



The Alpha's Mail Order Bride

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: It is troubles that brought me to this custom-built mansion.

Troubles that made me choose this last option.

But now that I'm here...

I have very different reasons for wanting to stay.

He has a look of casual elegance about him.

Refined, masculine features that draw me in right away.

There is something about him that I can't place.

A curiosity that has been stifled by darkness.

I want to lighten his darkness.

I want his warmth and his secrets.

I want him to whisper sweet nothings into my ear.

To be in the wild with him, where he can be free.

To see his inner animal before it kills both of us.

The paranormal Mail Order Mates Agency has one aim and one aim only: to match hot shifters with their destined brides and mates. To find matches with a chemistry that burns so hot that it melts down the agency's computers and algorithms. To enable eternal love... with just a touch of magic...

WARNING: Intended for 18+ readers.

Total Pages (Source): 41

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Chapter 1 – Jennifer

Romance was in the air, but it wasn't for Jennifer.

Afternoon sunlight streamed in through the trees as Jennifer scaled the last slope, pushing branches out of her face to pursue her friend, Lily, further up the trail.

"You wouldn't believe how romantic he is," Lily said, pushing a lock of her dark brown hair out of her face. "Last night, he booked the whole garden patio on the roof of the Grand Lux Hotel, and we ate under the stars. There were candles, music, oh, you wouldn't believe it."

"That sounds incredible." Jennifer smiled mischievously. "So, did you sleep with him?"

Lily blushed. "After a night like that, what do you think? I always thought I would wait until marriage, but Brandon has been incredible. I couldn't say no to him."

A few months ago, Lily and Jennifer met on a similar hiking trail after Lily twisted her ankle and needed help back to her car. They'd been good friends ever since, to the point where Lily wasn't shy about how many guys she dated, and Jennifer wasn't shy about how few she dated. Right now, she just didn't have the time—even coming on this mini getaway with Lily was a stretch, but Jennifer made the exception.

"You two have been together for a few months now, right?" Jennifer said.

"We met when Camella took me out boating at the start of spring." She laughed. "I

tripped coming off of the boat, and he caught me. I don't know, maybe it was love at first sight."

They reached the top of the hill where the trees parted into a small clearing, where several picnic benches were set out for hikers. One of the tables was occupied by a couple and their young daughter, so Jennifer and Lily went to the one closer to the opposite end of the clearing, which overlooked the valley below.

A gorgeous lake glittered in the sunlight, all the way back where their hike began. It seemed so far away, but it had only taken them a few hours to get here. Jennifer grinned when she took in the sight of the vast blue, and then the deep green forests all around the lake. It'd been months since she last went on a hike that she felt the burn in her legs after being on the move for so long. It was nice, though, to forget about everything else that made her life so chaotic ... even if it was just for a few minutes while staring out at the view.

"Tomorrow Brandon and I are going out for dinner again," Lily said as she took a seat at the picnic table. "I'm kind of nervous."

Lily's voice pulled Jennifer from her peaceful concentration on the valley, back to reality where she was single, working two jobs, and stressed out of her mind. Being out here in nature helped ease her nerves, but not by much.

Jennifer joined her at the table, taking their sandwiches out of her pack. "What for? I thought things went well between you last night?"

"Well yeah, but ... doesn't having sex with someone change your relationship with them? Aren't things different after?"

Jennifer thought back to the times she slept with her old boyfriends for the first time, trying to remember what it was like after that first time. With her most recent

boyfriend, whom she broke up with a little over a year ago when she had to move from Colorado to Oregon, they'd been hot and heavy from the beginning. But even that was so long ago, she wasn't sure.

She shrugged. "For me it never really did. If anything, it was a good change. Ron and I felt closer after the first time, I suppose. Didn't change much in the end."

"Oh, well, that makes me feel a bit better." Lily smiled sheepishly before digging into her lunch.

Jennifer was honestly jealous of Lily. She had the freedom to date as much as she wanted—even if her choice in men was questionable most of the time—and now it seemed like she'd found a genuinely good guy. Meanwhile, Jennifer hadn't gone on a date since moving to Portland. It wasn't because she didn't want to or even that she hadn't tried... it was just a mixture of extremely bad luck and no time.

Last year, her mother, Arabelle, was diagnosed with lung cancer after a lifetime of smoking. Her health had been on the decline for years, but after Arabelle was sick for an extended period of time and went to the hospital, they diagnosed her. The diagnosis was scary in itself, but when Jennifer thought her mom was getting better, things only took a turn for the worse.

Jennifer moved back to Portland shortly after the diagnosis, sacrificing her dream job as a tour guide at the Mesa Verde national park and her budding relationship with Ron to take care of her mom instead. She didn't regret the decision one bit, but it was tough working two jobs just to scrape by paying the minimum on all the medical bills with no end in sight.

The facts were that Arabelle wasn't getting any better. The doctors caught the tumor too late, so they couldn't perform surgery without too much risk. Now they were trying chemo, and some days it seemed like the treatment was working, and other

times, Arabelle just seemed worse.

"Now it's your turn to get a boyfriend," Lily said all of a sudden. "Don't give me that look; someone as kind and funny as you deserves love, and pronto."

Jennifer laughed. "I'm not going to argue against that, but what kind of guy wants to date someone who doesn't have time for them?"

"Taking care of your mom is your priority. The right guy will understand. You just have to find him."

"I just don't think I have the energy it takes to look. Not right now."

"Things will turn around sooner rather than later. Trust me."

Jennifer shook her head and finished off her sandwich. Lily looked like she wanted to say more, but thankfully she kept quiet. Right now, Jennifer just didn't have it in her to tell Lily that it just wasn't going to work out. Until her mom was better, she didn't think she would be able to focus on a new relationship at all.

If only Ron had come here with her ... but she didn't blame him for staying behind. She just couldn't help but think about all the 'what if's'. Most of the time, she tried not to think about it. Jennifer loved her mom and wouldn't trade taking care of her for a new relationship in the first place, not until she was better.

Most of the time, Jennifer was okay with her situation. It was just difficult, sometimes, when it seemed like her mom wasn't getting any better.

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"We should head back, huh?" Jennifer said.

The hot summer sun blazed on them from above, and she was glad that she decided to put on sunscreen that morning, even though it had been cloudy. On the trek back down the hill toward the lake, Jennifer's phone started buzzing. It hadn't made a noise since they arrived at the trail earlier that afternoon, so the noise sounded so foreign to her at first. And then she realized it was the sharp trilling ringtone she assigned to the hospital so she knew that it was them calling right away.

All the calm and relaxation Jennifer had found in going out for a hike evaporated in a second. She answered the phone in a hurry, slapping the screen against her face.

"Hello? Jennifer Wright speaking," she said.

"Hi Miss Wright, this is Tammy Grey from Portland General, I'm calling about your mother, Arabelle Wright, who is one of our patients. I believe you brought her in this morning for her regular tests?"

"That's right. Is everything okay? I thought she wasn't supposed to be done for a few more hours."

"I'm so sorry, but there's an emergency. Dr. Carlton is asking for you to come back as soon as possible," Tammy said.

"What happened? Is it serious?"

"I'm sorry, but we can't discuss those details over the phone. We'll have to wait until

you get here in person."

"Okay. I'll be there in twenty."

Jennifer hung up the phone, her heart in her throat. She felt guilty enough about leaving her mom's side at all during the tests and treatments, but Arabelle had insisted on sending Jennifer away. For most of the time she was supposed to be at the hospital today, anyway, and the doctors and nurses couldn't have Jennifer in the same room. So, Arabelle had convinced Jennifer to go out and enjoy herself until the evening.

Now Jennifer was regretting that decision.

How serious was the emergency? Was her mom going to make it? Why couldn't they at least give her an idea of how bad it was? Now she was going to assume the worst.

Her legs started moving, and she was jogging down the hill before she registered Lily's voice in the back of her head.

"Jen! Slow down! What's going on?"

She slowed just enough for Lily to catch up, but she kept on at a hurried pace. "It was the hospital—there's been some kind of emergency. They need me there right away."

Lily's eyes widened. "Then go! Don't worry about me."

They hugged each other really quickly. "We'll do this again sometime, okay?"

Before Jennifer heard Lily's response, she was already on the move, pumping her legs with every last bit of strength to make it down to her car.

Arabelle lay in her hospital bed, noisy machines beeping around her. She had a red floral scarf wrapped around her head to hide her balding scalp, and she looked so old and frail. Far older than her forty-five years.

Jennifer's lips trembled as she pulled a chair closer to her mom's side, taking a seat beside her. Her mom's eyes were closed when she entered the room, but she moaned when the chair scraped against the floor.

"Mom, it's me," Jennifer said. "Are you awake?"

Her mom groaned. "They put me on the good stuff."

Tears prickled Jennifer's eyes, but she managed a laugh. "Yeah, sounds like it. I wanted to give you more time to rest, but ..."

Morphine always made Arabelle a bit loopy, but she only got it when she was at her worst. Jennifer talked to the doctors before coming to see her mom—only because they wouldn't let her see Arabelle before she did—and it had become very clear, very quickly, that the situation was at its worst yet.

But Jennifer wasn't one for jumping straight to the bad news. Her mom was still her mom, not the cancer.

"How are you holding up?"

"Oh, you know." Arabelle chuckled, and coughed, and Jennifer placed her hand on top of her mother's, squeezing it tight. "Better now with the medicine and you here."

Jennifer swallowed, thinking back to everything Dr. Carlton said about Arabelle's chemotherapy. Today was just supposed to be a routine treatment, followed by some extra tests, but the doctor's explanation about what happened, and alternatives, all

muddled up in Jennifer's head. All she could think of was doing everything possible to keep her mom with her.

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"The doctors told me there was a ... a complication with the chemotherapy."

"Trust me, I felt it," Arabelle said. "Oh yeah, I felt it. A complication, all right." She was trying to joke, but Jennifer struggled to keep up with her mom's dark humor.

Arabelle was a stubborn one, and she wasn't ever going to admit that she was in pain. That was why it took the doctors so long to catch the cancer in the first place—she went on acting like she was invincible for far too long. It had taken a lot of convincing in the first place to let Jennifer help pay for the treatment when Arabelle's health insurance wouldn't cover the treatment.

"Mom ... Dr. Carlton said it was serious. I know you're not feeling good right now, but they said the sooner we decide, the better. Hours could make a difference."

"The doctors say a lot of things, hon."

Jennifer buried her face in her hands. This wasn't the type of conversation to have when her mom was loopy on morphine and she was still processing the shock of the situation, but they had to make decisions quickly.

"Please, I don't want to lose you, not after all this," Jennifer said. "We need to at least talk about it."

At last, Arabelle sighed and adjusted her head on her pillow so she could sit up straight. "I know, I know, but after they put me under, I've had a lot of time to think. This last year has been hard, Jenny."

Jennifer shook her head. "You're not about to say what I think you're going to say. No. You can't give up."

"I'm not giving up, I couldn't, not with you still around. I'm just trying to be realistic, okay? Dr. Carlton said it's my blood that reacted poorly to the radiation treatment, something about the proteins. According to him, it's very rare to have as extreme a reaction as I did ... and there's very little they can do."

"He told me what happened." Jennifer wiped the tears from her hot face. "I should have been there for you."

"You can't live your whole life looking after me. It's no way for a young woman to live. I already hate that you gave up your dream job and that nice boy of yours to come here ..."

Jennifer leaned forward and hugged her mom. It was an awkward gesture because her mom was lying down, but they made it work. After a year of the emotional trauma of her mom's diagnosis, Jennifer appreciated every moment she could get with her, but holding her like this, it was hard not to notice how small and frail she'd become over a couple of months of chemotherapy.

"That's so like you, to worry more about my romantic life than your health," Jennifer said.

Arabelle squeezed her tight. "As much as I love having you here ... the truth is, until now, your love life was in more danger than I ever was."

"Don't say that, mom. I'll worry about finding a new boyfriend once you're better."

"You say that like you're not afraid of what's going to happen next. Jenny, they can't use chemotherapy to treat my tumor anymore."

"This isn't the end of the road, not yet," Jennifer said with a hint of desperation. "Dr. Carlton said there's a special treatment. We need to decide right now. You already know what my answer is."

Arabelle sighed, closing her eyes as if she'd never been so exhausted before. "I know, but like I said, we need to be realistic. We can't afford the treatment. If my insurance wouldn't cover the chemo, it's not going to cover some experimental drug, either."

"I don't care. I'll pay for it. I can get a third job if that's what it takes. I'm not going to let you die if there's still something I can do."

Arabelle shook her head sadly. "You're going to get yourself killed doing that, and then what will all that work be for?"

"If I can save you, then it'll be worth it."

Jennifer wasn't going to admit it out loud, but she would do anything it took to save her mom. Her mom was the most important person in the world to her, and she couldn't imagine losing her. She would never let something as mundane as money end up causing her death.

"Did Dr. Carlton tell you much about the new treatment?" Arabelle said.

"He told me it's a new, revolutionary medication that can detect cancer cells. It will target and kill them without harming the rest of your body. You'll still get sick while you're on the pills, but it should be less harmful than chemo, and it won't affect your blood nearly as much, which is why he thinks it will work for you."

"But it's still in the very early stages, and it's not cheap. Did he tell you how much?"

Jennifer shook her head. "I told him I didn't care, I would pay whatever amount it

would take to save you."

Arabelle gestured to a stack of papers on the table beside her bed. "Those are the forms right there. It says the total amount."

Jennifer took the papers, a lump in her throat forming as she started scanning the pages. She really didn't want to know how much it was going to cost. It was one thing to say she would pay whatever she had to, another to face the reality of the high costs of medical care.

The forms went over the specifics of the treatment, mostly repeating what Dr. Carlton told her about how the pills worked, that it was experimental and couldn't guarantee results or the frequency of side effects, but that trials so far had been favorable. Ninety-eight out of one hundred early trials experienced complete eradication of their cancer after several months of treatment, depending on the type.

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She'd been expecting a high number, but when she found the cost at the bottom of the second page, her jaw dropped. "Two thousand per pill?"

"There's more," Arabelle said, her voice uncharacteristically dull.

Jennifer kept reading.

For Arabelle's lung cancer treatment, the recommended care plan was fifty pills administered once every three days. The papers went on to explain the phases of treatment, the monthly payment plan, the significance of the number chosen, but the words blurred on the page as Jennifer's mind focused on that exorbitant number. Two thousand per pill. Fifty pills.

Jennifer lost grip of the papers, and they scattered to the floor. "A hundred thousand dollars ... where am I going to get money like that?"

Even as a monthly plan, that was \$20,000 per month. Even if she got a third job, and a fourth, she couldn't afford that. There weren't enough hours in the day for her to work and ever come up with that number.

"You're not, Jenny. We're going to let this go. I can't let you go off the rails trying to make up that impossible amount of money."

Tears pooled in her eyes again. "Fuck no. I'm not giving up."

"Watch your tongue, dear."

Jennifer scowled, mostly because her mom was the one who usually swore like a sailor, but the cancer had calmed her fiery attitude and filthy mouth. But the reaction was also to hide how she felt sweat dripping down her back, her body heating up, her head started to spin. Another job wasn't going to cut it, not if she needed to pay such a high amount each month. Maybe there was a way to spread out the payments over a longer period, or another way for her to get the funds besides a regular job.

Blood pounded in her ears, keeping her from thinking straight.

"I'll take out a loan. I'll find a way." She crouched to pick up the papers she'd dropped, putting them back into their neat little stack.

"No. You have to let me be, Jenny. My time has come, and God knows it's my fault." Arabelle sighed. "Never should have let your father talk me into smokes. Never could go a day without one after the first."

Jennifer's father had died five years ago in a bad car accident. If he'd lived longer, he might have developed lung cancer, too, for all they knew. He'd been smoking since he turned 13 but died before it could develop. They didn't talk about her dad much. The topic was too painful for them both.

"I'm not giving up, and neither are you." Jennifer flipped to the page that required her and Arabelle's signature. "I'm going to find a way, and you're going to let me."

Arabelle shook her head and pushed the papers away. "I can't let you do that."

"Mom, please. You're all I have left, and you're worth way more than any amount of money can buy. I just need some time to think. Please just sign the papers so we can get this started before it's too late."

Arabelle looked doubtful, and then she yawned, resting her head back in a sleeping

position. "I'm tired, Jenny. I'll sign the papers, but only if you promise not to submit them to Dr. Carlton until you find a way to make sure you can afford it."

Jennifer pushed the papers closer to her mom. "I promise. Please, sign them."

Arabelle shook her head, took the papers and pen from Jennifer's outstretched hand, and signed her name on the dotted line in her elegant cursive. "If you're lucky, I'll live to regret this."

Once Arabelle's name was signed, Jennifer hugged her again. "I love you, mom. I won't let you down."

"I know, Jenny." She sighed. "It's me who let you down, letting you even think about paying this much money for some pills ... but when have I ever been able to turn you down?"

"Never." Jennifer smiled, trying to let the thought of spending more time with her mom, happy and healthy again, brighten the prospect of finding a way to pay the medical bills. "But now that we're on that point, mom, I really think it's time you quit smoking."

"If this works, I suppose it's the least I can do." Arabelle chuckled. "Now, you have your answer, let me get some sleep."

Jennifer held Arabelle's hand until her breathing evened out and she was dead asleep. With each second that passed in silence, Jennifer's stress levels spiked now that she had her head all to herself. How in the world was she going to pay for her mom's treatment?

She had to find a way. Lack of money wasn't going to be what killed her mom. Jennifer refused to let that happen. Even if she had to go into an incredible amount of

debt to make it happen, she would find a way to afford the pills. It just required some creative thinking and hard work ... or so she hoped.

Once she knew for sure that Arabelle was asleep, she peeled her fingers out of her mother's and pulled her tablet out of her travel bag. A quick web search of 'how to make money fast' resulted in an assortment of suggestions: various obvious scams, casino ads suggesting she try to make it big at the slots, a website talking about how hot chicks made several hundred bucks or more a night at strip clubs.

The last one, unfortunately, seemed the most legitimate. Although Jennifer had never considered doing that herself, she knew other girls who did the same thing and made it big. They said she had the body for it, too, since she was athletic and would get a lot of attention.

But ... that really wasn't the sort of work she ever wanted to do. The thought of putting her body on display like that terrified her.

What if it was her only option?

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Would she spend her nights at a strip club if that's what it took to save her mom?

Jennifer shook her head with a sigh, dismissing the thought. Right now, she wasn't going to think about it. She wasn't that desperate yet. Another, more viable suggestion was to set up a donation drive online so people could donate to the cause. While she doubted she could make \$100,000 that way, it was possible she could convince some people to help out, and at this point, every dollar made a difference.

But the question still begging for an answer was how she was going to make that much, and fast enough to make sure her mom received treatment in time.

She surfed around a bit more looking for answers, and her heart became heavier with each failed lead. She navigated to the main search page and went to tap on a page about quick business ideas to make money, but instead of sending her to the article, an offensively pink and red ad came up.

"That looks like it could cause a seizure," Jennifer joked quietly, but she couldn't deny how the colors caught her attention. Or how they made her glance over the words written on the ad:

Paying for your mom's medical bills shouldn't be your burden alone. Your perfect match will want to help you as much as you want to help her. Find love and financial help all in one place!

Jennifer frowned. "That's some serious ad targeting."

She knew about how companies could use very specific data to target customers, so

whoever was targeting this ad at her had to know she was looking for a way to pay for her mom's bills. But what was all that nonsense about finding love? How could that be connected at all?

Jennifer bit her lip, aware of just how scammy the ad sounded: way too good to be true. But after two hours of research and essentially limiting her options to strip clubs, the lottery, and relying on other people's generosity, she was approaching desperation.

At this point, anything that avoided the possibility of wagging her boobs and ass in front of perfect strangers sounded like a perfect solution to her.

She tapped the link, finding herself on a website for a mail order bride agency. Not what she expected in the slightest. How was becoming a mail order bride supposed to help her pay off her mother's obscene medical bills?

Still, Jennifer didn't dismiss the idea outright. She gave the website a chance to explain itself, and it did:

If you're reading this, it means our website's very special algorithm decided you are eligible to meet the love of your life. We understand this might come as a shock to you, but you've spent most of your life wishing for love, haven't you?

And yet you've never found the right person.

Now your mother is sick, and you're not sure you ever will.

Let me assure you that the right man is out there for you. He is waiting for you right now ...

... you only have to go to him.

The message on the webpage sent Jennifer's head spinning. How did this website know so much about her? She never told anyone just how badly she wished for someone to love her, more than Ron or any of her exes ever did. But for the last year, she suppressed those feelings with worry for her mother.

And she had to keep those feelings suppressed. Love wasn't a save-all, and it definitely wouldn't cure her mother of cancer or drop enough money in her lap to pay for the treatment that would save her.

Yet Jennifer couldn't outrightly dismiss the website as nonsense. She navigated to another page, where other 'successful' couples shared their stories about their mail order bride experiences. One guy even spoke about how his ex signed him up for the service as an act of revenge for his commitment issues ... only for him to find true love.

Jennifer giggled at that one. It sounded so ridiculous, but that wasn't something someone could make up. It wasn't just his story, though, that broke down her defenses. All of them, put together, sounded so real and convincing.

And yet Jennifer still didn't see how becoming a mail order bride would solve her financial issues.

At this point, though, what did she have to lose? If she married a guy, that wouldn't stop her from working her ass off to buy those pills for her mom. If she was lucky, maybe she really would fall in love, and maybe he would help her.

That wasn't a burden she would willingly place on someone she didn't know, but she could be hopeful. Her mom's life was at stake. The least she could rely on was exactly that: hope.

Jennifer went back to the page where she first read the message inviting her to apply,

but the bit about finding true love and her mom's sickness was gone, replaced by simply: :)

Below it was the button: register now!

With a deep breath, Jennifer threw her name into the hat ... and hoped for the best.

Chapter 2 – Mark

Mark leaned back in his leather chair and sipped his whiskey. The rich liquid warmed his spirit just as much as the blazing fireplace in front of him, the flames crackling in the late evening.

After a long run outside, searching for clues to a mystery that had eluded him for the better part of a decade, nothing settled his nerves like a solid drink and some time to think by the fire. For most of that same decade, Mark had taken his drinks and time to think in solitude, but now he had a friend by his side.

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Jake Baker swirled his glass of amber whiskey. "You still haven't ventured out to the city, huh?"

"No, too busy for that," Mark said. "These woods are dangerous. Sometimes I think my presence here is all that keeps them from devouring Marhan whole."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Ever since you hired me, I haven't seen a single anomaly on all your fancy security cameras. Not a single hint of magic out of place, no creepy crawlers in the night, nada."

"They don't come so close to the house. They don't come south at all, actually. But in the north ..." Mark shook his head. "You would understand if you saw it, but it's better for you to stay here."

"After all these months, you're still a mystery to me, Mark."

He grinned. "I'm keen to keep it that way. Now, tell me about this new wife of yours. Ever since you married, I can tell you've been dying to talk more about her, but you've kept your mouth shut."

"You would know more about her if you came to the wedding," Jake countered.

Mark felt bad about missing his friend's wedding, but he couldn't leave his mansion and the secrets within unprotected. Even with his state-of-the-art security system, both through magical and technological means, that could all fall apart without the intervention of a reliable person.

"You're not bitter, are you?" Mark said.

"No." At last, Jake sipped his drink. "I know what you're doing here is important to you. But you've spent a decade in these woods and haven't once gone to the city? It's about time, don't you think? You would like Zoe. I want you two to meet."

"You're my only security guard, Jake. You're the only one I trust with the job."

"Sure, but it doesn't have to stay that way. I know lots of reliable guys who you could train, too, then you and I could go hit the town. Give you a chance to live a little."

Mark shook his head sadly, but he didn't speak his thoughts out loud: he lost his life a long time ago. Now the only thing that could satiate him was revenge. Maybe after he achieved that, he could consider making a new life for himself. Until then, this was how he had to live: single-focused.

"Don't you want a girl of your own?" Jake said.

The question had Mark downing the rest of his drink instead of answering. The burn of whiskey was nothing compared to the pain in his heart, the secrets he'd kept to himself ever since he built this mansion to hide them—and himself.

"I can't," Mark said.

"Oh yeah? And why not?" Jake smirked. "It's been so long since you last dated that you're scared of screwing it up, aren't you? Nah, you have nothing to worry about."

Mark sighed. "It's not that. Let's not talk about my relationship status."

"An eligible guy like you shouldn't stay alone forever. It's like you're punishing yourself, trapping yourself in a fancy prison."

A spark of rage ignited inside Mark. "And what if I am? Maybe after what I've done, I deserve to stay here alone."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "I'm sensing some progress here. Just for you, Mark, I'll take the role of therapist. Now come on, tell me what's going on with you."

Mark stood so he didn't have to look at Jake. It'd been a long, long time since he talked about his past with anyone—actually, he'd never mentioned what happened to him out loud before. No one but he himself knew the whole truth ... and why it was completely his fault that he landed out here in the woods alone, trapped in his own little hell. Leaving his mind to run around his circles, trapping him in different torturous memories of blood and death.

He poured himself a drink. He downed it in one gulp. And then he poured another.

"Zoe is your mate, so you know what true love feels like," Mark said. "I knew love like that once, too. But a shifter only gets one mate. Once she's gone ... she's gone."

Mark remembered the day like it was yesterday. The day his pack tore itself apart.

"Mark ... I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"It was a long time ago. Maybe it shouldn't hurt as much as it still does ... but I can't help it."

"If she was your mate ... I can't imagine living without Zoe. I don't know how you've survived ten years of that, all on your own." Jake's fiery eyes were filled with sympathy, but that wasn't the right emotion. Jake shouldn't feel bad for Mark ... he should blame him, just like Mark blamed himself.

"It was my fault."

Jake placed his glass on the table beside him. "I don't want to pry, but you've kept all this in for so long. Maybe it's time you talked about it and found a way to move on. You still have your whole life ahead of you. Whatever guilt you're still holding onto ... there's nothing you can do anymore."

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"That's where you're wrong. The creatures that killed her are still out there."

"So that's what you search for every time you leave the house."

"It's a long story." Mark's feet itched to pace, but he kept himself still, only shifting to put his back to the fire and face Jake straight on. "I should start at the beginning—I should show you."

"Show me?"

Mark hadn't shown anyone what this mansion truly guarded. It wasn't his safety he was so concerned about ... but the treasure hidden in the vault below the structure.

"Come on. You'll see." He polished off the rest of his drink and led Jake through the winding halls of his mansion, through a secret door in the library.

"A long time ago," Mark said, "I was the Alpha of a pack of wolf shifters. We were incredibly tight-knit ... most of us grew up together. We were like brothers."

"Your mate, she was a part of your pack, then?" Jake asked as they walked down a winding set of stairs.

"She was my best friend's sister. I'd loved her for most of my life, but we were never in a relationship for long. Back then, I thought it was manly to play like you didn't care." Mark laughed. "How wrong I was. Stupid. I should have just married her and been done with it. But now ... I live with that regret every day."

"Mark, you still haven't told me what happened."

They came down the stairs and into an imposing metal hallway. At the very end of the hall, the whole wall was the door to a large steel vault. Magic filled the air, covering every inch of the metal, the stone behind and above the walls, covering every possible way that someone could think to break into the vault.

"A week before—" Mark swallowed, "before it happened, one of my pack members, Ryel, caught wind of a hidden treasure hoard in the nearby mountains."

Jake's eyes widened. "Like a dragon hoard?"

"We thought so ... but it was worse. Treasure goblins."

"We're thinking about the same goblins, right?" Jake said. "I thought goblins were at the lowest end of the monster threats out there."

"Regular goblins, yes. A child with a bit of magic could sneeze on a goblin and it would fall over, dead. Treasure goblins are far, far worse. They are vile little creatures. They don't have the brute force or fire of a dragon, but to the unsuspecting, they're far deadlier."

From a hidden panel on the wall, Mark opened up a screen and started disabling the protective wards on the innermost layer of the room one by one.

"The goblins told us the treasure was unprotected and convinced Ryel that it had once belonged to our pack and that we were free to re-claim it. There were old stories in our pack of old wealth and riches so we were easily convinced. Of course the goblins tricked us, but we did not know at the time. Several trips to investigate left us to believe it was safe to take," Mark continued as he disabled the next round of protections. "But we were wrong. We took the treasure back to our pack ... planning

how the treasure would change our lives forever. We would expand our little settlement and turn it into a shifter paradise—a safe haven for our kind.

"The treasure did change our lives, just not in the way we expected."

When all of the magical protections were down, Mark passed fingerprint and DNA scans, which allowed him to cross the room without being incinerated. Once in front of the door—which was twice his height—a sensor blinked down at him to scan his irises. After a second, the machine made a pleasing chime.

Finally, Mark input the combination into the safe, and the massive door hissed open under his palm.

At his urging, it swung open. Automatic lights flickered on, and a swarm of dust flew up from mountains of treasure. Gold coins, bars, jewelry. Emeralds, diamonds, piles of every valuable gemstone imaginable. Jewel-encrusted goblets and vases, artifacts from ancient cultures and more.

This door hadn't been opened in over eight years, ever since Mark finished the mansion guarding it and took out enough gold to last him the rest of his life. Looking at it now pained him more than he could describe. His heart clenched, and he wanted to look away, but he forced himself to take it all in.

"Wow ... so this is what you've been hiding down here?" Jake made to step into the vault, reaching for the nearest shiny thing in reach, but Mark immediately grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Don't touch anything," Mark warned.

"There's literally enough money here to fund, I don't know, whatever the hell you want. If I were you, I'd be sleeping in here instead of in a bed!"

"If you did that, you would be dead." Mark released his hold on Jake's arm. "The treasure is cursed."

Jake and Mark silently took in the mountains of gold and treasure. "I take it has something to do with what happened to your girl."

"The curse turns whoever touches it mad with anger. My pack, we ... in the days after we found the hoard, we did some awful things to each other."

In the end, Mark had been the one to resist the pull of the curse. But only after hurting Ariya, his mate. He told her that he never loved her, that his promise to be with her was a lie. In that moment, he witnessed her heart breaking for the last time. But he already told Jake so much. He couldn't share his whole burden today.

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"The suspicion came first—everyone thought the others were planning to steal the treasure for themselves. Then the violence came when they did try to steal it," Mark continued. "Ariya was one of the shifters who tried to steal the treasure. I tried to knock some sense into the rest of the pack, and I argued with her. Nothing worked, so I left them to deal with the treasure on their own. I didn't want to be a pack leader to a bunch of rabid dogs."

Jake sighed. "I'm sorry, man. That's rough." He gestured to the vault of treasure. "But if you left, how did you end up with the whole haul for yourself?"

"After I was gone for a few days, my senses started to return to me. I realized what the treasure had done to us. I went back to my pack, trying to come up with a plan to cure them. But when I got there, it was too late." Mark closed the vault, and after a string of clicks, it locked beneath his touch, sealing the treasure away for who knew how many more years. Just as his story had once been locked away. "Some had ripped each other apart ... but it was the goblins that killed the rest. It was a slaughter, Jake. We never stood a chance."

They went back up to the main floor in silence. On one hand, it felt good to say what happened to him and get it off his chest, but on the other, acknowledging the horrors of that day brought all that guilt back to the surface. He felt enough of it every day, but now it felt like a tree had collapsed on top of him and he couldn't lift it off, with or without his strength as a wolf shifter.

At the top of the stairs, Jake leaned against the wall instead of continuing back to the living area. "I'll take your word for it and pray I never encounter a treasure goblin in my life."

"I hope you're so lucky." Mark joined him against the wall. "But I still have part of their hoard, Jake. When they killed my pack, I wasn't enough to fight them all off ... but there was so much treasure we had to hide it all over the place. The stuff I have in my vault? The goblins never found it, but they know it's out there. They know I have it. And they're coming."

Jake appraised him. "You're using it as bait."

Mark chuckled. "Now you're getting the picture."

"Shit, so when I had danger-vibes when I first started working here, I wasn't far off the mark."

"Right. But the goblins aren't after you, they're after me. You and Zoe are safe, don't worry. Like I said, they won't go south for some reason. I don't think they like cities."

"If you say so," Jake said.

"I failed my pack as their Alpha, but I can still destroy the creatures that murdered them. I can still avenge Ariya."

Jake was quiet for a while, and Mark's gaze traveled down the hall, to the window. It was dark out now, but that darkness was symbolic of the time where the goblins were the most active. The time where it was most dangerous to go out hunting, but also the time where Mark was most likely to find his prey ...

"You'll get your revenge, Mark, I have no doubt about that," Jake said. "But that doesn't mean you should put your whole life on pause. You've already punished yourself with ten years of isolation."

"My life paused the second Ariya died. You have no idea what it's like to lose a

mate," Mark growled. "I can't move on until her murderers are dead."

"But there's one major flaw in your story, Mark. I understand your guilt and you desire for revenge ... and I'll do everything in my power to help you see that through. This isn't something you should be working through alone. But." Jake held up a finger. "One big but. How do you know for sure that Ariya was your mate?"

The question took Mark aback. "What are you talking about? I loved her—I'd never felt such an intimate connection to someone before."

"Sure, but you can love people who aren't your mate, especially before you've met the right person."

A low growl rumbled in Mark's throat as he tried to summon his wolf's anger at such a statement. But his wolf wouldn't lend him its strength; instead, it pushed back at Mark with all possible resistance, almost as if it agreed with what Jake was saying. What in the world was happening?

"Why wouldn't Ariya be my mate? I don't understand what you're implying," Mark said.

"I don't mean to suggest you didn't love her, or that you're wrong to mourn her ... but you said you fought a lot, right?" Jake sighed, a bit exasperated. "Let me put it this way. When I met Zoe, I tried my damndest to resist her, working against biology and my own twisted logic to find a way to justify how to keep her out of my life. But it didn't work, no matter how hard I tried. My tiger knew even if I didn't at first. And once my tiger knew, it never let me do anything that would make it impossible to stay with her."

"What I'm saying is, if Ariya was really your mate, I don't think you would have been able to argue with her to the point of breaking up multiple times or continuously

hurting her feelings. Doing so would only hurt you more, and your wolf sure would have given you shit."

Mark reflected back on his relationship with Ariya. Yeah, it was bumpy, but the passion was there from the beginning, even when emotions ran high. But how had his wolf responded to her? Whenever he thought about Ariya, he was filled with so much love and regret, but since she died, he never paid much attention to how his wolf felt about her. Now, delving deeper into himself, he saw how his wolf held a fondness of her gained by familiarity, but its pain wasn't nearly as severe as Mark's.

While he felt like he'd been stabbed in the heart multiple times, left to gush blood whenever he thought about love, his wolf had been scratched ... and healed over many, many years ago.

What if Jake was right and Ariya hadn't been his mate? Did that change anything?

The goblins and their cursed treasure still killed her and the rest of his pack. Even if Ariya wasn't his mate, his drive for revenge wasn't just for her sake. It was for his, and his pack's. They'd been thirty strong when they found that treasure ... now it was just Mark.

"That doesn't change anything," he said. "Even if she wasn't my mate, I'll never know the difference until those goblins pay. For what they did, I'll make sure they're torn apart in turn."

"It does make a difference, though," Jake said. "Because if your mate isn't dead, that means she's still out there somewhere."

Mark's heart stuttered. Jake was right. If Ariya truly wasn't his mate, then the woman of his dreams was still waiting out there for him ... and he'd wasted a decade away from her in isolation, hunting the elusive monsters that killed his pack. No, but it

wasn't a waste. Those monsters had to die because of what they did—before they could hurt anyone else.

He'd been alone for so long ... without love, or anyone.

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"Finding your mate isn't as simple as walking out into the world and looking for her," Mark said. "And even if it was, I can't leave this place until those goblins aren't a threat anymore, and, ideally, until I can find someone who can lift the curse from the treasure."

"What if it was simpler than that?" Jake said. "What if you could have your mate delivered right to your door?"

Mark snorted. "Yeah, right. If that was possible, everyone would be doing it."

"That's what happened to me, Mark." Jake laughed at the look on Mark's face. "I never told you the whole story about how Zoe and I met. She was ordered as a mail order bride to my house ... by someone else. I looked at the site Zoe mentioned after we were married, out of curiosity, and it turns out that the site was made to pair shifters with their mates. So if you order a bride, there's an extremely high chance she'll be the one meant for you."

After all these years, was it really possible for Mark to find true love? No, that didn't seem possible. Finding a mate was supposed to be a difficult and long process. Many shifters went their entire lives without finding their mate ... that was just how it had always been.

But why did that mean it had to stay that way? Everyone deserved to be happy, including shifters.

Including Mark.

"But what if Ariya was the one?" Mark said.

"I don't think they'll send you a match if they can't find your mate. You have nothing to lose by trying it out."

Mark nodded. He would either be given confirmation that his mate was gone, or he would be given an opportunity to find love again. Knowing the truth terrified him, but so did the prospect of not knowing. If Ariya was or wasn't his mate didn't change how he once loved her more than he loved himself, how he wanted to avenge her.

But that was so many years ago, now. It wasn't betraying her memory to look for love elsewhere. Especially if that love ended up being his mate, where Ariya hadn't been.

Mark breathed in deeply. "Okay. Let's give it a try."

Jake brought up the website of the mail order bride agency on his phone, and Mark filled in the forms as he was directed. The questions ranged from typical, like age and gender, to weirdly personal, and then outright bizarre and specific, such as how many goblins he'd killed so far in his lifetime.

At the end of it all, he submitted the form, and the phone screen turned into a pink background with a red heart that slowly filled up. Presumably, when it was done, he would know if there was a match out there for him.

Mark pushed the phone back into Jake's hands. "I can't watch."

"Okay, okay," Jake laughed. "Relax. Whatever happens, now you'll know for sure. And maybe I'll win, too, and you'll finally have a reason to leave your hermit mansion in the woods and come to the city."

"Yeah, right, don't push it."

A minute later, the phone made a chiming sound. Jake's eyes flicked up from the screen to Mark, and he waved it around before tossing it at him. "Looks like you've got a match, Mark."

Chapter 3 - Jennifer

The last time Jennifer got on a plane was when she moved from Colorado to Oregon, giving up the life she'd built so far to ensure her mother stayed alive. Now, she flew with a similar purpose: doing whatever it took to save her mom.

Even if that meant flying to the other side of the country and marrying a perfect stranger.

Jennifer strode from the airplane, turning on her cell after the long flight. She was met with a missed call from Arabelle, a concerned text from Lily, and another text from an unknown number.

No, Jennifer hadn't told Lily or Arabelle what she was doing ... and it was going to stay that way for now, until Jennifer knew exactly how this was going to work. For now, she ignored their text and call and opened the one from the unknown number.

Hi, this is Jake. I'm an associate of Mark's. I'll be at the airport to pick you up at 3 p.m. sharp. Black SUV.

Succinct. Hm. Jennifer had been expecting to meet her future husband right away, but maybe this was better. She didn't need to be as nervous about meeting Jake, and instead, she could get a feel for what her husband was like—who he was. She started for the front of the airport, weaving around other travelers and taking the stairs to the lowest floor and toward the exit.

Based on what the mail order bride site said about him after they were matched, he

was wealthy. Just how wealthy, though, Jennifer had no idea. Regardless of how much money he did or didn't have, that wasn't the first topic that she could broach with her new husband or one of his business associates.

First of all, it was rude. For all Jennifer knew, the man might have truly 'ordered' her looking for real love. She wasn't going to make any promises about falling in love with him, but she had to admit she was curious. The website claimed that whoever she was matched with, she would fall for them. Maybe she would.

And if she did, that would be amazing ... it had been so long since she'd felt the rush of love in her veins and head. With each step she took toward the front of the airport, her excitement grew. She wanted to meet Mark, and Jake, to at least know if she made the right choice in coming here ... or if she made a horrible mistake.

That brought on the second problem. Jennifer wasn't exactly confident enough to straight-up ask for the \$100,000 she needed to save Arabelle's life. In fact, the idea of asking at all made her so uncomfortable she thought she would throw up. The number alone made her anxious but asking for someone to give her that money ... she couldn't imagine it.

Her parents raised her on the idea that all money was earned, that she had to work hard to receive her wages and purchase the things she wanted. Of course, buying essential treatment for her mom was different than buying new clothes, but that didn't change how it didn't feel right to ask for, and then use, money she didn't earn on her own.

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It seemed wrong. And she definitely didn't want to leave Mark, or anyone else for that matter, with the impression that she was just in this for the money. While her primary motivation had to be saving her mother ... it was the dream of love that pulled her in this direction.

She wouldn't ask for a dime. She couldn't. Right now, she could afford the first four pills from the last of her savings, and with her remaining credit and the expenses she saved on by moving out of her apartment to live with the man who would become her husband.

In that time, she would make a plan that didn't involve asking for anything. She would work for every penny she received.

And maybe, in the meantime, she would fall in love ... like her mother always wanted for Jennifer.

Outside the airport, she spotted the black SUV waiting in front. She checked her phone again, seeing that it was 3:05, and then opened the passenger door.

"Are you Jake?" she asked the man behind the steering wheel.

"That's me. You must be Jennifer. Hop in."

She slid onto the leather seat, stuffing her bag of essentials between her legs—that was all she brought with her. Jake extended a hand to her once she settled in place, and she took his firm handshake.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "Do you usually run errands for Mark?"

He chuckled and put the SUV into drive, circling through the airport and toward the highway. "I wouldn't exactly call picking up Mark's future wife an errand," he said, "but to answer your question, no. I made an exception for you."

"Is that right? What do you usually do?"

"Security. Not that there was any particular concern in getting you back to his place in one piece, but it adds some peace of mind."

If Mark had his own security workers, that seemed like a good sign. He might have a large property that needed maintaining. If she was lucky, maybe he had a business that she could work for as a way to pay for her mom's medical expenses without working three minimum wage jobs.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," she said, "but what is Mark like?"

"Nothing to worry about, I understand you're probably nervous. My wife was a mail order bride, too. If you're willing to approach this scenario with an open mind—unlike I did—I think you'll find yourself pleasantly surprised."

Jennifer smiled, tilting her head in Jake's direction. "What, did you order a bride and then change your mind?"

"Not quite." He laughed. "The story is far more complicated than that—but what matters is that we're happy now. I couldn't imagine being without her. I wish as much luck and happiness to you and Mark. He's a good guy, if a little strange."

Jake seemed like a nice guy, too. Hearing that he, too, had a mail order bride story and ended up in a happy marriage reassured Jennifer. Maybe meeting someone this

way could result in true love after all ... just like she was promised. A prickle of anticipation buzzed in her chest. She wanted to meet Mark more than ever, and with each passing moment, her desire became more unbearable.

"What do you mean by strange?" she asked after a while.

"Well, for one," Jake started when he turned off the main highway and onto a secluded road into the trees, "he lives alone in a mansion in the woods."

"Sounds like the start of a horror film," she joked.

"Trust me, I thought the same when he first told me about it. The place is set up like a fortress ... but, well, you'll have to see it for yourself to believe it. We're almost there."

Jennifer wanted to ask more questions about Mark and what he did, but she didn't want to pry too much. Those were questions better saved to ask him directly, but not knowing dug into her nerves and made her squirm. She couldn't stop thinking about Arabelle, about the incredible cost of her medical bills. Jennifer was her only hope at living to see another year.

But it wasn't just that. Jennifer left Portland without saying a word about her intentions to either Arabelle or Lily ... she made arrangements for Lily to watch Arabelle for a few days while Jennifer found a more permanent solution, and that was it.

No word about how she moved across the country, how she sold all her belongings except for her phone, tablet, a couple of keepsakes and other essentials, to make sure she had enough cash on hand to pay for Arabelle's first few treatments.

The guilt of her decision was a heavy one, but she had no other options. There was no

way either of them would have let Jennifer become a mail order bride if they knew the truth.

Now it was just up to Jennifer to make this work.

She stopped paying attention to her surroundings, and when the SUV pulled to a stop, she glanced outside to see a vast ocean of trees in every direction. No mansion or house in sight.

"We're here," Jake said, and cut the engine.

But whatever he saw, she didn't.

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Oh God, had she made a mistake?

Heart in her throat, Jennifer took her bag and joined Jake outside. Despite the summer warmth, a chilly breeze made her shiver. Good thing she was wearing a hoodie.

The intense thicket of branches and leaves from the forest canopy overhead blocked most warmth, casting most of the area in shade, but it was still early enough in the day for the bit of light that made it through to illuminate the forest. If it weren't for the apprehension growing in her gut about having been promised a mansion and ending up in the middle of nowhere instead ... she might have found the forest peaceful, even beautiful.

Jennifer squeezed the handle of her bag. "Is this a joke?"

"No, not at all," Jake laughed. "It messed with my head the first time I came here, too." He came up beside her and pointed into the trees. "When you see it, you'll understand. Look between those two trunks there ... can't you see the reflection in the glass?"

Jennifer squinted, trying to follow the direction of Jake's pointer finger. But all she saw were the bright green maple leaves in every direction, the branches of pine needles. The two trees he pointed at were thicker than the others, but they were the same ... wait. Jennifer blinked when she saw the flash of sunlight against glass.

"Is that a window?" she said.

Jake tucked his hands in his pockets. "Yep."

With the window as her center point, Jennifer re-examined her surroundings. Now she saw it: the two central beams—beams, not trees—that supported the highest point of the mansion's front wall. Between them was a small window looking down from the highest room, maybe an attic. Down lower, the beams formed the frame of a massive set of doorscamouflaged behind an array of leaves. Now, she noticed how other trees had an unnatural bend to their trunks and limbs, all of them working together to forge the supports of a mansion hidden in plain sight.

She'd never seen anything like it. She gaped. "How is that even possible?"

"Don't ask me, ask him." Jake pointed as the heavy wooden front doors heaved open, and a tall, handsome man walked out.

In the distance, Jennifer could only glimpse him, but still, something warm stirred inside of her.

"Is that ... is that him?" she whispered.

"Mark Callahan," Jake said. "Yep."

Jennifer swallowed hard as Mark strode closer, waving at Jake, and then, her. He wore a white button-up dress shirt and black pants. He had a look of casual elegance about him, refined, masculine features that drew Jennifer in right away. There was just something about him she couldn't place, something that took him from being a regular kind of handsome to something otherworldly.

Maybe it was his hard shoulders, his strong jaw, the sexy glint in his eyes ... or maybe it was how his expression told her a story about someone deeply curious about the world, but that curiosity had been stifled by darkness.

How could she tell so much from just a glimpse? Never had she felt so naturally attuned to someone before, and they hadn't yet said a word to each other.

She wanted to know his life story.

She wanted to share the next chapter of that life with him.

Jennifer swallowed again, her eyelids fluttering to try and get her head back on straight. She had to think, to keep herself focused, before her mind went wild like that again.

When Mark approached, he gave her an easy smile, one that spoke of warmth and secrets. She wanted him to press those lips to her ear and whisper sweet nothings, to share what it was about him that made him so alluring.

"Jennifer." He said her name as if testing the sound of the word. There was something uncertain about the way he said it, and yet there was an innate authority to the way he stood and spoke. Together, he contradicted himself.

"Mark, it's good to finally meet you. Jake speaks highly of you," Jennifer said.

Was she supposed to shake his hand? Hug him? Kiss him?

Jennifer's mind and body sent mixed signals all over the place, leaving her staring at Mark like a hot mess. She wanted to touch and hold him, to tell Jake it was time for him to go so she and Mark could have a bit of alone time ...

But it seemed Jake got the message all on his own. He cleared his throat. "Time for me to go. Good luck you two."

Jennifer blinked, and whatever spell trapped her in Mark's eyes faded away. "You're

going to leave me here, just like that?"

He laughed. "You say that like it's a bad thing. My wife's waiting for me at home. I have a feeling you can handle Mark just fine."

Mark gave an awkward look. "I think we could use some time to get to know each other. Come on, let me show you around."

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"See ya," Jake said, and Jennifer waved. A moment later, he was driving back down the road they came on and disappeared into the trees.

Now that she and Mark were alone, a subtle warmth moved through her, a mixture of excitement and expectation of what would happen next. She bit her lip when she glanced back at him, finding him looking her up and down as if he liked what he saw. She felt exactly the same about him. Never had she met anyone so sexy before. Jake had been handsome, but compared to Mark ... it was like he was the perfect male specimen brought to life for her personal pleasure.

But Jennifer blinked away those kinds of thoughts for now. She couldn't deny how much she was attracted to him, how badly she wanted him right then and there. Right now, though, she had other concerns on her mind that were more important than sex ... like learning more about the man who was to be her husband.

Learning more about his body, and his skill at making love ... well, that would have to come in time, wouldn't it?

Mark offered her his arm, and she took it, carefully. His touch warmed her right to the core, and when she locked her arm through his, a sense of safety overcame her. As if, by being by his side, the universe promised that no harm would ever come to her again.

She smiled up at the mansion hidden in the trees—no, the mansion that looked like it was made to blend right into the forest. "Jake said you made this place?"

"I designed it and oversaw the creation, but I'm not exactly an artisan or builder," he

said. "But I still have pride in its appearance as if it came from my own hands. I suppose you were shocked to come here and find yourself in what looked like the middle of nowhere."

She smiled sheepishly. "Just a little. I thought maybe this had been a whole big joke ... and that Jake had driven me out here as a prank."

"It's nothing like that. Just a vision brought to life," Mark said. "The mansion is built to blend seamlessly into the environment ... for all intents and purposes, the exterior is the environment."

Now that they were closer to the front door, it was easier to see that it was a structure, not a collection of oddly shaped trees. But it was the details that made it blend in perfectly: the stone steps to the front door that looked like a natural arrangement of rocks, the way the trees right next to the building were arranged to hide the walls with a natural landscape of leaves.

It made her wonder even more about Mark. Jake had mentioned something about this place being a fortress ... why had he gone through such effort to make a building that invariably must have taken months if not years of careful preparation and planning to get perfect?

Mark welcomed her inside, the front door opening into a house that looked far more like the type of home that she was familiar with: cabinets and chairs, tables and couches, even though the decorative accents on the interior were still natural themed, like leaves and wood.

And still, despite the familiarity, the fact that she was stepping into a mansion with an entranceway the size of her old apartment in Portland ... that was a wholly new experience to her.

It was like walking into a whole new world, and it was Mark who brought her here.

"It's beautiful," Jennifer said. They walked through the living area with front windows designed from smaller pieces of glass, an amber, emerald, and crimson mosaic of individual leaves.

"This is your new home."

"What inspired you to build a house in such a remote locale?"

She wasn't going to say it out loud, but from her experience with wealthy people, a lot of them preferred living at least near the city so they could have anything and everything at their convenience. Jennifer supposed that some people were just rich enough that they could live wherever they wanted and not have to worry about trivialities such as where their food would come from.

Mark offered her a warm smile, one that heated her up inside her core. His lips called to her, wishing she would just place her mouth on his and forget about all of her worries. The troubles that brought her here in the first place.

"I admit, the forest has always called to me ... call me a country bumpkin, but I've never been one for big cities," he explained. "Too loud. I need to live somewhere that I can hear the wind whistling in the breeze, the wolves howling in the night, the uninterrupted music of the birds."

It was like he plucked the words right out of her heart and whispered them right back to her. "You don't want to be suffocated by cement skyscrapers or choke on vehicle fumes," she said. "You want to be in the wild, where you can be wild and free, like the animal in your blood."

Something flickered in Mark's eyes. Excitement, maybe. Or uncertainty.

Maybe those were her feelings.

She bit her lip and looked down. "That's how I feel when I'm in the wilderness, at least. Born in the trees, my mom always said, though she definitely gave birth in a hospital."

They laughed together. "In that case, you really might be at home here. The grounds are lovely. You'll want to go for walks, I imagine."

"Grounds?" Jennifer laughed. "We're in the woods."

"The trees are a fence. You'll see when—"

Jennifer's phone started ringing, interrupting Mark. She was going to put it on silent, but then the high-pitched birdsong that was her mom's ringtone started to play. Crap. She was hoping to settle in, meet Mark, and get back to her mom when she had a better reading of her situation. Her mom was going to raise hell, and now Jennifer had to quell the flames. Her guilt over just up and leaving would demand with it.

She shook her phone with a sigh. "I'm sorry, I need to take this."

"Take all the time you need. You have no reason to rush with me," he said.

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She offered him a small smile before placing the phone to her ear and wandering from the living area and into the kitchen, which was just as large and elegant. "Hey mom, I hope Lily hasn't been driving you crazy, she does that sometimes," Jennifer tried with a laugh.

"You know very well that I'm not calling because of Lily," Arabelle said. "When you told me you were sending Lily to bring me home from the hospital today, I thought it was because you finally saw that I was right, or at least that you'd gone out to have some fun for yourself."

"You know I couldn't do that, mom."

"I saw that you signed the papers, and Dr. Carlton told me that my first treatment comes tomorrow. What did you do? How are you going to come up with all that money?"

Jennifer bit her lip. She was in a custom-built mansion that was designed and owned by the man who lived in it. Mark was amazing, and he seemed like a genuinely nice person. If she asked, she had the feeling he would help her—especially since they would be married any day now. But those were the same reasons she couldn't ask him.

"Lily isn't giving you trouble, is she?" Jennifer said.

"Jenny! Lily is the one who told me you were up to no good. Said your apartment was all emptied out, the people at your jobs told her you had left, and you're not answering your texts."

Right, Jennifer forgot that she gave Lily a key in case of emergencies. They'd only used it once before.

Jennifer sighed. There really wasn't any getting out of this. "Mom ... you need to follow the doctor's instructions perfectly. I have enough for the first four payments, which is more than enough time for me to sort out the details of my plan."

"But you do have a plan?" Arabelle said. "One that's not going to end up with you working yourself to death?"

Tears pricked in Jennifer's eyes. Talking to her mom about life-saving medicine like it was optional always drove her crazy. In Jennifer's mind, there were no options. Her mom needed this treatment, and Jennifer needed to make it possible, because she needed her mom, and she couldn't live in a world where she didn't try her hardest to make sure that happened.

"Yes, I have a plan."

Silence stretched between them, all but Jennifer's sniffles and the birds whistling in the trees just out of the nearby window. The song eased a bit of the tension in Jennifer's heart, but it wasn't enough to soothe her worries altogether. When it came to Mark, Jennifer didn't really have a plan because she didn't know what was going to happen between them. Working three jobs wasn't going to cut it. Nor was trying to fund the treatment through donations.

So while Jennifer didn't know exactly how she was going to get the last \$92,000 she needed to pay for her mom's treatment, coming to Marhan as a mail order bride still seemed like her best option.

But how was she going to explain that to her mom without her exploding?

The answer was she couldn't. Not yet, at least.

"You better start explaining, Jenny," Arabelle said, "because according to Lily, it looks like you moved out of your apartment."

"That's because I did." Jennifer bit her lip. She could just say that she was planning to move in with her mom permanently to save on the cost of rent and put that toward the medicine instead—which was true, to an extent—but Arabelle would see through the lie. "To get the money for your treatment, I had to get a bit creative, mom. I'm not in Portland right now, I'm in Pennsylvania."

"That's so far away ... hon, what are you up to?"

"What matters is that I'm hopeful I'll be able to find a way to cover the treatment. You'll just have to last a few days with Lily until I can find a nurse. Can you manage that?"

Arabelle laughed. "Yes, but as punishment, I will be sharing as many embarrassing stories as possible, starting with the time you were a little girl at the supermarket—"

"All right, all right, mom!" Jennifer laughed, "I'm glad you're still in good spirits. I have to go. We'll talk again soon, hopefully when I have more news."

They said their goodbyes, and Jennifer hung up. She leaned into the wall, not realizing until then just how much she'd been relying on it to keep her standing and steady. She felt like she could topple under her guilt ... she should have told her mom the whole truth, but she couldn't.

Even to herself, she sounded like a gold digger. But she didn't want to blindly take anyone's money. She didn't want to get married just for that reason alone, either. If she was going to marry Mark, it would be because she actually liked him. When the time

was right, she would ask him to help her find a way to raise the funds. She wasn't going to ask for a gift. She wouldn't expect anything from him at all ...

But whenever she thought of Mark, the thought was swiftly followed by her imagining his strong arms around her, holding her close and telling her everything was going to be okay.

The survival rate of her mother's kind of lung cancer was only roughly 50%. They caught it before it spread from Arabelle's lungs, but it was still bad. She didn't like the odds of 50/50 that she'd never hear her mom's voice again.

So there were times where she thought it wasn't going to be okay.

But maybe, with Mark by her side, there was a chance that things would be okay. Just how he managed to make her feel that way ... well, she couldn't explain that yet.

For now, Jennifer wiped her eyes, gave herself another minute to calm her breathing, and then went back to join Mark in the other room.

Chapter 4 – Mark

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When Jennifer left for her phone call, the intense heat in Mark's body, and in the air around him, dropped by several degrees. He could finally breathe again.

Never had he been so attracted to a woman before. He noticed everything about the way she moved: her athletic legs and build, the way the fabric of her shirt clung to her breasts, the exhaustion in her light blue eyes. She looked like she wanted to love. Was open to the idea of perhaps even lovinghim.

But there was also sorrow hidden there, a hesitation he'd yet to unravel. She was a mystery he was keen to follow the clues to.

The second he saw her, he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to hear the sound of her pleasure in his ear, to feel her shiver at his touch.

It had been a long, long time since he last had a woman. Back when he was a true Alpha, he could have had anyone he wanted. Now, he knew he would have Jennifer.

It was only a matter of time. A matter of trust. And after just a few minutes with her, he had the feeling that wasn't going to take long at all. When she took his arm on the way in, her touch had been electrifying ... now he wanted nothing else.

Maybe Jake had been right all along. Maybe Mark had been caught up in the idea that Ariya was his mate and never thought to consider the other possibilities: she wasn't his mate, just his first love.

And now whatever he felt for Jennifer, it challenged the misconception he'd been living with for the last ten years.

Somehow, he was okay with that.

Jennifer was new and exciting ... and in just the few minutes he'd been near her, he sensed the possibility of something more.

In the hall, Jennifer raised her voice. He winced at the sound, but crept a bit closer. Not because he really wanted to eavesdrop, he just wanted to make sure she was okay.

"I have enough for the first four payments, which is more than enough time for me to sort out the details of my plan," Jennifer said.

A human wouldn't have been able to hear her through the wall, but Mark's wolf senses gave him an advantage. Just hearing her voice made his whole body prickle, made his wolf raise its ears with eagerness. It was a good sign that his wolf seemed to like Jennifer as much as he did ... but once he got over the initial pleasure of hearing her voice, he realized just how concerning her words were.

She sighed. "Yes, I have a plan."

He had no idea who she was talking to, so that immediately removed a lot of potential useful context when considering what kind of 'plan' she referred to. His immediate worry was that it might have something to do with their pending marriage ... but he didn't think that made any sense, either.

He felt bad for immediately assuming she was up to something. But after so long of being alone, away from other people to interact with, it was easy for him to become suspicious. Part of the reason Mark remained isolated for so long was because of the fear of betrayal, seeing enemies at every corner, that the goblin's cursed treasure hoard once instilled in him.

At times, he worried that it still affected him. But after all these years, and only physically touching gold pieces that were cleansed by a witch beforehand, it was impossible. He was just afraid of himself.

Mark cut away all his suspicions when he heard her sniffing. His wolf's hackles raised inside him, and he gritted his teeth. Jennifer was upset about something. Was he going to have to beat someone up for her?

He shook his head, trying to keep him from jumping to conclusions—any kind. Stood in front of the cold fireplace, watching the way the light reflected through the stained glass leaves. Each leaf, each color, glimmered in a different way from the next.

A moment later, Jennifer came back. "Sorry about that."

The first thing he noticed when she looked at him was the red rims around her eyes, the slight puffiness. "Have you been crying?" he said. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

Mark came up closer to her. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and hug her close, but he wasn't sure if that was the right move. But his wolf's determination rose inside of him, and he made the move anyway.

He placed his arms around her shoulders, pulling her face against his neck. She melted against him, as if she, too, experienced the burning warmth that came when he felt her against him. A tidal wave of heat and stirred desire, but Mark shoved those sensations aside to focus on Jennifer's needs instead.

"I promise it's not usually the kind of work I do, but if someone is giving you trouble, I have two good fists," Mark said.

Jennifer managed a half-laugh through her sniffles. "Unless you can punch cancer into the dust, I don't think that's going to help."

A trickle of cold invaded the warmth of Jennifer's body against his. He tightened his hold on her, not sure he heard her right.

"Cancer? You're far too young for cancer, tell me it's not true," Mark said.

He knew it wasn't impossible for people in their 30s or younger to develop certain kinds of cancer, but it wasn't typically an illness associated with people their age.

"Not me," she said. "My mother. Diagnosed last year. Her lungs."

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Her sentences came short and clipped between heavy breaths as she attempted to control her emotions. Meanwhile, Mark squeezed her tighter with each syllable.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"Before I came here, I was the only one watching over her. Taking her to her appointments, paying for the bills when insurance fell through ... she's all I have left."

But now Jennifer wasn't alone. She had Mark, and everything about Jennifer so far screamed to him of certainties and questions answered after many long years. Just holding her like this, she made him feel like this was meant to be. He had reservations about ordering a mail order bride up until the second she arrived.

Now he knew he had to marry her. It was like, within minutes of her walking through that door, she had cast a spell on him.

And if she was to be his wife, he couldn't leave her mother behind, either. He couldn't let her or Jennifer struggle if there was something he could do for them.

Without hesitating, he said, "If paying for the treatment was an issue for you before, it isn't anymore. I'll cover everything. I'll find the best doctors, the best treatment money can buy. We can have her flown here so you don't have to worry about her being so far away, either."

Cancer was tricky, and he wasn't a medical or magical expert, but he was pretty sure that there were spells out there that could cure any kind of illness or disease ... for the right price. Mark had piles of money beneath his house, and he would give it all up if

that was what it took to make sure Jennifer was happy, her mom was safe, and they could start a life together.

It was still incredible for him to think ... that she was going to be his wife. It was his responsibility to take care of her, wasn't it?

"How does that sound?" he said.

Jennifer didn't say anything at first. After a minute for her to calm down, he loosened his grip on her, and she wiped tears from her eyes.

"Mark ... thank you so much for your offer, really, it means the world to me, but ..." she trailed off, keeping her gaze on the floor. "I don't think I can accept it."

His brow furrowed. "Why not? Jennifer ... we're going to get married. As you can see"—he gestured to the mansion around them—"money is no object. Your mother's life is priceless. Let me do this for you."

She bit her lip and twisted her fingers. "Really, I can't express how grateful I am that you would even consider offering to help us, but it's too soon. I need more time to just be here for a while before I could even consider accepting your help. And ..." She lifted her gaze to meet his again, her gorgeous, sky-blue eyes shadowed by her bangs. But it didn't hide the conflict in her eyes—her desire to accept his offer, muddled by something else. "I don't want you to think I came here with the intention of asking for money or help. Perhaps in the beginning I thought it could help. But I quickly realized that it isn't my main motivation."

Mark saw in her eyes that it was true. She desperately wanted to make sure her mom was safe and healthy, but there was something more, too. A hopefulness that after whatever she'd been through, love might be possible after all.

And whatever was starting to bud between them ... she didn't want to compromise it with talk of money. That was how Mark felt, too. But he made the offer for that very reason. He wanted it to be a way to pull them together, to show her that he was willing to make a commitment to her right here and now, something other than a marriage license and a ring. Except right now, it seemed more like it would drive a wedge between them.

She needed more time to learn to trust him. Maybe more time to trust herself. For now, all he could do was give her space and time to consider his offer ... even if he wished she just accepted it.

"I never thought it was," he whispered.

He wanted to kiss her right then. More than ever, he wanted to show her that he was on her side, that he would support her no matter what. But he sensed that she wasn't ready. That conflict was still high in her mind, and him kissing her might just confuse her even more.

For now, Mark could wait.

Jennifer took another step back. "Thank you again. I will consider it. But if you don't mind, I had a long flight, and I could use some rest."

"Of course. Let me show you to your room."

Jennifer relaxed once they moved away from the topic of money, and on the way to the guest bedroom, the warmth and tension between them grew to incredible heights. He saw from the way her body reacted to his that she felt it, too.

But just like before, Mark resisted. For now.

"I'll be around if you need anything," he said. "Just text or call me if you can't find me."

"Thank you."

They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment before he finally drew away ... striding down the hall before he had a chance to change his mind about waiting.

Chapter 5 – Jennifer

Jennifer couldn't sleep. Not at first, at least. That might have had something to do with how it was still early afternoon in Portland where she just flew from.

Or maybe because Mark had just offered her over \$100,000 to cover various expenses, including Arabelle's cancer treatment.

Without blinking.

She sighed into her pillow. The guest bed—one of many, she was sure—was like lying on a cloud. Better than any bed she'd ever slept on in her whole life. She couldn't believe that Mark was willing to pay for everything as soon as she walked through the door. Was he insane?

Or was she insane for not accepting?

That was life-changing money. Life-saving.

But Jennifer had refused because she knew she could afford to wait. Arabelle's treatments would be covered for the next two weeks, so Jennifer had time to adjust to being around Mark and sense if he had any ulterior motives.

She sighed again. Of course he did, she was going to be his wife. If they were going to spend their lives together, he would want her to be happy. It probably wasn't any more complicated than that.

Still, Jennifer hadn't grown up with a lot of money. Her parents had always lived a frugal life. Even when she moved from Oregon to Colorado to work at the Mesa Verde national park, it wasn't like she was rolling in money. More like living a dream as carefully as possible.

Mark's mansion was an enormous change. Like her whole world had been flipped upside down, and now she was floundering to find something real to grab hold to.

And the only real thing left was Mark. Already he was an anchor ... and she wanted him in more ways than one. Just one look at him filled her mind and body with such filthy thoughts she shocked herself: part of her had wanted him to take her the moment she walked through that front door.

While they were still perfect strangers ... she wanted that primal attraction that bounced between them to take control. Even after their initial encounter, and after that call from her mom had her all nervous and worried, she still wanted him to throw her against the wall and have his way with her.

But, Mark was a perfect gentleman. He wasn't going to do that unless she told him exactly what she wanted—though she saw in his body language that he wanted the same thing as she did.

Yeah, when it came to the marriage part of the equation of becoming a mail order bride, Jennifer was cautiously optimistic. She liked Mark, his life was just going to be an adjustment.

And his wealth could save her mom's life.

But something just seemed so wrong about even considering taking that much money as soon as she walked through the door. No amount of merry-go-rounding in her head was going to change that fact.

The only thing that might convince her to trust that Mark wasn't going to turn around and ask her for something she couldn't give in return was by getting to know him better.

Jennifer imagined his body pressed against hers, his muscular chest and arms wrapping around her, a solid, stable rock against the chaos of the world.

After an hour of tossing and turning in bed, Jennifer gave up on trying to nap. She got up and straightened her clothes and hair, making herself look presentable. At least lying down and closing her eyes for a bit did ease some of the exhausted pounding behind her eyes. She was still tired, but no more than usual.

With a nod of determination, she ventured through the house in search of Mark. She admired the hand-carved wooden walls and support beams, depicting intricate wolves, birds, and other forest creatures. Where the walls themselves weren't painted or carved, paintings of the wilderness—as if outside wasn't quite enough—hung wherever Jennifer looked.

In fact, she noticed that there was nothing left inside the house to remind her of the city of all. Just walking these halls brought her a similar peace as when she was outside in the forest, or when she'd been giving tours and exploring the vast park of Mesa Verde.

The stairs from the second floor deposited her at the front entrance, where Mark was pulling on a coat. She froze on the bottom step when he spotted her.

He smiled broad and warm. "Had a good rest?"

"Not so well that I won't sleep better tonight," she said.

"Good answer." He finished putting on his coat. "I'm about to go for a walk. Would you like to join me?"

"Of course. I've been interested in seeing what exactly you consider the 'grounds' since you mentioned them."

He held out a hand. "Come, let me show you."

His hand wasn't just an invitation to go on a walk, but an invitation into his life. But Jennifer had already accepted that invitation when she decided to become a mail order bride. Now it was her curiosity that had her finish the final step and take his hand.

When her fingers touched his, their eyes met. His were dark green like moss-covered emeralds, and whenever his face moved, he revealed more hidden depths within them. They were enough to swallow her whole if she wasn't careful ... and Jennifer wasn't exactly in a careful mood.

His hand was warm when he curled it around hers and guided her outside. That point of contact between them sent waves of heat through Jennifer with each step they took, regardless of the chill they faced when they stepped onto the front stairs. With Mark holding her, she would never be cold again.

"You won't be able to see it from here," Mark said and pointed out into the trees, "but there are three layers of tree walls. Instead of building fences, the forest becomes naturally thicker and provides a natural barrier."

Jennifer stared out into the vast trees, and though far in the distance it seemed likemaybeshe could see what he meant, there were just too many trees between here and there.

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"Everything within is the grounds, I take it," Jennifer said. She twisted around, keeping her hand in Mark's as she took a closer look at the surroundings. "When I think of mansions, I usually picture enormous swimming pools, manicured lawns, windows that reflect the sun like eyes."

He chuckled. "None of those ever would have satisfied me."

"Good, because this is better. I like how you don't rake up the leaves, you just let them whirl about and pile up, like they're meant to. You let the trees grow wild and true to their nature, just like us people need to learn to again. Is there anything on the grounds that is man-made?"

"One thing, besides the house. You wouldn't notice it unless you knew it was there, though. Let me show you." He squeezed her hand, and as they continued along the rough path of rocks and leaves and grass, Jennifer found her leaning into him, attracted to his warmth, the surety of his presence.

She could picture going on a walk like this every day for the rest of her life and never getting bored of the same trees and sky.

"I hope this isn't too big a change for you," Mark said.

Jennifer laughed—she couldn't help it. "It's a massive change. Portland isn't exactly a small city. You couldn't look outside without seeing another person. Out here ..." She scanned the trees, the rustling leaves, the trees that swayed in the wind as if they were about to break free and dance. "I think you're much more likely to see a bird than another human. Does anyone even live out here?"

"Not within five miles in any direction; that's the land owned by me," Mark said. "But I don't think the nearest neighbor is until the outskirts of Marhan, maybe fifteen miles away."

Jennifer understood people wanted to own land ... she herself had dreamt of having some land for herself and her family one day. Farmland maybe, so they could live off the land without having to rely too much on city resources. Far enough from people that she could pretend she was in the forest, living out a life where she was at peace with nature.

But realistically, that was never going to happen, not even when she had her park guide job.

Mark actuallyowninga big chunk of forest, though? It really was that dream come true. As far as she could tell on her way in, nothing nearby was agricultural land at all ... he just owned a part of the forest because he wanted to.

She loved that.

"Careful," Jennifer teased, "or you'll have trouble getting rid of me. I've always wanted to live somewhere like this."

"Did you live in Portland for your whole life?" he said.

"Most of it, yeah, I grew up there. But I never really felt like I belonged, I guess. The first opportunity I had, I moved out to Colorado in search of something new that didn't involve cars whining in my ears all day long. Ended up in the south, a nice secluded area not far out of Mesa Verde. Working at any national park, where I could experience nature every day, was always my dream, but Mesa Verde was a dream come true."

"There's something appealing about knowing that people like the ancient Puebloans lived out in the middle of nowhere long before we felt the need to," Mark said.

"You know exactly what I mean," Jennifer said.

He gave her a meaningful look, and then they stopped walking. "We're here."

Mark gestured to the space in front of them, but at first, Jennifer didn't see what he was pointing at. It looked like more trees and grass, but she was already learning how to spot Mark's hidden creations.

Built encircled by trees was a small gazebo, the roof covered with a dense layer of leaves.

She pointed. "There."

"Very good." He chuckled. "Maybe you were made for the wilds after all."

He guided her across the remaining path and up the stone steps, into the little shaded gazebo. An earthy scent came from the wood circling the structure, enveloping her in the scents of the outdoors.

On both sides, there were benches covered with brown cushions, patterned to match their surroundings. Again and again, the attention to detail stunned Jennifer.

"This place is incredible," she said.

Mark was close, his whole side pressed up against hers. He shifted to look into her eyes, and he pulled a stray lock of hair away from her face. The warmth and desire in his bright green eyes pulled her in, amplified by the warmth moving between them. She wanted to kiss him ... just like he looked like he wanted to kiss her.

"Why go through so much effort to keep everything hidden?" Jennifer said.

Mark pressed his palm to her cheek. "You're incredible. In just the few hours since you've come here ..."

The way he touched her face finished what he left unsaid. Jennifer hadn't been able to stop thinking about him since she laid eyes on him. Hadn't been able to stop picturing what it would be like to give in to the desire pumping through her veins.

Mark's other hand touched her hip, curling around her back. When he pulled her closer, her hands came onto his chest. The strength of his muscles pressed against her palms, but as soon as his mouth was on hers, that feeling was secondary.

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His lips were hard and reassuring, confident in the way they pulled her in, holding every bit of her attention on a rope and not letting go. He tasted of cinnamon and other spices, and when their tongues met, she lapped up every hint of it. The taste of Mark.

The heat in her body grew with each kiss, and her hands moved before she could process what she was doing. She started unbuttoning his shirt, placing her hands against his hot skin. His muscles rippled at her touch, and she ran her fingers through the valleys and crevices of his abs and pecs.

She'd never been with such a sexy man before. And now he was going to be her husband.

They hadn't talked about marriage yet ... but it was part of the deal. They were supposed to get married as soon as possible.

But married or not, that wasn't going to stop her from letting their bodies take control. She wanted him, and she couldn't hold back.

He kissed her harder, then drew back to help her take off his shirt. A second later, his gorgeous chest was completely bare. Their mouths crushed together again, gasping between long kisses fueled by their growing desperation.

"This is what you want?" Mark said against her mouth, his voice husky with need.

Instead of answering him, Jennifer pushed him back and down onto one of the benches. She lifted her plain t-shirt over her head, revealing her red bra to Mark's

hungry eyes. He looked like he wanted to leap off the bench so he could touch her again, but instead he stayed put, seeming to enjoy the show as she then wriggled out of her shorts to show off her matching red panties.

The world outside of the little gazebo disappeared from Jennifer's mind. All there was left was just the two of them here in this space, the burning need inside of her. She wasn't leaving until she had her first taste of him.

She moved closer to him, pressing her knees against his. When he looked up at her, she saw all the things she wanted reflected back at her. They both breathed heavily, taking in their need with each breath. Their mouths attacked again when Jennifer made a move for his belt, all hot breath and tongues. She couldn't get enough of him.

While she unbuttoned him, she deliberately rubbed her palms against the bulge beneath his pants. He was rock hard, throbbing against her touch. She wanted to feel him in her hand, to make him moan until he turned into an animal. Beyond sensuality, right into need. Better yet, she wanted him inside of her. It had been so long since she last had sex, and now all of her body screamed at her as if to say that this was what she'd been waiting for, unknowingly: Mark.

His belt fell away, and then his pants, and boxers. She claimed him with her hand, his thick length burning in her palm as she stroked him, hard and long.

"Fuck," he groaned, arching back.

Mark's hands found her panties, slipping them down over her hips, his fingers slowly trailing down her thighs as he did. He brought his mouth to her stomach, kissing her belly button, nibbling lower, and lower, building up the heat inside her with each bite.

Her body arched back of its own accord, a rippling moan surging through her. Mark held her in place by putting a hand on the small of her back, and once her panties

were on the ground, he nudged her forward. She lowered herself onto his lap, her knees into the cushion beside his hips. His hard cock rubbed against her folds as she swayed back and forth, feeling the whole length of him against her.

Mark buried his face in her neck, kissing the sensitive flesh, igniting the eternal flames inside of Jennifer. She pushed down harder against him, and he panted against her shoulder.

"You want me?" Jennifer murmured.

"More than anything," he said.

Jennifer's eyes fluttered shut, and Mark's hands wrapped around her. She arched back, lifting her hips to position him at her entrance before finally lowering herself. His thickness spread her open and plunged inside, filling her with pleasure more intense than anything she'd ever felt before. A moan bubbled up her throat and she leaned back, letting it free. Her whole body burned as if she injected fire into her bloodstream, but it was just Mark.

And the only way to satiate the flames was with more of him.

He filled her all the way up, and she rocked her hips so she could feel him inside every crevice of her being. As she did, Mark unhooked her bra and buried his face in her chest. He took a nipple in his mouth, sucking her and sending another wave of pleasure through her. Hot and sizzling, her skin burned twice as hot wherever he touched her. Inside and out.

Mark pushed his hips up against hers, nudging himself deeper. He was so big she could have just sat on top of him like this, but she wanted more. While Mark entertained himself with her breasts, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pushing his face harder into her. His tongue swirled and pushed in tune with the movement of

their hips, rocketing Jennifer's body with incredible pleasure.

Finally, she lifted herself up then moved down, riding those waves with her body. He throbbed inside her with each shift up and down, flooding her with a new form of intensity each time. She dug her nails into his scalp, tugging at his hair and suffocating him in her chest.

He gasped for air and drew his face up, searching for her mouth instead. When their lips touched, they sailed off to an island of pleasure, just the two of them. The landmass sprung up from their innate desire, the burning need that had grown inside them ever since they first met.

It was like the universe had been waiting for them to meet, and now, supernovas exploded inside them with each touch, caress, sigh. His hands sent fireworks dancing across her skin, lighting her up like a candle, a burning beacon above their island built for two.

Jennifer bounced on top of him, straining every muscle in her body to feel every last hint of pleasure possible. And then the fire licked the edges of their island, swirling deeper within, blazing up from their bodies. It came from within, coiling and pulsing with each thrust.

A surprised gasp escaped her, and she leaned forward, melting against Mark's body. Waves of burning fire raced through her, setting her on fire, eating her alive until at last she exploded. A rush of fire and heat coursed through her along with a cry of pleasure. Mark thrust up into her harder, pushing her up even when she lost the strength to move.

A world of white encased her, intensity far greater than anything she experienced before. Mark groaned into her neck, against her mouth, kissing every part of her until, at last, the world stopped spinning. She blinked her eyes open, but kept her arms tight

around Mark's neck. He was her anchor. He had been ever since she got here to this strange place all the way across the country ...

Fuck, she felt amazing. Her body tingled all over with the rush of pleasure, and she never wanted it to go away.

With a satisfied sigh, she relaxed her hold on him—just a bit. She buried her face in his neck, breathing in his earthy scent, taking deep pleasure in the simple feeling of his arms around her.

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Her eyes felt heavy. She could just sleep here, right in his arms ...

"I think it might be bedtime for real now," Mark joked. He hefted her up in his arms, carrying her like a husband would his bride, and carried her off to the house.

She closed her eyes, utterly at peace, and let him take her wherever he wanted.

Chapter 6 – Mark

Mark woke with his heart so full he thought it would burst.

He squeezed his arms around Jennifer's sleeping form, enjoying just the feel of her body pressed against his. The curve of her hips and ass, her soft skin and hair, the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

Having her by his side was like living a dream.

He hadn't expected to sleep with her as soon as she arrived, but it had felt so right that he couldn't stop himself. Everything had felt right since Jennifer arrived ... those ten years of loneliness and guilt were erased the second she smiled at him. Like everything he'd gone through was worth it all because he now had her with him.

Ariya couldn't have been his mate. If she had been, he wouldn't be falling for Jennifer already. He loved everything about her: her compassion and fearlessness, her sexy body.

He never wanted to let her go. It was too early to tell if she was his mate or not, but

that didn't matter to him right now. They were to be married soon, and Mark knew for a fact that he would be more than happy to spend the rest of his life with Jennifer.

When he lifted his head to get an idea of what time it was, he knew from the level of brightness on the other side of the room that they'd slept in. But he didn't mind at all. He didn't have anywhere to be, except with Jennifer. In fact, he was glad. He couldn't remember the last time he had a good, full night's sleep that wasn't filled with guilt-ridden dreams about Ariya and his old pack.

Instead, he dreamt of what his life would be like with Jennifer: once they were married, they would spend most of their life here together at his mansion, exploring the wilderness beyond. Together.

Maybe start a family.

But they could only do that once it was completely safe in the area ... and so long as Mark had that cursed gold beneath his mansion, and those treasure goblins were after it and him, it would never be truly safe to live out that dream.

He had to deal with the goblins sooner rather than later. He'd been patient for ten years, now he needed results.

Before Mark could start thinking about how to expedite the process, Jennifer stirred in his arms. She turned over, and Mark brushed the hair from her face, kissing her forehead, her nose, and then her lips.

Warmth trickled through him. He became even more aware of the press of their naked bodies. He wanted her again ...

"Hey, you," she murmured, her voice still heavy from sleep.

"Good morning. Sleep well?"

She yawned. "Yeah. That flight really did a number on me. I haven't been on a plane since ..."

Jennifer trailed off, and he realized right away that it was because she was thinking of her mom. Whenever she did, she had a certain look in her eyes. A mixture of mourning and guilt.

"Tell me more about her," he said.

"My mom?"

"Mhm, what's she like? She must be an amazing woman to have raised you, and for you to love her as much as you do."

She bit her lip, but there was laughter in her eyes. "She's something, that's for sure. She's the most stubborn person I've ever met ... when she wants something, she's always sure to get it. Failure isn't an option—in the end, she always gets what she wants in one form or another."

There was an innate stubbornness to Jennifer, too. An uncompromising attitude that gave her an air of confidence even when she probably didn't realize it. That was one of the many things Mark loved about her so far.

"I guess that was why when she told me about her diagnosis, the first thing I did was drop my life in Colorado and move back to Oregon," she said. "Otherwise she would have gotten it in her head that she was just going to let nature run its course on her, and there would have been no changing her mind. I couldn't let that happen."

He kissed her cheek. "You've sacrificed a lot for her sake."

"It's nothing she wouldn't have done for me—nothing she hasn't done for me. She raised me, after all. For some reason, she doesn't think that's a good enough excuse, though."

She chuckled, but it was laced with her ongoing sadness and worry about her mom. In some sense, Mark understood. His father had died a long time ago, passing the position of Alpha onto him when he was only twenty-one. And his mother died in the treasure goblin attack. There was very little he wouldn't have done to keep his mother alive had he known what was going to happen.

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"My offer still stands," Mark said. "I don't want you to have to worry about her anymore. If you let me cover her treatment, I'll make sure she's taken care of. I know an excellent doctor in Boston."

That doctor was actually the elven healer who developed a magical cure for cancer, but the treatment would only work if Jennifer's mom came here. And it was going to be difficult to make that happen without convincing Jennifer to accept his offer.

"Mark ... I know you mean well, but ... that's a lot of money, and I don't feel comfortable accepting it right now," she said. "It's not you, it's just ..."

He cradled her cheek with his palm, running his thumb along her face. "It's your decision. I just want you to be happy." He lowered his face to hers, kissing her again, this time slowly, savoring the taste of her lips against his. The hot flick of her tongue, the eagerness running through her body and into his. "What will make you feel more comfortable?"

She bit his lip gently, and it took all his self-restraint not to roll on top of her. He throbbed beneath the sheets, his hardness pressing into her thigh.

"I'm supposed to be your bride, aren't I?" she said. "Maybe it wouldn't feel so weird if we were married first."

A beat of excitement moved through him. Already he had staked a claim on Jennifer, but officializing their marriage would make her truly his. There was only one problem.

"Confession time," Mark said, drawing away from her and leaning against the headboard. "I haven't been to the city since this place was finished."

"So, what, like a year or two?"

He laughed, deep and amused. "No, ten years."

Her eyes widened. "So Jake wasn't kidding when he called this your hermit mansion."

"Not one bit. He's tried to drag me out to Marhan a few times, but ... not for the right reasons. And I don't like leaving unless I know there's someone in the house to watch."

"You said it yourself, though. No one lives out here for at least five miles in all directions. What are you worried about?" Jennifer said.

Mark's smile faltered. He had a lot of worries. But ultimately, it was the goblins. The last time they came sniffing around his house he hadn't been around ... But that was years ago, and before he had a dedicated security officer to watch when he was gone. Jake was home now, but it was probably a bit paranoid of Mark to assume it was going to happen again the instant he left the house without someone back to watch it. Still, he liked the peace of mind, and it wasn't like he couldn't afford the expense.

"Nothing you need to bother yourself with," Mark said. "But if you're ready to make things official ..."

She laughed. "That was the deal, Mark. Besides ..." She put two fingers on his chest, creeping them up toward his chin. "If last night was any sign of how things are going to be, I think we'll be fine."

He kissed her again. Hot and passionate, lips and tongues melding together, and then

their bodies ... warmth snaked through him, and he pulled her closer. When she moaned against his mouth, that was his cue to peel away, as reluctant as he was to do so.

"Then it's settled, we'll go to town ..." Mark said.

"You sound so terrified of the idea," she joked. "Don't worry. The only ones who will know you're a strange hermit are me and you. This is as good of an excuse as any to go out and have some fun, don't you think?"

The idea of going to the city wasn't that exciting to Mark, but going with Jennifer was a different story. She would be the first to convince him to go since he made his mansion his prison and locked himself away.

"You don't have to convince me," he said. "Let's go."

"So what is there to do in Marhan?" Mark asked as they drove from the forest path and onto the highway leading into the city.

"I feel like I should be the one asking that question," Jennifer said, but she pulled out her phone and started scrolling. "Let's see ... there's a museum of classical arts, an arcade, movie theater. Mmm, no."

Going to a museum didn't sound like the worst idea, but Mark didn't think a movie or the arcade were good ideas. They couldn't talk if they went to the movies, and an arcade would probably have too many people for his taste. He knew there were far more things to do if they considered the magical options, but it was far too soon to introduce Jennifer to that side of his life.

After being away from the city for so long, he wasn't sure he could call himself too acquainted with that side of the world anymore. Who knew what could happen? Better just to remove it from the equation altogether for now and just not worry about it turning things upside down.

They drove into the city, cars, people, and buildings whizzing by. The noise was the first thing that struck Mark as foreign compared to the forests. Lacking was the sound of trees and animals, replaced by the cacophony of machines. They were the sounds that Mark grew up with, but it'd been so long that all of it seemed so strange.

Jennifer stopped looking at her phone as they entered the city, as focused on taking in as much of her surroundings as he was. They were unified in their curiosity for the buildings that went past, both the short and tall, old and new. More people than Mark had seen in years.

"What's that sound?" Jennifer said.

He didn't hear it at first, but when he pricked his wolf senses, he figured it out. "Music, sounds like," he said.

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A look of excitement grew on Jennifer's face. "Could it be a festival of some kind?"

Mark tried to think of if there were any events at this time of year, but honestly it had been so long since he cared or bothered looking that he couldn't say for sure. Midsummer seemed like a good time for all sorts of outdoor events, so he wouldn't be surprised. It was Saturday, too, so that increased the odds.

"Want to check it out?" he said.

"None of the other options I came up with right away piqued my interest, so yeah, why not?"

He smiled. "Then we'll follow the music."

Even with his wolf senses, that was harder than expected. It seemed like the music was coming from several different places, though it ultimately got louder as he drove closer. When they came to Marhan's largest park, there were people everywhere. Various tents dotted the edges of the park, and on the other side, there was a large stage where live music was currently being played.

"'Marhan Annual BeerFest', oh that's cool," Jennifer said. "Let's go take a look!"

When Mark found a place to park, he and Jennifer hopped out of his SUV and, hand in hand, wandered toward the growing crowd. Electronic music blared through speakers everywhere, but the longer Mark was with Jennifer, the less the noise bothered him. Seeing the look of pure joy on her face made venturing out from his isolation worth it.

"This is a lively city if this is what the place looks like at 11 a.m.," Jennifer said.

"We probably won't want to be out here when the real crowd kicks in," Mark said.

"But it'll be fun to look around."

She grinned. "Good thing I'm not one for day drinking." She pointed off to the side.

"Hey, look at that."

Mark followed her gaze to a tent where several men were lining up next to a sign labeled 'beer chugging contest.' His wolf seemed entertained by the idea, and without thinking, he said, "I bet I could out drink all of them."

Jennifer raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? Well why don't you give it a shot?"

Again his wolf grew excited, urging him to jump at the opportunity to impress Jennifer. Well, more like show her that he was capable of having fun. He wasn't particularly a drinker, though he did enjoy one or two here and there. What made him especially good for a drinking contest, though, was the metabolism that shifters had to account for their quick healing abilities. It also worked on alcohol, so it was hard for him to get tipsy, let alone drunk.

The contest was just to show how fast the contestants could chug a whole two-pint glass, though, not to see who could drink the most. The winner gained a gold medal shaped like a beer mug—it seemed pretty harmless and fun.

"You sure?" Mark said.

"I'm not the only one here to have fun," she said. "Watching you will be quite entertaining, I'm sure. Just so long as it won't leave you drunk for our wedding."

He laughed. "I'll barely notice two pints."

"Last call for contestants entering the drinking contest!" the woman organizing the event called from the tent.

Jennifer pushed him. "Then go on! Impress me."

He hugged her close, said, "Just you watch," and then slipped under the tent to sign up.

Two minutes later, he was registered and sitting at the table besides six other men, ranging from skinny, to a bit ragged, to muscular, like him. To his advantage, they all appeared to be human ... so this was going to be a piece of cake.

"The rules are simple," the woman organizing the event said as she placed a large but empty two-pint mug in front of each of the contestants. "Hands on your lap until I say 'drink'. First to chug the whole glass and put it back flat down on the table is the winner. Any excessive spillage will be counted against you, so be careful."

Another assistant took a large pitcher of beer and carefully filled each glass right to the brim. The hoppy smell filled Mark's senses as his glass was filled up.

As instructed, he planted his hands firmly on his lap, waiting as the last glass on the table was filled.

"Are you ready?" the woman said, and the contestants and onlookers cheered.

Behind her, Mark caught Jennifer's eye, and he winked at her. For her, he was going to win.

"One ... two ... three ... drink!"

Mark's hands flew up to his glass. He gripped the drink and had it at his mouth before

all of the others, tipping the rich, woody beer into his mouth. The guy next to him moved too fast and tipped part of the drink into his lap, and everyone laughed and cheered as he went on drinking anyway.

Meanwhile, Mark chugged, and chugged, andchugged. That bad boy filled his belly in two seconds flat, and he slammed the mug back onto the table while the others were still only halfway into their drinks.

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The woman refereeing the contest looked at him with wide eyes. "We've got a winner!" she announced, grabbing his arm and waving it up in the air. "That has to be the fastest I've seen anyone down two pints since I started working here."

The crowd cheered, but it was Jennifer's excited cries that made the moment for Mark. She looked even more thrilled than he did, which was saying something, since he was bursting with energy, too.

Once the others finished their drinks, the woman looped the medal around Mark's neck and declared him the winner.

"Next contest is this evening, come back later, folks!" she said and waved amongst the cheers and excitement.

A moment later, Mark found Jennifer amongst the audience, wrapping her arms around him. "You were right, that was fun," he said. "Hope you found it entertaining, too."

"That was amazing. You can really drink, huh?" she said.

"Just got a big mouth. See?"

He planted his mouth on hers, and she laughed. "Mm, tastes like beer. Not bad stuff, too. Must be a local brewery."

Mark felt bubbly and alive for the first time in years. Not because of the alcohol, but from being with Jennifer. She was amazing, and every second by her side slowly

brought him out of the cocoon he'd built around himself after being alone in the woods for so long.

And soon, she would be his wife.

They spent another hour playing around at the beer festival, mostly just watching other people play drinking games since Jennifer didn't want to drink anything herself. After Mark's victory in the drinking contest, he wasn't too keen on drinking anything else, either. But it was fun to watch, even more so because Jennifer seemed to be enjoying herself, and that was what mattered the most.

After they saw everything there was to see, they found a secluded area away from the growing festival crowd and danced to the music in the distance. Jennifer leaned against Mark and they swayed to the loud tune, an electrical buzz that wasn't exactly meant for the kind of dance they performed, but this was how they wanted to hold each other. Holding each other close, breathing each other in.

"I think it's time to go get the paperwork done," Mark murmured into Jennifer's hair.

"Mm, paperwork, how romantic," she laughed.

An idea sparked in Mark's head. Maybe it was the remnants of the alcohol, or maybe it was just wanting to hear her laugh one more time before they left ... but he lowered himself onto one knee, not caring if people were watching.

Jennifer looked at him with cautious amusement.

"Jennifer, I've never met a woman as amazing as you," he said, reaching around his neck to take the cord of his newly won medal. "I have no ring for you, and should you choose to scold me for such an oversight, that is well within your right. However ..."

He held up the medal to her, and she broke into laughter.

"However," he continued, his grin matching hers, "I hope you will accept this honorably won medal on your behalf as a token of my affections. Will you marry me?"

Her smile softened, and she extended her hand to him. "Of course, Mark. This last day has meant more to me than I can put into words ... so yes. Just yes."

He wrapped the medal around her wrist, and once it was secured in place, Jennifer knelt in the grass with him. He took her into his arms, vowing to himself never to let this woman go. She was the best thing to happen to him, and he wasn't going to waste a single second he had with her.

Within the hour, they would be officially married. And once they were, it would be his responsibility to make sure that she was cared for. In his eyes, that meant looking after her mother, too, whom she loved so dearly.

So even though Jennifer hadn't agreed to take him up on his offer of paying for her mom's treatment, he was going to make sure it happened.

A few minutes later, Jennifer rested her head on his chest. "I guess we should get going, huh?"

He kissed her right on the mouth, triggering a swarm of bubbles in the simmering heat of his desire for her. "It's time to make you my wife."

Chapter 7 – Jennifer

The next few days passed in a blur. Now that Jennifer and Mark were officially married, they spent very few minutes apart. Being with him was a dream come true,

the relationship she'd been waiting her whole life for.

Whenever Jennifer stared into his deep green eyes, whenever he brushed his lips against hers, ran his fingers down her arm ... her insides shivered with such inexplicable joy. She could only describe it as the makings of love.

Maybe it was fast, but what else could she call what she felt? She'd never felt anything like it before, not even with exes she thought she loved in the past. Mark was the man of her dreams, there was no denying it ... or him.

They lay in bed together, just enjoying being in each other's company, when Mark asked, "what are you planning on doing now that you're here?"

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"Mmm," she mumbled, as if stirred from a dream. It was so easy to forget that she had to still find a way to pay for her mom's medical bills. "I'll need to find a job soon, those cancer treatments won't pay for themselves. I was hoping that perhaps you had a business that I could work for ..."

"No, there are no business ventures here. But if you want, we could always start one. What would we do?" Mark smiled broadly when he played with the gold medal that she still had wrapped around her wrist. "We could start a brewery of our own."

She smiled back. "I don't think I'll ever be that fond of beer. Maybe ... oh, we could run a food truck, or maybe a restaurant. Ah, but that would involve leaving the confines of our forest vacation home, wouldn't it? Mmm, I'll have to think about it. We'll come up with something, at the very least."

Before Mark could respond, his phone started ringing. He kissed her cheek before rolling over to answer. "Yeah? Okay. Okay. Yeah, I'll be right there."

He hung up, kissed her again, and then rolled out of bed. When he looked at her again, he had a huge grin on his face, as large and happy as he'd been when they got married. Jennifer had to admit, she was curious what had him so excited.

"What's got you beaming like the sun?" Jennifer said, flopping onto her stomach so she could watch the show as he got dressed.

"You'll see. I've got to head out, but I'll be back in a few hours."

She arched a brow. "You? Leaving the mansion? Mark, we just went to the city," she

teased. "What happened to being a hermit?"

"I know, it's strange, leaving twice in the span of days after being stuck here for a decade, but this is worth it. Trust me, you'll understand when I get back."

She bit her lip as he turned around, showing off his hard ass while he buttoned up his shirt. "Mhm, yeah. It's a surprise, then?"

He finished getting dressed, much to Jennifer's disappointment, and returned to kiss her again. "Two hours," he said. "Maybe three."

She forgot all about what she was curious about when his mouth touched hers. She melted against him, sighing against his mouth. Their days had been filled with incredible sex throughout the house ever since they were married. They hadn't been able to get enough of each other. Even now, she wanted him to take her again instead of running off without her ... but she knew he would make it up to her later.

"Okay," she breathed against his mouth when he finally let her go. "I—" She bit her lip again. "I'll see you soon."

He gave her a knowing smile, his bright green eyes showing her that he knew what she meant to say, and then disappeared from the bedroom.

She'd almost said I love you, but she'd stopped herself. It'd been a spur-of-the-moment feeling. Mark was amazing, and he'd been wonderful to her ever since she arrived at his place ... it was hard not to fall for him as quickly as she had. But she wasn't ready to say the words out loud yet.

Once Mark had been gone for a few minutes, she rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. It was so strange, being without him now after spending the last three days with him at her side every minute of every day. It wasn't a feeling she wanted to

get used to ... but she also knew that one day, they would have to find other things to do besides spending all day pleasuring each other.

As fun as it was, Jennifer would eventually need something more to occupy her brain with.

In part, she asked Mark if he had a business because she was curious where he got his fortune. If he wasn't a young business owner, then the only real answer was inheritance. But of all the talking they'd done since they met, he spoke very little about his past, and when he did, only in broad strokes.

It really wasn't her business, but the longer they spent together, the more inclined she became to accept his offer of helping out her mother. Mark had a lot of money, and he was generous with it—he told her about his donations to various local charities and such. But it would just make her feel a bit better knowing where the money came from, especially since they were now married and, legally, his money was hers, too ... even if she would never really see it as hers.

But she trusted Mark, so she didn't think it was worth pushing the issue yet. Wherever he got his money, she didn't think it was from anything illegal or immoral. Mark seemed like a straightforward kind of guy, not someone to mess around in something potentially dangerous or harmful to others. In the end, that was really what mattered to her.

Before she accepted any money from him, to pay for Arabelle's medical expense or otherwise, though, she wanted to secure a way to make sure she could pay him back. Maybe the amount she needed wasn't something she could ever really offer him back, and he might not want her to, but the principle mattered to her.

After lying down for another half hour, caught up in her thoughts, Jennifer finally got dressed and ventured from the bedroom. The grand hallways and bright chandeliers

still startled her every time she came out of the room. It was incredible to think that this was her home now, that she wasn't just a guest here.

She imagined that it would take several more months before the truth really sunk in.

Not that just this home was hers, but so was Mark. Mark, the sexiest, most incredible man in the world, was her husband.

She rolled her wrist, the one that had the blue band with the beer mug-shaped medal attached to it. It wasn't a ring, but honestly, she thought this was better. A fond memory came with the medal, one she would treasure forever.

When he went down on one knee and proposed to her, as if their marriage wasn't already set in stone, that was the first time she realized she was actually falling for him already. Now, days later, he'd completely done her in.

He was just so thoughtful and caring, tender and loving ... it was easy to imagine spending the rest of her life with him, locked away in their woodland palace.

If only it wasn't for her mother.

For now, she pushed those thoughts aside. Tonight, she would tell Mark that she decided to accept his offer, for her mother's sake. He would be pleased to hear the news, and then she could finally explain what was going on to her mother, too. They'd talked every day since she left Portland, but she still kept the details of her arrangement obscured ... but she wouldn't be able to much longer.

Ever since she married Mark, she'd been dying to scream the truth out to the world. Right now, the two of them, Jake, and the two staff members that did the cooking and cleaning were the only ones who knew where she really was.

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Jennifer spent the next two hours eagerly awaiting Mark's return. She had no idea what kind of surprise he was planning, but the fact that there was a surprise, and she knew about it, was killing her. She had to know! To distract herself, she explored the rest of the house that she hadn't gotten a good look at since coming to the mansion.

She spent a bit of extra time in the library, admiring the bookshelves carved into large tree trunks.

By the time two whole hours passed, she circled back around to the entrance to peek outside. It was midday now, and pleasantly warm outside. The instant she heard the sound of an approaching vehicle, though, she sprung toward the front door and searched outside.

Not one, but two vehicles approached. One was Mark's black SUV, the one Jake borrowed to pick her up from the airport, and the other a large white van. Jennifer stood on the front steps, watching the two vehicles with curiosity waiting to burst out of her chest.

Mark parked out front, and Jennifer hurried over to hug him, but on the way over, the passenger door to the SUV popped open and a familiar face peeked out at her.

Jennifer froze in her tracks. A little gasp came from within when she saw the familiar woman climbing out. She looked far older than she should have at only forty-five years, but that was what cancer did to the body.

"Mom?"

Arabelle's face brightened from confusion to absolute joy and relief. "My Jenny!"

Jennifer had her mom in her arms a second later. She was so small now, but she still hugged like a bear. Tears formed at the edges of Jennifer's eyes when she held her mom, something she thought would be impossible for at least another week, maybe longer.

The guilt of leaving her behind to come to this strange place where Mark lived stayed with her every day. In her mind, she was living in a permanent vacation while her mom was left to suffer ... but now she was here.

"How is this possible?" she said.

Arabelle, too, let out a little cry. "It was that big man of yours." She gave Jennifer a motherly jab in the ribs. "The one you didn't tell me about."

Leave it to Arabelle to jump straight to the secrets-kept part of the reveal. Jennifer had planned on telling her ... eventually. Once things made more sense in her head. Now it seems Mark must have told her everything.

"I'm sorry, mom," Jennifer said. "It's all so complicated, I'll tell you the whole story once we're inside."

"It's always complicated with you, but now I have some of the pieces. I expect the rest of them before the day is through ..."

"Of course, mom. You've come all this way, I couldn't imagine keeping anything from you anymore."

Across the front of the SUV, she met Mark's eyes and gave him a thankful nod. She couldn't express just how much this meant to her ... to finally see her mom again. But

when she stared into his eyes, she saw something else staring back at her, not just a man who wanted to be helpful and take care of her: she saw the eyes of love.

Was she imagining it?

She swallowed. No, it had to be real. She felt it, too. Only a man who loved her would go so far out of his way, even after Jennifer previously refused his offer, to make this happen.

Arabelle seemed tired, and she leaned all of her weight on Jennifer. If she made the same flight as Jennifer did a few days ago, then she was probably exhausted and needed some rest. Good thing there were lots of guest bedrooms.

Jennifer held Arabelle close; she wanted to keep her mother close, and also make sure she didn't fall over.

The van stopped behind the SUV and the driver's door popped open. A tall woman with fair skin, blonde hair, and a white lab coat climbed out. She had an ethereal beauty, something that didn't seem quite right, but Jennifer couldn't explain it. It was almost like she wasn't human.

Mark joined Arabelle and Jennifer on the other side of the SUV, placing a light hand on Jennifer's shoulder. "May I introduce Dr. Variety, the cancer and disease specialist I talked to you about before, Jennifer," Mark said. "She'll be here to provide in-house care while Arabelle undergoes the rest of her treatment."

Jennifer vaguely recalled him mentioning knowing such a doctor being in Boston, but she assumed that meant taking regular trips from their hidden home to the big city, not moving the doctor to the woods with them. But, this was Mark she was talking about—it didn't seem that he did anything part-way.

Dr. Variety came forward, giving an old-fashioned, sweeping bow. Jennifer raised her eyes in surprise.

"Honored to be here," Dr. Variety said. "Mrs. Wright will fare well under my care. Over the weekend, I organized her care plan utilizing the best technologies and medicines available, as well as my personal touch." She smiled widely. "Cancer is a beast, but it is now a beast we can beat."

Jennifer looked between the doctor and Mark. Did that mean what she thought it meant? She wanted to ask the question out loud but couldn't quite bring herself to voice that much hope.

Instead, Mark caught the question in her eyes and said, "yes, Arabelle will be just fine." He gripped her mother's shoulder like they were old pals. "Won't you, Mrs. Wright?"

"Yes, yes, thank you, I'm so sick and tired of dying."

They had a good laugh at Arabelle's twisted sense of humor. While Jennifer helped her mom inside, Mark stayed back to help carry the equipment left behind, giving the pair a few minutes on their own.

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When Jennifer opened the front door, Arabelle's eyes noticeably widened. "I know, when I first came here, I thought we were just in the middle of the woods."

"I admit, it seemed too good to be true to have this handsome young man, claiming to be your new husband, come pick me up at the airport," Arabelle said casually. "When he brought me out into the middle of nowhere, I thought, 'oh well, seems the assassins have finally come for me.'"

"Mom!" Jennifer laughed. "What have you ever done in your life to warrant assassins, anyway?"

"Oh you would be surprised, my dear, you would be surprised."

They made it to the largest guest bedroom on the main floor, and Jennifer helped Arabelle into the bed. She tucked herself right under the blankets, making a comfortable sigh once she had a pillow beneath her.

"You look so tired, mom. Should I leave you to rest for now? We can talk later."

"I am tired, but not so tired I can't listen." Arabelle made a tsking sound. "So you eloped with this husband of yours, leaving me in Portland all on my own? Jenny, dear, I think you might have taken a page out of my personal handbook."

Jennifer smiled, pleasantly surprised by her mom's reaction. "You're not mad?"

"Can't say I blame you. All the hospitals and old people have to be a bore to my energetic little girl."

"It was nothing like that. I was happy to keep caring for you, mom. But when the doctors said the chemo wasn't going to work anymore ... I couldn't just sit by and watch you wither away."

"Of course you couldn't. That's not the daughter I raised." Arabelle sighed. "But I wanted a more fulfilling life for you ... after all this, it seems you might have found it."

Jennifer sat on the floor next to Arabelle's bed, tilting her head to rest on the mattress beside her mom. "Yeah, I think so. I wasn't sure anything would come of it, but in the end ... Mark is great, mom. I think I love him."

Arabelle laughed. "I would hope so, after all the trouble he went to round me up and ship me over here."

"Speaking of which," Jennifer said, "how did he convince you to come here? He didn't tell me a thing about what he was planning."

"Oh, he's a sneaky one, that's for sure. A few days ago he called, confessing who he was. Naturally, I cursed him out as a liar, trying to trick a sick woman, but as he began to tell me more, I realized he had to be telling the truth," Arabelle said. "Only my daughter would think to torture her mother by finding such a handsome young man and not telling me."

"Mom ... I didn't tell you because I was embarrassed," she said.

And because she didn't want to give Arabelle any false hope. She wasn't sure that a relationship was going to work out with Mark, or that it would result in a better paying job she could use to pay those medical bills. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected to get matched with someone with a fortune like his, or that he would simply cover the expenses of all the treatment without a worry.

Arabelle placed her hand on Jennifer's. "He loves you too, Jenny."

Jennifer's stomach twisted, as if releasing the cork on a bottle of butterflies. "Did he say that?"

"No, but I heard it in the way he talked about you. He's a winner. I don't know where you found a wonderful man like him ... but you better keep him."

She still had the medal tied around her wrist. It would be too impractical to wear forever, but for now, it was a symbol of her devotion to him. She had no intention of letting him go, not now, not ever.

Ever since she arrived at his place, Mark had been nothing but kind and caring to Jennifer. Now, bringing her mother here, promising to care for her, paying for treatment that would save her life ... he'd won Jennifer's heart.

She could feel the love pouring from her like an overfilled sink. Love, and all of it meant for him.

Chapter 8 – Mark

Now with Jennifer, Arabelle, and Dr. Variety at the mansion, Mark couldn't risk shifting so close to the house.

While Jennifer and her mom were catching up, Jake arrived for his regular security shift, nodding to Mark as they ventured in opposite directions: Jake back into the house to watch over the women, Mark off into the woods.

Over the last few days, Mark had passed off his trips into the trees as regular walks for pleasure's sake ... but the truth was far from it. Ever since he got the last mounds of the treasure goblin's cursed gold, the goblins had sniffed around in these woods

here and there, searching for it—but without knowing it was in the area for certain.

Over the last few years, the goblins came to realize that their treasure was in this forest, but they were not sure where. They crept around in the trees and hills at night, searching for Mark's hidden mansion, but the woods were fast, and he paid well for elves and other local magical creatures to put markers up every few months to draw the goblins elsewhere.

He tried to trap and kill them several times, but they were too smart. He'd yet to trick any of them.

But over the last week, since just after Jennifer's arrival, it seemed the goblins were getting closer and closer to pinpointing the real location of his mansion. As hidden as it was, it was impossible to keep it as such forever. That it had lasted a whole decade without being uncovered was miracle enough.

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Mark found one of the trees marking the edge of his territory. There, he stripped from his clothes and laid them neatly beneath a bed of leaves. Deep inside him, his wolf howled and scratched at him, eager to break free and run wild. To track the creatures responsible for tearing apart his pack.

That spark of anger rose inside of him, and in a flash, his arms and legs began to morph, black fur sprouting on his muscled arms and body. Within a minute, he was on all fours, shaking out his shaggy coat and clawing at the earth beneath his feet.

His wolf self became him, his human mind giving in to the primal essence that was his shifter nature. The first thing his wolf did once the shift was complete was throw its head back, letting a rippling howl flow through him, echoing through the trees around him.

Oh man, that felt good. Filled with all that primal energy, the earthy scent of the forest, the delicious smell of prey, the crisp sounds of the forest ... everything came into focus, swirling around in his mind and senses. Beneath it all, he smelled Jennifer. She was so far away, back at the mansion, but he smelled her, all the same.

His mate. She had to be—she smelled like him, the piece he'd been missing his whole life. The woman he wanted to make love to every day for the rest of his days. Mark shook his head, trying to keep his wolf's primal, sexual nature from taking control. He wanted Jennifer, and he would have her again tonight ... but right now, he had a job to do.

He had to keep her and Arabelle safe.

When it was just him living out here, it ultimately hadn't mattered when or how the goblins struck, only that they inevitably would, unless he found them first. But now Mark had the motivation to find them before they found him.

He would take them out before they had a chance to threaten his new family.

Mark leaned into his wolf senses again, this time pushing Jennifer's scent aside in search of signs of the goblins. Over the last few days, since he picked up their scents nearby, he knew that they'd all been around the river further north.

He sniffed in that direction, shifting soil and leaves beneath his nose and paws. About halfway to the river, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. As far as he could tell, they hadn't come in this direction—yet.

Although all his senses were on high alert for signs of goblins or any other bad-news creatures, being in his wolf form out in the woods had a naturally calming effect on him. Seldom did he give in to his animalistic nature while in his human form, but as a wolf, he let it all free. He wasn't sure how shifters like Jake who spent most of their time in the city could leave all that energy pent-up for days at a time or longer.

Out here, in the wilds, was where Mark felt truly free. Himself.

Out here, or with Jennifer.

A sour, unwashed scent prickled Mark's nose as he came closer to the river. It was further south than the goblins had come since the first time they almost uncovered his mansion several years ago, which was a cause for concern in itself ... but it was a natural progression. Today, their scent drifted much further than he was comfortable with.

And it was fresh, as though they had been here within the last couple of hours or so.

His wolf-self snarled, a vicious sound, representative of just how badly he wanted to tear the little shits apart for destroying his pack. For so long, Mark had played the careful game, but he was done with that. He wanted to tear them apart sooner rather than later.

He followed the scent through the trees and underbrush, aware of just how fresh it was, how it grew stronger with each step he took. The fur on his hackles raised with anticipation of finding one.

Mark was so focused on following the trail, imagining biting into one of the goblins and ripping it to shreds, that it wasn't until he saw the first markers indicating the edge of his property that he realized just where the trail was going.

He stopped, looked around. The scent came up right around to the northernmost edge of his territory, curling along the edge as if they were searching for a way in. Thankfully, Mark's extra layers of natural elven protective spells kept the goblins out without them seeming to realize just what they were dealing with.

But that didn't make him feel any better when he reached a small clearing. There, the scent trail deepened, as if a goblin had been waiting there for a long time. And it was fresh, from within the last hour or so. Mark stifled a growl, eyes flicking through the trees and bushes.

When he saw nothing, that didn't make him feel much better. He had the sense of being watched ... he just didn't know where from.

More importantly, when his eyes searched down from the trees and into the ground in front of him, he spotted tracks. Goblins were light-footed and rarely left evidence of their presence besides their distinct, disgusting smell, but the footprints were unmistakable. This wasn't just one or two goblins searching around ... there were at least half a dozen, all of them parading around.

They were getting close.

They knew their treasure was around here somewhere. And they were ready to reclaim it.

Leaves crunched in the nearby bushes. Mark whirled around in the direction of the sound, haunches raised, a growl in his throat. From the underbrush, a set of demonic red eyes glittered, looking out at him.

Then the creature hidden there giggled like a small child, disappearing into the trees.

Mark made after it. After several tense steps toward the trees, he stopped, snarling, warning it to stay away from his home.

Every part of his being screamed at him to run after it. Kill it before it could come back.

But he just spotted tracks of a dozen other goblins. For all he knew, multiple of them could be waiting in the bushes for him, ready to spring out and attack. He, alone, wouldn't stand a chance against so many goblins ... no matter how strong he was.

His pack hadn't survived them. He, alone, wouldn't, either.

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As desperate as he was to get his revenge, to make these forests safe for Jennifer, Arabelle, and one day for any children he and Jennifer might have, he needed patience. Anything less would be throwing his life away.

With another growl, he tamed his less-logical wolf self by pawing at the ground, and then steering himself back around the edge of his property, back to the spot where he'd left his clothes.

The goblins were preparing to attack. Mark would be ready for them.

Chapter 9 – Jennifer

The machines around Arabelle were much quieter than the ones back at the hospital in Oregon, but they were still machines. They gave off a sense of eerie uncertainty, at least to Jennifer, who associated them with the passing days toward death.

That wasn't the case anymore, at least, but Jennifer still couldn't help thinking of that awful year in the hospital. Across on the other side of Arabelle's bed, Dr. Variety flipped through several pieces of paper attached to her clip board.

"All right," she said. "Everything is looking good so far, Mrs. Wright. Just two days in and your vitals have improved; blood pressure decreased, steadier breaths, stronger overall. Your first two doses seem to be performing nicely so far, but we will have to keep monitoring you twice daily in case of any unexpected changes."

Arabelle sat up. "Oh yes, it was the medicine that reversed the near heart-attack-inducing stress of finding that my daughter moved across the country without a word,

that she went off and got married without so much as a ceremony ..."

She looked like she was joking, but Jennifer sensed a hint of seriousness, and she felt guilty. Of course her mom had been stressed about Jennifer's disappearance without so much of an explanation, she was just glad she hadn't made things worse.

"Well," Dr. Variety smiled, "after your third dose, assuming your progress looks favorable still, we will begin mental stimulation exercises—your brain health is just as important as your physical health."

"Is that your special touch, hm, doctor?" Arabelle said.

"In fact, yes. All of my patients find it quite effective, and I'm sure you will, too."

Arabelle mumbled something incoherent, but Jennifer figured it was her cursing under her breath. Taking care of her health, mental or otherwise, had never been a huge priority of her mom's ... but now she had little choice in the matter. For Jennifer's sake, Arabelle had already said that she would do everything the doctors told her if it meant she would get better quicker.

Even quit smoking, which was a miracle in itself.

"You're free to go, if you'd like," Dr. Variety said. "I'll just finish up recording the results."

With a grateful nod, Arabelle took the monitoring bracelet from her arm, and Jennifer helped her up from the bed. Despite Arabelle's mumbling and grumping, it was undeniable that Dr. Variety was right: back in Portland, there were times where Arabelle was so weak she couldn't stand even with Jennifer's help; she needed a wheelchair just to get around. As much as it stung Arabelle's pride, it was sometimes her only way of getting around. But after only two days of being at Mark's place,

Arabelle seemed so much stronger.

Once Arabelle was on her feet, she could stand and walk on her own again without issue. The machine made an irritating buzzing sound to indicate that it wasn't receiving Arabelle's vital information anymore, and Jennifer hit the button to quiet it.

"I'd be glad to get out of the house for a bit," Arabelle said as they moved into the hallway. "Is there somewhere outside that we can sit?"

Jennifer immediately thought of the gazebo where she and Mark first made love, but hesitated to tell her mom about the location. The spot was special because of how it drew the two of them together ... and as selfish as it was, she wanted to keep it that way.

"There are small stone benches hidden amongst the trees," Jennifer said. "We can find a spot if you'd like."

"That will do nicely," Arabelle said, and then started humming as if she was the happiest and healthiest woman in the world. "So, tell me more about you and Mark. How did you hide him for so long? Without saying a word about him to Lily or me, hmm?"

Jennifer gave a shy smile. She didn't want to tell her mom the whole truth about the mail order bride part, but there were enough details she could reveal. "We met online. That was really the only way for me to get to know anyone over the last year, you know. But he and I ... it happened fast. After Dr. Carlton told us that chemo wasn't safe anymore, and you talked about 'being realistic' ... I panicked."

"Trust me, Jenny, neither of us took that news well," Arabelle chuckled. "You ran off to be with your secret lover."

"I came here to be with Mark, yeah. I didn't realize just how wealthy he was at the time," Jennifer said. "All I knew was that I needed a different way to pay for the new medicine, as trying to work a third job wasn't going to work. I thought maybe coming here, I could find something new. But then Mark ..."

"Whatever you're worried about, stop. It's clear just how much you two care for each other. That's all that matters to me in the end, you know. I've always wanted you to find love, it hurt me more than you know to watch you work so hard for my sake, giving up so much ..."

Jennifer bit her lip. "You know I didn't mind, mom."

In the end, she was just happy that now, neither of them had to stress about what they did or didn't have to do in order to pay for the treatment. Mark was single-handedly responsible for lifting that worry from their shoulders, and Dr. Variety would be the one to make sure it stayed that way.

Nothing Jennifer could do would ever repay him for saving her mom's life. She was indebted to him forever ... and now, she found that this didn't bother her at all. Mark was, without a doubt, the man she would spend the rest of her life with. Out of choice. She was more than happy to spend the rest of their time together, being an attentive and loving wife.

But for now, she wanted to find a way to surprise him. Although she didn't have any way to surprise him the same way he did for her, she would find a way to make him smile.

Jennifer pointed to one of the benches. "Just over there."

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They spent an hour outside, chatting about Mark, the incredible mansion, about the process of leaving Oregon. All-in-all, Arabelle seemed to be taking the situation pretty well. Considering she had lived her whole life in Portland, Jennifer had expected a bit more resistance about coming all the way to Pennsylvania.

"I don't see myself staying here forever," Arabelle explained, "but I don't want to be far from you, and I don't see you or your man wanting to leave this wonderful place."

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you would like, mom." Jennifer smiled. "I'm sure Mark won't mind. It's not like we lack space."

"I know, I know, but I'm not an old lady, remember. Not yet, at least, no matter what the cancer tries to do to me. Once I'm better, I'll be looking for a place of my own. Maybe in the city we drove through on the way here, or ... I've always wanted to live in New York. Not too late to live young dreams."

Jennifer hugged her mom close, leaning their heads against each other. It made her happier than she could describe that for the first time in over a year, Arabelle was looking toward the future, not just the days ahead ... or worse, the past.

Later, after bringing Arabelle back inside to rest, Jennifer grabbed her purse and headed for the stairs to the underground parking area. Although Mark mostly used the SUV, she'd been quick to discover that he had multiple vehicles down there, any of which he said she could take to go to town or travel with.

Jennifer still didn't know what kind of surprise she was going to come up with for Mark, but she was intent on finding something, and right now she just needed some

ideas. Going out and exploring the city seemed like a good way to find inspiration for now.

As she approached the stairs down, the front door burst open. Mark strode in, but when Jennifer looked up at him, eager to see him again, his eyes were wild. It was a look that made her freeze in place, so unfamiliar and scary on his face it was.

He looked afraid, and Mark didn't seem like the kind of guy to be afraid of anything.

"Mark? What's wrong?" she said, climbing back up to the landing.

He wrapped his arms around her. She noticed how he was breathing heavily, and he held her close to him almost as if he hadn't expected to find her at home.

"Have you been out recently?" he said, his voice harsh and out of breath.

Jennifer's heartbeat picked up. "Arabelle and I were outside this morning, just in the yard. Why? What's going on?"

"You have to stay inside."

"Mark, you're scaring me. What's happening?"

"It's fine for now, but I need you to stay inside. Don't go out for any reason."

His tone was so strange, crackly like it pained him to talk. But his command was also so sure, leaving no room for her to refuse him. She wished he would tell her more, but Jennifer trusted him with her life—her heart. She had to believe she would get answers later on.

That didn't stop her from being worried, though.

"Okay, I won't go out. There's enough to do in the house anyway," Jennifer said, trying to push aside her concerns to do as he asked, but that was easier said than done.

So far, Mark had been open about almost everything ... so him coming here, keeping secrets, something that clearly distressed him, was very concerning. But she had to stay strong for him.

"Promise. It's important, Jen. For everyone's safety."

He squeezed her tighter, and she burrowed her face into his neck, breathing in his reassuring scent, letting his warmth and strength steady her.

"I promise," she said.

"Good."

He kissed her, soft and slow on the mouth ... almost enough to forget how, just a second ago, he'd seemed worried and afraid. His tongue and lips spurred her desire for him, but she kept that need at bay, at least for now. When he slowly let her go, he looked much more at ease than before, though there was still a hint of worry in his eyes.

"I'll explain everything later, I promise," he said. "Just be careful for now. I have something to deal with."

He kissed her forehead and then let go of her, taking his warmth and stability with him. Jennifer was concerned, but she trusted Mark. She had to. She just wished that whatever was going on, he would trust her, too.

With a sigh, she pushed her messy hair out of her face. So much for going out and

finding a surprise for Mark. Now she would have to use what she had in the house instead ... or come up with something altogether.

Chapter 10 – Mark

As requested, Jake hurried to the mansion after Mark called him. Within an hour, he joined Mark in the main security room, and they were both staring at the screens showing the feeds from the perimeter cameras.

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"You never saw anything, did you?" Mark said.

"Nothing at all," Jake said. "But let's take a look at the footage. When did you say you went out again?"

"This morning. I spotted the tracks around 9 a.m."

Each word spoken was like releasing a tiny bit of pressure from a balloon on the verge of popping. Ever since that morning when he spotted the goblin just outside his territory, he'd been running on full drive, thinking of every possible security measure that he'd already taken to protect the mansion, his treasure, and anyone inside.

And then again, what else he might still be able to do—anything he overlooked.

The goblins wouldn't be able to get close to the house without activating the defense turrets, the ones designed to blast holes into anything Mark labeled aggressive. But goblins were tricky bastards. If they had any clue what was in store for them, they might find a way around it.

That was part of why Mark had so many redundancies and alternative forms of protection. Just in case. But now it wasn't just his life on the line if he failed, or if they weren't well enough prepared.

Jake went back to the security camera footage from that morning, zooming in on the area Mark had been investigating earlier and saw signs of the treasure goblins.

He reversed the footage until Mark came into view, and then kept going, and then ...

"There," Mark said, pointing at a bronze-colored blob on the screen.

Jake paused the footage so they could get a better look at the creature's face. Its red eyes glowed even on camera, and its ugly, wart-covered face was round and misshapen, just like its body.

"That's a treasure goblin all right," Jake confirmed. "Never seen one with red eyes, though."

From Mark's memories all of them looked that way. They reversed the footage some more, bringing the recording back enough to show more than a dozen of them cross the screen, sniffing about in search of a way through the wall of trees. Several of them clawed at the trees, but to no success.

It was only a matter of time.

"Looks like you have a pest problem." Jake tilted his head. "Still ... never heard of treasure goblins with red eyes, though. That's super creepy. Is it possible they are cursed too?"

Mark looked closer at the footage. He knew if they kept going back, they would find more glimpses of them on the cameras around the border. This had to be the first time they came so close, otherwise Mark would have smelled them before. "It's possible, I never thought about that before. But I don't think it makes a difference—they're still coming for me, and we have to be ready."

"Yep, yep. What's the plan? I already looked over all the weapons and defenses, everything looks good; you've kept it all well-maintained since you put them up. I learned how to control the technology up here, too, thanks to this big guy." Jake patted the massive, thousand-page instruction manual that Mark had tossed at him to look at on the first day he started working as Mark's security. Asking him to read it

had half been a joke, but now he was glad that Jake took his suggestion seriously—they might need it.

"We can't let them get inside, which means I think our best option is to lure them into a trap," Mark said. "The only trouble is, treasure goblins are smart. It will have to be a really convincing lure."

"If these treasure goblins are as dangerous as you say they are, I doubt Marhan will be safe until we can get rid of them. I'll do whatever I can to help. Luring, fighting them, whatever you need."

Mark nodded, appreciative of his friend's willingness to help. "Okay." He leaned in closer. "Here's the plan."

Mark and Jake talked and planned their next moves in the security room over the following three hours. It wasn't until their stomachs started growling that they finally put an end to their planning and scheming.

It was after dinner already, so Mark grabbed some leftovers from the kitchen, nodding and thanking Maria, one of the elven women he hired for cooking and cleaning. He once considered hiring shifters to help him out, but decided against it because he didn't want anyone getting any ideas about him becoming an Alpha again. That part of his life was over ... and now he just wanted to live out the next part with Jennifer.

He wondered where she was. After hours of worrying about goblin attacks, he just wanted to fall into her arms again, letting the world around them melt away in their embrace. Mark needed a distraction, and the woman he loved was the best kind there was.

After stuffing himself with leftover lasagna, he wandered upstairs in search of her. He pushed open the door to the bedroom. "Jen? You in here?"

She was lying on their king-sized bed, naked except for a transparent, black nightie. He had an excellent view of her round breasts and the curve of her hip, suggestive of so much more.

"I was wondering when you'd finally come up here," Jennifer said, her voice low and seductive. "You look like you could use a way to de-stress."

He drank in the sight of her. In the low light, her skin shimmered, and her eyes were dark with desire. Warmth stirred inside Mark, dipping down his groin into his cock. Fuck, he wanted her. With so much going on since he brought Arabelle back, he and Jennifer hadn't had as much time together.

Mark wanted to fuck her. He wanted to make love to her. He wanted to make her scream and sigh and moan his name ... and he was going to make it all happen. He hardened and flexed against his pants, eager to break free.

"Yeah, I could ..." Mark murmured as he closed the door and crossed the room toward her.

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She sat up onto her knees. He ran his hands through her hair, enjoying the softness of her hair before tilting her face up and planting his mouth on hers. Just one kiss was all it took to ease the stress in his body, each press of her tongue and lips lowering the tension inside him, bringing him closer to relaxation.

Jennifer kneaded his tight arms, using skilled fingers to loosen his muscles. He sighed in relief, finally starting to feel like himself again ... all thanks to her.

She unbuttoned his shirt, running her fingers along his tense chest, again kneading the tension free. Meanwhile, he found the tiny spaghetti straps of her nightie and tipped them off her shoulders, letting the small garment fall down her sides and chest, bringing her breasts out into the open.

While they kissed, he took them both in his hands, squeezing them gently to the rhythm of their mouths. Her tongue and mouth moved quicker with her growing need as Mark's thumbs found her nipples. Jennifer moaned into his mouth, and she arched her neck back, letting him kiss down her jaw, her neck ...

"Mark ..." she moaned, the sound shivering through her whole body.

The delightful sound made him growl in response. He nibbled on her neck, earning more sighs and moans while she brought her hands down to his buckle, desperately working at his pants.

"You've been so stressed," she murmured. "It's my job as your wife to help you with that ... why don't you just relax?"

She freed his cock, taking it in her hand and stroking his thick length. Another rumbling growl escaped him at her touch, and he thrust into her hand while he stroked her, letting the animal inside him free. Letting the last of his stress and worries about the goblins fall away. In this moment, it was just the two of them, building up their desire, closer and closer toward bursting.

He lived for the pleasure, that burning heat she gave him. But Jennifer didn't stroke him for long—as soon as he was hard enough for her liking, she dipped her head down, planting a kiss on the tip of his cock.

"Mmm," she said. "That's right, you're starting to feel better, aren't you? But I can see just how worried you are ... I know this will help."

Before Mark could say anything, she wrapped her mouth around him. Waves of warmth shot through him, stoking the flames deep inside his chest. He arched back, pushing his hips into her so he went deeper into her mouth.

"Oh, fuck, Jennifer," he moaned.

Nothing was better than being with Jennifer ... she knew exactly how to make him sing, as if she were the composer, he the instrument. She rolled her tongue across his length, sending another shuddering cry through him. Mark pushed all the way into her mouth, taking her hair into his hands, keeping the feel of her in his focus as she moved him in and out of her, and he thrust his hips in tune.

He burned from head to toe with need of her. "You're right," he groaned. "This is exactly what I needed."

She sucked him until the fire inside him raged out of control, bringing him close to bursting. His primal wolf energy spiraled through him with each brush of her tongue and lips, each bump against the back of her throat.

Mark's animalistic nature came closer to jumping free, and just as Jennifer let him slip out of her mouth, the wolf inside him leaped free. He pushed her down onto to bed, flipping her over so her ass was in the air.

He smacked her, and she cried out with shocked pleasure as he roughly grabbed her thighs and pulled her against him. He rubbed his wet cock against her pussy, testing to see just how ready she was for him.

"Take me," she moaned. "I need you inside me."

Mark didn't need any more prompting than that. She pushed up onto her hands and knees, arching her back to push into him. He positioned himself to carefully enter her, but she was soaked and he just slipped right in, shoving deeper inside her where it was meant to be.

She squeezed around him, sending a ripple of blazing heat through them both. Mark gripped her hips, holding her ass against his hips so he could push all the way inside. They groaned in unison, her clenching and him throbbing, before he let himself thrust, slapping against her in search of their extreme pleasure.

Jennifer looked over her shoulder back at him, her eyes so filled with trust and love. This was the woman he was meant to be with, the love of his life, his mate. He wanted to confess how he felt about her, to shout from the rooftops just how much he cared about her.

But he knew so much had changed so quickly for her. He didn't want to rush her. And so he would wait until she was ready to hear those words ... or she was ready to say them herself.

She didn't need to say them for him to know how she felt.

Mark slowed his thrusts, making them more slow and deliberate, moving his hips to push against her inner walls at all sorts of amazing angles. From the way she moaned and shuddered, he knew she was loving it just as much as he did.

Each second they were together like this, they came closer to the apex they were searching for. Mark could have finished just like this and they would have both been happy, but he wanted to show her just how much he loved her. So he leaned forward as he slowed his thrusts even more, kissing her spine, her back, up to the back of her neck until he was on top of her, and then he rolled them both onto their sides, bringing her into his arms.

Jennifer's moans deepened when she was lying there beside him, and she wrapped her arms around him. Her nails dug into his forearms, grounding them both in the burning sensation of their lust and pleasure. Their bodies were just vessels for their love and need ... their spirits were linked together, burning like candles from the fire and heat their bodies and love produced.

Warmth turned into raging heat, coiling at the center of Mark's being. Each thrust into Jennifer built them up higher, hotter, more desperate for their ultimate pleasure. Mark could feel it coming: the rush of sensation building up as pinpricks in his arms and legs, his cock. The growl in his throat, rumbling through his chest and into Jennifer's neck.

Her eyes fluttered, and she shifted her head, leaning far enough back for him to kiss her. Tongues and lips burned with the shared heat of their bodies, the heat and smoke rising, embers igniting and combusting.

"Oh god, I can't ..." Jennifer's moans turned sharper, and she bit down on Mark's lip. She shuddered forward, crying out even louder. "Mark, I'm ..."

He felt it. She squeezed around him, pulsing faster and faster around him, pushing

him right over the edge, too. He crushed her body against his, holding her close. She was the most important person in this world to him, and there their love blazed like the sun, infinite and never-ending. Hotter than their minds could handle.

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Panting when the best of it was over, Mark loosened his grip on Jennifer, kissing her shoulder. She moaned lightly, shifting in place. Neither of them wanted to move ... he was content to just stay like this with her, forgetting that there was anything else out there for them to worry about.

He couldn't deny how much he loved this woman. He'd waited his whole life for her, and here she was ... all his. He kissed her cheek, her hair, her ear, until she started giggling.

"What's gotten into you?" she said.

"Mmm, just you." He sighed and hugged her closer to him. "I'm sorry about earlier. I know I got all snappy and scary at you, I didn't mean to. I've just been ... stressed."

She stroked the hair on his arm, twining the dark strands between her fingers. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Since Jennifer was a human, he couldn't tell her the whole truth about the goblins, the magic, everything that was going on. But he didn't want to lie to her, and she deserved to know. It was too early to tell her about what he really was, what was out there. He still could tell her more, though. He knew she wanted more.

"I don't know how to explain it," he said, which was the truth. "It has to do with ... with ..."

"Your past?" Jennifer guessed.

"How did you know?"

She shrugged, which moved both of them, since they were entwined. "You've been very careful not to say anything about how you ended up here, alone in a mansion in the woods. A mansion that's impossible to see unless you're looking for it."

"Well, yeah. It does." Mark kissed her ear with a sigh. "The past always comes back to haunt us at some point."

"I'm here for you if you want to talk about it."

He couldn't tell the truth, but he could still give her broad strokes of the story. That way she would know she really did need to keep safe.

"The reason I don't talk much about my past is because, before I came here ... most of it was erased."

Jennifer frowned. "What do you mean erased?"

"My family, we got involved in something we shouldn't have. People came after us as a result. In the end, everyone I knew was killed. I was the only one who survived," Mark said.

He believed he was the only survivor, at least, since if anyone else had lived through the treasure goblin attack, he wanted to believe that they would have found him by now. In all the years since, he never heard anything about any potential members of his old pack still living.

Jennifer's mouth opened and closed, left speechless. Mark brushed his fingers through her hair; he didn't expect her to say anything, just listen.

"Mark ..." she managed after a minute of him thinking.

"Don't worry, it was a long time ago," he sighed. "The point is, the people who came after us, they're still out there. We've been hunting each other this whole time to no luck ... but the last few months, they've been getting closer. Today, I think they might have found out where we are."

She stiffened in his hold. "After all this time, they would send an assassin after you? Why?" When he didn't respond, she added, "it has to do with your fortune, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "They want it, and they will go to great lengths to get it."

She pulled free of his hold, sitting up to look at him. "Then why are we still here? Shouldn't we take it and run, finding somewhere else to hide?"

"I've been hiding for the last decade, Jennifer. I promise you, I'll do everything in my power to keep you safe ... but I'm tired of running." He took her hands in his, squeezing them. "I don't want you to have to live on the run, either."

"But they took your family from you. I don't want them to take you from me."

"They won't. I promise."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Jake and I have a plan ... and it will work. I don't want you to have to live on the run, either, so this comes to an end now. Our family will be safe."

Jennifer blinked slowly, and then she leaned into him, smiling brightly. "You want a family?"

"If you do." He touched her cheek. "What matters is, for now, that you are careful."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about that. They won't make it anywhere near the house; like I said, Jake and I have a plan."

Jennifer snuggled up close to him again, breathing him in and then resting her head on his chest. "Okay, I trust you."

Mark, too, relaxed with Jennifer by his side, at ease knowing she would be careful until he dealt with the treasure goblins. Later, when this was all over ... he would tell her the whole truth.

Chapter 11 – Jennifer

The next two days were tense and quiet. Mark was gone a lot of the time, supposedly patrolling the grounds in search of his would-be assailants and setting up his plan to deal with them alongside Jake. He spent a lot more time at the mansion, too, but he kept to himself, and Jennifer just tried not to think about what was going on.

Of course, Arabelle wanted to know why they couldn't leave the house, and Jennifer and Dr. Variety tried to pass it off as it just being for the best for her health. Arabelle wasn't having any of that, though, and Jennifer had to spend a lot of time just trying to make sure Arabelle didn't go outside on her own.

It would have been a lot easier to convince her had Jennifer been able to explain what was going on, but she didn't want to try explaining that her new husband's family had been killed by assassins who were after his fortune and now they wanted him, too.

She didn't even want to think what Arabelle's reaction to that would have been.

Regardless, they spent several hours in the sunroom, which had large windows and fresh air, to make up for not going outside. They read what books Mark had lying around, and played chess, but Arabelle didn't seem too pleased regardless.

"I read online that there is a river in the area," Arabelle said. "It would be nice to go on a walk and see it."

"We can't right now, mom. Maybe in a few days," Jennifer said, moving her knight across the chessboard.

"Why not?"

Jennifer just shook her head, tired of trying to come up with different ways to say the same thing. She couldn't blame Arabelle for being restless; she was, too.

In response, Arabelle completely disregarded the rules and captured Jennifer's knight.

On the afternoon of day two, Arabelle went for a nap, and Jennifer went out to the kitchen in search of lunch. Jake was in there making a sandwich. With one half stuffed in his mouth, he said, "want one?"

"Sure, that would be nice," she said and leaned against the counter. The kitchen was large, the kind that should have been equipped with a whole staff, but Mark only ever had two staff members besides Jake at a time.

Now that she knew what was going on with the assassins, it made more sense why this whole place was as hidden as possible, including very few people knowing about it. Mark didn't want to put anyone else in danger for his sake.

"If I have to hear my mom complain about chess rules one more time, I'm going to go crazy," Jennifer said.

Jake gave her a sympathetic look while he prepared another sandwich. "It should only be for a few more days. We're going to put an end to this."

He spread mayo on the sandwich, and placed cheese and ham on top of it, and Jennifer watched in silence. When he finished and handed it to her, he said, "how much do you know?"

"Enough." She took the plate. "Thanks."

"I'll see if I can find something to better keep Mrs. Wright occupied. I'm sorry that you have to deal with all this, and that you can't tell her, but it's for the best."

"I know." She bit into the sandwich, chewed, swallowed. "So what's your stake in all this?"

He shrugged. "Mark is a good friend; he's helped me out when I really needed it. Zoe and I are together because of him. I couldn't leave him to deal with this all alone."

"Can you two really handle these ... assassins that are coming after him?"

"They're not as refined as you're thinking, just dangerous. They won't be slipping through the windows in the middle of night. At least, not without getting detected by our security systems. Don't worry, everything is under control."

From the way Mark and Jake both talked about what was going on, Jennifer was starting to form the impression that they were keeping something important from her. At least, besides any of their plans for dealing with the attackers. The fact that they were being attacked at all was such a strange concept to her—that wasn't the sort of

thing that happened to normal people.

But she was going to trust that in a few days, this would all be over, and she could go back to her dreamlike life with Mark at her side, her mom in recovery, looking forward to a bright future.

"Anyway," she said, pushing off the counter, "I better go back to watch my mom. Don't want her running off."

Jennifer finished her sandwich on the way down the hall to the room that was now Arabelle's. She planned on just sitting on the window seat on the opposite side of her mom's bed and playing a game on her phone until her mom woke up again. But when she pushed the door open, there was no sleeping figure beneath the blankets.

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They were thrown across the bed in disarray, as if they'd been thrown off in a hurry. Jennifer's pulse spiked. "Mom?" she cried out, but there was no response.

The ensuite bathroom door was open and the bathroom behind it empty. Jennifer rushed down the hall, throwing open doors in search of Arabelle, but there was no sign of her anywhere.

"Mom? This isn't funny, where did you go?" she called out.

She wanted to believe her mom was just playing a prank on her, but the immediate fear that leaped on her chest like a rabid wildcat was that the assassins after Mark did make it into the house, and they took Arabelle instead of him.

"Mom!"

Footsteps sounded nearby, and she whirled in their direction, only to find Jake turning around the corner. "What's wrong?" he said.

"My mom is missing, I can't find her anywhere."

"Shit." He glanced around, and he had to be thinking the same thing as her: the house was so damn big that if she was hiding somewhere inside, it would take forever to find her. "It'll be fine. Stay calm. You take a look through the house, I'll go outside."

But what if she hurt herself?

What if she was taken?

What if it was neither, and she'd tricked them and ran outside on her own?

"She has to have gone outside," Jennifer said, trying to convince herself of the most likely scenario. "Let me come help you."

She followed him to the threshold, but he stopped her. "No, you have to stay inside, Mark's orders. I'll find Mrs. Wright, don't worry, okay? Everything is going to be fine."

"She's my mom, I have to help you. It'll be faster with the both of us."

"And Mark will kill us both if you go outside in the middle of this mess. The chances of anything happening are low, but for everyone's peace of mind, just wait here, check all of the rooms. Upstairs, too, just in case. I'll find her and be back in a few minutes."

Tears stung Jennifer's eyes. She didn't want to make Mark and Jake worry more by going outside when there was potential danger there. So she bit her lip and shoved down as much of her concern as she could, willing herself to sit on the sidelines for now if that was what it took to make sure her mom was safe.

"Be fast," she said. "If you're not back by the time I look through every room, I'm coming out to search, too."

Jake nodded his assent, and then he was gone, shutting the door behind him.

Jennifer took a minute to collect herself, steady her breathing, and wipe the tears blurring her eyes.

"Mom, are you in here somewhere?" she called out. "Please, you're making us all worried."

She searched behind curtains, in closets, under tables. Jennifer would much rather find that her mom was just trying to trick her than her being taken or hurt. She wanted Arabelle to jump out of a hiding spot and spook her, but as Jennifer ran through all the rooms on the first floor, the less and less it grew likely that that was going to happen. There was no reason for Arabelle to go hiding in the house in the first place ... it didn't make any sense.

Jennifer played back the moments after she left Arabelle's bedroom in her head over again. Arabelle had tucked herself into bed, and Jennifer hadn't noticed anything abnormal besides her mom's grumpiness, but Dr. Variety said that was because of the medication; she was starting to get her energy and mobility back, only to get locked inside the house.

After leaving the bedroom, Jennifer never heard the front door open, but she had gone to the kitchen and was chatting with Jake. She'd only been gone for a few minutes, that was plenty of time for her mother to sneak out of the house if she had really wanted to.

Or enough for someone quick to come in and snatch her away.

Jennifer shook her head, placing her index fingers to her temples. No, that didn't happen, Mark and Jake both assured her it wouldn't.

Arabelle broke the rules and went outside. But Jennifer was still overreacting. Her nerves were on edge because of Mark and Jake's warnings, and because of tales about assassins and Mark's family. They both said that being in the house was safe. So long as Arabelle didn't wandertoofar, she had to be fine wherever she was outside, too. That was what Jennifer believed.

But just thechance that something would go wrong had her pacing between the rooms, trying to think of where she hadn't checked.

Jake would find her outside. It wasn't like Arabelle was the most mobile right now, either. She couldn't have gone far.

As the minutes passed into ten, and then twenty, Jennifer became less convinced of her own beliefs—the truth she tried to convince herself of. Jake was supposed to be back by now.

The only reason that would happen was if something went wrong.

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Jennifer couldn't wait inside anymore. It had been a mistake to let him go alone, to let him convince her to stay in the house while he looked for Arabelle.

She cracked open the front door, peeking into the landscape of green outside. The trees shifted in the warm, midday wind, and there wasn't anything amiss. It looked like a regular summer day, not one clouded by the threat of assassins coming for her husband.

Where was he? He'd been gone for much longer than usual, too.

Now when Jennifer stepped out of the house, she had three reasons. She had to find the others and make sure they were safe.

The front yard technically spanned a larger area than she could take in with a quick scan, but if Jake, Mark, or Arabelle were out there somewhere, she would have spotted them. After determining that they weren't out front, Jennifer hurried around the mansion, keeping to the makeshift path so she didn't lose her way.

She checked all of the spots where she and Arabelle usually went, but there was no sign of her after circling the whole mansion. Another ten minutes gone, and no sign of anyone.

"Mom!" Jennifer called out, starting to panic. "Jake? Mark? Where are you?"

Her words echoed through the trees, but there was no response.

Somehow, when she stared out into the forest, this time she didn't see the usual serene

landscape that shielded her from the busyness of the city. Instead, it was as if the forest had gained a sinister complexion, the leaves staring down at her with evil eyes. Watching.

Jennifer hesitated at the thought of delving deeper into the forest. Something was wrong with this place, and until now, she hadn't noticed a thing.

But if she stayed behind, she might never find her family. She might be left alone in the mansion. After finally finding love with Mark, she knew she would rather run out into the woods searching for him, risking death, than staying behind any longer only to find that she lost him and her mom and she survived.

Mark was her husband. Arabelle was her mother. And she wasn't going to let anyone take them from her.

She scanned the part of the landscape that she knew was the house, searching for a utility cabinet. After patting the trees and cleverly designed exterior walls of the mansion, she found a closet with some gardening equipment. The lawn clippers looked like a decent weapon, but they were rusted from too many years of disuse. Her second choice was a shovel. The edge seemed sharp enough, and the handle was sturdy.

With the shovel held out in front of her, she cautiously approached the edge of the woods. Tree branches grabbed at her clothes like the hands of malevolent spirits, but she yanked herself free, her eyes set on every hint of movement in the wilds.

"Mom?" she called. "Are you out here?"

The underbrush shifted, followed by a snapping twig. Jennifer jumped, whirling around with her shovel just in time to see a startled stag leap behind a tree and disappear deeper into the woods.

Jennifer wiped sweat and fear from her brow. There wasn't anything but animals out here, what was she so afraid of? The chances of a wolf or bear coming so close were minimal, too.

But that didn't explain the sinister feeling she got from the forest, or how Jake, Mark, and Arabelle had all but disappeared.

Jennifer tried to push down the rest of the fear pounding in her heart, but it was impossible. "Mom! Where are you?"

Her steps grew hurried and more frantic with each call. She rushed through the trees, her sleeves tearing from all the wild branches. Now she was approaching the edge of Mark's property, she had to be, but still no sign of anyone ... and she couldn't have made her way back to the mansion if she wanted to.

All around her, the trees looked familiar and yet unfamiliar. She could wander out here for days without finding her way back.

A shiver coursed through her, as if she was being watched. She tightened her grip on her shovel.

And then she heard her mother scream. A high-pitched, terrified sound that made Jennifer's whole body lurch in that direction.

"Mom!" she screamed, her feet already moving way ahead of her voice.

Between the trees, she spotted a small clearing—and Arabelle was running right through it and toward Jennifer. Behind her, a little bronze-colored creature about the size of a medium dog raced after her.

"Jenny!" Arabelle cried out just as Jennifer leaped through the bushes. She pushed

her mother behind her and swung her shovel at the snarling creature.

The flat of the shovel smacked it over the head, knocking it back and into the grass, leaving it to lie there twitching. She held her shovel out to hit it again, to make sure it wasn't going to jump back up at her, but it stayed groaning like an old man in the grass.

She could have smacked it again, made sure it didn't wake up. But the fact that she'd hit it surprised her. She definitely wasn't a killer. For now, though, it seemed like it was unconscious.

Jennifer turned back to her mom, and they embraced. Arabelle was cold and shaking.

"What the hell is that thing?" Jennifer said.

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"I-I've never seen anything like it," Arabelle said, sobbing. "Oh God, I saw it wave at me from my bedroom window, I thought it was a child lost in the woods! I followed it out here, and I ..."

"Shhh."

Jennifer heard the bushes nearby rustling. She and Arabelle turned in time to see another pair of red eyes in the shadows.

And then another. And another.

"Jenny, I don't think that shovel of yours is going to be enough this time ..." Arabelle whispered.

Jennifer grabbed her mom's hand, squeezing tight. "Run!"

They raced back across the clearing, in the direction of the mansion. The red-eyed creatures jumped out and ran after them.

Chapter 12 – Mark

Mark sniffed around in the bushes, but today his senses were confused. There were too many unfamiliar scents in the woods—familiar and yet unfamiliar. The unwashed smell of the goblin lingered in the mix, but it was as if someone else was tracking them, too. Following their every move. And it wasn't him or Jake.

None of that mattered, though. Today was the day he led the goblins into a trap. He

and Jake had all the details planned—they brought down one part of the protections around the main property. The goblins would see it as an opportunity to break in ... when in reality, the second they crossed the border, they would be incinerated.

Those carefully detailed plans fell to pieces the second he heard Jennifer scream. He growled and raced off in that direction, uncaring for anything but that sound. His heart beat with the thrum of fear.

What was she doing out here?

Why wasn't she in the house?

The questions swirled in his mind up until the moment he found the part of the tree barrier that he intentionally broke off. The scent of treasure goblins was thick in the air, thicker than it ever had been before.

They were here, and there were lots of them.

And his mate wasn't inside.

Mark howled and pumped his legs harder than he ever had before. Their plan to take care of the goblins as they passed through the fence had failed ... but how?

Now his mate, and his mother in law, were in danger.

Mark heard Jennifer and Arabelle in the trees before he saw them. They passed through the trees, running back toward the mansion, Jennifer with a shovel, waving it back at the goblins that were in pursuit.

Six of them in all, but Mark knew there were more hiding in the trees. He could hear them. He could smell them.

Nothing out here was safe.

One of the goblins grabbed hold of Jennifer's shovel, using its inhuman strength to rip it from her hands. She fell back onto the ground, and that was when Mark pounced. He snarled as his claws and fangs bit into the goblin, and he snapped its neck in one clean break. Spinning around, he ducked out of the way of another that threw itself at him.

His claws flashed out, hitting and felling another, which landed on the forest floor with a thud. With two down, the last four looked at him with a measure of hesitation, long enough for Jennifer to climb back onto her feet.

Mark backed toward her, his hackles raised as he stood by her defensively. But the goblins regained the confident stances. More eyes appeared in the trees; their reinforcements.

Mark turned his head to make eye contact with Jennifer. He hadn't wanted to reveal his true form to her this way, but assuming they made it out of this alive, he would have a lot of explaining to do.

But when he looked at her face, none of the fear in her eyes was directed at him. The way she looked at him, it was like she knew it was him. The connection they shared was more than enough for her to look at him and, even if she didn't quite understand what was going on, she trusted him. She knew he would keep her safe.

That's what he wanted to believe, at least, when her expression softened.

He jerked his head in the direction of the mansion, and she nodded.

Jennifer grabbed her mom's arm. "Back to the house!"

And they ran.

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Goblins leaped from the trees above the second Jennifer and Arabelle moved. They missed, landing on the ground beside them, reaching out for them with clawed hands. Mark clawed one into oblivion before it could touch his mate, and then he turned to dodge the attack of another ... but there were too many.

One latched onto his side. Another grabbed his back leg, weighing him down. Too many for him to fight. Too many to run from.

He just had to hold them off long enough for Arabelle and Jennifer to make it to the mansion. Even if he fell here, the goblins wouldn't make it through ... the defenses were too solid.

Mark rolled, trying to throw off the goblins holding him prisoner. He mauled the next one that came closer to his front paws, but another jumped onto his back, digging into his back with sharp claws. They scraped and cut him, sending spikes of pain all through his sides.

With a howl, he kicked up and tried to run, but the goblins were too heavy. He could barely move, barely stand ... and all around him, the goblins cackled like little demented children. They would eat him alive if he didn't stop them.

So foolish, to think he could outsmart these goblins ... but at least he would die having found the woman he loved withall his heart. Knowing that she still lived, and he had sacrificed himself for her.

Amongst the goblin's victorious cries, a booming roar silenced them.

A massive tiger leaped into the fray, a streak of amber and black as it clawed the goblins from Mark's back. In the instant he was free, Mark bit into the goblin right in front of him, cutting down another three with an angry swipe of his front claws, and finally kicked off the goblin on his hind leg.

Even with Jake in his tiger form here to help the fight, there were too many goblins. A dozen more replaced the ones they defeated, swarming around them from all sides.

They'd vastly underestimated just how many treasure goblins had come hunting them.

They had to get back to the mansion—rely on the defenses they put in place just for this purpose. Otherwise, they didn't stand a chance.

Jake and Mark fought their way free of the horde of goblins, sending another half-dozen of the wart-covered creatures into the dirt. As soon as there was an opening, they ran in the same direction as Jennifer and Arabelle, toward safety.

They broke through the tree line. In the distance, Mark made out the glinting window made of stained glass in the colors and shapes of scattered leaves. Safety.

Just below, he spotted Arabelle rushing into the house. Jennifer stopped on the front steps, watching. No, go inside! he wanted to yell at her, but she wouldn't understand him in his wolf form.

On the edges of his vision, the true extent of his 'pest' problem came into view. Fifty more treasure goblins swarmed the grounds, creeping toward the house. Several attempted to cross the threshold and closer to the mansion, only to be shot down with blasts of light and fire.

Only ash was left behind.

At least the defenses worked. He could fight here knowing that, without a doubt, Arabelle and Jennifer were safe. Another bzzz sound and various flashes told him that more goblins tried to cross, only to get incinerated, as had always been the plan.

More waited in the trees. If enough of them charged at once, would the cannons be able to keep up?

Mark didn't want to think about that.

He and Jake rushed toward the mansion, but the space to make it in safely became smaller and smaller until everywhere in front of them was blocked by dozens more of the shiny, warty, ugly little creatures. They grinned up at Mark and Jake with their sharp teeth and claws, some already making to attack.

They knew they were significantly weaker than shifters ... but they won in number by a landslide.

Shit. Mark tossed his head to the side, searching for another escape route. The path behind them was blocked, as were their sides.

This time, it seemed like they were done for.

Mark glanced at Jake. Back at home, his mate, too, was waiting for him. Mark had dragged him into this mess ... a messy vendetta that should have just ended with his death. Then no one else would have had to get hurt.

Now, Jake would fall with him.

Yet, Jake didn't seem upset. The look he gave Mark was more like a reassurance that he wanted to go fighting rather than standing around, cornered. In a split second, they made a plan with simply their eyes. They might not make it to the protective zone

around the mansion where the defenses were activated, but they were sure as hell going to try.

Mark met Jennifer's eyes way in the distance. He would hold her again. He would kiss her, make love to her, after all of this was over.

Or he would die dreaming of it.

The first goblins neared again, falling instantly to a flurry of claws and fangs. Mark and Jake protected each other's flanks, but there were still too many goblins for the two of them. They killed two, for five more to replace them. They scraped at Mark's sides, slowly wearing him down ...

And then there was a howl in the distance. No, not one howl, three, and then six. Mark's ears twitched, searching for the source, but it was difficult to pinpoint through all the growling of the goblins as they attacked.

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Mark and Jake took down another six, but the goblins who came in next were less enthusiastic about the attack. They shifted about like a wave on the ocean, turning toward the arrival of six wolves to the left of the swarm.

The goblins on the right kept attacking Mark and Jake, slashing, clawing, falling to the ground with a thud. Between the skirmishes and trying to keep track of Jake, Mark tried to get a better glimpse of the wolves joining the fight.

The largest of the pack was snow-white with eyes like ice. He tore a goblin to shreds, then looked up and met Mark's gaze. The wolf nodded to him, a ghost from his past life.

He was supposed to be dead. All of the wolves around him—dead. But Mark also recognized the shaggy gray wolf fighting alongside the white one, the brown and black one ... and the others.

It was impossible for Mark not to recognize them: he'd grown up alongside them.

No way. These were the survivors of his old pack. The ones he thought were dead.

Excitement burned through Mark, and after defeating another goblin, he threw his head back and howled his acknowledgement of them. With the addition of them to the fight, they stood a chance against the massive amount of goblins. The other wolves howled in turn, and with the flow of the fight changing so the goblins focused most of their might on the newcomers, Mark and Jake finally made it to the safe zone around the mansion.

Waiting on the steps, looking terrified, was Jennifer. From here, Mark would make sure nothing broke through to reach her. But he couldn't abandon his pack members, either. So another plan formed in his mind.

He threw his head back, growling at Jake and jerking his head up toward the light rays firing down at the goblins. A bunch of them weren't firing as often as they should because the goblins weren't coming close enough, but Jake could go back in and control them.

Jake looked up at the motionless turrets, nodded, and ran off toward the house. Jennifer skittered out of the way as the massive tiger leaped up the steps, barreling through the open doors.

Inside, Arabelle screamed, but Mark knew he could rely on Jake to get the turrets under control. He circled the edge of the safe zone, inching toward the wolves slaughtering the waves of oncoming goblins. On his own, Mark didn't risk just running in a diagonal line straight for them. Instead, he dragged goblins along the edges right into the zone protected by the turrets, letting them go as soon as he heard the bzzz sound of the light firing.

A few minutes later, and the rest of the turrets activated. Three started firing wildly into the horde furthest from the wolves. Another flashed and glowed with a bright white light before slowly firing a scorching ray of fire in a perfect line, burning up a dozen goblins in its path before puttering out. A third one picked off some of the goblins nearest to Mark, clearing a way toward the other wolves.

Mark tore into more goblins, finally reaching the other wolves who were currently in battle. The white wolf, Ryel, nodded at him again, and they fought alongside each other, clawing and cutting their way through the horde. Mark checked back often to make sure that Jennifer was safe, as winning the fight meant little to him if he made it out of here and she didn't. But by the doors, she was safe from the goblins. In the

yard, goblins rushed at the wolves from all directions, but between the wolves and the guns from the mansion, they thinned the tide, and at last, the battle turned in their favor.

When only a dozen or so goblins were left in his immediate vicinity, Mark noticed how the leftovers began their retreat, running off into the trees, terrified of their horrible defeat. Mark and Ryel stayed in the heat of battle, ripping apart the last few treasure goblins.

Axel, Finn, and the other wolves howled and snarled, running off in pursuit of the ones fleeing. Mark wanted to chase after them, too—after coming this far, ten years of waiting for this moment, he wanted to make sure that none of them could come back to haunt him, his pack, or his wife and family ever again.

But he trusted the others to deal with it. He had to make sure Jennifer was okay. Even if she was spared from the brunt of the fight, watching all of this ... not knowing what was going on, it couldn't have been easy.

Mark and Ryel finished off the last of the goblins that stayed behind to fight. The yard smelled like death and unwashed bodies—the signature smell of the goblins. He was breathing heavily from the fight, covered in uncomfortable scratches, but thankfully nothing life-threatening.

Looking out at all the death around him, Mark wasn't proud of how things had turned out. He wished it hadn't needed to be this way. But it was him, his wife, and his friends ... or them.

Next to him, Ryel shook out his fur, gave Mark a knowing look, and then jerked his head up to the stairs, where Jennifer was still waiting.

They had so much to talk about. Mark and his old pack members ... the ones he

thought were dead. But Ryel showed with his body language that he was more than happy to wait a couple of minutes.

For now, Mark had to go check on Jennifer.

He ran toward her, slowing as he approached the stone steps and looked up into her worried face.

Chapter 13 – Jennifer

The jet-black wolf climbed the steps in front of her, and apprehension picked up again in Jennifer's weary body. Her instincts told her to back away from the predator, covered in the blood of countless kills.

She'd watched him rip apart dozens of those strange little creatures ... the ones that had attacked her.

The wolf saved her and Arabelle, as had the tiger and those other wolves.

But this wolf was different than the others. Jennifer wasn't afraid of him ... his eyes were so warm and familiar, the green of deep forests, the eyes of the man she loved and married.

How was that possible?

He sat on the step below her, lowering his head. Waiting.

Jennifer hesitantly reached out, running her fingers through the glossy fur. His ears twitched just like a dog's when she scratched behind them. With a smile, she realized for certain that this wolf wasn't a danger to her at all—he was her protector.

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White light spread from the crown of his head, turning his black hair into thinner hair. The wolf's head flattened into that of a man's, and Mark's familiar, loving face looked up at her.

As his arms and legs reshaped into those of a human, Jennifer's eyes moved up and down his naked, muscular body, sticking to the red, bleeding cuts along his sides.

Her lip trembled to see that it was him after all. Joy that he was safe, alive ... and all of this was over.

"Mark, you're hurt," she said as she reached out to brush her fingers along the cuts.

"I'm all right. They're already healing," he murmured, taking her hands in his. He was right: beneath her touch, the wounds sealed over, leaving nothing but dried blood.

Jennifer didn't realize her hands were shaking until Mark squeezed them. He pulled her against him, and a sob escaped her throat. Just feeling safe in his arms again ... it seemed so impossible.

"Oh, Mark," she cried. "I was so worried. I ... had to go out, and if I hadn't, my mom ..."

"Shh, shh, it's okay. Everyone is safe. It's all over now."

Jennifer's mind was abuzz, just her being so afraid and confused left her feeling overwhelmed, but now that Mark had her in his arms, everything seemed like it was going to be fine again. Slowly her mind began to settle, and her breathing calmed,

and her thousand other questions about the events that had just passed came to the surface.

What were those creatures? What was Mark? What was with the tiger, and the other wolves?

What kind of madness had she gotten involved in by moving here and marrying Mark?

After a few minutes, she slowly peeled herself from Mark's hold, and they sat together on the steps, hand-in-hand. She couldn't stop thinking about how he was naked, his muscles still rippling with the adrenaline of a fight ... but Jennifer had too many questions to let that train of thought get too far.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," Jennifer said.

Mark ran a hand through his hair, sighing deeply. "Where should I start?"

"With you."

He blinked tired eyes at her, but that infinite green always had a way of making her feel safe. She knew that, based on what just happened to them, whatever he said was going to sound crazy ... but Jennifer had no reason not to trust him, especially after he'd saved her life today.

"I'm what is known as a wolf shifter," Mark said. "I can take the form of both man and wolf at will. And the other wolves that were here, helping us, they're like me."

She noticed how his voice changed when he mentioned the other wolves. "Who are the others?"

"I thought they were all dead. Ten years I've lived thinking I was the only one who survived the goblins that attacked our pack ... but here they are. They came out of nowhere. And without them we wouldn't have ..." He shook his head, reining in his rambling. "They're my pack, Jen. The family I thought was dead."

Jennifer squeezed his hand, realizing just how shocking that had to be for him. "That's ... Mark, that's good news, isn't it? You have your family again."

"Of course it's good news, but you're my family now." He smiled. "Are you worried about what I am?"

She shook her head. "I knew who you were when I saw you in the woods. I don't know how, I just knew. It was scary, but I know you were trying to protect us. And you did. I couldn't ever be afraid of you."

Relief washed over Mark's face, and Jennifer couldn't help but smile.

"I'm more worried about everything else that happened," Jennifer said. "What about the tiger? The gross-looking creatures?"

Mark became quiet for a moment, nervously rubbing her fingers. "The world is a lot more complicated than you've been led to believe. The wolves like me and my pack, we're far from the only shifters out there. Wolves, bears, lions, and yeah, tigers. But also dragons."

"D-dragons?" Jennifer stuttered.

He chuckled. "After watching us almost get mauled by a horde of goblins, you're questioning the existence of dragons?"

"I was kind of hoping the murder gremlins in our yard were the extent of it, actually,"

she joked. "So that's what they were? Goblins?"

They didn't look anything like the goblins depicted in various fantasy shows she'd seen over her lifetime.

"Treasure goblins, specifically," he said.

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"Ah." That started clicking pieces of the story together in her head. "So these treasure goblins, they were the ones hunting you down, trying to take your fortune."

He nodded. "Now that you know that part, you might as well know the rest of the story: the treasure was theirs to start with. Our pack made a mistake, thinking that it didn't belong to anyone. But it turned out that the treasure was cursed, making us easy targets for the goblins when they came looking for it later on."

A curse didn't sound good.

Mark must have noticed the alarm in her expression because he immediately said, "the curse isn't in effect right now, it's okay. What happened today was a long-awaited result of what happened to my pack ten years ago." He looked out into the trees, where, far in the distance, they could hear the faint sound of howling wolves. "It all ends today. We get to return to our lives. And you and I ... we get to start ours, if that's what you still want."

It was a lot of information that was thrown at her all at once. Goblins and dragons, as well as presumably other types of creatures. People who could turn into wolves and bears. A cursed treasure. Mark's long-lost pack, returned.

But in the end, even though it was a lot, it wasn't enough to scare Jennifer away. Now that she knew the truth, so many more things started to make sense about Mark and his strange behaviors.

And none of that changed how she felt about him. If anything ... it made her love him more.

For days, she'd been worried about whether it was too soon to fall in love. But after all the craziness that just happened, she didn't want Mark to go another second not knowing how she felt about him. She was ready to hear how he really felt about her.

Jennifer leaned in close, wrapping her arms around Mark's neck. She stared into his dark green eyes, and they glittered like gemstones in the light, curious and so full of love.

She smiled. "I love you, Mark. You being a wolf shifter doesn't change a thing. You're my one and only. No matter what's happened, or what happens in the future ... I want you."

Mark tightened his hold on her, dipping his face closer to capture her lips and breath. She gasped under the ferocity of his mouth, so hungry for her. A wave of heat rose inside her to match him, ready for more. For him to make her his all over again.

"I love you too," he murmured against her lips. "Ever since you came here, I've been drawn to you ... you're the one for me, Jen. You're my mate."

He traced her jaw, rubbing her cheek when she drew back. She didn't know what that meant—to be a wolf shifter's mate. But she had an idea ... and she liked it.

They kissed again, and Jennifer crushed his mouth against hers, eager for more. Just kisses weren't enough.

"Why don't we go clean up first?" Mark said. "I think we'll have a lot more fun that way ..."

Jennifer peeled away from Mark, remembering how he was covered in the blood from various slain goblins, as well as his own, and she gave an embarrassed laugh.

"That sounds like a good idea," she said.

But still, he swooped her up in his arms, carrying her up and into the house.

Chapter 14 – Mark

Mark wanted Jennifer in the shower, and if it hadn't been for the blood, he would have helped himself to her.

Instead, he waited until the water was off. He toweled himself off, and when she turned away, drying her back, he came up behind her, pulling her soft, supple form against his muscular body. The towel fell to the floor between them, and Mark enjoyed the feel of her nakedness pressed against him.

His cock, already hard, pressed between her ass cheeks, where he ground against her. She moaned and arched against him.

"Have I ever told you what an amazing body you have?" Mark said.

"No, but I like where you're going with this ..." Jennifer moaned again when he kissed her neck.

"I love your neck." He ran his hands up her stomach, taking her perfect breasts in his hands. "Your breasts"—he pinched her nipples, and she shivered in his hold—"your nipples."

He kneaded her breasts, slowly working her up from quiet panting to louder moans, cries of eagerness. Just like him, she wanted more ... but Mark was enjoying himself, keeping her at the ready. Now that there were no treasure goblins out there, at least not any that would be coming after him any time soon ... he had all the time in the world. And he planned to take it—starting with spending as much time as he needed

to properly worship Jennifer's body.

His wife, his mate, the love of his life.

He wasn't in any rush to have his way with her. They had a whole lifetime of that ahead of them. But now, basking in his victory, their confession of love, he wanted to be slow, careful, to enjoy every moment.

"What else?" Jennifer gasped.

"Mmm." He pushed against her butt again. "Your ass." He released his hold on her breasts, leaving her shivering by the time he was done with her. His hands traveled downward, where he squeezed her thighs. "Your thighs ..." And he spread them apart, a finger roamed in search of the precious territory hidden within. He found what he was looking for, and she gasped, squirming in his hold. "Your clit ..." Slipping his finger further between her folds, a groan escaped Jennifer, turning into a gasp when he found her entrance. He twirled it around the edges before pushing inside. "Your pussy."

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Jennifer writhed with pleasure as he pushed in deeper. With each flick against her inner walls, she moaned again, a chorus of music to his ears. He pushed in deeper, loving the way she squeezed him tighter, desperate for each sensation, big and small. Her ass pushed harder against him, giving him better access to her, but also making his cock throb with need.

She was right there, ready for more of him. Mark swirled inside of her, building up their shared heat with each movement. The connection they shared transcended the physical realm, rising right through their bodies, twining them together on another plane. Their souls were attuned to each other; Jennifer's pleasure was his pleasure, his pleasure was hers.

And their desire ravaged them from the inside out.

With each cry of delight from her, Mark's anticipation rose. He wanted more of her, to be with her the way he should be with his mate. Kissing her neck softly, he fingered her harder, pushing her closer to the edge they both craved.

Her cries became louder, less coherent. She squeezed her thighs around his hand, locking his hand in place. Before he took his own pleasure, she had to reach hers. He twirled his fingers, finding the spot that made her cry out the loudest, pushing her to her limits. And Mark held her as she soared up, crying out as she reached that high point. She quivered against him, leaning on him for support as she convulsed with pleasure.

"M-mark," she moaned, "oh ..."

By the time he withdrew his hand from inside her, Jennifer couldn't stand. He swept her into his arms, kissing her, stealing the sounds of her lingering moans and gasps. Her tongue and lips tried to match the intensity of his need for her, but she was still recovering from her orgasm.

"I'm not done with you yet," Mark said against her lips before laying her on her back on the bed.

With her hips at the edge of the bed, he positioned himself between her thighs, rubbing himself up and down her soaked folds. She looked up at him with lust-filled eyes, a spark that showed him she still wanted more. They would always want more of each other ... that was what it meant to be mates.

A growl of pent-up need surged forward, and Mark slipped inside her. Warmth cascaded through him, his insides lit on fire with a thousand different pleasurable sensations. Jennifer's pussy wrapped around him, slowly beginning to satisfy his aching need as he buried himself deeper inside her.

She arched back with a moan, grabbing at the sheets. She groaned something unintelligible, but how she struggled to find words only urged Mark on. He needed more of her, to make her go so mad with pleasure she couldn't see or think straight.

He wanted to be right there with her, both of them so overcome with each other that they couldn't do anything else ...

Jennifer's breasts bounced and swayed as he thrust into her, each slap against her thighs building their pleasure higher, hotter, closer to the eternal flames of their love. Because that was the ultimate dream, wasn't it? To try and find a way to show just how much they meant to each other.

The language didn't exist to describe just how much he loved Jennifer, but with their

bodies, uncovering emotions and physical feelings they couldn't describe, they might just come close.

Burning heat filled Mark, and he rose like smoke, like a phoenix reborn from the ashes of his old life, and Jennifer was the one who brought him back to life. He leaned over top of her, slowing his thrusts, bringing in a steady, pleasurable rhythm. Their mouths met, kisses between gasps and eager sighs.

Heat burned behind Mark's eyes, his groin, twisting and burning, desperate to break free. His insides shuddered as Jennifer squeezed around him, and then wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him flat against her. He kissed her neck, his wolf side breaking free and biting her neck as the burning coils inside him snapped. Pleasure exploded through him, intensified by Jennifer's nails digging into his back.

There, in that moment, they were truly one. Fire flew through them both, and they reached the top of the world. Only in the seconds that followed did their motions slow, their gasps quiet, the real world return to them.

Mark cradled Jennifer in his arms, kissing her neck, jaw, lips with the tender care his mate deserved.

"I love you," Jennifer said, breathless, when his mouth found hers again. "I'll love you forever."

He smiled against her mouth. He was the happiest man alive: safe, his pack alive, the woman of his world, his mate, in his arms. It was crazy how in a short week, he went from slowly coming out of his shell to this. His past was behind him, and the future ahead ... it seemed almost too good to be true.

"I love you too," he said. "And with each passing day, I'll love you even more ..."

Chapter 15 – Jennifer

"It's official," Dr. Variety said, putting her clipboard down. "The cancer is in full remission—you're in the clear, Mrs. Wright."

Jennifer screamed with happiness, hugging and squeezing Arabelle tightly. Tears pooled in both of their eyes, to finally know for sure that her mom was going to live.

"Careful, Jenny," Arabelle said. "You have the baby to think about."

Jennifer giggled and let her mom go. She placed a hand on her rounding belly, where her and Mark's first baby was slowly preparing to enter the world. She was five months along and already starting to lose her balance with how big her little one was getting inside her, but she wanted to believe that her child would want to hug his or her grandma, too.

After months of treatment with Dr. Variety's care and the new experimental pills, it seemed that Jennifer had nothing to worry about at all. Her mom wasn't going anywhere, and her child would have a grandma.

With the cancer gone, Arabelle could start living her life again.

"It seems like I won't need to stick around here much longer," Arabelle said, standing up from her chair. She wore a warm woolly sweater on account of the snow outside. "Maybe I'll open a shop in the city, just like before Dad left us."

Jennifer smiled. "That's such a great idea." The baby kicked, and she placed a hand on her belly to feel the vibrations. "Maybe I can help once the baby is born."

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"We'll talk about it, hm? Now it looks like that sweet husband of yours wants your attention."

Smiling, Jennifer looked up to see Mark waiting in the doorway. "Good morning, love," he said, taking her into his arms and planting a kiss on her forehead. "Seems like I made it in time to hear the good news."

Jennifer twisted the wedding ring around her finger. Mark got it for her shortly after the whole stressful incident with the treasure goblins, to officially mark the turning of a new chapter in their lives. But to make sure they didn't forget the old one, she still wore the beer-shaped medal he won for her at the beer festival earlier that year from time to time.

"She's all clear." Dr. Variety winked at him, and Jennifer, too, grinned.

It wasn't just science and medicine that saved her mom, but a touch of magic, too. Jennifer didn't know about it until a few months ago, but apparently Dr. Variety's mind exercises were a type of magic to help Arabelle's body naturally fight off the cancer alongside her regular treatments.

"Remember, no smokes!" Jennifer joked as they left the room, even when after this experience, Arabelle had sworn off smoking permanently.

The whole ordeal with the treasure goblins had freaked out Arabelle, but Jennifer and Mark decided not to tell her the whole truth about what happened. They didn't think she was ready to step into the world of magic and creatures that Jennifer was now a part of—she just assumed that her medicine made her hallucinate the creatures.

But one day, they would tell her the whole story.

Jennifer's hand traveled down to her belly again; her child was still kicking. Mark placed his hand on top of hers, grinning at how enthusiastically their child was kicking.

"Yep, the baby has the energy of a wolf shifter, all right," he said.

Jennifer's eyes widened. "Our baby is going to be like you?"

"Of course. Soon we'll have our own little pack running around. I hope that doesn't bother you."

"Not in the slightest ... I just hope not all of them take on Arabelle's stubbornness."

When her child was born, sooner rather than later, they would have to make sure that Arabelle knew exactly what their child was. They wouldn't want any surprises. Who knew how she would react if their son or daughter turned into a wolf cub while she was babysitting?

Jennifer grinned in amusement at the thought, but it was one better left avoided.

Mark held her close, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "No, they're going to take on their mother's ... which is far worse."

"Better, I think," Jennifer corrected. "It's my stubbornness that brought us here. "

"You're right ... any qualities they take from their mom will prepare them to butt heads with her when they grow up."

With a loving sigh, Jennifer kissed Mark again. Soon they would have their first child ... the next step of the long, happy life they would share together.

THE END