Wolf’s Vengeance, After the Crash Book 6

By Maddy Barone

Chapter 1

Mel dropped the last cube of dried beef into the oil sizzling in the bottom of the stew pot. Making stew was a chore she’d done a thousand times in her life, but not one she’d ever expected to do again in this kitchen. Everything here was worn out, from the countertops scarred by decades of use to the tile on the floor made nearly colorless by the years of feet walking on it. All of it was infinitely familiar and precious to her.

“Hey!” Sara said. “The meat’s burning!”

“Damn!” Mel hurried to stir the beef in the pot.

Sara went back to kneading bread dough at the counter a few feet away, but she slid a sideways glance at Mel. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

She was. Really. Ten days ago she didn’t know what would happen to her, but here she was, safe in her own kitchen. At least for a while.

“Mel!” said Sara.

*Damn it!* The scent of scorched meat jerked Mel from her thoughts. She used the spoon to pry the meat from the bottom of the pot before going to the sink to pump water for the stew broth.

“What’s up with you?”

Mel added the water to the pot. “Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“The Bride Fights.”

Sara’s gaze met hers with understanding. Yeah, Sara knew how she felt. She was offered as a prize for the Bride Fights too. That’s how they met. Ellie Overdahl had been the third of the prizes for the fights in Ellsworth City. It was because of her Mel was standing in her own kitchen right now instead of lying in some shallow grave after being raped and murdered by the man who won her for his bride. Well, indirectly because of her, at least. A wicked man sold Ellie to be a prize, and when Taye Wolfe, Ellie’s rich and powerful cousin from Kearney, Nebraska, found out about it, he sent some of his kin to rescue Ellie and bring her home. They rescued all three women.

Mel took the carrots she pulled this morning and began slicing them for the stew. Even in the heat of the kitchen, cold scraped down her spine at the memory of watching five men fight with brutal, vicious determination for the right to marry her.

“Bride Fight,” Sara muttered with a disgusted scowl. She kneaded the dough with far more force than necessary. “Bride Fights should be outlawed. Men think it’s exciting to be able to pound each other to a pulp to see who will win a woman to marry. As if a woman is a heifer they can own! I mean, the Terrible Times have been over for more than forty years. There’s no need for Bride Fights anymore.”

After the Terrible Times when foreign terrorists destroyed the world with bombs and poisoned the water supply with diseases, there were so few women left, men fought over them. Fifty-odd years ago in 2014, men died trying to get a woman, and even if he did get one, there were other men who would kill him to take her away. A Bride Fight was a more civilized version of that. Arranged by a city’s mayor, it was a legal fight with referees and rules. A man needed to qualify according to whatever criteria the city laid out, and he paid an entrance fee. If he didn’t follow the rules, he would be disqualified.

Mel sighed. “I guess a Bride Fight is one way to be sure a husband is strong enough to protect his wife.”

Sara’s eyes sprang wide. “*You* are saying a woman needs a man to protect her?”

That made Mel choke on a laugh. “Oh, hell, no! I have my gun.” She patted it fondly where it sat in its holster on her hip.

“And you’re not afraid to use it.” Sara sounded congratulatory. “You shot your husband last winter. What was his name again? Rick Fosse? Roger?”

Mel felt her face go stiff. “Rob. Rob Fosse.”

“And then his brothers won you in the Bride Fight. I can’t believe they were going to rape you! Good thing Snake killed them. Serves them right.”

Mel’s mind veered from the troubling thought of Rob, and the equally disturbing thoughts of his brothers, to her new husband. Snake Wolfe, one of the men Taye sent to rescue Ellie, had saved her. “I guess things worked out okay. All things considered.”

Sara sniffed. “You call this okay? You volunteered to be a prize, but me and Ellie didn’t!

We were sold like cattle by men who had no claim on us.”

Sara had a point. Women shouldn’t be bought and sold like livestock. When Ellsworth City announced they would be holding a Bride Fight, Mel offered to be a prize. Her brothers argued back and forth about it, but finally agreed it would be a way for them to get the money they needed, and allow Mel to get away from home. She could have ended up married to someone horrible. Hell, she *did* end up married to someone terrible. You couldn’t get much more dreadful than Jim Fosse and his brothers. Even in the heat of the kitchen, Mel shuddered at the memory of Jim’s evil smile as he swaggered past her into the fighters’ ring. Her thumb dipped down to stroke the butt of her .45 belted around her waist, needing the familiar comfort of the satiny wood of the grip.

Sara pinched a bit of dough to test its elasticity and sent Mel a glance with brows raised.

“How come you shot your husband?”

Mel narrowly missed slicing a finger off. “What the— Where did that come from?”

The girl stared at her with interest. “Ever since you mentioned it when we first met, I’ve been wondering about it.”

No one could call Sara shy. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She spent six miserable weeks as Rob Fosse’s wife before she shot him and ran back home to her brothers. The remaining Fosses, all six of the brothers, hungered for her blood ever since. Three of them followed her to Ellsworth, where Jim Fosse won his fight and made her his wife. She knew what he and his brothers planned for her. Jim, Randy, and Dave dragged her out of the school where the fights took place and hauled her to the hotel. They beat her and tore her clothes. There was no doubt in her mind they would rape and kill her. Her stomach shivered even now when she remembered Snake Wolfe breaking into the hotel room and saving her from the Fosses.

“It all ended up okay,” Mel said in a firm tone to chase the memory away. “None of us was raped or beat up by our husbands. We were pretty lucky.”

“Hmph,” grunted Sara.

Quill Wolfe, one of Taye’s men, won Ellie, and she seemed happy with him. On the other hand, Sara, won by Stone Wolfe, the youngest of the Wolfe men, *wasn’t* happy.

If Sara could ask rude questions out of the blue, so could Mel. “What do you have against Stone?”

“I don’t want to be married to some guy who bosses me around.” Sara flipped the bread dough with expert ease and went back to kneading. “He’s a jerk.”

Mel didn’t think Stone was a jerk. He was young, maybe not even twenty, but he seemed competent and strong. Mel finished cutting the carrots, feeling again the happy glow of being home and safe. “It’s good to be home again.”

“For now.” Sara shook her chin length waves of golden-brown hair back. “You know we’ll be going north to Kearney soon. Ellie and Quill are already on their way up there with Paint and Snow and the rest of the Pack to guard them. I want to go to Omaha, to live with my uncle. It’s not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair, Sara. You married Stone. I bet he would take you to visit your uncle.”

“You married Snake,” Sara shot back. “You didn’t have to. He didn’t even win you in the

Bride Fight. Do you love him?”

Mel didn’t respond right away. Being married to Snake was a hell of a lot better than being married to any Fosse. She dumped the carrots into the stew and stirred. “I barely know him, but I think he’s a good man.”

“Man? Ha!” Sara pulled the big ceramic bowl close to dump the dough in it. “It’s hard to get to know a werewolf. Yeah, yeah.” She waved a flour-covered hand. “I know, they say they aren’t werewolves, but what do you call a man who turns into a big furry wolf?”

*A big furry wolf with teeth*, Mel amended in her head. Ten days ago, she’d never heard of a werewolf, much less seen one. Now she was married to one. She swallowed, remembering Snake in that hotel room tearing into the Fosses. She never wanted to see something like that again.

“Incoming!”

The distant shout jerked Mel’s head up from the big pot of stew. She tucked a hank of her dark blond hair behind her ear to listen. When it fell free to brush over her shoulder, she shoved it back again in an impatient gesture.

Sara punched the bread dough down. “What was that?” the teenager asked, laying a damp towel over the bowl and pushing it to the back of the counter.

“Strangers are coming.” Mel put the lid on the stew pot and grabbed a rifle from the rack by the kitchen door to hand to Sara. “You know how to use this?”

Sara grabbed the towel to wipe her hands clean of bread dough before taking the rifle. “Of course.”

The teenager checked the chamber to see if the rifle was loaded. Mel approved the easy familiarity she showed as she handled the weapon. Sara might be barely sixteen, but she knew how to use a rifle. “Come on, Sara. We need to close the doors and windows and head upstairs.”

Even as she spoke, Mel slammed the iron-reinforced shutters closed over the kitchen window. Sara hurried to the back door off the mudroom and closed it. The lock fell into place with a loud metallic click, relieving a tiny bit of Mel’s anxiety. Mel took the other rifle from the rack and ran into the hall that led past the living room to the front door. Before she reached the entryway, two large gray-furred wolves barreled into her, hackles raised, toenails clicking and scraping over the worn tile.

Mel, scrambling for balance, tried to determine which of these wolves was her husband.

Snake was a bit bulkier than his cousin Stone, his fur slightly darker, but she couldn’t tell who was who until the wolves morphed into naked men. She should be used to their casual nudity by now, but she felt blood rise to her cheeks, and she kept her stare on their faces instead of their bare brown bodies. Snake, the man she married only twenty-four hours ago, gripped her shoulders with urgency.

“Michael and Mordecai are out with the cattle in the south pasture, too far out to get here in time,” he said in a rapid voice. “Marc will be here in a minute. He’ll bar the front door. Stone and I will get the windows before we go to the bunkhouse. You and Sara cover the yard from upstairs. Don’t show yourselves, though.”

Mel was holding a rifle, but she slipped her free hand down to touch the butt of her pistol for reassurance. “Okay. Who’s coming? How many?” Snake’s face, never as soft and pretty as Stone’s, hardened. “Fosses,” he spat. “I saw ’em.

Spitting image of the skunks I killed in Ellsworth.”

Horror hit her with such icy force she swayed. If Snake hadn’t been holding her shoulders she might have fallen. “Oh, God.” She fought her rebelling stomach to keep her voice steady.

“Already? How can they know about what you did to Jim and…?”

“Maybe they don’t know yet. Maybe they don’t know you’re here. You and Sara keep out of sight.” He leaned forward and brushed his lips lightly over hers. “Get upstairs now.”

Mel refused to touch her fingers to her lips. It was only the second time he’d ever kissed her. The first time was at the wedding yesterday afternoon. She turned to the stairs and saw Sara jerk her arm out of Stone’s hand. Did Stone realize his wife was holding a weapon? Mel mentally shook her head. This was no time for joking.

“Come on, Sara,” she said and went up the stairs two at a time.

She heard Sara coming up behind her, and then the *snick* of shutters closing downstairs.

“Hey, you take the window in your room. Keep watch for anyone coming up behind the house. Don’t shoot unless Marc gives the word. I’ll keep watch out front from my window.”

“Okay.”

With the bedroom doors open, Mel could see Sara as she ran into the room directly across the hall. The teenager took a stance beside the window, angling her body to look through the gap in the heavy curtain, the rifle butt on the floor, its barrel held loosely in one hand. Mel liked that about Sara. She could whine and put up a fuss like a spoiled two-year-old, but when shit hit the fan, she was calm.

Mel didn’t feel calm. As she leaned against the wall beside her window, her heart beat in her throat so hard she could count her pulse by it. She stared out the window, forcing herself to focus on the ranch yard and the rolling hills beyond. They were bare except for the dried yellow grass that moved in the hot summer breeze. A shadow bobbed on the crest of the hill to her left. A rider? A movement close by caught her attention, and she saw her oldest brother Marc run around the house to leap up the front steps. The front door opened and slammed shut, and then the solid *thunk* of the bar settling into the brackets on the door drew a relieved sigh from her. “Mel?” he yelled.

“Yeah,” she yelled back. “Snake said Mike and Mord are still out with the cattle. Me and Sara are upstairs. Sara’s watching the back, and I’m in my room keeping an eye out front. I just saw a rider coming up the hill to the west. There he is again, and there’s another rider behind him.”

“Sara?” Marc called. “You see anyone out back?” “I haven’t seen anyone yet,” the girl shouted.

“Keep your eyes open. Let me know if you see anyone else. These two riding up to the front door might be trying to distract us from anyone else sneaking up the back.” “You got it.”

Mel waited by the window, searching the empty landscape for more riders. The two rode under the arched entry in the broken fence. She watched their hands, noting they held them in plain sight, nowhere near the pistols in their belts or the rifles sheathed on their saddles. Smart. They knew they were sitting ducks for a gunman in the house. She lifted her rifle to have it ready in case of trouble.

“See anyone out back, Sara?” she called in a low voice.

“Nope.”

Okay, maybe it was just a neighborly call. Mel twisted her lips in a sour smile. Neighborly, like hell. The Fosses wanted her dead. She killed their big brother to save herself, not because she was a stone cold killer, but they didn’t care about that. Just the memory of that night twisted her guts with horror. She’d never forget the look of surprised rage on his face draining away to blankness as he died. Some nights she lived through it all over again in her dreams. The nightmares often ended with the remaining Fosses attacking the ranch and killing her brothers. She couldn’t regret saving herself, but it would have been so much better if she never married Rob. Then the Dirks and the Fosses would have stayed nothing but friendly neighbors.

The dogs Marc kept to warn them of strangers approaching barked in a frenzy of canine wrath. She recognized the riders as they came closer. Sam and Curt Fosse were the two oldest in the family since Rob’s death last winter. Did they know their brothers Jim, Randy, and Dave were dead too? A new memory flashed through her mind. Blood splashed over a hotel room floor. Chunks of meat still wearing shredded jeans. A feral wolf crouched in front of her, teeth gleaming like ivory in a snarling muzzle covered in dripping blood. Snake shimmering from blood-smeared wolf to blood-smeared man.

“No,” she muttered, free hand clenching the butt of her pistol. “Forget that. Focus, Mel.”

When the Fosses got to the edge of the yard, Marc yelled, “That’s far enough. What do you want?” “Just passing by,” Sam shouted back, tipping the brim of his hat back to show a white smile. All the Fosses were handsome devils, Mel reflected. She married Rob not only because his ranch was doing well, but because of his devilish good looks. “No need for those boys in the bunkhouse to keep their guns pointed at us.”

Marc might have grunted, but didn’t answer in words. Mel could imagine the hard set of his mouth.

After a minute, Sam went on. “Heard your sister went off a week ago to Ellsworth to be a prize for a Bride Fight.”

“That’s right.” Marc’s tone was cold and flat, but it didn’t discourage Sam. “So, who won her?”

“How would I know? Haven’t gotten a letter yet. Hell, the fight might not even have taken place yet.”

Mel smiled, even with the memory of the grisly ending of her third, very brief, marriage lingering in her mind. Not exactly a lie. She did go to the Bride Fight and was won by Jim Fosse, but she hadn’t sent a letter. Not, she snorted to herself, that Marc had a problem with twisting the truth. He could say anything with a bland, blank face, and no one would know he was lying. Sam’s face lifted to stare up at her window. Mel stood utterly still, knowing she couldn’t be seen where she was. After a minute he looked back to the front of the house. “You had visitors last night. Indians. They had some white women with them, I heard.”

“You hear a lot.”

Sam laughed. “Sure. Folks like to talk to me. So who were they?”

“Just travelers, passing through. We sold them some supplies, and they left this morning.”

“Were the women young? Pretty?”

Marc declined to answer. Silence stretched. Mel moved slowly and carefully to wipe away the sweat gathering on her upper lip. It wasn’t nerves that made her sweat, she assured herself. The bedroom was sweltering in the humid July afternoon. She kept her gaze sweeping over the distant hills, looking for any threat, but checked Curt and Sam frequently. They sat quietly in their saddles, twenty-five yards from the house. If they thought they could force Marc to speak, they were in for a surprise. Her big brother was a champion at keeping his mouth shut. Finally, Sam gave up and spoke again.

“Mind if we fill out canteens?”

“Yeah, I do. It ain’t but a three hour ride home for you. You won’t die of thirst before then.

You oughta get going.”

Mel caught the corner of Sam’s mouth tightening below the wide brim of his hat. “This ranch used to have a reputation for hospitality.”

“The Flying D is plenty hospitable. Any of our friends and family would be welcome to come in out of the sun and have a drink.”

Sam’s horse shied at his sharp jerk on the reins. “Not exactly neighborly. In fact, that sounds downright rude.”

“Yeah,” Marc drawled. “I get that way with folks who threaten to burn me out, kill my brothers, and rape my sister.”

Curt made a sudden move of his hand. Mel raised her rifle, watching him, but he settled down. “Look, Marc,” he said. “That was right after Melissa shot Rob. We were all pretty hot then, and maybe we said some things we shouldn’t have. It’s water under the bridge now.”

*Really?* Mel silently scoffed. Being won by Jim in the Bride Fight and taken off to a hotel to be raped and murdered by three Fosse brothers didn’t sound like water under the bridge to her. Once the three remaining Fosse brothers realized Jim, Randy, and Dave were killed by Snake, they would come hunting him. *Unless they already know?* She considered that. How could they? No, this was a fishing expedition. They wanted to find out what Marc knew, but he wasn’t giving them anything.

“Better get going,” Marc suggested, “if you want to get home before supper.”

Sam and Carl sat silent in their saddles. Another bead of sweat gathered on Mel’s upper lip, trembling with its own weight. It broke and rolled over her lip in a salty slide.

Sam raised one hand and tapped a spur into his horse’s flank. “We’ll be going then. See you around, Marc.”

Mel finally wiped the sweat from her lips. She kept her gaze moving over the hills instead of staring at them as they rode slowly up the road and under the arch in the fence, but she saw the two gray wolves slink through the grass behind them. She wiped sweat away again and felt the knot of worry in her chest unkink a tiny bit. Snake and Stone would follow the Fosses and make sure they didn’t double back.

“With the Wolfe boys out there, I think we’re safe from an ambush, but keep watch another fifteen minutes anyway,” Marc called.

Sara called back, “I see Mordecai and Michael out back. They’re half a mile off, and they’re walking their horses in real slow.”

Mel eased a careful breath out. Thank God, all her brothers were safe. For now. She didn’t know what would happen when the Fosses found out more of their brothers were dead, but it wouldn’t be good for the Dirks.

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Snake wasn’t sure which he liked more, the rich taste of the stew his mate made or the feel of her thigh pressed against his under the supper table. The stew was good, but the warmth of Mel’s thigh made his thoughts turn to other appetites. Last night was their wedding night, and he spent it on the floor of her bedroom, stretched out in front of the door. Tonight, he decided, he wouldn’t be sleeping on the floor. Here, at the supper table with her three brothers present, wasn’t the time or place to share that decision, but after supper he would tell her. He couldn’t wait to find out what her reaction would be.

At the head of the table, Marcus Dirk, the eldest of his brothers-in-law, swiped up the last of the gravy in his bowl with a chunk of bread. Snake judged his age to be around thirty. His short brown hair showed no gray, and his lean sun-browned face showed no wrinkles, but neither did it have the softness of youth. He nodded to Sara, sitting with Stone on the other side of the table from Snake. “That’s good bread.”

Sara flushed becomingly. “Thanks. It’s about the only thing I make that’s really good. My dad always ate whatever I fed him, but he always said the bread was his favorite.”

Stone raised a hand to tug a lock of his new bride’s wavy golden-brown hair. “It was good bread. You’ll have to show us how you make it when we get back to the den.”

Her brown eyes narrowed, and Snake braced for an explosion, but she only jerked her head aside to free her hair. Stone hid his hurt behind an expressionless face, but Snake could feel his younger cousin’s yearning to love his mate and the pain her rejection caused. He cast a sidelong glance at his own mate. Lust and mating were powerful urges, so tangled with snarled emotions that sometimes he felt like he would lose control of his wolf.

Marc pushed his bowl away and leaned back in his chair. “Well, this is the first chance we’ve had to really talk since you showed up yesterday. We’ve heard the basics of your story, but I’d like to know more.” His eyes, a harder, colder green than Mel’s, narrowed at Snake. “From what I can figure, you didn’t win Mel in the Bride Fight. So how did you wind up married to her? Hell, what were you doing in Ellsworth in the first place? You’re from Nebraska.”

Mel opened her mouth, but closed it again and settled back, looking at him. Mordecai, next to Stone across the table, and Mike, seated beside Snake, leaned forward on the elbows they planted on the table, looking like they were anxious to hear every word. They were both younger than their brother and sister. Mike was maybe in his early twenties, and the hint of roundness in Mord’s cheeks showed he was probably in his late teens. Both had the brown hair and the tall, rangy build Marc had. Snake glanced at Mel, pleased her figure was soft and plump. So womanly. So beautiful with her suntanned face framed by dark blond hair just long enough to touch her shoulders. He curled his fingers into a fist to keep from reaching for her and turned back to Marc.

“I’ll start at the beginning. The Chief got word that his cousin Ellie was going to be a prize in the Bride Fight against her will. He sent a bunch of us down here to Kansas to bring her home.”

“The Chief?” Marc asked.

“Taye. Our cousin.” He nodded at Stone. “He’s Alpha of the Pack. You know about that?”

Marc nodded. “Some. The men turn into wolves, like you do. I know about the Lakota Wolf

Clan. Same thing, right?”

“Pretty much. The Pack is part of the Clan, but we stay put at the den by Kearney, and the Clan roams the prairie.”

Stone straightened in his chair to lay a hand on Sara’s shoulder. “Except during the winter,” he told her. “The Clan has a permanent settlement in the Black Hills they stay in during the winter. I can build us a house there if you want.”

Sara twitched her shoulder away from him without looking in his direction. He slumped back, face blank. Snake mentally shook his head. His little cousin’s courtship wasn’t going well. A quick glance at Mel showed she was listening with a quiet face. Would she like to live in the sacred lands during the winter? Would a room in the den be enough for her? He would give her anything she wanted.

“So, Taye sent us down to fetch Miss Ellie,” he went on. “She’s Taye’s cousin, and Sara was with her. We planned to buy her and Miss Sara from the city council in Ellsworth. We didn’t know about Mel then, but we would have bought her too. The men in Ellsworth were set on having the fights, though, so it didn’t matter how much gold we offered to buy them. Ellsworth wasn’t selling. A couple of us entered the Bride Fights. Quill won Ellie and Stone won Sara.” He didn’t have to glance at Sara to know she scowled. “The first woman won was Mel.”

Marc jerked his chin at his sister. “Jim Fosse won you?”

“Yeah” she said. Snake sat closely enough to feel the tension in his mate’s body. “Him and Randy and Dave all entered the fight. I think they figured one of them would win, and Jim did.

They took me to the hotel for the… And they…”

Her voice trailed off, and Snake wanted desperately to hold her, but though she hadn’t completely rejected him, she wasn’t entirely comfortable with him either. He touched her arm lightly instead, feeling how tightly her muscles were clenched.

Marc’s narrow face showed no expression. Anyone with a nose less keen than a wolf’s wouldn’t know of the fury roiling inside him. “How bad did they hurt you?”

“Not too bad,” Mel told her hands, not looking up from her intense study of her fingers.

“Snake got there before…”

She trailed off again, so Snake took over. “We saw the Fosses take her out, and we could tell she wasn’t happy, so we were glad when Quill told a few of us to go check on her, be sure she was okay. The Chief put Quill in charge, so we did what he said, but I would have gone after her anyway.” Even from a distance his wolf had taken close notice of the struggling woman. He had whined and tugged at Snake’s control, demanding to go after her.

One of Mord’s eyebrows arched. “What did he think you could do for her if she wasn’t okay?”

“Hush, Mord,” said Marc sternly. “Let the man tell the story all the way through. Once he’s finished we’ll ask our questions.”

“He probably thought I’d do what I did,” Snake told his youngest brother-in-law. “Me and Paint went after Mel and found out what room the Fosses were in at the hotel. When we got there we could hear Mel yelling and the Fosses laughing. Sounded like they were hitting her. I heard fabric tear.” The memory roused his wolf and painted a red curtain over his vision. To calm his wolf, he laid a hand over Mel’s wrist on the table and stroked the tender skin over her pulse as if he were petting a kitten. It calmed his wolf enough, so he could keep talking. “We knocked on the door, and when it didn’t open, we broke it down.”

He could feel Mel’s pulse quicken under his fingers. What did she remember of that? His few lucid memories revolved around the sight of Mel held down on the bed by two men while a third ripped her shirt. The mental image of her face turning toward him with agonized hope was crystal clear in his mind, as was her shock when his wolf tore out of him. In that one split second while he stood in the doorway, his wolf had chosen a mate. His elation at finding a mate at last was swallowed by rage at the men who dared harm her. His memories of the wolf attacking the men who dared to rape his mate were hazy but bloody.

“The Fosses were trying to rape Mel. I killed them.” Such brief, simple words to describe how his wolf tore them apart with teeth and claws. The bodies of the three Fosses were collected in several chunks for burial. “My wolf chose Mel to be my mate.”

Mel pulled her wrist out of his hold, so she could wrap her arms round herself in spite of the heat lingering in the early evening air. He saw her jaw clench and her lips turn white. During their journey from Ellsworth she hadn’t said a word about any of it to him. He smelled her horror and terror the day he found her, and though it had lessened significantly, he still caught occasional traces of it in her scent. A wolf’s mate should never be afraid of him. His wolf squeezed a snarling whine out of his throat. All the Dirks jumped in their chairs, looking at him nervously.

“None of us wolves likes to see a woman mistreated,” Stone said quietly. “It doesn’t matter who he is, a man who hurts a woman around us will get what he deserves.”

Marc’s eyes showed approval, but he said nothing, waiting for Snake to continue.

“Miss Ellie’s son was at Moore’s Mill, so we went there first to get him. Mel talked to me and Stone about coming here before going up to the den. Quill agreed because Miss Ellie wanted to be married by a priest, and your uncle could do the ceremony. You know what’s happened since then.”

Marc eased forward to put his forearms on the table. “Yeah. My uncle married you to my sister yesterday, and this morning Quill and his new wife and the other men escorting them left to go back home. Now it’s question time. One, what happened to Jim, Randy, and Dave’s bodies? Two, how long before word comes to the Fosses about their deaths? And three, you asked to be able to stay for a while, but not why you wanted to be here. All I heard was some confusing talk about lies having a particular scent that wolves could smell.” “We buried the bodies ourselves,” Stone answered.

“What was left of them,” Sara muttered, flicking a glance at Snake.

He felt no remorse for the deaths. The Fosses deserved to die for what they did to Mel. “I don’t know how long before word comes back about the deaths. Probably not too long. We tried to keep it quiet, but anyone at the fights would have heard Jim Fosse’s name. There was no way to hide that something had happened in the hotel room, but only a few people saw the bodies.

We’re here because Mel told us about your mom. She asked us to sidetrack and see if we can help.” Snake shrugged and slanted a glance at his wife. “Do you want to explain?”

She let her arms drop and met the eyes of each of her brothers, one at a time. “We’re here because Stone can tell when someone is lying. They smell different. Right, Stone?”

Stone nodded. “Yeah, a person’s scent is different, sharper, when they lie.”

The Dirk men glanced from Stone to Snake with confusion. Mord shoved an elbow into Stone’s side with a snort of a laugh. “Yeah? That’s a nice trick.”

Plainly Mord didn’t believe Mel. Snake folded his arms and asked, “Mord, who are you in love with?”

Mord’s ears went pink. “Nobody!”

“Lie,” said Stone, buttering another slice of bread.

Mord’s face flamed. “What? Who do you think I’m in love with?”

Stone shrugged. “I can’t read your mind. I can only tell when someone lies. Like I said, their scent changes.”

Marc shushed Mord with a lifted hand. He stared at Snake. “Can you tell too?”

Snake shook his head. “No. My sense of smell is decent, but nothing like Stone’s. I can sometimes make out some emotions, especially if it’s someone I know pretty well, but most people could tell me the sky was purple with green stripes, and I wouldn’t know if they were lying by their scent.”

Mord snorted. “Cute party trick, but big whoop-di-doo. You delayed your trip north just to show off your little game?”

“No! Don’t you get it?” Mel said urgently. “When the man comes to collect the ransom money for Mama, Snake and Stone can trail him and question him. They can track really well too. They can find him, and they’ll know when he’s lying. We’ll be able to find Mama and rescue her.”

A spark of excitement animated Marc’s face. “The letter will be coming any day.”

Mord’s lower lip had a barely noticeable tremble. “I haven’t seen Mom since I was seven years old. That’s how old I was when Dad died, and Mom was stolen only a week after his funeral.”

Mike leaned forward, staring across the table at Stone with guarded hope. “Honest? You know when someone’s lying?”

Stone put the last bite of bread in his mouth and nodded.

“Hot damn!” Mike pounded a fist on the table, making his bowl and spoon jump and clatter.

“We’ll get those bastards now!”

After that one outburst, the brothers were silent, but Snake could almost feel their jubilation.

He was happy for them, but what he really cared about was the radiant smile Mel gave him.

“What actually happened to your mom?” Sara asked. “I never heard the whole story.” The Dirks lost some of their jubilation. A dark heaviness settled over them.

“Not much to tell,” Marc said with a shrug. “Dad died of blood poisoning about eleven years ago. Not long after the funeral, all of us were out with the calves, and Mom was alone in the house, getting lunch ready. When we got home for lunch, the food was still in oven, burnt to a crisp, but Mom wasn’t here.”

“We looked for her,” Mike said bleakly. “We didn’t see any tracks. There was no sign of a struggle. Nothing.”

“Nothing,” Mord echoed, sounding suddenly young. “We never saw her again.” Sara reached an impulsive hand over Stone to pat Mord’s arm. “You were so young, and your dad had just died. That must have been terrible.”

Stone grabbed her hand and yanked it away from Mord. She jerked it free with a glare. Mel spoke before Sara could yell at Stone. “It was bad. I was just thirteen. A girl really needs her mother at that age. But what came next was even worse. A month later we got a package in the mail with a letter. The letter was from a man who said he had our mother, and if we wanted her to stay alive we had to pay gold twice a year. The box…” Mel paused to swallow. “The box had the end of Mama’s finger in it. We knew it was hers because she had a scar right along the fingernail. The finger was already decomposing but we recognized the scar. The letter said every time we failed to pay, another piece of Mama would be sent to us.”

“Cowards,” snarled Stone. “Evil cowards!”

“We buried the finger next to Dad,” Marc said, looking down at his clenched hands. “We’ve never missed a payment, even when the amount demanded increased, but if Mel hadn’t volunteered to be a prize for the Bride Fight we’d have missed this next one. We have no money left. We’ve lost or sold most of our stock. The only thing we have now is the ranch itself, and we can’t sell that. It’s been in the Dirk family for nearly two hundred years.”

Snake hesitated, but it had to be asked. “How do you know your mother is still alive?”

“She sends a letter with the man who collects the money. He leaves it at whichever place we’re supposed to put the money. It’s a different place every time.” Marc nodded to the marble box sitting on the mantel in the living room just visible through the archway between the dining and living rooms. “We re-read them from time to time. She says she’s being treated well. She said no one hurt her.”

An even darker shadow fell over all the Dirks’ faces. Snake thought he knew why. Why was any woman stolen except for sex? “I guess she couldn’t say anything else, could she?” he said.

“The men probably read the letters.”

Mike nodded heavily. “Yeah. In one of her first letters she said she wasn’t raped.”

Stone gave Snake a glance that doubted the veracity of that letter. Marc caught it and nodded. “It’s been eleven years. For all we know she’s had other children. She was only in her mid-thirties when she was taken. If we find out we have more brothers or sisters, we’ll bring them back home too.”

“She’s never said in her letters that there’ve been more kids,” Mike pointed out. “She does mention things like nice clothes and good food.”

The men who stole women sometimes took very good care of their prizes, and sometimes they even fell in love with them. Snake doubted that was the case here. Why demand ransom from the sons of the woman you loved? Then again, why give up a source of easy money? “It sounds like some of the money you send is keeping your mother comfortable at least.”

“Yeah.” Marc dragged the word out in a sarcastic drawl. “Won’t keep me from feeding a bullet to those assh—” He broke off with a glance at Sara. “I reckon it depends on what we find, but I don’t see any reason to waste time in a courtroom. Shoot ’em or hang ‘em, that’s what I figure to do when we find ’em.” “We’ll find them.” Stone’s voice was very sure, and he seemed older now than nineteen.

Snake nodded his support as his cousin went on. “They’ll pay for what they did to your mother.

“We’ll be able to see her soon!” Mord’s laugh was heartfelt, bubbling with relief and eagerness, lifting the mood out of the grimness back to jubilation. “Mel, I wasn’t too sure about this new man of yours, but if he’ll bring Mom back, I’ll welcome him to the family with open arms.”

Mel snorted. “Thank you very much for your approval.”

Her tone was tart, but Snake could sense the same lighthearted relief in his mate that overflowed from her brothers.

Mord’s face creased with sly humor, though he tried to disguise it by setting his mouth into an earnest line. He leaned over the supper table, gazing at Snake with obviously faked concern.

“Are you sure you want to be my sister’s husband?”

Snake cocked his head to the side, aware Mel had straightened. “Yeah.”

Mike joined in the teasing with a *tsking* sound. “You positive about that? Do you know what her track record with husbands is?”

Mel’s happy scent instantly soured. She slammed her hand onto the table. “Cut it out,

Mikey.”

Snake put a hand on her knee beneath the table and gave her a gentle squeeze. “I don’t know what a track record is.”

Mord widened his eyes with mock distress. “Do you know what happened to Rob Fosse?” Snake cut Mord off. “Sure. He got what he deserved.”

“Melissa Ann is quick to shoot,” Mike said with a sad shake of his head. “Mind your toes, and other parts.”

Mel gave a furious snort.

Mord smirked. “And then there was Danny Bell.”

Mel’s scent changed so completely, for a moment Snake felt as though he were teetering on a cliff with nothing to cling to. So many emotions rushed out of her he couldn’t identify them all. Shock, rage, grief, and guilt were some of the scents he caught. She stood up, drilling her brother with a glare of pure fury not reflected in her cold voice. “Sara, wanna give me a hand with these dishes?”

Snake waved the girl back. “I’ll help with the dishes.”

He sent a cold glare of his own at the younger Dirks, and maybe he would have said something to them if Marc hadn’t intervened.

“You boys have time to flap your mouths, you have time to clean the outhouse,” he said evenly. “Aw, c’mon, Marc. We was only joking,” Mord protested. “It’s getting on towards dark.”

“If you want to act like a shit, you can shovel it,” Marc replied evenly. He dipped his head in

Sara’s direction. “Pardon my language.”

Amid protests at the late hour and other complaints, Mel made her escape to the kitchen. Snake followed her, keeping his distance as he lifted the kettle to the stovetop to heat for dishwater. When there was no more to do but wait for the water to heat, he took her hand and looked into her eyes.

“Who is Danny Bell?” he asked.

# Chapter 2

Mel tugged her hand free, and turned to the sink to hide the burn of tears in her eyes. Danny. She shot Rob with no remorse, but Danny… The muscles in Mel’s shoulders coiled tight then slumped. Danny was different.

“Mel?” Snake asked softly.

Mel took a moment to be sure her face was under control before she turned around to meet

Snake’s gaze. “Danny was my first husband.”

Snake nodded, face calm and gently concerned, which confused the hell out of her. He was a vicious werewolf. Shouldn’t he be snarling about now?

“Aren’t you going ask me how many husbands I’ve had?”

The corner of his mouth twitched as if he were suppressing a smile, and that confused her too. The way he looked now, dressed in jeans and a cotton button down shirt, with his long, wavy hair hanging down his back in a casual tail, he just didn’t seem like a werewolf. She couldn’t quite reconcile his wide mouth hiding a smile with the wolf’s muzzle dripping with Fosse blood.

He shrugged a broad shoulder. “Sure. How many husbands have you had?”

“Counting Jim Fosse back in Ellsworth?”

The ghost of a smile left Snake’s mouth, leaving those luscious lips flat and hard. “No. We don’t ever need to count him.”

*Luscious* lips*?* Mel mentally kicked herself. *Well,* she admitted in her private thoughts, *Snake’s lips are perfectly shaped, plump, and almost pouty when he sleeps.* She’d had a daydream or two of taking his lower lip between her teeth and biting down gently. His mouth was almost girlish, but his muscular body was anything but. She kicked herself again. Daydreaming about her confusing new husband was preferable to discussing Danny, but Danny was who she needed to be thinking about now. Snake would hear it eventually.

“I married Danny six years ago, when I was almost eighteen. About a month after we were married, he was hurt while unloading a wagon.” The memory of his crushed legs gave her an inward shudder. “He died just before our fifth anniversary. I came back to the ranch after he died and lived here for a few months before we decided I’d need to get married again to someone rich enough to give us the money we needed for Mama.” She forced herself to stop rubbing her hands up and down her thighs and folded them over the rim of the sink. “Rob Fosse was the oldest of the Fosses, and their family was well off. The Leaning F is as big as the D, and the drought didn’t dry up their water as much as ours. I married him last December, right about Christmas time.”

After a minute of silence, Snake spoke. “When did you come back home?”

The edge of the sink cut into her palms. “You mean, when did I shoot him?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean.”

“February fourteenth. Valentine’s Day.” She tossed a defiant glare over her shoulder at him. “You want to know why?”

How could he look so calm while her stomach was churning? He lifted a shoulder again in another shrug. “If you want to tell me, I’m listening. But I don’t need to know. You must have had a reason, and that’s good enough for me.”

“I had a damn good reason.” She hesitated, teetering on the edge of telling him the full truth she never told anyone, but slumped back against the edge of the sink. “I don’t want to talk about it, okay?”

“Okay.” He reached for her hands and held them. “Is that when the other Fosses threatened to burn the place, kill your brothers, and rape you?”

A shiver worked its way down her back. “Yeah. There were seven Fosse brothers, and they have half a dozen hands, besides their foreman, Rick Avon, so they could have done it. I killed Rob, and you got Jim, Dave, and Randy, so they’re down to only three now, but that’s still enough. That’s why we’ve never been able to follow the man who collects the ransom for Mama. We never leave this place totally undefended in case the Fosses use the chance to take the ranch.”

He nodded again. “I wondered why you hadn’t followed him to find your mother. Makes sense. What about before you killed Rob Fosse? Why didn’t you follow him then?”

“The first few years, Marc didn’t want to leave us younger three alone. He was only twenty, and I was thirteen, Mike was ten, and Mord was only seven. Even later, Mike and Mord were too young, and Marc didn’t want to leave me without enough protection. Everyone in the area knew I was here, and lots of men will behave when a girl’s brothers are around, but if she’s alone or undefended…” She shrugged. “Well, you know what could happen.”

The faintest shadow of rage colored his expression for a moment. “Yeah. You don’t need to worry about that anymore. I’ll see to it you’re protected.”

“I can take care of myself.” Mel swept her thumb over the butt of her pistol. “Dad taught me to shoot before I was ten, and I haven’t taken my gun off since. I’m never unprotected.”

His laugh surprised her. “Glad to hear it.” He glanced over at the pot of wash water on the stove. “Looks like the water’s warm. Let’s get going on these dishes.”

Mel let out a shaky laugh. “Okay. I’ll get started if you’ll bring the dishes from the dining room.”

After he went out to collect dishes, Mel braced herself with her hands against the sink’s rim for a long breath. Her husband was a stranger. His attitudes threw her off stride, but she thought she liked him. He didn’t push for details she’d rather forget.

When he came in, holding a pile of dishes that would have taken two of her brothers to carry, she was busy at the sink. He set the dishes on the counter and took the washrag himself.

“I’ll wash, and you dry and put away. You know where things go better than I do.”

How odd that a werewolf washed dishes with deft hands and hummed while he scrubbed.

Again, that domestic image clashed with her memory of his snarls and growls in the hotel room. Which was the real Snake?

“Oh,” he remarked, as if the thought had just come to him, “I won’t be sleeping on the floor tonight. I’ll be joining you on your bed.”

A plate slipped from her hands to shatter on the floor. She blinked down at the scattered shards for a moment before realizing her mouth was gaping wide. She closed her mouth and stared at him. This shouldn’t be a surprise. They were married. Her uncle had performed the ceremony yesterday. Last night she had expected him to claim his marital rights, but he had only lain down on the floor in her bedroom. She swallowed now, her breath oddly cold in her lungs, and bent to pick up the pieces of the plate.

Snake stopped her with a wet hand on her wrist. His eyes were shadowed by thick stubby lashes, and it seemed to Mel they were carefully blank. “Was that such a shock?”

“Well, ye— I mean, no. Well, sort of.” Mel inwardly cursed herself for fumbling her words as well as the plate. She drew in a calming breath and tried to smile at him. “We’re married. You’ve been pretty patient, but I know you want to, uh…” She waved the dishtowel. “You know.”

He took a step closer, so close she could make out each individual eyelash that shaded his eyes. “Do you want to?”

Did she? In her mind’s eye she could see through his clothes to the thickly muscled body beneath. During their trip to the ranch, she had seen him switch from man to wolf and from wolf to man often enough to have memorized how he looked naked. There was nothing about his physique that turned her off. What kind of lover would he be? Sweetly fumbling like Danny? Viciously aggressive like Rob? He was strong, stronger than a normal man. He could do serious damage to her without even meaning to. Her heart slowed to sluggish thumps, as if it were beating in a vat of icy molasses.

Fingertips rough with calluses grazed her cheek. “Mel?”

Her heart magically leapt free of the molasses to take off at a gallop. Staring at Snake, she jerked her head from side to side. “No, I don’t want to.”

His hand fell away. “Okay, we’ll wait until you’re ready.” He turned back to the unwashed dishes and spoke quietly. “Please don’t be afraid of me.”

She touched the butt of her pistol. “I’m not afraid of you.” She went to the closet the broom and dustpan were kept in and came back to sweep up the broken plate. “Just cautious, that’s all.

You and me, we’re still new to each other.”

“Okay.” Suds dripped from his fingers when he turned to face her. “It might take some time, but you’ll learn that I won’t ever hurt you. Tonight we’ll sleep together in your bed. Just sleep,” he said, raising his voice slightly to override her unspoken protest. “We won’t make love until you want to.”

Wanting to and being happy about it were not the same thing, but Mel didn’t tell him that. Part of her was curious about making love with him. The rest of her wasn’t so sure. Sex with Rob had soured her on the experience. She poured the broken fragments of the plate into the garbage and went back to drying the dishes he washed with what she hoped was a serene face. Sleeping next to him. How hard could it be?

\* \* \* \*

Mel hurried to strip out of her clothes to take a hasty sponge bath in the washbowl on her dresser. Normally, in this kind of muggy heat, she slept in just her panties and a loose tank top whose armholes gaped nearly to her waist, but she wasn’t going to wear that with Snake sleeping beside her. Instead she chose a sleeveless button down shirt she’d inherited from Marc. The hem was almost long enough to cover her ass. She tugged it as low as she could, but it still barely covered her, and when she was lying down, it would ride up. She sent a quick glance to the door and dug out a pair of shorts and put them on too.

Just in time. A knock sounded on the door. She swallowed, took a steadying breath, and called, “Come in.”

Snake came in and closed the door quietly before leaning his back against it. The sun was just setting, and even with the curtains mostly, closed it was light enough to see him clearly. Mel swallowed while looking him up and down. He was wearing only a pair of baggy shorts that belonged to her brother Mike. She recognized them from the many times she washed them. The faded blue cotton seemed to barely cling to his lean hips. She thought a sudden movement might send them sliding down those long muscular legs, and she wasn’t sure if that would be a bad thing. From his casual lean against the door, he smiled at her. It wasn’t a leer, or a suggestive grin, but just a small gentle curve of his lips. At that moment, he appeared to be the most handsome man she’d ever seen.

“I’ve waited all my life to have a mate of my own.” His voice was low. “From the time I was ten until I was twenty, I barely ever saw a woman up close, but I always wondered what it would be like to have a mate. I dreamed of it. In my dreams, my mate loved me, and I would do anything for her.” His dark eyes looked directly at her. “I would do anything for you, Melissa, and I would never hurt you.”

She hated being called her full name. “I believe you.”

“No.” His hand lifted and swayed from side to side as if to disperse her words like campfire smoke drifting in his face. “You’re afraid of me. I smell it on you from time to time.”

Mel resisted the urge to hunch her shoulders. She also forced her instant denial back.

“Maybe I am. But I know I don’t need to be. You’ve been really decent to me. All your friends have been nice too.”

“Then why? Is it my wolf?”

Her shabby bedroom faded to be replaced by a hotel room. Randy Fosse’s hard hands dug cruelly into her shoulders to hold her down on the bed while Jim yanked on her shirt. The bruising pressure on her shoulders suddenly lifted, and a huge gray wolf tore into Jim Fosse, slinging saliva and blood over her…

“Yeah,” Snake said in a near whisper. “There’s that scent. It *is* my wolf, isn’t it?”

“No.” She curled her fingers to hide their tendency to shake, but she couldn’t quite keep her breath slow and steady. “No.”

“My wolf would never hurt you either. He cares so much about you, he’d rather be killed in a trap than do anything to harm you.”

White fangs dripping with blood, shreds of flesh stuck between them. That’s what she saw in her mind’s eye when she stared at him. “I know that. Really. In the hotel room in Ellsworth you—he—could have torn me apart. But he just stood in front of me to make sure no one else could get to me to hurt me. So I know he doesn’t want to hurt me.”

His hands went to the waistband of the shorts. “You need to meet him. When you know him you won’t be so afraid.”

“What are you doing?”

“Getting undressed to let my wolf out.”

She held a hand up, palm out, and stepped back so sharply the back of her knees hit the bed, and she almost fell on the mattress. “No! I’ve already seen the wolf. Not just at the hotel, but lots of times on our trip here.”

“That’s not the same, Mel. You haven’t had a chance to pet him or scratch behind his ears.

When you get to know him you won’t be so afraid.”

“Not now! It’s getting late, and I’m tired. I want to get some sleep, okay?” She hated the whining note in her voice on that last word and forced calm into her tone. “Snake, really, we have plenty of time for that.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “Okay. Which side do you usually sleep on?”

Relief crept into her stomach. “I usually take the middle, so it doesn’t matter. Which side do you want?”

He looked at the bed, glancing from it to the window, and then from the bed to the door. “I guess I’ll take the side by the door.”

Mel nodded and took the gun belt she’d draped over the headboard to shift it closer to the window side. “Hope you don’t mind sleeping with Alfie.”

One of his thick black brows arched up. “Alfie?”

She stroked a thumb over the butt of her pistol. “Alfie, meet Snake. Snake, meet Alfie.” “You named your gun Alfie?”

The incredulity in his voice was exactly what she’d wanted. “Of course. He’s my best friend.”

Snake shook his head slightly. “If Alfie keeps to his side of the bed, I’m fine with him sleeping with us.”

Mel had to force her lips from a smile. She tossed the sheet back. “If you keep to your side,

Alfie’ll keep to his.”

Snake stretched out on the bed, pulling the sheet up to his waist. “Alfie doesn’t need to worry. I’ll behave myself.”

Somehow their banter lightened her heart, and she climbed into bed, careful to keep a little distance between them. “Good night, Snake.”

She thought she’d go to sleep pretty quick, even with a near stranger lying beside her. She was tired after days of travel, safe in her own bed with her brothers down the hall, and her pistol only inches from her hand. Maybe she would have drifted off if her stupid mattress didn’t sag in the middle from so many years of holding her body in its center. Gradually, inevitably, she and Snake slid toward each other in the middle. She shifted on the mattress to hold her position on the left side, but gravity was inescapable. She found her shoulder pressed to Snake’s arm.

“Sorry,” she muttered, squirming to move herself back to the edge.

She noticed he wasn’t trying to move away. “Mel, Alfie can’t possibly blame me for not sticking to my side of the bed considering the circumstances.”

Twilight dimmed the room, but she saw his teeth gleam in his dark face, a ghost of the smile she’d seen on his face so many times during their ride to the ranch. “Don’t laugh,” she muttered.

“This isn’t funny.”

“No, it’s natural. Come on. Is it so bad to sleep close to me? I promise to not touch you.

Well, not with my hands. See?”

He shifted to tuck his hands beneath his head. Mel rolled onto her side to watch the thick muscles in his biceps bunch and the taut swell of his pectorals smooth nearly flat with his arms in that position. Some women preferred a tall man with a slender, lightly muscular build, but she liked his broad shoulders and thick chest. And since she was only five feet five, his five-footeight height was fine with her. He was young and strong. A thought struck her. “Snake? How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.” His brows pulled low. “No, twenty-seven.” He turned his head on the pillow to look at her. “Why?”

A few years older than she was. “You said you didn’t see any women up close until you were twenty.”

“Yeah. My mom died when I was five.”

A pang of sympathy warmed her. “My brother told me about how almost all the women in your family were stolen and killed. Was she one of those?”

He was quiet for a moment. “Yeah.” His voice was rough and low. “I don’t remember her too well. After that, there were only a few women in the Clan. I went to live with Taye and the Pack when I was eight or so. They live in an old building with lots of rooms. Back in the Times Before they called it a motel. Taye’s mother died a few years after that. She was the last woman to ever hug me until Taye mated Carla. And then there was Tami. And then, Lisa.”

A new note of warmth came into his voice when he said the last name, and Mel was shocked to feel a little niggle of jealousy. “Who’s Lisa?”

A gleam of white in the dark revealed his smile. Mel cursed herself and rolled to her back to glare up at the ceiling, arms folded over her chest.

“Lisa is my sister. She adopted me after she left her husband and came to live at the den. His name is Eddie Madison.”

Mel’s crossed arms loosened a bit. “You don’t like him.”

“I didn’t like him then. He was a… a…”

“Jerk?” she suggested. “Asshole?”

“Yeah. He was so selfish he didn’t even know he was hurting her. Jerk.”

Mel clamped a hand on the edge of the bed to hold her fury inside. “Did he beat her?”

“If he’d ever laid a hand on her he wouldn’t be alive now,” Snake snarled. “Even if Lisa begged me to not hurt him I would have killed him.”

Why did women stay with men who mistreated them? Mel would never put up with that. Hell, she hadn’t put up with it. Just ask Rob.

“He’s better now.” Snake sounded reluctant to admit it, but he went on. “Since she agreed to return to him, he treats her fine. Better than fine. I know they’re happy. Even a wolf with a bad sense of smell can scent their happiness, and my sense of smell isn’t that bad. They have three little boys now, all as pretty as angels, just like their mom and dad. Lisa is the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen, and Madison is good looking too.”

Mel refused to compare herself to beautiful women. She was at best pretty. But Snake was beautiful. She half sat, leaning on an elbow to look at him. She tightened her grip on the edge of the mattress to keep from tumbling on top of him. In the near dark Mel felt her cheeks flush. How stupid, to think of a man as beautiful. But he was. Not pretty. Not even quite handsome. His nose was maybe a little too craggy for that, his cheekbones too pronounced, his eyebrows too thick and low. No, not a pretty boy, but his mouth was full and soft, a startling contrast to his hard features. She could bend over right now and kiss it to find out if his lips were as soft as they looked.

It was an astonishingly tempting thought. No, she decided. Not yet. Someday she would kiss him. They were married. Husbands and wives did kiss. And more. She settled herself carefully on the mattress, hugging the edge. Someday they would do it all. But not tonight.

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Snake smiled down at his sleeping mate cuddled under his arm. As soon as she fell asleep, she lost the battle with gravity, and her warm body had found its way to his side. He decided he really loved this bed. It sagged enough to give him a backache, but it sent his mate to snuggle against him. It took all his self-control to keep from caressing her bare thigh. This was the closest he’d been to her, and he savored the weight of her head against his shoulder, the scent of her hair in his nostrils, the soft press of her breast against his, as he let sleep claim him.