



A Kitten for Alpha Kenny (Omegas of Animals #13)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: It all started with a challenge...

Wolf shifter Kenny works in an office. He has PTO, a 401K, and an excellent benefit package. At least he does before he accidentally challenges his pack alpha and wins. Now every waking moment is spent trying to get his birth pack back on track after years of destructive leadership. When the alpha of the Wolfe Enterprises pack invites him to an event at Animals, he accepts. Maybe he can get some clues on how to do this alpha thing.

It all started with a favor...

Omega cat shifter Mulder hates parties. They are crowded, loud, and stressful. But when his boss begs him to be his plus one to a charity fundraiser at Animals, he doesn't feel like he can decline. After all, his boss saved him and his young kitten when they had nothing.

The night of the party he scents his fated mate and panics. He can't be the alpha mate of a wolf pack...and what about his daughter? Maybe fate was wrong.

Spoiler alert: Fate is never wrong.

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Kenny

I never wanted to be pack alpha—and yet here I am.

Sitting behind my desk in the alpha house, where things were quiet for once, my thoughts went back to how I got here.

Growing up in a pack is a tough thing for a young alpha wolf. At least in one like ours. It's fine when you're young and cute and just running around the lands and having fun, learning to use fangs and claws and hunt. Once I reached adolescence, though, everything changed. Males were watched for leadership qualities from that point on, as the older alphas wondered who might take what jobs in the pack or even want to challenge for the top dog, err wolf.

And there was no question of any of that happening with me. When my packmates dropped out of school as soon as possible to begin to learn their pack job, I stayed in, doing online classes that allowed me to be accepted at a human university. Although no one in charge there knew I was a shifter, my dads were low income—since most of the pack wealth was held in common and there were complicated and well-established corporate documents that kept anyone from realizing their true assets. My grades were stellar, and there was some kind of rural scholarship in our county. I applied for all of it and managed to be awarded grants and scholarships that covered enough of my costs that I could do it with one part-time job for incidentals.

Other than visits to see my dads, I never looked back. Let others throw themselves into pack politics. I had bigger plans for my life.

My university's career office matched me with a firm that offered an excellent starting salary, amazing benefits, a 401K, and bonuses. After just a few years, I moved from a windowless shared office to a private one with a personal assistant sitting outside and a view of the mountains and desert that made me smile every day when I arrived.

My townhouse lay a few miles away, with easy access to those gorgeous open spaces, and once the sun set, I could shift and run under the moon and stars across the shifting sands and hard-packed dirt with the scents of desert fauna and flora in my snout.

Keeping so little contact with the pack and other shifters was a bit lonely, but I'd learned in college how to get along with humans, and most of them were okay. One day, I'd find a way to meet more of those who preferred a life outside the pack. Not the criminals who'd been banished, just wolves or other shifters like me, making their way in the broader world. And perhaps my mate was out here somewhere, too.

The pack wasn't too far away in miles, but it was a world away in culture and lifestyle. On my visits home, I rarely interacted with anyone but my fathers, but even coming and going, I'd had cordial short visits with friends and family. No, pack life had not been my choice, but not because it was terrible, just not what I wanted. My folks liked it, and most of my friends stayed and stepped into the grown-up wolf world just fine.

While I was at school, the alpha was challenged and lost to an outsider. It must have been a bitter pill, since he'd been well liked and done a good job in his office, but rules were rules, and pack alphas had to face that possibility. And then, I started seeing changes. Slowly, the easy, relaxed air of the lands tensed. Each visit home, I saw more regimented behavior from those who lived there, and even my fathers who had been older when I was born and were therefore retired, were quieter. Oh, they hugged me and fixed big meals and asked me all about my life, but the little pack-life

anecdotes grew fewer. I had to ask them questions in return about their life, which was new, and their answers were brief and along the lines of, “Oh, you know how it is,” or “Change is never easy.”

Worried, I made more frequent trips to see them, which made me more aware of issues of concern. My dad’s pantry was no longer full, and I feared that they were putting themselves in danger of hunger when they prepared feasts for me. I managed that by bringing groceries and prepared meals as gifts, but they insisted that they were fine, had everything they needed.

And, no, they did not want to leave the packlands and come live with me or even in a place of their own.

My wolf grew more unsettled with each visit.

“We’ve lived here all our lives, Kenny,” Pops said. “We don’t know anything else. Change is never easy, and things will smooth out.”

Those stories were wearing thin. But I couldn’t force them to move if they didn’t want to.

I had approached my friends, but they were even more closemouthed and looked around as if they were afraid to speak or maybe even be seen with me.

And then, one day, I could no longer stand back and hope for the best.

The gates a quarter mile off the main road were never locked. Never closed in my memory. When I was a child, if humans wandered in, at least ones with no legitimate business, someone would guide them back out explaining we were a private community. Usually they gave them some sort of produce or handicraft as a parting gift to back up the theory that we were kind of a commune who farmed and made

things.

It worked fine.

Then one day, I arrived to find the gates closed. I got out of my car to open them...but they were locked. And while I stood there, digging out my phone to call my dads and get someone to let me in, two males approached and demanded to know my business.

Which would have held water if we hadn't grown up together.

"Barney, Ezra, what is this all about?"

"These lands are only for pack members, Kenny." Ezra apparently got over pretending not to know me. "We can't let you in."

"I always visit my fathers," I pointed out. "And while I don't live here, I never gave up membership—and I pay a fee to keep that." Nobody had asked me to, but once I was making a good living, I'd wanted to contribute to the welfare of my family and friends. "So, what's up?"

Barney glanced over his shoulder and looked back at me. "New rule. Alpha says if you don't live here, you aren't pack and you have been declared rogue."

All of the concerns I'd had that my family and friends were suffering under bad management at best and tyranny at worst bubbled up from where I'd stuffed them down, followed by my wolf who fought to get out.

He probably didn't like being called rogue, but the scent of rage and fear pouring from my skin were all directed toward saving our people. We might have been called rogue, but we were not. We left with the old alpha's blessing, and our gifts of money

for the pack had been gratefully accepted.

The new alpha had never rejected anything either, but now I was being kept from my fathers and the rest? With no assurance they were all right? My wolf's connection with other pack animals had him sure they were anything but all right. "Open the gate, now," I snarled. "If I have to get in any other way, you'll pay."

The two cringed, as I knew they would. My wolf was much larger and stronger than theirs, and the alpha must have put them on this duty thinking it would be easy. Most people would simply turn away from a locked gate.

"You can't come in," Barney whined. "Everyone is fine here. You don't have to worry. Just go back to the city."

Most people's fathers were not on the other side of that gate. Most people's pack had not been imprisoned by an unjust alpha. I didn't have proof of these things, but my wolf was feeding me thoughts from those animals he had contact with. It wasn't all, and I'd been told it wasn't common for animals to share what they learned from one another with their other halves. But mine had shared such things with me since I was very small.

And I trusted him.

Unlike these two who I remembered as so cowardly.

"One last chance." I breathed hard, holding my wolf back as best I could. I might need to let him free, but for now, I felt it best to keep in two-legged form. For communication purposes.

"But we'll get in trouble," Ezra whimpered. "The alpha will kill us."

Okay...I could go around, get in through one of the many places in the fence nobody had ever maintained, and kill them myself. But I didn't want to kill anyone if I could avoid it. My wolf was angry, but he didn't want to do harm either, unless it became necessary.

"Are there cameras here?" I didn't see any, but maybe the alpha was unusually tech-savvy.

"No." Barney shook his head.

"Then who's to know if you unlock the gate, let me in, then lock it again?"

Ezra reached for the padlock, and I knew I had them. If not for my dads, I should have turned around right then and gone back to my happy, serene, successful life. But a few years later, although it had nearly killed me, I was glad I hadn't. The people of my pack deserved the very best...

"Alpha? You're needed in the storehouse." Shaken from my memories, I set out to deal with whatever was going wrong. Maybe something was going right?

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Mulder

“I’ll get you out in just a second, Madeline. I promise. Daddy has to figure out this tire first.” If I didn’t, getting out of the car seat was going to be the least of our problems. Fortunately, she was in the fussing, not crying stage of wanting out. There was still a slight hope she’d fall back asleep, so I could figure this hot mess out.

Last month, I had a nice apartment, a husband who adored us, and the promise of things going up from there. Now? Now, I was pulled over at the side of the road with a flat tire, a fussy baby in the car, suitcases in the trunk—and that was the entirety of my existence.

I will not cry. I will not cry. She deserves better. She deserves everything. I didn’t have Jason as my hype man anymore. It was up to me to keep myself focused and headed in the right direction.

My stupid donut was flat. I didn’t know donuts could get flat, but, apparently, that’s what happened when you spent the last of your money on a crappy car. I-I only needed to get to the next town. I had a hotel prepaid for the night, and thanks to my late husband’s aunt, I also had a job interview in the morning. All I needed to do was to get over this little hump, and everything would fall into place from there.

I was sure of it because it was either being sure or giving into the darkness, sobbing in a ball on the ground.

Even though it was a fool’s errand, I took out my phone again, checking for bars as if they would magically appear this time. They did not. I didn’t even have emergency

conductivity here. It was either walk to where there was help or cross my fingers that someone stopped to help us—someone who wasn't a serial killer because my cat shifter was pretty useless in the defense department.

“All right. I need to regroup. At least it's cool out now, the desert sun not beating down.” Hold on to the little things.

There was a diner a couple of miles back. If I could get us there, maybe they could help us find somewhere to stay for the night or at least find us a tow truck.

I grabbed my baby wrap and took Madeline out of her car seat, settling her against my chest. She instantly calmed. The baby carrier was her favorite place to be. I buckled her in and grabbed the diaper bag with its stack of random gift cards I'd found in a drawer while packing up Jason's things after he passed. I didn't even know why he had them all. I assumed they were gifts from students over the years, but why not use them? I was so grateful he hadn't because right now, all I had was them and the small bit of cash that I had left after paying for his funeral.

In theory, there was insurance money coming at some point, but because the accident was “under investigation,” I wouldn't be seeing any of that for some time. The crash wasn't intentional on Jason's or anyone else's part, but the company was looking for any way out of paying.

I believed that an animal walked across the road, and he overcorrected before going over the embankment. It was dusk, raining, and he was tired. Those three never mixed. But in any case, I didn't have a choice as to when I got the money. I had to wait, be patient, and somehow stay afloat until it did.

The only relative we had on his side of the family was an aunt. Technically, she was a great-aunt and, from the interactions I had with her, she didn't really remember him at all. Humans didn't seem to bond about their extended as deeply as shifters. My

guess was that the only reason she gave us the hotel room was because she had bonus points or some shit. But I was gonna take it. Anything to keep us going in the right direction.

“Okay, sweet girl, let’s go down to the diner. Maybe we can get a cup of coffee, borrow a phone, and figure things out from there.”

I chatted with her the entire way, and she fell asleep just as the diner came into view. Even though it was late, the diner still had a few customers, a sign that it wasn’t going to be closing too soon.

The place smelled delicious, was welcoming, and had a coziness to it. Instead of being super cautious with my cash and only getting a cup of coffee, I splurged and got the hamburger plate special. Who knew how much I had to walk tonight and if Madeline was going to have a good breakfast in the morning.

“She’s a cutie.” The server put a glass of water on the table. “You meeting someone? Or is it just the two of you?”

“Yeah, we’re not meeting anyone. My car got a flat a couple miles down. My donut’s dead. I had no bars to call for help. So, here we are. Is there any place walkable we could stay the night?” Was I babbling? Probably, but at this point I couldn’t really care.

He shook his head. “No. We had a room out back, but it’s currently being used. I get off in about four hours if you need a ride.”

“Maybe. Let’s see if I can find a tow first.” I thanked him, and he went on his way.

I took my phone out. It had one bar. Hardly what I’d call good reception, but it was enough for me to look up some local tow companies and call them one by one. I soon

discovered that none of them were open. If only I had an automobile club membership. They had 24/7 people.

The door opened and in came a wolf. Not just any wolf—a freaking alpha. I could feel his power radiating off him, and normally I didn't mind, but here I was, a domestic cat shifter with a baby, in no way able to either defend myself or leave. I felt trapped.

I didn't think I was on his territory, but my nose wasn't the best—not with all this crying. If it was his, I'd apologize and hope for the best. It was all I could do and, given this place had humans in it, I had some buffer.

He walked past me, and I lowered my head, tilting it to the side, wanting him to know I wasn't causing any trouble. And, to my surprise, instead of continuing past me, he backed up and squatted.

“Hey. That's not how we do things here.”

“Sorry, alpha,” I murmured.

“Aspen. Just Aspen. Are you okay?”

I shook my head, and the tears started coming. “No. Everything's...decidedly not okay. Her father died. I have no income. I have a job interview tomorrow I can't get to because my car broke down along the road, I might be on someone else's territory, and...” I blinked back the tears that were now freely flowing.

“I'm sorry about your mate.”

“He wasn't my mate. He was human. My husband.” I needed him to know I wasn't pack. The last thing I needed was to make this mess even more disastrous.

“I see. And where is your interview?”

“Wolfe Enterprises?” It came out like a question and once the words were spoken, pieces fell into place. Wolfe—Wolves. Crap. It was this alpha’s company, or at least his pack’s. Why had I not considered that before?

The alpha reached into his front pocket, and when he pulled it out, placed a card in front of me. “I am the alpha of the company’s pack. How about you let me help you tonight, so you can start working tomorrow?”

“Oh, alpha, I didn’t mean to mislead you. I don’t have a job. I just have an interview.”

“No. You. Have. A. Job.” He wasn’t leaving room for discussion, but also, he wasn’t being harsh. There was a kindness to him, an almost-fatherly like quality. “I don’t know if it’ll be the one that you applied for. I don’t know your skills or your credentials. But you have a job. And because you’re relocating for work, we can set you up with a place to stay in the room.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.” He righted himself. “I’m gonna call my beta, and he’ll come and help you out. His name is Swale, and he might look intimidating, but trust me—he’s got a heart of gold. And my guess is he’s gonna start spoiling this little one pretty darn quickly.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I know so.” He leaned in closer. “The pack calls him Grandpa Swale, hardly intimidating, but we aren’t your typical wolf pack.”

He excused himself and went outside to make the call.

“See, Madeline...everything’s gonna be okay.”

And for the first time since Jason died, I believed it.

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Kenny

It was a few days before I had any more time to myself to mull over things. I probably should just look to the future, but I held strong to the premise that those who forgot the past were doomed to repeat it.

The original alpha of my childhood had made the job look easy. Of course, he'd been doing it for decades by the time I came along, and I only had a few years under my belt.

"Alpha, I brought your lunch." Zoe, my lead beta poked her head through the doorway. "Is this a good time?"

I waved her in and took the tray from her before sending her down to the kitchen for her own meal. I generally ate down there for dinner, often skipped breakfast, and took my lunch at my desk. Since most everyone else was eating around the same time, I could count on being undisturbed for a while.

After the scene at the gate, on the day everything changed, I promised not to "fink" on the two goofball security wolves and pulled my car a bit down the road behind some trees before continuing on toward the alpha house and all the buildings in the vicinity. Most of the pack members lived there, including my fathers, and it was toward their home I was beelining when a shout caught my attention.

Pivoting, I spotted clusters of people, whispers reaching my ears. I continued past them, though, wanting to get to my dads. In my mind, I was going to get them the hell out of here and whatever was going on. They'd fought me before, but nothing about

this place was the home they'd loved. Everything I passed looked run-down and uncared for. How had I not seen it in progress?

I'd been raised to be a pack member, but I'd lost that spirit. My wolf had missed his people, but I'd tuned that out too. It was all about me and what I wanted. Of course, I'd sent money and brought food to my dads, but I'd missed whatever this all was.

Shame infused me at the misery I could see around me. The children who should be running around, laughing, playing, learning, but none were in sight. Where were they? And the elders who I'd expect to see sitting in the shade or perhaps teaching the little ones were few, and none appeared at all relaxed.

Getting my dads out wasn't enough, but it was all I could do. It would have to be enough.

But right before I got to their home, a cry brought me back around. The others in the open area fell quiet, and my heart sank. The alpha—I'd never actually seen him, but I had no doubt who it was—had emerged from the manor house and stood over a beta who cringed away from him, reeking of fear.

My wolf struggled to get out again, but what if he did? He couldn't attack the alpha. This pack had enough issues without that happening. There was only one reason to fight an alpha, and that was a challenge for leadership of the pack. I had a great life, a great job, everything I wanted. Living here had never been the plan.

But I couldn't look away from that beta and his terror. What did he think the alpha was going to do? And then the alpha, the person in charge of the pack's welfare, reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flogger.

"Shirt off!" he snarled, and the shivering beta pulled his faded T-shirt over his head. Before it was all the way off, the flogger's leather straps landed on his vulnerable

back with a snap that made my blood boil.

All thoughts of grabbing my dads and getting them the heck out of there fled my brain as I strode over and snatched the whip from the alpha's hand and flung it into the dirt as far away as I could. "Stop that."

The alpha was a good three or four inches taller than me and all muscle. He wore jeans, boots, and a cowboy shirt with all those snaps down the front. "And who are you? How did you get on the lands?"

"Never mind that. Why are you beating this man?" Not that there was any excuse for it, ever. If he'd committed some kind of crime, he would face the elders or, if it was particularly egregious, the alpha might judge and banish him, but this type of public pain and torment had never been allowed. Even with right on my side, I had a hard time keeping upright in the face of the rage the alpha turned on me.

"You dare to question me? Whoever you are?"

"I am a member of this pack, and I know our rules and lore."

"You are no member. I know the members and I have never seen you." As he shouted at me, his claws began to extend. How could an alpha have such poor control of his wolf? "Wait, you're that Kenny who I have banished."

"With what cause?"

"You went rogue." His fangs descended. "And you are not allowed here."

"Yes I am. I pay my share and visit often and I was born of this pack." Rage suffusing me, I closed in and poked him in the chest. "And, unlike you, I know the rules and follow them."

His eyes burned into me, but it didn't matter. If this poor excuse for an alpha was allowed to continue, who would he beat next? A female? A child? One of my fathers?

Patches of fur broke out on his arms. He had zero control. "Are you challenging me?"

"If that's what it takes." I stumbled back a step, not in fear of losing but of winning. My perfect life melted in front of my eyes. I was nobody's hero. "But I think we should be able to talk this through."

His laughter rolled over me before the shift covered him. Challenges in our pack were in two-legged form, but this alpha was breaking all the rules, and I doubted he'd been able to stop it anyway. With a prayer to the goddess, I let my wolf out, clothing shredding around me. If I'd been enraged by what I saw, my wolf was more so, and he did not wait for me to act, leaping upon the shaggy gray animal with a vicious growl. Not all challenges were to the death, but this one would be. As the alpha sought my throat with his yellowed fangs, I struggled to find a position where I could make my own impression on his jugular.

We were locked in mortal combat, rolling in the dust, blood spattering around us. I had jagged wounds on both shoulders, but the alpha was hurt too. We went back and forth, evenly matched, it seemed, but then, as I was beginning to tire, I saw my shot and ended it in one clean bite. Well, not really clean—but at least it was over, and I stood over the alpha, tongue hanging out, panting. He shifted back, blood spurting from his destroyed throat, and lay still.

It seemed every member of the pack had closed in around us, and they stood quietly, watching. I stared, horrified at the battered corpse that lay at my feet, but my wolf tipped his head back and howled in triumph.

He was glad, apparently, but I was horrified because I had made a move in the heat of the moment that uprooted my entire life and left me in charge of a pack that had been

subjected to years of destructive leadership. And I had to get them back on track.

At first, I thought that I'd never make progress, but a few years in, I was beginning to see the light of day. It had taken all that time to get somewhat past the hurt and distrust that had built in my people. To accept that I wasn't going to be able to just step back into my old life. And for the storehouses to begin to refill with the abundance that made all those things happen.

I'd learned that the alpha had separated the pack from all others, and one of the things I was working on was rebuilding all the connections there. We'd been isolated and had a terrible reputation to overcome. Although things were better, they were far from perfect, and sometimes I was so exhausted I fell asleep fully dressed, too wiped out even to disrobe.

"Alpha? You have a call from Aspen at the Wolfe Enterprises pack?" Zoe was back. "And you haven't touched your lunch."

"I'll take the call." My lunch did not look so good anymore, but I picked up the phone. I'd never met Aspen in person, but we spoke on the phone from time to time. "This is Kenny."

"Afternoon, alpha. How are things going there?"

"Coming along. Are you planning to attend the event at Animals this week?"

"Animals?" I'd heard of the club but never been. "I'm not sure I can get away." Although I wanted to. Desperately. I needed a break like nobody's business.

"It's for a good cause. Come and spend a couple of hours. There will be a lot of people there you might want to meet."

“I’ll accept, then. I really could use a night out, too.”

And maybe he could give me some tips on how to do this alpha thing. He’d been the first one to extend a hand of friendship, and his pack seemed a well-functioning group. I never even asked him what the cause was.

“We all need a break from time to time. Meet me at my office midafternoon and we can talk pack matters and then get some dinner before the event. If that works for you.”

“Absolutely.”

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Mulder

“Come on, Madeline, it’s time for breakfast.” I flipped the pancakes. “It’s a good one, too.”

Madeline wasn’t exactly the quickest to get ready in the morning. She was like her father, easing into the day. It was difficult to believe he’d been gone nearly four years already. So much had changed in that time. I’d been so scared when my world crumbled, but our new life was better than I could’ve hoped for. I had a great job with an adorable home, and Madeline was soaring in school.

Sure, it was only preschool, but the teacher said she was definitely ready for kindergarten next year, and that was huge. I’d been so worried that all the upheaval in her life in the beginning would somehow hinder her—but so far, it seemed not to have. Thank gods.

“Daddy!” She came running out with her tutu on over her jeans. “I got fancy for school!” She twirled around.

I wouldn’t exactly call a T-shirt with a bicycle on it and a tutu that had seen better days paired with jeans fancy, but it wasn’t my call. “Super fancy.”

There’d been a time when I used to worry about whether her interesting fashion choices would get her picked on or be in the way when she climbed on the playground or participated in all the fun kids her age enjoyed. But my clever girl figured out that if she put the tutu over jeans, she could have the best of all worlds.

“Do I smell pancakes?” Her eyes lit up.

“You do.”

She sniffed the air. “Banana?”

“Very good.” I’d been working on helping her with her scenting.

I could sense that she was part cat, but I still didn’t know if she had one inside her. And I thought maybe if I focused on some of these skills, it would better prepare her for her first shift—if she had one. If she turned out to be human, that was fine, too. She could be a perfumer with the skills.

Some shifters cared if their young took after them, but not me. Her father was one of the kindest people I ever met, and he was human. It would be an honor for her to take after him.

“We don’t have a lot of time today. Daddy’s got a meeting this morning.”

“You always have meetings. When I grow up, I’m gonna have a job where I can dance all day. No meetings.” She changed her career goals often. One day, she wanted to be a train conductor, the next, a doctor, and now, a dancer. It was good to keep her options open.

“Well, I hope that works out for you. But I don’t mind meetings.”

They were far better than some of the other jobs I’d had during my younger years.

“Now, hurry up and get started. We don’t want to be late.”

I would have to tell her at least three more times because, well, she would get

distracted. Normally, it didn't matter. Her school was pretty flexible about when she arrived, since she went to childcare before class began. But today's meeting was early, which was unusual for my boss—and that meant rushing her more than normal.

She ate her pancakes and then had to go change her clothes because she was a sticky mess. But we still managed to get there on time.

“Have a good day, Daddy. Remember, tonight is story night. I want the one about Father breaking you out of jail.”

It sounded far more scandalous than it was.

“I can do that.” I kissed the top of her head and sent her off with her teacher.

The story requested was her favorite and one of mine, too, for that matter. I hadn't been sure I should tell it to her until she was older. Having a little kid talking about their dad being a cat in a cage wasn't ideal in human circles. But, since we managed to get her into Wolfe Enterprises' pack school, I figured it was safe for her to learn everything right from the start. She could openly speak about all things shifter there.

One of the first things I did after we settled in here was to turn different parts of my life with her father into storybooks for her. I wasn't sure when or how I would use them at the time, but I knew they were important. The one she wanted today was her favorite. It told the story of a human boy who worked at an animal shelter during college, saw a cat in distress, and snuck him home.

That cat was me.

Instead of being sent to quarantine like the director had sentenced me to, I found my home. We became best friends and eventually married. Growing up, I always thought I'd find my true mate and live out my happy ever after. That wasn't how it worked

out, but there was not a single moment with Jason that I regretted. True mate or not.

It was a very short drive to the office, and when I got in, I set my lunch on my desk and headed straight to the conference room. My boss was already there, as well as the alpha and beta.

Shit. I hadn't thought it was one of those kinds of meetings.

"Alpha, beta—"

"This isn't pack business." The alpha pointed to the open seat. "Join us. I want to talk to you about a new fundraiser."

For a brief second, I thought that meant this meeting wouldn't be that bad after all.

How wrong I was.

The alpha knew the story of how I met my husband—how some do-gooder was pretty sure I "had rabies" and dropped me off to be put down. And by "pretty sure I had rabies," I meant, they were pissed I was in their yard and thought I was the cat who'd been pooping in their flower beds. Which I was not. I was just chasing a mouse away from my college rental. But that was another story.

After hearing the tale, the alpha began to loop me in on things related to animal rescues. And lucky me, Animals was having a huge fundraiser for exactly that—the local shelter.

"Karma has done a great job getting everything arranged and we wanted to have someone from the company there to represent us. And, I thought—who would be better than you?"

I could name a thousand people who would be better than me—a shy house cat shifter in a room full of dragons and bears and wolves, all drinking, everything loud—and just no. But instead, I worked hard not to let him see it.

“Sounds good, alpha.”

Because the truth was, without the alpha, I’d have nothing. No job. No home. Nothing. He made my first few days here so much better than they would have been. I hadn’t been surviving on gift cards in a roach-filled hotel. I had a nice apartment, food, a job, and an entire office building full of people who treated me as if I belonged. If me being happy-happy over an event I wanted no part of was required, so be it.

“What kind of attire should I be expected to wear?”

The beta, AKA Grampa Swale, stood up. “That’s where I come in. We’re going shopping.”

Great. Shopping. Another thing I detested. But, at least, it was with Grampa Swale.

As a surprise to no one, I came home with a tutu for Madeline—a glitter-ific sparkly one. Because, in his words, “Every princess needs more glitter.”

I had a feeling my vacuum wasn’t going to agree with that. Not that I had room to talk. I was as just as bad as he was when it came to spoiling her. And if seeing her smile over a brand-new “fancy” skirt meant vacuuming all day, every day, so be it.

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Kenny

Because I was so fried from endless days and nights of trying to undo the damage caused by my predecessor, I took Beta Zoe's advice and made plans to stay off the packlands for a day or two while meeting with Aspen and attending the event at Animals. If things went well there, I might be able to set up some face-to-faces with other alphas and continue my program of reconnecting our pack with those who had been so close to us until recently. Rebuilding trust was not for wimps, and while I never groveled, I also did not hesitate to agree with them when they said our pack had not been the best of friends with anyone for a while.

I didn't have to say it was because the alpha had been an asshole. A pack not only took its tone from its alpha, it always had the option to replace them if they didn't do a good job. All it required was someone to challenge them and win. Which sounded easier than it in fact was because the one they sought to replace had won his seat in battle and generally was pretty strong.

The wolf-to-wolf fight had caught me off guard for a second because most challenges I'd ever heard of at least began in two-legged form. And many modern challenges were anything but to the death. Nobody had to tell me this one would be. Every move the old alpha made was an attempt to kill us. Leaving me no option but to end it as I had.

I'd expected to be more freaked out by having done that, but the second he left his body, the gloom over the entire packlands lifted. What kind of evil had he held? Of course, that didn't mean I was fine about it or that all went right into the land of perfection, but after a lot of hard work...it was better. It had never been my plan, but

it was a burden I shouldered out of love for my people.

Sometimes Fate knew best, and it was not right to fight her. Perhaps one day she'd help me with my loneliness. Surrounded by people I cared for and yet with an aching for a mate, I'd hoped to find one who shared my love of my other life, but things had changed.

As Zoe pointed out, everyone needed a little break from time to time, and this was a work trip anyway. No harm in a little extension of time to take care of as much as possible and maybe rest. My beta also mentioned that an exhausted alpha did nobody any good. Of course, the packlands were not far away, and I could have just come home after the event, but the idea of a night or two in a hotel room far from the constant needs of a healing people held great appeal.

I drove away from the lands in the 4-wheel-drive SUV I'd traded my beloved luxury sedan in for when I got stuck in the mud once too often. It wasn't fair to her...or to the pack members who had to come help me dig out. They never complained, but after what I'd learned about my predecessor using them like personal servants, I never wanted them to have cause to think the same of me.

SUV or sedan, I was elated to turn onto the highway and merge into traffic flowing toward the city. I wouldn't have felt comfortable using pack funds for an upscale accommodation, but I had the money I'd saved when I sold my townhouse. That hurt too... I'd go to Wolfe Enterprises and meet with Aspen, take him out for a nice meal to thank him for the invitation, and then we'd go to the club together. One thing I didn't mind spending pack money on was the fundraiser. It would help show others present that we were not only out of the financial bind we'd been in but that we didn't mind being generous for others in need.

The deep-blue desert sky stretched toward the mountains in the distance where Animals was located. The mysterious Superstitions with all their lore. A few puffy

white clouds sailed majestically along, casting their shadows on the desert floor below. I turned on the stereo and leaned back in my seat, drawing deep, relaxed breaths. Zoe was right as always. Everyone needed to get away sometimes, and I would take full advantage of this time and return refreshed and ready to reshoulder my responsibilities. I had left her fully in charge, only to contact me in an emergency. This would be good experience for her.

As if I have any choice.

But I didn't mind, much. I'd grown used to it all.

All plans for meeting Aspen at his office fell apart when my car did. Strictly, it did not fall apart, but I was halfway to town when the engine died, and it took a while to get a pack mechanic out with another vehicle for me to drive while they dealt with mine.

The sedan wouldn't have done this to me.

By the time I was on the road again, it was dark, and I'd already let Aspen know I would not be able to meet him at his office. We'd arranged to meet at Animals if possible. He offered to send a beta for me, but I couldn't ask that. For one, it wasn't a good look for me as pack alpha. Many didn't even drive themselves at all, but I liked it. When the vehicles cooperated.

I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast, but Animals served food, I'd been told, so I pushed on and didn't stop for anything, wanting to at least arrive at the fundraiser close to on time. The road to Animals was longer than I'd anticipated, and the parking lot was packed. I truly was late. Aspen had told me it was by invitation only tonight, but my name was on the list, so I should have no problem getting in.

After circling the parking lot a couple of times, I found a spot at the very end of a row

and parked. Then I followed some stragglers up a cliffside pathway to the doors where a bear shifter manned a podium with a reading light mounted on it. I gave him my name and checked down a list then nodded. “Good evening, alpha. Please wait one moment while I let Karma know you’re here.” The owner’s mate wanted to meet me? Why?

“I’m right here.” A woman appeared in the doorway and offered him her hand. “Welcome, Alpha Kenny. We’ve been hearing things about you lately.” She was human, I’d heard, but there was something about her that promised she was more than that. I couldn’t pin down what.

I shook her hand, her grip firm but not obnoxiously so. “Good things, I hope.”

“Oh yes.” She smiled and drew me inside before releasing my hand. “All good. Now, can I offer you refreshment, or...”

A scent reached my nose, a cozy blend of vanilla beans and cinnamon, and my wolf went on full alert. Everything the woman in front of me was saying was overtaken by a chanting from deep inside me.

“Thank you for your gracious greeting, but I have to go. I scent something I need to deal with.” It sounded ridiculous, but she only smiled again.

“I’m sure you do.” Karma stepped aside as if I might have walked right through her if she hadn’t. And I couldn’t have sworn I wouldn’t have in my single-minded march toward my mate.

It was my mate. My wolf was sure of it. There were so many people between us, and I wanted to shout at them all to move aside, get out of my way, let me through. Luckily, I had just enough presence of mind left not to do that. I just moved with purpose, and they seemed to melt away without being asked.

Fate. I'd been wishing for a mate, and she'd answered.

But when I saw them, they were with someone. A tall, good-looking alpha who was introducing them to another alpha. He called him his plus one. And then the omega, my mate, mentioned getting a babysitter for his child.

My mate already had someone. And they had a family.

I turned on a heel and walked back the way I came, only lifting a hand when the bear shifter asked me if anything was wrong. At least Karma wasn't there to see my humiliation. And none of my pack.

Not only had Fate placed me in the pack where I had never wanted to be, but now she'd shown me my mate so I'd know I couldn't have him.

Approaching my borrowed car, I pulled the key fob out of my pocket, wanting only to get away from this place and put miles between me and my mate before I did something stupid. And then I dropped the fob, and it landed under the car.

Dammit!

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Mulder

I turned slowly in front of the mirror. I might not be looking forward to the party, but even I had to admit I looked pretty good. Grampa Swale had been right when he picked out a navy-blue suit instead of the standard black. It really accentuated my eyes and my ass.

He was watching Madeline for me, tonight, too. Well, actually, he was watching a movie, because she had already fallen asleep for the night. It was field trip day at school, and she was exhausted beyond measure when she got home. I wasn't sure she was going to be awake long enough for me to make her spaghetti, her favorite dinner. Even knowing Grandpa Swale was coming over hadn't been enough to keep her eyes open. I had a feeling she was going to be up with the sun.

There were plenty of people I trusted babysitting Madeline during the day if I had to go somewhere or if school was out. And I trusted them at night when it came to giving Madeline the safety she needed. But, at night, if she woke up, I wanted someone she considered family there.

And besides, he knew where everything was. He helped build the kitchen table, after all.

I stepped out, not quite ready to go but knowing my ride would be here before long.

“If you need me, call.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know the drill. Quit procrastinating. Go have fun.” He shooed

me toward the door with a gesture of his hand.

“You mean go and network and do work things.”

Grandpa Swale shrugged. “I said what I said.”

He turned the volume on the TV up. Not loud enough that it would bother Madeline but enough to let me know that we were done with the conversation. He wasn’t like some betas who were bossy with harsh words and commands. Nope, he was grandpa bossy. Best pack beta ever.

“Fine.” There was no sense in arguing. “I’ll see you later. Did you want me to bring you back anything? I heard the food is great there.”

“Nah, I’m good. If I get hungry, I’ll just dig through your freezer.”

The alpha pulled up just as I stepped outside. I was glad he was driving. I knew where-ish the club was but had never been there before. Besides, walking in with such a powerful man could give me some alpha repellent of sorts. At least, that was my hope. The thought of dealing with alphas who drank too much wanting to get it on was not appealing. Not at all.

My home was about halfway between Wolfe Enterprises and Animals, and I rarely drove in that direction. With the full moon out, it was quite beautiful. Parking, on the other hand, sucked.

The place was packed. Beyond packed. That was great for the fundraising, but less so for me. I was quite grateful the alpha opted to drive, because I very much did not want to be navigating this place. With my luck, I’d end up circling for an hour and missing every opening by a few seconds.

We eventually found a spot—one with a long walk, but that was fine. I could use the air, and the time to brace myself for what was to come. Because it was a charity event, we all needed invitations in order to get in, which was good. It meant there was no line at the door waiting for bouncers to let us in like I'd heard happened often.

I followed Alpha Aspen inside...and the crowd was larger than I anticipated, even with the number of cars.

People were everywhere. And not human people—nope. There were dragons, wolves, bears, a coyote or two, and so many more. If a fight broke out here, my cat didn't stand a chance. Not that this was a place known for fights, but I'd been in a shifter bar or two in my day, and they hadn't been great experiences. I kind of carried that with me.

We were barely in the door when the scent hit me. It wasn't the food or the fancy drinks I smelled now; it was my mate. All pine and cotton candy—two scents that shouldn't go together and yet somehow did.

My cat was already purring. All I wanted to do was run and find him. Except I was here for work. And before I could process everything that was happening, Alpha Aspen was introducing me to the director of the rescue.

“We're so glad you're here and came out to support us this evening.” He held out his hand for me to shake.

If you paid me 50,000 dollars to tell you what our conversation was about for the next few minutes—I couldn't. I couldn't tell you a single thing. And then the director excused himself, and I found myself face-to-face with the alpha.

“What exactly is going on with you?”

I wasn't sure if he was pissed or worried.

"I scented my mate when we walked in." I wasn't going to lie to him.

"You what?" Pissed it was. I'd never seen him pissed before and I understood why other packs feared him now. If I hadn't known he would never hurt me, I might've been pissing my pants about then. "You scented your mate here, and you then spent time working and networking?"

I nodded.

"No. Unacceptable. I don't want to see you again until you have your mate. Go. Get out."

And no part of me wanted to argue with him. A because he was right. And B because I had already lost enough time.

I wove through people, following the scent, trying to pick it up where it was strongest, most recent. As good as my nose was, it wasn't easy with so many shifters in the room.

About ten minutes later, I ended up outside, wandering through the lot until I reached a car. That wasn't surprising. What did confuse me was that there was no alpha in the car. There was nobody at all. And the scent was new enough that the person hadn't driven away to have a new car take its place. If anything, it smelled like he was still there.

Shit.

I let my head fall against the side window. He didn't scent like he was a bird or a dragon or anything else that flew. If I put money on it, he was a gray wolf. How

could his scent just end here? And it definitely ended—not started—here. Scents didn't do that. That's not how they worked.

Slowly circling the car, I tried to figure out what could be going on—when I saw a foot emerge from underneath the car.

“Hello?”

The foot became a leg—became an ass—a very hot ass—became a full-ass person.

No, not a person. An alpha. Yeah. Like a pack alpha. But shockingly...all that power didn't intimidate me at all.

Because this alpha was my mate. He'd been under the car of all places.

“You.” His eyes went wide as he righted himself. He was a mess, worse than a mess. His suit was wrinkled, full of dirt. In his hands was a key fob. There was even a bunch of dirt on his face. I reached up and wiped it clean.

“You.” He leaned into my touch.

“I thought you... I came here, and your scent stopped. Why were you under the car?”

“Because I'm distracted, and I dropped my key fob.”

“Didn't you scent me in there?” I pointed to the club. He had to have, right?

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“And then you left.” Was he going to reject me? I wasn't sure my heart could take it, which was a weird thought since I still didn't even know his name.

“You’re my mate. My job is to make you happy. Messing up your family would be the opposite of that, so when you didn’t look for me, I took the hint.”

“Family?” I was still caught up on that part. Did he mean Madeline? How would he even know about her?

“Yeah, your alpha. I saw you guys come in together.”

“That’s my pack alpha. Not my alpha. And my mate was less of a mate and more of a husband. And he’s gone. Car crash years ago. Our daughter has just turned four.”

His mouth formed a perfect little O.

Weren’t we the pair? I delayed finding him, all for a stupid job, and he tried to run away because he thought I was dating my pack alpha of all people.

Things could only go up from here.

Right?

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Kenny

Maybe Fate didn't hate me after all.

When he brushed the dirt off my cheek, I almost lost my mind.

She just had to have her little joke before giving me the mate I'd never dared to dream of. My dad's always said I'd know my mate the minute I scented them, but after all these years when most everyone I knew was already settled down, mated and with families, I'd really begun to think my only gift from Fate was the job I didn't want. Dad's score one, loneliness zero. Because I'd do anything not to be separated from my mate and his young. All I knew about his daughter was her age and the fact that she was now under my protection. And then I realized, I had said he was my mate, but he had not said it back. The scenting thing could imply it, but we had things to say to one another. Starting with. "My name is Kenny."

The omega's cheeks flushed in the most becoming way. "I'm Mulder, and my daughter is Madeline."

"That's a beautiful name."

"She's a beautiful girl."

"I am sure she is, and I can't wait to meet her, but I meant yours, mate."

His voice low, he replied, "Thank you, mate."

We stood right there next to the car for a long moment after that. If I'd thought I could pull it off, I'd have taken him right there on the hood and marked him as well, but we were in a very public place, not exactly romantic for a first-time lovemaking. "If we don't go back in, I'm not promising that I can control my urge to make you truly mine."

"In. Oh my gods, I left my pack alpha there without saying a word. We do need to go in. You're coming, right?" He shifted from foot to foot, chewing his lip in the most adorable way.

I brushed his lip with my thumb. "If you keep that up, you'll make your lip bleed."

Letting his lip go, he licked it and said, "Bad habit. But are you coming with me?"

"Of course I am." I reached for his hand and linked our fingers. "Do I still have a lot of dirt on me?"

Mulder, and I truly did love that name, helped me to brush off the dirt so I didn't shame myself and my pack by looking like a slob, and then we started up the cliff path back to Animals and the event that had brought me in scenting distance of my omega.

We never let go of one another, holding hands, brushing shoulders. An inch away from me was too far, and any alpha within arm's length was too close. My wolf growled when a lion shifter bumped into us. I was happier than I'd ever been, but already I could see that having a mate would have its challenges. Ones I'd be happy to deal with.

"We should go find the pack alpha and let him know what happened." Mulder grimaced. "He was not pleased with me before I came to find you."

“He wasn’t?” Puzzled, I squeezed his hand. “He didn’t want you to be with your mate?” In my pack, that was a priority, and I’d encouraged any member to go after them the minute they came in scenting distance. We celebrated their good fortune, too.

“That wasn’t it.” We were standing in the middle of the crowded main room, and Mulder’s head swiveled in search of the alpha.

“No, it wasn’t.” The deep voice came from behind us, and I turned to find out who was interrupting our conversation. I recognized the alpha who had been talking to Mulder when we had our misunderstanding. “Explain to your mate why I was annoyed with you.”

The blush returned, and I tried not to think about what else might have the omega’s cheeks redden in private. “Alpha Aspen was displeased that I stayed there and continued to try to do my job for Wolfe Enterprises when I had scented my mate.”

“Aspen?” I held out my free hand, which luckily was my right. “I didn’t know it was you. What a coincidence.”

He chuckled and shook my hand. “No coincidence where Fate is involved. I’d about decided you weren’t able to get here at all. What do you think of Animals?”

I looked around, taking in the club for the first time, although I’d been in here earlier. “To tell you the truth, I scented Mulder right after meeting Karma at the front door and then I was outside and back in and I’ve only had eyes for my mate. But now that you ask, this place is nicer than any I’ve been to in a city. And it’s way out here in the cliffs.”

“Animals is an extraordinary place. Warren opened it, but once he met Karma and she came on board, it became even better. She’s the reason humans are allowed.

Everyone is allowed at all their clubs as long as they know how to behave in a civilized manner.”

“Are you telling him about the witch incident?” A huge bear shifter paused beside our little group, and I noticed he had Karma tucked into his side. “We don’t have a lot of rules, but once those ladies climbed on their brooms and flew all around destroying the place, we made a no-broom regulation.”

As I took in the big, high-ceilinged area, I couldn’t imagine how it had looked after the incident. “Whatever repairs were required, you’d never know anything happened,” I said.

“Get Karma to show you the video one day. I can’t watch it without my bear going nuts. I’m Warren Ursa, by the way, and Karma is my mate.”

I introduced myself and Mulder, hesitating but then proudly saying, “my mate.”

Karma’s laughter was musical. “They are very newly mated, Warren. I met Alpha Kenny on his way into the club, and if I’m not mistaken, he had not yet encountered Mulder.”

“That’s right.” I released my mate’s hand and put my arm over his shoulders, wanting him even closer than before. “Fate worked extra hard to bring us together. You have a fine club here. I hope we can visit again.”

“I hope you will,” Karma said. “We like happy couples around here, don’t we, mate?”

Warren rumbled in reply.

“But we have to get up to the front and keep things going on this fundraiser,” she

went on. “I hope you don’t have to hurry away.”

We all assured her we were there to support the cause, and after they left to go conduct their business, the three of us strolled around the silent auction area, admiring all the items and placing bids. I had done this plenty of times in my city life, but it was the first time surrounded by shifters and all sorts of beings. It was nice.

There were a lot of different activities and opportunities to donate, as well as talk some with Alpha Aspen who kindly said he’d heard good things about our pack. Considering a few years ago nobody would have said that, I accepted the compliment in the spirit in which it was given. We rescheduled our meetings for the following morning as well. But after a few hours, I noticed Mulder was not too focused on our conversation or the things going on around him.

“Mate, you must be tired.” I hoped he didn’t just want to go home. Tonight was a lot.

“No, but I can’t stay out too late with my daughter at home. We have an early morning, and sometimes she manages to stay up too late with the sitter. She’s a charmer, that one. But I hate to ask you to leave early, Alpha Aspen.”

“I’ll take you home,” I blurted. “No need to drag Aspen away from the event. Looks like it will be going on for a while.”

“I should be going, too,” Aspen said, “but if Mulder accepts your invitation, I’ll hang out anyway. I don’t get here often, and there are a lot of people I would like to connect with.”

That had been my intent as well, but my omega came first. His daughter needed him at home. As soon as he thanked me and said he’d be glad for the ride, we said goodbye to Aspen and headed for the exit.

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Mulder

“I should warn you...” I buckled my seat belt. “When we get to my house, the pack beta will be there.”

“Okay.” What did he mean by that?

Was it an okay, thanks for the heads-up or an okay, I was half listening and didn’t fully hear you ? Or maybe something else altogether.

“Wait, does your pack treat you poorly because you are a cat? Or is he there to keep you safe?”

Whoa, that was a leap and a half.

“No.” I hadn’t even considered he would think of it that way. “It’s nothing like that. In fact, when I asked for Madeline to become pack so she would have one of her own, they were more than welcoming.”

Cat shifters didn’t tend to have a pack, but given we had no family or friends here, and they had become my second family, it only made sense.

“That’s great. Because I wasn’t really in the mood for fighting off a bunch of wolves. For you.”

He chuckled and turned on the ignition. I strongly suspected there was no actual joke in there, and that he really would. I more than liked that.

“Yeah, no fighting needed. Grandpa Swale has on his babysitting hat tonight.”

“Grandpa? You said your husband was human, right? So your pack beta is a feline?”

“No.” Now it was my turn to chuckle. “Everybody just calls him Grandpa Swale. His official title is Beta Swale, but he’s everyone’s grandpa.”

“This pack is a lot different than mine.”

“In a good way?”

“Yeah. Very much.”

I stayed quiet as he navigated through the parking lot, avoiding drunk shifters and moving cars. We were leaving at probably the worst time as far as that went. Once we were out on the main road, his hand settled on my knee.

“That’s better.” I hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but out the words came.

During most of the drive back, I told him about my first day here—how I met Alpha Aspen and how my life became intertwined with Wolfe Enterprises. It was easier to talk about all that than about us, about our connection. Because, honestly, all I wanted to do was beg him to pull over and kiss me already.

But I needed Madeline to meet him first. Because as much as I wanted him, as much as I knew Fate placed him in my path just for me, she had a say in this. In fact, she had the biggest say. And if she told me she didn’t like him for any reason, that was that.

I couldn’t see that being the case, but I refused to take the choice away from her.

We walked in to find Grandpa Swale pulling cookies out of the oven.

“I wanted to bake a cake,” he said, in all seriousness, “because finding your mate is something to celebrate. But you didn’t have the ingredients. Seriously, how do you have so little in your house?” He pointed to the cookies. “These are from a mix. A mix!”

There was nothing wrong with a mix, but I’d had his homemade cookies, and they were miles above anything out of a box.

“I don’t bake much,” I said. “And how exactly did you know that I had met my mate?”

“Because Aspen told me someone else was gonna be dropping you off. Someone special. Someone you scented. He didn’t quite say mate, but I connected the dots.”

“And how many other people know?” I didn’t have a need for privacy in this, but I wanted a heads-up.

“Guessing just me.” He didn’t sound entirely sure. “Anyway, Madeline didn’t wake up at all. Her field trip really wore her out. Cookies are done. The only things left to clean are the cookie sheet, the cooling rack, and the spatula. You can deal with that tomorrow. I’ll be out of your way.”

He hugged me goodbye and whispered in my ear, “Congratulations.” Then he patted Kenny on the back—squeezing his shoulder, probably a little rougher than my mate was expecting. “He’s special. Don’t mess it up.”

Great. Just great. Kenny started the night thinking his mate already had another then learned his mate came with an instant family, one who had veto power, and now he had a pack beta all out threatening him.

Beta Swale wasn't out the door three seconds before Kenny turned to me and said, "He's more like Daddy Swale. I felt like he was going to ask me what my intentions were."

"It didn't seem that bad to me," I said, but then again, I wasn't on that side of Swale's stare. "But, agreed. He probably wanted to."

I plated up some cookies, and we went into the living room and sat on the couch together. "I just want to put this out there. We're not mating tonight, okay?" There was more to be said, but words failed me the second I caught his eyes.

He stared back at me, his expression unreadable. Was he angry? Understanding? Confused? I had no idea.

So I did what I always did in cases like that—I overexplained.

"Madeline was only a few months old when her father was killed. She didn't have anybody else in her life except for her pack, and she didn't even have them right away. A lot has happened to her—a lot. And I need to be fair to her. That means not making huge life choices without her input. If she wakes up tomorrow morning, and I suddenly say, 'Hey, here's my mate. He's moving in,' that would be too much for her to process. It's not that I don't want to."

He took my hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I understand why. She's your daughter." He leaned his forehead against mine. "She has to come first. But I want you to know that she comes first for me too. You both do. And if that means we go slowly, then we go slowly. If it means we stop, we stop."

He brought our joined hands up to his mouth and gave mine a kiss.

We talked some more. I learned a little about his history. He learned more about

mine. But eventually, it was getting too late for conversation, and time for him to go home. I hated it, wanting him here with me, but it was for the best.

I still had to be at work the next day. Why they had a fundraiser on a weeknight, I didn't know—but they did. Maybe because the weekends were already too busy and they didn't want to shut out the regulars? And Madeline had school in the morning.

“What are you up to tomorrow?” I asked.

I could and would call in if he was free, but if he was busy, too, I'd save the time off for when he was around. He didn't live here, and our time would be limited. That was another thing we were going to need to address. But not tonight. Not this late.

“I have a meeting in the morning at Wolfe Enterprises.” He stood up. “One that is far too early.”

I walked him to the door, and his hand reached up to cradle my cheek. “Tomorrow...”

I leaned in to his touch.

“Maybe we could go on a date. No—date's the wrong word. Maybe we could do something. The three of us. You, me, Madeline. We don't have to tell her who I am yet. But maybe I could get to know her a little.”

“Yeah. I'd like that. I'd like that a lot.”

I leaned forward and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to his lips.

“Good night, Alpha Kenny.”

“Good night, mate.”

I watched as he climbed into his car and drove away. My cat was pissed we didn't make him stay, but it wasn't up to him to decide. This was better, as much as it sucked.

“Daddy?”

I looked over to see Madeline, her eyes half closed, standing in the doorway of her bedroom.

“Do I smell cookies?” She walked up to me, giving me a hug.

“Yeah, you do, and if you go right back to bed, you can have some for breakfast.”

She ran back into her room at lightning speed. Cookies for breakfast it was.

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Kenny

I hated leaving my mate at his home, even though I had my luxurious room waiting for me. But I'd rather stay in a tent with my mate than the finest hotel in the world without him. We were mates, and the separation was only temporary, I promised myself before clicking off the bedside lamp and trying to sleep. My busy mind refused to stop showing reels of our evening together from the moment I first scented him until our sweet kiss good night. I wanted so much more, yet the press of lips on lips was infinitely satisfying at the same time.

We'd be kissing goodbye all our lives, even if we did live under the same roof. And then, later on, kissing hello. Finally, toward dawn, I drifted off for a while, waking just in time to shower and dress and get to Wolfe Enterprises on time.

Since I hadn't remembered to eat at Animals, more interested in my mate and my conversations with Aspen, and I hadn't eaten breakfast, I was very pleased when a staffer led me into a small conference room where a delicious-looking spread was waiting for us. A lot of food on platters and keeping warm over candle flames. Way too much for the two of us. Perhaps the rest of his staff would also be eating at some point.

"Help yourself." Aspen arrived right after me and waved toward the sideboard. "I thought you might have been too busy to eat, and I haven't had breakfast yet either. Sometimes pack business isn't nine to five. But look who I'm telling that."

"Preaching to the choir." I accepted a plate from the alpha and proceeded to fill it far deeper than was polite. But then so did Aspen. "This is my first day off in years."

“This is a day off?” He cocked an eyebrow. “Business meetings.”

“You have no idea how much I love the air of an office.” I took the seat Aspen pointed to and waited for him to join me before picking up a fork. “You might have to throw me out at the end of the meeting.” Except that I wanted to get to my sweet kitten even more than be in a meeting.

Aspen forked up a chunk of fresh, juicy pineapple and savored it before replying. “Now, I know you had one heck of a mess to clean up when you got there, but you’ve done a wonderful job to all accounts. Rumor has it your people are on track to be better than ever.”

“Thank you. I’m glad word is getting out to that effect. The members of our pack have worked very hard to achieve these results and they will be proud to hear your kind words.” The frittata was creamy and savory and everything I missed about city food. We ate well, but it was nothing fancy. I supposed I could ask for anything and someone would make it, but I didn’t want to put them to extra trouble.

“So, while I’m sure the work is still hard, you don’t strike me as someone afraid of putting in effort.”

I shook my head, chewing.

“So, why are you so happy to be here? Most alphas squirm when they have to sit indoors for hours for meetings? I am the other exception. My skills are best used helping the pack succeed with this company.”

“I never thought I’d be an alpha—”

Suddenly the room filled with others, mostly males and a couple of females, and nobody had to tell me they were all pack alphas from the region. I knew some, not all,

but their aura of command told the whole story. Well, most of it. Not why they were here.

“Welcome, everyone.” Alpha Aspen stood from his seat and held out a hand to me. I also rose. “We’ve waited far too long to bring Alpha Kenny into our group. He’s earned his seat not only through challenge but by correcting all the mistakes of an alpha we shall not honor by stating his name.”

All the alphas came over and shook my hand, introduced themselves, and then helped themselves to heaping plates of food—the quantity of which was now clear to me. When we were all seated, they began discussing business matters as if I had always been one of them. They even asked my advice about some matters it could be surmised I had experience in. Like cleaning up messes and making money. Every so often, someone stood up to get more to eat, so I didn’t feel bad doing the same. I had anticipated being done with my meeting in an hour or so, but in fact, it went past lunchtime before our business was concluded.

When the last of the others had left for the day, I leaned back in my seat and let out a breath. “That was so much fun.”

Aspen stared at me. “You really do like this kind of stuff, don’t you?”

“I love it. But, most of my time is not about this now. I do meet with betas, but the only way to correct everything that was wrong about our lands and our people was to be out among them. The suit I am wearing now hasn’t been used in years. They probably all knew it was out of style.”

“I doubt it. You saw the others. Wearing everything from jeans to suits and back again. They don’t care about that.”

“No, and I suppose I don’t either anymore. How much do you know about my story?”

He shrugged. "Very little. I know you were living away and declared rogue then came back to challenge the alpha for dominance."

I huffed out a breath. "Is that what they're saying?"

"It's not true?" He cocked his head and picked up his coffee cup. "Then enlighten me."

"Well, you see, I never wanted to live on the packlands. I wanted to live in the city and be a businessman. So, I went to college and got a degree and a good job and made a success of myself, I think."

"And then they decided you'd forgotten yourself and declared you rogue?"

"The alpha when I left was fine with my choices, and I visited my dads often, contributed to the pack funds, and it seemed fine. Then the last alpha came in, and slowly things changed."

"For the worse." It wasn't a guess. Word would have gotten out somehow. I wasn't the only pack member who visited their family and friends.

"Much. Over time, the pack was deteriorating, and I began to worry and ask my dads to consider leaving but they insisted on staying there in their home. Said it wasn't too bad, a time of transition or something. And then one day, they closed and locked the gates and declared me and, I later learned, any pack members who lived off the lands to be rogue."

"I see."

"I didn't become alpha by choice but more by accident." And I went on to tell him about the cruelty that pushed me over the edge and led to a challenge I'd never

wanted but had to make. “As you noted, the pack has come together since that day and things are much better.” I slumped in my seat. “And now I have a mate who has found his own happy place. If his happiness means staying here, then I need to find a way to make that happen.”

“Who’s in charge while you’re here?”

I looked up at him, startled by the question. “Zoe, my beta. She’s a strong leader, and it was time she had an opportunity to use those skills without me watching over her.”

“Interesting.”

We discussed possibilities and then I texted my mate and made plans for a family date.

Mulder

I wasn't sure what Kenny had in mind when he asked us out on a family date, but during his meetings, he must have asked for some local suggestions. Because when he picked us up, his GPS was already set to the local children's museum. By local, I meant about forty-five minutes away, but that's as local as it came to those kinds of things.

I explained to Madeline we were meeting someone special and that we were going to hang out for the afternoon. She was a pretty quick kid and asked if I meant mate when I said special, and I told her, "Maybe." It was the best answer I could give.

This parenting thing was hard. I wasn't sure how much to say or how much to explain. Thankfully, she just rolled with it. She even put on her glittery tutu as we waited for him to come, saying that she needed to be fancy for our fun.

Madeline took an instant shining to him, talking his ear off as we walked to his car. I offered to take mine so we didn't have to transfer the car seat, but when I got to his vehicle, he already had one there, and it was installed correctly. At my look, he said, "Safety matters." He'd gone out of his way to get one just for her. Beta Swale must have helped him with it, since car seat choices had to do with height and weight along with age.

On the way to the children's museum, we sang along to the radio. The satellite channels had one that played a lot of favorite children's songs. Not one of us could carry a tune, but Kenny and Madeline had the ability to sing loud and proud and with enthusiasm. We had a blast.

The children's museum was great, as always. It wasn't super crowded—the youngest kids, the ones who were home during the day, were already leaving, and most of the school-age kids didn't come midweek. We wandered from room to room, making huge bubbles, playing store, and using pulleys to lift heavy objects. She'd been there plenty of times and took advantage of that experience to give Kenny the full tour.

But, soon enough, they were closing for the day, and it was time to go.

“Do you want to get dinner next?” Kenny asked Madeline.

“No. I want to see you guys shift. You smell like a wolf, but I can't tell what kind.”

He gave me a look.

“We've been working on her scenting skills,” I explained.

“Well then, I guess I'll have to show you what kind of wolf I am sooner rather than later. But little girls need to eat if they're going to grow big and strong and stay healthy. So, why don't we stop by the store and grab some things for a picnic?”

She seemed to think that was a good idea, and we went to the grocery store that had a full deli and made sandwiches. Unlike most kids, she didn't want a plain one—instead asking for pretty much every vegetable there was to go along with her roast beef.

I was the opposite. My roll had turkey and nothing else.

And Kenny was in between.

It amused me and reminded me of *The Three Bears*, even though none of us here were actually bears.

I typed the location of my favorite shifting spot into the GPS, and off we went. Along the way, we took turns talking about our favorite exhibits at the museum—the bubbles being the overwhelming winner.

Once, I would've been worried about Madeline seeing a wolf and being scared, but there were a lot of different kinds of shifters at Wolfe Enterprises—everyone from fox to shark to dragon—and she'd seen it all at company gatherings. A wolf wouldn't intimidate her, not in the slightest. If anything, she would call him a “puppy” or “cute doggy,” which was understandable, even if it wasn't totally ideal.

After we ate our sandwiches, she worked on the ginormous cookie she'd picked out at the grocery store's bakery and, the two of us shifted.

Madeline had seen my cat a million times in her short life. I was one of the fortunate shifters who could take my fur at home, no problem. Well...there was the one problem way back when, but if it hadn't been for that pain-in-the-ass neighbor, I wouldn't have Madeline, and I wouldn't have had those years with Jason. So, it had all been worth it.

When Kenny took his fur, she set the cookie down and came over. “You're beautiful.”

She hugged him around his furry neck. “Next time, I'm bringing a tutu for you. I think your wolf could use one.”

I'd need to talk to her about that. Putting a tutu on a pack alpha was far from proper etiquette.

She asked us to run races, and we did. Then she asked us to lie down so she could see which of us was better for snuggling—and we did. She picked Kenny. And, finally, she asked us to switch back because she had something “really, really funny” to tell

us.

Well, that really, really funny thing was all about the fact that I was a cat and Kenny was a dog.

“My second most favoritest book,” she explained, “is about a cat and a dog, and they are best friends. Like best, best friends. Not like the kind that are mean, where you say, ‘Oh, you’re my best friend’ because you want the other person to know they’re not.”

Gods, sometimes I hated school. Kids could be so mean. The best friend thing had been a big issue at the beginning of the year—not with her particularly but with the entire class—and we spent an entire parents’ meeting listening to the principal and teacher telling all the parents how to handle it at home. Apparently, it was still fresh on Madeline’s mind, and I filed it away as something to ask the teacher about next time I saw her.

“Anyway, they get into so much trouble—not because they’re naughty though—they just are in the wrong place at the wrong time. It’s hilarious.”

“And what’s your favorite book about?” Kenny asked.

“Oh, that’s about when Father broke Daddy out of jail.”

Kenny’s eyes snapped to me.

“It wasn’t jail.”

Kenny broke out laughing, already knowing the story.

“Is that your only book about Daddy?”

She shook her head. “No, Daddy made me lots of books so I don’t forget my father.”

“Maybe you can read them to me one day?”

She bobbed her head up and down. “I can try. I’m not good at reading yet, but I can pick out a, the, and cat. And Madeline. I can tell you the stories, though.”

“That sounds great. I’d love to hear them.” Kenny wasn’t threatened by my past. He wanted to know all about it.

“Are you going to be my papa?”

Kenny looked at me as if I had all the answers. This was just as much new territory for me as it was for him.

“Papa?”

“Yeah. I have a daddy, and my father is with the Goddess. So that leaves papa. Is that gonna be you?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yeah. I really want a papa. And Daddy gets lonely. He needs a dog to get into mischief with.”

I...wasn’t gonna argue with that, not if that “dog” was Kenny.

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Kenny

After our fun and exciting day, Madeline drowsed in her car seat all the way home to their house. When I turned the car off, I waited, thinking she might wake, but Mulder shook his head. “She’s down for the night. I would like to give her a bath after all the running around, but she’ll have to have one in the morning because that would wake her up and then she’d be bouncing off the walls until midnight.

“That doesn’t sound like a good thing.”

“It’s not, for a lot of reasons.” He winked at me. “A couple not even related to her being rested at school tomorrow.”

“She wants me to be her papa, right?” I was pretty sure that’s what her asking then mentioning the cat and dog being friends added up to.

“That’s my read on it. She wouldn’t have brought it up if she didn’t, or at least not in such a happy, friendly way.”

“So, she likes me?”

“Yes, she does. She has added you to her little group of adult friends, but also, if you want to be, her papa.”

“Family.” My cheeks ached with my smile. “I guess we’d better get her in to bed, then.”

Mulder eased her out of the car seat and handed me the house keys. “If you’ll unlock the door?”

“I was staring, wasn’t I?”

“Yes.” He freed one hand and reached for mine, giving it a squeeze before releasing it to help support Madeline. “But since I just spent the afternoon ogling your”—his gaze flicked down to the child in his arms—“face. I was ogling your handsome face.”

“Good trick while walking behind me so much of the time.” We reached the door and I opened it and stepped back to allow Mulder to pass. “I’m glad you like to look at my...face.”

Mulder continued on down the hall, and I waited while he got Madeline into her jammies and tucked in bed. When he came back, he had a rueful grin on his lips. “I didn’t even brush her teeth for fear of waking her. I’m probably a terrible dad.”

“You’re a wonderful dad, and I would say missing a tooth brushing once in a great while is okay.” I did not bring up the fact she’d had a cookie.

“I’ve brushed them every night since they grew in and her dentist says shifters almost never get cavities. Do you suppose all parent mates think of ways not to keep their children up late just so they can rip each other’s clothes off and do naughty things to each other all night long.”

I swallowed hard, his words making me rock-hard and aching for him. “I don’t know. I guess every family has to come up with their own plan, but as the partner with zero experience in the raising of children, I’m going to have to follow your lead in these matters at least for a while.”

He crossed the room to where I had taken a seat on the sofa and plopped down on my

lap. “An alpha, a pack alpha no less, putting me in charge of something so important.” He leaned back, resting against my chest, face tipped up toward mine. “Then my first command is that you kiss me right here and now.”

“But, Madeline? She might wake up and come out here and see.” I didn’t want to traumatize the child. “I walked in on my dad’s one time when I was young and about scared myself to death.”

He cupped my cheek and planted a quick, hard peck on my lips. “Which is why I only asked you to kiss me. I don’t mind Madeline seeing mates express affection. In fact, I think that’s healthy.”

“Anything more than that, we go to the bedroom.” Not a question. A statement. Even if he was going to have to guide me in all things fatherhood, I knew that much.

“Yes, but I hereby declare kissing PG.” He leaned closer again, and I captured his lips in a more profound kiss, deeper and with tongue. When we paused for breath, foreheads pressed together, my mate sighed. “Okay, some kisses are PG. That was definitely R.”

“Agreed.”

“Let’s try a PG again so we have it for reference.”

We tried and failed.

“I think it might be easier when we’ve burned off some of this sexual tension,” he said.

“Omega mine, when do you think that will be? Because I cannot imagine not wanting to strip you naked and fill your body with my cock every time I see you.”

He cleared his throat. “Okay, new rule. Closed-mouth is PG, anything else behind closed doors. Deal?”

“You’re the expert.” I stood up, bringing him with me. “Now, if you’d like to show me to your bedroom where we can close the door?”

It wasn’t far, but cradling my omega against my chest, it seemed to take forever to get into his room. He pointed out Madeline’s was across the hall and down a bit, so as long as we were quiet, we should be all right. This papa stuff was a challenge but I knew it would be totally worth it.

Alone together in the quiet of his bedroom, we undressed one another slowly, only a small nightlight allowing my shifter vision to take in what my hands caressed. I’d seen him when we shifted, of course, but that was quick and not a time for staring. Especially with a child there, we had to use our very best shifter manners.

Now, it was just us, and we didn’t have to rush. It was early in the evening, and this was our first time together. As the last of our clothing landed on the floor, I guided him down onto the bed for some more of that R-rated kissing.

The kissing led to touching led to other things. My mate’s scent surrounded me, and my desire to go slow and make this lovemaking leading up to marking last as long as possible was seeping away. Mulder’s body temperature was a little warmer than most people’s. Maybe because he was a cat?

What would it be like to bury myself inside him with that extra heat?

The thought almost had me coming before I found out. Instead, I dropped to the floor and tugged him to the edge of the bed so I could try some X-rated kissing. He was long, with a slight curve and a broad head that went between my lips with a smack. I reached between his legs and cupped his ball sac, teasing gently while taking more of

his rod into my mouth. When I had him as far into my throat as I could, I sucked hard and glided my fingers back to find his slick.

Head bobbing, I took him deep over and over while working one, two, then three fingers into his hole, stretching and preparing him for my aching cock. Moving faster and faster, I licked around his shaft and grazed his head with my teeth, sucking and releasing until he grabbed a pillow and covered his face, his cry muffled behind the cotton case.

His salty, tangy cum filled my mouth, and I swallowed it down then licked him clean before releasing him to lie back panting, tossing the pillow aside.

“You taste so good, omega mine,” I said, rising to push his knees to his chest. “And you’re so slick.” Even after my preparation and all the slipperiness, my cock was still going to be a tight fit. “Tell me if I hurt you so I can stop.”

He reached up and pulled me down for a kiss. “Don’t stop. Ever.”

“I will make it good for you, I promise, but at least let me know if I need to slow down at first.”

“No promises.” He was purring, tugging me toward him. “No more waiting. Make me yours.”

Make me yours.

He didn’t have to ask me again. I would dare any alpha to reject their fated mate’s pleas for lovemaking. If they could, they were stronger than I was. Fitting my cockhead to his hole, I prodded once, twice, and then he thrust his hips up and I slid balls deep into his hot, tight channel. Trying to go slowly, I failed, but my omega was bucking and moaning and reached for the pillow again to stifle his cries.

It was too much, and I braced myself on his bent legs and drove in again and again, grunting his name with each thrust until my balls retracted and I filled the precious body of my omega with my cum.

Knot swelling, I leaned in and sank my fangs into his shoulder, deep, mouth filling with coppery fluid. I swallowed it then lapped at the gaping wound, my saliva sealing it and ensuring the mark would remain.

I rolled over then, bringing him to lie on top of me, still tied together by the knot that stayed for long minutes, but not long enough. I'd gladly be bound to my omega for the rest of our lives.

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Mulder

Madeline was in bed for the night, and Kenny was scheduled to go back to his pack in the morning. There was still so much for us to decide. We were mates, and that was great—but we had two very different lives, and somehow, we were going to have to figure out how to merge them.

“As cliché as this is, this omega is gonna go make sandwiches. I’m starving. You?”
I’d have made something better, but it was time for grocery shopping.

“I could eat.”

We pulled on enough clothes to be decent in case Madeline woke up and went into the kitchen. Shifter kids were used to nudity in the shifting process, but they didn’t need to have adults wandering naked for no good reason.

I pulled the sandwich fixings from the fridge as he grabbed the plates and knives. I loved how he pitched in on the mundane tasks like this. Not all alphas would, especially not pack alphas.

“I hate to bring this up, but you’re supposed to leave tomorrow?” Ignoring it any longer wasn’t going to help anyone.

“Yeah, I am. I was thinking about that. A lot.”

He and I both. There wasn’t a quiet moment when I wasn’t hyper focused on what came next. I should’ve brought it up sooner, but part of me was terrified about how it

would go, and I didn't want to ruin the wonderful time we'd been having.

Being part of his pack had never been his plan. He went to college as an escape. He was even less happy about being thrown into the role of pack alpha. But that was the hand he'd been dealt, and the one he was currently living with. He took his responsibilities seriously, and the pack was significantly better since he took over.

"So, what are we going to do?" He grabbed the loaf of bread and made two sandwiches—one for me and one for him. Maybe this wasn't as cliché as it could have been.

"I don't really know." I wish I had all the answers, or even one at this point.

"And as I see it, we have two choices. We can go back to my pack, or we can stay here."

"Won't that mess everything up for you?" His pack ran very differently than Alpha Aspen's.

"No. It won't." He didn't sound like he quite believed that. "Please don't be offended by this question, but are you officially pack?"

"Ish. Madeline is. I am...pack-adjacent. They treated me like pack, but I never officially joined, mostly because I didn't want to deal with the paperwork."

He leaned forward in his chair, giving me his undivided attention.

I went on, "I was born into the cat equivalent of a pack. I haven't seen them since I was a child, but I'm not officially rogue. It didn't matter to me if I was pack or not. What did matter was Madeline having one."

“Well, in that case, if we decide to stay here, you would need to become pack officially—and that would be the loophole. I know it’s not fair to ask you that, but rules are rules.”

“I’d need to talk to the alpha.” I wasn’t opposed to the idea, but I had turned down the offer once. It wouldn’t be right to assume that I could simply say backsies and have it be a done deal.

“Your alpha hinted that if I wanted to, I could be a beta here.”

“What do you mean hinted?” Aspen had always been very straightforward with me, but then again, I wasn’t the leader of another pack.

“I mean, he said if I wanted to take advantage of the loophole and stay here, then I could do that. He didn’t say you needed to become a member, not exactly. He told me to talk to you about your position in the pack, though, and I read between the lines.”

Aspen was always looking out for me.

“As far as the pack is concerned, I’m one of them. It’s not a usual situation, for sure.”

“Yeah, I’m beginning to see that.” He took a bite of his sandwich.

“Where does this leave us?”

“That leaves you to decide what you want to do. I’m making decisions for just me. You know what’s best for Madeline. It isn’t my call.”

“No, it’s not me who decides. It’s you. You’re a pack alpha. I may be deciding for Madeline and me, but you are deciding for an entire pack.”

We went back and forth as we finished our sandwiches, both of us basically saying, you decide; no, you; no, you .

When I put the plates in the sink, I dropped one a little too loudly and cringed. I was going to wake Madeline if I wasn't careful.

Only thirty seconds later, I realized it was too late for being careful—because out she came, and she looked visibly frazzled.

“Hey, sweetie, are you okay?” I asked.

She ran over to Kenny and hugged him. “I had a dream. I had a dream that we had to leave everywhere, and we broke down, and we had to start a new life. And it was a bad dream.”

It was the dream of the story of how we came here, only instead of the two of us alone, Kenny was in it too. Somehow this situation melded with her past during her dreams.

She remembered a lot more about that time than she should. At first, I thought it was because I'd been pretty honest with her about our journey here. But over the years, she'd mentioned details I'd never shared. She remembered things I was sorry she'd been aware of—not a lot, but anything tied to deep emotions like that was too much.

“Well, you don't have to worry about that,” he assured her. “You're home. You're safe. How about I tuck you back in and tell you the story about when I was in college and my wolf wanted to come out so badly that my foot shifted during a test?”

She gasped. “Is this a make-believe story, or is this like a book Daddy makes?”

“It's like a story Daddy makes.”

She grabbed his hand and the two of them went in. Based on the giggling I heard coming from her, the story was hilarious.

He came out a minute later. “She’s already mostly asleep. Even my hairy foot story didn’t entertain her enough to keep her awake.”

“That’s good. From the sounds of her laughter, I need to hear that tale soon.”

“I can arrange that. In the meantime, I think we know what we need to do.”

“What’s that?” Because I sure didn’t know.

“We need to sleep on this. I’m going to send a text to my pack and let them know more meetings came up. Buy us a few days. But we shouldn’t be rushing into this too quickly, either way.”

Relief flooded me. Even though it was only a few more days to decide, the time felt like decades compared to what we’d just been facing.

“Tomorrow, I’m going to ask Aspen to make me officially pack. Then we have choices.” Even if we decided to stay with his pack, having Madeline and I both transferring from the same pack would be easier. “I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“We should go to bed.” He stood up and approached me, hugging me close. “We’ll figure this out. And we’ll live our best life ever—you, me, and our beautiful daughter.”

“Gods, I love the sound of that.”

“Me too.” He kissed the top of my head and scooped me into his arms. “Now let’s go

get some sleep.”

And we did get some sleep—but not quite right away.

Kenny

I had finally made the big decision and accepted the gift offered me by the Wolfe Enterprises pack. Madeline had already taken the step when she was too little to do it on her own and had the honor accepted for her by her father.

But she was nonetheless a full member, and Mulder would be joining her later that night. The steps for me becoming one were more numerous and complicated, but I had faith that everything would come together.

Fate wouldn't have given us to one another without there being a path toward happiness, and from where I sat—on the front porch of my mate's home, that path was pretty clear. Zoe was going to be a great alpha. She'd continue growing the pack's success as we'd done together up until now, and I had a feeling she wouldn't see it as the burden I did. Everything she did as beta was done with such irrepressible enthusiasm that people were delighted to be part of any project she was involved with. And they respected her. Zoe was born and raised in the pack and had worked many of the jobs available there. She'd always put pack first and, in truth, was far worthier of being pack alpha than I'd ever be. But I'd always be available for consultation or advice if she wanted or needed it.

There would be no challenge, as long as she was willing to accept the title. A process for transfer did exist. If she didn't want the job, things could be a lot stickier, but I wouldn't think about that now.

Our new pack had a big ceremony planned for Mulder, and I was just honored to be invited since I had not yet been able to join. Aspen was the most secure pack alpha

I'd ever met in his invitation to me, though. He was bringing in someone who had held his job and trusting that I wouldn't become power hungry and try to take it from him.

Or perhaps he was just a good judge of character. As a beta, I'd be able to use my skills both in pack management and in business for the benefit of the Wolfe Enterprises pack. It was a position that suited me far more than my previous one.

"The ceremony is about to start."

I glanced up to see one of the betas waiting on the walkway. "Thanks. I'll be right there." Mulder had been locked up with various pack members all day, learning his part in the ceremony, pack lore, having lunch, and generally being with them. Although he was just now finalizing his membership, he'd already been part of them for several years, and many of them wanted to have a part in his special day. While there was a sort of village where some members lived, many dwelled in ordinary neighborhoods in the surrounding area, and so the beta had been sent to pick me up and drive me to the ceremony in the village, an honor given the newest member's alpha, who would usually belong already.

All things in good time.

I climbed into the passenger seat and rode to the open area in the village where people had spread out picnic blankets or set up chairs of various kinds. Off to the side were long tables laden with food. Everyone brought their best dishes, and a pig was just being lifted out of a hole in the ground.

At the front, a row of folding chairs had been decorated with balloons and ribbons, and in the center stood a gazebo, also decorated. "This is incredible," I muttered.

"What? The ceremony? Doesn't your pack have one for new people?"

“Uh, yeah.” But not like this. We’d only had one person join since I’d been alpha, probably due to our bad reputation that was just now clearing up. But all we’d had was a formal greeting and taking of oaths on the front steps of the alpha house followed by cake and punch. I’d suggest Zoe up our game if she accepted the alpha position.

Madeline, who’d been playing at a friend’s home, came running up to me. “Lap?”

I lifted her and settled her on my thigh. “It’s an exciting day, isn’t it?”

That of course had her launch into a description of just how exciting it had been for her. She had mac and cheese for lunch and swung on the swings in the pack playground, went down the “big” slide for the first time with nobody holding on to her, and generally had a good time. As she finished her description, my mate filed in along with Alpha Aspen and his several betas. They took seats in the folding chairs and waited while all the rest who had been visiting settled into their chairs and onto the blankets.

The alpha never even had to tell them to be quiet. His pack was respectful, without fear. The same feeling I had been building toward with my pack. Maybe soon my former pack. The thought made me a little sad, but I knew I’d be happy here with my family. And Zoe would be a leader to be proud of. She wouldn’t take the job accidentally but with great forethought.

Madeline lay back on my lap and drowsed, the great events making no impression on her. She’d lived here almost her whole life, and that was one of the reasons Mulder and I had made the choice we did. This was our daughter’s home, where all her friends were, the pack school, and her safety and comfort.

The ceremony itself was short, but Mulder fidgeted from foot to foot as it went on, and I thought he looked a little pale. He’d probably had too much food today, since

everyone would have plied him with treats. This pack was big on treats. And a whole dinner awaited.

After he took his oaths to pack and alpha and completed all the other formalities, there was a pack run. I had been invited to join, and I left Madeline with some of the elders who were playing games with them, keeping an eye on the food, and setting up a grill. Looked like the giant pig wasn't the only barbecue happening. Everything perishable was in coolers or on ice, and we were only going to be gone a short time. This pack had their plans down for all occasions. And food was a big part of it.

I was happy to have been invited on the run, since it was technically a pack-only welcome to Mulder. I stripped and shifted along with all the rest, heading out into the wild desert. After a while, I noticed he was lagging a bit, his shorter legs having a hard time keeping up with the wolves. So I lay down, and he took the hint and hopped on to ride on my back for the rest of the glorious cavalcade.

When we got back, there was much eating and drinking, but my mate only picked at his food and didn't want any of the spiked punch or home-brewed beer. He wasn't a big drinker as far as I knew, but I had seen him have a cocktail or two at Animals.

"Do you want something different to eat? Maybe some lemonade to drink?" I didn't like his color that looked a bit green. "Why don't you lie down somewhere for a half hour or so?"

"I'm fine, mate." He brushed aside my concerns. "Just all the excitement, I think."

I wasn't so sure about that, but the whole event was in his honor, and I couldn't drag him away against his will. "All right, but if you don't feel better in a half hour, we'll make our excuses and say Madeline needs to go to bed."

"All right." Shoot. His giving in this easily worried me even more. My omega had

been independent for a long time, and he didn't need me to mother him. Nonetheless, I was going to keep an eye on him, and if he didn't look better in that half hour, we would get someone to give us a ride home. Or go see the healer.

Grandpa Swale walked up, Madeline swinging from his hand. She let go and ran off after some other children, and he sat down beside us on an empty lawn chair. "Did you enjoy the run?" He had stayed behind with the kids, although I had heard he usually went along.

"We did," I told him.

"My alpha gave me a ride for part of the time," Mulder told him. "I don't know why I got so tired. I guess it was keeping up with so many wolves, but I'll do better next time."

The older wolf tsked. "Only if next time is after you deliver."

My mate blinked at him. "Deliver what?"

My jaw dropped. "Grandpa Swale, why do you think my mate is pregnant?"

"Just look at him." He leaned in close and nodded. "You don't get that shade of green any other way unless you ate something bad."

Mulder jumped up and clapped a hand over his mouth, looking around before darting off. I was on my feet, but the older wolf stayed me with a gesture. "Give him a moment before you follow. He needs to take the news in and let out...whatever he's eaten."

"But he needs me."

“In a moment. You are very new and he may feel embarrassed. Once he’s emptied his belly, you can go and pet your kitty and make him feel better.”

I wasn’t sure if he was right, but I waited a full sixty seconds before running after my omega. If Grandpa Swale was right, and I had no reason to think he wasn’t, we needed to head out ASAP to my old pack to make the arrangements necessary to put down roots here.

Mulder

I don't know what I was expecting when I went with Kenny to his pack. I guess, in a way, I thought it would be similar to Wolfe Enterprises—which I knew couldn't be the case since they were one of a kind—but at the same time, it was really my only experience with wolves.

It was nothing like that.

They were more centered around pack life than anything external. And it was fine, and they were nice, but I was glad we made the decision we did, happy that he gave Zoe his power. She was great and in her element. It would be good for the pack and for us. Basically, it was a win-win.

It was painful to watch him be stripped of his pack—not because he didn't want it to happen but because the ceremony itself was...pretty harsh. I couldn't even fathom how horrible it would've been if he was being forced rogue when the process for an amicable departing was this intense. There were even a few times it took all I could do to hold back and not tell Kenny I'd changed my mind. But as we left pack lands, he pulled over, leaned back, let out a long sigh, and said, "I'm free. I'm finally free."

And in that moment, I realized—we made the very best decision for our family. Sure, the road wasn't as easy, but the destination? It was everything.

We came home and went straight to Aspen to plan Kenny's ceremony. We had to wait until he was officially out of his birth pack to begin, or we'd have already done it. He was already technically connected to them in a way similar to what I had been

when Madeline became pack, but there were formalities I didn't fully understand and of course a huge-ass party to attend.

"And there's one more thing we need to discuss." Aspen slid a folder across the table to us. "Now that you are a growing family, it's time to upgrade your living situation. Here are some listings I think would be suitable."

I rolled my eyes. He really did act more like a father than an alpha some days.

He wasn't wrong. We were going to need a bigger house. We could make do in the one I had, and I did love it. After Jason's insurance finally came through, I'd had the kitchen redone to be my dream kitchen, but the house was really designed for a family of two or three, and that was no longer going to be us.

I rested my hands on my belly, knowing that our young was growing in there, getting ready to join us. It was best for us to have a home where we weren't packed in like sardines.

"Hey, don't blame me." Alpha Aspen smirked. "You think I'm the one who put this list together?"

"Grampa Swale," Kenny and I said at the same time. I loved the man, but he was a class-A meddler.

"Exactly." Alpha Aspen tapped the folder. "So you can see, you really have no choice but to at least check them out."

I turned to Kenny, who gave me a single nod. There were some things worth being stubborn about, but having someone help us make our lives better wasn't one of them, even if we didn't ask for said help.

Kenny opened the folder and flipped through the listings. Upon first glance, they looked solid.

“Why don’t you go grab Madeline from school and start taking a look? I have Joanna outside, and she’s ready to show you all the places.”

Joanna was a pack member who owned a local real estate company. She’d helped me find my current house and, if we found a new one, was the perfect choice to sell it.

“Are we not able to do any of the deciding?” I teased.

“Nope. If Kenny’s going to be working here, then he gets relocation help—just like you did.”

I didn’t bother arguing with that not actually being a normal thing—not even for around here. Our alpha was big into making sure his pack members had what they needed, and that looked different for everyone.

For whatever reason, that night in the diner, even though I wasn’t pack, Alpha Aspen had taken a shine to Madeline and me I couldn’t imagine where my life would’ve taken us if he hadn’t.

Madeline was done with classes and in her after-school-care portion of the day when we picked her up. She was thrilled to go look at houses. Every one we walked into, she found something to love. And really, they were all fine. But if we were going to move, I wanted it to be one time—and to find the perfect place. It wasn’t a realistic expectation, but given we had no time crunch, I wasn’t in a rush.

We spent four days looking at houses, but none of them were quite right. At least not until we walked into the only one on the list I thought wasn’t worth looking at. I had been so wrong.

The windows let in so much natural light and in the living room, the light refracted through them perfectly, forming little rainbows that danced on the wooden floor.

Madeline ran over to them and twirled and twirled and twirled. “It’s a fairy house!” she singsonged. “Do you think my room has fairies, too?” Not the bedroom but my room.

And just like that, we knew we were home.

Three weeks later, we were moving in.

“You know, my love...” Kenny wrapped his arms around me, placing his hand on my belly—which was still just as flat as before.

That’s how it had been with Madeline, too. I didn’t look pregnant until, suddenly, I looked like I was very pregnant. Pregnancy was wild.

“There are enough bedrooms here that if you have a full-on litter, we have room.”

I turned in his arms and scowled at him.

“I am not having a litter.” Although, given that he was a shifter too—and another animal who often did have litters—it was actually quite possible I was.

“Okay, my love.” He kissed the dip in my nose. “Whatever you say, but fair warning, Madeline told me she’s having four sisters. But what do I know?”

I’d heard her say it, too. But wishful thinking did not make reality. Probably.

“Papa!” Madeline ran from her bedroom with two tutus in her hands—and they were identical aside from size.

“Why do you have two of those?” I had a feeling I already knew.

“Because I went shopping with Grandpa Swale, and I saw this, and I said, ‘Papa needs this!’ and he agreed.”

She handed Kenny the one she’d purchased for him, and I could barely contain my giggle. He’d been warned. From the very first time she saw him shift, she said he needed one. Most alphas would’ve discouraged her. Not that he was a pack alpha anymore, a change that had us both happy.

“We’re in a new house, and we haven’t even shifted yet.” She stepped into her tutu. “Papa, your wolf can dance now!”

“Then dance he shall.” Kenny walked toward the back door, not a single hesitation in his step.

Okay. We were doing this.

We undressed on the back deck. I loved our backyard. It was huge and private. I didn’t have to worry about a pissy neighbor here, for sure.

I shifted first, wanting not to miss a second of my mate’s wolf dressed in a sparkly tutu. In hindsight, I should’ve waited to shift so I could get a picture of it—because if he wasn’t the epitome of a great dad in that moment, dancing around in a magenta tutu with Madeline, I wasn’t sure there ever was one.

If a human had stumbled upon us that afternoon, they’d have wondered if they were dreaming. Big-ass wolves didn’t stand on their hind legs, wearing a tutu, and letting a little girl hold their front paws as she sang a song and taught them a dance. None except for Kenny, aka best papa ever.

Kenny

With all the excitement of the last few months, it was a real pleasure to settle into our home and get ready to become a family of four. Our house had enough room for Madeline to have her own room and, eventually, the baby. At first, of course, our new addition would sleep in our room because even a baby monitor wasn't going to be enough to reassure me that all was well.

Mulder laughed at me, worrying before the baby even came, but he'd already been through this once before, and I had not. Besides, I couldn't imagine a more peaceful way to sleep than lying on my side with my mate tucked into my embrace and our baby sleeping peacefully just a few feet away.

Madeline had so much fun setting up her space. It had a canopy bed but instead of a standard ruffled top, the canopy made up a hanging space for her extensive tutu collection. It was a sparkly rainbow overhead, and somehow Grandpa Swale had set it up so that she could lower them with some kind of remote control and access whichever one she wanted.

Considering how young she was, we'd both been impressed that she could operate it, but Grandpa was a good teacher, and Madeline was a motivated learner. She had a desk, a doll house, a play kitchen, and all the sparkle a girl like her needed for happiness. A true fairy room.

Once we got past the first trimester, Mulder's stomach settled down, he seemed less tired, and we were all about getting ready for our new addition. Madeline had a lot of ideas about what the baby would need, some good, some—like real wings that flap so

she can fly—impractical since neither of her dads were bird shifters.

And I had an office again, along with the sedan of my dreams. Wolfe Enterprises embraced my skills, but unlike my previous job, which I'd also loved, this one was eight hours a day and no more. Back when, I didn't care how many hours I worked. Back then, I was not a family alpha.

Speaking of which, my family should be arriving soon. Mulder had gone to pick up Madeline for a trip to the baby furniture store to buy something we all thought would be very important. Since we'd all lived under one roof, every Saturday, if Mulder felt well enough, we went on adventures. At first, there were hikes and trips that involved a lot of steps, but as my mate grew larger and more uncomfortable, we went more places with less athleticism like the movies or a play. Sometimes we just wandered to the playground and watched Madeline have fun with her friends on the swings and slides and teeter totter.

So, with that in mind, we set out to purchase the best, the "fanciest" stroller in the whole city. There were several stores on our list to explore, and nothing in the first three seemed to meet our needs. It had to be sleek enough to fit almost anywhere but also convertible, safe, and structurally sound. We had a long list of things we wanted from this one item, and the baby's big sister really felt that some level of sparkle was right at the top of that list.

Poor Mulder waddled into each store and found a chair then sat uncomfortably while the store staff and Madeline and I brought him strollers that met as many of our criteria as possible. I almost thought we had one that would be a win once, but it didn't have the sparkles. I felt for the salespeople who had to deal with the three of us. Not that we weren't nice or anything. But we put them through so much work and not one of the strollers was right.

Finally, we gave up for the afternoon and went to get something to eat. Madeline was

drooping in her car seat when we arrived at the diner, but she perked up at the thought of having a unicorn shake with her dinner. We all had them, along with burgers and fries. It had been too hard a day to worry about calories or sugar.

“What are we going to do about a stroller?” my mate asked when we got home. Madeline had drifted off for good this time, and I was carrying her up the stairs, followed, slowly, by Mulder. “I was so sure we’d find something we liked. It’s not like our requirements are so difficult.”

“We will try again. Maybe we need to go over the list and see if we’re being too picky.” I cringed as I said it, hoping it wouldn’t hurt Mulder’s feelings. He was extra sensitive lately.

But to my surprise, he laughed. “I was just thinking the same thing. I only hope we can find one that meets Madeline’s choices. I really don’t know what we’ll do—” The doorbell rang, and I looked down the stairs, my arms laden with our little girl.

“I’ll get it,” my mate said, but he was almost to the top of the stairs and out of breath.

“No, just let me set Madeline down and I’ll take care of it.”

“I’ll get her in her pajamas, then.”

Downstairs, I opened the door to find nobody there. Just a stroller with a big bow on it. No note. I searched it for any hint as to who had given us this wonderful gift. And it was...

“It’s perfect.” Mulder waddled down the last of the stairs and came out onto the porch. “Why did you put us through this if you already had ordered the one we wanted? Was it a joke because I’m too pregnant for jokes.”

“I didn’t order this but I have a feeling I know who did.”

Mulder groaned. “Grandpa is spoiling this baby before it’s even born.”

My life was so different than the one I’d dreamed of. I hadn’t had the imagination to picture the happiness of even the little things in this pack and with my omega. One child growing like a weed and another on the way.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:41 am

Mulder

“Whoa.” Jayne quickly covered his mouth.

Whoa had not been the reaction I’d hoped for when I walked into the office after lunch, but my coworker was right. Whoa, indeed.

Just like with Madeline—one day, I didn’t look very pregnant, and then poof—I looked like I was ready to pop. And since he’d just taken a week off for vacation, the contrast was even sharper for him. And really, I was a lot larger than I had been with Madeline, although at the time, I’d have sworn that would be impossible. I felt the size of a house with her. And maybe I had been, but if that was true, I was the size of an entire condo complex now and I still had a few months to go.

“I know. I didn’t look like I was pregnant when you went on your cruise.” I rested my hands on my middle.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you absolutely should’ve. You weren’t being cruel. Don’t worry about it.”

I started to leave and he stopped me, saying, “Alpha Aspen’s here for your meeting in Conference Room C.”

“Oh, I better waddle lively, then.” Because waddling was pretty much all I could muster lately. “I’ll catch ya later.”

I waddled down the hall into the conference room, where Alpha Aspen was waiting with Karma and Grandpa Swale—or today, Beta Swale, since this was business.

“Sorry I’m late. For some reason, I thought the meeting wasn’t until next hour.”

“Oh, you aren’t late,” Karma assured me. “We had another meeting ahead of the one with you, so you’re actually early.”

Good to know.

“I can come back—” There were plenty of tasks on my to-do list for the week, if they needed more time to finish their conversation.

“No, this is perfect timing. Have a seat.” She indicated one that had not only a teapot with a nice teacup in front of it but also a small basket of baked goods. The rest of the people all had coffee mugs. Someone, I assumed her, arranged for the tea specifically for me, which I appreciated. Tea was much kinder to my stomach these days. “Thought you might be hungry.”

I was pretty much all the time. My guestimate was that at least half of my growing belly was a food baby, by this point.

“Why don’t we move on to the next stage?” she said to the alpha, and he nodded in agreement.

“We’re planning to have another fundraiser, one co-sponsored by Animals and Wolfe Enterprises,” Alpha Aspen explained, “and thought you might want to take a more active role in it, seeing how the last one was such a success.”

“To be fair, I didn’t actually do anything at the last one,” I said. “Unless you count finding my mate.”

“It was still a success, and you were there.” Beta Swale pointed to the basket in front of me and then mimed eating.

I took the hint as Alpha Aspen showed me a pitch for another fundraiser—this one for helping a different kind of animal—shifters, specifically single father shifters who needed to make a new start. The goal was to financially support scholarships, daycare, basic necessities—everything to help them get on their feet.

It was an issue close to my heart and I was glad to help.

I was at the point of my pregnancy where everything was starting to be uncomfortable, including sitting for an hour in these chairs. I was relieved when my phone buzzed with a reminder for my doctor’s appointment.

“Please keep me in the loop,” I told them. “I’d love to be part of this project—but it’s ultrasound day, and I can’t wait to see my little one.”

I pushed myself up, holding on to the table for a second to stabilize myself. My center of gravity had definitely changed.

“Babies?” Karma gave me a knowing glance.

I’d suspected multiples, too. I was already so much bigger than I was with Madeline—even near the end. But it was the first time anyone else had suggested it.

“Baby...probably.” I snatched a muffin to go.

“If you think so.” She very evidently did not.

When I got back to the lobby, my mate was already waiting for me. Gods, I loved working in the same complex as my mate.

We drove to the shifter clinic—run by one of our pack members—and waited for our turn, looking around at all the other parents-to-be, the room full of hope and love.

When it was finally our turn, we went back and did the usual routine. They took my weight—which I'd rather not have known—and took my blood pressure. Everything looked great.

And then it was ultrasound time.

The tech strolled into the room. “Hello, Dads. Before we get started, are you wanting to know the sex?”

“I think so,” I told him.

Kenny and I had talked about it. It was going to be a surprise whether we found out today, next week, or next month—so we figured we might as well know now and be prepared.

“Okay. Let's see what we have here.”

I leaned back. He started coating my belly with gel before moving the wand slowly across it. It took a while before he said anything, clicking and typing as he captured images.

This wasn't my first time at one of these appointments, but I was confused by what I saw. One thing was for sure, though. There were two babies in there.

We could handle two. Two grown-ups, two babies. We could do this.

“Okay, so I've got all the images the healer needs. Let's go through them one by one.” He moved the wand all the way to the left. “This is your son,” he said, pointing

out everything that made him absolutely perfect.

“And this...” He moved the wand over. “This is your daughter A.”

Kenny blinked. “A.”

“So...not twins?” I swore I saw twins.

“No. Not twins.” He moved the wand again. “This is daughter B.”

My heart stuttered.

“This is daughter C...”

Wait. What? I counted on my fingers as I said the letters. How could I be growing that many babies at once? How did they all fit? Would there be enough room for them? And just when I was able to find the words to ask, the healer moved the wand over another baby.

“And this is daughter D. Your litter looks incredibly healthy. Just keep doing what you’re doing. And if at any point you have even a single concern, give us a call and come in.”

After he got to baby B, my only response to him had been a blank nod. I was in shock.

I knew I was big.

Twins seemed realistic.

But five?

Five babies?

Five!

The healer left to give me privacy to get dressed, and I turned to face my mate and held up my hand showing the number five. “Can we...have five kids?”

“No, my love,” Kenny said softly. “Your math is wrong. We’re going to have six kids, five of them babies.”

“That’s true.” We were going to need to buy a bus.

“Good thing we have a pack. One that will, if nothing else, come and dote on them so we can catch a couple of minutes’ sleep.”

How was he so calm?

“You’re completely okay with this?”

“Of course I am. They’re ours.” He bent down and kissed my belly. “Now let’s go home and tell Madeline.”

We stopped at the toy store on the way and picked out five little stuffies and one large one. We didn’t know if we were having wolves or kittens, so we got wolves wearing shirts with kittens on them. Seemed like the perfect choice. Madeline’s sported a tutu.

Swale was dropping her off just as we arrived. We asked him to stay so he too could hear the good news.

“We went to see the healer today,” I told her, holding up the gift bag. “And we got to see your siblings.”

“You got to see my sisters? All four of them?” She’d been right all along...sort of.

“We saw more than that.” I handed her the bag, and she took the stuffies out, one at a time. When she was done, she looked up.

“There are five baby wolves here and one big one.” She tapped her nose, the way she did when she thought intensely about something. “I’m having five sisters, not four? I was sure there were going to be four.”

“Four sisters. One brother,” Kenny clarified.

Grandpa Swale squeed. It was adorable.

She twirled around, hugging the stuffies in her arms, barely containing them all.

“I can’t wait to meet them! We’re gonna have so much fun playing!”

“Not at first, honey. They don’t actually play in the beginning,” Grandpa Swale explained.

“No, but when they do start to play, I’m gonna be ready.” She put them all back in the bag. “I’m going to put these in their room, okay?”

She ran off, not waiting for a response.

The room we’d planned for the baby wasn’t going to be big enough for five, but we’d figure it out. We had space. We had the time—or at least some time.

“She took that well,” Kenny said.

“She’s going to be a really good big sister,” Grandpa Swale beamed.

“She is.” Kenny smirked. “At least until she decides to put tutus on them.”

“Oh, she will do that, and I think I know who will indulge her in buying them.”

“We all have our roles in her life, and mine is Grandpa Swale/tutu supplier extraordinaire.”

I had a feeling those tutus were going to arrive long before the babies did. We were so lucky to have him in our lives, even if it meant tutus for days.

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Kenny

The babies were coming, and it couldn't be soon enough. We'd been busy as anything preparing for them ever since we learned they were a litter instead of a singleton. Turned out, there were people in our pack with skills that made expanding our home in the short time before the babies were due to arrive possible.

And, the room addition was a gift from the pack itself.

I'd argued that it was not necessary since my salary was excellent, the benefits even better than my old job in the human world, and we could manage ourselves. But Alpha Aspen said it would be a lot better if we didn't have debt with five more mouths to feed, and he also gave me a raise. Now we were down to the wire with a big, beautiful nursery, enough clothes, diapers, and baby stuff from the shower of the century given us by both packs, jointly, and all we needed were the babies to fill the cribs.

"Mate, where are you?" I usually found him in the living room, sitting on the one chair comfortable enough to support him but firm enough that he could get out of it on his own. We'd decided I would work until his due date or when the babies arrived, whichever came first, but each day when I left was harder than the one before. I peeked in the kitchen and den and downstairs powder room, but no sign of him. "Are you taking a nap?"

I worried about him. He hadn't been able to fit behind the steering wheel for a couple of weeks, so we took that as a sign that he should go on paternity leave. I had suggested earlier, but he pointed out that we were going to have a whole lot of

expenses and, even with the pack's help, extra couldn't hurt. My independent omega, always putting others first.

I climbed the stairs, headed for our bedroom, although he hadn't answered me. If he wasn't in our bedroom, perhaps the nursery or Madeline's room. But I didn't have to go far because when I ducked into our room, I heard his moans from the en suite. "Omega!" I dashed over and tried to open the door. It was stuck. "Omega, open the door. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I am sitting against it."

"Why? Can't you get up?"

"I don't know." He huffed. "Hang on, I'm trying."

I tapped my toe, desperate to get in there with him. Had he had the babies? I had to help my omega. Finally, just as I was thinking of going outside, getting a ladder, and climbing in the window, the door swung open to reveal my omega lying on the bathroom floor, his pants around his knees, and his face tense with strain.

"Omega, what are you doing?" This was not the plan!

"I'm having our babies. Feel free to help."

I reeled back. This was not how my omega behaved. The sarcasm hung thick in the air. But that wasn't the immediate problem. When I looked closely, I could see the top of a head. "Okay, omega. We're going to be having a home birth, but let's not do it on the bathroom floor." I put an arm under his shoulders and the other under his knees. "We'll have our babies in our own bed."

From that moment, they came fast. We'd had plenty of time to plan our in-hospital

birth with everything there in case anything went wrong. But that was before this day when all that changed. I carried him to our bed, tapped a message into my phone, and stood between his legs. “I called for the healer.” I hoped they’d come. But it didn’t matter because no sooner did I have that thought than our son, Buddy, was in my hands.

By the time the healer arrived and let himself in, along with his nurse, Kemi, Ana, Tani, and Georgia, the rest of the litter, were lined up on the bed, wrapped in towels, and I was never so glad to see anyone because that was really all I knew to do.

The healer and nurse took over, cleaning up my mate and the babies and doing all the things that they were so good at while I sat on the bed next to my mate and watched.

“Have you ever seen such beautiful children,” Mulder marveled. “They’re so tiny, though.”

“They’re perfect.” I kissed him and then sat back to take the two babies the nurse was handing me. “And so are you.”

“Did you pick up Madeline?” he asked suddenly.

“No, was I supposed to?”

“She’s with Grandpa Swale,” Mulder said. “I sent her to him when I felt the first pains. I called you to tell you.” He reached for his phone on the bed table and looked at the screen. “The message never sent.”

“We’re going to have to do a better job with six than we just did with one.” I felt like an awful father as the nurse fitted a third baby into my arms. “Call him and see if he can bring her home?”

Ten minutes later, all the babies were cleaned up and wrapped up and tucked into their bassinets. Madeline was perched on the bed between us, and our family was together for the first time.

We were going to need help, but we'd had so many offers already, and we were going to accept them. At least for a while, until we felt as if we could handle everything ourselves. Because they were given in love, and our babies would grow up knowing how many people cared about them. And that people helped one another in happy times and sad. Our little wolves and/or cats were born to this pack.

What lucky babies!

What lucky dads.

Mulder

Madeline came running outside wearing a cat-eared headband and her birthday dress, which was complete with a tutu, of course. She was never without one of those. Even though she'd just turned ten, and most of her friends had long outgrown their whole fairy-princess, fluffy-skirt phase—she never had, and I suspected she never would. If they made her happy, I'd continue to supply her with them. Not that she needed me to, not with Grandpa Swale around.

Kenny had a strong suspicion that she was about to shift soon. It was a little bit young for cats, but not terribly so. I'd scented her fur a few times this week as well. I wasn't sure if I wanted her birthday party to be her first shift or not, but it really wasn't up to me anyway. It would happen when it happened.

For a long time, I didn't know if she was going to take after her father or me. Either way, she was exactly perfect and who she was meant to be. But lately, she'd been talking more and more about getting her cat, and I was glad when she started showing signs she was nearly ready. Thinking she was going to shift, never to be able to, would break her heart.

We were having a small party. And by small, I meant in the backyard as opposed to a large venue—not in the number of guests. We had a bunch of people from work, Karma and her mate, Warren, and even Zoe drove by for the celebration. And because Grandpa Swale was Grandpa Swale, there were tutus galore.

Everybody who came in was redirected to a table to pick out their own. I didn't think that would go well—most adults weren't really good about things like that—but I

guess when the pack beta tells you to go to the table the alpha was at to help find your tutu, you do it with a smile. And it had our sweet girl overjoyed.

Her siblings were already outside, her sisters trying to talk Aunt Zoe into giving them cake well before cake time. Zoe stood firm, telling them it wasn't time. If they had been smart about things, they would've gone to Grandpa Swale. He wasn't one for denying them anything.

"Hey." My mate came up behind me and kissed my mate mark. "Everything looks wonderful."

He rested his hand on my middle. This pregnancy was different than the last—I was already showing, only a month and a half in. We'd thought we were done having children after having our first litter. Those first couple of years had been intense, to say the least. We were outnumbered in everything, but even so, it was a wonderful time, and I was glad that we were able to savor it. Our work had been great about giving us the time we needed, and our friends and coworkers had offered support that made all the difference.

But then, as they went to kindergarten, Madeline asked when her brothers were coming. I said they weren't. And she said okay—but not like she believed me.

Well, once again, she was right. This time, I didn't ask her how many, and I was glad she didn't tell me. Because if we were having another litter, I was already tired. We'd figure it out when it came. There was no denying I was carrying more than one, though. If I was showing this much already...probably more than two.

"You don't have your tutu on," he teased and nipped my ear. "Is it too small?"

I had a special one the same exact color as Madeline's. And it was too small, yeah. But for a good reason.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Jayne’s working on opening it up so it’ll fit me.”

A few minutes later, Jayne came out with it. It was no professional job—no one would look at it and think a tailor had done it. There was a rubber band involved, along with a bread tie. But it worked, and I slipped it on.

“It’s officially party time,” I said and twirled. That was a mistake and if my mate hadn’t been there to steady me on my feet, I’d probably have fallen.

Madeline flitted from person to person, thanking them for coming and asking them to be part of her fairy dance, which she’d created just for the event. It was adorable watching them all trying to learn her little dance, the song playing over and over again as they eventually got the routine down—or at least close enough.

I nearly toppled over the first time around and offered to be the camera person instead. I was fairly confident not everyone there loved the idea of being caught on film now—but they would, when they had it later to look back on. It wasn’t like I was posting it on social media or anything.

They stayed for hours. And when it was time for everybody to leave, all the cake was gone, all the presents opened, and our youngest were sitting on the porch, working hard at not falling asleep.

“Hey, guys, it’s been a long day. How about we take you up to bed?” I could sure use some sleep. This was the exhaustion stage of pregnancy.

“No,” our Buddy said. “We can’t. Madeline said we get to meet her cat today.”

That was news to me. I knew it was coming but not that she had a set time in mind. “Yeah?”

“She’s coming tonight,” Madeline announced proudly.

“Are you sure?” I asked. I wouldn’t be surprised, but it wasn’t something you knew ahead of time. At least not normally.

“I saw it in a dream. Why do you think I’m wearing these cat ears? They hurt. But in my dream, I had them on when I started to shift.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her—not as I was looking down at her four beautiful sisters.

“Do you want me to shift and see if that helps?” Kenny asked.

She nodded. “But take your tutu, Papa. Maybe your wolf can wear it.”

He still put that thing on for her, even after all these years. It was so adorable.

I sat down with the others, not really comfortable shifting anymore, and watched as he took his wolf form and stepped into the tutu she held for him. The two of them ran around one another until she stopped, flung her ears off, and kicked off her shoes.

It was happening.

She was shifting.

She didn’t manage to get her clothes off before she took her fur, and I ran over to help her get out of the pile of clothing she was tangled in.

“Oh, my sweet girl,” I whispered. “You look just like I did when I was your age.”

She was not a teeny tiny kitten, but pretty close, and she had the longest whiskers—plus extra toes.

When I was little, I was told that extra toes meant you had a gift, one extra toe for

every unique talent. I already knew what hers was. She could see things—not everything, and not enough to have it negatively impact her life with worry—but more than once over the years, she did things ahead of time, things she shouldn’t have known.

She jumped onto Kenny’s back, and he walked around with her. It was ridiculously adorable, and you could hear her purring across the yard.

Her brother and sisters ran up to her. “Can we, like, pet her?” Kemi asked.

“Not now. But if she comes up to you and rubs against you, you can.”

Petting was something very personal. I didn’t mind when the kids petted me, but I knew many a cat who hated it.

Everyone ran around for a while, and then she shifted back.

“This needs to be a book,” Madeline insisted.

I’d been adding to the books since we moved here. I had one about the night I met Kenny. Another about when she became a member of the pack, Kindergarten graduation, and a lot of other major and minor events alike. And she was right—today was book-worthy.

“Oh, absolutely.” I hugged her tight. “We can start working on that tomorrow—if you go right to bed.”

“But it’s my birthday.”

“It is. But barely. Look at the moon—it’s pretty high. And besides, you have to be a good role model. Look at your siblings.” Kenny pointed to the others who were no longer asleep. They had gotten their second wind—not acting very tired at all.

“Fine,” she sighed. “It’s bedtime. But tomorrow we can work on the book. I want to be able to show it to my kids one day.”

And off she ran inside. Kenny followed her, taking the others with him. He came out about a half hour later with a cup of tea for me.

“She’s growing up. They all are.” Kenny sat beside me.

“Pretty soon, we’re gonna have even more. Our bookshelf is gonna be full at the rate we’re going.”

“It is,” I said, resting my head on his shoulder. “And I wouldn’t want it any other way.”