Once the girls were kidnapped, I knew what the right thing was. So, I had to be more of a part-time parent. Letting Sarah and Tom have them full time was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. At first, I felt like garbage. Then I saw how happy and safe they all were. I see them on weekends when I’m not working and we have a lot of fun. We catch up on their lives and talk about the wedding. Someday I’ll sell the house and the girls will visit me at the manor but that day is far of. For now, this arrangement works.

Is it awful of me to wish that they were a little less well-adjusted without me around? Yeah, it is but I’m just being real and honest with you. I wished they needed me more.

Pulling into the parking garage, I found my usual spot open. It wasn’t far from the walkway entrance and gave me a chance to see Alex before heading up to work. At every entrance now was someone checking temperatures and handing you masks. The first few times they checked my temp it read low – like really low. They thought it was their thermometer. Then Alex assured them that some people run low and are fine. No one questions a doctor. Now, they all joke about how “cold-blooded” I am. Then I quip that you have to be to survive as a nurse. They laugh.

Same exchange every night.

And tonight, was no different. Afterwards, I made my way to the office of Dr. Alex Kitchner – hematologist, human friend, my fake doctor for my fake condition, and researcher for the werewolf and vampire cure. He’s a busy man.

I tapped my knuckle against the door. Before he called “come in” I already knew he was there. I could hear his heartbeat and smell him. Alex smells like fresh laundry and some kind of spice. It perfectly fits him – clean with a hint of something exciting underneath.

Opening the door, I pulled off my mask, put it in my pocket and closed the door behind me when I was in the office. He knew I couldn’t carry or contract COVID so he stopped looking for his mask when he saw it was me. “Good evening, Kate.” He was writing something in his journal so I let him finish. While he did, I moved some books off his second chair and plopped down to wait. A few minutes later, he closed the book and turned his seat to face me. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing Kitchner, I’m here to check on you. We’ve all been so busy I haven’t seen you in a week.” He looked tired. His jaw was covered in the stubble that drove the female staff crazy. His brown hair was getting a little long and I saw that it was curly when left to its own devices. The blue eyes I was used to seeing seemed dull and a fair amount of green had come into them. Instead of the Caribbean waters they used to mimic, they now looked like the ocean water closer to our slice of the planet. I knew that some people had eyes that looked like different colors under different circumstances but seeing it was different.

I leaned towards him and took his hand. “Alex, are you sleeping? Eating? Taking days off? You look terrible.”

He smiled and looked down. “Thank you but I promise I’m fine. It’s all hands-on deck right now. I’ll take a break when this is all over.”

“Do you mean COVID or the cure or Monica?” I knew I hit a nerve because he pulled back, took his hand from mine and ran it through that mass of hair. “Sorry, Alex. I just want to look out for you. Has she called?”

“No,” he said and dropped his face to his hands. “She said she needed space and time. I get that. But when you were turned you didn’t shut everyone out. You still came to work.”

My heart ached for him, like literal chest pain. In the last six months, Alex had quickly become one the most important people in my life. He’d protected me when I was turned, got me on straight nights and fought for the hospital to accommodate me. He’d been abducted and drugged because he’d helped me. He’d sat by my best friend’s side when she was in the hospital and she didn’t want to see me. And he’d started to have feelings for her. It was perfect because Monica had loved him for half a decade so she was over the moon. I thought they’d be happy every after.

Then she’d been scratched by a werewolf and become post-human. After the night of the fashion show, she’d quit her job and retreated to her pack’s place an hour from here. Her maker, Diana, was teaching her how to be a lycanthrope. Monica had asked everyone to respect her need for time. We did and she’d cut ties. But, while I had Sorin and Rhys and the girls, Alex had no one. Just like that he’d been cut off from the one piece of happiness and hope in his life. So, he’d buried himself in work and finding the cure for Monica’s condition. I didn’t think she knew about it. Diana was donating blood to help him research. Knowing Alex, he didn’t want to give Monica the promise of a cure unless he knew he could do it. While I was rooting for him to succeed, I was worried about him. He’d put the cure for vampirism on hold – and that was fine. We had plenty of time. But he’d also stopped looking for his sister. He didn’t even talk about her anymore. It might be a good thing since he’d needed to move on for a while but it also might be some seriously unhealthy way of not dealing with things. Since I wasn’t trained in mental health, I left it alone. Plus, who was I to judge? I was far from mentally sound.

“Alex,” I said. “It was different. I had to push forward. I have kids to provide for. Plus, Sorin wanted me to help find the person who attacked me. I had to come to work and figure it out. But I was not okay. It took months for me to adjust and stop wishing I was never turned. And remember, I had Rhys and Sorin. Monica needs to be with her kind for a little while. She doesn’t have to work so she’s taking a much-needed break. But I know one thing. She cares about you more than you probably know.”

He looked up. “I knew she liked me the whole time. I knew she had a crush on me. But I hardly thought of her. Then, I saw her – really saw her. My feelings changed. Just as they did, she did. Human Monica liked human Alex. But, how do we know that the new Monica will feel the same? Maybe she’s moving on from her old life. She’s dropped whatever reminded her – you and me. And, let’s be honest Kate – Monica and I never started. We had one nice night with a limo and champagne. That’s hardly a relationship. Maybe she’s realized that I’m not really who she thought I was. She had a crush on a man she hardly knew.”

That sent my chest pain from a five out of ten to a ten out of ten. I knew exactly what that felt like. I stood, stepped towards him and lifted him up for a hug. Even if he didn’t want it, he couldn’t fight me off. I was too strong. But he didn’t resist. He melted into the hug and I felt his arms encircle my back. He used to feel so big to me. In that moment, he felt smaller – weaker. He rested his head on my shoulder and sighed, sounding exhausted. It made me miss the tough man that I used to believe didn’t care about anything or anyone. The person in my arms was utterly fragile and close to breaking.

“Alex” I said into his hair. “I don’t believe that but let’s say it’s true. Let’s prepare for Monica falling out of love with you, whether it’s because she never really knew you or because she’s changed too much. It’s her loss. Because I have gotten to know you, the real you and I think you are the smartest, bravest, most loyal person I know. You are selfless and brilliant. And, all your little broken parts make you who you are. So, she may not like you that way anymore but I promise you it is not because you are not worthy of love.”

I felt him shutter and knew he was holding back tears. I could smell the salt of them just inside his body. I rubbed my hand up and down his back. “Please,” I whispered. “Please don’t stop taking care of yourself. Get sleep, eat something hot, take a shower that’s longer than it needs to be and watch some TV. If not for you, do it for everyone that’s depending on you. You can’t save the world if you collapse.”

He pulled back, showing that he hadn’t let the tears spill out. He nodded his head and wordlessly picked up a backpack that looked like it had seen college with him. He slid off his white coat, laid it on his chair, dropped his journal into the bag and zipped it up. I took his elbow and led him out of his office. A white board graced the wall left to his door with a marker dangling from some string. He grabbed it, wrote OFF TOMORROW. The pen fell, bouncing up as the string stopped its descent.

“Good job, doc.” I led him to the garage and then to his car. When we reached it, he fumbled through his bag for keys.

“You didn’t have to walk me to the car.”

I smiled. “Consider me your bodyguard. Want to make sure you go home safely and don’t double back to work.”

He laughed and unlocked the door. “Scout’s honor. I’m going home and won’t be in tomorrow.”

Opening the door, he hesitated. Turning to face me, he leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Thank you, Kate.”

“You’re welcome, Alex. You’re stuck with me and I don’t let my people hurt alone. Call me later, okay?”

With that, he climbed into his car, shut the door and started the engine. As he pulled away, I felt a strange ache. He seemed so bruised and isolated and it killed me. I wanted to call Monica and rip her a new one but that wouldn’t help anything.

That man deserved so much better and I was going to lay a serious beat down on the next person that caused him pain.