

The background of the cover is a photograph of a muscular man with dark hair and a woman with blonde hair. The man is in the foreground, shirtless, looking directly at the camera. The woman is behind him, also shirtless, looking towards the camera. The title 'Wyoming Wild 2' is written in a large, stylized font at the top.

Wyoming Wild 2

Breakdown of a Pack

Gwen Campbell

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Breakdown of a Pack

Wyoming Wild Book 2

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Wyoming Wild Book 2

**Breakdown
of a Pack**

by

Gwen Campbell

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Chapter One

“Brodie, confirm the location of that 9-1-1 call.”

Sheriff Ed Timberman felt cranky, plain and simple. He released the call button on the squad car’s receiver. Waiting for his dispatcher’s reply, he tried stretching his back. No good. There wasn’t enough space behind the steering wheel to get a good stretch going.

He’d spent a lifetime of hours in squad cars and, lately, too many sitting behind his desk. All he had to show for it was a gut that stuck out like he was in his second trimester and a case of piles creeping up on him like moss up a tree.

He sighed, rubbed his tired eyes, and grinned.

Ah hell, he had nothing to feel sorry for. He’d been doing a job he loved for forty-two years, had a mate who’d given him three terrific pups and who baked the finest cinnamon rolls this side of the Great Divide. In fact, there was a batch of those fine cinnamon rolls waiting for

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him at home once he finished with this last call. Although from the looks of things, somebody was having a joke at the sheriff's department's expense.

Ed checked the dash clock. His shift had officially ended ten minutes ago.

"GPS coordinates confirmed, Sheriff. It's the last turnoff on South Fork Road." His dispatcher's calm, modulated voice crackled through the squad car. Reception wasn't so good when you were snugged up against the foothills of the Wind River Mountains. *"I'll play back the 9-1-1 call to confirm the information the caller gave but the last turnoff is the one on the right."*

"Thanks, Brodie. That's real helpful," Sheriff Timberman deadpanned. This far out, there was *only* one turnoff. "Sheriff Timberman out."

He put the car back in drive. The sun would be coming up in ten minutes or so, making it easier to see, although it wouldn't crest the foothills for another forty minutes after that. As he drove down the pitted, dirt road, he checked the shoulders for tire marks. The caller had said he'd side-swiped a tree. Ed decided to give it one

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more mile before he wrote the call off as a crank and headed home.

Like it so often did, his persistence paid off. Cresting yet another hill, he spotted a pickup truck hanging off the side of the road. Grabbing his hat off the passenger seat, he got out of his car and scanned the ditch. He scented the air at the same time. Odd. There was no scent of human nearby and the truck cab was empty. The front tires were resting in the ditch but it seemed to Ed a bruiser of a half-ton like this one should be able to pull out no problem.

Spring was late coming this year. Snow was still piled up in spots in the forest on either side of the road and the ground, for the most part, was still frozen.

Huh. Driver had probably been drinking and couldn't figure out how to back his own damned truck out of a ditch. Ed lifted his head and sniffed again. Fella was probably in the woods, taking a leak.

He was heading back to his squad car to give the siren a quick blast when his head shot up.

Were.

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The barest taste of another wolf in the air when the wind died down in honor of the sunrise.

When the hairs on his arms stood up, for no good, rational reason, he unsnapped his holster and withdrew his service revolver.

Sheriff Ed Timberman heard the repeat of the rifle an instant before his head was slammed sideways. He was dead before the momentum dropped him onto the road.

Every bird in the forest stopped singing and if there had been anybody around to listen, they would have had no problem hearing the measured, heavy footsteps coming through the trees, upwind. A man wearing sturdy boots stepped onto the road, slung his rifle over his shoulder, knelt beside Ed, sniffed the air around him then checked for a pulse. He checked the wrist of Ed's gun hand—the only exposed pulse point on his body not spattered with blood.

After a moment, the man stood, went to the truck, climbed into the cab and started the engine. Driving slow and precise, he backed out of the ditch. The engine growled with Detroit-heavy power. Gravel crunched beneath the beefy

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tires. He made a U-turn, gave Ed's body a wide berth and headed back to South Fork Road.

The silence was broken by the crackle of the radio. *"Sheriff Timberman, come back. Playback of the 9-1-1 call confirms the location. Sheriff?"*

The pitch of Dispatcher Brodie Dell's voice began to change from its usual controlled, calm cadence.

"Sheriff? ED!"

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Chapter Two

“You pull the cinch tight but a little at a time. Like this.” Six-year old Ryan Upton’s brow furrowed in concentration. The pony shifted its weight but didn’t actually move. “Pull it too tight, too hard and the horse’ll do something to get you to stop. Some of them hold their breath and stick their belly out so you *can’t* tighten the cinch.” Ryan pulled on the cinch again with a deft control that belied his age.

Owen Wells felt the permanent furrow between his eyes deepen as he watched. What kind of idiot let a first grader hang around animals that outweighed him by hundreds of pounds? Pony or not, he kept expecting the thing to kick Ryan straight into an Emergency Room. He looked around the interior of the barn, hoping to find it ringed by cushiony bales of hay.

What kind of whacked-out werewolf pack was this? Weres, keeping animals as pets. Any self-respecting pet he’d had the misfortune to come across had scratched first and asked questions

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later. Instinct told every animal where they stood on the food chain. They were smart enough to perceive weres as predators.

Except in Wyoming, apparently.

“You try.” Ryan glanced over at the big horse watching them from two stalls down.

“Me? I don’t think so.”

I’m staying right here where I can grab you out of harm’s way when that pony goes berserk.

Owen held his hands out. They were big hands, darkened by the sun and battle scarred. He was a three-tour veteran of the war in Iraq, could sniff out an IED at five-hundred yards and knew at least twelve ways to kill a man with his bare hands so the fella wouldn’t know he was dead until he hit the ground.

There was no way he was going to climb onto a skittish, half-ton horse whose feet somebody had conveniently nailed iron plates onto.

“How about I watch you?” Owen said. “Everybody says you’re a good rider. Show me how it’s done.” He was a fearless man but he was about three seconds away from hyperventilating

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when Ryan climbed onto a nearby wood crate and used it to help himself mount the pony.

Holding his breath, Owen walked alongside after Ryan touched the heels of his leather cowboy boots to the animal's sides. Trying not to be too obvious about it, he held his hands at the ready. If the pony got up to mischief which he was sure it would, he'd be ready to pluck Ryan to safety and remind the beast of its manners with a solid left hook to its skull.

He wasn't going to take any chances with his only living relative.

To Owen's utter surprise, the pony walked calmly. It obeyed the subtle pressure of the reins on either side of its neck, adjusted its pace when Ryan tightened his knees or touched it with the toe or heel of his boots.

Despite that, Owen stayed close. Ryan smiled and the April sunshine lit up his profile, sparkled like summer lightning in his eyes. Owen blinked. They might only be second cousins but Ryan had the same, brown eyes he did. The same blond hair stuck out under the brim of Ryan's warm, felt cowboy hat. Even their noses were shaped the same, although Ryan's was considerably smaller.

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Something heavy and poignant settled in Owen's chest. He'd never wanted pups. The cliché lone wolf, he liked his independence and the closest he'd come to belonging to a pack over the last thirteen years were the units he'd served in. Now, maybe, he just might think about reconsidering the life plan he had going.

Ryan lifted himself up in the saddle by balancing his weight on the stirrups, on the balls of his feet. His skinny long-limbed body shifted and Owen grabbed Ryan's waist without a second's delay, making sure he didn't fall.

Yeah. Right. He'd make time to reconsider his life plan if this kid didn't give him a premature stroke.

"Hey, big guy, looking more like a cowboy up there everyday." Nath Powell walked up to them. This pack's Beta, he shaded his eyes from the sun, watched Ryan with a critical eye then smiled. "Yep. You sure are. Now get down here and show me you remembered to smooth the wrinkles out of the horse blanket before you threw the saddle on top. A good horseman..."

"Takes care of his horse before himself. I *know*, Nath. Jeesh." Despite his childish pique, Ryan

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dismounted and stood to one side, holding the reins so Nath could examine the pony.

“Hooves are clean. Nice job, Ryan,” Nath said as he lifted one of the horse’s fetlocks and rested it across his knees. “Coat’s been brushed.” He slapped the pony’s neck affectionately. The animal quivered with unmistakable pleasure and gazed back at him with what could only be adoration. Nath continued his monologue. “Tack’s clean. Blanket’s tight and smooth. Stirrups are at the proper height and the cinch is perfect. Well done, big guy.”

“So? Do I get to keep him?”

“It’s not my decision to make alone,” Nath answered. “Cutler and Fina have a say too. If they think you’ve done a good enough job caring for it, we’ll talk to Gil Pike about buying this little guy. But if what I’ve seen today is any indication, I’m pretty sure they’ll say yes.”

Ryan jumped up and started punching the air. “Yesss.”

“Just remember, this is your birthday present. From all three of us. Don’t expect anything else.”

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Ryan's air-punching stopped then he nodded. "Yeah. Yes. The pony's the best present I've ever got."

"But if somebody happens to give you a book, or a new pair of riding gloves..." Nath looked around covertly, although nobody but the three of them was in sight. "Get a little excited over that too."

"I will," Ryan vowed and put his knee in Nath's cupped hands. After the Beta helped him back into the saddle, Ryan took off at a canter, moving in a big circle around the two males.

"It still makes you crazy watching him up on that thing, doesn't it?"

Grudgingly, Owen nodded. He wasn't used to being around other weres. Was no longer used to their discernment. He'd been here less than a week and still didn't like feeling transparent. "Yes."

Nath grinned, adjusted his cap and turned so he could keep an eye on Ryan as the boy rode past. "All our stock is bred by weres. Because we raise them from birth, they're not afraid of us like outside animals would be, if that's any help."

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And you know that although Fina, Cutler and I aren't related to Ryan, he's our surrogate son. We fret over him more than we will our own pups."

"Yeah," Owen acknowledged with a grunt. He scuffed the tread of his steel-toed boot against the partially frozen turf. "This is new to me. All of it. Before my enlistment was up, I got the usual psych debriefing." He was still amazed how easy it was to talk to Nath. Owen Wells wasn't a sharing kind of guy. Maybe being a good listener was part of being a Beta? Owen no longer knew. He'd left his pack the day after he'd turned eighteen. "They said it'd take some time to acclimate back into civilian life." He lifted his hand and returned Ryan's wave when the boy rode past.

"My brother was the same," Nath said. "Our mother was still alive when Cutler came back from Iraq. She and I used to sit up nights, worrying about how quiet he'd get or how... wooden he seemed."

"He's not like that now."

"No. But it took him almost a year to snap out of it. 'Course, that's probably not the PC term for it." Nath offered a wry smile which Owen

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returned. “Now, let’s see about teaching you how to ride. No self-respecting Wyoming man doesn’t know how to ride.”

“You’re nuts. Fucking certifiable,” Owen grumbled but followed Nath into the barn. “All you guys out here are. God I miss Tennessee.” He pulled up his coat collar against the wind freshening out of the north, then held out his hand to take a horse blanket from Nath.

“The weather might suck at times and the work might be hard but the women are mighty fine.”

“Touché.”

Nath’s cell phone rang and he answered it. “Hey, big brother. When’ll you be home—”

When the color drained out of Nathaniel’s face, Owen stared at him and trained his wolf ears on the phone conversation—both sides of it.

“Sheriff Ed Timberman’s been murdered. First thing this morning. Looks like he was ambushed. His deputy called me and asked me to come up. State police are already there but their Alpha wants a were in on the investigation. Says I’ll be able to

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communicate with his pack better than humans could."

"Do they know why—?"

"No. Might be because he was a cop, the sheriff, a Beta or simply a were. Gotta go, Nath. I'll be home tonight but don't wait supper on me. You tell Fina for me. She knows the dangers of being mated to a cop but this'll be hard on her."

"Sure. We'll wait up for you. She'll be fine."

Through the phone, Owen heard the Alpha's sigh, clear as if the man was standing next to him.

"I'm glad she's got you too, Nath. Give her a hug and a kiss for me."

When Nath ended the call and slid the phone back in his pocket, Owen was watching him. "You knew that sheriff?"

"Met him a few times." Nath ran his hand over his face. "My brother's real good at his job but today, I wish he wasn't a cop. Every time Cutler steps out the door for work, in the backs of our heads we know it might be the last time. Something like this..." His voice trailed away.

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“Brings it home,” Owen supplied quietly. He stared down at his own hands for a moment. “At first I thought it was weird.”

“What? Fina having two mates?”

“Yes. But you and your brother are different enough to balance each other out. She’s lucky to have you. Both of you.”

“Damn straight,” Nath acknowledged without a trace of vanity. He inhaled and it was as rife with meaning as his brother’s exhale had been. “She’s working in the greenhouse. Watch Ryan, okay? This is gonna be hard on her.”

“Of course.” Owen watched Nath walk over to Ryan’s pony, talk with him briefly, tickle the kid’s ribs then take off back to the house.

“Hey, Ryan,” Owen called out, drawing his cousin’s eyes back to him. “How about you show me how to saddle that horse in the barn?”

“Sure thing, Owen. Come on. We’ll have you riding like a Wyoming rancher in no time.”

“I was afraid of that,” he muttered and trotted off in Ryan’s wake.

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That night, Owen stretched out on his back in the guest bedroom of Fina and Ryan's home. The heat was still on so he didn't sleep with the window open. He'd taken to doing that ever since he got back...liked being able to scent the air outside, know what was around him. Who was around him. Back in the sandbox of Iraq, when he slept his unit had always been nearby. Sentries patrolled beyond that. In the midst of trained, alert soldiers, Owen could let his guard down for awhile. Here, there was a female and a pup needing protection.

It wasn't that he didn't have confidence in Fina's mates. He did. Cutler and Nath were powerful weres. But there were only two of them and Owen...Owen scrubbed his hand over his face, relaxed his shoulders which were gravitating up toward his ears and let his breath out. He was in Wyoming for crying out loud. Who was going to attack them? Canada?

Living on alert for so long had left its mark on Owen, and he wasn't thinking about the permanent furrow between his eyes. A thirty-

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one year old male shouldn't have wrinkles. He ran his fingertips over the furrow, felt his skin smooth then snap right back.

His wolf's ears picked up the sound of a heavy vehicle coming down the gravel drive. The slight hitch in the timing of Cutler's big, Sheriff's SUV was familiar to Owen now so the sound didn't make him tense in preparation for battle. Lying in the dark, with the light of the waning moon washing his chest with a cold, clear glow, he listened to the crunch of Cutler's boots, heard a key in the front door. The lock box inside the hall closet opened and a faint, metallic clink told Owen that Cutler was storing his service revolver for the night.

It was good for an Alpha to have a mate to come home to. That nuclear family within a pack helped keep it stable. Happy that Fina had found that kind of stability, for herself and Ryan, Owen dismissed it for himself. Sure he wanted security and predictability in his life. Unlike some he'd served with, he wasn't an adrenaline junky. He'd just always been better off without a pack, although he did miss having females in his life.

Turning his face toward the window, Owen

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thought about a woman he'd met on leave, seven months ago. He'd been in Germany and she'd been there teaching adult classes in English. They'd hooked up in a bar near the base and hadn't left the hotel room for two days. He remembered how her long, pale body had looked stretched out in the moonlight. The scent of her. The taste of her as he'd touched his lips to every square inch of her skin. She hadn't been a were but she'd been lovely. More important, she'd had a good heart. Despite that, after his leave was over, the e-mails between them quickly fizzled into nothingness. He wasn't real proud of himself when he realized that didn't bother him.

"Are you all right?" It was Fina's voice, muffled by the room and the hallway that separated her bedroom from Owen's. Despite that, he heard the anxiety in her tone.

"How's Ed's family taking it?" This was Nath's voice. He didn't sound groggy. Huh. Guess Owen wasn't the only one not sleeping tonight.

Owen heard Cutler's response but tuned it out. Things whispered in the dark between mates were nobody's business but their own.

For a moment, he envied Fina's good fortune.

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Then he remembered how every single one of his relationships had failed. A long time ago, he'd figured out he had no gift for being a mate. He'd spent too many years without a pack, hiding who he was. What he was. Now, he was a were by birthright only and content to live that way.

He picked up Fina's voice again. It sounded less tight, like whatever Cutler said had made her feel better. Then she sighed—a warm, feminine sound of pleasure. Cutler and Nath made similar, masculine sounds and when they did, Owen deliberately tuned all of them out.

Fina was an extraordinary woman. This pack was lucky to have her. The three were down the hall would be getting married this summer. Of course the State paperwork would list only Cutler's name as groom but the people that mattered, their pack, knew both brothers were equally her mates. Personally, Owen couldn't imagine an Alpha giving up one of his privileges.

Any Alpha he'd known would kill another male who so much as touched their mate. It looked like Fina had found a mate as extraordinary as herself. Two of them.

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Wyoming was working out well for Fina. She'd made a good life here for herself and for Ryan. Owen knew the same wouldn't be said for him. He liked the place well enough. The weres he'd met in Cutler's pack were good people. Despite that, Owen had already decided he'd move on in a month or so. Find a pack he could live on the outskirts of so he could join in a run now and then. Find a job he liked doing, a friend or two and maybe a few, frisky females who'd get off on his size and rogue persona.

When the bed frame down the hall started rocking, Owen put his pillow over his head and willed himself to sleep.

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Chapter Three

“Turn here, Owen.” Ryan sat up straight in his booster seat and pointed at the roadside café Owen was just about to drive past. Owen flicked on his turn signal and slowed down. The big Ford F250 he’d bought in Tennessee obeyed with a smoothness that belied the power humming beneath the hood. He’d fallen in love with the vehicle as soon as he’d cranked the ignition on the dealer lot and had written a check faster than a were on a speed-date.

“Why here?” The café had a country charm to it, a big play area and an even bigger parking lot. That parking lot was surprisingly full, considering the place was a couple miles away from the Interstate.

“Let’s have chicken for lunch. You said you’d get lunch, right?”

“Huh,” Owen grunted as he pulled into a parking spot and killed the ignition. “What you’re saying is you’ve tasted my cooking.”

Ryandidn’tanswer,andwasuncharacteristically

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quiet as he undid his seatbelt. Owen took that as a yes. After they'd stepped out of the vehicle, Ryan took Owen's hand and tugged.

"Playground first," he insisted and led Owen over to the tall swing set. He claimed the middle swing and started pumping his skinny legs. "Push me, Owen. Really high."

Owen couldn't remember the last time he'd pushed a pup on a swing. Maybe he never had. He positioned himself behind Ryan and tried anyway.

"Higher. No, *higher*," Ryan repeated, annoyance creeping into his voice. No doubt about it...the kid was the natural-born son of a Beta.

"Give me a break. I'm new at this."

Ryan sighed loud enough for Owen to hear but didn't criticize him again. The first, gentle pushes made Owen a little surer of himself. He pushed a little harder, then a little harder still. "Tell me when it's high enough." Holding his breath, Owen took two steps back. The arc of the swing now required it. After another couple

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of pushes, he had to lift his hands higher to reach the swing. Then higher.

Ryan laughed...a sound of uncontained joy. "A bit more," he called out and curved his back so he could throw his whole body into the next upward swing.

Owen wasn't sure his nerves could take more. The kid was already sailing ten feet off the ground at the apex of each arc and Owen could only catch him partway down. Then Ryan laughed again. The strain in Owen's chest eased at the thrill and exhilaration in his cousin's voice. He pushed again, a little harder than before, then stepped aside and watched Ryan's face—red, sweaty, and smiling as he threw his body back and forth, pumping his legs for all he was worth. Owen smiled too and stepped beneath Ryan when the momentum of the swing lagged. He pushed again. And again.

After what felt like a long time, Ryan dropped his legs and dragged the soles of his running shoes over the sand beneath the swing set. Stepping aside, Owen broadened his focus, surprised he hadn't felt a compulsion to scent the area in a good fifteen minutes. When Ryan

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jumped off the swing, Owen followed him over to the monkey bars then hovered while Ryan did his best to defy the laws of gravity.

The strain in Owen's chest came back and hung on tight.

"Time to pick up lunch and get going," Owen finally ordered. "There's milk in the truck, remember? We told Fina we were just going into town to pick up a few things."

Ryan shot him a look of defiance full-grown men carrying assault rifles hadn't dared. When Owen cocked a brow and glared, Ryan backed down wordlessly. He climbed off the monkey bars, took Owen's hand and leaned his forehead into Owen's hip. For a moment, Owen held himself still. Then he cupped the back of Ryan's neck and accepted the pup's nuzzling. It felt weird to his human self but his inner wolf recognized the apology in the bonding gesture. Owen didn't step away until Ryan did. Even then, Ryan still held his hand and put his weight into dragging Owen over to the café entrance.

A sheriff's cruiser pulled into the parking lot.

"Hey, Suzanne," Ryan called out, let go of

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Owen and ran over to the driver's side. "What're you doing here?"

"It's Tuesday." The voice was confident and obscenely cheerful, and it said *Tuesday* like that somehow explained everything. It was also very, very feminine.

The owner of the voice stepped out of the cruiser and Owen felt his brow *and* the corner of his mouth go up.

"Everybody at the station pitches in and we have chicken for lunch."

"Us too," Ryan said and smiled up at the deputy sheriff as she ruffled his hair in passing. "Not Cutler though. He's helping Mr. Amos' pack. Somebody died."

"Yeah." Her attention zeroed in on Owen and stayed there. "So I heard. That's sad news. Who's this?"

She moved closer, subtly positioning herself between Ryan and Owen—who she was checking out like he was a face on a wanted poster. The challenge, the sizing up of him in her expression and body language were unmistakable. Still wearing a deliberately crooked smile, Owen

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leaned back on his heels, crossed his arms over his chest and looked back just as hard as she was looking at him. He saw it the instant recognition hit her. When she saw the similarities between him and Ryan—hair, eyes, nose. Despite that, she continued to position herself between him and his little cousin.

“That’s Owen. He’s a soldier. We used to e-mail all the time but he lives here now.”

“Here?” The suspicion in her voice was unmistakable. Her earlier cheerfulness was replaced with a cool, in-command tone.

“At the ranch,” Ryan answered. “With me, Fina, Cutler and Nath.”

Owen sized her up openly and without apology. The brown shirt and standard tan pants with the dark brown stripe down the outside of her legs did nothing to disguise a face and body that had his inner wolf jumping forward to get closer to her, and butting its head against the barriers Owen erected around it. She smelled like vanilla, cinnamon and sun-warmed skin. The smile on Owen’s face broadened. This was a prime bitch, ripe and worthy.

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Down boy, he muttered to his inner self and added a gentle nudge to his wolf's ribs to get his point across.

The female carried a gun on her right hip. Now *that* was hot.

Blonde and blue-eyed, she sported a set of drool-worthy breasts. She had a radiant, perfectly oval face, and straight, brilliant teeth.

Damn. His appreciation for law enforcement just went up a notch. But her overt suspicion was starting to piss him off. "Yes I'm a male outsider." Owen answered the questions he felt hovering behind those beautiful, critical eyes. "I'm also here on your Alpha's invite, living in the Alpha and Top Bitch's home. See, *this* is why I don't like being around packs. Everybody assumes you're going to undercut their business and hump their women. Not necessarily in that order."

Ryan peeked around Suzanne and stared up at Owen in amazement. The woman started grilling him.

"Where are you from? Where's your pack?" That spectacular body was now planted firmly between him and Ryan.

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“Eastfield. Tennessee.” That shut her up for about a second and a half. Last May, while he was in Iraq, his small pack in Eastfield had been massacred by rogue weres. Only Ryan and Fina had survived...and Fina had been lucky to get away alive.

“How long do you intend to stay here?”

She was getting pissy and Owen figured it was time to get pissy right back. “I know packs don’t take kindly to stray males but if you’d use your head instead of letting your prejudices jerk you around, Blondie—”

“*Blondie?*” The outrage in her voice made it shrill. One hand got real close to the baton looped on her belt and her fingers actually twitched.

“What?” Owen snarled. “You’re the only one who’s allowed to be rude? Like I said, *Blondie*, Cutler and Nath *invited* me to stay awhile.” He planted his hands on his hips and leaned over her. At six-two, he was over a half-foot taller than her. “Listen. I’ve been handed enough bullshit from the Taliban to last a lifetime. I don’t need any fresh on the stick from the likes of you.”

Owen had risen to the rank of Sergeant

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First Class before retiring. Dressing down insubordinates had been his special gift.

“And don’t even bother reaching for that baton, or those handcuffs. I haven’t done anything wrong and besides, you’re acting like a were challenging another were. Not a law-enforcement officer doing her job.”

Color rose in those smooth cheeks of hers. The sight of it satisfied him...and made him ease off. A little.

Owen continued to bark at her though. “So unless there’s some other reason you’re sniffing around me the way you are, we’ll be going.” The pointed, up-and-down look he gave her made the corners of her mouth lift in an unmistakable snarl. “I’d wish you a good day but I’m not feeling that charitable all of a sudden. I wonder why.”

He stepped around her, took Ryan’s hand and headed for the café.

“*Owen*,” Ryan called out. He sounded as outraged as the woman had. “You were mean to her.”

“Yeah well she started it.”

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“Cutler says men are supposed to treat women nice.”

“She’s not a woman,” Owen growled as he opened the door for Ryan. “She’s an anti-personnel device in a D-cup.”

“What’s a D-cup?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.”



That evening, after Ryan was in bed, the adults sat around the living room. During a break in the hockey game on the flatscreen, Cutler stood. “I need to talk to you, Owen. In private. It’ll only take a minute.”

Owen followed the big sheriff into the room they used as an office.

Cutler was the same height as Owen. Two years younger, Cutler had regulation-short brown hair...which he was running his fingers through so hard Owen worried he was about to yank a patch of it out.

“This investigation into Ed Timberman’s murder is making me crazy,” Cutler said as he

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crossed over to an antique cabinet set against the wall.

“Any leads?”

“Nothing,” Cutler answered with a harshness that was unusual for him. He was an Alpha and could be as volatile as any of them, but he was also calm, centered and confident. “Some partial tire tracks, a voice recording from a disposable cell, and a chewed-up bullet fragment that’s been sent to the State lab for analysis.” He swore under his breath then opened a drawer. “Not to change the subject but I wanted to personally invite you to our next pack run. Two nights from now. The day before Ed’s funeral.”

Cutler reached into the drawer. From where he stood, Owen saw the neatly stacked, cardboard boxes inside. They were small, each maybe four inches square. Cutler lifted one of the boxes out, opened it, and pulled out the silver case inside. “The pack needs a run,” Cutler added absently. “I hope you’ll come.”

The boxes were arranged in three different stacks and when Cutler opened two more boxes, Owen realized they each contained a different style of silver case. One was ornate with fine

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fligree work and scrolling, one simple, one in between.

“I remember my time in the military,” Cutler was looking over the silver boxes in his hand, like he was trying to decide something. His expression was tense, making it obvious he wasn’t enjoying what he was doing. “How hard it was to find opportunities to run in my fur. For me, that was on furlough mostly.”

Owen nodded.

“I met some weres in the military,” Cutler continued. “Not many but some. Good men. We’d get together and run whenever we could, which wasn’t often.” He glanced back at Owen, smiled thinly, then resumed picking over the silver boxes. “Some of them I still count amongst my best friends.”

Finally, Cutler chose the plain box and put the others back. “Ed was a simple man. He was fierce about what was right and wrong and I’d like to think he died because of those beliefs. Whoever killed him has got nothing to worry about from human justice. It’s pack justice that’ll take him down in ways that redefine pain.” Cutler snarled and the muted voices in

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the family room fell silent. With visible effort, he lowered his shoulders, closed up the cabinet and turned back to Owen. His eyes, an aqua that Owen had always thought were way too pretty for a man, reflected anger *and* pain. "There are a lot of things about being an Alpha I love. This is one of the things I hate."

He handed the small, plain, silver box to Owen.

Cutler kept talking. "It'll be a big funeral. Ed was well liked. Had a good reputation in these parts. Plus, being killed in the line of duty, police forces from all over the country will send representatives to attend. A couple from Canada too, last I heard. They're holding it out in Casper because no place else has a facility big enough.

"After, of course, there's the private memorial service. Weres honoring their own." He looked at the box meaningfully. "Along with the other Alphas, I'll present his widow with a token of our mourning. Remorse expressed in blood and tears.

"Anyway," he continued, inhaled sharply and looked Owen in the eye. "I wanted to thank you for watching over Ryan while I've been away.

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And to get you to promise to come to the pack run. Also, to ask if you could run this into town for me tomorrow. Have it engraved.”

He paused and Owen gave him a moment. The silence between them wasn’t entirely uncomfortable.

“My pack would be stronger with a male like you,” Cutler said eventually. “But I have to tell you straight out, if you’re as much a natural leader as I suspect you are, I won’t extend an invitation for you to stay permanently.”

Owen felt his mouth thin but he held back on commenting. He’d felt this moment coming since his arrival.

Cutler continued. “This is a good place to live and I’d like to think you could use us as a benchmark for any other pack you think of joining. A good place to raise pups.

“Weres need one thing above all else—an established hierarchy. We’ve got that here and I won’t let anyone mess that up.”

“Like the hierarchy in Pinebridge has been shaken.”

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“Yeah. Something like that,” Cutler agreed. He pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger then continued talking. “Anyway, run with us because you need to, and so you can remember what it’s like to be part of a pack.”

“Okay.” Owen answered with a nod. “But if your pack needs a run to reaffirm their bonds, won’t I kind of stick out?”

“Not this week. Nath’s brought in a couple of guys as consultants for his eco-tourism business, and they’ll be running with us too. Fina suggested to him over the winter that he look at expanding his offerings. These guys, apparently, work for other tour companies in the warmer months. Ones not run by weres. They do things like rafting, wagon rides, horse-back riding, mountain biking. Nath says if he likes what they’ve got to offer, he might hire one or two of them as guides.”

“Fina’s father was a genius when it came to business. Sounds like she inherited her father’s talent.”

“That she did. Oh, and if you’re going to hang around for awhile, try not to piss my deputy off

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again.” Cutler grinned wryly. “When she gets mad, she takes it out on the rest of the station.”

“She started it,” Owen growled and wondered why he felt the need to justify himself.

“Never figured she didn’t. But things are running tense in my department since Ed’s murder. It’s worse in Pinebridge.”

“Is that why they asked you to help?”

“Huh. Perceptive bastard, aren’t you?”

“Never said I wasn’t.” Owen shook his head curtly, slipped the silver box into his shirt pocket and laid his hand over it like he was protecting it. “If the deputies in Pinebridge were incompetent, or not trained to handle a murder investigation, I figured you might have mentioned it.”

“They’re neither. They’re just too close to it. Hell, their dispatcher’s taken a medical leave of absence. He’s got the worse case of survivor guilt I’ve ever seen. They’re all hurting. It’s a credit to their second-in-command that he’s keeping them involved without making them shoulder the responsibility of taking the lead in the investigation.” Cutler headed for the door and Owen followed.

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“It’s too bad you’re so strong.” Cutler held the door open for Owen and clapped him on the shoulder as he walked past. “Ever since Nath and I mated Fina, the prime, single bitches in the pack have been sniffing outside our borders for big studs like you. When you *do* leave, just don’t pull a pied-piper act.”

“Can’t make any promises there, Sheriff.” Owen grinned. “Can’t help it if I’m a chick magnet now can I?”

“Smug bastard,” Cutler huffed then returned Owen’s smile.

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Chapter Four

Owen arrived for the pack run late. It wasn't by accident.

He'd offered to drop Ryan off at the home where the pups were being watched over that evening. There, he'd stuck around longer than he'd needed to. He'd taken advantage of an opportunity to spend more one-on-one time with his cousin, sure, and he'd been happy to have Ryan introduce him to his friends.

The pups were curious about him, curious about what a soldier did, and when Owen mentioned that it had made him very happy to get the drawings Ryan had mailed to him, most of the kids started hunting for paper and coloring supplies.

They made Owen promise to pick up their pictures when he picked up Ryan, and mail them to the members of his old unit still serving in Iraq.

Owen was so touched, he actually got a little choked up inside.

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When he arrived at the pack's running ground, he hung back in the tree line and looked into the large clearing where no less than one-hundred adult weres were milling around.

It was a far different vibe than Owen was used to. There was no laughter, greetings, good-natured ball busting. This group was solemn and he stayed where he was, unwilling to disturb the mood that had settled over them.

In the middle, lit up by the huge bonfire in the center of the clearing, he made out Cutler and Nath's profiles. There was a gap between them and, instinctively, Owen knew the much shorter Fina was standing between her mates. After a few words from Cutler, the pack began to form itself in a loose line. The trail rimmed the perimeter of the clearing. In ones and twos, members of the pack approached Cutler and the fire. Through a gap, Owen's wolf's eyes picked out a long, narrow table, covered in a clean cloth. On the table were various boxes. He watched as the first two weres, a mated couple from the looks of them, moved past the table. They each tore open a small package taken from the first box, swabbed a forefinger with an antiseptic wipe, then from

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the next box, took out a wrapped, sterile lancet. Each lancet was very small. They pressed the tip to their forefinger then let their blood drop into the long-handled earthenware crucible resting across a metal rack near the fire.

One or two drops each, the members of Cutler's pack gave their blood in tribute and mourning to a fallen Beta.

Some of the women laid neatly folded handkerchiefs in the crucible instead, adding their dry tears to the pack's tribute. The handkerchiefs absorbed the blood, took it in, gave it a solemn place to rest where it waited for the second part of the ceremony.

After all the other pack members had filed by, Nath then Fina then Cutler added their own drops of blood. Cutler picked up the crucible and, using the long handle, placed it on a series of short, iron tripods set in the heart of the fire. As if overwhelmed by the burden placed within it, the heart of the fire sputtered and the flames died. But the heat of the thing couldn't be held back. Soon, the crucible was obscured by thick columns of fire. Cutler tended the crucible while his pack watched in silence. He took the end

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of the handle, which sat well out of the flames, gave it a gentle shake now and then, tipped the crucible ever so slightly, then laid it back down onto the row of tripods. Some time later, he lifted the crucible out of the fire and returned it to the metal rack set away from the flames.

From his shirt pocket, he produced a small, plain, silver box. Owen recognized it, knew the engraving identified it as belonging to Cutler's pack. Below that, Ed Timberman's name was etched deep in simple, square text. And below that, were three words: Remembered And Honored.

With Fina and Nath's help, Cutler tapped the ash residue out of the crucible, into the box, closed up the box and, solemnly, returned it to his pocket.

There was a moment's pause. Small animals foraging on the forest floor, even those in the trees fell still and quiet. Guarding the small, precious box, Cutler began to take off his clothes. His pack followed suit.

Watching from the tree line, Owen did the same.

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“Let the run begin,” Cutler bellowed at last. The words were gravelly and hard to make out. Owen could hear the structural changes already taking place in the Alpha’s throat as his emerging wolf struggled to make the sounds of human speech.

All across the clearing, were after were tensed, dropped to all fours. Their bodies lengthened, their legs and arms got shorter, their torsos grew broad and powerful. Grunts of pain turned to whines. Skin, luminescent in the moonlight, was obscured as glossy fur snaked out through miniscule pores.

The last thing Owen did before he unleashed his wolf was look around carefully. He scented the air, hunted for signs of trouble but found none. Inside his head, he stepped back. He had no trouble finding the sheltered spot in his human forebrain. He even recreated his favorite recliner, the one that used to sit in his mother’s living room, made himself comfortable, and closed his eyes.

Owen’s wolf leapt forward. Eyes that had been round a moment before, stretched back. Its brown irises grew long, became flecked with

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gold, saw a pine needle fall from a limb, high on a tree that had stood over a hundred years, on the far side of the clearing. A voice box that, a moment earlier, had been capable of speech and song in a broad range of human emotion, grew smaller and less complex. He refused to whine when pain rippled down his back. His ankles shattered, dropping him down on all fours before realigning themselves, longer and far more powerful than before.

A gust of cold, spring air chilled his nakedness before fur, thick and golden, slithered out the thousands of pores in his skin. The sensation made him tremble and smile horribly. His nail beds stung as his claws grew thick and hard. They dug into the dirt and detritus of the forest floor, bracing him as his head was pulled back by the shifting of his spine. They grounded him against the ache of his teeth growing and shifting in a jaw that stretched into a snout.

There was a final, encompassing flash of pain then Owen's wolf's dark, moist nose twitched. He scented the air around him and was pleased by what he smelled. Weres. A lot of them. A healthy, vibrant pack, some of them already greeting each

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other, making play overtures. Instinctively, his ears perked then rotated back. He heard nothing out of the ordinary, sensed no danger. Panting lightly, he tasted the air and liked that as well. He saw the fire but felt no sadness. He was an instinctual creature, not ruled by foolish, human emotion or confusing thought.

When he stepped into the clearing, the two wolves closest to him jumped, spun, and backed away. They weren't young but there was no real strength in them. They'd been caught unawares by the arrival of this new wolf, obviously frightened by the confidence and power he radiated. Owen was used to that and he stood still for a moment, telescoping his energy, before dropping his head and sniffing their genitals. They held themselves still for his inspection. Taking charge came naturally to this wolf and few had ever challenged him for the right to sniff first.

Owen sensed the mating bond between the two, knew they were past the mid-point of their life expectancy, caught the lingering scent of pups that were almost full grown. He didn't rush his perusal of the pair. His approach was calm, thorough and he took charge of the meeting

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without effort. When he was finished, he held himself still so the pair could sniff him. They did so quickly. Lesser wolves didn't tempt fate by pissing off more powerful wolves, and lingering around a male's vulnerable backside was liable to piss him off.

When the female splayed her front paws, dropped to her chest, tilted her head to one side and let her tongue loll out the side of her mouth, Owen yipped, bounced in place and obliged her by chasing after her when she ran playfully through the clearing. Her mate ran beside Owen, although he stayed a step behind. The three of them ran fast, their feet pounding over the earth, driving hard. The bitch spun with surprising agility, rolled, gave Owen's shoulder a solid nudge then took off again. He caught up to her, bounced his heavy skull off her hip, then opened his mouth in a parody of a human smile when she flopped down, waved her paws in the air and showed her belly.

Her mate caught up to them, raced around to her other side, rubbed his snout over the curve of her breastbone and jumped away obligingly when she cuffed him. The female scrambled to

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her feet, yelped in invitation, and took off again. Owen stayed where he was this time and watched the pair run off to continue their play.

The wind freshened and, from near the fire, brought a scent that felt like...home.

He made his way through the pack. Bodies shifted subtly, making room for him. No one challenged him or blocked his path. If they had, his first reaction would have been surprise. *No* one challenged him. No one had for a long, long time. He closed in on the scent and found its source in a large, reddish brown bitch who was standing shoulder to shoulder with two, massive, chestnut males.

Only the larger of the two came close to Owen's size. He addressed this wolf first. Not because of his size, but because his carriage and confidence trumpeted Alpha. For a moment, instinct told Owen to challenge him. Every pack had to have a leader and that leader had to be stronger than the others, and not just physically. An Alpha needed an innate ability to lead and believe without a doubt he had the biggest balls in the forest. Owen sensed this male was well matched to him. Maybe even his equal. He

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looked around the clearing. This wasn't his pack. These weres weren't his family. He *could* lead, had the gift for it, but he'd been on his own for so long, he'd lost the drive to take over a group just because he could.

Instead of challenging the Alpha, instead of approaching him as an equal, Owen presented his flank to the large wolf and let it sniff first. Despite his instincts, it felt right to show respect here. The Alpha took the invitation without question, but he kept his sniffing short before letting Owen sniff him.

The wolves around them tensed visibly. This meeting could get ugly. Tempers could flash over. Dominance would have to be asserted. The wolves backed away and stopped only when the two massive males lifted their heads, let their tails relax, and turned to the confident bitch standing a few feet away.

Owen approached her calmly so she wouldn't startle. She was the source of the scent that had drawn him. She was young, younger than him. Projecting the haughty, righteous strength of a top bitch, she growled softly, made her lip flutter, but accepted his invitation to sniff. He smelled

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her at the same time. They moved around each other slowly, taking the full measure of each other's strength, age and health. To Owen, she *did* smell like home. A home he'd left behind so long ago he'd forgotten the taste of it. There was no compulsion to return to it though. No yearning or sense of entitlement. It was more an echo than a living, viable presence in his mind. Owen's wolf didn't understand but it didn't need to. It simply accepted what was.

Catching Owen off guard, the young bitch licked his snout. No were had tended to him like this since he'd been a pup. He held himself still, submitted to her nurturing touch, shook his head when the other chestnut male, the Beta, whined softly and nuzzled the bitch's cheek. Owen stepped aside obligingly, letting the males crowd their mate. He didn't want a fight. He wanted to play. Dropping to his chest, he barked, twice, and leapt up when the bitch spun and took off so fast she was nothing more than a reddish-brown blur.

She led the three males through the pack, dodged wrestling weres, groups chasing each other in tight circles. Young and strong, she sped

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by the others with an agility and gift for evasion that left Owen shaking his head in surprise.

Other wolves joined in their chase. They exuded joy as they raced around the clearing, falling in and out of the game as either attention or endurance flagged. Owen and the two chestnut males didn't flag. They chased the bitch with a singular focus, exalting in their strength and the freedom to play.

When the top bitch bolted for a clearing that had opened up between the jostling, racing wolves and disappeared into the forest, Owen pulled back. He stopped instead of following the three mates. Their bond was strong. Their acceptance of his presence was a courtesy, but only that. It would be fun to run with such strong wolves but, tonight, he didn't want to feel like the outsider he was.

Turning back to the wolves still playing in the clearing, Owen inhaled and felt his ears perk when a fresh, seductive scent passed in front of his nose. A female with long, strong legs, eyes that shone like moon-blue ice, and a coat as glossy and dark as midnight, strolled past. She cast him a haughty look over her shoulder but

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Owen wasn't fooled by her feigned disinterest. This was a healthy, choice female. Young and unmated, she approached him from upwind, flicked her tail up for him as she walked past.

His tongue lolled out and he licked the drool off his lips.

A flurry of movement on the far side of the clearing jerked his attention away from the black bitch.

Another female, small and sleek, skidded to a halt, jumped sideways and spun to evade the pack of no less than six males chasing her. The males crashed into each other, howled indignantly, snapped and snarled as they righted themselves. Then they jostled each other as they tried at the same time to get close enough to her backside to catch her scent. Her golden-brown fur was lightly streaked with the color of sunshine. Her lips were pulled back in a parody of a smile as she jumped again, leaving the males to untangle themselves before they could resume chasing her. She was beautiful when she ran. Small and agile, there was joy in her every movement.

Owen's nose dragged his eyes away from her. Another bitch, long, red and putting out enough

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pheromones that Owen's hips actually started rocking, strolled by. The tip of his penis began to emerge from its protective fur-covered sheath. This wolf would be coming into heat soon. Owen and every other male nearby began to trail after her. A few of them cried out in pain when the bitches they'd *been* playing with, smacked them hard with their forepaws or slammed their skulls into their ribs. Unimpeded by a mate's claim on him, Owen followed the red bitch for awhile, knocked her shoulder with his when he got close enough, stepped aside obligingly when another male squeezed between them.

He could fight the other males for the right to mount this female but claiming her would mean siring the pups her body was gearing up for. Owen's wolf didn't act on its urges. In fact, the red bitch was simply forgotten as the golden-brown female ran past, still trailed by her would-be suitors. Skirting the males around him and knocking the rest aside, Owen joined in the chase. The golden-brown female looked over her shoulder, saw him bearing down on her, and put on a burst of speed.

Owen's wolf bayed with delight. This was what

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he'd yearned for. This was what he'd needed. The freedom to play, to be part of a group, accepted equally because they had no claims on him, and he had no claims on them. At top speed, she turned in a tight, controlled arc. Owen felt his heart beat faster as he exerted himself to keep up. She was lighter and more agile. He was the most powerful being in this clearing this night and his powerful flanks and solid bones let him drive through a turn that made two other males spin out and bowl over a group standing nearby. The rest of the males were no more than a body length behind him. The female turned again, in the opposite direction only this time Owen was too close. He overshot her path and by the time he was back on her tail, the rest of the group was ahead of him.

Growling, he dug his claws into the ground, used the traction to push off, hard, and leapt forward so fast his ears flattened in the wind. One then two males dropped behind him. He caught up to the third, nipped the back of its leg, and snarled with pleasure when the male yelped in surprise and dropped out of the race.

There was only one more male between him

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and the female. This one was big but a little clumsy because of it. It raced after the female with open exuberance, perhaps enjoying the chase as much as Owen. Owen matched this brown wolf, stride for stride, content to hang back with the other big male so the female's sharp, sudden turns wouldn't catch him unawares. But Owen's wolf was too competitive, too sure of its right to dominate to accept the other male as an equal in the chase. He slammed his body into the brown male's, and left him yelping and skidding across the dirt.

Alone now, without competition, Owen gave the golden-brown female his full attention. He snarled, letting her know he was biding his time before he caught her. She threw herself into a wild sprint in response. Owen kept up. At this speed, he knew he couldn't control his turns like she could. If she deked, he'd spin out and would be blowing dirt out of his snout for a week. Instead of turning however, the female stopped, quite suddenly. Owen's head snapped to the side so fast his neck hurt as he blazed past her. He dug his paws into the ground, locked his shoulders, and spun around before he'd stopped moving. When he raced back to her, she simply

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sat, opened her mouth in a wide grin and began to pant, hard.

Wary of another dodge, Owen approached her slowly. She didn't move. She simply sat where she was and watched him, letting him approach her. Although small, she exuded an unmistakable confidence. Clearly strong and smart enough to relish play, she stood up when he was beside her, bumped her chest into his shoulder then held herself still so he could sniff her. Even though it was night, she smelled like she'd been warmed by the sun. There was no challenge in her, merely calm acceptance. When she dropped her head and tapped his jaw with the top of her snout, Owen pushed her away playfully then let her head-bump him again.

The big, brown male trotted up to them and moved beside her like they were old friends. Two more males, followed by the final three, joined them. Owen was jostled away from the female. Reacting instinctively, he growled in warning then sank his teeth into the thick ruff of the closest male. He shook his head once, hard, then let go. The male whimpered and took two steps back. Two other males spun away from the female

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and charged. Owen dodged the first, getting in a hard underbelly nip as the other flew past him in an uncoordinated blur of fur. He threw his weight up onto his back legs when the third reached him and came down in a flurry of growls, snapping teeth and swiping forepaws. The third male dropped under the weight of Owen's body, scrambled, tried to roll away and cried out in fear when Owen latched onto its throat and bit hard enough to touch skin.

The other males backed off while Owen's opponent froze where he was. Accepting the male's acquiescence, Owen released him and trotted back to the female with his tail held high. Again she sat, watched him, waited for him to reach her. This time, her head tipped to the side. The big brown male approached Owen. Owen growled, then growled louder and backed it up with a snarl and a mock charge. To his credit, the brown male didn't tuck tail and run but he did step aside, giving Owen a clear and unimpeded path to the female.

When he reached her, Owen spronked up on his forelegs then let his chest rest on the forest floor. Head cocked, ears perked, he looked up at

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her hopefully. She jumped, all four paws leaving the ground, spun and took off for the forest. Owen, with the six other suitors in pursuit, ran after her.

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Chapter Five

Owen's wolf ran like the wind. It had been too long since it had been let loose, able to release the full potential of its strength. He caught up to the golden-brown bitch as soon as the trees thinned then reined in his speed so she could keep up. Trailed by her suitors, they ran side-by-side, dodging pines, leaping over fallen logs, scrambling over rough, granite outcroppings.

The spring grasses grazed Owen's chest as he ran. His tough paws found purchase against dirt and rock. The night air was sweet and heady. He had been born for this...this playing, the chase, the exhilaration that came from pitting himself against a worthy female.

In ones and twos, the other males put on bursts of speed, caught up, and ran beside them for awhile. They turned their heads, joy in their expressions as they looked at Owen before falling back. He remembered this, the freedom, the easy friendships once hierarchy was established. Even though he was a stranger, he was accepted. It had

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been so long, he'd almost forgotten what it was like to be part of a pack.

When the golden-brown bitch pulled ahead, he let her. He let her take the lead like males of his kind had done for millennia. When he ran beside her, she bumped him now and then. Subtle nudges of her shoulder guided him through the unfamiliar terrain. She adjusted his direction so he ran parallel to a deep gorge instead of running straight off the edge. She steered him around a patch of wet, almost swampy ground hidden in the grass.

She led them to a stream where they drank, splashed around, and lay with their chests in the cool, refreshing water. Not until every one of the males following her had stopped panting did she get up and resume the chase.

The half moon rose higher in the sky then began to descend. Still racing, still playing and dodging the others, she led them up a steep, rock incline, out onto an outcropping that overlooked the mountain valley below.

When she settled down to look out over the valley, Owen stretched out on his belly next to her, never questioning his right to be beside

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her. Never questioning the appropriateness of the other males taking up positions beside yet slightly back from theirs. At the female's side, he breathed in the night air. Tasted it for predators, competitors, danger or prey. The other males didn't seem to notice his alertness, or share it. The female did though. He sensed it in the way she watched him, the way she waited for his big body to relax before she sighed and laid her chin on her forepaws. The way she lifted her head after a moment, licked his muzzle then stretched out again.

With the others relaxing around him, Owen looked down over the valley. Now and then, he spotted groups of wolves, playing in the moonlight. They chased each other, wrestled, mock charged or simply rested, like Owen and his group.

When the female beside him washed Owen's face a second time, the brown wolf whined quietly. She silenced him with a glare and a growl.

After awhile, she stood, led them back down to the valley, and resumed the chase. They stopped by the stream once more then lifted their heads

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in unison when they heard the deep, powerful bay of the Alpha. Trotting in the female's wake, they followed her back to the clearing.

When he caught sight of the dying fire through the trees, Owen picked his moment and veered away from the others. His wolf preferred to be alone when it changed because it knew the man inside him preferred to be alone. Hidden beneath the trees, he sat beside his human clothes and peered out at the other wolves gathering in the clearing. He closed his eyes and bared his teeth at the slither of pain firing his nerve endings.

The transition from wolf to man wasn't as traumatic or as painful as man to wolf. Owen's wolf was tougher and its body experienced little stress as it shrank back to its normal dimensions, although his back itched like crazy after his fur retreated into his skin. Content and pleasantly tired after such a hard run, Owen dressed, walked back to his truck and drove off without anybody seeing him.



Suzanne Young's wolf lifted its head and

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scanned the clearing. The six males that always trailed her were here with her. The seventh was nowhere to be seen. She made a quiet noise of distress and Wally Pierce's wolf stepped up beside her and leaned his heavy, brown shoulder against hers. He stayed where he was, supporting her body as it transitioned back to human form. Then he changed as well, wincing and grunting once in discomfort as his feet returned to their normal shape. Wally was her best buddy and another deputy sheriff on the police force. He was also wildly, kid-crush in love with her. He *had* been since they'd hit puberty. Like he always did, he looked down at her body with open longing, sighed, and turned away from her to hunt for his clothes.

Her wolf might have been distressed by the powerful, golden male's absence but the woman was not. Sure that male was something special... so special there could be no place for him here unless he challenged their Alpha.

Nobody wanted that kind of upheaval, especially from an interloper. And to leave her pack to be with him would be...untenable. She had a home, a position in this pack, a job she

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loved. She picked up her panties, slipped them on then reached for her bra which lay on top of the rest of her neatly folded clothes.

That male might be everything she'd ever wanted in a mate but strays like him weren't what she needed.



At work the next morning, Suzanne sat up a little straighter in her chair when Sheriff Cutler Powell stepped out of his office. There was a time she'd take every opportunity to flaunt her looks whenever the good-looking Alpha was around. The arrival of Fina Whitesage last summer put an end to that. Suzanne had been disappointed Cutler hadn't chosen her for his mate. What healthy female wouldn't? But now that she was no longer chasing Cutler's tail all over the county, Suzanne's working relationship with him had improved, her dedication to her job had improved, and she was, in many ways, happier and more content.

An established hierarchy would do that to a were.

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“Listen up,” Cutler said in that booming, commanding voice of his. “You all know the sheriff’s office in Pinebridge asked me to step in there for a few days. Help them while they deal with the murder of their sheriff.” He sat on the corner of a desk, leaned his hands on his muscular thighs and looked around the open office. “Tomorrow’s going to be my last day there but they still need help.” Glancing down at the floor, he shook his head slowly. “They’re in shock and floundering. Their dispatcher has fallen to pieces. I need two volunteers willing to transfer to the Pinebridge sheriff’s department on temporary loan. The assignment will last three months. More if it takes awhile for them to find a suitable were to send to the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy for training.” He stood and adjusted the gun belt hanging around his taut waist. “I’m going to the bakery. Talk it over amongst yourselves. If nobody’s interested, I’ll ask the rest of the deputies, although they’re all mated and I can’t see any of them wanting to move away from their families.”

Suzanne watched Cutler’s broad back as he left, then the top of his head as he walked past the front windows. She flipped the mic on her

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headset up and spun her chair so she could look at the rest of the deputies.

Owen stopped mid-stride, about ten feet outside the front door of the sheriff's office. Somebody inside was pissed. And bellowing.

"No way in *hell* are you going."

"You're not my father or my boss, Wally. So back off."

Huh. Owen had no trouble recognizing *that* pissy female tone.

"You all seem to forget I wear the same shirt you do because of my skills, and not just because I fill it out nice."

With a sigh, Owen resumed walking. Cutler was expecting him. The sooner he was in there, the sooner he could get out. When he stepped into the sheriff's office, his skin prickled from the tension in the air.

"I'm not your boss but I am your friend. I get a say when you do something stupid. And putting yourself in the middle of a disintegrating

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pack with a cop-killer on the loose would be the stupidest thing you've ever done."

"This gun isn't for show," Suzanne yelled back. She snatched off the tiny headset she was wearing, tossed it to another deputy and marched up to the humongous, brown haired cop she'd been arguing with. "You all seem to forget I'm a fully certified deputy sheriff, just like the rest of you. Since when does wearing my reproductive organs on the inside prevent me from doing the job?"

"Aw, Suzanne, you know I don't mean it like that." The big cop spread his hands in a gesture of appeasement.

Owen could see it was wasted effort.

"And just *how* do you mean it? Hmm? Compared to me, your marksmanship is so bad you shouldn't be licensed to carry a cap gun. And what the hell do *you* want?" she yelled, turning to glare at Owen who'd stepped up to the counter.

He let his brows draw closer together but other than that, wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing how much she managed to annoy him.

"And what the hell are you doing with *that*?"

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she added, making a grab for the silver box Owen was pulling out of his breast pocket.

“Easy there, deputy,” Owen growled. He held the box out of her reach, uncharacteristically enjoying the fact he was able to rile her up so easily. She made another grab for the box but his height defeated her easily. When she resorted to huffing at him and planting her fists on that tiny waist of hers, he admired the way her breasts pushed against her regulation shirt.

“This,” he said, tilting the silver box in his hand, “hasn’t been reported stolen nor has it been. I’m a citizen you’re sworn to protect and serve...not play snatch and grab with. So tone it down a notch.”

“Why you arrogant...” The pretty deputy sheriff launched herself across the counter at him, grabbed the front of his shirt with one hand and her cuffs with the other.

Owen held his ground and glared down at her. “I’m no expert but attacking a civilian is a chargeable offence, isn’t it? Is it just your blonde roots showing or are you always this dumb?”

“Suzanne!”

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She flinched and snarled when the door behind Owen slammed. Cutler stepped up beside Owen and glared at his deputies. "Let him go and get back to work. All of you," his voice boomed through the office.

He flipped up a little gate that led past the counter into the main part of the station. "Come with me," he barked at Owen before heading for the door with his name painted on it. Inside, Cutler dropped the small paper bag he was carrying onto his desk, releasing the scent of cinnamon and apples into the air. He sat down in his big, leather chair.

Holding his tongue, Owen took one of the chairs across from Cutler. With quiet reverence, he set the silver box on Cutler's blotter.

Cutler picked it up and ran his fingers around the lid. Owen knew what he was checking for. The same jeweler who'd engraved the box had just finished soldering it shut. The man was an artist. There wasn't a drip, ripple or ridge to mar the perfect symmetry of the box. The ash inside would be preserved forever.

"I'd like to apologize for my deputy's behavior."

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Cutler's sigh was ripe with released tension. "If you want to press charges—"

"No," Owen interrupted adamantly. "You're all under a lot of stress and maybe I went out of my way to provoke her. A little."

Cutler shot him a discerning glare then the corner of his mouth quirked up. "Just don't do it again while she's on the job. Jeez, what is it with you two? You're like oil and water and you don't even know each other."

"Must be my charming personality."

"Must be." Cutler sighed again. "You were right to come down on Suzanne like you did, but there's room for only one Alpha in a pack. I'm sad to say this, Owen, but at some point, I'm going to have to ask you to move on."

Owen's mouth tightened, but he nodded in agreement. "I don't want to fight you." He sighed, much like Cutler had. "I don't want your pack or your position. And I definitely don't want to wreck Fina or Ryan's lives. They've been through enough upheaval for two lifetimes."

"Agreed."

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The weres sat across the desk from each other, not saying anything for a moment, just watching each other and taking the measure of one another's strength.

Eventually, Cutler spoke again. "I pegged you for a natural leader when I met you in Tennessee last summer. Guess you got good at hiding what you are while you were in the military. I did too. I also think you've gotten good at hiding what you are from yourself."

Owen's instinct was to argue the point. But he realized he didn't actually disagree with everything Cutler said, he just had an inborn need to win. So he kept his mouth shut and accepted the cup of coffee Cutler poured for him, along with one of the apple fritters the Alpha pulled out of the bag on his desk. While they ate, Cutler told him what he knew about the neighboring packs, and the few out-of-state ones he was familiar with.

When Owen left maybe fifteen minutes later, Cutler's message, while veiled in layers of politeness, was clear. It was time Owen started thinking about where to live next.

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Suzanne smelled the approach of the big, annoying as hell were even before the door to Cutler's office opened. She glared at Owen when he walked past her desk and he glared right back. Owen Wells was terrifyingly handsome and she hated him even more for it. His face was all hard edges and stark intensity. The background check she'd run on him a few days ago hadn't turned up anything. Bastard had an exemplary military record, filed his taxes on time and had only one traffic charge...a speeding ticket back in Tennessee when he was seventeen.

She loathed the sight of him and would have trussed him up, dropped him in the trunk of a squad car and dumped him over the State line if she could get away with it.

When the outer door closed behind him, she stood up and turned to face Cutler.

"I'm volunteering to work in Pinebridge."

Behind her, Wally inhaled so sharply he actually hissed.

"Shut up, Pierce," she barked over her shoulder. "And I'm not going there as any damn dispatcher

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either,” she told Cutler without bothering to temper her tone. “And now that we’re *on* the subject, I’m not going to work as a dispatcher here anymore either. Hire a civilian. It’s a waste of my skills and taxpayer money to pay a deputy sheriff to field 9-1-1 calls from old ladies who can’t remember where they parked at the Bingo hall.”

The corner of Cutler’s mouth twitched. “As your sheriff, I don’t have a legitimate reason to refuse. As your Alpha...” The pitch of his voice dropped into that firm, confident undertone only Alphas ever really mastered. “I also have to consider the needs of my pack. You’re a healthy, young, unmated female in a pack with more males than females. I send you to Pinebridge for three months and I can damn-well guarantee some stud over there is going to poach you away from us. What’s my guarantee you’ll come back?”

She set her hands on her hips and shot a leg forward. It was the closest she could safely come to challenging her Alpha without being insubordinate. “Fine. If I meet someone, I’ll drag his shaggy ass back here.”

A couple of the other deputies, the older

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ones, chuckled. The younger ones just growled quietly.

Cutler scowled but his brow didn't furrow...a sure sign he wasn't completely opposed to what she'd said. "Okay. You can go. But if you bring a mate back with you, he damn well better be a plumber. I'm sick to death of having to call in a human every time the sinks in the town hall back up."

She stood up straighter and even felt her chin go up. "Thank you, Sheriff."

"No," Wally blurted out. He moved to stand beside her, shot her a hard look then glared at Cutler. "Equality be damned, she'd be a woman going into an unknown pack...a female deputy going into a community with a cop-killer on the loose. It's bad enough when a male cop runs into trouble on the job. When it's a woman..." His voice trailed off.

"When it's a woman," said Bill Anderson, Cutler's forty-three year old desk sergeant. He stood and waded into the argument, bringing his calm demeanor and even calmer voice with him. "We feel it more. It's not professional but men just hurt more when a woman gets injured." He

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laid his hand on Wally's shoulder. "That doesn't mean we should hold her back from doing the job she's trained for. Suzanne's one of the most dedicated, hard working cops I've known. Chaining her to a desk just because we'd go crazy if some guy punched her for trying to give him a ticket doesn't give us the right to keep her from doing the job she was born to do." He looked up at Cutler. "No offense intended, Sheriff, but I'm right."

"Well if she's going," Wally declared, "I'm going too."

Cutler leaned back on his heels. Suzanne looked up at him hopefully.

"Looks like you're going to Pinebridge, Young. You too, Wally. I'll phone their interim sheriff and tell him to expect you tomorrow." With that, Cutler turned away and walked back to his office.

"Young," Sergeant Anderson said quietly. He gave her a brief, one-armed hug then buzzed a quick kiss to her forehead. "Don't get yourself hurt out there. Your daddy would kill me."

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Chapter Six

The Saturday after Ed Timberman's funeral, Owen stormed into the barn, tracking the squeals.

"*Hey.*" He had to bellow to make himself heard. God almighty...whoever thought two first-graders could make such a racket. Ryan and his best friend Koby froze in place—leaning out of the hay loft overhead, just about to swing down a rope they'd looped over a rafter. "You two are a whole new definition of insane. The noise alone is going to drive every one of these animals berserk any minute now. The first thing they'll do is trample the shit out of you just to shut you up. And you let go of that rope this minute, young man. If you *think* I'm going to let you drive that skull of yours through the floor when you fall..." He let his voice trail off meaningfully.

Both boys shook—Koby more than Ryan—but they let go of the rope and backed away from the railing.

"Better. Now get your skinny behinds down

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here and find something less suicidal to play at.” Hands on hips, he glared at them as they rushed down the ladder and ran past him, giving him a wide berth as they headed for the door.

When he turned, he saw Cutler and Fina standing side by side, watching him through narrowed eyes.

“No, no, no,” Owen huffed. “You are *not* going to bust my balls for disciplining my own cousin.”

“No. We’re not,” Cutler agreed then visibly relaxed his stance.

“Good. Because as his only living relative, I *am* his legal guardian, remember?”

“Yes, but you’ve never talked about wanting to take him from us.” Cutler’s expression darkened. “And you won’t. He’s bonded with Fina like she’s his mother. He’s settled here, has friends and standing in this pack.”

The two males glared at each other.

“Oh will you two stop it already?” Fina interrupted with a snarl. “I’m drowning in testosterone over here. *Owen*—”

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“What did I do?”

She silenced him with a look that reminded him way too much of his mother.

“We wanted to talk to you,” she said and it sounded like she was trying to rein in her anger.

Owen made an effort too.

“First,” Fina said, “thank you for stopping the boys from swinging down that rope. They know they’re not supposed to be out here without an adult.”

“You’re welcome.”

“But next time,” she added gently, “tell them the *act* is insane, not them.”

“Oh.” He thought about that for a moment, then nodded in agreement. “Yeah. I suppose you’re right.”

“I need a favor,” Cutler said, stepping forward. “I need a man in Pinebridge. Somebody no one knows. Somebody with some training in covert ops who can move around outside of the official police investigation. Everybody out there knows who the cops and the pack leaders are. If whoever killed Ed is still there, if they’ve managed to keep

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their mouth shut this long, there's no way they'll let anything slip around anybody official."

"What makes you think the killer's still there?" Owen asked.

"The site of the murder, for one. It's so isolated the road doesn't show up on State maps. The time of day...it was chosen too perfectly. It was the one time a caller would be guaranteed to get Ed as the responding officer at that location." Cutler bared his teeth. "Sheriffs don't normally respond to low-priority 9-1-1 calls, but he took it because it wasn't too far off his route home." Fina touched his arm and Cutler relaxed visibly. He rubbed the back of his neck. "We're out of investigative options. It's time to try something creative."

"Okay, I'll buy that. But won't they turn me away?" Owen asked.

"Not Pinebridge," Cutler assured him. "Their Alpha's getting older. Almost too old now to do the job effectively. Over the past couple years, he's become more accepting of outside males. Whether consciously or unconsciously, whether the decision is his or his wolf's, he's opening up the field to newcomers who might be able to take

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his place.” Cutler shrugged. “After spending a few days there, it was pretty obvious none of the younger weres had what it takes to take over as Alpha in a pack that large and spread out. Beta, maybe, but I don’t want to tell you too much. You’re more than capable of taking your own read on the situation and I don’t want to color your impressions.”

“Plus,” Owen added, “I can’t stay here much longer.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that. More than you’ll know.” Helooped his arm around Fina’s shoulders, pulled her small body into his and kissed the top of her head. “I wish things had turned out different.” He straightened and looked Owen in the eye. “I like you. You’re a good man. Fina and Ryan, well, their lives are more complete with you here. But even though it’s the last thing our brains want, we both know that instinct and the drive to lead will pit us against each other. My pack doesn’t need that kind of stress. It’s killing my ego to admit this,” he added with a wry grin, “but we’d probably wind up crippling each other in a fight, with no clear winner. Then where will the pack be?”

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“Okay.”

At Owen’s simple, single word of acceptance, both Cutler’s and Fina’s shoulders went down.

“Thank you,” Cutler said. “First thing Monday, I need you to move out to Pinebridge. There may be one or two weres there that recognize you but they’ll believe your cover story about moving on and looking for a home. Their Alpha will set you up with a place to live, a job...make it look like you came to him honorably and asked about joining his pack.”

“All right.” Owen nodded. “Where do I meet him?”

“Oh he’s easy to find. He’s the pharmacist.”



That afternoon, Owen was carefully labeling packages of heirloom seeds in his neat, square script, and storing the packages in numbered trays inside one of the refrigerator drawers in Fina’s greenhouse. Well, *one* of her greenhouses.

“How have your on-line orders been so far this spring?” he asked. As a teen, he’d worked part-

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time in her father's nursery back in Tennessee. His mother had been the company's sales and merchandising manager. Now that their pack was dead, Fina had re-created the company's set-up out here.

"Better than I'd hoped." Fina was keying seed dates, lots and quantities into a laptop hooked up to the refrigeration units. "When I closed down the site last summer, I re-directed customers. But we had a good mailing list—thanks to your mother," she added with a nod, "and most of them have come back. I did some fairly aggressive marketing aimed at potential Western customers over the winter and we've recouped those dollars already. Repeating the message next winter will be almost pure profit."

"Whew. You sure are smart for such a tiny thing," Owen teased. He hip-checked her lightly, snapped off his sterile gloves and tossed them into a trash can.

"I wanted to ask..." Fina's voice was tentative.

Owen encouraged her with a grin and a nod. An only child, he'd never had a kid sister. He liked to think, if he *had* one, they would have the same easy-going affection he felt for Fina.

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She continued. "When you came back to the States, you spent your first month in Tennessee."

"*Riiight*." He drew out the word, just a little.

"How was it? Back there."

Owen exhaled slowly, considering his answer before he spoke. "Well, I spent time with two neighboring packs. First, with the one our families split off from when they formed their own pack."

"The one we weren't told about growing up." Her expression darkened, just a little. Like him, she hadn't liked finding out she had distant relatives after the fact. Their parents' split from their original pack had been so nasty, they'd kept their children from knowing anything about the others. If those packs had been closer...if her family had been part of a bigger pack...

"Yes," Owen continued. "Then with the other pack...the one that sent their Alpha and a couple of his men to help out when Cutler and Nath went back to wipe out the rogues."

Fina fell silent. Like Owen, she was probably thinking about the friend who'd been kidnapped

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and almost killed when the rogues had tried to blackmail Fina into returning to them.

“I took your friend Helen out to dinner while I was there.” Owen changed the subject, hoping it would ease the darkness he sensed settling around Fina.

“You did? I hope you didn’t mess with her. She’s just a kid.”

“She’s two months older than you are,” Owen blurted out. “And no I didn’t try to seduce her. Although she is cute.” He laughed when Fina slapped his shoulder. “Don’t worry. She’s human. They’re too fragile for my tastes.”

“Eww. TMI.”

He laughed again. That was one of the best things about hanging out with Fina. Even as a kid, she could always get him to laugh. “Anyway,” he continued, “the packs back East made me feel welcome. They gave me space and time to think.”

“But you didn’t ask to join?”

“No.” He shrugged, locked up the refrigerator drawers and re-set the thermostat controls. “It

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was too soon to commit myself to a pack. I'm not even sure I'm that kind of wolf anymore."

The look she gave him clearly said, "Oh yeah, tough guy?" He'd seen her flash Cutler that same look, Nath too. It might bring them to heel but the effort was wasted on him.

He grew serious. "The houses are all torn down now." Even to his ears, his voice sounded unusually deep and somber when he talked about the small community their pack had lived in. "They've laid the foundations for the first four geared-to-income homes. When I was there, I paid for new surveys. The county adjusted the street addresses for the lots. With so much death there, I didn't want families to live at the same addresses where people had died."

They fell silent for a moment. Owen blinked then returned Fina's hug when she wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her cheek on his chest. Dropping his chin onto the top of her head, he held her for a moment then released her, dried her tears with the pad of his thumb. He closed up her laptop and trailed after her when she left the greenhouse.

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Just after noon on Monday, Owen stepped out of a Wyoming Department of Transportation office with a new, shiny set of Wyoming license plates in his hand. Cutler had said he wouldn't stick out so much if his truck had Wyoming plates. Like *that* was going to help. He was six-two, weighed two-twenty and when he let it loose, scented like a werewolf with a case of large-and-in-charge that made other weres piss themselves.

The nice lady behind the counter had also given him an application for Veterans plates. Owen was pretty sure he wouldn't fill the application out. Custom plates just felt too permanent. That same nice lady had reminded him he no longer qualified for a military exemption on his driver's license renewal. She'd issued him a temporary Wyoming license; he'd given her a chunk of the cash in his wallet. Great. This favor for Cutler was feeling more like a lock-down assignment by the minute.

Grabbing his tool box from the back of his truck, he started in on bolting the new plates in

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place. They sported a big silhouette of a guy in a Stetson, riding a bucking horse. What was this obsession with horses out here? The whole thing smelled like a State-sanctioned conspiracy. Why couldn't Fina have gone just a little further west before settling down? Like California. Hmm. Babes in bikinis. Now *that* he wouldn't mind sporting on his license plate.

When he was finished, he climbed back in his truck, re-checked the GPS and continued on his way to Pinebridge.

About an hour later, he was driving down the main street, slow. His windows were open enough to let his scent out, and let the town's scents in. No sense in springing his presence on a nervous community without giving them a whiff first. The place was big enough to support two supermarkets, a number of shops, a large hardware store, some fast-food joints and an interesting looking diner. The smell that rolled out from there when the front door conveniently opened as he drove past was enough to make him salivate...and he'd already eaten.

He parked a couple of blocks past the pharmacy. Walking back through town gave him

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an opportunity to scope out the locals up close, and let them check him out as well.

And speaking of checking out...a couple of local lovelies gave him the once over as he crossed the street. Hmm. This assignment might not be so bad after all. A few of the men watched him too. Owen knew they'd be trying to get a read on his confidence level. He kept that carefully neutral. There was nothing he could do about the confidence in his walk or the way he was able to move among an unknown pack without cowering though. If the weres watching him had any discernment, he was counting on them reading him as a strong male but without agenda or design on their position or women.

He walked into the pharmacy, held the door open for a young mother, tipped his head and wished her a good afternoon, then made his way to the dispensary.

Even without the name tag, he would have recognized Cory Amos. The Alpha gave off that calm, confident vibe Owen had expected. Somewhere around sixty years of age, Cory stood maybe an inch shorter than Owen. His gray hair was receding and his blue eyes were warm and

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intelligent as he spoke in hushed tones with the woman standing near Owen.

Although she was obviously listening, she looked up at Cory with that slightly blank, timid look that lesser pack members showed higher ranking ones.

After she moved over to the waiting area, Owen walked up to the counter and held out his hand.

“Hi. I’m Owen Wells. We spoke on the phone.”

Cory’s grip was surprisingly firm, considering his age. His smile was broad and welcoming. “Owen. Good to meet you.” He spoke loud enough for everyone in the pharmacy to hear, even the two humans looking over the greeting cards. “Welcome to Pinebridge.” Cory’s smile widened. “You mentioned you just got out of the military.”

“Yes, sir.” Owen snapped to like he was talking to a superior officer. “Did three tours in the Army. I joined up when I was eighteen so my pack, well, the best way to describe it is it’s moved on without me.” The lie didn’t sound too blatant

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to Owen's ears. "Besides, it's small. *Real* small and I'm related to just about every female in it." He grinned sheepishly, mostly for the benefit of the few weres in the pharmacy who were now getting real interested in whatever merchandise was close to where Owen was standing. "A pack on the other side of the State line said Pinebridge had a healthy, thriving community of weres and was tolerant toward outsiders."

Cory nodded sagely. "That's true enough, son. So what kind of work do you do?"

"Well," Owen flashed that sheepish grin again. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? I've got some cash put aside so I can afford to figure things out for a little while before I commit myself to a line of work. The VA will help me with re-education expenses and training. Trouble is, I'm not sure what I want to do. I've been a soldier all my life and I don't know anything else. Field work and I got along just fine but with my years of service and rank, I was looking at a promotion into administrative work."

"Were you good at it?" Cory asked. "Being a soldier."

"Damn good."

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“Well that’s a start. Any man who can succeed in the military has good character and the kind of attitude I like.” He looked Owen over like he was sizing him up for a suit, then nodded. “Listen, there’s a house for rent not too far from here. Nothing fancy but it’s furnished. The bank owns it. Damn sub-prime meltdown,” he huffed. “The bank manager’s a friend of mine so we can get you a good rate on the rent.

“As to a job,” Cory added with a sure nod. “My wife works for the Department of Education. They’ve got aptitude tests they give to students. Don’t see why you can’t take one.” He gave a wry shake of his head. “Her office has information on just about every job known to mankind. I’m sure you’ll find a couple of occupations that interest you among those eighteen filing cabinets her office keeps stocked.”

“Sounds good,” Owen replied and his enthusiasm wasn’t feigned. “And, thanks.”

“My pleasure. This is a good pack. Good people. Adding another strong, young male to the mix will only make us stronger.” Cory’s expression grew serious. “As long as you’ve got your head on straight—and you strike me as a

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fella who does—we'll be pleased to consider having you join us. Now, let me finish filling this script and we'll get you settled in. How about you join the missus and me for supper?"



That evening, in the Amos' house, Owen leaned forward in his chair and accepted the platter of baked chicken pieces Piper Amos was passing around. She was younger than her mate, maybe forty with brown hair and warm, brown eyes. Owen had been surprised to learn she wasn't top bitch. One of Cory's cousins was. Cory had promised to introduce Owen to her and her mate later.

"I still can't believe he's gone." Cory swirled the wine his wife had served with dinner around his glass then set it down. "Ed Timberman and I grew up together. He was my best friend going on forty-five years. This afternoon, two boys came into the pharmacy after school and they were teasing each other about the girls they thought were pretty. Reminded me of how Ed and I used to bust each other's balls. My hand was reaching for the phone to call him when..." Cory's voice

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trailed off. He finished the wine in his glass, then wordlessly started stabbing his fork into the chicken and mashed potato on his plate.

“Ed was our Beta,” Piper said, filling the silence. She offered a basket of rolls to Owen. “His death’s left a big void and he was so well liked, we’re all stumbling around the issue of replacing him.”

“Sounds like a man who’d be hard to replace.” Owen was moved by the looks of gratitude Cory and Piper gave him.

“He is.” Using his fork, Cory played with the leaves in the salad his wife had set beside his plate. “My pack is getting edgy. They’re in mourning, scared and the hierarchy’s been cut off at the knees. That’s a bad combination.” When he looked up at Owen, sadness colored his expression. “I heard about what happened in Eastfield.”

Owen nodded slowly. He didn’t open up often but something in the older, calm Alpha’s eyes made it easy to let the words out. “I hadn’t seen my mother for months before she died. Didn’t e-mail her nearly as often as I should have.” He shook his head, leaned back from the table and

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crossed his arms over his chest. The words kept coming though. Slow and with awkward breaks, but they kept coming.

“I was her only pup. For years, it was just the two of us. I never knew my sire. The pack was real small...only eight families.” He sighed and ran his fingers over the napkin on his lap, just for something to do with his hands. Cory and Piper didn’t interrupt. They just sat quietly, listened and radiated compassion.

“I left the pack the day after I turned eighteen.” Owen grinned but didn’t feel any humor in the gesture. “That’s not entirely true. I challenged our Alpha. Got up in his face, picked a fight for no good reason. I was all balls and no brains. He was a big, strong male in his prime.” Owen exhaled heavily. “It was no contest. Took me a few years to figure out why I’d done it. I’d already looked up the nearest Army recruiting center. Hell I’d called them and had a spot in an orientation session the next day. I just hadn’t figured out how to tell my mother that her only pup needed to leave the small, safe enclave she’d helped carve out for us.

“Anyway...” Owen picked up his fork and

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played with the chicken on his plate, much as Cory had before putting some in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed. “Next day, I showed up at the recruitment center with a black eye and a bruised jaw. Figured they’d reject me for being a troublemaker. Turns out more than a few recruits show up looking like that. I signed my enlistment papers that day and I’ve been wearing Army green ever since.”

This time, when he fell silent, it didn’t feel uncomfortable. The three of them ate during the lapse in the conversation. When they were finished, Piper stood, picked up his plate and Cory’s. When she moved past Owen, she laid a hand on his head and stood beside him for a moment before heading for the kitchen.

“What about *your* family?” Owen, glad to get away from his maudlin thoughts, asked when Cory stood and picked a bottle of amber liquid up off the sideboard. Above it, on the wall, hung a big, professional-looking picture of the Amoses and two young men.

“Ah. That’s Geoff and Ty. Geoff, he’s our oldest,” he said, pointing to the shorter boy who looked just like Cory. “He’s studying to be

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a pharmacist at the University of Arizona. His brother, Ty, is our budding artist.” With a sweep of his hand, Cory pointed out the impressive number of framed paintings and sketches that decorated the room. “He won a competition when he was in high school. Now he’s on full scholarship studying fine art at the same school as his brother. They’ve been inseparable since they were kids. Between you and me, I think Geoff chose Arizona because it had a great art school, and his brother could follow him there.”

Owen chuckled and accepted the glass of Scotch Cory had poured for him.

Cory took a sip from his own glass and sat back down. “I want to get to the bottom of Ed’s murder before they come home for the summer.” There was a growl in the Alpha’s voice. “I want this pack to be a home for them, not a place of fear or stress.”

Piper came back into the dining room, carrying a tray laden with plates of peach cobbler and ice cream. The serving she set before Owen could have done for two men. Cory’s serving wasn’t half as big.

“Aw, *Piper*,” he whined.

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“You’re lucky you’re getting *any* ice cream with that cholesterol count of yours.” She might be a weaker were than her mate but it was obvious who ruled within those four walls.

Cory shot her a disgruntled look, gazed at Owen’s portion with open lust then pulled his plate toward him, anchored one arm around it protectively, picked up his fork and began to eat.

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Chapter Seven

Owen winced when his big pickup bounced over a series of potholes. His back spasmed in protest when he turned the wheel to get onto the paved highway. The house he was renting was nice enough but the one lone bed the owners had left was the most god-awful uncomfortable thing he'd ever slept on. His spine had no problem reminding him of that this morning.

Killers be damned...his priority today was buying a new mattress.

He spotted the sheriff's cruiser tucked in behind a clump of trees just as he was driving past. Out of habit, he checked his speedometer and felt a zing of elation. Ha. He wasn't even up to the speed limit yet. The elation fizzled like air let out of a balloon when the lights on top of the cruiser lit up and it turned onto the highway behind him fast enough to lift a cloud of dust and fishtail.

"Terrific," Owen huffed, turned on his signal, pulled over, opened his window and waited.

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The deputy sheriff that got out of the cruiser behind him was a big son of a bitch. Over six feet and built like a freight train—all upper-body mass and legs that looked like he spent his off-duty time doing nothing but squats. His scent identified him as a were.

Owen made an effort to tap down his anxiety when he saw the cop's hand hovering over his service revolver.

Taking his time about it, the sheriff checked the back of Owen's truck, the back of the cab, then positioned himself between a door pillar and Owen before saying, "Driver's license, registration and proof of insurance. Please." The guy's tone said the *please* was habit, not a courtesy.

Trying hard not to growl, Owen produced his paperwork, then sat back for what turned out to be a long wait while the cop went back to his cruiser. Through his big side mirror, Owen watched the guy's arm move like he was keying something in. The cop kept looking up, like there was no way he was going to take his eyes off Owen for any length of time.

Finally, the cop returned to the side of Owen's

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truck. He didn't, however, hand the paperwork back to Owen.

"You're not from around here."

"No I'm not."

The guy huffed with what sounded like frustration at Owen's lack of response.

"I saw you turn off from Harmony Way." His tone was confrontational. "There's nothing up there but a few houses and a ranch. What business did you have up there?"

Owen spotted a second cruiser driving up on them, coming from the direction of town. It crossed the road and stopped in front of Owen's truck, blocking him in.

This time, Owen didn't bother holding back his snarl of annoyance. "I'm renting a house on Harmony Way from the bank. Cory Amos arranged it for me after I came to him yesterday and asked about joining his pack. Honorably," he added with enough force that the hostility in the cop's eyes flickered for a moment. "My paperwork's in order and I wasn't speeding. If we're done, I've got to get to the Amos' place. I promised to drive Piper to some fabric shop

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so she can barter for scraps for school projects. So my day's promising to be god-awful already without police harassment thrown into the mix."

For a stretch of about five seconds, the cop stared down at Owen. Then, quite suddenly, he grinned. His grin lit up what had been a forbidding expression.

"Sounds true enough." He was laughing as he handed Owen's paperwork back, then he waved the other cruiser off. "I remember my mother dragging me with her to one of those places awhile back. The air was so full of dust I sneezed loud enough that every female in the place turned and looked at me like I'd let off a bomb." He shivered lightly inside his State-issued bomber jacket. "Just the memory of the looks on all those female faces gives me the willies."

Owen chuckled obligingly and made a mental note to wait outside the shop.

"My name's Tom by the way," the male said as he extended his hand. His skin was rough, his grip strong. "Tom Ray."

"Owen Wells. But I guess you know that

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already,” Owen added with a grin as he held up the paper in his free hand.

“Good to meet you, Owen. Sorry about the frosty reception but just so you know, our Beta was killed a week ago.” Tom’s expression tightened. “We’re still looking for the killer so we’re suspicious of every new face these days.” He slapped the roof of Owen’s truck. “Drive safe and keep an eye out for who’s around you, buddy.”

“I will. And thanks for the heads up.”

“My pleasure. See you around.” Tom walked back to his cruiser while talking into a hand-held mic. He waved as he turned his car around and headed back to the clump of trees.



Owen took another pull off his long-neck Heineken. The bar was what he’d expected of a western honky-tonk. Except there was no honky in the tonk tonight. The juke box was broken and a middle-aged guy with a toolbox was squatting down beside it, his backside on the verge of flashing a plumber’s smile.

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Owen looked away before he scarred himself mentally.

Still, the place was clean and smelled of malted barley, bacon and fried eggs from the grill in back, and lemon polish somebody had rubbed the tables and bar-front with. There was the requisite sprinkling of sawdust on the pine-plank floors, and the place was decorated in early chuck wagon—spoked wheels on the walls, rodeo photos and horse tack.

What *was* it with people and horses around here? Even the bar was named Hair Of The Horse.

Although, he had to admit as he watched two females walk by, he was fast becoming a devotee of short denim skirts and flashy cowboy boots.

He'd chosen a table not too far from the bar so he could, if the opportunity presented itself, make conversation with people going back and forth. He also sat with his back to the wall, where he could take in the place in its entirety. Serving in a front-line unit had made him a cautious man.

Mostly though, he was getting a feel for the

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weres who were starting to fill up the bar, and letting them get a look at him. Around him were the sounds of conversation, some laughter, and pool balls clacking off one another.

“Now, Jackson,” the affable bartender said as he walked up to the repairman. When Jackson looked up, the bartender handed him a cup of coffee. “I know we’ve got a service contract but that doesn’t mean I like seeing your ugly puss out here every other week.” The grin on his face softened his words.

Jackson sat up, leaned back on his heels and took a sip of coffee. The patch over the breast pocket of his shirt read Fender Amusements and Repair. “I wouldn’t have to come out here every other week if you’d trade this relic in. I’ve got a digital jukebox back at the shop. Brand spankin’ new. It’ll hold ten-thousand tunes. The lease rate would be cheaper than your maintenance contract on this thing.”

The bartender patted the top of the neon-nightmare jukebox with the same affection women bestowed on babies. “Some things just aren’t about money. Old Juke and I started out together, and I aim to finish together.”

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“Well best of luck to you and your missus here,” Jackson teased, fiddled around some more and when he plugged the box back in, it started pumping out a George Strait tune. The patrons applauded then went back to their conversation and pool.

As he packed up his toolbox, the repairman glanced around the room. He spotted Owen, gave him a friendly smile then walked over to the bar. Owen watched as the man filled out a form on his clipboard. One of the waitresses came out from the back, carrying a sandwich on a plate, and set it down in front of the repairman. Owen went back to nursing his beer and surveying the room.

“Mind if I join you?”

He looked up to find the friendly, wind-burned face of the repairman smiling down at him.

“Sure,” Owen said and moved the bowl of peanuts to one side of the table.

“Thanks. Name’s Jackson Fender.” He set down his sandwich and held out his hand. “Thought your face was new. Andy the bartender says you

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just got back from Iraq. I'd be pleased to buy you a beer if you're in the mood for another."

"Much appreciated. I'm Owen Wells by the way." Owen shook the hand that was offered, then Jackson waved the waitress over. "So what all do you repair?"

"Electronic games, pinball machines, things my company leases. Some privately owned machines, like that old beast over there." He took another sip of his coffee and a healthy bite of his BLT. "What do you think of Pinebridge so far?"

"I like it." When the waitress, wearing a short skirt, heels and a tight little shirt tied off around her waist walked up to their table, Owen flashed her a big smile. "Nice people."

"Oh I bet you soldiers say that to all the girls," she teased then went to get him another beer.

"Pretty much," Owen agreed wryly and turned back to Jackson. "Is there enough business around here to keep you going full time?"

"Not right around here. My territory extends through five counties. I like that though. I like driving, seeing new faces, talking to different

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people. Keeps life interesting. Course, it's not so nice in the winter sometimes."

Owen nodded in understanding. He liked the older were and the man certainly had a gift for conversation. Maybe in his early sixties, he had gray hair, brown eyes and a bit of a belly. With the enthusiasm he was showing that sandwich in front of him, it was no wonder the guy was packing a few extra pounds.

Two other older weres came up to them—brothers from the looks of them—said hello to Jackson, were introduced to Owen, sat and chatted for a few minutes before moving on. They were local ranchers and curious about the newcomer in their midst.

"Well," Jackson eventually said and ran his napkin around his mouth, "I best be going. It was a pleasure meeting you, son. I hope I see you next time I'm in town." They shook hands and Jackson carried his empty plate and coffee mug back to the bar. He and the bartender said their good-byes, Jackson picked up his tool box, and waved to Owen on his way out.

Owen picked up his second, as yet untouched beer and had it halfway to his mouth when a

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familiar scent caught his nose. He looked over at the door. Sure enough, standing there large as life, was the cop who'd pulled him over that morning. Deputy Sheriff Tom Ray looked around the bar, returned a few waves of greeting, then glanced around until he saw Owen. Without asking, he sat down at Owen's table, unzipped his bomber jacket and put his broad hat on the table.

"Thought that was your pickup out in the parking lot. Sweet ride. Hey, Frannie," he said to the waitress who was standing beside their table almost before he had his butt in the chair. "Just a coffee, thanks. Anything for you?" he asked Owen.

"I'm good, thanks."

Frannie flashed them a smile—Tom more than Owen—that made her already pretty face light up even more. Her cute little backside twitched as she walked away.

"Italked to Cory today," Tom said and shrugged out of his jacket. "I know you approached him honorably about joining. Figured you for ex-military when I saw you."

Owen noticed Tom was talking a bit louder

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than necessary. Since everybody in the bar was a were, they'd have no trouble eavesdropping if they wanted to. And, from the looks of things, just about everybody in the place wanted to. Owen figured out the cop was announcing the new guy was vetted and okay.

Tom continued. "Cory says you're going to check out some different jobs before you settle on one. That's great. My brother-in-law? He just kind of fell into HVAC. They got mated real young so they needed the money. But I think if he had the choice, he'd love an opportunity to hunt around for a job he really loved." He lowered his voice. "I wanted to thank you for driving Piper into town today. The woman's a pure menace behind the wheel."

"Does she drive too fast?"

"Just the opposite. She's the most nervous driver I've ever come across. Took her three tries to get her license and the only reason the examiner finally passed her is she's the Alpha's mate. He got scared Cory was taking it personally. Thanks, Frannie." He leaned back and gave the pretty waitress an appreciative, lingering look as she set a cup of coffee in front of him.

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“Already sweetened just the way you like it, darlin’.” She touched Tom’s arm, gazed down at him from beneath eyelids heavy with sexual promise, then went back to work. It was no wonder the ladies kept glancing their way. Tom scented like a powerful were, had a steady job and, as far as Owen could tell, was a good-looking guy. He had black hair and the kind of pale, almost icy blue eyes he sometimes saw on models on TV. Tom’s sister was probably a babe.

Owen waited until Tom’s attention swung away from the waitress’ retreating ass before picking up their conversation. “What about you?” he asked.

“Me? I wanted to be a cop for as long as I can remember.” Tom’s expression darkened. “You know we lost our sheriff recently. Murdered. Damn waste. Every time I walk into the station, I feel it like I did when I first heard Ed had been killed. Ah hell,” he added with a self-conscious shake of his head. “Last thing you need is some guy getting sloppy when you’re out on the town for a little R and R.” He drank about half of his coffee at one go.

Owen wondered what kind of shape the guy’s

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gullet was in to handle something that hot. “Do you want another? Or something to eat?” he asked.

“No, thanks. Some other time though. There’s a frozen dinner waiting on me at home and my shift starts real early these days.”

“Frozen? Don’t tell me your mate cooks as bad as I do.”

“No mate.” Tom shook his head ruefully. “Not yet anyway.”

They fell silent as two pretty females strolled past their table. Their eyes tracked them with hot deliberation.

“Never say die, buddy,” Tom said then downed the rest of his coffee. He put his coat back on and picked up his hat.

“Amen to that,” Owen seconded and nodded when Tom stepped away and headed for the door.

After that, Owen picked up his beer and wandered over to the pool tables. He stood out of the way and watched a game in progress. One of the players was ex-Navy. Jake and his two

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buddies spent the next couple of hours with Owen, shooting the breeze, checking out the ladies and playing pool. One of the males, guy named Keenan, sold shoes for a living. Keenan had the gift of the gab and kept them laughing. His other buddy, Terrence, was a student working on his Master's in sociology. For the most part, he was quiet but he had a ready laugh and a laid-back vibe. Owen liked them. He liked how easy it was to fall in with these weres, although when the younger guys preened for the ladies, Owen stayed out of it. He didn't want them to perceive him as competition and he had no intention of sticking around long enough to give any female the wrong idea.

Still, he was comfortable. For the first time in a long time, he didn't have to hide what he was. When somebody told a corny joke, he didn't have to muzzle his instinct to growl. He liked how he was accepted, and the potential for friendship.

When he got back to his rented house, Owen phoned Cutler. "I'm getting to know a few people," he reported. "Men, mostly. There are no recent arrivals in town, except myself. No one's spotted any transients."

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“Somebody in the sheriff’s department ran your ID this morning. I’ve flagged you so I get pinged if somebody checks up on you.”

“Yeah. Tom Ray. You know him?”

“He’s a good cop. A good were. He’s filling in as interim sheriff.”

“He pulled me over because he didn’t recognize me.”

“That and you drive a pickup.”

“Huh?”

“Tire marks at the scene of Ed’s murder were from a big pickup. Just keep your eyes open, and be especially wary of anybody driving a truck.”

“Every second vehicle out here is a truck.”

“Yeah. Still, be safe. Fina will skin me alive if anything happens to you.”

“Ah, I’m getting all weepy.”

“Fuck you,” Cutler said amicably.

“You’re cute but you’re not my type. Anyway, gotta go. Give Fina and Ryan a hug for me.”

“Will do.”

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After he ended the call, Owen stripped off his clothes and climbed in between the clean sheets Piper had loaned him until he could buy some of his own. He'd considered sleeping on the sofa but it was two feet too short. Shifting away from the saggy middle of the mattress, he cursed the delivery schedule that wouldn't get his new bed there until tomorrow.



The next morning, Owen swung by the Amos' house to pick up Piper. His nose actually twitched when she opened the door and the smell of fresh baking wafted out.

"Come on in," she invited him with a big smile. "Cory's already gone to work but I made extra muffins this morning to say thank you for driving me around today."

"My pleasure," Owen said as he took a chair at the kitchen table. Piper poured him coffee and juice, gave his shoulder a squeeze then set a platter of raisin muffins and fresh-cut fruit in front of him.

"Eat up," she encouraged him. "I'm the one

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who's grateful. Cory insists on driving me to and from work...says he likes the together time...but he starts earlier than I do so it was nice having some time to myself this morning to putter around the house. What did you have for dinner last night?"

Owen blinked at her tone. It was part polite curiosity and part motherly grill. "A couple of burgers and some pub fries down at the Hair Of The Horse."

The look she gave him made him feel like a kid. "Keep eating like that and you'll have a cholesterol count higher than Cory's. Still," she added as she turned away to wipe down the counter. "It's nice to ignore the veggies now and then. But how about you have dinner with us tonight?"

He could just see the food groups dancing behind her eyes.

"Sounds terrific," he agreed and helped himself to another muffin.



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“Turn in here, would you, Owen?” Piper said as they neared the drugstore. “Cory forgot his lunch this morning.”

Out of habit, Owen scented the air outside the drugstore then followed her inside. He was simply intending to pay his respects to the Alpha. He regretted his decision when he saw Piper’s determined walk, when he saw the way Cory’s mouth flattened when his slip of a mate marched up to the dispensary counter.

Her saccharine smile made Owen wince, and it wasn’t even directed at him.

“You forgot this.” She dropped a small cooler bag onto the counter. “How is it that you conveniently forget your lovingly prepared, low-calorie, nutritious lunch every time the special at the diner down the road is a double cheeseburger?”

“Ah, Piper.” Cory’s voice was deep and seductive. He came out from behind the counter and wrapped his arms around Piper’s waist. “A man’s got needs.”

“Needs for medium-rare hamburger piled high with grilled onions? Nice try but I’d like to

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keep you and your ticker around for a few more years.”

Owen decided now was a good time to pretend interest in something else. He spotted a guy pushing a dolly full of soft-drink cases, trying to get it over the lip near the front door. He walked to the front of the store. “Here, let me help.” Taking hold of the bottom of the dolly, Owen lifted so it cleared the hump.

“Thanks. They keep making these cans bigger. I swear it’s punishment for my misspent youth.” The man flashed Owen a wide smile and held out his hand. “Steven McMaster but everybody calls me Mac.”

Indeed, the name embroidered on the front of his shirt said Mac.

“Do me a favor and grab the case of water off the top before it falls?” Mac asked when the load wobbled precariously.

Owen lifted it off and followed Mac to the bank of coolers down the side of the store.

“You new in town? Military, right? I can always tell. It’s the walk that gives you away.” His

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smile widened. He didn't say no when Owen started helping unload the cases of soda.

"Guilty as charged, on both counts," Owen replied.

"You must be here to see Cory."

"Yes but he and his mate are, um..."

"Let me guess," the older man laughed. He had a friendly face and had to be in his late-fifties. Laugh lines crinkled the skin around his blue eyes. He was balding, about five-nine and wiry rather than bulky like most weres. "Cory Amos skipped out on a home-made lunch in favor of the diner."

"Does he ever get away with it?"

"Sometimes." Mac chuckled then leaned to stretch his back. "Thanks again, son," he said and slapped Owen's shoulder. "It's appreciated."

By the time Piper came looking for him, Owen knew that Mac's route brought him through town three times a week, that the diner served a terrific breakfast, and that he was more comfortable getting to know older weres than young ones. Guys like Mac were easygoing, calm

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and had nothing to prove. They just accepted Owen for who he was and couldn't be bothered getting into a pissing match.

He made a mental note to check out jobs where he could travel a set route. Make a lot of friends, be accepted without having to commit himself. It sounded pretty good to him.



"This can't be right." Owen frowned as he re-checked his test results.

Piper looked up from her desk. "Remember, there's a reason that particular test is free. It's simple and therefore only accurate within limits."

"Within *limits*?" Owen looked up and felt the furrow between his eyes deepen. "This says I'm suited for a job with the Fish and Wildlife Service."

"That doesn't sound unreasonable."

"As a forensic biologist?" He read the description out loud. "...involves extensive time spent in the bush, searching for wildlife

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carcasses. Forensic Biologists identify the species if not precluded by decay, dissect the carcasses to determine cause of death, then record their findings for statistical analysis.”

“Who knows? Maybe if the State springs for rubber gloves?”

“Yeah and nose plugs too I hope.” Owen winced.

“What did you list as your primary interests?” Piper stood and came over to the small conference table Owen was working at.

“I like to work outdoors. And I answered yes when they asked if I had an interest in science.” He shrugged. “I like putting bombs together and blowing stuff up. That’s a science.”

Laughing, Piper laid her hand on his head then walked back to her desk. “We’ll have you do another test tomorrow. A more complex one. It’ll take longer but the results are more useful.”

Owen grunted, tossed the test he’d completed into a recycling bin, and read through a calendar for the University of Wyoming for the next hour, until Piper was ready to be driven home.

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Dinner that night was good. Piper grilled some lean steaks and served them with corn *and* Brussels sprouts, baby potatoes tossed with parsley, and a pasta and tomato salad that tasted as good as it looked. The conversation was interesting. Cory talked about some new ideas he had for the community center's after-school care program, and wanted Owen's input about what activities and equipment were popular on military bases. Piper and her mate had a heck of a time busting Owen's chops because not one but two local, unmated females had dropped by the drugstore that afternoon to make *discreet* inquiries about whether Owen was mated or not.

Things went downhill quick when Piper offered to get out the phone book for Owen so he could look up some numbers. He said his thanks and left before his face got any redder. Talking to Piper about stuff like that was like telling your mother how you lost your virginity. She'd been there, done that, but nobody wanted to share the details.

Owen went to the Hair Of The Horse. Other than the diner and the supermarkets, it was the

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only place open that hour with a steady stream of people Owen could strike up a conversation with. He hadn't forgotten why Cutler had asked him to come to Pinebridge.

When he walked in, the bartender looked up, called out a hello and fished out a long-necked Heineken from the cooler under the bar. Some of the faces in the place were the same as last night but not all of them.

"Hey, Frannie," Owen said in his friendly nice-guy voice when the dark haired, perky waitress strolled up to the bar. "I like those shoes. They look good on you."

Owen didn't know a heel from a hemline but he *did* know women liked it when you complimented them. The effort was rewarded when Frannie did a little pirouette that made the flounce on the bottom of that micro-short skirt of hers flare up. He looked her long legs up and down with open appreciation.

"Thanks. They're new," she added and pointed a toe for him to admire. Hmm. If he'd be sticking around for awhile, he'd offer to suck on it for her. That and other parts of her fine self. "Your friend's at his usual table by the juke box."

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Owen frowned and followed her line of sight. Tom Ray was leaning back in a chair, his back to the wall. He was surveying the room and half-listening to a couple of what looked like ranch hands. They were laughing at whatever it was they were saying.

Frannie's glossy mouth opened in a wide smile. "You two do nasty things to a female's libido, soldier boy. You shouldn't be allowed in the same county at the same time," she added, flashed him a saucy wink and picked up the tray Andy the bartender had filled for her. Owen watched her sweet behind sway as she carried her load of drinks to a table of females. All of them were still dressed for the office, kicking back and having themselves a time.

When Tom caught Owen's eye, he nodded and lifted his coffee cup. Owen made his way over to Tom's table.

"Owen." Tom greeted him with a smile and a nod. The deputy sheriff had changed out of his uniform and was wearing jeans and a snap-button shirt.

Did *everybody* in the State have a cowboy fixation?

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“Did you get to start that aptitude testing with Piper?” Tom asked and pushed aside the plate in front of him. It held what looked like the remains of a meatloaf and boiled potato dinner.

“Oh yeah.” Owen sat down and took a drink of his beer.

“What did it say you were suited for?”

“You don’t want to know. Especially with a full stomach.”

Tom shot him a quizzical look but whatever follow-up question he was going to ask was interrupted when the office ladies, hooting and laughing amongst themselves, cleared a swath as they made a beeline for Tom and Owen’s table.

Frannie was behind them and Owen suspected whatever she was whispering was egging the females on.

“Tom,” purred a statuesque brunette with legs that went all the way up. She looked Tom over like he was prime rib and she was starved for a taste. “Introduce us to your friend.”

Owen had to concentrate to keep track of the five names. He’d just got them down when one of

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the females, a tiny thing with a mouth that looked like it had been made for the express purpose of sucking a man into her soul, grabbed his hand. She was tiny but strong and she dragged him to the dance floor in front of the juke box. Two of the other females pulled on his free arm. The other two females grabbed Tom, looped their hands around his waist and dragged him up too.

One of them dropped some coins in the juke and a hard-driving Luke Bryan tune pulsed through the bar. Owen had never danced with two women at once, let alone three. Tom didn't seem to have any problems adjusting and he had an arm around each female, laughing at something one of them said and stepping them all around. The females' girl bits swayed in all the right places.

Owen gave up trying to figure out the logistics and let the females guide him around the dance floor at will.

By the seventh dance and his second beer, he was convinced Wyoming had some outstanding points, horses notwithstanding.

Now and then a cowboy would cut in, take a female off Owen or Tom's hands for awhile

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then return her. Other females drifted in and out of the group. Whenever he got a chance to sit out a dance, Owen eavesdropped on as many conversations as he could. Everybody seemed to be there for a good time, maybe to blow off a little steam. Nobody was talking about Ed Timberman or his murder.

All in all, maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

Finally, just about the time Owen was worried his steel-toed boots were going to stomp a hole in the floor, the lovely office ladies called it a night. He and Tom returned to their table, where Tom picked up his shearling coat and Stetson.

Stetson? Owen glanced down and saw cowboy boots sticking out beneath the cuffs of Tom's jeans. Lip-smacking females aside, Owen was in cowboy purgatory.

"Time for me to go," Tom said and buzzed a kiss against Frannie's cheek when she came by to clear their table.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" Owen asked, more out of curiosity than anything.

"Afraid not. I have got myself a date," Tom

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announced happily. “Temporary deputy sheriff on loan from a nearby pack.”

“Huh.” Owen drank the last of his beer. “Not that it matters but I never could tell whether someone was gay or straight.”

“What? Nah. The deputy’s a lady and a fine one at that.”

“Huh. She got a sister? Or do you for that matter?”

“She doesn’t but I do. Three of them. All mated and older than me.” Tom shuddered lightly. “Sailed right through my sensitivity training at the Academy. Just nodded and said, ‘Yes. You’re right,’ in every simulation before hauling my ass out of the estrogen line of fire.”



The next night, Owen picked a booth in the town diner and sat so he could see the entire place, plus the street outside. The diner wasn’t busy. In fact, most of the customers were finishing their meals, or leaning back in their chairs, nursing what looked like a final cup of coffee. Cory and

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Piper had invited him to dinner but he'd politely refused. He needed to be out in the community, meet new people, and besides, mates needed time to themselves now and then.

Owen ordered the special when the waitress, a middle-aged woman with sturdy ankles and a smile a mile wide, came up to him. She brought him a coffee and a glass of water without being asked. Huh. They sure seemed to like their coffee in Pinebridge. Maybe it took their minds off horses for awhile.

The place smelled as good as it had the day Owen arrived. The tables were clean, the décor had that fifties, roadside grill feel to it, and the music drifting through the speakers in the ceiling was from the same era.

There wasn't a wagon wheel or piece of tack in sight. Thank god.

"Here you go, darlin'." The waitress, whose name tag identified her as Myra, set a generous serving of short ribs, garlic mashed potatoes and green beans in front of him. Beside that, she placed a small plate holding two rolls and pats of butter, and another plate with a strawberry

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and spinach salad. “Give me a shout if you need anything else.”

Owen was a bit surprised she didn’t pat his head before leaving. Maybe she would once she knew him better.

As he ate, he eavesdropped. He didn’t learn much, except the results of a cattle auction the weekend before, and some speculation about that summer’s rodeo circuit. The ribs were just about the best he’d ever tasted, stewed in tomatoes and white wine. Owen devoured his serving then sopped up the gravy with one of the rolls. When Myra stopped by to refill his coffee cup, he was more than happy to take her suggestion and ordered a refill on the ribs. When she left for the kitchen, she didn’t pat his head but she did give his shoulder a squeeze.

All this motherly interest lately felt unfamiliar, but not uncomfortable.

He was polishing off his second helping of ribs when a man wearing a chef’s jacket and tall hat came out from the kitchen. Owen watched the man move around the diner, going from table to table, greeting the other customers by name. There weren’t a lot of people left by now and

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the man talked to them about everyday things... the weather, their pups. He asked if they'd liked their dinner, accepted their compliments and bid them a good evening when they left.

After the last customer paid and walked out the door, the cook walked up to Owen's table.

"I wanted to drop by and say hello." He held out his hand. His skin was smooth but his grip was solid. "I'm David Hold. I own this place. I'm guessing the ribs were to your liking."

Owen grinned and couldn't help it. "Best I've ever had."

"Glad you enjoyed them. You're new in town, aren't you?"

"Yep. I'm Owen Wells. Would you like to sit down for a minute?"

"It'd be a treat, son." The man sighed as he slid into the booth across from Owen. "Been on my feet all day and my dogs are barkin'." He smiled up at the waitress who walked over to them. "Bring us two servings of berry pie, would you, Myra? Then why don't you take off early. I don't think anybody else'll be in tonight."

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“Sure thing, David,” she said with a smile. “And thanks.” Turning, she headed for the kitchen.

“You’ll have to tell me what you think of my berry pie,” David said. “It’s one of my most popular menu items.”

“Have you owned the place long?” Owen asked as he forked up some spinach, strawberry and light, creamy dressing. He resisted the urge to sigh with pleasure as the flavors burst in his mouth.

“A little over six months now.” He grumbled quietly. David Hold was a stocky man, in his sixties, with gray hair and brown eyes. “I don’t like all this unrest since Sheriff Timberman’s murder though. Ed was a good man. Met him only a couple of times but I liked him. Now? Folks don’t like to be out after dark and my supper trade is off. I thought this would be a great place to spend my golden years. The pack’s real accepting of outsiders, as I’m sure you’ve found out.”

Owen nodded his agreement and polished off his salad. He’d had some good chow in the Army, contrary to popular beliefs, but this man’s cooking was outstanding.

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David continued. "I hope they catch who did it real quick so we can all get back to the business of living."

Myra returned with two servings of pie. Each plate also held a spoonful of what looked like thick sour cream, shot through with dark flecks. She set a clean coffee cup beside David's place setting, cleared away Owen's dinner things and left the coffeepot on the table. She bid them good night, picked up her coat and left through the front door.

"Berry pie," David announced proudly and flaked his pie crust like he was checking the texture. He smiled and looked pleased with himself. "No matter the time of year, I can always find fresh berries of some sort or another. Local grown or imported. The trick is balancing the tart with the sweet. The clotted cream adds mouthability to the dish. I think it's the perfect compliment."

"Clotted cream?" David tried to hide his distaste at the name.

David grinned. "Kind of like whipped cream but more complex. Sweeter too. It's not that well known in the States although it's popular in

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Europe. I reduce it myself, add a vanilla bean to make the flavor pop.” Using his fork, he cut off a piece of pie, added a bit of the cream and popped the mix into his mouth with an air of expectancy. “Delicious. Even if I do say so myself.” He looked over at David pointedly.

David tried the pie and cream. This time, he did sigh with pleasure.

“Hah. *Knew* you’d like it.” David got up. When he returned, he was carrying a half-empty pie plate and a bowl of the clotted cream. As they ate, refilled their plates and ate some more, David asked about Owen’s time in the military, where he’d served, what his plans were.

“Well, I don’t have a job yet,” Owen answered and helped himself to another half-cup of coffee after refilling David’s. “I’m doing some aptitude testing this week. See if I’m good for anything other than marching in a straight line and waking up before dawn.”

David laughed obligingly. They spent the next half hour or so talking about David’s culinary training, the upcoming baseball season and some good fishing spots nearby.

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Finally, David glanced at his watch and stood up. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Owen," he said and picked his tall hat off the bench seat.

Owen followed him to the cash register and paid his bill with pleasure. He'd expected a few things when Cutler asked him to go to Pinebridge. Eating great every night of the week hadn't been one of them.

"Don't forget a nice tip for Myra," David said while Owen still had his wallet out. "She's my best employee. She's also a single female with two pups," he added conversationally. Without begrudging it, Owen pulled another bill out, said his good-byes and agreed to come back when David told him the diner also served a fine breakfast, seven days a week.

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Chapter Eight

On Saturday morning, Owen was sitting behind a desk at the local community center. The squeak of sneakers on hardwood drifted into his small office as the basketball game down in the gym geared up. Since Ed's murder, the center didn't have a volunteer director. At Cory's request, Owen was filling in a couple days a week until they found a replacement.

The space wasn't much...just a desk, a chair, and a filing cabinet he hadn't got around to going through...but it had a window and it was clean. He had to use his own laptop because all Ed's files were on his personal computer at home. Neither Cory or Owen had wanted to bother Ed's widow about it. Owen set about signing off on invoices for cleaning supplies, putting together next month's work schedule and allocating space for two birthday parties, as well as the center's regular activities.

A were in his eighties if he was a day popped

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his head into Owen's office. "It's Owen, right?" the male asked.

"Right. I don't think we've met." Standing, Owen held out his hand.

"Peter Overton. I teach the art classes. Cory said you were filling in, um, well until we found a replacement for Ed."

Owen shook his head. "From what I've heard, nobody could replace Ed. But I'm glad to help out while I can."

"Good to hear it." Peter was sinewy but he held himself erect. Cory had said Peter taught art at the local high school before he retired. He'd been Ty Amos' biggest influence and had badgered him into entering art competitions. One of those competitions had earned Ty his scholarship to the University of Arizona. "Anyway, I put in a requisition for supplies. My budget this year was pretty limited but since the winter was so cold and we didn't have to run the refrigeration units as much as last year to keep the ice in the outdoor arena, I was wondering if there were a few unused dollars lying around."

Hunting around his desk, Owen found the

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requisition. It wasn't outlandish, just some new pastels, modeling clay, tempera paints and beads. There was money left over in the rink budget, but Owen had found out the shower stalls in the women's change room needed regrouting, or else the Health Department would cite them for mold. He looked at the dollar estimate at the bottom of the requisition.

"Tell you what, Peter. Shop around and find a supplier willing to donate some things. Something to get this three-hundred dollars down to two-fifty and the money's yours." There wasn't any extra money in the budget but Owen was willing to donate it out of his own pocket. A charitable receipt would help him come tax time and besides, nobody had to know.

"Consider it done," Peter called out with an enthusiasm belying his age. He rushed off with a speed most people couldn't match.

Owen checked his watch then headed for one of the larger classrooms.

Earlier in the week, when Cory asked what activities Owen could lead, the only thing Owen could think of was PT. Hand-to-hand combat, maybe. He didn't think school kids

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would have much use for planning strategic arms deployment. Piper had stuck up some flyers and now Owen didn't know how many—if any—kids would be interested in what had been billed as Introduction to Self-Defense, ages six to eleven.

Dressed in sweats and one of the community center's T-shirts, he pulled the door open and stopped dead in his tracks. No less than twenty pups, each of them with a parent, some with more than one, looked up at him expectantly. Owen exhaled, lifted his chin and walked into the room like he had a right to be there. He scented the room out of habit.

Getting the crowd squared away was easy. He just stared them down and addressed them—parents and pups—like he'd addressed troops when he'd been in the Army. The multi-purpose room was already cleared of desks. The few spectator chairs he'd set against a wall weren't enough so he soon had parents lining up more, and putting their butts in them. He'd laid out some mats off to one side and had kids working in groups to drag more over.

For the most part, Owen simply kept the kids moving for forty-five minutes. They ran around

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the room then did lunges. He taught them how to center their weight, bend their knees a little and punch out into the air while they yelled. That alternated with learning to kick, in the same way he alternated upper then lower body exercises. He taught them to do shoulder rolls on the mats, taught them how to fall and not get hurt. The last five minutes, they simply sat, and eased into stretching their muscle groups. After all that running around, yelling and laughing, Owen was enjoying the quiet. But even that was shattered when he sat up straight and dismissed them. The yelling started right up again, only this time it was the kids asking if he'd be their teacher next week too. A little girl, with big dark eyes and a sweet smile, plopped herself on his lap and stayed there contentedly until a male were, with eyes the exact color and shape of hers, firmly reminded her they had to go pick her brother up from hockey.

When Owen stood, pups crowded him, asking him all sorts of questions. Some of them leaned against his leg or hip, nuzzling lightly. He wasn't used to kids. Wasn't entirely comfortable around them but his inner wolf recognized and accepted

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their acknowledgement that he was a leader and a powerful were.

He shook hands with the parents, tried to memorize as many names as he could, recognized a few of them from around town. Volunteering at the center was going to be a good thing. It gave him an in with the pack that didn't rely on hanging out in bars or restaurants.

Outside, there were even more pups lined up for the twelve-to-seventeen age class.

Despite his reluctance at being cast as the center of attention, Owen started to think he could get used to this. Get used to belonging. But, he reminded himself, it was only temporary. Just an assignment. Still, maybe some day...



“State police pulled out of Pinebridge this afternoon.”

Sitting in his pickup behind the community center at the end of the day, Owen frowned when Cutler gave him the news over his cell.

“Their investigation has stalled. There’s a State-

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wide warning for all police responding to calls in remote areas. Problem is, just about the whole State is isolated.”

Cutler sighed and so did Owen. He rubbed his forehead and wondered if the Alpha was doing the same thing.

“We’ve been instructed to do call-backs on cell 9-1-1 calls, travel in pairs, those sorts of precautions. The official investigation has been widened to cover the State, not just Pinebridge.”

“I’m not buying it,” Owen snarled. “Ed Timberman was targeted. Lured out and ambushed. I’ve driven the road he was killed on. Nobody but a local could even find the damn thing.”

“I agree with you but I can’t exactly call up the State Inspector’s office and tell them my werewolf senses are tingling.”

Owen chuckled at that.

So did Cutler. Then he sighed once more and continued. *“I’m still convinced you’re our best resource for picking up information. Keep your ears open and watch your back.”*

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“I always do,” Owen said wryly and ended the call.



The next time he was invited to supper, Owen suggested a pack run to Cory.

“In Cutler’s pack,” he said, “it brought them together after they heard about Ed’s murder. There’s no comparison to what your pack’s feeling but they got pulled off center too. The run reaffirmed their bonds and brought a sense of normalcy. It let them mourn together but it let them play together too.”

Cory and Piper looked at each other.

“That’s a good idea,” Cory finally said. He shook his head ruefully. “I’ve been so wound up by Ed’s murder, I haven’t been thinking like a leader”

As he made his way from the parking area to the big clearing in the pack’s running grounds early the next week, Owen found himself

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walking beside David Hold, the owner of the diner in town.

“Owen,” the older man greeted him warmly. “Hoped I’d see you here.” He raised his hand in acknowledgement as a mated couple walked past. “Piper asked to put up a notice on my board, about that new class you’re teaching down at the community center. Teaching pups is great but what I want to know is if you’re going to hold an old-fart class, for guys like me?”

Owen laughed obligingly. He also scented the air with more deliberation than he knew was necessary. Being overly cautious was a habit he just couldn’t shake. “I doubt a man of your experience needs lessons in basic fighting techniques.”

David huffed and adjusted his belt. “Don’t be so sure about that. Ed was one of the strongest weres in this pack,” he added, lowering his voice, “and look what happened to him.”

The worry lines around the man’s mouth caught Owen off guard. He’d underestimated how unsettled the pack was...even mature common-sense members like David.

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“I’ll see about fitting in a seniors’ class,” Owen offered. “Although most of the seniors who come during the week are females. You’d find yourself seriously outnumbered, friend.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Again, Owen laughed, and was reminded how centering it was to hang out with older weres. With the back of his hand, he gave David’s belly a light slap. “Keep eating your own cooking and you’ll *need* a fitness class.”

“Yeah well you keep coming by and eating right alongside me, young’un. We’ll see who can hold his own when it comes to downing chow.”

“Keep feeding me that berry pie and I’ll be putty in your hands.”

They were still laughing, still busting each other’s balls when Cory’s strong voice, coming from the middle of the clearing, called a beginning to the run. They stripped off and, from training and by habit, Owen folded his clothes neatly before setting them on top of his boots. He and David changed at the same time.

Owen leaned into the shifting of his skin, the stretching of sinew, the pain of shattering bones.

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When it was finished, he shook lightly, panted in discomfort then let his nose take over. His wolf scented the clearing, searching for signs of danger or distress. It didn't expect anything extraordinary but it was a wary creature. With ears perked, it reached out over the clearing and beyond with all its senses. It didn't take long to satisfy itself there was no danger nearby.

There was no way Owen's wolf could hide its strength like the human could. It turned to the smaller, grayish wolf standing beside it.

This wolf was sinewy. Its muscles hadn't atrophied, they'd simply become rangy and pronounced with approaching age. This wolf was also wary of Owen. He felt it in the air around him, scented it when the wolf looked at him out of the corner of its eye, holding still in the presence of a much more powerful animal.

Owen sniffed the graying wolf then it walked away without doing the same. He found the behavior odd but not unexpected. His size and strength intimidated some lesser wolves, especially before they got to know him. Owen tracked the gray wolf, seeking it out to give it an opportunity to learn he wasn't a threat. It had

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skirted the pack then stepped in between two groups of wolves.

When Owen turned in to follow, the gray wolf had disappeared.

Then something caught his nose. A smallish bitch with a golden-brown coat was sniffing and being sniffed by a group of wolves. He recognized her scent, knew he'd run with her but didn't know why she was here. A large, lumbering brown wolf was trailing her with a focus that was as admirable as it was humorous. That male he remembered as well.

Owen approached the female.

A massive, black wolf, almost as big as Owen, stepped into his path. They circled each other—each holding their tails high, their heads low, moving slow so neither had opportunity to smell the other. Other wolves saw and moved back.

Owen growled, a low, rumbling sound that made his upper lip flutter. The black male did the same. Then Owen growled again, louder and deeper. The black male did too, but couldn't reach the same bass notes Owen could, the sub-harmonies or volume. Finally, the black male

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stood still and didn't protest when Owen sniffed him.

There was pride in the other male's stance. Strength and confidence hummed through his body. He was powerful but not as powerful as Owen.

When Owen was finished, he let the black male sniff him. It was the sociable thing to do. Dominance had been established and Owen was eager to start playing. Together, they approached the golden-brown female.

Her other would-be suitors stepped back. Some likely left in search of less domineering wolves to play with. Some simply dipped their tails and turned away quick. One, the large brown male, seemed determined to remain beside her but one solid, deliberate slam of Owen's shoulder into his, dissuaded him without further contest. Looking sheepish and smelling of disappointment, the brown male moved away.

Owen smelled the bitch first. Yes. He remembered this one. Remembered her intelligence, speed, agility and love of the chase. She smelled him and did it quickly, like she

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remembered him too and didn't need to remind herself of his strength and presence.

She and the black male sniffed each other at the same time. Finally, impatiently, Owen dropped to his chest, yipped and cocked his head to the side. The other two copied the gesture, returning his invitation to play, then the golden-brown bitch took off at a speed that, like before, surprised even Owen's wolf.

Once the clearing was behind them, the black wolf took the lead. He ran shoulder to shoulder with Owen, but it was obvious he knew this land. Knew the dangers and the safe, flat valleys where they could stretch out in uninhibited bursts of speed. They ran through the new spring grasses. The black male led them to a pond where they drank, cooled themselves in the water and rested. He spronked in front of Owen, smacked his snout against Owen's and when Owen stood, they both got up on their hind legs, bounced their chests off each other, tried to wrap their long forelegs around each other in a mock wrestling match.

The female looked on then joined in. She changed the game to a chase, around and through

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the pond. They chased her, splashed through the water with her, caught up to her, wrestled her to the ground, nipped at the back of her neck then released her so they could chase her again—or she could pounce on them and nip before racing away.

Her scent resonated in Owen's head. She was healthy, young and unmated. Unusually strong for such a small female. Moonlight lit up her lush fur in pale shades that reminded him of the color of sunshine. Her muscles were sleek but there was no mistaking the strength in her. She stood up to him without deferring. Him *and* the black male. She knew her worth and carried it with singular pride.

The next time he caught up to her, Owen bumped her before she had a chance to run and resume the game. He bumped her again, chest to shoulder then circled her. The next bump was aimed at her hip, then her back end.

The golden-brown bitch looked at him over her shoulder. There was a haughtiness in her. Owen's wolf knew she wouldn't submit to a lesser male but he had never been a lesser male. The air surrounding her grew quiet. Expectancy

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began to hum around her. She didn't rebuke him when he laid a heavy paw on her back, when he crowded her hind quarters. The shaft of his penis emerged from its fur-covered sheath. The female held herself still but she didn't move her tail aside for him.

Owen heard the black male's disciplining bark, aimed at him. Sliding off the female, Owen's wolf turned to the other male, snarled and bared his teeth. The male came at him, barked, made a mock lunge to nip at Owen's belly. Owen charged, slammed his skull into the black male's ribs, barked and didn't stop barking until the other male backed off. This time, when Owen turned to the female, he smelled her acquiescence. He'd proven himself worthy and moved in to claim her.

She stood still and absorbed his greater weight when he braced his forepaws on her back. Shifting her tail to the side, she trembled and made low, siren sounds as she panted. She was willing and Owen was eager to mount her.

The first touch of his penis to her wet, swollen opening made him shake. Fiery pleasure and a determination to see the pleasure through to

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completion left him blind to everything else around him. There was only the female and the feel of her hot, slick body opening for him. He slid into her, past the tight ring of muscle that squeezed and stroked him like a vice as he thrust and pulled back.

There was no subtlety in his movements and the vibrant scent of the female's arousal told him none was needed. They were instinctual creatures. Like their human counterparts, they mated for the pleasure of it, not just to appease a mating heat.

It had been so long since his wolf had claimed a female. So long since he'd felt this need to claim, fuck, and overwhelm. He came. It was an orgasm but a ripple of pleasure instead of blinding ecstasy. The semen he pumped into her was a lubricating wash. Her body opened to him easier and he could now drive deep and hard. With hips thrusting furiously, his back feet skittered over the pebbled shoreline as he tried to get closer. He wanted to climb inside this female, bury himself so deep there would be no part of her sex he didn't mark, didn't claim.

When she trembled beneath him, Owen

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closed his jaws over the back of her neck to hold her in place. She whimpered and it was the sound of pleasure. He didn't pierce her skin but he forced her to stay still and not be pushed away by the power of his thrusts.

He came again. This orgasm consumed him as pleasure washed through him, hot and eager. Instinct told him the fluid he pumped into her body was rich with his seed. The quantity he released forced her passage to open more, the thrusting of his hips and the tightening of the mouth of her sheath holding the base of his penis in the grip of a powerful band of muscle...all this pumped his seed up and into her womb.

The female wasn't in heat. There would be no pup from this mating but Owen relished it anyway. Relished the idea, one he entertained so infrequently it wasn't part of his psyche, that one day, he would mate a female and father pups of his own.

Beneath him, the female leaned back into him. The trembling in her body increased and his front paws slipped. They regained their balance but threatened to slip again. Panting, he felt the strong contracting of her sheath bearing

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down on him as it rippled with the waves of her orgasm.

The pressure around the base of his penis was almost overwhelming now. It was hard to drive in and out of her but his strength didn't fail him. When she came, he came a third time. A gentle orgasm, sweet and soothing. Gentler even than the first. The fluid he released into her was thin but his body was able to pump it out fast. The furious flow carried the load of semen already deposited into her, even deeper. Every part of her womb would now be flooded with his potency. The female trembled one last time then sagged under his weight.

His legs unsteady, Owen panted and let his paws slip off her back. He stood beside her, his penis still lodged inside her, the grip of the mouth of her sheath too strong to be overcome. The band of muscle holding him kept the blood from draining from his penis and he remained hard and wedged inside her. None of his seed could escape.

The black male circled them slowly. He sniffed the female's backside, sniffed Owen's testicles and the place where Owen and the female were

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joined. The male whined impatiently then circled them again.

Owen looked up at the sky. His wolf's eyes tracked the movement of the stars, sensed the turning of their world. The half-moon had risen high and Owen bayed to it. He shouted his joy and completion. He shouted his praise of the worthiness of the female he was locked with, his delight with her strength and the pleasure they'd reached.

Long minutes later, the wicked grip her body had on him eased. With a grunt of discomfort, he managed to pull his deflating penis out of her. He stumbled as he moved away.

The black male took his place. Again, the female looked over her shoulder as if confirming this male's worth as well. She whined, once, held her tail out of the way and braced her legs to hold his weight. Without preamble, he shoved the knob of his penis into her, drove deep and humped her with a deliberation that had to leave him blind to everything else.

Instead of obeying his body's desire for sleep, Owen stayed awake. He scanned the area as the scent of lust grew. Watched the male's strong

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flanks tense, drive and withdraw. Watched his forelegs scramble for purchase, watched him bite down on her neck, snarl his pleasure until her elegant coat was flecked with spit.

He was puzzled by the strangeness of it. He was separate from the act, a watcher only, yet he felt part of it. Part of them. Moving to her head, he nuzzled her, licked her face, loved how she trembled as the other male pleased her.

Finally, when they were finished, Owen moved behind her. He mounted her a second time and this time, the flurry of his thrusts drove her to her knees. She didn't cry or whine. She simply tried to brace herself as best she could and held her back end steady and exposed so he could pleasure them both. The scent of her lust drove him mad. She smelled like hot, willing female spiced with his seed and the other male's. The decadence of it thrilled him, blinded him to everything else and made his hips pound into her furiously.

The pleasure was as overwhelming as the first time. For the female too if her desperate cries and the way she shook were any indicators. He licked her neck, cleaned her fur as he stood beside her,

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waiting for the swelling in both their bodies to subside.

When he was able to pull out of her, she staggered to the pond. She drank, long and deep. Owen and the other male joined her. They flanked her, letting her lean into their taller, stronger bodies. She gave each of their faces a cursory wash then, on unsteady legs, made her way over to a patch of new grass. Side by side by side, they stretched out and waited for their strength to return.

They spent the rest of the night together, running, mounting, resting until they heard the Alpha's call. The black male led the way back to the clearing. Instead of veering off, Owen's wolf stayed with them. He liked the sense of family he felt with these two, even though they weren't mated. Together, three felt like a whole. Owen had never experienced that before and he was reluctant to part from them.

Just before they would have re-entered the clearing, Owen stopped beneath a large spruce tree. Here, the ground was cushioned with decades of soft, spent needles. He lay down and looked at them expectantly. They didn't

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disappoint him. The golden-brown bitch stretched out beside him, the black male beside her. Curling into each other, one after the other, they fell asleep.



When Owen awoke, his human eyes registered the growing, pale differentiation between land and sky. The air had a particular stillness and feeling of cold. It told him sunrise was less than twenty minutes away. He smiled. A woman, soft, rounded and pale was spooned into his body. His hips cradled her ass and his morning wood nosed at her warmth with singular pleasure.

A few hours earlier, he'd been sleeping so deeply the change from wolf to human had barely registered. That change was far less traumatic. Nevertheless, he recalled the shot of hot pain, the itchiness in his back. The shiver as the night air touched his nakedness before he wrapped himself around the woman now in his arms.

He smiled again. An untidy mass of soft, blonde, female hair protected his face from the pine needles beneath them. Owen inhaled

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deeply, letting his chest swell into her smooth, delicately muscled back. Her hair smelled vaguely of flowers, although the scent of fresh air almost overwhelmed the shampoo she used. He smelled his seed on her, and the other wolf's. Lifting his eyes, he saw the sleeping profile of Deputy Sheriff Tom Ray beyond her. Tom was sleeping on his back, his mouth open, just a little. He snored softly. The female was curled up into Tom, her arm draped over his chest so that her body was sheltered and warmed on both sides. If they'd been human, they'd have hypothermia. But weres were tougher than that.

Slowly so he didn't startle her into wakefulness, Owen slid his hand over her breast. Man, she had great boobs, whoever she was. Firm mounds, soft skin and definitely more than a handful. Were they real? He squeezed gently. Oh yeah. *Definitely* real.

Releasing her reluctantly, Owen reached across the woman and nudged Tom's shoulder. After the second nudge, the other were woke with a muffled snort. He looked up at the sky as if gauging the hour like Owen had then smacked his lips. His nose bunched like he was scenting

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the air before he turned his head to look up at Owen.

Tom blinked then the corners of his mouth quirked up. "First time I share a woman and it turns out to be with some tenderfoot from back East." He kept his voice quiet, even though from the way his eyes were crinkling, it looked like he wanted to laugh. "Should have known it was you and not one of those junior jerk-offs going through town on their way to that hockey tournament."

They chuckled and it carried the sound of irony, swaggering male satisfaction and a hint of adolescent titillation.

The female stirred, passed a small, pale hand over the dark hair peppering Tom's chest, and squirmed her ass back into Owen's erection. "Now that's a fine good morning," she whispered.

Owen froze as soon as he heard her voice.

"Shit," he deadpanned. "Not you."

"Wh...?" With a jerk, she rolled toward him.

In the thin pre-dawn light, Deputy Sheriff Suzanne Young stared up at him, then snarled.

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She jerked again, this time trying to get away from him. The movement shoved her hip into his testicles.

“Easy, Blondie.” Owen grabbed her hip, stilling her, and leaned away from her. “You were pretty enamored of them last night so don’t go disappointing yourself by crushing them now.” Despite the anger in her eyes and his previous, less than stellar encounters with her, he liked the feel of her skin. The way her muscles rolled beneath it and the solid, enticing curve of her hipbone. Her breast swayed, drawing his eye to a peak so pink and luscious he stared and drew his tongue over his lower lip.

“*You*,” she blurted out, slapped his wandering hand and rolled away from him. When she moved, Tom grunted in discomfort.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Suzanne demanded. “Who told you you were welcome?”

Owen could always tell when a party was over. Stretching out the tightness in his muscles, he climbed out from beneath the spruce and stood. She crawled out right after him. The light caught the paleness of her eyes. Disheveled and with a

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few pine needles sticking to her arm, she was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Too bad he couldn't stand the sight of her.

"Not that it's any of your business," Owen answered dryly. She glared up at him, fists planted on hips, chest stuck out aggressively. How could anybody that beautiful piss him off so much? "But I'm here on the Alpha's invite. And I'm guessing you're here on Tom's invite. Last time I checked, an Alpha outranked a deputy sheriff. No offense intended," he added, directing his voice at Tom who was stumbling out of the soft bed of spruce needles they'd shared.

"None taken." Tom yawned, stretched with wanton focus then scratched his balls. "I take it you two have met."

Suzanne took a step toward Owen, stuck out her index finger like she was about to shove it in his nose. He didn't give her a chance. "Later, Tom," he said gruffly, gave the other were a quick nod and left.

He felt her eyes on him as he walked. His skin prickled with awareness but it felt sexual, not angry. Great. The one woman he shared a

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mutual hate for thought his wolf was the hottest thing since the invention of the howitzer. And dammit all if the feeling wasn't mutual. Cursing his luck, Owen snagged his clothes from where he'd left them the night before and headed for his pickup.



Back at his place, after he showered and dressed, Owen grabbed his cell and called Cutler. He didn't even give the Alpha time to greet him before Owen started ragging on him.

"You didn't tell me Suzanne was in Pinebridge." There was a snarl in Owen's voice, one he didn't bother toning down.

"*Yes. On purpose.*" Cutler snarled right back. "*You're supposed to stay out of the official loop, remember?*"

"Well the entire State's not big enough for the two of us. That woman delights in rubbing my fur the wrong way." Unfortunately, his cock chose that moment to twitch and it wasn't a happy feeling. Just thinking about the blonde from hell made his inner wolf horny and the

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thing was determined to drag Owen along for the ride. The sex in wolf form had been great. There was no denying that. The run too.

Cutler's voice was calmer when he spoke again. *"She can be tenacious. But she's a good cop. Sounds like you're rubbing her wrong too. Just try to stay out of her way so you can both do your jobs."*

Owen snarled once more but this time, there was less venom in it. "There's nothing I'd like more."

After he ended the call, Owen scrubbed his hands over his face. Cutler was right. The best thing for him to do was stay away from her. He checked his watch. It was too early to drop by the Amoses and pick Piper up for work. He also wasn't in the mood to wait around where he was and tighten the knots he'd already wound himself up into by dwelling on Suzanne.

Remembering David Hold's offer, Owen grabbed his coat, jumped in his pickup and headed out for breakfast.



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Except for two vehicles parked in front of the diner, the main street was deserted. When he stepped inside, the scent of fresh coffee and baking made his nose perk with interest.

“Hey, there you are.” David Hold, wearing his chef’s jacket and tall hat, called out a greeting. “Glad you could drop by. Sit down and meet Garnett and Jackson.”

As he shrugged out of his coat, Owen nodded to the juke-box repair guy. “Jackson,” he said and smiled. “Good to see you again. How’s business?”

“Can’t complain.” The older were returned Owen’s smile and turned to the male sitting beside him. “Garnett, I don’t think you’ve met Owen. Owen’s new to these parts and we’re doing our best to convince him to stick around.”

“Garnett Ross,” the man said, stood and took Owen’s hand with tempered but unmistakable strength. Garnett was a bull of a man. Maybe a couple inches shy of six feet, he had tough palms, arms that looked like they could crush a tree, and short-buzzed gray hair. His blue eyes were warm though and they crinkled when he smiled. “Pleased to meet you, son.”

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“Likewise,” Owen replied. He watched David snag a coffeepot, a fresh mug, and bring them over to the table.

“Owen, here,” David said as he poured Owen a cup and topped up the others, “is looking for a new line of work. Garnett’s a blacksmith and he was saying just a few weeks ago he was thinking of taking on an apprentice.”

“A blacksmith?” Owen said with rising interest. “Didn’t know there were any blacksmiths left.”

“A few of us.” Garnett sipped his coffee then smacked his lips in appreciation. “Farm work’s my bread and butter. Shoeing horses, repairing equipment. I also do decorative work.”

David put his hand on Owen’s shoulder, squeezed then headed for the kitchen. “Sit tight, you three. I’ll be back out with breakfast in a minute.”

After he left, Owen realized he hadn’t ordered anything. Curious now, he wondered what David would bring back.

Garnett continued. “I like the work. I get to make my own schedule, which is great. I’ve got a portable forge and travel an informal route

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through this county and the ones around it. Lots of big ranches in the area. Nice folks too.” He took another sip of his coffee. “During the summer, I follow the rodeo circuit on weekends. That’s interesting in itself but I also get a lot of orders for custom, decorative things. Trivets, fire-place pokers, fence gates and such.”

The conversation gradually drifted to after-market truck accessories. Owen had a chromed bush-bumper on his rig, visible through the diner window.

They all turned and, with visible anticipation, eyed the trolley David wheeled out of the kitchen. The scent coming from beneath the covered serving dishes made Owen’s mouth water. David set warmed plates in front of each of them, including a place setting for himself. He started setting the dishes on the table.

“Now, this egg dish has shaved portobello mushrooms in it. I like it best with truffles but that would make the price-point too high for a simple place like this. Dig in, fellas, and don’t spare the compliments.”

They passed around dishes of French toast made from banana bread, home-fried potatoes,

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meaty sausages that, if Owen wasn't mistaken, held a hint of rosemary and sun-dried tomato, whole wheat toast, watermelon cubes and a sort of egg pie that was so delicious, he took three helpings. Even the orange juice was fresh squeezed.

"Won't your other customers get jealous?" Owen asked, even though there were only the four of them in the diner.

"Chef's table is only open to early risers, like us." David checked his watch. "First customers of the day, other than you fellas, won't be by for another half hour or so."

After the other men pressed the last slice of French toast on Owen, all four of them sat back with an air of pleasantly stuffed contentment, and sipped at their coffee.

"Anyway," Jackson said, picking up on an earlier conversation, "there's enough honky tonks and such in the general area to keep me busy. The modern jukeboxes and arcade games always need tinkering. The electronics are more delicate than the models from the fifties. I've serviced this route going on twelve years now. I keep an

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apartment in town with a garage out back. I keep that set up as a little workshop.”

“What about your family?” Owen asked. The guy scented like a mated were but the mating was old. “Traveling around for a single fella like me isn’t an issue but...” His voice trailed off and he shrugged.

Jackson grinned ruefully. “Pinebridge has evolved into the middle of my territory, and, really, there’s no pull to stay around my own pack much. Me and my mate, well, in human form we’re kind of like oil and water. She’s given me three fantastic pups though. Them, we *do* see eye to eye on. But unless we’re in our fur, we get along as long as we’re not together.”

Owen could relate.

The other two weres chuckled. They obviously knew this story.

David stood and began clearing the table. He looked directly at Owen. “Anytime you’re in the mood for a good breakfast and some conversation with a couple of old farts, you come by.”

“You do this every day?” Owen asked. He’d

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have to teach an extra PT class to work off the food he'd just eaten. Maybe two.

"Nah. Maybe three times a week. It's kind of a hit and miss because some of the guys have jobs that keep them on the road. Now that you know what time we're here, you drop by any day. It's a nice change having a young guy join us for a change."



After Owen picked up Piper and drove her to work, he went to the community center. He'd paid to take two more aptitude tests, both of them long and detailed. The results on those would be back from the State Board of Vocational Education tomorrow. Piper had promised to go over the results with him, and discuss his options.

He was looking forward to it. New friendships aside, unemployment was getting to be a bore.

At the community center, he was wheeling big racks of stacking chairs into a classroom for that afternoon's gardening group. A tall female with a commanding presence stepped into the room,

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crossed her arms over her chest and watched. She looked fifty but something about her told Owen she was older, more experienced than that. He guessed sixty. The straight no-nonsense skirt she was wearing was flattering and looked expensive. Despite her age or perhaps because of it, he liked the way her high heels showed off her long legs.

When he focused on her face, he blinked. She could pass for Cory Amos' twin. "Can I help you?" he asked, and smiled.

"That remains to be seen," she answered. There was no animosity in her. There was also no perfunctory courtesy. She scented like a strong were who'd worn her confidence for so long it was as comfortable and familiar as her own skin. "I'm Katherine Clark. I'm head bitch around these parts."

She unfolded her arms and adopted an aggressive posture—hands on hip, silk-blouse clad chest stuck out, back straight, chin high. Katherine Clark had that kind of haughty, righteous strength Owen had always found incredibly hot. If she was thirty years younger and unmated, he'd be all over her in a heartbeat.

Deciding to keep his wolf's lecherous thoughts

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to himself, Owen walked over to her and held out his hand. "I'm Owen Wells. Cory and Piper mentioned you. She says you play a helluva game of tennis."

"That I do, Owen," she replied without modesty. Her grip was sure but her hand felt soft, feminine. She glanced back at the chairs. "You know we have a caretaker whose job it is to set up and clear away after activities."

"Gerry. His arthritis is acting up so I offered to pitch in." Gerry was seventy-something years old. He'd taken on the job after he retired to keep busy but it was obvious the physical requirements were getting to be too much. Old age caught up to weres too.

"Hmm." Katherine shifted her weight to her other leg and that critical look on her face became one of assessment. She shut the door behind her and when she spoke, her voice was quieter. "He needs to be shuffled into a less demanding role. I like your diplomacy though."

Owen nodded curtly. Katherine's stance relaxed a little.

"I mentioned it to Ed, rest his soul," she added

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and walked around the room, looking at the artwork, posters and announcements tacked to the walls. “Cory and Piper speak highly of you. They say you’re looking for a place to settle down.”

Accepting the olive branch for what it was, he took her to the center’s kitchen where he made coffee for them. Gradually, Owen steered the conversation back around to Sheriff Ed Timberman. He asked if Ed being out on South Fork Road at that hour of the morning was usual, what Katherine thought the motive was, if anybody disliked him that much. He got what he got from everybody else—that Ed was a well-loved Beta, a great cop and his death had left a void in the pack nobody was conveniently looking to step into.

Owen was clearing away their coffee things when the kitchen door flew open so hard it slammed into the wall.

He sighed and it sounded more like a growl. Deputy Sheriff Suzanne Young, pretty blue eyes blazing with anger, stormed into the room. That gun on her hip still looked hot as hell and speaking of hips...Owen dragged his gaze back

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up to her face before she slapped him for ogling that fine, curved body of hers.

“I want some answers, Wells, and I want them now.” She walked right up to him, so close he felt her breath on his throat.

It felt real nice, dammit.

“You turning up here days after the pack Beta is murdered?” She glanced at Katherine, nodded in acknowledgement then focused back on Owen. “You’re the only new were in town and here you are getting all cozy with the Alpha and the head bitch. Why do you suppose that is?”

“Like I told you this morning when we woke up naked. *Together*,” he reminded her and didn’t hide his grin when a blush colored those downy cheeks of hers. “Although I’m related to Ryan, and therefore have cause to petition to join your pack, Cutler was polite about letting me know he wouldn’t be extending an invitation for me to stay. Instead, Cutler offered to introduce me to Cory.”

“So when I leave,” Suzanne said coldly, “you’ll be moving on?”

“Or staying, maybe.”

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She growled and it sounded so hot coming from her, Owen's cock started to lengthen. He really hated that.

"There's something you're not telling me," she said and this time her voice was cool, accusing. "I can smell it on you. I'm keeping my eye on you, Owen Wells."

"I'll just bet you are." He sneered, licked his lips and took his sweet time looking her up and down. He knew it would irritate the hell out of her. The anger in her eyes confirmed her outrage but he got no satisfaction from it. Just the opposite actually although he made sure he didn't let on.

To her credit, this time she didn't grab him or attempt to assault him. She turned and left, her back ram-rod straight and her boot heels hitting the linoleum with sharp, echoing authority.

When he turned back to Katherine Clark, she was again wearing that critical look.

"Do you often have deputy sheriffs make veiled accusations about you being a suspect in a murder investigation, Mister Wells?" Her voice

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could freeze water. Without another word, she turned and left.

Owen stood where he was for a moment then swore, threw a cleaning cloth across the room and raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. If the top bitch turned against him, there was no way he could stay. No way he could nose around on Cutler's behalf.

No way he could find a way to charm Suzanne's wolf into running with him again.



After an early supper at the diner, Owen spent the rest of the evening at the community center. He taught two self-defense classes, talked with pups and their parents, signed off on some bills for payment and sent a few back-and-forth e-mails to a graphic designer. He had an idea for flyers to advertise the center's facilities for corporate team-building activities, family get-togethers and special occasions. Lucky for them the graphic designer was talented and offered to donate five hours of her time.

For the cost of a ream of paper, a local pizza

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joint with a good, color printer had offered to print up the flyers. They'd also distribute them.

More and more, Owen was enjoying the work. It cleared his head and made him feel he had a purpose. As he and Gerry locked up and wished each other a good night, Owen was looking forward to getting the results of his aptitude tests the next day.

As he got in his pickup and headed for his rented home, he decided to put off calling Cutler until tomorrow night. The only thing he had to report was zero progress. Owen hated the thought but maybe he should tell Cutler to get somebody more experienced to help. Maybe a private investigator or something. His head was full of ideas about what that aptitude test would tell...that and images of Suzanne's soft curves and pretty mouth. The wind was strong, out of the west and carried no unusual scents.

Still pissed at the idea of having to admit his failure, Owen stopped halfway to his front door. The walkway was littered with tiny, black boxes, almost invisible in the dark. Bending down, he picked one up. It smelled vaguely of lemon, which puzzled Owen. He looked up at the eaves

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trough, at the roof. Maybe they'd fallen, but from where? His musing stopped when the little plastic box in his fingers began to vibrate.

The boxes still on the ground started to shimmy and bounce. His fingers were opening to drop the box in his hand. He was pivoting, starting to run for cover as fast as he could when the boxes all started emitting a high-pressure mist.

The stink of citronella was overwhelming. Still moving, Owen could feel his eyelids swell as the spray from two of the boxes scored a direct hit and soaked his face. His throat tried to close up and protect his lungs. Pain exploded behind his knees when what had to be a baseball bat caught his legs from behind. He went down like he'd been shot but rolled. Through swelling, streaming eyes, he could just make out four males surrounding him. With a start, Owen recognized the outline of gas masks over each of their faces. Probably Army surplus. How fucking ironic was that?

With no time to dwell on it, Owen twisted out of the way of a boot coming at his gut. They reached for him, all at once. If they wanted him on

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his feet, Owen had no problem with that. Two of them held his arms behind his back. They hadn't shot him and they hadn't used that baseball bat to beat him into unconsciousness. Whatever it was they wanted probably involved some talking. He had no problem with that either. If they talked, they might just say something useful.

"Consider this your one and only warning, stray." The voice was definitely male, so gravelly and muffled it had to be disguised. The two males holding him were strong. They had to be weres.

"Get out of town." The speaker, the one Owen took for the ringleader, was swinging the baseball bat and smacking the business end with his palm.

The air around Owen began to clear as those little black boxes, one by one, exhausted their stores of citronella. He was still coughing like an asthmatic though.

"In fact, get out of the State." That baseball bat kept moving in steady, hypnotic arcs.

Owen couldn't make out any identifying features on any of the men. His eyes were still watering like crazy so all he could see

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were baseball caps hiding their hair, and dark nondescript clothing covering them from neck to ankle. They were all shorter than him but that wasn't much help. Just about everybody was shorter than him.

That baseball bat kept moving. "This ain't your pack and you ain't welcome."

After that, the punches started flying. One caught him in the ribs, hard. The two were who thought they had power-lock holds on his arms were flung forward as Owen stepped back, leaned against their weight and used their own shifting inertia to swing them around either side of him. The rolling momentum of their own bodies ripped Owen's arms out of their hands.

Apparently, the conversation was over. It was time to rock.

A fist caught him in the belly but he managed to duck in time to keep that baseball bat from taking his head off. He kicked out, sending one of his attackers into the shrubbery. Another jumped on his back, hung on with arms and legs and tried to choke him out. Owen tipped forward, grabbed the guy's neck and flipped him up and over.

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Guy number two landed on the concrete walkway with a satisfying groan.

When Owen straightened, when he shifted his weight to block the next two incoming punches, the odds caught up with him. That baseball bat connected with the side of his head, stunning him. He dropped to his knees.

The last thing he heard was the sound of running feet. Then, from a distance, the sound of an engine roaring to life. He looked around as best he could but couldn't even see tail lights speeding away. Instinct screamed at him to get up and chase the bastards down.

Common sense told him he didn't stand a chance—not with lungs full of choking gas and eyes half swollen shut.

Still on his knees, he grabbed up a handful of the little black boxes. He'd been brought down by canine spray-trainers...the kind dog owners used to keep their dogs from barking. Dog trainers! When he got his hands on those guys, Owen was going to mess them up good. Enraged, he whipped the boxes in his hand across the yard as hard as he could, and passed out.

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Chapter Nine

Owen was behind the wheel of his pickup, thinking that was a bad idea. He probably had a concussion, although his wolf wasn't as sentient as Owen so his wolf could withstand a head shot better than Owen.

And it was his wolf that was taking him to the sheriff's office.

Logically, it made more sense to seek medical help. Dial up 9-1-1 and call himself an ambulance. Or contact Cory and advise him what had happened. Maybe there was a covert coup going on?

One of his tires hit a pothole and the jarring made Owen flinch. Who the hell would bum rush a were who'd approached the Alpha honorably and been given permission to stay? He felt spots of blood trickling down the side of his head. Gingerly, Owen rubbed away the tickle.

He pulled up outside of the sheriff's office and practically sighed with relief. His wolf wanted to

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be one place and one place only—with Tom and Suzanne.

How fucked up was that?

When he staggered in, Deputy Sheriff Wally Pierce, who was manning the desk, took one look at him, hoisted Owen's arm over his shoulder and led him to a chair. He sat Owen down then grabbed a first aid kit off the top of a filing cabinet.

"You look like shit," Wally said succinctly, picked up a water bottle somebody had left sitting around and began drizzling water in Owen's eyes. "And you smell like furniture polish. I'm not sure which is worse."

Owen appreciated the oversized, brown haired were's humor. He appreciated the ice pack Wally held against his head even more. Wally tended to his injuries and asked what happened.

When he could finally see more than fuzzy outlines and felt a little more lucid, Owen looked around the office. "Where's Tom and Suzanne?" It seemed odd only one sheriff would be on site. There wasn't a desk sergeant or even a dispatcher in the place.

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“Didn’t you hear?” Wally asked. He handed Owen a towel so he could mop himself up. “No, I guess you didn’t,” Wally said, shaking his head and answering his own question.

“Hear what?”

“Look, maybe it’ll be best if they tell you.” Wally got on the radio and called up Tom. Once he had him on the line, all he said was that Owen Wells was at the station and he’d been attacked.

Owen heard Tom’s voice, saying he’d be at the station soon. Leaning back and cradling his bruised ribs, Owen held the ice pack to his head and began repeating his story while Wally keyed the particulars into a computer.

A little while later, Tom came in through the front door. Suzanne was on his heels. Without a word, she walked up to Owen and punched him in the face, hard.

“What the...?” Owen bellowed, jumped to his feet, dropped the ice pack and raised his forearms to deflect another blow. *If* one came.

“You slimy son of a bitch,” she cursed, grabbed her cuffs with one hand and his wrist with the other.

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He had to hand it to the bitch, she sure could move fast. In an instant, she'd spun around behind him, had his thumb bent back over his wrist, had one cuff on him and was yanking his other arm back to restrain that one as well. Owen's wolf snarled but didn't resist the female manhandling him. Big, strong and trained, Owen could have easily thrown her away from him. But his wolf had no interest in harming the female and he submitted without argument.

"You're under arrest," she yelled in his ear, making him wince. The small, feminine hand on his shoulder dug right into a pressure point, dropping his ass back in the chair like there were magnets in it.

"For what?" Owen yelled back.

"Murder, you lying, snake in the grass piece of shit."

"Murder? Who? What the—?"

"Cory Amos, you dumb ass. I'm arresting you for the murder of Cory Amos."

Owen blinked. His head ached from the sudden, deafening silence. Cory? Cory was dead?

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“You had means, motive and opportunity,” Suzanne hissed. The venom in her voice made his stomach roil...and not because he’d taken a shot to the head less than a half hour ago. “Cory’s neck was snapped and it wasn’t done by an amateur.” She stepped in front of him, dropped her face near his and sneered.

Owen wished she wasn’t standing between his legs. He wanted to squeeze his thighs together and protect his boy bits from her. Whatever else she was, the fine deputy sheriff was, at the moment, scary. Eyes bugging out and mouths open, Tom and Wally stared at her like she’d gone insane.

Suzanne continued in a quiet, furious tone. “Whoever did it left wide tire tracks on the unpaved parking lot behind the pharmacy. There are boot tracks too.” She jammed her brown steel-toed boot into his.

“A group of weres,” Owen shot back, “jumped me outside my place.” He might be liking the way those full, round breasts of hers were moving beneath her brown uniform shirt but he didn’t lie down and bare his belly for anybody. “They gassed me with citronella spray.”

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“What kind of lame-ass excuse is that?” she demanded, but her nose was wrinkling like she was finally registering the smell coming off him.

Owen stood up so suddenly, she staggered back a step. “The proof’s right here, in my front pocket.” He shoved his hip at her.

“Shove that thing in my direction once more and you’ll find yourself neutered.”

“Are you always this dense or is it just your blonde roots showing? Check the pocket. I kept one of the spray trainers they used. The rest are scattered over my front lawn. What? You think I *like* admitting I was brought down by a dog-training device?”

Throughout all this, Tom had stood one step behind Suzanne. Now, he took the lead, reached around her, slid two fingers into the pocket of Owen’s jeans and pulled out the small, black plastic box. He sniffed it, then held it up for Suzanne to do the same. They both recoiled from the strong, residual smell.

Owen watched them peer at his eyes. They still felt puffy and he bet they were red as hell too.

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After a moment, Tom's mouth thinned. "What were," he said slowly, "especially one as strong as Owen, would admit to something so humiliating unless it was the truth?"

"I also didn't hit myself in the head with a baseball bat, or across the back of my knees." Owen made a deliberate effort to bring his anger down a notch. Cory was dead. He couldn't believe it. Refused to believe it.

Suzanne shot him a skeptical look but she also examined the side of his head, glanced at the open first aid kit, the ice pack sitting on the desk. She held her breath for a moment then exhaled, slowly. "Show us your injuries," she said in a calm, professional voice, stepped behind him and unlocked the handcuffs.

Without argument, Owen loosened his belt, unbuttoned his jeans and slid them down his hips. "Guess my momma was right about the clean underwear," he quipped when Tom joined Suzanne. He felt her warm fingertips smooth over the backs of his knees, right where the swelling was starting to rise.

"Wally," Tom said, "get us another couple ice packs, would you?"

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Owen took off his jacket and lifted his shirt. He winced mentally when he saw the red, swollen imprint of a fist over his ribs. In a day, the bruising would be ugly as hell. When Wally came back, Tom took one of the ice packs and held it against Owen's side.

"Hope nobody drops by," Owen quipped, even though he didn't feel much like laughing. "What would the citizens of Pinebridge think if they saw me with my drawers down, and you two with your hands all over me?"

Grinning crookedly, Tom used the back of his hand to slap Owen lightly—right on his rising bruise. Owen flinched.

"Sorry, buddy," Tom said dryly. "Suppose I should have asked if you thought anything was broken first." His grin, even though it faded quick, took the sting out of the teasing slap. Getting hit actually made Owen feel better. If he'd been hurt bad, the big cop would never treat Owen's injuries so lightly.

Owen let them tend to him, ice his wounds, drizzle more water in his eyes. He could have taken care of himself. He was used to taking care of himself. Still, when Wally walked back to the

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dispatcher's station to respond to an incoming call, Owen felt peaceful with Suzanne and Tom near. When his bruises were iced to numbness, he pulled up his jeans and tucked in his shirt.

"Okay but why him?" Suzanne asked. She sat on the edge of the desk, one foot dangling and one on the floor. With her arms crossed in front of her, she looked pensive instead of angry for a change.

"I can think of a good reason," Tom said. He pulled up a chair, sat down and stretched out his long legs. "It was an attempt to injure Owen or overpower him so he'd have no choice *but* to leave. Think about it. An attack like that was meant to humiliate him. It would have if those boys had managed to beat you." Tom nodded slowly and pointed at Owen. "He leaves the same night Cory's murdered..." Tom's voice faltered when he said Cory's name. "...and he implicates himself. Also, he leaves and...and the strongest male in our pack leaves the same night our Alpha's murdered."

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Suzanne transferred the call she'd placed to Cutler to the speaker phone in the station's conference room.

"I agree with Tom's theory," the Alpha said. He sounded tired and angry at the same time. "The strongest males in Pinebridge are being eliminated, systematically. Tom, as acting sheriff, you make your own decisions about how to handle this investigation but I'd suggest you assign deputies to keep a close eye on Roger Madison and Skip Walters."

"You think they're suspects? Not them. No way." Roger owned one of the grocery stores in town. Skip worked as a foreman for one of the big ranches in the area.

"No. Just the opposite. When I was there, I pegged them as two of your pack's strongest males. Potential candidates to step in and take on Ed's role as Beta."

Tom's brow furrowed then he nodded. "Agreed. I'll meet with them tonight. Tell them what's going on and set up a roster to keep them under surveillance."

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“And Tom...assign a deputy to keep a watch on you too.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You.”

Tom's brow furrowed again. Deeper this time. His head came up. Suzanne was giving him one of those cool, assessing looks of hers then she nodded. Owen shrugged and nodded too.

Cutler continued. *“With Ed gone, you're a logical choice for Beta, Tom. No insult intended but I'm not sure you've got what it takes to be an Alpha. Especially now when your pack needs a powerhouse leader. Leaders,”* Cutler added, correcting himself.

“No insult taken, Sheriff,” Tom said. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Once or twice, Ed and I talked about me moving up in the ranks. We joked about me honing up on my fighting skills. Funny thing was, in the back of my mind, I kind of felt he *wasn't* joking.” He shook his head slowly. “I'm sorry I didn't talk to him more outside the job. He was a good male and there wasn't enough time to learn all I could from him.”

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“That’s something you’ll have to process another time, Tom,” Cutler said. “What your pack needs now is strong, interim leadership. You’ve got a helluva situation unraveling there. I need the three of you to step in and step up. Yes, Suzanne, the three of you,” Cutler added even before Suzanne’s growl rumbled through the room. *“Whether Owen stays or not, he’s got Alpha written all over him. That pack needs him, now.”*

“I’m your Alpha, Suzanne, and I trust Owen. It comes down to whether you accept my judgment.”

Her mouth thinned and those eyes of hers looked at Owen like she was thinking of stringing him up out back and laying a good beating on him herself. Then her expression softened. The anger faded and was replaced by a resigned professionalism that Owen admired.

“I accept your judgment, Cutler. You know I do.” She exhaled slowly. “I also agree with Tom. Whoever’s behind this has destabilized the hierarchy. That said, in the absence of worthy leadership, people will cleave to anybody who steps up and dazzles them with a few well-chosen words. Best case scenario, that’s what whoever’s behind this is waiting to do.”

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Tom nodded. "Wipe out the hierarchy and step into the void," he added. "Worse case scenario? The killing hasn't stopped and Owen and I, as well as the other two fellas, are at the top of the hit list."

"Agreed," Cutler said. *"Protect Roger and Skip, then protect yourselves by staying together."*

"No way, Cutler." Suzanne interrupted hotly.

"I know you and Owen are like oil and water."

Owen wondered where he'd heard that recently?

"Well think of Tom as soap," Cutler suggested with the high-handed, unshakeable confidence of an Alpha. *"He'll let you bind. Make you a cohesive team that can lead that pack through this. When it's over, Suzanne, you can bite Owen's ass on the way out the door. Nobody will reprimand you for it, me included."*



When he woke up the next morning, Owen stared at an unfamiliar ceiling. He was in Tom's guest room. Somebody was using the shower

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down the hall and he sat up gingerly. There was a goose egg on the side of his head that hurt only when he touched it. His ribs were tender but nothing that would sideline him.

His legs were another matter. They were sore, stiff and the backs of his knees were swollen enough he couldn't bend his legs all the way. He forced himself to walk down the hall, around the living room and back again. Tom, who'd camped out on the sofa, watched him.

"Bad?" Tom asked. He got up, stretched, and started folding up the blankets he'd used.

"Could be worse. Walking it off is helping."

The shower had stopped and Suzanne came out of the bathroom. Owen stared at her for a moment. She was so pretty—pink and freshly scrubbed. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and it emphasized her cheekbones. She stared right back at him then, like last night, something in her expression softened. Inhaling slow and deep, Owen took in her scent and liked that too. Then he yawned. Tom did too.

They hadn't got much sleep. After Tom contacted Roger and Skip, and brow-beat them

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into accepting police protection, he'd driven Owen and Suzanne back to the site of Cory's murder.

Still reeling from the loss, Owen thought back on the previous night's investigation.

While Tom directed the other officers, Suzanne walked Owen through the crime scene. Cory's Cadillac was parked in the middle of a taped-off section. It looked forlorn.

"We believe he was killed after locking up," Suzanne said, snapping him out of his reverie. "Employees told us he leaves through the back, where he parks his car."

Owen liked this side of Suzanne. Professional, straight to the point, confident without being overbearing. He guessed he was the one who brought out the ornery side of her. If they were going to be spending time together, he'd have to correct that.

"We took casts of the tire impressions," she said as they walked around the taped-off area. "There are no signs of attempted forced entry so whoever it was wasn't trying to break into the pharmacy. That's especially troubling because

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Cory had the keys to the place in his hand when he was killed. The keys to his car were on the same ring."

"So no robbery. What was the killer driving?" Owen asked.

"A pickup. Full sized, like yours." She looked up at him and her expression was apologetic. "That truck had snow tires on though. Yours doesn't have any."

"Problem is," Tom said as he walked up to them. He was pulling off a pair of latex gloves. "Just about every second vehicle in the State is a pickup, and everybody's taking off their snow tires about now. We won't find a matching tread unless we check every garage, shed and auto shop with a three-county radius. Even then, we'd find too *many* matches."

Owen roused himself from his musings and forced his attention on the two deputy sheriffs standing in the living room with him. "What'll you two do this morning?" He'd meant the question to convey simple curiosity. Instead, it came out with a note of command. Why was it he couldn't lay off stepping in and taking things over? No matter what the situation was.

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“We’ll go into the station,” Tom answered without a hint of attitude, like he had no problem with Owen’s bossiness. “We’ll start going over the evidence, interview witnesses.” He headed down the hallway, grabbed fresh towels out of a closet, and walked into the bathroom. Tom’s house was small—only two bedrooms and one bathroom. “Correction. Witness. Somebody heard a muffled shot but nothing else.”

“Not even a vehicle peeling out?” Owen asked. He sat down on the closed toilet seat while Tom yanked off his T-shirt and sweats, and turned on the shower.

“No. Now that you mention it, no.”

“Damn. That’s cold,” Owen said to the shower curtain as it closed behind Tom. “And... professional.”

Suzanne stepped into the bathroom, carrying a big satchel of cosmetics. She began applying foundation and eyeliner. “What about you?” she asked Owen.

“I’m going out to Cory’s. See if Piper needs anything.”

“That’s a good idea,” Tom said from inside the

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shower. The sound of the spray kept changing, like he was moving around under it. "And thanks. We'll drop by too. I imagine everybody will at one point or another."

"Maybe while I'm there," Owen said, thinking out loud, "I'll keep a running tally in my head. See if somebody doesn't show, or if they try to insert themselves into the investigation."

"Somebody other than you?" Suzanne asked. She shot him a wry grin then undid her ponytail, fluffed her hair and started pinning it up.

Mesmerized, he watched the efficient movements of her hands. They looked small, delicate and for some reason, he couldn't take his eyes off them arranging that pale, shiny hair of hers. She was wearing a pair of low-riding sleeping pants and a camisole top. Bright pink polish highlighted her toenails. Her breasts swayed with the movement of her arms and her nipples...

He hadn't even noticed the shower turning off, or Tom stepping out with a towel wrapped around his hips. Looking away from Suzanne, Owen cleared his throat and tossed a second towel to Tom without being asked. "Yeah," Owen

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said, finally getting his head together enough to answer Suzanne's question. "Somebody other than me."

"Damn, Wells, you've got a natural instinct for this," Tom said and crowded Suzanne away from the front of the sink so he could reach his toothbrush.

"Don't know about natural." Owen shrugged, flexed his knees and stood gingerly. He untied the borrowed sweat pants he was wearing, let them drop and stepped into the shower. They'd all agreed it was a prudent idea to camp out at Tom's house overnight, although Suzanne had insisted on dropping by her apartment to grab what she called *the basics*. Apparently, lip liner was a basic necessity. "In the sandbox, I got used to looking for danger everywhere and honed my talent for sniffing it out. Although I'm severely pissed at myself for not sniffing those boys out in the dark." He didn't mention that, at the time, he'd been thinking about Suzanne's ass instead of scanning the area for danger. The hot water felt good on the back of his legs and he braced his hands against the far end of the enclosure, letting the spray loosen him up.

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“Just keep your eyes open and don’t go anywhere alone.” Tom’s voice was distorted, like he was talking around a mouthful of toothpaste. “I’d hate to have to phone Sheriff Cutler Powell and tell him I let his mate’s best buddy get killed.”

Suzanne piped up. “I wouldn’t mind so much.”



It was still early morning when Owen, Tom and Suzanne stepped up to Piper’s front door. After getting dressed and eating a quick bowl of cereal, they’d driven to Owen’s house. He’d put on his dress uniform, packed the rest of his clothes and thrown his suitcase in the back of Tom’s pickup. Owen’s truck was still parked beside the sheriff’s office. Suzanne followed them in her beefy SUV. They’d gone back to her apartment next, and came out with three heavy suitcases.

“Do you actually need eight pairs of shoes?” Owen had complained as he lugged a suitcase down the narrow flight of stairs.

“Don’t dis a woman’s shoes, Wells.” Her voice

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had echoed up the stairwell with unarguable authority.

“Yeah but do you need the pink high heels?” He knew he was pressing his luck but he did so like to rile her.

“It’s early. I haven’t had coffee. Do not start in on me.”

Owen figured the prudent thing to do was shut his mouth. The arch look Tom shot over his shoulder at him confirmed it.

As they waited for someone to answer the doorbell at Piper’s, Owen realized the three of them had presented a cohesive unit, driving like a convoy through town. Twice. Windows down, they’d scented the town and left their scents in their wake. In a community on the verge of chaos and hiding behind locked doors, if that drive didn’t trumpet confidence and a take-charge attitude, Owen didn’t know what did.

They were admitted by a woman Owen recognized as one of Piper’s sisters. She led them through to the kitchen. The house smelled faintly of were and floor polish. Every surface was immaculately clean, like someone had been up

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all night, scrubbing. Katherine Clark, the pack's top bitch and, Owen remembered belatedly, Cory's cousin, shot him a suspicious look as he walked past. She seemed too busy talking on the phone to someone about funeral arrangements to pay him more attention than that. Her eyes were puffy and she looked like she hadn't slept.

"Owen." Piper's greeting was warm although her voice wasn't as strong as usual. She held out her hands, took hold of his arms then fussed over his overseas service bars, straightened pins that were already straight. "You look so handsome. Cory would be so proud..." Her voice faltered, then stopped altogether. When the first tear slid down her cheek, without stopping to think about it, Owen opened his arms, touched the back of her neck until she laid her head on his sleeve. She hiccupped but didn't sob. He wondered if she was even able to cry out her pain yet.

The house fell quiet. As he stood there, stroking Piper's strangely fragile back, he looked around. There were maybe eight other weres, other than him, Tom and Suzanne. He saw their eyes move over him, taking in his size. Saw their nostrils dilate ever so slightly as they reached out

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for his scent. Owen took his own read on the room, smelled their pain, confusion and anger.

His wolf sensed one question from each of them. How? How could their Alpha be dead? How could he leave them so soon after their Beta had been taken? Without discussion, Owen knew these people were vulnerable. Without being asked, his wolf gave his consciousness a hard slap and demanded that he step up.

When Piper straightened away from him, he handed her the handkerchief he always kept in his inside pocket. She blew her nose discreetly then brushed an invisible speck of lint off his dark jacket.

“Have you eaten?” she asked and stepped over to the refrigerator. “I can make you something.”

“We’ve already—” Tom started to say. Owen lifted his hand, silencing the other were.

“Breakfast sounds great, Piper. And maybe coffee if you’ve got some.” They really didn’t need food but he knew Piper needed something to do. Anything to keep her body moving and distract her from the unbelievable truth that her mate was dead. He sat down at the kitchen table

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and ignored the ache behind his knees. Tom and Suzanne joined him. Owen remembered when he'd got the news that his mother had been killed. How he took all the extra patrols he could, how he worked out until his muscles shook with exhaustion. Anything to keep busy. When the pain was so horribly fresh all he wanted to do was deny the truth of it, frenetic activity bought his psyche time to deal with what had been thrown at it.

Piper brought out eggs and a loaf of bread. There were a few foil-covered casserole dishes on the counter but she by-passed them in favor of cooking herself. She brushed her brown hair back from her face. "We're getting low on coffee," she said, speaking to no one in particular. "The coffee cups are all clean though." She put bread in the toaster and began breaking eggs into a fry pan. Without asking, she poured three glasses of juice and put out three place settings. "I got the walkway swept this morning but I'll probably need to do it again."

No one interrupted her rambling. For awhile, Piper lost herself in cooking and musing. When she set their plates on the kitchen table, she

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stopped quite suddenly and stood still. Owen stood, seated her in an empty chair, put a half-slice of toast in her hand and touched her cheek before returning to his seat. Piper simply stared at the toast for a moment then began nibbling on it like she wasn't really aware of what she was doing.

"Abby," he said, speaking to Piper's sister. "Would you get a pen and paper and make a list of things Piper might need from the grocery store?"

Abby blinked like she'd just been shocked out of whatever dark thoughts had taken her. "A list?" she asked and her voice shook, just a little.

"Yes. Please." Owen kept his smile and his voice as warm and encouraging as he could. The Army had taught him how to create order out of chaos but it wasn't big on mollycoddling. He'd just have to wing it. "Start with coffee then see if she needs any milk or cream."

Abby jumped to the task. Soon she and another woman were rummaging around Piper's cupboards, pantry and refrigerator. The scent of unease and grief that had been hanging around

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them dissipated as they focused on the task Owen had assigned.

He asked another woman who was hovering in the living room to call the grocery store. "It's not open yet but Roger's there. Ask him if he'd open up early for Abby." The woman nodded, fished a cell phone out of her purse and went in search of a phonebook. Owen hadn't actually seen Roger inside his store when they'd driven past but he had seen a sheriff's squad car parked out front. It had to belong to the deputy assigned to guard Roger.

When the house phone rang, Katherine answered it. She told the caller that, yes, Piper was in and it would do her good to have people drop by. Katherine looked up at the sudden activity around her. Her gaze went to Owen when he asked a couple of women to start running hand towels through the washing machine. The suspicion in her eyes toned down to skepticism.

In groups of two, Piper's visitors presented their lists to Owen. He glanced at the items, nodded his approval then got out his wallet. With wads of twenty-dollar bills in their hands, Owen sent them out on their tasks.

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Suzanne leaned across the table and nudged his elbow. “You shouldn’t carry so much cash,” she said. “What if you get mugged?”

He sneered, stood up and stuck out his chest. “Like *that’s* going to happen.”

Tom and Suzanne left soon after. They’d be back that afternoon to pick Owen up. They said good-bye to Piper and told her they’d find whoever killed Cory. Another visitor, a retired male Owen recognized from the community center, saw them off at the door. Once they were gone, Owen sat back in his chair, flexed his knees covertly, and exhaled slowly. Piper, sitting across from him, was still nibbling on the piece of toast he’d given her. Her knuckles were red, like her hands had been immersed in cleaning products all night. A wave of foreign, emotional discomfort almost had him running for the door. Almost. Instead, he put his shoulders back and got to his feet.

“Piper?” he said gently and when she looked up, he nudged his empty plate in her direction.

“Oh,” she said and blinked like she was in a daze. “Did you get enough to eat? Can I make you anything else?”

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“No, Piper. It was delicious. Thank you.” He stood back and let her clean away the breakfast plates. He could have helped. When he’d eaten there before, he usually helped clean up. But Piper needed activity so he watched her fill the sink with hot, soapy water. There was a perfectly good dishwasher sitting right beside the sink but Owen knew she wouldn’t use it...not when she could do the job by hand and stretch it out.

Another one of Piper’s sisters, Clarice, came up to him. “Is there something I can do?” she asked hesitantly.

Owen gave her the same smile he’d given Piper. “Yes. Do you think you’re up to calling Piper’s work? I don’t know if they’ve heard. We need to tell them she won’t be in for awhile. Can you do that?” he asked and gentled his voice. “If you don’t think you can, look up the number for me and I’ll make the call.”

“N-no. I can do it.” The short, timid were breathed in and squared her shoulders. A few years older than Piper, Clarice had the same gentle, brown eyes as her two sisters. Before she turned away though, she laid her forehead on Owen’s arm. She nuzzled him carefully, like

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she wasn't sure of her welcome. When he didn't rebuke her, when he touched her head and smiled at her when she finally looked up at him, he sensed the tension in her ease.

Next, Owen made his way over to the male hovering around the front door. "Do you know if any of Cory's employees have a computer and printer at home?"

That lost look that had settled around the older were's eyes receded. "Yes. Bethany, his head cashier for sure. Oh and Harris, the stock boy. He's always fiddling with computer games. Wants to study computer programming when he goes to college."

"Good," Owen said. "Can you call one of them? Bethany, perhaps? Ask her to print up a sign for the front door, saying the pharmacy will be closed for today." He put his hand on the older were's shoulder. "Tom told me the sheriff's office needs the place to stay closed for a day at least."

"I'll get on it. The name's Tim by the way. Tim Egley."

Owen held out his hand. "I'm—"

"You're Owen Wells," Tim interrupted with a

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wide grin. “Most folks around these parts know who you are. Cory spoke highly of you before he...” Tim’s smile faded. “Well, I’ll get Bethany on the phone. She and her mate should be awake by now.” Tim shook Owen’s hand again and he and his cell disappeared into the dining room.

When Owen returned to the living room, Katherine looked at him, long and hard. The phone rang again. This time, when she answered it, she held up a finger like she was asking Owen to hang on.

“One moment. I’ll find out.” She held out the receiver to Owen. “It’s David from the diner. He wants to know if he can send Myra over with a platter.”

Owen looked at the receiver in Katherine’s hand and felt his eyebrow go up. Despite how surreal it all felt, Owen took the call.

“Hello, David. It’s Owen speaking.”

There was a pause. “Owen? Um, hi.” David cleared his throat. “Listen, I wanted to know if I could send something over. Maybe a platter of sandwiches for lunch.”

“That sounds terrific. There are already a

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dozen or so people here and I expect more will start turning up soon. Can I give you my credit card number or something?”

Owen had to hold the receiver away from his ear when David, as nicely as possible, tore into him for offering money. David promised to add a couple of berry pies and said Myra would be out there with the order around eleven or so. When he gave the handset back to Katherine, Owen waited for her to say something.

She looked at him for a moment. The skepticism had left her eyes. Acceptance, albeit grudging, had replaced it.

“Seems everybody wants to do something,” she said as she hung up the receiver. She straightened the hem of a blouse that looked like she’d been wearing it all night. “Most of them are in shock. Ever since it happened, I’ve been fielding calls.” She blinked furiously then looked away. “I’ve lost track of how many people I had to tell, yes, my cousin is dead.”

Owen reached for her arm. She grabbed his hand, held on tight for a moment then let go.

“Do Cory and Piper’s sons know?” Owen

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asked. He'd spoken quietly but when he heard the strangled gasp from the kitchen, he swore at himself and looked up.

Piper, her eyes huge, her face pale, was staring at him. Without conscious thought, he walked up to her and opened his arms. This time, she collapsed into him, clung to him with a strength he wouldn't have thought she possessed, and sobbed. Harsh, tearing sobs that made him want to weep. He held her head to his chest and willed himself to wait out the storm. Helpful hands passed boxes of tissue, reached under his arm, dabbed at Piper's cheeks. She squeezed him so hard his bruised ribs started to ache. He let her hold on.

When the worst of the storm was passed, Owen touched her chin, made her look up at him. "Are you up to telling your sons?" he asked quietly.

Piper shook her head. "I don't know how to tell them. I've been waiting for a decent hour to call. They like to sleep in and, and..." Someone handed her a fresh bunch of tissues and she wiped her face, blew her nose.

"Katherine?" Owen asked, turned his head

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and looked at the far more powerful female who was standing near his elbow.

Piper exhaled audibly. "I can do it."

Gently, Katherine took Piper in her arms and led her upstairs.

"Katherine," Owen said just before they left. "Tell the boys to make their own flight arrangements. It'll give them something to do."

By the time they came back downstairs, Owen had finished his second cup of coffee and was listening as two weres shared stories about Cory with him. Six more weres had dropped by. Piper roused herself visibly, welcomed them, asked them if they wanted something to drink or eat.

Katherine drew Owen aside. "Piper will need somebody to stay with her around the clock for the first few days," she said.

"Can you make that happen?" he asked. "Set up a roster. I see a lot of bodies milling around and I'm pretty sure they'd be glad of something to do. Maybe get a few of the people here to make the calls and get everybody organized."

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Nodding tiredly, Katherine began rounding up visitors.

The next time the doorbell rang, Owen recognized one of the doctors from the clinic in town. His wolf's ears tracked Piper's conversation with Dr. Hillman, heard the doc say she was there to give Piper an injection and leave some pills to help Piper get through the next few days. When the doctor and another one of the women led Piper upstairs, Owen wandered into Cory's office.

The room was quiet. Off the front hall, it was big enough to hold a desk, a bookshelf, some cabinets and a small conference table and six chairs. The phone on the desk rang and kept ringing. Owen glared at it, wishing he could throw the thing through the wall. Then follow it out and never come back. Instead, he took a breath and forced himself to sound pleasant when he answered it.

"...no, no date has been set for the funeral. We'll let everybody know. Piper's resting now but if you come by this evening, she'd be glad to see you." As he talked, a middle-aged were walked in. He moved around the office, looked at the

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framed pictures on the walls, at the certificates, the letters and drawings grade schoolers had sent their Alpha, before taking a seat across the desk from Owen.

It was then Owen realized he was sitting in Cory's chair, writing the caller's name down on a pad of paper on Cory's desk, using one of Cory's pens. What business did he have doing that?

After Owen hung up, the older were slowly tipped his head to one side and looked Owen over. He looked at the width of Owen's shoulders, the row upon row of service pins on his uniform jacket, the bits of colored ribbon. After a moment, his head came back up.

"I'm Howard Rupert. The pack's business manager. I dropped by to see if Piper needed anything and to see if Cory signed some checks I left before he..." Lifting his chin, Howard stared at a point on the wall behind Owen. He sighed. "Well, that can wait." He looked back at Owen. When he spoke this time, his voice was flat. It sounded forced, like he wished he was doing anything but sitting there, discussing money when his Alpha had just been killed. "Pack treasury allocates a set dollar amount for funeral

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expenses for every member. But since Cory was Alpha..." He spread his hands helplessly.

Owen stood. His knees gave him a twinge but he didn't let on. "Let me get Katherine. She'll help you decide."

He stepped out of the room and looked around for Cory's cousin. *Just what the hell was he doing here?* he thought to himself yet again as he moved past knot after knot of mourners, smiled kindly, held himself still whenever one laid their forehead on his arm or chest. Several minutes later, he returned to the office with Katherine in tow.

She didn't even blink when he sat in Cory's chair. Katherine took the one beside their business manager.

"Howard brought up the matter of the standard funeral stipend," Owen said.

"But since Cory was Alpha," Howard said. "Do we want to approve more?"

Katherine seemed to be thinking about it. She looked out the window and the angle of the light caught her face. Owen could see circles under her

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eyes that hadn't been there the first time they'd met.

"No," she said after a moment. "I'd say no. Cory liked simple things. So does Piper."

Then, against all reason, they turned to look at Owen. He blew out his cheeks and looked back at them. "I guess that settles it."

"Good," Howard said with the air of a man who liked decision. "I'll let the funeral home know. For big funerals, we usually hold the service at the community center. Will that be all right?"

Owen blinked when Howard posed the question to him. He actually balked when Katherine looked at him expectantly. Finally, he swallowed and nodded. "That will be all right."

Howard stood and held out his hand. "Good to meet you, Owen, although the circumstances suck. Good to have you here." He turned and left.

Owen sat back down slowly. He expected to hear the Twilight Zone theme playing in the background. Across from him, Katherine was staring at nothing. She ran her fingers through

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her short, coifed hair, disturbing it in a way that made Owen uncomfortable.

“There are so many things to take care of,” she said and he wasn’t sure she knew she was speaking out loud. Her voice was distant, distracted and weak. It startled him to see this assertive woman so frazzled. Again, he remembered it wasn’t just her Alpha who’d been killed. He’d been her cousin too.

He reached across the desk and touched her hand. “Call your mate, Katherine. Tell him to take you home for awhile. If that doctor’s still here, we’ll get her to give you something. Just to take the edge off for awhile. Get some sleep. The pack needs you to be sharp, for them...for the next couple of days anyway.”

Katherine blinked and she looked tired, maybe even a little lost as she focused on Owen’s face. “Who’s going to take care of all this?” she said, and spread her free hand over the papers on Cory’s desk. “You?”

Before he could stop him, Owen’s inner wolf answered for him. “Yes.” Owen hated the sound of his own voice. Hated the admission that he could and would step in to help this pack out.

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He wasn't the leader they needed. "I liked Cory but I didn't know him that long." Owen inhaled slowly. "I wish it hadn't been so but I've got the luxury of being able to step back from your grief, be objective. Your family needs you, and you need to take care of yourself. Now go. Mourn."

"Why would you take this on?"

"Because I can't *not* step up, dammit." He rubbed that permanent furrow between his brows. "As much as I wish it wasn't, taking charge is in my DNA, like it's in yours."

"I wish I was stronger." Katherine tried to smooth the creases in her skirt. "I'm just so tired."

Owen moved around the desk, helped her to her feet and, with his arm around her, walked her to the kitchen. There, she phoned her mate who agreed to pick her up immediately. There'd been nothing for him to do last night after they'd gotten word of Cory's murder. He'd left Piper in his wife's care and had been manning the phones at their place ever since.

Owen took the doctor aside, asked if she had anything for Katherine, and after her mate came

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by and took her home, he separated himself from the other mourners by returning to Cory's office.

Like earlier, it was quiet there. An echo of Cory's scent remained in the room. Owen had to raise the chair just a little to fit. He stared at the phone which had, blessedly, fallen silent. Then he picked up a pen, grabbed a pad of paper and got to work.



"...talk to Tom and find out when Cory's body will be released to the family." Cutler was talking and Owen was taking notes. "Work with Piper and Katherine about who they want to speak at the funeral."

"We can handle that. But what about the pack? They're all..."

"Bumping into each other like lost sheep. So step up and keep the wolves from picking them off."

"That's not my job, Cutler. Nobody gave me the authority and I sure as hell don't want it." He

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lowered his voice and glanced nervously at the open door.

“Tough shit, pal. This is what you were born to do. Nobody’s saying it has to be permanent, or that you have to be right all the time. But you abandon these people now and you might as well run a knife across their throats yourself.”

Owen glared at the phone so hard he was surprised it didn’t explode in flames. Piper’s sister, Abby, wandered by. She smiled hesitantly, walked around the room then sat down across from Owen.

He returned her smile then sighed into the receiver. “Okay,” he said grudgingly. “What are my first priorities?”

“Back up Katherine and Piper. Stay visible and stay with them during the day. Keep any other were from muscling in and taking control.”

“Huh. Sounds exactly like what I’m doing myself.”

“Just keep the status quo in place until after the funeral. After that, the strongest will step up and duke it out for control. Nature will have her way

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and the strong will rule. For now, just make sure the weak don't get steamrolled."

After more notes and after he hung up, Owen looked across at Abby. He realized his head didn't hurt any more and his legs had lost much of their stiffness. His ribs didn't even hurt, as long as he wasn't leaning to the side. Not for the first time in his life, he was grateful weres healed fast. "How you holding up, Abby?" he asked, gentling his voice.

"Better than when I first heard the news. Turns out I can be stronger than I thought... when I need to be." Her smile was sad but it moved Owen nonetheless.

"Would you do something for me, Abby?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. Can you and Clarice stay with Piper for the next couple of nights? It might be a little crowded but—"

"I'm sleeping with my sisters tonight." Piper, the skin around her eyes looking paper thin, stood in the doorway. She stepped up behind Abby and wrapped her arms around her sister's

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shoulders. “We haven’t slept in the same room since we were kids.”

There was a happiness in her voice that tightened Owen’s throat.

Piper continued. “We’ll leave the bedrooms to Cory’s family when they get here. The three of us will take over the basement rec room.”

Abby stood and hugged her sister. When she did, Owen picked up the phone again and started calling pack members, asking if anybody had rollaway cots they’d be willing to loan. Cory’s desk might be a logistical nightmare but the man had kept his computer spreadsheets neat. It was easy for Owen to retrieve the phone numbers he needed.

Two more pack members wandered in. They sat, looked at Owen, and listened to him talk. After he hung up, they asked about arrangements, if there was anything they could do. Introduced themselves. They shared tall tales about Cory. One of the males had gone to grade school with him. They talked about how awkward and tongue-tied the young, large-and-in-charge were had been when he met Piper.

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After they left, Piper started fussing over Owen. She fixed him a plate of sandwiches and salad and brought it to him, and seemed pleased to oblige when he asked if there was any pie left.

More visitors arrived, others were leaving so she left to talk to them.

Owen hung his uniform jacket on the back of Cory's chair and kept the door open. As weres passed by, they stopped to greet him, talk awhile, ask questions. He kept one ear tuned to the conversations outside.

Owen made sure he kept the pack in the loop. Passed on word when it reached him. He told them Katherine and her mate would be picking the boys up at the airport around suppertime. He told them he'd talked to Tom Ray twice and although they had several good leads, no one had been arrested yet.

It was late afternoon when Piper came back in. Owen had brought up Cory's on-line calendar and was making calls, canceling appointments.

Piper sat for awhile then made an effort to organize the papers on the desk. She said, "Cory had a unique filing system...no system at all."

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When she laughed softly, Owen joined her. “He liked you,” she added quite suddenly. “A lot. He hoped you’d stay, but he wouldn’t have wanted to throw you into all this.”

When Owen stood, Piper came around the desk and laid her head on his arm. “In case you hadn’t noticed,” he said, “I’ve got a nose problem. Can’t seem to keep it out of the pack’s business.” The doorbell rang. “You up for more callers or do you want to lie down again?”

She shook her head. “It’s too hard, being up in bed without Cory there. His scent...” She blinked furiously, like she was refusing to cry. “My mate was a strong were. I’ll show them all one last time that I deserved to be the mate of the finest male I’ve ever met.”

Owen hugged her briefly then, as gently as he could, ran the pads of his thumbs beneath her eyes, gathering up the moisture that had gathered there. He walked beside her and when she positioned herself near the front door, Owen stood a little behind her, off to one side. He said nothing, smiled—even laughed when it was appropriate. And he watched and listened,

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sheltering the small, fragile female with his brooding presence.



It was pushing six o'clock and the visitors were coming more frequently. The house started to fill up. All the activity gave Piper an excuse to move around, offer food and drink, run a cloth over her clean kitchen counter with obsessive regularity.

Standing off to one side of the living room, Owen looked up when two familiar scents caught his attention. Tom and Suzanne, dressed in the brown shirts and tan pants of the deputy sheriff's office, walked up to him.

"You look like shit," Suzanne said quietly, and grinned.

"You don't. And doesn't *that* just piss me off to no end." He wasn't kidding. Even with her hair bound up tight, and the bullet-proof vest she wore under her shirt disguising that phenomenal body, she was the loveliest female he'd ever seen. He saw concern in her eyes. Saw her soft, pale skin brighten when she looked at

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him. She looked like a female who liked what was standing in front of her.

Tom just smiled and looked them over, projecting a calm that almost masked the alertness Owen felt humming through the deputy sheriff. Tom glanced up and his smile widened. “Now *there’s* a beautiful female.”

Piper blushed as she stepped up to them. “Don’t lie.”

“I’m not lying.” Without asking, Tom touched her hair, smoothed it back, ran his hands down her arms with a gentleness belied by his size. “You look beautiful, Piper.”

She waved his words away then leaned into him and slid her arms around his back. The room grew quiet, almost reverent as the weres gave their dead Alpha’s mate a moment to nuzzle and be comforted. Piper straightened and wiped her eyes. “Are you three hungry? You must be hungry. Come on. Let me fix you a plate.”

They were guided into the dining room, set into chairs, and hovered over while Piper and her sisters put together supper from the casseroles, dishes and baskets that had been arriving all

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day. More plates appeared and a buffet was put together on the sideboard. As various weres ate, they asked Tom about the investigation, asked Owen about arrangements. Wally Pierce and another deputy sheriff showed up.

“I asked them to keep an eye on the place tonight,” Tom said quietly and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I’m one-hundred percent sure the boys will have the duller evening of their lives. But without them, you’d feel honor-bound to stay. Figured you’d need a break.”

“Thanks,” Owen said just as quietly. Like before, the weres’ discernment caught Owen off guard, although not so much now. Actually, it was starting to feel familiar. He said no to a second helping of dessert and finished off the coffee in his cup.

“Piper,” he said after he’d tracked her down. She was sitting in the kitchen, staring at nothing, surrounded by her sisters and other females. “I’m leaving now but I can stay longer if you’d like.”

“No. I’ll be fine.” When she stood, Owen took her hands, raised them to his lips and kissed her knuckles reverently. “My boys will be here soon.” She saw him, Tom and Suzanne to the door.

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Tom drove them back to his place. They didn't speak during the trip. He took the long way, through town, and rolled the windows down so the few people out at that hour, most coming home from late work, could scent the presence of three strong weres. Familiar weres, there to protect them and who meant them no harm.

Inside Tom's small bungalow, Suzanne grabbed the first shower. While Tom sprawled on the sofa and channel surfed, Owen wandered back to the guest room he'd slept in the night before and started undressing. The pack's scent was all over him. His uniform jacket, his white shirt reeked of them. Not just them but their neediness. Every were he'd met today had been lost. Simply because Owen was strong and there, they'd turned to him for answers, support, confirmation of any and every little detail. He stripped off the shirt and threw it in the corner. The rest of his clothing followed, although he picked up his pants and jacket, put them on hangers. Even in the middle of a mental rebellion, he was still compulsively tidy. Yet another ring of hell he'd descended to.

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Naked, he wandered down the hall, went into the bathroom, closed the toilet seat and sat on it. He grabbed a nearby towel, laid it across his lap and lowered his face into his hands. He didn't even notice when the shower turned off. When the curtain was pulled back and Suzanne stepped out, he finally looked up. She had a towel wrapped around her body and was squeezing the water out of her hair with another. The look on her face wasn't a happy one but it wasn't overly annoyed either.

When she walked past him, heading for the sink, he reached out and slid his fingers around her waist. They might have gotten off to a rocky start but his wolf told him this female would accept him. Especially now, when he was drained and vulnerable.

Suzanne didn't complain when he pulled her to him, shifted his legs so she was standing between them, and lowered his forehead to her chest.

They stayed like that for several moments, her hands on his head, him breathing in her scent, filling himself with it until he couldn't smell anything else. Until there *wasn't* anything

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else. He pursed his lips, kissed the swell of her breast then relaxed when she moved her fingers through his hair and held him to her.

Tom popped his head into the bathroom. From the corner of his eye, Owen saw him watching. It felt peaceful. He felt like he belonged, like he had a right to be there, with them.

“You know,” Tom finally said, breaking the comfortable silence. “If this keeps up, I’m going to need a bigger water heater.”

Chuckling, Owen lifted his head, stood, nuzzled Suzanne’s wet hair then stepped into the shower. When he was finished, Tom showered while Owen dried himself off. Eventually, the three of them, barefoot and dressed in sweats and shirts, sprawled on the sofa and chairs in Tom’s living room. They drank beer, ate popcorn and watched a movie with a lot of car chases and little plot.

When the movie ended, they found themselves wandering towards the bedrooms, and standing awkwardly in the hallway. Owen exhaled slowly. Without asking, he took Suzanne’s hand, jerked his head in Tom’s direction like he expected him to follow, and led them into Tom’s bedroom. He

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pulled back the sheets on the king-sized bed. Like they were pups, they climbed in and began to wrap themselves around each other.

“This doesn’t mean I like you, Wells,” Suzanne whispered as she found a spot for her head in the crook of his arm.

“Same here,” Owen said as he pulled the blankets up over all of them. Despite the darkness, his wolf’s eyes saw Tom curl into Suzanne’s back, wrap an arm around her body and nestle his groin against her ass. “Tom’s okay though.”

They chuckled at that.

“You don’t snore do you?” Suzanne asked. She lifted her head, shot him a look but laid her arm over his chest as she burrowed into his warmth.

“Don’t know.” Owen shrugged lightly. “My reputation as a stud is far reaching and well deserved but this might be the first time I’ve ever actually slept with a woman.”

As if to prove the point, he was asleep almost as soon as he’d finished the sentence.



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When Owen woke up, the digital clock on the dresser told him it was just past midnight. He was on his back. Suzanne and Tom's scents were all around him and made him feel cocooned, content. Her heavy, silky hair was spread across his arm and he felt her hand on his abdomen. His T-shirt was pushed up a little and he stretched to give her more access.

The mattress shifted and he heard movement behind her, heard Tom slide against the sheets, the sound of a gentle kiss. Then another. She turned her head and buried a quiet giggle in the pillow.

Oh yeah. Snuggling with Suzanne was a lot better than arguing with her.

Her hand slid beneath his shirt. She caressed his abdomen then ran her palm over the rise of his pecs.

Always one to oblige the ladies, Owen pulled off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. That tumble of pale hair made it easy to find her in the dark. He took her face in his hands.

Her mouth was as soft as he'd imagined. Full lips parted for him as he nibbled gently. Warm

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breath washed his nose and the sensation made him smile. The fitted T-shirt she was wearing slid against him as it was lifted up and over her head.

“Ever hear of wooing a girl instead of getting straight to business?” Suzanne’s tone was cool as she fired the comment over her shoulder, at Tom.

“I like to think I’m more take-charge than that,” he said, leaned over her and took her nipple into his mouth.

Owen thought it was one of the hottest things he’d ever seen. Especially when she inhaled sharply, when those soft lips of hers parted, when she moaned and trembled instead of berating Tom. Tom’s hand was darker than her skin and his dark head moving over her, the hollowing of his cheeks, the quiet, suckling sounds made Owen’s cock lengthen.

It was perverse as hell but he’d always been a helluva pervert.

Tom hummed and it was the sound of pleasure. “Besides,” he said as he leaned away from her soft mound. His hand caressed her breast, trailed

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across to its mate and squeezed gently. "I've wanted to do this..." He drew her nipple back into his mouth, suckled then released her with a pop. "Ever since you showed up at my station house."

"Hang on." Owen's head came up. "Didn't you two go on a date that first week?"

"A date, yes," Suzanne said. She touched his face, then Tom's. "But that was just dinner. Mostly we talked about the case."

Owen felt his eyebrow rise. In the dimness, Tom must have seen it because when he spoke, he sounded defensive.

"It's not like I didn't put it out there that I was interested. It just felt, I don't know..."

"Like I couldn't get my head away from the investigation," Suzanne supplied, "leastwise enough to even think about sex."

"Uh huh," Owen deadpanned. "Other than the fact there have now been *two* murders, what's changed? I seem to recall none of us had issues during that pack run."

Suzanne grinned and it was just about the

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naughtiest, sexiest thing he'd ever seen. "Key word was pack *run*. It wasn't a mating run but all my wolf could think about was getting you two alone and all to myself."

"Damn," Tom whispered. He kissed her then nuzzled her throat. "You're one hot, greedy female. That turns me on like crazy." His hips rocked forward and the erection tenting his sweat pants rubbed her hip, illustrating his point.

"It *does*?" she teased. "How about you show me how much, cowboy." She sighed with pleasure when Tom palmed one breast and dragged his tongue around the other.

For a moment, Owen simply watched. His wolf's eyes caught every detail. The way Suzanne's ribcage rose as she arched, lifting herself to Tom's mouth. The contentment and heat that came off the other male as he suckled her breast. It was poignant and hot as hell at the same time. His gaze rose when he felt Suzanne's hand on the back of his head, drawing him to her.

Before his mouth touched hers, Owen paused. "How come you like me now?" he whispered, stared at her lips, licked his own.

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Smiling, she stroked the side of his face. "Ask me after we make love, Wells. It'll be a bit of a killjoy if I tell you now."

That sounded reasonable to Owen. Besides, he was fully hard now and the nubbly texture inside the sweat pants was chafing the hell out of his cock head. It wanted to be somewhere soft instead...like inside her.

He kissed her. Gentle grazes of his mouth over hers, pursing just a little. Just enough to capture the texture of her lips then release them, teasing them both. Suzanne sighed and at the same time, Tom switched to her other breast. For some reason, Owen got off on not knowing which male she was sighing for. They were pleasuring her, together. Nothing much else mattered at the moment.

Like before, her breath washed over his nose. Like before, it made him smile. Being touched by something that had been part of her felt so intimate. Her fingers caught his hair, short as it was, and pulled him closer. His peripheral vision saw her other hand moving over Tom's head. She cradled him to her breast, sighed, arched again.

That mouth of hers though, it seemed

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determined to taste him and he parted his lips when her tongue flicked over the seam between them. He'd always admired a woman who could multitask.

Suzanne's tongue was warm, curious and determined. It slid into his mouth like it was sure of its welcome, touched his without apology and wove around it. This time, Owen groaned as he slanted his lips over hers, caught her hair between his fingers and held her still so he could sink into her sweet, salty taste. Her bare shoulder against his, the gentle, suckling sounds Tom made at her breasts made his balls ache with pleasure. She tasted good, smelled even better. The heat coming off her skin was feminine, sweet, and carried that hint of sun-warmed vanilla and cinnamon he remembered from before. When he ran his hand down her arm, her softness made his breath still. Grinning like a demented high school kid who'd just discovered his father's stash of girly magazines, Owen caressed her face, her hair then let his tongue plunder and devour.

She jerked, just a little and Owen looked down her body. Saw one of those lush nipples being pinched between Tom's fingers, saw the male's

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tongue flick over the other, hard. Damn. He had to get himself some of that. But later. Now, Owen drove his tongue back into her mouth, lapping up as much of Suzanne's sweetness as he could then began mouthing a path down her body, aiming for another kind of sweetness.

Navigating around Tom's fervent fondling of her breasts, Owen licked her navel, wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted until her back was bowed off the bed. One flannel-pant clad leg wrapped around his torso. He tongue-fucked her belly with harsh focus, sucked the surrounding skin into his mouth, bit her delicately while she made erotic little sounds of pleasure. The sting of her fingernails against his scalp made his cock even harder, especially when he realized she was taking pains to avoid the spot where he'd been hit. Looking up, Owen met Tom's eyes. Tom's mouth was still on her breast, Owen's was on her belly. They grinned at each other then returned their focus to the woman straining between them.

It was an odd moment for Owen. He felt a connection with Tom that was as unfamiliar as it was comfortable. Maybe Cutler had been right?

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Maybe Tom *was* the soap to his and Suzanne's oil and water. Not being big on emotions, Owen let the moment slide so he could get back to enjoying the beautiful body arching into his.

And she did have a beautiful body. Strong. Flexible. Soft and curvy in all the right places. Speaking of getting straight to business...dipping his head to hide his grin, Owen mouthed the smooth skin below her navel, nudged the waistband of her sleeping pants out of the way, then felt around for the knot holding them in place. When he located it, he felt smugness shape his smile. He didn't yank her pants off though. Owen knew the value of a good tease and he tugged on the tie with a gentle, steady pressure. Propping himself up on one elbow, he lifted his head so he could see her face over Tom. Passion made her eyes shimmer in the pale light and he grew jealous when her teeth tugged on that plump, lower lip of hers. Lifting his arm so she could see, exaggerating the movement, he undid the neat bow holding her pants up. Her hand clutched Tom's head and she trembled. Her other hand cupped Owen's face, traced his jaw. When he kissed her palm, when he nuzzled his mouth into it, she trembled again.

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Blinking, he looked away. The emotion on her face was making him uncomfortable. He wasn't used to women looking at him like that. Wasn't used to *females* looking at him like he was more than just a good lay, more than the sum of his parts. Owen was relieved when Tom blocked his view by kissing a path up her chest, mouthing her chin then kissing her until she moaned softly and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

As delicious as her mouth was, Owen had other oral pleasures in mind. With both hands, he tugged on her flannel pants until they tangled around her legs. Pale, toned thighs tried to lift to him when he grazed them with his fingernails. He stared at her pussy, blew on it gently until she squirmed and twitched.

"Beautiful," he murmured, and pressed a light, lingering kiss to her mound. He wasn't exaggerating. She was bare, except for a narrow pelt of curls pointing the way to her cleft. Her hair was so pale, the only reason he knew it was there was the light angled off it differently than her skin. Lifting his head, he watched her abdomen clench as he slid her pants down and off.

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Owen gritted his teeth to keep from grunting in discomfort. He'd leaned most of his weight on his knees and they wanted no part of it. Even a few hours sleep had tightened them up and they were barking like a son of a gun. A problem, considering the circumstances, but he was nothing if not creative. He could lie back and let her ride him but nobody mounted Owen Wells. Never had. Never would. He'd always been funny that way. Instead, he curled up on his side—the one without the bruise—propped his weight on his elbow and kissed her knees, her thighs. She squirmed and tried to open her legs, which he found incredibly hot *and* rewarding. The pressure of his arm held her legs together. He liked the way she groaned in protest.

That feeble complaint made Tom lift his head. Owen watched the other were track Suzanne's line of sight as she shot an annoyed glare in Owen's direction. Grinning, Tom propped himself up on his own elbow, cupped Suzanne's breast in his hand and leaned back with the air of a man looking forward to a good show.

Hell, Suzanne Young naked was as good as a show could get.

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Using his upper-body strength, Owen hoisted his chest over her thighs and lowered himself slowly. Her legs parted beneath his weight. When she looked at him with those passion-filled eyes, he felt the warmth of her welcome. Knowing he couldn't give that kind of emotion back, knowing it just wasn't in him, Owen looked away and kissed the curve of her hipbone.

Concentrating on the pleasurable task at hand, concentrating on her pleasure, Owen reached back, took hold of her knees and lifted them so high her ass rolled up and off the bed. Groaning as his cock hardened fully, he inhaled, slow and deliberate. Arousal tightened his balls as Suzanne's scent rolled over his tongue. He smelled her heat, her need. She was young, healthy and strong. Tom reacted seconds after Owen did. His mouth opened and his eyes drifted shut. When his hips jerked forward, Tom fumbled with his sweat pants, yanked them down around his knees and grabbed Suzanne's hand. She lifted her head, captured his mouth with hers and wrapped those long, slender fingers around his cock.

Grinning, Owen looked down at her. His

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heartbeat stuttered. Diffused moonlight made the convolutions of her pussy lips shimmer. There was no need to see her though. His nose told him how aroused she was and he followed his nose to the source of her need. He licked her inner thighs, gathering up the sweet cream her body had spilled. Her taste reminded him of hot summer nights just before a thunderstorm—tangy, rich and complex. Owen swore he could feel ozone crackling in the air and the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Reverently, he bathed in her heat and need. Cheeks, lips and tongue slid over her labia, felt her tissues swell and part for him. Lifting his head, he stared at nothing, licked his lips and drank down her taste until he was drunk with it. When the taste faded, he dropped his face back down to her cleft and worked his tongue furiously to gather up more.

She jumped and howled. The sensation was probably too much too soon but Owen tightened his grip on her knees, forcing her to accept his loving. Needing her to. After a moment, her howls turned to sighs and groans as she twitched beneath him.

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When he dragged his tongue over her clit, she jumped again. He felt her thighs tense beneath his forearms, the bite of her fingernails but he held on and let his tongue flick against her. That tiny bundle of nerves quivered then pulsed, leaving what felt like a demented smile on his face. Owen played with her, licked up and down, side to side, learning what she liked best. Beneath his chin, the mouth of her pussy flexed then released. Looking up, he saw her nipples tighten even more, saw the delicate muscles in her forearm clench as she stroked Tom's cock in a rough, uneven rhythm.

Wanting more of her taste, he fucked her with his tongue, drawing out as much of her cream as he could reach. Her body wept more for him.

When he looked up again, he saw Tom's mouth pulling on her nipple, his cheeks working. Her eyes were shut tight and her head rocked sideways into the pillow. Seeing her near the height of her passion was about the most wondrous thing Owen had ever witnessed.

He licked at her with deliberation. Gathered up the juices that had spilled from the mouth of her pussy, gorged on her scent. He ran his tongue

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roughly over her swollen folds. Returning to her clit, he flicked his tongue side to side, fast and hard. Shook his head to add strength to his loving. Yes...she liked that. When she moaned, he had to tamp down his satisfaction. Her thighs began to shake and he could just make out a flush of color spreading across her chest.

The mouth of her pussy flexed, then convulsed. When her clit began to pulse, Suzanne whimpered, cried out, thrashed against the powerful hands holding her in place. When the bucking of her body eased, Owen released her knees and slid up beside her. He grabbed his sweat pants and without fanfare, yanked them down and dropped them onto the floor. She was so relaxed and pliable it took no effort to ease her onto her side, facing away from him. Like it had a mind of its own, his cock nuzzled her ass. Firm and resilient, her backside felt as hot as the rest of her. He snuggled close, lifted her leg up and over his, then took hold of his shaft.

With his chest against her back, he felt her gasp more than he heard it, felt the tremble spilling through her as he rubbed his cockhead against her swollen folds, found the entrance to her core

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and pushed. Rocking forward, balancing his weight on his hip, Owen grunted as he squeezed inside her. He took hold of her leg again, raised it to make more room and pushed. His second grunt was louder than the first. Her pussy was as hot as he'd dreamed. It gripped him, flexed around him, snapped tight behind the cockhead determined to burrow into her softness. Pulling back just a little made the next slide feel even better. She arched her back, making it easier to claim her. Owen kissed her shoulder in thanks, grazed her with his teeth but didn't bite.

No. He would not bite this female. He wouldn't bite any female. A claiming wasn't in the cards for a wolf like him. Better to love her well in thanks for sharing her body, her sweetness, than to bind a female to someone who wouldn't give her the life she deserved.

Shaking his head to clear it, Owen leaned back, bared his teeth as her pussy lips clung to him, then rocked his hips forward. He claimed another inch, laid his hand on her belly, and pulled her into him until he sank in yet another inch.

She rocked into him in a discordant rhythm.

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Looking over her shoulder, he saw Tom's hand on her breast, holding the tip still so he could rasp his teeth over it, lick away the sting with his tongue. Tom's other hand was on her mound, his fingers pressed into her clit, drawing jerky, tight circles over it. She was rocking between the two males, gasping with pleasure.

With a grunt, Owen drove his hips forward. He was deep inside her now, feeling tight rings of muscle grip him, ripple around him. The pleasure was so intense it almost hurt. With human women, he always used a condom. Always. But with a female...and he could hardly remember the last time he'd been with a female...there was no need. Weres didn't harbor most human diseases, let alone sexually transmitted ones. And if a female was in heat, his nose would tell him. He'd forgotten how exquisite it felt to fuck without a condom, to feel all that slick heat wrapped around him, feel every ripple and tight slide, skin against skin. Fucking with a condom was like typing with gloves on. It got the job done, but...

Beneath his hand, the muscles in her belly clenched as she rolled between him and Tom.

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Rough and un-feminine knuckles scraped the underside of his cock and Owen froze.

Holy hell and back. No guy had ever touched his dick before. Owen looked over Suzanne's shoulder, saw the furrow between Tom's closed eyes, saw the male's lips stretched around her breast as his cheeks hollowed. Nope, Owen was pretty sure the touch was accidental. Maybe inevitable, considering their proximity. The fingers rubbing Suzanne's clit were jerking around some, in counterpoint to her hand riding Tom's cock.

Owen saw her wrist flex like she was tightening her grip. With a hiss and wearing a savage grin, Tom let go of her nipple, curled into her like his abdominals had clenched, and again, Owen felt the rub and press of the backs of Tom's fingers.

It made him uncomfortable and, in a weird, forbidden way, turned him on too. Huh. Maybe he wasn't as uncomfortable as he thought. Maybe Tom *was* the soap that bound them together. With his hips still rocking and his rod still squeezing into that wet slice of heaven that was Deputy Sheriff Suzanne Young, Owen started to think he wouldn't mind sharing the feeling.

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After all, indulging in the luxury of her pussy while Tom was making do with a hand job was just...selfish.

Leaning forward, Owen kissed the shell of her ear, licked it long and slow until she trembled and leaned into him. He withdrew from her sheath until just the head of his cock was inside, pumped into her with shallow, teasing strokes, held her hip in place when she tried to rock back into him. When she whimpered, he nuzzled her again.

“I want your ass.”

Suzanne stiffened against him. He might just have shocked the hell out of her but, no, that sweet pussy juice suddenly trickling over his balls told him she was definitely intrigued. When Tom's head came up into Owen's field of vision, he saw the glint of lust in the other male's eyes. An un-PC grin quirked up the corners of Tom's mouth.

To emphasize his point, Owen squeezed Suzanne's backside then sank his pole into her pussy slow enough to make her squirm. He hadn't asked her if she'd care to indulge in anal sex with him. That wasn't Owen's style. He

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took charge no matter where he was or what he was doing. It wasn't always a good thing but he couldn't stop being who he was any more than he could change his eye color.

"You got any lube?" Owen asked Tom.

Tom jerked his head in the direction of the night table behind Owen. "Top drawer," Tom said with undisguised lechery. Still peering over Suzanne's shoulder, he watched Owen grease his pole, then apply liberal dabs to the head. Obliging, Tom took hold of Suzanne's leg, angled it up so high it hovered over her shoulder. After he tucked her knee into the crook of his arm, he reached behind her to grip her butt cheek and tug until she was fully exposed.

"Thanks," Owen said as he smeared lube over her ass, teased her opening by rimming it with his forefinger then pushed gently.

"Any time, buddy. Any time." Tom stopped talking when he leaned over Suzanne and sank his tongue into her mouth.

Still levered up on one elbow, Owen paused as he watched them kiss, listened to the muffled, desperate sounds they made, felt her much

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smaller body tense then tremble as she shifted her weight forward and back.

He pushed his finger in a little deeper, paused, then withdrew. "Oh yeah, baby," he growled. "Your pussy's pure heaven but this ass of yours, hmm..." Letting his voice trail off, he kissed her shoulder, dragged the smooth front of his teeth across her. "You're going to make me insane." Leaning back again, he watched his finger move in her. It would have been better with the lights on but he could still see well enough. Maybe, sometime, they could do this again in daylight. The thought of the three of them being together again was so appealing, Owen felt his unease rise like before. That didn't stop him from enjoying the moment though. He added a second finger to the first, nudged Tom's hand so the other were would spread her ass more, and turned his wrist slowly as he sank into her.

Suzanne hissed against Tom's mouth at the same time as she started trembling. Owen stopped, giving her time to protest. She didn't. Instead, she rolled her hips gently, like she was making herself more comfortable. When she moved, her ass shifted around his fingers, gripped

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tighter then eased. He started trembling right along with her. Again, he kissed her shoulder, felt the subtle rocking of her torso against his chest as she moved between him and Tom. Smelled the heat of her arousal bleeding from her pores.

So hard now he ached, Owen veed his fingers, stretched her carefully but deliberately, moved his mouth over the back of her neck and with long, gentle strokes, licked the top of her spine. She shook and moaned into Tom's mouth.

Gradually, that strong ring of muscles around his fingers relaxed. He was able to push deeper, move faster. The taste of her skin almost made him drunk and he kissed her—full, open presses of his mouth to her back—and licked so he could drink down the fine sheen of sweat that was making her body shine in the moonlight.

“Please,” she murmured against Tom's lips.

That one word was so loaded with need and frustration, Owen couldn't bear to keep her waiting any longer. He eased his fingers out of her, took hold of his cock, seated the head against her back opening and pushed.

Suzanne gasped. A sharp inhalation then a

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desperate, tense mewling. She didn't rebuke him though. She didn't try to scurry away. Instead, she trembled and leaned back into him, ever so slightly. Again, Owen thought she was adjusting her position so his penetration would be smoother, maybe even more comfortable.

All he knew was her ass was the tightest, hottest vice he'd ever sunk into. He snarled, scraped her shoulder with his teeth when that tight, wicked ring of muscle stretched just enough for the head of his cock to force itself inside her. Her ass bore down on him, right behind the flared head, holding him inside her with a determination that made him wince.

Those muscles of her might be squeezing the hell out of him but he liked it, just fine. When he grunted again, he felt her butt cheek shift. Looking down, he saw Tom's darker fingers dig into her flesh. The other male spread her even more.

He wanted to say thanks but the shifting of her hot flesh around him allowed him only a groan of need.

For a moment, all Owen could do was pant. The soft skin on her shoulder grew moist from

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his breath. She shivered and it communicated so much pleasure he kissed her reverently. But like always, he pushed the unfamiliar tenderness aside, laid his hand on her hip and pressed into her.

It wasn't a smooth slide. It was jerky as he fought against the tightness that seemed determined to force him back out. But that was just Suzanne's body communicating its vulnerability and he took her slow and careful. Push. Pause. Retreat. When he rolled his hips to the side, ever so slightly, she made a quiet, erotic sound that was more rumble than gasp. When he pulled on her hip, pulling her into him, that tight, round ass of hers tipped back like she was hungry for more.

Oh yeah. He had no problem obliging the lady. But first, Owen leaned away from her, dragging his cock out of her with a slow, nasty tease until only the head remained wedged inside her. His wolf growled with satisfaction when the female moaned, reached behind her and dug her fingers into his waist. Owen paused, counted his heartbeats until he reached five, then eased his rod back into her.

Slowly, mastering his strength, Owen slid back

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and forth inside her well-lubricated passage. The heat made him crazy with lust. The tug of that strong ring of muscle on his shaft made him snarl every time he pulled back. When his pubes were finally crushed against her butt, he sighed and dropped his head on the pillow behind hers.

He still held her hip, keeping her close, keeping himself buried inside her. For a moment, the haze of his lust cleared. He felt connected to her, and not just because his dick was buried in her ass. Pursing his lips, he breathed a kiss to her hair. Suzanne's body rocked subtly and Owen knew it was in time with Tom's finger moving over her clit, the way the other male's tongue moved in her mouth. Slowly, buying himself another few seconds of this odd, aching intimacy, Owen lifted his hand off her hip and touched her breast. He cupped the weight of it, squeezed gently, then simply held her. The hairs on Tom's chest, when they rubbed his knuckles, weren't coarse. They were fine and carried the warmth of the other were's body.

Shaking his head, Owen slid his hand back down Suzanne's body, took hold of her hip and gritted his teeth as he slid away from her. They

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were here to fuck, maybe recoup a little, not get tied up in stupid, maudlin thoughts. Still moving carefully, trying to judge her readiness, he filled her ass, retreated, then filled her again until the only thing he could think of, the only thing he could feel was the feminine power wrapped around his cock, riding his pleasure into madness.

When he took hold of her knee, lifted it out of the crook of Tom's arm, Tom hoisted himself up and peered at him in the gloom. There was a furrow between the other male's eyes and Owen could smell his confusion, a hint of anger too, like Tom was thinking he'd changed the deal with regards to sharing. That furrow eased when Owen laid Suzanne's leg over Tom's hip then slid it up until it hooked over the male's waist.

Owen pressed into Suzanne with more force than before and let her body rock into Tom's.

"I'm all for sharing the wealth," Owen rasped and kept his gaze on Tom's as he dipped his head, exposed his teeth and dragged them carefully over Suzanne's shoulder. The big deputy sheriff didn't need a second invitation. Owen heard

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Tom's body slide across the sheets, felt Suzanne jerk as Tom pressed into her.

She squirmed hard, but froze when Owen settled his teeth over the back of her neck.

He heard her clear her throat. "I've never done this before." Her voice was quiet and it wavered, although the anxiety he smelled around her wasn't full blown.

"Neither have I," Tom said and his voice was deeper than usual.

Owen saw the other male's forearm move like he was stroking Suzanne's face.

Tom continued. "But you trust us. And we will be gentle."

"Well," Owen whispered, "not *too* gentle." With a soft growl, he nipped her neck then licked away the sting with long, steady sweeps of his tongue. "Just gentle enough."

Tom chuckled. "Yeah. Gentle enough."

Between them, Suzanne moaned quietly. Owen felt her arch and was pretty sure Tom's mouth was on her breast again. He got a weird sense of satisfaction as the other were touched

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her. He also realized she'd stopped squirming and that her hips were moving back and forth, teasing his cock until he ached. The mattress shifted a little as Tom pressed into her.

Owen heard her gasp a second before he felt a sliding pressure up the back of his shaft. Sweet fuck...he could actually feel Tom's cockhead pushing into her, through the wall that separated pussy from ass. Too weirded out to move, Owen held his breath as Tom slid against his length like a thick thumb rubbing over him. Too soon, the shocking pressure stopped. Suzanne twitched and groaned. It was the most erotic thing he'd ever heard. He and Tom both held still, held her tight and safe between them as her much smaller body tensed, impaled on both of them. Feeling like his cock was compressed in the most beautiful vice, Owen breathed hard and waited.

She trembled then, gradually, the tension in her body eased. The grip on his pole eased too, like she'd adjusted to having the two of them inside her.

"Damn weres," she grouched.

Wondering what she was complaining about,

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Owen heard her slap Tom's ass before she reached back and slapped his.

"Fuck me, dammit."

"Yes, ma'am," they drawled at the same time and withdrew.

Owen took the lead like he did in everything else. Pushing back into her slowly, he held her steady by gripping her hip with one hand. He slid the other beneath her neck and anchored it around her chest. He stroked her shoulder then kissed it softly. When he withdrew, Tom filled her.

"Damn," the other male groaned. "I can feel it."

Owen was pretty sure Tom wasn't just talking about those mind-blowing rings of muscle in Suzanne's pussy. He hid his lust-driven grin in her hair then worked his shaft back into her.

The rhythm came easy enough. Maybe out of self preservation, Suzanne kept still for the most part, although those quiet moans, punctuated by gasps of pleasure sure did things for a male's ego. He and Tom filled her in turn, took her a little faster when she started digging her fingernails

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into them, took her a little harder when she started to sweat.

Peering over her body, Owen watched Tom's hand slide down her thigh until it reached her hip. His fingers pressed down on Owen's for a moment, flexed hard then fumbled like they were trying to find a good place to grip as he drove into her. Owen shook his head, trying to stave off the hunger drawing his balls up tight and hard. He needed to come, soon; however, he'd always lived by the creed of ladies first.

Sliding his hand forward, he followed that thin, silky pelt of hair to her cleft, stroked her swollen pussy then, with his forefinger, began drawing tight circles around her clit.

Suzanne bucked into him, snarled so authoritatively it made his balls ache, then drove her head back into his shoulder and cried out.

Damn but he loved a vocal woman.

It was then he felt the hand grabbing onto his hip. Big, heavy fingers held him with far more strength than Suzanne was capable of. The angle of the grip was wrong too. With the head of his cock just inside her ass, Owen paused. Tom's

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knee jerked against his and Owen knew the other male's shaft was buried in her pussy. Using the torque of his grip on Owen's hip, Tom held himself there and groaned. Owen's big head had an instinctive urge to punch Tom in the mouth. But neither his little head nor his wolf protested. It accepted the intimacy, maybe even liked it. Since puberty, when Owen had been old enough to change and recognize his wolf as a separate being, his wolf had never wanted much intimacy. It got what it needed from sex. The three of them, together, pleased it in ways Owen knew surprised it.

A horndog at heart, Owen shrugged off his homophobic reaction and decided to go with the flow. For now. He could deal with these touchy-feely issues later. Or not. For now, he wanted to fuck.

With his hand anchoring Suzanne against him and Tom's hand sandwiching the three of them together, Owen began to rock his hips hard. He put some of his strength into each thrust, shoving that sweet smelling, feminine body wrapped around his cock, into Tom's. Felt the other were's rod rub his, knew from Tom's snarls and the way

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he tightened his hold on Owen's hip, that Tom felt it too.

Even the way the other male touched him was a revelation. Women didn't have the strength to grip that hard. Most of them lacked the courage to, although he suspected Suzanne could twist his dick until he came...under the right circumstances. In his experience, women were gentle when it came to sex. Their soft hands caressed and stroked until the pleasure stripped his senses. That was great and all but that sweaty, hard hold of Tom's was making the base of his spine tingle.

How fucked up was that?

Fucked up enough that Owen's hips started rocking faster.

"Oh yeah. Oh god." Tom was moaning now, deep and rough. Each thrust into Suzanne's body made Owen shiver with pleasure.

Suzanne apparently liked it even better because she was shaking and making sexy little mewling sounds. She gripped his forearm hard and her free hand clamped over his—the one

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over her mound—and forced him to rub her clit harder.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he whispered near her ear. When her ass bore down on him, when he felt the contractions of her orgasm through the thin wall that separated him from her pussy, he gritted his teeth, humped her like a mad dog and made himself think about stripping down an M16 to keep from coming too soon.

Holding her tight as she tensed, curled, cried out, Owen felt his reserve defrost...a little. Whatever else she might be, when it came to lovemaking, Suzanne was uninhibited, generous and honey sweet.

Tom grunted, drove into her and stayed deep. His pubes crushed Owen’s fingers so he withdrew them, but only so he could tug Suzanne’s labia open and let the other were’s pubic bone rub her clit. Her reaction blew him away. She shrieked—actually shrieked and her hip flexor tightened so much Owen knew she had to be digging her heel into Tom’s back and pulling him into her with all the strength she possessed.

The pulses of her orgasm dragged on until her shriek rose in pitch, then was cut off with a

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shuddering gasp. Owen's reason slipped when he felt Tom's rod swell, get even harder, then felt the throbbing of the other male's release.

"Fuck," Owen groaned, held on tight and fucked them both as hard as he could. Suzanne whimpered but he was in no shape to stop now. He snarled and felt the animal in him rise as Tom shot his seed deep in the female. His lover...his *lovers* groaned one more time then the tension in their bodies eased.

Not for Owen. Still thrusting hard, he planted his shaft deep, obeying his instinct to come when he was as far inside her as possible, and let loose his control. The tingling at the base of his spine migrated to the base of his balls, drew them up hard and tight. His rod swelled until the skin around the head of his cock hurt. He felt like he'd turned to steel, like every nerve ending was riding an adrenaline-shot of sensitivity. Tom's cock, still buried in Suzanne, flexed and that was all it took to throw Owen over the edge.

Snarling, growling with the exquisite agony of it, Owen came. He lost the ability to think, leaving him a base, sexual being. Every sense was heightened. He smelled her rich, sweet cream,

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tasted it in the air, felt it smearing his balls. Heard the pounding of her heart, saw her back bow so she could capture more of him. He gave her what she needed even as the first, painful throb made his nuts draw up so tight they were practically inside him, then the muscular spasms that heralded the shivery ecstasy of his seed shooting up and out of him. Holding her tight, Owen let his body pay its tribute to her until the mindless throbbing faded.

One by one, his muscle groups relaxed. He let go of her pussy and gently petted her mound. When she sighed and rolled her head back into his shoulder, he smiled. He heard kissing...soft, moist sounds. Felt her body roll lightly, her back arch just a little and liked the quiet sound she made after Tom's hand left his hip and settled on what was probably her breast.

As his cock deflated, he eased out of her, rolled away and, despite his complaining knees, got out of bed. Heading to the bathroom, Owen told himself it was best to leave the post-coital cuddling to guys like Tom. He told himself it was because he just wasn't very good at it. Letting the water run until it was warm, he wet a cloth and

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ran it over his rod and sac. It wasn't until he was again standing beside the bed, a fresh cloth and towel in his hands, that Owen realized he'd never taken the time to bathe his partner after sex.

Sure he liked to watch but he'd never felt a pull to help. Until now. Suzanne turned her head and gave him a lazy, sated smile as he smoothed the cloth across her back, down her arm. She sighed with pleasure when he ran it between her legs.

Tom kissed her mouth gently then eased her knee up to make it easier for Owen to clean her. He snagged the cloth when Owen was done so he could run it over himself.

Tending to the two of them, even in that small way, satisfied something inside Owen. But, like so many things recently, Owen pushed the feeling away. He watched Tom carry the cloth and towel back to the bathroom, heard the water run then the toilet flush. When the other were returned, they both climbed back into bed.

"So why do you like me now?" Owen asked quietly. He brushed Suzanne's hair away from her face.

She sighed and it didn't sound happy. "Figures

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you'd remember that." When she stretched out on her back and lifted her arms, her breasts swayed enticingly.

To Owen, the movement seemed wholly unconscious. Simply more of the banked sensuality resting at the core of her being.

"You're a strong were. One of the strongest I've ever met." She sighed again. "I love your spirit, your energy. Hell, that ass of yours alone makes me wet every time I get a look at it."

Owen chuckled self-consciously.

"My wolf wants a male like you. It's unwilling to settle for less." She glanced at him shyly. "Guess that makes me a greedy bitch."

Owen shrugged non-committally.

"But you've got wanderlust written all over you, Owen Wells," she added and regret echoed in her voice. "My wolf might want you, might want to lick you all over, but you're not what I need."

"Wow." He exhaled. "That was blunt."

"But honest," Tom added quietly. He nuzzled Suzanne's cheek then looked at Owen. The

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expression on Tom's face communicated the same regret Suzanne's voice had. Now Owen knew why she'd tried so hard to push him away.

Suzanne shivered and Owen was quick to pull the blankets up over her. Up over all of them. This was temporary. He'd accepted that. So, apparently, had they. Hell, he'd established his transience from the get go. This just made him determined to enjoy the peace and happiness while it lasted. He pulled her into his warmth, arranged a pillow for her head, and when Tom curled into her other side, Owen accepted the odd ties between the three of them with drowsy contentment.



The sound of the shower running woke him. He stretched, hissed when his knees complained, then flexed them gingerly. Suzanne mumbled, scratched the tip of her nose and snuggled closer, pressing her breasts into his ribs in a way that made his morning wood bounce like the happy camper it was. Lifting his head, he confirmed that the far side of the bed was empty. Good thing

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too because if anybody besides Tom was taking a shower, it would be a helluva interruption.

Easing his body away from Suzanne's, he rolled her onto her stomach, eased her legs apart and ran his fingertips over her damp slit.

Hot damn but she felt good. Soft, warm, and those sexy as hell sounds coming from inside her chest made his inner wolf sit up and pant. Propping his head up on one hand, he used the other to trace her folds, tug gently, graze her clit then ease inside her pussy. Her thighs flexed and that sweet, round ass of hers lifted to him. He kissed each cheek in turn then used his thumb to fuck her slow and gentle while his fingertips stroked her swelling bud.

The sounds she was making became more focused. Soon, her head came off the pillow. She looked at him and the morning sky shone back at him in those beautiful, blue eyes. He kissed her shoulder, her mouth, drew on her lower lip and, real gentle, scraped his teeth over it. When she shivered, he grinned like a smug son of a bitch.

His knees hurt less than they had last night but even if they hadn't, he still would have knelt between her legs and eased her hips into

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the air. She didn't complain. Instead, she rolled her torso, drawing his eye to the smooth, pale expanse of her back, the deep indent of her waist. That was where he took hold of her and pulled until his cock nuzzled her pussy. She was warm and soft and Owen tried to figure out how he'd deserved such a perfect slice of heaven. Wet and open, she was beautiful and scented like a were's wet dream come true. Vanilla. Cinnamon. Sun-warmed skin. Tom.

Shaking his head and grinning, Owen fit the head of his cock to her. He used it to tease her slit, held onto the base so he could rub her clit, over and over. When she squirmed, when she shot him an impatient look over her shoulder and tipped her hips up to him, Owen growled and squeezed the head inside her.

She grunted like his size caught her off guard and didn't that do great things for his ego. With one hand still on her waist, he let the other caress her back, spread over her stomach then drift between her legs so he could draw gentle circles over her pleasure button. When she bucked then settled into his touch, he groaned and focused on muscling his way into that tight, hot pussy of

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hers. Rings of muscle layered around him, flexed, gripped, parted. Moisture teased his sensitive glans and he felt his lips part in a primal grin. He watched his shaft sink into her, pause, come out glistening with her cream, press forward again. Saw the mouth of her sheath stretch around him, hold him tight, tug him closer.

When he smelled her rising need, he snarled.

The delicate muscles in her back flexed as she lifted her torso off the bed. Braced on all fours, she angled into him. The unbearably soft thighs bracketing his coarse ones moved with subtle but unmistakable need. When he was finally buried in her as deep as he could go, Owen sighed, leaned forward so he could kiss her shoulder, then straightened. Wrapping his fingers around the strong, feminine curve of her hipbones, he began thrusting. In. Out. Slow and careful at first then as the heady wetness inside her began to spill out and smear his groin, he spread his legs, changed the angle of penetration, growled softly when she gasped in pleasure.

He was barely aware of the shower turning off, quiet and off-key humming coming from the bathroom.

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Still fucking her gently, relishing the slow build of need, he let go of her waist to hold her breast. It swayed, keeping time with his thrusts. The weight settled into his palm as her nipple rocked into his hand. He sighed with contentment and was pretty sure she did too.

The scent of soap and water brought his head around. Tom was standing in the doorway, a towel draped around his hips, droplets of water making the hair on his chest glisten. Grinning like a demented fool, Tom dropped the towel and climbed onto the bed.

“I can always take another shower,” he said and knelt in front of Suzanne. He touched her face, combed her hair back, gathered it up in one hand and used the other to guide his stiffening rod to her mouth.

Owen leaned to the side so he could watch.

Taking care not to jolt her, he continued to fuck her in a steady, sweet as hell rhythm while she tongued Tom’s growing erection. She suckled the tip, hollowed her cheeks, pulled back and held the flared head between her teeth.

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Tom hissed, looked down at her with flaming adoration, and tightened his grip on her hair.

Unlike last night, they let her do the work. Her small, strong body rocked back and forth. Her pussy gobbled up Owen's cock then her mouth did the same to Tom's. The two males moaned in appreciation and when she hummed, Tom's hips jerked forward and he bared his teeth in obvious pleasure.

Owen could practically feel her sweet mouth himself.

Gradually, she started rocking faster. Tom was breathing hard and Owen couldn't stop himself from groaning. Being inside Suzanne, being here, with her and Tom in this safe, quiet little house felt like a tonic. Arousal had never been this encompassing and he tightened his hold on her hips, afraid she might slip away and ashamed for being so needy.

He shook himself mentally and quit the drama-queen episode in his head. The sounds of loving—the sounds his lovers made brought him back to the moment, to the erotic high they were sharing. A corner of his mouth quirked up when Tom trembled. The other male's abdominals

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punched out as he groaned. Suzanne had wrapped her hand around the base of Tom's shaft and was working it in tandem with her mouth.

Niiice.

Just the sight of it got his hips to rocking. Taking control of the cadence of their lovemaking, he drove his rod into her, angled his body so the head rubbed the front of her sheath on the out-stroke. Oh yeah. So nice.

That sweet pussy of hers felt even hotter now and it was definitely wetter. Throwing back his head, he growled his pleasure to the rising sun. He held on tight and rode her hard when her thighs began to tremble. She paused in her loving of Tom's cock. Her shoulders tensed and her head dropped. Owen rubbed her clit, hard, and groaned when her core began to throb and squeeze.

Grunting, he was barely able to hold back his own release. The woman was pure dynamite anytime but when she came? It was like holding a thermal reaction between your hands. She cried out, trembled some more and Owen continued to drive his cock into her, rub her clit...anything

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to please her, meet her need, give her what she asked him for without words.

When the pulses faded, her shoulders straightened and she grabbed onto Tom's cock so hard the other male hissed and rocked on his knees. But if that weird grin on his face was any indication, he liked what the lovely deputy sheriff was doing to his rod, just fine. Owen kept looking at Tom's mouth. At the shape, the firm line of it that didn't look hard. It took a moment for Owen to realize Tom was staring back at him. Sweat dripped down Owen's temple when he felt the other male's gaze on his own mouth. When he looked up at Owen's eyes, Owen gritted his teeth against the electric sensation gathering at the base of his spine, in his balls. Tom's stare, blue like his, swept over Owen's mouth and he didn't even have time to gasp before he came.

Groaning, holding Suzanne hard, he drove into her when the pleasure erupted like fire needles in his brain. His balls drew up tight and hard and spasmed as he released into her. The sounds Tom made as he came only drove Owen's lust. His ecstasy echoed in the other male's grunts, cries, tearing breaths. The powerful contractions that

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drove his seed into Suzanne made Owen ache but that only intensified the pleasure.

Finally, spent, he fell forward. Catching his weight on his hands at the last minute, he kept from crushing her. He laid his cheek on her sweaty shoulder, breathed in the scent of her repleteness and her hair, and liked the warm feeling he got when the rise and fall of his chest nudged her back.

He could feel the movement of her arm. Small movements, accompanied by quiet, gentling sounds reverberating inside her. He heard her swallow, then heard her swallow again. Above them, Tom was making the same, satisfied noises until it almost sounded like he was humming.

The scent of contentment settled around Owen. It came from Suzanne and Tom but instead of relaxing him, it made him edgy. He had no frame of reference for this kind of intimacy. It was powerful, threatening to overwhelm him. Retreating, Owen kissed her shoulder again, told her how beautiful she was, slid his cock out of her and ignored the pain in his knees as he hurried off to shower.

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Chapter Ten

Rubbing his forearm across the mirror, Owen cleared a spot to watch himself shave. He also made the spot big enough so he could watch Suzanne step out of the shower behind him, and rub a towel over her pink, luminescent skin.

Damp toothbrush in hand, Tom came back in from the kitchen. Since Owen was using the sink, there was no space for Tom. Owen did however step to the side so Tom could put his toothbrush and paste away.

Apparently one to oblige the ladies himself, Tom walked up to Suzanne, used her towel to rub her back then slid his hands forward to cup her breasts.

Owen had to temper his grin before he shaved his lower lip off. After his own shower, that feeling of contentment had returned and it hadn't gone away. He hadn't felt this sense of belonging since he'd been a kid, living in his mother's home. After rinsing his disposable razor off under the water, he used his free hand to pull his cheek taut

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and started in around his jaw. They might not be a pack but they almost felt like a subset of one. Kind of like family.

He shook his head, rinsed his razor again, and cleaned up the edges of his still regulation-short sideburns. Suzanne giggled quietly, turned in Tom's arms and stroked the other male's heavy pecs. Owen grinned into the mirror as he watched their reflection.

A pack within a pack. He dwelled some on the concept as he let the water out of the sink and ran a cloth over his face, removing the last of the shaving cream.

"A pack within a pack," he murmured and was surprised to hear the words out loud.

Tom and Suzanne's reflections stopped moving. Their heads turned until they were looking at him. He watched them thoughtfully as he dried his face.

"That's what we haven't been looking for," Owen said. He hung up the towel, leaned his butt against the counter and crossed his arms over his bare chest. "A pack within a pack."

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“Explain,” Tom said just as quietly. His head tipped to one side.

“A covert alliance. A pack within a pack.” Owen tightened the towel wrapped around his hips. “I figure we’re looking for four males, maybe more. They’re tough enough to lay a beating on me, although I fought them off.”

“Maybe they let up because they wanted you to run?” Suzanne offered. That opinion had been voiced before and it was still sound.

“That could be,” Owen acknowledged. “It could have been a strategic retreat but the tide of the fight was turning. I think they expected those dog trainers to incapacitate me.”

Tom made a humming sound in his throat. “About those citronella-spray boxes. I checked on-line and that brand sells for one-hundred-forty bucks each. Somebody was rich enough to throw a couple thousand dollars worth of sprayers at you.”

“Or maybe a bunch of guys pitched in,” Suzanne added thoughtfully.

Both he and Tom nodded slowly.

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“You know,” Tom said, “this is starting to feel like rogue males poking around the periphery of an established pack.”

Suzanne jumped in. “Looking for weaknesses. *Creating* weaknesses within the pack.”

“Agreed. I was a kid last time I was a member of a pack,” Owen said, “but some things you just feel in your bones.”

“Are your bones talking, Owen?” Tom asked.

“Yeah. They’re tuning up like a symphony orchestra.” He ran his fingers over his damp hair. “I’m not going to assume I’m right though and dismiss any other scenarios. Too much depends on ferreting these guys out.”



Leaning back from Piper’s dining table, Owen ran a napkin around his mouth. “Thank you, Abby,” he said to Piper’s sister as she removed his plate, then Suzanne’s.

Tom was still working his way through a second helping of egg pie.

Piper’s other sister, Clarice, came in with a

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coffeepot, refilled their cups, and set a plate of fresh toast on the table. Through the connecting door, Owen could hear Piper talking to someone about the crocuses outside just coming into bloom. She sounded tired. More than anything, he wished her mate was with them. That verve she'd always worn like an aura had all but disappeared.

Shaking his head in frustration, he helped himself to another piece of toast. Geoff and Ty Amos had been quiet throughout breakfast. They'd sat across the table from each other in dull stupors, eating whatever was put in front of them without seeming to pay much attention to anything but the blank space on the tablecloth between them.

Katherine Clark and her mate, Boyd, rounded out their desolate group. Owen had never felt the Alpha's absence this clearly.

Refusing to sigh out loud, he set his napkin aside. "We should go," he said, nodding in Suzanne and Tom's direction. "I'll head into the community center and—"

"No," Katherine interrupted with more firmness than he'd heard from anyone since

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arriving. “Nothing’s been decided and don’t assume I’m giving you an endorsement, but there’s a lot of work that needs doing here.”

Her tone reminded Owen forcibly that being top bitch wasn’t all about physical strength. It was that inborn ability to lead, take charge like you had the biggest balls in the room. She straightened her back and ran a hand over her short, styled, graying hair.

Katherine continued. “The pack’s been cut to the heart and we’re floundering.” Her voice had pulled everyone at the table away from their self-absorption. Even Geoff and Ty looked up at her, blinked, and sat up a little taller. She pointed at Owen and he couldn’t help but admire how this sixty-something female could pin him with a look. “You’ve got what it takes to step in, keep things going, keep us grounded while we mourn.” She swallowed, hard, but her voice didn’t falter. “Until somebody qualified shows up, you’re doing the job.”

When she stood, her mate got to his feet beside her. He leaned his forehead against hers, took her hand and led her out of the room.

Owen looked around at the faces watching

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him expectantly. Katherine hadn't used the words Interim Alpha but he was pretty clear that's what she'd meant. The hurt was too raw, too recent for anybody to say the words that would officially replace Cory as their leader. Nodding quietly, he finished his toast, took a sip of his coffee then turned to Ty.

Although taller, Ty Amos was the younger of the two brothers.

"You did all these?" Owen asked as he glanced at the framed paintings on the walls.

Ty nodded jerkily. He also had that blank, timid look lesser pack members showed higher ranking ones. Owen flashed his best friendly-guy smile. "When I told your dad I liked that one best," he said, pointing to a watercolor of a mountain valley, "he laughed his ass off at me."

The corners of Ty's mouth twitched upward. "Most people do. Like it best," he qualified. He looked over at his brother like he was looking for support then glanced around the table. His mouth, so like Piper's, moved again like he wanted to grin. "I did that when I was six."

Owen chuckled and so did everybody else.

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“Guess my red neck is showing. I’ve got no eye for anything more sophisticated.”

“Nah. It’s not so much that,” Ty offered timidly, although his voice firmed as his enthusiasm for the topic rose. “Some people just like pretty pictures. They’re relaxing. They don’t challenge you. Conceptual art is harder to get. It screams in your face and makes you work for it... understanding what it means, that is.”

Owen nodded sagely. “I don’t have a clue what that means.” He laughed at himself and so did everybody else at the table. “But maybe while you’re here, you’ll explain it some more. Cory told me you were given a full scholarship to the University of Arizona. About how many applicants get accepted into the Fine Arts program there each year?”

As he drew Ty out on what was obviously an impressive talent, he studied the young were’s features. Ty was tall like his Aunt Katherine and slim. His hands moved expressively as he talked, his face—a handsome combination of Cory and Piper’s features—started to light up.

His brother, Geoff, was shorter and far more muscular. He resembled Cory so much it was

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spooky. When Owen asked him about studying pharmacy, Geoff admitted he'd always had a good memory and a head for science. He also played intramural football and liked the weather in Tucson because they could play the entire school year.

"Okay," Geoff said, "I admit it's not actually fair to play against non-weres but it's a helluva rush bringing down some of those big boys." He might look like his father but Geoff obviously had his mother's wry humor.

Owen caught Tom checking his watch and stood up as soon as it was polite to. "Guess you two need to get to the station," he said and walked Tom and Suzanne to the front door. They stood there for a moment, listening to the quiet hum of conversation coming from various parts of the house. Suzanne leaned into him and Tom leaned into her. Owen didn't understand his need to nuzzle them but they obviously shared it. After a moment they stepped back, told him they'd pick him up around supertime, and left.

Squaring his shoulders, Owen lifted his chin and stepped into Cory's office. The room still carried Cory's scent, only now it was overlaid with

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his. Settling his jacket over the back of the chair, Owen settled in, powered up the computer and picked up the phone when it started ringing.



Hours later, Owen checked the spreadsheet he'd created against the various printouts he'd made of the pack records. He'd centralized notes about upcoming events like anniversaries, birthdays, weddings and expected births, entered everything on a calendar, with reminders, and was about to e-mail it to the pack hierarchy. Continuity was important. The exercise also confirmed there were no new pack members, only a few journal entries about weres, like the junior hockey team members, who'd passed through town.

Sitting back in Cory's leather chair, Owen rubbed his forehead. "Why now?" he whispered to nobody. If a group within the pack was maneuvering for control, what could have set them off? From what he'd seen, this group was stable. There was little discontent with the hierarchy. Weres controlled just about every business in town and they had a habit of hiring

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other weres over humans. Financial hardship couldn't be blamed for any malcontent.

Rubbing his forehead again, Owen shifted his attention back to the business at hand. He picked up Katherine's note identifying the were who'd helped Cory with the minutiae of running the pack, then reached for the phone.

"Ian? Hi. This is Owen Wells." Ian was a recently retired oil exec, and from all accounts, glad to have the time to volunteer to the business of the pack. "Actually, there is something you can do," Owen said into the receiver as he opened a new window on the computer. The other were didn't even balk when Owen started issuing orders. "I'm sending you a new calendar, covering the next two months. I've added two pack runs to the schedule. Can you see about disseminating that information? Great. And some of the women wanted something for the kids for Easter. Work with Gerry down at the community center and organize an Easter-egg hunt around the outdoor play area. I agree," he said, sorting through more papers, "it's about time we put his skills to better use than stacking chairs. Second, I'd like you to come up with a short list of names, maybe four,

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five weres who could work with Peter Overton and put together an art fair so kids and pups can make stuff for their mothers the Saturday before Mother's Day. I'll have him put together a budget that will cover the cost of supplies, plus a percentage over that to go to some charity in Cory and Ed's names. Yeah. I liked the idea too," he added solemnly. "Hopefully we won't have to charge each kid more than eight or so bucks to participate. If the pack's as generous as I think it is, parents will round that fee up to ten dollars and the extra can go right to charity."

In the background, Owen could hear the other were keying in notes.

"Just got your e-mail, Owen. The calendar's attached. I'll get on it. You need me over there today?"

"Maybe tomorrow. I'm also going to send you information on Cory's funeral. We've got a date and time. The memorial service is being held at the community center. The local funeral home isn't large enough. Piper's working through the order of service today." He exhaled slowly. After his mother died, he couldn't imagine having to deal with something as poignant and yet

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incredibly unsettling as an order of service for her wake.

People needed to mourn though and the accepted traditions helped them deal. Even something as trivial as calendar notices so that important dates like anniversaries and birthdays could be acknowledged, would help members feel reconnected. The heart of their pack had been ruthlessly cut out but there were still weres in charge who cared and were proactive.

Owen checked the clock on the screen. "I'm heading down to the pharmacy in about an hour. Tom said they'd be releasing the crime scene then."

"Won't they need a pharmacist?"

"Fuck," Owen hissed under his breath. "Yeah. I'll get on it. Thanks for your help, Ian. I'm going to need you for the next week or so, while I'm here," he added, more for his benefit than the other male's. After he hung up, he checked the online phone directory. This was temporary, he kept reminding himself as anxiety started crawling up the back of his neck. A favor to Cutler, to Piper, hell even to Tom and Suzanne. Soon, he'd be out of here with no responsibilities except mulling

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over what jobs he might be interested or, even better, sitting back on a sandy beach somewhere, enjoying a cold beverage of the adult variety.

When his and Fina's pack had been killed, they'd left a sizeable fortune behind. It was about time he took some time off and bought himself a little R&R with some of his portion of the cash.

Feeling his mouth settle in a determined line, Owen called up the pharmacist Cutler's pack used.

"How do I get a pharmacist here, fast?" he asked. He did the math in his head, calculating Ty's graduation date. "One who'll stay for two years and a bit?"



The day of Cory's funeral was sunny and cool. The sky was so clear and looked so high up it almost hurt to look at. As Cory's pack followed in the wake of the simple, gleaming, maple casket, following it through the progression from memorial service, to testimonials and burial, Owen followed them. He, along with Suzanne, kept their eyes and ears open for

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whispered words of dissention, triumphant sideways glances, groups that kept to themselves too much. There was nothing out of the ordinary though and certainly nothing suspicious.

Every other deputy sheriff was there but they weren't working. Like the other members of the pack, they needed a few hours away from the investigation to mourn. While the town was patrolled by Wally Pierce and police on loan from nearby counties, the members of Cory's pack paid tribute to their murdered Alpha.

After, in the community center, before the sandwiches and tea were served, Owen found himself standing behind Piper, off to the side when Cutler walked up to her. Flanked by Nath and Fina, he handed Piper a beautiful, silver box. His expression was grave. Both Nath and Fina looked pale but they stood strong. After saying a few words to Piper, they nodded to Owen and stepped aside. Two more Alphas were waiting in line behind them, each holding a small, sealed, silver box. The first one identified himself as Lowell from Grace Junction. Piper's hand shook as she accepted each box but she took the time to read the engravings, the words of tribute

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from other packs. She smiled as she listened to the comfort each Alpha tried to express, ran her fingers gently over the smooth edges and indentations of the boxes.

Standing in his freshly cleaned dress uniform, Owen pulled his shoulders back even farther. He blinked then searched the crowd for Suzanne and Tom. Their faces seemed to echo his thoughts. They'd catch whoever had done this. They'd punish the bastards who were trying to destroy this pack and god help them when they were found.

After the tributes, when the mourners were milling around, carrying plates and cups, talking about Cory or commenting on how beautiful the flowers were, Owen clamped down on his emotions. Still standing close to Piper, held there by those dimmed, brown eyes that kept coming back to him like she was reassuring herself of his presence, he wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of there. None of that showed on his face as pack member after pack member came up to him, introduced themselves, shared small talk then hugged him or nuzzled him, rubbing their scent on him.

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This isn't my responsibility, he kept telling himself when the urge to bolt got bad. In a couple of days I can get out of here. These aren't my people.

The nuzzling was bad enough but he wanted to pull his hair out when the questions started. A middle-aged couple wanted to know if they had the Alpha's blessing to proceed with their daughter's wedding plans. A pretty little bitch with hips that swung like they were on ball bearings asked if it was okay for her to attend school out of state come fall. A young male with hands like an iron worker wanted to talk about a start-up business loan for a cabinet making shop.

After just a few minutes, Owen was convinced the two-hundred and fifty or so weres in the room were nuts. How could they ever imagine he was capable, let alone worthy of stepping into this role?

It wasn't until he, Tom and Suzanne were back at Tom's place that he took what felt like the first full breath he'd had all day.

Tom had the refrigerator door open and was

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rummaging around inside. “What do you want for supper?” he asked.

“Do I *look* like I give a flying fuck?” Owen bellowed. When Tom and Suzanne’s heads snapped around and they stared at him, open mouthed, he tore off his jacket and threw it on the sofa. “I don’t have the answers and I will rip the head off the next asshole who—”

“*Hey*,” Suzanne barked at him. One of her hips shot out and she planted her fist on it.

He pointed a finger at her, growled then stormed off to the bathroom without saying anything. There, he started yanking off his clothes as fast as he could. The need to wash off the smell of the pack’s neediness was overwhelming. “What the hell do I know?” he muttered to himself and cranked on the shower, almost to the point of scalding. “Who the hell put me in charge of making decisions for strangers? Why don’t they just...” Naked, he stepped into the shower. It was so hot he shivered. “Leave me alone.”

A hand that wasn’t his shot into the shower and turned off the water. Another yanked the curtain back. Owen spun around, grabbed the wall to keep from slipping and glared at Tom and

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Suzanne. Naked, dripping and shivering didn't make holding onto his moral imperative easy, not when faced with two deputy sheriffs in dress uniforms, looking at him like they were ready to rip him a new one.

"We *can't* leave you alone," Tom growled into the thick silence. "Like it or not you were born to live this life."

"What life?" Owen barked. He scrubbed his hand over his face, wiped away the water streaming from his hair. "Playing nursemaid to a bunch of wounded cry babies?" As soon as the words come out of his mouth, he wanted to kick his own ass.

"No. Being an Alpha." Tom had never sounded so harsh. Command rang in his voice.

"I don't want it. I never wanted it. I've spent my life—"

"You've spent your life," Suzanne interrupted coldly, "hiding from what you are. Maybe coming from a small pack skewed your view of how a normal pack operates." As she spoke, she glared at him and flashed her canines. "I want to shoot myself for saying this but you are a good man,

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Owen Wells. The man for this job. You're an Alpha right down to the marrow in your bones. Now put on your big-boy pants and do the job you were born to do," she snapped. "Hmmp. And you call everybody else a cry baby."

Anger made heat flare in Owen's extremities, then faded when guilt flushed it away. When he felt his cheeks turn red, the expression on Suzanne's face softened. Tom's too. After a moment with him standing there, listening to water drip onto the shower floor off his body, Suzanne started to unbutton her uniform jacket.

"This still doesn't mean I like you," she said and her voice got low and sultry. He watched her eyes flare as she looked him over real good, especially when his cock started to get interested right back.

"Yeah. I know," Owen replied and undid her belt buckle. Tom pitched in by starting in on her shirt buttons. "But you do like fucking me. Guess I can live with that."

Tom's shower wasn't exactly big enough for three of them, especially with guys their size. When the water got turned back on, Owen

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leaned into it and sighed when Suzanne's soft, soapy hands starting to move over him.

Once or twice, between the laughter as they jockeyed for position and fought over the bar of soap, he also felt a larger, rougher hand on his back. What was really weird was he liked it. Liked the fact Suzanne *and* Tom were both cleaning away the scent of the pack's need. His rejection of it wasn't right. He knew that. But he did need a break from it, maybe even needed a few hours to mourn in his own way. Resigning himself to take Suzanne's advice and man up next time the pack marked him, Owen relaxed into the closeness and humor around him.

"We keep taking showers together," Tom quipped, "and I won't need that bigger water heater after all."

When they were clean, they grabbed towels and, in a clumsy clutch, made their way to Tom's bed, yanked back the covers and rolled in. Righting himself, Owen sat up with his back against the headboard. He grabbed a pillow, made himself comfortable, spread his legs and glanced down at his swollen cock.

"I need that pretty mouth of yours," he said to

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Suzanne and didn't recognize the sound of his own voice. It was rough and deep, more wolf than man. She licked her lips and eyed him hungrily. "Great answer," he teased and shook when she ran her soft, pink tongue over his length like he was a big 'ol ice cream cone.

"Come here, baby," Tom growled. He stretched out on his back and shouldered her knee up and out of the way so he could slide his head under her. "Give me some of that sweet pussy."

Owen saw the other male's hands slide over Suzanne's hips, saw the indent they made in her skin as he pulled her down to him. Heard the wet sounds of Tom's tongue moving over her sex. Grunting with pleasure, Owen held her breast when she took the head of his cock into her mouth and applied just enough pressure to make his loins rock. His other hand held her hair out of the way and when he did, she looked up at him. The vivid blue of her eyes was beautiful. Hell, everything about her was beautiful. Holding her breast, he was as captivated as he'd been the first time he'd seen her. That soft, oval face was radiant and when she flashed those white, straight teeth before grazing his cockhead with them, he knew

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he'd never experienced a moment as perfect as this one.

He looked down her body, past the indent of her waist, the rise of that round split-peach of an ass of hers. Tom's fingers held her hard and his darker skin emphasized her paleness. Her hips moved in gentle rhythm to the sounds of the other male's tongue working her. Looking past her, he could see Tom's torso. The hard, muscled frame almost as large as his own. Tom's impressive erection bobbed, drawing Owen's gaze to the male's shaft and the dark nest of hair at the base.

Shutting his eyes, Owen groaned as Suzanne ran a fingertip over his perineum, cupped his balls up tight then rubbed her lower lip over them.

"Damn," he hissed and let his head fall back. She'd sucked him in deep and he could feel her throat muscles close around him. The sounds she made drove him crazy and he tightened his hold on her breast. One second, then another, then she pulled back, worked the head inside her mouth before starting in on his balls.

That tongue of hers made him ache but it

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was the gentle, rhythmic pressure of her sucking mouth that made him moan.

Owen held out as long as he could. When he felt the familiar tingle at the base of his sac, he eased her away from him. Sometime he'd like to finish in her mouth, as long as she was okay with that. But not today. Today, after he'd spurned the needs of an entire pack, he needed to connect with this woman.

Her. And Tom.

"Slide back, baby," he said quietly and eased her mouth away from him. "Take Tom in your pussy and give me your ass."

There it was again. That drive to give orders, orchestrate. But Suzanne and Tom weren't complaining and he was enthralled by the excitement in their expressions as she crawled backward. She was so damn sexy when she tossed her hair and let her breasts hang over the other male's mouth. With a groan, Tom grabbed hold and suckled one while she made soft, feminine sounds of pleasure. He held her other breast, his big hand almost dwarfing her and pinching her nipple until she trembled.

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Owen couldn't take his eyes off them. His lovers were perched on the edge of the bed. Tom's feet were actually braced on the floor. Without looking, Owen yanked open the night table drawer, grabbed the lube and walked to the foot of the bed. They were so beautiful together. Against Tom's rougher skin, she looked so soft, and delicate in comparison to his size. When she slid further back, Owen heard the hot, wet sound of them kissing and squeezed the head of his cock, remembering how good that mouth felt on him. Her lush, pink pussy hovered over Tom's shaft. He and Owen groaned when she dipped her hips and moved her slit over Tom. The other male's rod, now glistening with her moisture, bobbed like it was seeking her heat.

When Tom wrapped his fingers around himself, held his cock straight up and ready, Owen took a step closer. He had to bite back a moan when Suzanne tossed her head a second time, palmed her breasts and started working herself down onto Tom's length. Her swollen pussy lips stretched around him, wrapped him up tight, moved as she rode him. Down. Up. Small movements, controlled by those strong thighs of hers, the flexing of her ass. Then longer

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strokes as she got aggressive with him, tossed her head yet again, rolled her back.

The positioning of the other male's arms told Owen his hands were on her breasts, the erotic sounds she was making told him how much Tom was pleasuring her. He watched with unshakeable focus as she took Tom deeper, harder until he was buried inside her. When he was, she rolled her hips, leaned back and gasped, then her hand disappeared between their bodies.

"Not so fast," Owen growled. Taking hold of her forearm, he brought her fingers to his mouth and sucked her cream off them. "That's *our* pussy." Looking over her shoulder, he met Tom's glassy stare. The other male grinned, nodded, and grabbed her hips so he could grind up into her. "Nobody gets you off but us."

"Damn straight," Tom said firmly. The muscles in his arms flexed as he encouraged her to ride him faster.

Owen squirted a liberal amount of lubricant onto his fingers. Exhaling, buying himself a minute to regain his control, he closed his eyes so the sight of them fucking wouldn't get him even more turned on. Bad idea. Without his sight,

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his wolf focused on their scents, the sounds. Watching them was hotter than hell. Listening to them made his heart race and warmth tingle in his extremities. He put his hand between her shoulder blades and applied gentle pressure.

She turned her head and looked at him. Color had brightened her cheeks and her eyes were heavy lidded and seductive. Glancing down his body, she looked at his cock with open approval, and laid her body onto Tom's. Like before, the sound of them kissing, even the sight of Tom's fingers moving through her hair filled Owen with unaccountable poignancy. That and a rising lust he had no intention of denying any longer.

She startled, just a little when he touched his lubed fingers to her puckered rosette. The sight of that vulnerable little opening, right above the tight ring of her pussy stretched around the base of Tom's cock, made Owen's balls ache. He massaged her carefully, applied more lube and eased the tip of his finger into her. Both Suzanne and Tom gasped. In to the first knuckle, pause, retreat. Alert for any signs of distress or tension, Owen eased her tightness. A little deeper, a slow turn of his wrist, then withdraw. When he

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added a second finger, her thighs trembled and he waited until it stopped, until she looked back at him again and nodded jerkily. He moved his mouth over her back. Gentle, moist kisses while his breath misted her skin. His lips made love to the softness of her as he slid his fingers in and out of her ass.

Tom grunted again and lifted his head off the bed. He growled but it was a sound of pleasure, deeply erotic and Owen realized the other male could feel his fingers moving in Suzanne. That they were probably rubbing over him. It was perverse and perverted and...and it was hotter than hell. Owen got off knowing he was turning on both weres. Pleasuring them at the same time was a heady thing and he stared into Tom's eyes as the other were snarled and bared his teeth.

Owen's gaze was drawn to the heavy muscles in Tom's neck as the male leaned his head back. They were all so vulnerable there yet Tom had no problem baring his throat for Suzanne...and him. Humbled, Owen swallowed spasmodically. A vein echoed the beating of Tom's heart and it was beautiful, powerful. Seductive. Turning away, Owen forced his full attention back to

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Suzanne's ass. He slid his fingers out of her, took hold of his shaft, positioned the head against her opening and pushed.

Oiled heat fisted him, made him growl with pleasure at the same time as the female beneath him cried out in pleasure. That soft, warm ass lifted to him, angled so he could slide in easier, although her tightness ruled out any sudden moves—for him and her.

Aware of the hard length of Tom's cock inside her, just on the other side of that thin, flexible wall, Owen held Suzanne's hips, withdrew, and pressed forward again. Having Tom's feet planted on the floor allowed Owen leverage and he positioned himself between both their legs, felt Suzanne's soft thighs and Tom's rough ones against his own. He watched his cock sink into her, pause, then retreat. Using his strength, he rolled her hips in a subtle rhythm. He was fucking her, yes, and pleasuring her and himself but through her, he was pleasuring Tom as well. It was overwhelming to make love to them at the same time.

And he *was* making love to them. Owen guided her carefully, listened to the sounds she

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made, responded when she panted with rising need, backed off when her shoulders tensed. Through her, he felt the thrusting of Tom's cock. He smelled the other were's need, felt his hand on his hip, another on his waist and wallowed in the contact. He felt joined to them and not just physically. Emotions he'd walled inside himself for over a decade rose in tentative waves while hunger set his teeth on edge and made the base of his spine tingle.

The needy sounds Suzanne was making began to rise in pitch and volume. Her body hummed between his and Tom's. Owen saw her hands ball up the bed linens and squeeze. When she started shaking, when her body tensed and she cried out, Owen rode her hard. Lifting her hips, rocking her between him and Tom, he groaned when her ass bore down on him tight enough to make him snarl and sweat.

His eyes opened and he found himself staring down at Tom, saw the need in the other were's face, felt his cock jerk against his own.

Leaning forward, his hips pumping madly, Owen ground his mouth into Tom's. He snapped his head back in disbelief. Tom looked just as

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shocked as Owen felt but the hand on his hip tightened. The hand on his waist hauled him in tighter. Letting go of Suzanne, Owen wiped the back of his hand across his mouth but he couldn't stop staring at Tom. At those blue eyes, lighter than his own, rimmed with ridiculously thick, black lashes. Growling, Owen grabbed onto the back of Tom's neck, lifted the other male's mouth to his and kissed him, hard.

His lips were soft. Of all the things Owen had expected, if he'd expected anything at all, it wasn't this pliant warmth. While Suzanne cried out, while her body twitched and bore down on them rhythmically, Owen held his breath in wonder. It wasn't like kissing a woman. The neck he was holding was thick and strong. The mouth grinding into his didn't flinch when Owen showed his strength. Storming his mouth, Tom's tongue moved against his with authority, without apology. They gasped at the same time, sucking the breath from each other then Owen slanted his head and took Tom's mouth like he owned it.

Suzanne was still making those sharp, rising sounds of release, her body was still squeezing

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him hard when the tingle in Owen's spine shifted into his balls. He huffed, misting Tom's cheeks with hot air at the same time as the other were groaned and arched.

Pleasure...sharp and encompassing drew Owen's balls up so tight they ached. He felt the throb of Tom's release against the underside of his cock about two seconds before Owen came. Their lips went slack but didn't break contact as Owen fought to breathe through the waves of ecstasy. His. Suzanne's. Tom's.

When it was over, when he could finally fill his lungs and summon enough wit to hoist some of his weight off them, Owen continued to hold his lovers. Suzanne's hip. Tom's neck. She turned her head, nuzzled his cheek until he offered his mouth. He kissed her softly, feeling a strange reverence as her lips moved, softened beneath his. A smile shaped her mouth and he returned it. When she pulled away and nuzzled Tom's cheek, Owen watched with a contentment that felt so strange it was fuzzy. She kissed the other were as gently as she'd kissed him, let him shape her lips, tug on them with his own as he smoothed her hair back and caressed her cheek.

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“It’s okay.”

Owen blinked when he heard Suzanne’s soft voice, when he realized she was looking at his profile...looking back and forth between his and Tom’s, smiling with growing languor. Encouragement. Acceptance.

Carefully, expecting a rebuke, wondering why the hell he even wanted to, Owen kissed Tom again. He felt Suzanne’s gaze on them. He also felt that weird bond when they were together. That sense of belonging. Tom returned the kiss. It wasn’t delicate like Suzanne’s. Tom knew what he wanted and had no problem expressing that. Yet the kiss wasn’t hard either. Both males tempered their strength, maybe because they were nervous. Maybe because the repleteness emanating off Suzanne was filling them too. Owen touched Tom’s tongue with his and his taste buds perked when they caught a subtle hit of citrus.

Suzanne shifted between them, just a little, and lifted her head so she could rub her cheek against his then Tom’s, nuzzle her forehead into their temples, drop soft, sweeping kisses onto the corners of their mouths.

After what felt like a long time, Owen pulled

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back. He eased his deflating cock out of Suzanne's rear and stared raptly as Tom slid out of her as well. His lovers were shiny with a liberal coating of her cream and Tom's cum. Owen was so moved by the eroticism of the sight that he caressed her back, kneaded the muscles delicately. He helped her to stand, pulled her into his body so her breasts nestled warm and sweet between them, and kissed her like he'd kissed Tom.

When she padded off in the direction of the bathroom, he realized both he and the other male were watching her twitching backside. Chuckling, Owen climbed into bed beside Tom who hoisted himself up and dropped his head on one of the pillows.

Owen pulled the covers over both of them and stretched out on his back. Staring up at the ceiling, he flexed his body gingerly, enjoying the post-coital, well-used feeling in his muscles. Tom's arm was touching his. It was still weird but Owen felt no urge to pull away. The warmth was pleasant and he felt comfortable. His lids began to get heavy. It was still too early for supper and his body wanted a nap in the worst way. As tiredness wrapped around him, Owen rolled

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into Tom's warmth. The other male shifted too so that Owen could spoon into his back, rest his knees behind Tom's, drape an arm over the were's heavy ribcage.

The far side of the bed dipped under Suzanne's weight. The blankets shifted then settled back into place, along with the soft warmth of her body pressing into his back. She kissed his neck, touched the tip of her tongue to his skin like she was tasting him, and did it again like she liked it. Breasts, hips and arm snuggled him from behind, warm breath traced his shoulder, a solid back rose and fell against his chest as he curled between them and fell asleep.



"You're probably sick of me by now."

Piper touched his head as she removed his empty breakfast plate. "It *was* pretty crowded the past few days but it's just family now."

Owen noticed she touched her sons' heads like she'd touched his as she moved around the kitchen table. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she was reassuring herself of the

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bonds between them, maybe even just their presence.

He also didn't mind so much being counted as an honorary member of the family. Setting down his coffee mug, he turned to Geoff. "I made some inquiries about getting in an interim pharmacist."

Geoff and his brother Ty paled like the words hurt but they didn't balk. Instead, they looked up at Owen with identical, resigned expressions. Katherine Clark, who'd spent the night and was now having breakfast with her family, squared her shoulders and gave him a quick nod of approval.

Owen continued. "I've got three interviews set up. One's a were, two aren't. The pharmacist from Cutler's pack will drive over tomorrow and vet them."

Like her sons, Piper was pale. When she stepped away from the kitchen counter, Owen stood, took her arm and guided her into an empty chair at the table.

"Closing the pharmacy's not an option," he said as gently as he could. "Yesterday, there was

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a farming accident near the county line. The doc told me she had to call a pharmacy way out in Lander for meds.”

Piper looked at her sons. They looked back at her before returning their focus to Owen.

“Geoff, when you graduate,” Owen said, “you’ll take over the pharmacy. That’s still the plan, I assume.”

“Yeah.” Geoff lifted his chin. He reached across the table, squeezed his mother’s hand then let go. “Probably. Dad was planning on retiring within five years.”

Owen nodded. “Okay. No pressure on you to make any decisions about your future right now. Piper, I believe Cory’s will gives you ownership of the pharmacy.” She paled a little more but lifted her chin like her son had. Katherine put an arm around Piper’s shoulder. “I suggest you offer whichever pharmacist gets the job a temporary contract. Come to the interviews if you’re up for it. You too, Ty. Geoff, you definitely need to be there. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” Geoff didn’t sound too sure but he answered quick enough despite that.

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“Good.” Owen leaned forward. “Your options for after graduation are open. No doors are going to close so you take all the time you need to decide.” Deliberately, Owen ramped back his intensity as he settled back in his chair. “So how long can you boys stay?” he asked, changing the subject.

Geoff and Ty looked at each other, then their mother. “Until next week, maybe,” Ty said. He brushed back his too-long brown hair. “We’re both excused from classes on compassionate grounds but we still have to pass our finals at some point.”

“There’s six weeks of classes left,” Geoff explained. “I probably won’t pass if I miss them. Which means I’d have to repeat the year.” He shook his head. “Mom and I started talking about it last night but I haven’t decided yet.”

Owen nodded. “What about you, Ty?”

“Wunderkind there,” Geoff answered for his brother, “has already started in on advanced assignments for next term.” Grinning wryly, he balled up his napkin and threw it at his brother’s head. “Brownnoser.”

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“Geek,” Ty shot back as he ducked. “I’m going back,” he said eventually, folding and re-folding the napkin he’d caught. “I’m on scholarship so if I blow off school, I’m basically stealing a spot away from a student who can’t afford the tuition. And I, I miss Jess.”

“Jess?” Owen asked. He drank the last of his coffee and smiled at Ty’s self-conscious grin.

“My girlfriend. She’d studying modern dance and theater. She’s not a were though.” He looked up at Owen. “You ever date a non-were?”

Date? He’d never really dated anybody. Fucked, yes, but a family breakfast seemed an imprudent occasion to discuss that.

“I’ve known a few,” he hedged. “I’m sure she’s terrific, even if she isn’t were. Hell, nobody’s perfect.”

That made the others laugh like he’d hoped it would. When the laughter died down, he excused himself, parked his butt behind Cory’s desk and started tackling the e-mails that had piled up.

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Chapter Eleven

Owen pulled off his sweater then let his head fall back. The night air felt good on his skin. They'd buried Cory three days ago and the pack needed this run. Hell, *he* needed this run. Everything about his life had changed and he still wasn't sure he liked it.

He was, however, stuck with it. For now. In Cory's memory and for Piper's and the pack's sake, he'd be what they needed him to be.

For now.

"Hey, Laura," he called out when he spotted a tiny redhead at the edge of the clearing. He made his way over to the interim pharmacist they'd hired. "Come and meet my friends." She tensed a little when he took her hand and, wearing a slightly blank look, glanced up at him shyly. He didn't give in to her submissive need to hide in the background. Instead, he tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her alongside him without yanking.

"Tom, Suzanne, I'd like you to meet Laura

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Samuels. She's the new pharmacist I told you about." He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Tom and Suzanne are deputy sheriffs so if you ever have any trouble down at the pharmacy, give them a shout."

"N-nice to meet you both," Laura said and held out her hand. It shook a little.

"Nice to meet you," Tom said and clasped her small hand in his. "Piper said she was glad a were applied for the position. Thanks for pulling up stakes and coming here so quick."

"M-my pleasure." She glanced up at Tom like she'd done with Owen, but she managed a nervous smile when Suzanne took her hand and beamed down at her. "I was a rotating fill-in for a pharmacy chain in Iowa. I, I like having something permanent instead."

"Perfect." Tom touched his forehead to hers. She stiffened then, gradually, relaxed into the gesture. "Good for you. Good for us."

Geoff Amos had edged close and Owen made room for him to join them. "Hey, Geoff. Just introducing Laura to the local law enforcement."

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“Now she’ll know who to call if she gets busted for speeding.”

They laughed, mostly at the idea of the timid were doing anything outside of the law.

When Geoff maneuvered so he was standing close enough to Laura to touch her shoulder with his, the movement wasn’t lost on Owen. He smiled to himself. With a subtle nod, he turned Tom and Suzanne’s attention to Piper, standing a few feet away, surrounded by family. With Geoff and Laura in tow, they made their way over to her.

Tom complimented Piper on how pretty she looked. Suzanne admired her shoes. Myra, the waitress down at the diner, came up and asked Piper if she’d like to join a progressive euchre group that met the first of every month. Standing at Piper’s side, Owen lifted his head and scanned the crowd. He noticed Tom doing the same. In various stages of undress, pack members were milling around. They gave off the scent of unease and they moved in random directions, like ships with the rudders smashed away. Gradually, most of them made their way over to say hello, to him

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and Tom, to chat with Piper, talk to the boys and ask about their plans for the summer.

Small talk mostly. Tom handled it casually, warmly. Owen still felt like a fraud but he kept up the friendly veneer. When Suzanne gave him arm a squeeze every now and then, it made it easier to accept the deference surrounding him.

Some weres asked about the investigations into Cory and Ed's murders. Some were scared. But when two couples admitted to keeping their cubs out of school, Owen knew he had to speak up.

Amazed by the stupidity of his actions, Owen stepped away from the others and lifted his head. "Your hierarchy has been cut down." Trained by years of giving orders, his voice rang through the clearing. All conversation stopped and every face turned toward him. "You're frightened. Anxious." He paused, letting the hard truth of that sink in. "But you *are* a pack." He felt Suzanne and Tom step up, one on either side of him. "Nobody's going after you, your pups or your loved ones." There was absolute surety in his voice. "Tom and Suzanne are two of the finest law-enforcement officers I've ever met. They will find out who did

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this and you will have justice. In the meantime, fight back by refusing to roll over and bare your bellies. Cory wouldn't want you to."

"Ed would whup asses and ask questions later." Tom's summation made the group laugh...and they laughed like they were hearing a truth.

David Hold, the diner owner, lifted his head in the ensuing silence. "Owen, I don't want to sound patronizing but I think I'm speaking for a lot of folks when I say thank you for stepping up and helping us through this." He swallowed audibly. "But aren't you putting yourself in the line of danger *by* stepping up? I don't know you that well but I do like you. I was hoping you'd stick around. Us old, single farts like having a young, single fart around."

Again, the pack laughed and, in it, Owen could hear the release of some of their anxiety.

David turned to Tom. "Can't we do something to keep Owen and our other leaders from being singled out? Why can't we, I don't know, have a group of interim leaders instead? Spread the responsibility and the risk around. At least until the murderer is caught."

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“Who’s protecting Katherine and what’s left of our hierarchy?” This came from a younger female. Owen didn’t know her name.

“Are you sure our cubs are safe?”

Tom addressed the pack’s questions and fielded some to Owen, although neither gave out strategic information that was being withheld deliberately. Soon though, the talk broke down into small-group discussions with little alleviation in worry for anybody. Instinct told Owen only one thing would make these people feel better—a run—and even that was a band-aid solution. He gave them a few more minutes to talk then, feeling like more of a fraud than ever, started taking off the rest of his clothes.

Whether by design or not, the others copied his example. He hated how easy it was for them to follow him, although he hadn’t expected anything less. For the first time in his life, Owen lifted his face to the moon and cried out, “Let the run begin.”

His voice was foreign to his ears—guttural as his changing vocal cords struggled with the subtleties of human speech which they were suddenly no longer capable of. What started

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off as words ended in a howl. Pain splintered through his chest, radiated down his arms and legs, dropping him to the ground where he trembled and forced himself not to cry out. His skull ached as it elongated, thickened, pulled his eyes back into almond shapes. Heavy fur whispered against his skin as it burst free of tight follicles all over his body. It lay in a thick, protective pelt over his belly, covered every inch of his groin, crawled over his penis where a heavy sheath now encased him.

Lifting his head, Owen's wolf scented the air. There was anxiety in this pack, the kind that could lead to unrest and foolish actions.

The first fool caught Owen's eye as it separated itself from the others. Tail high, a young, gray wolf walked straight up to Owen. Aggression saturated the air around it.

Owen and the other wolf circled each other. The gray charged, pulled up at the last minute, huffed so hard it sprayed Owen's coat with spit then tried to circle around him for a sniff.

Owen was having no part of that. No wolf smelled him first. Owen snapped, closing his jaws less than an inch from the gray wolf's neck,

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then held himself ready. The gray tried again. A civil reprimand hadn't worked so Owen ramped up his game. He snarled, darted forward, closed his teeth over the male's ruff then released. This time, the gray stood still and let Owen circle him, sniff first. When Owen was finished, he let the other wolf smell him. Owen's wolf knew the power it projected and had no problem letting a lesser challenger get close. That calm, absolute authority was the core of him. The gray wolf moved away.

Two young, cocky wolves approached the large black male at Owen's side. He watched closely. This challenge was the other wolf's but Owen knew him, felt a great bond between them and if Owen was ever to have a Beta, it would be him.

The other males bluff charged, pulled up, charged again. The black wolf sent them scurrying with an ominous growl and a well-aimed nip.

A few other males strolled by. They watched the fights, such as they were, lifted their noses and sniffed him and the black wolf from a distance. Owen's wolf knew more challenges would come over the next days. There was a void in this pack.

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He'd stepped into it. It wasn't a decision he'd made, it was something that simply had to be. If he was worthy, he'd hold onto leadership of this pack.

His nose followed the sleek golden-brown bitch who'd been standing nearby. She moved toward a nervous cluster of females. At their center was a silver-tipped wolf. The heady, righteous strength of a top bitch radiated off her but she was old. Too old to fend off serious challenges. Few came. Mostly, one bitch or another bounced their shoulder into hers. Another snapped her jaws then moved away. The golden-brown female smelled the ranking wolf and didn't balk when the older female rebuked her. When she was finished, the younger female strolled back to Owen. Owen and the black male.

Other males lifted their heads as she passed. He knew firsthand how mouthwatering her scent was. Other females cuffed their mates when they showed too much interest.

The prime, golden-brown female stepped between him and the black male. She rubbed the top of her head against their cheeks, licked their snouts, leaned her smaller body into theirs.

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Owen's wolf stayed in the clearing longer than it normally would. He accepted play overtures when they were extended, sniffed other wolves when they held themselves still for him. There were few in this pack he knew, fewer that knew him and he gave them an opportunity to learn his scent, gauge his strength. A few single, prime bitches strolled by, cocked their tails as they passed, gazed at him with sultry, sideways glances. He smelled what was offered but took it no further. The pull the golden-brown female had on him was too strong. She was approached by other wolves as well. Owen could smell she was new to this pack too, and he saw how seamlessly she made herself part of the group. The easygoing way she had of demonstrating her strength without rubbing it in anyone's face.

The black wolf stayed close to both of them and they stayed close to him, like a sun and its orbiting planets.

Finally, when Owen's wolf was itchy with the need to run off its residual, foolish anxieties, he howled, crying out an invitation, and took off through the trees with the black male, the golden-brown female, and every other wolf still

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in the clearing racing and yelping with joy in his wake.



“So what do you want me to say to him when we get there?” Owen stretched in the passenger seat of Tom’s pickup.

Tom snorted and, as a concession, turned down the volume on his favorite country and western station when Owen’s hand twitched in the direction of the radio. The man did have an unnatural hate for the glories of country. “I thought you’d be able to figure that out yourself.”

“It’s early. We went to sleep late. Some help would be appreciated here.”

“All right. His name is Brodie Dell and he’s our dispatcher. Well, *was* our dispatcher until he took a leave of absence. He’s a were but he’s a civilian so I can’t order him back to work.” Tom shook his head. “We’re shorthanded so I need him to come back to work. Hell, for his own mental health *he* needs to come back to work.”

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Tom pulled up in front of a neat bungalow with a big spring-bare vegetable plot on the south side.

A pretty middle-aged female, wearing a nurse's uniform, let them in.

"Hey, Missus Dell." He touched his hat to the female who'd let them in. "Hey, Brodie," Tom said as a male with dark circles under his eyes hoisted himself out of a living room recliner. "Thought I'd bring Owen around to say hi."

Brodie Dell was an inch short of six feet, broad in the chest and had the beginnings of a pot belly. His short gray hair was rumpled and his blue eyes looked he hadn't slept in weeks.

From the kitchen, Tom smelled fresh coffee brewing. He figured Owen could use another cup but Brodie had the look of a man who was being held together with caffeine and prayer... and the caffeine just wasn't cutting it anymore.

"Sit down, boys," Brodie offered. He waved a tired hand at the comfortable-looking sofa and chairs ringing the room. "I've heard good things about you, Owen."

"Well I'd like you to see firsthand and make your own opinions," Owen said. There was an

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honesty in his bluntness that always took the sting out of it. “Word has it you haven’t left this house since Ed’s murder, except to go to his funeral. You didn’t come to Cory’s.”

The older were flushed and looked out the window.

“That’s not an insult,” Owen continued. “Just an observation. Why haven’t you gone back to work?”

Brodie blinked, looked at Tom then Owen. “Every time I think about it, all I can see is Ed’s empty office. The way he left it that morning.” He ran his hand over his face. “The sound of his voice that morning over the radio when I sent him to...” Brodie’s voice dried up and, with his elbows planted on his knees, he hung his head.

Tom stood and laid his hand on the back of Brodie’s neck. Although he didn’t lift his head, Brodie leaned into the touch like he was accepting the comfort being offered. The pain emanating off the dispatcher was raw and familiar because not a day went by that Tom didn’t feel it too. Difference was, he’d been born with just enough strength to keep him functioning through one day into the next.

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“Do you need more time or do you need to quit?”

Owen’s deep, non-judgmental voice was what finally brought Brodie’s head up. There was a long pause before he finally answered, “Quit.”

While Tom wanted to rail against the older were’s decision, against the evidence of his perfectly understandable frailty, Owen simply nodded. Not for the first time, Tom hated Owen’s ability to distance himself and think clearly. He also envied it.

“Do you need to find another job?”

Brodie shook his head. “No. I’ve put in enough years at the sheriff’s department that I’ll be able to draw a full pension.”

“All right.” Owen nodded slowly. “Tomorrow, you will get your ass out of that chair and you will get yourself down to the community center and put in six hours of volunteer time.”

“Huh?” Like before, Brodie blinked, only this time he stared up at Owen blankly.

“Six hours, four days a week. Minimum. You have any special skills?”

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“He’s real good with cars.” Brodie’s mate came into the living room and set down a coffee tray. “Changes the oil in mine and keeps the engine tuned better than either mechanic in town.”

“Fine,” Owen said with that confidence and finality only true Alphas were capable of. Too bad the thick-headed male couldn’t hear it himself. Tom held back a grin as he looked over at his friend.

Owen continued. “We’ll see about starting up a course in basic auto maintenance. ‘Course, it’s mostly females who come to the center during the day. As long as your beautiful mate won’t mind.”

“Charmer,” Brodie’s mate teased right back. “He always did like working around females more than males. He’s good with kids too.”

“Even better.” Owen accepted the cup of coffee she handed him then turned back to Brodie. “Tomorrow, we’ll talk about what else you can do at the center. For now, let’s see about getting your head around stepping out the door. Your guilt is stinking up your mate’s clean house.”

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Later, outside Brodie's house, Tom leaned against his pickup and adjusted his utility belt. He watched Owen's eyes track the movement. Like so many WTF moments lately, he didn't mind the idea of another male looking at him like that, so long as the other male was Owen. Even without Suzanne between them, he felt stronger, more comfortable in his skin when Owen was around. He looked at Owen's mouth and remembered the taste, kind of like coffee and chocolate without the cloying sweetness. That permanent furrow between Owen's brows drew his attention next. A male that young and good looking shouldn't have wrinkles, yet it suited him. Owen was always too serious and demanded too much from himself, especially now that he'd resigned himself to stepping into the void Cory's death had created. Somehow it was fitting Owen carried the mark of that responsibility front and center.

They turned when the front door opened and Brodie stepped out onto the porch. On tiptoe, his mate pressed a kiss to his mouth, waved at

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the other males, got in her car and drove off to the clinic to work.

“Thanks for giving me a ride to Piper’s,” Owen said as Brodie walked up to them. The older were was freshly shaved and his hair was still damp from showering.

“Like you gave me a choice,” Brodie grouched but there was no venom in his voice.

“All for a good cause. Besides, Tom needs to get to the station.”

“Speaking of which,” Tom said. He held out his hand to Owen. “Give me the keys to your truck.”

“Why?” Suspicion colored Owen’s voice but he fished around in the pockets of his jeans anyway.

“It’s still parked at the station. I’ll drive it back to my place when I finish my shift.”

“Why don’t I have Brodie drive me there and—”

“Because I’ve never driven a new pickup and that’s one sweet ride you’ve got. I’ve been wanting to get behind the wheel since that day

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I pulled you over.” He snagged the keys out of Owen’s hand and turned to Brodie. “Suzanne’s been assigned to keep watch on him and me. Part of the surveillance network for ranking members and potential leaders in the pack.” He gave the older were a moment to let that sink in. “That’s a big reason why we need you out of the house. I’ll respect your decision to quit the force. I don’t like it but I’ll respect it. But you know police procedures and you can work as part of Owen’s surveillance detail. I’d like you to start as his part-time chauffeur and bodyguard today. We need your eyes and ears out there because you’ll pick up on anything suspicious.”

Nodding slowly, Brodie squared his shoulders. “Yeah. Yeah, I can do that.” A were as smart as Brodie probably knew Owen didn’t need a bodyguard, but keeping a watchful eye open would give Brodie a purpose. Maybe give him some of his confidence and pride back too.

“You can also bring some tools with you,” Owen ordered as he headed for Brodie’s vehicle. “Show your Alpha’s widow some respect and change the oil in her car while we’re there.”

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Brodie grinned at both of them. “Yeah. I can do that too.”



After he tended to pack business at Piper’s and had lunch, Owen had Brodie drive him to the community center. On the way through town, it was hard not to notice how few people were out on the streets. There were way too many free parking spots for a Friday, although the pharmacy seemed to be doing a booming business. Probably weres dropping in to meet the new pharmacist and make sure the cash kept flowing for Piper’s sake.

More parents than usual showed up for the after-school programs, like they were nervous about letting their pups out of their sight. Owen introduced himself to the new faces and he seemed to impress most of them with how well he knew their children. He also took the opportunity to find out more, ask about the pups’ strengths and interests.

He took notes and talked about existing programs, speculated about potential ones then

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got down to the business of finding out what the parents' skills were. The center needed more volunteers and not just babysitters either. They needed adults who could teach classes with real-life applications. Maybe even make kids aware of hobbies and careers beyond the scope of their daily lives.

Owen could relate to that one.

He chalked the day up as a success when he got two adults to promise volunteer hours. One female, a timid low-ranking were whose mate was a long-distance trucker, actually blossomed when he asked her to take on administrative duties. Lord knew he needed help with the paperwork and she seemed keen to take on the job. He also liked the no-nonsense bark in her voice as she shepherded a group of rowdy cubs away from the refreshment table that had been set up for that evening's line-dancing class.

When he yelled at kids, it was a coin-toss whether they'd obey or cry.

Yet another skill set he didn't want, didn't need but sure as hell was going to have to work on.

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Just after five o'clock, he said good-night to Gerry, thanked the caretaker in advance for locking up later on, and, with Brodie at his side, made his way to the police station. The fresh air smelled good and the exercise loosened the knots in his back from too much sitting behind a desk.

"Hey, Wally." Owen greeted the humongous, plain-faced were. In the parking lot beside the station, Deputy Sheriff Wally Pierce was just stepping out of his personal vehicle. "You on duty tonight?"

"You bet," Wally answered with a wide smile. "We're going to catch those murdering bastards," he said quietly after he'd looked and made sure nobody else was within earshot, "and I aim to be the were to bring them in."

"I like your attitude." Owen clapped him on the back then turned to Brodie. "You want to come inside and say hello to the fellas?"

"Some other time," Brodie said as he scanned the parking lot. "My missus is waiting supper on me" Turning, he headed back the way they'd came. "I enjoyed the walk over here though.

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Haven't done enough of that lately," he added with a friendly wave.

Satisfied by the energy in Brodie's step, Owen followed Wally inside.

The station was unnaturally full and every deputy sheriff ready to go on shift made a point of greeting Owen, asking after Piper, about his day. Simple, short, everyday conversations that made Owen acutely conscious of how much even the police deferred to him.

Working at a desk in the middle of the station, Tom lifted his hand in greeting then returned his focus to the computer monitor in front of him. Although the State had officially granted him the title of Temporary Sheriff, at least until the next election, Tom hadn't taken over Ed's office. Owen knew the space would make doing the job easier but he liked the respect Tom showed his dead Beta by not moving in too quick.

Owen made himself comfortable in the chair on the other side of Tom's desk and waited for the male to finish up work for the day.

"How was Brodie out at Piper's?" Tom asked without looking away from the screen.

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“Good, as long as he was busy.” Owen shrugged. “I kept him busy. I told him to clean out the garage. Geoff and Ty helped. They seemed glad to have something to do.”

Tom grunted. “I’m sure they were. Being occupied helps.” His nose moved like he was scenting the air, then he looked up. “Hey, Suzanne. Any trouble on that last call?”

“No.” She set her broad-brimmed hat on an empty desk, smoothed back her hair and took off her parka. “Just a couple of kids messing around behind the lumberyard after school. Had a chat with their parents. They seemed anxious to take care of it themselves.”

“Good call,” Tom said and flashed her a grin.

When Suzanne walked past Owen, she paused long enough to run her cheek against his temple. “You smell like you’ve been hanging out with the kids at the community center.”

“Yeah?” He heard his voice get deeper, seductive even...if a guy like him was capable of something so subtle. “And what does that smell like?”

“Tapioca and wet boots.”

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“Nice. Thanks.”

Chuckling, Tom finished typing. “Okay,” he said. “I’ve got an ad on the State Ethernet about an opening for a dispatcher.” He handed a colored piece of paper to Owen. “And if you could post this at the community center, we’d be more than willing to train if the right were applies.”

“Consider it done. You want to tell Brodie first or do you want me to do it?”

“What do you think?”

Owen mulled it over for a moment. “You know him and you’re his boss. Okay, *interim* boss,” Owen corrected when Tom’s mouth thinned. “You tell him. Tell him I’ll post the ad the day after.”

Tom nodded curtly. “Sounds good. Don’t let it get overshadowed by those grass-roots meeting posters I’ve seen popping up around town.”

“Consider it done. Guess some of the folk feel a need to get together and just talk things through.” Owen shrugged. Talking had helped some of the men under his command. Others, like him, preferred to process internally and move on.

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Tom switched off his monitor and stood up. “Ready for roll call,” the big cop barked and every deputy in the place quit their own conversations and turned toward him. Moving around his desk, he leaned against it, one boot planted on the floor and the other swinging freely. “State forensics lab has identified the treads on the truck Ed’s killer used. Weight and wheelbase say it’s a Ford but by now the killer’s probably taken the snow tires off. The tracks behind the pharmacy are different.”

“Different how?” one of the deputies asked. “Regular versus snow tires?”

“Different width. Heavier vehicle, maybe even commercial weight. That backs up Owen’s theory that we’re dealing with more than one killer.”

Hearing his name, Owen sat up a little straighter. Huh. Not only was he getting sucked into leading this pack, now the police were following up on his ideas. It also dawned on him that every deputy sheriff probably knew he’d been taken down by dog spray trainers, but nobody’d busted his chops over it. He hated that he was getting to like these folks more with each passing day.

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“Damn. That’s scary,” another deputy said quietly.

“Check your on-board computers.” Tom resumed talking. “We’ve got two stolen cars reported out of Lander, a BOLO for a senior with Alzheimer’s, although he probably won’t get anywhere near our county, and Missus Howlett’s gate got left open again.”

Owen felt his brow furrow when the sheriffs started chuckling.

“Missus Howlett is a human who lives outside of town and breeds prize-winning dachshunds,” Tom told him like that explained everything.

“Yeah,” another deputy added. “Every time one of the German Shepherds at Fairwind Kennels comes into heat, those stubby little dogs make a break for it.”

“Well then they shouldn’t be too hard to find.” Tom was grinning ear to ear. “Just be on the lookout for a line of dogs carrying stepstools. Dismissed.”

Still chuckling, the deputies headed for the door.

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Beneath the noise, Owen heard Tom's stomach rumble.

"Whadya say we pick up supper from the diner on the way to my place," Tom said. "I'm sick of cooking and you two just plain suck in the kitchen."

"No argument here," Suzanne replied.

"Same here. And we should get one of those berry pies too. Listen, Tom, I was thinking about that forensics report you got earlier in the week saying two different guns were used—"

"Deputy Ray." The front door burst open, cutting Owen off. Three young weres stormed into the office. They stood on the other side of the counter, smelling like hyped-up bravado and looking far too aggressive for their age and size. All three of them glared at Owen before the first one resumed talking.

"We want to talk to him."

Leaning back on his desk, Tom casually crossed his arms over his chest. "You do?"

Standing, Owen moved to the public side of the counter, assumed a comfortable stance and

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didn't bother to mask his irritation at the whelps' rudeness. "About what?"

"About...about Sheriff Timberman." The young were's voice lost some of its confidence but he pressed on anyway. "Yeah. How come you show up only a couple of days after he's murdered, and all but move into our Alpha's house. And now our Alpha's dead too."

Owen knew the kid's name was Jasper Baker and he'd seen him working out a few times at the community center. Enrolled in the nearby veterinary college, Jasper liked to talk about how he followed the rodeo circuit in the summer and roped calves. Learning to heal animals while scaring the shit out of them during his off hours had struck Owen as a bit of an oxymoron.

The young male stepped forward until his chest was almost touching Owen's. "You've been strutting around here like you own the place and some of us have got something to say about that."

"You do?" Owen's voice was calm, his words measured. Wally and Suzanne were newcomers too but he noticed these kids weren't asking about them. Mentally, he was calculating how

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many of the Jasper's bones he could snap before his buddies figured out what was going on and rushed him. The thought cheered him up for a second or two, until he made himself admit a non-physical response was the more prudent choice. "You've got balls, Jasper. I admire that. You're also a bucketful of stupid jacked up on adrenaline. What's your plan? Challenge me, take me down with a right jab to my solar plexus, helped along by that roll of coins you're holding? Tsk, tsk, boys." Owen grabbed the were's wrist, turned it up and back. The roll of coins hit the floor before the kid had even yelped in pain. Owen let go so Jasper could rub his owie. "Then maybe your buddies will bum rush me. Or they'll hold my arms while you wail on me? Hmm? Was that it?" Stepping up to the other weres, Owen spotted the sweat beading their foreheads, smelled the uncertainty rolling off them. One was Keenan O'Donohue, the shoe salesman with the charisma and taste for the ladies down at The Hair Of The Horse. The other was his quiet friend, Terrence. Now that Cory was dead and Owen had stepped up, he'd been expecting challenges like this. It was how weres were hardwired. What he hadn't expected was to feel was embarrassed because his

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first challengers in human form were so much smaller than him. That and they had the tactical savvy of gnats. "I'm feeling helpful this evening so go ahead." He held out his arms. "Take hold. Take me down."

Compared to his, the kids' arms were thin and short. When Owen flexed his hands into fists and grinned, the weres took a step back.

Owen lowered his arms. "Like I said, I admire a were with balls. But it took three of you to get up the courage to challenge me. Give yourselves another few years of growing up and filling out and try again. Hmm? Now go home, boys. I'm sure your mommas are waiting supper on you."

In an act of deliberate dismissal, he turned his back on them and walked away. They might be young, dumb and full of...well, whatever...but he also sensed they were the kind of males who would challenge a higher-ranking were head-on and honorably. That roll of coins notwithstanding. Yeah, not the sort of were who'd killed Ed or Cory, or who'd attacked him. He heard the door open and close behind him.

"That was interesting," Suzanne said. There was a glimmer in her eye as she watched him walk

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up to her. Oh yeah. He liked it when this female looked at him with that kind of lusty approval.

“Seems every time I step in here, somebody’s looking to lay a beating on me.” He fit his hands around her waist and pulled her body into his. “You included if I remember correctly. In my dreams I still hear the sound of those handcuffs you slapped on me.” Grinning, he rubbed his nose against her throat, tasted her with the tip of his tongue. Resisting the urge to bite, he leaned back and released her. Marking her, binding her to a lone wolf like him was something he’d never do to Suzanne. He liked her too much to ruin her life.

Tom clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s official now, buddy. Your first challenge for leadership in human form. Better polish up the brass knuckles ‘cause I smell more where that came from.”

“Terrific.”



Owen hit the off button on Tom’s TV remote and stretched out on the sofa. A weird contentment stole over him when he heard

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Tom's deep voice coming from the direction of the bathroom, followed by Suzanne's silvery laughter.

The evening's challenge had been weighing on him. Obviously, those males saw him as a frontrunner for pack Alpha. No matter how content he was living in this bubble with the two weres down the hall, this was temporary. He'd planted himself in the middle of this pack's social structure and he had damn well better find a way to un-plant himself. Soon. The pack as a whole was coming to depend on him. Those two down the hall were coming to...well, love was too arrogant a word but they did care for him.

He'd have to leave soon or risk hurting them. Badly.

"Want some ice cream?"

Looking up, he smiled when Suzanne skipped into the kitchen. Yeah, skipped. Her step seemed lighter than it had a week ago. She was cheerful, although that didn't distract him from the way her breasts moved under her camisole top, or the way her pert ass tightened as she stretched up on tiptoe to reach the bowls. Those slinky sleeping

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pants she wore did nothing but enhance her shape.

“None for me, thanks,” he answered and continued to admire the view. The two helpings of pie he’d had following dinner had left him a happy man.

When she turned back to him, full bowl in hand, she looked pleased to find him watching her. “I wanted to tell you how well you handled your first pack run.” She slid the spoon between her lips and her cheeks moved like she was licking it clean.

The sight made Owen’s cock twitch.

When Tom came into the kitchen, dressed in sweats and smelling of soap and shampoo, he grabbed a clean spoon and helped himself to some of the ice cream in Suzanne’s bowl. “Nobody could have guessed it was your first.”

Suzanne nodded. “You got the word out to everyone, date and time were clearly established, you kept the speech short and the fun-factor high. You did a good job.”

“Yeah. I excel at organization.” He winced at the flatness in his voice and hid it by pinching

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the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

“Maybe,” Tom added. “But you also made a good choice when you picked that little redheaded were to work at the pharmacy.”

“True.” Suzanne waved her spoon in the air, emphasizing her words. “Like most, this pack’s short on available females. You tackled two problems at once. And, she might be timid but Geoff Amos seems to have taken a shine to her.”

Owen felt he had no right to take credit for any of that so he shut his mouth and stared at the ceiling. The end of the sofa dipped when Tom sat down. Suzanne dropped beside the other male, leaned into the side of his body and, facing Owen, crossed her legs lotus style.

“Why did you leave the Army without a career plan in place?”

This time, when he winced, Owen didn’t bother to hide it. “Because I didn’t plan on leaving.” He fell silent for a moment, sorting through his thoughts and appreciating the space the other two gave him before he resumed talking. “Not too long ago, I was promoted to Sergeant

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First Class. It's not an automatic promotion and not many soldiers reach it. I figured, this is it. I'm more than just a cog in the wheel. I can use my knowledge and experience and make a real impact. But ever since my pack died...ever since Cutler told me to get my ass on leave to Tennessee to help take care of those bastard rogues who killed them...it's like I was restless. The Army was my life. I loved doing the job and everything about it and all of a sudden, it wasn't enough." He felt his cheeks puff out as he exhaled. "I had the re-enlistment papers in my hand. I had a headquarters position waiting for me. Instead, I asked for my discharge papers. Twenty-four hours later, during debriefing in Germany before they flew me Stateside, I realized I had no place to go and no idea what to do once I got there."

He squeezed his nose again then sat up, tugged Suzanne's spoon out of her hand and scooped some of the ice cream into his mouth. The strawberry sweetness of it was thick and cool on his tongue and the distraction pulled him out of his maudlin thoughts, somewhat.

"The day I turned eighteen, I challenged my

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pack Alpha for leadership.” Shit. Why did he feel the need to bring that old news up?

Like before, the two weres kept quiet and let his thoughts spill out where they wanted.

“Fina’s father was a big son of a bitch. Fists like ham hocks and he knew how to use them.” Owen didn’t realize he’d started rubbing his jaw until he felt the movement of his hand. “I’ve thought about the whys over the years. Even at the time, I knew there was no chance I could win. For awhile, I thought it was me just being a stupid, cocky kid. But that wasn’t it. I knew and he knew I had the makings of an Alpha. Like in Cutler’s pack, the drive to lead would have me challenging for leadership until one of us was dead. No pack needs that kind of upheaval.” He thought back on Cutler’s words and how right he’d been.

“It would have been years before Fina’s father was too old to lose and the waiting would have destroyed something in me. But how do you tell your mother her only cub has to leave? For his sake as well as everybody else’s? I took the easy way out instead.”

“No.”

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The sound of Suzanne's annoyingly sensible voice brought his head up.

"You did what was right for your pack. You left before a power struggle ripped their hearts out."

"Yeah but I wasn't there when they needed me, was I?" Owen lashed out. "Seven...only seven fucking rogues took out my entire pack in one night. You think I don't know how to take out multiple targets if I have to?"

The room was silent for a moment.

"You think one more male would have saved them?" Tom asked quietly.

"I sure as hell..." Letting his head fall back, Owen squeezed his eyes shut and answered truthfully instead of emotionally. "I don't know. And that's what keeps running around in my head. My pack needed me and I wasn't there."

"So you keep yourself at arm's length from every other pack." Like before, Suzanne's voice was annoying as hell...only it was because she was right. She didn't sound judgmental, even though he had no problem judging himself. "Hate to break it to you, big guy, but the façade's

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cracking.” Leaning forward, she lifted the edge of his T-shirt. First her soft hair then her even softer lips grazed his belly. She looked up at him at the same time as she exposed the edge of her teeth.

Owen held his breath but it came out all at once when she bit him gently. When his cock started to harden, it pulled blood and oxygen away from his cognitive functions, as usual. Before he was reduced to a grunting Neanderthal, he caught the scent of their acceptance. He might be a cluster fuck waiting to happen but they loved him despite that. Accepted him. The quiet smell of it was filling the room.

They were patient, manipulative bastards. Both of them. And he loved them for it. Great. Yet another revelation he was too messed up to handle.

When she took the spoon back and dipped the end into the ice cream, Owen watched with rising anticipation. The cold made him shudder when she tracked a circle of frosty dessert around his navel. He shuddered again when she slowly licked him clean.

“Oh yeah,” Tom growled. “Now we’re talking.”

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He dipped his spoon back into the bowl, and she was soon gasping as he smoothed ice cream over her back, between where her top had pulled up and her pants sat low.

Owen liked the direction this was heading in too, especially when Tom eased her pants down, then lifted her top up and off. In a soft cloud, her hair drifted around Owen's belly. It gave him an idea. He handed the bowl and spoon to Tom, and with a curt nod of his head, told the other were to get out of the way. Handling her carefully but without apology, Owen flipped her over. She looked uncertain, like she had no idea where this was heading when he slid her naked body toward the end of the sofa. But it was her gasp—that soft, sexy, breathless sound—that got him hard when he lifted her hips. He planted them high on the arm of the sofa so her torso bent back on one side, her legs splayed freely on the other. With his hand on her belly, he steadied her then made quick work of stripping off his clothes. Tom followed suit.

Naked, Owen knelt on the floor between her legs, kissed her soft thighs, let his stubble-rough cheeks graze her skin. While she watched him,

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he draped her knees over his back, held onto her hips and lowered his mouth to her pussy.

Suzanne cried out and bucked. At least she tried to. He held her too tight and the way she responded to him overwhelming her smaller body was erotic as hell. The first, tangy taste of her went to his head like straight liquor. Her scent made his gut cramp with need. He slowed down, enjoying each twitch of her clit, the sight of her belly tightening, the anxious sounds she made when he thrust his tongue into her then dragged it back to circle her anus. Her legs flexed and he liked how her thighs felt against his temples. Liked how the movement exposed her folds even more.

When Tom came into his line of sight, ice-cream bowl in hand, Owen chuckled. The movement of his mouth made Suzanne quiver. He chuckled again so he could feel her response a second time.

Grinning like a maniac, Tom let the frosted back of the spoon hover over her nipple.

“No,” she gasped but it sounded more like excitement than protest. She watched the spoon,

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bit her lower lip then bowed her back and yelped when Tom pressed the metal to her nipple.

When he snatched the spoon away, Owen swore her breast looked bigger, swollen, and her nipple was definitely harder. Still wearing that deviant grin, Tom worked the spoon across the ice cream. This time, he held it over her other nipple, even longer than the first. Slowly, a fat droplet formed on the back. It hung there while they held their breath, while Owen worked his tongue over her clit in sharp little flicks. When the ice cream fell, all three of them sighed.

Suzanne shivered when the spoon followed the drop, smearing it around her nipple. Gooseflesh popped up on her belly and arms. She held Tom's head when he bent to her and covered her with his mouth. The movement of his cheeks told Owen the other male was licking her clean, sucking the strawberry taste off her skin. Tom's eyes closed and he looked more content than a male had a right to be.

Owen drove his tongue into her sheath and fucked her slowly.

"Want some cream with that, buddy?" Owen looked up. Like him, Tom was naked and the

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other were's cock was so hard it was bent back at the top, like it was so eager it was looking to fuck his navel. Tom held up the bowl, looked at Suzanne's pussy and licked his lips.

"Great idea." Leaning back, Owen held on tight. He had to. Suzanne saw what was coming and she squirmed, hard. Her distended breasts swayed prettily. Her mouth formed a protest that came out as a squeal of delight as Tom dribbled half-melted ice cream over her pussy. Owen knew the thick liquid was cold because her hips jerked and she shivered whenever a droplet hit her.

He watched, mesmerized by her response—the way she gasped and squirmed when Tom bounced the back of the spoon on her clit. When Tom had finished tormenting her, Owen stuck out his tongue and ran it through the thick, creamy sweetness coating her. She sighed and shivered again. He lapped at her, drawing the residue taste into her core where it mingled with her juice and exploded on his tongue like liquid ambrosia.

Nothing had ever tasted as delicious. Between his hands, her hips trembled and he watched the movement spill through her arched torso. He

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watched along with her as Tom eyed her breasts and began stirring the ice cream again.

Breathing in the sweet arousal pouring off her, Owen flicked his tongue across her clit, drifted back to lick the mouth of her sheath and around her anus. Tom tortured then soothed her breasts with the cold cream and the heat of his mouth. When she came, her body jerked so hard she almost hurt Owen's neck. Crying out, arching so high he was amazed by her flexibility, she grabbed onto Tom's head as her clit pulsed against Owen's tongue.

When she finally let the other male go, Owen checked her hands to see if she'd pulled any of his hair out. Fortunately for Tom, his head and the hair on it was intact. The tender way he kissed Suzanne enthralled Owen. The way Tom's mouth captured hers, the way his lips brushed hers, it bracketed the warm silence settling around the three of them.

Gently, Owen released her. He helped her to slide back down on the sofa, lifted her so she could stretch out. The tips of his fingers were drawn to her mound. Nearly bare, she was plump and so soft she took his breath away. Her

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face and chest shimmered with a blush of color. When she looked at him—him and Tom—she looked content, replete and so utterly feminine he could only shake his head in amazement. On their knees, shoulder to shoulder, he and Tom became absorbed by the lushness of her body in the aftermath of orgasm.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured and watched his fingers slip between her legs, glide across her warm, wet flesh, felt her tremble as residual passion coursed visibly through her. He touched her breast while Tom caressed her belly. As they stroked her, their hands crossed paths, touched, slid away, returned. Still on his knees, Tom turned to him.

The other male’s mouth looked hard but Owen knew different. He knew how those lips could move against his, knew Tom’s taste, his scent. Tom’s gaze lifted to his. In it, Owen saw that he could have him. Could take what he wanted. Anything he wanted, if he wanted anything at all. When Tom’s head dipped to the side, just a little, Owen moaned at the unconscious sensuality of the gesture and couldn’t have muffled the sound if he’d tried.

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Unsure how or if to proceed, he licked his lips and felt his cock get thicker as the other were tracked the movement of his tongue like he was hungry for it.

“I’m not into other guys. Never have been.”

“Me either.” Tom’s voice was rough, deeper than usual. The sound made Owen aware of how close their chests were. How their cocks seemed to be straining toward each other.

“Damned if I know why I like being this close to *you*.”

Tom’s lips moved, like he was going to say something. Nothing came out. Instead, he nodded and swallowed. The movement of his throat drew Owen’s gaze. Strong muscle framed the jerky bob. When a bead of sweat took a long, slow slide down Tom’s cheek, when it clung to his hard jaw and spilled over his throat, Owen leaned forward, dying without the taste of it on his tongue.

He laid his lips on Tom’s neck, licked at the drop of sweat, trembled and tasted him again. Like Suzanne, Tom’s taste was ambrosia in his mouth. That was fucked up as hell. Tom was

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hard, big all over, scented like a prime male and the hands that gripped Owen's shoulders were powerful and rough.

There was no benefit to loving another male that Owen could see. No soft breasts or thighs to press into him while they fucked. No pups to be conceived, not that Owen saw parenthood as a viable option. There was just...Tom. For some reason, it was enough.

He sucked on Tom's skin, harder than he would dare with Suzanne. He growled with pleasure when the other male bucked in response. The scent of this male's need was familiar, arousing as hell and Owen breathed him in until their chests touched.

Hard warmth, skin against skin. Owen felt his lips pull back in a feral smile. Lifting his head, he kissed Tom full on the mouth, paused, then drove his tongue in deep.

The hand on the back of his neck held him hard, kept him right where he was. Powerful fingers fisted his hair as Tom's mouth slanted against his. The other male tried to control the kiss, drive his tongue into Owen's mouth, tried to drive Owen's back. Owen was having no

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part of it. With both hands, he held onto Tom's head, forced the other were to arch under his strength. Again, Tom fought back, struggled for dominance but when Owen growled a second time, when the sound came up as a deep, wild rumble from his chest, Tom inhaled. A single, sharp inhalation and the lips beneath Owen's softened. Warm breath grazed the bridge of his nose and the hand on his shoulder held him tight without bruising.

The movement of Tom's chest against his as he breathed was so intimate Owen growled again. This time, the sound was subtle instead of fierce and conveyed so much tenderness, Owen surprised himself. Like before, Tom tasted warm, salty and had that subtle hit of citrus that made Owen feel light in the head.

Without giving himself an opportunity to second guess his need, Owen let his hips rock forward until his hard cock rubbed Tom's.

"Ah. *Fuck.*" He wasn't sure if it was his need or Tom's voice he was hearing. Reaching between them, he wrapped his fist around his cock, his and Tom's, and squeezed.

This time, Tom's hips punched forward. They

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jerked like he was trying to fuck himself inside Owen's grip. The feel of Tom's cock moving against his, living satin over steel core, made it impossible to think about anything but the pleasure and intimacy. Tom shoved his hand between their bodies, tried to take over the rough pull on their rods. Owen fought him off, held on tight, pushed back.

"Fucker," Tom moaned, brought his fist down on Owen's chest then arched his back so his hips could power forward.

"Asshole." Owen caught Tom's nipple between his teeth, bit down until the other male groaned then licked and sucked. It was so different from a woman's breast. There was no warm cushion of flesh to cradle his face. Tom's nipple was smaller, harder and the solid backing of pectoral muscle meant there was no softness to pull into his mouth. Despite that, Owen felt a surge of pride when Tom shivered, when he wrapped his arm around Owen's head and sighed voluptuously. The other male stopped fighting and trembled when Owen stroked them both in a rough rhythm.

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There was no weakness in Tom's concession, just an admission of need.

Owen focused on what he was feeling, trying to make it good for both of them. The head of Tom's cock leaked pre-cum, making the slide smoother. His scent just about drove Owen mad. Holding on with the full width of his palm, Owen moved their skin up and back, squeezed the heads, grunted when they rubbed together. Lifting his mouth from Tom, he sucked air into his aching lungs, turned his head to the side and cursed when Tom pinched his nipple and didn't let go.

Movement caught his eye. Stretched out on the sofa, Suzanne watched them. Her lids were heavy with lust. Those small, beautiful hands of hers slid over her body, squeezed her breasts, coasted over her belly, disappeared between her legs where they moved with a soft, squelching sound that made Owen's balls ache. She rolled toward them, kissed his hip then Tom's, squeezed his ass. He figured she was squeezing Tom's ass too because he started rocking into Owen's grip, even came up on his toes at the same time Suzanne's fingernail grazed Owen's perineum.

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Owen didn't know who he loved more at that moment. Then it dawned on him. He loved them both. Loved them together, like this, with him. Loving him and him loving them. The male gripping his shoulder and nipple so intently groaned and the cock pressed against his own began to pulse.

In time with Tom's growls, cum splashed up between them, landed in thick trails on Tom's belly and his. The wet stickiness made it easy to move his hand and he gripped and pulled, drawing the other male's seed out of him. Reaching between them, he palmed Tom's balls, scraped his nails over the tight skin, held onto what control he possessed as the hard orbs pulsed.

When the final spasm of Tom's orgasm ceded a warm dollop that oozed between Owen's fingers, he didn't stop. Despite the other male's groans and the way he shuddered, Owen moved his hand hard and fast. Throwing his head back, he braced himself with his free hand on Tom's shoulder and gave in to the tingling building up beneath his balls. He cried out, squeezed his eyes shut when he came. Lightening strikes of ecstasy

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blinded him, made him ache, made him drive his cock into his fist as hard as he could.

With a final, shuddering gasp, it was over. Letting go of his over-sensitive cock, Tom's too, Owen swayed, despite being on his knees. He leaned his head on Tom's shoulder just as Tom was using his. When he felt a soft hand on his arm, he blinked and looked up. Crouched beside them, Suzanne held a damp cloth. She bathed him gently, him and Tom. The cloth was warm and comforting and he leaned back, grinned and enjoyed the way she tended to them.

When they were clean, her hand replaced the cloth. Her fingers trailed through the hair at the base of his shaft, teasing the sensitive skin beneath. She caressed Tom's balls, ran the pad of her thumb around the crest of Owen's cock.

"Watching you two together made me crazy hot," she whispered then kissed his throat, sucked on Tom's earlobe. "I've never seen anything so erotic. Just so you know, I'm jumping the first one to get hard again."

Owen laughed—a deep, lusty sound that washed away his self-recrimination, his doubts. He kissed her, then Tom. "Deal," he said. "Squeeze

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the head harder and I'm your man. And when you're finished with me," he added and jerked his head in Tom's direction, "I'm going to watch you make him howl."

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Chapter Twelve

“Crouch downnn...now jump!” Owen threw his arms into the air and exploded upward. The nine pre-schoolers in front of him did the same thing, only they yelled like mad. “Shoulder roll.” Remembering not to bark, he flashed them a big smile and held his hands ready to nudge their tiny bodies over so they completed their rolls.

“Plant your feet. Punch right.” Elbows tucked in, he thrust his right fist straight out from his body. The pups copied him, yelled again. “Punch left.” This time his left fist shot out. “Oohhh...you’re way too good at that. Way too good. Quick walk around the mats. Faster. Move your arms. Yeah, you’re *so* good at this.

“And rest.”

Sweating, groaning and grinning, the pups collapsed on the mats in the middle of the community center gymnasium. The parents, sitting in chairs against the walls, heard the cue that the class was over. They hoisted their

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children up, smiled and praised them, mopped sweaty faces and offered water to drink.

A tiny female pup stepped away from her mother and parked herself in front of Owen. "I like coming here," she said and held out her arms.

Wondering why the hell he was doing it, Owen reached down and picked her up. She sat in the bend of his elbow like she was used to big people holding her, wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed her cheek against his. While she did that, another pup wrapped himself around Owen's leg. There'd been so much demand, he'd started a third intro to self-defense course, this one for pre-schoolers. The group was by far the most demonstrative. By the time the class dispersed, every one of the pups had nuzzled and marked him. What was crazy about it was he didn't have that maniacal urge to wash their scent off.

Shaking his head, he trotted to the far side of the gym where he'd left his warm-up jacket and cell. There was a voicemail waiting for him.

"*Owen, hi.*" He stood up a little straighter when he recognized Piper's voice. "*I know*

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you're working this morning but I wanted to ask if you could drive the boys and me to the airport tomorrow. We're catching a flight to Arizona. All three of us."



Precisely at quarter to nine the next morning, Owen checked the departures board. The flight to Tucson was on schedule. He looked over the group of weres huddling around Piper and her sons. For the most part, the weres were older. Friends of Piper and Cory. Katherine and her mate were there of course, Piper's sisters, Ian the pack's business manager, Myra the waitress from the diner. Because his pickup could only seat three, he'd borrowed Suzanne's SUV.

"Time to check-in," he said to no one in particular. When he pushed the trolley holding the family's suitcases, they fell into step behind him. Just before they reached the counter, Piper handed him a set of keys.

"They're for the house," she said, straightened his coat lapel and brushed it smooth. "The office

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is yours.” Her sons began passing the luggage through to the check-in agent.

“Piper, I’m...I’m not the man for the job.”

She smiled and it looked so sad, he felt his heart crack. “Says you,” she whispered, stretched up on tip-toe and pressed her cheek to his. She turned away from him, waved at the others and let her sons lead her up to the check-in desk.

Standing back, he watched what was left of Piper’s family produce travel documents, wave one last time then walk toward a security gate. Halfway there, she paused, reached out to the female who’d distanced herself from the others. “Take care of yourself, Victoria. I’ll miss you.” She hugged her, hard, then let her sons guide her away.

The female, now standing by herself, looked unaccountably small. Myra walked up to her and said, “Let’s get going. It’s a long drive back to Pinebridge.”

“You go ahead. I’m going to ask Owen to drive me home. You’ll be late for work as it is.”

“If you’re sure?”

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“Absolutely. Go ahead. I’ll call you later.”

Hearing his name, Owen looked over at Victoria Timberman, Sheriff Ed Timberman’s widow. He held out his arm. She took it without prompting and let him lead her out of the terminal.

“Warm enough?” he asked after he’d gotten her settled in the passenger seat. He adjusted the heater.

“Fine. Thank you.” Ed’s widow was around five and a half feet tall but she seemed smaller than that. She stared out the window and kept turning the gloves in her hands over in a slow, hypnotic rhythm. Owen hadn’t spent much time around her before this. After her husband’s funeral, apparently, she’d kept to herself, staying with one then another of her three adult cubs and their families. In her mid-fifties, she had short brown hair and blue eyes. He supposed she was pretty, except she looked too worn down for it to show.

“So the boys are going back to school?” she asked, finally breaking the silence that had settled around them.

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“Geoff is. He says he’ll lose the year if he doesn’t get back to class. Apparently Ty’s gifted enough he’s already met the course requirements for a pass.”

She smiled thinly when he looked over at her. “I imagine that annoyed the hell out of Geoff.”

“I think so. Especially since Geoff thinks he’ll have a hard time getting his mind back on school. He might have to repeat a course or two, or get tutoring next term.”

“I imagine he would. Find it hard to concentrate.”

She stared out the window again and Owen let the conversation lapse. She probably had a reason for asking him for a ride. It was just a question of waiting for her to tell him what it was.

It was some time before she broke the silence again. “It’s good that Piper’s found a house to rent in Tucson. Being with family helps. Taking care of her boys will give her something to do.”

Owen grunted noncommittally.

“Are you working with them?”

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He felt the furrow between his eyes deepen.

“Tom and the other sheriffs. Are you helping them solve my Ed’s murder?”

He considered lying then remembered this was a cop’s wife. She’d know how to keep a confidence. “Yes. Cutler Powell asked me to snoop around.”

“He’s a good man. And what do you know so far?”

Owen hesitated.

“I was married to a cop for thirty-six years. Not once, in all those years of him coming home and getting off his chest the things he had to, did a peep of what he said make it past my lips. So when I ask you, young man, for information about the investigation into my mate’s murder, you damn well better answer me.”

Shifting nervously behind the wheel, Owen glanced at the female sitting beside him. All of a sudden, she didn’t seem quite so small. “Two different shooters,” he said evenly. “Different weapons, different vehicles. A group of weres attacked me the night Cory was murdered.” For the sake of his pride, he left out the part about

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the dog-training sprayers. “Tried to shame me into leaving town.”

“Hmm.” Victoria nodded. “To make you look good for the murder?”

“That’s what we’re thinking.”

“A *group* of weres you said? That’s not normal behavior. We each fight for and accept our position in the pack. One will rise to Alpha. For our kind, leadership isn’t by committee.”

He grunted in agreement.

“Well it sounds like they’re organized. And smart. Be smarter.” That was the last thing she said during the trip, until they passed through Pinebridge and she told him which turnoff to take.



Wearing a big, fake smile, Owen took a stroll around the perimeter of the community center gymnasium. The floor was thumping in time with the crazy dance moves the fifty or so young weres were putting down on this small-town Saturday night. This was the first and last time

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he'd let himself get roped into chaperoning a dance. If he never listened to another song by the Zac Brown Band it would be too soon. He supposed they weren't that bad but had nobody this far west heard of AC/DC? Feeling like his ears were going to start bleeding any minute, he headed for the side door for some fresh air.

Outside, he navigated the picnic tables that had been set up for late supper, and ducked beneath a rope of party lights.

"Back inside this instant, young lady."

His head came up when he heard one of the other chaperone's shrill, unmistakable, mom-voice.

"I bought those cigarettes with my own money." The young female being hollered at appeared out of the darkness, dogged by an older and obviously far more determined female chaperone.

"Dolores Beattie...you know smoking's against the rules here. Give me the package."

"No."

"Give me the package..." The older female's

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voice was lower and carried even more authority. "...and I won't tell your mother."

"Fine," the young female spit out, slapped her package of cigarettes in the chaperone's hand, and snarled at Owen as she headed back inside.

"There goes tomorrow's future," he quipped as the other chaperone stopped beside him.

"Tell me about it," she deadpanned. "I've got two teenagers of my own and I'd sell them for a nickel if I could find a buyer." Grumbling, she stalked back into the gymnasium.

With a sign of resignation, Owen followed her. Cubs might be cute as all get out but from what he'd seen lately, when they got older, they could be a pure pain in the ass.



"Try this one. It's one of my specialties. Crab cake with grain mustard Hollandaise. Hell on the cholesterol count but once in a while won't kill us. Will it, boys?"

Owen inhaled then sighed when David Hold set a plate in the middle of the diner table. Tom

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and Suzanne had gone to work early because the coroner's reports were due in, so Deputy Wally Pierce was with Owen this morning. At least until after breakfast when Owen would be at the community center. Then Wally would be officially off shift. But for now, he was grabbing his fork and staring at the offerings on the table with a lust that almost embarrassed the hell out of Owen.

Jackson Fender, the juke-box repair guy and Garnett Ross, the blacksmith, rounded out their number.

All five men fell silent as they dug into David's breakfast.

As he chewed, Wally made quiet, voluptuous sounds until Owen poked his elbow into the humongous were's ribs.

"So tell me more about your idea of a group hierarchy," Owen asked David when they'd finished eating and the coffeepot was making its second round.

David waved his hand dismissively and passed the sugar. "Nothing to tell. It was just an idea I had off the top of my head. Mostly I was thinking

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of you. You're settling in here nicely and I'm sure I'm not the only one who'd hate to see something bad happen to you."

"You do kind of stick out above the others," Jackson added. "That's a good thing but considering what's been going on around here, it might be a bad thing too. Pinebridge needs a strong leader but it also needs to find a way to protect its leaders." He took a sip of his coffee and smacked his lips in appreciation. "Are the police looking into protecting the hierarchy?" he asked Wally.

"Yes, but our priority is protecting every member of the pack," Wally hedged.

"Nobody can find fault with that," David said. "I just wish somebody smart would get their head around the problem of how the hierarchy has become targets. More toast anybody?"

Sitting back and waving off another helping, Owen drank the last of his coffee. Whether he'd intended to or not, David had planted an idea that Owen knew he'd be wrestling with for days to come.

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Owen's wolf looked up at the quarter moon. He felt the milling of almost two-hundred wolves around the clearing. The stink of unease still permeated the pack but resignation was edging it out. The void in the leadership had to be sorted out, and soon. Like their kind had always done, they'd accept the strongest leader to emerge from their ranks. Owen's wolf knew this instinctively but wasn't capable of rationalizing it. It understood strength, the bonds of the pack, affection—even love. It also knew that to rule was its birthright.

With the golden-brown bitch and the massive black wolf flanking him, Owen moved through the pack. A male and female, a mated pair, spronked in front of him. Accepting the invitation to play, Owen chased them around the clearing, held back his speed while they navigated huddles of wrestling wolves. When another male joined in the chase, Owen broke off his pursuit so he could return to his earlier companions. He scented them nearby and wasn't surprised to find them behind him when he turned around.

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A big, reddish male approached him, head on. In a second, the male was on him, snarling, gnashing his canines. Driving up on his back legs, Owen's wolf twisted its upper body and brought his powerful chest down on the challenger's back. His jaws clamped over the red's neck, held for the space of a heartbeat then released. Shoving at the other with his forepaws, sending him sprawling, Owen used the shift in momentum to jump clear and land on his feet with calculated grace.

He felt his lips flutter menacingly as he faced the red wolf, waiting for another challenge. It came. This time, the other male came at him fast and low, deked to the side just before impact and swung his heavy skull so he could hit and bite at the same time.

Being big didn't mean Owen's wolf was slow. More than one challenger had made that mistake. Jumping to the left, he let the other wolf's momentum carry him past. Owen clamped his jaw on the male's hindquarter and snarled when a drop of blood wicked into his mouth. Yelping, the challenger hopped away, leaving Owen's wolf to spit out the tuft of fur lodged between his teeth.

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The red wolf faced him again, seemed to consider his options, then turned so his flank was exposed. Giving one final growl, Owen trotted up to him, gave him a sniff then cuffed the male's shoulder playfully. The tension around them diffused and they rolled around the grassy clearing, mock wrestling and batting at each other with their forepaws.

It wasn't long before Owen's wolf scented fresh tension rising nearby.

Scrambling to his feet, he sniffed the air and glanced around. A large white wolf was pacing nearby—circling not him but the massive black male that had a hold on Owen's heart. As much as he wanted to intercede, to help the male that was his packmate, this was not Owen's fight. He would diminish the black wolf's position by letting the others think the male couldn't fight his own battles.

Growling, he watched Tom's wolf fend off the first charge, turn and attack. In a vicious flurry of movement, they were all over each other. Teeth snapping, paws striking and fending off. They stopped, circled then dove at each other again.

Just as quickly as it had started, it was finished.

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The white was on his side, whining, casting fearful sideways glances at the massive black wolf towering over it, still snapping its jaws in warning.

The golden-brown bitch walked up to Owen like she owned the land around him, butted her head into his jaw then, tail held high and back end twitching, walked over to the black wolf. She treated him to the same, haughty greeting she'd shown Owen's wolf then led the black back to Owen's side.

Just the scent of her made him mad to father her pups. Lots of them.

The sound of fighting drew his attention. Angry because he was no longer focusing on the golden-brown bitch and the sleekness of her hindquarters, Owen turned to gage the new scuffle.

Two females were circling a silver-tipped bitch. He knew that one. Although old, she had the righteous strength of a top bitch. Either her challengers were poor fighters or their hearts weren't in it. One then the other charged her, snarled, flashed their teeth but jumped back in fear when the silver-tipped female snapped

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at them. He watched with rising anxiety as the golden-brown bitch ran toward the silver-tipped. Instead of offering a fresh challenge though, the younger female stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the older. She took on the next challenger to step forward.

Owen's wolf growled. Part of him respected the protection the younger female offered an older, venerated member of the pack. Part of him recognized that the gesture announced the top bitch was no longer physically able to fend off challenges. However, his instinct was to trust the golden-brown female and if she declared those challenges would wait for another day, so be it.

The next challenger, a dark brown female with long, sturdy legs, tried to take a bite out of the golden-brown's belly. The challenger was soundly repulsed when the golden-brown spun, used the momentum of her body to drive her larger opponent into the ground then bite down on her ear.

Yelping and shaking her head, the larger female broke free and ran off.

Owen's wolf wanted to trot over to the golden-brown bitch, nuzzle her, trumpet her victory by

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bumping his chest into her shoulder. Two more challengers, one that squared off against him and another that started running toward the black male at Owen's side, yanked his focus away from the golden-brown female.

He and his packmate accepted their respective challenges, ran toward the fight, struck first and struck hard. Both fights were over quickly and when they were, he heard the golden-brown female's growl. A second bitch was circling her. This one seemed canny and experienced as she looked for weaknesses in the golden-brown's confidence and stance. Owen's wolf could see none but he heard the black male whine when the two females tore into each other.

The fight was ferocious but quick. Again, the golden-brown female was victorious, although she limped through the first two steps she took afterward. The limp righted itself quickly.

Tension in the clearing, like before, diffused. Groups of wolves resumed their play, chased each other, rolled and rubbed their backs into the dirt with luxuriant focus.

Owen's wolf, with the black male at his side, headed for the golden-brown female. Other

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wolves bounced across his path, smiling with their tongues lolling out. Owen ran around them, accepted the invitations to play but only for a moment before continuing on. He stopped short when he came across a small, trembling female. From the corner of her eye, she glanced up at him shyly then looked away. Her rich, red coat shimmered in the moonlight. A wolf this timid was as good as asking to be humped by any member of the pack looking to flaunt their dominance. Owen growled at a nearby young wolf that smelled of careless aggression, sending it running off in another direction. He stood beside the female, nudged her snout with his, leaned some of his weight into her. When she shied away, he walked around her and leaned into her other side.

This time, she understood he was offering protection. Friendship. Tentatively, as if she was expecting a reproach, she licked his muzzle. The black male stuck his face in hers and wouldn't back off until she licked him too. When the golden-brown bitch strode up to them, as if by unspoken agreement, the males dropped their chests to the ground. She did the same then spronked, accepting the invitation to play. They

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watched and waited for the small, red female to do the same.

She did, eventually, although it took a second invitation. The four of them ran around the clearing, dodging and carving tight, fast curves across the turf. Owen's wolf and the two wolves he considered his pack, left the small female with a group of older wolves who were doing more sniffing than playing. He jumped, turned on his hind legs and led them out of the clearing. At a dead run, he chased the freedom and exhilaration he sensed waiting for then in the forest beyond.



“Do you have any more frozen peas?”

Tom, putting a band-aid on his elbow, looked up from his perch on the sofa.

“In the freezer downstairs,” he said and watched Suzanne head for the cellar door. He never could resist watching her ass when she moved, even if she was limping a little.

Beside him, Owen grunted as he repositioned the bag of peas, the ones from the refrigerator

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freezer, over his ribs. Suzanne had already iced her knee before handing the bag to Owen. Apparently, her knee needed more. Tom would have offered to get them for her but his ankle was throbbing and she was handling the stairs better than he could. His chuckling brought Owen's head around.

"Nobody said sorting out the challenges for leadership would be easy." Tom closed up the tube of Neosporin and wiped his fingers off with a tissue. "We look like a bunch of invalids."

"Maybe, but the other guys look a helluva lot worse."

"*Touché*, buddy." Tom lifted his half-finished bottle of Snake River Lager then took a long drink. "Skip Walters has got some moves though. Thought he had me for a moment." He thought back to the furious but short fight with Skip's white wolf. "Guess being a ranch foreman keeps him in fighting shape."

"Yeah. Just your luck. You kicked ass though."

"I did, didn't I," Tom answered with a satisfaction he couldn't contain.

"Watch your left flank next time." Suzanne

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grimaced a little as she climbed the final step from the basement. "You turn to the right every time and there's a moment when you leave yourself exposed."

"Do I?"

"Absolutely."

"Huh. Thanks." Moving over, Tom made room so Suzanne could sit on the sofa. He lifted her leg gingerly and settled it across his lap. "Here?" he asked after he took the peas from her and laid them on her knee.

She sighed and nodded.

Tracking Owen as the big were stuck his head in the fridge, Tom liked the way the male's shoulder swelled beneath his pressed shirt, the hard line of his lat. The male body had never appealed to him. He'd always loved the softness of women, the way they smelled, the sound of their voices. Still did. Suzanne especially and he smiled to himself as he adjusted the bag of peas on her knee then massaged her ankle. When her toes curled and she sighed with obvious contentment, he felt more of his heart cede itself to her. As much as he loved being with her, as

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much as he, well, loved her, they were stuck in this damned holding pattern. They'd stay that way until Owen made up his mind, one way or the other, to stay.

He was the shining star, the strength they were drawn to. He was also the only male Tom had ever wanted. Maybe it was because Owen didn't work at being a leader. He wore it with an almost dismissive ease. That kind of strength was seductive. Whatever it was, Tom still couldn't quite believe his luck at hooking up with not one but two blonde haired, blue eyed hotties. Who treated him like he was the center of their happiness.

"Before Piper left she gave me a key to her house."

Tom made himself focus on what Owen was saying and not the way that hard curve of his jaw worked as he spoke.

"I'm not comfortable setting up shop in her house though." Gently, Owen lifted Suzanne's shoulders, sat down and cradled her head on his lap. As he spoke, he held the frozen peas to his ribs with one hand and ran the fingers of the other across her hair, almost absently. "When she

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and the boys come back this summer, it should be their home, not an administrative facility.”

When his chuckle drew a scowl from Owen, Tom wasn't surprised.

“For somebody so smart, you're pretty obtuse sometimes.” Tom shook his head. “You keep telling yourself you're not the male to lead this pack, then you go and demonstrate your gift for it. Again.” He sighed in frustration and shifted the makeshift icepack on Suzanne's knee so it covered the inner curve of the joint. “You're not staying in Cory's house, effectively cocking your leg outside the front door and overriding what's left of Cory's mark. You're looking out for the interests of a widow in the pack—affording the mate of our former Alpha respect and dignity. Yeah I know—” Tom pressed on when Owen opened his mouth to interrupt. “These aren't concepts in your conscious vocabulary but they're innate parts of you. Fight it all you want but this pack needs you and you need it. From what I've seen, being Alpha sucks almost as much as it rocks. You've got it in you to be an Alpha and when there's a void, nature gives you no choice but to step up.”

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“What he said,” Suzanne added then grabbed Tom’s beer off the coffee table. She took a sip then another, and handled the bottle to Owen.

Frowning at the two of them, Owen accepted the beer, drank what was left and grimaced. “If you’re hell-bent on pursuing this topic, you should know I respond best to brow beating if there’s decent beer involved.”

“Decent?” Tom barked. He snatched the bottle back and cradled it to his chest. “The Snake River label is one of the finest brews in Wyoming. Hell, in the entire U S of A. Just ‘cause you’re in love with that elitist, imported crap. Huh. Might as well piss on rodeo.”

“Don’t get me started.”

Chuckling, Suzanne sat up, removed the peas from her knee and flexed it gingerly. Without a word, she lifted Tom’s leg onto her lap—much like he’d done with hers—and put the bag on his ankle.

He couldn’t help but grunt with pleasure when the ache began to numb.

They sat there for some time, passing the bags of peas around, occasionally getting up to fetch

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another beer from the fridge. Owen picked up the TV remote, looked at it then tossed it aside. Outside, frogs were croaking. Moths circled the porch light, casting hypnotic shadows on the railing. Tom had always liked this little house. It was quiet, his refuge from the ugliness of his job. But with Owen and Suzanne here, it was more. It was the place where they were all safe from the things that were tearing his pack apart. With them, it was a home.

And *they* were his pack.

"I'm going to take a shower," Suzanne announced quietly. He and Owen helped her to stand then stared at her ass as she padded toward the back of the house.

Owen got up next. He returned both bags of peas to the freezer, put the empties away then ran a cloth over the already clean kitchen counter. Tom smiled. This would-be Alpha of theirs might have a few quirks but nothing Tom couldn't live with.

"Coming to bed?"

Tom's gaze shot up. He felt the pull the male had on him and his libido attached all sorts of

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sexy innuendos to the simple question. Maybe some of that showed on his face because Owen looked him over with the kind of intensity he usually saved for Suzanne. When the other male licked his lower lip, Tom felt his cock get longer.

“Absolutely.” Without another word, he stood up. Ignoring the twinge in his ankle, Tom shut off the kitchen lights and followed Owen down the hall. He didn’t even bother to disguise his interest when Owen unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the taut slope of his abdomen, the full, symmetrical rise of his pecs.

When the shirt was finally tugged off, Tom dearly wanted to lick the deep indent beneath Owen’s triceps. Fully aware the other male knew he was being watched, Tom bit back a groan as Owen eased his belt clear of its fastening, then opened button after button holding his jeans together. Beneath those boxer briefs he always wore, Owen’s cock swelled into the gap in the denim over his crotch. With a decisive yank, with his gaze holding Tom’s, Owen dropped his jeans, underwear and all. Tom stood there for a moment, spellbound by the male’s height, the

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spread of his shoulders, those long, thick muscles in his thighs.

He inhaled so fast he made a hissing sound through his teeth when Owen palmed his rod, gave the head a rough squeeze then cupped his balls. He drew them up, making them look fat and full as they strained against his sac with its skin pulled tight and shiny. And the sound he made...that deep, seductive growl as he ran his thumb across the orbs. Tom shook and couldn't stop if he'd wanted to try.

With that mouth of his open, just a little, Owen let go of himself, crossed over to the bed, yanked back the sheets and sat up against the headboard. Blinking, Tom watched him arrange pillows behind his head then cock a finger in his direction.

Oh. Yeah. Without further invitation and with far less finesse than Owen had shown, Tom yanked off his t-shirt and jeans. He grunted when he yanked his sock off too aggressively and wrenched his ankle in a direction it so did not want to go in. Dropping down on the corner of the bed, he pulled off the second sock with a bit more care.

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“You all right?” Concern echoed in Owen’s voice, in his gaze too. Tom looked down at the were’s strong, square fingers resting on his forearm.

“I’m good. Just...”

“Me too.” Owen nodded slowly. “This is new and nothing I’d ever thought I’d want. If you ever, you know, *don’t* want—”

“I do,” Tom interrupted quickly then ran his palm across his face. “God help me but I do want you. As much as I want Suzanne. At the same time. *Not* at the same time. It’s all good. Too good.”

“Yeah. But too good’s okay.”

“Yeah.” Tom didn’t resist when Owen’s strong hand cupped the back of his head. He leaned into the kiss the other male offered. For the briefest moment, Owen’s mouth simply grazed his, pursed and tugged at his lips like he was asking instead of taking what Tom was obviously so eager to give. He liked it...liked feeling courted, like the opportunity to say no was being offered without condition or a need for explanation.

He exhaled shakily. When he did, Owen

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cupped his jaw, his long fingers touched his hair like they'd touched Suzanne's. He caressed him with gentleness and the feeling there was nothing this formidable were wanted more in this world, at this moment, than to touch him. Tom's cock started to thicken and rise so quick, he groaned.

Tom also liked it when the kiss turned possessive, when Owen let some of his strength loose, slanted his mouth and drove his tongue in steady and deep. The taste of him made Tom lightheaded. That hint of coffee and chocolate, dark and bittersweet. He barely registered the sound of the shower turning on. Owen's chin was rough against his, not buttery soft like a woman's. Yet another difference Tom found himself relishing.

"What the...?" he blurted out when Owen yanked him across the bed. The other male's biceps swelled as he hoisted Tom's weight. Big and strong himself, he struggled to get his head around the ease with which Owen manhandled him, laid him down, buried his face in his neck and scraped his teeth over his skin.

Like they had a mind of their own, Tom's arms came around the other male, held him close.

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He arched his neck so Owen could reach more of him, gasped at the sharp, stinging pressure of Owen's incisors. He'd never wanted to be claimed, never wanted to be marked but that was only because he'd never met anyone he'd felt a compulsion to mate with.

When Owen continued to seduce him with the teasing, gliding pressure of his teeth, the soft nips and tugs of his lips, the warmth of his tongue, Tom squirmed then brought his fist down on the bed. His hips punched up. His cock ached to rub against Owen's. Shifting his weight, Owen eluded him, held his shoulders down, moved to an untouched part of his throat and started sucking on his skin.

"Bastard," Tom groaned and trembled when Owen pinched his nipple between thumb and forefinger then rubbed it with diabolical slowness.

Owen's only response was a deep, seductive chuckle that made the moist heat of his breath flow over Tom's skin. Then he lifted his hips, slid his hand between their bodies and fisted Tom's cock.

This time, his groan was drawn out and came

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from deep inside his belly. Owen handled him with just enough roughness to make his balls tingle. His body was hot and smooth in a way that made Tom want to be rubbed all over. When the muscles in his back shifted then let the momentum carry though to his hips, he could only grunt in frustration. What had been a thrilling, merciless jerk, stopped. Owen held him tight, almost too tight. With fingers wrapped in an unforgiving, restrictive circle around the base of his cock, Tom could only shake his head in frustration. There was no way he could come like this. No way for more blood to pump into his rod. Or out. Not until his hips stopped moving and they settled back onto the bed in an acquiescence that took every bit of control Tom could muster, did Owen's hand start to move again.

Those big, rough fingers wrapped around him. His palm ghosted up his length, paused at the tip, held, twisted almost to the point of pain, squeezed then slid back down.

Gradually, Tom opened his eyes. He couldn't remember closing them. Over him, Owen's scary-handsome face hovered. The other male was staring down their bodies, looking at him

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with the same adoration he usually reserved for Suzanne. He licked his lips and exposed his teeth as he watched his hand moving on Tom's cock.

Tom could only moan, wrap his arms back around the big were and pull his mouth down to his. He moaned again. The taste of Owen, the deep, rumbling growls made Tom ache to fuck. Harsh puffs of warm air misted Tom's cheeks as the other male started breathing hard and fast. His tongue filled Tom's mouth, caressed, seduced yet plundered at the same time. Shaking, he absorbed the sensations as his palate was stroked, huffed in time with the tensing of his abdominals when Owen ran his tongue over his teeth.

His scent filled Tom's head. Hot and heady, Owen smelled like power underscored with the sweet musk of sweat left over from the battles he'd won that evening.

Just when he couldn't stand it any longer, Tom felt Owen's weight bear down on him. It got hard to breathe then Owen's mass shifted so the pressure was lower down. There was nothing Tom could do to stop the bigger were from spreading his legs and dropping between them.

He heard the night table drawer open and

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close, heard the lube drop onto the bed beside them. When Owen grabbed his knee, lifted it so the back of his thigh was pressing into Owen's chest, Tom began to struggle. He wasn't scared and he really didn't want the intimacy, the off-the-charts hotness between them to stop. But he was a powerful were in his own right. Maybe not as powerful as Owen but more than strong enough to stand up to him. Fight to be on top. He might not win but his pride and his inner wolf demanded he try.

Snarling and baring his teeth, Tom shoved at Owen. He tried to roll him off but the big bastard just braced his legs and laid more of his weight onto Tom's chest, compressing his ribcage. Fighting hard, making use of the last few oxygenated seconds he had, Tom drove his forearm into Owen's shoulder. He could have gone for the cheap hit and punched Owen's bruised ribs but that kind of win would only be overturned the next time they did battle.

And next time, Owen might not be in the mood to play nice.

The big were grabbed Tom's wrist, pressed his thumb into a spot that made Tom cringe

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and howl. "I know you have to fight me. I also know I'm going to win. I'll stop this..." Owen punctuated the last word with a thrust of his hips and Tom groaned when the other were's cock slid against his. "...if you want me to. At any point, just say the word." He let go of Tom's wrist and licked the spot he'd just brutalized. "But until then, I'm going to fuck you." The muscles in his face rippled and his words came out oddly distorted, guttural like his wolf was close to the surface. After giving his head a quick shake, Owen leaned down, brushed his lips over Tom's then nipped his lower lip. "Make love to you." Suddenly, his voice was quiet. That same deep, erotic rumble was there only this time it was subtle, seductive.

Tom touched the other male's mouth and was rewarded with a series of light kisses that made the pads of his fingers tingle.

Damn. He was pretty sure even Suzanne had never made him tingle.

"You finished?" Owen asked. "Because I'd like to get back to the hotter than hell sex. With you." The grin that quirked up the corner of Owen's

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mouth was catching and Tom felt his own lips do the same thing.

“Yeah. Finished.” Tom rolled his hips and was rewarded when Owen hissed like his nuts were caught up in a pleasure vice. He felt the gentle shifting of Owen’s body, heard the top being popped off the lube, smelled it before he felt Owen’s fingers on his ass.

The first touch of the lube was cold and Tom jerked, just a little. After that, there was nothing but warm wetness being smeared across his hole. He stiffened and couldn’t help it.

“We’ll stop anytime you want,” Owen repeated. He kissed him leisurely, like there was nothing but the two of them and more time than they could ever want. The timbre of his voice made Tom’s cock twitch, the heat and power of the other male’s body worked their magic too. When the finger pressed against his opening paused then breached him slowly, Tom didn’t stiffen. Instead, he trembled and held onto the big male’s shoulders. His leg was still hoisted up between them so he couldn’t get as close as he wanted to but it was still good. He could practically taste the intimacy between them as

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Owen worked his finger into him, watched his face like he was searching for signs of hesitation, maybe even distress, then pulled it out with a slow turn that made Tom growl.

“Damn that’s hot,” Owen groaned then pressed into him again. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

With the sensuality *he* was capable of, it was a wonder the other male didn’t have females falling all over him. Oh, yeah, Suzanne would shred them. Maybe he would too, after tonight.

A second finger joined the first. Inhaling sharply, Tom absorbed the feeling. The quick burn that morphed into a pressure and a gentle stretch that made his balls draw up tight and happy. He relaxed into the feeling and licked his lips.

“More,” he moaned. “Fuck it. Give me more.”

Owen’s only response was a wild grin and a tiny increase in speed.

“I’m not fragile, dammit.”

“No but you’re also a virgin here. Right? So we start slow and pick up the pace only when you’re ready.”

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“*I am* ready.”

That made Owen laugh. The deep rumble transferred from his chest into Tom’s and felt achingly intimate.

“You make me feel ten feet tall and hard as granite.” Owen cut off any more complaints by kissing Tom again, parting his lips with his, running his tongue across Tom’s with uninhibited relish.

After that, Tom stopped making like a nancy and focused on how damned good Owen made him feel. The feel of his mouth on his, those big fingers working into him so patiently. When a fingertip nudged his prostate then stroked it, light and slow, Tom froze. Then his back arched and he groaned so loud his throat hurt. Sweet mother of...he’d never felt anything so good. Pre-cum dribbled out of him and smeared between his belly and Owen’s.

“So. Fucking. Sexy.” Owen’s moan was cut off when he latched onto Tom’s throat. Lips and tongue worked him over with a spiraling intensity that matched what he was feeling down south. He shook his head but it was with disbelief when a third finger joined the first two,

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pressed into him so cautiously Tom wanted to yell in frustration, then began to pump in and out, slow and deep.

Every withdrawal brought the tips of two fingers into contact with that sweet spot deep inside him, bracketing it, stroking him until he squirmed and panted. It went on forever. It didn't last nearly long enough. He was shaking, burying his head back into the mattress when Owen finally removed his fingers.

Another muffled pop, another quick whiff of lube then the hot, blunt tip of Owen's cock was rubbing against his back passage.

"Grab your ass," the big were moaned. "Spread yourself for me. Show me you want me. Show me you want this..." The cockhead pressed into him, spread his loosened sphincter just enough to make him gasp, then eased off. "...as much as I do."

No lover had ever asked him for that much capitulation. But then Owen was no ordinary lover. Nodding jerkily, Tom slid his fingers around his ass cheeks and pulled. All of a sudden it wasn't about who was stronger or who was on top. It was about two lovers and Tom felt his

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courage rise as he showed Owen what he wanted, shared his need, his heart. Gave this lover what they were both aching for.

Owen leaned his weight back then inhaled. “You’re...beautiful.” His mouth fell open, just a little as he pressed into Tom’s opening.

Enthralled, Tom felt himself being spread. Like before, he gasped as Owen breached him. His gasp was cut off and he stiffened with amazement as his ring snapped tight behind the flared head. Above him, Owen was all male beauty and power. His face was flushed, his lids were heavy with need. That wide, unforgiving chest rose and fell fast, rocking against him in a way that made Tom want to be ridden hard and fast. The scent of him filled Tom’s head and he licked the other were’s throat, rumbled with satisfaction when Owen sighed and held himself closer.

Still breathing hard, Owen held himself up on his arms, hanging still and patient above him. Only when Tom let go of his ass to mold his fingers to Owen’s hips, only when he squirmed impatiently did Owen bare his teeth and press deeper.

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Tom shook his head in disbelief. As much as he loved fucking women, this feeling of being claimed, possessed made him want to howl with pleasure. Huh. No wonder females got off on it so much. He slowed his breathing in an effort to center himself so he could concentrate on the incredible things Owen was doing. That pole of his was hard and thick and he wielded it with a gentleness that made Tom moan for more.

Owen must have heard because he started thrusting a little faster, going deeper with every down stroke, catching Tom's prostate with that broad, mushroom cap on every upstroke. God help him but he wouldn't last long, not at this rate. Gasping, grunting with pleasure, he hung onto his lover's thick biceps, struggled beneath the weight of his own leg pinning his chest in place, even though he didn't want to be freed. The feeling of being full up, the stretching were like nothing he'd ever known. Nothing he'd ever imagined. It was hotter than fuck and felt twenty times as good. But when Owen slid his belly back and took hold of Tom's cock, gathered up the slick pools of pre-cum and used them so the friction of his pumping hand didn't burn, Tom shook and cried out.

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“Come for me, baby. Come on.”

Part of Tom loved the cautious way Owen fucked his ass. Part of him was annoyed as hell. All of him, however, tensed up as that familiar tingling gathered at the base of his spine, moved into his balls and made his hips punch forward. He couldn't hold back what promised to be a Grade-A orgasm. Didn't even want to. With Owen's shaft going deep into places he hadn't been aware of, with that thick head rubbing his sweet spot, not to mention the big hand pumping him so hard he saw stars, Tom felt the first, muscular throb as his nuts tucked up high and hard, pulsed with every spasm of pleasure, made him grind his teeth because it was almost too good to bear.

It got even better when Owen growled then shoved into him, fast and deep. That fat rod inside him began to throb in time with the big were's grunts. Owen held him tight, his arms bulged until Tom thought that thick skin might split. Finally, Owen gasped, shuddered then started to withdraw.

He must have registered Tom's moan of protest though because he went slow, paused

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with his cockhead just inside Tom's ass, then eased back into him. Even though Owen's cock was shrinking, Tom still felt full. His body held onto the memory of being filled, worked, loved by that hard muscle. He swore he could feel Owen's cum inside him, a thick, hot pool that the male churned with every stroke.

He'd never felt so cherished, so powerful in his life.

A soft gasp, coming from the foot of the bed, drew his attention. His and Owen's heads turned at the same time. Naked, her skin glowing and pink from her shower, Suzanne stared at them. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted, swollen and moist like she'd been giving them a workout with her tongue. Her full breasts rose and fell with the fierceness of her breathing. Those delicious, blushing nipples stood out hard, succulent and needy.

"You're...you're so beautiful together." She sounded breathless and her gaze moved over them with an intensity that made Tom's cock twitch. Owen's too. "You're just so, so..." She shook her head like she was trying to make it work better. "Beautiful."

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Owen lifted his weight up, just enough for him to release Tom's leg. He lowered it gently and as he did, eased his cock out of Tom's well-used and happy ass. "We're selfish." His voice had that incredibly sexy, post-coital rumble to it. "We took our pleasure and didn't leave anything for you." Tipping his head a little, he gazed at Suzanne's body, licked his lips. Tom wasn't being looked at but even he started to heat up, kind of like a contact hard-on.

After a final, teasing kiss, Owen released him and slid back to make space between them for the lovely female. Suzanne looked just as hot as Owen had, only in her own, seductive, feminine way as she crawled toward them on hands and knees. The smooth, round curve of her hip rolled. Tom levered himself on his elbow. Her ass stuck up proudly and he kissed it then drew his tongue around then into the soft crevice between. "Damn you taste good," he breathed, bit her gently then wiggled his tongue past her dripping pussy lips and into her core.

She gasped, squirmed back into him yet somehow managed to lower her mouth to Owen's. Tom knew that because he could hear

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the soft, wet sounds of them kissing, saw Owen's hands move over her back. She smelled of soap and hot, needy female. Tasted like everything he'd ever wanted in a mate. With the scent of Owen all over him, he tended to Suzanne with a devotion and need that echoed the feelings growing inside him.

Two mates. Greedy bastard that he was, he wanted two mates and he wanted the two who were in his bed, with him, this very minute. Unconventional? Yes. Weird-ass as all get out? Definitely. But if anybody could make it work, they could. Using his thumbs, he spread her gently, tongued her clit until she spilled more juice onto his cheeks then started in on lapping it out of her. There was so much love between the three of them he was surprised the roof didn't pop off the house. True, Owen was the wildcard in the bunch but Tom was confident that between him and Suzanne, they'd win him over. The male was *going* to be their mate. Just like he was going to be their Alpha. If that required a little more time and sweet talking, well, Tom had no problem with that.

He kept on making love to Suzanne's pussy

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until she was making low, needy sounds and squirming back into him. Rolling her onto her back, he eased up her body, kissed her breasts, pressed them together and sucked on her nipples until she started pulling on his hair. Ignoring the twinge in his ankle when he shifted, he got up on his knees, lifted her hips, took hold of his cock and positioned it against her opening. Huh. His recuperative powers around these two were nothing short of amazing. Even if he did say so himself. As he drew her to him, he lifted up a little, harnessed the strength in his shoulders and forearms to control the movement of her body. He bared his teeth and growled as he slid into her. Tight, slick rings of muscle resisted him, held him in place for the space of a heartbeat, then another before giving way to his determination. He thrust slow and careful, powering into her and paying attention to her responses.

Tom felt a fresh appreciation for the gentleness Owen had shown him.

The female bowed over his loins gasped, ran those long, delicate fingers over her breasts, pulled on her nipples until they turned a dark rose. Then his view was obscured as Owen bent

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over her and drew a fat tip into his mouth. She grinned like she was losing her mind as the sounds of sucking, a low hum of pleasure filled the room.

Fresh moisture seeped around Tom's cock and he pushed in deeper. Oh yeah. This promised to be a long, slow, sweet ride. For both of them. With the air of a man settled in for a long, comfortable stay, Owen stretched out beside her, palmed one breast and kissed a path up to her mouth.

Inspired to make it as good for her as possible, Tom tapped the back of Owen's hand. With that furrow between his eyes deeper than usual, the other male watched Tom tug on his fingers, trail them down Suzanne's body and cup them around her mound.

If that grin of his was any indication, Owen was definitely on board with the plan. He caressed her plumpness, nudged her clit then drew easy, slow circles around it with the tip of his finger. Adjusting his grip on her hips, Tom slid her up and back on his lap, watched his cock reappear after each stroke, glistening with her juices. The scent of their combined lust almost drove him mad. The sounds she made—quiet, desperate

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and seductive—made him thrust harder, faster. He felt the bump of Owen's hand on his pubic bone as the big were got serious about pleasuring Suzanne.

She was soon gasping, moaning with pleasure into Owen's mouth. Tom loved the way her torso rocked, the clenching of those delicate abdominal muscles, the way her pussy flexed around and gripped every inch of his cock. All female, she was soft, pale and pink as she jammed a heel into his ass, prodding him to go faster.

"Yes, ma'am," he drawled, tightened his grip and drove into her. She cried out when he smashed Owen's fingers between them, ground them into her then she shivered and scented like a female in desperate need when he eased off. Hot. Damn.

Gasping one last time, Suzanne tensed, all over. Her breasts seemed to swell and that sweet pussy grabbed on and beat a tattoo all around his aching pole. She made sharp sounds of pleasure as she came, in time with her torso rocking and rolling.

Suddenly, Tom gasped. He felt a finger—a single, oily, rough and thick finger caress him,

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strike paydirt on the second try and press into him. Man but that were was good at multitasking. Owen's mouth was still making love to Suzanne's breast but the hand that had been massaging her pussy had shifted, found the lube when Tom had lost track of everything, including whether or not his head was still attached, and was zeroing in on his prostate.

Bingo. His hips shot forward as the last, milking convulsion gripped Suzanne's core. He swore he'd gone blind as ecstasy gripped him tight and cancelled out every sense other than feel. With Owen stroking him and Suzanne squeezing him, he stood no chance. Groaning loud enough to make the female he was holding onto jump, Tom ground into her and felt his seed pumping out, fast and hot. His ass clenched, holding Owen right where he needed him. The pleasure as that fiendish digit stroked and stroked made him cry out.

Forget blind, he was losing his grip on reality. Ecstasy speared him, filled him, made him hot, cold and feel like he was a high-voltage conduit.

When it was finally over, when his balls ceded a final, thick dollop and offered it up in gratitude

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to the beautiful, loving female bowed against him, Tom sucked in as much air as he could and collapsed on his side.

Bad idea. His ankle bent and did not like it. Groaning, Tom grabbed his leg, rolled away then tried to stretch out and relax. It took awhile and his ankle wasn't in a mood to be appeased. At least not until Owen got out of bed and came back with one of the bags of frozen peas and a towel. Deftly, the male used the cloth to secure the peas in place, pulled Tom's head up and shoved a pillow beneath it before collapsing back against the headboard.

"Fuck that was hot," Owen said. He pulled Suzanne to him, snuggled her up nice and close and kissed the corners of her mouth. "Did you mean it when you said he and I were beautiful? Nobody's ever said I was beautiful before."

He spoke quietly, so quietly Tom almost missed the wistful note in his voice. But it resonated with him because he felt the same.

"Yes." Her pale, soft hair flowed as she nodded. "I've seen the look on your face when you watch Tom and me make love. Seen the same look on his face when I'm with you. A part of me

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assumed you were just being polite, waiting your turn. I didn't realize how...how moving it was to watch my partners pleasure each other. And those completely hot, hard male bodies moving together...just about the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed. Please tell me I can watch again."

"Sure thing, baby," Owen whispered through his wide grin and nuzzled her temple. "For you, anything."

They stayed like that for several minutes while Tom lay back and let the makeshift icepack do its thing. He turned his head to look at Suzanne when she finally broke the comfortable silence.

"Why did you fight so hard, Tom?" she asked. She stroked his shoulder, ran her fingertips across his short hair. "Hard enough that you messed up your ankle. I'd be surprised to see you walking tomorrow. No pun intended but you were an animal. The way you took on your challengers was ferocious."

Shrugging bought Tom a moment to think. "I wasn't just fighting for the Beta spot. I was fighting for both of you." Their brows furrowed. "As much as mister man there wants to deny it, we're falling in love with each other. Hell, we

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might already be in love.” He rubbed his chest absently, letting his palm glide over the sweat on his skin. “We’ll always be part of the bigger pack but we’re also a pack within the pack. Lovers *and* leaders. No way I’m giving up on that potential.”

He watched Owen’s features harden, felt the male’s emotional withdrawal as clear as if Owen had got up and started packing.

“Deny it all you want, Wells,” Tom said firmly, “but we’re part of you. You’re part of us. We’re sucking you in good and deep. Give us another day or two and you won’t want to leave. Now turn off the lights. Daylight’ll be here in a couple of hours and this cowboy needs some sleep.”

Not giving the big were a chance to protest, Tom rolled to the side of the bed and curled up on his side. He bent his knees so his ankle was positioned just so, and clear of possible, random foot movements from the others. Suzanne curled into him, pressed her soft breasts into his back, made him smile when her breath warmed his neck.

As expected, Owen took a little longer getting with the program. After some grumbling and

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huffing, he unwrapped Tom's ankle and carried the bag of peas and the towel down the hall. A moment later, Tom heard the sound of water running in the bathroom. When Owen came back, he smelled like soap and fresh water and he climbed into bed behind Suzanne, switched off the light and, with a bit more grumbling, pulled up the blankets and tucked them in together, all safe and warm.



"Owen."

The fear in that one word made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He grabbed his keys, his fleece cover-up and headed for the community center exit at a dead run.

Caller ID told him Laura Samuels, their new pharmacist was on the other end of his cell phone. It sounded like her speakerphone had been switched on and the voice in the background was crude and pleading in turn.

"What don't you understand? Look, I'm being as nice as I can but I've got a legal prescription for this stuff. See? Here's the bottle. The pills spilled out

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when I pulled the bottle out of my pocket. Happens all the time, right?"

Jumping in his pickup, Owen cranked the ignition, dropped the beast in gear and peeled out of his parking spot.

"If you'll just take a seat, sir. Federal law requires me to verify all schedule-two narcotics—"

"The government's just out to screw the little guy. Everybody knows that."

He hated doing it but Owen flicked Laura's call into a holding pattern and dialed 9-1-1. "Give me Tom. Now," he barked into the phone as soon as somebody answered.

When the call was transferred, he didn't even give Tom time to say hi. "Some guy's trying to shake down Laura at the pharmacy. He wants pills and he sounds about a minute away from taking instead of talking."

"We're on it."

The call cut off and Owen immediately reconnected with Laura's number.

"...because you're being stupid. Now I need those

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pills. Can't you see how much pain I'm in without them?"

It seemed to take forever but the drive to the pharmacy, at about forty miles per hour over the posted limit, took less than a minute. The tires were still bouncing back from the curb when Owen jumped out and hit the ground running.

The pharmacy door didn't open when he plowed into it, it imploded. A display of Easter candy and a rack of shopping baskets went flying. He ignored the booming crack as the glass split, top to bottom, and thundered toward the dispensary.

Laura looked up and he registered her wide, blue eyes, the choking scent of fear around her. He also registered the stink of the human male leaning over the counter. Clothes that had been worn too long, bad teeth, and desperation that had just brought anger to a boil. The guy was tall and skinny, although judging from the speed of his hand shooting out and making a grab for the lapel of the white coat Laura was wearing, there was still some strength in that wasting body.

Fortunately for Laura, being were meant she

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was faster. Tiny though she was, she jumped back. And yelped.

No way was Owen giving the guy another chance to grab her. He grabbed first. Fisting the guy's collar, Owen spun him around, bent him backward across the dispensary counter, shoved a knee into the guy's thigh until he cried out in pain. He was probably in his twenties, although his eyes looked older.

"Fuck you, man," the guy squealed. "Wait your turn."

Hauling back his fist, Owen popped him a good one.

"Police brutality." The man cradled his nose and started hollering. "I'm gonna make a million bucks off this pissant town."

"I'm not a cop," Owen growled, apparently with sufficient ferocity because the man started to shake.

"Who are you?"

Owen's wolf wanted a taste of the action and Owen saw no reason to refuse. He felt the muscles in his jaw shift, his teeth grind against

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bone as they got longer. For an instant, his skin felt tight then it loosened, got thicker. Just like his voice. "I'm the nightmare that makes you piss yourself in the dark."

The man started screaming and didn't stop until Tom, Suzanne and at least three more deputy sheriffs raced into the pharmacy, yanked the guy away from Owen, slapped cuffs on him and dragged him outside.

Looking up, Owen met Laura's wide, terrified eyes. Without asking, he walked behind the counter, put his hands on her shoulders and scanned her for injuries. "You all right?" he asked although his nose told him she was unhurt. She nodded and those tiny shoulders of hers started shaking. He pulled her close, turned her head so her cheek rested on his chest, and held her carefully. She felt so damn fragile but she surprised him when, after only a few seconds, she pulled away, straightened her white coat, wiped a drop of moisture away from the corner of her eye and looked up at him.

"Thank you for getting here so quick."

He smelled courage, even strength seeping out of her.

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“I panicked. I’d programmed your number into speed dial and hit that instead of calling 9-1-1.” Lifting her chin, she smiled thinly. “Next time, I’ll keep my cool.”

“Next time, you’ll kick butt. That punk was lucky you didn’t jump the counter and go all Cujo on his ass.”

She laughed like he’d hoped she would.

“You need any help cleaning this place up?”

“No. We’re good.” With a movement of her hand, she motioned the pharmacy assistant forward. The middle-aged were crept out from behind a back counter. “You got here so quick, he didn’t have time to mess the place up. Thanks, Owen.” She exhaled. “Thanks.”

After nuzzling her forehead, Owen turned to leave. As he headed for the exit, he heard the buzz of conversation rise around him. Other than the lingering stink that punk had left in his wake, he couldn’t smell any other humans in the pharmacy. They’d caught a break with that. And any crazy story about werewolves the guy in cuffs might spin for his public defender would be dismissed as a hyped-up junkie rant. Still, it

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seemed a good idea to leave the premises, and soon.

The few weres in the store headed for him, touched his jacket or hand as he walked past. He offered his best reassuring smile, made a quick joke about getting away before the paranormal creature conspiracy nuts started nosing around. Smiling with him, scenting like weres coming down from an adrenaline fueled fear rush, they let him be before heading back to the dispensary. Probably to rehash the juicy details.

A female voice, sharp and mean, caught his ear.

“See? You need to step down. You’re too old to stand up for your pack. Owen’s an outsider and he had to run over here and take care of business. What did you do? Stood there shaking in your Pradas while an innocent female got beaten up by a human.”

He turned a corner and saw a young female poke Katherine Clark in the chest, hard.

“You haven’t got the guts to be top bitch anymore. If I were you—”

“If you were her,” Owen interrupted coldly,

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“you’d be a helluva lot brighter.” When he kept moving forward, the young female backed away like she was reacting instinctively. “From what I saw, she handled the situation correctly by gathering up the females in the shop and keeping them away from a volatile human until help arrived. What I also see is a young, impulsive were who can’t rationalize that this pack needs to hold onto whatever stability it can in the wake of the murders of its Alpha and Beta. Katherine here is the only surviving member of your hierarchy. The day will come when she’ll be replaced but that day is not today. And this is definitely not the time or place. Am I making myself understood?”

The young female shrunk visibly, nodded then scurried away.

Katherine huffed, drawing his attention back to her.

“Why don’t you just stick a fork in me, Wells, and tell everybody I’m done? First Suzanne now you fighting battles that should be mine.”

“Yeah. It blows to have people value you. Flash me that look all you want but these people need you functioning, in place and on your feet. Once

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they get back on *their* feet, you're on your own, lady."

"Well thank heavens for that."

She huffed again, shot him another look then headed to the back of the pharmacy. Owen took a moment to admire her shoes, and those legs of hers before heading for the exit, double quick.

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Chapter Thirteen

“I want to thank you all for coming. There’s been some talk around town and a couple of us thought it was time to get together as a pack and discuss these issues in a public forum.”

Owen leaned against the back wall of the community center gymnasium, arms crossed over his chest, ears open, nose working, eyes scanning the crowd. He had to hand it to the guy at the podium. Keenan O’Donohue had the gift of the gab, all right. The twenty-something was charismatic, charming, and a born orator.

No wonder his buddies had elected him speaker. Terrence Smith and Jasper Baker sat in the front row, applauding enthusiastically and letting out a holler of affirmation now and then.

Tom and Suzanne, still in uniform, stepped away from the elderly weres they’d been talking to and took up spots on either side of Owen. This was the third such meeting they’d dropped in on this week alone, although it was by far the best organized, publicized, and attended.

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Keenan looked out at the rows of seated weres. His smile was friendly with equal parts aw-shucks-good-'ol-boy and the kind of intelligence that fostered trust. "The idea of group leadership or leadership by committee is new. Maybe even radical. But this is the new millennium. Listening to some of you, I get a sense we might *want* to consider something new. Might work, might not. I for one want to hear what people have to say." He flashed that smile again and pointed to a pretty young female. She wasn't the only one with a raised hand but the quick way Keenan's eyes went to her, and the speed with which she shot to her feet made Owen suspect she knew she'd be the first picked to speak.

"Thanks, Keenan." She had a nice, feminine voice and it carried well. Almost too well, like she'd had practice with the public-speaking bit. "I like the idea of having a committee of leaders. When Ed and Cory were murdered, I cried for days."

Owen spotted a tissue in her hands. With the way she was wringing it and turning in place so she could make eye contact with the crowd, it was hard to miss.

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“Now we’ve got no leadership and we’re looking at weeks, maybe months of fighting before males strong enough to take on the job of Alpha and Beta sort themselves out.” Again with the wringing. Again with the little tremble in her voice. “I’m just sick thinking about what might happen in the meantime. Why just the other day, some human tried to rob the pharmacy. Thank goodness the police eventually showed up but he tore the place up before they did. Tossed poor little Laura Samuels around like she was a sack of potatoes. Sure that sort of thing never happened when Cory was alive but he was getting older. Just the thought of one of our elders having to step into...well, if we had a group of leaders, the younger ones could step into any physical situation and fix it. The risk and the responsibility would be spread around.”

She sat down gracefully.

“Why am I not surprised,” Tom muttered as Keenan called on the next speaker, a male, this one even younger. “He and Keenan were best buddies at school.”

“I think Keenan’s right,” the male said. “If we had younger leaders to help the older ones, we

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wouldn't be putting our best weres in harm's way."

At least this one wasn't yanking on a hankie but he did have that address-your-audience pirouette down pat. Mentally, Owen applauded Keenan's handling of the whole affair. The kid had come a long way from making adrenaline-fueled knuckle-headed challenges to weres he had no chance of besting physically. Being Alpha wasn't all about being strongest. You had to be smart and ballsy too. Keenan was also demonstrating he could learn from his mistakes.

The meeting went on for just over an hour. The organizers had orchestrated the timing perfectly. Nobody had to sit too long, attention didn't flag and the big group didn't break off into smaller groups and start talking amongst themselves. All but a few of the weres who got to speak seemed handpicked—judging from the sometimes rehearsed cadence of their words. The same message was repeated again and again though. Select a committee to lead them, half of it experienced and half young weres.



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“Well. What did you think of that?” Owen tossed the question out to no one in particular as he settled himself into one of Katherine’s living room sofas.

Tom was the first to answer. “Group leadership among weres will never work. The pack needs to consider then dismiss the idea as unworkable though, and that meeting got that process started.”

“Yes but what if some of them do go for it?” Suzanne was filling a thermos from Katherine’s coffeemaker. They’d give it to Wally and the two other deputies who were keeping an eye on Katherine’s home that evening.

“Some will,” Tom answered. He shrugged. “They might even give it a try, for awhile. It won’t take folks long to remember that weres don’t follow democratic rule. We follow the guy who believes he’s got the biggest balls in the room. It doesn’t mean he’ll be a good leader but we all have an instinctive imperative to submit to the leadership of one Alpha.”

“I’ll buy that,” Owen said, “but you have to hand it to those four guys tonight. They did a good job organizing the meeting, took charge

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right away and didn't let go of control for an instant."

"Well choreographed," Suzanne added.

"Hmm," Owen acknowledged with a grunt and a nod. "I think they persuaded more than a few weres to embrace this new, peaceful command structure. Young ones especially."

"That's because young, stupid and weak weres," Katherine said with a confident finality that focused everybody's attention on her, "like the notion of being in charge. They just don't have a clue what that entails, or have what it takes to lead a group this large. They want to gobble the goodies without earning them.

"Bottom line?" she continued. "It's bullshit. You can paint it and call it what you like. It'll still be bullshit. I don't have to step in it or sniff it up close and personal to recognize bullshit when I see it."

Owen grinned but managed to hold back his laughter. The more time he spent with this female, the more he liked her. Too bad her prime fighting years had come and gone.

"And on that note," he said as he stood, "what

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do you say we leave this outstanding female and her mate to enjoy the peace and privacy of their home.”

“Peace and privacy...hmmph.” Katherine snorted then led the way to the front door. “Sheriffs tailing me everywhere I go, driving around here all night. You just find the bastards that killed my cousin and Ed. Then we’ll *all* get back to peace and privacy.”



Three days later, Owen was walking around the community center with Katherine. He’d come up with an idea to name the center in honor of Sheriff Ed Timberman and wanted her input. If nothing else, the exercise would provide a focal activity for the community, kind of like a pack run without the fur. Ed had been hugely popular and Owen was pretty sure the pack would embrace the idea. They needed something to get them out of their homes because they were still spending most of their time behind locked doors.

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Weres were social creatures. They didn't do well when they isolated themselves.

"Owen Wells, right?" A young male, one of the group-leadership meeting organizers, came in through the front door and stepped up to Owen, hand extended. Keenan O'Donohue was a step behind him. "I'm Terrence Smith but everybody calls me Terry. Sorry we got off on the wrong foot last week."

Owen sized the smaller were up for a moment, then shook his hand. "Apology accepted. Times like this, these genes of ours have all of us looking to butt heads. Now, what can I do for you?"

"We wanted to ask to see the pack's financial statements. Howard Rupert says you've been running the pack's affairs out of your office here. I must admit, we were surprised to hear that." Terry was somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, a couple of inches short of six feet and although his tone was civil enough, his eyes kept shifting around like he was checking the area for challengers.

Or more likely, checking to see if Owen had backup around.

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Keenan flashed that trademark, ingratiating smile of his. "Howard's our business manager so we were wondering why he wasn't handling the day-to-day affairs of the pack now that Cory's gone. We went by his house to check on the books there but the place is locked up tighter than a drum."

"With good reason," Katherine interjected. "It's a private home. The home of your dead Alpha's widow. I don't like the idea of you boys trying to break in."

"Oh no. Nothing like that." There was that smile again. "We explained the whole thing to the deputy sheriff who showed up. He sent us here. To you."

"What we were wondering," Terry said and he didn't sound quite so appeasing now. In fact, his voice was rife with the undertones of an indirect challenge. "Is why a newcomer who's got no position or standing in the pack is bothering himself with our business."

"You mean business that's not his to take care of?" Owen crossed his arms over his chest, widened his stance and lifted his upper lip just enough to let the edge of his teeth show. "Cory

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was murdered and nobody else stepped into the void. That's what leadership is about, boy. Stepping up. Stepping in. Taking on the hard jobs nobody else has the fortitude to tackle. Now, I appreciate what you boys are trying to do. Really I do. You recognize there's a void in the pack leadership and you're trying some creative problem solving. Kudos to you. And of course you can take a look at the books. By pack law they're open to any member who wants to look. But let's be clear about one thing. While you boys have been out there glad handing, Katherine and I have been keeping the pack running, taking care of the day-to-day business and long-term strategic planning. Now, whenever you're ready to step up and play with the big boys, I'll see you're given an opportunity. But if all you're interested in is posturing and fear mongering, then—"

"Fear mongering?" Terry barked. He flashed his incisors. Keenan put a hand on his buddy's shoulder, obviously trying to rein him in. Terry shook him off. "That's a bold faced lie."

"I'll tell you what's a lie. That fabricated half-truth your little girlfriend at the meeting came

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out with about the junkie at the drugstore a few days back.”

“It wasn’t—”

“Terry. Shut *up*.”

“Ah. So part of the truth comes out.” Katherine shifted her weight from one foot to the other, planted her fists on her hips and seemed to swell in size. “You should listen to your friend there, Terrence. He obviously knows Owen was the first male on the scene. Laura Samuels called him for help before she called anybody else. I found that telling. Under stress, a were looks to the strongest, most capable leader. She knew Owen would climb mountains to come to her aid when she asked.” She jerked her head in Owen’s direction. “That tiny female called him. Not you or any of your juvenile friends. Now, get out of my way. I’ve got business to tend to. And don’t take up too much of Owen’s time going over the books. His time is valuable too.”

With that, she spun on her heel and headed for the interior of the community center to finish her walk-through inspection.

Owen knew he was wearing a self-satisfied

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grin as he watched the top bitch stroll away on those long pins of hers. "Office is this way, boys. And wipe your feet. Gerry's already mopped the floors this afternoon and if you mess them up, you mop them up."



Sitting back in one of his comfortable guest chairs, Owen sipped his coffee and watched the two young weres go over the spreadsheets he'd opened for them. The ledgers Howard Rupert kept as back-up were laid out on his desk.

"You want something done with that poster?" Owen nodded in the direction of the bright yellow sheet of paper in Keenan's hand.

"Um. Yeah." Keenan held out the printed sheet. "Just some information on the group leadership forum. A wrap-up of the issues discussed at the meeting."

"Hmm." Owen scanned the poster then set it on the corner of his desk. "Doing some campaigning, I see. I'll have Gerry put it on the bulletin board." He neglected to mention that any were could post anything on the board, so

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long as it was okay for kids to look at, yet these boys had felt the need to ask him first.

“How come there’s a surplus in the community center’s operating budget?”

Huh. Bonus points for their face man. Turned out Keenan could sell shoes and read a journal entry.

“As volunteer director, I made it my business to initiate programs that would bring in user fees, as well as promote the place for private functions. Which have been lucrative enough, by the way, to cover the cost of resurfacing the parking lot this summer, keep the seniors’ fitness program and the art program going.”

Keenan blinked. His buddy, Terry, just looked pissed.

“Well it looks okay on the surface but we’ll want to examine the numbers in detail.” Keenan started to close the laptop up. “We’ll take this with us. We’ve discussed it and the pack’s business should be run out of a central location.”

“No can do, boy.” Standing, Owen walked over to the door and held it open in a dismissive gesture that couldn’t be misinterpreted. “That

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laptop's my personal property. Copy the files if you want."

"Oh. Well, do you have a data stick?"

"No." He heard the growing irritation in his voice, felt that furrow between his eyes deepen. His schedule was tight today and he didn't have time for posers. "And when you do come back to copy the files, you might want to have a look at the social calendar."

"Why?" Terry's tone was dismissive but carried none of the depth and resonance Owen was pumping out. "It's just the stuff Cory set up."

Exhaling audibly, Owen started rubbing his forehead. "Check again, junior g-man. A pack's social events evolve constantly so a pack's changing needs are met, month after month."

"Well how come nobody told us?"

"If you've got it in you to lead, nobody *has* to tell you." Standing up straight now, Owen barked down at the younger weres. He was tired of explaining himself to kids with an agenda, let alone the basic precepts of keeping a pack healthy and growing. Keenan then Terry slouched and

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stopped making eye contact, but Owen kept barking in that fine, military-trained tone of his. “You take it upon yourself to step back, ascertain the pack’s needs and meet them. I applaud your efforts, boys, but you’re a day late and a dollar short.” Putting a hand on each of them, he shoved them out the door. “Come back when you’re ready to grow up and take on the job.”

Owen sat back in his chair, taking little notice of their muttering in the hallway as they walked off.

He checked his watch—twenty minutes before the Bridge games started. He wasn’t a fan of Bridge but it was a big hit with the senior were set. Tim Egley had roped him into it a few weeks back because the male had been feeling outnumbered by all the females who attended. Turned out Tim was a good teacher, although his efforts were mostly wasted on a mediocre card player like Owen. Still, the older were persisted and Owen liked the conversation.

To fill the time, he called a female back with a quote for her and her mate’s upcoming wedding anniversary party. The center had a full roster of volunteers and the free labor had helped them

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throw two splashy shindigs already. He was now getting a couple calls a week about private events. After he hung up, he went looking for Katherine. She was probably finished with her walkthrough by now and he liked to hear her opinions after she looked around the place with those fresh eyes of hers.

The sound of growling turned him in the direction of the main foyer instead.

“I *said*...I was here first. Step aside, old woman.”

What he saw stopped him in his tracks. A young female was standing in the doorway that led back to the gymnasium, blocking it. Katherine was standing on the other side, looking like she was ready to knock the kid's head off and eat it for lunch. On the far side of the foyer, Keenan and Terry were just standing there, watching.

He knew the young female. Dolores Beattie, if he remembered correctly. She'd narrowly escaped being kicked out of last Saturday's dance.

“I said move.” Dolores put her hands up like she was getting ready to try and shove Katherine out of her way. She might have succeeded too.

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Although still a teenager, Dolores was full grown, and Katherine *was* sixty.

Dolores didn't get a chance to make contact. Owen grabbed her arms, pulled her back and spun her around to face him.

"You did *not* just try and assault a senior, respected member of this pack. In front of me. Kid, you are a whole new definition of stupid."

Lifting her chin defiantly, Dolores pointed at Katherine. "She's on her way out. Everybody knows it. Why shouldn't I have a shot at beating her out of the top bitch spot."

"Are there heavy metals in the water around here?" Looking at the ceiling, Owen prayed for patience. "You can have your shot, during the next pack run. That's in a couple of weeks. For now, that female is the only breathing, experienced leader you've got. You take her out with no Alpha or Beta in place and the pack structure will collapse."

"Says who?" She tossed her black hair back with an aggressive flick of her hand.

"Me." Owen growled and it was so deep and loud, the glass surrounding the front doors

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vibrated as if a heavy truck were rumbling past. Dolores paled, stepped back and clutched her throat like she could feel Owen's command resonating inside her. He held out his hand. "Now hand over the smokes." She'd tried to disguise the smell of tobacco by dousing herself in some body spray that smelled like cotton candy.

"No way." The kid might be shaking in her Nikes but she was still hanging onto that bravado of hers.

"Oh absolutely way." He flexed his hand and snarled. Next thing he knew, she'd dropped a pack of Virginia Slims in his palm. He tossed them into the nearest garbage can.

"Hey. I'm old enough to buy those legally."

"Do I look like I care? And why the hell aren't you in school?"

"I have a free period this morning. My grandmother asked me to drive her to her card game."

"Well that'll be the last time she asks because you should be using your free periods to study. Now get back to school."

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Dolores glared at him on her way to the exit. "I'm going to tell my parents. You can't treat me this way."

"Damn straight you're going to. Because I'll be calling your mother as soon as you leave here. And don't even think of ditching school because I'm going to call the principal too and make sure you show up for the rest of your classes. Dolores."

She paled when he used her name, like she thought she'd get off scott-free because he didn't know who she was.

"I hear anything other than *yes, sir* come out of that smart mouth of yours and I'll make it my business to check your school attendance next week too."

Swallowing visibly, Dolores turned and walked out the door, double quick.

He turned on Keenan and Terry next. "You were going to stand there and let that kid attack your head bitch? You've got no sense and no ability to lead. I'm sick of the sight of both of you. Get out and don't come back for the rest of the day."

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He all but metaphorically kicked dirt over the young males as he turned his back on them and approached Katherine.

“We better find those killers quick. I’m getting real sick of this.”

“You and me both.” She growled with impressive volume, despite her age.



“It’s a campaign, plain and simple.” Suzanne took off her hat, smoothed her hair back and sat down in front of a terminal in the sheriff’s office.

Owen had finished his shift at the community center and was waiting for her and Tom to knock off for the day so they could head home. It had been over a week since that public meeting and they were no closer to solving Cory and Ed’s murders.

She flipped a page in her notebook and began typing up another report. Even under fluorescent lights, she was still the prettiest female he’d ever known.

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"I spotted a group of young weres hanging out around the bakery, talking to the stay-at-home mom crowd," Suzanne continued. "Then they made their way to the hair salon and the auto-body shop." She huffed dismissively. "They're hitting all the demographic groups, that's for sure."

"There's not a shop window in town without one of those posters," Tom added.

"Except the pharmacy."

"Except the pharmacy," Suzanne and Tom echoed.

"At least they've learned not to piss on Cory's space." Owen raked his fingers through his hair. "They also fit the definition of a pack within a pack."

"That they do, my friend," Tom said. "I sent some of the boys out yesterday with search warrants. An investigator from the State lab is running ballistics tests on any firearms they own. Probably won't yield anything but we've got nothing else to go on. We're looking into every sub-group within the pack."

Owen nodded. "This group leadership thing's

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finally beginning to lose momentum. A couple of the boys wanted to talk to my seniors' weight training class. Those old weres wanted nothing to do with them. Said they'd heard enough. Said they'd *seen* enough. You remember that fight outside Roger Madison's grocery store a few days ago?"

"Yes. Didn't amount to anything though. Why?"

"Well, it started out as two teenagers with nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon. They started arguing about something stupid then started throwing punches. Some of Keenan O'Donohue's crew were across the street but they just stood there and watched. Roger had to come out, break up the fight and call the kids' parents to take them away." Owen shook his head. "I think Pinebridge is ready to take its collective head out of its ass and remember that weres need a single, strong, take-charge Alpha. Without one, social structure starts to break down."

"Which we're starting to see," Suzanne added as she typed. "Three nuisance calls today alone, a prowler complaint that turned out to be a male nervous about his neighbors eyeing his asparagus

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crop through the fence, and a female who lit into a gas attendant because the pump wouldn't accept her bank card."

When the front door rocketed open, the desk sergeant, who'd been listening in, rolled his eyes.

"Deputy Ray." Keenan O'Donohue led the way with his regular band of three hot on his heels. "I'm hiring a lawyer. This is police harassment. Just because we're out there talking to people about this new, peaceful command structure." From the other side of the counter, he pointed at Tom. "You and your buddy there are trying to take over this town and we won't have it. That's the old way and look where it's got us. You hear me?"

Owen didn't comment on the fact the kid kept the hunk of wood and laminate between himself and the massive, full-grown, gun-toting lawman.

"Get yourselves a lawyer. By all means," Tom replied in that calm, modulated tone he was so good at. "Make sure you show them your copies of the warrants and the receipts those fine officers gave you when they took your weapons.

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Did they tell you when those weapons would be returned to you?"

"Well...yeah."

"Well good then." He dismissed them by returning his attention to the computer screen in front of him. Eventually, after some complaining amongst themselves, Keenan and his crew left.

"When did you say that warrant was served, Tom?"

"Yesterday morning. Why?"

Owen felt his mouth flatten. "Just wondering why it took those boys a day and a half to figure out they might need a lawyer." His mouth flattened even more and he lowered his voice. "They *didn't* figure it out themselves. Somebody else planted that idea in their heads. And if they planted that one, they might have planted others."



Two nights later, Owen walked into the Hair Of The Horse. He hadn't been in the bar for weeks and wouldn't be there tonight, except Tom and Suzanne were pulling a long shift and

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he'd been drafted to tail some of Keenan's boys. Just about every deputy was working overtime, keeping an eye on who the group and their friends were talking to.

Problem was, the group's agenda was to talk to everybody they could, so it was practically impossible to separate out subsets of weres who might be manipulating Keenan and his boys from the sidelines.

"Hey, Andy." He greeted the bartender, chose a barstool in front of the mirror so he could see what was going on behind him, ordered a Heineken and cranked his ears open.

"Hey yourself." The big, affable were greeted him with a smile. "You've been keeping yourself scarce."

"Trying to keep busy."

"From what I hear, you're doing a good job down at the community center. Most of my waitresses go to those new Tai Chi classes. I always thought the place was for kids and seniors."

"Glad to hear your staff has set you straight, friend."

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“I also heard about plans to re-dedicate the building. Name it after Ed Timberman. Fine idea. You let me know if you need corporate sponsorship. Ed was a good man and an even better friend.”

“I’m just sorry I never got a chance to meet him. I’ll send around some information on our sponsorship recognition program.” That was new too.

Andy nodded then went off to fill one of his server’s drink order.

“Hey, stranger. Long time no see.” Frannie, the waitress with the ready smile and penchant for mischief, walked up beside him. She pressed a kiss to his cheek then used the pad of her thumb to wipe the lipstick off him. “Hmm. You smell like you’ve been spending time with a certain bodacious lady sheriff.” She made no attempt to hide the fact she was sniffing the air around him. “And our hot deputy-sheriff Tom Ray.” After she cleared her tray of dirty glasses, she picked up a stack of bowls full of peanuts. “I told you you two were hell on a female’s libido. When am I gonna scent a mating mark on you?”

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He choked on his beer, sputtered, and grabbed a napkin to mop his chin.

“Cold feet, huh? Never mind, sugar.” She patted his arm then arranged the bowls on her tray. “They’ll rein you in sooner or later.”

Jeezus. Spare me from the horse metaphors.

With her hips swaying, she headed off to pick on someone else.

Nursing his beer, he got down to the business of tracking the conversations in the bar. After awhile, it became apparent the group-leadership campaign was indeed losing momentum. The young weres hanging out around Keenan’s buddies were more interested in talking about the females in the bar, complaining about work and the price of gas.

Three of them stepped out back, probably for a smoke. Owen got up so he could find someplace near the doorway to lurk. The boys out back were talking about nothing more serious than deciding whether or not to play some pool and tomorrow afternoon’s baseball game. While he kept track of two other young weres sitting in a booth nearby, he heard the boys out back greet a

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female...no, make that two females who were just arriving. It sounded like they knew each other, but not well.

“...you just keep your hands to yourself, Terry.” There was a playfulness right along with the censure in the female’s voice. “I told you, unless you’re gonna buy me dinner and meet my momma...”

Grinning, Owen started paying more attention to the young males in the booth.

“...this new central leadership model. It’s just what we young weres have been waiting for. No more toeing the line for old farts who can’t remember what real love feels like.”

“Or get it up.”

The grin on Owen’s face disappeared when he realized the young guys out back were laughing and the females were conspicuously silent.

“Lots of benefits for young weres like us. We’d be free to mate with whoever we wanted.”

He put his beer down and sat up straight. Although he’d been away from packs for a long time, he knew the notion of ranking pack

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members claiming any female they wanted was archaic. And wrong. It was a perversion of a lower-ranking member's acceptance of the pack system.

"Let me *go*, Terry. I mean it. You're hurting me."

Owen was on his feet and running for the back door. Good thing it was heavy otherwise he probably would have popped it off its hinges in his race to get through it.

"Let her go." His voice was so commanding and so brutally harsh, the young males backed away from the two females like the move was instinctive instead of deliberate.

He recognized one of the females. She was one of the office workers he and Tom had danced with weeks ago, the pretty little one with the made-for-sin mouth. Right now though, she just looked scared. He planted himself between the two groups. "Go inside," he told the females with a gentleness that surprised him. "I'll be there in a few minutes to check on you."

They nodded and scurried away. He turned

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back to the males when the metal door clanked shut with the females safely on the other side.

“You fellas were saying?”

“We were saying...” This was from Terry, Keenan’s number two and, right now especially, Owen’s least favorite person on the planet. “... you should get out of here, stray, while you can still walk.”

“Stray. Hmm. Where *have* I heard that before?” He bared his teeth. “If you want to take me on, now’s your chance. There’s three of you and only one of me. Odds seem good.”

“Better than good, I’d say.” One of Terry’s buddies picked up a big plastic crate and threw it at Owen’s head.

He dodged the crate, roared and charged. Two of the boys got pitched back like tackle dummies. A clothesline from each of Owen’s outstretched arms took them down with little fuss. He grabbed Terry next, spun the young were around to face him, hauled back and hit him so hard the kid’s jaw rocked back and forth. When Terry slumped to the ground, Owen figured that was it for him for the time being.

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The other two struggled to their feet. "Time to call it a night, boys. Oh and pick your friend up out of the dirt. Don't leave it up to Andy to clear away all the trash back here."

It didn't take long for Owen's breathing to return to normal. While it did, he stood his ground, feet spread, arms across his chest as he watched the three weres stumble off. When they disappeared around a corner, he turned around... only to find Andy himself standing in the doorway, crowbar in hand. Frannie and a handful of patrons were looking out around him.

The big bar owner's forearms flexed then he lowered the crowbar. "Looks like you managed to chase off those punks who tried to jump you. Those males are turning into bad news. Guess I'll call in a bar fight and see if Pinebridge's finest can't pick 'em up and throw 'em in a cell for the night."

Straight-faced and solemn, Owen nodded. "Good plan, Andy. And thanks...for looking out for your patrons."

"My pleasure."

Owen followed him back into the bar, only to

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find himself assaulted by Frannie's off-the-charts coddling.

"Are you all right, baby?" she cooed into his ear, and started massaging his forearm.

The two females who'd been out in the alley joined the scrimmage. They were worse than kids. Kids just nuzzled you or hugged you so hard you wondered if your bones were going to bend. These females were hell-bent on fawning over him, touching every inch of exposed skin on his body, pressing into him and asking over and over if he was hurt.

It took some time and he'd just about managed to disengage himself when the bar got real quiet. He looked up, right into Suzanne's bright, furious eyes. She got out her nightstick and started swinging it.

"Paws off my male," she growled and used the stick to lift the chin of one female away from Owen's biceps. Another, who had been in the process of running her dainty little hands over his waist, got elbowed aside unceremoniously.

Frannie, ever the smart one, obviously knew when it was time to cut and run. Without another

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word, she got off Owen's knee and raced back to the bar. He screwed up his courage, looked into the eyes of the only female on the face of the planet who could intimidate him, and groaned when he saw Tom hovering just behind her.

Reaching out, Tom ran his thumb roughly across Owen's cheek. He held it up, showing off the lipstick smear. "Not your shade, buddy." Tom grinned crookedly. "We got a call about a bar fight. You need medical aid?"

"Maybe when Deputy Young gets finished with him."

Owen scanned the bar quick but by then, everybody was laughing so he had no clue who'd spoken. He was yanked to his feet when Tom wrapped his fist in the front of his shirt and pulled. "Come on, lover boy. We'll need a description of your *assailants* for the arrest warrant."

More laughter, punctuated by a few whoops and whistles, and Owen was dragged out the front door.

"Some of the younger males might be pissed at you but you've got the female vote tied up."

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Laughing at his own joke, Tom led Owen over to his pickup.

Suzanne parked herself next to one of the two squad cars in front and glared at him in a way that made his balls feel tiny as raisins.



“That’s youth for you.” David Hold refilled Owen’s coffee cup and added more to his own. “All balls and no brains. Wherever did they come up with that old idea that hierarchy males could mate with the females of their choice?” He shook his head and passed around a platter of buttermilk pancakes and a dish of blueberry compote.

There were four of them at that morning’s old-fart breakfast. Wally of course, because he’d been reassigned to keep an eye on Owen. David, who’d had them drooling over his sugared strawberries and every other thing he’d set in front of them. Steven McMaster, the soft drink delivery guy was sitting across from Owen and enjoying the last, thick, moist slice of Canadian bacon on his plate.

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“Maybe it’s part of Pinebridge’s uniqueness though,” David continued. “Like we welcome outsiders, maybe we’ve got a mentality for new ideas. While I don’t cotton to mass claiming of females, I say let the pups try something new. If it’s got value, it’ll stick. Personally, I doubt this group-leadership thing will last but if you aren’t allowed to make mistakes, how will you learn? Coddling never did anybody any favors. More bacon, anybody?”



Owen scented the air in the clearing that opened onto the pack’s running grounds and didn’t like what he was smelling. Standing on either side of him, Tom and Suzanne looked like they were thinking the same thing. The pack was too hyped, there was too much aggression in the air and, over the heads of everyone else, he spotted a few older weres discreetly heading back to the parking lot.

Only a few days after his run-in with Keenan’s boys out back of the Hair Of The Horse and they were up to their old tricks. They’d asked for this pack run and, from what Owen could see, had

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done a good job organizing it. He had to give them points for that. But as he saw a pushing match break out across the clearing, he knew Tom had been right. This run was an excuse for the young males to pick fights.

Without delay, he got naked. He had a feeling those boys were out to bite his tail tonight and when the time came to change, he didn't want to be impeded by tearing clothes.

Tom and Suzanne followed his lead. The light of the rising moon reflected off their bodies and he felt a swell of warmth that almost overshadowed the quick punch of lust that rocked his 'nads. He loved Suzanne's breasts. Had from the day he'd met her. Those long legs and that cute little indent of a navel of hers. He licked his lips. Tom's body was all about size and symmetry. Bulging abs, a neck as thick as most men's legs, and that long cock resting against his thigh. His lovers had physical beauty to spare but that wasn't why he was staring at them. Well, not the *only* reason. They were his as sure as his name was. When they looked at him, even in public, he felt love and acceptance shimmering around them, scented it whenever they got close to him. Close to each

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other too. This thing between them shouldn't work. The odds against three big-balls weres sharing and playing nice just didn't compute. But it did work and that was fine by him.

He spotted a middle-aged female stepping into the clearing. She was medium sized, medium build, average in every way but the sadness in her eyes drew his attention. Victoria Timberman was surrounded by her three grown pups and their mates. One was even holding her hand, drawing her forward gently, saying something to her in a soft, appealing tone.

Owen's heart felt heavy all of a sudden. This was the first pack run Ed's widow had come to since his murder. As he watched, other weres approached her, greeted her with smiles, laughter and hugs. How many runs had she attended with her mate over the years? Hundreds, probably. Now, surrounded by friends and family, she looked all alone.

Some of what he was feeling must have altered his scent because first Suzanne then Tom leaned into him. He kissed the top of Suzanne's head, put his hand on Tom's shoulder and breathed

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them in. Christ but he never, *ever* wanted to forget their scents.

As the pack edged around them, Owen waited. Although Owen had taken it upon himself to announce the start of the last pack run, Keenan had organized this one. Owen wanted to give the young male a chance to finish the job, step into the shoes of authority, demonstrate that he could be more than a face man with a grasp of logistics.

No announcement came and Owen shook his head as the kid dropped the ball spectacularly.

By now, most of the weres had stripped down and were giving Owen sideways glances, like they were asking *him* what the delay was. Through gaps in the crowd, Owen spotted three groups of young males form. One was watching him and Tom. The other groups were closing in on Roger Madison and Skip Walters.

“Ah, hell.”

The last word didn't come out right because Owen was dropping to all fours and speeding through his change despite the pain, snap and grind. The four males who'd been tracking him

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had changed in a flash and were bearing down on him.

His wolf's eyes picked up the movement of the other groups changing too. Those ran off in a collision course with Roger and Skip.

One of the wolves charging Owen veered and came right at Suzanne. Tom's black wolf leapt, planted himself in front of her, and snarled.

Owen's wolf figured out the strategy quick enough. Threaten the female and draw off one of the males to protect her. It was sound, although despicable. A male attacking a female? Oh these boys needed to be disciplined all right. These pups needed schooling and the teacher was in the house.

Three males charged him at once, two going high, one low. He spun, kept his tail down to protect his vulnerable bits, ducked his head to prevent a skull from bashing into his and took the opportunity to sink his teeth into one of their legs.

The wolf's howl of pain satisfied him on a lot of levels.

As he turned, he spotted the massive black

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male and the elegant, golden-brown female standing nearby. Even though Owen's wolf was being attacked by three—make that four, now—wolves, he knew the black wouldn't come to his aid. He couldn't and besides, Owen's wolf would probably kill him if he did. That wolf's place was at the female's side, guarding her. As long as the threat of one of the attackers breaking away and going for her again existed, the female had to be protected.

The black wolf whined, pawed the ground but stayed where he was.

Owen felt a sting of pain as teeth grazed his hindquarter. He locked his legs as the weight of another wolf came down on his back. Another tried to bite his snout, hold his mouth shut and probably suffocate him. This was no quick and furious scuffle where determination would win out over aggression. These wolves meant to kill him. He scented it on them, felt it in the coordinated hits and bites as they tried to bring him down.

Game. On.

He reared up, left the wolf sprawled across his back to roll in the dirt. Pain made him snarl as

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he tore his snout away from the wolf gnawing on his face. A shake of his head assured him he was unhurt, just tore up a bit. Blood seeped into the fur near his lip. Spinning, he cuffed the wolf trying to bite his ass, and cuffed the other one closing in on him too. The wolf in the dirt was a little too slow getting up. Owen bit down on one of the male's back legs, hard. Bone crunched and the smaller wolf cried in pain.

One fool pup down.

Owen jumped, positioning himself so one challenger stood between him and the others. Oh sure the others would race around their packmate and flank Owen but he'd bought himself a couple of seconds where he faced only one opponent. He took advantage and took it fast. Snapping his jaws in the wolf's face made the young male jerk its head back. Caught out of position, it lifted its head and tried to spin away. Owen was ready for him. He clamped onto the male's neck and bit down. Blood, a warm gush of it, filled his mouth then drooled out the sides. His opponent froze. Letting go before the others could get to his vulnerable sides, Owen ran in the opposite direction, right between them. The

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male he'd bitten collapsed on the ground behind him, whimpering. He pawed the dirt weakly. Owen had missed the artery but not by much. The male would live but would never be the same. So be it.

Two challengers down. Two to go.

They circled him, breathing hard, scenting the air around him. These two were cannier than the first. They took the time to look for weaknesses, signs of injury, a lapse in defense. Owen gave them one. The next step he took, he leaned into one shoulder like his foreleg was injured. The closest challenger was on him in an instant, teeth bared, aiming for the lame leg. He looked utterly astonished when that leg came up, hit him across the snout so hard his head spun to the side.

These young wolves were determined and too eager. He was bigger, stronger and far more experienced. He could have toyed with them. Wanted to toy with them. Wanted to make them hurt and rub their noses in their inevitable defeat. He was also disgusted by them. They were unworthy, pretenders, and he'd had enough of their short-sighted posturing.

A blow from his shoulder sent one wolf

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careening off course. The other, the one he'd just hit, turned to him, snapped its jaws and snarled.

It felt almost anticlimactic to plow into the smaller male, jump on his back, hump him a couple of times for good measure then bite down on the back of his neck, hard. Owen's teeth speared through fur, punctured skin, clamped down on the muscle guarding the male's spine. When the wolf cried out in fear, Owen jumped away, leaving his opponent to drop to the ground and cower.

He turned to face his last, remaining opponent. This wolf was bigger than the others but still no match for a wolf of Owen's size and experience. They circled each other, snarled, held their tails up at aggressive angles. Owen growled. It was deep and rumbled through his chest cavity with so much volume that other wolves, standing nearby, shook.

His opponent turned and ran. Owen might have let him go except the male ducked in behind a female, cowering behind her smaller body and looking out at Owen from the sides of his eyes. Every instinct inside Owen—everything that made him a male and a leader—rebelled at the

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other wolf's cowardice. The female, a tawny beauty with long legs, stood still and watched him with an alertness and trust that humbled Owen. He didn't know this female. Her scent told him she was mated and healthy but he didn't know her. And she didn't know him. Yet she stood there, trusting him to protect her like she'd known him all her life.

Still growling, Owen raced around the female, clamped his jaws down on the young male's flank and dragged him out from behind her. Yelping, trying to curl up so he could snap at Owen, the male dug his claws into the ground and tried to hang on.

Owen just pulled harder. When the male was clear of the female, Owen bit him, over and over. Ribs. Shoulder. Ear. Holding long enough each time so the other wolf would turn and roll. Then he bent his forelegs and dropped down onto the male's chest.

The male froze. The fight was over. He was on his back, belly exposed. Owen bit, hard. He cut into the male's groin then his gut. He could kill him, *wanted* to kill him, wanted to tear his gut until he was dead. Instead, Owen jumped away

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neatly, kicked his back legs so dirt and debris showered his opponent, then walked toward the large, black male and the elegant golden-brown female. The defeated male was young. He could be taught and it wasn't in Owen's nature to hand out death when a hard-learned lesson would suffice.

The female trotted over to him, head and tail held high and proud. She touched her forehead to his cheek then licked the shallow tear above his lip clean. The male stood on his other side, scented the pack that was beginning to crowd them, guarded Owen's wounded flank with his body.

A small group of middle-aged weres changed back to human form and bent over the young were still lying on the ground. They examined the punctures in his groin and abdomen. When that wolf changed as well, they helped him to his feet and held him up while he hobbled toward the parking lot. They weren't overly gentle with him and there was no scent of compassion around them, still, Dr. Hillman and two males Owen recognized as Rescue Services drivers did what was right.

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Owen's wolf scanned the crowd for Roger Madison and Skip Walters. Their wolves had been challenged too and Owen was relieved to catch a glimpse of the grocery store owner and the ranch foreman standing on their feet. They looked a little banged up and Skip's ear was torn, but they were being nuzzled by their respective mates and projected a cockiness that told Owen they'd won their battles. Almost at the same time, Roger and Skip's wolves looked at Tom like they were sizing him up for another round.

The black wolf had beaten them before and the scent that drifted over from them told Owen's wolf they were content to let the pack rank stand.

Tough, sensible males like them made this pack richer.

Nearby, he heard snarling. Before he could stop her, the golden-brown bitch was racing toward the sound. She planted herself in front of a silver-tipped female and growled at the two challengers circling the older bitch.

It took every bit of strength Owen had not to charge them in defense of his female. The black male beside him obviously felt the same because

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he was snapping his teeth together, salivating and trembling. But the female had sought out this fight. She pushed her way into it and accepted it on behalf of the older female. The older female head butted her hip like she wanted to knock the golden-brown out of the way but, after a moment, backed away and let the younger female take on her opponents.

Owen and Tom watched as Suzanne charged, flashed her teeth, snarled and nipped. She reared up, collapsed one female by dropping her weight onto her back then scrambled back to her feet. The second female smashed into her but Suzanne spun in time, deflected the momentum and got in a nip at the other's belly. All three wolves whirled around each other, struck out hard with their forepaws, bit down on ruffs and vulnerable back ends until, as suddenly as they'd charged, the other two females raced off.

The golden-brown bitch moved in a tight, alert circle. When she growled, no other challengers came forward. The fur bristling on her back started to relax back into smooth, glossy waves. She walked up to the silver-tipped female, stood in front of her for a moment then watched the

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female drop her head, turn and slowly disappear into the crowd.

With her tail held even higher than before, Suzanne's wolf skipped back to the two males and shouldered her way in between them, taking a place she'd aptly demonstrated she deserved.

The three victors made their way around the clearing. Other wolves held themselves still to be sniffed, then spronked or dropped onto their chests, extending invitations to play. Some trembled, exposed their flanks and whined with pleasure when they were greeted, sniffed and cuffed playfully.

Owen paused when they passed a brown female. She was lying down, chin on paws, hardly watching the other wolves move. He sniffed the air around her. She was lonely. And sad. Despite the wolves who hovered near, nudging her hip with their snouts or giving her cheek a lick now and then, she stayed where she was and watched the pack with ancient eyes.

He walked up to her. Loomed over her. Lifted his lip so his incisors were exposed then dropped his head. He buried his snout in her ruff, exhaled hard enough to ruffle and dot her sleek fur with

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moisture. It took two solid nudges, the second one harder than the first to get her on her feet. Even then she looked at him with a defiance that should have earned her a reprimand. Her grief was too palpable for him to do anything but nudge her disinterest as he nudged her shoulder.

Finally, she lifted her head and walked back toward her adult pups. They and other wolves surrounded her, played with each other, took turns nuzzling her. Owen's last glimpse was of her settling back down on the ground, chin on paws, and exhaling hard enough to send up a little cloud of dust.

When he and the two wolves flanking him had circled the clearing, the golden-brown female raced around him and the black male then took off like a shot beneath the trees. They and at least half the pack followed. The run wasn't what he was used to but it was what he expected. Older wolves remained in the clearing, socializing, sniffing or chasing each other at half speed. The rest of the pack followed Owen's wolf. They stayed close together.

They followed their new Alpha.

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Chapter Fourteen

Owen shrugged into his leather jacket and slipped into the darkness beneath a stand of pines. Tom and Suzanne had their backs to him and were talking to Brodie Dell and his mate about the investigation. They were also screening him so he could circle around to the parking lot without being seen.

Using his nose and ears, he trailed Terence Smith. The young were was limping a bit from the beat-down Owen had handed him. Those deep scratches on the back of the pup's neck didn't slow him down any and he jumped into his bright blue, flashy little SUV without so much as a pause to check out who was around. He simply cranked the ignition and took off.

Owen knew enough to scent the air and take a good look around before he got in his pickup and followed.

There was little traffic, especially on this backwoods, dirt road so he kept his headlights off. His wolf kept its eyes on the road for him.

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Damn thing was sharper than night vision goggles.

He had a hunch about Terry. Had a hunch about all those young, full-of-stupid-ideas weres. Had a hunch somebody had planted those ideas in their brains because, after they started in on a plan, they couldn't see far enough ahead to carry it through to completion. Not without disappearing for awhile and re-grouping. Nope. Nobody in that brain trust was smart enough to plan and carry out precision attacks designed to wreck the structure of the pack.

Terry stopped at the bottom of the dirt lane, put on his turn signal and headed in the direction of the county road. A minute later, Owen did the same...except for the turn signal part. When they started to run into some traffic, Owen dropped back so two vehicles were between him and Terry, switched on his lights and breathed in the air through his open window.

Pup must have had his window open too because it was like following globs of fluorescent paint on a moonlit blacktop.

As he drove, Owen slammed his fist down on the wheel and called himself all kinds of stupid.

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He'd just gone and demonstrated to one and all that he was their Alpha. Just stepped right up and claimed the big prize.

Except it felt more like a penalty.

He was *not* going to stay, dammit. These people deserved so much better than him. He didn't run packs; he ran *away* from them.

Terry slowed down enough that the car behind him passed. He was driving like he was looking for something, a turnoff maybe. Dropping back, Owen checked his GPS. Sure enough, there was a side road coming up but there was also a square marked Restaurant. Feeling like luck was on his side tonight, Owen touched the brakes, killed his headlights and coasted to a stop on the gravel shoulder. The stretch of road ahead was long and straight. It ran smack up the middle of a valley. If the pup turned off, Owen would see it. If the pup didn't turn off, Owen could always get back on the road and catch up to him.

He didn't have to wait long.

Law-abiding little driver that he was, Terry put on his turn signal and pulled into an all-night diner with a couple of gas pumps out front.

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Owen jumped out of his truck and started jogging down the road.

When he was close enough to see in through the diner's big plate-glass windows, he found he wasn't all that surprised by what he saw.

Steven McMaster. Tonight, the guy wasn't dressed in his soft-drink company shirt and his delivery truck wasn't in the parking lot. The sixty-something were had a baseball cap and a black windbreaker on. He looked completely nondescript, like somebody's grandpa, and the snarl that kept twisting the corner of his mouth as he talked to Terry told Owen the older were was pissed. Owen was pretty sure he knew why.

His stomach felt like somebody had filled it with ice cubes. The old farts. All four of them. A pack within the pack. On the periphery so nobody paid much attention to their movements. Accepted members yet newcomers all the same. The ice melted in his gut when it started churning with anger. How many times had he sat at David's table, eaten the male's cooking, listening to how much he'd liked Ed, how much he was missed, what a good were he was. Owen

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spit on the ground, trying to clear the rancid taste filling his mouth.

Bastard might have been the one who pulled the trigger.

He and his pals had out-foxed Owen *and* an entire sheriff's department. Old and easy-going was a perfect cover. Pulling his cell phone out of his pocket, he backed away from the diner and headed for his pickup.



"Wait there. I'll round up the boys and we'll grab that bastard tonight."

"He's yours but grabbing Steven McMaster now is tactically unsound."

"You did *not* just tell me to wait on this son of a bitch." The growl in Tom's voice was unmistakable. And loud. Owen seconded that emotion but they needed to be thinking with their heads, not their adrenal glands.

"His employer will know he's missing as soon as he doesn't show up to work tomorrow. If the others get wind of him disappearing, they'll

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scatter. We need to grab somebody who won't be missed right away so we can work on getting a confession and the names of his packmates out of him."

The connection went silent for a moment. Owen checked his rearview mirrors, his speed, confirmed he had almost a full tank of gas. Yep. His suspicions had been correct and he'd planned this tail with precision.

It sucked to be right though.

"*Who then?*" Tom growled again, like he was salivating to get his paws on somebody and hand out a little backroom justice of his own.

"Garnett Ross."

"*That big bastard? We'll have to work him over good to get a confession.*"

"Yeah but he works for himself and his route doesn't follow a set schedule. If he drops off the radar for a day or two, nobody'll notice."

"*Consider it done.*"

Owen could practically hear Tom's savage grin.

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“Wake up.”

Owen almost purred with satisfaction when Garnett sputtered, snorted water out of his nose and struggled against the chains binding him. The solid flat-back chair he was tied to had been bolted into the concrete floor of Cory Amos’ garage. Owen and the boys had used the blacksmith’s own tools to do the bolting. Isolated and currently uninhabited, the garage gave them all the time in the world to get to the truth.

Stepping forward, Owen clapped Skip Walters on the shoulder, took the bucket out of the were’s hand and set it next to the garden hose.

Tom and four of his deputies were outside. Owen had demanded that. This was pack justice, plain and simple, and involving law-enforcement officers, even if they were weres, went against the oath they’d sworn to protect and serve.

Grabbing another chair, Owen turned it around so he could sit on it backwards, facing Garnett. The grizzled blacksmith looked like hell. One eye was swollen and marbling up in a fine rainbow spray of color, although Owen

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knew the were would heal fast. His hands were tied behind his back, his ankles were tied to the chair and the chair was holding up a lot better than Garnett.

“Who shot Ed?”

“Fuck you.” Only it came out as *fub*.

Owen let the corners of his mouth curl up. “Never met the man.” Leaning to one side, he picked up the hose, turned it to a light mist setting and focused the spray on Garnett’s neck and chest. The were was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, and he was already sopping wet. It was cold in the garage and the water, straight from a mountain well, was maybe a degree or two above freezing.

The cold mist took its time seeping into Garnett’s heavily muscled body but because he didn’t struggle like he would against a gushing blast, the cold had time to sink in deep and stay there. Garnett might be a were but all that shivering he was doing was only buying him time.

“Who shot Cory?”

This time, Garnett blinked stupidly, like his

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brain was starting to shut down. Owen was counting on that. He'd kept his voice quiet, even gentle. Even let the were drift to sleep a couple of times. Nobody had yelled at Garnett or threatened him. Well, not since Tom and a bunch of other deputies had grabbed the guy out of his traveling-forge truck on the other side of the county line that morning and hauled him back here. Owen had simply asked him the same two questions, going on five hours now. He was waiting for the male's guard to let down, for the numbness in his brain to loosen his tongue. He'd give this technique another few hours and if it didn't work, he'd move on to Plan B. Plan B involved pain, some broken toes and a few volts to the guy's nut sack.

Owen was good with whatever worked.

"What..." Garnett shook his head, snorted out the water that had glided up into his nose, and looked around the garage like his head was sitting on a wonky swivel. "What guarantees do I have you'll let me live if I tell you?"

"You can leave," Owen assured him readily, although he didn't flick off the misting. "I'll let

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you out of here soon as you tell me what I want to know.”

Garnett groaned and tensed his muscles like was testing the strength of the chains. Again. Chances were if they hadn't broken over the past five hours, they weren't going to now, but the guy was welcome to try.

In the silence of Cory's garage, with the late-afternoon sun hanging in the horizon outside, Owen misted the rogue were like he was a prize fern. He gave it exactly eight more minutes then said, “Who killed Ed?”

“Wrrssh.” Garnett lifted his head and ran his tongue over his lips like he was trying to prod them into working right. He swallowed. “Keenan.”

“Keenan O'Donohue?”

Garnett nodded lazily. Owen wasn't fooled. While he was conscious, Garnett kept almost constant eye contact with him, probably because he wanted to prepare himself if Owen attacked. Now, Garnett wouldn't look him in the eye and was looking to the left instead. Dead giveaways the guy was lying.

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He decided to try again. “Who killed Cory?”
“Jackson.”

“Jackson Fender?” Bingo. The guy was telling the truth this time.

Owen exhaled slowly. “What did you tell the young males so they’d go along with your plan?”

“Never knew. Dumb asses.” Garnett blinked again. “Never knew *much*,” he corrected himself and, what do you know, those eyes of his refused to meet Owen’s.

“Tell me more.”

Suddenly, Garnett seemed in the mood to talk. Hypothermia left most people unable to make decisions and the ones they could make, were bad.

“Told ‘em they could mount any female they wanted. Mated. Unmated. Wouldn’t matter. Top dogs...” Garnett laughed and it was a guttural, cruel sound. “...own everything they piss on.”

“After they’d convinced the pack to accept this group-rule scheme, what then?” Owen’s voice was still calm and modulated.

“Needed older weres to fill the other half of

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the ruling group. Huh. Stupid pups were falling over themselves to get us to step into the group. Figured we'd had the idea but were too weak or stupid to do it ourselves. Figured we'd be pushovers. Figureheads. Stupid pups."

"Thank you, Garnett. We'll be out of here very soon." He motioned Skip forward, gave the man a moment to produce the padlock key and let Garnett hear it. "Just one more question. Who's *we*?"



Sitting on the edge of Tom's bed, Suzanne relaxed as Owen rubbed at the knots in her shoulders. They'd been up a day and a half now but it had been worth it. Jackson Fender, Steven McMaster, David Holt and Garnett Ross were in cells down at the sheriff's office and they'd stay there until they were hauled in front of the pack, this evening. That would be about twelve hours from now. Time enough for the pack to process the shock of discovering they'd accepted killers into their midst and been utterly fooled by them.

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She and Owen looked up when Tom walked into the bedroom, fresh from the shower with a towel draped around his hips.

“You did some good investigative work, Young,” Tom said as he stretched. A vertebrae in his back popped and he sighed with obvious pleasure.

Owen twisted on the bed so he could look at Suzanne’s face.

“Nothing he wouldn’t have done,” she told Owen with what she thought was a remarkable lack of ego. “While he was, um, checking that Cory’s place was secure, I ran a check on Garnett Ross. The bank manager helped. He ran Garnett’s credit cards. The manager was a good friend of Cory and Ed’s and he was glad to cooperate.

“The town of Grace Junction kept coming up then stopped about eighteen months ago.”

She remembered warning flares going off in her head when she heard the name. “I called their Alpha, woke him up and asked for the 4-1-1. The man cursed himself up and down as soon as I mentioned Garnett’s name. See, Lowell—he’s their Alpha—he took the pack

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over eighteen months ago.” She shook her head then touched Owen’s hand. The adrenaline and fatigue were catching up to her and his fingers were better than homemade chicken soup and warm milk. “The pack keeps itself isolated but now and then you’d hear whispers something wasn’t quite right. That their old Alpha treated the females in his pack like a personal harem. He was a megalomaniac and Lowell, who’s one of the guy’s many illegitimate cubs, fought him for control. Lowell said he won the fight but his father wouldn’t accept it. I could hear the pain in his voice when he told me his sire came at him with a knife.”

“Did he kill him?” Owen asked without censure.

“Yes.” She leaned forward and sighed when his fingers moved over her neck. “From the sound of it, and I checked with their sheriff to confirm, Lowell had no choice.” Looking up at Tom, she felt her back relax even more. “Lowell recognized the four names I gave him. They were his father’s inner circle. His band of enforcers. Apparently, they got to gobble up almost as many goodies as his father did. Lowell sounded sick with himself

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when he told me he'd banished them instead of killing them.

"And it looks like they moved around the periphery of a lot of packs, hunting for weaknesses they could exploit. Looking for a way in so they could start up their psycho-were ways all over again."

Falling silent, she rocked slowly in time with the movement of Owen's fingers. For awhile, she thought about getting dressed again and going down to the station. But Tom had assigned a full contingent of weres to guard the prisoners. She realized it was mostly nervous energy she was feeling. That wasn't much of a surprise. So much had changed over the last day and a half. Yet one thing remained in a holding pattern.

Loosening the towel she'd wrapped around herself after her shower, she handed it to Tom. He carried it, along with his own, into the bathroom and when he returned, he slapped Owen's shoulder, urging the big male to get up so he could turn the sheets down.

Owen had wandered around the house naked after his shower. He did that sometimes. Not that she minded. Frowning, she reached out

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and tested the edges of the cut on his hip. One of the young males he'd fought the night before last had bit him. Although it was more of a deep scrape than a puncture, she still shivered at the idea of him being hurt. There was another cut on his cheek but that one was already healing.

Her battles hadn't been nearly as brutal. All she had to show for them was a stiff knee and that would probably be better come nightfall.

After crawling up toward the pillows, she stretched out on her back. Owen lay down beside her. Tom took the other side. They were quiet for awhile, staring up at the ceiling and thinking.

Lifting herself up on her elbow, she flicked her still-damp hair back and leaned into Owen's body. She didn't bother to disguise her sigh of pleasure. Owen was big and solid and she loved the feel of her breasts nuzzling into him. Liked the way he looked at them, all round and swollen against him. She got told she was beautiful, more than was probably healthy but when Owen said it—when Tom said it—she really felt it.

She put her hand on Owen's chest and let her palm coast over the sharp rise of his pecs. That soft furring of pale hair tickled the spaces

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between her fingers. Leaning over him, she opened her mouth to kiss his throat.

He stiffened, put his hands on her arms and pushed her away gently.

“Oh yeah,” she said quietly. “You always want to be on top. Don’t you.”

It wasn’t a question. Behind her, Tom popped up. He kissed her shoulder, stroked her hip then snorted dismissively. “Alphas. Stuck up and too good to be mounted by the likes of us.”

Owen’s expression darkened. “I’m not stuck up. And I’m *not* an Alpha.”

She huffed. “You are one dense male,” she said and planted her hand in the middle of his chest. “Recap of last night. Fight with multiple opponents.” She started counting off on her fingers, which earned her a scowl. “Win fights with multiple opponents. No further challengers. Winner equals Alpha.” Leaning back, she kissed Tom, inhaled sharply when that first hit of citrus reached her taste buds, then pulled away. “He’s really big so we’ve got to expect him to be a little stupid at times.”

“Why you...” Whatever Owen was going to say

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was cut off when he rolled on top of her, sat up so he was straddling her hips and drove his fingers into her ribs. Squirming did her no good against a were that huge so she settled for swatting at his hands and laughing like a pup.

When he finally relented and rolled off her, she came with him. The body beneath hers stiffened as she sat up with her pussy nuzzling his cock. "I'll say it once more and once more only." Deliberately, she kept her voice quiet, perhaps even seductive. "You are this pack's Alpha. You were challenged. You accepted the challenges. You won. It is just as simple as that so unless you want to call another pack run this afternoon, tie your hands together and let everybody who wants to, beat the bejezus out of you, you're going to remain their Alpha."

He opened his mouth to interrupt but she kept on talking. He put his hands on her hips like he was going to lift her off, but she started rocking. Light, subtle movements that made him inhale sharply and hold her against him. And get hard. Nice and hard.

"Being Alpha isn't all about strength, although holding your own in a fight goes a long way in our

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world.” Her voice was still soft, still confident. Her hips kept moving. “Leadership is more about having an inborn ability to lead, having more of it than anyone else. Like so few, you have the ability to take command of a group just by showing up. You’re smart, focused, and ruthless when you have to be.” Leaning down, she let her breasts press into his chest, kissed his shoulder then ran the tips of her fingernails down his arms until he shivered. “You fight like you face every situation—full on and full out.” She grinned deliberately to soften her next words. “That doesn’t mean you’ll be a good leader but others *will* submit to your leadership.”

“And, buddy,” Tom piped up. “That sound you hear is the pack breathing a collective sigh of relief because they’ve *got* an Alpha. You can screw up from now until round-up and they’ll still follow you because every wolf needs one thing. An established hierarchy.”

Owen rubbed his face and growled. “*No* horse analogies. Ever.” He rubbed his face again. “Why won’t you listen? I’m not the male for this job. I don’t *do* packs. I find creative and violent ways to make sure I’m not welcome in packs. I—”

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“Oh enough with the sanctimonious bullshit, Owen.” Suzanne felt her temper snap. She grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the mattress on either side of his head. “Being a punk-ass whiner isn’t your style. Now man up and accept the responsibility you were born to handle.”

Owen blinked. He looked at the hands restraining him, one side then the other.

“And another newsflash, stud. I’m your top bitch. And as of yesterday, he’s...” With a jerk of her head, she indicated Tom, who was stretched out beside them all relaxed and casual, except for the hard flash of light in his eyes. “...your Beta. I love you. Sure you could be a pussy and take off but I can’t follow you. Neither can he. We accepted the responsibilities of those positions when we accepted those challenges. You leave and we...” Her breath caught and she had to swallow, hard, before the words would come. “We’ll have each other. We’ll live our lives out as mates but we’ll never be whole. A part of us will always be missing. *You*.”

Owen’s expression was neutral, like he was

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processing everything she'd thrown at him. Finally, he opened his mouth.

"You love me?" he asked and for the first time since she'd met him, he sounded hesitant. Maybe even wary.

"Yes. I do. I love you even though I've lived every day knowing you might run off."

"Tell me you love Tom, too. God, please tell me you love him."

She felt the corners of her mouth turn up. "I love Tom too."

"Thanks, baby," Tom said quietly. Those eyes which, a second earlier had reflected nothing but anger, were suddenly soft. He looked at her with unguarded warmth and touched her face. "I love you too. Have since about five minutes after I met you." Leaning forward, he kissed her. His tongue touched hers in that slow, seductive way of his. His lips moved and made her shiver.

When he finally leaned back, she tilted her head to the side. "Five minutes? Why did it take so long?"

"Because I was too busy being in lust with you."

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His gaze trailed over her. Hair, face, breasts, the curve of her hip planted over Owen's loins, all the way down to her pink-polish decorated toes, Tom looked at her with a fire that made her pussy clench and spill moisture onto Owen's cock.

The big male beneath her hissed then rocked his hips into her.

"And you love me too," she barked down at him.

Owen stilled. When he finally spoke, it wasn't reluctance she heard but fear. "Yes. I do. And you're a masochist for wanting me."

"My issue to deal with, not yours," she answered dismissively. Still holding his wrists, she started rocking her hips again, nice and slow, arousing them both. That smooth, fat cock of his felt so good sliding against her labia, teasing her clit. "I'm going to mount you, stud. Fuck you good and hard until we both howl."

His throat flexed as he swallowed.

"I'm going to take you because this body is mine. Every delicious square inch of it." Because *her* body needed it, she rocked a little faster. "No other female will ever touch you."

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“N-no, ma’am.” Again, Owen swallowed harshly. That rebellious expression he’d worn earlier had faded. Now, he just looked a little stunned.

“That’s right. The only people with access to this fine body will be Tom and me. And when you’re old, flabby and flatulent, we’ll still love you. We’ll still be making love to you. Got it?”

“Affirmative.” His gaze moved down her body and he moistened his lips.

“I’ll second that.” Tom got up on his knees, positioned himself beside them and held his cock out to her in offering. He ran the tip across her mouth. The way he touched her, the way he bared his need was so...intimate. She ran her tongue over the smooth crest until the taste of warm skin and salt sparkled in her mouth. It was so good, arousing her males at the same time. She felt powerful, utterly feminine and desired. With one hand, Tom held her breast. With the other, he slid his shaft across her lips. Tom smiled when they pursed and manipulated his delicate skin, then he guided his cock into her mouth.

Semi-hard, the length of him fit inside without struggle. He held himself there, letting his balls

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rest on her chin and his pubes tickle her nose. She licked and sucked, swirled her tongue around him. Owen shifted his hands so they were on her thighs. Still holding her Alpha captive, she was able to sit up straighter, use more of her weight to rub against his swollen rod, accommodate Tom's growing shaft without choking.

Her males grunted, even growled softly as she used them. When she began bobbing her head in time with the subtle rocking of Tom's hips, he let go of his shaft for a moment, stroked her face and smoothed her hair back. Looking up through her lashes, she was blown away by the intensity of his expression. He watched her with enough lust to make her shiver, and that look held undisguised love too. Her shiver became a tremble as warmth cascaded though her body.

The easy roll of her cleft over Owen's pole wasn't enough. She bore down on him, hard enough to make him snarl and his abdominals clench. The fingers on her thighs dug in and urged her to move faster.

Tom was fully hard now. She pulled back for a moment, sucked in air then dove on him like he was sustenance and she was starving. He grinned

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and growled his appreciation. Glancing down, she saw Owen watching them, saw him lick his lips like he was imagining her mouth on him, or Tom's cock in his. She wasn't sure which but both scenarios cranked up her arousal until she was groaning around Tom's fat rod and rocking to appease the ache, the need in her pussy.

Soon, rocking wasn't enough. She sat up, let go of one of Owen's hands, held his cock up straight and lowered herself onto it.

Dripping with her juices, the head parted her folds easily then wedged tight against the mouth of her core. Hung didn't begin to describe Owen and she groaned as she forced him inside. The stretching and the sting were exquisite. Arousal drove her close to the edge of control and she sucked Tom furiously, swirled her tongue around him, bobbed her head up and down until he moaned. His taste and the exquisite, erotic scent of his skin filled her. She felt thoroughly seduced, from her head right down to her pussy. Tom's hand, still on her breast, honed in on her nipple. He pinched it then ran his thumb across it, back and forth until she shivered and arched into his touch.

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Owen slid his hands out from beneath hers, grabbed her waist and started pulling her down onto him. She felt nothing but pleasure as she ceded control of the joining to him. Her attempts to take him in had been too slow, too tentative. She didn't have the strength to impale her much smaller body on his. Those strong arms moved her, pleased them both, but she loved him most for being able to harness that control-freak side of himself that had never let either her or Tom mount him until now.

And from the expression on his face, it was clear Owen was getting into the being-on-bottom thing for a change.

She grunted when he was fully seated inside her, rubbed her loins against his tentatively, tried to breathe past the heavy cock threatening to split her in two *and* the one filling her mouth. They were going to be the death of her.

She couldn't wait.

Suddenly, Tom pulled out of her mouth. He kissed her hard, wrapped his tongue around hers then just as suddenly, pulled back. With her head in his hands, he said, "You're the sexiest female I've ever known." Then he was gone.

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Damn but that male could move fast. She held onto Owen's waist when the mattress shifted then she felt Tom's hand on her ass, felt something oily being smeared over her rear opening. Leaning forward, she grinned and relaxed. She knew what Tom wanted and she loved taking both her males at once. They made her feel utterly feminine and so delicate as their much larger bodies sandwiched hers. She loved them equally, loved making love with them but nothing compared to this sharing between all three of them.

One of Tom's well-oiled fingers breached her. He paused when she gasped, then, after she glanced back at him and nodded, he slid in deeper. In. Out. Slow and careful, he massaged her opening until the feeling of being stretched faded. It returned and peppered her nerve endings with pleasure when he added a second finger.

Beneath her, Owen groaned. She knew he could feel Tom's fingers on the underside of his shaft, knew the Beta was deliberately masturbating Owen through the thin wall between her anus and pussy. She gasped when

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Tom spread his fingers, just a little and began fucking her faster.

Leaning forward, she let her breasts graze Owen's chest. He watched her with hungry eyes. When she took hold of his wrists again, dragged them up beside his head and anchored them there, some of the hunger in his expression was replaced with unease.

"You're going to give this to me," she said softly, punctuating her words with confident rolls of her hips. The pleasure of fucking herself on Owen *and* Tom made her lips pull away from her teeth, exposing her sharp canines. "Give this to *us*," she added. "You love us and trust us so there's nothing to prove. You just have to accept the pleasure."

"What she said." Behind her, Tom growled then fit the head of his cock to her.

She groaned when that fat, smooth wedge of flesh parted her. The stretching made her head spin. When she arched her back, the tightness eased and she held her breath as she absorbed the sensation of him sliding past the tight ring of her sphincter. It felt so good, so wicked that she smiled through the hitch in her breathing. Tom

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moved slow and good thing too. Two big rods weren't easy to accommodate but they fucked her so gently, it quickly changed any discomfort into need. She felt Tom's chest against her back, his legs spread to find a spot with good traction between her legs and Owen's.

Her two males grunted then kissed each other over her head as they began driving their cocks in and out of her. An instinct for self preservation kept her still. For the most part. Her movements were limited to rocking back and forth between them but it felt wonderful. She felt full, loved, stuffed with the pleasure they gave her. A fresh flood of cream spilled out of her and wet Owen's loins so thoroughly, they set up an obscene and totally hot slapping sound as they rocked together.

Tom jerked at the same time as he moaned against Owen's mouth. The Beta began moving faster, forcing her down onto Owen and fucking her tender opening with more strength than he'd shown her before.

She could have smacked him for holding back.

The pleasure rising in her body banished that

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from her mind. Arousal began to peak, making her nerve endings tingle and her muscles tense. She heard a drawn-out moan and realized it was hers, realized she was thrusting her hips back and forth, urging her lovers to take her harder. The muscles in Owen's wrists shifted and she realized she was holding him so tight her fingernails had left crescent-moon shaped gouges in his skin. When she loosened her grip, he slid his mouth away from Tom's.

"Come, baby. Come for us." Like always when they were in bed, Owen's voice was deep and modulated, yet it was the most erotic sound she'd ever heard. Tom must have felt the pull of it too because his body trembled against hers and his hips started pumping fast.

She wanted the feeling to go on and on but her own arousal wouldn't be held back any longer. With Owen filling her pussy with deep, determined strokes and Tom doing insane, delicious things to her ass, she started shaking and didn't stop until desire squeezed her belly and made her hips rock forward. Release, bright white and overwhelming, torqued her muscles and made her cry out. Soul-deep throbs of

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pleasure started in her pussy and radiated out from there. She cried out again, bore down on her lovers as her body clenched and held them close, kept them deep.

Without asking and unwilling to accept any refusal, she bared her teeth and bit down on the top of Owen's pec. As drops of blood wicked into her mouth, he yelled, jerked but didn't shove her away. Instead, he held her head to him as she marked him. Claimed him as her mate. The taste of his blood changed as it mingled with her saliva. It changed his scent as her mating hormone spread through him, changing him. He was fully hers and weres mated for life.

She unlocked her jaws, began licking the small puncture marks on his skin and moaned with pleasure.

Behind her, Tom made a rough sound that sounded almost like pain then his hips were bouncing off her ass, thrusting him into her in a rough rhythm. Buried inside her, his cock flexed rhythmically, in time with his groans. His legs tightened between hers and she gasped as his seed began to fill her. Dropping his head down beside hers, he bit the other side of Owen's chest.

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This time the Alpha jerked. His eyes opened wide. For about a second and a half, he looked flat-out scared then he grabbed hold of the back of Tom's head, held the other male to him and started to pant.

Suzanne rolled against Owen with uninhibited sensuality. He seemed a little zoned out at the minute so she took control of the mating, rode both her males hard and fast, thrust her hips back and forth. She came again, even more violently than the first time when Tom released Owen and bit down on her shoulder. For an instant, his saliva stung then it warmed almost to the point of boiling. The heat sped through her veins, carrying release and completion with it. Two mates. What had she ever done to deserve something this good?

Tom licked her wound then returned to Owen's. Watching him lick the mark on Owen's chest was just about the hottest thing she'd ever seen.

Beneath her, Owen stiffened. His hips punched up. He drove into her and shouted hoarsely. Buried deep inside her, his cock began to throb.

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“Mark me,” she cried out. “Mate me or lose me.” It wasn’t ego speaking. It wasn’t a threat or coercion. It was the most basic tenet of their species. Marking had to go both ways.

Without hesitation, he lifted his head, fastened his teeth over her shoulder and bit down. For the second time, she felt the ache, the sting and burn of a mating bite. Throwing her head back and grinning like a drunkard, she squeezed Owen’s wrists, held him still and hers as her body brought him to orgasm.

He groaned against her, lifted his hips to her again and again, filled her with his sweet, potent seed. Without warning, he reared up, grabbed hold of Tom and pulled the other male to him. He bit down on his Beta’s shoulder, groaned, snarled then released him with a gasp. When the tension drained out of him, when his muscles began to unclench and he started to breathe fast and deep, she shot forward. Both her males grunted when she yanked clear of their shrinking rods. With a strength that caught her completely off guard, she turned, grabbed Tom, tossed him onto his back, straddled his belly and bit down on his chest.

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Hollering and holding her so tight it was hard to draw a full breath, he shook as he accepted her marking. When it was done, when she was finally finished licking the tiny wounds she'd given him, he still wouldn't let go. Owen rolled into them, pressed into the sides of their bodies and pulled the covers up over the three of them.

She wasn't a delicate female and Suzanne knew she should get off Tom. He wasn't having any part of that though. He just hugged her tighter until she relaxed and used his big, warm body for a bed.



Owen rolled his shoulders. His mating marks didn't hurt but he was hyper-aware of them. He was also aware of the way the other members of the pack were sniffing in his direction. His direction, Suzanne's and Tom's. Their scents had changed and announced as effectively as a neon sign, *Hey! In a threesome and loving it.*

As he walked the path between parking lot and clearing at the edge of the pack's running

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grounds, he steeled himself for dirty looks and ribald comments.

What he got was weres stopping him with the pressure of their hands on his forearm, leaning into him, nuzzling him and breathing him in deep and long like they were anxious to learn his new scent. Without conscious thought, he growled when one or two males stayed too close to Suzanne too long.

They dipped their heads, watched him warily from the corners of their eyes and backed off. He snorted and felt all big man when they took the hint and took their paws off his female.

He felt the same impulse when weres crowded Tom too long but the rational middle of his forebrain let Suzanne take that battle on. Part of it was he knew the male could take care of himself. Part of it was the gut-deep surety that Tom, now that they were mated, had absolutely no interest in any female other than Suzanne. Or any male but him.

The others could look, even be tempted to lust after the handsome, dark-haired male. Tom's heart was solidly in his and Suzanne's corner and Owen knew it would stay that way.

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When they entered the clearing, the weres already present stepped aside and let the three of them through. He'd timed their arrival deliberately. Most of the pack was there and they'd formed a tight, seething ring around the four rogues in the center. Neither Jackson, Steven, David or Garnett were bound. They stood close together, back to back, their eyes shifting and narrowing, circling like they were looking for a way out.

Keenan, Terry and their two buddies were there too. They were held in place by a smaller but no less fierce-looking ring of weres.

After a slow, deliberate inhale, Owen stepped up to the older weres from Grace Junction. "You planned and carried out the murders of this pack's Alpha and Beta." His voice rang through the clearing but there was no pleasure in it. "Only two of you pulled the triggers but you share equally in the blame. The motive was your greed for control, which you were incapable of earning honorably, and which you in no way deserved." He spat on the ground because every part of his being needed to rid itself of the aftertaste of

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speaking the unthinkable crimes these males had committed.

“The punishment is death.” Oddly, he felt no triumph proclaiming that. He simply spoke it as fact. This distancing of his emotions had served him well in battle. As an Alpha, he’d thought it would hinder him. Instead, it gave him clarity and a determination to do right by this pack. “Sentence must be decided by the pack. If anyone wants to speak in these males’ defense, do it now.”

Owen stood still, closed his mouth, waited. He heard breathing, smelled anger, pain and impatience. When the breeze shifted, he turned around, scanned the pack’s faces, saw zero compassion.

No one spoke up and although he hadn’t expected anyone to, it was only right to present the opportunity. “A vote by show of hands will do. Raise your hand if you think these rogues should be killed.” Again, he scanned the crowd. An overwhelming majority of weres raised their hands and resolutely kept them there.

“Thank you.” It took a long time for every

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hand to go down. “Raise your hand if you think these rogues should be banished.”

A few hands went up but, again, that was only right. Even among weres, not everybody believed in capital punishment. Also, not everybody knew these rogues had already been banished from Grace Junction, only to cause trouble here.

Straightening his shoulders, he turned and faced the four older males in the middle of the clearing. They’d been eerily silent, like they’d assumed they’d be banished like they’d been banished from Grace Junction. Maybe the thought that the pack would kill them had never occurred to them. “Garnett, you lured Sheriff Ed Timberman out and shot him while his back was turned. Jackson, you—”

A wrenching scream cut him off. Owen spun around and, faster than he’d ever seen a female move, Victoria Timberman was leaping through the air. He heard clothes rip, saw her change in mid-jump. Garnett didn’t even have time to get his hands up before the weight of her compact, brown wolf drove him backwards. Owen heard a wet, gurgling sound before a silence so thick it pressed in on his chest, filled the clearing. He

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didn't need to look but he did anyway. Garnett lay sprawled on his back, his eyes wide and unfocused. There was a bloody hole where his throat used to be.

The three other males who'd been standing with him backed away in panic. They were shoved without quarter by the weres already closing in on them. Victoria's wolf scrambled to its feet, staggered, then turned to Owen. He held himself still. An instinct, one he still wasn't comfortable with and one he was certainly unfamiliar with, kept him where he was. The wolf took another step toward him. Her mouth was open and drops of blood from her muzzle fell in her wake. When she came to an unsteady stop, Owen leaned down, put his hand on her head, ran his thumb over the soft fur between her blank, blue eyes.

She changed back, although nowhere as quickly as she'd morphed into her wolf form. With blood smearing her chin and her chest rising too fast for her small frame, Victoria stumbled forward. Owen grabbed her, hugged her tight, and stared up at the stars as she began to sob.

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He heard snarls then screams as the pack surged forward. Smelled fresh blood, urine, then the screaming stopped. While the inconsolable female clung to him, he looked over the heads of the pack. Keenan and his buddies were still standing. The front of Keenan's shirt looked like he'd thrown up on himself.

When a group of large males walked by, wheeling carts of cut logs so the rogues' bodies could be destroyed by fire, the scent of the young males' fear made the inside of Owen's nose burn. Owen knew he'd taken a risk declaring sentence on the rogues first. He still felt the young males could be re-educated. The pack might very well pardon their own but only if their bloodlust and need for revenge had been appeased.

But the blood of four rogues only went so far.

Eventually the pack, Victoria included, fell silent. She still clung to him so he still held her, even when her adult pups approached and tried to coax her away. Owen had fought his innate drive to lead his entire adult life. For the first time, he made an effort to embrace it. This female needed to draw on his strength for awhile. The drive to care for her, for every were in this clearing was so

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strong, he refused to step back from it a moment longer.

He was Alpha. They were his.

What a cluster-fuck this was probably going to turn out to be.

But as long as he stepped up, as long as he made an effort, right or wrong, that's what mattered.

Victoria trembled, loosened her hold on him a little but didn't let go. Not yet. He lifted his head. "Four young males, four of our own..." His voice carried with confidence and authority. "...were recruited by the rogues to aid their plan."

"We were lied to." One of the males, Terry, shouted.

"Shut up." Tom's powerful voice boomed across the clearing.

Everyone fell silent.

"They did not participate in the murders," Owen continued. "Nor were they aware of them. They were promised unchecked mating privileges and power they didn't have the strength to earn on their own. They allowed themselves to be seduced by those promises. If you think they

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warrant a second chance...if you think they're smart enough to be re-educated, we will punish them but they won't be banished. If you don't think they're worthy of a second chance, they will be banished." He hesitated before he offered the third option. "If you think they represent a danger too strong to release into our pack or any another, they will be killed. Raise your hands if you think they should be killed."

The hands were slow in going up but eventually, fifteen, maybe twenty percent of the weres raised theirs.

"Thank you. Raise your hand if you want them banished." Owen kept his expression neutral as he gauged the votes. A little less than half the hands were up. Unless there were a lot of abstainers, it looked like he'd have to cast a deciding vote.

"Thank you. Raise your hand if you want to punish then re-educate them."

He exhaled with displeasure.

Ian, the were who'd been Cory's go-to guy for the minutia of running the pack, and had served

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Owen in that capacity since Cory's murder, stepped up.

"I counted the hands as best I could. A margin of only four votes in favor of leniency. Guess it's your call, boss." Ian spoke quietly, still, there was no way even a hard-of-hearing were couldn't pick up the sound of a single voice at this distance.

Owen knew what his decision was but one of Victoria's adult pups had chosen that moment to walk up to him. She had a sweater in her hand and, scenting like a nervous were, she handed it to him. The comfort and care of one of their own, especially the widow of their murdered Beta and sheriff, took precedence over any pronouncement he'd ever make.

He settled the sweater around Victoria's shoulders, pressed his lips to the top of her head then pulled himself up to his full height.

"The young males will not be banished. They will perform a thousand hours of community service, each, in addition to attending school or holding down full-time jobs. They will be mentored by senior members of the pack on the proper and right way to live within a pack."

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“Thank you, Alpha,” Keenan called out.

“Don’t thank me.” Owen’s voice was cold. “I’ll be the one supervising your community service. And unless I see a genuine change in each of you, I’ll banish you so far north you’ll be fighting polar bears for food. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir. Yes.”

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Epilogue

One Year Later

Owen adjusted the fit of his belt, made sure it was centered and his sidearm hung over the dark-brown stripe on his tan pants, just like they'd taught him at the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror. It had only been two days and he still wasn't used to the way his new name badge looked or the pins on his lapels. He'd been used to the old badge, the one that identified him as a deputy sheriff. The new one just said sheriff.

The election was over and the county, non-weres and all, had spoken its mind. Owen Wells, retired Army Sergeant First Class, bad-ass were to the bone, was the man they'd given the nod to for the sheriff's job.

He squared his shoulders and stepped out of his office. The deputies coming on shift that

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morning looked up, applauded, made mocking attempts to polish his new badge for him until he growled and brushed them off. Grinning, they backed away and accepted the call sheets Tom was passing out.

Suzanne was sitting at the dispatcher's desk, looking up at Owen with so much pride he felt his chest swell. Her hand was on her bumped-out belly, rubbing a spot his unborn pup was probably kicking the heck out of. There was an open box of saltines and a glass of ginger ale beside her. She hated being back on dispatch but he'd refused to let her out on patrol while she was pregnant. Tom had backed him up, adamantly, and the discussion had ended there.

Just like Owen knew he'd back Tom up when Suzanne was pregnant with the other male's pups.

"Heads up," Owen barked and the station house fell silent. "Keep an eye open for any election signs still standing. If you see one, call the campaign office and tell them to remove it by the end of business, today. Most of you will be on traffic duty this week. Spring's here and a lot of the big wildlife are wandering close to the

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roadways to eat the salt and vegetation near the shoulders.” He pointed at his deputies. “Keep the speeds on the highways down. There’s a BOLO for two stolen vehicles from out of State, and one for a fly-by-night moving van that’s been ripping off customers up and down this side of the great divide all winter. Oh and Piper Amos and her boys will be back from Arizona next week. There’s a group of volunteers going out to her place to clean the yard, plant some bulbs and make sure the house is fit for habitation. If you want to contribute an hour or two, phone Brodie down at the community center and let him know. He’s organizing the crews. Questions? Okay,” he continued after sufficient pause. “Have a good shift and come back safe.”

After the deputies filed out, Owen walked over to the desk where Keenan O’Donohue was checking timecards against a payroll software program. “Any problems, Keenan?” he asked.

“None so far, Sheriff.” Shifting in his seat, Keenan glanced up out of the corner of his eye at Owen. “I’ve got two classes this afternoon so when I’m finished, I’ll be at the college. If that’s okay?”

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“Absolutely.” Owen gave the young were a nod. There’d been some reticence at first but Keenan had eventually settled into his punishment. He’d starting off doing odd jobs around the station but when he showed an interest and aptitude for bookkeeping, Owen had arranged for Keenan to go back to school and study accounting. A grant from the pack’s higher-education fund had helped with most of the tuition.

Keenan had been a better male ever since. There was now more self-confidence in the way he held himself, and he openly emulated the way both Owen and Tom treated other members of the pack—with friendship, kindness and deference where it was called for.

Owen continued. “If you see him, say ‘hi’ to Terry for me. Brodie has nothing but good things to say about your friend’s work at the Community Center.” Even though Terry was finishing up his last term at college, and had long since completed his hours of mandatory community service, he still volunteered a few hours a week. Brodie kept a tight leash on the pup but it let the former dispatcher spend time

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with Terry, mentoring him and letting that easy-going mature personality of his rub off.

When Owen headed back for his office, Tom sat on the corner of a desk and grinned at him. "Not bad for your first day on the job, Sheriff. By the way, the ranch backing onto our house is going up for sale next week. The owner talked to me about it. Said he wanted to do the neighborly thing and give us first crack at it. If we were interested, that is."

"You bet we're interested," Suzanne called out. She shifted in her chair and her blonde hair, even thicker and shinier than it usually was, grazed her cheek. She pushed it away impatiently. "How much does he want? Between the three of us, I'm sure we can swing the mortgage payments."

"There will be no mortgage payments," Owen barked. He jammed his fists down on his hips. "I told you when we bought the place we own now, I've got money."

Tom frowned at him. "Enough for a four-bedroom bungalow, especially when I sold my old place and used the profit as a down payment, sure. But we're talking almost half a million dollars, Owen." His jaw dropped when Owen

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shot him a look. “You mean you can swing that?”

“Yes. I’ll call Fina today and ask her to cash in some of my investments.”

“Some?” Suzanne got up, walked over to him and threw her arms around his neck. She tended to be a little demonstrative when it came to the emotional stuff these days. He didn’t really mind, especially when he got to hug her back and feel the firm mound of his pup press into him. “Tom, that means we’ll finally have the land for a couple of horses.”

“Yeah.” The other were’s eyes lit up. “I know you wanted to give riding lessons some day.”

“Sweet baby Jesus,” Owen huffed. “I’ll buy the land if you want it, even get a contractor in to look at those plans we had drawn up for a bigger place. But no way will I let any of my pups near some damned horse. Have you two lost your minds?”

Suzanne glared at him. And glared. As his balls got to feeling like raisins, he slowly shut his mouth.

Wyoming might still be cowboy hell as far as

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he was concerned, but a smart male knew when to cut his losses.

“Consider yourself outvoted, buddy.” Tom came up behind Suzanne. With his hand on her hip, he nuzzled her gently. His other hand rested on Owen’s waist. “A few horses, a few head of cattle...sounds pretty damn near perfect to me.”

“Sheriff, we’ve got a fence down on County Thirty-Five.” One of his deputy’s voices came over the dispatcher’s open line. *“Jensen’s goats are all over the place. I called him up but we’ll need more manpower. He sends his apologies, this being your first day on the job and all. Any suggestions?”*

“Yeah. Break out the roasting pans,” Owen muttered. He stopped rubbing his forehead when Suzanne and Tom started chuckling. “Well don’t just stand there, cowboy,” he told Tom. “You’re the one who wants to be a rancher. Get out there and round up the buggers.”

“I’m on it, Sheriff.” Still grinning, Tom grabbed his hat and headed for the door.

“Get him some help,” Owen told Suzanne as he watched his other mate leave. “Hawkins isn’t far from there.”

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She nodded, went back to her desk, put her headset on and started coordinating his department's response.

Shaking his head, Owen headed back to his office so he could finish preparing for his inaugural meeting with the town council. This life might not be anything he could have imagined for himself, even anything he thought he'd deserve. He was resigned to worrying himself into an early grave because his mates were hell-bent on putting their pups in the same space as crazy-eyed horses. Still, he liked this life just fine. Owen Wells had found a home. And it was a damned good one.

End

About the Author

Gwen Campbell got her start in the magazine industry, writing everything from news stories to children's fiction to obituaries. When the company she worked for succumbed to economic turndown, she looked at her bank book and gave herself one year to pursue writing full time. The deal was if she made money, she didn't have to look for a real job. It's worked out pretty good so far and she still doesn't have a real job. A life-long believer in romance, she now writes romantic fiction. Gwen is married and she and her husband contribute the success of their relationship to making a point of saying "I love you," at least once a day, sometimes saying, "Yes, dear," just because, and making sure the toilet paper always comes over the top of the roll. She says her best sticky-plot resolutions come to her while dog walking.

Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot erotic titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed the werewolf paranormal *Wyoming Wild 2: Breakdown of a Pack* by Gwen Campbell you might also like Gwen Campbell's *As My Warrior Commands*, a scifi themed *Frontiers of Love* title.

When a kingdom crashes down around her, will his love be enough to save her?

Sibyls are old crones. Everybody knows that. So what's a warrior supposed to think when a beautiful young woman turns up in the middle of a siege, says she's a sibyl, predicts the downfall of a kingdom and tells him he's going there with her to prevent it? He does what any hot-blooded warrior would do. He follows the woman. She's intelligent, brave, can see the future, has an ass he can't stop staring at and she knows how to make him laugh. What he doesn't know is that the sibyls have predicted the downfall of the Kingdom of Jareb-Phar if a young sibyl enters their throne

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room. What they don't know is if her arrival will be coincidental or cause the kingdom's fall. The only thing the warrior does know for sure is that beneath his beautiful, young sibyl's discipline is a woman as lusty and wanton as he is.

Here is a short excerpt from *Frontiers of Love 2: As My Warrior Commands*.

Touching her arm, Thain encouraged Jessica to take another bite of hard bread. They'd eaten the last of the soft two days ago. He had a sense she dipped it into her tea, bit off a piece and chewed only to make him happy. They'd left the flood waters behind that morning.

For the most part they kept to their own, dark thoughts. Because a full bath was impossible, both Jessica and Thain stripped down in the failing light and dragged wet cloths over their bodies. Again, Thain had to discipline himself to look away. The beautiful Sibyl stirred him more with each passing day. As a Warrior, he was trained to ignore the distraction of women—when necessary. His discipline had never been so

Book Excerpts

thin. Jessica had laid her leathers out to air and sat wrapped up in one of his drying cloths. It provided adequate coverage but Thain couldn't stop looking at her smooth shoulders, the curve of her knee. He adjusted his seat and wished his damned hard-on would go away. His balls had ached for days.

When they finished eating, he reached for her metal plate. Leftover food slid off hers and landed on her leg.

Thain had noticed she trimmed the fat off her meat. He found it odd but didn't mind. It meant more for him and he'd taken to cleaning off her plate for her. Without thinking, he knelt in front of Jessica and licked her thigh, picking up the perfectly good piece of fat while he cleaned her skin.

Jessica gasped—then moaned.

Damned Warrior. He'd got right past her defenses. Thain's warm breath, the rasp of his tongue sent shivers up Jessica's leg, straight to her pussy. It spasmed and she couldn't stop her response.

Thain grinned wolfishly. He'd thought this

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Sibyl incapable of lust...or a master of it. He touched his tongue to her skin and watched her reaction.

“Stop,” Jessica breathed. She gripped his hair but pulled as much as she pushed.

Setting the plates aside, Thain wrapped his fingers around her thighs and licked her skin. Jessica was the sweetest, softest thing he'd ever touched. He inhaled her scent, the heat of her body, the spiciness of her arousal. She wove her fingers into his hair and this time made an effort to push him away. Thain resisted her easily and dragged his tongue along the primly shut line of her legs. He pulled gently and Jessica allowed him to ease her knees apart.

There was no more need to resist her. She clearly wanted him and he'd wanted her from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Six days of riding with her soft body pressed into his...nights lying beside her had taken their toll. Thain's cock was rock hard and ready to make this beautiful Sibyl his.

Or you might enjoy reading *In Heaven's*

Book Excerpts

Arms, a Finding Love: Memorial Day themed contemporary story by Persephone Jones.

Two wounded souls find healing over the Memorial Day weekend.

Hawaiian tattoo artist Koal Kalani is a man making peace with death. Having lost his daughter and ex-girlfriend in a car accident, he is no stranger to heartache. So much so that when he encounters an unnamed woman in the cemetery, he is drawn to her for reasons known only to those in the midst of sorrow. Though their exchange is brief, it leaves him wishing the angelic stranger will take him up on his offer to visit him at his shop in town.

School teacher Madalyn Maris is still looking for the strength to move on after the death of Matthew, her beloved Marine Corps fiancé. A year after her devastating loss the unexpected happens. She meets a man in the cemetery, one with bottomless dark eyes, a leather jacket, a warm embrace...and a business card for a tattoo parlor.

Book Excerpts

With a lifelong fear of needles, Maris can hardly believe it when she stretches out beneath Koal's masterful hands. But something about the tall, dark, and handsome Hawaiian puts her fear at ease and her libido in overdrive...

Here is a short excerpt from *In Heaven's Arms*.

“So, how much do I...”

He took a step toward her and took her by the hand, his black coffee eyes simmering with intensity. In a second, she knew his intentions. Without saying a word, his eyes roamed the features of her face, down her chest, her body, all the way to her feet and back up again.

Her heart started beating double-time. He led her into the back of the shop to what appeared to be a dimly lit break room of some sort, equipped with a table, a black leather couch, a few chairs and a kitchenette. The most important thing she noticed however was they were completely alone.

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Koal placed her hand on his chest and took hold of her at the waist. "C'm here."

"I shouldn't b—"

This was wrong on so many levels. What was she doing? First hugging a stranger in the cemetery, stripping down to her underwear for the same stranger, letting him give her a tattoo. Never mind what went on inside her head...

She watched his head tilt slightly to the side as his face descended toward hers. Upon feeling the soft strength of his mouth, she closed her eyes and let his kiss take her over. This was the kind man from the cemetery. The man who'd held her while she fell apart. Koal. When she opened her heavy eyelids he was looking at her, searching for a reaction. A reaction she couldn't decide on. Truly, she didn't know whether to slap him, cry or both. All she did know was that she wanted him to kiss her again.

Miraculously her lips gravitated to his as if pulled in by some unseen magnetic force. They kissed again, this time when their lips met it was deeper and more wanton, their tongues lashing at each other as if in combat.

Book Excerpts

She resisted under the force of his desire and pulled ever so slightly away from him to catch her breath, planting the heels of her hands squarely on his shoulders. “You called me a name while I was in the chair.”

Heavy-lidded, he swallowed visibly. “Mm—’anela. It means angel.”

Painting her jawbone and neck with kisses, he hooked his fingers under the thin waistband of her red lace panties and eased them down her legs, gentle as a feather. She met his gaze and watched him pause for telltale signs of objection that she had neither the strength nor the will power to give.

She didn’t stop him because she couldn’t.

You might also enjoy *Secret Fantasy* a contemporary BDSM title by Kitty Cahill.

Good girl Sara doesn’t stand a chance against charming bad boy, Chris.

Sara Donovan is a good girl. That is until the

Book Excerpts

day her best friend gives her a gift certificate for thirty minutes with a phone sex operator. “Joel” unlocks forbidden desires in Sara, needs she’d kept hidden from the world, for fear of reprimand from her domineering preacher father. Once unlocked her desire to be dominated in the bedroom threaten to overwhelm her.

Bad boy Chris Masterson wants Sara Donovan for himself. But his reputation as a player keeps the one woman he truly desires from trusting him. When his usual tricks fail to entice the cautious beauty, he comes up with a plan. To become her secret fantasy...in the flesh.

Here is a short excerpt of *Secret Fantasy*.

Chris shook his head. “Nope, too late. You just tossed down a gauntlet. I’m obligated by men everywhere to pick it up.”

“Listen to me. I’m not interested in the type of sex games you play with your flavor of the month. Okay? I want more than a one night stand and a promise to call.”

Book Excerpts

“Jealousy?” He tilted his head slightly and stared at her. “You know, I never would’ve thought you’d have that emotion where I’m concerned.”

“I am not jealous,” she retorted lamely.

“You want to know what I think?”

“Not really,” she said through gritted teeth.

He pushed away from the car, invading her space. His mouth dropped to speak softly next to her ear, hovering close enough his hot breath fluttered over her neck. “I think you’re more than interested. More than just intrigued by it. You want—no—*need* it.

Sara pushed him back a pace. Of course, she knew he allowed her to do so. The man was as solid as a brick wall. “Let me repeat this so you get it. I am not some little...airhead you can push around. Got it? Not. Interested.”

“Why do you lie to yourself? You and I both know the truth. Why not just admit it? Then we can begin this.”

Sara scoffed. Yeah, sure begin it and end it in one sweet, hot, but most importantly brief night

of conquest. "There's nothing to begin. I'll never be one of your little...what do you call them? Subs?"

"Sub? What the fuck?"

"What? Is that the wrong term? You'll have to forgive me. I'm not well versed in the whole BDSM thing and..." Her stomach clenched at the sight of his nostrils flaring, like a wild animal scenting the air. Everything about him screamed dominant male. Sara guessed that's why it was so easy to believe he'd be a Dom.

"Don't tell me that you actually believe all the bullshit people pass around this town?"

"What else am I supposed to believe Chris? You're a womanizing Dom who struts around with every woman who's dumb enough to fall for your tricks." She crossed her arms and glared. "You prove the rumors true with the way you act."

"I'm not a Dom," he stated plainly, running his hand through his hair. "I'm just confident and like things to go my own way. And if that means I have to take charge to achieve that, I do."

Book Excerpts

His gaze didn't waver for a second. Sara shivered under that concentrated stare.

"Whatever. The point remains that I don't want anything to do with you or your wild life style. I won't join in with you and your buddy. You will not have me tied to anything, with any part of yours or anyone else's body inside any part of me. Is that clear enough? Never going to happen."

Again, he leaned in close, and her senses were filled with the spicy, manly scent of him. "Never say never to a man who can make you scream with nothing more than the tip of his tongue."

Before Sara could retort he brushed her lips with his, then strode away. Confidence riding every step of his long hard body. Against her will, her eyes dropped to the tight butt beneath his Old Navy carpenter pants. Why, oh, why couldn't he have been ugly? That would've made telling him *no* a helluva lot easier.

Or you might also like *Apocalypse Dance* a paranormal erotic romance by Michael Barnette.

Book Excerpts

For Nikki salvation is just a Dragon away.

With the world population decimated by a mutated strain of Ebola civilization as we know it has gone down in ruin. Warlords rampage across what was once the United States of America, killing, raping and adding to the misery and horror that has swept the once proud nation.

Nikki, once on her way to becoming a brilliant doctor, is being sought as a concubine by Roderik, self-styled King of the Lone Star Empire.

Here is a short excerpt from *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette

Her breath caught, and she shuddered under the onslaught of sensation. Her nipples peaked so tightly it looked like it should hurt. He drew the tip of his tongue around the areola, one hand pressed at the small of her back, holding her still for his exploration.

She tensed slightly and he eased his hold,

Book Excerpts

sensitive to her reactions, both positive and negative, learning what she liked and what sent a dampening of desire through her on the wings of fear. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. He wanted her to know nothing but pleasure from his every touch, his every whispered breath across the silken expanse of her flawless skin.

"Bells...." She almost screamed his name as he closed his mouth around the stiffened nub, sucking, teasing it with the edges of his teeth. His cock throbbed with want for her, his own desire heightened by her cry. She wanted him, and even if it came down to nothing but the heat of the moment, her need for comfort, he didn't care. He'd take this, savor it, use it as a balm to the nightmare memories that haunted him in the small hours of the night.

Pulling away, he met her gaze. Awakened passion warmed her sable eyes. "Do you want this from me?"

"Yes!" There was no reservation or hesitation in her reply, nor in the way she kissed him afterward, her entire being seeking what he offered with the same intensity he had sought

Book Excerpts

her. Her answer was as immediate as her need, and just as heated as his own.

You can buy *Frontiers of Love 2: As My Warrior Commands* by Gwen Campbell, *Finding Love-Memorial Day: In Heaven's Arms* by Persephone Jones or *Secret fantasy* by Kitty Cahill and *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette along with other fine erotic romance and erotica titles from:

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