



CYNTHIA CAROLE

The
Alpha
A Cedarville Novella

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THE ALPHA

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THE ALPHA

The Alpha
A Cedarville Novella
By Cynthia Carole

CYNTHIA CAROLE

For my mother, because she believes in things that go bump in the night.

THE ALPHA

CHAPTER ONE

Deanna gulped down the triple-shot latte, ignoring the burn of scalding hot espresso and foamed milk going down her throat. Exhaustion slumped her shoulders, but she needed to keep alert. Awake. Somehow. She tossed the cup in the trash as she opened the door. The sleigh bells jingled from the handle. A blue-grass song coming over the café's radio tempted her to come back in, sit down, and put her feet up on the chair next to her. Relax. Who was she kidding? The second she sat down she'd clunk her head on the table and pass out. But she couldn't stop, didn't dare, not when she was being hunted.

Now I'm the prey, the rabbit huddling beneath the bushes hoping that the hunter will pass on. Just pass on.

She glanced up and down Main Street. Main Street! How quaint was that? The green sign outside the city limits had named the place Cedarville—just an average rural town, surrounded by wild forests and wedged between a national park and the jagged snow-capped peaks of the Cascade Mountains. Cedar and dew, along with the smells of cut grass and brewed coffee mingled in her nose, bringing with them the urge to run free, go past the human scents, and flee into the pristine wilderness. She pushed aside her instincts. Changing to four paws right now would not free her from pursuit and would probably only bring her death that much sooner.

As she stepped onto the sidewalk and into the foggy morning light, she tried to see Mt. Baker to the north but the haze distorted everything behind tattered, drifting veils. The pale orb of the sun behind the mist hinted that the vapor would burn off as the day grew older. She hoped so. All this grey was causing her vision to blur.

A flutter caught her attention, and she glanced up to see a banner strung across the street with pennant flags in red, white, and blue—a Fourth of July picnic was only days away and the air, despite the fog, lingered warm and promising on her bare arms.

Tears stung her eyes as she stood on the sidewalk, swaying with fatigue. She was so tired. Driving day and night would do that to anyone, even her, but she didn't know what else to do. The

last time she had gotten a motel room, *he* had found her. She closed her eyes, remembering the dark shape stalking across the parking lot in Oregon—her head jerking back, the smell choking her through the partially open motel window.

How was he following her? His tracking sense was far and beyond anything she had ever known. Perhaps her heartbeat called to him.

A wave of dizziness hit her, and she rested a hand on the roof of the Mercedes sedan she had borrowed from her grandmother. Well, perhaps borrowed wasn't the right word. Inherited. Pain clenched her stomach, and memories threatened to overwhelm her. *Oh, Nana, I failed you.* She blinked back the stinging moisture. *But I won't fail my brother. I won't let the monster have him too.*

"Ma'am, are you all right?" She turned to see a tall man in a brown uniform approaching, the star on his broad chest and the gun on his belt were superfluous—everything about him screamed authority. His scent reached her nose as the breeze stirred the damp air.

Wolf.

And not just any wolf—he was an alpha, a packleader. She could feel the power radiating as his aura brushed against hers and her own wolf wanted to lie down and expose her belly. Her human pride straightened her spine and she met his gaze. "I'm fine. Just passing through." The formal words notified him that she posed no threat to his pack.

The air crackled between them. His eyes flashed gold even in the muted silvery light of the foggy morning. A big man with narrow hips and long legs, he didn't need the magnetism of his wolf to hold her gaze. He was too handsome for his own good, and not playboy handsome either. He had the rugged outdoors look, like a cowboy from an old western. She clenched her teeth to keep from closing her eyes and putting her metaphoric tail between her legs. She looked down though—resentfully. Alphas always expected other wolves to grovel.

"Passing through?" he asked, his tone cool and yet polite. She could feel the bulk of him standing in front of her.

"Yes," she answered and gazed at the well-swept sidewalk. If she wasn't staying in his territory, he shouldn't bother her. She wasn't his concern.

"All right. If you want, you can stay at the motel up the road. It's not a bad place."

Like a king giving her permission to stay in his lands. Her fists clenched at her sides. All alphas were the same. Nodding without looking up, she kept eyes on his shoulder to show her submission. She fumbled with her keys. They clattered to the asphalt, and she silently cursed.

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“I don’t think you should be driving,” he commented, watching her as she bent to grope at the ground.

She wished he would go away. Why did he have to hover? His presence unnerved her. He smelled of wild things—forest and pack—and also human things, like soap and shaving cream. The combination made her knees weak.

“Good thing it’s not your business,” she replied.

She dropped the keys again.

He caught them just before they hit the ground, moving in a blur of controlled speed. Now he was close enough for her to feel the heat coming off his body. Her nipples tightened and warmth centered in her belly.

She fought the urge to step closer, to run her hands over his broad shoulders and snuggle up against the male perfume of his overheated skin. She wanted to rub herself against him, damn it. She knew he could smell her arousal. Her cheeks burned, but she lifted her chin, holding out her hand.

“Can I have my keys, Sheriff?”

His hazel-gold eyes crinkled at the corners, the only sign of his amusement. “I’m afraid not, Ma’am. I can’t, in good faith, let you drive in your condition.”

He hit the button on her keys and took out the canvas duffel bag from the backseat.

“That’s illegal,” she said, her eyes drooping. “You can’t do that!” Had the woman in the coffee store given her decaf? Or had she just reached an overload on caffeine? She had been living on it for days—ever since, well, ever since. She closed her eyes to fight against the tears. Poor Nana! *I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.*

She swayed on her feet, and he caught her with one hand. He helped her to his Jeep, his smell surrounding her, protecting her. Mumbled protests escaped her mouth, none of them making much sense. As soon as she sat down, her eyes closed, and the snap of the seatbelt was the last thing she was conscious of.

* * * *

Jackson Creed radioed the license plate, make, and model of the girl’s Mercedes to Arlene. He also dug through her bag—illegally—and called in her driver’s license and address. Sage, California? Sounded like a small town to him, but you never could tell with California, it might be

some huge suburb for all he knew. He also found a Blockbuster card, a cell phone, and a picture of three people standing in front of a pale blue lake with mountains in the background. On the back it said—*Me, Nana, and Chris at Mono Lake*. He couldn't help but wonder who the dark-haired man in the photo was. *Chris*.

So, she was a Californian, but he knew that from her plates. She was also a werewolf, and she reeked of fear. He started for the motel near the highway, passing the touristy rows of shops, cafes, and the ice cream parlor on Main.

Jackson chewed on the inside of his cheek. He had a pack to protect, and a town to look after, so really the girl's problems were not his and the sooner he got her out of his town the better. So why was he turning around? He flipped a quick U-turn on the empty street and headed north instead. He drove home just as the sun broke through the fog and lit up the thick pines on the rising slopes to the east.

The girl slept with her head slumped and her mouth slightly open. Her thick brunette hair blew about her face as the wind came in through the open windows of the Jeep, and her skin glowed soft and gold with a light tan—a color one didn't get from a tanning bed or lying in the sun. Of course, he didn't know a werewolf who liked to work in an office cubical, so she probably spent part of her days outdoors. He glanced at her delicate face, pink lips parted and a thick fan of lashes dusting her blemish-free skin. A faint hint of freckles dotted her cheek. Lust stirred in him, but also a fierce protectiveness.

He sighed. She was a stranger, not a part of his pack. He should just leave her at the motel and hope she passed on through town. He could be endangering the others—what had frightened her so much, anyway? Whatever it was that could send a healthy werewolf running into exhaustion, it couldn't be good.

Reason aside, he found he couldn't help himself. He wanted to help her. He needed to help her. Something drew him to her—like a fly to a bug zapper, he growled in his head. *Damn it, Creed, you're thinking with your dick.*

Turning off the two-lane highway, his Jeep shuddered on the gravel road. The sunlight flickered through the tall evergreens, like a strobe light flashing gold, as the stones churned beneath the wheels with a growling crunch. The girl jostled around in the leather seat but didn't wake. Jackson shifted in his seat. What was it with this girl? Why hadn't he been able to drop her off at the motel and forget her?

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She was pretty, sure, but so what? He couldn't endanger the pack because he wanted to get laid. Besides, one night stands got complicated when werewolves were involved. Wolves had a tendency to mate for life—and he wasn't ready to get to know the girl that well.

His cabin came into sight as he pulled into his long, private driveway. While arguing with himself, he hadn't even slowed down. It seemed she was coming home with him, whether he thought it was a good idea or not.

He parked and turned off the engine, the sudden silence drawing a soft snort from the girl, but nothing else. Her face remained lax with sleep. As he carried her in, beneath the wild climbing roses that grew up over the front porch, he thought how good she felt in his arms. Lithe and yet soft in just the right areas.

He laid her on the bed in one of the upstairs guest rooms, her hair dark against the white comforter.

"A wolf! And female." Margy poked the girl gently on the shoulder, her wavy silver hair falling about her face and her blue eyes crinkling with laugh lines. "What's the matter with her? Did you drug her?" She frowned at him, though her suspicious tone was less than convincing.

"You think I would do that? I'm in law enforcement, for God's sake." He wanted to brush back the girl's hair from her face, maybe run a finger over her cheek to see if her skin was as soft as silk, but not with Margy watching him. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Margy laughed. "So what's the matter with her?" She fussed around the girl, checking her neck and her forehead. "She looks on her last leg, poor dear."

"I found her in town ready to pass out. Her plates and license say she's from California. She's probably been driving all night."

"To get here?" Margy's eyebrows went up. He knew what she meant—who would want to get to Cedarville?

"I don't think so. She said she was passing through before she fainted."

"Fainted!"

His radio buzzed and he answered, walking into the hall. A fender bender outside of town needed his attention—it seemed the occupants couldn't agree on whose fault it was. He leaned back into the room.

"Can you keep a watch on her? I don't want her left alone, and I gotta run."

Margy pursed her lips. "I'll call Isabel right now. She can look after my shop. Don't worry."

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Jackson gazed down at the girl. She was small and thin, but definitely well shaped beneath her black jeans and fitted white T. His body stirred again with both lust and protectiveness, and he felt his wolf wake inside.

Mine, the wolf growled silently. *Mine*.

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CHAPTER TWO

Warm and cozy, Deanna fought against waking. Sleep enfolded around her with the comfort of forgetfulness, and she didn't want to let her drowsy peace escape. The blanket rubbed on her arms, soft and thick, and the sheets felt silky beneath her lounging body. Was it a school day? Didn't she have a class to teach? She tried to think, her dreams mingling with reality until memory struck her like a hammer to the head, and she sat up gasping.

"I like you," the creature whispered in her ear as his fingers dug into her shoulders. Cold penetrated through her sweater, as if he held ice to her flesh. He reminded her of a Greek statue, white and heartless, and yet beautiful in structure, too perfect to be human. He leaned closer, his eyes pulsing scarlet with the pounding beat of her heart, and his bloodless lips smiling, slow and stretched.

Swallowing back a sob, she tried to free herself from the grip of the nightmare. She glanced around at her surroundings, not seeing anything for a moment but those vicious eyes. Slowly, reality came back. Where was she? Outside the small window, the sky was cobalt blue with silhouetted black treetops jutting up to meet the first glimmer of stars and a nearly full moon. She could feel the pull of the silver song, but she resisted. Not now. Not tonight. Tomorrow she would have to change though. She sighed and continued her inspection.

She could smell the Sheriff. His scent lingered in the air, but not enough to mark the room as his own. The simple furnishings, a double-sized bed with a white comforter, a dresser, a mirror, and the lack of personal effects told her she was in a guest room. A guest room in his house?

She heard voices from the floor below her. They spoke too quietly for her to make out individual words, but one was her Sheriff and the other was a woman. Her Sheriff? She bit her lip. He was certainly not hers!

Climbing from the bed, she found her body rested. How long had she been asleep? Too long, probably. Much too long. She stretched the kinks out and noticed her duffel on the floor. It was open, and she remembered how she had told him that he couldn't search her bag. He didn't

seem too concerned about the law, though that was the way alphas were. They thought everything belonged to them and didn't hesitate to take it.

Rummaging through her things, she found some old jeans—soft and well worn—and a black T-shirt and she changed quickly. Her eyes caught on her cell phone, and she picked it up. She had turned it off yesterday, mostly to stop her brother's unending calls. He was furious at her for running, but if she had stayed, he would be dead by now. She stared at the dark screen and sighed, her thumb over the power button. Should she call him? She chewed her lip and dropped the phone back into her bag. Later. She'd do it when she was on the road.

The voices silenced when she opened the door, but she knew they had heard her every step across the wooden floor. Werewolves had excellent hearing. She went into the bathroom across the narrow hallway, the green-tiled room definitely not where Sheriff Hot Body shaved or showered. The small bottles of hotel soap and travel shampoos gave off a generic feeling. This was a common area, used by many. The smells caught in the rug and hand towels were varied, men and women, tinged with the faintest musk of werewolf.

The cold water on her face made her feel alive again, and a brush through her hair pulled out the tangles, though her dark brown strands still begged for a shower. Ah! Wouldn't that be heavenly? But it would have to wait.

After drying her face, she stared into the mirror, drops still clinging to her cheeks and chin. Like tears. She looked too pale, slightly pinched with circles beneath her eyes. Not exactly super model caliber. She bit her lip to add some color, but castigated herself for caring. The green of her eyes was shot with a gold ring, the wolf rising inside her for tomorrow's full moon. Oh, how badly she wanted to race out into the forest and let the cool breeze tug at her fur and see the world through the uncomplicated instincts of her alter self. Tomorrow. Under the transforming gaze of the full moon, she would run at least one last time.

A simple ponytail neaten up her hair and a towel dried the rest of the water off her cheeks. A quick brush of her teeth, and she was as clean as she could be under the circumstances. No point in doing much else.

She slung her bag over her shoulder and headed down. The house had the appearance of a large cabin, with a wood paneled interior and stairs like hewn logs. The wide steps came down into an open, cathedral-ceilinged living room. A river rock fireplace dominated the space while a Navajo rug covered the floor and the overstuffed leather furniture faced the fire. No TV was in sight. The

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overwhelming smell of werewolf raised a warning over her taut skin, like static gathering in electrified air. She paused mid-step and gazed about the room, her hand clenched on the railing.

She breathed in deep. Six wolves, she estimated—a small pack then. In San Diego, the packs had run upwards to thirty or forty individuals. She had been living with just her brother though for three years, and six wolves seemed like plenty to her.

“You’re awake.” The Sheriff stepped out from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. His short, dark hair was mussed, and his hazel eyes held a gold gleam. “Want dinner?”

Sexiness radiated from his tan skin, the slope of his wide shoulders, and the nonchalant grace of his every move. His alpha magnetism did something to her knees, and she gripped the railing tighter. *Am I going to swoon now? Or just roll over and give him my neck?* She hated how her wolf wanted to grovel.

His gold-hazel gaze met hers, and she lowered her eyes, despite her best intentions to stand up to him. It wasn’t wise to meet an alpha’s stare for very long. The wolf saw that as a challenge. She fought the urge to flee back to the guest room, and walked down the stairs, taking them one at a time. The logs shifted in the fire, and the flames crackled.

“I need to get moving. You have my car?”

His scent fluttered her stomach and sent warmth downward.

He had traded his uniform for faded jeans and a flannel shirt—his gun belt and revolver were nowhere to be seen. But then a gun on a werewolf was redundant. Anything a werewolf couldn’t take down with his hands probably couldn’t be killed with a mere bullet or even an assault rifle.

Maybe a tank. She wished she had a tank—for that was exactly the kind of creature coming after her. Something a mere werewolf couldn’t and shouldn’t fight.

“I need to go. You want me to go,” she said, meeting his eyes but trying not to give him a challenge. She took the last step and faced him. The smells coming from kitchen, stewed beef, garlic, rosemary, filled her nose and made her stomach growl. Her cheeks reddened at the audible sound.

He quirked a dark eyebrow. “Tell me why you’re running. You want coffee with your soup?”

She sighed. Alphas were always giving orders. She wasn’t part of his pack though and didn’t have to listen to him. Well, not really. His voice compelled her, his aura of dominance made her want to obey, at least partly, but she had experience with alphas. She knew how to hold her own ground. Crossing her arms, she glared.

His lips twitched. “You do not like to be told what to do. Look at you. Your hackles are up, aren’t they?”

“Excuse me for being a free adult who doesn’t have to listen to you. I am not your problem,” she replied with a small growl.

He didn’t seem fazed. “You need help and I’m offering. I don’t see why you’re so defensive.”

Defensive? She crossed her arms. “You kidnapped me!”

He had the nerve to shrug. “You passed out on the street. What was I to do? Lock you up in a cell? I can’t have strange werewolves passing out on the day before the full moon. Now tell me what is going on, Deanna. Why are you running like you got all of hell on your tail?”

“I’m...” She hesitated and looked away. *I like you*, the creature had whispered. *I’m going to kill everyone you know*. “I’m being hunted by a vampire.”

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CHAPTER THREE

A plump woman bustled into the room, dishes rattling on the tray in her hands. She tossed back her shag-cut, silver hair and set her burden on the coffee table. The smell of hot soup drifted out from under the lid. *Beef*. Deanna's stomach went from a gentle rumble to a loud demand.

The older woman's eyes twinkled. "Stop bothering that girl, Creed, and let her eat. We can't have hungry wolves in the house." She smiled at Deanna. "Now my name is Margy and you sit down and eat, dear. You must be starving."

The kindness brought tears to Deanna's eyes, and though she still thought she should leave as soon as possible, how could she offend Margy? After introductions the woman settled her on the couch and let her eat, talking of nonessentials and chatting with the Sheriff as if she always spent her evenings feeding strangers who were pursued by bloodsucking fiends. Maybe she did. What did Deanna know?

Sheriff Creed sat in one of the wide chairs near the fire and sipped his coffee. Deanna fought the feeling of security that washed over her. It was a side effect of being close to an alpha and in the presence of other wolves, nothing more. Like the buzz from a beer, it wouldn't last and could only lead to trouble.

The rest of the pack was in the house, but she suspected they were keeping their distance because Creed didn't want to spook her. She counted six distinct scents, but only two females—herself and Margy. That was unusual for a pack—the norm was to go in the other direction, more females than males, since men were the mostly likely to go "lone wolf" and leave.

Her hand to her full stomach, she sat back against the soft leather of the couch and smiled at Margy. "Thank you, ma'am. That was delicious."

Margy's eyes sparkled. "I can see that you hated it. I'm not even sure that bowl will need to be washed, it's so clean."

The teasing words and the gentle expression on Margy's face reminded Deanna of her grandmother and pain stabbed beneath her rib cage, as if she were taking a stake to the heart. She clutched her fingers to her chest, and tears blurred her vision. "I'm sorry," she muttered, wiping at her face with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Now, now. Tell us your story. We'll help if we can." Margy patted her shoulder. Werewolves were demonstrative people, at least within their own pack.

But Deanna wasn't pack. She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "You can't help. Trust me."

"Just tell us what happened." Creed spoke gently, but with unmistakable command.

She couldn't resist and the words tumbled out, one on top of the other. "My brother and I live in Sage, in eastern California, up in the Sierra Mountains. It's so beautiful there, just sky, granite, and hills. We moved in with Nana when we left our..." She fell silent. Why they had left San Diego was another story. She blinked her eyes and continued.

"I'm a schoolteacher and my brother's a lawyer." Her voice cracked and she swallowed. Margy shifted closer, and put her arm around Deanna's shoulders. It was so good to be near someone, touching someone. She hadn't had the support of pack in so long.

Her voice trembled as she continued. Grief clenched her gut. "I was leaving the local bar after a glass of wine with a coworker, and I... I was stopped. A vampire. I don't know why he was there, or why he grabbed me. He just said he *liked* me."

The soft, whispery voice whispered at the back of her mind, and she tried to free herself of the memory. His hands had gripped her shoulders with a strength even a werewolf couldn't break. She had been moments from death, the parking lot lights yellow and buzzing and the smell of beer coming to her from the cracked open door of the bar. Neon had flashed from the darkened windows—red and blue reflected in the vampire's eyes.

Creed joined her on the couch as she shivered from the memory. His body heat, higher than a normal human's, warmed her one side while Margy pressed close on the other. Touch soothed her. She tried to say the next part without emotion. But the memory came back hard, hitting her like blows. Awakened in the middle of her grandmother's family room by the sun piercing the windows, she had seen blood. Blood and pieces of flesh. Her grandmother's head was on the fireplace. "Who's next?" was written in dripping smears on the wall.

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Sobs shook her. Creed pulled her onto his lap and she pressed her face into his hard, muscled neck. The pain that constricted her heart would probably never leave her. *I'm so sorry I failed you Nana.*

"I ran," she said softly, sniffing. "I didn't know what else to do, but I had to lead him away from town. My brother is furious with me. He wasn't at the house that night and didn't know. I thought if I could just get far enough away...maybe the rest of the town would be safe and Chris. He never admits that there's something he can't do, can't handle. I just couldn't lose him too."

She pushed back from Creed, wiping at her face. "But I don't know where to go. And now I've probably led him into your town. I have to keep moving. I've been here too long already."

"So are we going to kill this vampire, or what?" a new voice asked from across the room. She stiffened, but her nose told her it was one of Creed's wolves—and soon she saw all four of the others enter. They were an assorted group of werewolves, all male and all very aware of their space and standing. The one who spoke had to be the second in command. He was large and handsome, with skin so dark he could have disappeared into the night except for his bright teeth and the white of his eyes.

She breathed in the air, taking each of their scents, letting them wrap around her like a warm blanket. The feeling of family and security brought yet more tears. It had been so long since she had felt pack. For just a moment she wanted to luxuriate in the heated closeness. Creed's arms around her were rock hard, bands of steel, and she was very aware of her bottom on his lap.

"Why don't you have a pack, Deanna?" one of the men asked. He had silvery-peppered hair.

"My brother and I left a San Diego pack to go live with my grandmother." That wasn't the whole story, but she had shared enough with these people, who, despite the feeling of community, were strangers.

Silent communication was common in a pack, and she could feel it going on around her. It wasn't really telepathy, but more a sort of empathy, a shared awareness. Two of the werewolves headed for the door.

"Are they going to get my car?" She stood up, ignoring the pain in her heart, and trying to put aside the feeling of rejection. How could they not reject her? And she hadn't been asking for help anyway—why ask for something you couldn't get? Creed didn't want a vampire stalking in his

territory. The best bet for protecting his people, both normal and werewolf, was to send her on her way.

Her wolf so badly wanted to stay though. Instincts clutched her, told her that safety came in numbers. Her human reasoning kept her from begging them. She'd just get someone killed. She lifted her bag from the floor and slid the strap over her shoulder.

Creed rose, his face unreadable. His gold eyes danced with the firelight as he gazed at her. "They've gone to see if the vampire has entered our territory. If he tracked you here, Deanna, we're going to take care of him."

"He'll follow me out of town—"

"And then what? You can't run forever and he can. I'm not acting just as an alpha. I'm also the elected Sheriff, and I've promised to keep the citizens of my county safe."

"Your wolves are going to get hurt. Killed. I don't want that on my conscience," she said. "Just let me go." He was like her father had been, and like Chris was now—these men never *listened*. She was trying to save his wolves, damn it!

"So this vamp is chasing you across state lines? He's a determined bloodsucker. Maybe one of us should mention this to Henri." The big black werewolf smiled, a flash of white teeth in his dark face. She wondered why he didn't have his own pack yet—he certainly had enough charisma.

"It's a hunter," commented the older man. "Some of those vamps are crazy. I think it comes from living for centuries. And why get Henri involved? We can take care of one leech all on our own." He rubbed his hands together.

She shook her head. "You're mad! You don't know what you're talking about. A vamp is six times as tough as a werewolf." She glared at Creed, knowing that it was a bad idea to challenge him, but a small growl escaped her throat at her frustration. "Just let me leave. I don't want to be the cause of any more deaths."

"I'm not holding you prisoner," he said, calm but with unmistakable warning in his tone. "Wait until morning, and we'll talk again." His dominance exuded from every pore of his body, and her wolf wanted to back down and curl at his feet. She snorted, disgusted. She headed for the front door. Her wolf's need for pack was going to get them all killed, and she didn't want anything more on her conscience. Better to die alone.

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She grabbed open the door and stepped out into the night, the cool summer air caressing her face with the scents of freedom, wild woods, and old growth forest. The nearly full moon sang to her, whispering with power. She dug her nails into her palms. Not yet. Not now.

Bright outdoor lights around the cabin illuminated several cars and trucks parked in the gravel driveway. Thick pines bristled darkly on the edge of the clearing, silhouetted against the midnight blue sky pinpricked with a thousand stars.

She found her grandmother's Mercedes, but the Sheriff's Jeep and two trucks wedged it in. She cursed under her breath but heard Creed chuckle behind her.

Anger made her reckless. She whirled around to glower at his large silhouette. "How dare you hold me against my will!" Her shoulders hunched and another growl filled her throat. The outdoor floodlights blinded her, and she had to look away.

She heard him take a step closer. "Look, little wolf, I'll let you go, but don't be a fool or a martyr. I'm offering you the pack's help, but whether you want it or not, I'm going to take care of that vampire."

She clenched her fists. "Just like an alpha. You need to control everything. Won't admit that maybe you can't handle something." Her brother was just that way, which was why she had left him fuming back in Sage.

Creed came even closer, now his bulk blocked the light. "And you aren't doing exactly that? Do you think you can fight this vampire and win?" He loomed over her with rings of gold-fire in his eyes glowing from his backlit face. The wolf in him rippled close to the surface, and so did hers, and it took all her human willpower not to put her metaphoric tail between her legs and lower her eyes. His power came off him in waves and traveled with his scent right into her most primitive places. The sexual tension between them grew until it was painful. She wanted to submit to him in all ways—but she wouldn't. That was just wolf. The animal in her.

You are a person first, her father used to say.

"No," she finally answered, her voice hushed and serious. "I don't think I'll win. I know I'm going to die. I didn't want to leave him in my town. My brother is all the family I have left, and I taught third grade; I was worried for the kids. I know a lot of children and families."

"So you'll leave him in my town, to kill the children that I've sworn to protect?"

"No!" She bit her tongue. What could she do? "I'll keep moving."

“Where? The north pole?” She could feel his body heat now and tilted her head to gaze up at him.

“You don’t know...” she started.

“How hard it is to kill a vampire? I do. Trust me.” He raised his hand and touched her cheek, moving slow and giving her every chance to back up. She found her legs locked in place. His fingers grazed down her flesh, coming to her jaw line and tracing it to her chin. She thought he would kiss her—his hot breath was on her face—but instead, he bent his head to her ear and took her earlobe in his mouth. He ran the edge of his teeth up her ear, her entire body shivering and warming.

Her knees weakened and a small sound escaped her mouth. Her body tingled with awareness and sensitivity.

“Be my mate,” he whispered. “Can’t you feel the power between us?”

“No,” she raised her hands and meant to push him away, but instead she gripped his broad, hard shoulders. Desire cascaded through her—pure, pulsating need. *He’s a stranger! I don’t want this.*

But he was right. Something was between them, some purely physical connection—like the pull of magnets when turned in opposite directions. God, she was already moist and ready for him. Part of her burned with embarrassment, but the wolf was rising, growing stronger in the moonlight. She opened her mouth to protest but instead bit lightly on his neck. She tasted his hot, salty skin. His arms, rock hard bands of strength, pulled her closer, her breasts tight against his chest and her nipples like pellets, small and hard.

He growled, picking her up and carrying her as if she weighed nothing. He couldn’t move fast enough for her—she wanted him so badly—until he entered the cabin. The family room was empty, but she suddenly realized what she was doing. She was not going to sleep with a complete stranger and especially not with an alpha.

He hesitated too as they left the moonlight, and she could see his own control return. He set her down and ran a hand through his dark hair. The fire crackled in the sudden silence and sent sparks twirling up the chimney. “What the hell...” he muttered, turning from her.

She drew in a ragged breath. Her heart beat too hard in her chest, like a drum at the end of a solo. “Has that ever happened to you before?”

“No.” He still didn’t meet her eyes.

THE ALPHA

They both turned toward the open door at the same time—she stopped breathing and he crouched, as if ready to spring.

The unmistakable smell of vampire drifted in on the night breeze.

CHAPTER FOUR

Creed slammed the door with his foot at the same moment the other wolves were back. Two changed already—one of those was Margy, whose alter shape had grey-black fur and silvery blue eyes. She panted a bit and nudged Deanna's hand with her cold nose.

Deanna couldn't help herself, she knelt and put her arms around the other female, holding the smell of fur and pack to her as the memories hit her. She closed her eyes and trembled.

"He can't enter. My house is warded," Creed said with authority. "And Stan and Jessie know to keep their distance."

"But we never tested Isabel's warding," the older man said, his nostrils flaring in excitement and eyes flashing with sudden brightness. He was close to shifting. Deanna could feel the spark of current in the air. It called to her wolf.

"We should hunt," said Creed's second. He paced near the windows, moving with incredible grace. Muscles clenching and rippling beneath his tight T-shirt.

Creed shook his head. Was it just her imagination or did he appear bigger? Broader? "Not tonight," he said with the authority of the alpha. "Not unless we have to. I want to hunt this bastard when he's gone down for the day, and we have to get word to Henri. A rogue in Greenwood County is definitely his business, though he may want us to take care of it."

"Henri?" Deanna asked, raising her head from Margy's fur. "You've said that name before. Who is Henri?"

Margy made a soft whine. Creed stared hard at her, his dominance nearly a physical presence around them. "Our local Master Vamp."

She blinked. Horror filled her. "You have a master?" *And I came here? I trusted you?*

Creed gave the slightest smiles. "No. He doesn't own us. We have a truce and a division of responsibilities."

"And you let him kill your people." Her stomach turned.

THE ALPHA

“No. Of course not. Only rogue vampires kill people.”

“No one prospers when supernaturals kill humans,” said Richard as he came back from the kitchen with an armload of wooden stakes.

She shook her head, but didn’t argue. The idea of being *partners* with a vamp was beyond her reasoning ability. Bloodsuckers deserved to die—they were dead things, not natural, like werewolves. That’s what she had always believed anyway. She hoped she wouldn’t meet this Henri, she would certainly be tempted to drive a stake through his unbeating heart—if that was even how a vampire was killed. She couldn’t assume a thousand movies had it right. “Why would he help you kill his own kind?”

Creed shrugged. “He kills his own kind, Deanna. Rather more than we do. He’s an enforcer for the Master Vamp of Seattle. They keep a tidy house here in Western Washington. We, at least, have to get word to him.”

She turned away, confused and somehow angry at him. How could he align himself with vampires? They preyed on people.

The night beyond the windows called to her. She longed to run out the door, change shape, and lose herself in the dark forest. What had happened between her and Creed confused her, frightened her.

But the thing of her nightmares lurked nearby, a far worse terror than the strange pull between her and the alpha. The bloodsucker was out there right now. Watching her. She shivered and clenched her eyes close, fighting the crippling panic.

* * * *

It was a long night. She fell asleep at last on the couch, Margy beside her still in wolf form. Her fears tried to haunt, but the smell of pack comforted her despite her worries. She fell asleep at last, staring in the coals of the fire and listening to Margy breathe beside her.

She awoke in a strange bed thick with Creed’s scent. No panic or fear filled her though, just comfort and security. Ugh! That was worse. Her wolf was accepting him as alpha—the very last thing she wanted. Well, second to last. The first thing she didn’t want was to be a vampire snack.

Still, the cotton sheets were smooth and rich. He did have good taste in bedding. The sound of running water made her turn her head, and she found herself looking straight into his private

bathroom and shower. The glass door was only partially fogged and she held her breath while her eyes roved over his amazing body. Lean muscle wrapped in sinew bulged in all the right places, from his tight calves to his narrow hips to his broad, rippling shoulders.

He opened the door, shaking the water from his eyes. “You want to join me—or you just here for the view?”

She blushed, and gathered the sheet to her chest. “I’m not getting anywhere near you.”

“Scared, huh? All right.” He closed the door, and she ground her teeth. She listened to the hiss of the hot water while steam moved wet and warm over her face.

Scared? She had been running from a vampire for three days—she thought she had gone a long way to proving her courage. Of course, fleeing for one’s life wasn’t the same as fighting. And he thought she was scared of him? Well, to be honest, she was. The physical attraction between them was unlike anything she had ever felt. A formless panic gnawed at her. If she gave in—she could lose herself in him, in his dominance. Did she really want to be his mate, now and forever? But then, maybe it was purely physical, she reasoned. Maybe if she just got him out of her system...

Now that was a dangerous thought.

Her heart beat faster, and she went back to looking at him. Longing clenched her lower regions, her stomach tightening, her inner thighs quivering. Part of her wanted to run from the room, but instead she rose, dropped the sheet, and walked toward him.

The warm shower steam caressed her skin like a tropic mist, comforting and secretive. Her stomach fluttered as she admired him, but as he turned, what she saw grabbed her by the throat. She didn’t breathe for a moment. Old scars marked his back and shoulders, paler lines on his tan flesh—and she knew what they were. The marks from his last challenge. Had he killed the previous packleader? To wound a werewolf to such a degree must have left him near death.

He looked back at her, raising his eyebrows in question. She blinked and shook herself. The smile that widened his mouth was downright wolfy, and his eyeteeth gleamed white and sharp. He opened the door again, challenging her with his stance and expression. Her womb clenched tight with need and overruled all the doubts and questions that filled her.

Pulling her T-shirt off over her head, she relished the wet air on her bare skin. She unhooked her bra and let it drop to the floor. His eyes devoured her, but he didn’t move any closer. She found his gaze heightened her arousal and seared her skin. Her nipples tightened—the buds tight and hot, begging for his touch.

THE ALPHA

Next came her jeans, and a delicious power filled her as she saw his stare hungrily following her fingers. She flicked the button, and pulled down the zipper.

Could she do this? Make love to this stranger? Worries began to crowd out her desire, like the drone of flies around a fresh pie. She shooed them away. She wanted her damn pie.

She raised her eyes to his, and felt once more wrapped in safety. Water dripped from his body, running over his cut muscles like aqueducts channeling water through canals. Dark hair started at his chest and formed a line down his six-pack belly and finally formed a nest above his massive erection. His sex bobbed upward, huge and pulsing. Blood rushed to her lower lips, infusing her with a raw, animal lust, but it was more than that. Power snapped back and forth between them. It was a connection she couldn't understand and yet, couldn't deny.

She wiggled out of her jeans and panties and thanked goodness they were the nice pair, the black ones with the lacy edge.

He reached out and took her hand with his much larger one. His skin burned with heat from the shower, and he pulled her inside the stall, her feet half-slipping on the wet tiles. The steam swirled around them as he yanked her up against his hard flesh, his sex pressed between them. One hand held her firmly in place while the other moved to her chin. He tilted up her face and kissed her, but this was not the kind of kisses she had received in college. That was like comparing a fluffy, white lap dog to a wild wolf.

Her senses went mad. His lips claimed hers, took her with possessive assurance, and his body left no space between them. She found herself against the shower wall, and his hand stroked her nipple. He flicked the eager tip with this finger and thumb before slipping his hand down her side, caressing her trembling flesh.

She gave herself to the present and didn't think about either the past or the future.

Her wolf gloried in submitting to him—exposing her neck and giving him access to master her body. He ran kisses down the slope of her shoulder, running the edge of his teeth across her taut skin. She cried with pleasure and dug her nails into his back.

As he stepped back, his eyes raked down over her naked flesh. A wildness came into his bright eyes, and his expression grew even more feral. Hands on her hips, he knelt down, the water pounding the back of his head, and he parted her cleft with his fingers. She gasped, searching for breath in the steam. Her curls wrapped eagerly around his fingers and he touched her. Then his mouth kissed her, his tongue slipping into the warm chasm and dancing with her clit.

She raised her leg and wrapped it around his shoulder while he pressed closer, tasting her and feasting on her juices. One of her hands dug into his hair. She couldn't help herself. The pleasure was consuming her, just as he was. She moaned out loud and he sucked her clit into his mouth and tugged.

He stood again, running kisses up her flat belly and sucking on each eager nipple as he stood. She arched for him with wanton surrender.

He lifted her up by the bottom, and her legs parted to wrap about his narrow hips. The shower spray hissed around them. It was like drowning in hot mist. His lips found hers again, and his tongue probed, forcing her teeth apart and thrusting deep inside her. Claiming her. Owning her. *This is mine*, his kiss said.

And she sucked his tongue, telling him that what was his was now hers. Her submission brought breathtaking power. The muscles on his back clenched and rippled as he pushed her higher on the shower wall, and his strength was hers. She could feel the supremacy of his body, and she clung to him like a rodeo cowgirl taking on the wild bronco.

His massive sex pushed an inch into her moist interior—and she stretched to accommodate him. He slowed, as she gasped in pain and pleasure. He was too big. She didn't think she'd ever fit him in—but her body strained, and her legs tightened, and he pushed inside some more until she cried out. His hands cupped her bottom, and his gold eyes peered into hers. Tension clutched his shoulders and strained the sinew that wrapped up his neck. She could see the strain of control tightening his jaw as he fought to keep from pushing all the way into her. And she wanted him. But he was already filling her. She didn't think she could take any more.

His look of pain hurt her too though, and she clenched her legs, forcing him deeper. Her sheath stretched around him and he pushed deeper, one inch at a time. When she was sure she had reached the end of him, he pushed even deeper.

He pulled back before pushing forward again. Taking her with slow precision, he slid in and out, the wet sound of their joining mingling with the hissing rain of the shower. She dug her teeth into his wide, wet shoulder as pleasure climbed past pain. Her warm interior greedily sucked him up, and ecstasy built in her like water behind a dam. He impaled her again and again with his long staff, but she took it, absorbed his strength, felt his sex sliding inside her lubricated tunnel, and she opened wide for it. He could take anything he wanted.

And he took her.

THE ALPHA

A growl came to his throat, rumbling her body as his own pleasure began peaking, and the sex grew rougher. He thrust into her with renewed aggression, his teeth tightening on her shoulder. He pinned her to the hard tiles, and one hand braced her bottom while the other traveled up to her hair, tangling in the wet strands. He drew her head to one side and clamped his teeth on her shoulder. It should have hurt. She should have screamed and fought him, but the wolf relished his mastery.

The dam broke inside her, and light flashed before her closed eyes. Bliss erupted from her womb and exploded upward, shaking her with intensity. Waves of pleasure made her body clasp around him and her legs squeeze. She cried out, an echoing howl filling the shower, and her teeth came down on his shoulder, the salty-copper taste of blood filling her mouth.

He arched against her, and she could feel him pump hot seed into her as he came to a shuddering stop. He pushed one last time to fill her, pressing her hard against the tiles and his own teeth grazed her deep, the pain seeming to be part of the pleasure. She shuddered and gripped him, wet and trembling.

At last they were still, clinging to each other while the final trembling waves of passion slowly faded.

He reached behind him and turned off the water without withdrawing, and then kissed one last time, the taste of blood mingling with the water dripping down her face. She felt him slide from her body, and she made a sound against his open mouth, a protest that made him chuckle. "Don't worry. It'll come up again soon."

He set her down and dried her off, holding the towel to her shoulder as she gazed in shock and embarrassment at the bite mark—red and vivid on the sloped muscle at the junction of his neck. Had she really done that? Good God, she couldn't believe she had savaged him in such a way.

Blood dripped down his chest, but even as she watched, he healed. She stepped away from him and moved to the foggy mirror. Brushing aside the condensation, she stared at the new scar on her shoulder, the remnants of blood still staining her right breast. A red circle, as if an outline of the moon—a crimson moon.

He came up behind her and kissed her healed skin gently. "Don't worry. We won't do that to each other each time. The mating ceremony requires an exchange of blood."

“What?” she turned and stared up at him. His eyes were brighter than usual, full of wolf-magic. He grinned, appearing a bit wild and stunned. He reached out and touched the new scar on her skin with his fingertips.

“We mated, Deanna. You know that, right?”

She gave a coarse laugh, and pretended not to understand. “Well sure. But here in the human world we call it a one night stand.” She dodged around him and picked up her clothes on the way to the bedroom.

“Werewolves don’t have one night stands with each other, and especially not an alpha. You should know that if you were raised in a pack.” He followed her, still naked and amazingly beautiful. Morning light came through the window above the bed, bright and sunny, the sky above the treetops as blue as she had ever seen it. She chewed her cheek.

She knew he was right. She could feel his pack now on the edges of her awareness—and the only way she would have been able to do that was if she had joined them. *No! I don’t want this.* She pushed the awareness away.

“Deanna.” He stalked towards her even as she yanked up her panties. She glared, tears coming to her eyes though she didn’t know why she was crying.

“I’m not joining your pack. And I’m not your mate. We just had sex. That’s all.”

He stopped a foot from her, and she hated how he aroused her despite her complete satisfaction only moments ago. She hated, too, how she could feel his magnetism and his power, and especially how it calmed her panicky edges. She grinded her teeth.

“Deanna. You are my mate. You can’t sever that tie. We just exchanged blood.” He reached out for her, but she shrugged away.

She tugged on her clothes, ignoring how raw and warm the junction between her legs was. “You can end it. Force me from the pack. I’m leaving. The bloodsucker will follow me, and none of your people will get hurt.”

She grabbed up her bag and fled. She was running faster from him than she had run from the killing vampire, but she refused to think about that.

In the family room, the pack was waiting for her. They surged around her and surrounded her in their welcome. They hugged her, sniffed her, and passed her from one to another. It wasn’t sexual, this touching, but just pack business. She was a new member of their family, and werewolves this close to the moon were particularly touchy. Hands ran down her back and emotions embraced

THE ALPHA

her, flowing from the pack to her as their arms enfolded her. She knew their names now, without being introduced. Richard. Stan. Kile. Jessie. And Margy. Margy was crying happy tears.

The pack. *My pack.*

For just a few minutes she fell into the familiar joy—a happiness she had thought lost to her forever. She was whole for the first time in three years.

But she knew how the sundering would rip her apart.

She couldn't risk it. She wouldn't live through yet another exile, better to never join than to be sent away. The door was open, letting in the late morning air, a warm day, and a high summer sun already kissing the pine-scented breeze with heat. She ignored the voices calling after her, the hands pulling her back, and pushed out into the yard.

The sunlight blinded her for a moment, but she ran forward anyway, letting her other senses guide her. The gravel parking lot crunched under her feet, and she found the Mercedes where it had been the night before, but it was no longer trapped. The metal was warm to the touch. She fumbled with the keys from her duffle bag and the car beeped as she unlocked the doors.

"Deanna!" Creed jogged after her, his uniform shirt still unbuttoned around a T-shirt but his gun belt and radio attached. "Stop," he ordered, eyes flaring.

She hesitated, but she fought past the compulsion to obey and threw herself onto the front seat. Yanking the door closed with one hand, she turned the key with the other. He could have easily broken the window, or even ripped off the door, but he just knocked on the glass.

"Deanna, please. Listen to me."

She trembled, fighting the temptation to submit. Obey. This was why she hadn't wanted to mate with an alpha. Why had she done it? Her body had taken control and left her head on autopilot. The tears on her face dripped off her chin, and fell to her lap. No, if she didn't go now, his pack members would die, and he wouldn't forgive her. She wouldn't forgive herself, and she couldn't survive another exile. Better to go first.

The car jerked ahead and she left him standing in his yard, gazing after her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jackson raced after her, gripping his steering wheel while the trees on either side of the two-lane highway blurred into walls of green. With a touch to a switch on his control panel, he turned on the lights above his roll bar. Red and blue flashers were a symbol hard to ignore. He drove up close to her bumper and waited for her to slow down. He trusted his reflexes in case she decided to brake suddenly, and he wouldn't put it past her—the girl was nuts. Sexy, stubborn, and willful, too. Her intelligent, caring eyes might have seen into his soul, but she was still a piece of work. He wanted to shake her and kiss her at the same time. Damn his wolf for choosing her as his mate. His hands clenched harder on the wheel, until he felt the metal give. Damn it. Now he'd dented his steering wheel, as if that would be easy to explain.

He didn't know who he was madder at—her or himself. He could have stopped her from leaving. One word with the force of the pack behind him and he could have crushed her will. But he knew if he used *that power* on her, she would never forgive him. Better to use his human authority.

Another flick at the control panel and his siren warbled out. Lord, she was an obstinate woman. Where did she think she was going? To die? His temper flared once more. She was just going to let the leech kill her? What kind of plan was that?

And why was she so scared of pack?

Wolves, and especially females, wanted to belong. They needed the community of their own kind. Even lone males would eventually settle if they weren't killed in territory disputes.

A trailer-pulling SUV slowed her down, and he saw her debate passing, her car sliding to one side and then the other. Would she dare? His blood pounded in his throat in fear. Maybe he should slow down, pretend to back off. He didn't want to scare her into doing something stupid. At last though, she braked, turning the sedan into a pullout, wheels crunching and dust rising. He drove up right behind her and killed the siren. Relief was once again replaced with anger.

THE ALPHA

The frown she wore as he tapped on her window would have made many a man tremble in his boots. Jackson longed to toss her into the backseat and make her scream out in passion—or maybe he could shake some sense into her. His jaw muscles clenched. He doubted it.

Cars passed them, and curious heads turned to watch them. Warm, exhaust stinking air blew over them in waves. With such an audience, he figured she wouldn't resist arrest. She didn't. But she cursed him under her breath in terms that he thought would have made a Navy Seal proud.

"Don't make me use the cuffs, Deanna," he warned, although the idea stirred up a kinkiness in him he hadn't thought he possessed. He told his libido to put the brakes on.

She stepped out of her vehicle, twin spots of rage on her cheeks. "Why the hell are you doing this? Just let me leave town!"

"And die? I don't think so."

"You're abusing your power," she growled, hair whipping around her face as a logging truck drove by. "Sheriff," she added. She hunched her shoulders up, muscles moving beneath her cotton tee. Power tingled between them.

"I've run unopposed for the last two elections. And you were driving recklessly." He leaned closer, his face inches from hers.

She jutted her chin and glowered up at him. "Why can't you let me go?"

He didn't really know how to answer that. Since the moment he had seen her on the street yesterday morning, he couldn't help himself. He was drawn to her. "We're mated now," he said softly. "You're pack, whether you like it or not."

"Then exile me," she said.

Shock punched him in the gut. "Is that what happened to you? What son-of-a-bitch would do that?"

She paled and shook her head, dark strands of silk falling down around her face like a curtain. The wind of passing cars blew it back again, away from her pale skin. The smell of exhaust and hot asphalt competed with the muskiness of his scent on her. Her fear touched him, and he tasted the sorrow on it, and something else...shame. That one tore at him. Whatever was going on with her though, becoming vampire food wouldn't solve it.

"Deanna. It's too late. You'll never get far enough away now. Stay with me and fight. God damn it! Fight for your life. Let me help you."

She looked away, letting her eyes follow the hot blacktop of the road north as a semi passed them, gusting the foul air one more time. Her eyes closed, thick lashes falling like a fan across her cheeks. He saw the tension leave her shoulders though he could still feel her anger at him.

“All right,” she whispered. “But it better not be your funeral.”

The drive to the station overflowed with taut, silent tension. The girl beside him was a mass of nerves and confusions, but he didn’t know how to reach her. He figured the best thing he could do was deal with her vampire problem, and after that, things would work themselves out. One thing at a time. That was how he had lived his life since he was sixteen.

He glanced at Deanna, taking in her delicate face, her large, sad eyes. To his human side, she was a stranger. He knew little about her—but his wolf saw her as mate, and if he tried to fight his instincts, he’d lose. Whether they liked it or not, they were now bonded.

Surrounded by evergreens and a freshly tarred asphalt lot, the sheriff station sat back from the road, the tan siding and wide windows looking like any other low-rent office building. Both his deputies were out, one hunting a nested vampire and the other on traffic patrol.

He kept a firm grip on her arm as he led the way into the station house, the cool interior a nice contrast from the summer sun. Inside was a reception desk, a door to the back room and a small waiting area with posters about keeping kids off drugs and using bike helmets.

Arlene widened her eyes as she glanced up from the receptionist’s desk. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and feathers dangled from her ears. Most of the locals considered Arlene and her sister eccentric—they practiced witchcraft and had a reputation for being strange. Jackson had always found Arlene competent though, and her charms and crystals were harmless enough.

“Hey, Arlene. This is Deanna. She’s going to be around.”

“Not by my own choice.” Deanna glared in his direction.

“Well, hello.” Arlene looked from one to the other with bright blue eyes. “Um. Do you want me to take a long lunch, Sheriff? Everything’s been real quiet. Stan went to talk some kids out of lighting rockets into the brush, but other than that we seem in good shape.

“Why don’t you take the day off? Margy will be here soon, and she’ll take care of dispatch.”

Arlene shrugged. “Okey dokey. I had some shopping to do anyway.” She hesitated in front of Deanna, pursing her pink painted lips. “You know hon, you got a dark aura. Lots of lavender—I think that means trouble is coming after you.”

THE ALPHA

Deanna blinked. "That's true enough."

His receptionist smiled. "Stick with the Sheriff. I think you'll be okay."

Deanna jerked her head at him. "What if he's the trouble..."

Arlene smiled. "He's the kind of trouble a girl dreams of getting into." She winked at Jackson before leaving, hips swinging in her too-tight mini-skirt and calf-high white boots. Jackson raised his eyebrows at Deanna, letting her arm go.

"Coffee?"

"Aren't you going to lock me up in one your cells?" She smiled sweetly, her eyes flashing with temper.

"Don't tempt me." He stalked her, but she backed up quickly, her cheeks flushing for a different reason. The sexual electricity between them jumped back and forth, charging the air with current.

"What the hell is your problem? I'm trying to save your life and the lives of your pack." She frowned, but he could smell her arousal. Every time he got close to her, her body reacted. Her deep, haunted eyes stared into his, and he realized that she was more than just pretty. She was beautiful. And brave. Oh yes. Brave and foolish. Didn't she know he was trying to save her life?

Caught between the office wall and Arlene's desk, she glowered at him as he leaned in close, looming over her.

"You came to the shower," he said. "You took my blood just as I took yours. Maybe our wolves made us do it—but it's too late to change those facts." He ran a finger down her cheek and slowly over the long column of her neck. She shivered beneath his touch.

When she took a deep breath, her breasts touched his chest and even through the layers of fabric he could feel her tight nipples. He had never in his life felt such lust—it was like the compulsion to change during the full moon. He couldn't fight it. He put his hands on either side of her face, sliding his fingers into her hair and holding her still. She opened her mouth to say something, and he pounced, taking her and possessing her with a kiss as deep as he could make it.

She kissed him back.

He carried her through the door, past his deputies desks, the gun lockers, the files and computers, and finally to his private office. He cleared his desk with one arm. A cup of pens and a stapler clattered to the floor while papers flew and slid in every direction. "Say you want me," he growled to her, pressing her down on the hard surface. She wiggled beneath him. Her lips were

puffy from his kisses, her cheeks flushed with passion. The gold ring in her eyes brightened, streaking the forest green. She was so beautiful, and he wanted her with a madness.

“Jackson...”

“That’s right, baby. Say my name.”

“Jackson!”

“And what is it you want me to do to you?”

He nipped her ear and ran his teeth down her neck, then the tip of his tongue. She tasted of salt and flesh. Her body trembled beneath his. Stepping back, he ran his hand down her chest, between her soft breasts and over her flat stomach, until his fingers caught on the top of her pants.

He ripped her jeans off with a loud tear. She gasped but tossed her hair back and gripped his shirt in her hands. Smiling slyly, she tore both his uniform shirt and his cotton tee from his shoulders, buttons flying, and scraps of cloth falling to the floor.

With a bend of his wrist he freed his erection. He couldn’t believe how much he desired her—like craving water in the hot desert.

She lay open and parted for him, and the smell of her arousal brought a responding growl of need to his throat. He couldn’t hold his wolf back anymore.

He thrust between her legs into her smooth, wet sheath. Her inner muscles clenched around him as she moaned, and he plunged deeper, giving her more of his length. He gripped her ankles with his hands and held her legs up to his shoulders as he took her with ferocity. He pounded his sex into her and she rocked her hips to take even more of him.

Together they climbed ecstasy’s peak, and she gripped him as the tide of orgasm flowed over her. Her legs tightened and her hips jutted up against his. He couldn’t hold back his own pleasure. He dropped his hands, grabbed her bottom and thrust once more deep into her center, spilling his hot seed into her eager womb. Her inner muscles milked his penis, and waves of satisfaction rolled over him.

They lay together, connected, sated, their breath mingling. He wrapped his arms around her, lifted and turned, until he sat on the desk and she clung to his lap, her legs around him. The smell of sex enveloped them and his small office—a place he had always considered his private sanctuary. He held her close, reveling in her sleek, silky skin. Her head rested on his shoulder, and her long, dark hair tickled his bare chest. Catching up a strand, he pulled the silk between his fingers. She sighed.

THE ALPHA

“What is this between us, Jackson? Are we mad?” Her dark eyes opened and he could see the loneliness haunting her. His heart twisted. Whoever had hurt her so badly he wanted to kill.

“No sweetheart. We’re lucky,” he whispered, and pet back her hair. “Sometimes it just happens, and who are we to fight it?”

She shook her head against him but didn’t answer.

All the wolves of his pack knew he had just taken his mate. He could feel them on the edge of his awareness accepting Deanna. But would she accept them?

CHAPTER SIX

Deanna tugged on the sarong skirt so that it would cover her thighs—well, at least she didn't have much to change out of when the full moon rose in the sky. She hadn't had a choice. The lost and found box in the station house had been filled with sweatshirts and jackets, but little in the way of size six jeans, and her pants were torn to shreds.

Jackson had put on one of his spare brown uniform shirts, transferring his badge and gear with little fuss. He had left to help out at a fender bender on Main Street, leaving her to watch Margy work the dispatch and phones. She was surprised at how her heart twinged when he strode out the front door. She chewed her lip in worry. Was she really falling for the guy, or was it all wolf-magic and his alpha magnetism?

The station house was small, and Margy watched her pacing while she listened to the police radio. Her shimmery-blue eyes were sympathetic.

Deanna stared out at the sunny parking lot when she reached the front lobby. She was tempted to run out the front door, but she didn't have time to get very far before darkness fell, despite the long sunny evening of a northern summer. The vampire was probably already awake—but he couldn't come after her until the sun dipped below the horizon, which would be around nine forty-five that night.

She collapsed into one of the chairs and peered blindly at the old magazines while listening as Margy answered the phone. It was something about a neighbor lighting firecrackers. When the older woman had assured the caller six times that she'd send a deputy by, she finally hung up, then she spent a few minutes radioing Deputy Irvingson. As she laid down the headset, Deanna could feel her eyes on her, but she determinedly stared at the pictures of skinny movie stars on the cover of *People*.

"You're still fighting us," Margy said. "Why are you so scared of pack? You exchanged blood with Creed..."

THE ALPHA

Deanna ran a hand back through her hair. How could she say what was in her heart? She had been lonely for so long. Her brother was not enough for her, she realized, but could she trust another family? Could she survive it if they exiled her? She remembered her mother's blank eyes staring at her when she confronted her that last time, asked her why she would sleep with the killer of her husband. "That's the way it is for us," she had answered. "We follow the strongest in the pack—and that wasn't your father."

"It's just been me and my brother for three years," she finally answered. "We... We keep to ourselves."

"And why is that? Why aren't the two of you with a pack?" Margy got up and moved beside her. Deanna swallowed. It was such an ugly story. "We were...exiled. My father was a packleader in San Diego. He was, a surprisingly gentle man, and he didn't see how dangerous Jerry could be. Jerry came to us and started talking ambition, about building up the pack. He didn't like Dad's rules...and he wasn't alone." She stared at the sunlight fading to gold out on her parking lot. For Jerry to win a challenge for pack leadership, he would have had to have the majority of the pack behind him. It wasn't just strength that chose the leader, it was the power of the other wolves. That was the worst betrayal—the people she had known all her life chose Jerry over her father. Even her mother.

Margy reached out and put her hand on Deanna's shoulder. The simple touch warmed her, and made the painful story easier to tell. "He killed my father. Ripped his throat out." The blood had been so red, and her father had looked surprised right to the end.

"Oh Lord!"

"My brother, Chris, tried to stop him, but the others held him back—they had to beat him unconscious. My brother was exiled because he wouldn't accept Jerry as leader, and I went with him. I pleaded with my mother to come too but she wouldn't. The man had destroyed our family, but she still chose his bed." Disgust curdled in her stomach. "I haven't talked to her since."

Margy hugged her. "What a horrible story! You poor thing. No wonder you're having a hard time joining another pack."

Tears blurred her vision, tears she hadn't shed in years—but it was so good to be back in the warm embrace of someone who knew and understood.

"Creed's not like that, you know. He's a good man. He keeps this town and county safe, and he didn't even kill Howard, who was the last pack leader and my husband. Howard died of cancer four years ago, and he had groomed Creed to take his place. They were like father and son."

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her eyes. “But I saw Creed’s scars. It looked like he fought for dominance somewhere...”

Margy nodded, grief furrowing her eyebrows. “His father was a park ranger. He was killed by a rogue who wanted Creed’s mother. She was a lovely woman. She died too, trying to save her mate. Creed was sixteen. He hunted the wolf down in Vancouver and killed him. It was terrible. After that, he came back to us—you see I’m his mother’s sister.”

Deanna stared at her in shock. “I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry!”

Margy patted her hand. “I’ve had a good life, despite these tragedies. And I still have the pack. I don’t think I could survive without it. And all these boys—they let me fuss over them as if they were my children. Stan even has a daughter. His wife’s human, but she’s a good woman. That child is like my grandbaby! But I miss having a woman to run with in the woods—another female. And I could use a few more babies to fuss over. Howard and I couldn’t have any.”

Deanna gave a startled laugh. “I think you’re way too far ahead of me now.” Though her hand went to her womb and she wondered. Why hadn’t they used protection? She was a grown woman and should have thought of it, but when she was with Jackson, thoughts seem to fly out the window.

But babies?

Was she ready for instant husband, family, pack? A painful and powerful longing rose in her that she hadn’t even realized was there. Jackson was still a stranger—but he didn’t feel that way. She could touch his awareness even now, closer and warmer than any pack connection. The mating bonds flowed back and forth between them, even when they were apart.

She reached up and touched her shoulder through the sweatshirt she wore.

When Jackson came back, bringing pizza and his other wolves, he looked at her funny as if he could sense her turbulent thoughts. She couldn’t help but watch him and the rest of...her pack? Was she going to accept them? Well, they were risking their lives for her, and maybe it was time to stop being ungrateful.

She walked over to where they gathered at the counter and shyly joined in.

Jackson put his hand on her shoulder and kissed the top of her forehead. “Stop worrying so much. You’re going to give us all a headache.”

THE ALPHA

CHAPTER SEVEN

The men stripped in the back room, and while they did, Deanna went to the front windows to look out at the twilight-shrouded parking lot. The road beyond was empty of traffic, and the lights flickered at the edge of the street. The sun had disappeared beyond the trees, and the light in the sky bled slowly away, leaving the world to grey dusk and fading shadows.

She pressed her face against the cool glass, wondering what the night would bring. Would they all die? If anything happened to the pack, wouldn't it be her fault? How could she live with herself?

A black shadow diverged itself from the surrounding trees, a man wearing all black—artistically torn Levis and a silk shirt that shimmered. The man drifted with inhuman grace, far beyond what even a werewolf would have managed. He glided to the center of the lot and stood facing the station, silver chains at his neck glimmering. His pale face glowed beneath his long, brown hair. That narrow, sharp face was one she would never forget.

She backed up from the glass, a scream caught in her throat. She swallowed it. Not useful. Her heart fluttered too fast. *No! It's too soon. I want more time.* It didn't seem she was going to get any.

Her fear washed over the pack like a swift tide. "He's here," she said, knowing they would hear her. The door to the backroom was open, and Jackson strode through.

"Get in the back, Deanna." Jackson's voice was deep, half-growling. His shoulders hunched and bulged with shifting muscles and his eyes glowed fire.

She stepped behind the counter and ripped off her sweatshirt. The change was fast. She had been doing it all her life, and the flow of magic moved through her as inexorable as when Jackson made love to her. Both acts required a touch of submission along with firm control, and as she gave herself to the magic her bones shifted, her muscles moved, and her flesh reshaped.

Her wolf was on the small side, with golden brown fur and heavy ruff. She whined, her fear eating at her. Her mate put a hand on her head and calmed her. As long as the alpha led, the pack

would survive. That was all that mattered to a wolf. Her instincts overran her human worries and doubts. Her hackles rose and a deep growl rumbled her chest as the enemy approached.

The others were about her now, closing ranks.

The door opened, bringing with it a smell of the outside—asphalt, car exhaust, humans, and oh, the best of all—the forest. How she wanted to be among the trees. Why had they trapped themselves in this human fortress? A wolf didn't need four walls for protection. She needed to run. The smell of the living-dead hunter reached her nose and she whined in fear.

He stood only a few feet into the station and smiled a toothy grin. The teeth that filled his mouth were too-long and pointed to be human. The terrible scent of dead flesh hit her nose. It wasn't the reek of decomposition, but it was the smell of death nevertheless.

To the wolf, beauty in humans was ignored, but she knew he was beautiful. She had seen him with her human eyes. His face was young, though his eyes were old. Old and bored. His skin had the pallor of the dead, and his eyes gleamed bright like a cat's in a dark room. He ignored Jackson who stood human in front of him, and his glowing gaze found her in the back. He breathed in, as if scenting her, his nostrils flaring. He smiled in slow motion, exposing too-sharp teeth under his pallid lips. "I advise you to give up the little wolf, Packleader. I will take her and leave you to yours." His voice was beautiful, each word pronounced with an upper class English formality.

Her tail came down between her legs, and she crouched. Perhaps Jackson should do it. Should give her up. What point was there in fighting?

"We are mated. If you attack one of us, you attack us all. Do you really want a war, bloodsucker?"

The vampire moved faster than even a wolf could track him. He grabbed Jackson by the shoulders and tossed him out the large front window. The crack of glass shattered the silence. Wolves growled and jumped forward into the fight. But the vamp chased her, swatting them aside as he leapt forward. His eyes shone with a crimson power.

She ran, hoping to lead him away from the pack.

Jackson was still alive, she could feel him changing shape—but none of them could survive for long. For the good of the pack, she had to get him to follow her. She ran for the back door, the one beneath the green exit sign. After hitting the bar in the middle with her torso, the door flew open and she ran out into the dark night. The cool air caressed her fear-filled mind and she raced into the embrace of the trees.

THE ALPHA

The primal northwest forest comforted her terror, bringing reason back. She still planned to die—but just as she had led the bloodsucker away from her brother, she now needed to lead him away from the pack. They called her back, but she fought free. The good of the pack was more important than the good of the one.

Jumping fallen logs and dodging through brambles, she raced but not madly, not without reason. This forest wasn't empty, and she didn't want to lead the vampire into anyone's house or yard. She kept to the thickest part of the woods, away from the smell of humans, and hoped to slow him down on the blackberry bushes and tangled brambles. She stretched her body, the soft debris of the forest floor cushioned the pads of her feet, the scents filling her mind with the joy of being alive, of running free.

He was right behind her, though not with the clumsy, lumbering rush of a human. No, he swooped behind her, barely touching the forest floor.

It wouldn't be long now.

A clear space loomed ahead, but not someone's yard. The smells of metal and exhaust from industrial lawnmowers burned her nose. The wide track was unavoidable. She burst out of the trees and into a power line corridor cut through the forest. The massive towers loomed high overhead, reeking of steel and buzzing with electricity. She raced for the other side, hoping to reach the beckoning forest.

His thin, bony hands grabbed her back and tossed her up into the air. She hit the sloped metal of the tower and fell to the weeds at its base. She landed on her feet and turned to face him, teeth bared. Growling, she leapt at the pale column of his neck. If she could just get a hold of him...

He batted her aside, laughing. His pale face floated like a moon above her, but not her moon, not the one that sang to her of power, this one held only death. His eyes flashed crimson.

"Finally, my she-wolf. You are mine. You ran me a merry chase." His smile was a flash of long, pointed teeth. "I like you, remember? When I'm done with you, I'll go back to that town of yours and kill your brother, or maybe I'll start with the children. One by one, they will disappear into the night. The FBI will come. A task force will form. But they will be looking for a human serial killer, not me. Not Death himself." He laughed. "I am the implacable reaper. Come, give in to me. Lie down and submit as you did for that big alpha—and maybe then I won't go back to that dim-witted little hamlet you're from. Perhaps, I'll just stay here. One village is as good as the next."

He stalked toward her and she jumped again, snapping her teeth on his arm and tasting his foul blood. The cool liquid tasted to her like something inedible—like gasoline. The impulse to spit him out and gag nearly overwhelmed her.

She forced herself to dig her teeth in, to chew his flesh despite repulsion. He hissed and grabbed the scruff of her neck and threw her to the ground. Before she could jump back to her feet, he smashed a knee into her ribcage. She snapped at him, ripping off a finger, but couldn't get up. The cracking sound of her ribs breaking filled the clearing, and she whined in agony. His sharp teeth gleamed in the light of the newly risen moon.

The smell of her mate came to her nose, and Jackson hit the vampire from behind. They rolled away. She struggled to her feet, the pain ignored but her breathing rough. She hoped a rib hadn't torn into one of her lungs.

For a moment, all she could do was stare after Jackson. His wolf was huge and black, not a natural color for wolves, but one she had seen now and again on werewolves. The tips of his tail and nose glowed silver, and he was huge, the largest werewolf she had ever seen. His gold eyes shone with fire as his massive jaws dug into the shoulder of the vamp. If he had been fighting a human, he would have torn the arm off.

The vampire seemed merely annoyed. He twisted and punched the massive wolf hard. Jackson landed on his paws and leapt back. He clamped his huge jaws around the creature's skull.

Deanna rushed in, biting the vampire's arm. He swung her like a boy being bit by a mouse and threw her hard into the metal leg of the tower. The blow sent shockwaves of pain through her already damaged body. She couldn't breathe, and blood gagged her. She gasped, trying to get air into her lungs.

Jackson's raking teeth ravaged the vampire's face, stripping half his skin away, and his skull glowed white. Still, he laughed. The black wolf moved fast, teeth slashing and chomping, his huge hunched body knocking the vampire to the ground. Snarls and the sound of flesh tearing filled the clearing, while blood splattered over the grass like a warm rain.

She limped forward, tried to find a place to put her teeth.

The bloodsucker took hold of Jackson's head and twisted, the crack loud in the sudden quiet. He shoved Jackson to one side and floated to his feet, flesh hanging off him in strips and his bones, sinew, and muscle gleaming under the silver radiance of the full moon.

Jackson didn't move.

THE ALPHA

Deanna howled, though she knew he wasn't yet dead. His heart faltered in his chest. The rest of the pack was close, but they wouldn't get there in time. Good. She didn't want anyone else killed because of her. She crouched as the vamp approached her.

He grinned, his face a macabre nightmare. One eye dangled. "Now. Finally. We are alone."

She trembled, waiting for those cold hands to close on her, but she didn't run. This had to end.

She snarled and snapped at him. As a wolf, she couldn't die without fighting—so he was going to suffer one more bite, at least. The only thing she regretted was not being able to spend more time with Jackson. He was truly an alpha worthy of his power.

The vampire reached for her, but before she could lunge back, a shadow moved behind him.

She caught yet another dead scent, this one mixed with cologne and the smell of laundry detergent.

The shadow put a pale arm around the bloodsucker's neck, lifting him off his feet and driving a stake into his heart.

The vampire screamed, an unnatural sound that sent shivers through all who heard it.

And he melted. His flesh liquefied before her eyes, tumbling inward and the bones collapsing, until all that was left of him was a puddle of filth and a pile of white-gleaming bones. The smell made her whine.

A different vampire stood in front of her, his dark eyes glowing, and his black hair messy as if he had just woken up. He wore jeans and a black T-shirt that had the words "Got Milk?" on his chest. She gaped at him. He smiled. A dimple flashed in one cheek. "Hello, beautiful. So you're Creed's mate? I'm Henri St. Thomas."

She might have bit him if he had bent close, but he stepped back, winking. "Have a good night," he said before disappearing.

The rest of the pack rushed to her and Jackson, and suddenly noses, fur, and panting surrounded her. She pushed past them until she reached her mate. He lay so still. She licked his bloody cheek, whining at him to get up, to heal. Why were his eyes closed?

His pack raised their voices to the moon, the howls probably heard for ten miles in every direction. She pushed at Jackson with her nose. Was he still breathing?

Sorrow gripped her. The mate bond ached between them, and she could feel his struggling heart. One beat. Another. She raised her voice to the moon and called on the magic.

He whined, and she ran a circle around him in excitement. She could see him healing. Feel him mending. The shattered bones knitted together beneath his torn flesh and the bloody wounds closed. The pack magic surrounded him, gave him strength. Her tail was crazy wagging, like a dog, but she didn't care. She licked his face and touched his nose with hers, and he gave her a soft bite to tell her that he would be fine.

After climbing to his feet, he staggered a bit, but his wounds were healing. His heart beat strong and sure in his chest. His gold eyes found hers, and then he was licking her face, and she was licking his. Her mate. Forever.

When he was ready, they ran into the forest together, with the full moon's blessing shining down upon them. The others ran too, and Deanna gave herself to the pack. She joined her senses to theirs, welcomed the awareness each shared with her. They ran as one, and it felt like coming home after a long, long journey.

THE ALPHA

EPILOGUE

She awoke the next morning curled against Jackson's side, naked and yet warm. They lay in a small, rocky alcove. The moss cushioned their bodies and the sunlight fell dappled through the green canopy of the forest. Birds filled the air with song, and somewhere distant she heard a stream rushing. It was a beautiful day.

And the vampire was dead.

Tears came to her eyes, and she buried her face against Jackson, his warm arms coming around her and holding her tight. Grief for her grandmother poured out of her, memories bringing more and more tears. She hadn't realized how much sorrow she had been ignoring these last few days. Now finally, she could grieve in peace.

Jackson petted her skin and kissed the tears from her face, and at last, her gentle sobs came to an end, and she lay comforted in his arms. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm glad it's over. I just miss my grandmother."

"You'll have to tell me about her," he said, stroking her dark, tangled hair. He picked a pine needle from the clinging strands.

"I will. I want to tell you everything...but maybe not right this second." She wiggled up even closer, until she was pressed against the full length of his large, muscular body. Blinking the last of her tears away, she smiled up at him.

"Well, we have time," he said, smiling back. "We have the rest of our lives to get to know each other."

She stroked his rippled back, touching his terrible scars and his air-cooled skin. "Can this possibly work?"

"From the moment we met, Deanna, you belonged to me, and I belonged to you. I love you and there's no use fighting the magic. That's like trying to fight the moon."

CYNTHIA CAROLE

She gazed into his gold-rimmed hazel eyes and slowly smiled. “Well then, we might as well give in to it and see where the magic takes us.” She pulled his face down and claimed his lips.

THE ALPHA

About the Author

I wrote my first story when I was in the fourth grade—it involved talking animals, a dark forest, and of course, romance. A hundred and fifty handwritten pages later, I knew I was in love with telling stories.

When I'm not chasing after my three kids, walking my dog, or being condescended to by our cat (who believes he is feline royalty), I am chasing after my muses. They always involve strong men and women finding love and passion against the odds. Whether they are ruthless warriors or noble vampires, runaway princesses or powerful witches—I hope my characters resonate with my readers and bring them a well-deserved escape. One thing you can count on, I will always provide a happy ending.

Find out my latest book news at www.CynthiaCarole.com

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