It was all a lie.

But if she took him back, then she’d see the kids. She’d see all of them, assuming she was ever allowed into the pack.

She swiped at her eyes, which were suddenly wet. It wasn’t fair to have to fight for a place in Knox’s life. No matter what, she’d always be an outsider.

Her mother behaved herself and did not bring her ex up again, but Jen ended up leaving anyway, needing a break from the chaos. She went to Target and roamed the aisles, picking out gifts for her niece and nephew. She even picked out a magnet set for Jonathon and a set of paints for Lexi. She'd mail them the day after Christmas, and they'd get them well before New Year's Day.

When she stepped outside, a chill was in the air. Finally. It was nice to have the weather get a little cooler for Christmas Eve. Back at home, her niece and nephew were baking cookies. She helped them until it was time to decorate, and then she escaped once a few of the neighbors showed up with a bottle of wine and a spice cake.

Jen sat in her old bedroom and lit a candle. She put on some classic Christmas music and listened to Bing Crosby sing. She hauled a bag of presents from her closet and dumped out tape and scissors, ready to wrap.

She was halfway through her pile when she felt a tingling sensation.

Jen.

Was someone saying her name? She hopped up from the floor and went to the door. "Mom?"

"What do you need, honey?" Her mother was playing cards with the neighbors, and her father was asleep.

"I thought someone said my name."

"No. I don't think so. Your sister's putting the kids to bed," her mother said. "She's probably fallen asleep."

Huh. Jen went back to her room and resumed wrapping, choosing teal blue paper with white polar bears. They reminded her of Alaska; she couldn't help it.

"Jen. Come to the window." This time it sounded like someone was speaking aloud to her.

What the hell?

She got up and looked outside. Part of her still expected to see snow, even though she'd only had it for a few weeks. It was as if the Alaskan landscape had become ingrained in her psyche.

But what she saw was even better than snow.

Standing in the yard, underneath her childhood bedroom window, was Knox.

Her heart leapt.

As soon as she laid eyes on him, she felt better.

Was that pathetic? Was that part of what it meant to be mates? She had no idea.

“Jen!” he mouthed. “Can you open the window?”

She found that had no desire to say no.

She would open her window, and then she’d go outside, and she would see him in person, on Christmas Eve.

She pushed the window open. “Was that you saying my name?”

He beamed. “Yes. But I wasn’t saying it out loud.”

She froze.

She heard him muttering to himself, something about wondering if he’d gone too far. “Can you come down?” he asked. “I’d also be happy to come in, but I wasn’t sure how you would feel about that.”

“I’ll come down. It’s really loud in here.”

“If you want to jump, I’ll catch you,” he said.

Why not? She might as well. If she could trust him to save her from a vampire, she could trust him to catch her from a second story window that wasn’t all that high up.

She shoved the window further up and swung both legs over, and then she turned and hung, just like her friends had taught her in high school. She’d never been one to sneak out much, but she had been the lookout for more than one friend. She let go, but this time she didn’t land on the ground.

Knox caught her.

Having his hands on her again was incredible. She hated to admit that she felt whole once again and for just that brief moment, it made her feel weak and dependent that she was that reliant on a man again. But if they were truly mates, then shouldn’t they be equals? If she felt like she was on equal footing, then she could move forward in a new relationship.

“What’s wrong? Something changed,” he said.

She wasn’t ready to lead off with such a serious topic. “I’ll tell you later.” That would buy her some time. She wasn’t sure how much she wanted to confess to him.

“How are you?” he asked. “I’ve missed you.” He hovered close by but kept his hands to himself.

“I’m okay,” she said. “I’ve been better. Being back here is not the Christmas experience I would have chosen. My parents asked me to come, and they’re trying to respect my wishes. But I didn’t tell anyone I was coming. How did you find me?”

“I’m not sure you’re going to like my answer,” he said, tilting his head. “Can we go sit down somewhere or go for a walk?”

She nodded. “We can walk. Are you fully healed now?” she asked, looking him up and down.

“Yes. It took about three weeks, but I’m finally one hundred percent again.”

She was aware because she still checked in with Roman every few days. It was Roman who texted her, but she always replied.

“I really wanted to see you for Christmas,” Knox said. “That’s why I’m here. If you want me to go, I will, but I’m here once again to declare my love for you.” He bit down on his lip.

“I have some news.”

She could actually feel his anxiety swirling. “Yes?” she asked. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

He swallowed hard. “I have been working with the pack to allow humans.”

“How did that go?” She was almost afraid to ask.

“It’s been tense a few times, but overall, it’s going really well. I started with Roman and his advisors and worked my way through every member of the pack. As you’ve likely heard, they have some valid concerns. But the good news is that if you were ever interested, you would be welcome there.”
As my mate, went unsaid.

“But why me?”

“Because of the bond we already share. We don’t want pack members bringing humans into the pack on a whim. So, we set up a committee to handle any new requests. But if one of us becomes close to a human, then we can get permission from a committee to tell our human the truth about who we really are. Then, if things progress, the human can visit our land.” He exhaled. “It’s to protect the human and the shifter both.”

“It seems like a lot of work.”

“It is. But it’s worth it, to be with the person you lov—” He stopped short “The person you care about.”

It was obvious he’d wanted to say “the person you love.” But he didn’t push it, and Jen appreciated that. He took both of her hands in his. “Come back home. Come back to Alaska.”

“I’ve already found a job in Arizona,” she said, but her resolve was already crumbling.

“I’ve heard about the job,” he said. “But I wasn’t trying to spy. Nova told me. She found out from one of the teachers. But I also know you still have your job in Anchorage. At the school.”

So he was keeping tabs on her. Somehow it didn’t bother her.

“Yes. I do still have my job, but I’m planning to let them know right after we get back from Christmas. I’ll stay until they find a replacement. I’ve also found a house in Tucson.” She protested, but she was already reconsidering. She just had to put up some resistance and give herself time to think rationally. She had to be sure she was doing the right thing.

“Come back with me,” he said. He brushed his lips over her cheek and her heart soared. “I can tell you want to. I know you think of Anchorage as home.”

That was true. She did think of it as home.

She was afraid to let herself fall in love again after what her ex-fiancé had done. And after how she’d been deceived by Knox.

She could tell that he understood, thanks to the bond. “I know you don’t trust me. But come back with me. Give me another chance.”

God, how she wanted to. “Okay.” The instant she said it, her heart was lighter.

He pressed his lips against hers. She let him kiss her, getting lost in the sensation. Her heart thudded as an electric spark zipped up her spine.

He pulled back a little and rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

She looked down at her watch. Sure enough, it was midnight – so now it was Christmas Day. And she was here in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, wrapped up in Knox’s arms. “Would you like to meet my family? Tomorrow?” she asked.

“Now that’s quite a bit of progress,” he said, grinning down at her. “How will you introduce me?”

“As my friend. It will be obvious to everyone, of course, that we are not only friends.” She ducked her head, then looked him in the eye. “I’m coming back, but I’m not ready to jump back in.”

He nodded. He let his hand rest on her shoulder. “I know. And I understand.” He made a face. “So how will they know I’m more than a friend, if you don’t tell them?”

“My co-workers always said our chemistry was off the charts. I think my family will notice too.”

“Nova mentioned that to me, back before I blew up our relationship. She said everyone noticed how much we flirted.” He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. “But yes. If you’re willing, I would like nothing more than to spend Christmas with you.”

He pulled away. “Do you want me to stop touching you?”

“No,” she said. She was probably sending mixed signals. But having him this close made her feel good, and she didn’t want it to stop. “What were you going to do if I hadn’t asked you to stay?”

“Fly back home if I could get a flight, and if not, just hang around here, hoping you’d change your mind,” he said.

She swatted at him. “I’m not going to let you spend Christmas alone.”

She could feel his pleasure through the bond link. That was going to take some getting used to. She still had plenty of reservations about their relationship, and she was going to have to be clear about that.

From now on, he couldn’t keep her in the dark about big stuff. He was going to have to be transparent.

He rubbed his large hand over her back. “I know you know about the bond now. You heard me that day right? When the vampire broke in?”

“Yes, I did. I couldn’t explain it, but I could feel you.”

“Now that you’re speaking to me, letting me hold you, and just generally accepting me into your life, my wolf is going crazy. The bond is lighting up for me, almost nonstop.”

“What exactly does that mean?” she asked.

“It means that I can sense your emotions. It’s not the same as reading your mind, but there’s an awareness.” He took her hands into his. “I just want to be fully open with you about everything. I know my deception will always be between us. But I’d like to prove myself to you.”

“So you can feel my emotions?” She’d certainly felt his more than once that evening.

“Yes, it’s not perfectly clear, but there are flashes. And then the day I found you in the park, I got images of where you were sitting. It’s all very subjective between mates, but that’s what mine’s been like so far.”

She gazed into his eyes. “Tonight, I felt different as soon as you were in my yard. I felt it before you said my name.”

“That’s great news. I wasn’t sure how strong it would be on your end.”

“Is that connection the reason you’re not giving up?”

“No.” He reached up and smoothed her hair away from her face. “The

bond helps me feel more connected to you, but it's not the reason I'm pursuing you. We didn't have a bond when we started dating. And the only reason I ever suggested that I date you as part of a scheme was because I really liked you. I liked spending time with you, and I was too much of an idiot to come up with a better plan."

"I've wondered about that. Why didn't someone help you come up with a better plan?"

"I don't think I've told you this yet. Maybe someone else has? But the truth is that right before I met you, I was a total fuck up. I was the pack loser." He lifted both hands. "I know it's not a very endearing trait. It's definitely not something I want to tell you, but like I said, honesty is my new policy."

She liked that he was committed to honesty. She couldn't ask for more than that. "What do you mean, you were the pack fuck up?"

"I mean that I was a childish party boy. I lived at home with my parents, which is common in our pack, but I did nothing. I didn't go to school. I didn't work. All the stuff about the landscaping company was an exaggeration. I did as little as I could.

"My parents threatened to throw me out, and they even got Roman involved. They have money, and I basically made it my hobby to spend as much of it as I could. My parents had enough. Even though I acted like a moron, I've always wanted to be involved in law-enforcement. Special ops, or the FBI or the CIA. But Roman would not give me permission to apply because of my poor habits.

"So, he told me that my first assignment was subterfuge. I had to convince you that Nova and Ian are good parents, and that Jonathon was safe. It was the first time in my life anyone had relied on me. It was the first time I've ever had something constructive to do.

"And then it started going well. He trusted me, and I fell for you instantly. At that point, I should've pulled out, but my own bad judgment pushed me forward. Being with you was addictive. But I didn't realize that that's because we're mates. I'd always ignored our pack traditions and our pack lore. Any other shifter would've understood. Ian was too preoccupied with his pregnant wife, and then his new baby, to keep a closer eye on me."

He blew out a breath. "So. That's the full story."

She flung herself forward, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"What was that for?" he asked.

“Just happy,” she mumbled.

“I expected you to be horrified,” he said. “Here you are, an accomplished nurse, who had been taking care of herself for years, and you’re hearing about how I had screwed up.”

She smiled again and put her hand on his cheek. “That actually makes me feel better,” she said. “I am so happy you finally told me everything.”

“Why? It’s hardly attractive to have a mate who can’t be relied on,” he said.

“No,” she said. “When it counted, you were there. I’ll never forget that.”

KNOX

They arrived back in Alaska to a blanket of snow. According to Jen, she wanted to spend Christmas in Alaska every year from then on. That was just fine with him.

They got back just in time to celebrate New Year's Eve with the pack. Or that was what Knox suggested, at least.

Once they were back in town, he needed her to see how much effort he'd put in to winning her back. He'd told her, but she needed to experience it.

Which meant coming back on pack land.

"Would you like to come have dinner with me at my house? I know you've been on pack land, and you've met Roman and his advisers, but circumstances were less than ideal," he said. Plus, he knew she'd hated that he'd never invited her over when they were dating the first time, thanks to the subterfuge.

"Your house? Do you really think I'll be welcome?"

"Yes," he said. "I've had quite a few people tell me that they've always thought the policy was wrong." He put his hand on top of hers. "If you don't feel welcome, tell me, and I'll address it."

"I want to come. But I'm nervous."

He wanted to tell her not to be nervous, but he knew that wasn't helpful. She had a right to her feelings, especially after everything he had put her through.

"It's up to you," he said. "But I want you there." They weren't dating – not yet. But she'd said she wanted to spend time together, whatever that meant.

It only took one day, and she was ready.

He spoke to the pack, letting them know she was coming. He was hopeful that they'd behave themselves, and there would be no awkward incidents.

To his utter relief, the evening went far better than he could have imagined. He cooked, making salad, a roast, and seared broccoli. He even made a banana pudding.

They ate by the fire, with her complimenting the food non-stop, and then went for a walk to the common area, which gave them several opportunities to see other shifters.

Roman and Everleigh came out to speak to Jen, and so did Kyra and Derek, as well as Ian and Nova, who brought their kids.

The kids were thrilled to see Jen and crawled all over her.

Knox was trying to ignore his libido, but it wasn't working. Seeing Jen, his mate, at his home, on his pack land, was doing something to him. His chest warmed with affection, but his cock responded too, getting so hard he couldn't stand it.

Finally, everyone had to put their kids to bed, and he whisked Jen back to his house, not wanting to share her anymore.

She nearly skipped all the way back. "That went so much better than I expected."

He didn't add that those were Roman's closest friends, and that they would have always behaved themselves, but he had a feeling she knew that anyway. After all, she talked to Roman all the time. He didn't like it, but it was easier to accept when it was the Alpha than it would be if it was another member of the pack.

He opened the door to his cabin and tugged her inside. "God, seeing you here with my pack mates is killing me," he said. "I need you." He pressed her against the wall, kissing her hard.

She surged against his body, rubbing her body against his erection. "I need to be inside you," he said. "Shit. Sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" she asked, panting.

"Because we aren't dating. I don't want to overstep." He moved away from her, running his hands over the back of his neck to keep from grabbing her again.

"Okay, I was an idiot," she said. "We can't be friends. We're mates."

He gaped at her. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes. I fucking mean that."

Christ, what she did to him. “Jen. I want you.”

She pulled at her clothes, and he got them off for her. He ran for a condom, not hiding how fast he could move. He got his cock sheathed and then he had her up against the wall again, lifting one of her legs.

“I need you to open for me,” he said. “I need to bury my cock in your sweet pussy.”

“Please. Knox! Yes!”

He pushed a finger into her entrance, finding her soaking wet for him. He held one of her legs up in the air, spreading her legs. He nudged his cock against her slit, pushing in.

He thrust in, holding her up as her body went lax. He filled her up, rocking his hips up into her warm channel.

She grabbed onto his shoulders, and he lifted her into the air, wrapping her legs around his waist. He held onto her, now able to better control his thrusts. He slowed down, going slower but deeper into her body, relishing every moan.

She had her head thrown back, showing off her graceful neck. He pressed his lips against her neck, sucking on the warm skin there. Her pussy walls began to tighten, and he picked up the pace of his thrusts.

“Knox!” she cried out.

His thrusts grew more frantic as her pussy pulsed around his cock, milking it.

He came, with her gazing at him with her bright green eyes. Dear God, he was going to pass out from the strength of his climax. He went over the cliff, letting himself empty his cock into her hot little pussy.

“Jen,” he said.

My mate.

He heaved a breath and carried her to the bathroom where he gently sat her down. He turned on the hot water, knowing she liked baths.

“That. Was incredible,” he said, still not recovered from the intensity of it. His brain felt like it had melted along with all of his muscles.

He helped her into the bath water. “Aren’t you coming in too?”

“It will be a tight squeeze,” he said.

“That’s what I was hoping for,” she said with a glint in her eye.

He climbed in behind her, fitting his body up close to hers. He wrapped his arms around her, enveloping her in his embrace.

He couldn’t believe his luck. He had gone from having nothing, to being

a wolf shifter male with a mate. And now he had the respect of his Alpha, his pack, his parents, and his mate too.

He'd worked hard to get there, but he felt gratitude too. Especially for Jen, for giving him another chance after such a catastrophic start.

EPILOGUE

Once Jen agreed to date him again, their relationship progressed quickly.

He was ready to propose. He couldn't stand not being officially mated to her, not for another second. He liked romantic ideas, and he liked the idea of proposing on a holiday.

It was February, which meant Valentine's Day. That would be perfect. That was when he would propose.

He would *not* be speaking to her family first. If her parents had respected her more, he would have given them the courtesy, letting them know he wanted to propose to their daughter. But even though Jen had gone home for Christmas, and she was glad that she did, the visit had been less than ideal. At one point her mother even tried to give her a photograph of her ex-fiancé – that woman just did not give up.

Jen was willing to maintain contact with them, but they would never be close, not as long as they kept up the charade of protecting her ex.

He needed the perfect ring. He didn't know much about rings because wolf shifters didn't wear them. It wasn't possible to keep a ring on and also transform into your wolf form. Some shifters wore a ring on a chain or a necklace, but that would not be necessary for her.

Although, maybe as a nurse, she would prefer to have something that she didn't have to take off when she was wearing gloves or washing her hands. He would go ahead and get both. then she could choose. And she could always wear the ring when she wasn't working.

Some people might think that Valentine's Day was cheesy. But he was

fine with that. He wanted to be over-the-top with Jen. He wanted there to be no doubt in her mind about the way he felt. After the way he had royally screwed things up in the beginning of their relationship, he felt like he had a lot to make up for.

She seemed to feel comfortable on pack land at this point, so he thought maybe they could have the wedding there. But he wanted to propose somewhere neutral. One of their first dates had been skiing, so he thought maybe he could take her skiing on purpose.

He went and picked out the ring with the help of Ian.

He'd already asked his brother to be his best man, and his brother had agreed. Although he and his brother had not been close in the past, thanks to Knox's poor decisions, Knox was hoping he could change that.

He was drawn to a ring immediately, choosing a gold ring that would match her hair. On the inside he had the word "forever" engraved next to the word "mate." Now he only hoped she would say yes.

"Would you like to go skiing on Valentine's Day?" he asked. It was a weekday, so she'd have to leave school a bit early.

"Yes. I'd like that a lot," she said. She even found a nurse to cover the afternoon hours for her at the school, so she could leave early.

He had the first part figured out. He got lucky and they had a fresh snowfall the night before. On Valentine's Day, Knox picked her up at noon. Jen changed in the bathroom and was happy to show off her brand new ski outfit. It was a teal coat with a cream-colored hat and gloves. "It's going to be a cold one today," she said.

He agreed, and they got on the ski lift and rode up. Everything had that still quiet look, the one that happened after a fresh blanket of snow. A deer crept by and they both watched. He held his hand out and she put her small, gloved hand in his.

There had been so many days when he thought he'd never get to have this again. If she said yes to being his mate, he would *never* let her feel taken for granted again.

He put his hand in his other pocket. Zipped inside was the ring and the chain.

He was ready. He didn't think he could take waiting another day. He was ready to start their life together. They got to the summit, and there were very few people there. Everyone was probably out having candlelit dinners. Well not yet, because it was still early. Heck, the kids were still in school, which

was nice because it meant the slopes were deserted.

It was so cold that he would not be able to keep her out long. Once they hopped off the ski lift, they skied over to the edge where they could see out across the valley. He popped his skis off quickly and unzipped his pocket. He made sure she was steady before getting in front of her.

He got down on one knee and popped open the ring box. “Jen, we had a rough start, but hopefully we won’t have a rough future. Will you marry me and be my mate for the rest of our lives?”

Jen gasped.

She pulled both hands to her mouth, still holding her ski poles. She just about tipped over, but he caught her.

“Yes!” she shouted. “Yes! I will.”

His entire body sagged in relief, and he picked her up, lifting her off the ground, skis and all, not caring if anyone saw. “My mate,” he said.

She beamed at him. “I think I’m too excited to ski down.”

“That’s okay. It’s snowing pretty heavily anyway so it might not be safe.” He got next to her and held his camera, snapping a selfie so they would have a record of this moment.

BACK ON THE LIFT, she kept her glove off, turning her hand this way and that, letting the weird light catch the glint of the diamond.

“I love it. Thank you.” She had not seen the inscription inside, but he wasn’t going to have her pull it off while they were dozens of feet in the air.

At the base of the mountain, she changed her mind and wanted to go back up. “Now I have all this adrenaline to burn off.”

He laughed. Of course, he could never get enough skiing with her. They stopped at a café for hot chocolate. “When do you want to have the ceremony? Do you want to wait like a year, or do you want to do it soon?”

“The sooner the better. I figure the universe sent us a message when you showed up at that school. Your wolf decided we’re mates, and I was attracted to you immediately.”

Upon hearing that, his wolf was delighted, and Knox himself was ready to jump up and down.

“So a month? Is that too soon?” He knew very little about weddings. But Everleigh had already instructed him not to behave as though the entire wedding and ceremony were Jen’s problem only.

“The simpler the better. When I was engaged before, my mother wanted a big wedding. Everything about it turned me off. As far as I’m concerned, I can get a pretty dress and pick up some flowers from the florist. What about you?”

“I think that sounds perfect. Would you be willing to do it on pack land, or would you rather choose some place neutral?”

“Pack land is fine with me. Will the whole pack come?”

“Pretty much. We can incorporate any human wedding ceremony rituals you like, or we can go for a traditional mating ceremony; it’s very simple. We commit ourselves to each other and to the pack. There aren’t a lot of complicated decorations. There are no things like DJs or photo booths.”

“As long as someone takes some photos, I’ll be happy,” she said.

How had he gotten so lucky? “You really mean that?”

“Yes. I don’t want to invite any of my family. And I probably will want to host a reception in town for the staff that I work with. But I think since I’m joining the pack, it would be a nice symbol for me to do it in a traditional way. Is that weird?”

“Um, no. It would be a dream come true for me. Think about it tonight, and if you still feel that way tomorrow, then we can start planning. It won’t take much time or work at all because we’ll gather in the community area by the lake. Someone, probably Nova, will pick some wildflowers for you, and then we’ll eat. And some of the pack may go on a hunt. That’s traditional, but we can serve steak and that will be just fine.”

“That sounds great,” she said. “Let’s do it.” She stood on her tiptoes and pecked his cheek with a kiss. “Let’s go home,” she said. “My mate.”

Home.

And mate.

There’d been a time when neither of those words had meant much to him. But now that he’d found Jen, that time was long gone. Jen had changed him, for the better.

She was his mate and going home with her sounded like heaven to him. He took her hand in his. “Yes. My mate, let’s go home.”

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading ***The Alpha Wolf's Human Mate***. I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to please write a review **HERE!**

It would mean the world to me. Reviews are very important and allow me to keep writing the books that you love to read!

THE ALPHA WOLF'S SHATTERED MATE

THE WOLVES OF ANCHORAGE SERIES

Blurb

She had to flee her country to escape the shifters who wanted to take her child.

The Lion Shifter Teacher

I always longed to be a part of the larger world.

While exploring, I met a wonderful mate.

Later, I got a teaching degree.

We had a beautiful baby cub.

But my mate was murdered. Killed in a senseless battle.

His parents wanted to steal my child away.

They wanted to raise her as their own.

I escaped to Alaska, to Anchorage, where I met a male shifter wolf.

He was a doctor, and he understood that I didn't want a narrow life.

But being with him was risky.

If I stayed in one place, my old pride would find me.

He vowed to protect me. But they'd never stop looking for me.

They'd try to take my cub again.

I would do anything to keep that from happening.

The Wolf Shifter Single Father

*My pup was the best thing that ever happened to me.
Raising him alone, I balanced my job as a doctor at the local hospital.
I had a great family, a good pack, and a thriving career.
But what I never had was love. Or a true mate.
My son's mother left us. She refused to even try to live as a family.
I'd rather be alone than go through that again.
But a female came into my life in an unexpected place –
She was my son's kindergarten teacher.
She was captivating, and I wanted to be with her all the time.
But she was on the run, trying to escape from her past.
She warned me not to get attached.
If I did, I would be signing up for more heartbreak.
She would not stay in one place.
But when her enemy arrived, I had to intervene.
I would not allow anyone to harm her or her cub, even if it killed me.*

**Could a single lion shifter mother learn to trust again, after she's
betrayed by her pride?**

“Okay everyone,” Nova Sandoval said. “Now that we’ve finished our watercolor painting time, let’s pick up.”

About half the kids began to pick up, as she’d asked. The other half kept painting.

“Mrs. Sandoval. Is it time for the playground?” a small boy asked. He had paint smeared all across his forehead.

“It sure is, once you’ve picked up.”

A chorus of little voices cheered.

She looked down to see a little girl tugging on her dress. “What do you need, Christina?” Nova asked.

“I’m ready for the treasure chest. And a snack!” As she shouted, the little girl jammed her paintbrush into Nova’s thigh, painting a blue streak over her cargo pants. Oh well. That was why they used washable poster paints for these projects.

“The treasure chest comes at the end of the day,” Nova reminded them. “And we just had lunch, so it’s not time for our snack yet.”

Her day filled with kindergarten students might seem mundane to some, but Nova reveled in her new life as a teacher, but after being on the run for so long, she treasured every routine, predictable moment that she got.

It had been a long, hard road to get there.

She’d had to flee her home country with a baby, and then she’d made her way north. She’d finally gotten to Miami, where she’d begun the process of becoming a resident of the United States. Only then could she apply for her teaching license.

When she'd finally gotten to Birmingham, Alabama and filed the paperwork to become a licensed teacher, she'd finally allowed herself to take a breath. She'd been hired in January, when another teacher went on maternity leave and decided not to come back, and now Nova had been teaching for four months. Four months of bliss, of staying in one spot for the first time in years.

She was certain that her mate's family would not try to immigrate to the States. They liked the tropical climate where they lived deep in Peru, and they refused to engage with humans to get the necessary travel paperwork. None of them had any form of ID or passport, even the Alpha.

They'd chased Nova to Venezuela, but she felt certain they wouldn't leave South America in search of her daughter. It was too far to swim, there was no way to drive, and once again, they'd have to talk to a human to rent a boat.

So once she was in Alabama, she didn't relax, but she let her guard down just a tiny bit.

The first week went by, and she reveled in the feeling of being able to teach her class. She liked the other teachers, the parents had been reasonable, and the best part was that her daughter was across the hallway in the pre-K program for four-year-olds.

She sighed with contentment. Finally, she could make a home for herself and her daughter.

She'd grown up in Peru in a lion shifter pride. She'd had a fairly traditional life, and she'd been happy. She'd met her mate when she was only eighteen. He was part of a neighboring pride that often blended with hers for ceremonies and other large events. They fell in love in the space of two days and had their mating ceremony a month after they first met.

But they upset their families because they both wanted to be a part of the human world. Nova and her mate went off to college. A private university in Trujillo, Peru accepted them both, much to their prides' dismay. She studied childhood education, and he studied business. They waited to officially mate, which also angered their families.

Nova didn't care, and neither did her mate. They were a united front, and eventually their prides accepted their non-traditional lifestyle, albeit grudgingly. They both graduated, and then finally got mated. A year after they made their bond official, their daughter was born.

Nova's life had been bliss for the first six months.

Then her mate was killed.

His death flipped her life upside down. Without warning, she found herself in the middle of a battle she'd never expected.

Her mate's parents wanted her daughter.

They would not settle for visits. They wanted full custody, as the humans said.

Nova's in-laws thought they should be the ones to raise Lexi.

And the pride agreed with them.

Both prides, Nova's and her former mate's.

At first, the elder members tried to convince Nova of the error of her ways. They lectured her, preached at her, and shamed her. They told her a cub should be raised in a traditional pride, learning all the ways a shifter should live.

Never mind that many of those ways were toxic and unhealthy, and that Nova and her mate had done their best to escape them.

The pride insisted that a child should be raised with more than one adult around all the time, and that Nova, as a single mother, would be a detriment. Nova did her best to humor them for a bit. She listened, and she argued, and she tried to reason with them.

She pleaded with her own family, but they agreed with her in-laws. They wanted her and Lexi to return to the pack, and they would settle for nothing less. She pushed back, and just when she thought she'd gotten her own mother and father on her side, they were both killed in the battle with a bobcat pack from Argentina.

The same group that killed her mate.

Her in-laws saw her grief and used it as an opportunity to take Lexi. They believed with every fiber of their being that they were best for her daughter. They were wrong.

But they didn't give up. They kept trying to convince Nova that she was unfit to be a mother.

Not once, but over and over.

The final straw was when they showed up at her house in the middle of the night and tried to take Lexi by force.

Nova knew then there was no way to avoid it. She had to leave. Her daughter would never be safe around them.

The sad thing was that she could have come up with a compromise. She would never have surrendered her daughter to them permanently, but she

would have allowed weekend visitations. She would have allowed them to be an integral, permanent part of their granddaughter's life.

But that was not enough for them. They insisted that they were right and that Nova was wrong. They even went as far as to call her a traitor to her own kind.

She knew then that they wouldn't be changing their minds.

So Nova packed up their things, and she and Lexi left.

For months, they made their way north in a zig-zagging pattern because it was the only direction with enough land to get far away from them.

If she'd gone south, east or west, she would run out of land too soon. At times, while she was in Brazil, Ecuador, Columbia and Venezuela, she would feel them getting closer. But she was always able to evade them. She never allowed herself to settle into a routine or have a home. She and Lexi lived like nomads.

They took different routes, shopped in different stores and hunted in different woods.

Sometimes they concealed themselves among humans to best hide from her in-laws. Sometimes they concealed themselves among other shifters.

There were areas where the shifters were common, which meant she and Lexi would be much harder to find. But in Ecuador, Nova met a witch who taught her that she could conceal herself from other shifters for a short period of time.

It was an ancient spell, and it took a little bit of practice and a lot of concentration, but she was able to do it when she felt them close. But sadly, it wasn't something that she could rely on all the time.

They went as far north as they could on the continent, all the way to the tip of Venezuela. At that point, Nova let down her guard a bit. She started teaching preschool and they settled in. But she had only been there for six months when she felt her father-in-law's presence.

She was on the playground, chaperoning a group of children who were climbing up for a turn on the slide.

Her hair stood on end, and she knew. She quickly recited the words to the spell to conceal herself, but it was too late.

She found the director of the school and told her she had to go. She grabbed her daughter, and they ran. She had enough money saved to pay for a bus ride to Central America. There she worked odd jobs cleaning homes that would allow Lexi to attend, and she saved every penny. She only hunted for

food, so that she'd have enough money to emigrate permanently.

She made her way north, moving through each Central American country. The weeks blurred together as she crossed through Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras. When she reached Guatemala, she and Lexi flew to Miami.

She kept the faith that her migration via plane would keep her in-laws away.

Not only would it be a long journey for them on foot, but they hated the idea of northern lion prides, and they also hated cooler weather. Alabama was hardly frigid, but the winters were colder than the area where she had lived. Her in-laws' aversion was more than a simple distaste; it was part of their entire belief system.

She wasn't sure they'd be able to let their prejudices go, even to look for her and Lexi, but she wasn't complaining. Their closed-minded attitude would work out in her favor. Her mistake had been settling in South America where she was easy to find. She wouldn't do that again.

So Nova settled in Birmingham, Alabama, secure in the knowledge that her in-laws' family had clashed with North American prides in the past, which led to an ongoing feud that had lasted centuries. When Nova and her mate had visited Florida during their relationship, her in-laws had ranted for hours.

She tried not to scare her daughter while they made their home in the southern U.S., but she knew that one day they might have to run again. She hated the idea because Lexi had come to love her school.

However, she thought they were safe.

But Nova was wrong.

She was wrong about all of it.

Four months after she started teaching in Birmingham, she knew she was in trouble. Her students were working hard with their safety scissors. The room was silent, except for the scrape of metal against the rough paper.

But Nova felt them. The prickling, needle-like sensation that said an enemy shifter was near.

Her in-laws were close by.

At first, she thought it was a random shifter that had happened to stop by the school. That wasn't common, but it had happened before. There was a bear clan that lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and occasionally they stopped in Birmingham.

But it was not a bear shifter.

It was her father-in-law.

And he was not alone. Her mother-in-law was there too, along with her former mate's sister, as well as at least ten members of her former pride.

They'd found her. They were going to try and take Lexi.

There was no way in hell Nova was going to stop and talk to them.

She had to leave. Again.

She had prepared her daughter for her entire life about how to handle a situation just like this. It had happened before, and it would probably happen again, now that they'd figured out how to get to the States.

Lexi had a GPS tracker watch and a cell phone. At five, she seemed far too young to have a cell phone, but she knew what it was, and she knew how to keep it hidden in her bag. They practiced many times on what to do if someone took her. But Nova didn't plan to let it get that far.

On a humid day in May, while her students were practicing cutting a circle out of a piece of construction paper, Nova pressed the buzzer for the office.

She'd told the office nothing about her situation. She didn't want to put them in danger. And she would not risk any of the children in her class. The only solution was getting out of the building as quickly as possible.

She probably could've found a pride that would take her in, but she never wanted to trust another one again. She felt safer with humans who could not physically overpower her. Or her daughter.

"I have a family emergency. Can you send someone to my classroom?"

The principal was an empathetic person and soon enough he was on the intercom. "Yes. I'll be there in a moment to find someone to cover your class."

She knew not all administrators were so understanding. But she'd also done her best to make sure she was dependable, so they knew she wasn't leaving lightly.

She walked across the hallway. Technically, she should have had the office call her daughter. But she would not be back to the school. She'd send in her resignation letter via email.

She pushed a wave of sadness away for the colleagues that she'd barely gotten to know. She'd have time to mourn them later when she was on the run again. She stuck her head inside the door. "Can I have Lexi? We've had a family situation."

Her teacher smiled. “Of course. Let me get her.”

Lexi knew not to say anything in front of humans. Nova could tell from her daughter's eyes that she knew this was not a false alarm. They'd done practice runs before, and this wasn't one of them.

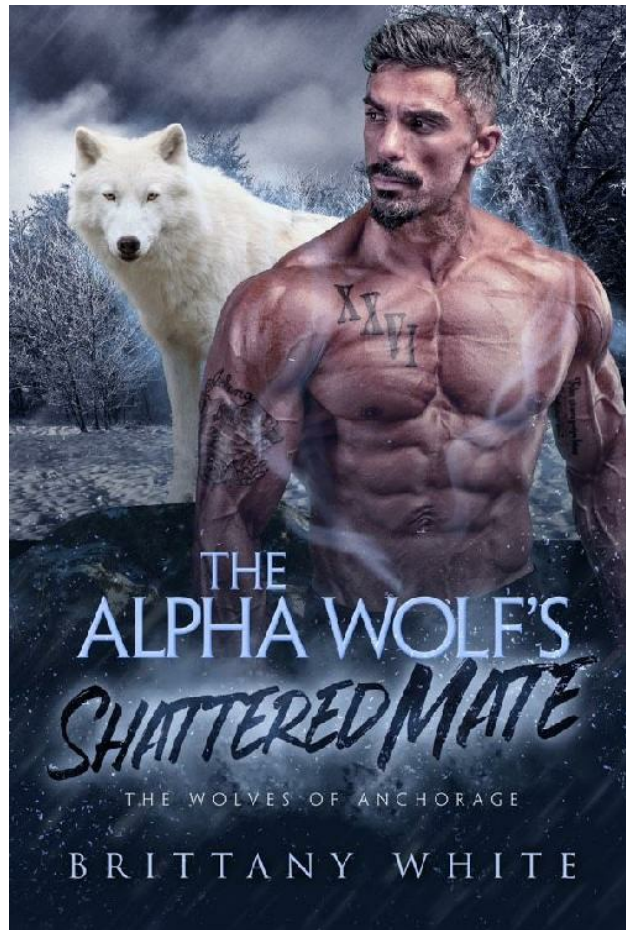
“I can feel them too, Mama,” Lexi said in a whisper.

“Good. I'm glad you can. Now we're going to go.”

Would a day ever come when her daughter did not want to run? When she got older and questioned their lifestyle? Would she ever refuse to go with her mother?

She struggled on what to tell her about her father's family. Before her mate died, she thought her in-laws were okay. Certainly, she never thought they were evil. They weren't abusive either, but her mate had not wanted his daughter raised within their confines. And neither did Nova.

One day when her daughter was much older, she might reject her mother's decision and go after her father's family. But that day was not today, and Nova was doing the best she could for the both of them.



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Bear's Second Chance

Bear's Forever Love

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittany White is the author of hot paranormal romance. She began writing short stories for family and friends. Her vivid imagination and love of mysteries and romance eventually led her to follow her dreams to become a published author.

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