

Wolf Mates: Ruff & Ready

Dakota Cassidy

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To the many people involved in making this series such a success -- this is for you.

Again, for my dear friend Michelle, who helps me find the answers to all of my crazy plot dilemmas when I'm cornered. You're the best, babe.

And for my pal Erin, who calls me a perv but is the best test reader this side of the planet and makes me smile a lot. This one's for you, cookie!

To Candy -- an unwitting participant in this whacky series, who left me with the wonderful surprise for an ending.

Last, but surely not least, my editor Sheri, who lets me cry on her shoulder when I'm blocked, calls me to be sure my status is still listed under "alive" and most of all is, bar none, not only the best editor in e-publishing, but one of my very best friends.

Love,

Dakota

Chapter One

"Fucktaaaaard!"

"Tree hugger!"

"Jack off!"

"Grow up, Emerson!" was the heated return response, followed by mocking laughter.

"Grow *this!*" she yelled back to the slam of the flimsy trailer door.

"Oh, Emerson! I don't see how being a potty mouth is going to help us here. I mean, we want to be civilized, don't we? Who's going to take us seriously if we resort to name calling? It's petty and well... sooooo kindergarten."

Emerson Palmer gave Hector Adams a pointed look and then hung her head, rubbing her temples. "You're right, Hector. That *was* childish of me." But hey, every once in awhile it was okay to let your inner child out Emerson decided, throwing a pine cone at Lassiter Adams' trailer window with fastball speed. "You hear me, you needle dick? You're a condo loving, landfill snarfing, brick laying 'ho!"

The trailer door remained closed.

Palmer versus Adams, round one bazillion and one was officially over.

For the moment.

Emerson Palmer, environmental groupie, defender of all creatures great and small, had had this argument with Lassiter Adams for three months now -- ever since he'd parked his stupid construction trailer/bachelor pad on Adams land and declared it his.

Every bloody day for three months.

Emerson blew a strand of long, platinum blonde hair that had escaped from her ponytail out of her face. Her cheeks were flushed with anger and frustration as she stood, looking at Lassiter Adams' trailer door.

He peeked out of the small window along the right side of his temporary quarters and waved to Emerson with a smug smile, further infuriating her.

"Arghhhhhhhhhhhhh! He makes me insane! I just can't figure him, Hector, ya know? He's been here for three months, digging stuff up, and not a single apartment complex to show for it. You'd think he'd want to get moving. Yet, he does the same thing day after day. Dig holes and cover them back up. He's like a dog looking for a bone and he can't remember where it's buried."

Hector smiled at Emerson, snickering while petting his beloved rabbit with a gentle hand. "Well, that *dog* likes your butt."

She snorted. Lassiter Adams didn't like anything but money. The money building an apartment complex in the middle of nowhere would bring him. Young city dwellers looking for a bit of suburbia would swarm here for a taste of town and country. Thus killing the animals Emerson fought so hard to protect.

Defeated for today, she began the long walk back to the Adams house with Hector close behind her.

Once more, for posterity, she shrieked into the now bulldozed clearing, "Animal killer!" Her vicious accusation echoed through the open space.

Hector clucked his tongue at her with reproach. "Emerson, I really don't think this has gotten us anywhere so far. Maybe you should try being nice to him? He doesn't hate animals. He has a parakeet. You saw him talking to it through the window when we spied on him. So he must not hate all animals."

Emerson's eyes flashed at Hector and he cringed ever so slightly. "If he didn't hate them, he wouldn't want to build stupid condos on their homes. If we don't stay tough, Hector, we're going to lose the fight."

His snort was all Emerson needed, but he went ahead and said the words out loud anyway. "I don't wanna be the bearer of bad news, but we *are* losing the fight, Em."

Turning on him, she threw her hands up in the air. "And so what? You want to just give up?"

"No." He shook his dark head vehemently. "I never want to give up, but how can we fight the back taxes owed on acreage this size, Em? Max didn't know about them and he couldn't come up with the money to pay it, so the town took what they were offered from Lassiter. He sure has plenty of money."

What a mess. How could it be that the taxes had been left unpaid for so long? The Adamses weren't rich -- well, maybe Julia was -- but they weren't poor either. So who forgot to check the little stub on the mortgage bill? According to Hector's cousin Max, no one had known the taxes hadn't been paid. Adams land had always been Adams land. Period. Which led Emerson to believe that the town of Columbia, in the fine state of New Jersey, was kicking the Adamses around for some cashola and they'd decided that the first person to come up with said money was as good as any -- and that money came from Lassiter Adams.

Greedy corporate bastard that he was, small town USA had let him grease their palms.

Yet, he hadn't built a single thing to date. He dug around with lots of machinery while Emerson and her group of environmental activists chained themselves to bulldozers and trees to protest. His answer to that was to simply choose another portion of the vast Adams acreage to dig up, surprising them each new day that dawned with a new location. It became like a daily game of cat and mouse to figure out where he'd dig next.

However, none of that explained his claim to be an Adams. Adams was a common last name -- as common as Jones or Smith. So where was the proof that Lassiter was an Adams? Of the *were* variety, no less?

There wasn't any proof like documentation, other than he shared the same last name. And, due to the fact that asking Lassiter might reveal a secret about the Adamses they didn't want to reveal -- no one said anything. They grumbled, they shook their fists at him, but they didn't make him prove he was really an Adams from the infamous werewolf pack, better known as One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

Yes, the Adams family was rare and unusual. They didn't care if your mate was a penguin, so long as you'd found love. They didn't care if you didn't like to hunt and run with the full moon or lived on a strictly vegetarian diet and married a cat. They loved you for *who* you were, not what the typical werewolf pack thought you should be. That was what made Emerson fight even harder on behalf of the Adams, because they accepted her for who she was -- an avenger of small creatures and animal lover extraordinaire.

Emerson's family couldn't accept what they considered her quirks and so, at the age of twenty-one, she'd left. Now she only saw them occasionally, because she couldn't accept their rigid werewolf rules and regulations.

That might have made her a rebel in the eyes of most wolf packs. However, not in the eyes of the Adams family. The Adamses didn't care that the very idea of hunting a small animal made her queasy. Just because she was a werewolf it didn't mean eating meat was essential to her well-being. She was, after all, half human and found she shifted just fine on broccoli, thank you.

It was simply another factor in her quest to help the Adamses. Their unconditional acceptance of her.

And that brought her back to the stalemate they were in with the newest Adams and where this land ownership nonsense remained. Lassiter Adams dug up the surrounding acres like a kid in a sandbox and the Adams clan couldn't stop him.

But it wasn't for lack of trying. All of the Adamses, in one way or another, had attempted to drive Lassiter away.

Even Julia -- wealthy from her designer pet clothing boutique -- didn't have enough liquid assets to stop Lassiter.

He was a monster.

An ass-tastic monster, but still a monster.

Emerson ignored the call of her hormonal whining and the reminder that Lassiter was crazy hot, and set about focusing on her newest form of protest.

Maybe she could find all the keys to his stupid bulldozers and swallow them?

She'd shit brass for a week, but it might be worth it.

* * *

Lassiter Adams let the curtain of his window fall, shutting out Emerson Palmer, and set about looking once again at the map of vast Adams acreage. Shit, there was a boatload of land to cover, but he'd dig and dig until the twelfth of never if it meant that he'd find what he was looking for.

For the first time in the many years since he'd been searching, he felt hopeful. An end to this disaster in life he'd been dealt would be welcome.

Crossing the room, he looked into his parakeet Bud's cage and winked. "Well, little guy, I think we shut up that Emerson for today. Looks like she's off to fight another cause. Christ, I'm sick of her yap."

"Sickofheryap. Sickofheryap," Bud chirped back.

Though, she did have a hot yap. Lassiter rather liked to watch it move when she opened it and called him some of the most vile names he'd ever heard. It was full, lush, ripe and very red -- very kissable and in the three months since he'd been here at the Adams stead, he'd, on more than one occasion, wondered what it would be like to have them wrapped around his cock.

She was a feisty one.

A feisty pain in his long drawn out search for a needle-in-a-haystack ass.

He looked at Bud and chuckled. "You know, I feel lucky here, Bud. I think this just might be it."

"Ititit," Bud chirped back, fluttering his multi colored wings from his perch.

“Yeah,” Lassiter said out loud, more to reassure himself than anything else, “it. We’d better hope this is it. We’re running out of options.” His stomach grumbled, making him momentarily forget the shitload of work ahead of him. It was feeding time.

Pausing for a moment, he wondered what Emerson would taste like. The creamy arch of her neck against his lips when he...

Rolling his head on his neck to relieve the tension Emerson never failed to create, Lassiter ignored the flare up from all points tropical just thinking of her evoked and went to his fridge for nourishment, planning the next day’s dig.

And how, yet again, to outwit, outlast, outrun Emerson Palmer.

Chapter Two

Emerson cooed at baby Quinn and shoveled another spoonful of goop into his mouth. His gummy smile gave Emerson a reason to smile too, rather than hang onto her anger.

"He's a messy one, huh, Em?" Derrick Adams remarked while grabbing a roll of paper towels and cleaning the floor surrounding Quinn's high chair.

"He's definitely a team player when it comes to messy," she giggled, taking some of the paper towel and wiping at her jeans.

Derrick ran a hand over Quinn's head with fatherly affection. "He gets that from his mother. Have you seen her eat?" he joked.

"I heard that, Derrick Adams, and I'll have you know, cats are the cleanest creatures on earth. You dogs are another story altogether." Martine sat on the chair opposite Emerson and grinned at Quinn. Tucking her long, graceful legs under her, she folded her hands and placed them on the wooden table. "And even if his eating habits were from me, it's very obvious, wolf man, his looks are too."

Derrick put an arm around his wife's shoulder and kissed the top of her sleek black head. "Yeah, I guess I have to credit you with those."

They made a great couple, Derrick and Martine, Emerson mused. They were another example of how accepting the Adams pack could be. Quinn was proof that the Adamses were good people. He was, after all, half domestic cat and half werewolf.

Cat-dog, as Martine had explained with a laugh. Little Quinn was the apple of everyone's eye and certainly would grow up with a healthy attitude toward diversity.

"You're good at this, Emerson. You really ought to have one of your own," Martine said, taking Quinn from his high chair and bringing him to the sink for a cleaning.

Well, at this stage in the game, Immaculate Conception was her only alternative. Unless BOB could father children, Emerson was shit out of luck. A twinge of motherly dreams gone astray hit Emerson, but she shrugged it off in favor of being a pseudo aunt and caretaker of stray animals.

"Emerson? How did the rumble for wee animals in the jungle slash potential pay per view special go with you and Lassiter today?" JC asked, stirring something that smelled delicious on the stove.

Emerson's snort was derisive. "It went like it always does. He digs. I hurl epithets at him for being an animal killer while he does it. He doesn't budge, he doesn't flinch, he just keeps on going. *Nothing* ruffles that man --"

"And it's starting to piss you off, eh?" Max interrupted, kissing JC's cheek and cupping her burgeoning belly. "How's Max junior in there today?"

JC smiled warmly, but said, "We don't know if it's a junior or a juniorette, farm boy, and the baby is just fine."

Though it looked as if JC were due at any moment, her pregnancy wasn't quite what the alpha Adams, Max, had expected. In a human pregnancy, JC was but three months along. However, seeing as the sire of this particular offspring was a werewolf and the mother a human, no one knew what to expect. Apparently, each half human, half werewolf pregnancy was different.

"I can tell you this, snookums. It might be a while before I let ya knock me up again. I have human friends who were pregnant and they don't look like this --" she pointed to her belly and snorted, "-- when they're only three months along. What I don't get is how I feel like I've been pregnant forever. It's the damned pregnancy of the millennium, for crap's sake," she complained.

"It's sturdy seed I planted, eh, wench?" Max nudged Derrick and snickered.

Turning, both hands on her wide hips, JC narrowed her eyes and pointed the spoon she had in her hands at them. "Sturdy my eye, Don Juan. It's demon seed, buddy, and don't you forget it! It keeps me up at night. It makes me puke all day long

and worse still, it's given me split ends!" JC stomped off to the freezer, waddling as she went.

"So, Emerson? Make any headway with Lassiter today? Or are we still where we were three months ago?" Max asked again.

Sadly, Max's defeated look made Emerson's daily report even bleaker. "Well, I did call him some new names today, if that makes you feel any better."

"Look, Emerson. You're not getting anywhere here. I feel like we're just wasting your time, not to mention the time of your organization. I don't want to give up but Lassiter is shredding our land acre by acre, and neither you nor I seem to be deterring him."

Emerson looked up into the handsome, rugged face of Max Adams and, for the first time since she'd begun this project to save his land, she felt all hope slipping away. "I can't give up, Max. I feel like it today, but I can't and neither can you. Don't you want your baby to someday be able to run under the moonlight on Adams land? Don't you want that too?" she asked Derrick pleadingly, turning to face him and Martine.

"Yes, Emerson," Max assured her. "It's what we all want, but we've used up a lot of your valuable time. There's no talking to the man, no reasoning with him. He bought our land right out from under us and with no explanation. It doesn't matter if he's an Adams, according to the town. They just like the fat account they have now because of him. So what else is there? You can't go on day after day calling him names and throwing foliage at him. You had a life before our cause and you should be able to go back to it."

If only the life part of that impassioned speech were true. Emerson's life was the animal rights organization she worked for. Save the Tails was all she had and, truth be told, she'd be really sad to leave the Adams, even if they did find a way to stop Lassiter. "So are ya kicking me out?" she half-joked, half-wondered out loud.

"Are you kidding? Who would teach us new and inventive ways to say shit stain, if not for you?" Martine asked. Her smile was sympathetic and so genuine it made Emerson's teeth hurt. "We just feel guilty, Emerson. We know the money for this

cause you've taken on is long gone by now. Your paycheck stopped coming three weeks ago."

Foiled again. Indeed, her paycheck had stopped coming because Save the Tails couldn't justify the kind of money needed to stop a company as large as Lassiter Adams'. It was a non-profit organization. Their salaries came from donations. The pay was little, but the work was rewarding for Emerson.

It didn't matter that her pay was inconsequential. It was never very big to begin with. Emerson just got by on her salary as it was. She couldn't afford to live without it permanently. She'd be high and dry if not for her trust fund.

"I'm okay, Martine. I really am. I want you all to have what you deserve, and Lassiter Adams has to shit or get off the pot someday. He can't just keep digging forever. We have to figure out what he wants and try to offer him something."

Damn, she hated the failure of her voice in her own ears. Fuck Lassiter Adams. The defenseless animal killer! "Just give me a couple of more weeks and let's see what happens, okay? I've been in a tangle or two with the likes of worse than Lassiter. Unless I'm imposing..." She let her words trail off. Maybe they were just sick of her interfering in their lives? Emerson could be very single minded when it came to the environment. When she was off trying to preserve something, she forgot much else.

Like her nails.

Looking down at her hands, she realized they were in need of a good manicure. Everything went by the wayside when she had the environmental bug up her ass.

"Emerson can stay as long as she wants. Got that, Em?" JC called from inside the freezer. "She's the only other person in this house who hasn't made fun of me because I'm worried this baby created by my farm stud is going to be born with better hair than me."

Max's chuckle was playful when he crossed the kitchen to swat at JC's backside. "You can stay as long as you like, Emerson. You're no imposition. We feel like we're imposing on you."

If only Max Adams knew how good his family was for someone like Emerson. Someone like Emerson who didn't have the support of her own family, but had found it with these people.

Her reluctance to give up was bolstered.

Lassiter Adams could kiss her hairy lupine ass.

And why did the very thought of that give her chills?

And not the kind that were unpleasant.

* * *

Emerson rapped on the thin, white door of Lassiter's trailer. Trees whipped with the nippy breeze and the air was clean with the scent of freshly dug dirt. The night was chilly, calling to her to shift and roam freely over the hills and valleys of the Adams farm.

But ya can't do that if Lassiter Adams is going to be hot on your ass with his bulldozer, now can ya?

That was the very reason Emerson was here. To try one last ditch effort to talk Lassiter out of keeping the land. Maybe she could talk him into allowing Max and his family to pay back the money he'd forked over. Like easy lifetime installments on a monthly basis.

"Ah, the tree hugger," Lassiter mocked, opening the door to reveal the brick shithouse hard body he was. His voice was like brown sugar melted with butter, thick and bubbling sweet. He grinned in that smug, disarming way that made her furious and tingly at the same time.

Emerson let out a loud, exasperated sigh and bit her tongue. "Yes, it's me. The tree hugger. I'd like to talk, if we could." She was shooting for amicable, but saying the words through clamped teeth might ruin the effect she was aiming to achieve, so she loosened her face into an almost smile.

"Shouldn't you be off trying to save the almost extinct tsetse bat in Zimbabwe or something?"

Folding her hands in front of her, she clasped them together to keep from clocking him in his perfect chops. Pleasant. She could be pleasant. She had to be pleasant if she wanted to try and find a rational end to this. "I don't think Zimbabwe has tsetse bats. I could be wrong, but last I checked, no tsetse bats."

Lassiter's jaw twitched and his hands rested on his lean hips. "Well, there must be a better cause than this. Go find it, Emerson, and leave this cause alone. It's a dead issue. I'm not leaving."

Sucking in her cheeks, she tamped down the ire that swirled in her throat and worked its way to her sharp tongue. "What is it you want, Lassiter? You haven't built anything, but you keep digging up stuff and ruining perfectly good wilderness. Why can't you just let the Adams be and go dig somewhere else?"

"Because you'll just follow me to '*somewhere else*.' I figure I'm hiding in plain sight here." He chuckled, probably because he thought he was clever. When really, he was just a shithead.

Ohhhhhhhh, that smug, arrogant tone of his chewed at her ears, making them burn. Shoving her hands in the pockets of her jeans, she plodded on. "I don't follow you, Lassiter. I follow a cause," she said with a calm she didn't feel.

Rocking forward on his toes, Lassiter positioned his body close to hers without actually touching it. The heat he emanated was sexy and daring, and Emerson's nostrils responded in kind, flaring to the musky, male scent. "Your cause won't stop me from doing what I need to do, Emerson."

And what the fuck was that exactly? What did he need so desperately to do? Emerson looked into his dark brown eyes, staring down at her, and narrowed her own. "You never change, Lassiter Adams."

His breath fanned her cheeks, warm and smelling faintly of something sweet. "Neither do you, Emerson Palmer," he said with sinister glee before hauling her to him and pulling her into the trailer, then shoving the door shut with a booted foot.

Emerson hung in his arms, neither allowing nor preventing her capture. Calling Lassiter large was, by far, understating his bulk. The arms that held her tightened,

holding her much smaller frame close, allowing her a sampling of his thickly muscled thighs.

And what hung between them.

Some things, like the hard thing between Lassiter's legs, never changed.

Chapter Three

“So when are we going to stop behaving as if we don’t know each other, Em?”

Emerson leaned back and she braced herself on his hard forearms. His rugged face, always suspiciously pale for the amount of time he spent in the sun, loomed in front of hers. “I never said I didn’t know you,” she hissed, finally losing the control she’d promised herself she wouldn’t.

“So then you’ve told the Adams you’re privy to me in, er, the most carnal of ways?” he taunted, but didn’t elaborate.

Her cheeks burned. “That’s no one’s business but mine. It has nothing to do with what’s happening here at the Adams’. However, if you choose, you can give me up. Go crazy,” she dared him, defiantly letting her gaze slip to his.

Lassiter’s hand slid down her spine, resting on the curve of her ass. The hip hugger jeans she wore now seemed terribly tight, making the heat of his bulk an entity she wasn’t willing to encounter. His tight, full body press was keeping Emerson from thinking clearly.

“So, that was just a weak moment for you last year in California? I meant nothing to you, is what you’re saying? I’m some cheap lay to be discarded at whim?” His tone was light, but the underlying anger in it was there too. She sensed it in the way he said discarded. Eyes like melted chocolate stared into hers, daring her.

To do what, she didn’t know.

To say what, she knew even less.

Oy. No, it hadn’t been like that at all. It had, however, been very foolish on her part, and when all was said and done, she’d left California for less humiliating territory with her tail between her legs, literally. “I’m saying that it happened and it’s over. What’s happening here has nothing to do with California.”

His head dipped and he rasped his tongue over the smooth column of her throat, evoking her raw nerves to dance to life. "Do you always fuck the men you hope to annihilate for your *cause*?"

"Do you fuck the women who hope to annihilate your cause to prevent them from coming out on top?" she shot back snidely.

"I *was* on top, as I recall."

Emerson's body trembled, not only with the memory of their one-time encounter, but with the idea that she wasn't trying very hard to keep another from occurring. "No, Lassiter. You know --"

"I know nothing, Emerson. I know we screwed our brains out and the next day you were gone. Your replacement didn't have nearly the ass you do, especially when he chained himself naked to a tree."

"I had business to attend to elsewhere. Now I'm here and we meet again. You on one side and me on another. That's not news. We had no business doing what we did. So could we forget that and move on like adults?"

His fingers swept over the underside of her breast and his mouth lingered over hers, the tip of his nose just touching her own. "Sure we can," he answered cockily before taking her lips to his and nibbling the soft flesh.

"Good," she muttered, more to herself than anyone else. Rotating her head away from his, she said brokenly, "That means -- well, it means -- that you have to -- Ohhhhh..." she murmured, distracted by the slither of his tongue, silky and hot, cool and sweet all at the same time, slipping between her lips and devouring her senses. Her mouth parted like the Great Divide, opening in acceptance, letting his tongue wreak havoc with her body.

His chuckle was low when Emerson responded, returning the kiss fully by arching into him.

Long fingers dipped into the top of her baggy sweater, trailed over the top of her cleavage, teasing her nipple with an elusive wisp of a swipe. He lingered, caressing the

skin and kissing her with a greedy mouth that demanded she comply. Lassiter's hands delved deeper, popping a nipple out of her lace bra and rolling it between his fingers.

Emerson's groan was long, shuddering, tormented by the electric shots of pleasure that flew to her cunt with rapid fire. Liquid and like molten lava, she found herself wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pulling him in closer, inviting him to relieve the burning ache in her pussy.

His fingers found the buttons of her sweater and deftly opened them, parting the sweater and popping the clasp on the front of her bra. He roamed over the swell of each breast, moving from the soft texture of skin to the harder, rippled texture of her nipple.

The internal battle for supremacy was losing in the wake of Lassiter's hands. Strong, callused, expertly moving from breast to breast, massaging them in sensuous circles.

She shivered, relaxing into him, straddling Lassiter's thick thigh and rubbing against it with a slow slide. The friction of her jeans, coupled with his long fingers teasing her nipple, left Emerson wet, squirming, and she clung to him.

When he dove for her nipple, latching onto it and sliding his tongue along the rigid flesh, Emerson sighed, leaving a residual squeak to slip out in its wake. His mouth was heaven, his tongue raspy and hot, lapping at her aching nipple.

Her trembling was supported only by his solid hold on her, keeping her from melting on the spot. The sharp sound of the zipper on her jeans sliding down was mingled with her exhale. Lassiter sinuously slid a hot hand over her abdomen, circling her navel with his forefinger, trailing it over the top of her bikini underwear. Slipping under the silk, he wasted no time spreading her flesh, roaming over the lips of her cunt, wet and hungry for his touch. She bucked against his hand, letting the heat of it hold her captive, absorbing the delicious torment he stirred.

When his finger found the hard, swollen nub of her clit, she bit her lower lip to keep from howling. Lassiter fondled her clit with gentle passes, then slid a finger into her passage, allowing a moment for her to adjust before thrusting with firm strokes.

The rise of an orgasm Emerson shouldn't be having lashed at her with a careless abandon. Small tendrils of smoke gave way to an inferno of sensation, clawing at her gut and settling in her pussy.

She fucked his finger, focusing all of her attention on the rigid pleasure it brought, while his mouth tugged at her nipple. Her hands grabbed at the thick locks of hair on his head, clutching and driving them into his scalp as the wild need to come took over everything else.

When his teeth grazed her already sensitive nipple and the heel of his hand caressed her clit, Emerson whimpered, then let go with a heave of air. The pressure of her climax suspended and held her in its grip, then slammed into her with hurricane force, making her knees buckle.

Lassiter's firm hold on her never wavered. When his skillful ministrations seized Emerson, she collapsed against his rock-solid frame, blowing out a gush of air and clinging to him for support.

Dragging her upward, Lassiter stood her up to face him and smiled. "So, I guess we're going to do the 'this was a mistake' thing again, right?"

Emerson's lips wouldn't move and her throat was Sahara desert dry. She shook her head. Cheerist what was wrong with her? What was it about this man that had her one moment wanting to slice his balls up and serve them as pâté on a cracker, and the next melting like so much butter in his hot hands?

Gathering her focus, Emerson looked into his dark brown eyes and gave him a wan smile. "No. It's never a mistake if *I come*."

His eyebrow slid upward, but his impassive face remained calm, letting her know he wasn't going to be ruffled by her smart mouth. "Well, at least *someone* did."

"The right someone," she shot back through teeth that were clamped.

He stepped back from her, letting his arms fall to his sides. "That someone is still not going to get what she came here for. Whether she lets me play with her fun stuff or not."

"Yeah? Well, that street goes both ways, stud! Playing with my fun stuff doesn't mean that I'm going to stop harassing you until you go away."

The implication that she'd come to win by any means, even if that means was trolling, finished it for her. It simmered in her brain, and then boiled over. Her temper did what it always did. Flared, zinged to an all points bulletin, and then spilled out of her mouth. "Screw you, Lassiter! I don't give a shit how many bulldozers you have or how much money you throw around. I'll see you in hell before I'll let you trash any more of the Adams' land!"

Swinging around on her heel, Emerson clomped out of his shabby trailer and into the night, letting her fury allow her to shift.

The shift of bone led to the ripple of muscle and tufts of fur appeared on her arms as she bent to go with the flow of her change. Her clothes fell away, pooling on the ground, shredding with the force of her growth.

She shook her now furry head, the snap of her ears satisfied her that she had indeed completed the shift. Once on all fours, Emerson lurched forward, hitting her stride with a light jog, then allowing her fury to fuel a fast paced trot.

The fucking son of a bitch.

The goddamned, thick haired, hard bodied, rippled abbed son of a bitch!

How dare he even imply she was willing to hock her wares for an environmental cause!

She just couldn't figure out why her cause didn't stop her from allowing him access to the wares in question.

* * *

"Screwyou. Screwyou," Bud chirped from his cage across the room.

"Okay, I get it. Shut up already," Lassiter warned testily. "Don't make me take your bird bath away, pal."

Damn it. He hadn't meant for things to get carried away. Emerson had a way about her that either had him cocked and at attention, or so pissed off he couldn't see

straight. Her defiant arrogance, her flashing blue eyes, her rigid posture lent to a lust that took on a life of its own.

She wasn't typically what you'd call hot. Her lips were too full, her body almost too lean and her hair, always falling down around her heart shaped face in unruly, silken strands of blonde the color of wheat in the sunlight, was always a mess. Her nails were short and sometimes ragged -- most likely from all of the chaining herself to inanimate machinery. Her clothes were anything but what he'd seen on the average hottie in a bar or at the mall.

Emerson didn't much care for female finery, he supposed. She didn't wear what the current fashions were, according to what he saw on television, but it didn't stop him from wanting her just the same.

She did things to his nether parts that no woman should be allowed to do. It could be called indecent, and all she had to do was show up. After almost a year since their last meeting, he still warred with the urge to hunt her luscious ass down and make her submit to him. Yet, there she stood at his door, fresh faced and blonde, fighting the obvious urge to wallop him one and it started all over again.

She turned him on. Her scent made his nostrils flare and his unrelieved cock swell, straining against his jeans. She engaged every last sense he had, and it infuriated him to find that he couldn't keep his hands to himself.

Emerson smelled like a warm summer breeze laced with a hint of jasmine. It clung to his nose and lingered there. Bringing his hand to his face, he caught the remnants of her desire on his fingers. Tangy and sweetly laden with the thick cream of her satisfaction.

In exasperation, he shoved a hand in his pocket. Fingering the well-worn, crumpled piece of paper that never left his hands, the reminder of why he was on Adams land to begin with, Lassiter resolved to get a better grip on his loins.

No one, not even Emerson juicy lipped Palmer, was going to keep him from achieving that.

No one.

Chapter Four

Emerson ran with the chilled breeze at her back -- as if running could keep her ahead of Lassiter Adams -- as if his sensual invasion of her body could be run from.

She'd done just what she'd done in California.

Or, close to what she'd done in California.

Pausing under a barren oak tree, Emerson lay down. Paws in front of her, nose buried between them, hunkering into the cold ground.

Aren't you the little tart? her conscience called.

Indeed, she was. Throw a little weak and spineless into the pot, and she had a bubbling sauce of sissi-fied Emerson.

Lassiter had something, whatever that something was, that made her forget everything but her hormones. She had no other explanation. It was the only one she could come up with.

Especially after California.

Their encounter had happened quite unexpectedly and probably not the way most one-night stands do. One moment they were spewing fire and brimstone, the next, kissing the living shit out of each other and throwing down.

Oh, and they had thrown down.

In fact, it was the best throw down she'd ever had.

It all happened so quickly, after months of their ongoing battle, that when it was over, neither of them knew what to say.

So Emerson didn't say anything. She left without so much as a glance over her shoulder, slinking back off to the east coast and spending every waking moment trying to forget what had happened.

And now, she'd done it again. Well, almost.

Shitpissfuck.

What she couldn't understand was how Lassiter had become so hard-hearted. There'd been a time when he'd been on the same side as she.

* * *

As usual, seeing Lassiter sent Emerson's pulse soaring and her eyeballs floating off into the back of her head like she was possessed. Seeing him with Hector made her want to throw things.

A good night's sleep and some perspective about her personal relationships versus work had left Emerson feeling stronger. Her convictions were the same, no matter who she allowed to crawl between her legs.

Lassiter Adams had to go and he had to go without the personal joy it would bring him if she pitched another hissy fit. She'd resolved to remain as calm as possible and keep her name calling to herself.

Until she saw Lassiter with Hector, chatting like they were old fucking college roommates, reliving the good old days.

Was that what she thought she saw?

Was Lassiter really petting Hector's bunny?

Ohhhhhh that was a cheap play for Hector's emotions. There was no better way to his heart than to give him the opportunity to talk about his bunnies. Hector loved his bunnies. In fact, he loved them so much he'd once tried to steal money from his wealthy cousin Julia to save them.

Yet, there was big, tall, albeit a bit pale, muscled Lassiter, talking and laughing with Hector and not just holding, but petting his bunny. His lean, long tapered fingers stroked the fur with the ease of an animal lover.

But Lassiter wasn't an animal lover, or at least he wasn't anymore.

He was a defiler of them, ripping their homes to shreds, usurping their lives.

In general, fucking shit up on a daily basis so he could build condos with hot tubs and vaulted ceilings.

Emerson strode on lean legs to the clearing in front of Lassiter's trailer and stopped in front of the two men, waiting for them to acknowledge her.

Lassiter's head bobbed up, his sunglasses hiding whatever was behind them. "Morning, Emerson," was his casual "oh, it's you" greeting.

Ignoring Lassiter and his scent on the cold morning breeze, one that made Emerson's knees weak, she gave Hector a pointed look. "What's up this morning, Hector?"

Hector's grin was wide. "Lassiter said he'd help me rebuild the bunny house. I was having a lot of trouble with Pinky here." He pointed to the large, white bunny Lassiter held to his chest. "He kept getting out because the lock won't stay shut and Lassiter helped me find him."

Oh.

Well, wasn't Lassiter a real caped crusader?

The glee with which Hector spoke, his complete obliviousness to whatever Lassiter was cooking up, Lassiter's taking advantage of Hector's innocence, made Emerson's blood boil.

Emerson brushed her hair out of her eyes and faced Hector, who was a little too moony eyed for her taste. "I can help you, Hector."

He frowned, his eyes flashing confusion. "You cannot. You don't know how to use power tools."

Emerson sent him a signal with her expression that begged him to work with her, but Hector was having none of that.

Shaking his head, Hector said, "Lassiter knows how to use power tools."

Lassiter knows how to use all sorts of *tools* was Emerson's first thought.

"So... so do I," she muttered back. Well, okay, so she didn't know how to use a power tool, but that's what the Internet was for, right? Shit, she sure hoped JC had managed to convince Max that DSL was a necessity in Hooterville, as she called it.

"Really?" Lassiter drawled. "You've come a loooonng way since that trust fund, haven't you, Em?" His dark hair shone in the sun, dark hair that Emerson, just last

night, had latched onto in passionate abandon. Leaning back against the shabby railed fencing that still remained after he'd dug the ground to China and back, Lassiter crossed his feet at the ankles and cradled the bunny. His T-shirt stretched over his pecs, enhancing their ripple.

And it was pissing her off. "Yeah, I have," she replied with as much calm as she could muster. "C'mon, Hector. Let's go see what we can do about Pinky's bunny hut."

Hector wasn't so convinced. "I dunno, Em. It has to be sturdy, otherwise Pinky'll get out again and I would be *very* upset if I lost him."

"We couldn't have Pinky running amok, now could we, Emerson?" Lassiter asked, turning his gaze to capture Emerson's. His question, laced with a taunt, increased her determination to build a freakin' bunny hut.

Hop, hop.

Emerson grabbed Hector's hand, staring up at Lassiter's dark, bespectacled eyes. "No, we couldn't have that. I can build a bunny hut. I will build a bunny hut. Now, c'mon, Hector," she commanded, pulling him behind her, before stopping momentarily.

Letting go of Hector's hand, Emerson took brisk strides back to Lassiter and shoved her hands in the cradle of his arms. "We'll take Pinky, thank you," she said stiffly, yanking Pinky, who was quite happy where he was, out of those fantastically bulging arms. Looking down at the silky white creature, Emerson said, "C'mon, Pinky. You're going to have a new home."

Emerson stomped off, Pinky and Hector in tow.

See me stick my tongue out at you, Lassiter Adams.

His chuckle drifted to her sensitive ears, mocking her.

* * *

Six hours later, a whole lot of chicken wire and piles of wasted wood, Emerson threw down the power drill with a scream of frustration. "Fucking piece of shit, useless, pointless, God damned waste of seventy-five bucks!" She closed her eyes and whirled around in a circle, kicking dirt as she went and dancing on the instructional sheet she'd

printed from the Internet. In one last moment of fury, she kicked the long two-by-four that lay on the saw horse over, stubbing her toe.

"Moootherrfucker!" she yelped while hobbling on one foot.

"Uh-oh. Is that the potty mouthed, power tool wielding, 'I can do this myself' Emerson I hear?"

Fabulous.

Just what she needed.

Lassiter Adams up her ass, cracking on her for not being able to do something as simple as build a bunny hut.

Rubbing her foot through her sneaker, she retorted, "Shut the hell up, Lassiter, and go back to your trailer. I don't need your comments. I'm just experiencing a couple of technical difficulties is all."

Duct tape... nothing a little roll or twelve of duct tape wouldn't fix. She'd been smart when she bought the economy pack. Who needed a freakin' radial arm saw when you had duct tape?

Lassiter flicked a hand at the pile of wood she'd wasted and smiled. "So, ya need some help?"

Not if the world were to tip on its axis and she needed a reincarnation of Noah's Ark to sail 'round the tilted world, would she accept help from Lassiter Adams.

"Um, no thank you."

Walking toward her, all yummied out, he said, "That's the 'I'd rather be dead than take help from you, Lassiter' no thank you, huh?"

"No, actually, that was the 'I'd rather have my ovaries removed with rusty pliers and no anesthesia, Lassiter' no thank you." Emerson smiled smartly and gave Lassiter the evil eyeball. Damn him for interfering. She didn't need him to point out that she was fucking this up. She had a handle on that already.

It hadn't occurred to her that his trailer was in plain view of her bunny hut building site, and that he'd probably been watching her from his window and laughing his hot tookus off while she struggled.

"I don't need any help," she said again, pushing her hair out of her face with irritation.

His glance surveyed the mess she'd made and he toed some of the sawdust at her. "I beg to differ."

"I like it when you beg."

"Funny, I thought that was you doing the begging in California..."

Fucktard. "I don't need your help."

"Oh, but you do."

"No, no I don't."

"I build houses and apartment complexes, Emerson. You save trees, of which you've wasted many on this project. I think I can help."

Stupidhead. "I don't think Pinky and his fuzzy mates need a sauna and hot tub in their hut," she said dryly, turning her back to him to survey the mess she'd made. "Stick to ruining perfectly good forests so you can build swanky apartments, and I'll take care of the bunny hut."

Emerson felt the heat of his body behind her even before he spoke. "It doesn't have to be this way, Emerson. It wasn't always." His words were sentimental to her ears, said with the memory of familiarity, rife with what she'd call regret if she didn't know better.

"Sure it does, Lassiter. It has to be this way because we're no longer on the same side." Saying that out loud was almost physically painful for her. Her gut clenched, tightening and recoiling from the truth. Remembering what once had been was bittersweet and almost always hidden by her anger. They meshed with one another so perfectly now that she didn't know how to separate the two. It was a rare occurrence that allowed her to take Lassiter out of the box she labeled "forget about it already." When she did, it led to a void she couldn't fill with the jerk she'd run into ten years after they'd parted.

Anger with Lassiter was best. When she wasn't angry with him, she was throwing herself at him like a virgin in a whorehouse. Slapping herself against him like he was the last man on Earth.

Placing his hands on the top of her shoulders, Lassiter drew her to the wide expanse of his chest, curling his fingers into her collarbone. "We were friends for a long time, Em, and then, in California, we were lovers." The warmth his hands radiated soothed Emerson, seeping into her pores and turning into a liquid, electric current that skittered down her spine.

Who was this Lassiter? Not the one she'd seen after almost ten years in California. This Lassiter who sounded as if he regretted never looking back wasn't the one she'd become reacquainted with in California. That Lassiter was cold and angry. He was too busy making money with his big construction firm to regret much, in her estimation.

Yet this Lassiter, the one who stood behind her, encouraging her head to lie against his breastbone, didn't feel like the Lassiter from California. He didn't smell like him either. His scent was less harried. Less dark was the only way to describe it.

Lassiter didn't have an easy childhood, but instead of allowing it to hold him back, it had always seemed to fuel his desire to help others. However, the man she'd encountered in California was a man who lived strictly to exact some kind of weird revenge that Emerson was unable to understand.

On who or what he wanted revenge, Emerson was clueless. But the fact remained that Lassiter was here to do something she despised and that would always keep them from what "used to be."

"We don't have to pick sides when we're in bed," he whispered low against the shell of her ear, sensuous and inviting. It took all of her will and everything thereafter to keep from winding her arms around his neck.

"We aren't going to bed." No, no they weren't. And they weren't going to *ground* either, she thought, scrunching her eyes shut and staving off the impulse to throw him down on said *terra firma*, tear at his clothes and nail him.

Lassiter chuckled against her hair, the sound deep, vibrating against her back. "You know that's not what you want. You want me, Emerson, as much as I want you." He stated as much with his hands as with his words, roving over her ribs, running small circles against her thin shirt, skimming the underside of her breasts.

Her throat was closing and words were forming with sludge-like motion, but she was fighting it with everything she had. "Sex won't solve anything, Lassiter," she offered as a meek refusal.

"I disagree."

Yeah, so what else was new? They disagreed. Novel, huh?

"I think we can solve a lot of things if we just let happen what should happen on a frequent basis with you and I." A delicious tendril of a flame spiked her continual craving for him when he gathered her hair in his hand and tugged her head back.

"There's no solving this. You're not the man I once knew, Lassiter." Her protest grew less vehement when he nibbled at the side of her neck.

"No, Em, I'm not the *boy* you once knew."

Chapter Five

That was the truest statement he'd made thus far. No, he wasn't the boy she'd once known. The boy she'd once known didn't do this to her body. He didn't leave her weak and wanting more. She stiffened but Lassiter held her even tighter, running his tongue along her neck, against the lobe of her ear. Her head began to swim, her heart crashed against her ribs, her pussy throbbed with needing him.

"Why does it have to be this way, Lassiter?" she whispered to him, longing for something long since over.

Caressing the swell of her hip, he said hoarsely, "Let it go, Em. Let's just let it go for now. Let me touch you, lick you."

Her knees shook, her pulse quickened enough that she could hear it in her ears. The word 'no' was on the tip of her tongue, but the tip of his tongue held a different answer as it skimmed her ear, tracing small circles along the outer rim.

Spanning her waist, Lassiter pressed her to him, against the hardness of his chest and onto the bulge in his jeans.

With a will of their own, her hands wrapped around his neck and she arched into his hold, biting her lip as the heat of their bodies sizzled, searing an imprint on her spine. Skimming her sides, Lassiter dragged his hands over the swell of her hips, rounded the curve of her inner thigh, roaming in and out of her legs with a precise pattern.

The groan she omitted was low, feral. It caught in her throat and she swallowed the urge to claw at him with hands that rushed the process. Instead, she opted to let her head fall back and revel in the myriad of emotions he stirred in her, forgetting the anger between them.

The pop of the button on her jeans, the slide of the zipper went almost unnoticed to Emerson. Lassiter swung her around, gripping her shoulders and dragging her against him. His lips took hers possessively, plunging his tongue between them with rough insistence, gathering her closer until she almost couldn't breathe. Splaying his hand over her ass, he ground his hips into her. Emerson stood on tippey toe, trying to drive back at him, but Lassiter was stronger, scooping her up and laying her down on the ground.

Through her fuzzy haze of lust, she realized that they were out in the middle of the woods. It was cold and the ground, colder still. However, that didn't stop her from wanting him. It didn't stop her from needing to complete this act of sheer madness. It didn't allow her the time to think about it, or even want to reason with it.

Pushing her jacket off with hard hands, Lassiter groaned when his hand cupped her breast through her shirt. He pulled her to him, lodging her thigh between his own and thumbing her nipple. His callused skin caught on the material of her shirt, rasping over it, sending rippling waves of electric currents to her cunt.

Emerson pressed her palms to his chest, straddling his thigh and squeezing it to keep the wet heat between her legs from overwhelming her and she found her hands tearing at his waistband, pulling his shirt upward.

Her urgency led to impatience as she fumbled with his belt buckle and the zipper on his jeans. Her heart crashed with her impulsive need, her lungs begged for air, her breath coming in choppy breaths.

Emerson needed Lassiter inside her *now*, but Lassiter had other ideas. Ideas that had nothing to do with rushing their mating.

Yanking her arms over her head, he collared them in his hand and used his other hand to tug her shirt upward. Rolling Emerson to her back, he swiped her flesh with his tongue, circling her nipple, dancing around it, eliciting shivers of anticipation from her. Thrusting against him, she bowed her back, arching to invite him to lick her, but he followed a lazy path along her ribs instead. Nibbling at them. Caressing her skin, so hot now it literally burned. Placing delicate stabs of his tongue into her navel.

Her cunt throbbed, ached, swelled with the taunt of silk against her flesh. His muffled chuckle mocked her ears, but seared her senses.

Just when she thought she could no longer withstand the torture, Lassiter took her nipple in his mouth, rolling it between his lips, lapping at it with a snake like tongue. He unzipped her pants, settling a hand to rest in the curls at the top of her pussy.

Emerson's hips bucked against the warm invasion. Lassiter's hand was so big it spanned nearly the width of her slender hips, possessive in its progress to her cunt. The sound of her own breathing, labored and raspy, slithered to her ears and she squirmed against Lassiter's hand, awaiting his next move.

Removing her jeans with one hand, he pushed them down past her knees, still suckling her nipple, moving from one to the other with licks and strokes. Slipping a finger into her folds, Lassiter teased her clit, trailing his finger over the tip of it with a light pass.

The ground was cold on her back, but it didn't stop Emerson from kicking her jeans from her feet, taking her shoes with them and spreading her legs wide. Then she pushed up to meet the hand that brought with it such skilled ministrations.

A fire erupted in her groin when Lassiter let her hands go and lowered his body to her abdomen, continually stroking her, rubbing the lips of her labia, planting kisses along her hips and thighs. Leaning over her, he lay across her belly and took a deep breath. The inhalation was sharp, and a familiar act displayed when werewolves mated.

Scent was everything. Yet Lassiter wasn't a werewolf...

Emerson lost that vague, worrisome thought when he laid his head against her belly and stroked her inner thighs. Her hands threaded through his thick hair, luxuriating in its soft texture, pressing him close to her, letting the warmth of his breath so teasingly close to her cunt keep her walking the ledge of desire.

Over and over he drew his hands along her skin, setting patches of it on fire with need. Spreading her flesh with fingers that were assured and deft, Emerson caught her breath, holding it and waiting for the ecstasy she knew his tongue would bring.

Lassiter didn't dive into her the way most men had in her experience. He savored her, tasting her with light licks, stroking her with both tongue and lips. Dragging his finger along her slit to stop at her passage, he inserted a finger with a slow glide.

Her cunt wept and Lassiter groaned, licking the cream of her with a flat tongue, circling her clit, sucking it until she lifted herself on her heels to grind against him.

The sharp swirl of orgasm fluttered in her pussy and the last thrust of his finger had Emerson releasing Lassiter's head and shoving a fist in her mouth to keep from screaming out. It rocked her, shaking her entire body, left her trembling as it assaulted her again and again. Her gut was in a knot, her nipples tight and hard against the now chilled breeze.

Lassiter stayed between her thighs, letting her relax, kissing her with a gentle mouth. Moving back up to her lips, he kissed her. His tongue driving into her mouth, spicy and tingled her own. Cupping his jaw with both hands, Emerson opened her mouth wide, absorbing the heat of his lips.

Reaching between them, Lassiter pushed at his jeans and Emerson's hands followed right behind them to slip into his underwear and touch his cock.

He groaned into her mouth, a low, husky, growl when she rubbed the smooth tip of his shaft, playing over the head of it before grasping it and stroking its length.

He shoved his jeans down, kicking his sneakers off with them and straddled her narrow hips. Rising on her elbows, Emerson met his gaze, intense, dark and shadowed with lust. Still clad in his T-shirt, it fell over Lassiter's lean hips carelessly. The sharp definition of his hips, cut and hard, made Emerson's mouth water. She ran a hand over them, burrowing into the crisp hair just above his cock. Her fingers explored the ridges in his abdomen, kneading the flesh. Clutching his ass, she pulled him to her and lay back on the cold ground to let his cock hover over her mouth.

He ran a hand down the side of her cheek, caressing her jaw, cupping it, directing her to take him between her lips.

Scooting further down, Emerson rested her lips against his hard shaft, licking the flesh with tentative strokes. He was long, thick and so hot it seared her skin. His scent was musky, male. It smelled of sinful thoughts and carnal desires.

Swiping her tongue over the cap of smooth flesh made Lassiter buck. Cupping his balls, she licked him from stem to crown, at first with a flat, slow tongue, relishing the taste and texture of his skin, salty and hard. Her pace quickened, until she enveloped him between her lips, arching her neck to take all of him, letting his cock rest in her mouth before swirling her lips back up his length.

His hiss of satisfaction carried to her ears on the sharp wind, cool and thick with the smell of sex, desire, need.

Lassiter's hands found her head and with hips pumping, he thrust into her mouth furiously. She let her saliva moisten the passes she took, tightening her lips around his cock to form an O. His balls drew closer to his body, full and heavy, and Emerson cupped them, rolling them between her fingers, skating over the sacs with light touches.

Lassiter growled, "Stop. Stop *now*, Em." His demand was husky, ripping from his heaving chest and ending on a grunt.

Threading his hands into her hair, he pulled her close to his belly, obviously fighting for control. Palming her head, he dug his fingers into her scalp and took deep breaths.

Letting her go, he moved down her body, slipping between her legs and hauling her to him, enveloping her in arms that were like bands of steel.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, Emerson lifted her hips, allowing his thick cock to drag between her folds. Her heart raced with anticipation. It had been so long since they'd been together, and she found all of her reasoning crashing around her.

The swollen tip of his cock pressed against her. Lassiter was thickly girthed, not outrageously so but enough to make Emerson apprehensively expectant. It had been a long time since she'd mated with anyone and Lassiter sensed it.

"I'll take it slow, Em," he murmured, hot against her ear. "I want you enough to drive into you without reason, but I'd never hurt you. Relax against me, baby. Relax," he coaxed.

Emerson took his gentle, husky cue and gathered a breath, focusing on the heaven that was his body, flush with hers. She let each plane of his body sink into hers, every ridge and silken muscle join with hers, and then Lassiter took his first stroke.

The thrust, a wet, sensual glide of flaming heat, took the breath from her and she clung to Lassiter's shoulders, adjusting to the bulk of him.

His muscles were bunched with tension, but he held back until she shifted her hips and moaned, no longer able to contain the need. Holding her up to shield her from the cold ground, he took another deep plunge. Emerson moaned when her clit scraped against the crisp pubic hair at his belly. His thrusts brought their hips in sync, sealing them together. Sweat glued their hips, fusing them. Lassiter buried his face in her neck, his lips attaching to the smooth skin while he rolled against her, rocking them in a slow dance.

The weight of him, the sheer delicious pleasure of his skin against hers, was heady. Her nose flared with the scent of his sweat mingled with hers. Her cunt swallowed the length of him, inch by inch as he slid into her, convulsing around him until she thought she might cry out from the delirious pleasure.

Curling under him, she tightened her legs around his waist, mumbling incoherently when the fierce onslaught of orgasm touched the first nerve and set her on a path there was no turning back from. Emerson drove against him, pumping her hips upward, undulating with wild abandon, reaching to find the release that would end this burning climb to relief.

She felt the muscles in his back cord and bunch with tension, flexing against her own. Lassiter's neck arched back, the strong column of it tense.

As a myriad of sensations flooded her, Lassiter clenched his teeth, threw his head back and howled, long, eerily, sharp and resonant. It sang in her ears, leaving behind the vibration so familiar when she ran with her pack mates.

Yet her focus was lost when she came too, digging her fingers into his back and gritting her teeth when the undeniable pleasure he created exploded. Her juices ran, mingling with the hot spasms of come his cock ejected, jerking within her.

She couldn't hold onto him anymore, her arms ached and were weak from her release. Letting her arms fall away, she hung from his grip, trying to process what had just happened.

Lassiter panted for breath against her chest, keeping a tight hold on her.

When reality set in, Emerson realized her ass was numb from the hard ground beneath her and the cold was seeping into her bones.

She also realized they'd just boffed in the middle of a clearing, in the dead of night, buck, fricken' naked for all to see.

Howling like two dogs in heat.

Jesus Christ in a mini skirt.

Wait, her brow furrowed. *Howling...* Lassiter had howled. That high pitched keening only werewolves were capable of.

She lifted her head, grabbing the top of his by the hair and yanking it upward, looking directly into his eyes. "Wanna explain?"

His eyebrow crooked upward. "Explain what?"

She narrowed her eyes. "How can I put this delicately? When you were gettin' your rocks off, you howled. Stop right there," she said to his open mouth. "I know you want to protest, but save it. I know a howl when I hear one."

"It was good. I said so in the way of a *moan*. If you want to call it a howl, okay. I howled."

Emerson let go of his head with a quick hand and pushed at his chest, scrambling out from under him and pulling down her shirt. She dragged her jeans on and shook her head. "I work with animals all the time, Lassiter. You howled, like a -- like a --"

Sitting up he asked, "Like a *what*, Em?"

Well, fuck. Now here was a dilemma if there ever was one. She was outright accusing him of being exactly what she was. A werewolf. But if she did that, if she spoke the words and he wasn't a shifter, how the hell would she relate his howling to something that wasn't supposed to even exist?

Or something like that.

For fuck's sake. If he was a shifter, how did she miss that all those years ago? And how did she find out what he was without exposing the Adams too? How would she know the first thing about shifting if she wasn't a shifter herself? How retarded would she seem if she came out, guns blazing, accusing him of being a werewolf? Humans didn't like that sort of thing. They mostly didn't believe in that sort of thing. But she damned well knew a howl during mating when she heard one and if she didn't learn to stuff it, she'd out herself and the Adams pack.

Oh, the web of deceit she'd been ready to weave. Her big mouth, impulsive and always at the ready, would be the death of her.

"Forget it," she dismissed her accusation, hoping he'd let it go. "I have to go. It's cold and I need to get up early to finish this damned bunny hut." She turned to leave, but Lassiter grabbed her arm and spun her around.

"It doesn't have to be like this, Em."

"It doesn't? You keep saying that, Lassiter, but I disagree. What else could it be like? Just because we rutted like pigs doesn't change the fact that we're still on opposite sides of the fence." So there.

"But the fence dynamics change when we get in the same corral."

"This isn't going to happen again. No more sex, Lassiter. Not until we talk like adults."

He pulled her up against him and smiled cockily. "You sure about that?"

"As sure as I am that your motives for being here aren't what you'd like everyone to believe, and I intend to find out what they are. There was a time when I would have already known all of this because you would have told me, damn it," she yelled in regret.

Kissing the top of her head, he let her go by dropping his hands to his sides.
“Knock yourself out, Em.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

“No, you’re right. You’ll rush headlong into something before thinking it through. Much like that mouth of yours, you’re impulsive. You always were.” His sardonic response was laced with a chuckle.

Yeah, yeah. Whatevah. “Look, meat murderer. This --” she pointed to the space between them, “-- isn’t going to happen again. Got that?”

He winked at her, his face splitting into a grin that enhanced his dimples and made her knees weak. “Yeah, I gotcha.”

Placing her hands on her hips, she sneered. “Good. Now go away. Better yet, I’ll go away,” she yelled at him, sticking her neck out like a three-year-old and whirling around to stomp off toward the Adams house.

“Niiiiiiight, Em,” he called from behind her.

Arghhhhhh! He was so smug, so self assured.

Crashing her way back to the Adams house, she pushed the door open and tiptoed into her bedroom, resolving to never get close enough to Lassiter again that they’d find themselves wound around each other like tangled yarn.

Nosexnosexnosexnosex.

Her hormones protested. *But why? It was good. It was so good one might call it spectacular. How silly is it to deny yourself the small pleasures in life?*

Lassiter was anything but small.

Emerson blushed. No more Lassiter and no more sex and no more thinking about his damned enticingly gift wrapped package.

No matter how lip lickingly hot he was.

And he *had* howled.

Yes indeed.

Emerson intended to find out just what that meant.

Chapter Six

“Em! Em, get up!”

Emerson popped an eye open to get a blurry glimpse of Hector standing over her, stroking his favorite bunny, Pinky. “What’s up, Hector?” she mumbled, pulling the covers around her and holding on to the cocoon of warmth she was in.

“You have to get dressed and come see! I can’t believe you did it, but you did. Thank you, Em. Pinky thanks you too.” Hector smiled and lifted Pinky’s paw to wave at her.

“How about you gimme a sec and let me brush my teeth and get dressed, and then I’ll come see. How’s that?”

“Okay, but hurry!” Hector scurried out of her room, his broad back a stark contrast to his child-like behavior. Hector was sweet and innocent and nearing thirty years old. Sometimes, even Emerson couldn’t believe he was a fully grown man. He was certainly as smart as one, but the maturity level he displayed was anything but manly.

Nonetheless, Emerson had found him irresistible when he’d come to ask for help from her animal rights group. His genuine concern, his knowledge about wildlife, coupled with his simple joy in living had given her all the reason she needed to support his cause.

And now, she needed to find out what had Hector so excited he’d come and woken her up. Dressed and washed up, she headed outside to find him waiting for her with a wide smile on his face.

He tugged her hand, enveloping her smaller one in his very large one. “Come with me. Oh, Em, you so rock!”

Oh, indeed, she had rocked. Or had rocks, stuck in her spine, that is. Her back was a bit tender from her overt display of uncontrollable lust in the middle of the wilds of Adams land, and as Hector dragged her back to the scene of the crime, she couldn't help but flush with guilt.

She was feeling very 'ho-like this morning.

No more encounters of the sexual kind, Miss I Want A Piece of That, she reminded herself.

Her resolve this morning was stronger than ever.

And the view that assaulted her eyes as Hector pulled her toward the clearing where she and Lassiter had banged each other senseless made that resolve weaken.

"See, Em? I can't believe you did it. After last night, when you were throwing stuff around and hacking up wood, I didn't think you could do it. But you did! It's really great, Em. Thank you. All of my bunnies thank you."

Oh, my.

Well, there it was in all its glory.

A bunny hut to rival Trump Towers.

It really was quite a sight with its multi-level tiers and chicken wire sides.

Lassiter. He'd done this and Emerson was baffled. What kind of a man, a man who willingly killed wildlife on a regular basis, built a bunny freakin' hut?

Hector scooped her up in a hug. "Thank you, Em. I love it."

Emerson rubbed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "It -- it wasn't me, Hector. I sucked at trying to make the bunny hut. I mean, I cut things wrong and in general made a big mess of things. I didn't do this." *I did, however, have an orgasm of cosmic proportions because of it.*

His head cocked in confusion. "Then who did?"

Rolling her eyes, she had to give kudos where they were due. "I think it was Lassiter..."

"Wooooow. He really digs you, Em," Hector fairly squealed his delight.

"No, no he doesn't. I think he digs *you*, Hector. Or at least, he was trying to help you. Definitely not me." It was so much like the Lassiter of old to do something like this. She had no other explanation unless he'd done it for Hector.

Unless...

Unless he was going to take some ghoulish pleasure out of knocking the hut down when he trampled all over the rest of Adams land...

The fuck.

"Emmmmm." Hector's tone held a warning. "I see your wheels turning. Don't do it, Em. It always gets you in trouble!"

Hector's voice became a muffled haze, rather like the adults in a Charlie Brown cartoon. Her anger soared and her mouth began before she was even at his trailer door. "Lassiter! Get out here, you animal murderer! Destructor of all things sacred! I know what you're up to and it isn't going to wor --"

Hector slapped a hand over Emerson's mouth with a clap. "Emerson Palmer, shut up!"

Her eyes opened wide with surprise while Hector dragged her backwards, his arms like steel bands around her, leaving her immobile. "Mmmmm," she protested against his big hand.

"I said shut up, Emerson. Sometimes a gift is just that. A gift. It doesn't have to have any ulterior motive behind it. If Lassiter did this, and I can't think of whom else might have, then fine. I'll say thank you *myself*. You keep your big, out of control mouth shut. It might work when you're fighting bad guys who kill little animals for profit, but it isn't always necessary. You're so 'rage against the machine' all the time, Em. Like everything is a big conspiracy or something. Chill out." Hector let her go with a slight shove and put his finger to his lips. "Now, shhhhhhhhhh."

Rage against the machine? The world had gone mad and forgotten to send her the memo. Who was this Hector, all reasonable and forgiving of a man who wanted to trash his home? "He's trying to tear up the very land this hut is built on, Hector," she protested yet again, albeit weakly -- quietly.

"You know what, Em? I don't know that I'm so sure of that anymore. I know you think he built this so he could take some sort of sick pleasure in tearing it down when he builds his condos, but I just don't believe that anymore. I think he built it to impress you. I think it's his olive branch to you."

Yeah, and Emerson would bet he hoped the branch had thorns on it so he could stick it up her ass. "I doubt that, Hector."

"You doubt everything, Emerson. You're a real downer sometimes. I'm telling you, let this go for now and let's see what happens. Keep your mouth shut and let me thank Lassiter. You can go think up new ways to convince yourself he's evil."

Emerson was speechless. Stunned. Rooted to the spot, watching Hector's retreating back go off to thank the almighty Lassiter.

Her eyes narrowed. Lassiter was up to something and there was no time like the present to find out what it was. She wasn't falling for this Lassiter has a heart crap. He might have had one once, but not anymore.

* * *

Emerson stood by the large maple tree, just beyond Lassiter's trailer. Under the cover of night and the howl of the wind, Emerson was feeling safe. The position gave her a bird's eye view of his back door. The sliding glass door where she watched him talk to his pet parakeet.

She'd shifted as a precautionary measure. Now, in wolf form, she curled around the trunk of the tree, perking her ears to see if she might catch a phone conversation -- or anything that might lead her to understand what had brought Lassiter here.

I'm not the boy you once knew. Lassiter's words were as close to the truth as it got for Emerson. They had stung her ears the other night and the more she thought about them, the more regret lingered.

She and Lassiter had gone to school together. His last years in high school were spent mostly with her. Emerson, the awkward teenager, and Lassiter, the foster child of caretakers he just couldn't identify with but loved nonetheless. They'd met when she

was in eighth grade and Lassiter in the tenth. She'd met him in an after school accelerated math class held at the local high school.

Lassiter had stopped a bunch of boys from picking on her and, for whatever reason, from that moment on they'd been friends. He was quiet much of the time, but when Lassiter spoke, it was like a kernel of wisdom Emerson clung to.

Meaning. It was always said with a purpose and with meaning. Lassiter's life hadn't been easy, shipped from foster home to foster home, until he'd come upon the Fullers. A kind, older couple who'd taken him in at twelve and loved him like their own.

Yet, Lassiter always had a dark side Emerson couldn't reach. It was deep and layered, rank with a smell Emerson could never quite pinpoint. He was as different as Emerson was and it bonded them.

Lassiter was a loner -- a loner no one screwed with. That didn't stop them from talking about his pale skin and sunglasses when he wasn't around, though. He wore them all the time, making Emerson want to tease him about it. But she didn't because Lassiter didn't tease her about her gangly, awkward body and her braces.

He'd treated her like his kid sister and, though Emerson had wished it differently, she'd respected their boundaries and kept her schoolgirl crush to herself. She'd had enough of a stigma already, hiding her half-were heritage. Yet she never felt like the dork everyone else thought she was when she was with him. Often, Lassiter had told her, her opinionated mouth would bring her trouble, but back then he'd chuckled more than he'd scowled over her rants about one thing or another.

Lassiter always said less was more.

They'd shared a common bond in their love of animals. At the time, Emerson was working after school at an animal shelter and she'd managed to wrangle a job for Lassiter too. He was diligent in his duties. The animals adored him and it'd seemed like he'd liked them right back. He had a way about him that drew them to him. Even the orneriest of domestics could be soothed by Lassiter. His low, honeyed tone of voice and his easy, gentle hands never failed to amaze Emerson when she watched him in action.

For two years, before Lassiter graduated and moved away, they'd been the best of friends. When he left to go to college, Emerson had cried herself to sleep every night for a month. Her parents had fretted over her and her mother had threatened to drag her into therapy if she didn't get over what she'd called Emerson's "bizarre attachment to the pale boy."

Sure, he'd called once in a while and she'd gotten a letter or two, but it would never be the same as sharing French fries on a park bench after work, watching the sun set. It would never be the same as the time he'd brought his portable radio to the park and slow danced with her after she'd gone to the ninth grade Spring Fling and no one asked her to shuffle off to Buffalo.

That moment, the moment when he'd held out his hand to her from her place on the park swing, would forever turn her insides out. She would always remember the warmth his arms around her had brought when she'd buried her face in his chest, fighting tears. The comfort he'd offered with no words but with a gesture, a gesture Emerson could still feel imprinted on her heart.

It would never be the same as being able to talk with him for hours on end about nothing in particular and everything that was important in her world.

After a year or so, Lassiter didn't call anymore and Emerson moved on, but she'd missed his presence for a long time thereafter. She'd lost track of her lifeline who'd been something so much more than a friend to her. He'd become an integral part of her life, and his leaving, something Emerson knew he'd eventually do, left a void that couldn't be filled by anyone else.

When next they met, it had been in California, and then nothing about Lassiter was the same.

Nothing.

He was cold and angry and bitter, but over what she didn't know. No longer the skinny geek she'd once known, their physical attraction was instantaneous, but Lassiter wasn't interested in strolling down memory lane.

If he'd been surprised to see Emerson picketing his condos, he hadn't shown it.

Refusing to be drawn back into the past by silly sentimental journeys, Emerson padded closer to Lassiter's sliding glass door. The steps leading up to it were rickety at best. Narrow and wooden, they creaked with each step she took. She could only hope that the roar of the wind hid her ascent.

Cocking her head, Emerson listened at the sliding glass door while Lassiter talked to his parakeet as if it were his only friend in the world.

"This is Adams land. It has to be the right Adams. I don't know what to do, Bud. I've looked and looked and nothing, but I can *feel* it's here. Damn it, I *know* it's here."

What the hell was here?

"Hereherehere," the parakeet mimicked back.

Lassiter put his hand in the cage and stuck a finger out for Bud to hop onto. Bud went willingly and Lassiter took care in taking him out and setting Bud on his shoulder. "I could use a little help here, my man. Wanna read the letter again?"

Letter?

"Nonononononono." Bud flapped his wings and squawked in protest, skittering from side to side on Lassiter's broad shoulders.

The parakeet nipped at Lassiter's ear and he chuckled. "Okay, so what you're telling me is we've been over it a million times, huh? Okay. No more letter."

It was as if the bird understood Lassiter. What kind of freaky nut had Lassiter turned into that he shared confidences with a parakeet? Talk about eccentric. Who did he think he was? Dr. Doolittle?

Leaning further toward the door, hoping to discover what this letter was about, she hit the banister of the stairs and scuffled to remain on the small landing. Her nails scratched the surface with a painful screech, echoing into the dark night. The sound bounced around the trees like a ping pong ball.

That's what she got for not getting a damned manicure.

Chapter Seven

No sooner had she righted herself than the back light came on, blinding her with its glare.

“What the hell?” was Lassiter’s inquiry as the door whipped open and he stared down at Emerson in her wolf form.

Hooo boy, she was in the shits.

Foiled.

Caught.

Red handed even.

However, as she looked up at him, his face split into the first grin she’d seen him display since meeting him again.

His hand reached down with tentativeness, much like he’d done when he worked in the shelter with her and a new animal was brought in, frightened and leery.

Emerson decided she didn’t have much of a choice. She could run away and not look back, but she could also gain some valuable information if she played this right.

It was sneaky.

It was covert.

It was soooooo despicable.

It was pure fricken’ genius.

Things were looking up.

Score one for Emerson Palmer.

“Hey, puppy, aren’t you pretty? Are you lost? What an unusual coat. You’re almost white,” he cooed, kneeling down and staring into her eyes.

Pretty. Yes, she was rather pretty in wolf form, wasn’t she? Preening, Emerson sat back on her haunches and allowed Lassiter to run a strong hand over her muzzle.

Oh, the man and his hands. Indeed they could be used as weapons of mass hormonal destruction.

Emerson had to remind herself that as a “puppy” she’d more than likely be very hesitant with a stranger. So she backed away from him and looked the other way.

“Ya hungry, puppy?” he asked in an obvious effort to tempt her in with food.

“Hungryhungryhungry,” Bud twittered from his shoulder.

“Tell ya what. I’ll leave the door open and if you’re so inclined, you just come on in,” he invited noncommittally, his voice swirling in her ears, husky, hot, calming.

“Comeonincomeonin.”

Damn, that was some parakeet. Her experience was that they were difficult to train and rarely learned the variety of words this Bud spouted.

Well, she had nothing to lose by gaining access to the inner sanctum and everything to gain.

Poking her head around the corner, Emerson placed first one paw, then the next over the sliders. Lassiter, tall and firm stood by the kitchen sink, was tearing something up that he’d taken from the fridge.

Emerson’s nose lifted, trying to catch the scent.

Ugh, beef. Steak maybe. Definitely steak. With onions. Bleh.

“I see the call of food wins,” he said over his shoulder with satisfaction.

Crap. Well, if she was going to play the part, she was going to have to put up or shut up.

Setting the bowl down in front of her, Lassiter pulled a chair out from the small table, leaning forward on his elbows to watch her, and waited for her to approach the bowl.

Sniff! Yes, she should sniff the bowl. That was very dog-like and totally in character. Nudging the bowl with her nose, she swiped her tongue over the bits of meat he’d taken such care to shred. Her stomach lurched.

Lord, the humiliation when he said, “Gooood girl. See? I won’t hurt you. I’m guessing you’re a girl because you’re so pretty. I’ll look later to be sure.”

No, no, no. She was not spreading her legs, er, paws for Lassiter Adams ever again. He was going to have to go with the assumption that she was a girl or she'd bite his hand off.

Her stomach rolled, looking at the bowl of meat. Definitely steak and decidedly a few days old. Licking at it with a light tongue, she found she had to grit her teeth to keep from yarking the meat right back up. Emerson silently sent an apology to all the animals she'd vowed never to eat.

Bud hopped from Lassiter's shoulder and onto her back, landing with his small talons digging into her spine. He dipped his head and nipped at her fur.

For the love of Pete.

"Bud, be nice. See how nice the puppy is? You be nice too," Lassiter warned in a high pitched, child-like voice.

Hookay, this was sorta freaking her out on a gazillion different levels. Closed mouthed, pissed off at the world, over the top manly-man was talking to her like she was a toddler. Coaxing her to eat, stroking her fur, talking to her all cutesy. It would be desperately funny if she could actually use it to mock him.

He'd spent far too much time alone in her estimation. What else made a man behave like this? It was a totally schizophrenic or bi-polar, or some crazy disorder that didn't have a name.

"Are you full, pretty girl?" Lassiter inquired, his entire face alight with complete serenity. "C'mon, you can do better than that. Eat up, Princess."

"Eatupeatupeatup," Bud seemed to encourage.

Princess? Princess? Oohhhh, this was ammunition to be used at a later date.

Now, onto the matter at hand. This letter... Where would Lassiter keep a letter and how was she going to find it?

Rising on all fours, Emerson decided some investigation was in order. Turning to get an idea of the layout of his trailer, Emerson made a beeline for the bedroom with Bud still clinging to her back. This letter, something that obviously held significance, would probably be there.

The hallway was short, covered in shag carpeting that was worn and fraying.

Lassiter's bedroom was small, merely enough to turn around in and not much more. It had a pile of dirty laundry she tried to delicately step over. Swooping her head down, she sniffed a stray sock.

"Ahhhh, I know what you want to do. You wanna play, don't you?"

Er, no. Not so much.

Lassiter stooped down and picked up the sock. The muscles in his arm flexed enticingly and Emerson had to look away from his yumminess. It blinded her to her mission.

The letter.

Dragging the sock beneath her snout, Lassiter teased her with it.

Oh, no, she was not putting his dirty ass sock in her mouth. Nuh uh.

"Get it, c'mon, girl, get the sock," he encouraged in that same stupid high pitch, smiling like a kid.

If she could roll her eyes right now, she would. For crap's sake. Making a halfhearted attempt at "playing," Emerson nipped the sock, successfully getting it between her teeth and giving it a slight tug.

Lassiter smiled broadly again.

What the hell was his gig?

He tugged back, swishing the other end of the sock around in circles playfully.

Bud flapped his wings at being jerked so suddenly when Emerson gave a small growl and pulled the other way. His wings flapped, carrying him to the tall dresser that was crammed in the corner. Digging her paws into the carpet, she got a hold of the sock and yanked hard, pitching Lassiter forward.

Girl werewolves rule, weird meat murderers drool, she thought with some satisfaction.

Plopping down beside her, Lassiter put an arm around her back and commented, "You know, I envy you, Princess. If I could stay like you all of the time, I'd bet life would be a whole lot easier."

Huh?

Stay like her?

He lifted her back leg and eyeballed her crotch. "You *are* a princess," he decided out loud.

A princess indeed.

Emerson yanked her leg back from his hand with a snort. How utterly degrading.

"Don't be offended, pretty. I was just checking," he assured her with an affectionate pat on the head.

Turning, Emerson gave him her back end and swished her tail in his face. Check *this*.

Emerson let her mouth open wide, pushing the sock to the floor with her tongue. It fell soundlessly to the carpet. She turned around again and sent Lassiter a disinterested glare, telling him playtime was over.

If he would just go away, she could rifle his bedroom. But Lassiter had other ideas.

"So what's your story, Princess? You lost? A stray?"

All righty then, Lassiter obviously wanted to bond. Sitting back on her haunches, she let him ramble, watching his delicious mouth move.

"Do you need a home? You could always stay here with Bud and me. We don't have a lot of room, but we can make adjustments. It's been a long time since I've had a pet. So, whaddya say? Wanna hang out with us?"

I'd rather walk over an acre of broken glass with my lips.

"You don't have to decide right away. I have plenty to keep me busy right now. Believe me, I got trouble and it comes in the way of another female that has nothing to do with the canine persuasion. In fact, it might be nice to have a female around these parts who isn't always such a pain in the ass and can't talk back."

Oh, really? I can't imagine who you might mean.

He ran a hand over his thick hair and chuckled. "Her name is Emerson, in case you're wondering who I mean. She's got a mouth the size of Canada and a cause just as big. She calls me a murderer. Can you believe that?" he asked her, looking into her eyes and chucking her under the chin. "She says I murder small animals. Me, an animal lover. If she only knew."

Only knew what, you oversized hunk of meat loving studliness? Damn, spit it out already.

"I would never hurt an animal, Princess. Emerson should know that by now. We knew each other when we were kids."

Yes, Emerson, all knowing and all seeing, clairvoyant, should just know what the fuck you mean. God, men could be such retards, but Emerson found his words touching the fringes of her heart. Much in the way the bunny hut had.

Stupidhead.

"We were good friends back then," he interrupted her thoughts. "She was skinny as hell and awkward, but she isn't anymore..." Lassiter trailed off with a hitch in his voice Emerson couldn't say she'd ever heard when he referred to her in the past and especially now. It lingered between them, and he smiled at her in the way he once had when he was her friend so long ago. When he talked about where and who he'd wanted to be after high school.

"You know what, puppy? I don't think Emerson and I are friends anymore. No matter how I feel about her."

* * *

Lassiter! Hey, doofus. You're talking to the dog again. It can't be healthy to only spend your time with animals.

Lassiter frowned up at Bud in his bird cage and mentally sent him a shut up.

No, no, I won't shut up. You're talking to a dog. Get a grip on your emotions, my man.

Yeah? Well, I talk to a bird too.

I'm offended. I'm much smarter than a dog.

If you're so smart, why the hell can't you figure this out?

If I had a pair of legs, I just might. Now quit bitching and why don't you talk to Emerson? Ever since you ran into her again, you've been an ass.

Yeah, well Emerson can do that to a guy, he shot back mentally.

Emerson was your friend once, Lassiter, and don't give me shit about it. I was there, numbnuts. All those nights you talked about her, all those nights when you said you wished she were just a little older. You liked Emerson, Lassiter. She liked you. Now you won't even talk to her. You won't even tell her what's really going on here. It's bullshit and it's bullshit of your own making.

Lassiter sighed in resignation. Looking down at the dog, he thought, *I am* talking to a dog...

His world had narrowed to not much more than Bud and the mission to find what he was looking for. Companionship, especially of the animal variety, seemed to suit him best. If he didn't have to do much else but feed them and throw them the occasional bone, things worked out just fine. A pet didn't require sharing himself or emotions, something Lassiter didn't do easily. Except when he'd been with Emerson... He couldn't afford to think about Emerson now. No matter how much he wanted her -- and he wanted her.

Christ, he wanted her.

He wanted to talk to her again, like they used to. He wanted her slender body pressed to his. He wanted to tell her everything that had happened in the last ten years.

But he couldn't. How could he tell her something like this?

Oh, please, Lassiter, Bud scoffed in his head. That's an easy way out for you. Hide behind me, why don't you? All these years you've been so determined to find the answer to this mess that you've forgotten about real, live people. Why don't you go get laid? Oh, wait, you did that. Why, I had to turn my wee parakeet eyes the other way when the two of you were all over each other.

Bud?

What?

Shut up.

* * *

How he felt about her?

And how do you feel about Emerson?

"So, I could certainly use one," he went on. "A friend, that is." Pushing off on his heels, Lassiter rose and headed back toward the kitchen, opening the fridge door.

Emerson followed, hoping he'd talk to her some more, but she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the contents of the fridge. The light from the refrigerator shone on his face, making his skin look eerily pale, but still as handsome as he'd always been to Emerson. His complexion was a rare blend of creamy beige, mixed with a dab of color on his cheeks. His cheeks were razor sharp and had dimples, deeply grooved on either side of his mouth.

She sniffed the air again. An unfamiliar, yet faintly copper smell assaulted her snout. Peering closer inside the fridge, she lifted her head and looked closer.

Um, unless she was mistaken, he had a whole lot of something that didn't look like the drink of champions in yon refrigerator.

It looked like blood.

Blood like one would find stored in a hospital blood bank.

Eek.

Well, then.

This was freaky beyond her expectations.

He shook the plastic bag of blood and took a small orange straw from the drawer, pushing it into the bag and sipped.

Like it was a fucking juice box or something.

But that sure as shit wasn't Hi-C Red Raspberry Splash.

Catching Emerson watching him, Lassiter grinned, his eyes glowing. "You can smell it, can't you, Princess? I know, you're thinking what the hell, right? All vampires drink blood, puppy." Winking, he smiled again, flashing his incisors, now long and gleaming in the dim light over the kitchen sink.

“Bloodbloodblood,” Bud screeched, flying above her head and landing on Lassiter’s broad shoulder.

Only vampires have fangs.

Of course they do silly.

Lassiter has fangs.

Very shiny, white ones too.

Only vampires drink blood.

Of course they do, silly.

Blood.

AB negative.

Or maybe he liked O positive?

Blood.

Vampires.

Jesus Christ in a mini skirt.

Lassiter Adams was a vampire.

Hookay, time to go.

Chapter Eight

Emerson scooted out the sliding glass door like a gang of rednecks in Hooterville were hot on her heels, threatening to marry her off to Bubba. She tried to be as nonchalant as she could about it, but when she scratched at the door, Lassiter asked if she had to “make potties.” Emerson would have yelled a resounding, “Hell, yes,” if she’d been in human form.

Her legs took the stretch of woods in harried urgency.

Memories from long ago rushed to her mind’s eye. They crowded out everything but what she’d just seen. Every conversation they’d ever had, every secret they’d shared she could remember in vivid detail.

How could he have not told her he was a vampire?

Which spawned the question, why hadn’t she told him she was a werewolf?

Because you just don’t walk up to your best friend and school girl crush and say, “Oh and FYI, I’m a werewolf. Kinda like a dog, but not quite the same, ya feel me? You know, woof woof.”

Why hadn’t she smelled him and the difference between a human’s scent and a vampire’s?

Because your hormones were in overdrive?

What the hell did a vampire smell like anyway?

Ohmigod. It all made sense now. His pale skin, his sunglasses, his solitude. They both had their reasons for secreting away, spending little time with their own peers.

Their paranormal bond had drawn them together and neither one had ever been the wiser. Her worry that Lassiter would find out what she was had been for naught. Each full moon when she’d fretted if they were due to meet, she’d worried he’d find out. Lassiter must have been as worried she’d find out about him.

Had his foster parents known? If vampires needed blood to survive, how had he managed to make it all those years on just Mrs. Fuller's chicken fried steak?

But he'd had *food* in his refrigerator.

None of this was adding up and the more she thought about it, the more two plus two equaled something other than four.

Emerson pushed her way through a thicket of trees, panting from her getaway. She found the spot where she'd left her clothes and began to shift. A chill coursed down her spine when she shifted back to her human form.

Nothing could have prepared her for what she'd just seen. Nothing could have prepared her for the shock that Lassiter hadn't shared the single biggest secret he had with her.

Emerson wasn't sure which upset her more, finding out at all or finding out without the benefit of Lassiter telling her.

Pulling on her clothes and leaning against the trunk of the tree, she sank to the ground, wrapping her arms around her legs. Her head was a mixed up jumble of emotions. Lost in the memory of conversations they'd had that now had a whole new meaning. She felt confused and lost.

Yet, one thing remained predominant in her mind and it wouldn't let her go.

This situation also had another meaning.

A bigger meaning than she'd first thought.

Lassiter Adams was no Adams. Not of the werewolf kind anyway.

The liar.

However, that didn't make much of a difference now. Lassiter had the money it had cost to buy the Adams land. It mattered little that he wasn't kin.

And this letter. What did it mean? What did it say and why had it brought him here to this specific Adams-owned land?

The Adams name and whatever Lassiter wanted fit like two pieces of a puzzle.

They were tied together with some sort of significance and Emerson had to find out what that was. She also had to tell the Adamses.

Cold now from the wind and her shift, Emerson rose to make her way back to the Adams house. On stiff legs, she ran a hand over her mussed hair.

"Emerson?"

Her head whipped around. Startled, she faltered, tripping on a fallen branch. Lassiter's hand snaked out to catch her.

His vampire hand.

Where had he come from and how did he manage to always sneak up on her without her noticing?

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, keeping hold of her hand.

"What are you doing out here?" she volleyed back.

"Looking for a do -- Never mind. Why are you out here? It's cold."

"I'm admiring the trashed landscape," she snapped.

His sigh carried on the howl of the wind. It held exasperation. "Emerson --"

"Don't Emerson me, Lassiter. You're ruining this beautiful retreat for your own selfish purposes. So you can make a little money to put in your already fat bank account. Damn it, Lassiter, who the hell are you?" she yelled into his face. Vampire or not, she wasn't afraid to voice her opinion. As long as he wasn't into biting. Those fangs had looked pretty damned sharp. That was okay, she had incisors too. Grrrrr and all.

"I know you're angry with me, Em. It still isn't what you think."

No, no siree, it sure as hell wasn't what she thought anymore. She never in a millennium thought Lassiter was a vampire.

Looking down at her hand clasped in his own, Emerson yanked it away. "So, why don't you throw me a bone, Lassiter? What is it if it isn't what I think?"

"Forget it."

"I can't forget it."

"You'll have to."

"Exactly. Now we're back to square one again. I have to go. I'm cold."

"Don't..."

Hearing the regret in his voice, Emerson stopped cold, hoping he'd spill the beans. For a mere second, she'd heard the Lassiter that once sat on a park bench with her and told her it was no big deal that she was so skinny. Someday, boys would be crazy about her. The Lassiter that held her hand when she'd cried because one of the animals she'd fallen in love with at the animal shelter had died.

"Don't what?" she asked, soft and almost hesitant to hear his answer.

His jaw ticked. "Nothing."

Being a vampire was nothing? Nothing?

Was being a werewolf? a voice whispered in her conscience.

Oh, the secrets and lies they'd created.

For some reason, tears stung her eyes. Tears for who they once had been, for who they were now. For all of the reasons they couldn't talk the way they'd once been so adept at.

On impulse, Emerson reached up, cupping his jaw, running her thumb over the rigid line, trying to smooth away the tension. Pulling his tall frame close, she gave him a brief kiss, skimming his lips with her own and moving away with haste before she said, "I don't know you anymore, Lassiter, but I'd like to."

His arms went to gather her close, but she pressed a finger to his lips and moved out of them, knowing what would happen if she let him hold her.

"For old time's sake, I'm ready whenever you are, Lassiter," she whispered, hearing the sad tinge to her words.

Squeezing his arm, Emerson turned and walked back toward the Adams house.

Her heart thrashed in a painful rhythm with each step she took. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to remember.

It hurt period.

* * *

"We have to talk," Emerson said to Max while they sat in the kitchen, sharing a cup of coffee. Her restless night's sleep had led to a morning filled with questions and

still no answers. She did know one thing, she had to tell the Adams pack. No matter how she felt about Lassiter, they deserved to know the truth.

"Go for it," Max said with a congenial smile.

Licking her lips, Emerson took a breath of air. "Lassiter Adams can't be an Adams."

Max's chuckle was something Emerson hadn't expected. "I figured as much. How'd you find out for sure?"

"It doesn't matter. Can I ask you a question that's gonna seem way out of left field?"

Sipping his coffee, he nodded. "Of course. Shoot."

Well, there wasn't any beating around the bush about it. So she'd just ask and damn the consequences. "Do you believe in vampires?"

His dark eyebrows rose. "Well, I guess I can't say as I don't. I mean, it would be hypocritical if I said I didn't, seeing as I'm what JC calls a dog, right? I'm a werewolf. So are you. I exist, so I'm sure other paranormal beings exist too."

Emerson shifted in her chair and rubbed her neck. "Wanna know why I know Lassiter isn't related to you?"

Max's handsome face frowned. "If you two had some sort of kinky liaison and he confessed during a good round of hide the baloney, then, no, I don't think I want to know."

Emerson's jaw dropped. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I've seen you look at him when he's not looking. Even in the height of your frenzied protests, you looked like you kinda dug him. He looks at you the same way. It doesn't make me any less pissed that he's here, tearing the shit out of my land, but it's there just the same."

For fuck's sake. This was ridiculous. Did everyone think Lassiter had a thing for her?

"Yes."

"Yes, what," she spat, angry that he and his family had noticed.

"Yes, we all think Lassiter likes you. It's sort of bizarre, the vibes I get from you two. I haven't been able to pinpoint it."

"It's called lust, honey," JC answered for him, waddling into the kitchen. "It's what gave me this." She pointed to her belly and smiled. "I take it we're talking Lassiter and Emerson?" Lowering herself into a chair, JC sat down and folded her hands together.

Max's head bobbed up and down.

Emerson hopped up from her chair and thwarted any further conversation about her and Lassiter. "Do you want to know how I know Lassiter isn't really an Adams or not?"

"Oh, relax, Emerson," JC chided. "It really is okay to be hot for a bad boy. We've all done it once in our lives. Lassiter is pretty hot, even if he is kinda pale. Lassiter has some deeper issues than building condos, that's for sure. I just don't know what. But I've seen him with that bird and I know he's not a meat murderer, as you call it." Clucking her tongue, JC shook her dark, curly head. "I just can't figure him out."

"Well, I did."

"Pumpkin?" Max said to JC, smiling at her. "Emerson has something she'd like to say."

JC leaned back in her chair and looked toward Emerson with an expectant expression.

Shoving her hands into the pocket of her worn jeans, Emerson looked back at them both. "I know he's not an Adams because he's no werewolf."

"Well, we didn't know for sure," JC reminded her. "It's why we haven't beaten him up for ruining the land out there. If someone were to know about us, we'd be in far worse trouble than we are now. It's rather irritating to know Max could annihilate him and he hasn't for fear of being found out. Talk about your hands being tied behind your back, huh? So do tell. How'd you find out he's not a werewolf?"

"He's a *vampire*."

"Wow. Cool. Like drinks blood and sleeps in a coffin, vampire? How do you suppose he put a coffin in that little trailer out there?" JC wondered out loud, completely unfazed by what Emerson had just revealed.

"Did you hear me, JC? Lassiter Adams is a vampire," Emerson repeated, hopefully this time with effect.

Taking a long sigh, JC nodded. "I know this is the part where I'm supposed to freak out, but do remember where I found my lifemate, would ya? In the pound. And also remember, he's a freakin' dog. Just like you, Em. Nothing could faze me after that. I have no doubt that there are plenty of you critters around, and I have no doubt there are critters I know nothing about. I'm not egotistical enough to believe I'm the only life form that roams the planet. I'm good with it. It's really sorta *X-Files*, if you ask me."

"The point is, if he's a vampire, he can't be an Adams," Emerson stated.

JC cocked her head up at Emerson and giggled. "Er, I wouldn't be so sure about that, Em. The Adams are a busy bunch. Look at Max and I. I'm human. Martine is a cat. Hector is a vegetarian, Xavier is a lion. Why would it surprise you that a vampire might be related to them? Nothing surprises me when it comes to this bunch of nuts."

Emerson's brow furrowed. "You can't possibly believe that what he says is true!"

JC stood, pushing back from the table and placing a hand in the crook of her back. "After what I've seen, Em, I'd believe anything." Coming to stand near Emerson, she picked a lock of her shoulder length blonde hair up and examined it. "You know, Em. I've been thinking about your hair. It's so beautiful. Never been dyed, silky and the color is gorgeous. Why don't you let me trim it? You could use a trim."

She'd just told them that Lassiter was a vampire and JC was offering product tips and makeovers. "Are you people insane? Lassiter is a vampire. A vampire!"

Max barked a laugh. "Yeah and so?"

JC laughed too. "It doesn't change anything. He still bought the land and paid those trumped up back taxes. He owns it. Even if he's an alien with two packages. He has the right to dig it up."

"And he digs you, Emerson," Max teased.

Deflated, Emerson knew she was going to have to confess to them about her past relationship too. It would save the questions later if they found out. She'd rather they heard it from her than someone else, or maybe even Lassiter. "I also have a confession to make."

JC rolled her eyes. "Lord, Emerson! What else is there?" Throwing her hands up, she said, "Forget I asked that. Never mind. I can only imagine. Go ahead, tell us."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Emerson sighed. "Lassiter and I were once friends. We kind of spent some of our last years in high school together."

Rocking back on his chair, Max gave her a knowing smile. "I knew I felt something between you two. I knew it. Question is, why didn't you tell us before?"

Pushing her hair behind her ear, she looked Max directly in the eye. "I didn't think it was relevant, and he's not the man I once knew."

"So what do you know about Lassiter? If you spent some time in high school with him, you must know who he comes from. Where he comes from. What his parents are like," Max asked.

"Lassiter is adopted. Well, not adopted, he was a foster child for almost all of his life. We saw each other in California again about three years ago. I hadn't seen him in almost ten years by then. He was so different from the man I knew when I was a kid. Knowing him didn't change the fact that we had different beliefs, and it didn't change the fact that I was going to keep protesting his stupid condos."

"So you have unresolved feelings for him. Don't bother to deny it, it's written all over your face." She waved her hand, dismissing the thought. "Forget that for now. Even if he isn't really an Adams, he had the money to pay off those trumped up back taxes. That still brings us right back to where we were. No condos. He hasn't built a single thing. He's torn up a tree or five and made himself a nice little trailer park, but no condos. So what do you think he's up to?" JC asked, wrapping her arms around Max's shoulders.

"I did something pretty sneaky last night," Emerson said, almost more to herself than to Max and JC.

"I'll bet. I'd even bet that it was how you found out Lassiter was a vampire," Max mused.

"I showed up at his door in my werewolf form and he let me in. He thought I was a stray. He fed me..." she revealed, her face turning red from humiliation.

JC began to laugh so hard that tears streamed down her face. "Oh, do I know that story. Max did the same thing. I took Max to PETsMART and to the vet to be neutered."

Emerson couldn't help but laugh too. It was all too unbelievable.

"So what happened? Did he turn into a bat?" Max queried.

"No, nothing like that, but he's got a whole lotta blood in his refrigerator and he sorta confessed to Prince -- er, me, that he was a vampire."

"Any clue as to why he never told you, Emerson?" JC asked, smiling in sympathy at her.

Shrugging her shoulders, she shook her head. "I'd guess for the same reasons I didn't tell him. Who just walks up to their high school crush and says 'I'm a werewolf'?"

"Hell if I don't know that," Max commented wryly, sending JC a warm smile.

"He also mentioned a letter. A letter he was telling that parakeet Bud about."

"You know," JC said, looking directly at Emerson, "how bad can this guy be if he takes in stray dogs and has a parakeet? Nothing about him is fitting here."

Martine poked her long, elegant neck around the corner, silky strands of hair framed her face. "Speaking of that bird of his, I can't figure it. I want to wrap him in a crescent roll and eat him, but something keeps stopping me..."

"Hector would shit a bunny if he knew you wanted to eat another animal, Martine Adams! I'd control those impulses, if I were you," JC joked.

Martine grinned and stuck her tongue out. "I'm just saying he looks tasty. Under normal circumstances and if caviar weren't shipped to me by Escobar on a regular basis, I might be forced to give in to temptation and it could get ugly."

Just then the phone rang, bringing both JC and Emerson back to the situation at hand. Max jumped up to grab it and a smile spread over his face, making him look worry free for the moment. "That's great news, guys. I'll pass it on and the troops will be there soon. Did you call Eva? She'll flip. Okay, see you soon, Xavier."

He winked at JC. "Guess who just had a little girl?"

"Oh! Julia had the baby. A girl... how fabulous!" JC squealed. "But wait. Is it a cat or a dog? And hang on just a second. I was pregnant before Julia! Why did she have a baby in just a few months and my pregnancy just goes on and on like *War and Peace*?" she asked Max. "It's not fair, damn it!"

Max laughed, shuffling her out of the room while JC moaned in between gabbing excitedly. Emerson guessed they were going to prepare for a trip to Manhasset to visit Julia and Xavier and the new baby.

A little girl.

Emerson's heart clutched with just a smidge of envy, but she pushed it aside in favor of the sleuthing that had to be done.

She had a vampire to catch.

Chapter Nine

The Adams house was quiet, too quiet with everyone off seeing Julia and Xavier's new baby in Manhasset. They'd named her Catalina and, according to JC after her phone call to Emerson, she didn't appear to be lion or werewolf. The nature of little Catalina's shifter form might take years to develop.

Emerson decided one last trip to Lassiter's in her wolf form was in order. For whatever reason, he seemed to feel comfortable talking to "Princess," and finding out about this letter was essential to finding out what Lassiter was doing here.

She didn't know why it was so important, but it had to be the key to unlock this last door. It was also the key to finding the old Lassiter and that had become as important as stopping him from building the condos.

She admitted to herself that she hoped Lassiter would take her up on her offer to talk. For old time's sake, if nothing else.

Her paws were silent as she crept up the back stairs to Lassiter's sliding glass door. Again, he was with Bud, talking to him as if he were a human being.

His dark hair was ruffled and he looked tired, peering at Bud who sat on top of the cage. There was a sheet of paper sprawled out on the kitchen table and it looked well worn. "Well, pal, we got trouble. I don't know where else to go from here, but I swear to you, we'll find a way." His statement was vehement, said with a conviction she saw written all over his face. It was in his body language, tense and rigid.

Damn it, this was frustrating. A way to what and to whom?

Focusing her mind on the task at hand, Emerson scratched at the back door.

The light came on and Lassiter popped open the slider. His smile was again warm and welcoming. If only he looked at her like that when she was in human form.

Her heart shifted when he knelt down at the opening of the door and put his hand out to her tentatively.

Emerson let her muzzle rest in his hand for a brief, lingering moment before pushing past him and into the trailer.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" he stated with a degree of smugness in his tone, picking up the bowl from the floor and bringing it to the refrigerator.

Yeah, bring on the bacon, she thought, admiring his ass from the view she had with his head buried in the fridge.

"I knew you'd be back. So whatcha been up to?"

A little of this, a little of that. You know, dog-like shit. Bone burying. Cat chasing. Cuz I'm a dog. An honest to goodness dog and don't you forget it, vampire.

Who was she convincing here?

"I went looking for you the other night. You sure are a quick one. You just disappeared. But it's okay, I'm glad you came back." Stooping, he ran his fingers over her back, hand over hand.

Even in were form it felt damned good. Shaking her head, her ears snapping, she forced herself to stay on task.

Find the letter.

No sex.

In that order and no variation thereof.

Lassiter tugged at the end of her ear and pulled it upward. "Do your ears bother you? Mites, maybe? I think have something that would help."

She let a low growl out to warn him that wasn't a good idea. Next he'd want to milk her renal glands or something.

"Okay, not today," Lassiter acquiesced. "You gonna eat? I can't figure how you got to be so picky. Strays usually don't demand human food," he teased, holding the bowl up under her nose.

She made a hacking noise, bringing the sound from deep within her throat. Which wasn't hard, considering he was offering her leftover Hamburger Helper.

Emerson moved her nose in the other direction, lifting her muzzle to display to him her displeasure at his culinary choices.

"Wow, Princess, you *are* picky. But you know what? It's okay. I went and got you some *canned* food." He went to the lower cabinet and pulled out a can of Decadent Dogs.

How special.

Oh, yay. Spare no expense for the stray, huh? Emerson decided more exploration was in order, so being the dog she was hoping to portray, she sniffed the floor. Beginning in the kitchen, she worked her way out to the small living room.

Someone needed to break out the vacuum. Hector's rabbit could quite possibly mate with the dust bunnies Lassiter had under his couch, thus spawning a litter or two.

Lassiter followed closely behind her. "Are you looking for that sock? Ya wanna play, Princess?"

Oh, hell's bells, spare her from the sock game. She'd be fucked and feathered before she'd put his damned sock in her mouth again.

It had an aftertaste that lingered unpleasantly.

"C'mere, pretty. Come sit next to me and let's talk," Lassiter coaxed with his cajoling tone and beseeching eyes.

Talk? Yeah, let's have a real gab-fest. Hook me up, brotha. Her ears perked and she took her place beside him on the floor where he sprawled out and patted his chest.

This man's best friend thing was going too far.

"C'mon, Princess. Come sit with me." Again, he patted his chest, calling her to him.

Hookay. Emerson harrumphed and blew out a snort, flopping down on his chest and looking him in the eye.

Shoot, he was good looking.

"So, where'd ya run off to the other night? You don't look like you're any worse for the wear because of it. As a matter of fact, your coat is so shiny and clean. What shampoo do you use?" he teased, stroking her back.

Her back foot thumped with a will of its own. Oh, dayuuuuuum that was good.

"You like that?"

Yes, please, may I have another?

Her eyelids grew heavy, but as Lassiter prattled on, she fought to stay awake.

"So, have you given any thought to coming and living with me and Bud? Bud's a special case too, just like you."

Special case? A special case of what? Lunacy?

"He needs me."

Huh?

Tilting her head to the left, Emerson hoped he saw the confusion in her eyes, cuz he was lookin' kinda nutty in them.

"I know, you don't understand, but Bud is special to me. His real name isn't even Bud. It's Drake. He's my brother." Lassiter's handsome face looked into her canine one and he winked.

Um, yeah. His brother. This vampire was short a bat wing. He thought a *bird* was his brother.

He was a fucking bird all right -- a loon.

"It's a long story, but I have a letter that says so," he assured her.

From *who*? A letter that said Bud was his brother? Who would write a letter like that? The National Pigeons Society for Reunification of Vampires and Their Winged Counterparts? This was just too much.

It explained everything about this new Lassiter.

He'd gone mad.

As much as she missed him, as much as she wished it could be like it once was, it couldn't. Cuz Lassiter Adams thought his brother was a flippin' bird, and that was on par with the need for a nice comfy couch and a trained psychiatrist.

Maybe even medication.

In large doses.

But he was so freakin' cute, even as a complete nut.

Digging in his pocket, he pulled out a well worn piece of paper. Obviously, he'd fingered it on many occasions. It was the kind you'd use in a spiral notebook, lined and frayed at the ripped edges. "This was from my mother and father. It's why I'm here, Princess."

Oh, oh and oh again. Jackpot!

Bingo and all the other stuff one yelled when they hit the big one.

Come to mama...

Chapter Ten

Emerson had two choices. She could wait until Lassiter told her what the letter said, or she could read it herself.

Seeing as he liked to play sock so much, Emerson decided it was time to play fetch. Snatching the letter deftly from Lassiter's hands, she ran, down the small hallway and into the even smaller bathroom. With a shove of her nose, she snapped the door shut and dropped the letter on the floor. Her muzzle dropped open and her tongue hung off to the side.

Lassiter crashed after her, calling to her to bring it back. His body pushed at the door she now leaned up against and Emerson let out a warning snarl.

Looking down at the letter, her heart skidded to a halt.

How could this be?

Losing her focus, she felt the shift back to human form begin and she had no way to stop it. If she lost her train of thought -- and the letter had certainly taken her focus off of her werewolf form -- she was sunk.

But Emerson didn't care. This was too incredible to believe.

As the fur of her coat melted away and flesh replaced it, tears stung Emerson's eyes, forming at the corners of them and falling to the cheap linoleum.

Oh, my God.

Placing a hand on the worn notepaper, Emerson trembled as she read.

*A parakeet you've been these years,
To protect you from our greatest fears,
The loss of your brother too much to bear
We've left you in his gentle care.
To break the spell which we have cast*

*You must seek out our distant past.
Go back to where it all began,
A place we call Adams land.
Within its earth you will find
A drink to help you join vamp-kind.
The cock that crows at morning's light
Will lead you from the dark of night.
A woman who is strong and true
Will know the secret that is you.
Find her on the Adams land
And carry out our simple plan.
You will awake at break of dawn,
All your feathers and little beak gone.
A family's love will join you there.
They're a strange lot so have a care.*

Emerson's mind raced, but was thwarted by Lassiter shoving against the door.
And she was naked.
Lovely.

"Emerson?" he roared, sticking his face through the wedge he'd made in the bathroom door.

Emerson forgot she was naked. Sliding across the floor, she rose on unsteady legs, clutching the letter in her hands. "All this time, Lassiter. All this time you had this secret and you never told me. Why? We were best friends. I told you everything. *Everything!*"

Lassiter glared at her, eyeing her nakedness with anger. "Well, apparently, you didn't tell me *everything*, Emerson."

Oh, yeah. There was that.

Yanking a towel from the rack, she tugged it around her. "This is not the same thing and you know it!"

"You're a dog, Emerson. It *is* the same thing."

"A werewolf, thank you," she corrected, backing up against the bathtub until she felt the fiberglass touch her calves.

"Yeah, I know."

"You know?" How could he know?

"Yeah. Now give me the letter, Emerson." His warning was followed by the tic of his jaw, clenched and angry.

"Explain it."

"Why? So you can call me a meat murderer? An animal killer?"

"That's soooo not fair, Lassiter. I had no idea. None and it wasn't as if you were telling me. So tell me now," she pleaded.

"You're right, but what is fair in this life, Em?" he remarked with dry sarcasm.

Tilting her head, Emerson gave him a narrowed look. "Don't *woe is me*, Lassiter. You didn't have to keep this a secret. You didn't. I would have helped you! I would have helped you figure out whatever the fuck that letter means. Fair? Don't talk to me about fair, Lassiter Adams."

"Give me the letter, Em."

"Nope."

"Em..."

"Nuh-uh."

"Don't make me come get it."

"Don't make me bite you."

"Don't make me bite you back."

Oh, sure, threaten her with his big fangs. Nice. "You wanna have werewolf versus vampire? A little trailer park rumble?"

His eyes opened in surprise.

"Oh, did you forget? You told the *dog* and that dog is me, Dracula."

"Give me the letter, Emerson," he growled at her. His face, handsome even in fury, loomed over hers.

Poking his chest with a finger, she shook her head stubbornly. "Or you'll what? Bite me? Suck me dry? Bring it, vampire. Let's do it because I'm not giving you the letter until you tell me what it means. Tell me about the parakeet."

"No, Emerson," he replied coldly.

And suddenly, she'd had enough. Emerson was tired of denying that she cared about Lassiter. To herself and especially to him. She was tired of pretending he had once been a man capable of great compassion. She was tired of fighting this battle that didn't just wage in her head, but in her heart. She was tired of telling herself he was inconsequential because she had a cause she so vehemently believed in. And she was sick and tired of spending endless nights, like those of the past ten years, pretending that Lassiter had never existed.

He did exist.

She wanted to be a part of that existence, but not without his willingness to let all of his secrets go.

"You know what, Lassiter, this gives you the best excuse ever. You can scurry off to your coffin -- do you sleep in one of those? -- and hide. Pretending like no one cares about you because it's easy, you big, damn pale-assed pansy! I'm standing right here, right now, telling you *I* care about you. I've *always* cared about you, even when you went off and forgot about me for ten years. I'd help you if you'd just let me. But you have to be all secretive and angst ridden. Everything has to be this big drama. It's such bullshit, Lassiter. Just grow up would you? Grow up and stop making everything so fucking hard." Her voice had risen now, peaking and swelling in the small bathroom. Her eyes flashed a myriad of emotions. Anger, betrayal and most of all, sadness that they could no longer communicate on the level they once had.

His silence spoke volumes to her.

Frustration got the better of her and she shoved his chest hard, knocking him back a step. "Fine. Keep your secrets, Lassiter, and your sad, lonely life, but I'm going to tell the Adams about this. I have to. I don't know if that letter means you really are an Adams from this Adams family, but it means something and I'm going to tell them."

Shouldering her way past him, she grabbed the doorknob, but Lassiter's hand, large and strong, drew her back to his chest.

He held her there, pressing her to him. "Wait, Emerson," he said, his voice unrefined, determined, revealing, making her stay.

Emerson didn't know if he wanted her to wait because he was afraid of what she'd tell the Adamses or because he wanted her help. Yet his tone held something so raw, she relaxed a bit against him and took deep breaths of air.

He gripped her bare shoulders, running his hands over them before turning her in his arms and dragging her to him.

Her pulse raced and her anger began to subside.

Lassiter kissed the top of her head, raining kisses along her scalp, moving down to her cheek and, finally, taking her lips in his, sliding his tongue into her mouth with silken skill.

"No, Lassiter. This can't be how we solve this..." was her murmured objection, weak and stilted.

Cupping her jaw, he caressed it with his thumb. "We'll talk, Em. We'll talk, but now -- now, I *have* to have you." Forceful and dynamic, his words slammed into her ears.

"I'm holding you to that," she insisted, putting her hand over his and pressing it to her skin. "Promise me, Lassiter. Say it," Emerson whispered against his hand.

His chest inflated against hers and he looked into her eyes with solemn assurance. "Promise," he repeated.

Emerson wrapped her arms around his neck and firmly planted her lips on his, showing him with her passion that she was ready to take him at his word.

Her hand wove into his hair, clenching the strands with tight fists, and she leaned into him, allowing his body to mold to hers.

Lassiter's hands found her ass, reaching up under the towel and cupping the firm globes of flesh. Massaging them, grasping them and pulling Emerson against him with forceful purpose.

She sighed into his mouth, forgetting their argument. Forgetting that Lassiter hadn't let her into the most confidential part of his life. Forgetting everything but his kiss.

A kiss that left her lungs without air.

A kiss that stopped her heart and prodded her senses.

The length of steel between Lassiter's legs was rigid, pressing between the apex of her thighs with urgency. He lifted her and wrapped her legs around his waist, moving them to the far wall.

Lassiter cushioned her back, keeping her from the cold tile, pulling away the towel with a sharp yank and exposing her heated skin to the cool air.

His breathing was harsh, ragged when he ran his hand along the swell of her hip, gripping it.

Emerson's body trembled with need and her pussy, swollen and hot rubbed with delicious friction against his jeans. Pulling her hands upward, he collared them, imprisoning her wrists to allow him better access to her nipples, now swollen and rigid.

The first swipe of his tongue was hot, like the strike of an iron swiping her flesh, and Emerson's moan resounded in the bathroom, acoustically moving around the small space. Lifting herself, she pushed into Lassiter's warm lips, bowing against the hands that held her until the top of her head pushed against the wall.

Lassiter moved from breast to breast, weaving between them with strokes of his tongue, scintillating and deft.

Emerson's whimper drew him to let go of her hands. She clung to his broad neck, struggling to find her breath before reaching between them and pulling at his jeans. Tearing at the button and zipper, jamming her hands into them and grasping his cock in a firm lock.

Lassiter's hips juttled against her hand and he hissed, letting his head fall back while she stroked him, long pulls designed to tease and taunt him to fuck her.

"Fucking hell, Em. I don't know how much more I can take," Lassiter said between his teeth.

Emerson unwound her legs from his waist and slid down his body, shoving his pants to his ankles with an aggression she didn't know she had in her.

She wanted him naked.

She wanted his cock, hard and hot, driving into her.

He kicked his pants off, shoving them roughly to the side and dragging her forward. With a socked foot, he tipped the lid of the toilet seat closed and sat down.

His eyes locked on her waist, hungry and lit with the fire of passion. He buried his face in her belly, wrapping firm arms around her and splaying his fingers on her ass. Creeping over the smooth globe, he slipped his fingers between her legs from behind, skirting the tender flesh of her cunt.

Lassiter inhaled her scent, moaning with low approval. Emerson's hands, resting at her sides, came up to pull him close to her.

With slow lips that moved in maddeningly deliberate kisses, Lassiter moved over her abdomen until he reached the curls at the top of her pussy. His fingers worked her cunt, slipping in and out of the folds, slippery wet with wanton need. Stroking her outer lips, he moved in time with his mouth, stroking her, licking her skin, until he slithered into her cunt.

The touch of his tongue sizzled her flesh, fraying the frazzled cord of control she held. He parted the flesh of her pussy, laving her clit, suckling it as he slipped into her, his finger thick and seeking.

He stroked her from the inside, hitting her G-spot, dragging his finger over it again and again, sending chills along her arms, making her nipples tighten almost painfully as his tongue lashed her cunt.

Emerson jammed her hips upward, raising her leg to rest on the seat of the cool porcelain toilet, finding the edge of the sink and gripping it to steady her grind against Lassiter's mouth. Orgasm clawed at her, release begging to be made a reality. She fought to savor the feel of his lips against her, his silken head resting against her inner thigh.

When her release hit her, it was with the fury of a bolt of lightning. It dragged her over an edge, yanked her gut, tearing at the speed of light from her feet to the top of her head.

This time, Emerson howled -- a howl of unmatched satisfaction, immeasurable pleasure. Undulating under his tongue, she let it happen. Letting go of her every inhibition with a scream that was wild, unfettered, riddled by lust.

Emerson collapsed against him, letting her leg fall and her hands grab blindly for his shirt.

Lassiter turned her in his arms, seating her with her back to his chest, hauling her backwards until his cock slipped between her thighs and rested between the slick lips of her cunt.

She reached for him, clasping his cock and lubricating it with the juice of her pussy. Stroking it hand over hand, rubbing it against her clit.

She felt his tension beneath her, his muscles hard and coiled tight with control. Emerson wanted him to lose control. Lose the barrier that kept them from connecting on every level.

"Em, now. I need to be in you *now*," he ground out against her ear between harsh breaths.

His hands came to cup her breasts, rolling her nipples between firm fingers. Lifting her hips, Emerson smiled to herself and sank onto his cock. Thick and long. Swallowing first the mushroom shaped head, descending inch by excruciating inch. Holding him firmly at her passage with her hand until she slid down to settle on his lap.

Twitching within her, Lassiter sighed when her ass rubbed against him. The crisp hair on his thighs scraped against her and she luxuriated in his maleness.

He shifted beneath her, but she held him by wrapping her thighs around the tops of his and clenching the muscles of her cunt. On the tips of her toes, bracing herself by gripping his wrists, she rose and drove downward, letting the sleek heat of his cock drive into her.

It jolted him and he reacted by gripping her waist, digging into it to drive deeper. His cock flared, swelling within her. Emerson could literally feel the blood course through it. Her ass hit his thighs with each plunge she took, impaling herself on the rigid fire. Sliding a finger down to her clit, Lassiter stroked it, bringing it to a hard nub.

Leaning back in his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, she let the rough stubble of his chin score her neck. Emerson focused only on the complete fulfillment she felt with him inside of her.

Her senses were raw, aware, hypersensitive to every vein that pulsed with the rush of lust. The sweet sound of their flesh slapping together.

His lips suckled her neck, tasting her flesh, rasping his tongue over it, and she caved in that instant.

The throb of his cock, her cunt, slick and aching became more than she could bear. She came with velocity, while Lassiter's hand was buried in her pussy and his lips caressed her neck. With his silken head of hair against her cheek and his puffs of breath in her ear.

She gyrated her hips as she soared upward, letting only the hot seed of his release be her goal.

His arm, tight and sculpted, held her around the waist and he lifted her with his thrusts. He shouted her name when he came, thick spurts of his seed spilling into Emerson while he did.

Quiet overtook the bathroom, an eerie calm with the scent of their lovemaking permeating the air. The harsh breaths they took slowed.

Emerson floated back from where she'd been to the reality that was now between them. If they could only forget everything else but this, Emerson would. But they had so much between them. It was time to bridge that gap.

Now, before anyone else was hurt by this lonely quest Lassiter seemed to think he had to make alone.

"It's time to talk, Lassiter," she reminded him, her voice sounding like that of someone else to her ears, hoarse and scratchy.

"Yeah, baby, it's time to talk."

Chapter Eleven

"The parakeet."

Lassiter rocked back on his heels and gave her a wary glance, taking her with him to the old sofa he had in the living room and plunking down on it. "Yep. He ain't heavy, he's my brother. Drake. His name is Drake."

"And he's always been a bird?"

"For as long as I can remember being in foster care. My parents died when I was seven. I was found with Bud, er, Drake and the letter. I couldn't read the letter for a long time, but I never told anyone I had it and when I could first read, I didn't understand it. I only knew my parents left it with me and told me to always keep it safe, that someday I'd understand. I made such a ruckus about keeping him that I guess the state let me. We were moved a lot until the Fullers found me."

"So you *did* know your parents?"

His face had a faraway look. "Yes. I don't remember them as well as I'd like, though."

"I'm sorry, Lassiter. I'm sorry they're gone." Her remorse was clear when she grabbed his hand to squeeze it.

"Anyway, Drake is cursed. I'm guessing my parents thought the state would split us up. Turning Drake into a parakeet was a good way of ensuring I'd keep him."

"Call me crazy, but I gotta ask. How can you possibly know that Bu -- Drake is really a human? I mean, you don't, right?"

His chuckle was ironic. "Yeah, I do. We can communicate via telepathy. He talks to me all the time. He understands everything. He said to tell you he's glad I stopped being an ass."

Emerson laughed out loud. "Well, tell him, me too. So you had the letter and, if I think I understand this properly, you dug up a lot of Adams land because Adams is a common last name and you were searching for a needle in a haystack, right?"

"Right. As crazy as it sounds, that's what I did and I'll keep doing it until I find what I need, Emerson." His words were sent as almost a threat.

"Hold onto your fangs there, pale boy. I'm not denying you the right to dig stuff up anymore. Now that I understand, of course. See before? Emerson had no clue there was a purpose to Lassiter's mindless destruction, cuz he didn't tell her. Ya feel me?" she teased.

Lassiter rubbed her hand with his. "How do you tell someone, anyone, you're a vampire?"

"Point. Tell me about this vampire stuff. Don't you need blood to survive? How did the state explain that to the Fullers, or any of your foster homes for that matter?"

"They didn't have to. I didn't even know I craved blood until I donated some and eyed up the vials of it like they were a rare steak."

"Huh? If you're immortal and the only way to sustain that immortality is blood, I'd think you'd need O negative in copious quantities."

"No, Em. I'm not entirely a vampire."

Okay, here's where she should tell him his rocker was broken and he was off it, but Emerson had to finish this. She looked directly at him. "Do I look befuddled to you? Cuz this is the face of a woman who thinks you're a whack."

Laughing, he pulled her close and rested his chin on the top of her head. "I'm half werewolf too, Em."

"Are you serious?" she yelped.

"Yep, I shift just like you. I found that out quite by accident on a night with a full moon when I was ten. The only thing I can figure is my vampire werewolf signals are all crossed, and what I need to survive are small parts from each species that make me whole."

"I don't know what to say..."

"What can you say to a guy who wants to suck your blood and mount you from behind, all at the same time?"

Never truer words...

"Why couldn't you smell that I was a werewolf, Lassiter? Why couldn't I smell you?"

"I've got to go with the theory that I don't have all of the perks each species has. My sense of smell is keen, but I couldn't have told that you were a werewolf just by smelling you."

For a moment, Emerson felt the sense of displacement Lassiter must have all of his life and it squeezed her heart. "Why did you stop writing, Lassiter? After you left, I thought we'd still be friends, but you stopped calling and writing."

"No, Em. I didn't. I sent letters. I called and when I did, your mother told me you were out."

Her mother. Never happy about the time she'd spent with Lassiter, she'd obviously decided to interfere. Running her hand down his face, she kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry. I never got the letters and I never heard about the phone calls."

"Are the Adams werewolves like you, Emerson?"

She nodded her head, and then a thought occurred to her. "Do you see what you could have avoided if you'd just told me the truth?"

"Did you tell me the truth about you?"

Sighing with exasperation, she said, "No, but I don't have a brother who has feathers either. I'd say your situation was much more desperate than mine."

"You know what's funny? I didn't know there were others like me, or at least half like me. Do you know what a relief it is to know you're Princess?"

Her face flushed. "Do you know how much it sucks to put your sock in my mouth?"

Lassiter howled with laughter, and it made Emerson smile. This felt like what they'd once shared and it felt so right. "I can't believe you were capable of such deceit."

"Look, I wouldn't cast the first stone there, big boy," she joked, nudging him. "This means you could really be an Adams, Lassiter. Okay, so next we go to the Adams and talk to them," she stated firmly, moving to rise and go to the next step in locating them all.

"No." He remained stubbornly seated.

"Fuck that 'no,' Lassiter. Get up."

His face returned to that glacial expression he wore with such finesse. "I won't be mocked by a bunch of werewolves who won't accept me because I'm half vampire, Em. No way in hell."

Oh, that was rich. She threw her head back and laughed. "Um, Lassiter? Get up off of your ass, and lemme tell ya a story about a family called Adams. Trust me when I say no one will mock you." She yanked his hand hard. "Get up and move it. We have some phone calls to make."

A reluctant, confused Lassiter tagged behind her as she dragged him out of the house and toward the Adams house.

Emerson waved at Bud in his cage on the way out. "Hang tight there, Big Bird. We're going to figure this out once and for all."

* * *

"Emerson, right?" a woman said from the chair in the Adams kitchen. Her blue eyes twinkled even in the dim light of only the stovetop bulb's glow.

"Oh, my God! You're the infamous Eva, aren't you? Max's grandmother?" Emerson greeted her with a warm smile. "I've seen your picture."

"That's me. Is everyone off in Manhasset with Julia and Xavier?"

"Yep. They were pretty excited."

"I so love babies." She smiled at Emerson and Lassiter. "I must do what needs to be done here and get right off to New York."

"What needs to be done here?" Emerson asked. "I told Max and everyone I'd hold the fort until they got back," she assured Eva.

Eva almost ignored her in favor of seeing Lassiter. Her eyes held him while he hovered at the edge of the kitchen. Rising from her chair, Eva smiled. "Oh, you must be Anna's boy," she cried, moving toward Lassiter and putting a hand on his arm.

Lassiter cocked his head, seeking Emerson's eyes from across the room. "How -- how did you know?"

Eva hugged him and smiled. "I'd know Anna's boy anywhere. Anna and I were raised together. My family adopted her. She was the sister of my heart, though I was a great deal older than her. We had a bond like no other."

"You knew my mother?"

Eva beamed. "I did indeed. Such a beautiful girl. Dark like you. She was an impulsive one, Anna was. Anyway, you're home now, young man. What's your name?"

"Lassiter," he answered woodenly. For the first time in knowing Lassiter, Emerson sensed he was overwhelmed.

"A fine name for a handsome boy. We have work to do, yes?"

"Wait. I have no idea what's going on here. I'm -- I --"

"You're confused, Lassiter," Emerson offered. "Eva? Could we sit down and talk. Lassiter has a lot of questions, I'd think."

"Isn't he here to help his brother? We need to hurry to do that, don't we?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am. How did you know that?"

Eva rolled her eyes at him and put her arm around his tapered waist. "Because I'm the one who created the spell for Anna, silly."

Well, of course she had. Emerson rolled her eyes. Eva was the answer to everything unbelievable and as far out as you could get in the Adams family.

"The spell," Lassiter muttered.

"Yes," Eva said on a sigh. "The spell to keep your brother with you. I didn't know why Anna needed it. You do know she was married to a vampire, yes? Your father?"

Lassiter nodded wordlessly.

"Well, it would seem there were other vampires who didn't like your father, Maddon, mating with Anna. Vampires who have no sense of diversity, if you ask this old woman," she spat. "They didn't want you and your brother to... to... How can I put this delicately? They didn't want you and your brother to, well, *exist*. Not at all. Anna's plan was to hide you, turn you both into parakeets. I'm sorry for the oddity of the chosen animal, but my spells are limited. I personally would have gone lion, like our Xavier, had I known how. It was designed to hide you where necessary. Hide you from your father's family, heathens that they were. Anyway, Anna disappeared shortly after she asked for the spell and then, one day, I woke up and in my heart..." Her voice caught, but she cleared her throat and steadied it. "I felt it. I felt she was gone, and I had no clue where you two were. I searched for you everywhere. It's left a hole in my heart that, now, can finally be filled."

Lassiter's mouth hung open and Eva reached up to close it with a smile. "This morning, when I woke up, I knew in my gut someone needed me here. I'm so glad it was you, Lassiter. What's your twin's name?"

Twin? There were two of them? Ohhhhh, this should be something, Emerson thought. Two over the top, uber pains in the asses.

Lassiter still had that hit by a freight train look on his face. "He's my twin?"

"Yes, dear, and your twin needs saving. That means I have some chicken soup to make."

Holy shit! Eva's infamous chicken soup was the key to this? *A drink to help you join vamp-kind...* Emerson knew the story well of Eva's chicken soup. She'd claimed to read prophecies in it. But wait. Hadn't she told Martine and Derrick that it was all just bunk? "I don't understand," Emerson interrupted. "You told Martine and Derrick that the chicken soup theory was all just made up to devise a way to get them together. The same with Max and JC."

Eva smiled knowingly. "Well, dear, to a degree it *is* made up. I admit to tampering with the chicken soup legacy for my own purposes, a bit of manipulation on

my part for the good of my grandsons if you will. But this time the chicken soup is what will turn Lassiter's brother into a fine young man like himself."

Lassiter looked down at Eva, his eyes were dark and unreadable. "Do you know how long I've looked? How many Adams there are in the world?"

Emerson snorted. "Yeah, and do you know how much wildlife he's devastated in his quest?"

"Now, Emerson, I think you'd do the same in Lassiter's position. Let's not cast stones, shall we?" Eva said with reproach.

Lassiter stuck his tongue out at Emerson.

"I do know that this journey has been hard for you, Lassiter, and your brother, but you have lifetimes to make up for it. After all, you're half vampire. Your immortality will grant you some justification. Now, let's make soup!"

"Soup," Lassiter murmured.

"Yeah, pale boy, soup," Emerson chuckled.

Chapter Eleven

Emerson smiled while watching Lassiter and his twin, Drake, plant trees.

What a difference two months could make.

Eva had made the chicken soup that restored Drake to his human form and he was, indeed, Lassiter's double. They were identical in almost every way.

Except the way that made Emerson's loins scream and her knees weak.

Only Lassiter did that to her.

Drake didn't do that for her. He had an easier personality than Lassiter, though, in her estimation, he should be the one who was bitter. He'd adjusted well to life on the Adams' farm and strove to adjust to the conformities legs and arms brought with it.

Lassiter had a much lighter attitude nowadays. He smiled more often and he and Emerson had spent a great deal of time talking again.

Like they'd once done.

Sometimes they laughed. Sometimes they sat quietly, but no matter what they did, they were never far from one another.

Emerson knew she was in love with Lassiter. What once had been an idol-like, schoolgirl crush had turned into love. The kind of love a woman feels when she knows it's the real thing.

She'd learned to temper her impatience and impulsivity with that knowledge. Lassiter was hers and there was no way she'd let him forget it.

Gently, of course...

She could wait until he was ready to admit he felt the same.

And he would.

All in good time.

Drake's transformation, the lift of the spell that had kept him locked in the body of a bird, had happened with little fanfare. Oddly, Emerson thought it would be much bigger than it'd turned out to be. But she would never forget the gratitude on Lassiter's face. She would never forget the wonder of seeing Lassiter finally meet his brother.

She'd left them alone, quietly slipping out to allow them the privacy they needed to get to know one another man to man. Brother to brother.

Lassiter came to find her the next day, and since then the dynamic of their relationship had changed drastically.

Planting trees was all in an effort to not only reimburse the Adams, but to show Emerson that Lassiter's intentions had never been to hurt anyone or anything in his quest.

The Adamses had welcomed him with their usual acceptance, with open arms and questions galore. Lassiter, usually a loner, had opened up in time, eventually allowing himself to come to terms with his unusual heritage and accept the warmth only the Adams family knew how to offer.

He'd signed the land back over to Max one morning over scrambled eggs, and Max had shown his gratitude by giving Lassiter twelve acres to do with as he pleased.

Lassiter planned to build a home there. A home that had a path back to his family right at his doorstep.

The Adams family.

Indeed, the Adamses had come full circle, Emerson thought.

"Hey, Princess," Lassiter called, coming up behind her and scooping her up, rousing her from her thoughts.

Emerson chuckled at the nickname he'd kept from her dog days. "You're all dirty!" she yelped at him. "Cut it out and put me down, vampire."

"Then I think some washing up is required, huh? What say we go do that?" Lassiter teased in her ear.

"You know, you're insatiable. Didn't we just nail each other this morning? Honestly, Lassiter, we have to spend some time out of the bedroom or we'll start producing, like Hector's bunnies."

"Well, I don't think I'd mind a bunny or two if they looked like you," he said against her ear, holding her closer.

Emerson's heart lurched and she knew what Lassiter was saying in as few words as possible. It wouldn't be long before Lassiter made the final leap.

She'd hold the hurdle steady when he finally jumped over it.

"Oh, really. Tell me, what do you suppose we'd procreate? Vampires? Werewolves? Werevamps, Vampwolves?" she teased, wrapping her arms around his neck and allowing him to hurry her off to his trailer.

Looking down at her, his smile was warm, filled with a promise he didn't know how to express. "I dunno, Princess, but I'd like to find out."

Emerson snuggled against his hard body.

Yes, Lassiter was saying exactly what she wanted to hear.

He was telling her it was time.

Emerson mentally held the hurdle steady.

Because Lassiter had just jumped.

Epilogue

And so ends the saga of a family called Adams. Unique in their diversity, strong in their love of one another, created in the mind of a writer who's one can shy of a six-pack.

But there are some things that beg to be sewn up. You didn't think I was the kind of author to leave you out on the ledge without a safety net, did you? That would be cruel... senseless, frustrating as hell, yes?

Ahem.

JC and Max had their baby boy on a fine spring day, crisp and cloudless with Max's mother, Corrina, acting as midwife. JC could be heard thanking deities for the end of the pregnancy that lasted a fricken' millennium throughout the Adams household. "Finally," she'd retorted, "a good hair day is within my realm of possibility." Max and JC named their son Max junior, though JC lovingly teased that Voldermutter might suit him just fine. As yet, Max junior's shifter form, if any at all, has not been determined. Only time will tell what he and little Catalina will grow up to be.

However, you can all rest assured, they will be loved in typical Adams family style.

Xavier and Julia are enjoying parenthood. Catalina is the apple of her daddy's eye and they've decided to make their family official. They plan to marry, as soon as Julia can fit into a size seven wedding dress, that is.

Martine and Derrick are with child again, and Martine has come to terms with her unexplained urge to devour Drake. It wasn't easy and much caviar was needed to help her get over the hump.

Eva and Escobar continue to travel the world together. No one knows for sure when she'll turn up but when she does, you can take solace in the fact that it won't be without mystery and mayhem.

Emerson and Lassiter were married two months after the birth of little Max. They said their vows on Adams land and sealed their life together surrounded by the warmth and blessings of the entire Adams pack.

Hector brought his "date" to the wedding.

His date Pinky.

A surprise to everyone, for sure.

It turned out, Pinky had a secret.

Pinky shifts too.

Pinky shifted into the form of a lovely young woman with eyes only for Hector. Pink eyes, but eyes, googley and filled with devotion, nonetheless. Hector lovingly refers to her as his "Playboy Bunny." Sometimes even the most unlikely of suspects has a match made in heaven, just for him.

Drake, after hearing about the debacle Columbia County made of the Adams taxes, realized he had a passion for the law and justice at its finest. He is attending law school in New York City and plans to begin his own firm, with the aid of his brother, upon graduation.

A were-legal, if you will...

Which brings me to the end of this story, but the beginning of a whole new adventure.

You didn't think I'd leave a hottie like Drake out there without a story, did you? Without someone to teach him the ways of a man and woman. The ways that have nothing to do with feathers and everything to do with passion...

Meet Drake when he takes on the task of the paranormal defending the paranormal, and take the journey of his carnal discoveries right along with him.

A half werewolf, half vampire *virgin*, folks... Does it get any crazier than that?

The End

Dakota Cassidy

Dakota is tired. Very tired. M, the esteemed owner of Changeling Press, makes her write a lot. A whole lot. So much that Dakota can't write her own bio. However, she's working on perfecting her tongue typing. Please e-mail her at Dakota@dakotacassidy.com. She promises to dry the e-mail before she sends it.

Note from M:

Dakota complains a lot, but we don't care much, cause we love her books. She forgot to mention she has a cool website, too. Check it out. It's DakotaCassidy.com