



Wolf!

Marie Beau

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language. This material is meant for mature audiences!

Marie Beau

Wolf!
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Dedication

Thanks to everyone who has read my writing and encouraged me on the road to publication. Without you I would never have made it!

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Chapter One

**Wilderness Wanderings
38 Militant Falls
Saliston, NY**

*For a casual hike, a week long trek,
wilderness or wildlife education,
or any other reason to explore the great
outdoors - we would be happy to be your guide.*

Lyssa Merrick closed her accounting software, shut down the computer, and sat back with a sigh. Her gaze settled on the full year calendar covering the wall in front of her. The previous quarter, even January and February, the slowest months, had filled up nicely. Red markings covered April and May, scheduled treks and educational tours stretching her thinner than she thought possible. So far, she was busier than even her brightest forecasts, and summer was booking up nicely. She smiled. At this rate, she might have to look into hiring someone else to help lead some of the trips.

With word of mouth as her main source of advertising, her name was getting around. Thank goodness it wasn't costing her a fortune. God knew

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the Yellow Pages and wilderness magazines were more than she could afford, especially at first.

She tucked away the last of her paperwork and lifted her head. Lyssa sniffed the air, her eyes drooping closed. *Mmmm, what is that scent Not sweet, but...she took another deep breath...enticing.* Turning her head, she stood and followed the scent toward the front of the shop as the door opened, the jingle of bells heralding the new arrival long after her nose had.

Lyssa swept the curtain aside and stepped through the doorway, automatically smiling for the potential customer. She lifted her gaze to the golden stare of a stranger...a very large stranger. Broad shoulders, reminiscent of a Viking, barely cleared the small doorframe with very little headroom. She glanced at the spare inches above his head. Six-four maybe. The late afternoon sun streaked through, highlighting the auburn streaks in his dark brown, curly hair creating a shimmer of red—an eerie sight. She had never seen hair that color. Not on a person.

Lyssa's face felt frozen, like a plaster cast ready to crack if she changed her expression.

His nostrils flared. *What does he smell? Who is he?* She sniffed again. *What is he? And who does he remind me of?* She stared at him for a moment. *Oh God, Chet, the wolf in wolf's clothing.* It had been years since she had allowed herself to think about him.

The memory rolled over her.

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“Here Kitty, Kitty. Where’s that little half-breed hiding now?” he taunted. “Yeah, you ought to hide. You’ll never fit in here. Why don’t you and your mama just slink away together so we never have to see you again?”

She shifted and ran, not paying attention to where she went, as long as it was away from Chet. He was evil. She ran until she didn’t recognize her surroundings. Panting, she stared at the granite wall in front of her. A branch snapped behind her. Looking back, she stared into his eyes.

The snarl on his muzzle had her backing away until she was cornered against the granite outcropping.

Lyssa squeezed into a small nook where he wouldn’t be able to reach her but he muscled in behind her. When Chet sniffed between her hind legs, she hissed, swiping her claws across his snout. Chet howled and backed out, pulling his bleeding nose away from more harm.

Lyssa bounded over him. She tore across the mountainside, exhaustion forgotten, running as if the hounds—or maybe wolves—of hell were after her.

* * * *

Her customer took two steps into the shop, snapping her back to the present. The walls closed in. Lyssa’s heart pounded, claws clamored to get out. Whoever he is, he certainly brings out the cat in me—and the memories.

Her nails dug into her damp palms. She clamped down on her fear, not willing to let her

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body control her mind. *I will not shift. I am in control.* Lyssa breathed deeply, concentrating, repeating the mantra. She didn't have to allow her baser instincts to have control. She was better than that.

Long moments passed before she felt fully in control. They stood staring at each other. She cleared her throat. "Can I help you?" Lyssa stepped to the side, putting the counter between them. Palms sweating, she rested them on top of the reservation book to stop the visible tremor.

Definite overreaction. But she trusted her instincts, even as she battled them. The can of mace within easy reach on the shelf below the counter helped, giving her a sense of security. She could barely stomach the thought of inflicting that kind of agony, but it was better than the alternative.

Since she was often alone with strangers, several people suggested she keep a small weapon on hand. She wasn't so sure she would be able to pull a trigger, but she knew she could spray the mace. Besides, she could protect herself with her martial arts training, and if that failed—her claws were plenty sharp.

Lyssa studied the man in front of her. He looked like someone she wouldn't want to try matching her aikido skills against. It might not be all about size, but when you're a kitten against a mastiff, it's not *all* about skill either. She met his gaze.

He never blinked. He stared back, raising one eyebrow.

A hint of a smile tugged at his lips a moment later, as if he had caught her little joke to herself. He looked away and glanced around the shop. "I'd like to schedule a hike into the Adirondacks and your services come highly recommended...assuming you're Lyssa Merrick." He pointed at the plaque on the wall behind her.

His voice, like warm maple syrup, poured over her. A vision flashed across her mind of hiking with him, touching, holding hands. She blinked and did a mental shake. She flipped open her planner. "How long a hike are you planning?"

Wiping her damp palms on her jeans, she tried not to breathe too deeply. His scent had her wanting to step closer and inhale him, to touch him...to lean into his broad chest, dip her tongue into his...*whoa. Down girl.*

"A few days, the first time out, maybe more." She snapped back to the calendar page open in front of her.

"Is this more than a casual hike?" She raised her gaze back to his.

He stared for a moment before answering. "Would it matter?"

Lyssa narrowed her eyes and she quietly closed the planner, setting her pen down beside it. "I like to know what I'm dealing with, how much experience people have, their strengths and weaknesses, and anything unusual we might face before we take one step onto a trail. If there's a

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reason for the hike, I need to know what to look for, so I can decide what the best area would be for your purpose. And if I think there's any reason we shouldn't go, I'll advise against it or tell you to find someone else."

Their gazes clashed, and slowly the corner of his mouth lifted in a semblance of a smile. His gaze made a short excursion down her body. "Good. I'm an experienced hiker and anyone else who comes with me will be also."

It felt like hands skimmed over her flesh, not just his gaze. Gooseflesh broke out on her arms as she quivered inside. Lyssa lifted one hand toward the pen and the other to the cover of her appointment book. She looked down, happy not to have to meet his gaze. She flipped the book open to July.

"Did you have any particular area in mind? And when were you hoping to go?" She looked up from the page and got caught in his stare once again. *Like a deer in the headlights*. Wrong animal, same effect. She shook herself and tore her gaze away to look back down. "How many would be in your party?" She hoped he didn't hear the quiver in her voice.

"I'm not certain yet. What are your minimum and maximum limits?" He stepped closer to the counter, close enough that when he reached out, his hand covered hers. Shockwaves raced through her system.

Her heartbeat kicked up a notch. She licked her lips and took a deep breath. *Oh God, now what*

have I done. Lyssa tried to slide her hand out from under his but he wrapped his thumb around to her palm and gently held her hand in place. She swallowed hard and set the pen back down, her insides melting.

The scent came to her again, stronger than before.

Her gaze jerked up. *Darn it all, I'm really slipping. Wolf! More like Chet than I thought.*

"Such small, soft hands for an outdoors woman." He leaned across the counter and breathed deeply. His eyes closed for a moment, and opened mere inches from hers. "You do lead all the expeditions, don't you?"

His other hand lifted to her face, brushing back her hair. His gaze followed every movement of his hand, steeping her in his aura.

"Who are you?" She whispered and tilted her head away from his hand. If he kept touching her, she wouldn't be accountable for her actions. She didn't know if she wanted to scratch, bite...or purr.

He lowered his hand to the counter, but continued to stroke the one he held.

Glancing down, Lyssa reached for the pen again, careful not to touch him. She stared at the dark fur...hair, on his hand for a moment. She cleared her throat. "Your name?" She waited a beat before looking up.

He met her look and smiled slowly. "Wolfe Reardon."

Lyssa pulled a scrap pad in front of her and jotted down his name.

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“That’s Wolfe with an ‘e,’” he said, pointing to the page.

Lyssa looked up. His golden eyes seemed to see into her soul. She tugged at her hand, again without success, looking to free herself from more than just his physical hold. Her eyes closed for a moment as she breathed his heavenly scent. *Mate*. Her gaze snapped up to his. Lyssa shook herself again. *No. Not a wolf!*

She thought of her mother and how beautiful she was. How lonely she must have been—different from the rest of the pack, always an outsider. After Chet, Lyssa swore her life would never be that way, that she would never stand on the outside looking in.

Even though things were different now, more open to mingling, she was happy with her life as it was, most of the time. Her group of friends was a wonderful mix and she fit in with all of them, but she was part of no pack. Never again. The loneliness she felt on occasion was locked tight in her heart, hidden away with the lingering hurts from growing up and feeling like she didn’t belong.

Lyssa met Wolfe’s gaze, aware of the heat coming from his touch, of the softening inside her body, the urge to lean closer, to smell, to taste...to connect. The sigh that escaped her came from the depths of her heart.

* * * *

She was temptation incarnate. Wolfe wanted to let his fingers linger in her short, white-blonde hair. Her pixie face and bright hazel eyes were

enough to bring any hot-blooded man back for a second look...or more. The intelligence behind the eyes and the self-contained responses made him want to dig deeper, get to know her—on every level. It was all he could do not to lift her over the counter and take advantage of the smell of arousal emanating from her body. But her look was anything but inviting. His fingers clutched the hand he was holding a little tighter, well aware of her resistance. Her sigh was his undoing. He reached behind her neck, his fingers luxuriating in the soft fur at her nape. He needed to taste her lips and take just a lick of her neck, maybe a nibble, mark her as his.

Wolfe leaned forward, tugging gently for her to meet him partway, and suddenly he was holding...air.

Silver-white fur glimmered and he caught a glimpse of her twitching whiskers and pointed ears as she swiveled and raced to the back. Her transformation was beautiful. A lynx. A soft, furry, intoxicating cat.

A smile spread across his face as he shifted and took chase, his nails clicking on the hardwood floor while her padded paws were silent. His size was no advantage in these close quarters.

He slid toward the doorway, his paws backpedaling, trying to slow his momentum. He crashed into a chair in the corner before tangling in the curtain in the doorway. Picking himself up, he gathered speed and skittered into the back room

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just in time to see her short tail disappear through the pet door.

Pouncing forward once again, his nails scraped on the floor as he skidded to a stop. He tilted his head to study the kitty door. He would never fit. It was a larger size than normal, but definitely not big enough for a full-size wolf. He sniffed at the opening and poked his nose through, wary of getting swiped at by her claws.

Her scent was fading...gone.

He yipped at the door, and trotted to the front to sniff at her clothes. He licked the small chain that had been around her neck before her change...gold, not silver. When he shifted back, he gathered her things to take with him.

Holding her clothes to his nose, saliva pooled on his tongue. *Mine*. They would meet again. There was definitely unfinished business here.

Wolfe set her clothes down so he could get dressed, not bothering to tuck or button the shirt that had ripped apart. He picked her clothes back up from the counter and held up the shirt. No seams were torn. The pants were the same when he held those up. The snaps seemed to have some sort of release built into them—magnetic. He smiled. Very smart.

He glanced down at the counter, where the notepad drew his attention. Shifting the clothes to one hand, he picked up the pen and added an “e” to the end of his name. Wolfe studied the appointment book. The last week of the month was crossed off with a bold X. Tuesday was circled—the

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full moon. He flipped to the following month. This time the third week was crossed off—Thursday was the full moon. A few more pages repeated the pattern.

Wolfe grinned. So full moons bothered her...he would have to help her with that.

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Chapter Two

Where is he? Lyssa shook her head, shoved the appointment pad under the counter, and stormed into the back room. Two weeks...it had been two weeks, and he hadn't called or come by. The girl that covered the desk when she was out on treks would have mentioned if he called. Was he even coming back? Why did he take her clothes? Not that she cared if she never got them back, they were nothing special, well, other than the quick release snaps, but she had plenty more like them. But the necklace—that was a hand-me-down, not an heirloom, not worth anything to anyone else, but she wanted it back.

Maybe he found some other quarry more enticing than her, someone else to lead him on his trek into the Adirondacks. More power to him. *Let him take his business elsewhere. I'm busy enough. He can go with whoever he wants to.*

She crumpled the paper with his name on it and held it over the trash can as she had so many times throughout the week. Her fist wouldn't open, her fingers clutching the paper. She closed her eyes and licked her lips at the memory of his scent. She smoothed out the paper again on the counter and stared at his name. Wolfe, with an "e"...from a long line of wolves no doubt, and definitely an alpha.

No one else had ever stirred her like this.

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Memories of Chet, feelings of not fitting in, of being an outsider to the pack, reared their ugly head again. No one outside of his little band of friends ever treated her as an outsider. Even her mother was treated as one of their own, taken in, accepted as family.

But Lyssa *was* one of their own, flesh of their Alpha. But she wasn't a wolf, regardless of the blood that flowed in her veins. Whenever there was crossbreeding, the dominant gene in females was always the feline.

Running with the pack when she was young was pure joy. She could outrun the best of them by the time she was three. But as she got older and realized she would never really fit in, she went her own way, hardly looking back. When she needed to run, she ran alone, never trusting another wolf to keep his paws to himself.

Now, one week a month was hers to spend in the mountains, no thought of pack or anyone telling her where to go. Oh, but she still missed the camaraderie sometimes, sharing the thrill of running free, curling up with other warm, furry bodies around her...

So why now? What kind of god would have her mate a wolf? She swore she would never be a member of any pack again.

Her mother warned her over and over again that when the time came to mate, the choice wouldn't be hers, that it was preordained. Lyssa didn't believe that, but no one else ever sparked a reaction from her like this wolf.

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Wolfe...her stomach quivered and she felt her body softening at just the thought of him. *Maybe I should Google his name, see what comes up.*

Lyssa sat dipping the tea ball in her cup, waiting for the computer to boot up. A moment later, her nose twitched and the hackles on the back of her neck rose. Maybe she wouldn't have to Google him after all.

The jingle of the bells over the door announced his arrival.

Lyssa sighed and dropped the tea ball into the cup of water. *I can do this.*

She stepped into the front of the store and looked toward the door. *Where is he? I know it was him.* She frowned, turned back toward the kitchen, and screamed when a hand landed on her shoulder.

Without thinking, she gripped the hand, stepped into his side, and flipped him. Her eyes widened when she realized what she had done. *I guess it's not all about size after all.* She practically giggled until she looked down at him, lying there so still. Perhaps he got the breath knocked out of him when he landed.

She shifted from foot to foot, staring at him, waiting for him to move, to open his eyes.

"Wolfe. Wolfe, I'm sorry. You scared me." She ran a hand through her hair setting it all askew she was sure. "Come on Wolfe, you didn't land that hard," she whispered. She knelt down to check his pulse only to have her hand snared and drawn to

his chest. His eyes popped open, a grin spreading across his face.

Lyssa jerked back, trying to get free. "Okay, joke's over. You can let me go now." She struggled to straighten and pull her hand out of his grasp but instead found herself sprawled on top of him when he tugged her down.

"Easy kitty, no claws..."

It wasn't often she lost control, but the hand he held was definitely showing her claws. Their gazes clashed and Lyssa slowly drew them in. "You can let me up anytime."

Wolfe stared up at her, his pupils so dilated she could barely see any gold. His free hand slid from her shoulder to her neck, where he softly rubbed the back of his fingers under her chin.

Oh God, she was going to purr.

The smile that slid across his face told her he knew exactly what he was doing.

She let her claws out a little and started kneading his chest.

The smile slid into a grin and he moved his hand away from her neck. But not far.

Lyssa tilted her head and rubbed the side of her face against it, her tongue sneaking out to lick a finger. Mmmm...

She felt a low growl rumble through his chest. "Keep that up and we'll both be purring."

Lyssa drew her claws back in. "Let me up."

Wolfe's hand brushed through her hair, his palm rubbing against her cheek.

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“Stop that,” she managed to say before closing her eyes and rubbing against his hand. *Oh, talk about mixed messages.*

His hand went to the back of her neck and tugged her the rest of the way down across his chest. She lay flush against him, her lips a breath from his.

His scent was overwhelming. She took a deep breath and held it. *Oh what the heck...just a taste.* She leaned in the rest of the way and rubbed her lips against his.

* * * *

Wolfe rolled over, leaving his arm to cushion her head as he took control of the kiss, his tongue seeking entrance. She opened to him. His tongue swept in, searching out the taste that was uniquely Lyssa—a taste he had been craving a sample of for weeks.

His trip to Washington had taken longer than expected, only to find out the funding necessary for the wildlife preserve was still unavailable.

A throaty growl started deep inside. The hair thickened on his arms and chest. Much more of this and he wouldn't be responsible for his actions. He pulled his head back slightly. Lyssa's hand slipped around his neck, the prick of her claws holding him still. Her kneading reminded him of a mother wolf carrying a cub. Her tongue slipped inside his mouth. He wrapped his tongue around hers, tasting, sampling. The mewl from her throat had him instantly hard.

Wolfe rubbed against her, feeling the answering heat. He would have loved to continue, but not on the floor in her shop. That was one sure way to make her hate him. Easing away, he licked her lips one last time, fighting his own desire as much as hers.

He reached behind his neck and wrapped his fingers around hers, feeling the bite of her claws for a moment before they were pulled in. "I don't think this is the time or place to start this." His voice came out a low growl as he brushed the soft curls on the side of her head, earning another rub against his palm.

"Oh..." Lyssa jumped up and backed away. "I, I don't..."

Wolfe got up slowly and chuckled. "You don't what? You don't usually do this?" He gestured to the floor. "Or you don't want to do this anymore?" He stepped forward. For each step he took, she backed away.

He held out a hand and she backed away hissing. "Easy. Nothing's going to happen that you don't want to happen here." He ran a hand through his hair. The last thing he wanted was for her to shift and take off again. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just want to talk."

Lyssa looked down at the floor, and back up at him, her eyes a muted mix of green and gold. "You have a funny way of talking."

Wolfe backed up a little and leaned on the counter. "It wasn't just me talking funny."

She growled deep in her throat.

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She was pissed. Watching her eyes narrow and her nose twitch, he couldn't resist tugging the kitty's tail just a little more. "Look, I know this is sudden." Fighting another grin, he settled back and crossed his arms over his chest. "It's not my fault you don't like the hand that's been dealt to you. Right now, I'm not too sure having a cat for my mate will be good for my health either. You have some pretty sharp claws there." Tilting his head, he watched her nervously wipe her hands on her thighs.

"If you need some time to come to terms with things, I can stay away for a while." The fur sprouting on the backs of his hands was a testament to how much it cost him to make that offer. "But make no mistake, we will finish what we started here."

"Says who? You can just stay away period. I'm perfectly happy with my life the way it is. I don't need a mate."

The fur on the back of his neck stood up, a growl hovering in his chest. Luckily, before he could say anything he would regret, she continued.

"I won't take you into the mountains. You can find another tour guide." She turned to walk away.

Wolfe straightened. "Even if my goal is to create a sanctuary for certain cats nearing extinction in this area?" he asked quietly.

Lyssa hesitated and turned back, her eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

He stepped away from the counter. Lyssa moved back again.

“Don’t do that!” he snarled.

Her gaze darted away from his. “Do what?”

He gestured toward the door. “Run away from me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Her gaze slid back to his. “I’m not afraid of you.” The pulse in her throat visibly throbbed as she breathed in quick little pants like a small, frightened bird. She still looked poised for flight.

“Yeah, well then stand still.” He stepped forward slowly, expecting her to shift at any moment. A telltale hint of whiskers on her face tempted him to touch her again.

She held up a hand. “That’s close enough for whatever you have to say.”

“Do I need to show you how close you really want me?” he whispered.

Lyssa let out a breath that sounded more like a hiss. “Let’s not confuse the issues. What’s this about a cat sanctuary?”

Wolfe inched forward carefully, his gaze never leaving hers. “Lynxes and bobcats are slowly dwindling, all but disappearing from their native territory.” He lifted a hand to brush his knuckles along her cheek, holding his breath, watching for her to pull away.

“A lot of people think that’s a good thing,” she answered as she tilted her head and rubbed against his knuckles.

He breathed easier, his fingers opening, rubbing lightly. “Yeah until some other critter

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overpopulates the area and causes unforeseeable problems.”

Lyssa closed her eyes and purred as his fingers slid into her hair. Her pulse kicked up a notch. *Oh God, I can't think.* She grabbed his hand and held it away, taking a step back. She slowly released him. Licking her lips, she looked up. Their gazes collided. Heart pounding, she couldn't look away. “Don't touch me for a minute, okay.” She held a hand in front of her. “I can't think when you do that.”

Brushing her cheek one more time, he stepped back.

“Why me? How did you find me? I don't believe in coincidences. And I doubt if you just picked my name out of the phone book.”

He smiled. “Word of mouth is a much better recommendation, I must admit.”

“Whose?”

He stared at her for a moment, their gazes clashing in silent communication. He finally nodded. “Your father's pack...”

She pointed to the door, her hand not quite steady. “Get out. I don't want their business. I do fine on my own. I don't want to feel like I owe him anything, like he has any power to draw me back into the fold.”

Wolfe shook his head, exhaling loudly. “They didn't send me. All they did was recommend you. And by recommending you, I knew that you were either one of the pack, or close to someone near

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the top of the pack.” His gaze stayed on hers. “In this case, both.”

“I’m neither. Now...just go. I’m sure they can recommend someone else.” She swept a hand toward the door and turned away, stepping toward the back room.

“And if I told you it was your mother?”

Her footsteps slowed and hesitated. Lyssa’s heart stuttered. The ache of missing her family had her gripping the door frame, her hand fumbling in the curtain. She stared at the floor, took a deep breath, and turned around. Her gaze searched his.

Mama? Oh mama, I miss you.

She stepped back and sank onto the chair in the corner between the two rooms. “You talked with Mama?”

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Chapter Three

Lyssa so badly wanted to ask questions, to find out where Mama was when he talked to her.

Oh, to see her would be...bittersweet. To see the pack, to reconnect. But would she be able to leave them again? To go back into the fold and walk away? She was so afraid of losing her hard earned independence, but just the thought of the warmth of other bodies curling around hers, her brothers surrounding her, shielding her from harm, was enough to make her whimper.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath then stood. "What is it you're looking for and what are you trying to accomplish?" she asked as she stood and stepped toward the counter, keeping an eye on Wolfe as she got closer. She wanted to get as much space between them as possible while she was in this emotional upheaval.

He stepped cleanly in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders, having a different agenda apparently. She shivered at his touch.

"I am trying to get a certain area set aside either as protected national forest or a wildlife preserve. I need to scout out the area with someone who knows it well. I'm told you're the best." His large hands massaged her shoulders, his thumbs rubbing along her collarbone.

She was melting inside. The liquid heat made her want to rub against him and purr.

"I need to see the terrain, track the local wildlife, and document their habitats," he continued softly as he drew her closer. "Make sure the area would be well suited to relocating other animals that also are endangered. I need a broad enough spectrum to make it worth the budget costs."

Lyssa closed her eyes and swallowed. Being touched felt so good. Perhaps it had been too long. Maybe she needed to reconnect. She tried to speak, but only a scratchy whisper came out. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Why me?"

He drew her closer until she could feel his heat reaching out to her.

"You know the territory in a way no other guide does." His head lowered and his lips whispered over hers. "And you can give me insight no other guide has, not even the best tracker." His lips dropped to hers again. A soft touch then they were gone. She wanted more.

Lyssa bit down on her lip and opened her eyes. "What did Mama tell you?" she whispered. Her gaze searched his.

Wolfe's hand brushed alongside her face, curling around to her neck, his thumb rubbing against her jawbone. He stared at her a moment, his eyes dilating until the gold once again disappeared. "She told me that you could help me better than anyone else she knows. She said you

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roam this territory wider than even the pack does, and that you know it well.”

How did Mama know that?

“When did you talk to her?” Again, she searched his face.

“Last month. I met her at a meeting in D.C., but we’ve talked before. She’s very proud of you.” He brushed his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp. “It’s a small world, Lyssa, and we’re a small community. Many packs communicate with each other. Other members of your father’s pack have mentioned you, too.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead on his chest.

* * * *

Wolfe could feel the purr rumble through her as his hands continued their foray. Her hair was soft, softer at the nape of her neck where it felt more like fur than hair. Once again he felt her claws gently kneading, this time at his waist.

“I didn’t think they knew or cared where I was.”

“They’re your pack, your family. Someone will always be watching over you.” He held her quietly and slid his hands down her back, petting her slowly. He kissed the top of her head. “This is nice.”

She looked up at him, green cat’s eyes staring out from her pixie face.

Lyssa sighed. She pulled in her claws and stepped back as far as his arms would allow, sliding

her hands up his chest. Staring at her fingers, she considered her next words. "I'm not part of any pack." Her gaze lifted to his. "I swore I never would be again. I..."

His lips covered hers before she could finish, her hands crushed between them as he drew her closer. When she opened her mouth to speak, his tongue rushed in, stroking, teasing, dragging her down to that mindless place where all she could do was feel. He lifted his head and stared down at her, gentling his hold.

Once again his hand was in her hair as he held her to his chest. "You'll always be a member of the pack—even when you're not there."

The drum of his heartbeat mesmerized her. She could feel the words rumble, echoing through his chest as she leaned on him. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head and forced herself to step back out of his arms. Lyssa backed up another step and held out her hand.

"Let me think here." She eyed him warily as she stepped to the counter and picked up her pen. She flipped the appointment book to July.

Wolfe's finger caught the page before it completely settled. "June still has an open week."

She met his gaze. "I won't be available. That's why it's crossed off. I could take you out July fourth. I would have four days to give you, enough time to scout several areas so you could document wildlife habitats and populations."

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He flipped the page back, staring into her eyes. His hand brushed her cheek then dropped to the page, pointing at the last Monday of the month. "What about a day hike, just a scouting trip to tag areas we want to look into in greater depth? The full moon isn't until the following day. I would be out of your hair by then." His hand slid over her hair, rubbed her cheek again, and settled on the side of her neck, his thumb brushing against her jawbone.

The gold in her eyes intensified before she sighed and closed them.

With both hands wrapped around his, she brought his hand down to the counter and patted it gently. She stared at it for a moment, and lifted her gaze.

"One day." Taking a deep breath she reached for the pen. "How many will there be?"

"For that day? Just me."

Her gaze shot up to his. *No way*. There was no way she was going out into the wilderness with just him.

She started to shake her head. The hand he slipped around her neck stilled her as he lowered his head to rub his lips against hers.

Lyssa put a hand on his shoulder to push him away...or to hold on. She wasn't sure.

"Say yes," he whispered against her lips before his tongue dipped in.

She groaned as her claws began to knead his shoulder, not caring anymore that he won this round.

Wolfe saw the moment she was going to refuse. He was willing to settle for just one day with her, but there was no way he was waiting any longer to get to know her better.

He slid his hand behind her neck and met her lips as he drew her around the edge of the counter. The scent of her exploded in his head. His tongue went in search of another taste of her.

Long minutes later he pulled back slowly opening his eyes. Her cheeks flushed, breathing ragged, he held her tight against his growing response.

Her eyes opened and she stared back at him with a glazed look.

His thumb rubbed against her jawbone. "Say yes."

She swallowed hard and nodded before rubbing her cheek against his hand. She nodded again, took a deep breath and stepped back. "One day."

Wolfe wanted to push the issue, to go out there longer and gather all of the information he needed, but he would have to wait. He knew he couldn't push her anymore, yet. He reached out to rub his knuckles on her cheek but she wrapped her hands around his before he could touch her.

"I think you should go."

The pulse still throbbed in her throat as her breathing stuttered.

He opened his hand and rubbed his thumb along her fingers. Green eyes stared at him, a hint

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of fear mixed with the indecision there. Another moment and he would pull her into his arms and there was no way he was letting her go once he had her there. *Patience*. He could give her time.

He nodded once and strode out the door.

* * * *

Wolfe headed south, hoping there would be no one at the house when he got there. He needed some time to think, to plan. How could he possibly win her if she wanted nothing to do with the pack? How could she not want to belong to a pack? The support, extended family, was worth a hundred times the petty squabbles.

As he opened the door, the sound of laughter drifted down the stairs.

“Shaunna?”

Whispers, followed by the sound of scurrying feet spurred him into motion. Taking the stairs three at a time got him into the bedroom before anyone could make it out the window.

“Drop.” Wolfe stepped around the two girls who dropped to their knees, face down on the floor.

He slammed the window shut. The rods vibrated in the window frame, echoing through the room.

“What do you think you’re doing going through Shaunna’s clothes?” A growl hummed through him and both girls sank lower. “Get up.” He watched them stand slowly still looking down. *Sara*. He looked around the room. If *Sara* was here, *Shaunna* wasn’t far behind.

Sara lifted her gaze, her face a bright pink as she met his look. "We just came to get some of her stuff."

Wolfe crossed his arms, looking from one to the other. "Where is she?"

They looked at each other, throats bobbing as they each swallowed hard, but wouldn't meet his gaze. Shaunna must be holding a lot over their heads for them to disobey the Alpha of their pack.

"This has gone on long enough. Tell her if she wants to leave the pack to come get her stuff. I won't stop her."

"Tell her yourself, big brother."

His gaze shot to the closet where Shaunna appeared in the doorway. She took a step toward him and paused. She glanced at the other girls. "Go downstairs and grab something to eat."

Sara hesitated until Shaunna nodded toward the door. Her two friends scurried out of the room.

Shaunna moved to the end of the bed and sat down on the edge. She stared at her hands for a moment before looking up. Her eyes glistened with tears. "I don't want to leave the pack. I don't want to move out, but they say you have to get married to stay leader of the pack and that you'll never find someone as long as I'm here." She sniffed and then continued more firmly. "I don't want anyone else taking over. And I won't be the reason you don't find a mate."

Wolfe sighed and sat next to her. He covered the fingers plucking at the bedspread. "So that's why you stayed away? Because you think you're in

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my way?” He growled. “I’ll get married when I’m good and ready.” Green eyes and silver white hair flashed across his mind. “And whoever’s been filling your ears with this trash needs to talk to me. If someone wants to challenge me...”

“No, no, no, it’s just the girls say you can’t have a life with me here...well, and some new loudmouth who thinks he knows it all is telling everyone that an alpha needs a mate or he can’t lead the pack.”

“The girls are just jealous. And whoever the loudmouth is will probably get himself in trouble soon enough.” He tucked a finger under her chin and lifted it to face him. “This is your home, too. Even when I do marry, you will always have a place here. There’s enough room for both of us to raise families in this house and still never see each other if we don’t want to. Mom and Dad intended for all of us to live here together. Why do you think the house is so huge?”

Shaunna looked from her suitcase back to Wolfe as if uncertain.

“Put your clothes away, Shaunna. I don’t know where you’ve been the past few weeks, but a lot of people were looking for you, worried about you.”

Her gaze shot to his.

He chuckled as he put his arm around her shoulders and drew her against him. “If you were younger, I’d be spanking your butt for making me worry like that.” Wolfe grinned when she strained against his hold. “Instead, I just want you to

promise that you'll let me know if you intend to go anywhere again."

Shaunna's eyes searched his before she sniffed and nodded her head. "I figured you wouldn't even notice. You've been so busy in Washington, trying to get your funding..." She sighed and met his gaze. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused. Do you want to let the pack know I'm found, or do you want me to?"

Wolfe smiled. "I would bet half the pack already knows, and the other half will know soon without any kind of announcement." He squeezed her shoulder and stood up. "And I would expect Slade will be knocking on the door soon looking for an explanation from you."

Shaunna's eyes opened wide as a blush spread over her cheeks.

Wolfe chuckled when he heard the pounding on the door and glanced back at his sister. "I think that's for you."

Wolf!

Chapter Four

Lyssa got back from the trip with the Women's Corps more tired than she ever remembered being. Not that the hike had been difficult, she just hadn't slept very well.

She yanked her hiking clothes out of the pack and slammed them into the washer, stripping out of her shorts and tank top and tossing them on top of the pile. Next came socks and underclothes. She started the machine and padded back into her bathroom, comfortable in her own skin. Sometimes she wished she could live in her other world all the time, without the entrapments of society, happy with the skin on her back. *Or fur*, she thought with a grin.

The grin faded as she realized she could have that. The pack would welcome her back with open arms. Chet was long gone. Her father had chased him off soon after he heard what happened. But she didn't want to be taken care of and coddled either. She wanted to stand up for herself and have her own life, to prove that she could take care of herself, be somebody, without daddy pulling the strings.

She shook her head. *Those women stirred up these feelings.*

Granted, the group was made up of seasoned outdoors women, in good shape from their marine

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training...but they were still so caught up in appearances and status. Who cared that one had brand name boots and the other didn't? Or fashion shorts vs. whatever? You would think they'd have learned from serving in the military that possessions, the accoutrements were nothing. But the world had obviously skewed their priorities.

Didn't anyone appreciate the simple things in life? The things that really mattered?

The fathers and sons last week were great...until the fathers started one upping each other about jobs and houses and cars. They just couldn't leave that stuff back home and enjoy the connection they had to each other.

Why couldn't they all just take pride in the families and friends that were part of their lives? Didn't they know how special that was?

Lyssa stretched her arms up, tugging until she felt her back muscles release the pent up stress. Thank goodness she was on her own next week, well, most of the week anyway. She shivered when she thought about Monday, then set the thought aside. She needed to escape all the pettiness, get back to what was important: life and death...and love and family.

I miss you, Mom.

She had been thinking more and more about the pack, about her family. Maybe it was time to go home.

She stepped into the shower. *Damn Wolfe. I wasn't homesick until he came along and set me off balance.* She scrubbed her hair, and tilted her

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head back to rinse away the soap as well as the tears she wouldn't acknowledge.

Wolfe spent all day Saturday getting the house in order and word out to the pack leaders of the impending meeting. If anyone thought he wasn't fit to be Alpha of the pack he wanted to know now. If there were sides being drawn, he needed to know that, too. He'd find out today if there was a battle to be fought, and who was fueling the fire.

The door downstairs slammed. Before Wolfe could reach the top of the stairs Shaunna was yelling that the pack had arrived.

Wolfe met her gaze and winked as he started down the stairs. "Where's Slade?" he asked, knowing her beau wouldn't let her far out of his sight anytime soon.

"He's outside trying to keep everyone calm. They think you're stepping down."

"Anyone happy about that thought?"

Shaunna raised her eyebrows, surprise showing on her face before she laughed. "You're setting them up!"

Wolfe's smile spread as he stepped beside her and draped an arm over her shoulders. "Well, since I have it on good authority that there's some dissension in the ranks about an unattached alpha leading the pack, I thought I ought to find out how deep that goes."

She sighed. "Probably as far as every family with a marriageable female."

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“Well, if that’s where it all stems from, then I may be able to set them straight soon.”

Her startled gaze found his again. “You’ve found a mate?”

A grin spread across his face. “Yeah, I just have to convince her.” He chuckled and led her to the door. “Let’s get this straightened out first.”

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Chapter Five

Monday morning, Wolfe beat the sunrise. He glanced out at the milky dawn, his first thought—to share the day with Lyssa.

Now that pack issues were settled, he could focus on more important things. He pictured her heart-shaped face, green eyes challenging him. That was one confrontation he was looking forward to.

Grabbing a lightweight jacket from the closet, he put on his hiking boots before heading downstairs. He should be able to get back to Lyssa's shop by seven if he hurried.

In the kitchen, he pulled four water bottles from the refrigerator and loaded them into his backpack, tossed in some protein bars and a few apples, some dried fruit and nut mix, and filled his larger sports bottle with more water to carry on his belt while they hiked.

He left a note for Shaunna and was out the door before six.

Lyssa double-checked her pack, added a couple plums, plus a bag of grapes on top of the rest of the snacks. The apples and cheese at the bottom of the bag would stay cool and make a good lunch while they were hiking.

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She lifted the pack, weighing it and checking for balance then headed down the stairs to the shop. She grabbed her windbreaker off the hook and closed the door.

The knock on the front door caught her by surprise as she stepped into the back room, a glance at the clock reassuring her that she wasn't late. Definitely an early starter.

"Ready to go?" Lyssa asked as she opened the door, a smile plastered across her face. Determined to be pleasant and friendly today, she planned to keep her distance from Wolfe.

Easier said than done.

Wolfe's gaze travelled from the top of her head to the soles of her feet and swung back up to meet her look. "Almost."

Before she could protest, Wolfe's hands were on her shoulders drawing her close as he leaned in.

Insides quivering with need, Lyssa put a hand between them to cover his mouth before he could kiss her. She'd never make it through the day if she trembled every time he was near.

His lips were soft as they kissed her palm. A flick of his tongue and she yanked her hand away and jumped back.

"Stop it," she hissed. "If that's how you plan to spend the day..."

Wolfe held his hands up in mock defeat. "Just wanted to be sure you were awake." His gaze

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travelled over her one more time before he asked, "Are *you* ready?"

She stared at him, words dangling on the tip of her tongue. *I should cancel the trip now. There is no way I can spend the whole day with him...no matter how much I want to.*

She jerked her pack off the floor. "Pull your truck around back. We'll take mine."

For a moment he worried that she might back out. The relief at her words as she stormed off was incredible. He pulled in a deep breath and realized he had stopped breathing while he waited for her response.

Wolfe couldn't hold back a grin as he drove around the shop. Yeah, he had definitely overstepped good behavior. He would have to make amends for that. He licked his lips, her taste still on him where she had covered his mouth. He groaned at the thought of being with her all day and having to keep his paws to himself.

Lyssa sat in a large, silver SUV watching him as he parked beside her.

Wolfe grabbed his pack and locked up the truck.

"Shift the seat forward. You'll be able to stow the pack behind it," Lyssa said when he opened the door.

As soon as he buckled in, Lyssa put the truck in gear, her gaze on the traffic as she pulled out. She never once looked at him. "I've given some thought to the locations you wanted to look at, but

I think we should start in the higher terrain. The cats won't settle in the lower areas. Sure, they'll hunt there, but they'll climb back up over the rocks and find a nice cave to settle in."

When she didn't glance his way Wolfe remained silent. There was no way he was going to be the student to her teacher. Yes, she *was* the expert on the area, and he was more than willing to follow her lead—but on his terms.

"So..."

With more silence, the wait wasn't long before she turned to glance at him.

He met her look. "Thank you. If we're going to work together, you have to at least be able to look at me when you talk to me." He watched her profile as she checked the traffic around her, giving her the benefit of the doubt that she was a conscientious driver and not just trying to avoid him again. "I apologize for what happened back there in your shop. That was very unprofessional of me. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again during working hours." He wouldn't make any such guarantee for personal time though.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel, turning white before he saw her grip loosen. The breath she was holding was released slowly. She swallowed hard enough to be heard. *What was she thinking?*

She bit her lip then gave a sharp nod.

With her acquiescence, he was willing to give a little, too. "As far as terrain, you're probably right. You're the expert on the area. Plus

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you have more personal experience with the species.”

Her glance made him wonder if holding a tiger by the tail was very smart at all.

Lyssa wondered for the hundredth time what she was doing out here with Wolfe. Of all the stupid things she had done in her life, this was certainly tops on the list. Well, near the top anyway. She never went out alone with a single client for several reasons, her own safety being foremost. Not that she was worried about Wolfe hurting her. He had made it patently obvious what he wanted with her. She hadn't missed his stipulation of good behavior “during working hours.” If he was any other species she might have obliged. There was certainly enough chemistry between them to set the forest ablaze.

But her main concern was the first practical thought in her head since he walked in the door this morning. What if one of them got hurt? The injured one would have to be left behind while the other went for help. Not a good idea for the area she had in mind.

She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and frowned in concentration, trying to think of a good way to phrase the problem without making it appear she was backing out.

“What’s wrong?”

Lyssa snapped her head toward Wolfe, for a moment forgetting that he was actually sitting right beside her.

“This isn’t a good idea.” She could have swallowed her tongue. That nasty habit of speaking her thoughts out loud would be the death of her yet. This certainly wasn’t the way to start a discussion about the pros and cons of this venture.

At the sound of Wolfe shifting in his seat, she looked to see what he was doing. His back was against the door and he was facing her so their gazes met for an instant before she turned back to the road. He looked amused.

“Exactly what isn’t a good idea?”

Lyssa groaned in her head. Oh, this was so not the right timing. No way around it now. “Us going out on this hike alone.”

His silence drew her glance once again. With one eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face, he didn’t even have to voice a question. He knew she didn’t trust herself.

“If one of us gets hurt...”

“We won’t.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No.” She looked at him again before glancing at the road for a turnoff or overlook where she could pull over for this discussion. She wasn’t afraid of him...not really. “This is rough terrain we’re going to be covering and a sprained ankle or broken bone is far from unheard of, even with the most experienced hikers.”

“How often have you been hurt when you’re out here?”

“Never, but that doesn’t mean...”

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“And how often has anyone else been hurt when they’re out with you?”

She wanted to scream. “Never,” she answered, gritting her teeth.

“And what makes you think that today is the day that’s going to change?”

She snarled. “You never know when someone is going to get hurt. That’s why it’s called an accident.” He sounded so calm and sure of himself.

“Lyssa, we’re not young kids going out into the mountains unprepared.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t take chances.” She flicked her blinker when she saw a turnoff ahead. “I’m turning around.”

Just as quickly, Wolfe leaned over and turned it off. “Don’t.”

He covered her hand on the steering wheel when she moved to flick it back on. Gooseflesh rose on her arm. Wolfe squeezed her hand and sat back and Lyssa could breathe again.

“No one’s going to get hurt. It’s only a day hike. If you’re more comfortable, we could shift and cover the ground twice as fast. There would be even less chance of anyone getting hurt that way.”

Running free in the mountains with a partner...she sighed. “But we wouldn’t be able to talk.”

“We could compare comments on the drive back, and you could be on your way to wherever that much earlier.”

Lyssa chewed on her lip. It would be a good way to cover the territory. And he’d be able to see

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it from her perspective. She glanced at Wolfe. His face gave nothing away.

The freedom to run with a companion—to share the joy of running free—she couldn't resist.

After a couple hours of scrambling after Lyssa over the mountainside, Wolfe sat back and watched as she pounced from boulder to boulder. She was poetry in motion. The muscles rippled along her flanks as she paused, preparing to jump to her next perch. There was joy in each movement, her body flowing freely, her silver-white fur reflecting the sunshine.

Wolfe looked around. She was obviously right about the higher terrain being a cat's paradise. He knew her mother would also agree. The rock formations were perfect for a cat to run and stretch, enjoy the terrain, and the caves were obviously comfortable for nesting and easily defended. Not quite above the tree line, there was still enough foliage to support other life, a viable food chain.

The other advantage was that this part of the mountain wasn't readily accessible, therefore it was only the occasional hiker or die-hard camper they would be shutting out.

He scrambled up the slope after her, happy with what he had seen.

When they returned, Lyssa stepped behind the truck to dress. Yes, today was a day she would remember for quite some time. Wolfe was a

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wonderful running companion, letting her lead the way up and down the mountainside, sharing her joy in the freedom.

He was just pulling a shirt over his head as she rounded the hood of the truck. She stopped to stare while he couldn't see her. His abs rippled with the simple movements, his arms flexing as he tugged on the shirt. "So what did you think?" she asked a moment before he would see her gawking like a school girl.

His head poked through, and he tugged the shirt over his chest before stepping toward her. "I think you were right," he said, his hands on her shoulders. He moved to brush his fingers through her hair. "And I think it's an easy sell, not much disruption of the natural order of things. Relocating some animals from similar environments should be an easy transition, and marking the boundaries again would be no problem." His gaze roamed over her face, a smile spreading to his eyes as he rubbed her cheek then drew back. "Thank you for taking me up here today."

Lyssa stared up at Wolfe, her skin chilled at the loss of his hand. She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his, drawing them back to her cheek. She kissed his palm before releasing his hand. This day had given her a peace, a sense of companionship she was only now realizing how much she had missed.

"My pleasure," she answered with a smile. "Anytime you want to come up here to get away from the rat race just let me know."

Lyssa waved to Wolfe and headed into the shop after turning down his offer for dinner. It wasn't that she didn't want to spend time with him. It was more that she was afraid of how much she did want to be with him. For the first time in years she didn't want to be alone. But was she ready to make a commitment to anyone? Was she willing to give up her freedom? Would she even have to? Could love really conquer all?

She walked through the shop and stopped at the counter. She tucked the planner onto the shelf underneath, strode over and checked the lock on the door, and headed toward the back.

Freedom hummed in her veins.

She jogged up the stairs to finish packing her bag...not that she had to bring much. Her essentials were always packed and ready to go. Plus, today's bag hadn't been touched. One change of clothes to come back in would be fine. She chuckled as she tucked a pair of jeans and a T-shirt into her backpack with essential underclothes. What would her customers think? Those women who started out with a suitcase and had to whittle their clothes choices down to fit into a backpack they could carry. They would be horrified. Now Wolfe on the other hand...would probably be happy if she brought nothing at all.

The thought had her smiling as she zipped the bag closed.

Lyssa turned toward the stairs, the ringing of the phone catching her by surprise. She glanced at

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the door and set her bag down with a sigh. She had no personal line other than her cell phone, but the business line was always a potential priority. She was on the emergency services list for a reason. She couldn't stand the thought of ignoring a call for help. And calls after hours usually meant trouble...someone lost, or hurt.

"Wilderness Wanderings."

"Lyssa?"

"Speaking." She frowned. *Wolfe?*

"I just wanted to thank you again for taking the time to scout the area with me today."

She sighed and shook her head. "You already thanked me, Wolfe. I'm glad we could get started on it. But I have to go now. You caught me on my way out. I'm going to be late if I don't get a move on." She glanced out the window at the level of the sun. They would have gotten back much earlier if she hadn't had so much fun running up and down the mountainside.

"I won't hold you up long. I know we're scheduled to leave on Tuesday, I just wondered if you'd have any time available the day before? I'd like to go over the map in more detail before we head out, and it would be good to bring in my team for that."

"What time would you like to come in?" The time was available. Lyssa didn't even have to see the appointment calendar. She had purposely left Monday open so that she could go over the area maps herself.

“Can I leave a message on your machine with the time?”

“That’ll be fine. I’ll talk to you as soon as I get back.”

His voice dropped. “See you soon.”

The tone of his voice vibrated through her. She swallowed hard so she could respond. “See you next week.”

Lyssa locked up, hopped in her SUV, and crossed her fingers as she pulled out. *Oh please, let the traffic be light.* As long as there were no delays, she could just make it to her favorite site before dark if she hurried.

She drove back into the mountains her mind going over the day, not just the time spent checking out the terrain, but their time together in the truck. On the way up, it had been stilted between them, her fault for trying to hold him at a distance. The ride home had been much more relaxed. The light touches, the easy camaraderie of like minds.

She had a lot of thinking to do this week.

Lyssa followed the dirt road into the mountains until she came to an open area where she could leave the truck. She locked up, tucked the keys in the wheel well, and jumped into the back of the truck to shift. Leaping down, she scrambled over familiar terrain until she reached the caves she thought of as her second home.

She smelled wolves but didn’t sense any danger. She settled in for the night. In the morning, she would head further up the mountain.

Wolf!

Chapter Six

Wolfe wanted to follow Lyssa, but seeing the uncertainty in her eyes, he didn't want to push. She could have this week to herself but it would be the last time she went away alone. This would give him the time to make sure everything was settled with the pack before he turned his full attention on her. He wasn't worried about his position as Alpha, there were always younger, more aggressive wolves to face off against, but the fact that a newcomer bothered Shaunna left him uneasy.

It was dark by the time Wolfe got home, but lights blazed from the house, reassuring him that Shaunna had indeed stayed. He smiled, anxious to find out how she had fared with Slade.

"You don't have to tell Wolfe. I'm fine!"

Shaunna stormed into the hallway as Wolfe let himself into the house, hearing the voices before he got the door open.

"Don't have to tell me what?" he asked as he closed it.

Slade stepped out of the family room, a scowl on his face. He opened his mouth to speak but closed it when Shaunna turned and glared at him.

Wolfe looked from one to the other, set his bag down, and crossed his arms over his chest.

From the stubborn look on Shaunna's face, he decided Slade would be the easier one to get an answer from. He slipped into alpha mode without any conscious thought. "What's going on?"

Slade glanced at Shaunna and back to Wolfe. "There's a loose cannon in the pack, trying to start trouble, saying he'll be the next Alpha—and hitting on every female he deems available."

Wolfe snapped his gaze to Shaunna. "Did he touch you?"

"No," she answered quickly.

"Not for lack of trying," Slade countered.

Wolfe felt like he was at a tennis match, his gaze going back and forth between them. "In my office." He glanced at Shaunna's stubborn countenance. "Now."

She huffed and flounced into his office, slumping into a chair while Slade and Wolfe followed more slowly.

Wolfe settled in the chair behind his desk and stared at Shaunna while she looked everywhere but at him. "Tell me what happened," he said quietly.

Her gaze snapped up to his and away again, passing quickly over Slade.

He stood quietly by the door as if he expected her to bolt, or try to.

"Shaunna..."

"Look, it was nothing. He grabbed for me and I elbowed him in the gut."

"And he was going after her again, looking none too happy, until I stepped in front of him."

Wolf!

Shaunna glared at Slade and crossed her arms over her chest looking away once more.

“What’s his name?” Wolfe asked as he stood up. “And where can I find him?”

Chapter Seven

Lyssa sighed as she turned in to Wilderness Wanderings. Normally, she would feel rejuvenated after a week away, ready to face the world, but five days and too many miles to count left her feeling tired and lonely. By the time Sunday had rolled around, she was ready to head back.

Stepping in the back door of Wilderness Wanderings, she decided to check the schedule. Wolfe said he would call and since there was no message on her cell phone, she wondered if he had called here and scheduled the appointment.

She walked into the front office and sitting in the middle of the counter was a large glass bowl filled with a variety of ferns and Trilliums, their large white petals overflowing the rose colored bowl, their centers a starburst of color. A card stood prominently in the center.

They reminded me of the mountain—and you.

Lyssa stared at the card for a moment, flipped open the appointment calendar, and picked up her phone.

“Are you home?” Wolfe asked without greeting. He couldn’t wait to have his arms around her to say hello properly.

Wolf!

Holding the phone to his ear, he got into his truck and closed the door.

“Yeah, I just got in. I was checking the schedule to see if you had called with a time when I saw your surprise.”

Wolfe grinned, liking the fact that he could hear the smile in her voice. He started the truck, anxious to get back even though he knew he wouldn’t see her tonight. Frustrated with the rogue in the pack and the trouble he’d been causing, Wolfe was happy to be going back and couldn’t wait to see Lyssa in the morning.

Lyssa lifted the shade to flip the OPEN sign in the window and barely held back a scream when she saw a fist on the other side. She slapped a hand to her chest, her heart pounding as she met Wolfe’s surprised look. Trying to calm her breathing, she turned the lock and yanked the door open.

“You scared the living daylights out of me,” she screeched at him.

His grin did nothing to calm her temper, adrenaline still pounding through her system.

Wolfe held up a doughnut bag and a tray of coffees from a nearby shop. “I come with peace offerings.”

Lyssa stomped into the shop, pushing brochures aside to make room on the small, round table where they would be having their meeting. Maps were already pinned on the corkboard, the area they had checked out circled and highlighted.

Wolfe set down the coffee and doughnuts and walked over to glance at the maps. His finger traced a line to a point south of the area in question, seeming to measure the distance.

Lyssa stepped over to him looking from the map back to Wolfe questioningly.

He tapped a spot on the map and smiled. "Nice spot. I'll have to take you there sometime."

The sound of the bell over the door distracted Lyssa. Wolfe invited his team in. Soon they were all seated and discussing what the area could support and how it would affect the surrounding territories.

By the time the meeting broke up, they had a good idea of what they needed to look into for a complete feasibility study.

"Join me for lunch?"

Lyssa dumped the scraps of paper into the trash and cleared away the coffee cups and napkins. She turned to find Wolfe right behind her. "Didn't we just finish breakfast?" she asked with a grin.

"I've missed you," he said, his hand stroking her cheek.

Lyssa sighed and closed her eyes, rubbing against his hand. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and looked from his eyes to his lips before leaning forward. He met her halfway, his lips brushing against hers. He paused only long enough to draw in a deep breath before deepening the kiss. He pulled her closer.

Wolf!

“Did you miss me too...a little?” His gaze searched hers, a faint smile bending his lips.

She closed her eyes again, leaning her forehead on his chest. “What am I going to do?”

Wolfe’s hand rubbed her back, brushing up to the nape of her neck and the soft hair there, tugging until she lay her head on his chest. “About what? Us?”

She lifted her head and looked at him. “I don’t want to like you. I don’t want to get involved with you.” She brushed her hand across his chest. “But I can’t seem to help myself,” she whispered.

Wolfe smiled and lifted her chin for a gentle kiss. “We’ll take it slow.” He paused while he gazed into her eyes. “Don’t be afraid. It’ll all work out.”

The hike in the mountains was everything he hoped for. Lyssa was an excellent scout, pointing out everything from vegetation and the type of wildlife it could support, to the water supply and the flow patterns left from previous seasons, to the marks left by climbers’ pitons.

By day, she was an endless source of knowledge. In the evenings, she sat back and left them to discuss the information she had provided, only commenting when asked a direct question.

On the first night, her sleeping bag was the furthest away from the fire, setting her apart. On the second night, he laid his bedroll beside hers before going to sit near the campfire for a discussion of the day’s discoveries.

Wolfe walked back to where Lyssa lay staring up at the stars, her hands behind her head. He crouched, running a finger down her cheek. "What do you have planned for this weekend?"

Her gaze searched his as she covered his hand. "Nothing much. Probably catching up on a lot of paperwork that I haven't been in the office to do, checking over the schedule..."

"Come meet my family."

Her gaze flew to his as she propped herself up on her elbows. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

Wolfe sat on the edge of her sleeping bag, leaving little room for her to move.

"And why not? My sister can't wait to meet you."

"You've told her about me?" She tilted her head and studied his face. "Why?"

Wolfe smiled and rubbed his fingers through her hair, tugging gently then setting a hand down on each side of her head. "You know why..."

She shook her head, stared up at him, and looked away before she spoke. "Nothing's changed. I like my independence too much to have to answer to—"

Wolfe's lips covered hers, rubbing softly until she opened. He sipped at her, licking her lips, tangling his tongue with hers. Withdrawing when she whimpered, he stared until she looked up at him. Her eyes flicked toward the fire and Wolfe tilted her head back to face him. "They won't look, and they certainly won't say anything. I value my

Wolf!

privacy, and I trust the men who work closely with me.” He brushed a hand over her cheek, leaned forward for one more slow, teasing kiss, and sat back up. Her hands fell from his shoulders where they had been kneading once again.

“Can you tell me that you don’t feel anything? Will you just walk away when this project is finished and wave goodbye like you did last Monday?” He stared down at her seeing her hesitation. “I don’t think so.” He caressed her face until she closed her eyes and rubbed against his hand. “I fall more in love with you every minute that we spend together. I don’t want to go home without you...and I don’t think you want to be alone anymore.”

Her gaze lifted to his, staring at him as if no one had ever touched her heart. Sadness crept back into her eyes and she shook her head slightly. “It’s too much, too soon. I can’t wrap my mind around the fact that you’re Alpha of your pack and I would have to give up everything I’ve built here.” She looked away. “You have no idea how your pack would react to a non-wolf being your mate...and I don’t think I can live through that again. Why can’t we just go on awhile and see where this goes?”

He gripped her shoulders as if to shake her and sighed. He ran a hand over her cheek. “I would never ask you to change who you are. And you don’t know how my pack would react. Obviously your mother and father have done fine—”

Marie Beau

“You don’t know what they went through to get there. The years of resentment toward my mother nearly killed her...and me. I won’t do it.”

Lyssa rolled away from Wolfe. “We’d better get to sleep. We need to get an early start tomorrow.”

Her snuffle nearly broke his heart. How could he convince her that it could work out?

Wolf!

Chapter Eight

As they made their way back down the mountain, Lyssa's silence grew oppressive. She walked quickly, her footing sure, but with none of the informative chatter from yesterday.

His men knew him well and stayed as far back as possible. Wolfe knew they were afraid he was going to blow, and they didn't want to be in range of any fall out. He didn't blame them. He could feel the pressure building.

When they reached the vehicles, Wolfe tossed his keys to David, his right hand man. "Leave it behind the shop with the keys under the seat. I'll see you two at the house over the weekend."

Lyssa looked from Wolfe to his friend and nodded toward his truck. "You can ride back with them..."

He stepped forward and climbed into her vehicle. "I'm riding with you."

Lyssa looked like she wanted to toss him out. *Let her try.*

After a moment's hesitation she cranked the engine and put the truck in gear, not looking toward him again.

She bit her lip and stared at the road. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? Why did it

have to be all or nothing? She loved her shop, loved staying upstairs after a long trek and having no one to answer to when she got back a day late.

Of course, how many times did she get back late and wish there had been someone to worry about her, to check if everything was okay? Things had worked out but there was always a chance of something happening that she couldn't handle alone.

After quite awhile, Lyssa glanced at Wolfe and found him staring at her. Still he didn't say a word. She waited another minute, the silence eating at her. "Why ride with me if you have nothing to say?"

"Oh, I have plenty to say, I just wanted to wait until we were well on our way and my men had passed us so you couldn't leave me on the side of the road for them to pick up."

She glanced at him and looked ahead at the taillights disappearing down the mountain. She smirked. "Maybe you should have made sure they were still behind us to pick you up if you're that worried."

He settled back against the seat, the crackle of his windbreaker loud against the upholstery.

"You've been a bear all day, all that bottled up frustration...come home with me this weekend."

Lyssa gritted her teeth. "I'm busy."

"No you're not. Stop running away from me."

Wolf!

Whiskers tickled her lip, and she flexed her fingers, claws catching on the vinyl steering wheel cover. "I'm not running away. I have things to do."

"Like what?"

"None of your business. I'm not going home with you. Some other time...maybe."

"I shook you up last night. I'm sorry." She shook her head. He went on as if he hadn't seen it. "But this attraction isn't going away. No matter how long you try to avoid it, it will still be there keeping you up at night and haunting you through the day. I heard you tossing and turning last night—and everyone felt your frustration today."

"I was uncomfortable. There was a rock under my pad." There wasn't, but he didn't have to know that.

"Yeah, right. You lead trips out here week in and week out and you're telling me you didn't spot a rock where you laid your sleeping bag?"

"So I missed it."

"Try again. And why were you such a bear on the way back down. Oh wait, let me guess, you didn't sleep well because of the rock so you're tired. Seems to me you should have gotten up and moved."

Lyssa clutched the steering wheel so hard her fingers were leaving imprints.

"If you don't want to walk the rest of the way back I would advise you drop it."

Lyssa punched a CD into the player and turned the volume up. A minute later, she turned it back down as the bass pounded in her skull.

Marie Beau

Chapter Nine

Wolfe pulled open the door to his truck and tossed his pack inside as he watched Lyssa pull out of the parking lot after dropping him off. If he hadn't stepped back, she would have probably run over his feet.

He grabbed his keys from under the seat and stepped up into the truck.

If the mountain wouldn't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed would have to go to the mountain.

Wolfe followed her, staying well back. Traffic was light, and the last thing he wanted was for her to spot him.

Lyssa watched in her rear view mirror for a few miles before she convinced herself Wolfe hadn't followed her. She hummed along with the radio as she followed the twisting road up the mountainside, the next peak over from where they hiked. She could practically drive it with her eyes closed—not that she would. You never knew when some idiot might be coming down the mountain and take a curve too wide. She had seen it happen too many times, thank goodness never when she was taking the curve at the same time.

As she turned off-road, another vehicle rounded the curve behind her. *Hmmm...I wonder*

Wolf!

where they're going. Not much up here unless they're real climbers and they're planning to get an early start after camping overnight.

She parked the truck in the shadow of a large overhang, grabbed her backpack, and locked up. Adjusting the straps, she stepped down onto the trail that meandered down the mountainside a little way then started a steep climb.

At one point, she thought she heard another vehicle, but when she stopped to listen there was nothing. Complete silence. She didn't have a lot of time to stand still, so she continued on as dusk waned, wanting to be inside the cave before true darkness hit.

The moon was bright in the sky, dispelling some of her fear of walking the path in total darkness. The dark didn't bother her nearly as much as the wildlife that came out in it.

Shifting with the pack on her shoulders wasn't fun. She'd been through that once before. She liked this pack and didn't plan on buying another one anytime soon and shifting was hell on anything she was carrying.

A sound on the path behind her had Lyssa picking up her pace and shifting her pack to one arm—just in case. Now the problem was whether she should go straight to the cave or lead whatever it was away...

Wolfe trotted along, happy to stay far enough behind Lyssa that she wouldn't know he was there. But where on earth was she going? And

why didn't she just shift at the truck like he did? There was no clothing on the seat when he glanced inside the vehicle so she must be on foot still.

He slowed to listen. There was a slight rustle ahead on the path. Thank goodness she *hadn't* shifted. Then he would have had to keep her in sight because she wouldn't make a sound.

His ears pricked forward. Silence. He stopped and dropped low to the ground, moving slightly off the path into the trees.

Her scent was in the air—not cat, just Lyssa.

A moment later, she started moving again at a faster pace.

He must have made some kind of noise that alerted her to the fact that she was being followed. Ah well, she would find out soon enough anyway.

* * * *

Lyssa set the pack inside the cave and tucked it into the alcove. The heck with misleading him—or whoever it was. Just let her shift and she could outrun whatever was out there.

As soon as the pack was out of her hands she crouched down to shift. The usual tickle of whiskers went unnoticed as she hurried through the shift not wanting to be caught in the cave with no way out.

At the opening, she lifted her nose to scent the air. Nothing...no, a slight scent...couldn't be—wolf...Wolfe. Her eyes scanned the forest around the cave. There. To the right. Golden eyes blinked at her.

Wolf!

Lyssa leaped over the nearest outcropping and raced off to the left, up the steep incline. She had kept it slow when they had gone out together. There was no holding back now. There was no way he could keep up. Her claws scrabbled at roots and clumps of brush for a hold to keep climbing. Heart pounding, she didn't dare take the time to look back although the sound of pursuit was growing fainter. Higher and higher she went until she reached a ledge where she lay panting. A clatter of tumbling rocks echoed quite a ways down the slope.

Wolfe wasn't built for this kind of climb, but eventually he would make it this far. Lyssa didn't plan to be waiting. She stood and stretched, arching her back. Too bad her furry face couldn't show the grin she was feeling.

She jumped to the next outcropping, a jump he'd never be able to make, and trotted onto the narrow path among the mountain scrub brush. The small ledge she had napped on last time wasn't too far. She would settle there for the night.

* * * *

Wolfe scrambled for a hold on the loose stones, his paws catching on roots and brush. Lifting himself up the side of the mountain by sheer strength, his hindquarters heaved when he had solid footing, pushing him up a few more feet. Panting, he paused on a boulder and searched for a path to follow, an easier route. Nothing. She certainly wasn't making this easy. He leaped to the next boulder before having to claw his way up more

of the treacherous mountainside. By the time he reached the large ledge, he realized she was long gone. Her scent was just a lingering trace as he tried to follow it along the path. Quite a while later he slowed, his eyes well adjusted to the dark. He saw a faint shadow on a ledge, tucked back from the path, nearly out of sight. Each step closer gave him a clearer scent, making his heart race.

He stood and stared at Lyssa, curled tightly in a ball, her chest rising and falling sweetly with each breath. She was wedged between the ledge and a stone shelf above her, with just inches to spare. He couldn't fit in with her if he tried, but she wouldn't be able to slip past him. He settled down to groom himself, happy to wait for morning, then curled into a ball at the entrance to her little nest. His head settled on his fluffy tail, a feeling of contentment lulling him to sleep.

Wolf!

Chapter Ten

Lyssa woke with a start, knocking her head against the stone above. Ears laid back, the scruff of her neck stood up as she tilted her head. Low rumbles sounded from a group of animals not far from her perch.

The growl of a cat perked her ears to attention.

Creeping to the edge of her hideaway, she crouched, ready to pounce. Wolfe was there. His auburn pelt made him recognizable even in a pack. His scent seemed to linger on the ledge with her, but she had no time to think about that.

Two large, snarling gray wolves circled around Wolfe slowly. Neither was bigger than Wolfe, but two against one could leave him in trouble. Heart pounding, she tensed, ready to jump into the fray, not even questioning why she would rush to his defense.

Where was the cat? She glanced around the periphery until she spotted the silvery fur of an older lynx. Their gazes met across the expanse...Mother.

She growled again. Her throaty roar held the two wolves back. *How could that be?* Her mother had never had any power in the pack. But it was obvious the grays were obeying her as they stepped

back and stood on point just watching Wolfe, their muzzles quivering with snarls.

Lyssa watched his reaction.

Wolfe stood poised, eyeing both opponents, and glanced at Mother. A moment later, he followed her mother's gaze and met Lyssa's look.

He stepped hesitantly toward her, glancing over his shoulder with each step. The two other wolves bristled but didn't move as Mother issued another low growl.

After a couple slow steps, Wolfe trotted up the hill, never losing eye contact with Lyssa.

* * * *

Less than a foot separated them before Wolfe stopped. He watched her, wanting nothing more than to rub his fur against hers, to lick her neck, to smell her sweet scent. Hopefully, the rumble in his chest couldn't be mistaken for anything but the desire that was coursing through him to claim her.

The approach of the other wolves had dragged him out of a sound sleep, their snarls conflicting with his peaceful slumber, making him want to protect his own. Being close enough to breathe in her scent all night was a balm to the beast in his soul that had kept him awake the past few nights. No one would take her away from him.

The standoff hadn't been about fighting over Lyssa, but rather protecting her. Once he was awake, he understood that. This was her father's pack and she was one of them whether she admitted it or not. But they had no way of knowing

Wolf!

he wasn't a threat to her. No claims had been made. And he wasn't sure how she would react if he marked her as his mate.

He took a step forward, then another, his gaze still locked with hers, until he was within reach of her deadly claws. He blinked and turned his head to the side to rub against her. Wolfe felt the shudder go through her before the low rumble of her purr eased his fears. He licked the side of her face before stepping back and turning to the witnesses.

The two grays sat back on their haunches and glanced at the older cat. When Wolfe followed their gazes he could have sworn Lyssa's mother nodded with a twinkle in her eyes.

Lyssa stepped forward and nudged Wolfe aside. She continued toward the clearing until she touched noses with her mother. They brushed alongside each other, and Lyssa circled back to rub against her mother once again. Much as Wolfe had done, Lyssa licked her mother's cheek.

The two grays yipped their excitement and glanced at Wolfe.

He read the invitation in their eyes before looking back at Lyssa and her mother, who were now watching him. He heaved a sigh and trotted down to join them. Before he was foe, now he was accepted. The way of the pack was as familiar to him as brushing his hair. Thank goodness her mother recognized him before blood was drawn. He would hate to have to hurt one of her brothers.

Marie Beau

Although he hadn't planned on meeting the whole family this soon, it would have happened eventually. Hopefully, Lyssa would see things the same way.

* * * *

"Hey Wolfe, here's a pair of jeans that should fit you..." Brian called from outside the bedroom door.

"I've got a sweater that'll be good for you, too," Mark commented as he tossed the sweater in.

Wolfe caught the sweater at the same time as the jeans landed at his feet.

"After you're dressed come on downstairs."

"Dad's waiting in the study."

Wolfe shook his head. They must have been quite a handful growing up. Not that they were done yet, it seemed. Their juvenile tendencies still shone through.

Leaning over from behind the door, he picked up the pants and looked at the clothes in his hands. "Thanks, I'll be down in a minute." He closed the door as they walked past.

The brothers joked, their voices carrying loudly from the bottom of the stairs.

Wolfe stared at the door for a minute, then stepped into the jeans. He pulled them up and buttoned them—a little loose, and a little short, but they would do. The sweater was a perfect fit.

Glancing in the mirror, Wolfe brushed his hair back with his fingers and shrugged. It would have to do. Not exactly the way he would have

Wolf!

liked to present himself to her parents but stragglers couldn't be choosers.

The mountain view outside the window caught his attention as he was about to leave the room. It was amazing how close the house was to Lyssa's favorite spot. He snickered. Well, not so amazing when he thought about the power her father wielded. Of course he would find a place where he could keep tabs on her, make sure she was safe. Any good father would try to do the same. He would certainly do it for his own pups, when he had them, if any strayed too far from home.

He had only gone down the top two steps when raised voices made him hesitate to join the fray.

"And just how long have you owned this house? And why didn't I know about it? I'm in these woods all the time..."

"At least once a month," a male voice chimed in with a chuckle, "and usually more like once a week."

Sounded like Brian. He apparently had a lot to learn about handling irate females.

"What? Are you having me watched?" She whirled around, her gaze meeting Wolfe's as he came down the stairs. "And I suppose you knew about this?"

He narrowed his gaze. *Oh no, I am not getting dragged into this.* He glanced at her father and back at her. "Knew about what? This house? That they would be out there today? What?"

Stopping in front of her, Wolfe met her furious glare. “I didn’t know anything about them.” He reached to brush the hair back from her face and she slapped his hand away—or tried to, but he caught her wrist.

Wolfe looked at her father and mother for a moment then back at Lyssa. They seemed to be wearing identical grins. “Excuse us a minute.” He tugged a sputtering Lyssa along behind him into the next room.

Face to face, she sneered and pulled against his grip, trying to free her wrist. “Let go of me. I will not be treated like a child,” she hissed.

Wolfe narrowed his eyes but didn’t release her. “Then I won’t say the obvious.” He watched her jaw tighten, could practically hear her teeth grinding. “The fact that your father has kept track of you just shows how much he loves you. Regardless of whether you like it or not, he is still your father, and still deserves to be treated respectfully.”

“Says one alpha of another.” Lyssa looked toward the door. “He could have sent me flowers—or cards. Or hey, calling would have been good.”

Wolfe tugged on her arm until she met his gaze. He saw her flinch but didn’t let go. *Did I hurt her?* “Why? So you could tell him to keep his nose out of your business?”

“Speaking of my business, just what are you doing here anyway? Were you following me?”

“And if I was?”

Wolf!

She stared at him, then heaved a sigh, and finally dropped her gaze.

He let go of her wrist, watching to see what her next move would be.

She took a step away and closed her eyes. She opened them to stare out the window into the forest behind the house. "This is my territory, where I escape to when I need to get away."

Wolfe stepped in close behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, resting his head on hers when she finally leaned back into him. "I know." One arm wrapped around her waist, holding her close and rubbed her opposite arm. He felt the tension drain out of her. "We all need a place to get away to. I'll take you to mine sometime. It's south of here, near Tupper Lake."

She nodded her head and heaved another sigh. She lifted a hand to his arm and started kneading.

He could feel the purr rumble through her softly as he continued to rub her arm. Wolfe breathed in her scent as they stood quietly staring out at the trees.

"Where will I go now when I need to run?"

"Shhh." He kissed the top of her head then turned her in his arms. "You don't have to go anywhere else." His hand rubbed her back as she stared up at him. He kissed her softly and drew her against him. One hand drifted up into her hair, nudging her head against his chest.

"I can't stay here. I don't belong. I don't belong anywhere."

He felt dampness on his shirt and tilted his head back to see her face. His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb sweeping tears away. Wolfe leaned down and covered her lips with his own, his tongue sliding along the seam of her lips, tasting the salt from her tears.

Lyssa opened to him, tilting her head as her tongue joined his in play for a moment before her hand touched his face and she slowly withdrew, leaning back to stare into his eyes.

“I can’t do this.” She shook her head, her eyes glistening with unshed tears as she backed away. “I can’t. I won’t be part of a pack again. I can’t.” She ran from the room before he could respond.

Wolf!

Chapter Eleven

Wolfe hurried to follow Lyssa but was flanked quickly by her brothers. He glanced over his shoulder as they crowded him into the study. She disappeared at the top of the stairs.

He shoved Brian away and turned to follow her.

“Leave her.” Her father stepped away from the window. “I didn’t expect her to accept this easily, but I had hoped...”

Wolfe jerked around to face the Alpha of her pack. “Didn’t expect it? I should hope not. I’ve only known your daughter for a short time, and I could have told you what her response would be to this.” Regardless of his respect for the other alpha, Wolfe could barely hold back his snarl.

The silence in the room was stifling as the two men stared at each other, neither backing down.

“It wasn’t me that sent her fleeing up the stairs,” her father said quietly.

“And it wasn’t me that sent watchdogs to keep an eye on her.” He looked at the two brothers who were studying the carpet. “Watchdogs too stupid to keep their mouths shut when confronted with an unhappy sibling.”

Brian bristled, but a look from his father sent his eyes back to the carpet.

“Yes, they still have a lot to learn.” He nodded his head toward the door. “Why don’t you two go see if your mother needs any help?”

They both looked from their father to Wolfe. “What about him?” Brian asked with a nod toward Wolfe.

The snarl on their father’s face resembled a growling wolf. “Get out of here before I let him show you how an alpha treats someone who slights his mate.”

Wolfe met his gaze and nodded slightly in acknowledgement of the truth between them.

“Go.”

The boys scurried from the room.

“With all due respect sir, I’d like to go see if I can find Lyssa.”

“Call me Bruce,” he said as he waved to a chair, seating himself behind the large mahogany desk. “I think you’ll do better if you leave her alone for a bit.” He stared down at his hands. “I hope...”

Wolfe stared from Bruce to the door and slowly settled into the leather chair facing the desk and doorway at the same time.

“How long have you known her?”

“A month, give or take...not that it matters.”

Her father chuckled as he sat back and locked his hands over his waist. “I know how that feels. One whiff of Elise and I was hooked. Course it took some convincing after that for her. I suspect you have your work cut out for you. Lyssa isn’t your average feline. As a matter of fact, if she were a

Wolf!

boy she would definitely be my second in command.”

“Why isn’t she?”

They stared at each other a moment before Bruce shook his head and sighed. “It’s not because she’s a girl. Nor because she’s feline. It’s because she wants nothing to do with the pack. As soon as she finished college, she set out on her own. Had to prove that she could make something of herself—as if any of us had any doubt.” He continued after a moment. “I would have placed her in a position of management in any one of my firms, but that wasn’t good enough.”

Wolfe shook his head and smiled. “She wouldn’t want anything handed to her. She had to prove she could do it on her own.”

Her father nodded quickly. “And she has. For a start-up business, she’s doing extremely well. If she would accept it, I know of several travel agents that I would love to refer to her when they’re looking for that sort of thing for a client, not that I haven’t mentioned her a time or two to business associates—or even to start a tour package or something. Not a handout, but she would see it that way.”

Wolfe chuckled. “Oh, yeah.” He sat back with a grin and crossed his arms. “Lyssa practically kicked me out of her shop when she found out I heard about her from someone in your pack.”

“You did?”

Wolfe eyed her father, measuring his innocent pose.

Bruce held up his hands. "The only reference I've heard was something about a cat sanctuary." He raised an eyebrow.

Wolfe nodded his head.

A sharp bark burst out of Bruce as he laughed. "That must have been pretty hard for her to swallow. A wolf protecting her habitat..." He shook his head. "What I wouldn't have given to be a fly on the wall for that conversation."

The kisses that preceded the conversation were much more memorable to Wolfe than any words they actually said. Wolfe cleared his throat and shifted in his seat before he responded. "Obviously I'm not the only wolf interested in protecting her habitat."

Bruce snorted. "Too bad she can't see it that way. Always was stubborn that one...and pig headed, too." He lifted his eyes to Wolfe. "She's a lot like me. You're sure gonna have your hands full."

"I'm looking forward to it," Wolfe said as he slowly stood up. "And I think she's had enough time to stew about this on her own. I'll see if I can find her."

Bruce stood and nodded. "Her mother gave her the room three doors down to the left at the top of the stairs. I'll look forward to talking more with you later."

Wolfe's long strides had him at the door before her father finished speaking. He glanced over his shoulder and nodded to her father, pulled the door open, and headed up the stairs.

Chapter Twelve

He paused at the top of the stairs. The sound of voices drifted up from the kitchen area, the boy's voices as well as a softer voice. Their mother. He stood and listened for a moment longer to be sure there was no other feminine voice.

He turned left and in a few long strides he stood at her door. A light tap elicited no response so he knocked again, a little louder. "Lyssa, we need to talk." He pushed the door open, waiting for a snarl or crash.

Silence.

"Lyssa?" He peered around the door—nothing. Where had she...he stepped across the threshold with his long strides only to stop short at the neatly folded pile of clothes on the floor beside the open window. "Damn." He hit the hallway at a dead run, his footfalls heavy.

"What's all the..."

"She's gone, damn it. Went out the window in her room." He stormed past her father where he stood in the doorway of the study. "I knew I should have gone after her."

Her mother and brothers stepped into the hallway as his hand landed on the doorknob.

"We'll go with you."

He pulled the door open. "You've done enough."

Brian put a hand on Wolfe's shoulder. "We're sorry, man." He looked back at his brother. "She's our big sister, and sometimes we just don't know when to quit." He met Wolfe's gaze, looking like he had grown up fast in the few minutes gone by.

Wolfe looked from one to the other, regret evident on their faces, grins and smirks replaced by concern. "Okay, show me her favorite spots—where she goes to run free because if I know Lyssa that's all she's thinking about—running so fast that her feelings can't catch up with her."

"I'm going too," her mother said. "I should have pressed a little harder to get her to talk with me instead of leaving her alone."

Like any family of shifters, they had no self-consciousness about stripping in front of each other and before he knew what happened, Wolfe and her father were the only ones still clothed. He glanced at her father. "I'll send them back when we find her."

Her father nodded. "Take good care of her. She needs a firm hand, but she needs her freedom, too."

Their gazes met and Wolfe could see the sheen of tears in her father's eyes. Wolfe looked away as he started to shed his clothes. "I will, sir."

He shifted and the boys slipped out the door past him, heading out at a full run. Wolfe was a bit larger and had no trouble keeping up but was surprised to see their mother speed past the three of them and head off in another direction.

Wolf!

* * * *

Damn, damn, damn...why a wolf? Why not a fox or coyote—or another cat! She was running as hard as she could, not watching or listening, trying not to hear her own thoughts. But it wasn't working this time. She couldn't run away from herself, her own heart.

Lyssa looked up as she nearly barreled into a man. A quick turn saved him from her claws, but that did little to protect her from his gun. By the time she saw the hunter reach for his rifle she was past him, pouring on as much speed as she could but still felt the excruciating pain as the bullet skimmed her hind leg.

She kept running at full speed, knowing that he couldn't keep up with her and wouldn't have time to get off another good shot. The next report of the rifle was a distance off...more a statement, she thought, than a shot at her.

Each step brought a burning pain, but Lyssa ran on, not willing to slow down until she reached a safe territory. She knew it was a surface wound. It would just have to wait till she could bed down somewhere and wash it clean...and wait for her Wolfe to come.

The sun was sinking below the horizon before she found a safe spot. The little nook hid behind the low hanging branches of a grove of evergreens. The scent slowed her to a walk as she remembered the spot. Her chest heaved from the exertion like a bellows of an accordion, her panting breath drawing the taste of pine into her mouth.

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She glanced back at her hind end. Blood smeared her silver fur, burrs and twigs stuck in the drying blood. She trotted through the pine needles, slipping behind the largest of the evergreens to find the cave she remembered. It was larger than she liked—harder to defend. But it was well hidden and she didn't think she had anyone to fear.

Lyssa stepped inside and after peering into the depths of the cave decided it was unoccupied—at least by anything that would bother her. With a catlike shrug, she kind of hoped a mouse or rat would venture out.

Sitting back on her haunches, she stretched her left leg out and started bathing it with her tongue. The pain was nothing compared to the satisfaction of seeing her fur come clean. The raw wound began to feel better by the time she was done.

Curling up on her right side, she left the leg exposed to the air to scab over and begin to heal.

* * * *

Wolfe caught a slight scent of Lyssa as they crashed through the undergrowth and brush. The burrs and twigs didn't bother him, but the amount of noise they were making could have awoken the dead. Too bad the area wasn't protected yet. They still had to worry about hunters and other trespassers. The shots he heard earlier worried him, but so far, there was no sign of anything.

He slowed slightly, trying to catch her scent again. Moments later he saw the bullet wound on the tree and drops of blood on the disturbed forest

Wolf!

floor. He put his snout to the ground and whimpered, knowing it was Lyssa's blood.

Wolfe lifted his head and raced after her brothers, no longer concerned with the amount of noise he was making. He just needed to find her.

Wolfe caught up with her brothers, anxious to see if they had spotted anything. They were sniffing at a branch covered with blood at about the height of her withers.

He gave a sharp yip and stepped in closer. The blood was still fresh. He glanced ahead to the copse of evergreens, somehow knowing she was nearby. He pushed past them, nodding back the way they had come.

Both younger wolves looked to each other, uncertainty evident in their postures.

Wolfe barked at them and turned to wind his way through the evergreens, stepping lightly so he wouldn't frighten her. The view that greeted him brought him low to the ground, whimpering at the sight of her bloodstained leg as she lay so still. Fearful to go any closer, he stared at her. Had he been in human form, tears would have been streaming down his face. To lose her before they had a chance to truly love, to become each other's mates, left a hole in his heart. It was so unfair.

Wolfe howled his desperation at the sky, not caring who heard. When he glanced back, he saw Lyssa lift her head and a breath shuddered through her. Joy exploded through him and he ran to her. Licking, rubbing his face against hers, Wolfe felt peace flood through him. She laid her head back on

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her paws as he curled his body around her, adding his warmth to hers. When he felt her sigh and shift closer to him, he heaved a sigh of his own and settled into a deep sleep.

* * * *

At the first hint of daybreak, something woke Lyssa. She lifted her head, listened for any sound, and studied her surroundings. Not only was Wolfe still curled around her, but her brothers lay just inches from her paws. The heat from their three bodies, as well as the security of their presence was enough to let her lay her head back down, but not before licking Wolfe under the chin and pushing deeper into his fur. His answering sigh was enough.

Wolf!

Chapter Thirteen

Wolfe opened his eyes, lifted his head, and saw Brian and Mark still curled at Lyssa's feet where they had been most of the night. Within an hour after he sent them away, they returned. He didn't have the heart to make them leave again.

Besides, the added body heat would be good for her.

He glanced down, lowering his head to nuzzle behind Lyssa's ear, not wanting to wake her but needing the contact. The smell of her warm, silky fur brought his tongue out to lick her softly. She tilted her head to give him better access.

Their movements must have woken the other two as both heads lifted, ears swiveling, alert for any danger. Wolfe looked from one to the other and then back down at Lyssa. Her eyes were open, looking at each of them in turn. A purr rumbled through her as she rubbed her cheek against Wolfe then turned to clean her wound.

Wolfe nodded to the boys that it was time to leave. They looked from Wolfe to Lyssa as if torn. Lyssa issued a soft growl making the boys take a step back. They obviously knew she was agreeing with her mate.

After much sniffing and rubbing of cheeks, the younger wolves left. Lyssa and Wolfe stared at each other. Wolfe would have loved nothing more

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than to shift and be able to talk with her, hold her, make love to her, but once again, it was not the time or place. So he rose on his haunches and waited for her to join him before heading back toward their vehicles.

* * * *

Lyssa led the way, the twinge in her leg minor. With each step she took, the soreness eased. Enjoying an easy pace, she spent the time thinking. She knew Wolfe would confront her with her own stupidity—not that she didn't deserve it. She just wanted to be sure of her responses to her wolf, her mate.

There was no sense fighting it. If nothing else, her run had taught her she couldn't get away from her own feelings, her destiny. She wanted to be with Wolfe. The way his touch made her feel, the way he held her at the house and listened—truly heard and understood how she felt was more than enough proof for her. She had found her mate. Or he had found her.

And then there was the family. Mark and Brian had certainly shown her how much they cared, as well as her parents. Maybe she had it all wrong. Maybe being part of a pack didn't mean she had to lose her independence.

And why had she ever thought it was such a bad thing for someone to look out for her? Finding herself surrounded by wolves when she woke during the night made her feel safe...cherished.

She had a lot of amends to make. Soon. But first, Wolfe had to know how she felt.

Wolf!

* * * *

Wolfe followed along, watching Lyssa. Was her pace slow because the leg was bothering her? Or was she just dragging her feet because she didn't want to face him? Oh well, it didn't matter. The end was in sight.

As soon as he saw the vehicles, he loped ahead of her and shifted in record time. He pulled his clothes out of the truck and was dressed and beside her before she had even begun her shift.

Wolfe moved slowly as he approached her, wanting to check the wound before she shifted. Lyssa held her ground, a low growl rumbling through her. She sniffed the hand he offered, glanced up and met his gaze before rubbing her cheek against him. Wolfe scratched behind her ears, crouching down to slide his hand along her flank. He parted the fur along the wound, looking for any sign a bullet had lodged there, worried there might have been more than one. It was raw, but clean. It looked like the bullet had only grazed her. His fingers tightened in her fur as he remembered the blood along the trail, and her matted fur when he found her.

Lyssa's hiss brought him back to the present and he realized he was gripping her fur. Wolfe patted her gently, her soft fur gliding under his fingers. He scratched behind her ears one more time then stood up.

He nodded toward her SUV. "Go ahead and shift. We need to talk."

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Watching Lyssa's smooth gait as she rounded the vehicle reassured him that she was fine.

* * * *

Lyssa looked around for her clothes. She groaned. Her bag was still in the cave.

"What's wrong?" Wolfe snarled as he hurried around the SUV, glancing around the perimeter. "Are you okay?"

Lyssa covered her face with her hands as her shoulders shook. She couldn't bear to see Wolfe's face when he realized her foolishness. What she didn't count on was her Alpha's protectiveness.

His hands skimmed her arms and sides, down her back and over her flank, apparently checking for injuries.

"No, no, I'm fine," she said as she smothered her giggles. "I just don't have my clothes here..." She moved her hands to his arms to push them away and glanced up at him. His gaze traveled the length of her then returned to her face. Lyssa's palms grew damp against his forearms. The heat of a flush burned its way from her midsection to the top of her head. The bright gold of his eyes disappeared as his lids drooped. Wolfe rubbed his hands in slow circles, squeezing her cheeks, pulling her closer, her lower body snug against his jeans. Lyssa watched as Wolfe slowly leaned forward, his gaze locked on her mouth.

The touch of his lips brought an instant meltdown. Lyssa's eyes drifted closed as she opened to the taste of him. *Oh, this was where she belonged.* Her body heated and with every touch of

Wolf!

his fingertips, every lap of his tongue, she wanted more. For long moments Lyssa forgot to breathe, luxuriating in the taste of him, the silky slide of his tongue as it danced with hers. He pulled her tight against his long, muscular frame, a groan humming through his chest. His flannel shirt was soft against her breasts as she rubbed against him, his jeans rough against her legs.

Lyssa's hands slid up his arms, over his broad shoulders and into the hair at the nape of his neck as he lifted her onto her toes, keeping her flush against him. No longer pushing to get out of his grip, Lyssa pressed against him. Breathing in his musky scent, her lips slid across his cheek, her tongue slipping down his neck to the artery pulsing erratically. She sipped at him, lapped his neck, loving the taste of him. The heat poured off Wolfe. Lyssa burrowed against him rubbing her cheek against his chest. Her arms slipped down and around his waist to hold on tight. A purr trembled through her.

The rumble that went through him was half groan, half growl.

* * * *

Wolfe sipped at her lips, trying to find it in himself to back off so they could take this somewhere more private. Granted, there was no one around, but anyone could come upon them. Plus, he had hoped their first time together would be in a bed, not on the ground.

He growled as he pulled his lips from hers and held her away.

“I have a blanket in my truck. You can wrap up in that on the ride to my house.”

Lyssa stared up at him as if she didn't understand what he was saying.

His gaze slid down her chest as she panted for breath. *Oh hell. As if it wasn't bad enough being curled around her all night with her brothers right there. Now this. Give me strength.*

He bent down, swept an arm under her legs, and turned toward his truck.

“What are you doing?”

He looked down at her. *Well that certainly snapped her out of it.* His gaze met hers and travelled down, stopping at her breasts.

Lyssa tried to lift her arm to cover herself. “I have to go get my clothes and my keys.”

Wolfe tightened his grip when she tried to kick out of his arms. “Stop it. I'm taking you back to my house where we can talk.” He looked at her as he stepped toward his truck. *Thank goodness she can't shift this soon or she'd be a hellcat.* He fought back a grin and continued on, ignoring her struggles. “You can't shift. It's too soon. Were you planning to walk naked through the woods to go get your clothes?” He glanced down at her mutinous look and then back at the path he was following. “You were going to stay out there for the week anyway. Your stuff will be fine.”

Dropping Lyssa's legs, Wolfe reached around her to open the door to his truck. He leaned in and grabbed the blanket off the seat. After shaking it out, he lifted it over her shoulders and pulled her

Wolf!

tight against him. She pushed back, but her hands were trapped between them with no room to move. Wolfe leaned forward, his gaze never leaving her lips.

“Let go of me, I...”

Wolfe couldn't bear another second without tasting her. His lips crashed down on hers, his tongue plunging into her mouth.

Her mumbles quickly changed to soft moans. Her fingers clutched at his shirt then kneaded his chest.

Wolfe groaned and slid his arms around her back, rubbing the remembered curves, the roughness of the blanket making his hands tingle. He nipped her lower lip and then licked it, slowly lifting his head. Leaning his forehead against hers, Wolfe took a deep breath and backed up slightly, his body aching to press against her.

“Let's get home before this gets out of hand.” He tugged the blanket back up to her shoulders and gave her another quick kiss. “You want a hand up?” he asked, waving toward the truck seat.

Lyssa glanced down at the blanket then back up to meet his gaze. She shook her head and turned to step up into the truck. “I'll be fine,” she answered quietly. She lifted one foot onto the running board and the blanket shifted off her shoulder.

Wolfe didn't know if he could stay in control if she dropped the blanket so he did the only thing he could. He lifted her into the truck. Other than a

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surprised gasp, she didn't complain. Walking around the truck, he smiled. Oh yeah, the ride home would be much too long.

Wolf!

Chapter Fourteen

“Where are we?” Lyssa asked as she stared at the large rambling house in front of them. The thirty-minute ride was quiet, only the radio filling the void. Other than asking if she was comfortable and warm enough, Wolfe had left her to her thoughts.

“This is my home away from home,” Wolfe said as he parked the truck. “I told you it was just a bit south of your stomping grounds.”

She stared at him, a frown wrinkling her features. “If you’re this close, you don’t need me to take you out into the territory. You could cover it yourself.”

He shook his head as he got out of the truck. “My pack runs south of here. We knew your father’s pack claimed that territory.”

Lyssa frowned. *Why didn’t I know that?* She opened her door and stepped down, the blanket climbing to the top of her thighs. She tugged it back down pulling it close around herself and then tucked it under her arms so she could walk.

“I’ll get you a shirt and some sweat pants inside,” Wolfe said as she rounded the front of the truck.

Chuckling, Lyssa answered, “A shirt will probably reach to my knees so the sweatpants

would be unnecessary. Plus, I would have to roll them up anyway.”

Wolfe laughed and put an arm around her shoulders. “My sister keeps clothes here in one of the spare rooms. I’m sure we can find something to fit you.”

“Oh.” Lyssa bit her lip. Maybe previous girlfriends had left clothes here too... she shuddered.

“Cold?”

Lyssa shrugged, looking away. “A little. My current outfit is a little drafty.”

Wolfe tweaked her nose and pushed open the door to the house. “Come on. Let’s find you something to wear.”

* * * *

Lyssa pulled on the sweatshirt and pants Wolfe found for her. At least the pants fit right. Heck, it beat wearing a blanket anyway.

“All set in there?” His voice came from just outside the door.

Lyssa opened the door and smiled up at Wolfe. “Much better.” She glanced down and shrugged. “Well, a little better anyway.”

His gaze followed hers and settled on the snug fit across her breasts. Wolfe stepped forward, sliding an arm around Lyssa, pulling her close. One hand tilted her chin and slid down to brush across her breast. “Definitely an improvement over the blanket.”

Lyssa gasped as her body responded, her gaze locking with his.

Wolf!

Wolfe leaned down and met her lips as they opened, his tongue dipping into her warm sweetness. He groaned as she tilted her head and sucked on him, her fingers kneading his shoulders as she clung.

Yeah, he could definitely get used to those claws.

Wolfe pulled back, sipping at her lips as he withdrew. Lyssa mewled the loss, one that Wolfe agreed with wholeheartedly.

“Shhh.” Wolfe brushed his fingers through Lyssa’s hair, holding her head against his chest. “We need to talk. Plus, we’re not the only ones home.”

Lyssa jerked away from him, looking around frantically, but he didn’t let go.

Wolfe felt her swallow and nod before he stepped back. One hand slid down to wrap around her arm. Wolfe tugged as he went down the hall. “I think we’ll be comfortable in the living room. I’ll find Shaunna after.”

* * * *

The only place she would be comfortable was in bed with her mate, but it didn’t look like that was happening anytime soon. A month ago he was ready and willing on the floor of her shop—well, definitely ready, but considerate enough not to be willing. She shook her head. The faster he found out they were on the same page, the sooner they could celebrate the occasion.

Lyssa bit her lip and sighed. It was her mess to clean up, so she might as well get started. She

stopped in the doorway to the living room and turned to face Wolfe, her hand on his shoulder. “We don’t need to do this. I’ve given a lot of thought to things.” She sighed and bit down on her lip. “I know I was wrong, and I have some apologizing to do.”

Wolfe lifted one eyebrow, a frown on his face. “And what were you wrong about? That your parents didn’t love you? That you’re a member of the pack even when you’re not with them? That your brothers love you so much that they led the search to find you when you ran off, and then had to be near you all night to protect you from anything else that might come your way?” He drew her up onto her toes, their gazes locked on each other. “That you’re my mate?” he whispered.

She gulped and wiped her sweaty palms along his shoulders, staring at the backs of her hands instead of facing him. “Um, all of the above?” She peeked at him through her lashes.

Wolf!

Chapter Fifteen

A door slammed open and voices could be heard down the hall.

Wolfe lifted his head, releasing his grip on Lyssa.

“Let go of me, you pig, or I’ll have you strung up by your male parts that you brag about so much.”

The response was too low to be heard, but the sound of skin hitting skin was enough for Wolfe to sprint down the hallway.

The sight that greeted him brought a growl to his throat. The stranger was a head taller and at least a hundred pounds heavier than Shaunna.

A red mark, the shape of a hand on his face showed that she was the one who had struck the blow. Bleeding lines down his right arm revealed that this hadn’t been the only attack—or defensive maneuver.

Unfortunately, at the moment he had a vice like grip on Shaunna’s waist, binding her arms to contain her fury.

Wolfe jumped into the fray and yanked one arm from around his sister.

Shaunna’s startled eyes met his and she twisted away.

The look of shock on the face of the dark-haired stranger was soon replaced by anger.

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“Who the hell are you?” he snarled.

Wolfe twisted the stranger’s arm behind his back and propelled him toward the door just as Slade appeared in the doorway.

“You mangy piece of crap,” were Slade’s only words before his fist connected.

* * * *

The gasp behind Wolfe drew his attention as he lowered the stranger’s body.

Lyssa’s face paled as she put a hand out to the wall. “Chet...” was the only sound she made as she slid to the floor in a faint.

Wolfe dropped the limp body he was holding as he made a mad dash to catch Lyssa before her head hit the floor.

Wolf!

Chapter Sixteen

Wolfe paced back and forth while Shaunna laid a cold, wet cloth over Lyssa's eyes and forehead. Wolfe had carried her to the sitting room and laid her on the couch, his eyes never leaving her pale face. Somehow he knew her past and present had just collided, and if this wolf was the reason for her wanting nothing to do with pack life then he had a lot to answer for.

At her groan, Wolfe was at Lyssa's side in an instant, taking her hand in his.

Shaunna stepped back. When Wolfe nodded his head she left the room.

Lyssa's eyes opened slowly.

"Hi."

Her gaze met his and she looked frantically around the room, trying to sit up. His hands kept her down. "It's okay. He's not here." He watched her eyes as she scanned the room as if not believing him.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath then looked at Wolfe.

"Who is he?"

Lyssa swallowed hard and looked away. "His name is Chet. He was a member of my father's pack when I was young."

"What did he do?" Her gaze shot to his and his fingers tightened on her shoulders. "What?"

She looked away and Wolfe shook her slightly until she met his gaze again. "He tried to rape me." She looked defiantly up at him. "When he failed, he tried to turn the pack against me because I wasn't like them." Her gaze went out of focus as she continued. "My father cast him out of our pack, but his friends blamed me. By the time they were old enough to understand what had happened, the damage was done. I stopped hanging with the pack after that and when I needed to run, I ran on my own." She glanced back at Wolfe. "Last I knew he was still searching for a pack that would accept him. My father's kept tabs on him and warned a few other Alpha's about the trouble he caused."

She struggled to sit up but Wolfe shook his head and gently held her down. "Shhh."

She sank back on the couch and watched Wolfe as he stood and paced back and forth in front of the large stone hearth. No need for a fire with the heat he was generating.

Wolfe paused in front of her, a puzzled frown on his face. "What he did was wrong. It wasn't your fault. You're old enough to know that. No adult in any pack would ever hold anything against you for what happened. Your father did the right thing, casting him out. But I don't understand why you stayed away. It wasn't like your family was against you. Obviously they supported you. Why would you think poorly of the pack for one's misbehavior?"

Wolf!

“Did your father ever leave your mother, ever give you any reason to think he was unhappy because she was different?” Lyssa shook her head. “And did your mother ever leave your father? Or threaten to leave?”

She shook her head and jumped off the couch, her hands splayed to the side. “You don’t understand. I know they love each other...and I know they love me. That was never the question.” She met his gaze then closed her eyes, dropped her hands to her sides, and released a sigh. Her shoulders drooped. “I just want to belong. I don’t want to be different.”

Wolfe stared at her a moment, his gaze searching hers. Without thinking, he reached out and traced a thumb over her eyebrow and down across her cheekbone. “We’re all different. And it’s not the differences on the outside that count.”

Lyssa hung her head and sank back down onto the couch. “I know that, I...”

“Shhh...” Wolfe stared down at Lyssa. “The pack is made up of a lot of different personalities, but we’re a community built around families. We all work together...take care of each other because we are different than the rest of the world. We live two very different lives in a world that doesn’t believe we’re real. So we have to watch out for each other, protect each other.” He began pacing again. “Your pack is still your pack, just like your family is still your family even if you move away.” Wolfe paused in front of her and took a deep

breath. "Do you have any idea how many people you hurt when you ran off last night?"

Lyssa looked at him in surprise, obviously forgetting how she ended up at his house to begin with. "I..."

"Shhh.... Did you know that your mother was out there searching for you at the same time as your brothers and I? And your father would have been out there too except he stayed at the house in case you went back." Wolfe stepped closer to her, "Do you have any idea what it did to me to see your blood on the trail, to come upon you lying there as if dead?"

Lyssa's eyes filled with tears at the torment she could read on his face, hear in his voice. "I'm sorry. I just needed time to think. It was too much all at once." She covered her face with her hands.

Lyssa lifted her head in surprise when Wolfe's hands pulled her up off the couch. He lifted her until his lips met hers, his tongue sinking deep into her mouth. Lyssa drank him in, clutching his shoulders as her feet barely touched the floor.

He tore his mouth away and stared at her, searching her gaze. "I nearly died when I saw you lying there with dried blood on your silky fur." His hands framed her face as he stared into her eyes. "And then I saw you take a breath...and I could breathe again." His lips sank onto hers again as his hands slid under the sweatshirt. His thumbs brushed the underside of her breasts, his hands spanning her rib cage.

Wolf!

Lyssa gasped when he lifted the sweatshirt over her head, only to have him once again claim her mouth in a soul-wrenching kiss, his tongue twining with hers. Her head dropped back as his open mouth drifted across her cheek and down her neck to finally feast on the breast he was caressing.

Wolfe lifted his head to stare down at her, one hand holding her against his arousal, the other sweeping up through her hair then gliding down her shoulder to cup her breast again.

His eyes glittered. "If it wouldn't hurt me more than you, I would make you wait as long as you've kept me waiting." He growled, and slid the sweatpants down her legs, pulling her against his full length once she was naked. Sliding one knee between her legs, he rubbed his jeans against her most sensitive spot.

Lyssa groaned and reached for his waist, needing to feel him against her, inside her.

"Oh, no you don't." He grabbed her hands, pulling them behind her back, one hand shackling both of hers. His other roamed from her breast to her thigh and around to her rear, drawing her nearer still.

Lyssa rubbed against him, whimpering—wanting, no, needing more.

When he released her hands, she immediately unsnapped his jeans, pulling the zipper down along the ridge of his arousal. His growl filled the room.

Wolfe swept an arm under her legs and in four long strides carried her down the hall to his bedroom. He pushed the door open, and in a passing blur, Lyssa saw dark oak furnishings and a glorious painting of a wolf set between two large windows...but not much else. Wolfe set her down in the center of a massive four-poster bed and kept his gaze glued to hers. He toed off his shoes, slid his jeans down, and kicked them away.

Lyssa stared at the masculine beauty before her. Fur-covered pecs arched down to washboard abs. His manhood stood strong and proud in his thick pelt.

Licking her lips, Lyssa watched this man, her mate, as he knelt on the bed and crawled slowly over her, hovering above her on hands and knees. She lifted her hands to run them over his furry chest. He groaned before his mouth met hers. Wolfe lowered his body, aligning them chest to thigh. A shiver ran through Lyssa.

Heart pounding, she clung to him, arching her back for better contact.

Slowly, he lifted his head, watching as he rubbed against her. "I can't wait to hear you purr my name, admit you're my mate."

Lyssa opened her mouth, ready to admit that without any coercion when Wolfe settled his lips on hers, his tongue tangling with hers. The sound torn from Lyssa resembled more of a growl than a groan.

Their tongues danced together, hers following his when he retreated. His warm,

Wolf!

masculine taste assaulted her senses. After releasing her tongue, he lifted his head and stared into her eyes. His gaze travelled lower, his mouth following until he suckled her breast, each tug echoing in her lower regions.

“Please...”

“Please what?” he mumbled, licking his way up her neck, stopping to nibble on her ear before plunging into it with his tongue.

“Take me!”

Wolfe chuckled as he ground his arousal against her, her legs trapped between his as she tried to open to him. Lifting one leg to slide between hers, he allowed her to open herself. He plunged in, sinking deep, pumping hard and fast. His mouth sucked on first one then the other nipple.

Lyssa arched her body, lifting her free leg around his hips. The pressure built as she met each thrust with a twist of her hips. Her claws dug deep into his waist as she clung to him. A scream built inside her, finally escaping when she reached her peak.

Wolfe bit into the soft flesh of her shoulder as she screamed her satisfaction. He licked at the wound until it healed then stared down at her as his tension climbed. A moment later, he howled his own pleasure.

* * * *

Lyssa lay panting as Wolfe settled over her. She dropped her leg back to the bed and slid her hands between them to press on his shoulders in a

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plea for breathing room. Wolfe shifted his upper body to the side to take some weight off her, not willing to separate from her completely yet.

He kissed her shoulder. Lyssa turned her head to him, whispering a kiss across his lips, a purr rumbling through her chest. "My Wolfe, my mate."

His body, as well as his heart, swelled at her words. Wolfe wrapped his arm around her as he rolled and lifted her above him. One thought overrode all else in his mind...*MINE*.

Wolf!

Epilogue

Lyssa jumped over the cubs, keeping an ever-watchful eye on the kitten. She was a blaze of energy. With a swipe of her sharp claws, she terrorized one cub then the little white blur of fur streaked past the other. Lyssa watched with a smile. The cubs galloped after her, tripping over their own feet in their haste to catch up.

She shook her head. At six months old, the kitten had them beat without even trying. Little did they know, although the cubs were a year older, they would never be able to keep up with her again.

Lyssa started up the slope, catching a glimpse of her mother and father standing at the crest of the hill. Within moments, the kitten tumbled in the dandelions surrounding her mother, and halfway up the hill the cubs were busy wrestling, the chase long forgotten.

Glancing to the tree line, Lyssa met Wolfe's gaze. He stood and trotted over. A brush of fur on fur, his tongue grooming her face brought a purr rumbling through her.

They trotted up the hill side by side, nudging the cubs along when they reached them.

Signs marking the territory as part of the national forest and wildlife sanctuary appeared at

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the tree line and again at the crest of the hill
where a path led further up the mountainside.

Lyssa rubbed her head along Wolfe's neck,
her alpha, her mate—proud to be a member of his
pack. She wouldn't have it any other way.

Wolf!

About the Author

Marie Beau grew up in Northern New England and has always enjoyed the outdoors. Whether writing, hiking, or going for a drive, she loves to share the beauty of the landscape she calls home. Although this is her first published book, she has several works in progress including the sequel to *Wolf!* You can keep up with her at <http://www.authormariebeau.blogspot.com>.

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