



Wolf

A Torquere Press Single Shot by Sarah Black

Jake stepped out onto the front porch of his cabin. The air was fresh and cold, ground mist rising in the early-morning light. The coffee was perking in the old red enamel coffee pot on the little propane stove inside.

His daughter's cat, Max, came strolling up to the porch from out of the dark. Jake raised his middle finger in Max's direction, but Max ignored him, sat down, and began cleaning a paw. Jake went back inside the cabin for one of the kitchen chairs. He set the chair next to the porch rail so he could prop up his feet and looked out across his land.

He had a hundred and forty acres of rolling hills just west of the Continental Divide in central New Mexico. It was old rangeland, alligator juniper and pinon pine, with elk and fox and deer and the occasional wolf, and more jackrabbits than he had ever imagined could live together in a group, a skill he did not possess. The land was empty and paid for, and he could sit on his porch and drink coffee in the morning and not see another person. Most days that was enough.

Max walked over to the tiny CD player plugged in next to the door and patted it with a paw. Jake turned the music on low; Willie Nelson's *Teatro*. "If you weren't a Willie Nelson fan, you'd be out of here." The melancholy Spanish guitar sounded like heartbreak and the futility of chasing happiness in this life. The music seemed to belong to this little corner of New Mexico.

He hadn't been living out here alone for very long; six or seven months, but he'd had the cabin since he finished vet school and started practicing. He'd bought it so he could go camping on the weekends and spend some time with his kids.

Lisa had left Max here. She'd been worried about her dad being alone, though how she thought the cat was going to help he didn't know. He went back into the cabin and poured a cup of coffee, then rejoined Max and Willie on the front porch.

Lisa liked to fix people with problems, especially those in her own family. She was the only kid left still talking to him, so he'd let her dump Max on him. She'd been on her way down to Las Cruces for grad school, and had given him a lot of pop-psych lectures with detailed instructions for personal fulfillment. She must have spent weeks doing internet research and reading self-help books. And she'd told him she loved him no matter what about twenty times.

The phone rang in the cabin. He brought it out to the porch before he answered.

"Dr. Miller? This is Nathaniel Briggs. I'm Lisa's faculty advisor in wildlife biology."

"You're the wolf guy, right? Lisa's really excited to be studying with..." Jake felt his stomach contract with a sudden spasm of fear. It was six o'clock in the morning. "What's wrong? Where is she?"

"I don't know. We were supposed to track some wolves in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area this weekend. That's out near you, right?"

"Yeah."

"I canceled at the last minute, told the grad students we'd reschedule. I think Lisa went on her own."

That sounded like her, Jake thought. When she was a kid, she'd run wild in the Apache National Forest or the Gila Wilderness most every weekend. She wouldn't hesitate to go anywhere in the wild places on her own. He felt a chill deep in his chest. There was a big difference now. The Mexican gray wolf had been reintroduced in the southwest, the plan being to try and prevent the extinction of the species. They were running in packs through the public lands.

"She sent me an email. I'll read it. *Dr. Briggs, You remember that nursing mother and her litter we were tracking? I'm going out to check on them. My dad lives out that way,*

south of Pie Town. His name is Jake Miller, 555-7238. I've been meaning to introduce you. Anyway, if I don't come back in a week, send Dad out to get me! Dr. Miller..."

"Jake."

"Jake. The reason I cancelled the trip was over that litter, as Lisa knew. The alpha male was identified as a wolf-dog hybrid. The mother is one of the gray wolves from the re-introduction project." He hesitated. "Fish and Wildlife policy is to euthanize hybrid litters in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area."

There was silence on the line. Jake could feel the hair on his neck standing up. A nursing wolf protecting her pups, an alpha male wolf-dog protecting his family. Men with guns in the wilderness tracking them. "So Lisa launched a rescue mission. Thanks for calling. I'll go find her. I just need coordinates of the last few places the wolves were tracked."

"I'm coming, too. I'm calling you from my Jeep. Give me directions to your place and I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Jake wasn't scared for Lisa, not yet. Instead, he felt a small burning flame of anger in his chest. He dumped his sleeping bag on the porch, then dug out the water bottles with the filters. She was always so busy rescuing someone. It had been endangered animals lately and the homeless mentally ill before that. That was when she first went away to college. But he had screwed up so badly that she had turned all her attention to saving him. He should have been grateful to the wolves for distracting her, but somehow he suspected he didn't have the whole story yet. He was gonna find out this had something to do with him.

He dropped a waterproof ground cloth next to his sleeping bag on the front porch. That would do instead of a tent. They could move faster with less weight and it wasn't the rainy season. And if they needed to, they could carry someone hurt and incapable of walking out with a ground cloth, using it as a makeshift gurney.

Jake had most of the gear piled on the porch by the time Nathaniel pulled up in front of the cabin and climbed out of his Jeep. He was lanky and a little awkward, as if he wasn't quite used to how long his arms and legs had grown. He must have been six-four, six-five. He climbed the porch steps and held out his hand. "Jake? I'm Nathaniel Briggs."

Jake shook his hand, his heart sinking. Well, this explained why Lisa had started to write long, dreamy emails about wolves and finding love in the wilderness.

Nathaniel had clear gray eyes and a wide forehead, a calm and beautiful face, but tired now, and a little worried. His hair was a strange color given those gray eyes, Jake thought, studying him carefully. Golden brown, streaked with lighter amber, down near

his shoulders in waves. Unusual. *Lisa. What are you doing? Are you just trying to impress this guy?*

“Are you sleeping with my daughter?” His voice was abrupt and not friendly. The gray eyes were startled, and then a little pissed.

“No, I’m not. She’s my student.” He stopped and took a deep breath. “You got any coffee? I’ve got the topo maps. I can show you where I think she went in.”

Jake studied his face. “Yeah, okay. Come on in.”

Nathaniel spread the maps across the kitchen table, and Jake pulled a cup out of the cabinet and filled it with coffee.

“Thanks.” Nathaniel took the cup, and they studied each other for a long moment. “Lisa knows I’m gay. That’s why she said she wanted to introduce us.”

Jake sighed and looked down at the map, then rubbed a hand over his eyes. Lisa was out trolling for gay professors, trying to fix him up, was she? He ought to just leave her out there in the woods.

Nathaniel ran his finger along a ridgeline in the forest. “This is where the wilderness area starts. She would have left her car out here somewhere. We should be able to drive up there, check the parking areas. Now this,” he pointed, “this is where the wolves have been tracked.” He traced a line parallel to the wilderness area boundary. “They’re about five miles in.”

“Where’d the mother den?”

“Probably somewhere in this line of caves, but no way to know for sure. We were going to check with the Forest Service before we went in, see what new information they had about the location,” Nathaniel said. His hands were long and elegant, nervous as he refolded the map. “I’m not from here, so I don’t know the land very well. I just moved down here last summer. But I think the best plan is to find her car, then head from there toward the caves where we think the mother denned. We should be able to track her.”

Jake nodded. “That’s reasonable. Anything else?” Nathaniel looked up. “Anything else you haven’t told me?”

Nathaniel hesitated, then shook his head. “I just wanted to say again how sorry I am. I shouldn’t have told the students about the hybrid pups being euthanized. I assume that’s why she’s going in there. I can’t imagine why else she would do this.”

Jake shook his head. “It’s not your fault. If the kids want to work in this field, they need to be taught the truth about things. Besides, Lisa does what she wants. She just

doesn't..." His voice felt thick in his throat. "She just doesn't want for herself. She's willful, but it's always for someone else."

"You look like her." Nathaniel was smiling a little, sipping his coffee. "Lisa glares around with those big hazel eyes, and she shoves her blonde hair up under a ball cap and the guys still trail around after her like bears sniffing honey. I thought she had a thing going with this forest ranger working out in the Blue Range, but now I wonder if she was just pumping him for info about the wolves."

"Would he have gone with her?"

Nathaniel set his coffee cup down on the table. "I don't think so. He's one of the IFT rangers, the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team guys. He'll probably be one of the rangers they send out to trap the pups."

"I don't like to ask you to go with me, but it'll be safer if there are two of us. Have you got gear in case we're out overnight?"

"Some. I filled up the water jugs in the Jeep, and I've got a sleeping bag. If we hike in after we find her car, it shouldn't be far."

Jake shook his head. "Easy to get lost out in the wilderness, though. Even experienced hikers and campers can get turned around out there. Let's bring the gear we need in case we have to be out there longer than we think." Jake looked away. "She's already been out at least one night. If she raced in without proper gear, she's probably cold. And hungry."

Nathaniel was still, watching his face. "I'm hungry, too."

Jake looked up, startled, and smiled at him. "You must have left Las Cruces early. Okay, we can eat here before we go. I've got some eggs we can boil to pack in. Elk in the freezer, to lure the wolves. Fried eggs sound okay for breakfast?"

Nathaniel sighed. "Thanks, that would be great. I'll start loading the gear." He went out to the porch, lifted the sleeping bag and tarp, and walked down to the back of the Jeep.

Jake went into the kitchen, bringing the chair from the front porch with him and setting it back under the table. The iron skillet was already on top of the stove, and he turned on the fire underneath it. He opened the door to the fridge, stared inside. Slim pickings. A full carton of eggs, a loaf of that whole grain bread the lady in town made, a half package of bacon, and a bell pepper. He pulled a couple of potatoes and an onion from the storage bin under the counter. They had time to eat now. That way they wouldn't have to carry as much food in.

He chopped up the onion and the bell pepper, poured olive oil into the iron skillet and set them frying. When the potatoes were sliced up, they went into the iron skillet on top of

the onions and peppers. Jake set another pan on the stove, laid the bacon in, and turned the fire on.

Nathaniel stuck his head in the door, holding his coffee cup. Jake took his cup and filled it, handed it back. His boys used to do that; stick their heads in the kitchen door looking hungry. He'd always cooked big breakfasts when they were at the cabin. It was a good memory, the cabin full of hungry kids. Jeff was in Iraq now, Alex was in college in Virginia. Neither one wanted to hear from him. He was afraid if something went wrong with one of his boys, no one would tell him. No one would think he had the right to help, or even to know. He missed them the way he'd miss the stars in the sky, if they were gone.

He pulled the thermos out from under the sink, and rinsed it out with hot water and baking soda. They could use another pot of coffee. Nathaniel seemed like one of those guys whose coffee cup was permanently glued to his fingers.

"I've got everything stowed in the Jeep that was out on the front porch," Nathaniel said, coming into the kitchen and sitting down at the table. "It smells really good in here. I can't remember the last time..."

"You want your eggs fried or scrambled?"

"Either way. It's a real treat for me, having somebody cook breakfast. Since I came down here I've gotten to know the microwave real well."

"Why'd you come to New Mexico? Was it for the wolves?"

"Yeah. And I wanted to get out of Montana. My partner, he died last year, and I just didn't think I could take another winter. I decided to start again someplace warmer."

Jake put a paper plate of bacon on the table, then dished up a big pile of fried potatoes and set it before the other man. "Go ahead, start eating while I get the eggs cooked. Were you guys together a long time?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "No, a couple of years. We might have been. We never got the chance to put it to the test. He had HIV, but that's not what killed him. He was a cop, and he put a bullet through his mouth."

The kitchen was silent except for the hiss and pop of eggs frying in bacon grease on the stove. Jake scooped them up and slid them onto Nathaniel's plate. Nathaniel was staring down at the food, but then he picked up his fork and dug into the potatoes and eggs like he hadn't eaten for months. "I came up positive, and he was sure he had given it to me. God, this is good. I've never had potatoes like this before."

Jake cracked a couple more eggs into the frying pan. He piled some potatoes on a plate, and when the eggs were done scooped them on top. He sat down next to Nathaniel and

shook some pepper over the eggs and potatoes. Nathaniel reached for another piece of bacon. Jake had noticed the waistband of his jeans was loose. Maybe he was losing weight because he wasn't eating.

"That's really why Lisa wanted to introduce us. I'm her poster boy for healthy, well-adjusted, HIV positive men." Nathaniel chuckled softly, under his breath. "Like there is such a thing." He looked into Jake's face. "That's what she thinks, and I didn't want to make things harder for her right now. She was looking for someone pretty desperately, cruising the support groups and the Gay Student Alliance. 'Cause she was worried about her dad. Worried you won't choose to live."

Jake rubbed down between his eyes. Was he getting a migraine? He needed to take some aspirin before they left. "She telling everyone?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "I don't think so. Besides, people are so wrapped up in their own pain, you know?" He shrugged. "They don't have room for anyone else's burdens."

Jake got to work on his breakfast again. "What did she...?"

Nathaniel got up and went to the stove, poured another cup of coffee. "I think she only told me, Jake. And she told me that you picked up HIV somewhere, and nobody knew you were sleeping with men until you gave HIV to her mother, who is dying because of it. And the rest of the family, and all of your friends, have ostracized you. You've put yourself into voluntary exile, in punishment for your sins."

Jake nodded, his food abandoned. "That's about the size of it."

"Can I have some more potatoes?"

Jake nodded again. "Finish what's in the pan."

"Thanks." Nathaniel sat back down. "So, did you put yourself into exile? You waiting out here to die?"

Jake looked up into Nathaniel's face. Compassion filled those beautiful gray eyes. *Lisa, goddamnit. Why can't you leave me alone?* "I haven't decided yet."

Nathaniel looked up from drying the frying pan when Jake walked through the kitchen with the rifle. "You're really pissed off, huh?"

Jake set the rifle down on the table. "Yes, I am." He looked up at Nathaniel. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna shoot her. I've got some tranquilizer darts. She told you all about my sex life, my family life, and my medical history. Didn't she tell you what I did for a living?"

Nathaniel dried his hands on the cup towel, then draped it over the edge of the sink. “She told me you were a large animal vet.” He grinned, his hands on his hips. “She didn’t tell me you were a prickly, depressed asshole, but I guessed that much. She also didn’t tell me you were so good-looking.”

Jake shook his head. “Fix you a decent meal, you’ll follow me anywhere. I’m not looking for someone, Nathaniel. I’m, you know...damaged.”

Nathaniel nodded. “You think of it like that?”

Jake looked up sharply, but he didn’t speak.

“I’m not looking either,” Nathaniel said. “Friends is good, I guess, if you don’t make me work too hard for it.” He shrugged. “You want to put the elk meat in the cooler?”

They loaded up the meat from the freezer, and Jake lugged the cooler out to the Jeep. He knew he was being an asshole. He should be getting used to this out of control feeling, this roller coaster without a safety belt feeling. This was his life now, and all he could do was hang on and wait for the next disaster to crash into him. What kind of a life was this? He just wanted to have control over one thing. Any single thing. Like a daughter.

He looked over at Nathaniel. Maybe he was right. A friend would be nice, if he didn’t have to work too hard for it. A friend, someone who didn’t look at him like he was dog shit on their shoes. That would be good.

“Listen, I called Wolf Recovery, gave them a heads-up that Lisa might be coming.”

“You mean the sanctuary?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “You know them? I do some vet work for them.”

“They’re taking in habituated wolves, right? And wolf-dog hybrids?”

“Yeah. If any wolves can be said to be habituated. Mostly, they get the cute pets that grow too big and start acting like wolves. Sometimes, they get wolves that have been captured near human settlements, the ones that get hurt or get too used to killing calves. We still have ranchers using the old wolf traps, so we get injured legs and amputated paws pretty often. I’m thinking Lisa will try to take the pups there. They’ll have to stay for life, but the woman who runs the place, she takes anything that comes through the door. Lisa volunteered there in the summers when she was in high school. If she thought the pups were going to be euthanized, she would take them there.” He studied Nathaniel’s face. “You look tired. Why don’t you let me drive?”

Nathaniel nodded and tossed him the keys.

They drove into the Gila National Forest, started climbing into the mountains, and Nathaniel tucked a fleece sweatshirt up into a ball and fell asleep with his head wedged against the door. The junipers and pinon pine gave way to the taller ponderosas and firs of the higher elevations. The forest was thicker here, and dark, and the outcroppings and tumbled rocks were purple-gray granite, not the rusty red sandstone and pale gypsum of the High Lonesome, where Jake had spent most of his life. He'd never thought this land looked particularly dangerous. It was just the tail of the Rockies, the beautiful mountains that wove down through the West like a sleeping dragon's spine. But now the woods were full of wolves, and his little girl was lost.

Nathaniel slept for a couple of hours, his too-long legs bent awkwardly in the passenger seat. Jake drove slowly up and around the mountains, checking the switchbacks and pull-outs for Lisa's tiny white Escort. He made a small check mark in pencil on the map when he had driven the entire road and she wasn't there, and after a couple of hours he pulled into a scenic overview parking area.

He reached over and touched Nathaniel on the shoulder. When Nathaniel opened his eyes, he smiled at Jake and sat up, looking around. "Hey. You find her car?"

Jake shook his head. "I'm gonna stretch and look at the map again."

Nathaniel opened his door and stepped out, looked around at the forest, then walked down into the woods that edged the parking area. The air was cool this high up, and smelled like pine and damp earth. It was quiet, the birds and squirrels drowsing in the noonday sun.

Jake spread the map on the hood. They had driven the roads that abutted the wilderness area from the northern edge down south. About half the roads she could have taken had a neat pencil mark next to them. Nathaniel joined him and looked at the map.

"These areas we've covered," Jake said, moving his finger along the map. "She's still driving that little white Escort, isn't she?"

"As far as I know. I've never seen her with another car. What do you think, just continue south, keep looking?"

Jake nodded. "I'm not sure what else to do."

Nathaniel walked to the scenic overlook, stood staring out, his hands on his hips. He turned around to Jake. "Hey, did you see this?"

Jake walked over and joined him. A high mountain valley was spread out before them, the sapphire glimmer of a lake in the far distance. He hadn't been looking at the view. He'd been looking at Nathaniel's jeans, at the loose waistband that slid down his hips.

Nathaniel was smiling, looking out at the mountains pass. "I'm always amazed to come across something so beautiful. I don't know why, I've seen lots of beautiful things in my life." He turned to Jake, and concern made his face gentle. "What's wrong?"

Jake tugged on Nathaniel's waistband. He could fold an extra two inches of faded denim between his fingers and the warm skin of Nathaniel's hip. "You're losing weight. Are you sick? I mean, getting sick? You know, from the..."

Nathaniel shook his head, put a hand on Jake's shoulder. "From the HIV? I don't think so. My CD-4 count looks good. I'm pretty faithful about taking my medicine. I'm just...I don't know. A little down, I guess. I'm not eating." He turned to Jake. "How about you? Seems like it's hard for you to talk about it. Are you taking the medicine?"

Jake nodded, a little reluctantly. "I am, because I'm sure there's a reason I should be. I just can't imagine what that reason might be. I keep thinking I'll figure it out, why I need to keep living. They'll lose the life insurance if I shoot myself. I don't know. And Lisa's mother is not dying, unless she's dying of spite. She's taking the medicine, too, and enjoying being a feminist martyr. I've ruined her life several other times before this. But giving her HIV, that was a big one, no question."

Nathaniel was staring at him, grinning. "Maybe you have to keep living so you can punish yourself for all the people whose lives you've ruined. Because you haven't suffered enough yet."

Jake laughed at him. "Yeah. That sounds about right. Just what I was thinking." He sighed. "And if I do just bag it, Lisa will spend the rest of her life wondering what else she could have done to save me. There's more coffee in the thermos if you want some."

"Thanks."

When they got back on the road Nathaniel drove, and Jake looked out the window of the Jeep at the forest, looking for traces of dirt trails that might not be on the map, trails that looked big enough that Lisa might have taken a chance. He hoped she hadn't tried it. Some of these forest roads were bladed, but they washed out most years after the summer rains, and were buried under snow and mud when the snows started falling in late September.

Jake turned to Nathaniel. "Tell me about the wolves. How is it going, this whole re-introduction thing? I hear a lot of high talking down at the Chuckwagon Cafe about how ranchers got the right to shoot wolves on sight if they're threatening the calves, talk like that. But I haven't really been keeping up."

Nathaniel tapped a long finger on the steering wheel, gathering his thoughts. "It's going well for the wolves. So well that a lot of people are feeling alarmed. This is good country for them, their kind of country, and they're roaming, forming packs and having lots of babies, hunting elk and deer. The biggest source of conflict seems to be the ranchers, out

your way. They've had rights to the Forest Service lands to run their cattle for a couple of generations now. I think everyone expected the cattle ranchers would lose a few calves, but the conflicts between the Forest Service people and the ranchers have been really bitter. Lots of accusations thrown about, lots of wolves shot or trapped. Lots of talk about government conspiracies and the like."

"I was surprised that a hybrid was able to join the pack and breed," Jake commented. "I don't know much about it, but I see a lot of wolf-hybrids in the shelters. They seem really lost, don't seem to fit in anywhere."

"We never studied them before. I don't think anyone was expecting the number of hybrids to marry in. There are wolf-dog hybrids in all of the packs that have been tracked. The wolves let them in, sometimes let them mate. And since they mate for life, they're probably in the pack for life, too."

"Are the agencies involved in the project, the ones responsible for collecting the data, are they trying to separate the hybrids out of the packs? If they've integrated well, that's not gonna go over with the other wolves."

"I agree," Nathaniel said. "If we could just observe, see what they're doing, how they're bringing the different animals in and integrating them, how the hybrids are raising their young, for example, we might learn something important about the evolution of the species. Because this is exactly the way species evolve." He glanced over at Jake. "That's my field, species evolution."

"But the project is funded through the endangered species act, right? That's where they're getting their money?"

"Yeah. So there are rules to follow, a goal of re-establishing the species in their native habitat. I wish we could just let them be. Watch them, see how they adapt."

"Nathaniel, what do you think Lisa's going to do? I mean, what's her plan? She's not just out collecting data, is she? I mean, there's not a project for school or anything..."

"I've been thinking about that. Nothing for school. I don't...I sure don't want to think that she's going to try and trap them. Because you know she would try to keep the mother and babies and father all together. Trapping a nursing mother and a litter is a whole different proposition to trapping a fully grown alpha male wolf." He tapped the steering wheel again with a long finger. "Listen, Jake. Did you know she's been researching the genetic basis of homosexuality? She wanted to do one of her research projects on homosexual behavior among the wolves, but I wouldn't let her."

Jake nearly choked on his laughter, tears springing to his eyes. He leaned forward and rested his forehead on the dashboard and took deep breaths.

Nathaniel looked over at him, then eased the Jeep off the road. He slid a hand to the back of Jake's neck and held it there.

Warm and soft and comforting, a friend's hand. Jake held both fists against his eyes. *So this was about him, after all. He was born gay. The wolf was born with too much dog in his blood. She wanted to save that family, because she couldn't save her own. Lisa doesn't want to believe that he'd hurt so many people because he was doing what he wanted to do. She didn't want to believe that all the misery was just because he liked to fuck strangers he met in the park. She wanted it to be something he didn't have any control over. Like genetics. Like the wolf. But it wasn't like that.*

"It's almost five, Jake. Why don't we try the Forest Service office before it gets dark? See if they've heard anything. We need to stop soon, set up camp and get something to eat."

Jake sat up and nodded, wiped the heels of his hands hard across his face. "Yeah, you're right. Sorry, I'm just..."

Nathaniel shoved him gently. "You are such an ass. You think you're the sun, and Lisa is this little daughter planet that rotates only around you. Maybe this isn't about you. Maybe she just needs to work some things out in her own way."

That surprised a laugh out of him. "I've been spending a lot of time lately figuring out how everything's my fault, when things go wrong. I blame it on the HIV. It's turned me into a self-absorbed prick."

Nathaniel cut him a look, a grin starting up. "Really. So you weren't always like this. What did you think about, before HIV turned you into a self-absorbed prick?"

Jake took a deep breath, feeling calm settle in his chest. "Work, I guess. My kids, what they needed. Maybe I would think about finding some sweet-faced guy with gray eyes, and taking him out for a spin in my pickup truck." Jake reached over and gave Nathaniel a squeeze on the thigh.

Nathaniel laughed, and Jake felt a sweet little tingle, and remembered anticipation, that excitement in the stomach he used to feel when he thought he might go looking and find somebody to touch. It was the anticipation he missed the most; having something to look forward to. When they told him about the HIV, he knew he had to give up those men he loved in the dark, because he couldn't risk making anyone sick. And it wasn't all bad, being alone. He could still remember the letdown afterward, the loneliness that invaded his chest when his most intimate friends were still strangers, and he couldn't really talk to them. They left him alone in the dark.

They pulled up in front of the Forest Service substation about an hour later, just as the ranger was locking the front door. There was a white Ford F-150 in the parking lot, but no little white Escort.

The ranger was a tall, well-built guy with melting brown eyes, a Superman-lite sort of guy. He narrowed his eyes at them as they got out of the Jeep and started walking toward him.

Nathaniel nudged Jake in the side with an elbow. “Well, well, well. Look who’s on duty at this station, right near where Lisa went into the forest. Now, this is when you need to stick out your chin and let your hands dangle down around your non-existent gun belt and give him that, *Are you sleeping with my daughter?* thing you gave me.”

“What, is this the guy? The one you thought she might be...”

“Yeah.”

The ranger stepped forward to meet them. “Dr. Briggs? What are you doing here?” He turned to Jake, studying his face. “Are you... You’re not Lisa’s dad? Uh, Dr. Miller, right?”

He held out his hand and Jake shook it, crushing it a little, scowling at him. He couldn’t help it. He wanted to snap the kid’s neck, just for breathing her air. “Where’s my daughter?”

The ranger threw both hands up in the air, like this was the stick-up scene from an old western movie. “I don’t have her! What, is she missing?” He hesitated, taking a step back. “She isn’t back yet?”

Nathaniel stepped forward, gave Jake a look over his shoulder. *Calm down.*

“Greg, we know she went to the mother’s den to look at the pups. We’re just worried she might have had car trouble or something. Lisa’s dad and I, we’re gonna go check on her, make sure she’s okay. I want you to show me on the topo where the mother wolf’s den is.”

“Dr. Briggs, I can’t. You know I’m not supposed to...”

“I know you showed Lisa where the den was. If you don’t tell us, and she gets hurt out there, I think Dr. Miller here is going to rip your throat out. There’s no way I could stop him.”

The ranger glanced at Jake, who tried to look as ferocious as he could, a rabid father wolf.

“Okay, I’ll show you, but she didn’t go out there. She’s just doing research. She’s gonna put the coordinates into this computer program she’s developing, to model...”

Jake gave a bark of laughter and turned away. Not potential son-in-law material. He had a sudden picture in his mind of Lisa smiling in a wedding veil, Lisa pregnant, Lisa holding a newborn baby in her arms. Would he be able to hold the baby?

Nathaniel was climbing into the Jeep. "We won't get to her tonight." He turned the key and put the Jeep into gear. "It's nearly ten miles into the wilderness. And Jake, there's more. The male is hurt. That's why she went in. Dim-wit told her the father got his leg caught in a trap, and is dying."

Dusk was falling by the time they climbed out of the Jeep and started loading up the gear they would need to hike in after Lisa. If Greg had showed them the right place, and if it was the same place he'd showed Lisa, and if the wolves really had denned there, and were still there with the pups... Too many ifs. But it was too dark to start in after her tonight. They would be lucky to get a safe camp set up before darkness fell completely.

Nathaniel shouldered the pack and picked up a couple of gallons of water. "You think we should leave the elk meat in the car? It won't attract wolves out to the road, will it?"

Jake thought about this. "Well, it might. The meat is wrapped up in plastic and butcher paper. I don't know. The car may block the smells. Let's just hike in a little way, follow that creek. We can come back to the Jeep in the morning and stow our gear, move faster."

They hiked into the quiet of the darkening forest. The only sounds were the buzzing of a few interested insects and the soft bubble of the creek next to the deer path they were following. When they came to a small clearing they stopped and looked around, then dropped their packs. The ground was dry, covered in pine needles, and there was a downed tree they could use for firewood. The creek was full, running along the edge of the clearing.

"I'll make the fire," Nathaniel said. He pulled out a folding shovel and started digging a hole.

Jake looked around. "We got ten, fifteen minutes of light left." He unpacked the ground cloth and spread it out, kicking a couple of small rocks out of the way. Then he pulled the small, battery-operated lantern out of the pack, dug out a box of matches and tossed them to Nathaniel. The fallen tree on the edge of the campsite was covered in sap-rich pine twigs. They would be good kindling for the fire. "Did we bring a hand saw?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "I didn't."

Jake shrugged. "It's okay. We'll make do." He stood on a couple of large branches until they broke, then hauled them over next to the fire pit.

"We got any of that coffee left, Jake?"

Jake nodded. "Couple of swallows in the thermos. I packed the coffeepot and some coffee for the morning."

"Will you pour me what's left? I'm late taking my medicine. I try to keep to the schedule, otherwise I forget, and I really...I think the medicine is helping. I don't want to mess it up."

Jake poured out the coffee, and watched Nathaniel dig a Ziploc baggie out of his pack and separate out four capsules. Jake pulled his shaving kit out of his pack, took the bottles out and counted out the anti-retrovirals that were supposed to keep him alive, if not well. He popped the handful into his mouth, then looked around for the jug of water. Nathaniel handed it to him, his eyes concerned, then he went back to stacking the kindling in the fire pit.

It felt strange, too intimate and strange, to swallow AIDS medicine in front of another person. That's how he always thought of it. Jake had never minded going into Albuquerque for his appointments at the HIV clinic there. It was so anonymous, with that scrubbed linoleum floor and the bleach smell that he quickly came to associate with lost causes and dying men. The needle exchange program for the heroin addicts was right next door. It smelled like bleach, too.

He never saw anyone he knew there. No one ever called him Dr. Miller, just Jake, as if the casual use of his first name would make the whole awkward business that much easier. Jake kept his back turned while Nathaniel set the kindling on fire. When Nathaniel walked over and put his hand on Jake's shoulder, the tenderness and understanding in the gesture was nearly too much to bear.

"I know this is awkward for you, Jake. I'm sorry. I know so much about you, so much personal stuff, and you didn't have any say in it. I feel like you're a really private person, and the dog just got into the laundry basket and dragged your dirty underwear out into the middle of the living room."

Jake smiled. "I think I'm just used to being alone. I've never taken my medicine in front of anyone else, not even Lisa. My ex-wife, now, she probably takes her AZT with a video camera rolling."

"What do you mean? Come help me with this firewood." They walked back over to the downed tree and started breaking the smaller branches over their knees and feeding them into the fire.

"She tried to convince the DA to arrest me for attempted murder. She's video-documenting the course of her illness and death, in case they ever change their mind and decide to toss my sorry ass in jail."

Nathaniel looked up, surprised. “Are you kidding? Why does she think you gave her HIV, anyway? Maybe she gave it to you.”

“I don’t think so. I never saw her when I was out trolling the park for a quick blow job. Besides, we were just acting out our assigned roles, you know what I mean? Our lives have been set in stone since we were teenagers.”

Nathaniel shook his head. “Tell me.”

“I was seventeen. Her mother called me to get over there quick, the rabbit had died. I walked into her house. Gail had flung herself face down on the sofa, sobbing like Scarlett O’Hara. Her father’s glowering from the corner, balling his hands into fists. Her best friend’s perched next to her, stroking her hair and making all these soothing little noises. And that’s what it’s been like between us since. She’s the victim, I’m the asshole who ruined her life. So it was really no big surprise for either of us when I gave her HIV.”

“Trolling the park for a blow job? That sounds real lonely, Jake.”

Jake turned away, and his voice sounded like he was strangling. “That’s what I really regret. I can’t get it out of my mind. I think about those guys. Some of them were so young, and I didn’t even know their names, most of the time. Tad, Todd, I never cared. I hope I didn’t make any of those guys sick.” He cleared his throat and looked up. “If we don’t get this fire going and change the subject pronto, you’re gonna be eating peanut butter crackers for supper.”

Nathaniel was staring into the campfire with the eyes of a love-sick puppy. Jake had skewered a couple of fat sausages with a long stick and was cooking them over the campfire. The pop and hiss of the fat when it dropped into the fire, and the smoky, spicy smell was reminding them both that breakfast had been a long and frustrating day ago.

Jake closed his eyes, suddenly exhausted. Where was she? Did she have any food? He got a picture of her sitting next to a little campfire, against the warm sandstone wall in the back of a secure little hollow. She could sleep there, and be safe. Maybe she would have a granola bar. Lisa would know where to find water, so she wouldn’t be thirsty.

Jake had taken all the kids camping from the time they left diapers, taught them the pleasures of finding their favorite stars in the night sky from deep inside of a down sleeping bag. He’d shown them how to find animal tracks in the woods, and how good breakfast tasted when it was cooked over a sweet-smelling campfire, and how much fun it was to splash in a creek.

“My kids,” he told Nathaniel, “they loved being out in the forests, camping in the woods. They especially loved not having to take baths. You never saw such filthy kids. We’d get

home Sunday night, and I'd want to just turn the hose on them before I let them in the house. Lisa was even worse than her brothers."

"Is she the youngest?"

"Yeah. The boys are twins." He turned and looked at Nathaniel. "You're looking really desperate here. You're not gonna jump me for these sausages, are you?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "I'm trying to control myself. For some reason, I feel hungry since I met you. I think it's because you keep cooking food that smells good. Microwave breakfast burritos, they don't smell like much. Don't taste like much, either."

"Is that what you've been eating?"

"Yeah, mostly. I can get decent enchiladas on campus, but I haven't been cooking. No energy for it. No appetite."

"Here." Jake slid a sausage off the stick and wrapped a bun around it.

"It looks great. This thing must weigh half a pound."

Jake watched Nathaniel's face when he took the first bite. "What do you think? That's bratwurst with green chilies. I got them when we stopped for gas. There's a lady in town, she makes them fresh and sells them in the mini-mart. The buns are homemade, too."

Nathaniel couldn't speak because his mouth was stuffed full, but he gave Jake two thumbs up. Jake put his own sausage in a bun, set it down on his knee, and slid another sausage onto the stick to cook. "Tell me something about you," he said, looking into the fire.

"Like what?" Nathaniel asked, after he had swallowed.

Jake shrugged. "Anything. Something from when you were a kid."

Nathaniel leaned back against his sleeping bag. "I was in 4-H when I was a kid. I raised a calf named Janet from just a week old. I loved that cow. Sometimes I would sneak out of the house at night, go out to the barn, and rub her ears until I fell asleep curled up next to her. She thought I was her calf when she was grown. She lived until she was old, out in the pasture of my parent's farm."

"Your parents still alive?"

"My mom is, still on the same place in Iowa. She farms with my oldest brother now."

"Does she know about the...you know, the thing?"

“The HIV?” He shook his head. “It didn’t go over very well, when I told her I was gay. I didn’t think it was a good idea to proceed with full disclosure. She’s praying for me.” He looked over at Jake, grinning. “She’s praying for you, too, and you don’t even know it.”

He sat up and took the second sausage when Jake slid it off the stick. “You aren’t having another one?” Jake shook his head. “You want to split this one with me?”

“No, you go ahead. I like cooking for somebody who likes to eat. Tell me something else.”

“My favorite sandwich is bacon with onions and bread-and-butter pickles. I’ve had two serious relationships with men, and they’ve both ended in death. Their deaths, not mine. I don’t know where I got the HIV, and I don’t even care. You ought to just sleep with me, Jake. It might end up killing you, and then you wouldn’t have to die of loneliness.”

Jake felt something in his chest, a great clenching fist of yearning and desire, and the remembered feeling of another person’s skin against his. Nathaniel was sprawled out, his head pillowed by his sleeping bag. Jake leaned forward, put his hand against Nathaniel’s face, stroked along his jaw. He was strong, smart. Interesting. He was the kind of man you could depend on to help you when your baby girl got lost in the woods, chasing wolves.

“I don’t know, Nathaniel. I’ve known you for twelve hours. That may be a little too long for me. A ten-minute passionate friendship in the dark is more my speed.” He traced his thumb across Nathaniel’s bottom lip, then slipped it into his mouth, between his teeth. Nathaniel took a gentle bite. “Oh, what the hell. Why don’t you just bend over, and we can get to know each other.”

Nathaniel smiled at him, the glow from the campfire warming his face. “I like you. I was telling you the truth when I said I wasn’t looking, but this little idea had lodged in the back of my mind. Lisa is always talking about her dad. And I couldn’t help but think, now wouldn’t that be cool? Maybe...just maybe. Someone like me.” His face got a little bleak. “Someone who wouldn’t think my blood was poison. I’m not out here looking for you, Jake. But I wouldn’t mind finding you.” He sat up a little, looking more cheerful. “You got that High Plains Drifter thing going on, very hot, like you just walked out of a sad cowboy song. The first time I was ever in love with a man? Marty Robbins.”

“You mean *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*? *El Paso*, the Arizona Ranger with a big iron on his hip, that Marty Robbins? Kid, you’re a romantic.”

Nathaniel grinned. “Yeah. I bet you know all the words to all his songs, don’t you?”

“Maybe I do. But if you listen to country music, then you’ve been warned about cowboys.”

“What I think is you can walk your lonely self right into my bed. Leave your horse hitched outside. I knew a guy once, he liked to do the boys in the dark thing, young strangers. But I think it was the leaving he liked the most. Is that you, too? You like to leave?”

Jake shook his head, feeling utterly out of his depth. “Nathaniel, I don’t know anything about this. I know I don’t want to hurt anyone else. I know I miss...everything. I miss everything about it, except after. I always wanted to talk a bit, but we never had anything to say.”

“So you’re ripe to fall in love. I wasn’t expecting anyone else, myself. I wasn’t expecting a friend. I thought I’d had my share. You know, I’d had my share of men to love, and now I’d be alone. This is a real shot in the dark, Jake. I almost...I almost can’t believe it.”

Jake knelt next to him, and they studied each other in the dancing red-gold light from the fire. There was warmth and light in an arc surrounding them, and beyond that the cold dark woods. “I’m ripe to fall in love? Sad, lonely, middle-aged, diseased. Well, if I do fall in love, it’ll be with a good-looking wolf guy like you. And it’s not just because you’re like me, Nathaniel. I mean the thing. You know, the HIV.”

“But that makes it okay. That makes it okay for me, too. Thanks for the supper, Jake. Thanks for feeding me today.” His smile looked a little shy suddenly. “Got any marshmallows?”

Jake shook his head. He couldn’t speak. The warmth in Nathaniel’s gray eyes, the acceptance and the invitation, had driven the words from his throat. He could feel how fast he was breathing, feel the movement of his chest with each breath.

Nathaniel reached for him, tugged him closer until their mouths were within kissing distance. “I like you,” Nathaniel said again, his breath warm on Jake’s mouth. “If you don’t have any marshmallows, then let me taste something else sweet.”

Nathaniel had a calm face, a quiet voice. He seemed like one of those guys who would always let someone else go ahead of him in line. But he had a hungry mouth, hungry hands. He pulled Jake down, sucked kisses from his mouth like a man dying of thirst in the desert tasting cool, sweet water.

“Oh, wow.” Nathaniel tugged Jake’s shirt out of his jeans, ran shaking hands up over his back. “I guess I missed this more than I realized. Or maybe it’s you.”

Jake leaned up on his arms, looked down at Nathaniel spread out underneath him. His arms were open, his legs were open, eyes nearly black. Wow was right. “You want to chance the mosquitoes?” When was the last time he had wanted something this much? Desire flooded his stomach.

Nathaniel sighed, tugged him down for another kiss. “Yeah, I do. I like the way you smell, too. Like you’ve been cooking bacon. Oh, yum. Can we get into a sleeping bag?”

Jake grinned down at him. “I guess we can. Let’s roll one out for the bottom, put the other one over us. I like skin, too. I’ve never made it with a good-looking guy out in the woods, in a sleeping bag. You’re gonna be my first. I’m a little surprised to have another first, tell you the truth.”

Nathaniel reached a hand for his face. “Tell me what you like.”

Jake looked down at him. He could see Nathaniel, with his kind face and beautiful gray eyes and gentle hands. He wasn’t some stranger who would disappear in the dark. “I want to taste you, Nathaniel. I want your cock in my mouth.”

Nathaniel grinned. “Ah, really? Yeah, okay, I’m good with that. Then afterwards we can get naked and slide all over each other...”

Jake covered his mouth, swallowed his words, and Nathaniel opened his mouth and let Jake’s tongue inside.

They pulled their clothes off, piled them up on the ground cloth, then Nathaniel lay down on his back and pulled Jake into his arms. The night was getting cold around them. The fire gave off a little smoky warmth, a little light.

Nathaniel sighed and moved closer when Jake’s cock nuzzled between his legs. “You’re a good kisser, and I’m not a stranger, not anymore.” Jake looked down at him, warm skin against warm skin, their hips moving together, their cocks sliding up against each other. “I’m not a stranger. You can talk to me. You can kiss me.”

Damp earth, and pale gray, early morning light. Jake thought for a moment that he had fallen asleep on the front porch of his cabin and was waking up stiff from sleeping outdoors, on the hard floorboards. Then he remembered Nathaniel’s hands on him, the taste of his cock, the way he felt when Nathaniel opened his mouth and let him inside. He sat up in the sleeping bag and looked around. Nathaniel was down at the creek, rinsing out the coffee pot.

What was he supposed to do, chit-chat? Give him a good morning kiss? Sex didn’t hang around, making the coffee. Nathaniel watched him climb out of the bag, a half-smile on his face that broke into an out-and-out grin when Jake just grunted at him, pulled on his jeans and boots and went behind a tree to pee. Goddamn, this was awkward. He came back to the campsite and started rolling up the bag.

Nathaniel had started a fire and he had the coffee pot sitting down in the coals. He was working some pieces of bread onto sticks, holding them over the coals, and he was

already dressed, his gear neatly separated into what they would take back to the Jeep, and the gear to be stowed in their packs. Jake worked quickly to pack up, shook the ground cloth out, rolled it tightly and tied it to the bottom of his pack. When that was done he took his toothbrush and tube of Crest, went down to the creek and splashed icy mountain water on his face. He scrubbed around his neck and brushed his teeth.

“Let me use your toothbrush?”

He handed it over to Nathaniel, watched while he brushed, then packed both away. When he turned back around, Nathaniel pulled him close by a fist in the front of his shirt, kissed him sweetly. “The coffee’s done,” Nathaniel said, murmuring against his mouth, and Jake realized that he had both arms wrapped around Nathaniel’s waist, holding the two of them pressed tightly together, as if he couldn’t bear to let him go. And Nathaniel was kissing him back, holding Jake as tightly as Jake was holding him. Then he could smell the coffee, and the fresh cold air of the forest, pine and damp earth and Nathaniel’s warm skin. The birds were filling the air with their early morning songs, and he closed his eyes, trying to feel it all, trying to smell everything, so he could remember on a day when he woke up alone what he felt right now.

Nathaniel had both hands in his hair as he pressed a final kiss to his mouth. Jake could feel him through his jeans. His own cock was filling up with all his overflowing feelings, tenderness, erotic pleasure, gratitude for the way he couldn’t remember what his loneliness felt like when Nathaniel’s warm body was so close to his own.

Jake sighed and pulled away. “So I’m okay with this.”

Nathaniel nodded, trying to hide his grin. “Good. Me, too. Ready for some coffee?”

Nathaniel poured them both cups, then dug out his medicine again. Jake unpacked his bag and pulled out the bottles. He had forgotten, for a little while. He’d felt whole and strong and happy. But it was okay. He didn’t take his medicine half the time. Sometimes he just couldn’t think of a single good reason to take it. Well, maybe there was a reason standing next to him in old jeans, burning his tongue on a cup of scalding coffee.

“I toasted the rest of that bread and cooked the last sausage. We can split it, eat it on the way.” Jake nodded and swallowed the handful of pills.

A hundred yards in, and the deer path they’d been following disappeared. The forest was dense, with rocky outcroppings of granite and tumbled boulders blocking their way. They set a fast pace, but they were climbing into the mountains. It wasn’t long before they started seeing signs of the wolves, scat and muddy paw prints on the creek bank. The creek was getting wider as well, the water tumbling over rocks in the creek bed. They followed a rough course parallel to it.

After a couple of hours, they stopped and slid their packs off, stretched sore shoulders and refilled their water bottles. Nathaniel swatted a bug that was trying to bite his sweaty neck. “Jake, you know what’s worrying me?”

Jake shook his head. He was starting to feel anxiety creep back up in his chest. How could she have come out here alone, with no radio or walkie-talkie, just the gear in her pack, just an email to her teacher to send him out to get her in a week?

“She couldn’t have hiked into that den with enough equipment and gear to try and relocate the parents and the pups. She couldn’t have carried it all in this far. We must have been wrong, thinking that’s what she was trying to do.”

Jake nodded. “You’re right. I thought about that last night, when we were hauling the gear in. But what else would she be trying to do? I mean, she wouldn’t...” Dread was gnawing at his stomach. “She wouldn’t try and take a pup, just save one, would she? Are the pups old enough to leave the mother?”

“They’re four weeks old. So, yeah, they could survive. Especially if she brought the wolf pup to a vet.”

Jake drank some more water. “I don’t know, Nathaniel. I’m sure she would bring me a wolf pup if she found one abandoned somewhere, but to take one from the mother? Just one, and leave the others for the needle? Doesn’t sound like her. I’m afraid she’s gonna try to fix the male’s leg. You know, a vet’s kid picks up a lot just hanging around dad. But she wouldn’t try it alone, would she?”

“I don’t think so. I think she probably has some help.”

Jake stared at him. “One of the other students? Not that cub of a ranger?”

Nathaniel smiled. “Maybe he was just acting dim. Maybe you scared him and he couldn’t think. Jake, maybe she didn’t have to talk him into helping her rescue the puppies. He might not want to euthanize them, either. Well, regardless, he has a truck and he’s a Forest Ranger. That means he’s the only one of us who can drive into the Gila Wilderness. He could carry the cages, big enough for the parents and the pups. And he might know what to do with the wolves. The sanctuaries that would take them. Places they could relocate.”

Jake was so pissed off, all of a sudden, that he found himself cursing his baby girl under his breath. Nathaniel was grinning at him.

“I don’t get it, Daddy. I feel kind of relieved, thinking she might be with somebody else. You know, that she’s not alone if something went wrong.”

Jake didn’t know how to explain it, but he was very sure that having Superman Junior along to help out did not improve things one bit.

They kept moving toward the caves, only stopping a couple of times to drop their packs off, roll their shoulders, eat the boiled eggs and the little cellophane packages of peanuts Jake had bought at the gas station. Jake could feel a blister starting up on his left heel, but he didn't want to take his boot and sock off yet to check it. His legs were getting tired, starting to tremble with fatigue when they had to scramble up and over the rocks. They were about eight miles in when they spotted the first line of caves.

Nathaniel pulled out his tiny field binoculars and studied the caves. "There's a bunch of them," he said, handing the field glasses to Jake. "Pretty well protected, too. They'll know we're coming."

Jake was scanning the grounds. "I don't see anything that looks like a track big enough for a truck." He lowered the binoculars. "I think you're right, though. She's probably found some pup ranger to drive her in here. I just hope she didn't pick the dim one."

They hiked down into the canyon, looking for ways to climb the rock walls that led to the caves, and that was the first time they found any sign that Lisa had been there. Her boot prints in the sand led down to several pools of water, *tinajas* where the rain water had collected and the creek had overflowed its banks. Nathaniel pulled out the binoculars and started scanning the canyon, and Jake backtracked, following the footprints. He stopped, though, when Nathaniel gave a quiet whistle between his teeth.

"Jake, come over here. I can see her."

Jake reached him in three steps, took the binoculars, and started scanning the caves. She was sitting up against a hollow, her knees drawn up and her head down on her knees. It was just the sort of place he had pictured her in his mind last night. Above her, on a ledge, lay an enormous wolf, his dark-gray and black fur ruffling briefly when the wind passed over him. The wolf was still, and Jake couldn't tell if he was still breathing. Did she even know it was there? If the wolf was alive, and injured, it would attack anyone who came near it.

Jake started running, yelling her name and jumping from boulder to boulder. Nathaniel was right behind him. "Jake, give me the gun. Where're the tranqs?"

He shoved the rifle into Nathaniel's hands, tore the small pack with the darts from the Velcro straps that held it to the pack. "You know how to load it?"

"Yeah, Jake. Just go. I'll cover the wolf. You get Lisa out of the way."

He was halfway up the canyon wall when Lisa heard him calling her name. She lifted her head and looked over the edge. When she saw him, she started crying, her hands up over her face, then she came running for him. She'd worn a little path down to the river, and he found it, found his way up to her.

“Dad!” Lisa was filthy, tears streaking the dirt on her face.

He lifted her up in his arms, wrapped as much of himself around her as he could. “I’ve got you, baby. Are you hurt? Let me check you.”

“No, Dad, I’m fine. He’s hurt bad, Daddy. I didn’t know if you could find me. Did Dr. Briggs call you? What took you so long to get here?” He patted her gently on the back. Her clothes were muddy and damp, and a shiver was working its way up her spine every few seconds. She had her hair in two curly pigtails, just like she had worn when he took her camping when she was a little girl. He thought she looked about twelve.

“You said he’s hurt. Who’s hurt, Lisa? Is anyone here with you?”

She gave him an exasperated look, the same kind she started giving him when she was fourteen and he suddenly couldn’t do anything right. “The wolf, Dad. The alpha male is hurt. I think the mother’s getting sick, too.” She clutched the front of his shirt. “Dad, are you gonna help me or not? I don’t know what to do for him, and the food I brought is all gone, and he’s, they’re...”

Her voice was wavering, and he looked closely at her face as the tears started again. He pulled her close, kissed the top of her head. “My baby girl. Of course I’m gonna help. Nathaniel’s here, too. He’s right behind me.”

She put her head down on his chest at this, sobbed out a long and incoherent story. He petted her head, soothed her with soft, shushing noises until Nathaniel joined him. Nathaniel pointed up the wall, went past them, and started climbing up to the wolf.

After a few minutes Lisa wiped grimy hands over her cheeks and wiped her nose on her sleeve. She looked around, spotted Nathaniel on the path. “What’s Dr. Briggs doing with a gun?”

“It’s just the tranqs, Lisa. We brought tranqs in case we needed to put the wolf out for anything. It’s okay.”

“You brought your medical kit, Dad? Medicine for infection?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“Good. We’re gonna need it.”

“Lisa, what are you doing up here? Were you trying to save the pups, relocate them?”

“Dad, of course not! I couldn’t do that alone. I just brought some food in, because I knew the father was hurt and wouldn’t be able to hunt for the family. I’m not stupid.” She was starting to sound like her usual bossy self. “Come on. Follow me, Dad.”

“Okay, now start from the beginning again, and give me a coherent report.” She was shaking with nerves and cold but she didn’t seem hurt, and he felt something that might have been a prayer of thanks slip from his mind.

“The alpha male wolf, he got his back leg caught in a trap about a week ago. They didn’t know how badly he was hurt, because he got loose from the trap and ran. Greg thought he came here, where the female wolf was denning with the pups. He’s hurt bad, Daddy. I think it’s gangrene or something in his leg. The other wolf, she’s acting strange. I don’t know what’s wrong. The pups sound like they’re hungry, and she’s trying to feed the male. He won’t eat, though. He was drinking water until last night. I carried it up in a piece of plastic milk carton.”

He could feel his stomach twist at that. “Baby, how close did you get to him? Are you hurt anywhere? Did he bite you?”

“No, Dad. I’m okay, I promise.”

“Because if he did, I need to clean it, start some antibiotics. Don’t be afraid to show it to me...”

She had her hands on her hips. “Dad. I’m a professional! Well, almost. Dr. Briggs is very thorough; I know what to do. He’s nice, isn’t he? Do you like him?”

“Yes. Daughter, what...What exactly do you expect me to do for these wolves?”

She turned her beautiful hazel eyes on him, and he felt like he was looking in a mirror. “Well, Dad, everything. I mean, I expect you to do everything you can.” She was so earnest and young, so utterly hopeful. He didn’t remember ever feeling that way. She wiped at the smear of muddy tears she had left on his shirt. “You always do, Dad. But don’t worry, I don’t have unrealistic expectations.”

Uh-huh. They had reached Nathaniel. He was on the ledge below the wolf, where Lisa had been sitting when they first spotted her through the binoculars. He handed the rifle to Jake. “He’s still breathing, but I think he’s in a coma. It may be too late to try and save his leg, Jake.”

“I wish you’d gotten here yesterday, Dr. Briggs. My dad could have...”

He turned those gray eyes on her and she shut up. Jake could see that Nathaniel was trying to gather his calm to speak to her. “I have half a mind to flunk you out of the program, Lisa. This stunt will cost you some major community service. I don’t know what, but you can be sure I will let you know. This is your one and only second chance. If you ever do anything so dangerous and irresponsible again, you will be gone. Are we clear?”

They stared at each other, and Lisa's chin gradually dropped. She lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry, Dr. Briggs. You're right, I was being irresponsible. But when Greg told me about the alpha male being hurt in the trap, I couldn't..."

Nathaniel raised a hand to stop her, and she fell silent. Jake bit his lip. He didn't know whether to laugh or wrap his arms around her and pull her to his heart.

"Lisa, right now I need you to get some water, see about making a little fire to heat it up. Quick as you can. Your dad will need hot water to take care of things."

Jake pulled off his pack. He dug through it, then handed her the matches and the small pan, and Nathaniel handed her the small folding shovel. The stubborn tilt of her chin looked nearly back to normal as she headed down the path.

Jake looked up at Nathaniel, who winked at him. Then Nathaniel's face sobered, his beautiful face as sad as the rain. "They're dying, Jake."

But Lisa was safe. As long as she was with him, he would make sure she was safe. Jake felt a great relief welling up in his chest, some bubble that held the shape of all the desperate fears he had tried to keep to himself over the last two days. He looked up at Nathaniel. He probably knew. Whatever he could see on Jake's face right now caused him to pull Jake into his arms, pull him up tightly against his chest, and bend his head and kiss him.

Warmth in his chest, and down in his belly. A friend's kiss, a lover's kiss. They were something different from what he'd known before in his life. The promise of the future in Nathaniel's mouth felt almost overwhelming.

Nathaniel had both hands on his face. "We're not out of trouble yet. We don't have any food left, except the elk we brought for the wolves. Lisa looks worn to the bone, and we've got some sick wolves here." He reached down again, opened Jake's mouth with his own. "I could take you right now, drag you off behind those rocks into a nice empty cave. I don't know, you got something I want bad. That tortured genius thing, it's hot, baby."

Jake was laughing into his mouth. "Yeah. Okay. I'm with you on that." He slid his hand down Nathaniel's back, around his hip until he could reach between his legs, give his cock a friendly little stroke. "Let's go check on the wolves."

The wolf was huge, with thick black and silver fur. Jake had never seen a wolf in the wild this big before.

"He's a beauty, isn't he?" Nathaniel was right behind him, leaning over his shoulder.

Jake nodded. He could see the mangled back foot, the slow, shallow breathing. The wolf's eyes were half-closed. He pulled the stethoscope out of his pack and settled it in the thick fur over the wolf's chest. The heartbeat was slow and strong, the lungs clear, and

he barely heard a low, humming growl from deep in the wolf's chest. The hair on the back of Jake's neck stood at attention.

He lifted the stethoscope slowly and backed away, still crouching. He held his arms out on either side of his body so Nathaniel wouldn't come closer. "Nathaniel, back away."

Nathaniel stooped and picked up the rifle, stepping quietly down the path backward. He lifted the rifle, covering the wolf. Jake came down the path after him, as quickly as he could without showing the wolf his back.

Nathaniel pushed Jake behind him.

"Let's get a little farther away," Jake said, his lips nearly touching Nathaniel's ear. "We got us a live wolf there, and he sounds like he's in a really bad mood."

Nathaniel turned his head slightly, the rifle rock steady in his hands. "We're too close to tranq him."

"You got that right, brother." Jake grabbed the loose waistband of Nathaniel's jeans, kept it curled in his fist as they moved down the path one quiet step at a time. The wolf raised his massive head an inch, two inches. Nathaniel stopped and raised the rifle again.

"Too close," Jake breathed. He kept a hand on Nathaniel's jeans, wrapped his other arm around his waist.

The wolf raised his front paws, tried to drag himself upright.

"He's coming." Nathaniel brought the rifle up, sighted down the barrel and pulled the trigger. Jake felt the shock of the gun's recoil in Nathaniel's shoulder, down into his chest, and he held him tighter.

The dart lodged in the wolf's shoulder. He dragged himself up, turned toward them, and they heard the growl now, deep and low, and the vibrations seemed to be coming up from the rocks under their feet, the trees around them trembling with the sound.

"Get behind me, Nathaniel." The wolf took a step toward them, teeth bared, amber eyes furious and full of pain.

"Shut up, Jake."

The wolf staggered, roared, and the female came out of her den and howled. Loss and loneliness, misery and the pain of watching her mate die, her babies die; it was all in her voice. The wolf turned and howled back at her, staggered again and fell. Jake could feel the echoes of their voices bouncing off the walls around them. He pressed his hands flat against Nathaniel's chest, against his heart, and they watched the wolf roll to his side and lie still.

Jake rested his forehead against Nathaniel's back. Felt him take a deep breath and let it out slowly. His hands were still pressed over Nathaniel's heart, and he could feel it racing under his hands. "Okay, big guy. We're okay."

Jake turned when he heard Lisa coming up the path, held a hand out to stop her. "Stay down there, Lisa."

"Now, all of the sudden, I can't do anything? Suddenly it's too dangerous for me to be out here? I've been out here for three days, Dad. And what are you two doing?"

"We're tranqing the wolf, who just tried to get up. You want to go shake him, make sure he's really out before I examine his foot?"

"No, I mean why do you two have your arms around each other? That's not what..." She shook her head, staring down at the ground, mouth tight.

Jake let go of Nathaniel and came down the path to meet her. "What we're doing is none of your business, daughter. And as far as I can see, what you have been doing out here is making things worse for the wolves." Her head snapped up like he had slapped her. "It's a miracle one of them didn't take you down, just so you'd stop being such a pest."

"But, Dad..."

Nathaniel joined them. "Lisa, how many times have I said that human presence causes stress for wild wolves? Did you think your good intentions would change that? And an injured wolf, a nursing mother, they're under enough stress."

She had tears in her eyes now, but it looked to Jake like she was mad more than anything. "And it is my business about you two. I..."

"You can't always control the things you start, Lisa. The catalyst only starts the reaction." Jake felt suddenly exhausted and out of patience. "Do you want to help, or do you want to go wait in the car?" He pointed. "It's about ten miles that way."

"I'll help, of course." It sounded to Jake like she was grinding her back teeth.

"Bring that hot water back up here, then." She turned around and went back down the path without another word, her back rigid.

"I don't think it's the whole leg, Jake."

"Yeah. I saw that. We need to be sure, though, before we start anything. What do we have that we can use for bandages?"

“I got a shirt in the pack that’s cotton. He was just being so still and quiet up on his ledge because Lisa was there.”

“Yeah. That’s what I think, too.” He headed back down the path to where they had dropped their packs, and Jake went back up to the wolf. He couldn’t see any dog in him. He smelled wild, and he was huge, with paws almost as big as Jake’s hands. When Nathaniel joined him they rolled the wolf onto his other side, and he listened to the chest again.

“You monitor vital signs,” he said, handing the stethoscope to Nathaniel. “Let me know when he starts to wake up. Before, I mean. Before he starts to wake up.”

“Okay. I’m with you on that.” Nathaniel fitted the stethoscope into his ears and settled it over the wolf’s chest. “You should be able to tell by the snapping shut of his jaws around my throat.”

“That would be a good clue.” Lisa was coming up the path, holding the pan of hot water carefully to keep from spilling it. “Lisa, get behind him, over here.” He spread out his tools from the pack, and she knelt where he showed her. He stuck a couple of instruments into the pan of hot water, then lifted the wolf’s leg. The foot was gashed on both sides, the bones crushed, and the limb was swollen three or four inches above the wound. Jake quickly clipped the fur to expose the vein, and injected a bottle of antibiotics.

Nathaniel watched him, eyebrows raised. “You’re giving him your big guns, huh?”

Jake nodded, not speaking. He took his instruments out of the pan of hot water, identified the first joint above the foot, and started slicing through the skin with a scalpel. When the skin had been lacerated he splashed some hot water on the wound, then pulled the skin back and studied the muscles and tendons surrounding the joint. Then he picked up the scalpel and knife blade again, cut through into the joint, and amputated the damaged foot.

Lisa was pale, but she set her jaw and helped clean up the wound. Nathaniel nodded at Jake. “Heart rate’s okay. He’s not feeling it.”

Jake grabbed the suture material, heavy silk, and began drawing the tendons back down over the edges of the bone, tacking them down. He sprinkled iodoform powder inside the wound, then closed the skin in a flap down and around the stump. He washed the wound with the rest of the hot water, sprinkled the iodoform powder on top, and fashioned a tight dressing with the strips of Nathaniel’s shirt and bound the foot.

“That was quick, four or five minutes,” Nathaniel said. “How long do you think we’ve got?”

“Maybe fifteen. He’s big, though, heavy. Maybe not that long.” He injected a dose of rabies vaccine in the wolf’s thigh, then grabbed his gear and pointed down the trail. “I

brought immunizations for both of them. We better check on mother wolf before he wakes up.”

Nathaniel picked up the rifle and slung the pack over his shoulder. “Lisa, how many pups have you seen?”

“I haven’t seen them at all. I’ve heard them, though. I don’t think a full litter. Maybe only two or three.”

“Where’s the rest of their pack?”

“I haven’t seen anyone else. Dr. Briggs, did you see the scars on his muzzle? I wonder if the two of them left to start their own pack. You know, so they could breed. If they weren’t the alpha pair in the pack, they couldn’t breed. It’s kind of romantic, really.”

“Ah...”

Jake just shook his head. “No time for this discussion. Nathaniel, let’s tranq mom, then check her, give her rabies. We don’t have much time if we want to be out of here before he wakes up.”

Nathaniel nodded. “We’ve got two more darts, if we use one for her.” They picked up the pace.

“Lisa, you wait for us to get the other wolf tranq’d. Then you get that ground cloth off my pack. We’ll go into the cave and check on the babies.”

She pointed to a narrow path up to the den’s entrance. Jake reached down for a couple of small rocks, and they climbed up the side of the cliff. Nathaniel went to the right side of the cave, he went to the left, and then they bent over and went inside.

The female wolf was smaller, and she looked young, her fur pure silver-white against the gold of her eyes. She backed away from them, baring her teeth, the pups behind her. Jake tossed a couple of the small rocks into the cave, and when she turned to look at them rolling toward her Nathaniel darted her in the shoulder.

When she fell, Jake moved in quickly, and he and Nathaniel carried her out into the light at the entrance to the cave. “Ten minutes,” Jake said, looking down at the big male wolf they had left on the ledge.

Nathaniel ran his hands over her belly. “She’s thin, Jake. Doesn’t feel like she’s still lactating. She’s really a funny color for a Mexican wolf, isn’t she? She looks more like Montana.”

“Lisa, bring the flashlight. You think the wolf traveled down this far?”

“She could come this far, no trouble. I’ve heard of wolves traveling like that. But why would she?”

“Maybe she was following her big guy, over there.” Jake injected her with rabies vaccine and gave her a multivitamin injection, and when Lisa came back with the flashlight they went back into the cave. She’d had a big litter, and most of the pups were dead. Jake counted four furry little bodies, not moving, and two more that were.

“Nathaniel, you got the rest of that shirt?”

It was big enough, even with the strips they’d used for the bandages, to toss over the pups’ heads. Jake felt them quickly all over. No wounds, but they were dangerously thin. They didn’t put up much of a fight. “Lisa, hold them in the ground cloth.” They wrapped the puppies up, and she held the edges of the ground cloth closed. He moved over next to Nathaniel, and they looked at each other for a long moment.

“I think the parents need some time to heal, Nathaniel, without trying to take care of the pups.”

Nathaniel nodded reluctantly. “You think they’re gonna die if we leave them out here, even if the rangers don’t come and get them. I agree. You want to take them to Wolf Recovery?”

Jake shook his head, and Nathaniel sighed. “I had a feeling this is where we were going to end up. Let’s get going, then. We’ve got a long walk still.” He looked back at the big alpha male. “Uh, let’s leave the elk meat here with the female. I don’t even want to think I just saw the big guy lift his head.” He was already scrambling through the pack for the meat.

“Lisa, come on.” Jake grabbed the puppies and ran down the path, holding them in the ground cloth. “You stay between us, daughter.” Nathaniel joined them a moment later. He had the rifle in one hand. Jake yanked his pack off, pulled the fleece sweatshirt out and shoved it into Lisa’s hands, before grabbing the water bottles and then dropping the pack by the side of the trail. Nathaniel was doing the same with his pack.

“I’m not leaving the goddamn coffee,” he said. He shoved the Ziploc bag of grounds in his pocket, and thrust the little percolator at Lisa. “You carry it. Jake, get your medicine!”

“Oh, shit!”

Nathaniel turned around, ran back up the path, and grabbed Jake’s bottles from the pack and shoved them down into the pockets of his jeans.

It was a rough hike out. They were all three exhausted, shaking with fatigue and cold and hunger. They stopped to rest after a couple of miles.

Lisa unwrapped the ground cloth, but kept the puppies in Nathaniel's shirt. She carried them over to the creek, and held a cupped handful of water to their mouths. They took a little, not much, and when she came back she tucked them inside the big pocket of the sweatshirt she had pulled over her head. Jake and Nathaniel watched her, but didn't say anything. She was looking stubborn again. They just moved closer, and after a minute Nathaniel stood up, the rifle in his hand.

"Jake, I think they're too sick and hurt to come after the pups, but I don't think we should risk it."

He nodded. "You're right. Let's go."

They stopped when it was too dark to keep walking safely, and they were staggering with tiredness. Jake thought they had probably walked six or seven miles back toward the road. Lisa still had the matches in her pocket, so Jake started a fire. Nathaniel had been carrying the coffee pot, and he had the water and grounds boiling away within five minutes. Jake didn't think he'd ever smelled anything so good. They took the coffee pot out of the fire, and when it was cool enough they drank straight from the spout, swallowing the grounds.

Nathaniel gave a tired sigh, leaned over and kissed Jake on the mouth. Jake raised a hand and touched his cheek. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Can you do some of those fried potatoes when we get home?"

"Yeah, we can." Jake kissed him again. "I like it with sausage and cheese, too. Green chilies. I might have some chili in the freezer we can pour on top. That's always good."

Lisa cleared her throat. "Dad, Dr. Briggs, I want to thank you for coming out here to help the wolves."

They looked at each other, and Nathaniel laughed under his breath. Jake turned to her. "I came after you, daughter, not the wolves. I wouldn't trade you for the survival of the species."

"Dad!"

"You sleeping with that muscle-bound dim bulb in a Forest Ranger uniform?"

"Dad, do you have any idea how old I am?"

"Are you under the impression I give a shit how old you are?"

She sniffed.

“Let’s see the pups,” Nathaniel said. He held out one of his elegant long hands, and she handed him the first wolf pup, a female. The fur was a silvery white, like its mom’s. He checked her over, then handed the pup off to Jake.

“I don’t care if you’re sleeping with him, Lisa,” Nathaniel said, reaching for the second wolf. “What I want to know is this: He told you about the alpha male’s foot being caught in the trap.” Lisa nodded. “Did he know you were going in there to check on the wolves? Did he know you were hiking into the wilderness alone?” He kept his eyes on the pup in his hands.

Lisa sniffed again. “Maybe he trusts me. Maybe he has confidence in my ability to handle myself in the wilderness. I mean, I grew up out here. I’ll be a wildlife biologist next year, Dr. Briggs.”

“And do you know any wildlife biologists who go into the wilderness alone, with the wolves, without backup?”

“You were my backup, Dr. Briggs.”

Nathaniel didn’t say anything else, just handed the second pup to Jake. This one’s fur was dark gray and black, like the father’s. He stood up and caught Jake’s eye.

Jake got up and they moved together to the edge of the clearing, out of earshot of Lisa and away from the comforting warmth of the fire. Jake reached out and tugged him close by the waistband of his jeans. “I know you’re really pissed off at her, Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel nodded. “I am. And I know you’re really pissed off at him. But you leave that idiot to me, Jake. I’ll take care of it. It may work to our advantage. Maybe if the wolf lives, I can convince that nitwit to lose his data, stop tracking him and his family.” He sighed and closed his eyes, then rested his forehead against Jake’s. “But really, this is my fault. I should have emphasized the rules of the wilderness, talked to them more about safety, about reasonable precautions...”

Jake grinned at him, a crooked, heartbroken grin. “You and me, the poster boys for safety and reasonable precautions. Listen, how did Lisa find out that you have HIV?”

“She asked me. I think she was asking all unmarried male professors if we were gay, and I was the only one who said yes. And then she asked me if I had HIV. I was so shocked I just told her the truth.”

“I’m sorry, Nathaniel. I’m sorry you got dragged into this.”

“Are you? Don’t be too sorry. I’m not.”

“You want to come home with me? If you don’t, then you drop her and me off at her car. I’ll drive her and the pups back to my place, and you can go on home.”

Nathaniel put his hand on Jake's face, held it there until Jake closed his eyes, turned his face into Nathaniel's hand and kissed the palm.

"Okay, what I really mean, Nathaniel, is I want to see you again. I want you to come home with me. I'd really like to see you sprawled out naked across my bed, with your mouth wide open and your cock standing at attention. But maybe you've had enough of me and my family for this week."

"I'm coming with you. I want to get cleaned up, get a little food and a little more loving and get back down to school. Lisa, too. We've got finals starting next week. Do you need some help building the enclosures?"

Jake shook his head. "I'm gonna make them rough, keep them as wild as I can, so we can send them back. If they live."

Nathaniel had his hands in Jake's hair, long fingers making slow easy circles on his scalp. "Let's do this. We all go back to your place. We can probably stay another day, helping you with the pups and sleeping late. Then I'll bring Lisa back here to get her car on the way back to Las Cruces. And I'll follow her home, Daddy, make sure she gets there safe."

Jake nodded. "That's good. Thanks." He had his arms wrapped around Nathaniel's waist again, holding him close. How had that happened?

"Can I come up to see you on the weekends?" Nathaniel was holding his face, mouth moving over his bristly jaw. "We're like a couple of porcupines, trying to kiss. But I bet I can find the right spot."

He could find the right spot, and he took his time doing it, soft mouth moving along Jake's jawline, over his chin, until Nathaniel opened Jake's mouth and slid his tongue inside and tasted him.

Jake couldn't remember this, kissing someone he had feelings for. Someone who wasn't a stranger. He'd missed out on this his whole life. The heaviness was in his chest, moving down into his belly. It felt like lust, sexual pleasure, and something more. Desire, maybe. He looked up into Nathaniel's calm gray eyes, gave him a cocky grin to cover his panic when the 'L' word drifted into his mind. "Maybe you should run. I'm gonna be trouble for you."

Nathaniel looked down at him. "Man, you're a great kisser." They smiled at each other. "I'm not going anywhere."

They built the fire as high as they could, to stay warm through the night and to keep the predators at bay, but no one slept much on the damp rocky ground. Lisa kept the puppies

tucked up against her chest, and Jake kept Nathaniel tucked up against his chest, his fingers tracing the prominent ribs, coming to rest over the heart beating under his palm.

When the early morning light made it safe to move around, Jake got up, stirred the embers, laid more wood in the fire, then made a pot of coffee with creek water and the last couple of tablespoons of coffee grounds. Nathaniel stared at the pot with bleary eyes until the familiar smells began drifting around the campsite.

He looked up at Jake. "Did we save the toothbrush?"

Jake shook his head. Nathaniel pulled his hair back, using his fingers as a comb, and wrapped a hair band from his pocket around the ponytail. He went down to the creek and splashed cold water on his face. "I guess that's as good as it's going to get."

Jake handed him the coffee pot. "For now, anyway. You look good with a beard." He nudged Lisa. "Wake up, daughter." She was blinking up at him from a dirty face, looking just like she had as a little girl, same pigtails in her hair, same big, hazel eyes waking up happy.

She sat up and pulled the puppies out of the sweatshirt pocket, and Jake was relieved to see them both snuffling and moving around. He'd been afraid the silver one, the little female, wouldn't last the night, she was so thin.

"Give them some water, Lisa, then let's move. We're still a couple of hours from home."

Nathaniel had a good sense of direction. He lead them back to their first campsite, then back to the road and the Jeep. They were at the cabin before noon.

"I call the first shower," Nathaniel said, and Jake reached over and squeezed his thigh.

Jake closed his bedroom door and started peeling out of his filthy clothes. Nathaniel opened the door to the bathroom, and a cloud of sweet-smelling steam came out with him. He was naked and clean, rubbing a towel over his head.

"Your soap smells good, Jake."

"It's camping soap. I think they put bug stuff in it. Give me five minutes, and I'll tell you how it tastes."

Jake stepped into the warm, wet shower, soaped up quickly. His cock was already half-erect, just thinking about Nathaniel walking around his bedroom, waiting for him to come out and make love.

The shower curtain was pulled open, and Nathaniel steeped in behind him. He wrapped his arms around Jake, wrapped his fist around Jake's cock. "I couldn't wait." His mouth was against Jake's ear. "I can't wait." Jake could feel Nathaniel's cock pressed firmly in his ass. "Where's that soap?" Jake passed the bar back to him over his shoulder.

It smelled like lemon and rosemary, and Nathaniel filled his hands with lather, wrapped soapy hands back around Jake's cock, stroking hard up and down.

"You're gonna let me take you, right?" His mouth was moving over Jake's ear, the warm water spilling down over them both from the shower. "Bend over," he said.

Jake bent over, his hands flat against the tile wall, the water pounding down on his shoulders. Jake felt him then, those long, elegant fingers touching him, opening his intimate places, moving inside him. Just like he had opened Jake's heart with his delicate touch and moved inside. Then his cock was in place, and Jake forced himself to relax. And Nathaniel moved inside him, wrapped his arms back around Jake's waist, held Jake's cock in his fist, so they could move together.

Jake was shaking, his legs trembling with fatigue and with the feelings sweeping over his thighs, down into his belly. He closed his eyes. It had been a long time.

Nathaniel's fingers were tender on his body, his thighs tight against Jake's hips as he thrust inside. He was trying to be gentle, Jake thought. He turned his head, and Nathaniel reached for his mouth. Slow, deep groans were torn out of his throat with every thrust.

Jake sucked Nathaniel's tongue into his mouth. He was a sweet kisser. "You're not gonna hurt me. You're shaking, baby. Stop trying to be gentle."

Nathaniel closed his eyes, held himself still for a moment. Jake thought Nathaniel's cock was swelling inside him. Nathaniel moved his hands, grabbed Jake hard around the hips.

"Hang on." Nathaniel was fucking him hard now, as hard as a stranger would, fingers digging into his hips, but he wasn't a stranger, he wasn't...

Jake felt himself explode, his cock spurting on the tile shower wall. The man moving inside him wasn't a stranger.

Nathaniel pulled him up tight against his chest, and Jake turned his head so they could kiss. Nathaniel kissed him hard, pumping faster inside him, and Jake could feel when he started to come, could taste it on his tongue, feel it coming through his hands, feel it coming through his cock.

Jake was drowsing in Nathaniel's arms, the late afternoon sunshine coming golden through the window. Nathaniel stretched, nuzzled into his neck. "I'm gonna make some coffee. You want anything?"

"I'm good." Jake pulled the pillow close to his face after Nathaniel climbed out of bed. The linen smelled like his hair, like clean soap and clean sweat. Jake heard his voice and rolled over to his back to listen.

"You can stop glaring at me, Lisa. I'm getting tired of these dirty looks. You think I need to explain myself to you?"

"I said I wanted to introduce you! How did you go from that to climbing out of his bed, wearing his boxer shorts? I gave him those boxers for Christmas!" She sounded like she was about to cry. "Don't you think you're taking advantage of him? I explained how vulnerable he is right now."

Jake heard a chair scrape back. "What I think, Lisa, is that you like being the only person in your dad's entire world. Time you learned to share, girl. You need to back up and let him take a step out into the world."

"But..."

"No, you said your piece. Now you listen to me. The thing that bothers me the most about this entire fuck-up, Lisa, is that you slept with that kid, that ranger, to get information about the wolves. I know you did." Jake heard Lisa sniff, then a sound like she was wiping her nose. Was she getting sick?

"What makes you think sex is a tool you use to get what you want? This will put you on the wrong path for your whole life, Lisa. Sex is something special. You got to save it for someone you love, or that you might love."

"And is that what you're doing? Is that what you're doing with my dad?"

"Yes, Lisa. That's what I'm doing with your dad."

Jake heard her sniff again, and then her voice was full of tears. "Okay, Dr. Briggs. I'm sorry."

"How are the babies?"

"Good. They ate all that elk meat I put in the blender."

"Oh. Yuck."

Jake held the pillow over his chest. That was a very fatherly little talk, and for some reason he wasn't mad that it was someone else, not him, giving that talk to her. He'd

never talked to her about sex. How could he? He didn't know anything about it. He didn't know how to do it right. Maybe Nathaniel could teach him, too.

Autumn had turned the cottonwoods in the wash a brilliant, golden yellow, and the puppies were still alive. Jake climbed out of his bed just before sunset, left Nathaniel tangled in the sheets. He walked out to the porch with his coffee, pulled a chair up to the rail and propped his feet up.

Max came walking up out of the early morning dark from behind the barn. He'd probably been out torturing the wolves, walking slowly back and forth next to their enclosure. Jake and Nathaniel had a friendly wager on when the big male pup was going to rip a hole in the steel mesh and eat Max alive with one big gulping bite.

Nathaniel pushed open the screen door. He had his coffee cup in one hand, and he ran the other through Jake's hair. They both stared at Max, who turned his back, lifted a foot and started grooming his fur-covered balls.

Nathaniel gestured toward the barn with his chin. "How they doing?"

"Good. Growing. We don't have much more time if we're gonna get them back into the wild."

"Is today a feeding day?"

Jake shook his head. "I'm trying to give them a random pattern, so they don't get too used to me, or a schedule. I gave them a deer last week that got hit by a car. You want to go check on them?"

Nathaniel nodded and went back into the cabin for a sweatshirt and sandals. When they walked around the side of the barn, Jake threw an arm out to stop him, anxiety turning his stomach into ice. "Nathaniel, they're loose."

Nathaniel was staring at the fence, grinning. "Jake, look at the hole. They didn't dig themselves out."

They walked closer and studied the hole. Someone had dug them out from outside the fence, and it looked like the kind of hole a wolf would dig. They studied the tracks. The puppies were running all over the place, dancing with excitement -- and two adults, one with huge paws.

Nathaniel knelt in the dirt. "Come look at this." Two paw prints about a yard apart. A big paw print, and a little one, a nub, like the print of an amputated foot. Nathaniel studied the tracks. "He can run, Jake, and he came back to get his babies." Nathaniel slapped him on the back. "You dads."

Wolf

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