



My Omega's Gift (Nesting Ever After Christmas #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: All I want for Christmas is a home.

Most people ask for new clothes or some fancy new tech for Christmas. Not me. The only thing on my Santa wish list is a safe space to have my baby. Being forced rogue by my birth pack is making that nearly impossible. It wasn't my fault the pack's late alpha forced me to be his mate.

The new alpha doesn't see it that way, and now I am marked as unworthy.

Everything changes when I stumble upon a snowy resort that looks like it fell off a postcard. The nightly rate is much more than I can afford, but the owner takes me under his wing and gives me a cabin to stay in. Everything is going great until a sexy wolf shifter shows up thinking it is their accommodations thanks to an accidental double booking.

Now what?

Total Pages (Source): 18

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Wade

I took off my backpack and opened it, hoping that I had counted wrong and that there was still another granola bar inside. But as I dug around, I saw the harsh truth—I was out of food. A few months ago, I'd have just shifted and found some food, easy peasy. My wolf was a kick-ass hunter, and it wouldn't take long for me to grab a rabbit, a squirrel—there was always something around. But I was too far along in my pregnancy to continue shifting. I was stuck in my skin and beyond hungry.

My last meal had been the day before. I'd miscalculated how far I was from the next town, something I vowed not to do again. It wasn't like I could stick out my thumb and catch a ride—not that I'd try. Without my wolf at the ready, it wasn't safe, but even if it was, the likelihood of someone wanting to pick up a very pregnant omega who looked like me wasn't in my favor. Nope. My only transportation method was my two feet.

I unzipped the front pocket to see how much cash I had. Forty-three dollars. It was enough to get something to eat, but nowhere near enough for a place to stay. Wishing I didn't have to sleep outside again, I threw the pack over my shoulder, stepped out of the woods onto the side of the road, and kept walking. The day was drawing to a close, and I really needed to eat before I slept; My baby needed me to.

In the distance, I could hear more cars than I'd seen on this road, so I knew I was getting close to an intersection. Whether there would be someplace there for me to grab some food, I didn't know. It was hit or miss this far away from the city. Hopefully, there was a fast-food restaurant or a coffee shop—someplace I could get something to eat, warm up, use the bathroom, and then get on my way. Or, better yet,

a diner. They always seemed to be the most welcoming of the choices, one of them even giving me some odd jobs for some cash as long as I stayed away from the customers. They managed to be both nice and mean at the same time.

I didn't like going into places with humans, as a rule. They always stared at my face, stared at the mark on it. They didn't think it was a mark though. They didn't know it told other packs not to accept me—that I was worthless, that I was trash, that I wasn't worth a second of their time. To them, I was less than nothing.

Nope. Humans didn't see it that way. Instead, they looked at me with pity, assuming it was from a fire, an animal attack, or a car accident. Once, a child even asked if I'd been attacked by a monster—specifically, a yellow one. I assured him it wasn't the case—not because it wasn't a monster who did it. It absolutely was. But he wasn't yellow. He was a wolf, like me. In fact, he was supposed to be the wolf protecting me. What a joke that was.

The monster part was 1000 percent true.

Funnily enough, I was happy when Shaw took over the pack. I thought he'd set me free. But he hadn't set me free—he'd just shackled me in a different kind of prison, one where I wasn't accepted anywhere.

When Shaw challenged my mate, Raymond, for his spot as alpha, I knew he was going to win. Raymond was weak. He took the position of alpha by conniving, not force. It was the opposite of how he got me as his mate, which was completely by force.

Gods, I hated that this was the legacy of the cub growing inside me—a weak alpha overtaken by a strong one who then forced me rogue.

"I'm sorry, little one." I placed my hand on my rounded belly. "You don't even have

a chance at normal, nothing like it. But I promise you, I'll keep you safe and make your life as good as it can be.”

I wasn't sure how I'd do that, but I would. I refused to let them have anything less.

About a mile down the road, I saw the lights of a gas station. They weren't the best places as far as what I was looking for. Usually, they didn't have somewhere to sit and eat, and they didn't always have working bathrooms. But there was always food and a little bit of warmth. It would have to do.

I tipped my head to the sky and scented deeply, making sure I wasn't on any territory I shouldn't be. I'd made that mistake before—crossing through a bear's den. If I hadn't been pregnant, I wouldn't still be breathing. They'd taken one look at my face and deemed me a threat—I was seconds away from death when the den's alpha omega noticed my bump and pleaded with him to stop.

I'd been marked as punishment for being pregnant by the ex-alpha—out of fear that my cub could someday take over the pack. As if we'd even wanted to be there. If he'd asked me to leave, I'd have gone. All I wanted was to go, but I'd been scared to leave. Now my baby and I were both paying the consequences for that fear.

I didn't scent any animals, aside from a few domestic dogs, and headed straight inside.

It was actually quite a decent-sized station. They had fountain drinks, a coffee station, donuts, and pre-made sandwiches. I'd passed through worse in the past too many months.

“Whoa, that's some horror shit right there! Who did that to you?”

The kid behind the counter made me wince. When I turned to face him, his gaze fell

to my belly, and he apologized. “Sorry, dude. I thought—ummm—do you need help finding anything?”

At least he had the decency to sound sorry.

“No, I got it.” I hit up the bathroom and then grabbed some food. A couple of tuna sandwiches were marked down as last-day-of-sale and I snagged them both. If they’d been even a second past, I’d have avoided them for the baby. But last day? I could fill my belly twice as full. There was also a banana. It was overpriced for a single fruit, but it would be good for my baby, and that was all that mattered.

I brought them forward. “Just these today.” I plopped my pack on the counter and took out my cash.

He put them in a bag and handed them to me. “I was just gonna throw them out. You can have them.”

And there it was—the pity in the human’s eyes. There’d been a time when I’d have been too prideful and said, “No, it’s fine, I can pay for it.” Today wasn’t that day. I needed to save every penny.

“Thanks, dude. You know if there’s any camp spot close by?”

“No, not around here. There’s a resort up the mountain, but, other than that, nothing until you get to Hillsdale—about half an hour down the road.”

He assumed I had a car. I didn’t. For me, it’d be a lot longer than half an hour. It looked like I’d be spending another night outside.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” He reached into the display of protein bars and grabbed a handful. “Here, take these.”

“I don’t—” I stopped myself. This was for my little one. “Thanks.”

“Sorry I sounded like such a dick before. I thought you were—”

The bell dinged, indicating another person had come in. I took that as my cue to leave.

As I passed the other person, I realized what had happened. The person was dressed in makeup straight out of a horror movie. He thought I was here for whatever that guy was. Great.

“Little one, your dad looks like he belongs in a horror movie contest,” I told the baby, rubbing my bump in slow circles.

But at least we had two sandwiches and some protein bars. That was more than I had when I got here. I was at the point in my life where I had to be grateful for every little thing—even if it was old food and yucky bars.

Once outside, the cold air hit my face. I really needed to find some sort of shelter. My sleeping bag was not the best, and at most staved off the worst of the cold. Maybe luck would stay on my side, and I’d find an old barn along the way to sleep for the night.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Kurt

Five years before...

Pack alpha is not a job for the fainthearted. In most cases, it involves a challenge, often to the death between two wolves who actually want the job. I'd heard of this many times growing up when packs got together for a gathering. Legends told of battles where multiple alphas showed up to fight for the leadership of a group, and one as big as ours might have drawn many and led to a bloodbath of historic proportions. But we lived in peace, my whole life had been a serene and

There was a big difference between sitting by the campfire and listening to tales of yore or even of packs far far away and being an adult standing at my dying father's bedside. My dying pack alpha father's bedside.

Although his body was worn out, his limbs failing him, and his big, strong heart beating an erratic thump, his mind remained strong. His faded blue eyes studied me with a keen stare. "You must pick up the reins."

"I don't—"

He lifted a blue-veined hand. My father had been older when I was born; how much, no one seemed to know. But he'd been pack alpha for decades. And even lying in bed, his breathing irregular, his command held strong.

I closed my lips around the words I'd been about to utter. He knew what I was about to say anyway. It wasn't the first time I'd protested what I'd hoped would never

happen.

“You’ve heard about how other packs have chosen their alphas. In blood and trauma.”

“But not us. It has never been our way.” Of that I was certain.

He cleared his throat, painfully, before speaking. “Not true.”

“What, no! We are an example of peaceful transition.” I couldn’t think of us any other way. “In pack history, we were taught about all of the alphas who led us. We studied back almost two hundred years.”

“But not to our origins. Did you never wonder why?” Father moved to sit up then sank back down, and I hurried to help him higher against the pillows. “Thank you, Son. Now, answer my question.”

“I guess I didn’t think of us as having a beginning. It just felt like we were always the same. Or that maybe we just didn’t have time to get to ancient history.”

“As the new pack alpha, you need to think deeper into things. And you need to know our full history, ancient or otherwise.”

“Father...why are you so insistent that I take on this role? My brother would love to assume the alpha seat.”

“For a number of reasons. Now, I need you to listen and not interrupt because my strength is not limitless and by the time the sun rises, I will be gone.”

It was all too much. I had never wanted to be alpha, and there were only a few hours of night left before morning. If my father said he’d be gone, he would be gone, but I

had to do whatever it took to set his mind at ease before he passed. So, I did the only thing I could. I pulled a chair up to his bedside and sat down, prepared to listen.

“Long ago, this pack did not exist. We were part of another, one that had grown large and was under an alpha who did not have good control either of his pack or of his wolf. Unrest simmered under the surface. And the betas were quick to punish, not always in the most civilized ways.”

“As in physical punishment?”

“As in executions. And everything up to that point as well for minor infractions of rules that were never made clear.”

What a mess. Father was not huge on rules, preferring a few that made sense to many that infringed on people’s free will. “I see.”

“Things got so bad that when the old alpha sickened and people were lining up to challenge him, a few of the other alphas and betas who had no real pack positions got together and decided to use the chaos of the transition to leave.”

“Wait...they couldn’t just go?” Because anyone in our pack could do that.

Instead of replying, he gave me a level look that I’d had directed at me too many times growing up not to recognize. Of course, they couldn’t just go. I’d heard of others saying that abandoning their birth group without permission in the past would make them rogue. In the worst situations, that gave others permission to hunt them. But that really wouldn’t happen in modern times. Would it?

“They took nothing with them, waiting until the pack lands filled with challengers, alphas from far and wide who sought to take over the leadership. As now, not all alphas had their own packs, and many wanted them. The old one was still

breathing”—he chuckled, shaking his head—“probably very much as I am now, but all knew he had only hours, days at most. They could have challenged him, of course, but to do so would have been cowardice at this stage, so they waited for him to name a successor or simply die.”

He went quiet, breaths shallower, eyes closing, and I wondered if he had reached his last moments without finishing his tale, but then they flew open again. “He passed without a word on who he might support to follow him, and within hours, the battles broke out among the strangers and those of the pack, chaos like even our founder could not have foreseen. Blood flowed, soaking into the soil, and the cries of the injured mingled with the howls of those who chose to fight in their fur. You can find the record of it all in our annals in the library, or at least as much as those who left stayed to witness.”

“Was it always like that...then?” I had to know. “Why weren’t we taught this?”

He reached for the cup of tea at his bedside, and I held it to his dry lips, aching for the loss coming very soon. My father was a wise and kind leader. One whose legacy I could never live up to. Why couldn’t he see this?

When he’d sipped enough to go on, he said, “I was remiss. I didn’t realize the tutors were not sharing these things until recently. But no, it was not always that horrific. Depended on the prize at the end of the challenge. A large, wealthy pack with much land would have been like that though.”

“Like us?”

“Then, ‘us’ consisted of a dozen or so alphas and betas and their families who crept away under cover of the mayhem. In their fur, with nothing more than they could carry in that form.”

“Wow.” It was hard to picture, but I did know that over time, we’d welcomed many “rogues” who in truth only wanted a fair leader and secure pack. “Now I understand why we have the system we do for succession.” The one I had spent a lot of time begging my father to employ differently. “They never wanted that for us.”

“Exactly, Son. Now, the pack alpha names his successor early on, and all accept that decision. Oh, there was always the danger that the alpha might make a mistake, but so far, for two centuries, they have been at least acceptable. We have as you know a rule of law, and our people rely on that for their peace and prosperity.”

Dammit. “Father, please.”

“No, Son. I don’t have the strength to argue with you.” His pallor was shifting, a blue tinting the skin around his lips. I was taxing his strength.

“We can talk later.” I moved to stand but he reached for me, resting his hand on mine, his fingernails also blue.

“Son, you’re not that foolish. There is no later, and there is no one else I would trust with my people. You love them and this land, and they will look to you for leadership. Please let me pass in peace, knowing I have done my very best for them right to the end.”

My eyes filled, and a traitorous tear spilled down my cheek. This was so much more than a job discussion. It was a lifetime commitment and a deathbed request. “Father, how can I go on without you?” He’d been stern and strong and kind and loving...the best father for our family and alpha for our pack.

“You can and will. Your brother will not challenge you, even though he probably wishes he could. His actions would be struck down according to our laws. His life forfeit, and he is not brave enough for that. He is not a leader. Not the one our people

deserve. Say you will take the role and allow me my rest.”

“I accept.” What choice did I have? My father was gasping, holding on only for me to give my word. “I will never fill your shoes, but I swear I will try as hard as I can and give them everything I have.”

“Save some for yourself and your mate.” His chuckle deteriorated into a hacking cough, and he accepted another sip of water. “Fate has a good one for you, I have no doubt. Now, go join those who are gathered outside, and declare yourself alpha.”

I was about to argue that he was still alive until I realized he was not. His hand slipped off mine, his eyes were open, the blue gazing off into scenes I could only imagine. And I had no time to grieve because the mantle of leadership fell onto my shoulders with a silent thud.

Present day...

“I can’t go away. I have too much to do.” I was still protesting as my lead beta, Marco, closed the truck door after me. “Marco, you know...”

“I know you have not taken a day off since your father’s passing. And I know that everyone needs a break in order to do their job well. You’re wearing yourself out for us. All the betas chipped in for your trip, and we are not taking no for an answer.”

I knew this because they’d been saying it to me over and over since springing the vacation on me. They’d even packed my bags.

“Are you sure? What about all the arrangements for the big gathering in the spring? If we don’t get all the invites out, no one will come.”

“Already done.”

“And the distributions for holiday fixings for those who need them?”

“Done.”

“And—”

Mirth sparked in his eyes, although he was too respectful, too good a beta to actually laugh at me. “And nothing, alpha. Enjoy your trip. We’ll take good care of everything. You’ve trained us well. Go.”

So, I went.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Wade

The temperature kept dropping, and the wind kept roaring, so I kept walking. As long as I continued moving, I wouldn't freeze to death—or at least that was my logic. Eventually, I'd find someplace to stay, even if it was just an area with enough brush to keep the wind at bay or someone's unlocked car. Not that I'd seen a car in the past hour. I'd officially traveled to the middle of nowhere.

The wind howled, scents rushing past me—everything from car exhaust to animals to people, some possibly shifters, and the unmistakable scent that was impending snow. I couldn't keep track all of them and had no idea their origin. Shit, if I was scenting exhaust and couldn't see or hear any cars, it might be miles away—the wind was that strong and fast.

I wasn't used to this kind of wind, at least not as a pedestrian. A couple of times, I nearly fell over, it was so strong. And the way it had the cold settling into me was unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

Then the glow of electric lights came into view. At first, I thought I was reaching a neighborhood, but, as I got closer, I realized it was the resort the kid at the gas station had mentioned. There was a main building, but there were also cabins. It wasn't huge, by any stretch, but it had room for a decent number of people.

As a rule, I try to be honest, to follow the law, to give back more than I take, but tonight? Tonight, I was crossing my fingers and toes that one of the cabins would be empty and I could break in for the night. I'd leave a little money for housekeeping—it wasn't their fault—but I needed a place to stay. Outside just wasn't going to cut it,

and my money wasn't going to get me farther than the clerk showing me the door.

At least breaking in and sleeping was the plan until I broke into the clearing where I immediately scented shifters. I wasn't going to be able to hide in a cabin without being discovered. Not with shifters around. Had the weather not been getting progressively worse, I'd have turned my pregnant butt around. But it was and I needed this place.

The only thing keeping me from panic was that I hadn't crossed a den or pack line. This wasn't a marked territory, meaning, I wasn't breaking the laws of my kind by being here. In that respect, this place was safe. All I could do was cross my fingers that whoever was running the resort was not only nice but also human—a very clueless human. If all went well, they'd just think I was horrifically scarred and not what I truly was: excommunicated from my kind.

I didn't even get to the front door before someone came bounding toward me. "It's too cold to be out here."

He grabbed my hand and dragged me inside.

"Elias!" a rich voice boomed from inside. "You left the door open—it's cold!"

"I had to. We have guests!" Apparently, the guy holding my hand and dragging me in was named Elias. When we got inside, he stopped walking, instead bouncing on his toes. "I didn't know we had anybody coming in, Theo."

"Neither did I, but it looks like we do." Standing behind the front desk was a man who might as well have been Santa, minus the cool uniform. "How many days are you looking for?"

"How much is the rate?" I asked, putting my pack on the counter and taking out the

money I had. It ended up being closer to forty-seven dollars when I pulled out the coins. There was no way that was enough.

“Is that all you have?” Theo whispered.

I nodded. “Yeah, but I can, you know, clean. Or maybe I could stay in the storeroom? I’m not picky—it’s just, I was going to sleep outside. I have a sleeping bag in here, but the wind is just so cold tonight.”

“Do you have another bag?” Elias was still for the first time since I arrived.

I shook my head.

“So, your sleeping bag is in there with all of your things?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re having a baby?”

As scrawny as I was, I was very clearly with child. I didn’t look quite as pregnant as I should and that did worry me, but I could hardly stop by at a random midwife on my quest to find us a place to put down some roots. And even if I could, I didn’t have any money to pay them.

As Elias asked the questions, my situation felt more and more dire.

“Yes. I’m pregnant.” I refused to sound at all embarrassed by my answer. Did I wish I had a better life lined up for my little one? Absolutely. Did I wish they were created out of love and not force? Also, yes. But I wasn’t embarrassed they existed, nor would I ever be. They were my cub, and I loved them more than I thought it possible to love anyone.

“Well, then, put that away.” Theo slid the cash back in my direction. “Your money is no good here.”

“Is it because—” My hand went to my face.

“No, omega, it’s not because of that. It’s because I have a place you can stay, and it’s Christmastime. There’s no way I’m taking what little money you have. The only problem is, you’re going to have to go back outside again for a little bit because it’s in one of the cabins.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t even try to hide the emotions I was feeling. It wasn’t a weakness to be overwhelmed by the compassion shown by another.

We walked outside and down toward the cabin. He unlocked it, and it was small, clean, cozy, and—best of all—warm.

“A basket on the counter that has some basic foods. A few things in the cupboard and fridge. Nothing too fancy, but we can take care of getting you more tomorrow. There’s enough there for a starter pack. Towels are in the bathroom; toiletries are there too.”

“You do this for all your guests?” I couldn’t have managed to afford this place even on my wealthiest day, which wasn’t a ton of money, but a whole lot more than the less than fifty bucks I had now.

“The baskets, etc.? Yeah, that’s kind of what we do.” He shrugged it off as if it were commonplace and maybe in this industry it was. I had no idea. I’d never stayed in even a motel before I was kicked out of the pack, and then it was always places barely standing. “You met my husband, Elias—it was his idea.”

I loved the pride in his voice.

“I’ll pay you back when I can. I promise.”

“You can pay me back by not having me worry that you’re out in the middle of the night, having a baby in the cold.”

I wanted to tell him he was wrong, that even if I left right now, I wouldn’t be that omega. I couldn’t. He wasn’t far off on my dates. From my guess, I was ready to give birth any time now.

“Thank you.”

He made me promise to come get him if I ran out of food or needed anything. He also pointed out a folder on the desk with all the amenities, including laundry. It was such a big deal that he was even letting me stay here, and he was treating me like I was one of his top-dollar paying guests.

As soon as he finished explaining everything and went on his way, I headed straight into the bathroom and took a long, hot shower. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d taken one. It had been weeks at least. I’d done some cleaning up in gas stations and coffee shop bathrooms, and I’d once attempted a river bath—that hadn’t gone well. But I hadn’t stayed anywhere with actual running water since a campsite, at least a full moon ago.

The hot water running down my skin felt amazing. I’d have stayed in there a lot longer had the water not cooled. I dried off, dreading the idea of putting on my dirty clothes. Then I saw the hook on the back of the door—on it was a bathrobe, one fit for a king.

I pulled it on just as I heard the cabin door open.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Kurt

It had been well over five years since I'd left the pack lands for anything but business reasons. The last several years of my father's life, he'd kept me by his side, training me to take over while I tried to tell myself I'd find a way to avoid it. His shoes were so big to fill, his leadership so amazing, how could anyone do it?

And I'd been too busy since the day he left and took part of my heart with him. Mother's attempts to comfort me had only threatened to break down the wall I'd built against the grief of Father's death. I had to step into those shoes that moment. I did not have weeks or months to embrace the pain. Keeping busy was the best shield, and as pack alpha for a group our size, there was never a lack of tasks needing my attention. I should delegate more, but then what would I do with my time? Driving along the road on the way to the resort where I would spend the holidays, I allowed my thoughts to wander. To consider my actions since becoming alpha.

At first, I told myself it was just to get organized, to make the job my own. Father was a wonderful alpha, but we were different people and as his betas retired and I raised others to leadership positions, there were natural culture changes, nothing huge, but shifts to suit modern times and the current members of the pack. For example, the number of people who wanted to learn technology so they could work from the lands without working on the lands. That led to more machinery purchased for the farms and timber business. Busy! I would settle back a little and do that delegation stuff when the mate my father was so convinced Fate had in mind for me showed up.

But the years passed, and other packs visited or we went to gatherings elsewhere, to

no avail. If there was an omega out there for me, he was sure hiding well. Could Fate be so cruel as to place him somewhere on the surface of the planet where I wouldn't ever find him?

Or maybe it was just a fancy of Father's dying brain. How would he have known I had a fated? Not everyone did, and I had no shortage of omegas in my own and other packs who had let it be known they would welcome a mating with me. A pack alpha with no omega was not creating successors. While there was no rule that it had to be within the line, it always had been. And the pack omega had their own set of tasks and responsibilities, all of which were currently being assumed by other members. Which was unfair.

While working hard, I had managed to avoid the issue, but it was time to consider who among the candidates I should mate with. Surely, my fated, if he existed, would have shown up by now. Time to grow up and accept someone to share the harness of responsibility with me. Someone to have young with and sit by the fire on cold nights. To grow old with.

Why did that sound so unappealing?

I stopped to refill the tank at a gas station about six miles from the middle of nowhere. Snowy countryside stretched out all around me and my wolf shifted within, wanting out. Poor thing didn't get nearly the free time he should. Most of our runs were only with the pack, and I was about to deny him, as I often did because duty called, when the realization came over me.

There was no duty. Not today. Not for days ahead.

The sign on the pump said Pay Inside , likely due to the fact the card reader was hanging off the side by a cord, so I did, buying a coffee while I was there. "It's pretty quiet around here, huh?" I asked the young attendant who took my payment.

“Yep. Great place to run, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I couldn’t suppress the chuckle that emerged. “I guess it kind of was.” He was not a wolf but some kind of cat, which was probably why I hadn’t picked it up right away. “We’ve been on the road for a long time and someone wants to stretch all four legs.”

“Park behind the building and walk to the tree line. We don’t get a ton of traffic, but why freak out the mundanes who will probably call the news.”

“Gotcha. Thanks.” I took my coffee out to the truck and drove around the back. Carrying it with me, I sipped it as I made my way to the forest and stepped among the trees. The air was clear and cold and smelled of pines and small creatures who would remain in hiding while the predator was among them. My wolf would want to hunt, but we had eaten a big lunch from all the food the betas packed in my cooler for the trip. As long as we didn’t see anything, they were probably safe from us. I set my cup down beside a tree and stripped down, shivering briefly before the change took me, landing me on all four feet, muzzle stretching out and fur covering my goose-bumped skin. Tipping our head back, we gave a howl and tore off into the woods, feeling free for the first time in years. Snow and the last of the fall’s leaves crunched under our paws. The bare branches of deciduous trees stood stark amid the dark green of pines, and thin ice on the surface of a little creek cracked as we crossed.

It was amazing and beautiful and somewhere in my human mind, I recognized what my betas had seen and my wolf always knew. There were times to work and times to play. Times to worry about the future and times to live in the moment. To be fair, my wolf was usually about the moment.

I had trained my betas well, and they would keep things running while I was gone. My return was soon enough to worry about a mate. For these days, I would simply be. Or give it my best shot. Relax, shift as often as I wanted, provided the resort had available lands. And it seemed unlikely that my betas would have sent me somewhere

I couldn't run. Eat good food, drink good drinks, restore my energy so I could do my job better on my return.

In a way, it was my duty to do this.

Why did it take a thought like that to give myself permission? No more whys.

I ran until we were panting then returned to dress and grab my empty cup. Before leaving the gas station, I stopped to thank the attendant for their advice. He grinned and gave me a big bag of teriyaki bison jerky. "Shifting always leaves me starving. Safe travels."

"Thanks again." I got in the truck and drove on.

I was exhausted when I arrived at the resort. And startled to find someone already in my cabin, but when I took a good look at the omega, I couldn't ask him to leave. Far along in pregnancy, thin and pale with a hectic light in his eyes, he explained that he'd been given the room too, but not like me as a paying guest. Sounded like the owners had taken him in out of pity, but why in my cabin?

"No need to leave, tonight," I told him. There would be time enough to figure it all out in the morning. "Just stay and we'll talk to Theo and Elias in the morning and get it straightened out." I was too tired to do anything until then.

"I'll go sleep in the laundry room." Wade started away, but I reached for his arm and stopped him.

"No way." Even if he weren't pregnant, that was not happening.

"Seriously, it's nice and warm in there. I'll grab a few blankets from the linen closet and be very comfortable."

What was he used to that this was an acceptable choice? I had just met him, but my wolf was already in turmoil, demanding to know who had done this and where we could find them. The images in my mind were violent and savage, the wolf beyond irate.

“Come and sit down. You’re not sleeping in the laundry room.”

Wade’s eyes glistened, tears pooling before dripping down his face. “Then I’ll leave. You paid for the place, and I am just a charity case. I’ll find somewhere else to stay...”

“Omega”—I sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to me—“sit and tell me how you came to be here.”

To my surprise he did exactly that, sharing how he’d been forced to mate with the pack alpha and when he was challenged and lost, he’d been thrown out in the cold because he was bearing the former alpha’s young. He was light on details, but I got the picture. Like some of those other packs I’d heard about, Wade’s had still had brutal leadership changes. And he was a marked rogue.

His scar was livid on his cheek, a criminal act by criminal hierarchy, and one my wolf was now beyond enraged over. He struggled to get free, no matter how I tried to calm him and tell him that the perpetrators were far away and we couldn’t just run there.

Later, I finally insisted. The omega needs us now.

There was nothing else I could have said and garnered the result. He stilled. The wolf still planned revenge, but he was willing to put the omega’s immediate needs first.

“You’ve been through a lot,” I said, understating it all but not wanting to make him feel worse. “And there’s room for both of us here. I’d welcome the company, in fact.

Stay with me tonight.”

“But there’s only the one room.”

“And it’s big enough for two.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Wade

Whether I was going to stay or not, I needed to get dressed. I couldn't be walking around in a bathrobe in front of the alpha. But that meant I had to put my dirty clothes back on. I excused myself, went to the bathroom, and put them on. All the clean, refreshed feeling I had from the shower was gone.

I pulled my hood up over my head. He hadn't reacted the way I thought he would to the scar—the way I thought any shifter would. But that didn't mean I wanted him seeing it, didn't mean I wanted to remind him that I was worthless. He seemed nice. Beyond nice, like one of the good guys you read about in books or see on television—not the kind that really exists. But that didn't mean I needed to keep reminding him that I was damaged and worthless.

Sure, not for a second did I see any disgust in his eyes. Not over my scar, not over my pregnant belly, not over me being in his cabin. All I saw was compassion.

And how did I respond?

My wolf pushed at me to get closer to him, to scent him deeper. Gods, I wanted to listen to him. I wanted to reach over and touch the sexy alpha, which told me the cold had gotten way too deep in me and messed up everything. That was not how I thought about anybody—ever.

Or maybe instead of the cold, it was the loneliness of being away from a pack for so long. Whatever the case, I needed to push down that kind of thinking. It wasn't going to get me anywhere other than the land of disappointment. Even if I wasn't rogue,

what kind of alpha would want an omega pregnant by another? None. It was best not to even let such notions flit through my brain.

When I came back out, Kurt was putting random food on the small table. A couple of containers of instant noodles, some canned ravioli heated up in the microwave, crusty bread and butter, a couple of apples cut up with a jar of peanut butter, some pretzels, and a candy bar.

It was the most peculiar dinner I'd ever seen.

It looked absolutely delicious.

I sat down, waiting for him to fill his plate, but he didn't. He just watched me.

"Do you need me to go to town and get something different?" His question caught me off guard. I wasn't sure there was a town close by, but I didn't say anything about that, not wanting to look like I was correcting the alpha. I knew how that always ended, and it wasn't good.

"No, this—this looks great." I liked everything there except the candy bar. It had almonds in it, and that was not my thing. It probably wasn't good for my baby anyway.

"Then why is your plate empty?"

"Because you're the alpha." Wasn't that obvious?

"Did you...what do you mean by that?"

It took all the energy I had to meet his eyes. "You get to eat first."

His eyes flickered wolf. “That’s not how this works. Take the food that you want. Please.” The please came out as more of an order than a request.

I nodded and grabbed some apples with a big blob of peanut butter and one of the instanoodles. I figured I’d probably go back for the ravioli later, but it had been so long since I’d had a full belly. I wasn’t sure how much I could eat, and I didn’t want to take and waste.

“Thank you for cooking.” I dipped an apple into the peanut butter and took a bite. It was freaking delicious.

He laughed. “This isn’t cooking. I poured some hot water and turned on a microwave. Trust me, you don’t want me cooking.”

“I don’t?” I was pretty sure I wanted anything this man had to offer, and that wasn’t good. I shouldn’t be this attached to the first alpha who ever treated me like I had value.

“Probably not. I can get by—ish.”

I brought the noodles to my face, inhaling the brothy steam, and took my first bite. It was heaven on my tongue. Far better than the day-old sandwiches I’d eaten what felt like days ago but was really just a few hours. Walking through that wind had really taken a lot out of me, and I was starving.

“You make a mean instanoodle. Own it.” That earned me a smile.

We ate in silence for a while. I kept my face covered, halfway through the noodles when the alpha finally took some food for himself.

He grabbed an apple and some pretzels, but he left the noodles and ravioli—likely for

me. He seemed that kind of guy. He put his apple down. “Can you please not?”

I looked at him, confused. “Not what?”

Was I biting my fork? Tapping my foot? All the things I’d done that annoyed my late alpha rolled into my mind, but I didn’t think I was doing any of them.

“If you tell me what to stop, I will.” My voice sounded meek and weak, everything I swore I’d never be again. I started to correct myself, but he was already talking.

“Just take the hood down. If you’re trying to hide your face, please don’t. And if you’re cold, I’ll make a fire. But seeing you there, actively hiding in your clothes—I don’t like it.”

“I-I don’t understand.” I leaned back slightly in my chair, pulling my hood down but not wanting to stay too close to him while I was this exposed. “Why are you being so nice to me? You’re not even supposed to acknowledge I exist.”

“Why? Because of some stupid rules?”

I had no answer to that. It just was the way it was.

“I’m nice to you because I’m not an alphahole. And honestly, it looks like you could use someone to be nice to you.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t elaborate.

We went back to eating, not saying much more.

Afterward, we threw out the disposable plates, put the jar of peanut butter on the counter and the butter back in the mini fridge, and looked at what was left. There was

plenty of food, which was great because no part of me wanted to eat the protein bars in my backpack. I was grateful for them but wanted them to keep their position as backup.

“I’m gonna go now so you can sleep,” I said. “Thank you so much for this.”

He leaned his back against the counter in the least threatening position I’d ever seen from an alpha who was about to get bossy.

And was he ever about to get bossy.

“There’s a bed in there. You’ll be sleeping on it.” Not a question.

“No, this is your place.” He was the one paying for it, the one who’d booked it, the one who deserved it.

“It’s not mine more than yours. Theo made a mistake. You shouldn’t have to suffer over that.”

I wasn’t going to fight him too hard. This place was warm, and my wolf felt safe with the alpha. “Fine, but you get the bed. I’ll get the couch.”

“No, I don’t get the bed because I will sleep in my fur. Tonight, I’m probably sleeping by the fireplace because I love that. So your choice is to leave the bed empty or sleep in it. I prefer you sleep in it.”

“Okay.” If he really did sleep in his fur, it wasn’t like I was taking anything away from him. At least that was how I justified it to myself.

“But speaking of shifting, my wolf needs to run around for a while. He’s not used to being away from the pack. A hunt will do him good.” He paused. “When I come

back, I'll sleep in my fur by the fireplace.”

He really was vested in my sleeping in that bed.

“I promise not to bother you. But please, sleep in the bed.”

“It’s not just you, you know.” He looked at my belly. “You’re being stubborn, but it is best for you both to get a good night’s sleep.”

I hated how right he was, not because he was accurate but because I let my pride not even take that into consideration. It wasn’t just me. And yet, I’d been thinking about myself. “Thank you. I will.” I needed to think of my baby above all else, right now. “I promise.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Kurt

As my wolf reminded me, I'd essentially promised him a run anytime he wanted on this vacation, I couldn't deny him now. Not that I wanted to. If I didn't let him blow off some steam, he might find a way to do it I would like a lot less. He was all about comforting the omega, but a run in the forest and a chance to hunt would do more good than almost anything I could think of.

When we were out there earlier, in the forest behind the gas station, all the little creatures remained in hiding and, of course, we were full, but now he would be motivated. If it had been cold earlier, it was three times that now, with the wind kicking up and the snow blowing all over the place. But my wolf didn't mind.

I undressed on the porch and laid my clothes over the railing before taking my fur. When I checked in, Theo, a burly bearded man who looked a lot like a certain saint famous for climbing down chimneys said it was fine to fun in the area, especially at this time of year.

What he hadn't said was that there was someone already in the cabin he rented me. And once I got there, one thing led to another, and I was afraid that if I went back to try for another cabin, they might not have anywhere for him to stay.

Everything about the place was nicer than nice, a brochure in the cabin telling us about all the amenities. In the main building, there was a pool/hot tub area and one with a glass dome where guests could sit and look up at the northern lights or even the moon and stars. Or, during the day, watch the clouds streak across the winter sky. It would be nice during a snowfall too. Would Wade like to come in and do that one

day? Maybe with a cocoa and some cookies?

We headed out, bounding over the snow and low-lying shrubs along the pathway until we reached the edge of the resort. Muzzle tipped up, my wolf took the last bit of control from me and went on the hunt.

I'd never enjoyed this part of sharing our skin, but I had to accept that my wolf had needs and desires that did not always match mine. And some of them were less than awesome for my human side. When he tore into prey, I just tried to hang back and pretend I was elsewhere. He was doing his wolf thing, and mostly he had to tolerate me running around pack lands and putting out metaphorical fires.

Hunting had to be better than that.

We put a few miles under our paws and snacked on creatures foolish enough to allow themselves to cross our path. He needed to get the energy out before we could go back and face the omega. He was already off-kilter and didn't need erratic energy from an alpha to make him worry more. Wade had been through so much, but I had to stuff those thoughts down because they only served to aggravate my wolf further, and he'd already eaten enough animals; any more would be simply victims of his rage.

Finally, he allowed me to turn us toward the resort again, tired and panting but no less determined to ensure the omega was protected from whatever hurt him in the past. And my wolf did believe the best way to do that was to destroy anyone who ever caused Wade the least bit of harm. Mentally, physically, or emotionally. I agreed, but if I started saying so, we'd both be out of our heads.

As I trotted back into the resort, on my way to the cabin, I passed the main house and paused. I needed to have a conversation with someone that I didn't want Wade to overhear. Even if I went outside, shifter hearing might enable him to know what I

was saying. And I had some big and confusing thoughts going on. I needed to talk to my senior beta, Marco, because he was the one I always bounced ideas off of.

I knocked at the door, even though it was technically a public space, and a hearty voice called, “Come in.”

“I just shifted, so I don’t have any clothes on.” Shifters overall didn’t care about that while in the process of donning or shedding our fur, but we didn’t generally walk into buildings in our skins.

The door opened and I faced Theo with his white beard and jovial smile. “Robes right inside. Grab one and come on in.”

I wrapped myself in the thick warm robe, giving a little shiver. “It is mighty cold out there once the fur goes away.”

“Don’t I know it. To what do we owe your visit? Is everything all right at the cabin? Did you need something?”

“Actually, I was passing by after a run and remembered I need to make a phone call. Is there by chance a house phone I can use?”

He cocked his head, eyes twinkling. “This must be a very important call if you can’t wait to get back to the cabin. Why don’t you go into the office and use the line there for privacy.”

“That would be great. I appreciate it.” Also, his not asking for details. He was no doubt being professional, but that was perfectly fine, especially when Theo and Elias, who had come in to say hello, wandered away, leaving me in the office.

Considering it probably held all their business records and who knew what personal

things, it was very trusting of them. Not that I would touch anything but the phone. I absolutely would not. I sat down behind the desk and lifted the receiver of the old push-button phone. It must be as old as the resort itself.

It took a moment to remember the information because who actually did know phone numbers anymore. Shifters were as guilty as humans in depending on tech, I mused, but a deep think produced Marco's number.

He answered on the first ring. "Alpha, you're not ready to come home, are you?"

I chuckled. "No, you convinced me I need a vacation, but that's not why I'm calling."

"Everything is going great here. I should have known you'd check in."

When did he start trying to outthink me? I pushed some alpha into my reply. I was also his friend but more his alpha. "If you'll give me a moment, I will tell you why I'm calling."

"I'm sorry, alpha."

"There was a double-booking and—"

"What? We made those reservations weeks ago. Paid up front! I'm calling the resort."

"Marco!"

"Sorry, again, alpha."

"It's fine, but there are complications." I filled him in on the current situation, including the pregnancy. "And my wolf scents him as ours."

“Does he scent you back?”

“I don’t know, but, Marco, he was forced rogue.”

“Then it’s lucky he found you. Not only his fated mate but one who is alpha of a pack who accepts those like him.”

“You’re jumping fast, have us mated and moving in together.”

He laughed. “Isn’t that the whole point?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Wade

After Kurt left, my plan had been to climb under the covers and fall asleep. I was bone-tired from my journey, unable to remember the last time I'd had a decent night's sleep. I was warm and the blankets ensured I'd stay that way. And for the first time in a long time, I had a full belly. It would've been easy to let slumber take over. But I couldn't do it. It didn't feel right.

My head was going a thousand miles a minute and all of the thoughts revolved around reasons I shouldn't stay. The alpha had been so nice to me, and now he was trying to give me his bed. Trying wasn't even the right word, he was insisting I take the bed—his bed, in the cabin he was paying for with his money.

It wasn't like I could even offer to pay my share. I didn't even have \$50 to my name, and no money coming in the foreseeable future. This place could easily cost a few hundred dollars a night. It was absolutely stunning and had more amenities than anyplace I'd ever even read about. Staying here felt like I was stealing from him and the longer he was gone, the more that ate at me.

Instead of sleeping, I opted to do what I could by cleaning up. The place wasn't dirty, but I'd made it less tidy than when I arrived, and that I could fix. I found a broom in the closet and swept the floors, removing any dust that came in with us. I wiped down the bathroom as best as I could, making sure the fresh towels from under the sink were out for him. Then I organized the food. There was actually quite a bit more there than I'd realized, including an entire mini-pantry. A lot of meals could be made out of what was here if we got creative.

No, not we—him. This wasn't someplace I could stay, not really. I'd figure something out. I always did.

I grabbed the protein bars from my backpack and set them with the snacks. It wasn't much of a contribution, but it was all I could offer. They would have to do.

After one last look around the cabin to make sure I hadn't missed anything, I put on my coat and shoes, threw my backpack over my shoulders, grabbed the garbage, and stepped outside into the cold. Kurt's clothes sat there. He was out there in his fur. Was he the same color as me? Or maybe he was an arctic fox? I bet no matter which, he was gorgeous. Not that I should be thinking about that.

The dumpster was easy to find but not ideal to get to, not with me waddling through the snow, but I managed. My plan was to catch Theo before he went to bed for the night. If anyone had a solution, it would be him. There had to be another place for me to sleep, one that wouldn't be basically stealing from Kurt. He wouldn't call it that, but I did. It's what it was.

I waddled from the dumpster, through the snow, the wind howling even harder than before, and was glad to see the main building still lit up. I could sense that Kurt had been there recently—maybe he'd already asked for a new room. I wouldn't blame him, not when he was supposed to be on vacation, instead dealing with some messed-up pregnant omega rescue.

I barely had the door open when Theo greeted me. "Oh, just the person I was looking for!"

"You were looking for me because Kurt came and told you I'm not supposed to be there?" It was the only thing that made sense.

The man started laughing, his belly shaking in a way that immediately reminded me

of the old Christmas poem when it was like a bowl full of jelly. He must get called Santa a lot, or maybe he even leaned into it as a side hustle. I could easily see that.

“No, absolutely not,” he scoffed. “Elias and I made up a bunch of cookies and frosting for you guys to have with hot cocoa. Well, I say I did—my husband did and I supervised as the taste tester.” He rubbed his belly. “It’s one of our favorite traditions. Expect more of them throughout the week.”

I could envision the two of them in the kitchen, laughing, making messes, and eating gobs of sugar between kisses. There was no looking at the two of them together and not seeing how completely in love they were with each other.

“About that... I was wondering if maybe I could use a cot in the laundry room, or maybe the storeroom or basement until I can move on.” I didn’t want to promise it would be tomorrow. If the weather kept like this, that wouldn’t be safe. But I wasn’t planning on staying around forever. I wasn’t a squatter.

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I’m in somebody else’s room.” It wasn’t that complicated. At least I didn’t think it was. I was shocked he allowed us to both be in the same space in the first place. It wasn’t an ideal business move; that was for sure. He was in the hospitality business; he should give his paying customers what they wanted, right?

“You’re not in the wrong room.” He slid the basket of cookies and cocoa across the counter. “If you were, I’d have moved you already.”

“Oh, but he’s paying for the room, not—”

He cut me off.

“Not everything is about money.” He didn’t elaborate any further. “Now, take the cookies and cocoa and go back to your cabin. Enjoy the warm room, the delicious cocoa, and your bed.”

He looked me up and down then hesitated. “Wait a second.” Theo ducked into a back room and came back out with a small shopping bag. “They should fit you.” He handed it to me.

I peeked inside and saw red-and-green plaid fabric.

“They’re pajamas. And tomorrow, we’ll take care of your clothes, get them all cleaned up.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do it.”

“This is a full-service resort.”

“Yes—for customers. I’m not a customer. If anything, I’m a—”

“A guest. No, you aren’t a customer—you’re my guest. You’re in the room you’re supposed to be in, and you will be wearing clean clothes. None of this is up for negotiation, so you might as well give up. I’m pretty stubborn.”

“Theo, you are beyond stubborn.” Elias came seemingly out of nowhere and kissed the man on the cheek. “Ohhhh, you’re going to have a good night. These are some of my best work.” He looked at the basket of goodies. “Did you want help carrying them back to your cabin?”

The wind shook the windows, and I shivered despite myself. “No. I got it. Thanks for the food and...everything.”

As I stepped outside, the wind caught the door, and I dropped the basket while trying to grab it. Only, when I glanced down, the basket hadn't hit the ground.

Kurt was standing there, holding it...buck-ass naked. His scent tickled my nose, delicious and calling to me. Hormones. Stupid hormones. That's all it could be.

"I thought you'd be in bed." Probably because I promised him I would be.

"I took out the trash and then came here trying to see if there was another room because—"

"Please don't."

The wind rushed around us again, and I found myself wrapping my arms around my body, as if that would keep me any warmer. Nothing could. Not with this wind.

"Let's go back." He glanced down at the basket. "It looks like our friendly innkeeper sent us some goodies."

"Yeah, he sent cocoa and cookies. There's frosting in there too, I think—for dipping." I'd never done that before, but I was game.

He shrugged then took the bag of pajamas from me.

"No." I snatched both back. "It's way too cold for you to be buck-ass naked out here."

He looked around and, as if realizing it was below zero for the first time, agreed and shifted, his wolf moving gracefully through the snow as I carried the basket and bag back toward the cabin. He was stunning and huge. You'd be able to tell he was alpha from a long distance, but even so, he wasn't intimidating. If anything, there was

something warm and welcoming about him.

I longed to snuggled up with him in my wolf form, but that wasn't going to happen. Not only was I too far along to be shifting, I wasn't here with him as anything more than an uninvited sidekick. Not even that. At least sidekicks were wanted.

I filled the silence by talking about the decorations I'd noticed in the main building, the way Theo laughed like Santa Claus, and how I'd cleaned up a little in the cabin.

Mostly, I was talking to avoid thinking—because thinking led to places where I wasn't the only one in the bed.

And Kurt deserved far better than the likes of me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Kurt

I accompanied the omega back to the cabin in wolf form, listening to him speak to me along the way. He seemed more at ease with my wolf, even resting his hand on our head for a second, which the wolf adored. My beast was all in with this omega, and the moment we got back to him, anything the hunt did to take the edge off his anger melted away. He wanted the omega to be comfortable and happy, wanted to protect the baby, but he also wanted to find the evildoers.

There was not a whole lot I could do to convince him of the impracticality of that right at this moment.

Once back at the cabin, I shifted on the porch and dressed in the clothes I'd left there, before following Wade inside. He was setting a bag on the counter and turned to watch me carefully. My wolf took an annoying amount of pleasure in this, sure he liked him better.

"I'm a little tired," he said. "Are you sure you won't let me sleep in the laundry room or the living room?"

"You're going to take the bed, and I will sleep by the fire in wolf form. I'm trying to let him out more while I'm here. He doesn't get enough time otherwise."

He protested a bit more, but while I tried to convince him I would be perfectly comfortable there, his yawns grew wider and deeper. "It's not fair. You booked the room, and you should get the bed. I'm just so tired for some reason."

“Could be the fact that you’re extremely pregnant?”

His cheeks flushed and one hand went to his swollen belly. It was the only part of him that had any substance, making me wonder how long he’d gone without regular meals. Again...wolf anger, but since I felt the same, it was hard to control us both. “I guess.”

“And what kind of alpha would allow any omega, much less a pregnant one, to sleep on the floor...” Damn. I already knew what kind and it was the one who impregnated this very good omega. “Not this kind.”

Taking him by the arm, I steered him toward the bedroom right off the main area. “I’ll have no more talk about it. My wolf is looking forward to sleeping by the fire, and I’m looking forward to knowing you are comfortable. Deal?” I paused by the bed and pulled the covers back.

“It does look nice.” The longing in his eyes... “Thank you, alpha.”

“Get some sleep, and we can talk more in the morning if you’re up for it. Now, before I leave you to get undressed and into this nice warm bed, can I bring you anything? Tea? Cocoa? Water?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ll just make a quick stop at the bathroom and then crawl between the sheets.”

“Good night, Wade.”

“Night, Kurt. I appreciate this.”

“Shhh, sleep time.”

Leaving him to get ready for bed, I stirred up the fire and went into the kitchenette to make a cup of tea for myself. By the time I heard him emerge from the bathroom and the mattress creak under him, I'd finished my drink and hesitated. I wanted to go in and make sure he was settled, but would he find that intrusive? Would he prefer to just settle in privately?

I decided to split the difference and moved to the doorway. "All set?"

He pulled the covers over his shoulders and snuggled down. "Yes. Thanks. It's so nice and warm in here."

"Sure is. I'll be by the fire if you need me."

In your fur, right?"

"Exactly. Night again."

"Good night." He looked so cozy and comfy in the big bed, one with plenty of room for both of us, but it was not my place to join him. I didn't close the door though. The fire's heat would be cut off from him. Returning to the fireside, I divested myself of clothing and shifted. We curled up near the fire, but every time I fell asleep, slight sounds from the next room woke us. The omega was restless, and he shifted, turning and moving, probably having trouble finding comfort this late in his pregnancy.

My wolf wanted to go in there, get closer to him, and after a while, I stopped telling him no. After all, I wanted the same thing. We padded in and circled a few times on the rug next to the bed before curling up and laying our head on our paws. Wade never indicated he was awake, but he settled down and we all passed the rest of the night in peace.

Morning came, and I opened my eyes in time to shift and shower before Wade woke.

He looked so relaxed under the covers, and I saw no reason to disturb him, but my stomach rumbled, so I went to the kitchenette to see if there was anything I could use to make breakfast. The night before, I'd noticed there were several teas and a single-serve coffee maker. Also, Wade had returned from the main house with cookies and the makings of cocoa. But none of that was enough for a nutritious meal for him. And the snacks left from my picnic weren't much better.

An exploration revealed that the owners had left more in the refrigerator than I realized and there was a pantry cupboard semi-stocked as well. Among the goodies, I found a quart of eggnog, a loaf of bread, butter, syrup, and orange juice. I could work with that.

As a single alpha, people were always trying to feed me, dropping off casseroles and inviting me to dinner, but, when time permitted, I enjoyed cooking simple meals for myself. Breakfast for dinner, for example. And French toast was a favorite from childhood. Since it was made with eggs and milk and vanilla and spices, it stood to reason that I could substitute store-bought eggnog for the homemade mixture.

At least I hoped so.

I was dipping thick slices of sourdough bread in a pie pan filled with the substitute custard when I heard him rise from bed with a groan. I tensed, wondering if I should rush to see how he was doing but opted to remain in place, listening for any crisis. Instead, the bathroom door closed with a click and the old pipes rumbled bringing hot water to the shower.

The pregnant omega arrived in the kitchen in time to pour the orange juice and select his tea from the varieties available. "Lemon Zinger, I think," he said. "I really want coffee, but I haven't been able to do a lot right for this baby, the least I can do is avoid caffeine."

From what I'd heard, most shifters could tolerate caffeine even while pregnant, but I ached that he had so little control over himself until now that he was searching for any he could get. He wanted to take care of his babe. "Then good choice!" I opened the bags and put them in mugs then poured hot water from the electric kettle over them. "Breakfast is all ready."

We took our plates to the table and sat down. I'd already set out the butter and syrup as well as the sugar for tea, and for a few minutes, we were too busy eating to do anything else.

"This is so good," Wade said, finally. "Thank you for making it for me."

"You're welcome. It was my pleasure." I was so polite, the courtesy glossing over the feeling churning underneath. "Would you like more?"

He helped himself to two more pieces, pouring syrup while he said, "You slept by my bed last night."

"I did." I reached for my juice. "My wolf insisted."

"Thank you. I can't remember when I felt so safe."

Wade

The wind wasn't nearly as bad as it had been the night I arrived, but it was still whipping and the temperature was still below zero. It was the reason I gave for staying each day, but if I were being honest with myself, that wasn't why I was still here, sharing a cabin at a resort I couldn't pay for, with the alpha who had booked it. Nope. Kurt was.

I could try and convince myself a thousand different ways that it was being so pregnant or cold or tired. At the end of the day, none of that had stopped me from traveling on before. This time it was different, and that difference was the sexy alpha who treated me like I had worth.

Did I love the warm food, the hot showers, the clean clothes, and the soft bed? Of course I did. Who wouldn't. But if this had been a run-down motor inn with a cracked window and mold on the ceiling, I'd still be here. Kurt tethered me to this place. He was sweet and made me laugh. He treated me like I was someone of worth and not a disgraced rogue. Even when I'd been living in my pack, no one had respected me the way he did. It was a first for me, and an omega could get used to that.

Not one time did I catch him looking at my scars with disgust or discomfort. The only time I saw anything other than "normal" was the occasional anger that crossed his eyes when I mentioned the alpha who had done this to me. Honestly, I was right there with him on that one. That alpha was a piece of shit. If I had been strong enough, brave enough—and not carrying another life—I'd have challenged him.

I wouldn't have won, but I'd have gone out with a fight. And maybe, just maybe, it

would've convinced someone else to try and take him out—someone who could succeed.

This morning, I woke up planning to cook for Kurt. He'd been the one making breakfast every morning, always getting up much earlier than I did. But today, the sun was barely up when my eyes cracked open.

I'd love to say it was because I'd had a great night's sleep—which I had—but no, it was because I had to pee. My sweet baby had shifted and was living on my bladder, making the bathroom my new best friend.

It took a bit, but I managed to climb out of bed and shuffle into the bathroom without too much noise. As I washed my hands, I caught sight of myself in the mirror and froze. I looked...healthier. My eyes were less sunken, and I could tell I'd put on a few pounds. That was a good thing—I'd been woefully underweight when I arrived. I wasn't perfect, not even close, but I was heading back in the right direction.

If the right direction was lined with cookies.

Oh my Santa, those cookies were delicious. Dipping them in the frosting was everything. I needed to remember that for when my little one was born and ready to create their own Christmas traditions. I still had no idea where we would be next week, much less next year, but that didn't stop me from musing.

As clever and speedy as I thought I was, when I opened the bathroom door, Kurt was already cooking eggs on the stove.

"You're too fast," I said, stretching my arms and inhaling the scent of cooking eggs and butter. "I was going to make breakfast today."

"Nah, breakfast is my thing. You can make lunch."

He looked at me briefly before turning back to the stove. I wasn't sure what he saw, but it made him smile and, in turn, had me smiling right back.

We ate breakfast and then returned to our game, the one we'd been playing the past couple of days. The closet had a bunch of board games, most of which I'd never heard of, including a role-playing one where we had to save a princess from dragons in the land of fae. It was so clearly made by humans—they got almost everything wrong about both fae and dragons—but it was fun. We'd played for an hour or two every morning since we discovered it, and it was a great way to ease into the day.

I wasn't sure how many days it would take to finish the game, but I loved that it continued each time we played. Unlike chess, where he beat me in about three moves. I'd never been great at chess, but whoa, he was amazing at it.

For lunch, I “cooked” sandwiches, and he insisted on cleaning up. I padded over to the window to see if the snow I'd scented in the air last night had arrived or not.

“What do you see?” His voice startled me as he came up behind me.

“Nothing new.” I stepped to the side so he could see as well. “I was just thinking about how much my wolf loves the snow.”

“Do you miss him?”

I turned to face him. “What do you mean?”

“Do you miss not being able to have your wolf?”

“Oh, I have my wolf. He's here with me. He just can't come out and play. But yeah, I do miss it. That day, when you walked me back from the main house with the cookies, he really wanted to join you.”

“Maybe after...” he started, then stopped.

He had to see there couldn't be an “after.” He was the alpha of a pack, and, as nice as he was, they wouldn't accept me. And if he forced them, they'd never fully accept him. That was the way of things.

Before I could muster the courage to explain all of that to him, in case he was truly living in a happy happy bubble, the kettle went off. It was teatime.

I'd been drinking a lot of tea lately. It was better for baby than coffee—or the gallons of cocoa, which were my other hot beverage options.

As we sat down for what had quickly become our afternoon routine of hot drinks and cookies, there was a knock at the door.

“I'll get it,” I said, pushing myself up from my seat.

I could tell Kurt was itching to tell me he would handle it, but he tried not to tell me what to do after hearing my story. I appreciated it. Not that this would have been him telling me what to do—it would've been him trying to take care of me, but still...

When I opened the door, Elias stood there holding what I initially thought were badminton rackets.

“Hello.”

“Well, let me in—it's cold out here!” Of course he was cold. Elias was wearing nothing more than a red hoodie with white faux fur trim and skinny jeans and boots. Fashion over comfort—that was Elias. The complete opposite of me.

“I found these when I was looking for craft supplies. Thought you might like them.”

“What are they?”

“Snowshoes,” he said, pulling a bag from his shoulder. He handed me two boots from inside. “I think these will fit you. They’re warm and comfortable.” He shivered. “No offense, I just can’t be seen in these, and I think we are about the same size.”

I wasn’t sure if he was being truthful or trying to give me the boots without making me feel bad. Either way, I accepted. My shoes weren’t holding up well and did nothing for the cold.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime. I figured you could go out with your wolf.”

“Oh, my wolf can’t—” Then it dawned on me what he was saying. “Oh. He’s not...” I snapped my mouth closed, unsure how to back out of this conversation and opted the flight mentality. “I’m gonna put these in the other room.” I left him where he stood.

When I came back out, Kurt and Elias were deep in conversation about some glitter project at the main house. Apparently Theo was worried about it getting everywhere. He had every right to be. Glitter perseveres.

Before long, Elias was on his way, and Kurt and I were getting ready for a walk through the snow.

“Have you ever snowshoed before?” Kurt asked.

“No.” My wolf loved the snow, so there’d been no reason to.

“I don’t think it’s that hard.” He didn’t sound so sure.

“I don’t know. It’s worth trying.” And now that we were doing this, I was full-on excited.

“Let’s get you buckled up and warm. And before you even try to stop me, I’m giving you my coat. It’s longer than yours, and it’ll keep you warm.”

“I gladly accept.”

Ten minutes later, we were walking through the woods together, his wolf beside me. I chatted his ear off about the trees and the types of birds I imagined lived there in the warmer months.

We came to a small pine.

“I used to think how nice it would be to have a Christmas tree like this one.”

He rubbed his head against my leg in response.

“You would, too, huh?” I reached down to pet him, my gloves brushing his fur. I longed to pull them off and feel his fur with my bare hands, but I didn’t.

That wasn’t something for now—probably not ever. This would have to do.

Kurt

I couldn't remember having such a good time at the holidays...or any time before. Not that the pack didn't celebrate. They did and in a really nice way with lots of treats and caroling and gifts and everything. I presided over the group events, most of which were held in the alpha house, my home. The tree in the front window was selected by the betas and decorated by the omegas, and it was always gorgeous.

Carrying on my fathers' traditions and those of the alpha-omega couples before them was a truly beautiful thing. And I enjoyed it. Watching my people share joy? I'd have sworn there was nothing better. But over the past few days, I'd learned something surprising. While I sat on the sofa or in my favorite chair and everyone around me ate, drank, and danced, there was a thin veil between me and them. They all went home at the end of the party to their families, while I went upstairs to my bedroom alone. Of course there were other singles, but they hung out together, and somehow they never thought to include their alpha in his ivory tower.

But the last few days, playing games and doing the most pleasant and simplest things? I didn't know I could feel the spirit of the season so strongly. We were sitting in front of the fire drinking tea and eating cookies when the idea occurred to me. "Wade, how would you feel about a Christmas tree?"

He set his mug down and frowned. "I don't know. They're pretty I guess, but I've never had one." Which explained his comments on our walk. He'd looked at it so longingly, and I wanted to give him one.

I reeled back but this time I bit my tongue. I'd already tripped over my tongue more

than once. Fact: His former pack sucked. No need to remind him of that. He already knew. “Then it’s time you did. Truthfully? The tree in my home is always the pack tree. I’d like one that I pick out and cut down and that you and I decorate together, if you think you are up for some more snowshoeing?”

“I’ve walked a whole lot throughout this pregnancy and for a whole lot less-fun reasons. But do you think it is okay to do that?”

“We’re going to find out.” I clapped my hands and stood. “You bundle up, and I’ll dash up to the main house and see what a person has to do around here to get a Christmas tree happening.” If they didn’t want any trees cut, maybe they had an old artificial one tucked away somewhere. The few times I’d been in the main house, I’d been awed by the decorations, including the most beautiful Christmas tree I’d ever seen.

I shrugged into my coat and headed up to ask, but before I got to the door, I found Theo on the porch. He was sipping a mug of cocoa topped with a mountain of whipped cream and a candy cane. The resemblance to that old saint was stronger every time.

“Theo! Do you have a minute to chat?”

He waved me up. “Want a cup of cocoa?”

“It sounds good, but I really just wanted to ask a question. Wade is waiting for me.”

“All right. Shoot.”

“Is there anywhere around here we can cut a Christmas tree? We’d love to have one for the cabin.”

“We cut ours from the stand just west of here, and there are plenty of other options in there. Also, it’s level walking through the grove, which might be helpful to someone who is close to having a baby.”

“Absolutely. Do we need a permit, or is there a fee I can pay?” Everything here was so easy and smooth. “I have my wallet, or you have my card on file if you just want to use that.”

“No charge. We have to thin out the forest anyway. Just be careful and don’t cut more of a tree than you can fit in the cabin. We’ve had guests cut down thirty-foot trees for an eight-foot ceiling on occasion.”

“Considering we’ll have to make our decorations, we probably will keep it on the small side.”

He chuckled, a warm friendly sound. “There should be a box of lights and maybe a few ornaments in the bedroom closet, if you take a peek. But otherwise, you’ll probably find some materials for your project. I don’t suppose you brought an ax with you?”

He ended up giving me the ax, leather gloves, a tarp, and some rope all piled on a sled then sending me on my way. His cocoa had to be cold, but when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw steam rising from his cup. I shrugged, hurrying to the cabin to pick up Wade and head for the grove of trees.

Wade, all bundled up, was watching for me through the window, and, as I approached, he disappeared behind the curtains and reappeared opening the door. He wore a heavy coat and hat, fur-lined gloves, and a wooly scarf, none of which I’d seen him in before. Overall, he looked more like a bear than a wolf, and utterly adorable. He’d worn my coat before but this time, I wouldn’t be wearing my fur.

“Where did you get all those things?” I asked.

“The closet. Do you think I shouldn’t wear them?”

I shrugged. “I think they were left behind a while ago judging by their appearance. Can’t see why you shouldn’t.”

“Is that an ax?” He gave a little bounce. “We’re getting a tree!”

I pulled the sled, although he offered to help, and side by side we walked along the road in the direction Theo sent us. It wasn’t far at all, and soon we were moving from tree to tree, discussing them as if we were going to pay city prices. They were all great, but I mentioned Theo’s warning about height. When I held up my hand next to a tree I’d have sworn was eight or nine feet, it towered at least another few feet above my fingertips.

Finally, we narrowed it down to two. Both were between seven and eight feet high, but one had defined branches and the other was bushier. “How do we decide?” I asked. “If we stay out here much longer, your nose is going to turn blue.”

“I know.” He smiled but cupped his palm over his nose, muffling his words a little. “Let’s take the one that smells the best.”

“How will we know?” Everything smelled like green and cold out here.

“Simple.” He reached out to the closer of the two trees, the bushy one, and pulled off a few needles, crushing them in his glove. “Sniff.”

I bent to inhale the fragrance. “Heady, sharp, and somehow watery? Nice.”

He brushed the needles away and did the same thing with the more defined tree.

“Now smell this one.”

I sniffed the bruised needles and tipped my head back. “Smells like Christmas.”

“Exactly.” He nodded. “Now, give me the ax and...what?”

“Just step back. Maybe next time you can do it, but an ax is dangerous and I don’t want anything to ever hurt you.”

“Thank you, alpha.” His voice was thick with emotion. “I am not used to someone being so concerned.”

With everything in me, I wanted to say something, to let him know we were, but instead I chopped down the tree, wrapped it in the tarp, and secured it on the sled. All the way home, we were belting carols, and we did find that box of decorations, so the only thing we made was a popcorn chain.

Thoroughly fun, thoroughly happy Christmas outing, fun tree decorating, and my heart burst with the joy of it all.

Wade

Theo and Elias had called and asked us to come down to the main house to help them with...they didn't say what. We were happy to help, no matter what it was. It wasn't like they were jerks who would ask me to do heavy labor while pregnant.

We bundled up and made our way there. I wasn't sure what kind of help I could offer—not with my baby due any second now, but they had been so kind to me that I'd do what I could.

I hadn't been getting any contractions, not even the practice ones you're supposed to have before delivery, and that had me confused as to when my baby was actually going to arrive. Not that babies had a history of going by a schedule. Maybe the baby knew we weren't in a good spot yet. Or maybe I was overthinking and just needed to suck it up and ask Elias to help me find a midwife. I probably needed to do that.

It was a nice day, relatively speaking. Still cold because winter, but nowhere near as bitter as it had been. The sun was high in the sky, and the entire property looked like a winter wonderland you might see on a greeting card.

Kurt was whisked away almost immediately to hold a ladder while Theo changed the bulbs in the chandeliers. And as soon as they were gone, Elias asked if I wanted to help him in the kitchen. I was hardly an amazing cook, but it turned out that I didn't need to be. "Help" in the kitchen had been code for us to each make a lasagna for our own consumption.

"I bought too much food. You know how it is." He pulled out item after item,

showing me everything he'd bought for the lasagnas, including a random disposable pan for me.

I didn't know "how it is." I'd grown up lucky to have enough for what we needed, and even then it was often only because we supplemented with hunting. And later—well, things went to shit and even being the alpha's mate didn't give me abundance. Him? Yes, but not me.

Watching as he unveiled each ingredient, I realized I wasn't even sure what went into a proper lasagna. I'd had it once at a diner after getting kicked out of my pack, but I was pretty sure that wasn't authentic. Still, it had been warm and filled my belly, so I wasn't complaining.

"I don't know how to do this," I admitted, looking at the ingredients, feeling more than a little intimidated.

"The best things in life are often the things we don't know how to do," Elias replied. "Maybe one day I'll tell you about when I met Theo."

I was itching to ask him to tell me now, but it was obvious he didn't want to share just yet. Instead, he showed me how to make his homemade sauce while I cooked the ground sausage and beef. Then came the fun part; we assembled everything together. He had noodles that didn't need to be cooked beforehand, which he explained made the process much quicker and, I imagined, a whole lot easier. When we were done, one lasagna was wrapped up and put in the fridge. The other was placed in a handled paper bag he had waiting for it.

"There you go—now you have dinner." He pulled a baguette from a grocery bag and stuck it on top. "A complete one. It's French. They don't go together, but it looked so good."

“Trust me, it is going to be delicious. Anything with crusty bread is good.” My beast might live for the hunt, but I was all about the bread.

We’d just finished when Kurt came in.

“Smells wonderful in here,” he said.

“I’m glad, because we’re bringing some home.” I held up the bag. It was heavier than I remembered.

“I think we need to help more often,” Kurt quipped, taking the bag from me and chatting with Elias for a moment before we headed back to the cabin.

Once there, I put the lasagna in the tiny oven, already hungry, and turned it on. The pan barely fit. Before long, the aroma of our dinner filled the air.

“What’s this?” Kurt pulled a bag from the one holding the lasagna. I’d not seen it before.

“I don’t know. I thought it was just the lasagna and the bread.” I’d been sure of it. I was the one who put the pan in there to begin with.

He opened it and pulled out a baby blanket, a couple of onesies, a small package of diapers, and some wipes.

“Looks like Elias was being sneaky.” It was the only solution. I tried to figure out when he could’ve slipped those in but came up blank. It was almost as if Christmas magic was real in this place.

“Oh, and the tags are off, and they’re washed.” Kurt handed the baby items to me. They were the first for my sweet one, which had guilt slipping in hard.

How could I expect to be a good father when I literally had gotten my baby nothing? I'd been so focused on making it day by day, I forgot to look ahead. Maybe forgot wasn't accurate, more like, I was too scared to look there, which somehow made it feel worse.

"Smell them." Kurt yanked me from my spiral. He had a habit of doing that. At first, I assumed it was coincidence, but I'd come to think it was more that he paid attention and it was done with intent. I appreciated it.

I inhaled deeply. They were fresh and clean with a hint of lavender. I loved them, but why give them to me now of all times?

"Do they think I'm leaving?"

"No, I think they think someone's arriving," he said, reaching out as if to touch my belly but pulling his hand back at the last second. "Listen, can we talk?"

I didn't like the sound of that, not one bit. But I nodded and followed him to the couch, where we both sat down.

"Sometimes I think you're planning on leaving," he said.

"Well, I do have to at some point. I don't live here. I'm not paying my way. I can't just decide this is my home." As much as I loved it here, that was the reality.

"No." He took my hand in his. "I didn't mean leaving this place. I meant leaving me."

"Oh, Kurt." I turned sideways to face him. "There is no you and I. There can't be. You're alpha of a pack. Your responsibilities and loyalties are to them."

"That's for me to decide. Just tell me—do you have feelings for me?"

This was the point where the responsible omega wolf would have lied, where they'd have said they felt nothing. But I couldn't. Instead, it came out in a whisper.

“Yes.”

He reached up and cupped my cheek as if it was perfectly normal and not a marred mess. “Then, that’s all that matters. My wolf recognizes you as his mate.”

“Mate? That’s not possible. I had a mate. He wasn’t my mate by choice, but—”

“He’s dead. He was not your fated mate, but you are mine. And I want you. I don’t want to pressure you—I know you’ve got a lot going on right now—but I want you to know where I stand. What does your wolf say?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t have you lose your pack. They’ll never accept me.”

“The history of my pack says otherwise. They will accept you, even if you weren’t my mate. That’s who we are. But even if we got there and they decided you were the worst wolf in the entire universe—I simply do not care. I’ll take you and our family, and we’ll start our life elsewhere. Because my pack is with you. Always.”

Our family. He wasn’t just asking for me. He wanted the entire package deal: baby, scars, and all.

“What does your wolf say?” he asked again.

“That you’re mine.” It was faint, and the few times he tried to communicate it to me, I wasn’t quite sure it hadn’t been in my imagination, but he’d said it. “But I say it. You’re my mate.”

Before I could second-guess myself, his lips brushed sweetly against mine.

I was home.

Kurt

We sang, Christmas carols on the little sound system, the warmth of the fire wrapping around us. I had my arm around Wade, the omega's head resting on my shoulder.

"Dinner was so good," I said. "That was really the first time you made lasagna?"

"The very first. My experience was limited to game stews and basic things like that, but I've always thought it would be fun to learn how to cook things like Italian and Chinese dishes." He sighed. "Now I'm hungry again."

"And tired, I'll bet." I brushed a kiss on his hair. "Why don't you go get in bed, and I'll bring you a tray."

"What kind of stuff...oh my gosh. After that huge dinner, I shouldn't be hungry." He sat up straight. "Maybe I will just drink a glass of water."

"Over my dead body." I stood up and held out a hand. "Come on, omega. On your feet." I helped him up and turned him toward the bedroom. "I'll follow to tuck you in with cocoa and some cookies."

"That sounds perfect except..."

I paused, halfway to the kitchenette. "Except what?"

"Except I hope you'll bring enough for two."

I wasn't sure if he meant what I hoped he did. I wanted him desperately but would never make the first move after all he'd been through. "Omega, just to be clear, are you asking me to stay with you in the bedroom tonight?"

"Just to be clear, I am asking you to make love to me in that bed tonight." He spoke bravely, but his cheeks bloomed with color. "And I never thought I'd want that with anyone. But I want you."

I was at his side in a trice. "Are you sure?"

"Sure enough to say hold off on the cocoa and cookies for a while and come with me now."

"How could I refuse you, omega?" I scooped him in my arms. "Let's go see if that bed is as comfortable as it looks."

"It is. You'll never want to sleep on the floor again."

"I don't know. It's been pretty good so far." My protests might have been better if I hadn't strode into the bedroom and sat down on the bed.

He looked up at me, suddenly serious. "You don't have to do this, alpha. I understand if you don't want to. I'm not very appealing with my scars and my body all stretched out of shape."

"Omega, that could not be further from the truth. I wanted to say that if we make love tonight, it's not a casual thing."

"You mean you want to do it again? But you don't even know if I'm any good."

I hated that he thought of himself in those terms. "No, I mean if we do this, I want to

mark you, but I won't do it without your permission."

"You have it." He tipped his face up toward mine. "Now, are you going to kiss me, or do you just want to talk all night?"

"You have no idea." I bent to take his mouth, my hands already working to undress him. He thought he was ugly, but as I revealed his body, I saw only beauty. Young, strong limbs, the skin stretching over his rounded bump, and the mark on his face that said he could survive just about anything.

When he was naked, I stood and turned, lying him carefully on the bed before undressing myself. He watched me carefully, and I had never felt so self-conscious, hoping he would find me half as appealing as I did him. If his erect cock offered any indication, I was doing okay in his eyes.

Lying beside him, I used my lips and hands to map his body, learning all the planes and dips, tracing the stretch marks on his belly. I nibbled his earlobe before lapping the spot where I would mark him. Not yet though. I knelt over him, trying to think what position might be comfortable, even pleasurable for him, but any way I thought of I was afraid might cause him pain.

"On my side, alpha," he said. "I can support my bump with a pillow and pull my knees up high. I think that will work."

It was more technical than romantic, but it was also important to discuss and make sure my very pregnant omega was comfortable. I helped him settle into position then lay behind him, skin to skin for the first time. It was bliss before we got any further along. I nibbled the back of his neck, whispering naughty things while reaching between us to test his slick. I'd never been in bed with anyone pregnant before, and I didn't know all the details about how this worked, but he was so ready for me. "You're so slick, omega," I growled.

“Don’t make me wait, then,” he muttered, bucking his hips back toward me. “Please.”

Fitting the head of my cock to his needy hole, I drove inside, the slick gliding me deep into his body. It was so hot and tight, the walls enveloping me like a glove. After a few thrusts, I reached over his hip to fist his cock, stroking and squeezing, needing to bring him along with me. How had I never realized what this could be like? This omega put my casual hookups to shame. But then, my wolf was also really into him, making things more intense by the moment. “Squeeze me, omega. Yes, even tighter.” With him using his muscles, it was harder to get in and out but so rewarding.

I stroked him harder and faster, his bucking hips driving him into my fist until, with a cry, he poured his cum over my hand, and my balls tightened in response. I groaned and spurted jets of cum into his hot ass, my knot swelled, and I sank my teeth into his flesh, marking him as mine.

I pulled him back into my arms and we lay together, bound by my knot, until it eased, but even after my cock deflated, I held him, drifting into the most peaceful sleep of my life.

Wade

Everything in my world changed the second I admitted to my mate how I felt. And it wasn't just admitting it to Kurt, although that was huge—it was admitting it to myself. Allowing myself to see something I'd kept buried because it was too terrifying to face what I was sure would be immediate rejection. How wrong I'd been. He not only didn't reject me, he accepted me fully, loved me, and cherished me.

I'd spent every day since I was maimed believing that nothing about me was what anyone would be looking for, that I was exactly what they said I was. Kurt didn't see me the way I saw myself. He saw me the way I wanted to see myself. He saw so much more in me than anyone had, even before, and I loved him for it.

No, that wasn't right. I didn't love him because of that. I loved him because of everything he was, including the way he looked at me with such love in his eyes. I loved everything about the alpha.

And because I was so deeply in love, I was beyond nervous about today.

We were going to do a video conference with his pack. It had been his idea when I expressed concern about being unwelcome. He said it would help me see who the pack was and how different they were than where I'd come from.

My fear was that, unlike Kurt, they weren't going to look at me and see someone valuable. They'd see a pregnant omega, marked as less than, with not even fifty dollars to his name. Someone who looked like they could be taken out with a flick of a finger, thanks to how skinny they'd gotten. Someone who didn't live up to the role

I'd be filling.

And really, what could they possibly think I could bring to their pack? I hadn't been educated. I could barely cook. What was left? Not much.

That's how I found myself waddling to the main house to find Elias. I'd told Kurt I was going to get more towels. He offered to go himself, but I insisted I needed the exercise. Unlike him, I hadn't been going out for runs in my wolf form. At least, that was the excuse I gave.

The truth was, I just needed someone to talk to and given I knew only three people here, that lucky person was Elias, and it was as if he'd known I'd be coming.

When I arrived, he already had a tea tray set up, but instead of tea, it was laden with cocoa and cookies—cookies shaped like tiny candy canes and made from two kinds of dough, red and white. Even without frosting, they looked festive. Of course, there was frosting, and I planned to use all of it.

“Are you sure I'm not taking you away from your mate?” I looked at the beautiful display.

“They're in town getting some things for tomorrow. This is for us.” He indicated I take a seat, and I did.

“How did you...never mind.” I'd learned not to question things here—not when it came to the way Elias and Theo always seemed to know exactly what was needed.

“What brings you here?” He poured cocoa into two adorable marshmallow-shaped mugs.

“I told Kurt we needed more towels.”

“Okay, but what brings you here?” He held the frosting out, and I grabbed a cookie, scooping up a huge dollop.

“I’m just nervous. I’m meeting his pack today.” Nervous. Terrified. Same thing.

“No, you’re not.” Elias set the frosting down.

“What do you mean? Of course I am.” Unless he knew something I didn’t, which given his track record was a very real possibility.

“You’re not meeting his pack today. You’re meeting your pack. Your new pack. This isn’t about them accepting you.”

I started to argue, but he put his finger to his lips, indicating I be quiet.

“This is about you deciding if that’s where you want to be. And if you don’t believe me, ask Kurt. He’s as nervous as you are.”

“How do you know? Did he talk to you?” He’d been acting normal around me, but then again, I’d been pretty wrapped up in my head, so it was a very real possibility I missed something.

“No. But he’s in love with you, and that means this matters to him. Trust me, our alphas are like that.”

I took a bite of my cookie, needing time to think. Elias was right. This wasn’t about them accepting me. It was about seeing if I belonged there. Kurt had told me over and over that his home was with me and the baby. If his pack became my pack, great. If not, he was fine leaving.

But some part of me didn’t believe it. Power wasn’t a lineage thing with this pack or

a violence thing either, not from the way Kurt described it. That didn't mean giving it up was an easy thing to do.

“Okay,” I said finally, leaving it at that.

We shifted the conversation to lighter topics. I asked Elias about his sparkly top and how the glitter project had gone. The craft went about as well as I'd suspected it would—glitter everywhere, even on the front porch—but he loved the result, and Christmas required glitter, so it was a win-win.

After a cup of cocoa and a few more cookies, I followed him to the laundry room and grabbed a couple of towels. We did actually need them, even if it had been an excuse to sneak away for a few minutes. He stuffed them into one of his oversized paper bags like the one with the lasagna.

“This only has towels in it, right?” I teased.

He smirked. “You saw me put them in. What are you talking about?”

I hugged him the best I could, given my belly being in the way, and waddled back to the cabin, where I found Kurt setting up the computer. He'd borrowed some contraption to make the internet work here to give us some privacy. I appreciated it.

“I got the towels.” I held up the bag.

“I'll put them away.” He kissed my cheek—the one I'd hated for so long—and took the towels into the bathroom.

When I folded up the bag, I found something else inside: sandwiches, potato salad, macaroni salad, and more cookies. Elias had managed to put an entire lunch inside without me noticing.

“Looks like Elias sent us a picnic.” I set the bag on the counter. We would eat after the video conference. There was no reason to rearrange the small fridge for that short period of time.

“A picnic.” He wrapped his arms around me from behind and kissed where he marked me as his. “That sounds like him.”

It was meeting time. Kurt helped me sit in the right spot for the camera angle, took the seat beside me, and then hit “accept.”

Marco, his beta, appeared on the screen. I knew it was him because he wore a name tag, the first of many things I was about to discover the pack did to make me feel more at ease.

“We’re so glad you’re here!” Marco said with a wave before stepping back to reveal the pack behind him. “You got a good one with Kurt. He’s an amazing friend, a wonderful alpha, and I’m sure will be a doting father.”

The pack were nodding their heads, smiling from ear to ear, each one of them wearing a name tag. I couldn’t read them from this angle, but there would be time to learn their names later. I already learned the most important thing about them, just in this quick snapshot.

Not a single one of the wolves stared at my face or looked at me with disgust. No one whispered to their neighbor. No one giggled. There were greeting me and letting their alpha know how happy they were for him.

And in that moment, I knew where I belonged.

At Kurt’s side.

As the alpha omega.

As a member of this pack.

They were my new family.

This pack was my future.

Kurt

I wanted to take the omega home right that night, but it wasn't practical. Not to mention how I was enjoying his company. I'd arranged to have some groceries brought in and we were dining in for all our meals. I enjoyed feeding him, and he enjoyed not having to face strangers who might ask questions. Our pack had already been warned about his rogue marking, but he wouldn't be the only one there anyway. We took in a lot of others who'd been rejected by their pack for one reason or another, and there were worse scarrings than Wade's. I was increasingly proud of how we operated, the kindness and tolerance of our pack a shining light.

And it might have been a little selfish of me to want to have him to myself for just a little longer. The cabin was paid for for several more days, and this vacation was more than what the doctor ordered.

We would make our way home soon, this honeymoon time precious to us both. The resort offered so many activities, but we were very content just being us. Making love, eating good food, taking care of the omega and watching him blossom more every day...it was the best thing ever.

I was lying in bed in a half dream of being home with Wade installed in the alpha house, when a sound penetrated my rest.

"Ohhh." A moan.

My brain tried to process it, without waking, but that was not going to happen. And when I opened my eyes, what I saw had me scrambling to my feet. "Omega, what's

wrong?”

He was curled around his belly, clutching it and groaning. “Oh no. I think the baby’s coming. I’m cramping.”

“But I thought it wasn’t due yet.” He had said that, hadn’t he? Or was I making it up?

“I think...it’s due soon but maybe not this soon. It wasn’t as if I had any medical care in the pack.”

“Don’t they have a healer or a midwife?”

He whimpered. “Yes, but not for me.”

“Not ever?”

“At the beginning, I was fine and so I didn’t consult them, and then I...” He subsided into ragged breathing, and I had never felt more helpless.

“We’re getting the pack healer on video chat right now.” Why hadn’t I done it sooner? “And no arguments.”

“I-I’m not arguing.” He leaned back, letting out a long, slow breath. “I think you’re right.”

I scrambled to find my phone where I’d left it in the living room then returned to the bedroom and punched the healer’s name. He was always on call for everyone, something I needed to work on. A pack our size needed more than one healer, both for adequate coverage and to avoid burnout. “Zeus, we need your help. Wade is getting some pains, and he isn’t sure when he’s due. Can you help us figure out what’s going on?”

The older wolf had been in his position for all of my life and I wasn't sure how long before. Long time, anyway. I'd never seen anything rattle him, and this was no exception. "I will do my best."

We'd used the computer for our conference, but the phone was fine for a one-on-one conversation.

"Hand the phone to the omega, please." Zeus gave me a professional smile. "It will be fine, alpha. Why don't you go make some tea while I consult with my patient."

My grip tightened on the device, and my alpha self wanted to insist on being present. Not dismissed. Any member of my pack's business was mine, traditionally, and my omega's even more so. But the one person who could overrule me, boss the boss so to speak, would be the healer where a patient was concerned. So I passed the phone to Wade and left him to discuss his pains with the healer.

Not that the cabin was big enough to offer total privacy, especially with shifter hearing, but I closed the bedroom door and went into the kitchen to prepare some soothing tea and a plate of cookies. If he was in true labor, he probably shouldn't be eating anything, but from the bits and pieces of conversation I was getting, the healer thought these were just those early pains that Wade had mentioned he had not had up until now.

By the time the kettle boiled, the call was over, and Wade emerged from the bedroom looking relieved. "The pains seem to have stopped for the moment, but Zeus says from everything I told him, it's fine to deliver whenever I'm ready. He thinks, with a first baby and my description, that I still have some time though."

"Get back in bed and I will bring you tea and cookies to celebrate."

He grinned. "I might have other suggestions..."

Tea and cookies later. “You are insatiable, omega mine.”

“I know. I blame you for being such a sexy alpha.”

I’d take that blame any day.

Wade

I awoke with a start, patting the side of the bed in a panic. My heart pounded, disoriented thoughts racing through my mind, and relief washed over me as I realized I was still pregnant. Our baby wasn't here yet, and they hadn't fallen off the bed. It was only a dream. Another freaking dream.

The dreams had been different each time, but for the past few nights, they had been about our baby. They were nondescript and blurry in the dreams—I couldn't see them, not really. But they were there. I could feel them in my arms, see their blurry form, hear their little coos. I loved them so completely it nearly hurt, and I was happy. At least up until this most recent dream.

Usually, they featured mundane moments, like holding the infant while they slept or feeding them. But last night's dream was different. Last night, they fell off the bed. I managed to drop our baby.

Now, I was wide awake, the sun not yet up, sweat pouring off me, my heart racing.

Kurt's arm came around me. "Is everything okay?" His voice was still sleepy.

"Yeah. I just had a dream." A shitty one, but a dream, nonetheless.

"Come back to sleep. You need your rest."

"I will in just a minute. Baby is on my bladder again." I climbed out of bed and padded to the bathroom. After getting a drink of water and taking care of business, I

caught my reflection in the mirror. My eyes moved to the mark on my shoulder—the one Kurt gave me. Unlike the usual discomfort or anger I felt at seeing the marred skin on my face, this mark brought up an entirely different emotion: love.

When I climbed back into bed, I snuggled into Kurt's arms. I didn't think I'd be able to fall asleep again, but slumber came quickly. This time, it was dreamless.

Next time I woke, it was to the smell of bacon wafting into the room. Kurt was already up and cooking. Sometimes, I swore the man never let the sun beat him awake.

"I guess I was tired." I spoke through a yawn, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Yeah, you're allowed to be. You're growing a whole extra person in there."

I laughed softly and instinctively rested a hand on my belly. It was hard to believe our pup was almost here. Gone was the dread I'd felt, the fear of not being able to provide for them nearly paralyzing. Now all I felt was excitement and anticipation. We were about to meet our child.

We'd gone back and forth about whether we should try to get to the pack lands and settled in before the baby arrived. I'd had dreams that the baby was coming soon, along with a few bouts of false labor, but we still had time—probably. Babies were far from predictable.

A not-so-small part of me worried that if we left, I might go into labor on the way, becoming one of those parents giving birth on the side of the road in their car. I didn't want that for them. It was still winter, and they deserved better than horns honking being their first lullaby.

In the end, we decided to play it by ear, and, so far, that "by ear" meant we were

staying. Theo assured us that the cabin was open for as long as we needed. But then again, he'd told me the room was empty. On that, I was glad he was wrong.

If he even was wrong. The more I got to know those two, the more I suspected they could and did do things most of us could not. Or was that magical thinking? It didn't really matter which.

"What do you want to do today?" Kurt asked as I rotated my stiff ankles under the table.

If they could even be called ankles. They had officially reached the cankle stage.

"Whatever it is, I think I need some walking. Maybe it'll help my ankles look less like...ginormous." They would at least loosen up a bit.

"Well, Elias had an idea about that."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I grabbed a piece of bacon off my mate's plate. I was starving this morning.

"There's a town nearby with a Christmas market. I thought maybe we could go—and possibly find some things for the baby."

I cringed, thinking about how I'd arrived here with absolutely nothing. "You mean like a car seat?"

"Exactly...and other things." The other-things list had to be huge. So far, the baby only had the handful of things Elias snuck into our lasagna bag that day.

"Okay. That sounds good." I thought about my dwindling funds. Forty-something dollars wouldn't get much, but it was better than nothing. And Kurt planned to cover

the rest, citing that's what families did. Still...I felt bad.

After finishing breakfast and taking showers, we set out.

The drive was stunning, the road winding through snow-dusted trees. The small town we arrived at looked like a Christmas movie set. Storefronts were draped in garland and wreaths, windows filled with decorations. Along the sidewalks, little booths offered handmade crafts and local goods.

The first stop was the baby store. When he said Elias mentioned it, I assumed it would be a general store with some baby items, but no—it was entirely devoted to babies. There were products here I didn't begin to understand the purpose for, even after looking at the display. Babies were tiny, and yet they had an entire store full of products devoted just to them.

Kurt headed straight for the car seats. He stood there staring, and I joined him, equally clueless. There was a section for newborns—that much I understood—but the rest was overwhelming. All the seats looked the same to me.

“Did you need help picking something out?” a salesperson asked.

I said, “No,” at the same time Kurt said, “Yes.”

Leaning into his side, I changed my answer and listened as the salesperson gave us a rundown of the features and safety standards. Most of it might as well have been Latin. We then asked what she recommended for something simple and safe. We should've led with that. A few moments later, they guided us to a model that seemed perfect.

“Is that all today?”

Kurt took my hand, intertwining our fingers. “No, we need some essentials. Mind if we leave that at the counter until we are finished?”

By “essentials,” he meant a mountain of items: clothes, cloth diapers with snaps—who knew those were a thing?—pacifiers, crinkly toys, soft-and-fuzzy sleepers, and swaddle blankets. With every addition to the pile, my nerves grew. This was going to be expensive...more expensive than any other shopping trip I’d ever taken.

Once the salesperson left so we could take “one final look around,” I voiced my concerns.

“It’s money we have, I promise,” Kurt said, kissing me softly. “When we get to the pack, I’ll show you what we have and what we don’t. Trust me on this—we’re fine.”

“I trust you with everything.” If he said the money was fine, I believed him.

On the way to the register, we passed a section of handmade stuffed wolves. One caught my eye—it looked just like Kurt.

“I think we need a daddy wolf.” I picked it up. It was \$43.99 and with tax, I had just enough for me to buy it on my own. When Kurt reached for it, I shook my head.

“No, I want to get this for them.”

He nodded in understanding.

At the register, I paid for the wolf while Kurt handled the rest. The salesperson helped us carry everything to the car. To my surprise, guilt didn’t hit me over how much Kurt had spent. We were a team. What was his was mine, and what was mine was his. He wasn’t buying things to hold over me later, like others had in the past. He

was providing.

Once everything was loaded, we strolled through the Christmas market, sipping cocoa, eating homemade marshmallows, and buying a Baby's First Christmas ornament.

"Thank you for the wonderful outing." I kissed my mate under the mistletoe hanging from the lamppost. "I love you."

"As I love you, omega mine. As I love you."

Kurt

This time, the pains did not stop.

Christmas Eve morning dawned bright and clear, and once again, soft moans emerged from my omega's lips. "Alpha, I think this is it." He rolled into a ball around his belly and panted. "I hope I'm not ruining your Christmas."

"How could your getting ready to bring our baby into the world ruin Christmas? I seem to remember another baby being born on the same day—or at least that's the day it's celebrated. I think our child has chosen to share this special day."

"Unless they resent having a Christmas birthday," he said, panting. "Maybe I can hold out."

"Omega, it's Christmas Eve in the morning. If you try to 'hold out' until after Christmas, that would mean two days of pain for you, even if it's possible for you to do that. Our baby is ready, and it's entirely their call. Now, what can I do to make you feel better?"

"I don't even know." He straightened and sat up. "I think I'd like to take a shower."

Darting into the bathroom, I got the water running and laid out fresh towels before guiding him in. "May I join you?"

"I think I might need the support." He stepped to the side of the stall and made room for me. Grabbing a sponge, I squirted bath gel into it and squeezed it into lather

before smoothing it over his skin. A private conversation with Zeus had armed me with what to do when Wade went into labor, if we chose to stay. If we'd gone home, he would have been there, but for all the reasons we'd decided to remain here. If there was any real trouble, Theo had the number of a healer we could call.

So there was that.

But for the moment, my job was to keep him relaxed and comfortable, something I felt competent to do. Washing him slowly, I cleansed every inch of his body and then rubbed shampoo into his hair. His eyes were half closed, a moan on his lips, a situation that changed fast when the next pain hit.

Supporting him with one arm, I rinsed his hair and helped him out of the shower and into a warm, soft towel. When the pain abated, I guided him into the bedroom and under the covers. "You good?"

"Can I have some water?"

And so we went on for hours while the short winter day gradually reached its end outside and he was still laboring. The pains were a few minutes apart, though, and that was encouraging. He alternated lying in bed and walking back and forth with my arm around him.

Then, just as darkness closed in around our little cabin, something changed and Wade stopped in mid stride. "I need to lie down." He tugged free and stumbled to the bed. "I think...I think the baby is coming."

"Let me look." I eased him down and looked to see the head crowning. "There they are. The baby is right there." I was so excited and so scared I'd do something wrong. But I couldn't. It was just him and me, and my job was to bring them safely through.

Although why I'd thought I could do that?

I tried to keep in mind everything Zeus told me, taking my position, ready to catch the baby. "Time to push, omega," I said, filling my voice with every bit of confidence I could manage. "Our baby is ready to be born."

He nodded, drawing his knees up and bearing down with a long groan.

"Good job, now, when the next pain hits, push as hard as you can."

It was a few minutes, and since it had been less, that worried me too, but when it hit, he grasped the bedding on either side of him and gave the mightiest shove. The baby's head, dark hair wet and shiny, emerged from his body, followed by their shoulders. And then she was there. All the way out into the world.

"We have a daughter," I said, reaching for one of the towels Zeus had instructed me to have handy. "And she's beautiful. What are you going to call her?"

"Juniper."

"That's a beautiful name."

Wade held out grabby hands, and I laid her on his chest for a moment while I cleaned him up before turning my attention to doing the same for our little girl. By the time I had her washed and diapered and swaddled, her papa was asleep, but I tucked her into his arms, finished getting everything sorted, then took her with me into the other room to call Zeus and make sure I'd done things correctly.

"Let me see the baby," he said.

"Hello to you, too." I shook my head but held the baby up to the camera. "Here she

is. Miss Juniper, meet the pack healer who will make sure you grow up healthy.”

“She’s beautiful, alpha. Congratulations to you and your omega.”

He had me unwrap her so he could look her over but pronounced her a perfect little wolf. Then we went over the aftercare for her papa and he told me I was doing everything right then hung up.

I returned to the bedroom and crawled in beside my omega, breathing in his scent. His scent...which was now different. If I’d had the slightest doubt he was my fated, the scent that filled my senses showed me different. Fate had indeed sent this one omega to me. And me to him. This Christmas, I’d received the greatest gift of all. My mated mate and daughter...and our family.

Wade

A month ago, I'd been working hard, trying to get my baby and I to someplace safe before her arrival. That was the only thing on my mind. Christmas? It hadn't even crossed my radar. It was a holiday for those who could afford such frivolities, and that certainly hadn't been me.

Even two weeks ago, I hadn't expected to have anything resembling a nice Christmas—or really, any Christmas at all. Now, sitting in a post card-worthy resort, with my beautiful daughter in arms and my mate peacefully sleeping, it was difficult to remember how different things were even a few short weeks ago.

I'd been walking endlessly, just hoping to find shelter, a roof over my head. And here I was, having the best Christmas ever, and it had only just started.

Juniper woke up before the sun, hungry and needing a change. Now, she was nestled in my arms in front of the fireplace, sound asleep. I looked at her sweet little face. It was still so surreal that I was a father. My entire being was wrapped in love, warmth, and acceptance.

Originally, I'd considered going back to bed once she ate, but I didn't want to wake Kurt. He hadn't had a single day to sleep in since we arrived, and he deserved the rest. Especially after being such an amazing partner when I was going through childbirth. Having him by my side gave me the strength I needed. He said I always had it all along, but he was wrong. I needed him.

A light rap, rap, rap at the door stirred me from my thoughts. I stood carefully,

covering Juniper with a blanket to keep the breeze from catching her as I opened the door. Elias and Theo stood there, holding a huge box between the two of them.

“We brought food,” Elias said as they stepped inside, allowing me to close the door.

Elias began explaining the contents of the box, and each item sounded more delicious than the next. They had outdone themselves with homemade cinnamon rolls, an egg casserole, and, of course, cookies.

“Merry Christmas!” Theo and Elias brought the food over to the counter and set it down.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I said. “Thank you, really, but it’s so much.”

Elias waved me off as Theo put an arm around his mate’s shoulders. “We needed an excuse to come see the baby.”

“Did you want to hold her?”

Elias practically lunged forward, his arms outstretched.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” The moment she was in his arms, he cradled her close.

“Oh, she’s so beautiful,” he murmured. “Aren’t you, sweet girl?”

“She really is.” Theo smiled down at her.

“Thank you for breakfast.” I’d planned to cook omelets and tube biscuits. This was so much better.

“It’s part one of your gift,” Theo said with a grin.

“Part one?” It was by far more than enough.

“Yes, part one. We’re here to babysit.”

“I don’t need a babysitter—”

“But you do.” Kurt’s voice came from behind me. He placed a gentle hand on my back. “I called them last night. We won’t be gone long, but you need to let your wolf out, and I know you wouldn’t be happy going without me.”

Elias was already swaying side to side, soothing Juniper in his arms. She was going to be fine with him. “When did she last eat?”

“She just fell asleep, so not too long ago.”

“Perfect,” Theo said. “Why don’t you two go now? We’ll have breakfast set up when you get back—you’ll feel better for the shift.”

I wanted to argue, but they were right. My wolf needed the release. I trusted them completely; our sweet baby girl would be fine in their care. It wasn’t like we were going on vacation. We were going to be gone less than an hour, and there was no doubt in my mind that they would protect her like she was their own.

After thanking them, Kurt and I stepped out onto the porch, undressing quickly to shift. I knew Juniper was safe inside, but the instinct to stay close kept us from venturing far. We circled the cabin a few times, scenting the air for danger and, when we found none, we played.

I chased Kurt. He chased me. We rolled in the snow like pups. Our wolves reveled in the time together. I knew we’d have plenty more days like this, but there would be only one first shift together, and I wanted to cherish it. My mind wasn’t feeling the

same and kept wandering back to the baby. It was time to go back inside.

I thought we'd been outside at least half an hour. I was wrong. We'd been out barely ten minutes. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to satisfy my wolf and scratch the itch to play as our beasts.

When we stepped back into the cabin, the transformation inside was magical. The table was set, cocoa was fresh, Christmas music played softly in the air—and somehow, there were presents under the tree. They hadn't been there before.

“Does anyone call you Santa?” I teased Theo.

“Some call me a lot of things,” he said with a wink, whatever that meant.

Elias handed Juniper back to Kurt and then wrapped his arm around Theo. “Merry Christmas, you two. We hope to see you back again—and again and again. Maybe make this your Christmas tradition, or summer is nice too...fall is beautiful as well.”

“I'm sure we'll be back so often, you'll be sick of us,” Kurt said.

I wasn't sure how life in the pack would be, but I liked the idea of coming back. Maybe for Christmas in July, or another winter holiday.

They left, and Kurt and I sat down to the most delightful Christmas breakfast. The cinnamon rolls were shaped like little Christmas bells, and the egg casserole was delicious. As for the cocoa, well, there was never such a thing as too much cocoa.

“That was really sweet of them,” I said between bites.

“It was,” Kurt agreed. “I don't know how they make money at this place.”

“It’s not about the money with them,” I said, thinking aloud.

“Agreed. Marco shared what our rate was, and even if both of us were paying full price, it wouldn’t keep this place running. It’s got to be more of a hobby for them.” Kurt leaned back, Juniper stirring sweetly in his arms.

“Yeah, I can see that. They sure have fun with it. We do need to come back again.” In a weird way, they were family too, even if I didn’t understand them.

“Oh, definitely.”

I finished eating and had started to get up and clear the table, when the presents under the tree caught my eye again. “Did you put those there?”

“No. I mean, I wanted to, but I didn’t have time.”

“Huh, me neither...but look.” They were definitely new.

He turned to the tree. “Should we open them?”

“Maybe later,” Kurt said. “Right now, I just want to sit on the couch, snuggle with my mate and baby, watch the fire, and listen to Christmas music. How does that sound?”

“Any time with you sounds like heaven.”

After a quick cleanup, I joined him and our daughter on the couch, the fire blazing before us, “Sleigh Ride” over the music system.

“Merry Christmas, my love.” I leaned in to his side. “Merry Christmas, my sweet girl.”

“Merry Christmas, omega mine. Thank you for making this the best Christmas ever.”

It truly was.

Kurt

“Ready for the party?”

“Almost. Just need to get this little one warm and cozy. “Hold still, wiggle worm.” Wade struggled to zip our wriggling, giggling toddler’s snowsuit. “Oof.”

“I’ve got this.” Bending down, I scooped up the little one and stood her on a chair. “Now, this will be easier.” Or it would have been if our child wasn’t wound up on tales of Santa Claus and probably a handful of cookies shared by the other kids in the pack. Although my omega was very serious about a healthful diet and minimal sugar for cubs, at this time of year, homemade goodies were everywhere, and we’d decided to pick our battles. Like making sure we had a couple of hours at home before bedtime when we could be sure there were no sugar bombs being gobbled.

It was our only defense.

But somehow we’d made it to Christmas Eve when even the most health-conscious parent had to throw up their hands and let their young loose with the other cubs to run wild. Santa was on the way and, unlike other years, they were actually going to have a chance to meet the jolly saint in person. Our little Juniper bounced and held her arms out to me. “Uppy uppy.”

Taking advantage of her distraction, I ran the zipper up and snapped the flap at the top closed. Then I gathered her up in my arms and kissed her rosy cheeks. “Tell Daddy to get his jacket on so we can go to the community hall and meet Santa.”

She squirmed to turn around in my arms to face her daddy. “Daddy, Santa!”

“I’m almost ready. If I get any bigger, I’m going to need a new coat because this one barely contains my curves.”

Wade’s pregnancy wasn’t as far advanced as last year, so Junie wasn’t going to be sharing her birthday, but before the spring thaw, she’d have a little brother or sister for sure. My omega looked so much better than last time when he’d been so thin I hadn’t even realized at first he was pregnant—that despite the fact he was almost ready to deliver. Now he was rosy and round and complaining about his awkward belly in the most adorable way. I waited by the door, holding Junie in my arms, whispering to her about Santa and toys and other fun things at the pack Christmas party.

“Mate?” I glanced over to see my mate sitting on a chair at the dining table, defeat in his posture. “Help.”

My heart swelled with love for Wade and our family, including the little baby who currently was making it impossible for him to tie his boots. “On my way.” I set Junie on her feet and went to kneel in front of my omega. When I had his laces in secure double bows, I kissed his belly before standing and offering him a hand up. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

“Not in hours.” His lower lip thrust out in an adorable pout. “Do you still? I’m such a bother. Beached whale that I am. I wasn’t nearly this big with Juniper.”

My humor dissipated as I gave him a stern look. “The fact you were able to carry a healthy baby to delivery before was nothing short of a miracle. The healer has told you already you are just where you should be weight wise, healthy, wealthy with love, and usually wise. I’m so grateful that you are here with us now and not stripping your own body of nutrients for the baby’s well-being. Now”—I pulled him as tight against me as the bump permitted and brushed a kiss over his lips—“are you ready to

tell Santa what you want for Christmas?”

“I have everything I could ever dream of,” he sighed. “But I know of one little girl who might have some wishes.”

“Santa!” Junie chimed, wrapping her arms around our legs as far as they could reach. “Go now.”

Sometimes it occurred to me that our toddler’s basic sentences were very similar to my wolf’s.

My wolf who had finally agreed not to try to kill anyone who hurt our omega when the pack he came from went through another bloody leadership change but now seemed to be on a different track. Those who’d hurt him were all either dead or rogue, and nobody knew where they’d gone.

With my family finally ready, we paraded from our home to the community hall right next door. It was one of my first acts after returning from the resort to have it built because traditionally all the gatherings were held in the alpha house. I’d never minded before, but my family’s arrival gave me a desire for privacy. The hall was a community project, everyone coming together to raise the roof and put together a building we could all enjoy and truly be proud of. At first, I’d been afraid they might feel like we were pushing them back, but as Marco said, “This way, we can have all the celebrations and events we want without feeling like we are under the alpha’s feet.” I had no idea they had those concerns but was glad all of our interests coincided. It was as it should be. My father would be proud.

I always strove to use the training he gave me while making my own decisions for our pack. The first five years had been hard, but something changed since last Christmas. We walked into the hall and stopped short. When I was in there this afternoon, the decorating had just begun, but in a few hours, the pack had outdone themselves. There were bows and greenery and lights and tinsel attached to just about

every surface and a Christmas tree in the very center, where the ceiling peaked enough to accommodate it. A big chair draped with red velvet to appear thronelike stood beside the tree.

A buffet lined the far wall, tables filled with delicious food of all kinds from appetizers to desserts, and the scent of grilling meat seeped in from outside. My stomach rumbled.

Miss Junie went back into wriggle mode, and I set her down to find her way over to the other children gathered around the tree, all equally excited. It was a beautiful sight, and I pulled my phone from my pocket to snap a quick picture of the scene. Arm around my omega, I took in all the happiness. The pack had rocked every element of the holiday.

“Nice job, omega,” Marco said, appearing from somewhere in the crowded room. “It’s wonderful.”

“Omega?” I turned to face Wade. “How did you manage to arrange all this when you haven’t left the house in days?”

Marco looked from Wade to me and back again. “Hasn’t left the house? But he—”

The look my sweet omega sent his way could have frozen the urn of cocoa next to the buffet table. My beta clammed up.

“Wade? When did you do this?”

His cheeks reddened. “I didn’t exactly stay inside the whole time.”

“But the healer said...”

“The healer said to take it easy, not overdo, and recommended gentle exercise, so

while you were working, Juniper and I came over here and supervised. I didn't lift anything heavy or climb any ladders."

He must have been reading my mind. My wolf rumbled. "But why did you let me think you were always home?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want you to worry. You were being so sexy and protective, I hated to say anything. And, really, alpha, the hall's side door is about ten feet from ours."

"True." I chuckled. "I guess after all you went through before, I wanted you to have the happiest, easiest pregnancy possible."

"Oh, my love." He blinked fast, his eyes shiny with the tears that came easier when he was pregnant. "It's been bliss. But as the pack omega, I have jobs to do, and you set such an example, how could I let everyone down."

I hugged him to me hard. "As long as you promise not to do more than you need or, and this is important, want to."

He struggled to free one hand and raised it. "Upon my children's toes, I swear."

I was still laughing when the big front doors burst open to admit Santa Theo and his elf Elias. The children swarmed him, cheering and clapping and escorted him and the big bag of toys over his shoulder to the throne for the most important event of the night.

I escorted Wade to the comfortable chairs set up for us as the alpha-omega pair, and a beta brought us a plate of food. I kept an eye on Junie, as did Wade, but our pack loved their young and everyone watched all of them with care.

One by one, they approached Santa Theo and either stood in front of him or, if they

wanted to, climbed onto his lap and shared their Christmas wishes. Of course we had gifts at home both from Santa and from us, including a few extra for her birthday, but from the big red bag emerged a small present for each child. Junie, after her turn, raced toward us with the gaily wrapped package. “Daddies, it’s my prezzie!”

“It sure is, sweetheart.” Wade admired it as she presented all sides. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

The blank look on her face reminded me that she’d not only never had a Christmas to remember before but her birthday either. “Yes, Junie. The gift is inside the wrapping.” I took her shoulders and turned her gently toward the rest of the room. “See the other children?”

“Oh.” The wonder in her voice was everything. “I do it.”

As she shredded the paper and tossed it over her shoulder, I reached for my omega’s hand. “What do you think she got?”

He smiled but said nothing, so I just watched until our just-about one-year-old successfully managed to retrieve the contents of her present.

“Daddies, it’s a Cwistmas wolfie.” A little girl wolf wearing a red dress with a big poinsettia flower on it and Christmas Wolfie embroidered below. “I wuv her!” She climbed on my lap, the soft toy cuddled close. “And I wuv Santa and you and...” She waved her free hand expansively, encompassing the room. “I wuv everybody.”

“Me too, baby.” I kissed the top of her head and then lifted my omega’s hand to kiss as well. “But my family best.”