

Wyoming Wild 1

**When a  
Pack Dies**  
Gwen Campbell

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## **When a Pack Dies**

### *Wyoming Wild Book 1*

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**Wyoming Wild Book 1**

**When a  
Pack Dies**

**by**

**Gwen Campbell**

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter One

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“Yes I *heard* you, Helen.” Fina juggled her cell phone, keys and shoulder bag. She shut the car door with a quick punch of her backside. “I *did* ask and no we can’t get the keys early. Why? Because the previous tenants haven’t moved out yet for crying out loud.”

Technically it was still spring but the hot weather had hit with a vengeance a few days ago. Tennessee was like that. Her sleeveless blouse was already sticking to her back and she’d left the air-conditioned comfort of her vehicle only seconds ago. Fina walked faster, hurrying for the gloriously climate-controlled interior of the house she’d lived in for all of her twenty years.

“The good news is the lease is signed and they got my dad’s check for the first month’s rent.” She freed up a finger, punched the lock button on her key fob and didn’t even pay attention to the ping and quick headlight flash from her compact, hybrid SUV. It had been her high-school graduation present from her parents.

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“Honestly, you’d think you’d never had an apartment of your own before.” Fina laughed with delight and anticipation. The girl on the other end of the phone—Helen, her best friend forever—laughed with her.

“We can pick up the keys on the first of the month...yes I got measurements. Jeez, you *and* your mother are crazy-insane fixated on curtains.” Fina’s bag slipped off her arm, jarring the phone in her hand. She held on to everything, barely, hoisted the strap of her bag onto her shoulder, and hurried across the darkened drive toward the front door of her home.

“I gotta go, Helen,” Fina blurted out. She trotted up the steps and her soft sandals made no noise on the porch. “I just got home and I’m dying here...yes you’ve told me a zillion times to just get used to the heat and embrace it. I swear if you start spouting that Zen garbage when we move in together to go to college in the fall, I’ll start smacking you around.” The doorknob didn’t turn in Fina’s hand and the porch light hadn’t been turned on, although she was perfectly capable of seeing in the dark. She frowned and fumbled some more with her key ring. Her parents never

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locked the door, not before ten anyway. They'd just got sick and tired of having to open it for one of their four adult children every time one of them forgot their key. "No jury in the land would convict me for smacking you," Fina added warmly. "I gotta go, Helen," she repeated. "It's gonna be great," she added with an excitement that made her shoulders come up and the back of her neck vibrate.

Fina snapped her cell shut, dropped it into her bag, shoved her key into the lock and turned the doorknob.

"I'm home," she called out to no one in particular, dropped her keys in her bag, dropped her bag inside the door then pulled the door shut behind her as she toed off her sandals. "You won't—" Fina's head snapped up. The instant she smelled the blood, her canines extended, making her gums stretch and burn. The wolf inside her leapt forward with the surge of adrenaline. Her fangs slipped over her lower lip and that was before she saw a man's shadow at the far end of the polished hallway. He didn't move like her father or older brother. She sensed the wolf in

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him but he didn't smell like a member of their pack.

The smell of blood freshened as the air conditioning cycled on, kicking the fan up to a higher speed. The air rushed up at her from a grate in the floor. Fina gagged on the smell. *That* was her pack's smell. Her family's smell. They were the source of the blood. The man stepped out of the living room with the shadows of two others behind him. He was tall, with ragged, pale hair and was wearing a pair of her father's pants and nothing else.

The daughter of an Alpha, Fina's first instinct was to fight, defend her pack. But it was three against one and her common sense won out over her wolf's instincts and she spun around. The doorknob was turning under her fingers when strong hands grabbed her from behind. He was big and she was small...it was no contest.

He looped an arm around her waist, hoisted her off her feet and carried her across the wood floor her mother kept polished like it was a religion. Fina smelled more than saw the random, dry drops of blood on it. She started to change into her wolf form. In her human form, she was small

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and delicately made. As a wolf, she was large and powerful —especially so for a female. The first thing she consciously changed were her hands. Her claws extended and she raked his naked abdomen, aiming to disembowel. He smashed his free hand into her wrist, deflecting her aim. Fina broke his skin but penetrated no deeper.

Fina grunted and curled into a defensive ball when he stopped long enough to slam her skull into the wall. Pain and colors exploded in her head, obliterating all thought and her hands returned to human form.

“Submit or die, bitch,” the man carrying her growled. He cradled his wound with one arm and tightened the other until Fina couldn’t breathe. “Time to meet your new Alpha.”

He spun into the living room, slammed her hip into the door frame as he took the corner then tossed her onto the hardwood floor. Fina yelped as pain rocketed through her back but scrambled to her feet.

The smell of blood was thicker here. A part of her brain shut down, screaming when she recognized her father’s smell and her older brother’s...and saw bits of gore clinging to the



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white, plastered ceiling. The rest of her brain jerked into alertness, despite the pain still rattling it. Werewolves were sitting around her family's living room, lounging on the furniture and drinking out of glasses from her father's bar. Seven men, some of them naked, some of them wearing her father's or her brother's clothes, ranging from twenty to thirty years of age. If they'd shifted while clothed, the change in mass would have shred whatever clothing they'd been wearing. They grinned at her savagely.

"Well, well...aren't you a pretty little thing. I could just eat you up." A tall man stood and walked toward her. The one who'd been carrying her shoved her forward. She turned back to him, snarled and drew her arm back. Her claws were extending again and this time, she didn't plan on missing her mark.

"Now, now..." The tall man grabbed Fina's long, auburn hair and yanked her head back. "Mind your manners, little bitch." He was much stronger than he looked. Rough power pulsed from him and Fina recognized him for what he was—a rogue Alpha. His hand still buried in her hair, he turned her to face him. Fina shuddered

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when she saw splashes of dried blood on his forehead and chest. "My pack was a little shall we say overzealous when we carried out our assault on your pack. Turns out we haven't found a single breeding female...alive that is."

His head shot up and he glared at the other werewolves in the room.

"Still, we have to start somewhere." He sniffed her and his lips curled back into a smile that terrified Fina. "You'll do just fine."

Claws appeared from every direction, shredding Fina's cotton blouse and jeans. The rogue Alpha shoved her to the floor and as she fell, she changed into her wolf form, biting and clawing. She clamped down on the thigh of one of the rogues, growling with savage delight when her teeth pierced fabric and flesh. She'd missed the artery and she unclamped her jaw, aiming her next bite. Fina never got a chance to sink her teeth in again. The rogue Alpha changed as well. Fina's legs splayed as the weight of the larger wolf slammed down onto her. Instinct held her still when his jaws fastened onto the back of her neck, over her spine.

The first werewolf, the one who'd grabbed her

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at the door, stepped in front of her slowly, his movements almost casual. Two thin rivulets of blood had spilled out of the tears to his abdomen but they'd already clotted. Werewolves healed fast. He knelt down in front of her and dipped his head to one side so she could see his eyes. "Submit or die, bitch," he repeated conversationally then cuffed the top of her snout. His Alpha growled at him and Fina felt hot, moist breath a second before the Alpha's vibrating jaw clamped down even harder, driving the points of his canines into her skin. "Okay, scratch that," the man corrected himself nervously. "Take it furry or smooth—whatever. Oh and welcome to your new pack."

He stepped back, chuckling darkly. Fina struggled wildly, her back end jerking up and sideways. She fought for a long time but the rogue Alpha's grip on her neck didn't slacken. Her skin tore and her fur hung from her in thin strips. She felt trails of her own blood snake through her coat. Fina fought and fought until she had to stop to breathe. In that instant, his weight shifted and he covered her. A human hand—she didn't know whose—yanked her tail aside and the Alpha shoved the knob of his penis into her roughly.

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Fina howled in pain and anger as he started humping her fast. The man standing in front of her watched with barbaric intensity, adjusting his erection before pulling off the pants he was wearing. He changed into wolf form and circled them like a shaggy, gray specter. One by one, the other rogue werewolves changed too and joined him in his predatory, patient march.



Fina woke with a start. The sun hadn't risen but the room was slightly brighter than nighttime. Two large, naked bodies crowded hers on the hard floor and she grimaced at the cramp in her side and thigh. After she'd fallen asleep, her body had returned to human form which would explain why she hurt so much. She moved and fresh pain shot through her. Her head, muscles, neck and between her legs ached so bad she thought she was going to throw up. She lay her head back down, waiting for the nausea to pass. When it did, she took two deep, deliberate breaths and forced herself to stand. She stepped over the wiry, sleeping body of the man who'd been sprawled out in front of her and her shaky

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knees almost brought her crashing down on top of him. Fina held back a yelp of pain, stayed on her feet and made her way toward the front door.

She changed direction, heading for the kitchen instead when a tall, thin body, laying on the rug in front of the sofa, stirred. He was younger than most of the werewolves in the room—maybe twenty-two years old—and he looked up at her sleepily, got up slowly, stretched, scratched his groin and followed her.

Inside the kitchen, Fina turned on the lights and stood in front of the coffee maker, breathing and considering her options. He ambled in behind her and switched off the light with a growl of disapproval.

“Leave it on,” Fina ordered quietly.

“Bossy,” he grouched but flicked the switch back up. He walked up behind her, reached around her and squeezed her breast.

“Would *he* be happy to see you doing that without his permission?” Fina jerked her head in the direction of the living room. It was a long shot. She didn’t know what kind of control the

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rogue Alpha had over his pack or what liberties he'd let them take with their females. But since she was their only female member, it made sense that he'd use mating rights as a form of control over the others.

The werewolf behind her snarled but lifted his hand from her breast. She wanted to shudder and scream. Yanking open a cupboard instead, Fina got down a canister of coffee grounds. It gave her a plausible reason for being in the kitchen at this hour and the smell would confound the others... for awhile at least.

When the coffee started to brew, Fina took stock of her physical condition. She was pale and shaky—whether from shock or loss of blood she wasn't sure. Werewolf healing powers were extraordinary and even now, she could feel the massive bruising on her hips, thighs and head fade in tiny increments. The pain between her legs was pervasive though and she felt torn, raw and caked with spent semen. She watched the male werewolf warily as he ripped a handful of paper towel off her mother's holder, wet them under the tap then lifted her heavy, tangled

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hair and pressed the toweling to the back of her neck.

“You won’t get tore up as much if you don’t fight,” he mumbled then yawned lustily as he sponged the dried blood off her skin.

Fina bit back the urge to swing around and tear out his throat. She fought down her wolf who wanted to kill this interloper—just as he’d likely killed members of her pack—but he’d provided the insight she needed to plan her escape. Mated female werewolves stayed put. They didn’t leave the security of their pack and this man, although he was young, clearly believed she was now part of his pack. They’d probably watched her father’s land, planned their attack and struck before dusk when the eight families that comprised Fina’s pack were sitting down to dinner in their homes. The cooking smells would help mask the rogue werewolves. Every house would have had the air conditioning running, keeping their smell outside. She held herself still and tried not to wince when he wiped her still-jagged wounds too hard. He gentled his touch, moved closer and started rubbing his flaccid penis over the crevice

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in her rear end. Fina stepped away and got out a coffee mug.

“Want one?” she asked with deliberate, bored annoyance, jiggling the mug in the air.

He growled quietly then threw the paper towel onto the counter. “Nah. I’m going back to sleep. Let me know when you decide to take that pickle out of your ass. Maybe we can do it in our skin instead of in our fur,” he added nastily, slapped her backside then ambled back toward the living room.

Fina exhaled shakily. When the smell of brewing coffee had filled the first floor, she padded down the hall and headed upstairs, stepping over the fifth and eighth steps which squeaked. She peeked into her bedroom. The smell of blood was thinner up here and she stopped cringing every time she turned a corner. Fina dressed quickly, not bothering to clean herself even though she desperately needed to scrub herself raw in a scalding shower. If she was going to escape, she had to make her move while the rogue werewolves were still asleep. They assumed she’d accepted their claiming and why shouldn’t they? After their Alpha had mounted



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her, Fina had been too in shock to fight. She'd either blocked out the memory or simply stopped paying attention after the third wolf. A trumpet of hysterical laughter tore at her throat and Fina clamped her hands over her mouth, stopping it from forming. Wearing lightweight clothes, she headed back downstairs, moving slowly but deliberately. If any of them woke up and saw her, they'd assume she was moving around the house normally.

She kept moving and didn't freeze or bolt when a shaggy head lifted off the back of a chair and pale eyes watched her as she walked past the living room. They glowed in the near darkness before shutting tiredly. The werewolf's head drifted back down. Silently, Fina continued down the hallway, picked up her sandals, handbag and opened the front door. She closed it behind her but not enough for the latch to catch, making that unmistakable sound. Moving deliberately and expecting to be tackled from behind any second, Fina walked to her little SUV, opened the driver's door, got in and drove away.



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Fina didn't know where she was heading until after she turned in at the sign marking the entrance to Whitesage Nursery. The sun was starting to come up and she pulled into the parking spot marked Reg Whitesage, Owner. For an insane minute, Fina reminded herself that her father would give her hell if she stole his spot. Keys in hand, she headed for the side door of the nursery complex...the door marked Office. She scratched her cheeks, annoyed by a sudden itchiness and realized there were tears on her face. Fina stopped letting them bother her and simply let them fall as she unlocked the door to her pack's primary business, turned off the security system and headed for her father's office.

Her hand was trembling and she shook it, making it obey before turning the tumbler on his wall safe. The tumbler clicked one last time and the bolts pulled back. Fina turned the handle and her hand went straight for the papers bundled in the back. She checked them with numb deliberation...her father's will, deeds to the pack's land, investment statements. There was a tidy stack of twenty and hundred dollar bills and Fina took those too, closed up the safe and

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left the office. Her next stop was one building over—the refrigeration drawers. The secure drawers holding the company's trademark stock of rare, exotic and antique fruit and decorative plant seeds were small and unassuming and unless you knew what they were, you'd overlook them completely. She opened up one of the computer terminals nearby, keyed in new access codes and wiped the old ones out. Fina made sure the refrigeration units were locked into a hibernation setting and headed for the exit. She moved to one of the few windows that opened, cranked it and breathed in the outside air. She didn't scent the rogue wolves. She closed it up again and returned to the main office, re-armed the security system, locked the door and stepped outside.

She breathed in again but as fully as she could this time, letting the humid air pass over her tongue and into her nose. There was blood in the air, lingering traces of it. With the dawn, the wind had died down and Fina detected traces of the slaughter of her pack, overlaid with the scents of other werewolves. She knew who they were because each one of them had left his stench on her body.

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Back in her little SUV, Fina bundled up the papers and money, shoved them under the seat and drove away. It was going to be another scorcher and when the wind picked up in a few minutes from now, it would come out of the south-east. At the next intersection, she turned north, heading upwind. The windows were shut and the air conditioning was on...much of her scent would be contained in the vehicle but she wasn't going to take any chances.

The road took her through their little hamlet. The automatic streetlights switched off, making Fina start. She gripped the steering wheel tighter and kept driving. The little general-store-slash-post-office marked the northern boundary of her pack's lands. Humans lived beyond that and, in the quiet, empty, dawning light, Fina drove past their sleeping homes. She drove past the high school...they'd finished writing their final exams last week. She and Helen were going back to college in the fall. Fina was studying business administration and would come back to work full time in her family's business after she graduated—work with her father and older brother and the other members of her pack. Fina lacked the ability to question the sanity of her

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deep-seated denial. She and Helen were best friends even though Helen was human and had no idea she'd lived amongst werewolves her entire life. Fina's hand was already reaching for her cell phone before she yanked it back. She wanted to go to Helen's home—knock on the door and collapse in Helen's mother's arms and weep and scream and—and Fina kept driving, obeying the speed limit. She rubbed her sore eyes impatiently. Humans and human law enforcement couldn't help her. She couldn't send them into a den of rogue werewolves. The death count was too high already.

Fina exhaled shakily. She was alone, barely out of her teens and her pack was dead. She had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. She could ask another pack for sanctuary but after the rogues, she had no stomach to trust other wolves. She couldn't be sure of her welcome, despite the fact that she was female. She would appear weak and useless.

In their world, power was held by the strongest. Alphas could be challenged for leadership although it was usually done honorably, one-on-one. Rogues and strays were viewed with distrust

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and often eliminated but unless the rogues that had killed her pack went after another pack, no werewolf alive would be quick to challenge them. They'd be monitored of course and nervous, wary eyes would track them. But the cruel truth of it was that her pack lands had been taken over and Fina had two choices—bond with the rogues or leave. She'd already made that choice and was about to press down harder on the accelerator when her foot shifted to the brake pedal. She switched on her turn signal and pulled up in front of the local primary school.

Fina's wolf eyes spotted something that defied logic. There was a small boy sitting on the curb in front of the locked, dark school, with a backpack beside him and a small, electronic game in his hands. He didn't even look up when she stepped out of her vehicle.

"Ryan?" Fina said, her voice barely above a whisper. Ryan Upton was the son of her father's Beta and she'd babysat the loud, exuberant six-year-old often enough that she'd considered foregoing the pleasures of motherhood entirely. She knelt in front of him. Ryan loved his toys, especially his electronic gizmos, but she saw

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that the game in his hand was simply cycling on a Game Over message, even though his small, dirt-crusted fingers were moving randomly over the buttons. She brushed his dark-blond hair off his forehead. Like any werewolf, even as a child, he inhaled, instinctively focusing on her scent before her face. He jerked upright and scooted back from her.

Fina knew why. She smelled like the rogue wolves.

Ryan's brown eyes were frightened and too large for his small face but his shoulders went down when he recognized her.

"How did you get here, Ryan?" Fina asked as she picked him up. He didn't protest. Even when she leaned over to pick up his backpack, he sat with disturbing stillness in her arms, his thumbs still pressing buttons. She sat him in the passenger seat.

"My dad and I, we were going to have a sleep-out last night. In the tree house he built." Ryan Upton continued to focus on the game in his hands and lifted his arms only when Fina fastened the seatbelt around him.

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Fina knew Ryan's mother would die before letting her only cub wander out alone. Ryan's father would die before letting rogues take over his pack.

Ryan continued unemotionally. "Something happened because he told me to climb up into the tree house by myself. He told me to get into my sleeping bag and stay there until he came and got me. I waited and went to sleep but I knew I had school today and I got here early."

Fina was astonished that Ryan had obeyed his father and stayed put overnight. The kid only listened to her when she threatened to take away his toys. She shut the passenger-side door, looked around, scented the air deliberately, got back into her vehicle and drove back onto the road. She turned on the air conditioning, closed the external air vents, checked the rearview mirror and pressed on the accelerator.



An hour before dusk, Fina opened the motel room door and held Ryan back so she could walk in ahead of him. She was so used to him



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barging ahead, being loud and annoying that his acquiescence was eerie. It wasn't just letting her check out the room before letting him enter either. After she'd picked him up, she drove for two hours before stopping for gas and breakfast. She paid with cash. Ryan didn't complain when she ordered pancakes, fruit and milk without consulting him. He just picked up a fork with one hand after she cut his pancakes up into bite-sized pieces, started eating and kept playing with his game with the other hand. Lunch was the same, only they had cheeseburgers. By then, Fina's brain had stepped out of autopilot. It had to. It wasn't just her anymore. She checked the map in her glove box, drove to the nearest large town and headed for the Wal-Mart. Ryan sat in the cart, his thin legs dangling in the air, his fingers moving randomly over another one of his electronic games—the batteries had died on the first one—while she bought them each two changes of clothes, underwear, socks and a pair of shoes, along with an ear-jack equipped portable radio. She also picked up a jumbo pack of batteries.

Ryan walked beside her now, holding onto her purse strap with one hand as she entered an

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electronics store in the same plaza. She bought a laptop, wireless internet service and a new cell phone. The cash wouldn't hold out if she used it on big-ticket items so she used her credit card...well, her father's credit card. Fina thought she'd lose it when she signed the receipt but the light pressure on her bag forced her to keep it together. The rogues would have figured out hours ago that she'd taken off and was probably not coming back. They weren't vested in her and although their Alpha would probably knock some heads around for letting their one and only female get away, it would be a lot easier to look for other women to join their pack than track her down. They had their own land now. Chances were pretty good they'd be able to lure a few young or disenchanted females away from other packs. They wouldn't look for her, that is, until they realized she'd taken all the pack's assets and Fina had a plan to systematically strip every last penny from the pack's coffers. When the human authorities figured out that a massacre had taken place—if they ever did—the rogues would have to vacate the pack's houses for awhile at least or until they came up with a cover story for their presence. Who knew? Maybe they'd figured that

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part out already. All she knew was that they'd be seriously pissed when they realized they were living on land they couldn't legally claim title to, with businesses they probably had no clue how to run and not a cent in the bank to tide them over until they figured out how.

She loaded Ryan and their purchases into her vehicle and headed for the largest crossroads in the area. A poster slogan she'd read in some history class had been popping into her head that afternoon, not often but often enough for Fina to latch onto it weirdly.

Go West, young man.

If it worked for young men, it would work for her too. Fina reached the crossroads and turned onto the westbound interstate ramp.



Just after noon the next day, Fina was using a payphone in a mall maybe forty miles from her home. She'd doubled back in a big circle, paying cash at every stop. "May I speak to Percival Dust please," she said politely to the woman who answered.

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There was hesitation on the other end of the line. “One moment please,” the woman finally replied and put Fina on hold. Canned music echoed through the remarkably busy mall, considering it was a Thursday, but then the high school kids were out of school now and the grade school kids would get out the end of next week. Fina glanced over at the mall’s daycare service. Ryan was inside the fenced-off area, sitting on a colorful, square cushion, playing with one of his electronic games. When a little girl came up to him and asked him what he was doing, he showed her. Fina had asked him to be quiet and polite and wait for her. She was still surprised every time he obeyed.

“Percival Dust here.”

Fina gripped the top of the payphone and sighed. Kevin Percival Dust was her pack’s lawyer. Her father had picked him because he wasn’t local, although still in Tennessee. He was good at his job, he worked out of a mall—which meant that if one of them had to go in covertly they could pretend they were shopping—and he was happy to indulge his clients’ quirks for a slight markup from his usual fees. One of the

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Whitesage account's quirks was a safeword. If they needed an urgent meeting and asked for Percival—Kevin's middle name—instead of Kevin, he'd introduce himself back as Percival if it was okay to come in. Until now, Fina was pretty sure nobody had had to use the service.

"I'm downstairs. I need to see you," she blurted out.

"Come up," was the lawyer's curt and immediate response. Fina deliberately hadn't watched the motel's TV and every time the news came on the car radio, she'd changed stations. She didn't want Ryan to hear news about his family's death sandwiched between traffic reports and an ad for potato chips. Last night, she'd been too tired and too frightened to turn on the portable radio after Ryan had gone to sleep in the bed beside hers. From Dust's response, she had to assume there'd been something about her pack on the news.

Fina glanced over at Ryan once more, scented the air yet again then got onto the escalator that would take her up to the professional offices rimming the second story of the mall.

On being shown in, she sat down nervously in

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a leather chair across from the lawyer's desk. She set her purse down by her feet. Kevin Dust was pushing forty, pudgy and bald with only a rim of dark hair around the back of his head. His eyes were a dull, dishwater gray but once you looked past the uninspired color you could see the man's intelligence looking back at you.

Fina lifted her chin up. "My name is Fina Whitesage." She didn't know if he'd remember her. He held out his hand and it shook only slightly in hers. For reasons Fina hadn't been made privy to, her father had found it necessary some years back to tell his lawyer that he, his family and employees were werewolves. Whatever the reasons, Reg Whitesage had bought Kevin Dust's silence with money and a healthy dose of fear. That fear had diminished over the years as Kevin Dust and his family had been invited to pack get-togethers like communal picnics and softball games. "My family is dead," she said flatly and this time it was *her* hand that shook as she pulled out the copy of her father's will from her handbag.

Kevin Dust just nodded. "I know. You keep

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that. I have a copy. And I'm...I'm sorry for your loss."

Fina looked out the window, over the parking lot and the roadways in the distance, trying hard not to cry. She turned back to him. "I don't know if you know what happened, Mr. Dust, but my pack was killed by rogue werewolves. They're dangerous and operate outside of normal pack laws but the fact of it is they now have control of my pack's land." Fina inhaled sharply. "There's nothing that can be done about that...but that doesn't entitle them to my pack's assets." She pulled out the investment statements and bank account information she'd taken from her father's safe. "They won't get their hands on them if I have anything to say about it. The terms of my father's will put every cent of my pack's money in my hands...now that I'm the only surviving member." It was true that Ryan Upton was still alive but he was a minor and Fina's instincts told her to keep the child hidden and safe at all costs. "I need to have my father's will probated as soon as possible so I can start hiding the money where they can't touch it."

Kevin Dust exhaled slowly and laced his short,

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chunky fingers together. "It's usual to wait until after the funeral, Miss Whitesage."

"I don't think there'll be much to bury...if anything," Fina whispered and shuddered before forcing her head back on track. "How much time do you need?" she asked bluntly, cutting to the chase.

"Two days," he answered after a moment's thought.

Fina stood. "I'll be back then."



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# **Chapter Two**

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“Higher, Fina!” Ryan yelled out as he pumped his legs forward and forced the swing to move faster.

“Here it comes,” Fina warned him with a laugh and pushed the swing harder. She laughed again when Ryan shrieked with joy. There were some moments like this—when Ryan’s exuberance surfaced and Fina’s rose to meet his. There were some moments when they emerged from their pain, anger, loneliness and vapidness...some but not many.

They’d been on the road over two weeks now, moving in random patterns and sometimes circling back for a day or two...but always, gradually, moving further and further west. Something about that direction still pulled at Fina and she’d stopped wondering why.

“Let’s find a motel early today, Fina,” Ryan begged after he’d tired of the swing. It was just before noon and they’d pulled into a rustic, roadside café to eat. It had a big parking lot—even

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though it was on a road made almost redundant by a nearby interstate—shaded picnic tables and a large, children's play area. Ryan wove his hands into Fina's, held on tight and let her lift him and flip him in a complete circle until he landed back on his feet with his arms stretched taut behind him. He leaned forward and squealed happily, trusting his weight to Fina's slender arms before hopping, letting go and standing up.

He ran toward the café entrance and the promise of lunch. Fina raced after him, grabbed him, swung him into the air and when his striped t-shirt lifted up, blew a raspberry kiss into his exposed belly. Ryan giggled wildly and pushed her head away. By now they were both sweating a little and they ran into the restaurant's air-conditioned foyer.

"Let's find one with a pool again and can we stay two nights can we please, please, Fina?" Ryan pleaded.

Grinning, Fina opened her mouth to say yes then stood up very straight. The air in the café was full of the delicious smells of fried chicken and baking but beneath that was the unmistakable smell of wolf. Her hand shot out, reaching for

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Ryan and she started backing up toward the door. They'd traveled through a few communities with werewolf populations. It would have been almost impossible not to. They hadn't stopped in any of them and she always made sure the gas tank never got below half full so they wouldn't be forced to stop anywhere she wasn't comfortable. During the past two weeks, Fina's ability to think rationally had improved from the near catatonia she'd experienced immediately following the death of her pack. She'd rationalized that, as a female about to enter her prime breeding years, she wasn't likely to be chased off by another pack. Maybe she'd even be invited to join. She couldn't be absolutely certain of Ryan's welcome. Even though he was a child, he was male. Packs usually didn't accept outside males.

The door behind her swung open and a man walked in. He was big—huge—stood at least six-two and had a chest wide enough to qualify for two zip codes with shoulders to match. The flat stomach and lean hips that sat above and below his thick gun belt told Fina that every impressive inch of him was solid muscle, not flab. He looked to be in his late twenties, wore a

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dark police uniform and scented like a werewolf with a streak of badass that went bone deep.

Fina caught a whiff of urine and one look told her that Ryan was staring up at the man in terror, pushing flat against the wall like he was trying to back right through it to get outside. A dark stain spread across the front of his shorts and a thin stream of urine was sliding down his leg and puddling around his sneaker.

“Oh poor poppet.”

Fina’s head spun around to a fifty-something woman walking into the foyer from the café. She was dressed in an unflattering and rather silly looking alpine-style dress with an apron tied around her generous waist. She clucked her tongue gently, looked down at Ryan with gentle eyes and held out a slightly wrinkled, pudgy hand to him.

“Don’t worry about a thing, little honey,” the woman cooed gently. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Fina’s wolf jumped to the fore when the woman stepped between her and Ryan. The wolf in her shoved the woman back and made a grab

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for Ryan, ready to bowl right through the big cop if she had to get the child outside and safe.



Sheriff Cutler Powell stared at the slender, auburn-headed mad woman standing in the foyer of the best—and only—café on his pack's land. She was small, maybe five-four, and had satiny skin turned a pale gold from the sun. The spray of freckles across her pert little nose made his cock twitch...she was just that pretty. The scent coming off her made him harden instantly. It was like breathing in pure lust and there was nothing pure about his reaction to it. The wolf inside him raised its head and in a low, satisfied rumble, spoke one word.

*Mine.*

Only little miss pure lust was currently assaulting a senior, respected, female member of his pack. With a smooth, controlled movement, he stepped forward, put his hands on the most enthralling woman he'd ever come across and lifted her. The kid came up with her, hauled upward by her hold on his arm. She let go and

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the kid dropped back down onto his feet and started shaking all over. Holding her beneath her arms, Sheriff Powell pinned her back against the wall with her nose level with his. He had to bite down on his tongue before he did something stupid like shove it into her mouth then ask if she had any plans for the rest of her life.

*Where the hell had that thought come from?*

Cutler was pretty sure the flailing banshee in his hands wasn't the kid's mother. She probably wasn't even related to him. But their scents told him they were from the same pack and he could see from the way she'd reacted to Dorothea stepping between her and the child that she cared for him as if he were her own pup.

"No one in my pack would ever harm a child." Cutler spoke quietly and clearly. The woman stopped slamming her fists into his chest. She hung between his hands, the fire and rage draining out of her blue eyes. She looked at him warily. She was young, although her eyes looked older than her face, and she couldn't be more than twenty. He breathed in her scent again, wanting a full picture of her health, strength and status. The information he picked up was all

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contradictory. She was strong yet she wasn't. She smelled of youth yet there was a smell to her that was either age, pain or fear. She was unmated yet there was no innocence left in her. But by then, Cutler was sporting a raging hard-on and decided the prudent thing to do would be to put her down before the wolf inside him took over and dragged her out back for a quick fuck—then another—and probably one more after that.



Despite Ryan's instinctive terror and her own blind, maternal rage, Fina believed the big policeman. Maybe it was the uniform? When he stepped back and set her on her feet, Ryan rushed forward, wrapped his slight body around her leg and trembled.

Cutler noticed Dorothea Pike adjusting her waitress uniform. She cleared her throat quietly. "The washrooms are back here," Dorothea said, "I'll give you a hand with some washcloths if you'd like." She made the offer politely despite her obviously jangled nerves. Cutler saw Dorothea's hand flex and knew she was resisting the urge to rub the middle of her chest where

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the much younger, much stronger woman had straight-armed her after she'd made the mistake of stepping between a mother and her frightened pup. If their positions were reversed and Dorothea had found herself in the middle of a strange pack, she'd probably have done the same thing. "Do you have a change of clothes for him?" Dorothea asked quietly.

Fina looked at the pudgy gray-haired waitress with the gentle, blue eyes. She'd never felt so guilty in her life but she also knew she didn't dare apologize. In werewolf packs, the strong ruled so she held back the ingrained and heartfelt apology sitting on her tongue. It was far better to appear arrogant than weak...especially when she and Ryan were alone and defenseless.

"Yes," Fina replied evenly. She fished her keys out of her pocket with one hand and reached for Ryan's hand with the other. "I'll go get them."

The huge cop had tugged the keys out of her hand even before she realized he was pulling on them. "Allow me, Miss...?"

Sheriff Powell gave the spitfire his best friendly-guy smile. She and the boy were werewolves. Natural born too from the smell of



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them, probably from somewhere back east. His instincts told him the minute he let her walk out the door, she'd simply drive off and never come back. He just couldn't let something that smelled like forever get away. Even if her scent did confuse the hell out of him.

"Whitesage," Fina replied without thinking. She was in for it now. But they were in Wyoming. News of a murder-suicide in a tiny community in Eastfield, Tennessee, and the ensuing emotional distress that had sent seven local families off on extended vacations hadn't made it farther west than the Central Plains. At least the police officer didn't react when he heard her name. His smile just widened and he touched the brim of his big, straw hat.

"Miss Whitesage," Cutler murmured politely and turned back to the door.

"It's the—"

"One with the out-of-state plates? Just a hunch," Cutler added with a grin when her brow furrowed. "If it isn't an intrusion, I'd be honored to buy you and your young man lunch."

It was phrased as a request but Fina knew it

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wasn't. She and Ryan would be joining him for lunch whether she wanted to or not. Nodding resignedly, Fina picked up Ryan and followed the waitress into the café.



“So what brings a beautiful woman from Tennessee all the way out here?” Cutler asked conversationally. He speared a forkful of fried chicken into his mouth. It hadn't escaped his notice that the woman—Fina Whitesage—was pushing her food around her plate but not actually eating much of it. The boy on the other hand seemed to have a good appetite.

“Fina's my sister,” Ryan said and Cutler could tell right away from the cadence of the kid's speech that the story was memorized and rehearsed. “We're going west for our cousin's wedding. I'm the r-ring bearer.”

“Is that so.” Cutler nodded slowly. He took a sip of his iced tea and watched the two of them. A quick search of the woman's vehicle hadn't told him much. There were two new suitcases inside. One was black, plain and clearly belonged to an

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adult. The other was a garish blue, smaller and turned out to be the kid's. A map, a laptop case and a cooler with juice, water and some fruit were the only other things he'd found. On the surface nothing seemed amiss but he didn't rise to the office of sheriff—or get to be his pack's Alpha—by accepting everything at face value.

By then, Ryan had cleaned off his plate, drank his milk and pulled out an electronic gizmo from his backpack. Cutler caught the eye of one of his pack members seated nearby, one who had a child about Ryan's age sitting with him. At his parents' prompting, the boy left their table, walked up to theirs and stood beside Ryan's chair.

“Um, hi,” the new boy said, watching Ryan's game with rapt interest. “I'm Koby. You wanna play?” He jerked his head toward a play area at the back of the café.

Ryan looked up at Fina. She brushed his hair back from his eyes. The place seemed to make entertaining children a priority because there was an indoor play area as well as an outside one. The indoor one wasn't as big—just a slide, some hanging ropes and a ball pit—but it was colorful and clean.

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“Go play if you want,” she said and smiled for his benefit. “Stay where I can see you.”

“Sure,” Ryan replied absently, tucked his game into his backpack and trotted off with the other boy. Even though she couldn’t help saying it, Fina knew she didn’t have to remind him to stay within her sight. Ryan never let her get out of his.

“So what level can you get up to?” Koby asked as they headed off together. “I’ve got the connector for that. We can play against each other...”

As their voices trailed away, Fina looked up at the massive, overpowering presence sitting across the checkered tablecloth from her. Her sense of smell had already told her that everyone else in the café was a wolf and they’d been stealing glances at her and Ryan as they ate—discreetly of course. She put down her fork, giving up her pretence of eating.

“Thank you, Sheriff. It was very nice of you to buy us lunch. We have to get going.” Fina was halfway out of her chair when his meaty hand slid around her forearm.

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“There’s no cousin getting married, is there?”

His eyes were on hers and Fina felt like she was pinned under a microscope. She sat back down. As hard as his eyes were at the moment, they were also a brilliant, shimmering aqua—startlingly beautiful and completely at odds with his blatantly male, chiseled features. His eyes were framed by ridiculously long, dark lashes that matched the shiny, short chestnut-brown hair on his head.

His thumb moved over her forearm, his touch lazy and sensuous. Trembling, Fina pulled back from the contact, remembering the last time a man had put his hands on her.

Cutler Powell leaned back in his chair thoughtfully, not letting go, wondering why the woman’s fear had jumped when he’d touched her. He wanted her...and he wanted answers.

“I’m guessing something happened to your pack. You could be rogue but you don’t scent like it,” he said with slow deliberation. Her blue eyes widened with a fear she wasn’t even trying to hide anymore. She looked so damned small and vulnerable sitting there. “Who are you? Who are you really? And where are you from?”

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Fina's hand tightened on her bag. Every instinct and every rational thought in her head told her to grab Ryan, run the hell out of there and just keep on running. Every instinct that is except the wolf inside her. It leaned out toward the big sheriff, breathing in more of his delicious smell. It wanted to lick his face, nuzzle his jaw.

It was the wolf inside Fina that answered, "My name is Fina Whitesage. That's Ryan Upton. He's the son of my father's Beta...or was before his father was...was killed." Fina swallowed hard. A big part of her wanted to hold the words back and her throat felt stretched and achy with the effort. But her wolf knew they couldn't run forever. They had to find a pack willing to take them in. The small and the young didn't survive on their own. There were too many rogues out there just waiting to pick them off. "We're from Eastfield, Tennessee."

Cutler's head snapped back. "*Eastfield?*" he blurted out, loud enough for everyone in the café to hear. The place fell silent. Shock, even horror crossed the face of every adult. They looked to Cutler and when he didn't respond to them, their expressions dimmed and they looked

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away nervously. They glanced at Fina then back at Ryan, still playing and unaware of the change in the mood of the place...looked at them with pity and disbelief then looked away again.

“What do you know?” Fina asked Cutler in a small voice.

He exhaled slowly. “Only word of mouth. An entire pack in Eastfield, Tennessee, was wiped out by rogue wolves. Their pack lands taken over. They didn’t leave anyone alive, not even the breeding females,” he added with disgust then touched Fina’s arm again. His wolf voiced its approval of the contact. “I’m guessing word of mouth got some of the details wrong.”

Fina smiled wryly and was surprised when she felt humor shape her mouth. “I was away that day. I’m going back to college in the fall,” she stated calmly even though she was beginning to understand the impossibility of going back to the life she’d planned. “Housing is tight so if you want an apartment, you’ve got to pick the rent up in the spring when the previous students move out. That’s where I was...getting the paperwork and...and measuring for curtains,” she added with a dull laugh.

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Cutler shifted uneasily in his chair and let go of her arm when she leaned away from him. He hated the pain in this woman's voice...hated any pain she might feel and the strength of his sense of possession, his protectiveness for a wandering stranger startled him.

Fina threw her napkin on the table and lay her forehead in her palms. "I was so stupid...preoccupied with a dozen stupid things that didn't mean a damn thing." She sighed, trembled and stared up at the ceiling. "It was nighttime when I got home. I just walked in like I didn't have a care in the world and they were there."

"Who?"

"The rogues." Fina trembled again. "I could smell the blood..." Her voice trailed off and when Cutler set his hand back on her forearm, this time, her trembling stopped.

"Excuse me, miss, but my husband and I were wondering..."

Trudy, a member of Cutler's pack and the mother of the boy playing with Ryan, stood beside their table. She glanced back at her husband.



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“We’d be real pleased if you’d consider staying with us. Maybe for a little while,” she added with that warm, open smile that Cutler had almost fallen in love with back when they were in grade school together. They’d played with each other so much as kids it felt like they were brother and sister and Trudy had never held back on speaking her mind around her Alpha because of it. Cutler hadn’t offered the stray wolves sanctuary—not yet anyway. Trudy wouldn’t have a problem voicing her opinion on whether or not their pack should take them in. “Motels are fun for awhile but there’s nothing like a home. We’ve got three little ones of our own,” added the tall, harried-looking woman, glancing back at her mate with open affection. “Room might be a little tight but we’d be thrilled to have you stay...for as long as you like,” she added, lifted a dark brow in Cutler’s direction and headed back to her table.

Cutler shot her a look then turned his attention back to Fina. He ran his thumb over her forearm, enthralled by the smoothness of her skin and the delicacy of the muscles beneath.

“What happened then?”

She stiffened beneath his hand. The scent of

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numbing fear rolled out of her pores and coated the insides of his nostrils like oil.

“I walked out early the next morning. They must have thought I’d...that I’d bond with them because they’d killed everyone else. Bonded females stay put,” she added unnecessarily.

Cutler smelled the missing pieces in her story. Some pretty nasty scenarios came to him but he decided to respect her silence on the matter. For now.

“I just got in my car and drove. I spotted Ryan sitting in front of his school. He says his father hid him up in a tree house. Ryan spent the night there then when nobody came to get him, he just headed to school on his own when the sun came up.” Fina laughed hollowly and brushed tears out of her eyes. “Brave kid, huh?”

“He’s not the only one.”

Fina looked up at the big sheriff. As frightened as she was—for her and Ryan—she felt better sharing her story with someone. Anyone. She forced a smile and was glad she did when his stupidly beautiful aqua eyes brightened in response.

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Cutler leaned back from her and let his fingers slip away from her arm when Dorothea Pike stepped up to the table. She poured coffee in their cups without asking.

“It’s Fina, right?” Dorothea asked with a brightness that almost masked the concern in her eyes. “My husband and I have a house not far from here. Just a small spread with a couple head of cattle. Does your little one like to ride horses? Reason I’m asking is we’ve got space now that our own kids have grown up. I know he’d be tickled to have a young’un back around the place. Maybe teach him how to feed chickens... ours loved helping out when they were little,” Dorothea added with an infectious grin. “If you’d consider staying, we’d be thrilled to have you. Sheriff,” she added with a touch of frostiness and slapped the check down on the table in front of him before she stepped away to see to her other customers.

Cutler rubbed his temples. “Okay. Here’s what we’re going to do, Fina.” Cutler Powell was used to giving orders and having his pack obey them, not the other way around. This wasn’t a democracy. Their willful and not-so-subtle hints

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that he take in these strays, not giving him a chance to do it on his own when he'd had every intention of doing that about two seconds after he'd smelled Fina, smacked of dissention. He glared at every eye in the place that dared to meet his and kept glaring until they looked away. "You and Ryan will stay at my place. I've got more than enough room."

"We can't—"

"I don't give a rat's ass about what you think you can do, woman," he snarled. "Your pack's gone and I wish to god I could change that for you but I can't. You're a female and he's a child... you need a pack to take you in. I'm offering mine." He picked up his hat, the check and Ryan's backpack. "Stay for a week or stay forever, your choice." Cutler stood, looked at the check and slapped a few bills on the table. "If we're not a good fit, move on. I can tell you where to find two other packs less than a day's drive from here. Until then, you're one of us," he added loudly enough for everyone in the café to hear. He touched Fina's elbow and held it with remarkable gentleness, considering, until she stood up.

Cutler ignored the looks of approval he got

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from the members of his pack when he and Fina went back to the play area to collect Ryan. What he couldn't ignore was his wolf's demanding certainty that this woman was his.

Despite his offer to direct her to another pack, Fina Whitesage wouldn't be going anywhere. Not while he was alive to say anything about it.

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter Three

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“What do you think, Ryan?” Fina asked as they followed the sheriff’s marked Expedition down a long, unpaved driveway dotted with trees.

“About?” Ryan replied with a shrug. His fingers were moving over his game with their usual intensity.

“About Sheriff Powell.” The driveway opened up in front of a low, rambling ranch house clad in cedar. A stand of pine trees stood on the north side and the lawn in front was tidy and separated from the drive by a neat, picket fence. There was a large, red barn maybe a thousand feet behind the house. A herd of black cows grazed in a fenced paddock to the south.

“He’s scary,” Ryan answered evenly then his fingers paused on the controls. “Maybe not *that* scary,” he added thoughtfully and looked around. When he spotted the cattle he stared at them raptly.

Fina didn’t know Ryan liked animals.

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“He’s bossy,” Fina added.

“So was your dad.”

Ryan’s words struck Fina hard. He’d referred to her father in the past tense. He’d never asked and she’d never said but it was obvious that despite their denial and running, Ryan knew his Alpha and his pack were dead.

Fina pulled up behind Cutler’s marked SUV and turned off her ignition. As soon as she did, Ryan jumped out and ran over to the fence separating the yard from the cattle. Fina stared after him in astonishment. It was the first time either of them had spoken about their pack in two weeks. She realized they’d been living like they’d been dropped out of the sky—with no past or future and no ties to anyone or anything. Ryan had never asked where his parents were or where Fina was taking him. The two of them had shut themselves into their private and perverse little worlds—him with his electronic games and her with her on-line banking transactions.

She barely reacted when her door opened.

“You okay?” Cutler looked down at the beautiful little woman he was going to make his

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mate. The sure realization of that fact staggered him but he held himself upright by hanging onto the roof of her sporty little SUV and forcing a smile.

“Hmm? Oh. Yes I’m okay,” Fina replied absently and undid her seatbelt. She took his hand when he offered it. She stepped out of her vehicle but Cutler didn’t step back. Instead, he lay his hands on her waist and stood so close their toes touched. The bulky ends of his steel-toed boots pressed against the tips of her dainty, strappy little flat sandals.

“You’re part of my pack now, Fina,” he said gently. His aqua eyes moved over her face, liking everything he saw. “This is your home. Yours and Ryan’s. You’ll always be safe here.”

Fina trembled. She believed him but being touched by a male—a monstrously huge Alpha in his prime no less—brought back every repressed terror inside her.

Cutler’s brow furrowed when she seemed to shrink in size. He smelled her fear again. He hated it...wanted to tell her she was being foolish and irrational but in his work he’d seen the after-effects of trauma too many times to be



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that callous. Offering Fina what he hoped was a reassuring smile, Cutler stepped away, took her keys from her and opened up the back of her vehicle to retrieve the luggage.

He whistled loudly in the direction of the paddock. “Hey...Ryan! Give me a hand with this stuff, buddy.”

Ryan stretched his arm through the fence, offered up the grass he was holding to an interested heifer then ran back to them.

As he unloaded the vehicle, Cutler looked at Fina. She had her back to him, scanning the house with its wide, inviting porch and big windows. She was wearing a pretty little outfit—just a sleeveless blouse and a pair of modest shorts that ended above her knees. But her ass had that very fine, sculpted look to it and her legs were long for a woman who stood only maybe four inches above five feet.

Again, his wolf reared its head and looked over its mate with raw desire. It said two words this time.

*Mine. Wait.*

Cutler and his wolf were in complete agreement

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on the first. It was the second directive that threw him. His wolf was more primitive than he was. It was an instinctual creature and powerful enough to never have to deny its desires. It was a hallmark of the privilege and responsibility of being an Alpha. So why when this sexy little waif was standing only a few feet away from him and smelling like a wet dream come true was his wolf willing to wait to claim her? Willing? Hell the thing was telling *him* to wait. It had always been the other way around, mostly because single, pretty women didn't much care for being thrown onto the hood of their car and fucked like animals. Even if they did want to get out of a speeding ticket.

Shaking his head, Cutler led Fina and Ryan up to the house. He noticed the look she gave the empty, iron urn-shaped planters flanking the door. He kept forgetting to pick up flowers to replace the ones that died off in the fall. Cutler opened the wide front door and stepped aside.

"Oh it's lov—" Whatever compliment Fina was about to pay the broad entryway that ran straight through to the back porch died in her throat when she got her first whiff of the interior.

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“There’s another wolf here,” she whispered with dark fear. Ryan had already dropped his pack and was trying to climb up her back, clutching at her for protection. She grabbed onto his leg and hoisted him up, keeping him close so she could run if she had to.

“Damn I forgot to tell you. My—”

“Brother?” Fina whispered harshly after she’d inhaled again. This time, she saw past the terrifying specter of an unknown, prime male and realized that the man was a member of Cutler’s pack and a blood relative. She exhaled shakily but she didn’t tell Ryan to climb down.

“Yes.” Cutler was disturbed by his woman’s fear but not surprised. He knew she’d need time to get over whatever had happened to her and him ordering her to wasn’t going to help matters. “*Nath*,” he called out loudly, directing his voice toward the back of the house. “Come out here will ya? We’ve got guests.”

Fina felt the weight of the second man’s steps through the wide-planked pine floor before she saw him. Great, just what she needed, another behemoth.

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“Who—?” Nathaniel Powell stood stock still in the hallway of his home. All six-foot-two of him straightened up suddenly as he caught a whiff of the most exciting female he’d ever come across. Exciting? He was surprised he wasn’t running toward the smell, salivating and whipping it out. Lust dug into his belly hard and he was glad he was wearing underwear beneath his jeans or he’d bust out the zipper.

His mouth dropped when he got his first look at her, looking small and scared, with a scrap of a child clinging to her back, waves of fear pumping out of her little body like sweat off a mill worker’s ass. Her heart-shaped, perfect little face was framed by a luxuriant fall of reddish brown, wavy hair. She had a small waist, slender hips and breasts that were a little too big for her frame...although he’d always thought they *couldn’t* be too big. His wolf recognized her as its perfect mate but it wasn’t lust that moved its feet, it was the smell of her fear.

It propelled him forward and without a word, Nath obeyed his wolf’s instinct. He lay his forehead on the woman’s and let it rest there, breathing her in and letting her breathe him in.

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He suppressed his inner fuck-urge and projected as much calmness as he could. The child clinging to her whimpered at his closeness. Nath lifted his head then ran his jaw slowly and gently across the child's temple. After a few seconds, the child whined—a small, plaintive sound then he tipped his head so he could nuzzle the side of Nath's face before pulling back.

One corner of Nath's wide, sensual mouth quirked up. "So I guess this means you'll be staying for dinner." Deliberately not paying attention to his big brother's impressive, angry growl, Nath lifted his head and reached for the woman—and was surprised when she backed away from him. Again his wolf invaded his consciousness, instinctively chasing after anything that ran from it—especially when that anything was going to be the mother of his children. This time Nath didn't listen to it and he dropped his hands and took a step back, respecting her need for space. He looked up when his big brother snarled ominously.

"This is Nath Powell, my kid brother. He's my Beta. Feel free to ignore him," Cutler added curtly and, with his hand firmly planted in the

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small of Fina's back, led her and Ryan down the hallway toward the bedrooms.



"Just what the fuck are you trying to do?" Cutler stormed into the office where Nath was pretending to work. Cutler knew better. His baby brother was lurking, waiting for Fina to emerge after unpacking.

"Hey, back down, Sheriff," Nath shot back testily. "I don't know how you managed to poach her but I gotta say thank you for finding me my mate."

"*Your* mate?" Cutler roared. He slammed the door shut behind him and advanced on his brother. "The woman's already been claimed. *Little* brother," he added with a sneer.

"Who—? Oh." Nathaniel's ruddy, sun-darkened cheeks puffed out, momentarily obliterating his dimples. "I guess that complicates things."

"No shit."

The two brothers fell silent, glaring at each

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other and considering the ramifications of their mutual attraction to their newest pack member.

“So how come you haven’t marked her?” Nath asked suddenly. As Alpha, his brother had the right to mate with any female in their pack. He nodded in the direction of the door. “She’s out there and you’re in here. I don’t see you rushing out to slobber all over her.”

“Nice mental picture.”

“Nice avoidance technique. They teach you that one in the military or is it a police-academy special?”

Cutler snarled, revealing the tips of his upper canines. Nath had grown up watching his big, bad brother pitch conniption fits like this. Unless Cutler backed it up with a left hook, Nath wasn’t going to sweat it. His brow did go up however when Cutler dug his fingers into his short hair, walked around him and flopped down in the chair behind the desk they shared.

“I’ve never met anyone like her and she confuses the hell out of me,” Cutler admitted grudgingly. He rubbed his temples. “I saw her and it was like being kissed by the bumper of a

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Mack truck. I was just spinning around up there and didn't give a damn if I ever touched the ground again." He waved his index finger in the air in a vague circle. "One damn sniff of her and I knew...I just knew she was my mate. Didn't know her name. Didn't know the first thing about her. You know she tackled Dorothea Pike when she got between her and the kid down at the café?"

"No way."

"Most definitely way," Cutler replied with a grin and a nod. "Well, shoved her is more like it. Point is, instead of arresting her ass or handing her over for trial as a rogue, all I could think about was claiming her. Hell my wolf was all over that one like wet on water."

"I'll bet," Nath snorted.

"Only he..."

"He what?"

"Well *you* know how the damn things think. They put everything into one of three categories—you either eat it, pee on it or fuck it."

"Let me guess which door yours picked."



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“Yeah but it wasn’t that,” Cutler insisted hotly. He dropped his hands onto the wood desk. “Bastard took one good whiff of Fina and said two things. The first one was *mine*.”

Nath cocked a dark brow at his brother that clearly said I told you so.

“The second one was *wait*.”

“Wait?”

“Is there a fucking echo in here? Yes, Nath. The damn thing said wait. It wants her so bad I’m sporting a woody that could bat one out of the park. But it also knows there’s something about her that needs me to wait before I claim her.”

“You know what it is?”

“No. Her scent confuses the hell out of me. It’s...contradictory.”

“Well what *do* you know?” Nath demanded irritably.

“I know she and that boy are the only survivors of the pack from Eastfield, Tennessee.”

Nathaniel Powell’s jaw dropped slowly. He closed it just as slowly, nodded, and followed

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his brother when Cutler stood up and left the office.



“You two getting settled in all right?” For the second time that day, Cutler dredged up his friendly-guy smile as he knocked on the open door of the single bedroom he’d assigned to Ryan.

Fina lifted a final two pairs of socks out of Ryan’s vivid-blue suitcase and slid them into the room’s chest of drawers. “We’re good,” she replied brightly, lifting her eyes past the sheriff’s massive chest and looking up into those damned gorgeous aqua eyes of his. She glanced back at Ryan who was sitting on the bare mattress with his legs crossed and playing with one of his electronic games. “Ryan can see the cows from his window. Can’t you, Ryan?”

“Huh? Oh yeah.” Ryan jumped off the bed and crossed over to the window. It looked like he was making sure the cattle were still there. “They yours, Cutler?”

“It’s Sheriff Powell, Ryan,” Fina corrected him

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gently. She grabbed the hem of his striped t-shirt and tucked it back into his shorts.

“Cutler will do fine,” the big sheriff said with a grin and his grin only dimmed a little when Nath stepped around him and walked into the room. His brother was carrying an armful of bed linens.

“Let’s get you squared away, big guy,” Nathaniel said with that easy, natural charm of his that Cutler had always envied. “Maybe we’ll take a trip out to the barn after. Check out the rabbits and shit...” His vivid, blue eyes dimmed when Fina shot him a look.

“Um, rabbits and other animals,” Nath corrected himself quickly. He was saved from further embarrassment when the police radio hanging from Cutler’s belt started squawking.

“What?” Cutler barked harshly into the radio as he stepped out into the hallway.

“Take one too many grumpy pills today, Sheriff?” Officer Suzanne Young’s annoyingly pert and saucy voice grated on Cutler...even more than usual.

“I am down to one last nerve today, Young,

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and you're on it," he growled in warning. His dispatcher took the hint.

"Report of an altercation at Townline Roadhouse. Otto called it in himself. Said if you didn't haul ass down there and give him some value for his hard-earned tax dollars, he was going to break out the Woodinator and take care of it himself."

Otto was always too damn quick to pull out that monster baseball bat of his whenever the customers got rowdy. "Any report of weapons?" Cutler asked curtly. He crossed over to Fina, touched her cheek then left. Whatever his dispatcher's response was, Cutler was gone before Fina heard it.

"He'll be fine. He's good at his job. Real good," Nath assured them. He grinned and for the first time, Fina noticed how much he looked like his brother.

"So is it just Nath or does it stretch on after that?" she asked with a humor that felt a little awkward after two weeks of disuse. She grabbed a sheet and started making Ryan's bed.

"Nathaniel," he answered with another grin.

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“You just gotta accept the fact that if you give a boy a name with three syllables, the world will be hell bent on shortening it down to one for the length of his days.”

Fina laughed quietly and this time, it didn't feel as awkward. Nath stood on the other side of the bed and helped her tuck the sheet in. He had dimples on either side of his perpetually happy mouth and his eyes were blue, not aqua. She remembered that Cutler didn't have dimples. The two, really cute features balanced each other off, making both brothers equally, devastatingly handsome.

“Do you work, Nath?”

“I do indeed, pretty lady,” he said then tapped Ryan on the shoulder. He handed him a pillow and a pillowcase. “Pitch in here, big guy.” Ryan put his game down without argument. “I'm the President and CEO of Green Mountain Eco Tours.”

“Eco tourism is very hot these days.”

“Don't I know it,” Nath agreed happily. “We operate mostly in the summer months. When kids are out of school,” he added with a nod in Ryan's

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direction. “Actually, you’re lucky you caught me at home today. I just finished taking a group of Japanese businessmen on an overnight hike and don’t go back out until tomorrow morning.” He tucked in the top sheet then tossed a cotton blanket and a thin quilt on top. “Ready to see the sights?” he offered with expansive good humor and took the badly covered pillow out of Ryan’s hands. He dropped it onto the bed. “You know the best way to see them?” he asked Ryan with a fiendish twinkle in his eye. “Upside down.”

“*Nooo*,” Ryan squealed and giggled as he tried to evade the Beta’s grasp. He spun away, grinned and swerved to the left.

Ryan’s small body telescoped his moves. So did the direction of his laughing eyes.

Nath let him dodge away, twice, making a mock grasp at empty air a second after Ryan moved. Then he scooped the six-year-old up, wrapped a meaty hand around Ryan’s skinny ankles and held him upside down. He ran off down the hall, bellowing like a banshee with Ryan screaming in delight.



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Cutler was glad to see pieces of the steak on Fina's plate actually making it into her mouth. Nath had barbecued—something even Cutler admitted his little brother did well—and they were sitting at the table on the back porch. Ryan was sitting on the local phone book so he could see over his plate and was shoveling forkfuls of baked potato, baby carrots, meat and salad into his mouth faster than Fina could cut them for him.

“Slow down, buddy,” Cutler cautioned and handed him a napkin. “There's plenty more where that came from.” He refilled Ryan's milk glass and felt his mouth turn down into what his mother had always told him was his serious line. He looked at Fina. “You had enough money to keep him fed on the road?” he asked quietly. Ryan was too busy eating and looking at the cattle to pay much attention to adult conversation.

Fina exhaled deliberately and set her fork down. Cutler was Alpha—he'd insist on knowing his people were provided for. “Yes. I think his body's just gearing up for a growth spurt.” She hesitated. “Before I answer that further, I need

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to know what your financial expectations will be if I join your pack.”

In Cutler’s mind—and he could tell from the look on his face, in Nath’s mind too—Fina was already a member of their pack. Ryan too. Just like she was their mate and the boy their responsibility. Maybe even a surrogate son. “Explain,” Cutler said in that no-nonsense, demanding tone of his. He took a sip of the red wine his brother had served with dinner. It hadn’t escaped his notice that Fina had chosen milk instead.

“I mean that my father was Alpha of our pack. The terms of his will gave me sole control of the pack’s assets as surviving heir. His personal ones too. I...I emptied the piggy bank before I left Tennessee. The rogues may have rightful claim to our lands by pack law but that doesn’t entitle them to the money,” she added with enough verve that one of Cutler’s dark brows shot up. He and his brother exchanged a look.

“Accepted,” Cutler said curtly. He set his wine glass down. “You had his will probated?”

“Yes.”



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“Well if human law says it’s your money and the bank accepted that, that’s good enough. Pack law deals with land, inter-band relations and turning of humans only. It leaves money in the hands of individuals and the businesses they run.”

Fina nodded. “Thank you.” A part of her had started to worry she hadn’t been in the right by taking *all* of the pack’s assets. “He’ll have a number of financial needs before he reaches adulthood,” Fina said, nodding in Ryan’s direction. “His education—mine too.”

“Yours?” Nath asked. He wiped the residue off his plate with a slice of bread then popped it into his mouth. “I never asked how old you were.”

“Twenty. I’m going to...I *was* going back to college in the fall.” Something in Fina’s blue eyes dimmed and Cutler covered her hand with his. Nath cupped her shoulder tenderly in his rough palm. She blinked rapidly then looked up at the brothers. “My point is I have money but that money is earmarked for his needs.”

“Yours too,” Nath added pointedly.

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“Mine too,” Fina agreed with a thin smile. “If I join your pack, will my assets become yours?”

*Your physical ones? Definitely. The financial ones...?*

“No,” Cutler answered firmly. “When you take a mate, it’s up to you if you share your money with him. It’s up to him and the pack to provide for your needs. Any children you have would have a right to a claim in your estate but that’s too far down the road to think about.” He popped a last piece of steak in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “Just for argument sake, how much money are we talking here?” he asked after swallowing.

“Approximately eight-point-six million.”

Cutler coughed violently. “So I don’t have to top up Ryan’s college fund, huh?” he asked dryly after he’d recovered.

Fina grinned.

“Ever think about investing in eco-tourism?” Nath asked saucily, picked up Fina’s hand and kissed her knuckles. She rolled her eyes and pushed his face away playfully.

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“You warm enough?”

Standing outside in the hallway, Nath Powell listened to his future mate tuck Ryan into bed. He could hear his brother loading up the dishwasher at the other end of the house.

“I’m good,” Ryan muttered. “Leave the door open.”

“I will. Good-night, Ryan.”

“Night, Fina. Hey, Fina...?”

“Hmm?”

“We gonna live here now?”

“For awhile. Maybe. I haven’t decided yet.”

Nathaniel’s sharp, wolf ears picked out the sounds of lips brushing against a forehead and a hand smoothing hair back.

“Let me know. I wanna say good-bye to the cows if we go.”

“You like them, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Ryan answered with creeping drowsiness.

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When the sound of Ryan's breathing evened out, Nath stepped away from the door and waited for Fina. She tiptoed out and started when she saw him standing there. He held out his hand and, after a moment, she took it warily.

Nath took a step toward her and pressed his cheek against hers. His wolf was clawing at his self-control, wanting his share of Fina's presence... his share of their mate and the wolf repeated a single word over and over inside Nath's head.

*Mine.*

Nath didn't say anything and, after a time, some of the tension thrumming through Fina's slender body eased. He breathed her in, tasted her health, age, strength, fertility...Nathaniel's eyes opened suddenly.

*Wait.*

Nath's wolf retreated back into his head, curled around itself and settled down with calm, almost smug satisfaction.

Nath lifted his head, offered Fina a smile and led her toward the family room where he could already hear the sounds of a baseball game coming through the big screen TV.

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Fina followed Nathaniel without protest. She settled herself on the big sectional and Nath dropped a pillow on the floor at her feet, sat on it and leaned his broad back into her shins. Pinned in place, she felt a moment of panic. His proximity roused the terrors Fina had tried so hard to repress. Breathing slow and even calmed her. He had the remote in his hand and split the image on the screen so he could check the day's scores. Nathaniel Powell was massive, powerful and hadn't even reached his prime yet. Just then, Nath chuckled. At what Fina couldn't guess but the laughter rumbling through his broad back and into her knees comforted her. She reminded herself that he was gentle, easygoing and had a smile that could charm the panties off a nun. His sense of fun ran soul deep and he somehow felt younger than her, if that was possible.

Before the rogues, Fina had been sheltered, even coddled. The baby in the family, the daughter of an Alpha, she'd grown up privileged, indulged, perhaps even smugly entitled. She'd had a place in her well-ordered community—a place, a plan

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and a shining future with possibilities limited only by her intelligence and courage.

After the rogues, she'd...diminished. Feeling older than she was and somehow fragile, she realized that Fina Whitesage used to be more than she was now.

Her eyes tracked Cutler as he wiped down the counter. Focus, power and confidence reflected in every sure, precise movement of his huge body. Even something as mundane as cleaning up after dinner didn't mute his dominant presence. Nath was powerful but in a friendly, endearing way. Cutler could be just as funny—well, almost—but there was always an innate maturity and reserve about him. This Alpha was responsible for so much and to so many. He wore it like he wore his other strengths and they rested on his calm, wide shoulders with deceptive ease.

Whenever the brothers looked at her, it was with veiled heat and it terrified her.

It comforted her too. For whatever bizarre reason, they'd taken her in, given her a home and a pack, and hadn't made a single, sexual advance. Fina exhaled deliberately. They still frightened her, not as much as before and she wondered

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when she'd ever get over this shackling, groveling fear of prime males. Her fear made her want to run away but her instincts and common sense urged her to stay, for her sake and for the sake of the cub sleeping down the hall. Ryan was her responsibility. She had to be better than this to raise him, had to set an example of a loving, strong, intelligent parental figure. The trouble was, she wasn't that person anymore.

Again Fina's eyes moved between Cutler and Nath. One commanding, one gentle. One old soul and one young. She would stay with them, for now. Perhaps the two of them could teach her the things that used to make up Fina Whitesage. Things she'd so taken for granted that she'd forgotten what they were.



“Green Mountain Eco-Tours. How may I help you?” Fina looked away from her laptop screen and focused on the caller instead of the new Whitesage Nursery website she'd commissioned. She and Ryan had been staying with the brothers for ten days now and she'd tried to stay busy. Thinking distracted her from the pain. She lay

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her hand on the mouse of the office computer and brought up Nath's calendar. "We *do* have openings in August for the Highland Trek package...oh you have? Let me check for you..."

Cutler leaned on the doorway. He blew across the steaming mug of coffee in his hand and watched Fina with quiet admiration. She looked up at him, grinned and mouthed "*you'll be late for work.*" Cutler just shrugged, returned her grin and kept watching.

"Nathaniel Powell is available for only two nights in August..."

Glancing out the window, Cutler watched Ryan playing in the backyard. He and Nath had fenced in the entire area around the house, creating a clearly defined space where Ryan was allowed to play without supervision. It bordered on the south paddock, which suited Ryan just fine. So far he'd been good about not ducking under the picket fence and going into the barn or outbuildings on his own. Ryan was climbing on a big cedar play set with swings and monkey bars. After work tonight, Cutler was going to finish assembling the slide and raised fort sections.

"If you were willing to go with another guide



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I could offer you that date but if you want Nathaniel to guide you...yes he really is the best chef in the bunch. Uh huh. We also have a guide who's Shoshone. Chris brings his people's knowledge to the trek and cooks with only local ingredients. But I have to warn you he's got a wicked sense of humor so unless you're prepared to do a few sit-ups to get your abs in shape before you head out, I can guarantee you'll have a sore belly by the end of day two. Oh you do? I'll have to send the Johnsons a note and thank them for their lovely recommendation. Yes. Nathaniel's chicken tetrazzine is to die for and I'm speaking from personal experience here. It's so good you'll roll over on your back and beg to have your stomach rubbed."

Cutler heard a woman laughing on the other end of the line. He rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee.

"The date will be held for you upon receipt of your five-hundred dollar deposit."

Cutler was impressed by how quickly Fina had picked up on the particulars of his brother's business. Nobody had asked her to. The second day she'd been there, she'd figured out that Nath

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had a business phone line hooked up in the home office. If nobody there picked it up, it switched to his base camp. The official home of Green Mountain Eco Tours sat at the end of a dead-end road out of town. A number of trails their dad had introduced them to when they'd been kids, ones that snaked around the Great Divide Basin, branched out from there. Nath's base camp was a pretty log building where he stored his company's gear, food supplies and ran his tours out of. During the summer, Nath hired a high-school kid from their pack to run the office in his absence...keeping the shelves stocked, checking on the solar panels, running the sleeping bags into town for cleaning, answering the phones...that sort of thing. But Fina was just really, really good with customers.

“There's a full information pack. I can fax it or email it to you.” Fina flicked her long, auburn hair out of the way, tucked the receiver between her ear and shoulder and started typing. “That's right...you can bring your own gear or Green Mountain Eco Tours can supply everything you need except for shoes and the clothes on your back. There's a complete supply list in the pack and you check off what you'd like us to provide

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and we'll have everything ready for you. There's also a physical-fitness self-check sheet. Oh that's okay. The Highland Trek package will be perfect for you. It's two days and one night under canvas. Just work yourself up to an hour of walking per day at a slightly faster than normal pace and you'll be fine." She glanced up at Cutler again. "Thank you for calling Green Mountain Eco Tours and have a terrific day."

"My brother should pay you," Cutler grunted after she hung up.

"Yes he should," Fina agreed saucily. "Remind me to tell him."

Cutler grunted again, this time in agreement and drank the rest of his coffee. He watched Fina with feral heat when she stood, lifted her arms over her head and stretched her back. His cock twitched inside his regulation, dark-blue trousers and he adjusted his gun belt. He wanted this woman even more than when he'd met her but his wolf, always the hormone-driven one, still wanted him to wait.

Cutler was just about ready to go out of his mind with need.

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“Don’t forget there’s a pack run tomorrow night. Nath and I will take you. Dorothea Pike and her mate will be watching the kids this time so we’ll drop Ryan off there before we go.”

His high-handedness irked Fina but he was Alpha. It was how he was made. He wasn’t being rude, he was just being...Cutler. “You’re even bossier than my father was,” Fina grouched.

“Hmm. Sounds like a remarkable man,” Cutler grinned and walked up to her. He set his mug down, fit his hands around her waist and pressed his freshly shaven cheek to hers. Her hands settled lightly on his arms as she accepted the nuzzling. She’d been touching him back for a couple of days now—Nath too although that part irritated the hell out of Cutler. And this was the first time she’d talked about anyone from her past without prompting. Cutler took it as a hopeful sign that she was opening up...becoming more comfortable with him...and Nath. “Maybe you’ll tell me about him. Sometime,” he added with his friendly-guy smile and a light shrug of his big shoulders.

“Um, speaking about that...” Fina pulled back from him and leaned on the edge of the desk. “I

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haven't spoken with any of my old friends and I was wondering—"

"You want to know if it's a good idea to get in touch with your human friends," Cutler finished for her with a discernment that caught her off guard. But then he was a cop. He leaned back against the desk beside her. She was wearing shorts and his uniform pants were rough against her bare leg but Fina didn't mind. She liked the warmth and muscular solidness of him pressed against her leg, hip and shoulder.

Cutler looked down at her out of the corner of his eye. "I've made some contacts with other wolves near your home pack lands," he told her and waited for her reaction. When Fina simply raised her brow and looked up at him without censure, he continued. "The rogues are laying low. They've had little or no contact with nearby humans. I think it's okay for you to contact some of your friends but do it safely." She shot him one of what he thought of as her *oh-yeah-big-tough-guy* looks. He ignored it and felt his expression harden. "Who do you want to contact?"

"Helen, my best friend."

"She's your age?"

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“Three months younger.”

“Hmmpf. Is her mother smart? Level headed?”

“Definitely.” Fina nodded emphatically. “Right after I escaped, I wanted to run to her...”

Fina’s voice dropped away and Cutler felt her tremble. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, drew her close and pressed his lips to the top of her head.

“But you didn’t because you’d endanger her,” he said with quiet surety and kissed her hair. “Set up a new email account. Make sure it can’t be traced to Wyoming. Use it to contact your friend’s mother. Let her know you’re safe but were advised to go into seclusion because of the violence. No need to tell her anything else,” he added firmly when Fina tensed. “Tell her that you’d like to contact Helen but have to be sure she’ll keep her mouth shut about it. If your friend is like any of the other twenty-year-old human females I’ve come across,” he snorted with disdain, “she’ll get so excited about hearing from you she’ll blab it to everybody before realizing she could be jeopardizing your safety.”

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“My safety?” Fina blurted out. Her head popped up. “There’s no way those rogues would still be interested in me.”

“Why not?” Cutler asked coolly, holding her eyes with his and tucking his finger under her chin. “I’d never be willing to let you go.” He gave that a moment to sink in.

Fina averted her eyes. “By now they know the money’s gone.”

“There *is* that,” Cutler agreed with a sigh. “But I know I’d abandon everything I had to follow you if you left me.” He kissed her forehead, squeezed her shoulder gently then stood up. “We have to assume *that* Alpha would too.” He glanced at his watch. “Now I *am* going to be late for work.” Cutler inhaled her scent once more. “Damn I wish I could bottle the smell of your skin. That way I could take it with me everywhere.” He offered her a crooked grin and a wicked flash of his aqua eyes, turned away and headed for the front door.

Fina was still leaning against the desk and stroking her forehead absently where Cutler’s warm, firm lips had touched it when her wolf’s ears heard Ryan’s voice.

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“Please, Cutler, just once,” he wheedled from the front yard.

“It scares the cattle, buddy. You know that. How about you just turn on the lights. We’ll save the siren for some other time.”

“Cool,” Ryan blurted out and she heard his canvas shoes crunch the gravel in the driveway, heard the door of Cutler’s big, sheriff’s SUV open, heard Cutler grunt dramatically and figured he was hoisting the six-year-old into the driver’s seat.

“Whew! You’re packing on the muscle, big guy. Soon you’ll be too big for me to lift.”

Fina realized she’d started to cry and she hated it...absolutely hated it. She hated the constant flux of her emotions, her thoughts.

The real reason she’d stuck her nose into Nath’s business was because it was yet another activity to escape into. When she was working, it was easy to carry on like nothing bad had happened to her, easy to deny her family’s death, her pack’s death. Sometimes the tears just started to fall and she felt dark and numb inside. Fina had gotten good at burying her face in the blankets at night



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and crying soundlessly. The worst part about the tears was the anger that followed. She'd get mad at herself for being weak and being alive and then she'd get mad at her pack...her father and brother and Ryan's dad for not seeing this coming, not protecting them like they were supposed to and she'd cry even harder.

Fina picked up Cutler's coffee mug and carried it into the kitchen. She cleaned out the coffee maker, started up the dishwasher, grabbed the bucket of cleaning supplies from beneath the sink and headed for a corner in the front hallway—like she did every day about this time—preparing to obsessively scrub the house from end to end until the phone rang or it was time to make Ryan's lunch or drive him into town to pick up groceries or take him to a play date or mow the lawn. Anything so that she didn't have to think.



Fina inhaled slowly. The first things she picked out were the gas and oil smells from at least fifty vehicles parked in the big, grassy field. Beyond that, she caught the scent of a pack—Cutler's

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pack—in the forest beyond the field. The pack scent was fresh and old at the same time. It was an area wolves had used for decades...maybe a century. The sun had already set and it was almost fully dark. The full moon would be rising over the foothills in about a half hour. Fina's wolf eyes showed her a wide trail leading beneath the trees and after Nath helped her out of Cutler's personal, oversized and beefy SUV, he held her hand and headed for the trail. Cutler caught up to them, walked on her other side and lay his arm around her shoulder. The scents coming out of the forest clearly identified this as the pack's running grounds. Privately owned land, probably hundreds of acres of it where the pack gathered to run and socialize in their fur.

"How many are in your pack?" she blurted out, registering the number of cars and the fact that two more were just pulling in.

"One-hundred ninety," Cutler replied with smug pride.

"One-ninety-one," Nath corrected him gently. "Don't forget the Anderson's new pup."

"Oh. Yeah." He grinned crookedly and gave Fina's shoulder a squeeze. "That makes number

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six for them. I haven't figured out if they're wolves or rabbits." He chuckled ribaldly and Fina poked him in the side with her elbow. He grunted obligingly and cradled his waist. "We've got thirty-two families and forty singles, most of them male." He raised his hand in greeting as they passed two older couples walking together.

Fina felt the sadness creep in again. Her pack had been comprised of eight families only with no singles living on their own. Two of the families had been her older, mated sisters' and even her older brother—who everybody expected to take over as Alpha when her father got too old—still lived at home. She saw that her pack had been small and wealthy, ripe for takeover.

"Hey, Fina..." Nath squeezed her hand and nuzzled her temple. "You up for this, sweetheart?" he asked quietly. Even Cutler was looking down at her with open concern and he could be as emotionally subtle as a tick with gas.

"Just...remembering," she whispered and blinked hard. When another couple, followed by two single males passed them on the trail, she lifted her head, forced a smile and waved with her free hand. "I'll feel better after I run. It's been

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awhile. Maybe too long. I'll be better after," she added firmly and even Fina wasn't sure if it was for the brothers' benefit or hers.

The path opened out onto a big, flat, grassy clearing, roughly oval in shape. A mixed, ancient forest ringed it. Fina could smell the growing excitement in the hundred or so wolves already there. She'd never seen so many assembled at once. Cutler led them in a slow, informal loop of the clearing, greeting members of his pack and introducing Fina to the few she hadn't met. He laughed, asked after their families or their jobs. A lot of the single males looked at her with open interest. There was a time when Fina would have blushed under the attention. Now, she physically withdrew behind Cutler and Nath's bodies—as much as she could without being obviously rude. Cutler's unsubtle growls whenever another male showed too much interest in her kept any of them from getting too close.

Because of Ryan, she'd met most of the families with young pups. The two weeks they'd been alone and on the road, his cognitive skills had started to retard. Fina didn't know why but his ability to read, even his vocabulary and his ability

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to form complete sentences had diminished. From the first day with Cutler's pack, she'd asked the Alpha to introduce her to families with pups Ryan's age so he could socialize and she could watch the parents interact with their kids, hoping to pick up clues about what she was doing wrong. She really hadn't learned anything except that Ryan needed to sit in a booster in the back seat when she drove but for whatever reason, Ryan was almost back to a full post-kindergarten reading level, could do addition and subtraction again, and he played readily and happily with other children instead of withdrawing into his electronic games.

By the time they'd completed the full loop, the perimeter of the clearing was packed with wolves.

"Time to get started," Cutler said to no one in particular. "Any latecomers can catch up with the rest of us." He led Fina and his brother over to an unoccupied spot and nuzzled Fina's hair before lifting his arm from her shoulder. He began to unbutton his plain, ironed, light-blue shirt.

The rest of the wolves began disrobing.

Fina didn't feel nervous or self-conscious

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being naked around others. It was something she'd been used to since reaching puberty and she lifted her lightweight sweater over her head, folded it, set it on the ground beside her then reached back to undo her bra. With puberty came the ability for a young werewolf to change into wolf form...and changing meant getting out of your clothes first unless you felt the need to shop for more to replace the shredded ones. She glanced at the brothers' bodies and her heartbeat picked up.

Nathaniel was simply too beautiful for her inexperienced eyes to fully comprehend. His shoulders were almost as big as his brother's and his skin from the waist up was dark gold from the sun, shimmering with health and vitality. It stretched taut and smooth over striated muscles, deep pronounced pectoral muscles and a six-pack of abs that looked ready to punch out of his skin when he rolled his torso to drop his shirt onto the ground. He started to undo the button fly of his jeans and she looked away, swallowing the hunger growing inside her that belonged more to her wolf than herself.

Her eyes turned to Cutler next and they got

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real round real fast. Although he was the same height as Nath and had the same chestnut-brown hair, he was just...bigger. Everywhere. Cutler's arms were thick bands of defined muscle, his biceps and triceps huge yet managing to stay in proportion to that endlessly wide, lightly furred chest of his. Fina bit back the uncomfortable urge to rub her face all over him. Unlike his brother, Cutler folded his shirt before setting it on the ground and the movement made his obscenely wide lats fan out to dimensions that made Fina's mouth water. She actually licked her lips before she realized she was staring.

She looked away and hurriedly removed the rest of her clothing. The fluttering in her belly was deeply unsettling and she needed to change into her fur as soon as possible to run off the uncomfortable tension rising in her. She toed off her running shoes, pulled off her jeans and panties then ran her hands over her bare arms, fidgeting and needing the run to start soon.

Cutler scented her arousal the second it started emanating from Fina's small, nervous body. Just a trace of it. He held off unzipping his jeans when he realized his cock was starting to

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fill with blood. This was a pack run, not a mating run and he didn't feel like standing around in his skin sporting a hard-on in front of his pack. Although with Fina standing beside him, he figured folks would understand.

One look told him Nath was having the same problem. His baby brother kept looking at Fina's naked body and Cutler smelled the lust coming off him. He dared to take a quick look at her and immediately knew why. It wasn't because Fina was physically perfect—she wasn't. Her hips were too narrow and although her ass was taut and round like an adolescent's, both body parts were still girlish instead of womanly. But he figured they'd fill out after she'd had a pup or two. Cutler liked a well rounded, comfortably fleshed out woman in his bed. He liked the feel of a lush ass cushioning his hips as he drove into her instead of bony, unforgiving angles. Fina's waist was tiny but it was her breasts that drew his eye—and made his mouth open in anticipation of tasting her. High, firm and big enough to sway and jiggle enticingly when she turned and looked around the clearing or into the night sky, searching the treetops for the moon.



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*Mine. Wait. Soon.*

His wolf's voice was stronger than usual, sensing the rise of the full moon and the freedom that was coming. Cutler swallowed hard. He didn't know if *he* could wait. He didn't know if he had that much self control and he saw his hands come up, reaching for Fina, needing to pull her to him.

"Hey, boss!"

Cutler grit his teeth when that familiar, obscenely cheerful voice broke through the haze of lust that he just knew was turning his eyes red.

"*What?*" he snarled with unnecessary venom.

"Tes-ty," the owner of the voice purred, deliberately goading him. "You know if you ate more roughage, you wouldn't be this irritable."

He growled and his upper lip fluttered, exposing his descending canines. "What do you want, Young?" Cutler's voice was thick and gravelly—his wolf was very close to the surface now and the changes in his cells, the structure of his face and throat made talking difficult.

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"I *want* an introduction," she stated self-righteously and flashed a smile at Fina. "Rude-o," she shot back in his direction.

Cutler exhaled impatiently. "Fina Whitesage, meet Officer Suzanne Young—my dispatcher."

Fina held out her hand politely. "Ah...you're the voice I hear coming over the radio." Instinctively, Fina hated the woman on sight. She'd never felt that way about another woman before. The strength of her reaction startled her. Despite that, she pressed on, remembering her manners. "I swear you're the only one I can understand. All of the men I've heard sound like they've got a mouthful of chewing gum. I can't make out a thing they say."

Suzanne threw back her head and laughed delightedly. Fina hated her even more. Suzanne was a sex goddess. Her laughter was silvery and musical, her teeth white and perfectly straight. She was maybe five or six years older than Fina and next to this vivacious, confident woman, Fina felt like a child. Suzanne was taller than her, with long shapely legs that rose up to womanly hips and a waist that defied physics. It was just too small to hold up the rest of her and the rest

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of her made Fina want to slouch, cover her own chest and skulk away into the darkness. Suzanne's breasts were round, large and flawless. Fina bit back a growl of envy when they swayed with the woman's laughter, displaying all too clearly that every perfect, naked inch of them was real. Her nipples were so perky and pink that Fina wanted to slap the woman across the mouth. But it was her face that *really* ticked Fina off. It was the most radiant, beautiful oval Fina had ever seen, capped with a long, silky, lustrous fall of pale blonde hair.

Fina promised herself that next time she took Ryan shopping for a new toy, she'd snap every damned Barbie in the store in half.

Despite all that, Fina froze her pathetic, warm smile in place.

"That's because I make an effort," Suzanne laughed. "It's called enunciation, boss." She slapped her Alpha's belly lightly with the backs of her long, slender fingers. "You should try it some time." She turned back to Fina. "I like this woman already," Suzanne smiled and it made her impossibly beautiful. "I feel like I *know* you already. He talks about you all the time."

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Fina didn't know what to make of that but with her conflicting and uncharitable feelings, she wasn't about to explore it—not now.

“You got what you came for,” Cutler snapped at Suzanne and the tall blonde paled visibly. She let out a quiet yelp then a whine...a nervous sound of distress then, tentatively and slowly, moved closer to her Alpha.

Cutler swore at himself mentally and held himself still. He had no right to go off on Suzanne like that. It wasn't her fault her timing sucked. That was the second time she'd interrupted him with his mate. She didn't deserve to be reprimanded for what amounted to his lack of self control. He didn't refuse her when she hesitantly lowered her head to his chest. She moved slowly, in small increments, sniffing the air around him and glancing up at him again and again, gauging his anger and wary of it. She trembled lightly when she pressed her cheek over his heart.

Fina actually backed away from Cutler when the busty blonde started rubbing her face against his chest. With long, deliberate, gentle strokes Suzanne caressed his heavy pectorals with her cheeks, nose and chin, nuzzling him

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and whining so quietly Fina barely heard her. Her breasts pressed into his ribs but with boobs that big, there was no way it could be avoided. Fina was surprised the woman didn't just fall flat on her face from the weight of them...only she'd probably bounce right back up again.

Fina felt like booting her in the ass to test her theory.

Fina jumped a little when Cutler's strong hand wrapped around her wrist, pulling her back to his side. She tried to resist—tried to pull away from him but he held her tight and refused to let go.

Cutler knew why Suzanne was nuzzling him. He'd been angry with her—really angry and she needed the reassurance that her Alpha's reprimand was over—needed comforting and needed to reaffirm the bonds of Alpha and pack member between them. He held back his impatience, held himself still and waited for her anxiety to recede. When the scent of it faded, Cutler sighed quietly. "Go on, Suzanne," he said with uncharacteristic gentleness. He tipped his head toward the huddle of six, unmated males who were standing nearby and raptly watching

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his dispatcher's every move. "Before your admirers have a stroke."

Grinning self consciously, Suzanne lifted her head from him, glanced up at him once then lowered her eyes and walked back the way she'd come.

When she left, Cutler filled his lungs slowly then exhaled. Suzanne's scent was fresh on him, light, healthy, fertile and undeniably female—but hers wasn't the scent he wanted. His wolf snapped its jaws angrily and prowled through his head, trying to get away from the scent of this interloper and locate the smell of its mate again. Cutler tightened his grip on Fina's wrist and drew her closer.

"Mark me," he growled, dipping his face and rubbing his rough cheek across the side of her face. He slid his free hand around her waist and pulled her into him, overpowering her strength easily, holding her small, warm body against his. "I want your scent on me. I need it," he snarled. Cutler let go of her wrist, wrapped his hand around the back of her head, stood up to his full height and drew her face to him.

He threw back his head and let his wolf's

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growl reverberate through his still-human larynx. It was a frightening sound—part man and part animal but the cry was picked up by other male werewolves throughout the clearing. The wolves inside them trumpeted their strength and vigor in anticipation of the rising moon.

Trembling from head to toe, Fina rubbed her face over Cutler's chest, reveling in the scratchiness of his hair, drinking in the heat of his body, letting the beating of his heart overwhelm her hearing. The pulsing filled her head and her blood began to pound in her ears in time with it. She opened her mouth, dragged her lips over him, moving faster now. She gripped his thick biceps, dug her fingers into him, stretched up onto her toes so she could reach more of him, flipped her head back and forth and painted him with her scent.

Cutler held himself absolutely still except for his head. It lolled back and his eyes gazed unseeing at the stars. He willed his skin to drink her in and let his arms fall helplessly to his sides as his mate touched him.

The other woman's scent on Cutler's body receded, replaced by her own and Fina growled.

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A low, continuous sound she'd never made before—hadn't even known she was capable of. It was a song of possession, intent and need and a rational part of her wondered why this formidable Alpha didn't just simply throw her body away from his. Raise his hand to her and cuff her for her insolence. She snarled and stiffened when she felt another werewolf pressing into her back but her anger fizzled when she realized it was Nathaniel. He lifted her hair and began rubbing his temple against the back of her neck, her shoulders and spine—rubbing his scent over her like she was rubbing hers over Cutler. When her scent had completely erased Suzanne's, Fina turned, grabbed Nath's biceps and began to rub her face over his torso.

Cutler blinked then grinned like he was drunk. He growled but it was a drugged, gluttonous sound. He leaned down, wrapped his arms around Fina's waist and began sliding his cheeks over her shoulder blades, marking parts of her his brother hadn't.

The three of them clung to each other in a sated huddle until Cutler's deepest instinct lifted his head. With unerring accuracy, his eyes turned



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to the white nebula just visible over the treetops, heralding the approach of the full moon. He held his breath for the span of a heartbeat, then two, then threw back his head and howled. "Let the run begin," he bellowed in a voice that was half human, half wolf.

All around him, naked, human bodies shrank in height but expanded in mass. Rising, multiplying howls sang out through the clearing as his pack shifted into the form of the wolf. He kept his chest pressed to Fina's back but clawed at his zipper, yanked down his jeans and kicked them aside. He could hear his brother panting and growling as he too shed the last of his clothing.

The two of them stood on either side of Fina, standing tall and powerful and pressed against her.

Fina trembled but for the first time in weeks, it wasn't with fear. It was desire—raw and foreign and she looked at the two powerful males, smelled the heat and need pouring off them, saw the fully erect and formidable penises rising from the dark thatches on their groins. Her wolf howled with all the power it possessed and she felt her bones

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splinter. Her spine shifted, drawing her head back and pulling her mouth open. Her gums ached, then her jaw as her teeth shifted, grew and moved back to fill her elongating mouth. The ache flashed into pain then disappeared entirely. The sound of her howl changed. It was fully animal now, strong and primitive and gloriously free. Her skin broke loose from the thin layer of womanly, insulating fat beneath it, slithered over her freely then fastened onto violently expanding muscle. Hairs formed beneath her skin and slid out through tight follicles. She dropped down onto all fours and howled again only this time the tremendous sound of it joined hundreds of other wolves crying out with unfettered joy. Her ankles shattered, stretched without impediment then knit themselves up almost immediately. Her nails thickened into sharp, thick daggers that promised death to anyone foolish enough to challenge her.

Her snout snapped shut and Fina's fully wolf eyes gazed over the clearing, seeing everything. Her tipped, perked ears swiveled and she heard everything. She smelled everything. A red squirrel in a cedar chattered down at them aggressively then seemed to sense the combined power of

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the new animals crowding its territory. Its tiny claws dug into the soft bark and it spun, raced up the trunk and disappeared into a tiny crevice between two limbs. Fina knew it wouldn't come out until after sunrise. She heard a leaf tremble in the breeze, heard a blade of grass bend as the rough pad of a paw passed over it, smelled the quick, frightened release of an elk's urine from over a thousand feet away just before it flipped its tail up and ran, causing its small herd to stampede away in its wake. The muzzle of the wolf that was Fina pulled back from its sharp, solid teeth in a parody of a human smile. They were the most powerful creatures on the face of this land this night and the most powerful had the luxury of play.

But before her wolf let itself indulge, it had a piece of business to attend to. Moving smoothly and powerfully, Fina loped forward a few feet and waited. Another female, smaller than her, sleekly muscled and elegantly beautiful because of it, strolled her way with a wide-eyed crowd of young, impetuous males so close on her tail their muzzles bounced off each other as they pressed in after her, jostling each other for a whiff of her scent. When the female was close enough, Fina's

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wolf growled in warning. She turned to the side, presenting her flank to the other but held her tail high. The glossy, reddish-brown fur on her haunches stood up and her head was low to the ground.

The smaller female accepted her challenge and snarled. They circled slowly, not losing eye contact. They struck at the same time but Fina's attack was motivated by anger and a perceived slight that her wolf's intellect was too limited to comprehend. It only knew this bitch had offended her. She lined her thickly boned head up with her spine and slammed into the other female's flank, bowling her over. Fina's strong jaw latched onto the other's neck and she sprayed spittle all over the golden-brown fur that was lightly streaked with the color of sunshine. She let go just as quickly, trotting off with her tail and her head held high. The other female's scent and lack of resistance had clearly telegraphed her capitulation.

The drooling males who'd been following the female weren't as perceptive. Four of them rushed at Fina, snarling and growling and making more noise than effective aggression...

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or romantic overture. Fina spun and dipped her head. She nipped the belly of one, sending him yelping and racing for the tree line. She slammed her shoulder into another then turned to snap at a third when two massive chestnut-brown males came up from behind her and flanked her.

These were no blundering pretenders. These were prime males and they stood shoulder to shoulder with her, lifted their lips and showed their massive teeth without making a sound. The last of the combative males turned tail and ran off into the woods.

Fina trotted forward then paced around her would-be champions slowly. They truly were magnificent and they held themselves with a stillness that was as virile as it was confident. These males had no problem letting her sniff them first, judge their status, gauge their worth. The one with the taller haunches drew her eye first. He was easily the largest wolf she'd ever seen and his powerful frame was covered in thick muscle and a dense, protective covering of fur. It was so glossy it shone eerily in the moonlight. He cocked his tail, inviting her inspection when she walked behind him and his pale eyes, luminescent like

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the ocean, looked back over his massive shoulder at her with haughty confidence.

Fina sniffed and felt the delicate tissues around her ovaries quiver with anticipation. Her womb though was strangely quiet but Fina's wolf distanced itself from the deadened feeling. His testicles were large, round and stood out proudly from his body. The fur-cloaked shaft guarding his penis was deeply and securely rooted inside his loins. His size and confidence trumpeted Alpha and he snarled at her with a touch of self-entitled arrogance when she lingered too long at his vulnerable backside.

Fina moved on to the second wolf. This one wasn't quite as massive as the first but his health and virility were equally unmistakable. There was no arrogance in this wolf and his eyes followed her with clear and unfeigned desire. Yet it was an oddly chaste, restrained need that radiated from his powerful body. Fina's wolf registered the restraint, puzzled by it. She continued moving. She shoved his tail aside with her snout then held her nose very close to his back end and inhaled. Again, her unborn pups jostled each other in an attempt to free themselves from the

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pack and be mated with this male's seed. His... or the other's. She sensed the strong, family connection between this wolf and the first. They smelled like...home.

Fina trotted around to face them, rubbed her snout over the high, broad skull of the first wolf, then the second, then stepped back and waited.

Cutler lifted his head and looked down his long, smoothly furred snout at the young female standing before him. Her strength made her cocky, although he didn't doubt it was well deserved. She was large for a female but that roused his interest in her even more. This was a powerful, worthy female and he would have to work hard to run her down—harder than he'd ever had to work to claim any female and Cutler knew without thinking about it that he *would* claim this female. The struggle would make the claiming glorious. She was his. She was his mate. He knew that just as surely as he knew he was the single most powerful creature in these woods. She had bright, silver-blue eyes and they looked at him and his brother with brazen insolence. She was a child of Alphas and her wolf's haughty pride would accept no less as her mate.

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He also sensed a gentleness in her. She was confident enough to reveal that to them. She would make a formidable but loving mother. That same spirit softened the haughtiness in her just enough to accept his Beta. His brother. With a low, resigned growl, Cutler's wolf cast its blue-green eyes over Nathaniel. He could smell the other wolf's need for the bitch and it was as strong as his own. Unless he was willing to kill his brother, he would have to share her. For the first time in his adult life, the idea of sharing an Alpha's privilege did not meet with fierce, instinctual resistance.

His brother's focused, blue eyes turned to him as they came to an innate understanding and an acceptance of the bonds that would shape the rest of their lives.

Cutler shook his head violently. He was a creature ruled by its base needs and passions... not foolish, half-witted thought. The moon was full and he was standing shoulder to shoulder with his brother. Their mate—their perfect and long-awaited mate was standing in front of them—beautiful and strong and theirs to claim soon. The wolf understood the undercurrent of



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scents coming from its mate and those scents told him that he must wait. Even now there were changes taking place in her body and they must be allowed to progress to completion before the time was right to make her fully his...his and his brother's. He shook his head again, shaking off the last of the thoughts that were beyond his simple understanding and jumped, lifted his forelegs off the ground then dropped down onto his chest, spreading his paws forward and out. He dipped his head to the side. His tongue lolled out of his mouth and his tail swished over the ground in excited anticipation.

The reddish-brown bitch in front of him did the same thing then she jumped up again, spronked in place, flicked her tail up and raced away. His brother jammed his shoulder into his playfully, knocked him off balance then raced after the bitch, yapping with excitement. Cutler took off after them, stretching his powerful body out fully. The ground rushed by beneath him. At times, all four of his paws were off the ground and he hurtled forward unimpeded. He sensed the wolves they passed. Fina's wolf was smart and experienced in evasion, using the playing, wrestling bodies of the others to distract him

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and Nath. Given her age that surprised Cutler and more than a few times, they lost sight of her, despite her height and size. But the bitch hadn't counted on the powerful effect her scent had on the Alpha and Beta and no matter how fast she ran—no matter how fast she spun or backtracked around the tumbling, rollicking bodies of the others—those two tracked her with single-minded deliberation. Fina put on a burst of speed, surprising her pursuers so much that they slowed up just as she disappeared into the forest.

The Alpha lifted his head to the moon and howled. His Beta joined him, then, one by one, the song was picked up by the members of their pack. He let their mate gain a head start on them. A bitch this singular was worth a long, difficult chase and he relished the anticipation of it. But his need for her wouldn't let him tarry long and, soon, with his brother at his side, Cutler sped off into the woods. The rest of his pack started to take off as well, disappearing in all directions, running and trumpeting their joy and freedom.

Fina ran like the wind. She was young and powerful and born for the chase. The ground

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she was running over was unfamiliar, the terrain different from what she was used to but that didn't deter her. The mountains she had known were old, worn down and the forest wasn't ancient or untouched like this one was. The rocky slopes she scampered up now were new, fresh and jagged but her haunches were strong and her paws tough and resilient. They held against the sharp rocks. They were flexible, thick and rough and clung to stone like sticky, sweet honey.

She couldn't hear them but she sensed the males following her. She was a female, young and new like the land she raced over. She was worthy and she knew without doubt they would follow her. There had been other bitches in the pack, back in the clearing. She'd led the two big males a merry chase amongst them, knowing with a surety as powerful as she knew the sun would rise that they wouldn't be distracted by the others.

They were hers.

Her sharp ears told her a big, heavy male was rushing toward her, behind her and to the left. She veered slightly to the right, running down the granite outcropping she'd been following and put on a burst of speed. She knew the males

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would attempt to corral her, steer her through these woods but her wolf's sense accepted this. They knew this land. She didn't. They would run for miles and miles tonight but they would ensure that the distance was far greater than their displacement. She was theirs as much as they were hers and they would ensure she wasn't hurt or didn't travel too far from their clearing.

The second male closed in on her, further behind and slightly to the right. Fina adjusted her course accordingly. After a few minutes of sustained running, she saw why. A deep crevice in the earth opened up beside her path and below, she heard the violent rush of water through a narrow gorge. If she had continued straight, she might have run over the edge. She followed the edge of the gorge and the land dipped. The sound of the water was quieter and she knew the river basin had spread out, allowing it to flow calmly. She leapt down a short, sandy incline and ran along the riverbank, turned and retraced her steps. She did this three times before choosing a shallow slow-moving expanse of water. Fina jumped off the trail she'd left, landing squarely in four inches of river water then trotted over to the

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far bank. She drank then melted into the trees, looking back the way she had come and waited.

Less than a minute later, two massive, brown, male wolves appeared on the far bank. Their noses to the hard-packed sand and rocks, they tracked her path—up the bank then back—then tracked it again. The slightly smaller wolf growled its displeasure and the larger one lifted a forepaw and shoved his brother's jowl out of the way so he could sniff the trail yet again. Fina's wolf opened its mouth, panted with smug pleasure then she rose smoothly to her feet, turned and crept deeper into the woods without disturbing so much as a fallen twig.

After she was out of earshot, she chose a tiny clearing near the base of an ancient pine. The ground was cushioned by decades of fallen needles and she lay down and rested. Within moments she had recovered her strength and was back on her feet. Fina lifted her head and howled. The forest around her fell absolutely silent then she was off, again racing through the trees and over the rocky terrain. Again she sensed the two males behind her, long before they gained enough ground on her for her to hear them.

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She let them catch her once before the moon set and they caught up to her on their own once. Each time, the three of them rushed at each other, bluff charging, tackling, nipping at ears and tumbling over each other in abandoned, jubilant play. Each time, the three of them stopped suddenly, almost as if by unspoken agreement. Close together, they stretched out on their bellies, tongues lolling and breathing hard. Each time, after they'd recovered sufficiently, Fina would leap to her feet, yip playfully then take off again and it would start all over.

After a long, exhausting and demanding night of play, Cutler's deepest instinct again told him to lift his eyes to the sky. The moon was low on the far horizon. He stopped running and began baying to it. He heard his brother stop running then he trotted back to his side and took up the call. Seconds later, they heard the bitch's higher but no less powerful call in the distance. Other distant calls echoed theirs. Soon, she appeared, stepping up onto the granite outcrop he and Nath were standing on. She dipped her head then flung it back, adding her voice to theirs for a second time then allowed them to flank her

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for the short trot back to the spot they'd started from.



Fina brushed Ryan's dark-blond hair back from his forehead as Nath gently carried the sleeping child to his bed. She pulled back the covers then watched as Cutler eased Ryan's shoes off his feet.

Ryan had barely woken when they'd picked him up at the Pikes' after the pack run. He'd been snuggled deep inside his child-sized sleeping bag and lying in a jumble with the other children. They'd considering leaving him there for the remainder of the night but Ryan liked to say good-bye to Nath when he left to guide an overnight trip and Nath would be leaving the house at about seven in the morning. Nath had carried the boy and Cutler had walked in front of them. A strange prescience filled Fina as she walked. The Alpha headed up their odd little family, taking the lead and clearing the way. The child rested safe in the strong, protective arms of the Beta. As the lone female, she walked between the two powerful males. She shook her

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head and dismissed her foolish, girlish, romantic thoughts.

They stepped out of Ryan's room and moved away quietly only to pause awkwardly in front of Fina's door.

She felt better after running, like she knew she would. She felt...centered. Maybe even confident. A little anyway. In the clearing, before the run, the pack's Alpha and Beta had marked her.

They'd marked her.

She hadn't been a quaking subordinate sidling up to them, whimpering for notice, reassurance or acceptance. They'd painted her flesh with possession and intent. They'd marked her as their equal.

"Um, good night," she whispered and stepped into her room. She was pulled back by Cutler's strong hand on her arm. He pulled her to him and, with his aqua eyes shimmering, dipped his head and nuzzled her throat. He straightened and Nath nuzzled her ear. Without another word, the two of them turned away and disappeared into their bedrooms.

A short while later, Fina lay in her bed, dressed



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in a simple cotton undershirt and baggy pajama bottoms, staring up at the ceiling. Memories of running with her own pack crowded into her head and a deep, painful sob escaped her before she jammed her blanket into her mouth. She curled onto her side and wept.

Her door opened and she sensed Cutler standing there. Nathaniel joined him a second or two later. They were both bare-chested and bare-footed. Cutler was wearing loose draw-string flannel pants and Nath was wearing plaid shorts. They looked at each other then climbed into bed on either side of her. Cutler eased the blanket out of her mouth and cradled her head against his chest. Nath pressed his body to her back, warm, comfortable and comforting. Then he drew the covers back up and over all three of them.

Fina sobbed for several minutes. Painful, tearing sobs that had no voice, no sound and no movement except for the powerful tremors that shook her body. Her tears dripped down her face and landed on Cutler's chest. They spilled over his skin and pooled on the bed between them.

Nath stroked her shoulder and the side of her

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body, his hand riding the maelstrom of her grief without the ability to take it away or even ease it.

Her door opened a second time and Ryan stood there, blinking sleepily into the darkness with the faint glow of an open window further down the hallway illuminating him from behind. His thumb was firmly wedged in his mouth. He walked up to the end of the bed then climbed onto it, climbing toward the clutch of adults on its expansive surface. Cutler leaned back, shifted the blankets and made room for the pup. Fina lay her hand on the child's shoulder. Ryan wriggled back into the warmth of her body, spooning his small hips within hers.

"It's okay to cry, Fina," Ryan breathed into the darkness. "We won't tell." He stuck his thumb back in his mouth and lay his head on her pillow.

Fina wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, kissed Ryan's hair and cuddled him, holding him close. Cutler propped himself up on his elbow, looking at the improbable picture they made. Less than two weeks ago, he and his brother were single, self absorbed, lone wolves.

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Now they were a bonded family. He caught his brother's eye, saw him shrug then lay back down. Cutler let his arm fall across both Fina and the boy.

“Good thing you put her in this room,” Nath whispered then yawned lustily. He buried his face in Fina's hair, settled his arm over her and lay his hand on her cotton-covered belly. “This bed's the biggest one we've got.”

Cutler chuckled dryly then let sleep claim him.

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter Four

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Two days later, Fina woke just before dawn and groaned. Her belly cramped angrily—a tearing, brutal pain that radiated out and settled in her lower back—aching, sharp and ceaseless. She felt a sticky wetness pooling between her legs, felt it spilling over the back of her thigh. She hoisted herself out of bed, instinctively keeping her hips raised and clear of the sheets. Bent over, she hurried into her ensuite bathroom and sat down on the toilet shakily. Another cramp racked her, this one more brutal than the last and she wrapped her arms around her belly, leaned forward and rocked back and forth until it eased.

She ran a wad of toilet paper between her legs and got scared when it and her fingers came back soaked in blood.

*“Ohmygawd,”* she breathed and flushed it away. Fina counted back in her head. Her period was overdue, at least by two weeks. She hadn’t thought about it earlier because she’d been too

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overwhelmed by everything else going on in her life to pay much attention to her body. She supposed the stress had caused it to be late, although she was seriously pissed it had decided to hit with a vengeance when it did start. The pain gripped her again and she started rocking.

She cleaned herself as best she could, stripped off her pajamas, dropped the blood-stained bottoms into the sink, inserted a tampon then climbed into the shower. When she got out, she was horrified to discover she had to wash the toilet seat. She wiped it down quickly. Fina wished she had some of that Midol that Helen swore by. Being werewolf meant that Fina didn't feel pain as strongly as humans and Fina didn't think there was so much as an aspirin in the entire house. Another cramp rolled through her and she sat down gingerly on the edge of the tub, waiting for it to pass.

When it did she got up, cursed her uterus and headed back into the bedroom.

"Damn," she breathed when she looked at the bed. Rolling her eyes and feeling acutely embarrassed, as well as grateful that her period had held off for a couple of days instead of hitting

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the night the four of them had curled up together like a tangle of puppies, she stripped the blood-stained sheet off her bed. Thankfully the thick mattress pad had done its job. She wouldn't have to rent a steam cleaner for the bed. She threw on clean pajamas, grabbed her soiled bottoms from the bathroom and carried the bundle to the laundry room.

Cutler woke with a start. The smell of blood was fresh in the air and growing. He leapt out of bed, not even bothering to put a t-shirt on over his pajama bottoms. His first stop was Ryan's room but the boy was sleeping peacefully, sprawled with his head and pillow half off the bed.

He spun around and raced for Fina's room. "Oh jeez no," he groaned when he stuck his head inside. Fina wasn't there but the smell of blood was thick and ripe. He inhaled deliberately, delving beneath the overpowering smell until he located Fina's scent. He rushed down the hall, tracking her.

Cutler ran into the laundry room near the back door so fast his shoulder slammed into the doorjamb, spinning him into a sideways skid. His

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bare feet slid across the cool tiles and he didn't stop until his back slammed into the far wall.

Fina stood in front of the washing machine, staring at him in wide-eyed disbelief then she turned bright red. He looked at the bundle of sheets in her arms, smelled the blood before he saw it then stepped toward her.

He cleared his throat. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly. Fina got even redder if that was possible, nodded then her face tightened. She grunted, a low tearing sound, leaned forward and braced her hand against the washing machine. He held onto her shoulders, desperately wanting to take away her pain, almost unable to bear seeing her like this. He held her until the spasm passed then helped her to straighten.

Suddenly Cutler understood what the conflicting, disturbing scent surrounding his mate had meant. Understood his wolf's instinctive need to wait before claiming her. Understood what had to come to pass before he took her and filled her with his seed.

"You're miscarrying," he said with quiet, brutal honesty. Cutler saw the disbelief then the horror and anger flash in Fina's eyes. "Will you be okay

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if I leave you for a few minutes? I have to make a phone call.”

Fina nodded, turned away from him and began viciously jamming sheets into the washing machine.

Cutler closed the office door behind him and dialed the number from memory. “Trudy?” he said when the line stopped ringing. “Cutler,” he said sharply. “Shut up about how early it is.”

His opinionated, brash, childhood friend fell silent at the commanding tone in her Alpha’s voice.

“I need you to get over here now. I need you to take Ryan for the day. No questions,” he barked when she started to interrupt. “Now. He’ll be ready and waiting for you when you get here. Keep him until after supper. I’ll call you later and let you know if he needs to stay the night.” He hung up without saying good-bye.

The next number he dialed was the station house. He got the night sergeant, told him he wasn’t coming into work that day and wasn’t to be disturbed unless the whole damn town was going up in flames and the wind was blowing his



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way. Then he went back to Ryan's room, packed up a change of clothes, a toothbrush, a few toys and threw everything in Ryan's backpack. Cutler woke him up and got him dressed in record time. They were sitting side by side on the front porch, a small juice pack and an even smaller but now empty container of yogurt between them when Trudy pulled up in her minivan.

Cutler belted Ryan into one of the booster seats in back, ruffled his hair and told him what a fun time he'd have playing at Trudy's today.

Ryan just looked up at him and his brown eyes got big and wet. He started to cry. Cutler leaned back into the car and held him, surprised at the strength in the thin arms that wrapped around his neck, almost strangling him.

"She'll be okay, buddy," he said quietly, leaning his forehead against Ryan's. He kissed the boy's brow then leaned back. "She loves you but she needs to be alone today. She'll be better soon and I'll come pick you up myself."

Tears were still spilling down Ryan's pale cheeks but he nodded, clutched his juice pack in one hand and stuck the thumb of the other in his mouth.

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Cutler shut the door and backed away, waving. He caught Trudy's eye. She opened her mouth to say something then shut it just as quickly when she saw the look on his face. She eased the minivan into gear and drove away slowly.



The morning passed on a slow rollercoaster of pain. Spasms continued to grip Fina's body. She had to get up every half hour or she'd bleed right through yet another tampon. The pain would relent for awhile and she'd doze fitfully. She was so exhausted she felt drugged and would fall asleep as soon as the pain eased, only to wake up again when it returned maybe eight or ten minutes later. Cutler kept checking on her, offering her water or juice. Mid-morning he brought her a bowl of her favorite—chocolate pudding. Fina looked at him with pained, tired but amused eyes and ate it slowly and gratefully.

Cutler didn't ask questions. He stroked her hair, kissed her forehead then slipped out of the room to give her the space he sensed she needed.

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He fed her more chocolate pudding and a couple of slices of toast for lunch. She was halfway through the cup of tea he'd made for her, leaning against her headboard when she sat bolt upright, dropped the cup onto her night table and raced for the bathroom. Cutler sat on the edge of her bed, looking down at the fresh blood on the fresh linens. He cradled his forehead in his hands, fighting hard against the urge to jump on a plane for Tennessee and rip the throats out of every one of those motherless bastards who'd done this to his Fina. His wolf snarled, growled and threw its weight against the perimeters of his consciousness. It almost won the battle but Cutler managed to subdue the primal rage inside him. Fina needed him. He stripped the bed, put on clean sheets and carried the stained ones to the laundry room.

About one o'clock or so, Fina's pain eased up. She slept longer between bouts and in fact had slept a whole hour straight when Cutler heard the front door open.

He set his book aside, got up from the chair in her room and met his brother in the entryway. Nathaniel was dressed in heavy, canvas hiking

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shorts, sturdy boots that covered his ankles and a smudged golf shirt with the Green Mountain Eco Tours logo over the left breast. He smelled like fresh air and wood smoke and his eyes were wide and scared as he scented the air in the house.

*“Fina,”* he blurted out when he saw Cutler walking toward him, running his fingers through his short, dark hair. His big brother looked haggard and was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt in the middle of a workday. “Oh god...she lost it, didn’t she?”

Cutler’s brow furrowed as he looked at his brother. He nodded slowly. “How long have you known?”

“Maybe from the very first,” Nath admitted shakily. He brushed back his longer, sun streaked, brown hair. “My wolf knew. He knew we couldn’t claim her. No wolf will claim a woman carrying another’s pup.” He sat down heavily on the bench inside the door, cradled his face in his hands then started unlacing his boots. “I couldn’t bear to face it...couldn’t bear to think about what...what those bastards must have done

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to her.” He dropped his head back onto the wall and stared up at the ceiling.

Cutler nodded slowly. No wonder his wolf had hid Fina’s pregnancy from him, not letting the human recognize the scent of the fetus growing in her womb. He’d have struck out in a killing rage at those who’d dared to touch his mate. Normally, his wolf would urge him along in anything like that but it knew that Fina needed him, needed him close, needed him when the weak, bastard seedling in her womb died and her innocent body had to pay in blood and pain for its passing. He remembered the way she’d smelled before today. She’d been pregnant, yes—he knew that now—but there had also been a kind of sickness in that scent. Life and death combined like the fetus wasn’t viable somehow. Cutler had a lot of regrets but he’d never regret the fact that Fina’s body had shed the inferior and weak cells that had been forced on her.

“She told me that she escaped the morning after her pack was killed.” Cutler ran the back of his hand across his sore, dry eyes. “They assumed they’d bonded her to them.”

“Rape isn’t the same as bonding.”

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Cutler nodded jerkily at the cold, flat tone in his brother's voice. He rested his hand on Nath's head and they stayed like that for a moment, surrounded by the smell of blood and death, unable to do anything to help their mate, finding comfort in each other.

"I need to see her." Nath finally broke the dark silence that had settled over them. He finished pulling off his boots then rose to his feet. With his brother beside him, he headed for Fina's bedroom.

Nath eased the door back. Fina was sleeping. Her auburn hair was lank and clung to her forehead damply but she was breathing steady and the scent of her pain was less here than it had been by the front door. He exhaled quietly. Her pain was going away. He turned and tiptoed out of the room.



When Fina woke up a short while later, the first thing she saw was Nath leaning back in the big armchair in the corner of her room. His hair was damp and he smelled like soap and shampoo.

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His feet were bare below the frayed cuffs of his worn jeans and he smiled at her hesitantly.

“I’m so sorry, Fina,” he whispered. He stood, crossed the room and sat on the edge of her bed. He kissed her forehead and breathed her in. “I’m so sorry.”

Fina blinked back tears then she slapped his arm lightly. “Don’t start,” she groused deliberately. “You’ll make me start bawling.” He leaned back, grinned, and stood aside, holding up the covers when she crawled out of bed. “Damned uterus,” she bitched, rubbed her lower belly and closed the bathroom door behind her.



Despite Cutler’s fussing and coddling, she insisted on joining the brothers at the kitchen table for dinner. Nathaniel made a simple dinner of some of her favorites...chicken pieces roasted in the oven, flavored with sage and sprinkled with parsley and parmesan cheese, mashed potatoes, sweet corn and the last of the instant chocolate pudding for dessert.

By five-thirty Cutler was in his SUV and

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driving over to Trudy's place. Ryan put on a brave face in front of the other kids but as soon as they were outside, he started climbing up into Cutler's arms even before the Alpha had time to pick him up. He squeezed Cutler's neck tightly and ran his downy cheeks over Cutler's rough jaw. Then he looked pointedly at Cutler's big truck, telescoping his need to get home quick to Fina. Cutler understood and he strapped the boy into his booster in the back seat then drove away without delay.



A couple of hours later, Cutler and Nath were leaning against a wall in Ryan's bedroom, listening to Ryan read the next chapter out of the latest book Fina had picked up at the library for him. She sat on the edge of his bed and only grimaced a little when she bent over to kiss his forehead before tucking him in for the night.

"Stay in your bed tonight, okay Ryan?" she said quietly and ran her fingertips over his dark-blond hair. "I've got a sore tummy and I need some alone time."



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Ryan nodded, returned her kiss then rolled onto his side.

“ ‘Night, Fina. ‘Night, Cutler. ‘Night, Nath,” he whispered and played with a loose tooth in his mouth before sliding his fists under his chin. “Leave the door open,” he added then shut his eyes.

“I will,” Fina replied like she did every night and slipped out of the room behind Cutler and Nath. She walked into the big, comfortable family room off the kitchen and curled up in the corner of the sofa. She grabbed a blanket off the back of it and lay it over her legs. Fina never said anything but she was infinitely grateful when neither Cutler or Nath asked any questions about how she’d gotten pregnant. Cutler simply sat down beside her, lifted her feet onto his lap and began running his thumbs with slow, firm sweeps across the soles. He stopped long enough to hand her the satellite remote.

Nath tossed a pillow onto the floor in front of her and leaned back into the sofa. She looped her arm around the top of his chest and he held it there comfortably.

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When she woke up the next morning, Fina stretched lightly. Her belly still felt a little uncomfortable but no longer hurt. She exhaled gratefully. Nath was sprawled across the chair in her room, his head thrown back, his mouth hanging open. He was snoring quietly. She got up, tiptoed into the washroom and was relieved to find she hadn't bled through during the last maybe four hours.

She slipped out of her room to check on Ryan. His bed was empty. Frowning, she followed his scent trail, now hours old, into Cutler's room. The Alpha lifted his head groggily when she eased down onto her side beside him.

"You okay?" Cutler mumbled, looking at her through bleary eyes. He glanced behind him, making sure Ryan was still asleep.

"Peachy," she whispered tartly and grinned. "I see you had a visitor."

"Yeah." Cutler stretched and again looked at the tiny mound sleeping on his other side. Ryan was breathing deeply and rhythmically. "I think it upset him being sent away yesterday. Buddy

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climbed in here almost the minute after I went to bed. Is it gonna be like this with *our* pups?" he asked tiredly, not even thinking about how ill-timed and inappropriate the question was. "Ah shit," he breathed when Fina's face collapsed with grief. "I'm sorry, honey. Come here," he said, rolling toward her and not letting her push him away when he wrapped his arms around her.

"I hate them so much," Fina groaned in a harsh, subdued whisper. She hid her face in her hands. "They hurt me so bad." Her small body shook with noiseless sobs. "What if they hurt me so bad I'll never be able to have children?" she cried into Cutler's t-shirt and hated the neediness—the frailty inside her.

"Don't you think like that, Fina Whitesage," Cutler ordered in a stern whisper. His mouth snapped down into a tight, straight line. "You're strong. You survived," he told her firmly. "They were rogues...inferior wolves spawned from weak stock. Their seed didn't deserve to live inside you...wasn't strong enough to survive. Even if you don't believe me, remember that almost all first pregnancies end in spontaneous abortion."

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Again he cocked his head to the side, listening to Ryan breathe, making sure he was still asleep.

“In humans maybe,” Fina countered and wiped away her tears with harsh impatience.

“Weres too. Maybe not as many because our women are stronger. Tougher. The baby they forced on you didn’t deserve to live. That’s harsh and cold and it wasn’t your fault or its. It’s just the way it is and I don’t want you to shed another tear over that. You’re going to have lots and lots of strong, healthy pups, Fina Whitesage. You’ll see...fifty years from now we’ll be sitting out front on rockers, sucking soft foods through a straw because there’s not a tooth left in our heads...”

Fina giggled foolishly.

“...but that front lawn? It’s gonna be filled with great grandchildren. A third generation of our offspring playing in the sunshine.”

“Mine too.”

They looked up to find Nath leaning against the doorjamb, his heavy arms crossed over his chest, one ankle over the other. He grinned, walked over to them and lay down beside her,

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squeezing his big body onto the wedge of space between Fina and the edge of the bed.

She looked back and forth between them, chewing on her lower lip. “*Two* mates?” Fina whispered nervously.

“Yes,” Cutler answered with the kind of unarguable finality only an Alpha was capable of, caught her chin between thumb and forefinger and fit his mouth to hers.

It was a tender kiss, a simple, sweet brush of his lips against hers. He stopped, his mouth hovering near the corner of hers, breathing her in and smiling then he kissed her cheek, her temple, her nose.

Fina inhaled sharply and felt like part of the world was finally right for the first time in four weeks. In her head, her wolf jumped forward nimbly on padded feet then leaned toward the alluring, enthralling scent of the man kissing her. Her wolf knew this male...remembered his strength, his power. It let out a quiet rumble of satisfaction.

*Mine.*

Fina was startled and, frankly, appalled by her

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wolf's reaction. Fina Whitesage was nothing. She was an orphan without a pack or status. Cutler was Alpha. Her young wolf was obviously delusional to think that such a high-ranking male would accept her as his mate. *Despite* what he'd said. But Cutler was still kissing her. She inhaled him again and this time acknowledged the possession and contentment in him.

Lips moved over her neck and shoulder. A large, work-roughened hand glanced over her arm. Fina inhaled again and smelled Nath's desire rise as he touched her. His scent was laced with the same possession and contentment as Cutler's.

She exhaled shakily. "This is going to be weird."

Nath chuckled quietly and kissed her shoulder again. Cutler levered himself up on his elbow and looked down at her. The sun had risen and his aqua eyes shimmered with an enthralled intensity, framed into heart-stopping beauty by those lush, dark lashes of his. "Unusual perhaps... but not unheard of," he corrected her gently then brushed his mouth over hers again.

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This time, Fina's eyes fluttered shut and she kissed him back, chasing his lips with hers.

Cutler continued. "I'm a twenty-eight year old Alpha whose pack has been after him for years to take a mate. I've known strong, worthy women but I've accepted none of them because I've always dreamed of finding that one, perfect woman who would complete me."

Fina blinked. "That was almost poetic, Cutler."

"He stole it from me," Nath grinned, brushed Fina's hair aside and kissed the back of her neck.

Cutler growled at his brother but stopped when Ryan stirred behind him. "My wolf knew you were mine the second I met you, Fina Whitesage," he told her quietly. "He's never reacted that way to a woman and he wants no other." He kissed her softly. "*I want no other.*" Then Cutler sighed. "My brother feels the same way. I resented the hell out of it but I can't blame him," he added with a resigned shake of his head. "My wolf could share you...or kill my brother. It chooses to share."

Fina trembled with cold fear but stopped

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when she looked into Cutler's eyes. They were so warm, so gentle and loving that she felt safe and home and...right.

"Yeah, yeah," Nath murmured against Fina's skin. He placed his hand on her shoulder and rolled her toward him. "Too much talking and not enough kissing," he grinned and settled his mouth over Fina's.

Nathaniel's kiss tasted different than Cutler's. Cutler was patient confidence. Nath was rawer. He was sexual energy yet it was tempered. Fina gasped when Nath traced her lips with the tip of his tongue. "Open for me, Fina. Let me taste you," he breathed against her mouth then growled when she did. His tongue touched hers, stroked it carefully while Cutler ran his big hands down the side of her body and pressed kisses to the back of her ear.

The heat pouring off both their bodies was overwhelming and Fina squirmed. That only made their arousal ramp up and Nath leaned over her, pressing his chest lightly into her breast. He caressed her tongue once more with his then leaned back, breathing audibly. "Damn," he groaned and shut his intense blue eyes. His



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hips rocked forward and he looked as surprised as Fina did. He levered them back, dragging his swollen cock away from her thigh.

Cutler took hold of her chin again and pulled her back to him. This time his tongue filled her mouth...slow and heavy and determined and Fina tasted the primal, spicy musk that was Cutler. He withdrew, dragging his tongue over hers, leading and encouraging her to follow. She clutched his shoulder and tipped her head to fit her mouth more firmly to his.

Cutler pulled back leisurely then looked down at her with self-satisfied pride. He pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead before leaning away.

“Hey, wake up, buddy,” he whispered to the small lump beneath the blankets perhaps a foot away from him. Cutler peeled the sheets away from Ryan’s face. “Time to do chores. Then I’ve got to get ready for work.”

Ryan grunted and ran his fists over his eyelids and the bridge of his nose. He opened his eyes slowly. He sat up and looked at the three adults curiously, as if trying to puzzle out how the four of them had wound up in another comfortable tangle.

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“Morning, Fina,” he greeted her first. “Your tummy still sore?”

“It’s better thanks.” She smiled at him, reached over Cutler’s broad chest and brushed Ryan’s hair back. “I’ll put your barn clothes out for you.”

“Nah. I can do it myself.” Ryan yawned and climbed out of bed. Wearing pajama bottoms with cowboys on them and a plain white t-shirt, he padded out of the room without another word.



Less than fifteen minutes later, Ryan was scooping feed out of a bucket and spilling it on the ground in the chicken enclosure. When the bucket was empty, he opened the gate, closed it behind him with careful deliberation then carried the bucket back to the barn.

“Finished, big guy?” Nath asked when Ryan appeared beside him. He took the bucket from the boy, hung it up on a peg then slung another two bales of hay into the trailer hitched up to the back of their ATV. He started it up, settled Ryan on his lap then took off smoothly for the

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paddock their Black Angus cattle were currently penned in. When they reached the gate, he hovered behind Ryan as the boy climbed the fence to reach the latch. Nath gave it a little nudge to help Ryan open it. Ryan jumped down, pulled the gate wide open and stood aside while Nath drove through. The boy closed up the gate, shoved the latch back in place as best he could then trotted over to the feed and water troughs where Nath was already unbaling hay.

“That ewe we were worried about looks better,” Cutler said as he let himself into the cattle paddock from the sheep pen. He brushed the dust off his rawhide gloves, grabbed two buckets of corn from the trailer and set one near the trough. He started to tip up the remaining one then waited until Ryan took hold of the other side of the bucket and the two of them poured the feed together.

“Yah, cow. Yah,” Ryan barked sharply when one of the heifers got too close. It slowed its approach.

Cutler and Nath shared a wry grin over his head, finished filling the troughs then checked the salt licks before piling back onto the ATV.

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“What’s for breakfast, Nath?” Ryan asked. He hung onto his new, straw, cowboy hat when the trailer went over a bump.

“Don’t know, big guy. Fina’s cooking this morning.”

Ryan’s mouth thinned. “She’s doesn’t cook as good as you do.”

“As *well* as you do,” Cutler corrected him gently, then grinned. “Maybe not...but she’ll get better.”

Ryan seemed to mull this over for a minute. With Cutler’s hand on his arm, he climbed down out of the trailer to open the gate. “My mom was a good cook,” he said out of the blue as he pushed the gate closed after them. This time Cutler got out to help him secure the latch.

“She was?” he replied as casually as he could. It was the first time Ryan had talked about his life before he and Fina arrived.

“Yeah. I used to live with her and my dad... before the bad men came,” he added and there was a seriousness in his voice the brothers weren’t used to hearing. Again, they looked at each other over his head. Ryan fell silent and they let him.

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Nath pulled the ATV back into the barn. Cutler stepped out of the back then held out his hands. Ryan liked to ride back to the house on his shoulders but instead of walking toward him, Ryan faced Cutler, stood very still and his large, brown eyes looked very serious and far older than his six years. "She's dead," he told Cutler then climbed onto his shoulders and hung onto his head for the ride back to the house.

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter Five

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“Hell will freeze over first you son of a bitch.”

Cutler’s head came up at the raw anger in Fina’s voice. He set his morning cup of coffee down and hurried into the office. Fina sat at the desk, her laptop open in front of her. When she saw him, she slapped the screen.

“Did you *see* what that bastard had the gall to say?”

Of course he didn’t but Cutler decided it was prudent not to mention that. Fina shot to her feet and began pacing the room. Cutler took the chair she’d vacated and read the email on the screen. It was from a man identifying himself as Sim Brice and it had been sent to Whitesage Nursery’s general inbox.

*Time to get your cute rump back home, my pretty little Fina. I’ve been patient but unless you get back here—along with the pack money you stole—being rogue and alone will be the least of your worries. Those businesses, this website and your ass are the rightful property of my pack. I*

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*don't know what you've been playing at but if you get back here within the next few days, I'll consider forgiving you. Your Alpha, Sim Brice.*

Cutler felt his brow go up and his mouth thin. He could hear Ryan playing outside, carrying on a one-sided conversation with the cattle. He smelled Fina's rage as clearly as he saw her strident walk and the color in her cheeks.

"Is this him?" he asked coolly.

"I'm assuming," Fina spit out. "He never bothered to introduce himself." She swore under her breath and stormed out of the office. He let her go. Taking herself on a long walk down the laneway might cool her down.

Cutler glanced at his watch, radioed his dispatcher and advised that he was available for duty, but would be at home for awhile unless he was needed. Then he sent himself a copy of this Sim Brice's email before scrolling through the Whitesage Nursery website. He'd never seen it before and it was impressive. Their specialty was rare, antique, heirloom plants. The bulk of their business seemed to be the sale of seeds online. Cutler's brows went up. He hadn't realized there were over a thousand varieties of apples

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alone. The site's homepage was a short, gracious letter to their customers, advising that there had been deaths in the family and as a result, Whitesage Nursery was closed temporarily. The letter directed customers to competitor sites in the meantime. Cutler heard Fina's voice in every word of every sentence. He heard her determination and her hopefulness.

He checked the website for geographical indicators, the name of a webpage designer, anything that could lead this Sim Brice to her or Wyoming...and found nothing. Breathing a sigh of relief, Cutler wrote down the company's web address and forwarded it onto a buddy of his at the FBI who was a whiz at this sort of thing. He'd make sure nothing could lead the rogues to Fina. When he was finished, Cutler poured himself a fresh cup of coffee, checked the reports his officers had logged into the Sheriff's Office intranet overnight and waited for Fina to walk off her anger.



"When's Nath coming home?" Ryan whined as he crawled into bed a few days later.



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“Day after tomorrow, buddy,” Cutler told him as he picked the library book off Ryan’s night table. “Would you like to start the next chapter or do you want to wait for Fina?”

Ryan took the book from his Alpha, opened it then scowled. “She burned the macaroni.”

“Yeah I know,” Cutler agreed quietly. He sat down beside Ryan, stretched out his long jean-clad legs, and propped his back against Ryan’s headboard. “She’s trying,” Cutler added with a resigned shrug.

“I wish she’d try harder.”

“That’s enough of that,” Cutler interrupted Ryan firmly. “Can *you* cook macaroni?” Ryan looked away and shook his head. “Then from now on, when Fina goes to the trouble of making you something to eat, you say thank you and I don’t care how bad it tastes. Understood?” he added, gentling his voice.

Ryan looked like he wanted to argue but, finally, he nodded. “Okay,” he sighed plaintively, shoved his pillow behind him and sat up beside Cutler.

“Thank you,” Cutler acknowledged. “How

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about tomorrow I bring home fried chicken from the diner?" he added and held his hand out, palm up. Ryan grinned, slapped Cutler's hand with his then started reading out loud.

Fina walked in maybe fifteen minutes later, flexing her fingers gingerly. She'd spent part of the evening compiling an email contact list to promote Green Mountain Eco Tours to past customers and anybody who'd ever inquired about taking a tour. She leaned her backside on Ryan's windowsill, listening to him read the last page of the chapter. Ryan's reading skills continued to improve steadily. Fina couldn't be happier—or more relieved.

"Good story, buddy," Cutler said as he stood up. He fluffed Ryan's pillow while the six-year old scooted under the covers. "Are there any more books in that series?" he asked, looking up at Fina.

"One more," she answered, walked over to Ryan and brushed his hair back with her fingertips. "Did you remember to brush your teeth?"

Ryan took a deep breath and blew it out in her

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direction. "Cutler asked already," he answered impatiently.

Fina inhaled and plastered an artificially bright smile on her face. "Ah...minty fresh. All right then." She switched off Ryan's lamp and she and Cutler headed for the door.

"Leave the door open," Ryan asked like he did every night. "'Night, Fina. 'Night, Cutler."

"Good night, Ryan," they said almost at the same time and left.

In the family room, Cutler stretched out on the big sectional.

"Hey! Sofa hog," Fina grouched then headed for the kitchen. "Want something to drink?"

"No. I'm good," Cutler answered absently. He picked up the remote, looked at it then tossed it back onto the coffee table. He dug his fingers into his eyes. "State Inspector's coming by the station house next week." He rolled his neck and stretched his arms overhead until a couple of his vertebrae popped.

"Is that unusual?" Fina asked as she poured ice and water into a glass.

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“Routine,” Cutler answered curtly. “They send somebody every year.” His eyes tracked Fina as she walked back toward him. “There’s some running around to do before they get there. Make sure the filing is caught up and the evidence locker is tidy...that sort of thing. Thanks,” he added when he reached up and took the glass from her hand. Cutler drank about half of it before handing it back.

“You’re pushing your luck tonight, Sheriff,” Fina groused, looking at her half-empty glass. She took a drink then set it down on a coaster.

“Yeah? Wanna see what else I can push? Hmm?” Cutler taunted. He grabbed Fina’s waist, dug his fingers into her ribs until she laughed then pulled her down next to him.

Fina perched on the edge of the big sofa, her hip beside Cutler’s and lay her hand on the middle of his chest. The two of them looked at it for awhile—her small, pale hand riding the steady rise and fall of Cutler’s massive chest. After a time, Cutler reached up and combed his fingers through Fina’s heavy, reddish-brown hair.

“You’re beautiful,” he said quietly. “I don’t tell you that often enough.”

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Fina blushed and looked away. Cutler brought her gaze back to his by laying his finger beneath her chin. He looked up at her thoughtfully. He wanted to mate with her so much the wanting had become need. He'd waited until she'd stopped bleeding and had given her another two weeks on top of that.

"Cutler..." Fina said hesitantly, "Y-you said awhile back that you wanted me for your mate. You *and* Nath did."

He nodded, waiting for her to continue, and traced her jaw with the tips of his fingers.

"As much as I...appreciate your saying it, I know it was only to make me feel better. Like I could still be wanted...after..." Her voice trailed away self-consciously. "It was sweet and I love you for saying it, but I won't hold you to it."

"Come here."

"Pardon?" Fina's breath caught at the low rumble of command in Cutler's voice. There was tenderness in it too and her brow furrowed at the dichotomy.

"I *said*," Cutler said firmly. He wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled Fina's small

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body on top of his. "Come. Here," he repeated, saying it gently this time and arranged her limbs until she was stretched out on top of him. He kissed the tip of her nose and ran his big hands up and down her back. "My wolf has chosen you as its mate, Fina Whitesage," Cutler said like he was explaining something to a child. "Our kind believe that there is one true lifemate for each of us and my wolf recognized you as that the second I walked into the café and smelled you." Fina's blue eyes were wide and startled and Cutler smiled at her tenderly. "Now it does not necessarily follow that the human part of me will love my mate." Her expression dimmed and Cutler cupped her face in his hands. "But in this case I do, Fina. I love you."

"Don't do this to me, Cutler." Fina squirmed, trying to get away, but his hands returned to her back and he held her easily.

"Do you think I'm lying?" he asked and his brows drew together. The light from the kitchen caught his shimmering, aqua eyes and emphasized the dark, luxuriant fringe of his lashes. "Delusional? Heartless? Cruel?"

"No of course not but—"

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“But what, Fina?”

Fina placed her palms on Cutler's thick shoulders. She should feel foolish, perched on him like an infant, but she didn't. Cutler was big and powerful and his body supported hers effortlessly. She rose and fell with every breath he took and she could feel his hard body against every inch of hers and she liked it...liked it on a level that was unexplored and wonderful. Fina chose to deliberately ignore those feelings. “You're an *Alpha*, Cutler,” she blurted out and now it was Fina's turn to sound like she was explaining something to a child. “You've taken me in, sure, and I'm grateful—don't ever think I'm not. But my pack is dead. I have no status, no standing. I'm a *stray* for crying out loud,” she barked into his face. “Alphas don't mate with strays. That's only one step above rogue and the distinctions are thin. Your pack will never accept me as top bitch.”

“Are you finished?” Cutler demanded hotly. He exhaled hard and his lip pulled back from his upper canines. “Jeez...you're just about the most stubborn, idiotic woman I've ever met, Fina Whitesage,” Cutler exhaled again but this time

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he did it slowly, reigning in his anger. "I love you, Fina," he said with stark finality. "Do you believe me?"

"Cutler, I—"

"Do you believe me?" he growled at her and his big hands eclipsed her slender shoulders.

"Yes," Fina hissed in annoyance. "There—are you happy? You don't have to go all Alpha on me you know."

One corner of Cutler's sensuous mouth quirked up. "It'll do. For starters." He ran his hands up and down Fina's back again, liking the way her warmth bled through her soft, linen blouse. "I didn't say it would be easy on you. There are members of my pack who will see you as an interloper. Women especially."

"Oh and let me guess...the young unmated ones who've been chasing your tail for years."

"Well...yes," Cutler admitted with a shrug. "I'm older than you, Fina. I've been an Alpha for almost six years. I've dated," he added dryly.

Fina laughed and tucked her face in beside Cutler's thick neck, hiding the blush heating her



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cheeks. He hugged her to him and let his hands move over her waist, the curve of her hips, her jean-clad thighs. Laying his hand on the small of her back, he held her to him, making sure she felt the unmistakable swelling of his cock. She stiffened then squirmed uncomfortably but didn't pull away. Instead she chewed on her lower lip.

Cutler took hold of her chin, tilted it up and kissed her gently. He tasted warm, male and salty. His tongue swept her lip when she stopped biting it. Like before, Cutler's kiss was patient, sensual but most of all confident. He was a man who knew what he wanted, held it in his arms and entertained no refusal.

Knowing that, Fina was surprised when Cutler pulled back and looked up at her with those infuriatingly seductive, aqua eyes.

"If you tell me you don't want this...you're not ready for this I'll stop," Cutler explained quietly. His big hands moved over her back, warming her and that warmth slid straight down to her nether regions. "I want you, Fina Whitesage. I want you for my mate and I *will* mate with you. Whether tonight or sometime down the road.

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Give me a good reason, a reason that isn't a lie or fear," Cutler added quickly, "and I'll stop." He shifted and Fina felt his erection dig into then ease away from her thigh. "I won't like it but I'll stop." Those full, sensuous lips of his curled up in a naughty smile that made Fina want to chain him to the sofa, shred his clothes and hump him like a mad dog. She figured he had that affect on women.

He leaned back and waited like he had all the time in the world.

Fina didn't feel a need to fill the silence stretching between them with blathering. Instead she thought her situation through. She and Ryan were strays. They needed the security of a pack. Cutler had offered his. Cutler and Nath had offered more. It was immodest but Fina realized her value. The daughter of Alphas, she would birth strong, singular sons capable of leading a pack. Strong, beautiful daughters who would attract the finest, strongest males from other packs. In short she was a helluva addition to any gene pool.

Even though he was an outsider male, this pack accepted Ryan as one of theirs. He hadn't been

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turned away and he wouldn't be. By mating with this Alpha and trumping the deal by mating with his Beta as well, Fina would ensure her security and through her, Ryan's. Not to mention the fact that the Powell brothers were hotter than hell and just being in the same room with one of them made her panties smoke.

Fina hid her grin as she gave in to the truth of that.

Her pack was dead. She'd fostered the only other survivor as if he were her own cub. Running had served a need in both of them but maybe it was time to stop.

Nodding quietly, Fina dipped her head and kissed the corners of Cutler's mouth. A low rumble, more of a feeling than a sound moved from Cutler's chest into hers and he tightened his hold on her. He lifted his chin, grinned and exposed his throat to her.

Blinking, aware of the vulnerability and honor he was granting her, Fina kissed the hard column of Cutler's neck, carefully ran her tongue over the roughness of his beard stubble. She breathed in his scent. Both Fina and her wolf trembled. It was a fine, sensual shimmering that raised

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her hair, thrummed through her spine, womb and pussy. Fina's toes actually curled inside her cotton socks. This prime, powerful male was hers to claim. He was offering his status, strength and protection. Only a fool would reject him and Fina was no fool.

With a deep rumble of pleasure, Cutler ran his hands over her ass then squeezed gently. Fina trembled and gasped when Cutler's long fingers found the seam of her jeans and traveled back and forth between her legs languidly, pressing only hard enough to tease. "*Cutler*," Fina breathed against his skin.

When she started to shake, Cutler shifted her weight, slid her body off his, stood and picked Fina up. He carried her to her bedroom. He could smell her burgeoning arousal but mostly he smelled resignation. It wasn't what he'd hoped for but maybe it was all she was capable of giving right now.

"I won't hurt you and I'll never betray you, Fina," he whispered into her hair before he set her on her feet. Cutler closed the door behind them. "Your wolf wants me."

She blinked then nodded.

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“You don’t trust me fully yet. Hell you probably don’t really trust anybody anymore.” He put his hands on her shoulders then slid them onto her chest. His fingers rested on the top button of her blouse. “I know what kind of man I am—how I’m going to treat you. You *will* trust me in time.” Although he spoke quietly, Cutler’s voice had that firm, confident undertone only Alphas really mastered. “Me *and* Nath,” he added and his thinning mouth begrudged the mention of his brother only a little. “What you feel for me now is lust and maybe gratitude. It’s nowhere near what I want but it’ll do for now.” His eyes shimmered palely in the moonlight and Cutler eased the first button on her blouse open then the one below that.

“Damn you’re beautiful,” he whispered as he eased her blouse off her shoulders. He tossed it onto the chair in the corner of her room then cupped the bottoms of her lace-covered breasts in his palms. Cutler stepped closer, growled quietly and brought his mouth down on her throat.

Fina shivered and it wasn’t entirely with pleasure. Cutler’s lips were warm, firm and smooth and they fastened on her in an open-

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mouthed kiss that made her breath catch. He was also twice her size, monstrously strong and could tear her throat out effortlessly. Harnessing her unease, Fina lay her palms on Cutler's shoulders. She focused on the heat coming off his body, his patient, confident vibe. It felt good to be held—to be this close to another living being. Sensing Cutler's need for her and his control of it, Fina relaxed and allowed herself to accept the pleasure he offered.

“Hmm,” he breathed against her skin and Fina felt his smile. Without asking, Fina unbuttoned Cutler's shirt, pulled it free of his jeans and tossed it onto the chair with hers. She traced the thick muscles on his arms, enthralled by the warmth and smoothness of his skin. The dark curls on his chest teased the skin between her fingers. Cutler inhaled sharply when she ran the fleshy part of her thumbs across his nipples. He growled and scored her throat with the tips of his canines but his touch was so delicate that Fina only gasped before she leaned in closer.

When Fina's breasts pressed into his palms, Cutler sighed with contentment. Fina was his. Maybe he hadn't been able to claim her spirit

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fully—yet—but he'd be satisfied with her body in the meantime. He squeezed gently then stepped back to trail his fingers down her abdomen and unfasten the button of her jeans. In silence, they removed each other's clothing until, naked, Cutler eased back the sheets on Fina's bed, lay down and held out his hand.

Fina's eyes flared and her wolf prowled the confines of her mind restlessly, licking its lips. Cutler naked was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen. His endlessly broad shoulders and thick chest shimmered in the moonlight. Long legs, powerful thighs and a thick, daunting cock standing straight up almost pulled Fina's eyes out of their sockets. Suddenly her wolf wasn't the only one licking its lips and Fina blushed when Cutler chuckled.

"I feel the same way about you," he grinned and, propped up on one elbow, beckoned her forward with a subtle movement of his hand. She placed her palm in his and lay down beside him.

The smile he gave her was gentle yet very male when he cupped her mound. Inhaling sharply, Fina's neck arched and her knee rose like it had

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a mind of its own. Cutler's long, thick fingers slipped between her legs. He squeezed firmly, his fingertips pressing against the mouth of her core then he slid his hand away. Fina sharp rebuke died when he lifted his palm to his mouth and, his eyes never leaving hers, slowly and deliberately licked the taste of her from his hand.

Sexual need ratcheted her insides, twisting her as she watched. He made a quiet sound of disappointment when his hand was clean then wrapped it around her breast, the one farthest from him. The other he bent to, drew her nipple into his mouth and tongued it languidly.

"Sweet Jesus," Fina sighed and gripped his head.

"No," Cutler chuckled against her skin, slowly passed his beard-roughed cheek over her breast then looked up at her with those melting eyes of his. "It's just me, honey." Grinning, he recaptured the tip between his lips and suckled her slow and deep. He caressed and pinched its mate until Fina squirmed and arched her back, pressing her breasts closer to him. Cutler lifted her easily, settled her over him so that her lush nipples dangled above his mouth, crushed her



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breasts together with his hands and tongued and mouthed them at the same time.

The tip of Cutler's cock pressed into Fina's crease and she began rocking against it...light, teasing pressure that made his heat and hardness trail between her legs. His cock jumped, caught the mouth of her sheath then slid over her pussy lips. It nudged her clit and Fina pressed against him lightly before tipping her hips to start the slow, hot tease all over again.

He growled against her breasts and bit her nipples with sensual restraint.

Long, drugging minutes of the dual onslaught had Fina tossing her head, chewing her lower lip and grinding her pussy over Cutler's cock. With a fierce snarl, he rolled her onto her back, kneed her legs apart and lay between them. His shaft dug into her thigh and he sank his fingers into her hair, holding her still with the weight of his body. He passed his nose over her cheek, her jaw, inhaling deliberately.

Cutler smiled his approval when he caught the smell of his mate's arousal. He kissed her. It was soft but possessive...a slow, learning pass of his lips over hers. She was his and he had

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hours to touch her, pleasure her. Rolling his big body gently, Cutler gloried in the feel of her small, warm body beneath his, the scent of her in his nostrils and the taste of her on his lips. Fina squirmed, her body wanting more direct stimulation but Cutler held it back from her. He knew how provocative it was to give a woman a taste of arousal then backpedal, leaving her hungry and anxious for more. He also loved the feel of all that softness rubbing against him like his horny little mate couldn't get enough of him. Leaning more of his weight into her, stilling her movements, Cutler settled his mouth over Fina's and licked the inner rim of her lips.

Trembling, Fina wasn't sure if she wanted to squeeze him or cuff him. She opened her lips instead and sank her tongue into his mouth. Cutler growled and it made Fina so hot she squirmed harder, wanting to rub every inch of herself against him. Cutler tasted like warm sex with a hint of spice. He gave up on teasing her and drove his tongue deep. It was a thorough, patient exploration...like he was learning her. Fina learned him as well. She liked the way his breath suspended when she ran her tongue over his smooth teeth, the way his back trembled when

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she licked the roof of his mouth, the way his hips punched hers when she groaned and shoved her tongue into his mouth like she owned him.

“Hmm yeah, baby,” Cutler moaned. He broke the kiss and dragged his teeth over her jaw. “You’re mine. Every inch of you. I’m gonna love you just like that.” He wrapped his big hands around her breasts, plumped them then nuzzled the valley between them. He licked her skin, drenching it with his saliva then levered his big body up with such controlled violence that Fina gasped. Still holding her breasts, Cutler straddled her ribs, leaned his weight back on his heels and pressed his cock into her cleavage. His eyes glowed savagely as he began to slowly fuck her breasts, nudging her chin with the head. “Taste me, Fina,” he commanded in a tone that allowed no refusal. “Lick me. Make it wet.”

With each slow, teasing rock, Cutler squeezed her breasts around his length. His thumbs pressed her nipples sensually and he dragged his rod over the firm rise of her chest. Pausing at the apex, he growled his approval when she opened her mouth for him. His wolf’s eyes missed nothing as she swirled her tongue around the

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head, sucked him awkwardly then followed after him when he retreated. Pleasure traced through his balls as they dragged up and down her chest.

“Good, honey,” he groaned. “So damned good.” Cutler let go of his lover’s breasts and slid his ass further up her body. Setting his knees wider apart for balance, he supported her head and slowly dragged the bottom of his cock over Fina’s lips. He smiled ferally when her eager, pink tongue traced the thick vein there. He drew back and Fina’s eyes held his as she swished her tongue over him from head to root. His balls tapped her chin and without asking, he drew himself up, let them hover over her open mouth and held back a roar of pleasure when she tongued first one then the other. “Suck them, honey. Gentle,” he whispered coarsely and moaned his approval when she drew first one then the other heavy orb into her mouth to slowly work her tongue around him. “Damn. You’re killing me, Fina. Don’t stop,” Cutler breathed and let his head fall back. He moved his pelvis so she could reach his cock again. She licked him and his head shot forward so he could watch.

After three, slow passes, Fina touched Cutler’s

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arms, caressed his waist. She was old enough to attend mating runs and had seen women take men into their mouths in human form. It had always looked like hard work for the woman, uncomfortable too but Cutler used her mouth gently and pressed into her only a little. He held her head so there was no strain on her neck and he moved slow. Rather than being overwhelmed, Fina felt sensual, maybe even competent as he guided her. After one more pass, Cutler stopped. He levered his big body off hers, kissed her breasts then stretched out beside her. He lay his hand on her belly.

“Were you okay with that?” His voice was deeper than usual. Rough.

“Yes,” Fina answered. She ran her tongue over her lower lip speculatively. “Did I do okay?”

Cutler’s eyes crinkled and he grinned. “*Okay?* Honey, I had to stop or I would have come. Just a few licks of that hot little tongue of yours got me hotter than any woman ever has. Even if they...” His voice trailed off and he cleared his throat self-consciously.

She shot him a hard look.

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“Okay. I get it,” Cutler mumbled, abashed. “From now on I don’t talk about...I don’t *think* about sex with other women. Especially when I’m in bed with you.” The corner of his mouth quirked up. “You’re my first steady girlfriend. Some of this is new to me.”

“And you’re used to being an Alpha.”

“Yeah. There’s that too,” Cutler agreed wryly then made an X over his chest with his fingertip. “Promise,” he vowed.

“Promise *what*?” Fina demanded suspiciously.

“I promise never to love another woman like I love you, Fina Whitesage.” He kissed her lips, her collarbone. “I promise that when I look at a beautiful woman, that’s all I see nowadays—beauty. I don’t feel like doing anything about it. Nobody moves me but you anymore, honey. It’s kinda weird actually.”

She slapped his shoulder.

“So...now that you’ve collared and neutered me, Fina, what *are* you going to do with me?” Cutler’s brows wriggled suggestively. He nudged her thigh with the tip of his hard cock.

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“You’re the Alpha. You tell me,” Fina taunted then giggled when Cutler rolled on top of her to nuzzle her throat. He licked a slow, teasing path up and over her jaw then sank his tongue into her mouth with hot, thorough confidence. He kissed her gently, at first. Explored and retreated, teaching her and giving her time to experiment on her own. Cutler’s powerful, virile body covered her, warmed her, protected her and kept her fears at bay. Fina slid her arms around him and let him take what he needed.

She moaned in protest when he slid out of her arms and moved down her body. Cutler kissed her breasts, mouthed her nipples and suckled them languidly while his hands squeezed and stroked. His fingers trailed down her body and his mouth followed, caressing her ribs, her waist, the jut of her hip and her knees. Fina gasped when he painted tiny figure eights on her inner thigh with the tip of his tongue. Without preamble and like her body belonged to him, Cutler swung her legs to the side, letting them fall over the edge of the bed.

Fina bit down hard on her lower lip in anticipation and watched Cutler slip off the bed

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to kneel beside it, take hold of the backs of her knees and raise them high.

He was so beautiful. Inhaling sharply, Fina wrestled with the feelings Cutler raised in her. His primal, fundamental power overwhelmed her...almost. The perfect symmetry of his deep, furred chest rose and fell faster when he looked at her exposed sex. His nose twitched and his eyes widened as he deliberately breathed in her scent. Shoulders and arms that looked powerful enough to tear her in two shimmered in the moonlight and made Fina feel small, insignificant...adored. Cutler breathed in again. This time he smiled and his eyes drifted shut. His grip on her knees tightened and he levered them so far apart and so high that her tendons strained beneath her skin.

Wordlessly, looking down at her with a heady combination of lust and anticipation, Cutler ran his tongue over her exposed sex, across her anus, pussy, clit and mound. He swirled his tongue through her tight, reddish brown curls then up her belly to drive into her navel. He punched his tongue in and out of her like he was fucking her



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then sucked the surrounding skin into his mouth and gnawed on her gently.

“*Cutler*,” Fina gasped and she swore she felt him grin. Finally he eased off on the pressure and retraced his path. This time she sighed when he kissed her plump mound, and jumped when he circled her clit with his tongue. Squirming edgily, Fina tried to let her body tell Cutler she wanted him to touch her there. He ignored her unobtrusive invitation. Instead he slid his hands down the back of her legs, stopping when they covered the crease where ass met leg. He spread her fleshy nether lips with his thumbs and lapped at the wetness around the mouth of her sheath. Fina squirmed even harder. Cutler seemed to be actually purring with pleasure and waves of contentment poured off him. He flattened his tongue, dragged the rough length of it over and around her then narrowed it to lap at her tender, inner walls, drawing out her taste, her wetness, her need.

He licked his lips, growled his approval and lifted his eyes to hers as he crouched over her.

“Mine, Fina.” Cutler’s voice was rough, animalistic and the muscles in his shoulders

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jerked. His wolf was very close to the surface and instinct told Fina she was listening to Cutler's voice and his wolf's, simultaneously. He grabbed her knees hard and yanked her into him, rubbing the thick length of his cock against her slit. "*Mine*," he bellowed and his eyes flashed then narrowed on her.

Fina read the demand in them. "Yes," Fina replied, tilting her head and listening for sounds that he'd woken Ryan. The house was quiet. "Yes, Cutler," she said, gentling her voice, hoping to soothe this frightening possessiveness in him. "I'm yours. Love me, Cutler. Take me. Make me yours."

Was she babbling? Fina wondered. Did she sound pathetic? Stupid? Apparently not because the jerking in Cutler's shoulders stopped and the flashing in his eyes was replaced by the determined lust she'd seen earlier. She exhaled shakily and forced a smile.

"With the greatest pleasure," Cutler whispered fervently and bent to her again. He dipped his tongue into her pussy, lapped at her contentedly then pushed back on her knees until they crushed her breasts, raising her backside and exposing

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her fully. He dragged his tongue over the tight pucker of her anus then drew lazy circles around it.

This play was new to her and Fina squirmed uncomfortably. Cutler tightened his hold on her. He licked and nibbled at her back hole, stirring up deliciously wicked sensations. Fina felt hot then cold all over. Her belly tightened and she gasped as she felt herself grow wetter. Her wetness trailed over her ass. Cutler licked it up with undisguised pleasure then forced the tip of his tongue into her ass.

*"Ohmygod,"* Fina groaned. She'd never felt anything like it before. It was so decadently delicious. Her anus grew more sensitive by the minute and she relaxed, reveling in the unexpected sensations as he licked and probed. Cutler's breath stirred her tight curls and she shivered. It was so sensual Fina forgot about everything else.

Disappointment tinged with anger brought her head up when Cutler stopped and let go of her knees. She forgave him when he held her legs back with a heavy forearm and used his free hand to stroke her pussy. Panting now, Fina felt

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his rough fingertips move over her clit, rub it in slow, seductive circles before his thumb sunk into her pussy. His tongue returned to her ass. He bit one cheek then the other then licked her sensitized back hole.

Fina trembled when the gentle swirl of his finger over her clit firmed into a determined stroking. He growled, pressed his tongue deeper, shoved his thumb into her roughly and rhythmically and sped up the pace of his hand.

Again turning hot and cold in turns, Fina felt her thighs shake despite the powerful forearm holding them in place. She gasped and cried out when a fist of sensation squeezed her womb. "Cutler...please," she begged and wasn't sure why. She only knew she didn't want him to stop. Knew she'd die if he stopped. He seemed to understand and snarled with satisfaction when Fina came. Hot pulses of release licked through her, gripping her core, her sex. She felt her muscles flex hard and steady, clutching at his thumb, his tongue, needing Cutler's rough, determined touch. Barely able to stifle the moan of pleasure that formed in her chest, Fina rocked against

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Cutler, riding the maelstrom of her release. She shuddered violently when it faded.

With a move that was as powerful as it was arrogant, Cutler hefted her limp body back onto the bed, settled her head on a pillow and lay between her legs. His eyes on hers, he watched the dullness overtake her. He grinned ferally, dipped his head to her sex and flicked his tongue over her clit.

The sensation was too intense for Fina's sated body and she jerked, trying to pull away. Cutler overpowered her effortlessly. He yanked her thighs over his shoulders, spread them wide, grinned again and began a steady side-to-side flick with his tongue. Squirming, cursing him under her breath, Fina gasped in shock and arousal when the uncomfortable intensity morphed into pleasure. She returned his grin, settled back on the comfortable bed and ran her hands over her breasts. Cutler's eyes blazed with excitement as he watched. His hand moved over her slit. Slowly, two fingers slid into her core.

Fina's back arched at the invasion. Her body knew what it needed and it needed to draw him closer. She lifted her hips tentatively, moving in

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counterpoint to Cutler's touch, letting her body speak its pleasure then lay back again and let him satisfy her as he pleased. Fina knew that the Alpha could not be coerced, could not be tempted into anything other than how he chose to arouse her. She wasn't so sure she minded. When one finger slipped out of her sheath and slid back, Fina held her breath then let it out in a tight exclamation of anticipation when he pressed against her anus. Trying not to squirm, Fina felt him breach her then press inside slow and deep. He moved his fingers in tandem, claiming both openings at the same time. Lifting his head, Cutler looked at her face and Fina knew he was searching for signs of discomfort or rejection. He found none.

His mouth quirking up in a satisfied, indolent grin, he returned to her clit and began to flick his tongue against it even faster.

Fina gripped the bed linens and arched into Cutler, loving the power and determination in him. She rocked her loins against his face and his neck held steady against the force of her escalating passion. Groaning, growling, Fina felt her excitement rise faster than before. Her torso twisted and she dug her heels into his armpits,

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yanking his body into hers, wanting more, needing more. Gasping, she lifted her head and snarled. Cutler responded by violently rasping his tongue against her and shoving his fingers into her deep and hard.

“Oh...god,” Fina gasped when the trembling started. She gripped the top of Cutler’s head, tried not to gouge him with her fingernails but couldn’t help it. He growled but didn’t stop. Again the clenching in her belly sent tremors of sensation through her pussy. Her clit became hyper-sensitive and she felt every stroke of Cutler’s tongue, felt her swollen nub being flicked from side to side, felt the dual pounding of his fingers and lifted her body to him, wanting more. She shouted then slapped her hands over her mouth to muffle the sound when release poured through her like hot, melting sugar. It sparked every nerve ending in her body and Fina groaned and writhed as Cutler doubled his efforts.

When her climax was over she lay limp and sated without the energy to push her sweaty hair off her forehead.

Watching her intently as he rose up between

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her legs, Cutler did it for her when he stretched his body out over hers. "I love you, Fina Whitesage," he said quietly, took hold of his aching cock and rubbed the head of it against her weeping slit. "So damn much," he breathed and forced the head into her.

Fina gasped and her eyes flew open. Cutler felt huge—huge and hard and she wanted to scurry away before she realized his size felt good. The stretching was...unexpected. She rolled her hips tentatively then relaxed when pleasure trumped her fear.

"Better now?" Cutler whispered. He pressed his lips to her forehead and tasted her sweat. When he lifted his head to look into her eyes he was still running his tongue over his lower lip. "I love everything about you, Fina. The way you smell, the way you taste." He kissed her temple then slowly ran the flat of his tongue over it. "The way your pussy holds me...hot, tight, wet." A low harmonic reverberated in his chest and he smiled. "Everything." He rolled his hips gently, sinking in a little deeper and moaned. "You're everything I ever wanted. Everything I ever dreamed of having. And you're mine."



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"I'm yours," Fina parroted and lifted her hips to him. She held her breath when Cutler anchored his elbows over her shoulders, lowered his torso so that his chest grazed her chin and pressed in further.

Fina trembled. She felt her flesh part for him, felt his girth stretch her as he muscled his way inside. When his loins lay flush with hers, she panted, not sure there was enough air in the room and gripped his broad back. His muscles moved smoothly and powerfully as he pulled back and began to fuck her.

Growling, snarling, Fina clutched her lover. Her body demanded he satisfy her and he met her need with a haughty toss of his head.

"When *I'm* ready," Cutler snapped but he rolled his torso lightly, flattening and rubbing her breasts deliciously. "When I'm ready, honey," he whispered, kissed her forehead and drove his cock back into her.

Fina chuckled ribaldy, bowing to his dominance and experience. She lay back, lifted her knees to cradle his hips and let him pleasure them both.

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“Better,” Cutler grit out. He dragged his teeth over her shoulder, scored her lightly then shoved a hand beneath her hips so he could lift her to him. Groaning and baring his teeth, Cutler moved Fina’s small body against his, sinking in deep, slow and steady. After a time he picked up the pace, drove into her harder, growled so loudly he hurt her ear. He didn’t ask if she liked what he was doing to her. The moisture bathing his cock, her uninhibited sighs told him everything he needed to know—not that he’d doubted himself. His nature was too arrogant and he was too experienced not to realize that the woman beneath him rose and writhed with deep, encompassing pleasure.

Cutler pistoned Fina smoothly, working her small body with every trick, every technique in his arsenal. He growled his pleasure. He knew of mated pairs that took little pleasure in each other, even though the urge to mate was strong between them and couldn’t be denied. They mated quickly, efficiently and the only things that bonded them were the cubs the female conceived. He knew mated pairs that couldn’t stand to live with each other and only came together when the lust inside them burned.

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Cutler bent his head in supplication because the beautiful woman joining with him adored him. She might not love him yet. She might not even trust him. But she would. He knew that as surely as he breathed.

*"Fina,"* Cutler groaned and drove his cock into her as deep as he could. He rolled his hips, ground his pubis against her spread pussy and groaned again. Without asking, he withdrew from her clinging heat, used his great strength to flip her over and lift her onto her hands and knees. Kneeling behind her, he drove back into her wetness and snarled with pleasure.

He could sink into her so deep this way. Cutler's wolf eyes watched his cock, glistening with her juices, wink in and out of sight as he claimed her. He watched the mouth of her tight sheath draw back and forth, clinging to him, threatening to shred his control. Tingling heat curled at the base of his spine but he turned away from it with fierce determination. Not yet...he wasn't ready to come yet. His lips pulled back from his teeth in a parody of a smile when Fina groaned. Cutler anchored one hand around her thigh, pulled her back into him and ran the other

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over her taut belly. His fingers combed through the curls on her mound then slipped between her legs. She shuddered against him, sending shockwaves of pleasure into his shaft when he found her clit and rubbed it. He pounded into her fiercely.

Cutler looked down at his mate's slender, sweating body and imagined it swollen with his cub. He knew Fina wouldn't enter a heat cycle for another few months at least and even then he'd withhold his seed from her. Her spirit needed time to heal. She needed to finish school and mature into her role in their pack. He didn't know how he'd endure the wait. He only knew he had to for her sake.

He firmed his grip on her when she began to shake and shoved her hips back into him. She tossed her head aggressively, snarled and fresh sweat broke out on her back. Cutler inhaled sharply, breathing in the scent of his mate's cresting hunger. He'd never smelled anything so intoxicating and he punched his hips forward, sinking his swollen cock into her so hard and fast that her back bowed under the impact. When Fina cried out and her tight sheath bore down on

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him in crushing, rhythmic pulses, Cutler leaned over her, bit her shoulder and punctured her skin with his teeth.

Fina groaned then yelped. Her body twitched even as her pussy continued to grip and milk him hard. He tasted her blood and his wolf roared its triumph. She was marked. She was his. Savagely, Cutler drove into Fina's upturned pussy and let the pleasure inside him build. The base of his spine then his balls tingled. Tissue and muscle prepared to release his seed. Throwing his head back, Cutler groaned when his testicles drew up hard and tight then began to pulse.

He cried out at the first painful spasm. His virile seed shot up and out, flooding Fina's pussy, seeping into her womb. Spasm after spasm rocked him and he groaned with each one, lost to the unspeakable pleasure of his orgasm, mindlessly spilling himself inside his mate.

When the ecstasy began to fade, leaving him sated and happier than he'd ever remembered being, Cutler gently licked the punctures in Fina's shoulder.

She dropped to her chest when her arms wouldn't support her any more, turned her

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head to the side and breathed hard. The head of Cutler's penis felt very large inside her and instinct told her it would be several minutes before he'd be able to withdraw it. She flinched away from his mouth then forced herself to relax when she realized that his saliva—the same saliva that now ran through her veins and marked her as his—was soothing and sped her healing.

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# **Chapter Six**

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Cutler stared up at the dark ceiling about an hour before he needed to get up for work. He cradled the slight, warm body lying next to him and curled a length of Fina's silky hair around his finger. Inhaling deeply, Cutler filled his lungs with the scents that had kept him from sleep all night long.

His mate.

Cutler's wolf sniffed her at the same time and growled with pleasure. Content, it returned to sleep easily. Cutler wished he could say the same for himself. Fina was marked, his, but she hadn't marked him. It wasn't in his nature to feel rattled yet anxiety clawed at him. She didn't have to mark him right away and he cautioned himself against forcing her. Still, he felt uneasy without the evidence of her mark flowing through his veins.

He tightened his hold on her, squeezing just hard enough to make her uncomfortable. Fina woke up with a grunt.

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“Morning, honey,” he breathed into her hair. “Sleep well?”

Fina glared up at him. Some internal clock told her it was early and he was cheating her out of at least an hour of sleep. Suddenly she didn't mind so much when she realized Cutler's yummy body was pressed against hers, they were both naked and if she wasn't mistaken that was a very large, very tasty morning erection tenting the sheets over his loins. She ran her hand over his heavily muscled chest, dragged the linens down, caressed his abdominals then cupped his balls gently.

Cutler hissed then rolled his body into her touch. She caressed the heavy, pendulant orbs thoughtfully. It seemed she could sense Cutler's mood, his need more clearly this morning. Instinct told her it was because he'd marked her. His essence was part of her. She also knew she hadn't marked him.

Something had held her back—fear maybe or disbelief but Fina knew she could no longer afford to waffle. It wasn't that Cutler frightened her. How could her mate's touch frighten her? Fina was simply too wounded by what had



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happened in Tennessee to give herself fully to him. He'd seemed convinced that she would in time but that was an Alpha for you...decide quick and charge ahead. She fought the urge to roll her eyes.

What she couldn't shrug off was the surety that she and Ryan needed Cutler. They needed an irrevocable bond between her and this Alpha to secure their safety...even if Fina no longer felt safe about so many things. Making up her mind, she slid down Cutler's powerful body, moving her lips over his surprisingly soft skin and the deep undulations of his muscles. She dragged her breasts over his ribs then snuggled into him when she licked his navel. Cutler seemed to like that and he held back her hair so he could watch.

They'd shared a cursory wash last night before falling back into bed to sleep so when Fina ran her tongue around the thick cap of Cutler's erection, she tasted only skin and warmth with a hint of salt to perk up her taste buds. Cutler growled, rocked his hips forward and she watched a drop of pre-cum form on the tip. She licked it away,

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prepared to make a show of enjoying his taste then found she didn't have to.

Cutler smiled hesitantly. "You don't have—" he started to say but she silenced him by taking the head of his cock into her mouth. Sucking gently, swirling the smooth back of her tongue around his girth, Fina kept her eyes on Cutler's. He groaned his appreciation and didn't look away.

Still holding her hair back, he watched with rapt interest as Fina released the head to move her lips down his shaft, nibbling at him gently. She licked him slowly and sensuously and his hips rocked like they had a mind of their own. Cutler's wolf howled and panted. She licked his balls with singular focus until her saliva pooled at the base of his ass then kissed her way back up his rod. Fina showed no great skill at fellatio but she more than made up for it in enthusiasm and that blew Cutler away. Enthusiasm couldn't be faked and they had years ahead of them for technical improvement. He couldn't wait to start.

She swirled her tongue around the head, dug into the slit like she was rooting for more of his taste then swallowed him slowly, as much as she

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could and began a slow, up and down movement with her head.

*“Damn,”* Cutler groaned and dropped his head back. He touched her jaw and resisted the urge to lift his hips and force his cock deeper into her mouth. The tingling started at the base of his spine and he balked. *“Stop, Fina. I’ll come if you don’t stop.”*

She made a quiet sound of understanding and her tongue, pressed against his shaft, vibrated. Cutler hissed and pushed her away gently. *“Stop, honey. Now,”* he groaned and dragged her body back up the bed. He kissed her and slipped his fingers between her legs.

Fina welcomed his touch, rolled into it and lifted her knee so he could touch her freely. With his mouth on hers, exploring her hotly, Cutler petted Fina’s cleft and sifted through her soft, clinging curls.

*“Damn you’re wet,”* he breathed as his finger slid through her cream. *“Is it just me or do you always wake up this horny?”*

Fina grinned and touched the hard pole

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of flesh digging into her thigh. “It’s you and apparently I’m not the only one.”

Cutler grinned in wry agreement. “Hmm. Maybe we should do something about that.”

“Maybe we should,” Fina taunted with a whisper and lifted her mouth to his. She relaxed and let Cutler’s talented fingers arouse her. After several minutes of devoted petting and deep, wet kissing, her need had her loins rocking in time with his strokes and had left her thighs smeared with her juices. Like Cutler had the night before, Fina didn’t ask—she sat up, straddled him and held the tip of his rod to her pussy.

Confident and determined, Fina lowered her body onto Cutler’s, letting his thick arousal fill her slowly.

Cutler groaned and held her breasts, hefting their weight and strumming her nipples with his thumbs. He squeezed gently and lifted his head to watch her body swallow him up in a slow, jerky slide. She stopped once, midway, caught her breath and eased back up before moving back down. Cutler let her take him at her own pace. He let her needs dictate the cadence of

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their loving...loved her for taking him so openly and confidently.

He'd never tell her, never mention them to her again but none of his other lovers had taken him with confidence. Oh they talked a good game and swung their hips to catch his eye and tease him into fucking them. They'd touch him aggressively and peel off their clothes quick but when it came down to it, they rolled onto their backs and let their Alpha take what he wanted. In the past that had served his needs. None of the women in his pack were as strong as him... nowhere near it. Fucking them had been quick, mutually satisfying and without emotional strings. They'd fucked him because he was Alpha, not because he was Cutler. Until Fina came into his life, he hadn't realized how much he'd longed for more.

He bit back a groan when Fina's loins settled onto his. He wrapped his hands around her slight hips and rocked her back and forth, knowing it would feel as good to her as it did to him. When she leaned forward he felt the weight of her breasts, the silken curls of her hair settle on his chest and he gasped when her sheath tipped his

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cock up and tightened its hold on him until he found it hard to breathe.

Fina began to lift her hips in a slow, rocking rhythm and Cutler gasped in pleasure. He wondered what the coroner would list as his cause of death because if she kept this up, his sexy little mate would kill him for sure. He wrapped his big hands around her ass and helped her move against him despite the danger to his long-term health.

Sitting up slowly, Fina experimented with Cutler's body and let him pierce her from every angle she could manage. She rolled, bent, ground and rocked. She'd never felt so powerful, so sure of her ability to arouse, enthrall and the look on Cutler's face told her he loved everything she did. The only time his pleasure dimmed was when she paused to catch her breath. He'd wrap his big hands around her ribs or hips, encourage her to continue then growl his approval when she did. Fina put her hands on his chest and used the leverage for balance when she slowly rotated her hips. His hair felt crisp and damp between her fingers. His thick pectorals rose and fell quickly and she heard the beating of his heart speed up.

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She looked down at Cutler's body and forgot to breathe. He was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen if something so blatantly male could be called beautiful. He was powerful, sculpted virility. Desire clenched her insides at the sight of him, bathed her in heat and made her nipples ache. When he slid his hand between their bodies to rub her clit, Fina gasped, arched into his touch and let the pleasure roll through her.

She'd made up her mind. She knew what she needed to do. The *wanting* to do it would come in time...she hoped. Fina didn't have the luxury of second-guessing and she bounced up and down on Cutler's shaft with single-minded determination. When he snarled, when his eyes squeezed shut and his hips lifted to hers jerkily... when his cock got very hard and very large inside her, Fina leaned forward, bared her teeth and bit his chest.

Cutler howled. His hips surged up and he would have sent Fina crashing to the floor except he was holding onto her too tight to knock her off. His eyes snapped open and he stared with enthrallment and a measure of disbelief at the top of her head. He winced and howled again

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when her teeth broke his skin. He felt the warm sting of her saliva seeping into the wound and came. Punching his hips up hard and fast, Cutler flooded Fina's body with his seed. His balls seemed over full and kept pumping stream after stream into her. Snarling and thrashing, pain and pleasure rocked him, possessed him, and left him mindless yet more complete than he'd ever been.

Blinking, Cutler realized that the tearing in his chest had stopped. Fina humped him hard and fast. Her pussy convulsed around him. Claiming him as her mate had triggered her orgasm and he rubbed his fingers against her clit, dragging her release out for as long as he could. When the hard spasms in her body finally eased, Cutler slid his hand away from her, wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

A single tear slid out from beneath his lashes when she lifted her head and began to gently lick the wound on his chest.



“Hey, Ryan,” the big cop called out



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enthusiastically and scooped the skinny six-year old up by the ankles. He spun Ryan around carefully, avoiding the desks and the other police officers in the station house. "The Sheriff said you'd be dropping by."

Ryan giggled helplessly. "*Wally*," he squealed with more excitement than protest then giggled again. Officer Wally Pierce was only twenty-three, belying his humongous size, and played like he was still a kid instead of a responsible, respected law-enforcement officer.

"Hey," Wally scolded with a grin. "That's Officer Pierce to you, short stuff." He hoisted Ryan up high and the child's small body sailed over Officer Suzanne Young's coifed, blonde head. Laughing, she reached out and tickled Ryan's ribs when his momentum slowed.

Fina closed the station door behind her and smiled as she watched Cutler's men stop everything they'd been doing to fuss over Ryan. Biting back a grin of satisfaction, she recognized the signs of acceptance, almost deference they exhibited toward their Alpha's surrogate son. Ryan's place and safety were assured.

"Hey, Miss Whitesage." Sgt Anderson tipped

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his head in her direction. He wasn't as tall as Wally and was maybe twenty years older.

"Hello, Sergeant," she called out politely and stepped further into the station house. He unlatched the little gate beside the long, front desk and stood to one side, holding the barrier open for her to walk through. When she moved past him, he sniffed her. It was discreet, polite and might have gone unnoticed. Fina was paying attention. He was the first of Cutler's pack members she'd come in contact with after last night's mating. Before today, he'd always called her Fina. "Sheriff Cutler invited Ryan and me to lunch."

"At the café. Yes, ma'am," the thickly muscled werewolf with the slight, middle-age spread nodded. When he released the gate, his hand moved to the side of his head, like he was touching the brim of a cap in deference to her. He grinned. "Sheriff Cutler told us to expect you."

She'd met Cutler's day-shift desk-sergeant twice before. He was a nice man. His wife was an absolute joy. He'd never shown her this much overt respect before. Huh. So this was what it felt like to be top bitch.

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“Hey, Ryan,” Cutler boomed from his office. He stepped into the main area of the station, fastening his gun belt and grinning crookedly. “How’d you get way up there?”

Ryan was now perched on Wally’s shoulders and gripping the young officer’s head as they spun around.

“Hey, Cutler,” Ryan managed to gasp out between giggles.

“You know if he pukes up his lunch later, I’m taking it out of your hide, Wally,” Cutler chastised the young officer gruffly. His crooked grin took the sting out of his words.

“Oh. Um, sorry, Sheriff,” Wally grunted, set Ryan down on his feet and held him by the shoulders until the grinning six-year old stopped wobbling.

When he’d regained his balance, Ryan ran to Cutler, launching himself at the big Alpha. Cutler bent down, picked Ryan up easily and balanced him on the hip without the gun holster. Cutler nodded at Fina but his eyes were intense, expectant as they looked her over. When he turned away, it was a slow, almost telegraphed

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movement as he deliberately left the new top bitch alone with members of her pack for the first time.

“Catch any bad guys today, Cutler? Where’s your hat? I checked on the ewes before we left like you asked and yes I had Fina go with me into the fields,” Ryan added with an exaggerated sigh as the two of them disappeared into Cutler’s office.

Work slowly resumed around Fina. Every officer in the building walked past her on one pretence or another—some more obvious than others—during the first minute or so following Cutler’s departure so they could sniff her. Every officer that is except Suzanne Young. The busty, blonde dispatcher sat in front of her computer, thumbing through a small stack of papers repeatedly, refusing to meet Fina’s eyes while every other gaze in the room followed Fina’s movements. After the men had sniffed Fina, assuring themselves that she wore their Alpha’s mating mark just like Cutler wore hers, they drifted back to work.

Fina’s brows drew together in a harsh line as she approached Cutler’s dispatcher. Soon, Fina

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stood so close that Suzanne couldn't ignore her presence any longer. Suzanne stood up suddenly, turned her impressive body toward Fina's and stared down at the shorter woman. Bristling visibly, Suzanne clenched her fists repeatedly. Her blue, artfully made-up eyes flashed. Breathing hard, Suzanne's sharp exhalations made one corner of her full, shiny, pink lips lift.

Fina stood her ground. She didn't blink. She was being threatened, challenged. How she reacted to this strong, ranking member of Cutler's pack could set a pattern of acceptance amongst the other females. The young ones especially. Fina would remain Cutler's mate. Nothing could change that. But she'd never be top bitch and would be reduced to a cowering, submissive cur for the rest of her days.

She hadn't asked for power. She'd never coveted prestige. But Fina was the daughter of Alphas, surrogate mother to a defenseless cub and her wolf possessed the haughty, righteous strength of a top bitch.

A twitch of her brow narrowed Fina's eyes. Her lips pulled back just enough to reveal the

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sharp, white edge of her teeth. Deliberately, she leaned into Suzanne's space.

To her credit, Suzanne held her ground. She stood up to her full height, shoved her flawlessly pert breasts into Fina's, then blinked when Fina shoved back.

Fina held herself still as Suzanne looked away. The blonde seemed to shrink in size. She shuffled back a step, hunched her shoulders forward then tipped her head to one side, unconsciously—or consciously—exposing her throat to Fina.

"Hello, Suzanne," Fina said quietly, politely. "I like that shade of lipstick you're wearing," she added, deciding to take the moral high road. She could backhand Suzanne into the next county and nobody would raise an eyebrow. But this was her pack now—hers and Cutler's for however long she needed to stay here. Packs were more stable if they were ruled with an even, compassionate hand.

"Um. Thanks. It's new. Miss Whitesage," Suzanne added quietly and looked down at Fina's feet. She sank back into her chair slowly, letting Fina tower over her.

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“You can call me Fina.”

Suzanne’s obscenely perfect face turned up to Fina hopefully but she didn’t quite meet Fina’s eyes. “Um. Thanks,” Suzanne murmured as she looked back down. The transmitter on her desk squawked.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Fina drawled quietly. It wasn’t in her nature to be rude or condescending but, for these first few days especially, she had to be tough with the other bitches. Ruthless almost as she asserted her dominance, cementing her position and strength in their minds. After that she could be as friendly as she wanted.

Suzanne picked up a slender headset, positioned it over her shimmering hair, cleared her throat and dispatched a unit to the site of a reported fender-bender off the town’s main street. When she was finished, she switched off the microphone and looked back up at Fina. Her beautiful face was composed but she wore that slightly blank, timid look that lesser pack members showed higher-ranking members, especially when they were hovering over them in deliberately intimidating positions.

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Fina held her posture for the span of two more breaths. Her point made, she stepped back and offered Suzanne a thin smile.

“I was pissed when he came in today,” Suzanne said with quiet frankness.

Without asking, Fina understood that Suzanne was talking about Cutler.

The busty blonde continued in a demure, soft tone. “He stepped through the door and I knew the second I smelled him, he’d...mated with you.” Suzanne’s mouth tightened like she’d tasted something nasty and she cleared her throat. “I mean who wouldn’t be pissed? Who wouldn’t want to make a play for him?” Suzanne added wistfully. “I tried, a few times.” She shrugged then glanced up at Fina. The station had become strangely quiet. “I don’t think he even noticed. All those times I tried though, there were these thoughts niggling in the back of my head. The possibility that his true mate would come along some day and I’d get turfed.” With a dreamy look in her eyes, she looked away. “Someday he might tell me he loved me because he thought that’s what I wanted to hear but that would only make him leaving for his true mate cruel.



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Despite that, I didn't settle on a mate of my own. A girl can hope...*could* hope," she added resignedly, straightened her back and looked up at Fina respectfully. "Besides," Suzanne added and her voice was stronger, more confident. "If I can't be top bitch, at least I can get in good with the top bitch." Her smooth brow furrowed thoughtfully. "We haven't had one since Sheriff Cutler's mother died. Yeah, I was pissed," she added almost as an afterthought as she moved the papers to the other side of her keyboard and began making entries. "But trust me, I'm the least of your worries. Let's just say Sheriff Powell is...popular."

Nodding quietly, Fina turned away and headed for Cutler's office, drawn by the sound of his smooth, baritone voice and Ryan's high-pitched laughter.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Officer Wally Pierce's puppy-like, adoring expression as he stared at Suzanne.

"Shut up, Pierce," Suzanne barked, even though the young officer hadn't said a word. He flinched like he'd been shot, dipped his head and disappeared down the hall.

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“...ass as flat as a pancake. You *know* he likes some meat to dig his hands into when he’s humping...”

Fina turned a wooden smile up to Cutler and kept pushing pieces of spinach salad around her plate. The café was unnaturally busy today. Bodies were squashed into booths and extra chairs stuck out from the ends of tables. The whispers had been quiet at first, preceded by haughty, even angry looks. Whenever Fina looked, she saw unmated women glaring at her with perfectly made-up eyes. She stared back for as long as it took for them to break eye contact. Either that or they’d pretend to be distracted by something their friends said. Something that was harsh, insulting, and aimed at Fina.

The whispers were now loud enough that Cutler couldn’t pretend he didn’t hear. He touched her hand, wrapped his thick fingers around hers in sympathy then released her and sat back. This was her fight. For him to interfere would be to diminish her. Fina had to claim her

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own rank within his pack. He couldn't carve one out for her and expect the others to respect it.

"Hello, Cutler." Two beautiful women in their mid-twenties walked past their table. Not even bothering to acknowledge Fina's presence, they brushed their bodies against his.

Fina growled, angry and loud enough to make her point. The women moved on. Still, it was an unsubtle challenge to her position as his mate. Finally giving up all pretence of eating, Fina leaned over Ryan, wiped his mouth with a napkin and sent him over to the ball-pit to play. She squared her shoulders and stood.

"I'm going to the ladies room," she told Cutler quietly, knowing the wolf ears filling the café could hear.

"You're, um, sure?" Cutler glanced around nervously. Everywhere he looked, he saw women he'd had sex with at one time or another—in wolf and human form. Damn. He hadn't realized there had been that many and two more from the next county over had just walked in the door.

Fina bared her teeth in a parody of a smile. "Time to get this show on the road. May the

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toughest bitch win,” she purred in a tone too quiet for anyone but him to hear.

Something flashed in Cutler’s eyes at her words. Pride perhaps, with a touch of resignation. Mostly he just looked confident and Fina lifted her chin and headed for the washrooms.

From the other side of the café, a harried-looking Dorothea Pike watched Fina. The older woman gulped then gave Fina a nod and a reassuring smile before turning back to her customers. Fina wasn’t surprised to hear chair after chair scrape the floor in her wake, then the gathering sounds of footsteps—high heels, flats, boots and trainers—follow her down the hallway leading to the washrooms.

She took care of business quickly, looked at her hard, determined eyes in the mirror as she washed her hands then threw open the door to the hallway.

“Hello girls,” Fina snarled at no one in particular. “Got a bone to pick?” Her eyes raked over the women lining both sides of the hall. The door drifted shut behind her.

“Yeah,” one woman, taller than most of the

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others, pushed away from the wall and planted her high-heeled feet directly in Fina's path. "Whelp," she snarled dismissively. In her late twenties, she was probably five-nine or ten but her heels put her at over six feet of long, lean muscle. She had short, black hair and blue eyes. They sparkled with malice under the fluorescent lights. Hands planted on hips, she stared down at Fina. "You're not welcome, stray. Oh sure your little sob story about your pack being taken over softened up Cutler, but that doesn't make the dogs who spawned you any less weak and pathetic."

Fina snarled and stood so close to the woman that their breath fluttered each other's hair.

"Yeah, yeah...keep it in your pants, bitch," the woman taunted dismissively. Several of the women around them chuckled. She poked Fina in the chest with a short, polished fingernail. "You're a baby. A cub. Cutler and his pack need a real woman." She smiled and it was full of venom. "Not some skinny, underdeveloped weakling." Blue eyes raked Fina's body dismissively. "I know he likes to put his hands on a woman with some meat on her bones. Likes to feel something round

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and soft against that nice, hard body of his when he lays a woman down.”

The corner of Fina’s mouth twitched then curved up slowly into a knowing smile. She felt the corners of her eyes crinkle.

“Funny...he liked it best when I laid *him* down. Just this morning in fact.” Her smile widened and the woman’s haughty expression faltered. “Oh. I’m sorry. I guess *you* never had the balls to throw him down on his back, mount him and make him howl.” Her eyes left the woman’s. It was a calculated risk. Sure the taller and obviously stronger woman could flatten Fina with a single punch but looking away when they were standing so close told her and every woman standing around them that Fina wasn’t intimidated. Fina scanned the other faces. About half of them looked away immediately. After the second pass, only four were still looking at her. One by one they looked away, except for the black-haired woman standing directly in front of Fina.

With a dismissive snort as her only warning, Fina shoved at the woman’s shoulders with all her strength. The woman skittered backward on

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her heels then flopped down on her ass. From the floor, she glared up at Fina.

“Get out of my way, bitch,” Fina growled. “If that’s all you’ve got, I’d say we’re done here.”

The woman’s pale eyes flashed. Rage and indignation were replaced by calculation as she looked around the hallway at the other women, obviously searching for support. One by one, the other women subtly tipped their bodies away, exposing their flanks to Fina and keeping their line of sight well away from hers. They were here to intimidate, to take the measure of their Alpha’s mate. To see if she had what it took to lead their pack alongside him. It seemed only one of them was actively looking to challenge Fina for that position. Today anyway.

The woman scrambled to her feet but she was hampered by her heels and hobbled by her skirt. Fina had no trouble grabbing her upper arms and slamming her back into the wall. Bodies scurried out of the way before they got pinned behind her.

Jumping up, Fina landed a solid head smash into the woman’s forehead. The pine panel

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behind the woman cracked. She wobbled and her eyes teared up.

“I can go for hours, bitch,” Fina hissed. Adrenaline and the knowledge that, for now, Ryan’s rank would be tied to hers fueled Fina’s determination. That and growing up the youngest of four, squabbling siblings meant that Fina was going to hold her own in this fight. She grabbed the woman by the throat and squeezed.

Being top bitch wasn’t all about strength. Neither was being Alpha for that matter, although holding your own in a fight went a long way in their world. Leadership was more about having an inborn ability to lead. Having more of it than anyone else. A select few had the ability to take command of a situation, of a group just by showing up. They were smart, focused, ruthless when they had to be and they didn’t back down from any challenge. They’d fight just like they faced any situation, full on, full out and believing that they had the biggest balls in the room. It didn’t mean they’d be good leaders but it meant that others submitted to their leadership.

Long fingers tipped with red lacquer flailed beside the woman until she tapped on Fina’s



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shoulders repeatedly. “All right,” the woman managed to choke out when Fina eased her grip.

“Hmm? Sorry. I missed that. Would you mind repeating yourself?” Fina taunted. She tightened her grip for two more seconds, pressing her fingers and thumb in behind the woman’s voice box. With cold determination, Fina showed the bitch and every woman standing around them that, if they’d met in wolf form instead of human form, she’d be ripping the challenger’s throat out. Fina eased her grip but didn’t move her fingers.

“Enough. Please,” the woman croaked. “You win, all right?” Warily, she glanced down at Fina then looked away. “Alpha,” she whispered to Fina then deflated visibly.

With a snarl, Fina released her. Luckily the women standing closest to her challenger caught the tall woman under the arms when her knees buckled. Women pressed back against the wall, making a lane for Fina to pass. She walked away but as she did, she deliberately shoved her shoulders into bodies. The other women grunted and moved aside obligingly. Still snarling, Fina muscled her way out of the hallway. No one else challenged her. She was ready for it, maybe

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even wanted it with all the adrenaline pumping through her but none of the other bitches met her eye.

Fina had proven herself tough enough, strong enough to be top bitch. To this group at least. She had no illusions about not being challenged again. Surely there were other bitches out there with a hankering for power and she was sure she'd be challenged in wolf form too. But that was a fight for another day. Fina also knew her victory was a sham. Yes she possessed the innate talent, the character and strength to be a top bitch. She was also diminished. The rogues in Tennessee had ripped something out of the heart of her. Her head remembered what strengths she used to possess, knew how to exhibit them but it would only be a matter of time before this pack sniffed out the empty weakness inside her. Wolves had good intuition.

Until they did, she'd keep faking it, giving Ryan status and security until it was time to move on. He'd grow up with the innate strength of a natural-born Beta's son, become even stronger as the surrogate son of an Alpha.

When she stepped back into the main area

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of the unnaturally quiet café, every eye in the place turned up to her. Cutler watched her too. She gave him the briefest of arrogant smiles then walked up to Dorothea Pike.

“My apologies for destroying some of the paneling back there, Dorothea,” Fina said quietly but deliberately. “Send me the bill. Please.” She turned and walked back to Cutler’s table.

“Did you have to fuck *every* woman in the county?” she hissed at him, pitching her voice for his ears only. For the first time, she saw Cutler flush. “Come on. Time for me to get Ryan home and time for you to get back to work. Stud,” she added with a sly grin and led the way back to the children’s play area.

## **When a Pack Dies**

# **Chapter Seven**

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“No I haven’t seen that one yet. I don’t go to movies much out here.”

The sound of Fina’s muffled voice drew Cutler to the shut door of the home office. He shifted the bag of hot take-out chicken to his other hand, stood still and listened.

“No! Really?” Fina laughed and it was a sound of pure, titillated joy.

Cutler grinned in response to the girlish sound of Fina’s laugh. He sometimes forgot how young she was. How much she’d had to grow up the past couple months.

“You’re such a flirt, Helen,” Fina gasped out between gales of laughter.

The back door slammed and Cutler heard Ryan race toward him, probably drawn by the smell of food...food that Fina hadn’t cooked.

“Hey, Cutler. You snooping?”

“Yes,” Cutler answered without a trace of

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shame. He handed the exuberant and slightly sweaty child the bag. "Take that into the kitchen, wash your hands and set the table."

Ryan shot him a look of open defiance. It raised Cutler's brows. When he growled quietly, Ryan took the hint, took the bag and took off toward the kitchen.

"She's just talking to stupid Helen from back home. It's just stupid girl stuff," Ryan shouted with a hint of malice and enough volume there was no way Fina couldn't hear.

The laughter on the other side of the door faded.

"I haven't made up my mind about coming back for school." Fina's voice was quieter now, more mature. "Well I can attend lectures over the Internet. Yeah, I know..."

She sighed so quietly Cutler doubted the phone picked up the sound.

"Either way I'll send post-dated checks to the landlord for my half of the rent this year. I won't leave you high and dry." There was a pause in the conversation. "I guess it *would* feel like I'm

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already leaving you. Yeah, it sucks but I appreciate how much you understand. It means a lot.”

With a resigned shake of his head, Cutler headed for the kitchen and the deliberately too-loud sound of slamming cupboards.



“Thank you for taking him, Trudy.” Fina unsnapped the belt of Ryan’s booster seat then stood back for him to hop out of her vehicle. Ryan grabbed his backpack. It held a few of his favorite toys, a change of clothes and his toothbrush. He ran to the front door of Trudy’s home.

“My pleasure,” Trudy answered with a grin. “Koby’s been bugging me to ask if he and Ryan could have a sleepover.” She lifted her thin, slightly harried face up to the morning sunshine and her smile widened. “Thank goodness summer break will be over in a few weeks. The kids were driving me crazy until they found out Ryan was coming to visit.”

Grinning, Fina looked up at Cutler’s childhood friend. She hugged the older woman

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affectionately and climbed back into her vehicle.

“Hey!” Trudy’s piercing, Mom voice ricocheted down the driveway as she headed back to the house. “What did I tell you about climbing on the porch rail? When you break your legs, don’t come running to me...”

Her grin widening, Fina shook her head, turned the ignition and drove away.



“Hey, sweetheart.” Leaning against the doorframe of the study, one long leg crossed casually over the other, Nathaniel grinned down at Fina.

She looked up from the computer and smiled. Nath’s blue eyes were brighter than usual and that was saying something. His smile was warm, loving, maybe even a touch naughty. He scented the air in the house slowly.

“Ryan...?” he asked, deliberately letting his voice trail off.

“At Trudy’s, having a sleepover.”

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“Ah.” If anything, his smile widened. His dimples looked extraordinarily tasty today. He tucked his thumbs into the pockets of his hiking shorts. The movement made Nath’s broad shoulders flex then drew her eye to his lean hips and the very nice musculature of his tanned legs. “And you and Cutler...while I was away...” The curve of his full, sensual mouth flattened for a moment. “Mated.”

“Yes,” Fina answered, gentling her voice. Like always when he came back from leading a trek, Nath smelled of wood smoke, pine, fresh air and hot, hungry werewolf.

Only it wasn’t food he was hungry for.

An unsubtle glance told Fina that that thick, seductive ridge rising against the fastening of Nath’s sturdy hiking shorts wasn’t an errant hot dog that had fallen off its stick.

His gaze dropped to his crotch then came back up to her. His grin grew naughtier. “I want you. Although I guess you figured that out.”

“Hmm,” she hummed non-committally. The corner of her mouth lifted as she stood and walked over to him. Stopping just before their



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bodies touched, Fina looked up into Nath's shimmering eyes. The dimples on either side of that very bitable mouth of his deepened, shadowed by a day's growth of particularly sexy, dark brown beard. "In case you hadn't heard, I'm top bitch around here these days. You still up for that?"

Without hesitation, Nath snaked his arm around Fina's waist and pulled her against his thickening rod. "Yeah. I am," he replied with quiet honesty and rolled his hips gently, rubbing himself against her soft, warm belly. "Cutler hasn't ripped my throat out so he's got no problem sharing. He might not *like* it..." Dipping his head, Nathaniel passed his nose over Fina's neck then dragged his teeth over the delicate muscle capping her shoulder. "...but that's only because he's an Alpha. They're not used to sharing. And you, my beautiful, *beautiful* Fina," Nath added with a sensual growl, "are far too much woman not to share." He kissed her. Capturing Fina's mouth beneath his, Nath sighed and a fine shiver made his big body tremble against hers.

Nathaniel's mouth was warm and delicious. A hint of spice and the scent of wood smoke

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made Fina's wolf leap forward and growl with sexual enticement. It drove her tongue in deeper, making her, for the first time with Nath, the aggressor.

Nath's answering snarl told Fina that neither he nor his wolf minded. He tightened his hold on her, gripped her bound hair and anchored her mouth to his. Nath's kiss was gentle without being tentative. He explored her like he was asking and sighed with pleasure when she allowed his every caress. His tongue swept over hers, stroked the roof of her mouth, tested the sharpness of her teeth.

"You taste so damned good," Nath breathed when he finally broke the kiss to rest his forehead against hers and pant. "Not a minute went by this week without me thinking of you. Wanting you." He kissed her again, kissed her deep and seductively and it was a long time before he pulled back. "I need a shower." Nath's dimples reappeared when he grinned down at her. "Come on," he added with a sinful smile. "Wash my back for me." Taking hold of her hand, Nath led Fina down the hall.

Halfway there, Nath let go and pulled

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his dark green golf shirt off over his head. Reaching out with her fingertips, Fina touched the sun-darkened skin on his broad back. It was surprisingly soft, especially since the thick muscles beneath were so hard. Glancing over his shoulder, Nath gave her a wicked, self-satisfied grin. His blue eyes glowed with mischief and he started undoing the button fly of his shorts.

Fina gasped when they and the briefs beneath dropped to the floor. Nath stepped out of them nimbly and his ass flexed so sharply that Fina ran her fingers over her chin, checking for drool. His backside was firm, round and impossibly pert... if a guy's ass could be called pert. It twitched seductively with the slow, sensual roll of his walk. Without asking, he turned into Fina's room then paused in the doorway to her ensuite to tug off his thick socks. She crowded him, pressed her breasts into his back and fondled his ass.

Chuckling, the sound low and sensual, Nath took hold of Fina's hands, dragged them forward and anchored them around his cock. His head drifted backward and he sighed. Bracing his hands against either side of the doorframe and spreading his legs, Nath commanded the space.

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When she lifted her gaze to peek around him, Fina gasped. The big mirror over her double sinks reflected him perfectly. Her hands looked pale and small wrapped around his thick, purplish cock. She moved one over the head and squeezed carefully. The other drifted down to cup his shockingly smooth balls.

“Fuck. Yeah,” Nath hissed and rolled his hips into her grip. Then his pelvis rolled back and his ass ground into her belly. He made her use her strength to stand against him then rolled forward again, using the momentum to pleasure himself in her hands. His skin smelled like fresh, clean sweat, mountain air and tasted warm and salty when Fina dragged her tongue up his spine. His cock felt hard and twitched in time with the beating of his heart. Peeking around him again, she became mesmerized as his lean, angled body rocked with delight.

His eyes opened slowly, a blaze of blue set in his sun-darkened, sculpted face. He met her gaze in the mirror. “Take your clothes off, Fina. Slowly. I want to watch.” He stepped away from her, sat down on the padded bench next to the shower stall, wrapped a big hand around his cock

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and stroked himself. Leaning back against the wall and stretching his long legs out comfortably, Nathaniel licked his lips and watched her.

She was fascinated by the slow, firm cadence of his strokes. By the way he'd grasp the head, pause, tighten his grip and bare his teeth. Gnawing on her lower lip, Fina lifted her t-shirt up and over her head, letting it drop to the floor beside her. Nath hissed and gripped himself tighter.

"Squeeze your breasts, Fina. Make your nipples even harder."

She looked down at herself and saw them standing out, pressing against the thin satin of her bra, saluting and saying "hi." Nath's unchecked and unfeigned sensuality overrode any shyness Fina might have felt and she palmed her breasts. Squeezing gently at first, she made them plump and swell over the lace-topped cups of her bra. Nath's naughty grin widened.

"Yeah, sweetheart. Harder. Play with them for me. You're so damned sexy."

Fina squeezed harder, hard enough that she moaned and dropped her head back as an ache of pleasure arrowed down her abdomen. Holding

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his balls and tugging them away from his body, Nath smiled his approval. Still stroking himself, he stared at her with those intent eyes and licked his lips.

His eyes narrowed when she ran her fingers down her body and touched the top button of her linen shorts.

“Yeah,” he repeated with a jerky nod. “Strip for me, sweetheart. Show me that sweet pussy I’ve been fantasizing about for weeks.” He moaned when he tightened his fist around his shaft and tugged faster. Then he stopped. “I’m going to claim you, Fina,” Nathaniel said in a deep, rumbling voice. He lifted his gaze to her face as his hand fell away from his rod. The grin and the lascivious twinkle in his eyes faded, replaced by a furrow between his brows. “I will be your mate right alongside Cutler. You’ll bear his cubs *and* mine.” The furrow deepened as his eyes darkened. “I won’t be a fallback fuck for you, a little variety or kink when you feel like it. When I mark you, you’ll be mine just as much as you are his. You’ll accept us equally, treat us equally in bed.” Nath’s mouth was now perfectly flat. “Are you clear on what I expect if you become my mate?”

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“Yes.” Fina’s voice was quiet but there was no hesitation in her reply.

“Are you willing to accept me under those conditions? To love me as much as you love him?”

Fina blinked. He asked for too much when he asked for love. So did Cutler. Resisting the urge to shake her head, Fina kept her gaze locked on Nathaniel’s. They asked for forever...for a strong, whole, loving mate. She didn’t have that in her anymore but she did need their protection. She needed a pack. Ryan did too. Knowing full well her first act as Nath’s mate was a lie, Fina nodded, hating herself but doing it anyway. “Yes.”

Nodding, Nath exhaled slowly. The furrow between his brows softened along with the darkness in his eyes. Fina realized that Cutler had asked the same things of her, only Cutler didn’t ask. He made his demands clear then took. She loved the difference between the two brothers. The stray from Tennessee had found the best of both worlds in them. Instead of making her feel more guilty, it took away some of the sting...like maybe, somehow and someday, her acceptance of them might not be a lie.

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Grinning cockily, Nath ran his sun-darkened hand over his abdomen, palmed his balls then slid his fingers over his erection. “You’re still wearing too many clothes.” Letting his gaze drift over her suggestively, he moistened his lips and waited.

Feeling her eyes crinkle with excitement, Fina unsnapped the top button on her shorts and eased the zipper down. She didn’t feel self-conscious or even a little bit foolish. The werewolf lounging in front of her was so obviously aroused by each little movement, every subtle twitch of her fingers that his eyes blazed as he watched. When the tip of his tongue darted out and swept his lower lip, Fina thought about it moving over her body. As her shorts slid down her thighs, she cupped her satin-panty covered mound and slowly slid her fingers between her legs.

Nath growled his approval. “The bra next. Take it off.”

Tugging her lower lip between her teeth, Fina affected a coquettish look and if his deep, quiet laugh was any indicator, Nath approved. His gaze was riveted on her as she reached behind herself, unsnapped her bra then covered her breasts



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with her forearm. When the pale satin and lace dropped to the floor, his eyes flashed.

“Bring them here. Please. I need to taste you.”

Without hesitation but with teasing slowness, Fina crossed the smooth, tiled floor. He took hold of her wrists and pulled her arms away from her body.

“Beautiful,” Nath whispered. Fina’s nipples hardened. Bending his head to her slowly, almost reverently, he smoothed his whisker-rough cheeks over the inner curve of one breast then the other. He kissed her sternum...a gentle drawn-out pursing of his lips and inhaled. With a deep rumble of contentment, he drew his cheek over the curve of her breasts again. Rough, darkened fingers cupped her, pressed her breasts into his face, cushioning the sharp cut of his cheekbones with her softness and he smiled.

Fina felt the lifting of Nath’s mouth, saw the crinkles on either side of his eyes when he looked up at her. His eyes drifted shut as he kissed her. With a gasp, Fina felt the tip of his tongue move over her. She felt absorbed. Consumed. Nath explored her breasts with almost every sense—taste, feel, sight and scent. The sound of

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his breathing grew louder in the tiled bathroom. Rough thumbs grazed her nipples only to return to pinch, caress and squeeze.

Her hips rocked in time with the rising cadence of his heartbeat.

Threading her fingers into his hair freshened the scent of wood smoke and pine around them. "Nath," Fina whispered hoarsely and held him to her.

"Fina," he answered, kissed her nipple gently while his thumb strummed the other. He leaned his head back against the wall and flashed her a wicked grin. "Turn around."

Again chewing on her lower lip, she obeyed slowly.

Nath's warm, rough hands felt good on her skin. He caressed her back, her shoulders, the front of her thighs. Soft lips surrounded by a prickling of whiskers moved over the elastic of her boy-cut panties, the exposed bottoms of each ass cheek.

"Hands on knees, Fina. Bend forward."

The roughness in Nath's voice made Fina

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shiver and for the first time, she was hesitant to obey.

“More, sweetheart.” His voice was still rough but it was also encouraging now. She heard warmth instead of censure and leaned forward. “Back parallel to the floor. Damn you’re beautiful. I’d crawl on my knees over broken glass to kiss this perfect ass.”

She gasped and trembled when Nath’s lips moved over her butt. Thick fingers moved with surprising delicacy over her satin-covered nether lips before tugging her panties aside. A warm, moist exhalation of air was Fina’s only warning before his tongue sank into her. Moving slow and sinking deep, it curled inside her, gathering up her wetness and taste before sliding out. Fina groaned when she heard him smack his lips with pleasure, swallow then return. Holding onto her hips, still pulling her panties to the side, Nath slid his tongue into her again and again. Not fucking or probing her, simply drawing out her taste and drinking it with relish.

By the time he slid her panties down and off, Fina was shaking so badly she could barely keep her balance as she stepped out of them.

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Nath bit her ass hard enough to sting, stood up fast, gripped her shoulders and hauled her over to the shower stall.

“That’ll hold me for now, sweetheart,” he said with a wink as he reached inside to turn on the water. “After you wash my back I’ll finish what I started.”

Blinking dumbly at his broad, tanned back, Fina watched Nath test the temperature, adjust it then retrieve clean towels from the cupboard. Holding the shower door open with his shoulder, he took hold of her hands and led her inside.

The shower was roomy and accommodated them easily. Fina figured it would hold her, Nath *and* Cutler and held back a giggle as she considered the possibilities. A grin quirked up one side of Nath’s mouth as he handed her the bar of soap then turned and faced the wall, arms at a comfortable angle over his head, palms pressed against the tiles. His legs were set about shoulder width apart and he let his head fall forward.

Fina needed no other invitation. Nath’s body was hers. He was hers. This powerful Beta surrendered himself to her without fanfare, direction or stipulation. The position of his body

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was for her convenience and conveyed his want but he issued no order.

With a sigh of anticipation, Fina worked up a lather. Her soap had a light scent and the spread of Nath's lats, the lifting of his shoulders caught her eye as he inhaled.

"It smells like you," he murmured then dropped his head back down. The water spilling over his shoulder raised then rinsed away a thin line of dirt in the crease where shoulder and neck met. Fina set the bar down and started there.

Growling quietly and continuously, he made a sound that was almost catlike. Knowing he'd be insulted by the comparison, Fina simply grinned and massaged the lather into Nath's neck. His skin was smooth and slippery...warm, soft and the body beneath was hard and thickly muscled. She stepped forward, pressed her breasts into his back because it felt better to be close and explored the planes and expanse of Nath's body. The deep curve at the front of his shoulders. The powerful indent of his armpits. The smooth, full rise of his chest. The deep, powerful and long muscles guarding his spine.

When he dipped his head under the water, the

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scent of wood smoke and pine intensified then diluted quickly. He reached for her shampoo, squirted some into his hand and washed his hair while Fina traced the bumps and ridges of his obliques. His body fascinated her. The unchecked freedom to touch and explore was intoxicating and she picked up the soap again, raised even more lather than before and after putting the bar back down, caressed his hips, thighs then cupped his ass in her palms and squeezed.

Nath hissed as he inhaled. "Harder. God I love your hands on me." Angling his torso closer to the wall pressed his backside into Fina's belly. She pinched him, hard enough to turn his skin white then stepped back. Nath hissed again.

"My ass," Fina growled imperiously. "My pace," she added as she smoothed her palms over Nath's hard curves.

Chuckling, he glanced over his shoulder at her. "I didn't know my pretty little bitch had a touch of domme in her." Dropping his head back down, letting the water hit the back of his neck, Nath relaxed and stood still. "I'm all yours, sweetheart."

Touching him reverently now, she stroked his

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arms, pressed her body lightly into his and slid her fingers between his, washed them, before she kissed his shoulder. After his legs were soaped and massaged, she straightened and again pressed her breasts into his back. With a low sigh of anticipation, Fina slid her hands around Nath's muscular body and stroked his abdomen.

He rolled his torso into her touch, moving subtly, rhythmically and she could picture his eyes drifting shut, a smile curling his full, firm lips when she toyed with the nest of curls at the base of his cock. Breathing hard then holding the air in his lungs, Nath dropped his head even further to watch her fingers pet his shaft.

"You're killing me," he groaned and thrust his hips forward, shoving his cock into her hand.

Fina didn't have the heart or the will to tease him any longer. Nath's broad back warmed her breasts as she wrapped her hands around the hard pole jutting out from his loins. Sliding her grip up and down with a slow, light touch, she grinned when he shivered and moaned.

"Play with my sac. Please."

The muscles in his back flexed when her hand

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slid down and cupped his balls. Curious fingers manipulated the warm skin, the taut orbs inside, discovering their weight and size. Fina growled her approval.

“Yeah, sweetheart...if you like them now, wait’ll you see them in action.”

They laughed together then Nath inhaled sharply when she tightened her hold on his cock and moved her hand in earnest. “Hold me tighter.” His head was angled so he could watch. “The soap’s a great lubricant. It won’t hurt if you go faster.” Breathing hard and gasping once, he stopped rolling his hips and let her fist his cock. “Pause at the head. Squeeze. Harder. No, harder.” His voice was harsh. Demanding.

“Yeah,” Nath purred and resumed rolling his hips. “That’s good. So good.” He trembled. “Run your other hand over my stomach. Pinch my nipples. Make them burn.”

Fina blinked at Nath’s graphic instructions but that didn’t stop her from following them. She didn’t have much experience with lovemaking and she was all for making it as good for him as she could. Moving her hand over his torso, pinching his nipples and drawing her nails across



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his belly made Nath snarl and groan. Hot water pelted their shoulders and steam swirled around them.

“Fuck I’m gonna come,” he moaned as his hips rocked faster. “Rub my sac for luck, sweetheart. Make it a good one.”

Chuckling while Nath panted, she manipulated his pouch, held it gently and pulled it down and away from his body—just a little. He made no overt signs of distress.

“Yeah. *Yeah*,” he chanted. It was a rough, guttural sound. “Fina. Faster. Jerk my cock. Make me come. *Fina*.” Her name was a rising growl as Nath’s hips slammed forward. The balls in her hand resisted her downward pull, drew up hard and tight into his body then began to pulse. Grunting and shaking in time with the pulses, Nath snarled. The back pressed into her breasts tensed like the rest of him. His ass rocked back into her belly and she would have been knocked out of the shower stall except she was holding onto his genitals too tightly. Thick, silky warmth slid down the back of her hand as the powerful twitching of his cock eased.

Nath’s body jerked and tensed again. “Easy

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now,” he hissed and lay one of his hands over hers. The other slid across the tiled wall so he could rest his forehead on it. Taking hold of her wrist, he had her stroke him gently, from head to base, then stroke his smooth sac, pet the wet, coarse curls above his shaft.

As his heartbeat slowed, they fell silent. The sound of the falling water became the backdrop to her caresses. “I love you, sweetheart,” he sighed after a time, straightened and turned.

His kiss was warm, wet, maybe even a bit lazy. Large, rough hands cradled her neck. Fingers caressed the base of her scalp and his forearms rested on her breasts. His lips smoothed over hers, their sweetness enhanced by the stubble on his chin. Holding her lower lip between his teeth, he tugged gently and ran his tongue over her captive flesh.

When he finally lifted his head, Nath looked down at her with a boyish grin, grabbed the soap and washed her quickly and efficiently. There was nothing playful about his touch. In his haste, he handled her brusquely then grabbed the hand-held shower attachment, aimed the spray at her body, spun her and rinsed her fast.

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“Girls like it when you take things slow,” Fina grouched.

“Yeah, I know,” Nath replied saucily. He kissed her shoulder, the tip of her breast then aimed the spray at the wall, washing off the thick trails of semen clinging to the tiles. Then he turned the spray on himself. “So let’s not waste any more time in here, hmm?” The water bounced off his body from every angle as he aggressively rinsed the soap and cum off himself. Fina had to blink repeatedly to keep the water out of her eyes.

With a sharp jerk of his hand he turned the water off, set the shower head back in its cradle, opened the door and stepped out. “Hurry up before you get cold.” Grinning, Nath held up a large towel then wrapped her in it when she got out of the shower.

It was pure heaven when he rubbed the thick, nubby cotton all over her body. Her back tingled, her calves felt invigorated, her arms glowed. Even her breasts were rosy, her nipples tight, dark points when Nath paid particular attention to them and rubbed them vigorously. Holding her arms out obediently, Fina purred with pleasure.

“My hot little kit,” he teased as he ran the

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towel between her legs, teasing her folds then squeezing her ass. Ignoring her pout when he stopped, he tossed the towel over the top of the shower, grabbed a fresh one and handed it to her. "Make it quick, sweetheart. I've got a full itinerary planned."

"You do do you?" she drawled as she drew the towel over his shoulder and down his arm.

"Oh yeah. Sleeping outdoors under canvas for five nights with six snoring strangers gives a man time to think about all the hot," he slid his fingers around her breast, lifted it to his mouth and bit it gently, "wicked..." Reaching behind her while Fina rubbed the towel over his chest, Nath caressed her ass, reached between her legs and petted her swollen nether lips. "...dirty things he wants to do to his woman."

Fina's left knee buckled.

A corner of his mouth curled up in a knowing smile but there was no arrogance in it. He eased a finger into her, withdrew it slowly then shoved it back into her hard. Fina's other knee buckled but Nath's free arm was wrapped around her waist, holding her upright, the towel squished between them. His eyes on hers, he withdrew his finger

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gently, put it in his mouth and noisily sucked her cream off it.

“Hmm. Tasty.” His expression darkened. Lust overshadowed his teasing smile. “Stand up,” he growled as his eyes flashed and the muscles in his face rippled. His wolf was very close to the surface. “Show me how strong my bitch is.”

Locking her knees, Fina forced herself upright.

Without another word, Nath took hold of the towel, ran it over his big, muscular body, dropped it on the floor before he was fully dry and took her hand. He led her into the bedroom and stopped when they were beside the bed.

Nath sniffed the air deliberately. “Cutler mated with you here?” he asked although there was really no question in his voice.

“Yes.”

Looking down at her, Nath touched her cheek. “Then this is where I’ll mate with you too. Keep things even between us. Make this place special for us. Make it ours. All of us.” One of his eyebrows lifted slowly like he was waiting for her to agree. Or not.

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She nodded slowly. There was a...rightness in Nath's reasoning.

"Good. Now take your hair down, beautiful bitch. Do it slow. Tease me." Nath's grin was seductive and he stepped back. His hand drifted to his cock, stroked it lightly while his other hand moved over his tight belly. He touched himself as he watched.

The corner of her mouth curled up then she licked her lower lip. Reaching up slowly, glancing down at her breasts as they lifted and angled toward him with the movement, Fina undid the first clip holding her hair in place. One by one she removed them and set them on the night table, keenly aware of the sway and shift of her breasts as she moved. Loving the lust firing in Nath's eyes every time they did. Holding her elbows up higher than she needed, thrusting her breasts forward, Fina ran her fingers through her hair, loosened it and shook her head. Her breasts jiggled. Nath growled and his irises expanded until his eyes were more black than blue.

"Beautiful," he whispered. "That's what I've been fantasizing about." Reaching out, he took hold of her breasts, gave them a long, slow

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squeeze and rubbed his thumbs over her nipples. “It feels like I’ve waited my whole life for you, woman.”

Closing the distance between them, Nath pressed his chest into the backs of his hands, increasing the pressure on her breasts and lowered his mouth to hers. His tongue slid into her mouth slowly, with quiet intensity, and caressed hers. He moaned quietly when she ran her tongue over his and put her arms around him, pulling his body tighter into hers. When his fingers flexed, Fina trembled and drove her tongue deep into his mouth.

Nath held his ground against her. He kept his hands on her breasts, squeezed them sporadically and let Fina use her strength to hold him, grind her body against his, hang on tight. She stabbed her tongue into his mouth then tickled the roof of his mouth, tested the smoothness of his teeth, licked the sensitive, inner rim of his lips.

Growling with pleasure, Nath held himself still for endless minutes, letting her learn his mouth, telling her how he liked to be kissed by the intensity of his response, all the while

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cradling her breasts like they were the most precious things he'd ever held.

Finally he stepped back, easily overpowering her grip and silencing her snarl of disapproval with a snarl of his own.

"On the bed. On your hands and knees." He put more space between them. "Lift your ass to me, beautiful bitch. Offer me your scent." Moving slowly, his eyes all over her, Nath walked to the foot of the bed. He stood there, legs braced apart, a hand planted on his bare hip, the other stroking his swelling cock.

She wasn't self conscious but she felt awkward as she climbed onto the bed. Fina was no seductress. She was an immature bitch, inexperienced. Sure her older sisters had mated and had cubs by her age but Fina had focused on her studies instead. She'd been influenced more by her human friends' biological clocks than her wolf's. Out here, as a member of this large, vibrant pack, she was definitely behind the curve.

Nath touched her ankle. "Hey, it's okay," he whispered. "You're beautiful. Really, *really* beautiful. I love every inch of you. Even that



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funky kink in your big toe,” he added earnestly and stroked her foot.

Despite herself, Fina grinned. She’d broken the toe during her first pack run. It was the first time she’d changed into wolf form and she’d been a bit...uncoordinated.

“This is all just love play, sweetheart,” Nathaniel pressed. “Us teasing each other until we’re so hot to fuck we can’t stand it. You up for that?”

She grinned when she heard her own words spoken back to her.

“Yes,” she answered with only a little hesitancy. “It’s just...”

“New,” Nath supplied succinctly when her voice faded. “New is good.” He kissed her calf, the curve of her hip. “New is fun,” he added playfully and nipped at her butt, over and over until she giggled and pushed his face away. He straightened away from her, slapped her backside with enough force to make her yelp then watched her. Blue eyes blazing, arms crossed over his chest making his muscles bulge, Nath flashed her a heated smile.

“On your knees,” he repeated in a deep,

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domineering voice. “Offer me your scent. Don’t make me ask a second time for what’s mine.”

She trembled once. She couldn’t help it. Then she made herself stop, took a breath and turned on the bed so that her back was to Nathaniel. Moving slow because she figured it was seductive, Fina bent forward. When her palms touched the mattress, she looked back over her shoulder, mimicking a come-here-big-boy look she’d seen in a movie.

Nath must have liked what he was seeing because he snarled with approval and gripped his cock harder. She spread her knees a little, then a little more and dropped her chest to the bed.

“Yeah. Perfect. Just like that,” he growled, his voice dark and aroused.

Warm puffs of air moved over her exposed cleft as Nath breathed her in. He inhaled, snorted, rustling the hairs on her mound, then inhaled again—slow, deep and for so long Fina glanced back at him worriedly.

He held onto her hips, straightened and let his head fall to the side. He looked drugged, sated, gluttoned yet ravenous all at the same time. Nath’s

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lips pulled back from his teeth and he grinned ferally as his head lolled and his fingers dug into her soft flesh. Thick waves of damp, dark brown hair brushed his shoulders to hang down his back. His cock got longer, thicker and began to rise until the heavy, purplish head curled back into his belly and twitched.

Fina's mouth formed a perfect "O" as she watched.

His body was breathtaking. Muscles in his shoulders and forearms strained as he gripped her hips. Bulging with strength, his neck moved slowly from side to side. His belly was hard, undulating and his hips moved to some enticing rhythm only he could hear.

When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were glazed and he licked his lips. Bending forward again, Nath passed his nose over her backside. It tickled the soft curls framing her slit. Sharp huffs of air made her anus clench, the mouth of her sheath grow wet and the hood covering her clit slip back and forth as her inner muscles flexed.

"Your pussy wants me." Nath's growl was confident and aroused. "Your muscles are twitching...seducing." He inhaled again and

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exhaled deliberately, letting his breath stir her hair and blow across her wetness. "There. Such a pretty dance," he murmured.

Fina wasn't sure he was aware of what he was saying. The roughness in his voice and the pull of the muscles in his face told her he was more wolf than man at that moment.

"Your body's a tease." His words washed over her, making her tremble. "It's showing me how you'd grip me, how you'd milk me." His tongue traced the curve of her nether lips, first one side then the other. Sweat broke out on Fina's back. "How it'd fist me, tight, wet, hot and so, so delicious." His tongue snaked over her again. This time she gasped and her back arched.

"Hmm. That's it, pretty little bitch. Let your body show me how much you want me. How you'd lift yourself to me, offer yourself, find ecstasy impaled on my prick."

She bucked when his tongue circled her clit, trailed through her cream then moved back to her button...a button that he sure was good at pushing. Gasping, arching her back, Fina groaned when Nath nuzzled her pussy and began to tongue her. Her position exposed her

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clit fully and it felt swollen, prominent. Up and down, seducing slowly, he licked until she trembled. Then side to side, a quick flick but a gentle one, the tip of his tongue grazing her. His grip tightened and he pulled her hips back into him, spreading her even more. Nath seemed to be experimenting. Fina didn't mind. Up, down, back and forth. Hard. Gentle. Slow and long.

His thumbs rubbed her outer lips then hooked gently, pulling back the soft folds...her body's final defense. With a gasp, Fina felt her slit open. Cool air touched her wetness then more seeped out of her. When he lapped it up, Nath growled contentedly.

After that he returned to her clit, rubbed the rough surface of his tongue over the exposed nub, flicked it after each upstroke. Squirming, Fina ground her breasts into the bed, fisted the linens, panted. After a time she closed her eyes, arched back into his mouth and let the pleasure build.

Nath was tireless, practically ruthless as he aroused her. Now and then he'd drift back, lap up her juices and swallow them with audible

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satisfaction. Then he'd return to her clit and lick it even faster.

Her heart beating wildly, Fina felt the first tightening in her womb. Her sheath clenched, making her button twitch, adding to the building sensations. Behind her, Nath growled and flicked his tongue hard against her. His fingers gripped her with punishing strength as his thumbs tugged her delicate tissues.

Pleasure fisted her belly hard now. She felt wet, swollen, a wholly erotic being as she squirmed back at him, wanting more, needing more. Nath's strength didn't falter as he met her body's demands. Now his whole head and neck moved, adding strength and range to his brutal caresses.

Crying out, bowing her back and lifting her ass as high as it would go, Fina felt the trembling in her thighs a second before her orgasm tore through her. Waves of ecstasy radiated from her sex, tightening then spiraling. Overwhelmed, Fina cried out again, pleaded, spouted nonsense words for him to stop, to never stop. In a frenzy, his tongue rasped over her until the exquisite pulses faded and her battered clit became hyper-sensitive. She tried to squirm away but Nath held

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on tight. He gentled his touch, licking her slowly, tenderly now while she groaned.

When her breathing evened out, Nath kissed her—a slow, wet, open-mouthed kiss that covered her clit and vulva—then straightened slowly. She squirmed again, this time when she felt the warm, spongy head of his cock slide through her cream. Needing him inside her, she shifted her hips every time he passed the mouth of her core.

Nath wouldn't be rushed. His mate's cream was smeared over his chin. His nostrils were full of her scent. On her knees in front of him, she showed him her sex. Her tissues were gorged with blood following her release, sensitive, ruby red and glistening with moisture. Her hips swayed enticingly, balanced below that narrow, taut waist of hers. Only one thing was missing. High on Fina's right shoulder was a mark. It was shiny, pink and formed the faint outline of two crescent bite marks. Leaning over her, sliding his hands up her body until his elbows were supporting his weight and he was gripping her arms, Nath scraped his teeth over her back, high up, above her left shoulder blade.

"I claim you as my mate, Fina," he growled

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and pressed his teeth into her skin, hard enough to sting but not tear, then paused, giving her the chance to refuse him.

His heart thudding in his chest, Nath breathed in the scent of his woman and waited.

“Claim me,” Fina breathed and screamed when Nath’s teeth tore into her back. Bucking, trembling, she surrendered to his far greater strength then howled with him when he drove his cock into her. He filled her, stretched her and buried himself deep and hard while the flesh on Fina’s shoulder burned and stung from the saliva dripping into her open wound.

She shuddered when he pulled his teeth out of the punctures. Turning her head to the side, she watched him lick his lips, swallow, then look down at her with a humbling combination of lust, satisfaction and pride. She couldn’t see him after he dipped his head to lick her wounds so she rested her forehead on the bed and wondered what on earth she’d just done.

In the span of a few days, she’d pledged herself, bonded her body to two men. She didn’t know if she loved them, didn’t know if she could love. Didn’t know if she’d stay. She



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was a cheat, a liar and a fraud. Bonded females stayed put. That was one of the cornerstones of their existence, a biological imperative. She had become an aberration and she hid her face in the bed linens.

When he'd cleaned the wounds on Fina's back, sealing the evidence of his mark inside her body, Nath straightened. His hips began to rock gently, fucking her in a slow, easy rhythm. One hand held her thigh and the other curled around her waist, slid over her belly and pressed between her legs. With a slow, circular motion of his index finger, he began rubbing her clit.

She might be a cheat but she couldn't help her response to Nath's tender loving. Letting the pleasure overshadow her guilt, Fina rolled back into him. The pressure on her leg kept her movements small, kept the pace gentle, let it build gradually. His light touch taught her that not rushing was far more exquisite than sprinting toward release.

After a time, Nath pressed into her as deep as he could and held himself still. His finger still moved over her clit and he used his other hand to brush her long, auburn hair aside so he could

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look at her. The delicate muscles on Fina's back trembled. Against her pale skin his raw mating mark stood out starkly even though it had already closed. There was nothing frail about his Fina yet there was a vulnerability in her smallness, the sway of her slender hips against his muscled loins. Smiling, Nath imagined them a few years from now, him taking her gently from behind like this, her body swollen and lush with his unborn cub. Cubs maybe. He liked kids, always had and hoped for a big litter someday. Heaven knew he'd enjoy making them with her.

Fina's sheath was so wet and hot he didn't mind how tight she was. He wouldn't mind taking her hard and fast, once they were both worked up for it but wasn't sure he should. Her hips and thighs weren't the only things small on her. But he was confident that given time and a few more years to grow fully, Fina's body would bring him nothing but pleasure. In return, he was eagerly prepared to pleasure her...starting now.

"Can you lie on your back?" he asked quietly and rubbed his dark, rough hand over her spine. "How much does your shoulder hurt?"

Fina shifted her arm experimentally. "Not too

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much.” She glanced back at him. “You bit me pretty high up.”

With a soft growl, Nath slid his cock out of her, kissed the back of her neck then backed away, giving her room to roll over. His lust rising, he watched her body shift and turn. He stroked her calf, her thigh, trailed his fingers over her hip then threaded his fingers through her damp thatch. Fina lay back, putting more weight on her left side and stroked her breasts. Flashing her a naughty grin as he watched, he caressed her abdomen then lay on her carefully. When he took hold of his cock, teased the mouth of her channel with it then pressed into her, Fina let go of her breasts to grab his ass.

Nath snarled his approval. Very few women had ever shown him any sexual aggression. Okay two and even that might be stretching it. He snarled again and smiled when Fina flexed her fingers, squeezed his ass hard then trailed her fingernails lightly over his skin. He shivered and his smile widened. If he counted up the hours he'd spent with other lovers, teaching them how he liked to be touched, what he wanted, how to love him he'd weep with frustration because

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practically none of them could bring themselves to follow through. He wasn't intimidating like Cutler. He was the nice guy yet the women he'd had sex with had simply been unable to do anything but roll over and submit to him. The two that hadn't, well, they'd left him with a bad taste in his mouth when he figured out they'd used him to make his brother jealous.

He eased one of Fina's legs up, straight over his shoulder and began thrusting slow and deep. Her hands on his butt felt good...really good. She pulled him into her, squeezed him just hard enough to make him need to take her faster. When her tongue swept his lips he kissed her hard and thoroughly.

"*Fina*," he gasped when he broke the kiss off to draw air into his burning lungs. "Damn but you make me crazy." He brushed her wild curls off her forehead, framed her face in his hand and stared down at her. Sinking harder into her clinging heat, he heard her gasp, saw her lids get heavy and felt her hands slide over the sweat gathering on his body. Her sheath held him like the sweetest vice, every second inside her was paradise and he trembled when his balls bounced off her soft ass.

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She smelled so good and felt so warm and small beneath him. His cock got even harder when he breathed her in.

Straightening, taking his weight on his elbows and lifting himself off the delightful, rubbing cushion of her breasts, Nath let his chest hover over her mouth.

“Mark me, Fina,” he said in a voice that was as compelling as it was gentle.

She shook her head then blushed like she hadn't meant to do that. “It's my choice,” she gasped. “Who I mate with. When...” Her voice trailed off and she moaned when Nath sped up his strokes, rotating his hips so he ground against her clit at the end of each one.

“You made that choice in the shower, Fina,” he reminded her harshly. “You promised yourself to me. Don't make me ask a second time for what's mine.”

Blinking, Fina raised her eyes to his. Her mouth thinned then it relaxed. This time she nodded, anchored her hands around his shoulders and pulled him down to her. “You are my mate then,” she whispered and her words stirred the

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fine whorls of hair on his chest, warmed the skin beneath. She nudged him with her nose and breathed on him again. "You're my choice."

Nath took a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for the pain then made a sound that was more bellow than howl when she bit him. Flinging his head wildly, he gnashed his teeth and howled again. It hurt, a lot but the pain quickly morphed into a deep, overwhelming, dark pleasure. He drove his cock into her hard and fast. His belly punched into hers, his thigh slid against her sweat-moistened one. Cream spilled out of her, wet her ass and his balls, making him snarl and howl again.

Her saliva stung and he felt it deep inside him now. The pain made his teeth ache and he ground them together in a futile attempt to make it stop. Still his hips pumped in a furious, determined rhythm.

Like the pain and pleasure warring and morphing inside him, the man and the wolf each reveled and fucked. Nath and his wolf had never shared full consciousness before, never equally shared physical sensation. One always ceded control to the other. For the first time, they

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were wholly one. The being driving into its mate was instinctual *and* sentient. All his senses were heightened beyond human ranges but despite the exquisite sensory overload, Nath retained the presence of mind to slide his forearm under Fina's neck and lift just enough to keep her fresh bite mark from rubbing against the linens.

He also kept her teeth imbedded in his skin. Snarling, panting with pain he wept at the glorious pleasure of it. His mate, his perfect Fina was his. And he was hers. Her leg pressed back into her breast, making it flatten and swell. The other rocked against his ribs, soft, hot and enticing. Her hands were still on his arms, holding him tight, keeping him close. Blood smeared her lips and the wolf inside her growled in warning and triumph as it tasted him.

Nath wanted to rub her clit, drive her to the same climax that was making the base of his spine, the base of his balls tingle. He didn't need to. Her tight, wet channel rippled along his length, making him tremble all over. His next stroke came hard and fast and she rippled around him again. Lifting his eyes, clenching his teeth against the pain tearing into his pectoral, Nath

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roared, tipped his hips so the head of his shaft rubbed the front wall of her pussy and watched her cheeks, throat and chest bloom with color. Beneath him, Fina twisted, bit hard enough to freshen the tears in his eyes then screamed savagely. Ripping her teeth out of his flesh, she started to shake. Her sheath bore down on him so tight it hurt. Grip. Release.

Moaning, trembling, weak with pain yet shored by his wolf's stores of animal energy, Nath drove into her one last time, held himself taut, strained for the mouth of her womb and let his seed surge up from his balls and pump into her convulsing body. With each surge, his hips rocked forward and he humped her with short, digging strokes. Finally his ecstasy began to fade and the sensations were too much. Exhausted and hurting, he slid his cock out of her wetness, managed to hold his weight up on his shaking arms a second longer then dropped down on his back beside her.

He was still panting when a breast nudged his ribs. Pain made his wolf snarl a warning. Fina moved closer to him despite that. Sliding up and over him gingerly, she flicked her hair to the side



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and gently licked the four long tears at the very top of his pectoral muscle. She lapped up the last drops of blood that oozed out of his wounds as they were sealed by the healing properties of her saliva. When the pain faded, Nath took a deep breath and willed his body to relax. He stroked her hair, her face, her back—carefully avoiding the fresh bite on her shoulder.

When he was clean, when all traces of blood on his skin and around her mouth were gone, she lay her head on the right side of his chest and pressed her lips to him.

“That was...brutal.” Fina shuddered, obviously troubled by how violently she’d torn into him. Maybe even appalled. “I shouldn’t have let myself lose control like that.”

The pressure of his finger on her chin tipped her head up to his. “I was on top, remember? I held you down, made you keep biting. Maybe not one of my more intelligent choices but my wolf sure loved it to hell and back.” He eased an arm around her and kissed her forehead. “So did I. There’ll never be any doubt in my mind who I belong to, Fina Whitesage. Or who belongs to me.”

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter Eight

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Cutler's last call of the day was a brawl at the high school just beyond his pack's land although still inside his county. The kids might be human but they backed down pretty fast when he waded in, growling and snarling warnings about what would happen to them if they didn't stop. Now.

After he confiscated a few cell phones and watched how the fight started—he sure didn't miss the old days when he had to interview everybody and try to figure out who was the biggest liar—he hauled four skinny, fifteen-year-olds down to the station. He wasn't going to charge them, he was planning on having a chat with their parents. Cutler made it clear he expected to see fireworks when they came in to claim their kids. No fireworks and he *would* press charges. None of the parents let him down.

When he pulled his marked SUV in front of the house, he spotted Nath's hybrid in the drive. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. He'd

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known Nath would be coming back from a five-day trek today. He'd known Fina had planned on dropping Ryan off for a sleepover at Trudy's. He'd been confident he could handle sharing his mate with his brother, choosing to let his love for Nath override his wolf's instinctive need for control.

Problem was, he wasn't quite as sure as he'd been that morning when he left for work.

Taking a deep breath, he switched off the ignition, grabbed his hat off the passenger seat and headed for the front door.

He shut it behind him more quietly than he normally would and scented the air. Sex. Oh yeah. A lot of it. He sniffed again and surprised himself when his cock twitched. Cutler hung up his hat, toed off his boots, secured his sidearm in the lockbox set into the closet wall and followed his nose.

The house was quiet and it felt empty. Glancing at his watch, he realized he was late for his evening chores. His nose led him to Fina's bedroom and he inhaled slowly, sorting through the smells. The faintest smell was Fina and him—they way they'd smelled after making love

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that morning. Next came a whiff of Nath—they way Nath smelled after a trek—smoke and pine. That scent trail disappeared into the bathroom. On top of that he thought he smelled Nath again. Cutler wasn't sure at first because what he smelled was his brother and Fina's soap mixed together. His mouth thinned for a moment. Nath had showered, probably with Fina. He didn't need to check the towels to confirm what his nose told him.

Cutler stood beside the bed. The scents there told the whole story. Fina and his brother. Her cream and his semen, their sweat. Her blood and his. The freshest smells were new although he didn't have to be psychic to identify the subtle, cell-deep changes that their mating had left on their bodies. He ran his hand through his short hair and bared his teeth. He hadn't expected it to be this hard. Had he made a mistake? Cutler sat down on the bed and dropped his forehead into his hands. Would he harm his brother? Would he break Fina's heart by banishing, even killing her other mate?

Not today anyway. Straightening his back, Cutler stood and walked out of the room, tracking

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their scent. He'd find them, talk to them. The three of them were in this together and the three of them would work it out. Sensitivity wasn't his strong suit but he was good at compassion. It would be enough.

As he walked past the cattle paddock, Cutler noted the fresh hay in the feeder, corn in the trough and a few cows munching contentedly. He headed for the barn. The chickens had been fed. Despite the bleating sheep, his wolf's ears registered a woman's laugh, soft and throaty. Fina's. He walked faster.

It was dark, cool and quiet inside the barn. Listening very hard, he picked up the faint beating of two hearts, coming from the loft overhead. He climbed the wooden ladder until his head and shoulders rose above the floor.

His brother was naked, reclining on a stack of straw bales. One of the big winter coats they kept up here was beneath him and he was leaning back on his elbows. His legs spread wide. Clothing scattered around him. Fina was on her knees in front of him, his cock was in her mouth, her hand was on his balls. Her naked breasts rocked as she swallowed him.

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"You're beautiful," Nath murmured. He touched her face, brushed her hair back and smiled. "Run your tongue around the head. That's it, sweetheart. Damn that feels good," he hissed and his head dropped back. "The top of your tongue then the bottom. Yeah. Tease me with the different textures."

Cutler's jaw dropped. It wasn't so much what he was seeing but his reaction to it. He climbed up another two rungs and stopped. His cock was getting hard, fast. The last thing he expected was to be turned on watching his sexy little mate with another man. Well, not *any* man. Some instinct told Cutler that if it was any other man teaching her how to give head, he'd be ripping throats out first and taking names later. End of discussion.

But something about it being Nathaniel made it...acceptable. All right. Hotter than hell.

Nath cupped her breast, rubbed her nipple and Cutler's balls cramped so hard he had to lean forward and grit his teeth. With a low hiss, he adjusted his cock. It was pinned down between his thigh and pant leg and he wrestled it free before it bent in half. When he looked up, Fina's head had turned a little to the side. She

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was watching him. Her blue eyes were big and expressive. She looked so fucking hot with the head of his brother's cock moving back and forth against the inside of her mouth, distending her cheek.

"Wrap your hand around the base. Hold it tight." Nath's voice was calm and encouraging.

He'd always been a natural teacher, Cutler remembered with a jolt of surprise. It was one of the reasons his eco-tourism business was so successful. Tromping through the woods for eight hours wasn't all that fun when you came down to it. Nath had a knack for keeping his clients entertained and amused as he educated them. It explained why his repeat-customer rate was over eighty percent.

"Tighter, sweetheart. Yeah. Set my teeth on edge."

Cutler gulped and stared. He wondered what his pack would think if they found out their sheriff was a voyeur. Hot damn. He could just see the posters come election time.

"Damn that's good. Now I want you to take a breath, relax your throat and let me

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slip between your lips. Take it slow and easy, sweetheart. Just stay relaxed and stop when it feels uncomfortable.”

Cutler gulped again. Her bare ass tipping up with the movement, her pretty little feet crossed at the ankles, Fina’s brow furrowed in concentration as she slid her mouth down over Nath’s cock. When she turned red and balked, Nath stopped her by touching her forehead. He shifted the position of her hand, wrapped it higher up his cock so that it acted as a brake. She slid her mouth back up to the crown.

“Try again, slower this time,” Nath coached. “Stop when you run into your hand.” He winked at her and Fina grinned up at him. “It’ll get easier with practice. I’ll work with you every chance I get,” he added ribaldy then gasped when she chuckled with his cock in her mouth. “Try again,” he gasped and leaned back on his elbows.

Cutler squeezed his erection through his sturdy uniform pants as he watched her head drop down over Nath’s loins, over and over. Nath finally stopped her by putting his hands on either side of her face.

“Now lick my balls, sweetheart.” He held his



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cock against his belly, spread his knees further and slid forward on the bale until his nuts hung down between his thighs. "Yeah. Oh yeah. Pet them. Use your hands." He hissed. "Easy. That's better," Nath sighed and he sounded relieved. "Suck one. Take it in your mouth, run your tongue around it, tongue me..." His voice drifted off and his head dropped back. When he lifted it back up, he looked straight into Cutler's wide, staring eyes.

"Don't just stand there playing with yourself," he called out. "Get over here and give our woman some attention."

A slow grin spread over Cutler's face. He finished climbing the ladder and walked toward them, undoing his shirt.

Nath growled and touched Fina's hair. "Wrap your fingers around my cock, sweetheart, and jerk me off while you're licking my nuts."

While he unbuckled his belt, Cutler watched her stroke his brother. When Nath's abdominals clenched, he could practically feel how good her mouth felt. For awhile there he'd had his doubts but since he'd benefit from his brother's fellatio lessons, who was he to complain? He stripped off

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his shirt, toed off his boots, dropped his pants and shorts onto the untidy pile around Nath and Fina and fell to his knees behind her.

He touched her back. For a moment Cutler looked at the fresh bite on Fina's shoulder. It sat high on the left side. It was almost a twin for the fading scar on the other side. He bent forward and nuzzled the soft skin between her shoulder blades. There was a rightness about Nath biting her where he did. He hadn't trespassed on Cutler's territory, he'd shared it. They'd marked her equally although the bite on the upper left side of his brother's chest was jagged, ugly and looked damn painful. Cutler was grateful he'd gotten off as easy as he did. He reached around Fina, cupped her breasts and stroked them lovingly.

"I missed you today," he murmured.

"Me, hmm?" Fina murmured. There was a tease in her voice. She lifted her head from between Nath's legs. "All of me? Not just them?" She touched one of Cutler's hands as he squeezed her breasts.

"All of you," Cutler chuckled. He kissed her

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back once more then ran his hands between her legs.

“Hey. Sweetheart.” Nath bounced the tip of his finger off her nose. “Less talking. More head,” he teased, grinning so hard his dimples stood out. He cupped her face in his hands and gently drew her back to him.

Fina shifted restlessly when Cutler stroked her pussy, nudged her clit, circled her anus with his fingertip. Distracted, she didn’t seem to notice that she was taking Nath’s cock deeper into her mouth every few strokes. It was like she’d forgotten she had a gag reflex as she cupped his balls then ran her fingernails over his belly. When she pinched Nath’s nipples, Cutler groaned.

“Damn, Fina. You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever known,” he growled and sank two fingers into her pussy. “And you’re really wet.”

“Yeah. I know,” Nath piped up. He wriggled his eyebrows and grinned at Cutler. “You’re welcome.”

Cutler shot him a look then shrugged. He worked his fingers in and out of Fina’s clinging sheath. His other hand stayed on her clit,

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rubbing it gently and giving it a playful flick every now and then. It was Nath's turn to stare and the centers of his eyes expanded as he sat up to watch his brother's fingers slide into her. When she squirmed her ass back at him, Cutler slid his fingers out of her, kissed each of her butt cheeks then took hold of his cock and lined it up with her core.

"Fuck that's hot," Nath whispered and he stared as the head of Cutler's tool disappeared inside their mate's body.

Nodding in agreement, Cutler held onto Fina's hips and pressed into her. He snarled. She was tight and hot but not as tight as this morning. He actually preferred it. He was a big man and he'd always worried he'd tear his much smaller mate. After fucking Nath all day, Fina was wet, snug and wriggling back into him. He loved her enthusiasm.

Nath moaned and leaned back again. "Wet your finger, sweetheart." His voice was rough. "Use your mouth. Make it good and wet. Then put it in my ass."

She lifted her head, tipped it to one side and Cutler could feel the hesitancy in her. But he

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knew she liked having her ass played with. Loved it when he teased her there. Obliging, Fina doused her middle finger with saliva and pressed it to Nath's anus. He lifted one leg and rested his bare foot on her uninjured shoulder.

"That's it. Good, sweetheart." He took a breath and his face relaxed. "Now tip your finger up. Point it right at the base of my cock. Keep going. Slow. Almost there." Nath groaned and his back arched. Fina froze. "Don't stop. Please," he begged and lay back down on the bale.

"You hit his prostate," Cutler whispered. He leaned forward and licked her ear. "One of a guy's major hot spots. Stroke it nice and easy with the tip of your finger...kind of a come-hither motion," he added helpfully, excited at the prospect of Fina doing the same thing to him later that evening. "That little spongy spot. Suck his dick at the same time." He kissed her ear, straightened and resumed the slow, teasing shuttle of his cock in her pussy.

Nath groaned again and levered himself up on his elbows so he could watch Fina blow him while his brother fucked her hot little cunt. She rocked gently between the two of them, dictating

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the cadence of their joining, then began to pick up speed.

Running his hands up and down her body, not controlling her, Cutler let his mate pleasure herself at her own pace. He squeezed her breasts then thighs, rubbed her clit while his brother moaned. Grinning ferally, Cutler watched her pussy swallow up his hard-on, felt her wetness squeeze him just right, heard the sexy little mewling sounds she made with the head of Nath's cock in her mouth. He'd never done anything this wild or this hot. Ever. It felt like he loved the two of them even more than he had that morning.

Nath's abdominals clenched and he snarled. Threading his fingers in Fina's hair, the muscles in his arms corded like he was holding back his strength. His hips began to rock and his eyes squeezed shut.

"Now, sweetheart," he gasped. "I'm gonna come."

"Swallow it if you can," Cutler whispered, his voice dark and seductive. He bent forward, licked Fina's ear again then bit it gently.

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Nath's hips surged forward and he howled. Cutler felt Fina stiffen beneath him then she relaxed. When he heard her gasp and swallow, over and over in time with the jerking of Nath's body, Cutler almost came himself. The subtle movements of her elbows told him she was still fisting Nath's cock, still working that finger she'd slid in his ass.

Growling, Cutler licked the scar of his mating bite on her back and grazed her skin with his teeth.

"Jeez...stop, *stop*," Nath panted and lifted her mouth off his deflating cock. He shuddered when she licked him slowly and deliberately.

From the direction of his brother's gaze and the stunned expression on his face, Cutler knew Fina was looking into Nath's eyes as she cleaned him. The image made his cock rock hard and he shoved his loins forward.

Nath grunted and slid back onto the bale when her chin butted his balls. "Asshole," he bitched without any real venom and glanced up at Cutler.

"Lightweight," Cutler shot back, gripped

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Fina's hips and put some strength behind his thrusts.

Despite his lazy snarl, Nath sat up and positioned himself so he could watch them. He reached beneath Fina's body to fondle her breasts and pinch her nipples.

"Oh. Gawd," she breathed. Cutler's fingers moved faster over her clit. He was authoritative and his touch was goal orientated. There was more variety in Nath's touch—more tease than arousal. The difference turned her on like crazy.

Her thighs began to shake. Being with the two of them was so hot, being the center of all this delicious, male lust was making her come faster than she wanted...but who was she to turn down a good spine-jarring orgasm? Cutler had never felt so big, so hard inside her. A few days ago that would have made her wince. Now it made her belly clench and her pussy squeeze down on him. He grunted, swore and pumped her faster.

Fina came first. Crying out, she flung her head back. She braced her arms, dug the heels of her hands into the loft floor and let the pleasure wash over her. Trembling, her body bore down on Cutler, wanting him deep and hard. Bright light



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flooded the backs of her eyes. When the pulses of her orgasm faded, she gasped, lifted a hand to grab the edge of the bale Nath was sitting on, and hung on for the ride.

Behind her, Cutler howled. It was a primitive sound. Her wolf ran toward it, slammed her body back into his, and howled in response. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nath's cock twitch and swell.

She winced when Cutler's fingers dug into the healing bruises on her hip. He started pumping into her hard, pulled her back into him as his rod jerked inside her and wetness gushed out around the mouth of her sheath.

After a time, he fell silent. The hard, erratic movements of his hips stopped. Slowly, she felt the swelling at the base of his cock subside and when it did, he pulled out of her gently. Cutler sat down on the floor beside her, pulled her onto his lap and cradled her.

Nath ran his fingers through her hair, easing it away from her face.

"Um, what did you do to your nuts, man?" Cutler said quite suddenly a few minutes later. He

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lifted his head so he could look at Nath, lounging above them and looking smugly content.

Lifting his cock out of the way, Nath stroked his smooth scrotum.

“I had them waxed,” he answered conversationally. “Before my last trip. Some salon two towns over.”

“Did it hurt?” Cutler asked. He shuddered.

“Like a son of a bitch.” Nath shrugged then he grinned. “Had you going there, didn’t I?” he taunted Cutler. “I just shaved them. Who the hell would let anybody near their nuts with hot wax?” Chuckling, he gave his new mate a wink. “I figured Fina would appreciate it. After all, who wants to suck down a hair when they’re going down on somebody’s nut sac.”

Her brow furrowed at Nath’s crude language but she gave him an appreciative grin nonetheless. “That’s so sweet, Nath. Thank you,” she cooed and squeezed his thigh.

“Hey. I can be sweet too.” Cutler grumbled then held her elbow when she stood and started hunting around for her clothes. “Didn’t I let you come first?”

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“Oh yeah. You’re a peach,” Nath deadpanned, ducked when his brother tried to cuff him and grabbed his pants off the floor.



“Watch out for the buck. He’s got a bit of a mean streak.” Nath hovered over Fina, watching as she reached into the rabbit enclosure to pick up one of the kits. “He’ll kick back at you if you get within range and he’s got some nasty claws.”

Cutler refilled the water bowl and measured out feed pellets. He grinned when Fina’s face lit up. She held one of the smaller rabbits to her chest and stroked its long fur. They kept the rabbits up here, in a wooden enclosure in a corner of the loft because it was quiet, ventilated and away from the other animals.

Nath pulled some alfalfa off a nearby bale, separated the clumps and dropped it into the enclosure.

Her brow furrowing, Fina looked up at her mates. “How come he doesn’t mind me holding him?” she asked, looking down at the rabbit resting contently in her arms. “When I was six,

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one of my human girlfriends had a cat. When I walked into her house, the thing hissed at me, tore up the skin on my arm and ran away.” She stroked the rabbit’s ear and smoothed her fingertip across its cheek. It seemed to relax even more. “My friend said the cat didn’t come back for two days. Don’t rabbits, um, perceive us as predators?”

Cutler grinned. “They would, except these ones were raised with weres. When any of the farmers in the pack import new stock, they buy them as young as they can so they can acclimate. It’s better if we breed them ourselves, though. Nath and I buy frozen semen when the heifers go into heat. We tried bringing in a bull once.” He and Nath exchanged a look then started to laugh. “Damn thing went berserk then died of cardiac failure about a day later. The heifers were pretty disappointed.”

The corner of her mouth quirked up and she put the rabbit back in the enclosure. Wiping her hands off, she headed for the ladder to climb down out of the loft. “So why do you keep so many different kinds of animals.”

“Well,” Nath answered as he climbed down

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after her. “Habit, I guess. Our mother was into spinning—not the kind on a bike but the kind with a treadle and yarn. She built up the sheep herd, brought in some long-haired goats and the rabbits. I guess you could say we’re honoring her legacy by keeping them.”

Cutler looped his arm around her waist when he reached the barn floor. “That and we’ve been too lazy to get rid of them,” he admitted, kissed the top of her head and led her back to the house.

When they passed the cattle paddock, Fina pointed. “So why Black Angus cattle?”

“Because they’re delicious,” Nath answered with a shrug, kissed her quick and gave her hand a squeeze before he opened the kitchen door.



“...and he rolled down the hill like that and *boom* at the bottom and Koby put his hands on the air and...”

Angling his big body in the café chair, Nath grinned and focused his attention on Ryan,

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listening to the boy's play-by-play about how he and his friend Koby had spent yesterday.

Nath and Fina had picked up Ryan from Trudy's this morning. So the Beta could spend *some* time with Ryan before heading out on his next trek, they were having breakfast at the café. Cutler had wanted to join them but duty called... that and the state inspector's visit. In fact, the café was starting to empty as customers finished up and headed to work.

When Dorothea Pike walked in, Fina waved her over.

"Good morning," Fina greeted her warmly, stood and gave her a quick hug. "I thought you worked the lunch shift?"

"I do. But I like to get an early start. Thank you," Dorothea added when Nath grabbed an empty chair, pulled it up to their table and held it out for the older woman. She grinned when Nath leaned over her and buzzed a quick kiss to her cheek before sitting back down. "Plus it's a baking day."

"A baking day?" Fina asked. She got up, walked over to the servers' station, picked up a

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clean cup, saucer and a pot of coffee and brought them back to their table.

“Uh huh.” Nodding her thanks, Dorothea accepted the cup of coffee Fina set down in front of her, stirred in a bit of sugar and sat back in her chair. “Every Tuesday and Friday I make my secret-recipe apple crumble. It’s one of our most popular menu items.”

“Nath makes that,” Ryan piped up. He finished off the last of his milk. “Nath cooks way better than Fina does.”

Fina was the first to laugh. “He’s right,” she acknowledged with a shrug.

“Well you’re a fortunate young man, Ryan Upton,” Dorothea explained. She sipped her coffee then added a touch more sugar. “Nathaniel’s mother and I were best friends before she died. She’s the only person I ever gave the recipe to. She passed the recipe on to Nathaniel.”

Something in Ryan’s expression changed. He looked...blank for a moment. It was subtle but it caught Fina’s attention. She combed her fingers through his short, dark blond hair. Nath must have seen something too because he touched

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Ryan's shoulder. After a moment, Ryan blinked, pulled an electronic game out of his backpack and began playing.

"Speaking of your mother," Dorothea continued, directing her question to Nath, "are you going to get a shearer in this summer?"

"A shearer?" Fina asked.

Dorothea nodded. "For the sheep. His mother got me hooked on spinning years ago. Of course I weave more these days than knit."

Fina's brow furrowed.

"Oh it's my favorite hobby," Dorothea enthused. "I made a big production out of the whole process. Carding the yarn, dyeing it...my husband dug a fire pit in the backyard for me years ago. He rigs up a tripod, carries out my big iron pot, even stacks the firewood for me. I dye my own yarn the old fashioned way," she added with pride. "Just like my grandmother taught me. Onion skin for yellow, walnut bark for brown, indigo for blue." She winked. "Of course, it's more an excuse to sit out back with my feet up, soak up some rays and read a good book. I only



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have to get up every twenty minutes or so to give the pot a stir.

“Once I’m satisfied with the color, I hang the yarn up to dry then it’s ready for spinning.”

“Hmm.” Fina sat back, digesting what Dorothea had said. When she did, Dorothea sat forward and discreetly sniffed the air around her and Nath.

“Both brothers then, huh?” the older woman said speculatively and without condemnation.

“Both. Yes,” Fina answered.

“Well good for you is what I say. It’s about time somebody collared those wild pups.”

One of Nath’s brows shot up but that was his only reaction.

Dorothea grinned. She glanced at Ryan, made sure he wasn’t paying any attention to them and lowered her voice. “When the mating urge hits, there’s nothing you can do about it. They’ve found a good woman in you, Fina. I thought so from day one. Keeping them in line won’t be your only trouble, though.” She glanced around the almost-empty café. “There’ll be plenty of

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single bitches out for blood when they find out you've caught the two most eligible wolves in the county." Dorothea leaned back, picked up her cup, took a sip and sighed appreciatively.

Fina glanced at Nath. He offered an apologetic grin and a shrug.

"Great," Fina huffed. "Looks like I'll have to polish up my brass knuckles."

When the adults at the table laughed, Ryan glanced up, looked at their faces in confusion then returned his attention to his game.

"Well hello, Nath." A tall redhead, wearing a fitted skirt, a silk blouse and dangerously high heels headed for their table about a second after she entered the café. "Congratulations on how well your business is doing. We just mailed out your latest bank statement and I..." Her voice trailed off. She sniffed the air around them, then sniffed again.

"Um, Fina, I'd like to introduce Anna Fraser. Anna's the assistant manager down at the bank and—"

"*Both?*" Anna shrieked. She slammed her manicured hands down on her hips and leaned

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over Fina. "You're with *both* of them?" She trembled with anger.

Fina stood slowly, bared her teeth and growled.

For a moment it looked like Anna was going to take her up on her offer to fight. Then the anger drained out of her eyes. She looked timid when she glanced away and took a step back. Without another word, she turned and walked away slowly, shoulders sagging, head not quite as high as it was when she came in.

"What did she mean, Fina?" Ryan piped up. He tugged on Fina's sleeve. "Who's both of them?"

Fina forced a smile. "We live with both Cutler *and* Nath," she hedged. "Just like they live with both you and me."

"Oh." Ryan glanced down at his game then back up at her. "I don't think she likes you."

"Neither do I," Fina agreed with a sigh. "But she'll come around. They all will. I hope," she added under her breath, took the game out of his hand and set his unfinished plate of toast and scrambled eggs in front of him.

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“It would make a great tie-in with Nath’s business.” Fina turned the computer monitor so Cutler could see. He put a hand on the back of her chair in the home office and leaned forward. “Organic angora and mohair sweaters, hats, socks, throws made with yarn dyed with natural ingredients. We can cross-promote with his company—dedicate a display area at his base camp with a website tie-in. Plus it’ll create jobs in the community by having local women knit for us. I hear knitting’s a popular hobby.”

Cutler nodded. “You know Nath’s always complaining about newbies showing up without the right clothes. Somebody always needs more socks or an extra sweater.” He looked down at Fina curiously. “How do you know about this stuff?”

She shot him a look then returned to her research on the profit margins and availability of angora yarn. “Please. Start-up companies and looking for fresh opportunities are required projects in every applied business course. Besides, I grew up on this stuff. My father had the keenest

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eye for business of anyone I ever knew.” Her fingers faltered on the keys. “I miss him,” she added quietly.

Cutler kissed her head and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “What was he like?”

“Smart. No, not smart, brilliant. Focused. Stubborn, bossy and demanding.” She lay her cheek on Cutler’s forearm and sighed. “I was his baby girl and he loved me like crazy.”

When a tear landed on his arm, Cutler ran his thumb gently over her eyelids.

They stayed like that for awhile.

“Hey, Cutler.” Ryan raced into the room. “I put my plate in the dishwasher. Can we go over to Mr. Pike’s and ride the horses now?”

Cutler pressed a kiss to Fina’s hair and straightened. “You bet, buddy. Dorothea said she’d baked a pie today and we can have some for dessert after.”

“Yesss.” Ryan pumped his fist in the air. “Oh hey Fina...Koby’s mom took him shopping for school clothes. Am I gonna go to school here too? I’m going into grade one you know.”

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She forced a smile, waved him over and tucked his t-shirt into his shorts. "I know," she enthused. "How about I make an appointment for us to visit the school? You can check out your classroom and meet your teacher."

"Okay. Yeah," Ryan said, pushed her hands away and headed for the door. "Come *on*," he groaned and rolled his eyes. "Daylight's wastin'."

Cutler and Fina shared a look then obediently marched out in Ryan's wake.



"Whatcha doin', Fina?" Ryan ran into the Pikes' living room. He launched himself at the sofa and got up on his knees beside Fina, staring at her hands.

"I am looking at yarn," Fina explained. She grinned at the six-year-old then up at Cutler and Dorothea Pike's husband as they entered. Even though they smelled of horse, both Ryan and Cutler's face, neck and hands were freshly washed. "Thank you for bringing him back clean."

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“No problem,” Cutler nodded. “I didn’t know you could knit.”

“I can’t. Dorothea, however, is a master at it. I was just asking her how many women in the pack were good enough to produce items of saleable quality and what sort of production we could expect.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up.

“Local, hand worked goods, made with the finest materials available—the hair from organically raised mohair goats and angora rabbits.” She held up one of the balls of yarn. “Come Christmas, we won’t be able to keep up with the orders.”

“That optimistic, are you?” Dorothea’s husband, Gil, asked. He headed for the kitchen at the other end of the long room, lifted the cover off a raspberry pie and grabbed a container of vanilla ice cream out of the freezer.

“Yes,” Fina answered firmly. “It’s a natural tie in, given Green Mountain Eco Tours’ mandate. Minimal initial investment, considering the raw materials are walking around and eating hay in fields all over the county.” She moved her hand

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in a vague circle. “And a skilled work force that won’t see the work *as* work. It’s a win-win proposition.”

“Your mate here would make a fine business manager, Cutler.” Gil licked a smear of raspberry off his knuckle and continued sliding slices of pie onto plates. “She’s got a better head for it than you. No offense.”

“None taken,” Cutler acknowledged absently. “She does, doesn’t she?”

Ryan jumped into the conversation. “My Mom likes to knit. She made me a sweater for first day of school *and* Christmas. Fina do you think she’d...”

One by one, the adults in the room looked away from Ryan, hiding pained, cautious expressions. He moved to the end of the sofa and his expression became strangely blank. Producing a small, electronic game from his pant pocket, he pressed buttons with one hand while he stuck the thumb from his other in his mouth.





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Later that evening, while Cutler was listening to Ryan read before bedtime, Fina sat in the office in front of her laptop. Her finger moved over the screen slowly. It was the first time she'd logged onto the Whitesage Nursery Intranet since her pack had been murdered. She was bringing up customer lists. It was time to broadcast that Whitesage Nursery was going out of business. Talking with Dorothea Pike today and making plans for Ryan to go to school had made her realize she was starting to put down roots here. They were baby steps of course and nothing that couldn't be reversed. That made her feel a little better, like she still had an out—if she wanted. Despite that, she was starting to think of this place, this pack and this community as hers. It wasn't much and she was still a fraud for making them think she was vested, but it was something.

She came across Samantha Wells' files and smiled, picturing the fifty-something woman's puffygray-blond hair and the way she'd talk more with her hands than her mouth. A perpetual ball of fire in motion, Samantha had been her father's sales and marketing manager. Fina had learned a lot from her. Impatiently, she wiped her eyes,

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blinked and opened up a document Samantha had labeled as Pack Contacts. She scrolled down the list. More tears welled in her eyes. The list read like an obituary for her pack and, mentally, she repeated the word “dead” after each name. That is until she came to one she barely recognized.

Owen Wells. Fina blinked.

It had been so long ago she'd forgotten Samantha had a son. Fina had been eight when Owen had challenged her father for leadership of their pack. He'd been eighteen at the time, tall, muscular but still no challenge for a powerful Alpha in his prime. She remembered hearing the adults talk about it, how Owen had lost the challenge then left. He'd be thirty now. His address was an American military installation in Iraq. Fina wondered if he knew the pack was dead but doubted it. He would have attempted to contact her...someone...through the website. She placed her fingers on the keyboard and started composing an email.

*“I told you I did!”*

Her head snapped up when Ryan's strident voice echoed through the house, high pitched and ringing with indignation. She was already

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halfway down the hallway when Ryan yelled again.

*"You're not my father."*

By the time she rushed into his bedroom, Ryan was standing in the middle of his bed, red faced and shaking. He glared at Cutler who was standing a few feet away, staring back at the six-year old with his arms crossed over his chest and his back unnaturally straight.

"He never believes me," Ryan wailed, pointing an accusing finger at Cutler. His hand shook. "I brush my teeth every night like I'm supposed to and he never believes me."

"Ryan..." Fina walked towards him, holding out her hands.

"You don't believe me either," Ryan screamed and started flailing his fists, aiming for her face.

*"Enough,"* Cutler bellowed. He rushed at the boy, picked Ryan up and pressed his back into the wall behind his bed. He held him there by laying one massive hand over Ryan's chest. When Cutler roared, Ryan whimpered and fell silent. "Men don't hit women," Cutler said slowly and ominously. "The men of my pack take care of

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our women. We don't accuse them of things that aren't true." He snarled, once, then fell silent like he was waiting for Ryan to compose himself before responding. "Now," he said after a moment and his voice was quiet but no less authoritative. "Can you talk to us politely?"

Ryan nodded.

"All right then." Cutler removed his hand, slowly picked Ryan up beneath the arms and stood him up in the middle of the bed. "I should have had this talk with you before but I'm going to have it now. Fina is my mate. Do you understand what that means?"

Ryan hesitated then nodded. "It's like you're married."

"Right. And we *will* get married. Soon. Right now, Fina's still very sad that her family, her old pack is dead. I guess you're sad too."

Ryan looked away. He looked everywhere except directly at Cutler.

The heat rose in Fina's face as she stared at the back of Cutler's head. "*Pompous, presumptive ass,*" she thought.

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“You’re going to be sad for awhile. Sad *and* angry. Sometimes you’re going to make believe that your parents are still alive.” Cutler glanced over his shoulder. “Fina’ll do the same thing,” he added then returned his focus to Ryan. “All those things will happen but you cannot lash out at her like that.”

“B-because men don’t hit women.”

Nodding, Cutler pulled up the hem of his shirt and wiped Ryan’s face with it. “That’s right. You’re part of my pack. I love you and I love Fina. Nath loves both of you too.”

Ryan’s mouth twitched. “Nath is her mate too,” he added slowly.

“He is. Koby’s mom has one mate. Your mother had one mate. Fina’s different. Her heart is so big she’s got room in it for all of us.”

Ryan seemed to accept Cutler’s explanation and his thin shoulders went down. He held his arms out and Cutler helped him down off the bed.

“Come on, buddy. I’ll get you a drink of water then get you tucked in.” He held Ryan’s hand as he led him into the bathroom.

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Almost half an hour later, Cutler tracked her down in the office. She'd picked up on their muffled conversation...Cutler's rumbling baritone and Ryan's quiet, higher-pitched murmurs...but hadn't listened close enough to hear what they were saying.

"Look at this. Please," she said when he walked in the room.

Cutler's brow furrowed as he scanned the email. "Owen Wells. He's—?"

"Other than Ryan and I, the only surviving member of our pack. He left when I was young and never came back. I'd forgotten he existed."

"I'm sorry you have to be the one to tell him." He rubbed her shoulders gently and watched as she hit the "send" button. "Wanna put a movie on?"

"No. I think I'll work some more."

Cutler kissed her head. "You don't have to think when you work," he said, gave her shoulders a final squeeze and headed out of the room. "Sometimes it's good to take a rest from your head, honey."

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Fina heard the television turn on then tuned it out. She didn't expect a reply anytime soon from Owen. Soldiers were busy, right?

An hour later she was merging a customer contact list when her computer chirped an incoming-message alert. It was from a personal but generic military address. Fina opened it immediately.

*"Are you safe?"*

She blinked as she re-read the three, stark words. Her reply was less stilted and flowed easier than her first message. Typing as fast as she could, she told Owen that she and Ryan had been taken in by a large pack in Wyoming. They were making a place for themselves and were well provided for. She hit "send".

A reply came back in minutes. It was an invitation to join him in a live chat. As soon as she agreed, the little light beside the webcam built into her laptop screen lit up.

*"You really look like him."*

Fina's fingers hesitated on the keys. Owen Wells wasn't what she expected. He still looked big, even bigger than he had at eighteen and his

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face was all hard edges and stark intensity. He was terrifyingly handsome because of it. There was a crease between his eyes that looked like it had become permanent. His dark-blond hair was cut very short. He had the same nose as Ryan which caught her off guard. She'd forgotten they were second cousins.

*"I'm sorry I didn't know. I'm sorry I wasn't there to take care of you and Ryan. Are you sure you're OK?"*

She smiled and watched his big hand move over the screen, like he was tracing the outline of her cheek. Without thinking, she tipped her head into his imaginary hand.

"I'm sorry I forgot about you."

*"You were just a little kid. I can petition for compassionate leave. Be stateside maybe day after tomorrow."*

It took her a moment to think through her reply. "If it'll help you, come."

His image on the screen smiled quirkily as he read her post. *"So you're saying you don't need me."*



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“Men...always fishing,” she teased then glanced guiltily over her shoulder before hitting “send”.

*“Funny. Give me time to absorb this. Computer time here is limited and there’s a line-up of guys behind me. It’s oh-five-thirty here. I can log back on in a couple of hours when everybody’s at chow.”*

He touched the screen once more then logged off.

By the time Cutler switched off the game, Fina was again engrossed in an on-line chat with Staff-Sergeant Owen Wells. Cutler leaned over her, kissed her forehead and left her to mourn with this pack mate she didn’t know anything about while he ambled off to bed.

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# **Chapter Nine**

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“Have you met Wally’s parents?” Cutler cut up the breakfast sausage on Ryan’s plate, poured him some juice then drizzled maple syrup over a toaster waffle. Officer Wally Pierce’s parents would be watching over the cubs tonight during the pack’s mating run.

Ryan shook his head. Holding his utensils upright, his small body humming with impatience, he watched Cutler with a suspicious eye. Cutler suppressed a grin, amused by Ryan’s hyper-vigilance, even though Cutler had yet to mess up his breakfast and always added enough syrup.

Ryan nodded his thanks when Fina added some hunks of melon to his plate.

“Wally’s mother is fun like Wally is,” Cutler said. “She said she’d make mini pizzas for bedtime snack and you could roast marshmallows outside over a fire.”

Closing his mouth around a forkful of waffle, Ryan raised his eyebrows, clearly pleased.

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Anybody who fed him pizza was all right in his book. He looked down and focused on his breakfast.

“Nath’ll be back before noon?” Cutler asked Fina when she topped up his coffee cup then hers.

“Yes.” She toyed with the food on her plate and stopped only when Cutler lay his hand over hers.

“We don’t have to go,” he offered and his thumb moved over her fingers. “We can skip this one,” he added with a nonchalant shrug.

Fina knew his indifference was feigned. She knew he and Nath were anxious to publicly display their claim on her. She knew they wanted her to take on her rivals in wolf form—dominate them like she’d dominated them in human form. Cutler especially tried not to show it but they’d been impatient to have her fully demonstrate her right to be the pack’s top bitch. Until she did, the undercurrent of tension in his pack wouldn’t go away. Every wolf needed one thing—an established hierarchy.

“You never said anything,” he said quietly. He

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glanced at Ryan, making sure he wasn't paying attention. "But Nath and I, we always figured you were...forced in wolf form."

She stiffened then nodded jerkily. "I'm not saying my wolf won't have issues." Despite the anxiety clouding her eyes, the corner of her mouth twitched up in a halfhearted grin. "It's definitely got some issues. But I need to do this. I need to try. Just don't expect a really *good* time."

Chuckling, Cutler leaned across the table, kissed her then picked up his fork and started devouring his breakfast.



Before sundown that evening, Cutler knocked on the front door of Wally's parents' house. Wally's father greeted them warmly and once they were inside, Cutler stood on one side of Ryan. Fina stood on the other. Nath stood a step behind, his hands resting on Ryan's shoulders. The adults in the room took a moment to take in the positioning of their bodies, their closeness and sniffed the air around them. After that they came forward in ones and twos. Their greetings

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weren't fawning but they were overtly polite and respectful because of it. Children came up to them too. Those old enough to understand that Cutler was Alpha greeted him with a touch on his leg or arm, depending on how tall they were. They nuzzled him with unfeigned pleasure, deferring and affirming with the same gesture. Then they turned to Nathaniel. They nuzzled and touched him as well but their smiles were wider, their laughter louder when he grinned, told jokes, asked what they'd been up to.

After a few minutes, Ryan was pulled away from his surrogates, enticed by the movement of small bodies like his, by the giggling and wrestling match going on in the corner of the Pierce's living room. Fina's eye never strayed from him, although she was friendly and greeted the men and women who spoke to her. The children who were the same size as Ryan played with him enthusiastically but let him lead the games like they were obeying some deep instinct they were barely aware of. Koby stuck especially close to him, looping his thin arm around Ryan's equally thin shoulders in a fine display of *bonhomie*, demonstrating their friendship. The larger children stuck to their own games but they gave

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Ryan space. Gave way to his group when they tumbled past. The smaller children were excited but noticeably sleepier than the others. Mostly they watched an animated movie or clustered around a cardboard box that had once housed a refrigerator. Now it had windows cut out of it and crayon drawings to make it look like a fort. When they did check out what was going on around them, they also looked to see what Ryan was doing, where he was.

Fina's shoulders squared. She could live with being a cheat and a fraud if it meant Ryan didn't have to spend his youth cowering like a whipped dog and deferring to everyone else.

After she thanked the Pierces for looking after the children for the evening, she led her mates out of the house. Most of the other adults followed, got into their individual vehicles and drove off in the wake of Cutler's oversized SUV.



"I love your ass." Nath nuzzled the back of Fina's ear, swept his palm over her rear so quickly and nonchalantly she wasn't sure anyone around

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them noticed then grinned like a naughty schoolboy as he unbuttoned his jeans.

“Hmm. Mighty fine,” Cutler murmured in agreement. He glanced down at her body as he folded up his shirt. “Grade A. Choice cut.”

“Are we going to have sex or pass the steak sauce?” she huffed and slapped away Nath’s hands when he reached for the zipper holding her pants up.

“Just saying,” Cutler grinned, buried his face in her hair, inhaled with open pleasure and smiled until his pale, aqua eyes shimmered beneath the rising moon.

There was no full moon tonight. They were reserved for pack runs. This was a smaller gathering. Younger wolves mostly, more singles than married couples. As he and his pack stripped, Cutler scented the air. Four of the women in the clearing were in heat. He smiled. Come spring, there would be four new cubs in his pack. More if some of the births were multiples. His pack was strong, vital and growing.

He watched his old friend Eddie Robertson hover around his wife. They were standing a

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little apart from the others. Cutler smiled. Jane Robertson was one of the women in heat. No wonder her husband was staying close, touching her, keeping a watchful eye on the other males. Jane stood near her husband and pressed her breasts into his body. Still grinning, Cutler looked away. If everything worked out, this would be Eddie and Jane's second cub.

He and Eddie had gone to school together and once a day if he could, Cutler walked the block and a half from the station house to Eddie's bakery for one of the man's apple fritters. "*Ambrosia*," he thought as he licked his lips unconsciously. Someday he and Nath would be hovering around Fina just like that, gravitating to her fertility, orbiting her like planets around the sun.

"That lecherous look on your face better be for me," Fina growled and dragged her fingernails across his naked abdomen.

Cutler hissed then growled in response. "Always." He bent and ran his teeth over her shoulder. "Well, you and Eddie Robertson's apple fritters." When her blue eyes narrowed, he



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held up his hands defensively. "What? Do you want me to lie?"

Laughing, Fina smacked his hard belly then leaned into his warm body. He wrapped his arms around her, held her tight and gently rocked back and forth.

She sighed when Nath leaned his naked chest into her back and rested his head on hers.

After a moment they straightened and removed the rest of their clothing.

Bending to her, Cutler closed his mouth over one of her nipples. The cool night air had hardened it and his mouth felt especially good. Nath moved behind her, brushed her hair aside so he could kiss her neck and reached around her so he could hold her other breast, and gently comb the curls on her mound with his free hand. She reached up and clasped her hands behind Nath's neck, arching a little and pressing her breast into Cutler's face. He made a low sound of contentment as his tongue circled her nipple.

Fina scented the air and opened her eyes. Single females—not a lot of them but enough—were circling them slowly. The females gave them

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a wide berth to be sure but hovered nonetheless, giving off a hostile vibe in contrast to the single males trailing after them. The males were focused on the circling females almost to the exclusion of everything else, oblivious to the sway of their hard cocks as they walked. The females looked at her coldly but glanced away when her eyes met theirs.

Finally, Cutler squeezed her breast, kissed it one more time then straightened. His hard cock twitched against her bare abdomen. The muscles in his face contorted and when he called out, his voice was guttural, half man and half animal.

“Let the run begin,” he bellowed, howled at the quarter moon then dropped down on his hands and knees.

Fina watched as fine, dark hairs slithered out of his skin, covering him completely. His legs shortened, his neck elongated. Dark, vicious claws replaced his trimmed fingernails. He trembled with pain for just an instant as his face grew long, his head flattened and pulled back. A wet, midnight black snout replaced his sculpted nose and he pressed the fleshy end of it into her mound, sniffed her then growled with

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pleasure. He butted her once and Fina sensed the impatience in him before he sniffed her again.

She and Nath dropped to their knees at the same time. By the time their hands reached the ground, their palms had shortened into tough, thick pads, fur had grown between their toes and the sensitive strands brushed over lush grasses, dark earth and small stones, distinguishing the different textures with ease. She shook and her skin trembled in response. It was thicker now. Tougher. Her reddish brown fur fluffed when a light breeze stirred it, communicating the direction of the wind, its speed and temperature. She ran her snout over the muzzle of the massive, brown wolf standing in front of her. The other brown wolf, almost as large and almost as heavily muscled, held its nose out patiently and nuzzled her when she finished greeting his brother.

For a moment, Fina's wolf let itself relax, taking in this feeling of belonging, being wanted, cherished. She was theirs. They were hers.

When the moment was over, she lifted her head and scanned the clearing. Three bitches in particular were watching her. One was small and sleek with a shimmering, silver coat. Six

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salivating males trailed after her. Fina's wolf sensed acceptance from her, perhaps even friendship. She watched Fina but her bright, blue eyes picked out the other two bitches, telescoping their positions and conveying the information to Fina.

The second bitch was large for a female with a fox-red coat and long legs. The third was black and she lifted her lips, exposed her sharp teeth in open challenge, yet it was the red bitch that closed in on Fina first.

When Fina stepped away from the brown males, they growled and moved their bodies to cut off her escape. Her snarl froze them in place and she walked into the middle of the clearing. It emptied quickly. She held her tail high, her shoulders low and turned toward the red bitch. The red bitch charged her, bared her teeth, snarled. Fina's back end jumped, spinning her fast and effortlessly. She dipped her head, got in a nip at the other wolf's belly as she hurtled past, then dropped her shoulders again as she waited for the next charge. The red bitch yelped but didn't falter. She came back at Fina, faster than before, leading with her shoulder rather

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than her head so her momentum wouldn't carry her off course this time. Fina dug her feet in and sprinted forward, catching the other wolf's shoulder with hers, knocking her to the ground. As soon as she fell Fina leapt on her, bit down on her neck then released her just as quickly. She trotted away with deliberate arrogance, circled back and stood ready for a third charge. Fina's wolf tasted the red bitch's fur, her skin, a drop of her blood. She bared her teeth, exposing the proof of her victorious strike and waited.

The red bitch got up quickly, faced Fina but didn't move. She seemed to be considering her next attack, reassessing the large, new, reddish brown bitch that had mated with their Alpha and his Beta. Her blue eyes glared at Fina and she breathed fast. Without warning and perhaps motivated by desperation rather than relying on skill or finesse, she hurled herself at Fina. Saliva trailed over her cheeks as her jaws snapped. Fina charged. Ducking her head, she lined her heavy skull up with her powerful spine and plowed into the red bitch's chest. She was taller than Fina, her center of gravity higher but she wasn't as strong...or as motivated. The red bitch yelped, flipped, fell hard on her shoulder and yelped

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again. Before the sound was fully formed, Fina was on her, spraying spittle over the fine, bright pelt and sinking her teeth into the other's neck.

Blood. Fina's wolf tasted blood. She snarled with savage triumph. There was not so much blood that the other bitch wouldn't recover and recover quickly but enough to tell Fina that any more pressure from her powerful jaws would drive her canines past the thin network of capillaries beneath her opponent's skin, into the arteries below. The bitch froze and so did Fina. A part of her understood that this one had value in their pack. She was young, strong...an unmated, breeding-age female. She might have wanted Fina's mates, might have wanted the status and position that Fina now held and even though she wasn't strong enough to claim them, she should not die for trying.

Trying was good. It ensured that only the strongest female ruled. That her worth and position were established in the eyes of the pack. It affirmed the hierarchy.

When the red bitch began to whine piteously, Fina released her, growled once then stood her ground when her opponent ducked her head

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submissively and ran off. Fina scanned the clearing with unnatural alertness.

The other wolves stared at her then looked away when her gaze passed over them—male and female alike. All except for the massive, brown males who stood shoulder to shoulder as they watched her. She barked at them, calling out playfully and they barked back.

Fina circled the open clearing, ringed by the other wolves in her pack. Yes. This was her pack. She ruled as top bitch. The two strongest males were her mates. Despite that she felt hesitancy inside her, like something wasn't quite right. Like her holding this position wasn't quite right. Her wolf dismissed the feeling. It was an instinctive creature. It understood strength, the bonds of the pack, affection—even love. It knew that to rule was its birthright.

The black bitch stepped forward and circled opposite Fina. Fina growled. This one was cunning. She was large and projected confidence and power. By her size alone she should have claimed first challenge. Instead, she let another step forward. Let another tire Fina, demonstrate her fighting abilities, reveal any weaknesses.

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Fina growled again and her wolf licked its teeth. No sly pretender would rule in her place. No calculating sneak would get her paws on Fina's mates. Fina didn't wait for the challenge this time. She raced for the large, black bitch and their bodies collided in the middle of the clearing. Teeth dug into shoulders, tore into the thick ruffs of fur protecting throats. They shook their heads violently, powerful paws smashed into snouts, claws raked chests.

Fina bit, held on and dug her back claws into the ground. She shoved forward, hard, letting strength and mass drive her body into the black bitch's. The momentum carried her up and over her opponent, carrying the bitch's body with her until the other was on her back. Fina planted her body over the black bitch's, sunk her teeth in and shook her head violently.

Her opponent struck out with a powerful paw, twice. She couldn't dislodge Fina. She froze, lay back in submission then started to whine.

This opponent had been too cunning to let off that easily. Fina let go of her throat and smashed her paw across the other's black snout, rocking her head to the side before she got off her, shook



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off the saliva peppering her coat and walked away with her tail held at an arrogant angle. Before she reached the ring of watchers, she turned back. Her shoulders held low in readiness, she paced around her prone opponent. The black bitch whined piteously and watched her every movement. Her sleek, powerful body twisted and she crouched with her belly on the ground. What she didn't do was cower in submission or run away.

Fina closed in on her, teeth bared, hackles raised. The black bitch finally called an end to the match by yelping, jumping to her feet and racing off into the night with her tail tucked between her legs. Fina watched her retreat with savage satisfaction.

In a parody of a victory lap, Fina slowly paced the clearing. She sensed the massive, brown males fall into step behind her, although they followed at least two body-lengths behind. Fina's wolf surveyed her pack. She let them nuzzle her, sniff her snout, the drying saliva on her coat, the adrenaline-hot afterscent of victory surrounding her. One male began pacing alongside her. He was young but large and perhaps his size gave

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him more verve than it should. As he skipped along with his tongue lolling, he sniffed her back end then lay a heavy paw on her shoulder to slow her and hold her in place.

Fina's wolf reacted to the male's ill-considered attempt at mounting her before her mates did. She spun, sank her teeth into his chest, released then sank them into his shoulder. Fina bit hard. Deep. She snarled—a low, savage rumbling that made the young male yelp and try to run away. When he did, he cried out in pain. His jerky movements ripped his skin and she made no move to loosen her grip. She snarled again and every wolf around them trembled. Finally, she released her would-be paramour.

He backed away quickly, favoring his shoulder but backed right into Fina's mates. They bit him too, although not as deeply or savagely as Fina had. They growled, snarled and shoved him until, dazed and terrified, the young male spun and headed for the relative safety of the tree line. He stood in the shadows, shaking and licking his wounds. When Fina glanced back at him, he ducked his head and looked away.

Fina finished her tour of the clearing. The

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remaining members of her pack came to her willingly, sought her scent then touched her and her mates with their snouts as they passed. The pack settled and a palpable shiver of relief ran through it. Their top bitch turned, walked up to her mates and stood between the two, massive males.

As the three of them sniffed each other and rubbed their chins over each other's backs, the focus of their pack returned to their own lovers. The small, silver bitch stepped up to Fina, greeted her with a playful yelp then trotted away. She seemed to make a point of not getting too close to Fina's mates and when she left, her six salivating suitors trailed after her.

Fina's wolf chose its own route out of the clearing. Slowly, she made her way through the mass of playful wolves. The scent of lust began to grow thick. Her mates followed close behind, so close their snouts bumped her back end. She felt their breath as they took in her scent. One bitch they passed turned and lifted her tail, presenting her backside to Fina's larger mate. He snorted and kept walking. Another bitch spronked playfully, touched her paw to Fina's other mate's

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snout then lifted her tail in invitation. When he blinked, Fina spun. She bit the other bitch's backside then cuffed the Beta violently. He yelped, rubbed his nose, looked at her in open confusion then stood beside her despite her growls and snarls. He rubbed his jowls over her forehead and licked her cheek.

Satisfied, Fina nuzzled him back then resumed walking. After that, no other bitches dared offer her mates a friendly, casual mount. When she reached the edge of the clearing, she glanced over her shoulder, satisfied she had her mates' full attention then raced off into the woods. Fina's wolf ran with every ounce of strength it possessed. It remembered these woods, this young, wild land. Exalting in its freedom and strength, her wolf ran until the running intoxicated it. She sensed her mates behind her, keeping pace. Now and then, one of them would move forward, crowd her, re-direct her path, then drop back. They let her run, followed their bitch's lead like males had since their species had been born.

After a time, Fina smelled the river. She knew this place. The younger male caught up to her,

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squeezed her to the left until the three of them were running parallel to the water. When the land dipped and the river widened into a slow-moving stream, Fina ran into it, sending up sheets of water in her wake before she stopped. She sensed the males watching her. Pacing back and forth in the water, Fina surveyed the area with every one of her senses. When she was sure they were alone, she drank then lowered her chest into the water to cool herself. The males approached then yelped and jumped back indignantly when she shook, spraying them. Her mouth opened in a parody of a smile and Fina ducked her body under the surface again, letting the gentle current rinse the spit and dirt out of her coat, soothe the scratches and glancing bites on her skin. Her mates approached eagerly, but warily.

With gentle nudges of their snouts and shoulders, they guided her out of the river and onto the sandy bank. Circling her slowly, they rubbed her fur with theirs, yipped playfully and nuzzled her face.

The very large male with the bright, pale eyes bumped her back end with his chest. He lowered

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his snout, sniffed her and touched his tongue to her genitals.

Fina yelped and jumped away. Facing him now, she bared her teeth. The male held his ground, waited then walked forward slowly. He nuzzled her again and again moved behind her. Tension hummed through the bitch's powerful body. Her other mate stood in front of her. He stroked her cheek, licked her ear, ran his jowls over hers. The larger male sniffed her backside and the younger one calmed her with a low, peaceful rumbling in his chest. This time, when the Alpha's tongue moved over her, Fina didn't jump away. She jerked in fear but held her ground.

Breathing in the scent of her mates, Fina's wolf weighed its options. It wasn't much of a debate mostly because her brain operated on a different plane than her human one. It responded to its senses and instinct, not rational, confusing thought. She was young and strong. Even when she wasn't in heat, her body enjoyed the uncomplicated pleasures of mating. It also remembered her last mating, if it could be called that. There had been pain. She had been unwilling. Fina's back end jerked away when her

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mate's tongue passed over her more firmly than before.

This male was large enough to perhaps overpower her on his own. With his brother's help, her struggles would be futile. Yet she sensed the patience in them. They were her mates. They would honor her refusal at any time. The male behind her growled with pleasure, licked the most sensitive parts of her backside, seemingly intent on coaxing her into accepting him. His brother nuzzled her face then ran his tongue over her neck, grooming her. She shivered delicately.

When the large male behind her lay his paw on her back, she didn't rebuke him. She held herself still, locked her strong legs as he transferred some of his weight onto her then waited. After a time, when she didn't shrug him off, he put a second paw on her back, rose up on his back legs and touched the knob of his distended penis to her tail.

Fina shook, looked back at him hesitantly then slowly, very slowly, let her tail move aside. He touched his teeth to her neck, held her in place and gently sank his penis into her.

When the bitch standing for him continued

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to shake, Cutler gentled his movements. It wasn't in his nature to claim a female slowly but he was driven to care for this one like he'd cared for no other before her. He was rewarded when her body opened to him, accepted the pleasure he offered. Even then he didn't thrust against her. He held himself still while his brother stepped closer, nuzzled her, grumbled soothingly then licked her face. She finally stopped shaking. Adjusting his paws on her back, trusting his considerable weight to her powerful frame, he sank the knob of his penis deep into her, felt his balls draw up tight and potent and started to move.

His mate growled but it was a sound of satisfaction, not anger. When his brother moved, rolled and presented his belly to her, she dipped her head and lapped at the tip of his penis. Cutler snarled with lust and thrust into her faster.

His paw slipped and he adjusted his hold on her frantically. Panting now, he released his hold on her neck. Primitive, glorious pleasure shimmered in his sex organs, slid deep into his belly. The bitch holding him howled then her body bore down on him hard. She gripped him tight, painfully tight and he had no choice but



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to drive his penis into her as deep as it would go and let the ecstasy take him.

Cutler knew nothing but joy as his seed filled the remarkable bitch standing in front of him.

When it passed, the base of his cock was swollen and the mouth of her sheath was locked behind it. Not so tight that, if he wanted to and with a great deal of discomfort, he couldn't jerk his cock out of her. Cutler didn't want to. He rested his chest on her back, panted and imagined how it would feel to mount her when she was in heat. When the mouth of her sheath would close so tight around him there was no way he could escape and neither could the seed he'd spill in her...holding it deep in her womb and fathering the cub he longed for. He sucked in his lolling tongue, combed his teeth through the dense fur protecting the back of her neck and stepped off her.

They stood awkwardly for a moment with Cutler's swollen penis still stuck inside her. He sighed with relief when the swelling started to subside.

His brother got up, walked around them and made a sound that was more laugh than bark.

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Cutler tried to cuff him but his brother jumped out of the way.

When his penis finally slid out of his mate, she growled, looked at him contentedly and held herself still while his brother sniffed at her backside and put a big paw on her hind quarter. Her tissues were swollen and glistened in the moonlight. Cutler yawned then shook it off. Always after mounting a female, he'd simply drop to the ground and sleep, even if only for a few minutes. Something about this bitch kept him awake and focused on her. He'd never had a mate before. Never felt this pull, the need to stay close to a bitch, to keep her close to him.

This need in him blended somehow with the eroticism of watching his brother rouse her. Nath licked her backside, nudged her, ran the cold, spongy tip of his nose over her heat. Then, as gently as Cutler had, his brother stood over her, gave her the chance to refuse him then entered her slowly. She leaned back into him, accepted him without hesitation and howled at the night sky.

The three of them mated over several hours. In between they played, drank from the river or

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curled around each other like pups. Finally, when the moon was setting, Fina's wolf lifted its head, howled one last time and began trotting back to the clearing.

By the time they reached it, they'd resumed their human form. Holding hands, Fina and her mates wove their way through the members of their pack that hadn't yet left. Cutler glanced over at his friends, Eddie and Jane Robertson. Eddie lay asleep, spooned behind his wife's body, gently holding her naked breast. She nodded a greeting to her Alpha, Beta and new Head Bitch as they walked past, then resumed absently stroking her abdomen. They walked past Officer Suzanne Young. Her long, blonde hair was disheveled and spread over the weres lying in front of and behind her. Another male was curled up near her legs. His pursed mouth touched her mound then he sighed and fell asleep. They passed other clutches of weres, other couples, picked up their clothing and made their way to Cutler's SUV.

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter Ten

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“Am I here because it’s the easy thing to do, not the right thing?” Fina’s fingers hesitated on the keyboard. She glanced up at the screen. Staff-Sergeant Owen Wells was looking at her. The furrow between his eyes was deeper than usual. “I’m wasting your time again.”

*“No waste, Fina. There’s not many people I get letters from. Is this still considered a letter?”*

She saw his blue eyes glance at the computer he was using. His powerful shoulders, outlined beneath a plain, tan t-shirt, lifted then fell. He grinned.

*“Anyway, the guys respect me more now because I know a real, live girl.”*

Fina laughed. The darkness crowding the home office seemed to shrink back a little. “Flirt,” she typed back.

*“Flirt? Coming from your gene pool, you’re one to talk. Even when he was a kid your brother chased tail whenever he could. One time he chased*

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*Paulette Howard up a tree while he was in wolf form. Kept head butting her until she rubbed his belly. We were only in junior high then."*

Fina laughed harder when she saw the static images of his face, contorted in merriment, change about once every two seconds.

"*Did Paulette...?*" Owen's head dipped and his hands rested unmoving on his keyboard.

"She and her mate died too." Fina's fingers moved sluggishly. "They had two cubs."

Owen's mouth curled into a snarl and his head jerked away from the camera.

"You would have liked her mate," Fina typed, trying to find something to temper Owen's anger. "Great sense of humor. Always putting blobs of shaving cream in people's mail slots at the nursery."

She watched Owen turn back to the screen, saw his eyes move, saw his jaw relax and the corner of his mouth turn up.

"Your mother loved giving him hell."

"*I bet she did,*" Owen replied after a time. His head bobbed up and down in a nod.

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“Fina?”

She turned in her chair as the office door opened. She'd been so engrossed in her on-line chat she hadn't heard Ryan get out of bed. He stood there, wearing his cowboy pajama bottoms and a blue t-shirt, rubbing a knuckle across his eyes.

“Hey, Ryan. There's somebody I'd like you to meet.” She held out her hands. Ryan came to her readily, crawled onto her lap and blinked at the screen.

*“Hey. You must be Ryan. I'm Owen.”*

Ryan looked up at Fina then his finger moved over the screen. He was able to read out over half the words. Fina filled in the rest.

*“I'm Samantha Wells' son but I moved away before you were born.”*

“Aunt Samantha?” Fina typed for Ryan.

“Yes.”

“Are you a soldier?”

*“Yes. I'm serving in a country called Iraq. Maybe Fina can show it to you on a map later.”*

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Owen and Ryan looked at each other for a long minute before Owen started typing again.

*“Your dad was really good at building things. I remember he built a lot of things at the nursery and built that little strip plaza with the real estate office your mom used to work in. She was very pretty.”*

Ryan glanced up at Fina excitedly then started talking. “My dad built houses. He had other guys working for him,” Fina typed obediently, “and they built a row of six of them near my school.”

Owen smiled broadly then turned his head when someone put their hand on his shoulder.

*“My time’s up, Ryan. I have to give one of the other guys a chance to talk to their family. Maybe we can talk again later this week. Send me a regular email or maybe a picture if you like. Bye.”*

Ryan waved at the screen until it went dark, then Fina’s email screen came up.

“Is Owen our family, Fina?” Ryan turned his face up to her when he asked.

“Yes. I suppose he is.” She hugged his small body tightly, kissed his head then carried him back to bed.

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Fina held Ryan's hand as they walked into the local primary school. The floors gleamed, the air was fresh but the place seemed hollow, almost sterile somehow. It was too quiet. As she walked toward the door marked *office* she forced a smile and pointed out the bright artwork on the walls. Last term's work, no doubt. Each painting or drawing bore a child's signature. She recognized most of the family names. "Here we go," she said brightly as she pushed the door open. "Hello?" There was no one sitting at the desk inside.

"Ms. Whitesage?" a woman called out from the inner office. "That was great timing. I just got here." The woman who stepped out was about 40, maybe a few inches taller than Fina with a generous smile and bright, brown eyes. Her short, brown hair swung against her neck as she held out her hand in greeting. "I'm Dodie Smith. The principal. And this must be Ryan Upton." She was wearing a pair of tailored slacks, a blouse and, incongruously, a pair of high-tech running shoes. "Forgive the ensemble, or lack thereof," she laughed when she saw Fina glance



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at her feet. "I'm going for a run after our meeting and I forgot to bring dress shoes."

"You run?" Fina asked conversationally.

"I'm training for a 15K in September." She grinned conspiratorially. "I know it's not fair... me competing against humans but I can't turn down a good race."

"Impressive," Fina nodded. "Wear uncomfortable shorts and it'll even everything out."

Principal Smith laughed. When she stopped, she smiled down at Ryan. "Ready to meet your teacher?"

Ryan glanced up at Fina then back at the principal. He nodded.

"Miss Lee is in her classroom," she explained as she led Fina and Ryan out of the office. "She'll have you write and draw a few things, do some addition and play with some blocks. I think you'll like her." Principal Smith turned her attention to Fina. "We keep the kindergarten and first-grade classrooms closest to the office. The washrooms in this wing are designed for our smallest students." She pointed as they

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passed one sparkling example. “Our curriculum is grounded in the basics but we also put an emphasis on creativity. Music and art stimulate the students in ways other subjects can’t. We find our students’ grades are consistently higher than the state average because of it. Here we are.”

She led them into a spacious classroom. The walls were covered in colorful cutouts of numbers, days of the week, pictures of different topographies, mammals and birds. Ryan walked into the room without hesitation, drawn by the visuals, a cluster of soft cushions on the floor, and a neat row of cubicles. He ran his finger over the names taped above each one until he found his then he turned back to Fina, beaming. He hung his lightweight jacket on his peg then headed for the tidy baskets of toys arranged beneath the large, bright windows.

“Miss Lee will test Ryan’s cognitive skills this morning,” Principal Smith said to Fina, drawing her attention back to her. “You explained you didn’t have his kindergarten transcripts or notebooks and didn’t want to send for them.”

“Yes,” Fina replied firmly. “The pack that took over our lands is still in the area and...not *you*!”

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Fina growled and bared her teeth when a tall, black-haired woman stood up from behind the desk at the far end of the room. The principal stepped back nervously. Even Ryan looked at her and blinked.

The black haired, blue-eyed bitch that had challenged Fina in the diner and again before the mating run two nights ago walked toward her slowly.

“No.” Fina’s mouth snapped shut. She turned on her heel, grabbed the principal’s elbow and dragged her out of the classroom and away from Ryan’s ears. “That bitch isn’t getting anywhere near Ryan,” she hissed once they were outside.

Principal Smith’s mouth dropped open. She closed it slowly. “Of—of course. If you wish,” she whispered then glanced up at Fina from beneath lowered lids. Even though she was a good three inches taller than Fina, Fina seemed to tower over her. “But Melinda is one of our best teachers. I know she...” She took a deep breath. “...she challenged you.”

Fina snarled and the principal paled.

“Of course,” Principal Smith repeated.

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“Melinda is our only first-grade teacher but there’s a few weeks before the start of the school year. We should be able to get a replacement as long as you don’t mind a non-were teaching your surrogate son. Otherwise, we can have one of the other teachers switch—“

“Please.” Melinda Lee stepped up to them. Despite her height, which was impressive, she dipped her head in submission to Fina. She was wearing a pair of summery pants and a modest, brightly patterned, short-sleeved shirt. She exhaled nervously. “Okay. I was angry when you showed up. More than angry,” she admitted and shoved her black hair behind her ear. “But the simple fact is that my pack has a new head bitch. I may have perceived you as an interloper but you’ve demonstrated you’re tough enough to handle the job. He’s bonded with you. They both have. I can’t compete with that.” Melinda held her hands out in a helpless gesture. “I had three options. The first one was to challenge you...been there, done that, lost,” she admitted without rancor. “Two, leave this pack for another—not with the great pension plan I’ve got here,” she added dryly. “Or, three, start making friends in other packs, try to find my own mate and haul

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his shaggy ass back here.” She lowered her voice, glanced into the classroom to make sure Ryan wasn’t listening and whispered when she said the word ass.

Both Melinda and the principal looked at Fina warily.

“If...*if* I decide I can’t trust her around Ryan, you’ll fire her?” Fina asked darkly, directing her question to Principal Smith.

“Yes.”

She turned to Melinda and scowled. “Make me believe I should trust you.”

Melinda exhaled slowly. “I’m good at my job.” She held out her hand and led them back into the classroom. “I’ve set up a few key tests that will measure Ryan’s language and math skills.” Stepping up to a cluster of child-sized tables, she handed Fina the papers sitting on one. “Like all students he will have forgotten some of what he learned last term but he should still function at a certain level. I’ll test his comprehension and problem-solving skills as well. That’ll give me an idea of his general cognitive abilities.” She lifted her chin. “Children respond to me, Ms.

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Whitesage. They like me and I like them. I'm firm but fair. I provide structure, individual attention, encouragement and discipline when necessary. I've also got a kick-ass," again she lowered her voice, "file full of group games that teach cooperation, and are physically and mentally challenging."

Hands on hips, Fina looked into Melinda's wary, blue eyes and considered what she'd said.

"The two weeks Ryan and I were on the road, after our pack was killed," she whispered, directing her question to Melinda, "Ryan's ability to form complete sentences diminished. We've been working hard at it at home and his speech and reading are back to where they were."

Melinda glanced at the principal then turned back to Fina and nodded. "Homeless children start to lose their communication skills," Melinda said quietly. "He'd have started to shut down, even without the trauma." Something in her expression softened. "I also know you got him out of Tennessee alive. You've protected him, cared for him like he was your own cub." She glanced over at Ryan. "That child is also my Alpha's surrogate son. That means I'll defend

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him with everything inside me...maybe even more than you would because he *isn't* mine." She grinned crookedly. "I always take better care of other people's things than I do my own."

Fina looked at the principal, who was nodding hopefully, then back at Melinda. "All right. You can be his teacher. I will however be monitoring your treatment of him. If I catch so much as a whiff of animosity or hostility, I'll drive you out faster than a pneumatic nailer."

Melinda blinked then dipped her head in a submissive pose. "Thank you. I'll get started on his testing now. It shouldn't take longer than twenty minutes."

"I'll wait outside," Fina replied. "*Within hearing distance*," she added mentally and stepped out of the classroom.

"Melinda designed the tests to run twenty minutes," Principal Smith explained as they left. She was talking faster and her voice was pitched a little higher than before. "Students his age should be able to focus that long. It's another test she's built into the others..." The principal rambled on, selling their first-grade teacher to their new head bitch and explaining the different programs the

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school offered while Fina kept one ear tuned to what was going on behind the door.

When it opened again, exactly twenty minutes later, Ryan beamed up at her and handed her a drawing. She hugged him and smiled when he excitedly pointed out the horse, Cutler, Nath, her and him. Fina rolled it up carefully and said she'd tape it on the refrigerator, unless of course Cutler wanted to take it to work and put it on the board in his office.

Ryan promised to draw another one—one for her *and* Nath if Cutler wanted this one. He ran back inside to get his coat.

"I'm probably not the first one to tell you you're a greedy bitch," Melinda harped good-naturedly, albeit warily when she joined the other two women. "You just had to claim *both* brothers, didn't you?"

Even principal Smith grinned.

"Now, unless you have any more questions, I'll finish grading Ryan's tests." Melinda stood up straight. "But from what I saw, everything looks good. He shouldn't have to repeat kindergarten or any part of it. In fact his reading is better than



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what I would have expected. You're probably responsible for that."

Fina nodded, accepting the rather shameless compliment in the spirit in which she hoped it was intended.

"And when I'm finished *that*," Melinda continued, "I'm outta here. There's a pack two counties over having a dance tonight and I've got my high heels shined and ready to go."

Fina grunted non-committally. "Well bring back a plumber if you can. And make it a good one. Cutler says he's tired of calling in some human whenever the sinks get stopped up in the town hall."

"I'll check their resumes at the door," Melinda promised with a grin, nodded and walked back into her classroom.



"So Ryan's fully integrated into the pack now." Fina sat in front of her laptop, re-reading the last emails she and Owen had exchanged, waiting for him to come on-line. Cutler and Nathaniel

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were in the backyard with Ryan, catching worms by moonlight. They were going fishing in the morning. "He starts school after Labor Day. He drew a picture of the barn for you. Send me your snail-mail address and I'll send it to you. He's a lot livelier (read loud and boisterous) now that he's got a pack and a place in it. (grin)"

*"What about you?"*

"I feel like a cheat. What if they like me only because I'm strong, the daughter of Alphas and I'll bear them worthy cubs? Is it the money? My business acumen?"

Fina shook her head as she re-read her words. Why could she be so honest with Owen and not with her mates?

*"Sorry it took me so long to get back. I had to ask somebody what acumen meant. Look you don't make these guys sound like idiots. Not to be insensitive but I'm hearing a lot of grief talking. I feel the same way. Big boys aren't supposed to get all emotional and cry about the dead mother they haven't actually seen in two years. (Mom flew to Germany when I had leave. I guess she never told anybody back home.)"*

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“I didn’t know.”

*“We’re hurting, Fina. All three of us. You’re young and you have choices. This pack has taken you in and accepted you as one of them but that doesn’t relieve me of my responsibilities to you and Ryan. I can’t believe I’m saying this after I screwed my position in our old pack so I’d be able to get out but I’m the lone male adult in our pack now. Where you are, you’re safe and provided for. But if it doesn’t work out or you change your mind, you’ve got something to fall back on. Me.”*

Her laptop chirped and she clicked on the instant-message icon. The image of Owen’s face filled one-third of the screen.

*“Hey, cowgirl. Aren’t you sick of seeing my tired old mug?”*

Fina grinned. “Yes. But I’m polite.”

*“Nice. Is Ryan still up? Thought he could show me that picture before you mail it.”*

Fina turned away from the screen, bellowed, then smiled back at Owen.

“So have you decided what you’ll do?”

*“Other than fantasizing about kicking back on*

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*a tropical beach next time I'm on leave and count in my head those millions of dollars we have?"*

"Seriously."

*"Seriously. If it's okay, I'm going to stay where I am. You know if you need me, I'll hop on a plane as soon as I can. The work here keeps my mind off what happened. Besides, if you don't need me, there's nothing for me to come back to."*

"Hey, honey." Cutler walked into the office, carrying Ryan on his shoulders. He ducked so Ryan's head could clear the doorway. "You screeched?"

"I did. I'm talking to Owen and he asked if Ryan would show him his drawing before I mailed it to him."

"Yeah. Sure." Ryan scrambled down off Cutler's back and raced down the hall to his room.

"While I'm here, can I talk to him?" Cutler asked.

Fina's eyes widened then she nodded and stood up. Cutler sat down in the chair she'd vacated.

"Hmm. Warm," he teased and leaned toward the laptop, scanning Owen's face. He started

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pecking at the keyboard with two fingers. "Owen, my name is Sheriff Cutler Powell. Fina may have mentioned me." He glanced up and winked at her. "I'm the pack Alpha. I can't invite you to join without meeting you first. You know how it is with established packs and outside, adult males. But you're always welcome to visit. When you're ready, come out and stay for awhile. Fina tells us how much she likes talking to you about old times."

The two men looked over each other's images.

*"Thanks, Sheriff. I appreciate the offer. Maybe I will sometime."*

Cutler nodded, said "good," out loud then sat back in the chair and hauled Ryan onto his lap when the six-year old raced back into the room. Ryan held a drawing up to the pin-hole camera.

*"Back it up, cowboy," Owen typed. "It's too close." There was a pause. "That's a great drawing, Ryan. You're really good. I can't wait to show my picture off to the other fellows. Can I hang it up in my quarters?"*

Owen spent the next fifteen minutes

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explaining what quarters meant, what he did on night patrol and asking about Ryan's day.

Cutler stood up, kissed Fina and let her take his place so she could type out Ryan's responses for him. Nath came in, winked at her and thumbed through his paperwork for the next day's trek.

"Fina I wanna go *home*." Ryan's strident tone echoed through the room. He started to cry.

Owen's face was frozen in surprise, then the furrow in his forehead deepened.

*"Stop it NOW. Just because you're my cousin does NOT mean you can throw a temper tantrum. Do you understand me, Ryan?"*

Fina read back Owen's response. Ryan stopped crying but his lower lip shook. He nodded at the screen.

*"Better. I'll talk to you tomorrow. I can't wait to get my picture. Give Fina a big hug and kiss goodnight for me. Bye."*

His image faded off the screen. Both Cutler and Nath glanced down at Ryan worriedly.

"Okay. Bedtime, big guy," Nath said with

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forced enthusiasm. He ruffled Ryan's hair. "We're getting up early to go fishing, remember?"

Ryan stuck his thumb in his mouth as he followed Nath out of the room.

While the brothers helped Ryan get ready for bed and listened to him read, Fina stayed in the office, writing another email to Owen. He'd read it later that day when he could book more computer time.

"I wish I knew more about this parenting stuff. Today Ryan and I were in the grocery store and he was telling the clerk that his mother always buys apples *and* bananas. Present tense. He knows they're dead but sometimes I think he imagines they aren't. I'm going to ask the local doctor for a referral to a counselor. This is way beyond my skill set and I don't want to screw him up." She hit "send" and started a virus scan before calling it a night. To her surprise, the laptop chirped at her. It was Owen.

*"You won't. You take too good care of him to let that happen."*

"Thought you'd logged off."

*"Have a couple of minutes left before the*

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*friendlies start throwing live ordnance at me. I didn't want to reward Ryan's bad behavior by staying on-line with him."*

"Clever. Looks like *you're* the one developing some parenting skills."

*"Bite your tongue, woman. I'm a religious believer in bachelorhood and keeping the old trouser snake firmly wrapped in latex whenever there are ladies around."*

"TMI."

*"Yeah, yeah. Anyway I really do have to go in a minute. Let me know what the counselor says but I'm sure Ryan'll be fine. He's just hurting and acting out. Sorry you have to take it. Remember, if it'll help, I'd be willing to leave the service when my tour is up in a few months. The three of us can start up again in a new community back east. We'll be smart, we'll be safe and we'll grow a large pack around us. The two of you won't be anybody's charity. You're my responsibility. I'm not saying these guys poached you. They took you in and I'll always be grateful for that. I just want to be sure you've taken an opportunity to step back and assess what it is you want."* Owen's head came up and he looked around. *"Getting off my soapbox now."*



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*Gotta go. Send that picture express. We can afford it."*

The corners of Fina's mouth turned down as she touched the blank screen. A part of her was lured by his offer and the picture he painted. It was also the part of her that grieved, that was still in shock and denial. She sat back in the chair and looked at the dark window, surprised that she recognized those feelings in herself. A few weeks ago, the subtleties of what motivated her had been beyond her comprehension.

In so many ways she still felt like a victim. She didn't want to love again. She also wanted her old life back, wanted the things that had been taken from her. Talking with Owen made *that* seem real at least.

She closed the laptop. Now she was thinking like Ryan. Maybe all three of them were. She couldn't blame Owen. His grief was fresher than hers or Ryan's. He was a good man. A responsible soldier. A were. He'd commit to doing the right thing...he'd commit to doing the wrong thing if she said that's what she wanted. Fina felt the truth of that in her heart.

What she couldn't understand was the feeling

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of suffocation that had begun to settle on her. She rubbed her chest. Cutler and Nath had planned her life out for her. She didn't know if she didn't want it or if she was simply running away from yet another thing that could be taken from her.



"Are all the payments in?" Cutler nodded his thanks as Dorothea Pike handed him a cup of coffee. They were sitting around her kitchen table.

"The last ones came in this week." She served him, Nath, Fina and her husband Gil slices of blueberry coffee cake.

"Payments?" Fina asked.

Gil nodded. "All weres in the pack with a regular paycheck contribute five percent of their net to a business-development fund. Pack members are invited to submit start-up proposals and budgets for seed money. Or grants if existing businesses have a capital shortfall."

"What support do you give them?" Fina's head tipped to one side.

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“Support?” the older man asked.

Fina frowned. “Yes. Within the first two years, start-ups without mentoring in place have about a sixty-four percent failure rate. That percentage is higher if the business is in the food-service industry.”

Cutler jumped in. “The pack’s large, Fina, but we don’t have experts in every area of business. Look at Nath,” he explained, giving his brother a nod. “Before he started his outfitting business, there was nobody but old-time trackers leading a few guys from the city into the woods during hunting season.”

Fina tried to sound encouraging, not condescending. “Am I correct in assuming that, say, if someone wanted to start up a glass-blowing business, they’d know how to blow glass?”

“Um. Sure.” Cutler shrugged. “We ask about that on the form. What actual experience they have.”

“Good. That’s a good start,” Fina nodded enthusiastically. “Do you offer accounting information or seminars? Tax tips? Staffing referrals or even employee-sharing schemes? Ideas

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for keeping pace with market trends, the forces of supply and demand on the marketplace?”

“You’re still speaking English, right?” Nath asked. His brows drew together.

She grinned. “I’m talking business, Nathaniel. So what do you do with these payments once you receive them?”

“Well,” Gil answered. Before he’d retired, he’d been an accountant. Now he was the pack’s bookkeeper. “We deposit the money in a business account at the bank. Once we know exactly how much we’ve got to give out that year, we ask for proposals, then distribute the money after about three months.”

“Three months? All that cash, sitting in a bank account that’s not going to pay you any interest *and* charge you monthly fees?” She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Has anyone ever suggested putting the money into short-term investments, holding back a percentage of the capital and all of the interest after dispersal, rolling that over into set-term investments and GICs, then maybe after five or six years, letting the fund become self-sustaining so that annual grants can be paid out of interest, leaving the principal intact so you

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wouldn't need to ask your pack for money every year?" She stopped suddenly and inhaled.

Cutler blinked then grinned at her. "Looks like we've found ourselves a business manager after all. Guess you *are* more than just a pretty face." He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and rested his forehead on hers.

"Hey, Mr. Pike. That pony sure has grown." Ryan came racing into the house. Fina shot him a look, pointed at the boots still on his feet, and Ryan walked backward to the door where he toed them off. "Is he big enough to carry me?"

"I think he just might be. In fact, I was going to ask your folks about it. I'm going out on horseback first thing tomorrow morning to check the fence lines. Mrs. Pike is going to pack me one of her special breakfasts-in-a-basket. Was wondering if they'd consider letting you tag along."

"Yesss." Ryan pumped his fist in the air, ran up to the table and positioned himself between Cutler and Fina. Nath was generally a soft touch and didn't require wheedling. "Please. *Please*." He bounced up on his toes. "I could sleep here

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tonight and you wouldn't have to pick me up until later."

"Quite the social planner, hmm?" Fina murmured and she regarded Ryan with a thin smile.

"You haven't been invited, Ryan," Cutler reminded him firmly.

Ryan's face fell.

"Well, understanding that he *should* have waited to be asked first, and understanding that he'll make *sure* he waits for an invite next time..." Dorothea interjected. "Ryan, if it's okay with them, you're more than welcome to stay over and have supper with us tonight. Do you have long pants for tomorrow?" She cast a critical eye over his shorts.

"In my backpack. Fina always carries around extra clothes for me." He nodded enthusiastically. He looked up at Fina and Cutler hopefully then whooped when they said yes.



"That smells *good*." The last word rolled off

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Fina's tongue sensuously. She ducked in beneath Nath's arm, gave him a quick squeeze and inhaled the steam coming off the pots on the stove.

"Have you finished registering for college in the fall?" Nath asked in his serious voice.

Fina snapped off a sharp salute. "Done."

Cutler grinned as he walked into the kitchen, tucking his t-shirt into his jeans and heading for the sink to wash up for supper.

"Pre-registered for on-line courses? Paid the deposit?"

"Check and check." She watched with rapt enthralment as he transferred a very thick, very large, very rare flank steak from a sizzling pan to a cutting board.

"Dorothea would have fed you more cake this afternoon if you'd asked," Nath grouched as she leaned into his space, stared at the meat and licked her lips. "Did you forget to eat today?"

Fina shrugged then answered, "Grilled cheese sandwich. Heavy on the grilled." Nath had prepared a basket of crusty-bread slices. She grabbed a piece and ran it through the

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juices running over the board. “Ryan didn’t complain.”

“Ryan’s used to charcoal. Hey—using a sharp knife here,” Nath scolded. He waited until she stepped back then started cutting the steak into very thin slices. “Go help Cutler set the table before I spill something on you.”

Fina huffed then bit into the bread. She headed for the silverware drawer. “Would you get the serving bowls down for me, Cutler?”

“Is that all I am to you?” He sighed dramatically and gave her a gentle hip check, took the bread out of her hand and ate it in one bite. “Your domestic drudge? Tall, dark and, er, tall?” He reached up into a top cupboard.

“Of course not,” Fina teased. She ran her hands over his back, following the curve of his shoulder blades, the indent of his waist. “You’re also some mighty fine prime meat, Sheriff.” Grinning, she gave his bum a squeeze. “You too,” she added, reaching out so she could give Nath’s backside a pat.

“Oh so now you’re objectifying us, hmm?”



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Cutler tutted. "There are laws in this state about that sort of thing, missy."

"Laws that say I can?" Fina asked hopefully. She batted her eyes at him.

"Keep that up and you can get your own bowls down," Cutler growled, despite his grin. "How about I make a bowl out of you?" He dug his fingers into her waist until she bent over and squealed with laughter.

"Hmm. Not a bad idea," Nath said quietly. He set down the knife and turned to them. "I think a little...penitence is in order, Sheriff. What do you think?"

"Oh I'm always up for a game of crime and punishment."

"What are you two up to?" Fina demanded suspiciously. She watched Nath's eyes flash then darken as he licked the juice off his fingers.

Cutler leaned back on the counter. "Strip."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me," he barked and crossed his arms over his chest. "Strip. Everything off."

Gaping, she looked back and forth between

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the two brothers then, with a gleam in her eye, Fina began unbuttoning her sleeveless shirt. Nath turned back to the stove to stir something but kept his eye on her as she removed her clothing. Cutler did too.

“You responsible for this?” Cutler asked Nath in a low, demanding tone when Fina was naked and standing in the middle of a pile of discarded clothing. He arched a brow in Nath’s direction then ran his fingers over Fina’s shaved pussy.

She bit her lower lip and sighed.

“Yep. Did it this morning after you left for work.” His head dipped to one side as he watched his brother’s big hand slide over Fina’s softness. “You were unavailable for consultation.”

Growling quietly, Cutler shot his brother a look then shrugged. “I like it. Good call.” He straightened then smacked Fina’s backside authoritatively. “Get on the table. Now.”

Blinking and moving hesitantly, Fina climbed onto the heavy table and sat up primly. The table’s thick, turned oak legs with the broad curved feet didn’t shift a bit under her weight.

“In the middle. On your back. Nice. Very

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nice,” Cutler murmured encouragingly. He pulled her hair back and up, fanning it across the wood surface.

The table felt hard and cold. She shivered and her nipples got hard.

“Let’s start with the carrots.” Nath picked up a drained pot and carried it over to the table. He selected a lightly buttered carrot slice from inside, blew on it then put it on Fina’s stomach, above her navel. “Not too hot?”

“N-no,” she answered hesitantly. When he placed another carrot slice beside the first, Fina lifted her head to see what he was doing.

“Nuh-huh.” Cutler pressed a finger to her forehead, easing her head back down. He fanned out the hair she’d disturbed. “Nath was always pretty good at art in school. Let’s just see what he can do with you as a canvas.” His cock twitched as he took in Fina’s small body, smooth and pale on the kitchen table with her hair lying in waves above her head. Nath arranged slices of cooked carrot in a circle around her navel, overlapping the pieces then adding more at intervals until there was an orange flower displayed in the middle of her body.

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“Hand me the green beans.”

“Huh? Oh. Sure.” Rousing himself, Cutler walked to the stove. He came back with another pot and watched in enthrallment as Nath selected length after length and lay them across Fina’s ribs like they were stalks of grass. The beans had been cooked with diced tomatoes and Nath fished those out and arranged them across the bottoms of the beans like some sort of red, alien earth. He licked his fingers and grinned.

Fina swallowed anxiously.

“Potatoes next, I think.” This time Nath went to the stove himself. He stuck his nose over the pot, inhaled deeply and smiled. “Mashed with garlic. Your favorite,” he said to Fina. Leaning down, he kissed her mouth. Pressing his free hand to her shoulder, keeping her immobile, Nath moved his lips over hers. He nipped gently, licked the inner rim then sank his tongue in slow.

Fina’s chest rose as she gasped and she felt a hand, Cutler’s, graze her breast.

“Hmm,” Nath murmured as he straightened. “Tasty. Grab a spoon, Sheriff. You take one,

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I'll take the other. It's time we reigned in this miscreant." Nath pulled the stir-stick out of the pot, held a bit of potato to his lower lip, gauged the temperature then blew on the fluffy, white mash.

Holding her breath and staring raptly, Fina watched him smooth a trail of potato around her breast. It felt very warm and creamy. The smell made her mouth water. She was blown away by how erotic it looked. Nath dipped the spoon into the pot, reloaded it, blew on it and continued. She started when Cutler bent to her, pressed a long, chaste kiss to her other breast then dipped a serving spoon into the pot. His head dipped to one side, his brow furrowed in concentration he began to draw a design on her breast.

Fina's breath hitched but she held herself still. The spoons moving over her, the look in her men's eyes, the warm weight as the mashed potato built up on her all felt incredibly erotic. She trembled, just a little then held herself still when she felt her pussy get wet.

"A tulip?" Nath asked, glancing at his brother's handiwork.

"Uh huh."

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“Nice.” Nath nodded appreciatively then used the back of his spoon to raise the thick layer of potato covering Fina’s left breast into soft, regular peaks. He handed the pot to Cutler who scraped it empty then dabbed the last bit over Fina’s nipple. “Looks good enough to eat.”

“Not yet,” Nath cautioned as he carried the pot back to the counter. He picked up the serving plate holding the long, thin slices of steak. “Don’t forget the entrée.” He wriggled his brows suggestively, nudged Fina’s knees apart and set the plate on the table between them. “Pussy à la beef.” He picked up a slice, trailed it over her freshly shorn mound then draped it over the crease where abdomen met thigh.

Cutler grabbed two slices and followed Nath’s example. His mouth fell open as he looked at her.

Warm juices from the steak trailed over Fina’s hip and between her legs. She shivered and moved her hands to grip the edges of the table so she wouldn’t move. They trailed the hot meat over her, between her legs, across her thighs. It felt silky except when a crushed peppercorn or some other spice clinging to the steak grazed

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her. The contrast made her pussy clench. Cream seeped out of her, blended with the steak juice, and pooled beneath her. The meat was heavier than the vegetables and as it built up, as Nath and Cutler sculpted the pieces into swirls and curves, Fina groaned.

When they were finally finished, they stood, removed the plate, licked their fingers then circled the table slowly. They moved like predators. Stared at her with unchecked lust.

“Dig in,” Nath finally said, glancing at his brother.

“You first. To the chef go the honors. Besides, it was your idea.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Nath murmured seductively. He leaned over her, tucked his hair behind his ears and deftly picked up a carrot slice with his teeth.

“How is it?” Cutler asked. His voice was low and rough and he swallowed audibly.

“Very good.” As he chewed, his eyes met Fina’s and she gasped at the naked heat in them. “Dig in,” he said to his brother without taking his eyes off Fina’s.

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Trembling, her gaze moved back and forth between her lovers as they plucked the carrot slices, one by one, off her abdomen using only their teeth. She groaned when Cutler's tongue trailed over her waist, following a trail of butter and lapping it up. They grinned hotly and she groaned again. As the arrangement of carrots thinned, lips, tongues and teeth grazed her skin. When a tongue burrowed into her navel, seeking the remnants of the sweet, buttery liquid, her belly clenched and a fresh flood of juices seeped out of her.

"Smell that?" Cutler grinned savagely.

Nath nodded. "Smells like hot, horny bitch. Damn but I love it when she smells like that."

Chuckling, Cutler nodded, shifted and kissed Fina's mouth. She opened to him, loosened her death grip on the edge of the table, wove her fingers through his short, soft hair. He tasted warm, buttery, sweet like carrots and she ran her tongue over the front of his teeth. Nath's lips moved over her ribs and pulled a long bean into his mouth.

"Oh gawd I'm practically ready to come right now," Fina breathed against Cutler's lips.



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He smiled, kissed her once more then straightened. "Not yet, honey. But soon," he kissed her throat. "Often." He kissed her shoulder and passed his nose over her skin. "Hard," he added, took hold of her hand and licked the inside of her wrist before releasing her and closing his teeth over one of the beans lined up on her ribcage.

Shivering delicately, she felt their mouths move over her. Licking and nipping, they slowly ate the crisp vegetables and scooped their tongues through the trail of diced tomato. When her ribs were clean, they straightened, licked their lips, exchanged a look then stared at her breasts. Fina's back arched enticingly.

*"Please,"* she breathed and squirmed.

The corner of Cutler's mouth curved into a slow, sensuous smile. His aqua eyes darkened as the centers expanded. Nath growled, low and predatory as he looked at her then, laying a warm, rough hand on her belly, he bent to her and trailed the tip of his tongue through the potato at the very edge of her breast. Cutler watched, groaned and adjusted his hard cock.

Fina's eyes drifted shut as she sighed. She

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wound her fingers around Nath's shoulder as his tongue moved over her skin. It felt warm and wet as he scooped little mounds of potato into his mouth, rolled them around his tongue then swallowed the fragrant, garlicky mass. Her eyes snapped open when she felt Cutler's torso brush her arm. She pulled his head to her breast and he lapped delicately at the thick layer of potato directly over her nipple. Even though she couldn't feel a thing, it looked erotic as hell and she squirmed. Even Nath growled his approval before returning his focus to her other breast.

Slowly, seductively, they ate away at the soft, white mounds adorning her breasts, eventually revealing patches of pink skin. Staring at the tops of their heads and panting, Fina held them to her with growing impatience.

Nath flinched. "Easy, sweet bitch," he breathed and took hold of her hand, easing her sharp little nails away from his scalp. "Don't rush us. We're eating." He and Cutler chuckled then resumed swirling their tongues through the dwindling patches of potato.

She jerked when Cutler's tongue touched her nipple.

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"Hmm. Buried treasure," he teased and repeated the caress.

Soon they were licking her breasts in long, rough strokes, gleaning the last of the taste and cleaning up all traces of potato. Nath held her breast gently, like it was precious, kissed her nipple and suckled on it with long, tender pulls of his mouth. Cutler swirled his tongue around the other peak, flicked it playfully, nipped until she gasped. Nath was still making love to her breast when Cutler slid his tongue down her torso, snagged a piece of steak off her pussy and chewed noisily. He sounded primitive, savage as he teeth tore into the meat. Growling, he placed his hand on the breast he'd abandoned, swallowed and snagged another piece of steak.

Nath joined him. Snarling like puppies over a bowl of food, they bit down on the trailing edges of the meat, dragged them over her skin, chewed quickly, swallowed then returned for more. Tongues snaked through trails of near-raw drippings, down her hips, between her thighs. When her knees were levered apart crudely, Fina groaned and lifted her hips. A mouth kissed her mound. Lips moved over her pussy lips. Cool,

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room air touched her as pieces of meat were dragged off her. The sounds of chewing, tearing and rough, guttural snarls filled the air. When the last strip of beef was gobbled away, a hand grabbed her thigh, pulled it up then a tongue sank into her pussy.

Fina looked down and moaned. Cutler's head was buried between her legs. It jerked back and forth as his tongue lashed her. At her other side, Nath watched raptly. His mouth hung open and he was tearing off his clothes. When Nath was naked, Cutler stepped away to yank his t-shirt over his head. Nath leaned over her, levered her thighs high and wide and pressed a wet, loud kiss to the mouth of Fina's sheath. He wriggled his tongue into her, drew out her taste and Fina gasped before grabbing his head and pulling him into her as hard as she could.

Chuckling darkly, Cutler stepped up to her, cupped the back of her neck in his hand and rubbed the tip of his cock over her lower lip. He groaned when her tongue lapped over him then drew him in. The muscles in his arms bunched dramatically then he lifted his body onto the table, turned so he was facing her feet, positioned

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his rod over her mouth and held his weight up so he could stare close-up at his brother feasted on her wetness. Cutler licked the crease near the curve of her hip, lapping up a pool of steak drippings.

Fina wrapped her fingers around his ass and sucked on the head of his cock, swirling her tongue round and round. She felt dizzy, more aroused than she'd ever been. She felt consumed, worshipped and when her pussy clenched, squeezing Nath's tongue and trying to draw it deeper, he growled his approval.

After giving her clit a final, authoritative flick, Nath backed away, retrieved the basket of bread from the counter and returned to stand beside her. Cutler hadn't wasted any time in his absence and his big brother's head was planted firmly between Fina's thighs. His mouth moved over her mound as he sucked her skin gently and repeatedly.

Grinning, Nath grabbed a piece of bread, swirled it over Fina's hip, gathered up residual juice from the steak, then tore into the bread with his teeth. He swallowed noisily, drawing his brother's attention.

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Fina cried out in frustration when Cutler's mouth left her. She drew her teeth over his cock to voice her disapproval. He snarled, slapped her hip, pulled his member out of her mouth and got off the table. Levering herself up on her elbows, she stared open mouthed as the brothers bent to her, licked her thighs, her mound, lifted her leg, used pieces of bread to sop up the juices puddling beneath her then ate them with open relish. She'd never seen anything so animalistic in her life and her wolf howled in sexual anguish. With eyes flashing, the brothers looked down at her then continued feasting.

When she was finally clean, dewed only with saliva, long fingers dipped into her pussy, probed sensuously, drew out her cream. Her lovers swallowed it like it was the most decadent of desserts.

Cutler stepped away for a moment and when he returned, there was an open bottle of vegetable oil in his hand. He drizzled some over two fingers then pressed them to her ass. Gasping, Fina arched her back, lifted her knees and trembled as he worked his way into her. Nath bent to her

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and licked a lazy figure eight around her clit. She cried out at the exquisiteness of it all.

Pumping her ass slowly and gently, Cutler worked the oil into her tight ring. It loosened slowly and when it did, he turned his hand over so his fingers could massage her. When she gasped and started moving into his touch, he gently added a third finger and slowly turned his wrist, over and over, then pumped carefully.

Kissing her mound once more, Nath leaned back to watch. His hand drifted to his cock and he gave it a few, hard pulls before resting then squeezing and pulling again. He moved around the table, stood beside her shoulders and lifted her torso off the surface. "On your knees, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear and brushed his lips over her temple. "I think our Alpha wants your ass. Is that all right with you?"

There was hesitancy in his blue eyes. Fina touched the side of his face and kissed him. "Yes. I think so," she replied and he helped her turn over. Cutler hadn't asked. Cutler wouldn't ask. He touched her gently, handled her carefully but took what he wanted. He took with love of course and Fina knew in her heart that if she

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balked, he would stop. But his fingers felt so good, she didn't want him to stop.

She shivered when fresh oil was drizzled over her anus. She shivered again when Nath eased her shoulders down and her breasts touched the hard, polished wood. He stroked her back, kissed her neck, drew her hair to one side then stepped back when Cutler climbed onto the table behind her. It groaned but held. The rough hairs on his thighs and calves brushed the insides of her legs as he nudged them apart. He held her hips, tipped them up to him, let her find a comfortable position for her knees then rubbed the head of his cock against her backside.

He felt warm and slick. Cutler must have coated his rod as well as her back opening with oil. The hand he slid around her and anchored against her belly, holding her in place left a silky trail on her skin. The way he rubbed her anus made her hotter than hell. She arched into him and growled.

"Easy, little bitch," Cutler murmured. He leaned forward and drew his teeth over the mating scar on her right shoulder. "We'll do this slow and gentle. Nobody's ever taken you like



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this so we have to take our time.” He kissed her scar then straightened.

How did he know? Fina shook her head and stopped thinking about it. Cutler knew her, owned her, worshipped her. He and Nath. She squeezed the Beta’s hand and kissed it when he wove his fingers into hers.

“Okay, honey. Breathe in. Hold it,” Cutler coached tenderly. “Exhale slow.”

Fina obeyed then shuddered when the thick head of his cock breached her.

“Good. So good,” Cutler groaned. The hand on her belly tightened then relaxed just as quickly. “Breathe again.”

When she exhaled, Cutler pushed slowly, sank maybe an inch of his shaft into her, paused, trembled then withdrew until only the head remained inside her—hot, hard and making her anus tingle as it stretched around him.

For a moment, he held himself still, resting just inside her. She swore she could feel the beating of his heart in the tiny twitches of his cock. His hand shifted, a finger covered her clit and rubbed gently. Cutler pushed again. Slowly,

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inch by straining inch, he sank his cock into her sensitive backside, filling, stretching and arousing. When he pulled back, she groaned and arched then held herself still when he filled her again. She flung her head and panted, ground her breasts into the table, squeezed Nath's hand so hard he snarled.

When Cutler's coarse pubic hair touched her ass, when his heavy balls swung against her smooth pussy, she growled, straightened her arms and lifted her torso off the table. She looked back over her shoulder, saw the heat, the hunger flashing in his bright eyes, snarled and rubbed her backside against him.

Cutler threw his head back, howled, grabbed her hips and started thrusting. Another hand, Nath's, slid over her belly and long, warm fingers swirled over her clit. His other hand held a swaying breasts and pinched her nipple. He was breathing hard and ragged.

Rising ecstasy squeezed Fina's womb then squeezed it again. Cutler groaned as her ass bore down on him. She'd never thought about being taken this way although she'd enjoyed Cutler's gentle touches and questing probes. She felt

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Nath's eyes on them as clearly as she felt his touch on her body. She trembled, aroused and thrilled that he was sharing this experience with them. His hard cock swayed beside her and she licked her lips unconsciously. He bit down on her left shoulder without breaking the skin and rubbed her clit harder.

When her orgasm tore through her and twisted her insides, Fina cried out and arched back into Cutler's cock. He drove it into her hard, making her tender backside stretch and burn and the burn was delicious. She panted and cried out again when another spasm rocked her. Nath's fingers rasped against her clit and his rising growls joined theirs.

Finally it was too much. As ecstasy faded, Nath's touch became unbearably intense. He seemed to sense that and, to her immense relief, his fingers moved slower, he pressed lighter and lighter until he was gently massaging her sex. Slowing his strokes, Cutler finally stopped, pressed deep and rubbed his groin against her ass. Fina grunted—an unladylike exclamation when he wrapped his massive arms around her then in a move so fast she got dizzy, rolled onto

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his back, taking her with him. Her eyes spun in her head when the room seemed to corkscrew.

“Oh my,” Fina whispered when she found herself laying on Cutler’s hard, warm chest, his arms still locked around her, his cock still buried in her ass. He moved his hips slowly and she shivered with pleasure.

Nath leered down at them and grinned.

Gently, Cutler arranged her limbs. Fina lay limp and sated, her full weight sprawled on his torso. With his long reach, he pulled her thighs apart, lay them outside of his then he spread his knees, opening her fully. He took her wrists, held them up and out, and rolled his hips up and back, pumping her slowly and making her gasp.

Nath moved to the foot of the table, looked up at them, fisted his cock before climbing up between their legs.

Fina held her breath. Impaled on Cutler, his hands holding her arms immobile, she could only watch Nath crawl toward her. He kissed her thigh, bit it seductively, licked away the sting then lifted his head to look at her. Her breath caught again. Blue eyes shimmered, gazed down

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at her with an intense eroticism that made her gasp and tremble. Nath's smile kicked up a notch, making his dimples stand out rakishly. He bent his head to her, kissed her pussy then flicked his tongue against her clit. When she squirmed and tried to push back, he straightened, made a show of licking his lips then stretched over her to kiss her breasts. Holding his weight up on one arm, he took hold of the head of his cock, rubbed it against her slit and pushed.

Gasping, her head rolling back, Fina felt Nath's cock enter her. He felt huge, bigger than normal. Cutler did too. She was scared there wouldn't be enough room inside her body for both of them. Then worried there wouldn't be. Nath entered her slowly and Cutler stopped moving to let him.

"You're so beautiful, honey."

"So hot. Sweetheart you're the sexiest woman I've ever known."

They murmured intense words of passion and encouragement as Nath filled her. He lifted her knees...not much but enough to allow him to slide inside easier. He growled, kissed her soundly then stared down at her breasts as the tips rocked

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against his chest in time with the movements of his powerful body. She'd never felt so sensual, so desired, so wholly possessed.

When Nath withdrew, Cutler pressed forward. It was so beautiful that tears stung Fina's eyes. They rocked slowly. Cutler's strength seemed endless as he lifted his hips to her, pushed into her despite her weight and Nath's. He snarled and pulled back. Then Nath pushed into her, flashed her his naughtiest grin, grunted and retreated. His skin shimmered with a fine sheen of sweat and goose bumps dotted his arms.

Fina felt stretched, unbelievably and erotically full. She added her strength to the mix, arching back and forth subtly, not wanting to dislodge either of them or put them off their stride. She gasped and her wolf howled with pleasure.

Her lovers' voices joined hers.

Snarling, growling, they began to move faster. Their movements became harsh, skittered then faltered. This game was new to all of them but they were eager students. They regained their rhythm, again started off slow then let the need build.

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Cutler came first. Howling so loud he hurt her ears, he punched his hips up, grabbed her hips and humped her deep and hard.

*"Fuck,"* Nath groaned. His eyes opened wide and he stared down at them. "I can feel him coming." When his brother's howling faded, when the jerky movements of Cutler's body stopped driving Fina into him, Nath lay more of his weight on her, drew her knee up a little higher and began to roll his hips into her. Holding his weight on one arm, he slid a hand between their bodies and rubbed her clit.

Fina arched into him and cried out.

"Come on, sweetheart. Come for me. You're so beautiful when you come." He drew harsh circles over her swollen nub.

She felt so erotic she wanted to scream with pleasure. Her back slid against Cutler's warm, sweaty body easily. The thick cock in her ass began to deflate just enough that she was able to tip her hips up, wanting more from Nath and able to take it. He growled, drew his teeth over her shoulder then drove into her hard.

Beneath her, Cutler grunted but he also

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tightened his grip on her hips, keeping her impaled on him and holding her steady for Nath's rough loving. She wove her arms around Nath and ran her nails down his back until he snarled and fucked her faster.

Her cry was the only warning before she came a second time. Fierce shards of pleasure tore through her, possessed her. Bright light and ecstasy pulsed and squeezed. Before they'd faded, Nath was straining over her, driving hard and deep. He grabbed her leg, wrapped it tight around his ass, drove his loins into her and grunted, again and again in time with the shudders racking his body.

When it was finished, Nath shivered, then lay still, resting his head on her shoulder and breathing hard. His breath washed her sweat-moistened skin and the coolness felt wonderful. Eventually, he lifted his head, looked down at her from beneath heavy lids, dredged up a gluttonous smile and mouthed one word. "Wow."

Cutler chuckled, making both of them bounce.

"Um, you forgot to feed me you know," Fina grouched half-heartedly.



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Both brothers chuckled this time.

“I think we’ve got some frozen pizza,” Nath offered. He eased his cock out of her, shuddered then kissed her breasts before gingerly sliding back and off the table. “Good thing our folks invested in sturdy furniture.” He held his knees and flexed them carefully.

“Make two pizzas,” Fina insisted as she took his hand. He helped her to stand. Cutler groaned when her ass slid off his deflating shaft. She grinned ruefully. “That way maybe I’ll be able to steal a slice before the two of you eat it all.”

## When a Pack Dies

# Chapter Eleven

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*Eastfield, Tennessee*

Sim Brice slammed the front door behind him, ran a forearm over his sweaty forehead and shook his long, dirty-blond hair back. He picked up the thin stack of mail somebody had placed on the hall table, disturbing the dust around it.

Flyers. Nothing but flyers. He stormed into the kitchen to drop the flyers into the overflowing garbage. Dirt and a torn flower fell out of his boot tread.

He hated flowers. He hated smelling like compost. He hated the dwindling numbers of customers at the nursery because all his pack had to sell were common plants available at any big-box home-improvement store. He'd sold off the few mature, heirloom plants the nursery had and didn't know where that bitch had hid the seeds that everybody kept asking about.

The seedlings in the greenhouses had died.

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The mail coming to the house was being redirected and he didn't have the right ID to get it undirected. There was a stack of bills on his desk at work. They'd had to pay a locksmith to open the wall safe and that hadn't helped. The damn thing had been cleaned out. Sim's only consolation was that the greenhouse hydro bill was being paid automatically from somewhere. He'd have to track that down. Maybe it would give him a clue where some of the money went, and where Fina was.

One of his pack members, one of the younger males, was rooting around in the pantry. He emerged with a box of saltine crackers, a jar of olives and a disgruntled expression. The discontent in Sim's pack was growing. Even though they'd spread out into the houses owned by the previous pack, there was no money, little to eat and no females. Sim decided to take a shower instead of cuffing the youngster for no good reason.

Something leaning against a leg of the hall table caught his eye. It was a courier package that hadn't been there that morning. He tore open the packaging as he climbed the stairs two

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at a time and walked into the master bedroom. Dropping down on the unmade bed, Sim ran his dirty fingers over Fina's student union book. He opened it and scanned the pictures.

He found a few of Fina—for clubs, some sports and in each one, she was standing beside the same blonde. A human if he wasn't mistaken. There was even one picture of them together with the caption BFF.

He headed back downstairs.

"Hey. Jake," he asked the young were sitting at the kitchen table, desultorily munching crackers and clutching the package protectively. "What's this mean?"

"Huh?" Jake looked up at his Alpha but not before he'd fully disguised the suspicion on his face. He smiled woodenly, glanced at the book then his smile widened. "Best Friends Forever. Why? You thinkin' of tying your hair up in pigtails and hanging out at the junior school, boss?"

Sim cuffed his insolent head then headed up to Fina's room. It was the only room his pack hadn't disturbed and everything was just as she'd

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left it the morning she took off. Circling the room, Sim looked at the pictures on the walls and dresser. Why hadn't he seen it before? Sure enough, scattered amongst pictures of Fina's family, there were pictures of the blonde—the two of them together. He traced the outline of Fina's face in one. A quick search turned up her high school yearbooks. A quick flick through the pages gave him a name. He went looking for the local phone directory.



*“Urgh. That bastard never gives up.”*

Cutler's brow furrowed as he followed the sound of Fina's anger to the home office. She was sitting in front of her laptop, red faced. She glared up at him.

*“The only thing good about this is trashing his emails.”*

Cutler moved quickly and lay his hand over hers. “Let me read any that come in,” he insisted quietly. “I want to keep track of what the rogues are up to.”

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She shot him a look like she wanted to argue then huffed, scowled and marched out of the office.

Cutler sat down in the chair she'd vacated and clicked the message open.

Fina ran back when a woman started shrieking through the speakers. A little movie screen opened up in one corner and started to play.

"You remember Helen, don't you?" The were speaking was tall and wiry. He and maybe two other weres held a struggling, young blonde woman for the camera that had recorded the images. He shook back his hair and smiled ferally. His eyes were so dark they looked black. "Since you took off the boys have been a little... restless." In the background, a shaggy were licked the side of Helen's neck. She screamed and tried to punch him. "We're going to turn her unless you get your tail back here," Sim ordered hotly. "I want my bitch, my money *and* my pup. Oh yeah...you don't think I knew you were coming into heat when I fucked you? I figure about now you're puking up your breakfast every morning and wondering what the hell is wrong with you." He snarled at the camera, grabbed a handful of

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Helen's hair, dragged her head to one side and licked his lips as his man dragged his tongue over Helen's neck.

The screen went blank.

Cutler stood, sat Fina back down in the chair and picked up the phone. "Contact Owen. Tell him to get compassionate leave."

Her fingers shook as they moved over the keyboard. Cutler dialed a number and asked the woman on the other end about flights to Tennessee.



Nath's hand was firm and steady and she hung on tight as she stepped out of the beefy, rented SUV, onto what used to be her pack's running grounds. A heavy vehicle door closed behind her. Owen Wells came around, looking stern and scary-strong in his black t-shirt and jeans. Transmitted halfway around the world via satellite, he'd looked starkly, blatantly handsome. In person, his presence was almost overpowering and he was as big as Cutler. Owen stood close to her and touched his forehead to hers, then

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stepped back when Cutler moved to take her other hand.

The four of them walked out of the empty, gravel parking lot in the middle of nowhere, down a tree-lined path and emerged into a small clearing. Cutler and Nath walked on either side of her. Owen kept pace behind.

Behind him, eight very large, prime weres kept pace with Cutler. They scanned the area intently and sniffed the air. There had actually been a few shouting matches and a scuffle or two to see who would get to go when Cutler put out the word that he needed some volunteer muscle to come with him and Nath to Tennessee.

Fina ached at the thought of putting members of her new pack in danger. Eddie Robertson, the local baker, and his wife had just learned she was pregnant with their second cub. Officer Wally Pierce was huge and his heart was in the right place but he was so very young. She didn't stop to consider that Wally was actually three years older than her. She squeezed her mates' hands. They squeezed back. Nath lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed them fleetingly.



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She kept playing her last conversation with Ryan over in her head.

“Fina you *have* to take me with you. Take me home. *Please*,” Ryan had wailed after they’d dropped him off at the Pikes’ on their way to the airport. He’d cried piteously, turned red, collapsed on the floor then jumped back up again. He’d slammed his small fists into the wall until Dorothea’s husband wrapped his arms around him from behind and held him in a firm but gentle embrace. Even then Ryan didn’t stop screaming.

“I want Owen,” he’d cried. “I want my father. I want my *Mom*.” His brown eyes had flashed with a wolf’s rage. A rage he was supposedly still too young to experience. “You’re not my mom. You’re going to leave too.”

Tears had prickled her eyes but she refused to show them to Ryan, refused to let him see her fear, weakness and inadequacy.

“Go. Just go,” Dorothea had said quietly and helped her husband lead the screaming Ryan into the house.

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Nath had held her and let her cry on the way to the airport.

They reached the middle of the clearing, stopped, then, as one, turned toward the freshening scent of male were. Cutler's men fanned out around them.

The first rogue to step out between the thick forest cover was tall and pale. He was thin but Fina remembered how strong this Beta was. She refused to shudder. She lifted her upper lip, exposed her canines and growled quietly. Six more rogues stepped into the clearing. Two of them hauled a struggling Helen along with them. Her blue eyes flashed above the duct tape across her mouth. She kicked out defiantly, catching one of her captors in the side of the knee. He staggered, raised his fist to her then thought better of it when his Alpha snarled.

"Now, now, Jake," Sim Brice cooed. It was eerie how quickly his emotions shifted. "Musn't get off on the wrong foot." Despite being outnumbered, his pale eyes moved dismissively over the weres surrounding Fina. He walked up to Helen, touched her disheveled hair in a

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sickeningly tender gesture then ripped the tape off her mouth.

Shescreamed. "Run, Fina. They're werewolves." Helen blinked when no one reacted. Trembling, she seemed to sink in on herself as she looked around the clearing, taking in the number of men, their size. Her eyes communicated everything when understanding dawned.

"Here's the deal." Sim's eyes moved over Cutler and Nath, took in their proximity to Fina, then moved over them again. "Return my bitch to me. Save a human." He held out his hands, balancing them like weights on a scale. "Keep my bitch and we'll change as many females as we need. Your choice." He sniffed the air and scowled at Fina. "Despite the fact that you're mine, you mated with these dogs. Don't bother to deny it. I can smell their stench from here." One of his brows arched up. "I staked my claim first."

"Rape isn't bonding," Fina spit out.

"A technicality," he shrugged. "But that pup in your belly is mine."

"That bastard seedling you forced on me is dead."

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“What did you do?” Sim demanded hotly. He stepped toward her. His pack followed his lead, snarling and growling.

“What did *I* do?” Fina shouted. “Other than wash the stench off after you’d finished with me and I walked out the door? Nothing. It was weak and puny. An inferior seedling spawned from weak stock. It died on its own without any help from me.”

Sim took another step toward her, sniffing intently like he was trying to measure the truth of what she’d said. Cutler and Nath roared, took two steps forward and stopped only when Sim backed away.

Fina continued. “And now you threaten to change a human to win me back? What? You weren’t able to poach females from other packs? Is that it? Did they see you for what you are?” She snarled. “What are you going to do...change every one of my female classmates?”

“Not *every* one of them,” Sim taunted. “Just fourteen. I figure two bitches per man will keep my pack happy and...entertained.” His pale eyes hardened. “Now hand over the money,” he snarled. “You’re useless to me if you’re barren.”

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“Has everyone heard enough?” Cutler’s voice boomed across the clearing. No fewer than twenty men stepped out from between the trees.

“Yes. We have.” The speaker was in his early fifties, thickly muscled. His voice was deep, authoritative and for some crazy reason, reminded Fina of her father.

Another man, maybe a bit younger than the first but exuding the same powerful, unmistakable control of a seasoned Alpha, spoke up. “These rogues must be destroyed. Our females are in danger and turning that many humans is unacceptable as far as pack law is concerned. It would draw too much attention.”

At a subtle movement of Cutler’s hand, the men of his pack rushed the rogues. The two holding Helen let go immediately, dropped and charged. Tearing clothing, howls and snarls echoed throughout the clearing. Hard, wolf bodies collided with a series of sickening thuds.

Fina ran around the frenetic clutch, grabbed Helen’s wrist and hauled her over to the tree line. She spun, changed into wolf form and faced the

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combatants, putting her body between them and her friend.

“Oh shit,” Helen gasped. She sounded like she was hyperventilating. “Um, nice doggy.” Fina whacked her with her tail and snapped at a rogue who got too close. “You couldn’t have told me about this earlier?”

Fina kept her focus on the fighting. Nath dived at Sim Brice’s silver-tipped wolf, raked the side of his body with his claws then dug his teeth into the rogue’s ruff. Sim fought back and shook his head violently, hanging on to a mouthful of Nath’s fur. Owen was rolling around on the ground with the rogue Beta, his forelegs wrapped around his opponent’s smaller body, his back leg kicking out at its belly, his jaws wide and biting down on its neck. The rogue Beta howled, screamed then slumped to the ground with a gaping, wheezing hole where its throat used to be.

Owen stood over his victim, snarled then cocked his leg. He ran back into the thick of the fighting, searching for another opponent.

The howls of fighting diminished as body after rogue body fell to the ground. The men of Cutler’s pack closed in on the remaining enemies

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then turned away with their tails at an arrogant angle when they realized the fighting was all but over. They scuffed their back paws against the ground as they walked away, showering the bodies of the rogues with clumps of dirt. They and the other weres that had gathered to witness formed a loose circle around the final two combatants.

Fifteen seconds later, Nath had Sim Brice pinned beneath his powerful body, his jaws clamped on the back of the rogue's neck.

Cutler, still in human form, walked toward them slowly. "My brother, my Beta asked for permission to take you himself," he said conversationally. He crouched down in front of them and tipped his head to one side so he could see the rogue's eyes. "I could have done it myself but that would have been overkill. Don't you think so, Nath?"

Nath made a low, grinding sound that was more growl than laugh. Sim struggled, raked the ground uselessly with his paws then lay still. In a slow, powerful movement, Nath leaned back, pulling Sim's head back with him, exposing his throat.

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Wordlessly, Cutler assumed the form of his wolf, bit down on the rogue's throat at the same time as his brother snapped its spine. Sim Brice's body jerked then slumped on the ground, limp and lifeless.



"Your father was my second cousin." Fina looked up at the tall, stern, gray haired Alpha walking beside her. He held out the sweater she'd retrieved from the back of the rental and slipped it over her shoulders. She'd dressed in the spare jeans and shirt she'd brought from Wyoming.

"Your voice sounds like his," she murmured, staring up into his dark blue eyes. "He never told us we had relatives in the area."

He nodded quietly and walked beside her back to the clearing. The danger had passed but a detail of his pack followed in their wake anyway, forming a protective guard. "There was some resentment on both sides. We were finally putting out feelers to resolve that but there wasn't enough time." He glanced up at the early-evening sky and exhaled slowly. "Your pack originated from



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two members who split from ours. Differing business views,” he explained when her brow furrowed. “Our previous Alpha was old and set in his ways. He did not follow modern business trends. Hated change,” he added and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. “Your father was a financial genius. We shouldn’t have been so quick to let him go.”

“Now we know where *you* get it.” Nath walked up to her and nuzzled her cheek. Cutler nodded to the other Alpha then pointedly took his mate’s hand off the older were’s arm and wrapped it around his.

The gray-haired were grinned, touched his forehead to Fina’s then stepped away. “If you ever change your mind, Fina Whitesage, you will always have a home in my pack. You too, Owen.” He held out his hand to Owen, shook then turned with his pack mates and headed back to the parking lot.

The other older Alpha, the one who led the other pack in the area, nodded to Cutler and Nath then he and his men left as well.

Fina walked over to Helen who was shivering despite the heat of the day, glancing worriedly

## **When a Pack Dies**

up at the two huge men hovering over her protectively, and held her hand over her nose, trying to shield herself from the smell of burning fur billowing up from the pyres dotting the clearing. Fina hugged her friend tightly then smoothed back her wild, blonde hair. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

A few minutes later, Fina was standing on Helen's porch.

"What are you going to tell the police?"

"Nothing," Helen replied. She rubbed at a smudge of dirt on her arm. "Those guys made me text my mom. She thinks I went up to school for a few days to straighten out some course issues." Helen trembled. "So I guess your life is different than mine, huh?"

Fina grinned wryly.

"Different reality. Different rules," Helen sighed. "You're going to stay in Wyoming, aren't you?" She looked down at her feet and sighed again. "I'll miss you but I think that's where you belong now."

Fina hugged her again.

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“Um, are all the guys as hot as the ones back there?” Helen asked suddenly. Her blue eyes sparkled. “Wow. Maybe I can get my parents to spring for a plane ticket. You think you can hook me up with one of them if I visit for a week? I promise I won’t be greedy like you and take two.”



About an hour before sunset, Fina and Owen were walking through their old neighborhood. Her mates and the members of her new pack trailed in their wake.

“Our pack lands have been restored to us,” Fina said quietly. She looked up at the sprawling bungalow that used to be Ryan’s home, noted the unkempt flower beds, the litter on the front lawn.

Owen nodded quietly. His dark blond hair was cut so short it didn’t even move.

“Have you given any thought to...?” Her voice trailed away.

“To *what*?” Owen growled. That furrow

## When a Pack Dies

between his eyes deepened. “How come you neglected to mention that you’d mated?”

Her feet stopped moving and she looked down at the ground. Cutler and Nath stood beside her, facing Owen with their arms folded over their chests but saying nothing.

“Those ideas we were tossing around about you, Ryan and I forming a pack of our own? That deal’s off the table, Fina.” Owen’s hand slashed through the air. “Mated females stay put. You know that. It’s one of the cornerstones of our species. *Not* telling me you were mated, whether intentional or unconscious, is a pretty big omission,” he added harshly.

Fina blushed.

“And don’t start in about second thoughts, duress or survivor guilt, woman,” he barked. “You’re an adult. You knew what it meant to mate with these men. Weres mate for life and you made your decision.”

She kicked at the ground, wrapped her arms around herself then nodded jerkily. Owen gave her a brusque one-armed hug then let go.

“Ever since you told me about our pack being

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killed I've been chasing a demon around in my head. I keep thinking what if one more strong male in the pack would have made a difference?" Owen's voice faltered then he lifted his chin and firmed his mouth. "I ran away because I hated living here, in this pack. But what if I'd come back? I'm a trained soldier, Fina. What if...?" His voice trailed off. Eventually he started walking again and Fina fell into step beside him.

"You've got issues, Fina," Owen continued after awhile. "All three of us do. We're entitled to them," he added dryly. "Deal with yours but let your mates help you heal. You and Ryan. You're his family now. All three of you. I'm his cousin and legally I'm entitled to be his guardian. I think he'd be better off with you. Hell I know he would." Owen ran a sun darkened, scarred hand over his head. "We can't run away from our grief. Don't let that confuse you into running away from happiness."

They walked past the remaining houses.

"I'd like to tear them down," Owen said suddenly. "Sell the land so others can rebuild. There's too much death, too much blood here

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now. I can't stomach the idea of selling these houses to unsuspecting families."

Fina nodded slowly. "Agreed."

They picked up the pace and soon they were outside the nursery. It was run down, empty and almost completely void of greenery. Trees that had been planted before Fina was born had been uprooted. The stark, dank holes hadn't even been filled in. Harnessing the sorrow welling up inside of her, she keyed in the security code to the office.

"Can you get to them?" Owen asked anxiously.

Her mates shot her a curious look but they and the rest of her pack followed her inside without question.

"Yes. I made sure the electricity stayed on." She led them through the office and into a warehouse area piled high with refuse.

Owen grabbed a discarded pair of gloves and started digging a path through a pile of empty fertilizer bags. He brushed off a computer access panel then stood aside, hovering while Fina punched in an access code.

## **When a Pack Dies**

A long, nondescript bank of what looked like refrigerator doors clicked open. Fina and Owen began checking the contents, the humidity and temperature gauges.

“They should all still be viable,” Fina said.

“What will you do with them?”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“You can’t let them die. Too much here has died already.”

Fina looked up at her mates. “I can recreate this setup in Wyoming. I’ll need to dig into the old pack’s coffers but—”

“Do whatever it takes,” Owen interrupted firmly. “Let this be our families’ legacy. If you want, set some money aside for me in a retirement fund. Not too much though. My needs are simple and I’ve got a good job I love doing.” He grinned crookedly. “Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll get lucky like you and find a pack I fit into as an adult wolf.” He grew serious as he started shutting up the drawers. “Keep this business alive and keep you and Ryan provided for. His father was a good man. So was yours. I’ll come visit you when the Wyoming nursery is up

## **When a Pack Dies**

and running. Maybe we'll feel like talking about them. My mom too."



## When a Pack Dies

# Epilogue

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### *Three Years Later*

Fina Whitesage-Powell entered through the back door of her home, swiped the dirt off her overalls and toed off her steel-toed boots. She ran the back of her hand across her forehead, wiping off the well-earned sweat and dirt from a good day's work and walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, Mary. What's for supper?" Her nose twitched and she lifted a lid off a pot, inhaling expectantly.

She was rewarded with a light slap on her hand.

"Chicken," their feisty, sixty-something housekeeper-slash-cook snapped as she replaced the lid. "About time you got home too." She stuck out her cheek and tapped it with her forefinger. Fina kissed her obediently and affectionately then turned on the tap to wash her hands. "It might very well be warm outside today, young

## **When a Pack Dies**

lady, but that spring wind has turned your face red.”

“My men like my face when it’s red,” Fina shot back. “And speaking of men, is Nath home?”

“Hey, sweetheart.” He walked into the kitchen, right on cue, wrapped his arms around Fina’s shoulders, leaned into her back and kissed her neck. “Hmm. You taste sweaty.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” She dried off her hands and pulled two small, square, brass plaques out of her breast pocket. “The samples arrived today. Tell me which one you like and I’ll get them engraved.”

The front door opened. Fina’s wolf ears picked up the sound of Cutler’s boots thudding on the floor then the sound of him opening then closing the gun lock-box inside the hall closet. His firm footfalls preceded him into the kitchen. “Hey, honey.” He kissed his wife with a resounding, wet, smacking sound. “Are those the plaques?” He pulled one out of Nath’s hand. “Tell me again why you need them?”

Fina rolled her neck from side to side and stretched her back. “The plaques will be

## **When a Pack Dies**

mounted on rocks that will be set beside each of the specimen trees I've planted around Nath's base camp. They'll describe the plants, give the year they were planted in and the country they originated in."

"Hmm. Sounds good...something you tree huggers will get off on." He handed the plaque back to his brother, dug an elbow into Nath's ribs and leapt away nimbly when Nath tried to cuff him one.

"Anyway," Fina sighed loudly, cutting off their jousting before it got out of hand. "The greenhouse there is fully stocked and I've got a healthy ecosystem going. We'll be ready for our first customers next week. Nath was right." She grinned up at Cutler. "Housing our retail site there is a perfect tie-in to his eco-tourism business. Plus, I like having a secondary nursery location in case something catastrophic happens to the main nursery."

She glanced out the back window. Not far from the barn was a neat line of greenhouses.

An infant started to cry.

"This kid stinks," Ryan snorted from down

## When a Pack Dies

the hall. "You know, you'll be a lot more fun to hang out with when you can run around and stuff." When he entered the kitchen, his face was screwed up and he was holding a chunky ten-month old, carrying the crying baby well away from himself. "I don't *do* poopy diapers," he declared righteously. By his eighth birthday Ryan had passed the five-foot mark. Now, at nine, he was tall, gangly and had enormous hands and feet.

Cutler scooped the baby out of Ryan's arms. "That's my son," he proclaimed proudly. "Anything worth doing is worth doing loud and proud." The aqua-eyed child cooed up at him, slapped Cutler's cheek with a meaty hand and drooled. Cutler's nose wrinkled. "I guess you *do* need your bum changed after all." He ruffled Ryan's hair and grinned down at him. "How was school today, buddy?"

"Speaking of school," Nath interrupted. He dropped his fists onto his hips and faced Fina. "*You* got an email from college. That post-graduate course you're taking on tax law? You only got a B-plus." Both he and Cutler frowned down at her.

## When a Pack Dies

Fina cleared her throat nervously but they didn't say anything else.

"I also checked my bookings for this summer," Nath continued after a moment. His tone softened as he let the subject of her grade drop. "It looks good. This should be my best year ever. Of course that means I won't be around this summer to help you in the nursery although I should be able to step back in come October or so." He crossed over to Fina and hugged her gently. "If you can handle the phones for me the next couple of months, we'll be even." He kissed her forehead, gave her another gentle squeeze then stepped back to lay his hands on the slight mound of her belly. He grinned and rubbed it through her bib overalls like it was the most precious thing he'd ever held. "Now, how are all *three* of my girls doing?"

"The twins are sleeping right now," Fina said. "I could use a foot rub."

"Ah ah," Mary scolded. She waved a wooden spoon menacingly. "Please. At least wait until I've left for the day."

Nath looked disappointed but he kissed Fina

## **When a Pack Dies**

and leaned in to her to whisper, “After the kids are in bed, your wish is my command, sweetheart.”

Cutler kissed her cheek then carried his son away to change his diaper. “Count me in, honey. Two feet. Two mates. No waiting.”

End

## About the Author

Gwen Campbell got her start in the magazine industry, writing everything from news stories to children's fiction to obituaries. When the company she worked for succumbed to economic turndown, she looked at her bank book and gave herself one year to pursue writing full time. The deal was if she made money, she didn't have to look for a real job. It's worked out pretty good so far and she still doesn't have a real job. A life-long believer in romance, she now writes romantic fiction. Gwen is married and she and her husband contribute the success of their relationship to making a point of saying "I love you," at least once a day, sometimes saying, "Yes, dear," just because, and making sure the toilet paper always comes over the top of the roll. She says her best sticky-plot resolutions come to her while dog walking.

## Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot erotic titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed the werewolf paranormal *Wyoming Wild 1: Death of a Pack* by Gwen Campbell you might also like Gwen Campbell's *As My Warrior Commands*, a scifi themed *Frontiers of Love* title.

*When a kingdom crashes down around her, will his love be enough to save her?*

Sibyls are old crones. Everybody knows that. So what's a warrior supposed to think when a beautiful young woman turns up in the middle of a siege, says she's a sibyl, predicts the downfall of a kingdom and tells him he's going there with her to prevent it? He does what any hot-blooded warrior would do. He follows the woman. She's intelligent, brave, can see the future, has an ass he can't stop staring at and she knows how to make him laugh. What he doesn't know is that the sibyls have predicted the downfall of the Kingdom of Jareb-Phar if a young sibyl enters their throne



## Book Excerpts

room. What they don't know is if her arrival will be coincidental or cause the kingdom's fall. The only thing the warrior does know for sure is that beneath his beautiful, young sibyl's discipline is a woman as lusty and wanton as he is.

Here is a short excerpt from *Frontiers of Love 2: As My Warrior Commands*.

Touching her arm, Thain encouraged Jessica to take another bite of hard bread. They'd eaten the last of the soft two days ago. He had a sense she dipped it into her tea, bit off a piece and chewed only to make him happy. They'd left the flood waters behind that morning.

For the most part they kept to their own, dark thoughts. Because a full bath was impossible, both Jessica and Thain stripped down in the failing light and dragged wet cloths over their bodies. Again, Thain had to discipline himself to look away. The beautiful Sibyl stirred him more with each passing day. As a Warrior, he was trained to ignore the distraction of women—when necessary. His discipline had never been so

## Book Excerpts

thin. Jessica had laid her leathers out to air and sat wrapped up in one of his drying cloths. It provided adequate coverage but Thain couldn't stop looking at her smooth shoulders, the curve of her knee. He adjusted his seat and wished his damned hard-on would go away. His balls had ached for days.

When they finished eating, he reached for her metal plate. Leftover food slid off hers and landed on her leg.

Thain had noticed she trimmed the fat off her meat. He found it odd but didn't mind. It meant more for him and he'd taken to cleaning off her plate for her. Without thinking, he knelt in front of Jessica and licked her thigh, picking up the perfectly good piece of fat while he cleaned her skin.

Jessica gasped—then moaned.

Damned Warrior. He'd got right past her defenses. Thain's warm breath, the rasp of his tongue sent shivers up Jessica's leg, straight to her pussy. It spasmed and she couldn't stop her response.

Thain grinned wolfishly. He'd thought this

## Book Excerpts

Sibyl incapable of lust...or a master of it. He touched his tongue to her skin and watched her reaction.

“Stop,” Jessica breathed. She gripped his hair but pulled as much as she pushed.

Setting the plates aside, Thain wrapped his fingers around her thighs and licked her skin. Jessica was the sweetest, softest thing he'd ever touched. He inhaled her scent, the heat of her body, the spiciness of her arousal. She wove her fingers into his hair and this time made an effort to push him away. Thain resisted her easily and dragged his tongue along the primly shut line of her legs. He pulled gently and Jessica allowed him to ease her knees apart.

There was no more need to resist her. She clearly wanted him and he'd wanted her from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Six days of riding with her soft body pressed into his...nights lying beside her had taken their toll. Thain's cock was rock hard and ready to make this beautiful Sibyl his.

Or you might enjoy reading *In Heaven's*

## Book Excerpts

*Arms, a Finding Love: Memorial Day* themed contemporary story by Persephone Jones.

*Two wounded souls find healing over the Memorial Day weekend.*

Hawaiian tattoo artist Koal Kalani is a man making peace with death. Having lost his daughter and ex-girlfriend in a car accident, he is no stranger to heartache. So much so that when he encounters an unnamed woman in the cemetery, he is drawn to her for reasons known only to those in the midst of sorrow. Though their exchange is brief, it leaves him wishing the angelic stranger will take him up on his offer to visit him at his shop in town.

School teacher Madalyn Maris is still looking for the strength to move on after the death of Matthew, her beloved Marine Corps fiancé. A year after her devastating loss the unexpected happens. She meets a man in the cemetery, one with bottomless dark eyes, a leather jacket, a warm embrace...and a business card for a tattoo parlor.

## Book Excerpts

With a lifelong fear of needles, Maris can hardly believe it when she stretches out beneath Koal's masterful hands. But something about the tall, dark, and handsome Hawaiian puts her fear at ease and her libido in overdrive...

Here is a short excerpt from *In Heaven's Arms*.

“So, how much do I...”

He took a step toward her and took her by the hand, his black coffee eyes simmering with intensity. In a second, she knew his intentions. Without saying a word, his eyes roamed the features of her face, down her chest, her body, all the way to her feet and back up again.

Her heart started beating double-time. He led her into the back of the shop to what appeared to be a dimly lit break room of some sort, equipped with a table, a black leather couch, a few chairs and a kitchenette. The most important thing she noticed however was they were completely alone.

## Book Excerpts

Koal placed her hand on his chest and took hold of her at the waist. "C'm here."

"I shouldn't b—"

This was wrong on so many levels. What was she doing? First hugging a stranger in the cemetery, stripping down to her underwear for the same stranger, letting him give her a tattoo. Never mind what went on inside her head...

She watched his head tilt slightly to the side as his face descended toward hers. Upon feeling the soft strength of his mouth, she closed her eyes and let his kiss take her over. This was the kind man from the cemetery. The man who'd held her while she fell apart. Koal. When she opened her heavy eyelids he was looking at her, searching for a reaction. A reaction she couldn't decide on. Truly, she didn't know whether to slap him, cry or both. All she did know was that she wanted him to kiss her again.

Miraculously her lips gravitated to his as if pulled in by some unseen magnetic force. They kissed again, this time when their lips met it was deeper and more wanton, their tongues lashing at each other as if in combat.

## Book Excerpts

She resisted under the force of his desire and pulled ever so slightly away from him to catch her breath, planting the heels of her hands squarely on his shoulders. “You called me a name while I was in the chair.”

Heavy-lidded, he swallowed visibly. “Mm—’anela. It means angel.”

Painting her jawbone and neck with kisses, he hooked his fingers under the thin waistband of her red lace panties and eased them down her legs, gentle as a feather. She met his gaze and watched him pause for telltale signs of objection that she had neither the strength nor the will power to give.

She didn’t stop him because she couldn’t.

You might also enjoy *Secret Fantasy* a contemporary BDSM title by Kitty Cahill.

*Good girl Sara doesn’t stand a chance against charming bad boy, Chris.*

Sara Donovan is a good girl. That is until the

## Book Excerpts

day her best friend gives her a gift certificate for thirty minutes with a phone sex operator. “Joel” unlocks forbidden desires in Sara, needs she’d kept hidden from the world, for fear of reprimand from her domineering preacher father. Once unlocked her desire to be dominated in the bedroom threaten to overwhelm her.

Bad boy Chris Masterson wants Sara Donovan for himself. But his reputation as a player keeps the one woman he truly desires from trusting him. When his usual tricks fail to entice the cautious beauty, he comes up with a plan. To become her secret fantasy...in the flesh.

Here is a short excerpt of *Secret Fantasy*.

Chris shook his head. “Nope, too late. You just tossed down a gauntlet. I’m obligated by men everywhere to pick it up.”

“Listen to me. I’m not interested in the type of sex games you play with your flavor of the month. Okay? I want more than a one night stand and a promise to call.”



## Book Excerpts

“Jealousy?” He tilted his head slightly and stared at her. “You know, I never would’ve thought you’d have that emotion where I’m concerned.”

“I am not jealous,” she retorted lamely.

“You want to know what I think?”

“Not really,” she said through gritted teeth.

He pushed away from the car, invading her space. His mouth dropped to speak softly next to her ear, hovering close enough his hot breath fluttered over her neck. “I think you’re more than interested. More than just intrigued by it. You want—no—*need* it.

Sara pushed him back a pace. Of course, she knew he allowed her to do so. The man was as solid as a brick wall. “Let me repeat this so you get it. I am not some little...airhead you can push around. Got it? Not. Interested.”

“Why do you lie to yourself? You and I both know the truth. Why not just admit it? Then we can begin this.”

Sara scoffed. Yeah, sure begin it and end it in one sweet, hot, but most importantly brief night

of conquest. "There's nothing to begin. I'll never be one of your little...what do you call them? Subs?"

"Sub? What the fuck?"

"What? Is that the wrong term? You'll have to forgive me. I'm not well versed in the whole BDSM thing and..." Her stomach clenched at the sight of his nostrils flaring, like a wild animal scenting the air. Everything about him screamed dominant male. Sara guessed that's why it was so easy to believe he'd be a Dom.

"Don't tell me that you actually believe all the bullshit people pass around this town?"

"What else am I supposed to believe Chris? You're a womanizing Dom who struts around with every woman who's dumb enough to fall for your tricks." She crossed her arms and glared. "You prove the rumors true with the way you act."

"I'm not a Dom," he stated plainly, running his hand through his hair. "I'm just confident and like things to go my own way. And if that means I have to take charge to achieve that, I do."

## Book Excerpts

His gaze didn't waver for a second. Sara shivered under that concentrated stare.

"Whatever. The point remains that I don't want anything to do with you or your wild life style. I won't join in with you and your buddy. You will not have me tied to anything, with any part of yours or anyone else's body inside any part of me. Is that clear enough? Never going to happen."

Again, he leaned in close, and her senses were filled with the spicy, manly scent of him. "Never say never to a man who can make you scream with nothing more than the tip of his tongue."

Before Sara could retort he brushed her lips with his, then strode away. Confidence riding every step of his long hard body. Against her will, her eyes dropped to the tight butt beneath his Old Navy carpenter pants. Why, oh, why couldn't he have been ugly? That would've made telling him *no* a helluva lot easier.

Or you might also like *Apocalypse Dance* a paranormal erotic romance by Michael Barnette.

## Book Excerpts

*For Nikki salvation is just a Dragon away.*

With the world population decimated by a mutated strain of Ebola civilization as we know it has gone down in ruin. Warlords rampage across what was once the United States of America, killing, raping and adding to the misery and horror that has swept the once proud nation.

Nikki, once on her way to becoming a brilliant doctor, is being sought as a concubine by Roderik, self-styled King of the Lone Star Empire.

Here is a short excerpt from *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette

Her breath caught, and she shuddered under the onslaught of sensation. Her nipples peaked so tightly it looked like it should hurt. He drew the tip of his tongue around the areola, one hand pressed at the small of her back, holding her still for his exploration.

She tensed slightly and he eased his hold,

## Book Excerpts

sensitive to her reactions, both positive and negative, learning what she liked and what sent a dampening of desire through her on the wings of fear. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. He wanted her to know nothing but pleasure from his every touch, his every whispered breath across the silken expanse of her flawless skin.

"Bells...." She almost screamed his name as he closed his mouth around the stiffened nub, sucking, teasing it with the edges of his teeth. His cock throbbed with want for her, his own desire heightened by her cry. She wanted him, and even if it came down to nothing but the heat of the moment, her need for comfort, he didn't care. He'd take this, savor it, use it as a balm to the nightmare memories that haunted him in the small hours of the night.

Pulling away, he met her gaze. Awakened passion warmed her sable eyes. "Do you want this from me?"

"Yes!" There was no reservation or hesitation in her reply, nor in the way she kissed him afterward, her entire being seeking what he offered with the same intensity he had sought

## Book Excerpts

her. Her answer was as immediate as her need, and just as heated as his own.

You can buy *Frontiers of Love 2: As My Warrior Commands* by Gwen Campbell, *Finding Love-Memorial Day: In Heaven's Arms* by Persephone Jones or *Secret fantasy* by Kitty Cahill and *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette along with other fine erotic romance and erotica titles from:

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