

Cassie Walder



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Wolfbane

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Dedication:

This book is dedicated to all the women who have ever discovered strength within them, and all who will discover that. Sisters, unite!

Chapter One

Chuck Mooney could smell it from here, even outside the isolated Georgian style white stone mansion that sat at the western edge of the local country club's golf course.

Blood. Death.

The bodies inside the house were between two and three hours old, probably no more than that. His sensitive Lupine nose picked up the scent of violent death, but it wasn't yet overpowering. The bodies hadn't had the time to take on the full, sweet, rotting smell of carrion. Another few hours would change that.

Although he wasn't that far behind Whitfield, it was too late to stop this carnage. The string of murders needed to be stopped. Chuck resolved to catch Whitfield, if it was the last thing he did.

Catch him, and bring him before the Council...or not.

If the rogue gave him the slightest excuse, Chuck knew he wouldn't hesitate to put Whitfield out of everyone's misery. Just the slightest pretext of an

excuse and he'd gladly put a permanent end to the old monster. No one would question the word of a Defender. He almost hoped Whitfield would give him an excuse, any excuse, no matter how thin.

The former Pack Law was clear — summary execution for any Pack member who killed a Singleform or any member of the Pack, *unless* in self-defense or by accident. That ancient penalty had been replaced by a more “compassionate” set of punishments—confinement for life locked into base form or rehabilitation and reintegration into Pack society. What a total crock of bullshit! Animals like Whitfield couldn't be rehabilitated. Confinement for a violent sociopath was always dangerous. This current wave of murders following Whitfield's escape more than adequately demonstrated *that* point. There were times that a society had to act drastically to protect its members from the actions of a few who held themselves above the law.

If Whitfield didn't give him an excuse, the chances were that Whitfield would go back into confinement. The risk of the old reprobate escaping again were just too damned high. The Pack couldn't afford the risk.

Chuck sniffed again, letting his wolf's nose work.

Yeah, two people definitely lay dead inside the big house. That brought the total to seventeen people Whitfield had killed in just over two weeks since escaping from his run at Doc Park's Montana compound. Chuck had kept tally of the deaths for the Pack leadership. Yet, none of those deaths had been reported to the Singleform authorities. Chuck had seen to that. Pack business as much as possible

needed to be kept within the Pack.

For the last two weeks, he had been basically a glorified clean up unit as he'd tracked Whitfield. But, then that was sometimes the duty of the members of the corps of Defenders, a group of unmated males and females pledged to the protection of the Pack from all enemies from without and within. Most of his work came from threats from within, from Pack-members who stupidly exposed the Pack to the Singleform world through reckless behavior.

Yet, Whitfield wasn't reckless. No reckless wasn't the word for him at all. Criminal. Murderous. Sadistic. All those descriptors fit Whitfield far better than reckless did.

Chuck heard the sound of a car approaching. He leapt behind the professionally manicured shrubbery surrounding the house, sinking low on his furry haunches. He watched as a red sports car stopped in front on the immaculately kept cobblestone circular drive.

The lone woman who got out of the car was a looker. She wore the undeniable air of class with the ease of her own skin. This was a together woman, self-possessed and beautiful. She carried herself with the sleek dignity of an alpha female. He'd give her that.

He couldn't take his eyes off her.

Mature, tall, curvy – she was definitely built like a woman, instead of the fashionable thin look of a boy with breasts. She was soft and round in all the places a woman should be round. Her long legs were hidden

beneath her suit trousers. But somehow, he knew they were just as shapely as the rest of her.

There was just something about her.

Her red hair was a more subtle mix of shades than the candy apple red of her car, but was just as striking. She'd twisted those fiery red/gold tresses into a neat knot at the back of her head. All neat and prissy... He'd like to muss her up, get her all comfortable and sweaty.

Just thinking of their naked bodies with all that long hair wrapped around his hands, holding her close to him, took his breath away.

He sniffed. She wore no bottled scent. She smelled of soap and pheromones—lots and lots of feminine pheromones. There was a strong note of concern, of worry, mingling with the pheromones. She definitely had good reason to be worried about the pair inside the house.

Looking at her made him wish he were in human form—she'd be spread out beneath him. He'd sink in slow. She'd push back. That red hair was a flag. He'd never known a redhead lacking a passionate disposition. This woman would be no different.

Or would she? Chuck wanted her with an intensity that amazed, shocked, him. If the sight of a female Singleform got him all this worked up, he had gone too damn long without sex. Her scent was driving him insane.

He never got distracted on the job. Never. So, what was different about this woman? What made her this large of a distraction? Damn it! It was like she was engraved on his senses and in his brain...her scent,

how she looked and moved.

He swallowed hard as the realization hit. Oh God! She was his life-mate.

That shocked him. He'd heard of Packmembers talking about knowing their life-mate at first glance. Until now, he'd thought that was Pack lore, some sort of stupid romantic myth. Now, he knew better.

But a life-mate who was a Singleform? That just didn't happen. Not these days. Whitfield hadn't moved against anyone except half-breeds since his escape. Likely the pair in the house were half-breeds, too. And this red/gold woman could easily be connected to the pain in the house. If she was, then she was likely Breed. That meant she could really be his life-mate, even under current rules for Pack breeding.

Damnit! If he had any sense, he'd take off running as fast as he could in the opposite direction. Instead, all he wanted was to hunt—to run his mate down and mount her perfect ass. Already, the woman had become a burr in his fur. He couldn't afford that. He had no business even thinking about sex, less business thinking about a real mating and cubs. He was on a rogue hunt. He would stop the rogue before the animal killed more people. Letting the woman distract him from his sworn task was not a good idea.

Still, this was a distraction he wanted in the most elemental way possible. He *knew* he'd spend his whole life loving her, making love with her daily, hourly, and never love her the same way twice. The wolf inside him claimed it felt like a profoundly good

idea.

Chuck continued watching the woman. What he wouldn't give to spare his mate the pain of what she was about to see. Who were the couple in the house? Her grandparents? Her parents? Whoever they were, the next few minutes would live in her mind forever, would haunt her nightmares for the rest of her life. No one should have to live with that. But as a Defender, he couldn't intervene in the affairs of those outside of the Packs. The question remained, was she outside of the Packs? If she was Breed, did she even know what she was?

Could he risk exposing himself, if she didn't know she was Breed? There was a dangerous rogue on the loose and Chuck needed to catch him. If she were Breed, the Pack mind control wouldn't work on her. He didn't have time to educate her on her identity or to do damage control, if she didn't know who she really was. This was a disaster in the making.

Damn it! If he had arrived sooner, he would have cleaned up the mess and she'd have had nothing to report to the Singleform authorities. But, he'd been too late and now, he'd have to work around the police. He really didn't want to do that. Yet, there wasn't any choice.

If she knew who and what she was, chances were that she would be living in community with other Pack members. So, she probably didn't know her heritage, or anything about her people. All of this made the situation that much more dangerous for everyone. But there was no way of knowing for certain. And no time to find out.

One thing he did know, he couldn't afford to be caught here. They'd be looking for an animal—a large animal, like him. Getting shot on sight by an overly anxious policeman was *not* on his list of favorite entertainment. While a normal lead or steel jacketed bullet wouldn't kill him, he couldn't afford to be slowed down by it, not with Whitfield running loose.

Almost as though she felt his glance, she turned and looked toward his direction. Worry was sketched on her face. That tore at his heart. Her green eyes searched the area. He couldn't let her see him. He sank down lower into the shrubs. Then she shrugged and walked towards the house again.

He darted out of the shrubbery and ran for the nearby woods. He needed to pick up Whitfield's trail, before the scent faded. For the first time, simply doing his duty was difficult.

Chapter Two

“**M**om, Dad?” Emily Matthews, M.D. called out as she entered the house through the slightly ajar front door. It was very unusual to find the heavy front door unlocked. They seldom left the front door wide open, unless it was for a party when there was always someone at the hall greeting the guests.

And where were the dogs? Her parents had two pampered pets, both Champion Rottweilers. Emily had given the puppies to her parents, five years ago. She had trained the dogs. And sometimes, she was the one who worked them at dog shows. Caesar normally would be Johnny-on-the-spot, wanting his ears scratched by now. Between the open door and the lack of the dogs, this was beyond odd. Something was definitely *wrong*.

“Mom, Dad?” Emily called out again, her voice trembling with fear that grew fiercer each second she spent within the all too silent house. “Are you home?”

Then the scent overwhelmed her. She recognized that peculiar odor. It was a mixture of blood, other fluids, feces, adrenaline, and fear. Emily had learned it well during her time in college working as a

paramedic and then again during her internship rotations in trauma services and forensic pathology. It was one smell she could never forget. Nothing else in the world smelled quite like a violent death.

She swallowed hard, her heart pounding. Fear surged through her with the accompanying shot of adrenaline. *Oh God, please, no! Let me be wrong! Let them be just fine.* Even as she offered that prayer, she knew it was in vain. Someone was dead in her mother's parlor, maybe more than one person from the strength of the scent.

Oh, God, I don't want to see whatever is in that room.

Emily fought the impulse to simply run and call the police. Yet, this was her parent's home. She wanted so badly for them to be alive, even though she feared that they would not be.

She stood there for a moment, in the doorway of her mother's parlor, looking at the mounds of ripped flesh and pools of both oxidized blood and body fluids. It took more than an instant before she moved past the initial horror to register the torn bodies of her parents in the carnage. Dead. Yes. Definitely dead. Both of them. Somehow, it didn't seem real, too terrible for reality. Emily wanted to examine them more closely, and check for a pulse. Her heart was telling her one thing, her brain another.

She felt ill; faint and nauseated. Closing her eyes against the pain, she mentally lectured herself that the only way to handle this was to take refuge in clinical distance. All those years of medical school and practicing medicine had to be good for something.

She could handle this pain if she could just distance herself from it, if she could just force herself to back away from it enough to assess it objectively, if she could just look at this with some degree of professionalism.

You can do this Emily! You have to.

When Emily looked at the torn bodies again, she was forced to admit that no one could live with the injuries they'd suffered. The bodies had lacerations, contusions, avulsions, puncture wounds from animal bites—crushing wounds from those bites. Their throats were ripped out as though from the bite of a large, powerful, mouth. And there had to be wounds that she couldn't see beneath the tattered remnants of their clothing.

Oh, God, Oh, God. Intestines spilled from their roughly split open bellies, like masses of bloated sausages. Stomach acid pooled over Christine Matthew's black leather pumps, those handmade Italian shoes she had loved so. Part of a liver rested on her father's knee, partially eaten, the edges ragged as though ripped by a set of very sharp fangs.

So much for clinical distance, she thought as the bile rose once more to her throat.

She looked down at the light gray marble floor to give herself time to get calm. A teardrop hit the floor, then another. That was when she realized that she was crying. Paw prints blazed from the bodies to the doorway and down the hall toward the back of the house. *Did Caesar do this?*

Blood. Bodily fluids. Death. Big paw prints. Canine paw prints. Caesar was gone.

No, please no! I couldn't have given my parents an animal that killed them. I couldn't have! I won't believe that I did that.

Whoever, whatever, did this could still be in the house. She needed to get out of here before she was the next victim.

Unwilling to turn her back on whatever – whoever, had killed her parents, Emily backed down the hall very quickly, towards the front door. She needed something for a weapon in case she had to fight this beast. What she wouldn't give right now for the ability to morph like some members of the family had in abundance!

Morph! Could the murderer be a Packmember? The paw prints are way too big for Caesar. They don't look right. There's something wrong with them. Think! You've seen prints like this before. They're turned outwards instead of facing front.

That meant a wolf. Wolves, normal wolves, didn't attack people. So, if this wasn't a normal wolf, then it was a Packmember morphed into Lupine form, what the legends would call a werewolf. The identity of the murderer added a whole other complexity to the issue. She needed to call Nathan and get a team here, immediately. *And I want him to explain what the hell happened. He's supposed to keep this sort of thing from happening.*

Her parents' golf bags sat in the hallway as if they had been planning to grab them on the way out. She grabbed the nine iron from her father's bag and continued backing out towards the door. If this *thing* came for her, she'd not go down meekly! She'd hurt it

badly, kill it if she could. Maybe she couldn't morph, but her instinct for survival was strong.

She had to get out of here. NOW!

Oh God, they're really dead! Tears continued to flow down her face. Dead, torn, eaten. *GOD!*

But why would they have been attacked? Her parents, like her, had been half-breeds who couldn't morph, and as such were merely tolerated by the pack. They had seats and voice, but no vote, in the Council. Neither of them had been active in pack affairs. Both of them had longed to forget their heritage. Now, her parents were dead at the paws of a Packmember. Why? Granted, neither Patrick nor Christine Matthews had been well loved in the Pack community. But who held this serious of a grudge against either of them? The only person who had ever hated either of them this much was long since dead. While she did believe in werewolves, as it was hard not to believe in one's own people, she most certainly did not believe in ghosts.

"God, have mercy," Emily moaned as the nausea nearly overtook her.

No, it wasn't safe to let herself be sick right now. She needed shelter. She needed to call her half-brother, Nathan. She needed to be away from here as soon as possible. But her traitorous body wouldn't listen.. She dropped to her knees and threw up as soon as she was outside, the front door closed firmly behind her.

Emily was vaguely aware of the sound of a car pulling into the circular drive in front of her parents' house. She heard the sound of a car door closing. But

she was too sick, too busy bringing up ketones, to be able to look up.

With her throat still burning and the wretched taste of stomach acid in her mouth, she saw the polished black shoes and the crisp khaki pants worn by the county sheriff's department. She looked up into the concerned face of Manuel Ramirez, the son of her office manager.

"Doc? Do you need help? What's wrong?"

Emily's face crumbled and she swallowed hard. Her breath came with difficulty. Tears still streamed down her face.

She needed to think, and think fast. If Manny was here, he'd already radioed in that he was stopping. Following regulations came with the ease of breathing to him. If there was ever a man who was a cop to his soul, it was Manny. Emily really didn't want to involve the cops in this. But he was here. So, there was no choice, or was there?

The police were already involved, because of her lack of control. If she had just gotten into her car and gone home to call Nathan, this wouldn't be happening. If she hadn't been such a damned gutless wonder, she wouldn't be caught between a rock and a hard place now.

One person, or even a group of people, she could handle, could force their thoughts and direct them in the way she wanted them to go. That much Pack skill she had, to touch and bend the wills of others to her own. It was one of the few abilities she had linking her to her people. She'd almost always been careful in

using that ability. Still, if ever a situation called for the use of Pack skills, this was it.

No, she couldn't do that. There would be official records of his stopping here. Manny would have called in that he was stopping to the county dispatcher. So, even if she did bend him and make him believe there was nothing wrong, now, when her parents "disappeared" there would be questions, leaving her as the chief suspect in a murder investigation.

No matter how well her mother's parlor was cleaned, there would be a strong chance of a good forensic team picking up evidence of their death. If Jack got his teeth into this, and he might as the city had just annexed this area so now it was in his jurisdiction, he'd certainly run with it for all he was worth. What to do? There was only one real way to protect herself from the legal consequences, but doing this would open her up to some very real disciplinary actions from the Pack.

God, Emily. If this isn't the very essence of being caught between two races and being truly neither, I don't know what is. What would be best? Which set of consequences would be easier to take; the Singleform legal hassles of being considered a prime suspect in her parents deaths or the Pack discipline from bringing in the legal authorities into what is clearly Pack business? I've never really been part of the Pack. But I live among Singleforms.

She swallowed hard and shook her head. There really wasn't any other viable way of handling this. "They're both dead."

"Who's dead?" he asked, suddenly all cop.

"My parents. Inside," she told him as she tried and failed to get the tears under control. "It's horrible!"

* * * *

While she was sitting in her car waiting for the coroner and the other authorities to arrive, Emily used her cell phone to call her half-brother out in Montana. She kept his emergency clinic number on speed dial. He deserved to know their mother was dead.

"Parks Veterinary Clinic," he answered his phone.

"Nathan, it's Emily."

"Emmy, what's wrong, honey? You sound really shaken."

The concern in his voice brought fresh tears to her eyes. She sighed raggedly as she tried to bring herself under control. "I'm calling you on my cell phone. This couldn't wait until I got home."

"Okay. What is it?"

"Nathan, there's no easy way of saying this. Our mother is dead. So is my father."

He was quiet for a moment. "God, Emmy, I'm sorry. How?"

God, let him hear the things I need to tell him, even though I can't say the words on a wireless. Please.

"It's terrible, Nathan. Throats ripped out. Disemboweled. Bodies chewed on. It's awful, beyond words. You can't even imagine. No, with your imagination, you probably can." She sighed. "There are bloody wolf paw prints in the house and part of

their organs were eaten.”

* * * *

Oh, shit! I should have seen this coming. Whitfield went after my birth mother, thinking to harm me by that. Christine’s dead.

The further I can keep Emily away from Whitfield, the better I’ll like it. But, there she is right in the middle of it. Not telling her all of this could leave her open to attack. She’s on a cell phone. This conversation could be overheard, leaving the Pack open to repercussions. As Alpha, it’s my job to protect the Pack. Still, Emily’s my blood.. I owe her as much protection as I can give her. The thing is to get her out of there, ASAP. So, that’s what I’ll do.

Maybe it wasn’t Whitfield. Yeah, Nathan, and maybe the moon is actually made of Swiss cheese. Who else has gone rogue lately, killing like this? No, it’s Whitfield. I feel it in my bones.

He went after my birth mother, thinking to harm me by that. I should have seen this coming. Why didn’t I? I knew he was moving in that general direction. Chuck’s regular reports indicated he was moving in that direction. How in the hell could I have not seen this coming? Or did I just not want to deal with it?

She’s dead. My mother’s dead. He waited for the pain to come. But the particular pain surrounding his mother’s abandonment was so old it had faded into a familiar companion. The finality of this, the finality of never being able to resolve this, of never being able to understand the woman who had given birth to him, brought a new note of poignancy to the old ache. But it wasn’t unbearable. Think about yourself later,

Nathan. You have to protect Emily now!

Christine and I were never close. Oh God, how could we be? She walked out on my father and me when I was only three days old. Our only personal contact was one phone call.

He sighed. She was calling here to talk to Emily, not to me. I still recall that conversation vividly:

"Parks";

"This is Christine Matthews. I wish to speak to Emily";

"She's out at the moment, Christine. Do you have anything to say to me?"

"Don't mislead her, Nathan. Half-breeds have no real place in the Pack. We're about as welcome as a case of silver poisoning. I don't want her making the same mistake I did."

"What mistake was that, Christine? Walking away from your own infant son, perhaps?" Then she had slammed down her receiver, seemingly with as much force as possible.

Is it any real wonder I have a hard time thinking of Christine as "mother"? When was she ever "mother" to me? That title belongs in my mind to my father's second mate, Elizabeth, who always considered me one of her own.

Still, Whitfield's gone too far this time. The deaths of Patrick and Christine Matthews will not go un-remarked upon. They were just too rich, and were too well integrated into the Singleform world, for this not to cause some kind of scandal. We can't have this point back to the Packs in any way.

Now, what to say to Emily? She is on the cell phone. The call could be overheard.

Right now, as Alpha, it was his job to protect the

pack. Emily was his blood. He owed her his protection, as well. He needed to figure out a way to do both things without failing in either duty.

* * * *

What the hell is he thinking? Why isn't he talking to me about this? Emily wondered as she heard him sigh.

"Are you still there?" she demanded.

"Yes. I'm here. Did you find the bodies, Emmy?"

"I did. Just now. The coroner and investigators are on their way."

Nathan was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was disappointed, "I see. You called me second."

Emily closed her eyes and sighed. This was what she was afraid of. She needed to set this straight. If he thought she had reported what could possibly be Pack business to authorities outside the Pack, she could be in serious trouble. Even a half-breed knew that much. She didn't need to deal with Pack discipline, right now. She didn't need to have to turn away from her only relative.

"No. I didn't call anyone, except you. After I saw the bodies, I got very sick as soon as I got out of the house. I couldn't help it."

"I'd imagine that you did get sick," Nathan told her in a soothing voice.

"The county deputy was on his normal patrol and saw me vomiting. He stopped to help."

"It's okay. Right now, keeping you safe is the important thing. Anything else can be dealt with,

later."

"You know, the authorities are going to think it was Caesar."

"The Rottweiler. Yes, that would be the natural assumption. They'll look within the house first before they consider an outside cause."

"I know. But no one with any sense is going to look at those paw prints and attribute them to Caesar. They are clearly not those of a domestic dog."

"Look, Em. Be very careful. You have the heart of a wolf. Remember that."

"Nathan, please! I'm usually careful. I am my father's daughter, paranoid about safety."

"Yes, but even Patrick wasn't cautious enough, was he?"

She sighed raggedly. "Obviously not."

"You need to get away from there. Drive down to MidAmerica Airport. I'll have a charter flight waiting for you. I'll pick you up in Helena. Get in your car, start driving. Now. I'll call you with the flight arrangements in a few minutes. Don't stop for anyone or anything. Just go."

"I wish I could. The police will want to talk to me."

"Then talk to the cops before you leave. I can't stress this enough. It's important for you to leave there as soon as possible, Emmy. It's not safe for you to remain in the area."

She heard the warning loud and clear. There really was a rogue on the loose. That chilled her. "Nathan, you're scaring me."

"Good. You need to be scared. Fear will keep you

sharp. Only staying sharp will keep you alive. "

"Nathan. Is there something in particular I should know?"

"You're on the ground there, Em. I'm not. You should know everything you need to know by looking at the crime scene. Let's not waste more time. You need to get out of the area, *now*. I can't say that strongly enough. Come to me."

She sighed. "Nathan. There will be arrangements and things I'll have to do here. I can't just run away."

"Running is the best option, at the moment, Em. Just leave the dead to bury their dead, and move on."

"You aren't coming here for Mom's funeral, are you?"

"She didn't claim me when she was alive. I'll be damned if I'll claim her when she's dead."

"Damnit, Nathan! Don't be this way. Come for me. I need you. More now than ever."

"Yes. You do need me. More than you know. Come here. Leave that all behind you. I want you alive. Come to Montana. I can protect you here. My security is the best. Whatever, *whoever*, killed your folks won't get to you in my compound."

"I have a life and a practice here."

"A life. Is that what you call it? Alone without a mate, without children. With only work and more work to look forward to? You call that a life? Maybe this is a chance for you to think what is it that *you* want, without Christine's influence. I'm the only family you have now. Me and my people. Besides, dead is dead. Your parents are never going to get any less dead. You stand a better chance of staying alive

here. Think about it."

Emily sighed. "I hear you. I'll think about it."

"Emily, you're my blood. I love you. I don't want any harm to come to you."

"I know."

"Call me later on a landline. We'll talk in more detail."

"I'll let you go. Thought you'd want to know. You're the only one I have left in the world, Nathan."

"Emily, come home to Montana. You'll be safer here. I'm here. My people are here. We're your family. I'm arranging for the flight."

"No, I'll come later, Nathan. There are things I have to do here first."

"God, Emmy. Don't! You aren't safe there."

"Goodbye, Nathan."

"If you're staying there, I'll get you a bodyguard."

"I don't want a bodyguard."

"Tough. You're getting one anyway, just as soon as I can arrange it. I have just the man in mind. Expect him this afternoon."

"Goodbye, Nathan."

Then she hung up. *Well, Em, what did you expect? Nathan to be overwhelmed by sorrow at Mom's death? At least, he didn't break out into a chorus of 'Ding dong the bitch is dead.'* Given how he feels about her, that's something.

She rested her head on the steering wheel and let the tears flow.

Chapter Three

Emily sat in her car, talking to the city patrolman through the open window. She really didn't want to get out of the car. She felt relatively safe inside the steel and glass cage. Or as safe as she was going to feel anywhere. She'd never heard of a Packmember who could, in base form, claw his way through steel.

"Caesar's nails are always clipped short for show. Whatever animal did this had sharp claws, sharp enough to disembowel."

"You sure about that, Emily?" Jack asked as he walked up to the car. "Or is that just wishful thinking?"

Her mouth went dry. *Jack? Investigating the deaths of my parents? Crap. It's outside of procedures for the department to send a detective on an animal death case. So, what's he doing here? I don't like this.* Oh, yes, when trouble rained it came down in buckets.

"Have you ever known me to say anything I wasn't sure of, Jack? Wishful thinking isn't usually one of my faults."

Well, except for one notable exception that I'm looking at. Now, there was wishful thinking, believing that he loved me, believing that we could have a life together. One of my

major mistakes. I should have never forced the relationship.

"No," he agreed in a sharp tone. "You're *always* sure of things, especially when you're wrong."

She drew a deep breath. "Simply as charming as ever, Jack. Don't let your personal hatred for my parents color your investigation, or I'll file charges against you so fast you won't have time for your head to spin. Is that clear?" she demanded, her voice quiet and firm. "I've got enough trouble right now, without your adding to it. The ethics of your investigating this are questionable, at best. Besides, since when does the department roll detectives for an animal attack? I want it duly noted that I strongly object your involvement here."

"So noted and I'm trembling."

She looked at the man she had once loved, the man she still loved. More fool she. Oh, he remained appealing enough. Tall, strong, dark hair, blue eyes, a cleft in his square jaw. She'd fallen irrevocably in love with him the first moment, she'd saw him. But, he'd more than proven the only thing he valued or could be loyal to was his badge. She had only been someone to cook, clean... a warm body in his bed and a hot, wet place to put his cock. She couldn't let herself forget how he had been chronically unfaithful to her from the beginning of their marriage, how miserable she had been during the last years of their marriage, how he had hurt her both emotionally and physically at the bitter end. Yet, he could be a lovable rogue, and the sex had been good, but the bad times had far outweighed the good.

Jack is no good for you, in capital letters. Maybe, he's not really any good at all. Somewhere it's written that every woman has an asshole in her past. He's yours. Forget him and move on.

But somehow that was easier said than done.

"Where are Caesar and Claudia?" Jack said looking around.

She shrugged and sighed. "Claudia is in upper New York State being bred. I don't know where Caesar is."

"I told you years ago that those damned Rottweilers were dangerous. But you wouldn't listen to me then, would you?" Jack demanded, his voice fierce and low.

Emily fought the revulsion she felt at hearing his tone. "Because you were wrong then. And you're wrong now. When properly trained, Rottweilers are good, well behaved, affectionate and protective companion dogs. Caesar and Claudia are very well trained."

"Yeah right. That's why your parents are dead."

"You haven't even been inside. God, I'm surprised you've kept your job this long since you're making judgments based on assumptions. This isn't like you. You're letting your personal prejudices color your opinions. I won't tolerate this, Jack."

"Like I said, I'm trembling in my boots."

"My parents are dead, damn it, and you're harassing me about the location of their dog? Seems to me that you should have more important things to do."

"Right."

That comment was vintage Jack; sarcastic, short, and accusatory. So completely sure of himself at all times, that was Jack. She found it ironic that this self-assurance was the reason she had fallen in love with him. "Damn you! I don't need this. Especially now. Get off my back."

"Tell me about what happened today."

"Mom and Dad neither made it to church nor to the club. We play eighteen holes on Sunday afternoon after church and lunch at the clubhouse. Dad hadn't cancelled either the tee time or our lunch reservation."

"I remember your Sunday habits quite well," Jack said, his voice impatient.

"They never miss church. I thought they might be ill, so I came to check on them. They weren't ill...God, I wish it had been that simple... I keep thinking about how they must have died. How scared they must have been! It's monstrous."

Tears welled up in her eyes. She blinked those back. The last thing she wanted was to cry in front of Jack. She just didn't know she was going to have a choice.

"Come into the house and look around. We need to know what, if anything, is missing," Jack urged her.

The idea of going back into the house filled her with panic. "No, I can't go back in there."

"Em, you have to. We need your help. You're the only one who would know if anything is missing. Tracking missing objects may be the only way we'll have of finding who did this."

She sighed. Nathan's reaction had told her more than she wanted to know. It was a Packmember gone rogue who killed her parents. That meant he probably hadn't taken anything from the house. It also meant there would be more deaths before this was over. Still, she couldn't tell Jack that. Pack business stayed within the Pack as much as possible.

"I don't know the animal isn't still in the house," Emily said as she climbed out of the car.

"We're all armed. Nothing is going to happen to you, Emily," Mike told her.

Yeah, right, like lead bullets are actually going to do anything to stop a Packmember. At least that part of the legends is true. If he comes for me, the only thing that is going to stop him is putting silver in his blood.

Silver, the very thought made her shudder. Silver poisoning was lethal, always. She wanted a weapon that could stop this murderer. Without a doubt, Emily needed silver and an easy way to get it into his blood.

Think, Emily Ann. You know the drugs. Think. How can I get silver in a good form to use against this rogue? Basic pharmacology. What drug could you write a script for and easily separate out the silver? Silver Sulfadiazine? Nope, not enough silver there, would need about a kilogram of it for the necessary lethal dose to be distilled with the equipment I have access to. Silver Nitrate? Maybe. It's a higher concentration of silver in a carrier base. Anything else with more silver? No. Not since the FDA pulled the OTC colloidal silver compounds off the shelf, at any rate. So, silver nitrate it is. That's easy enough to get in quantities that won't raise eyebrows. It should be easy enough to work with.

"Emily?" Mike asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Mike. I'm not functioning very well."

"Only to be expected, Emily. You've had a hell of a shock today," Mike allowed.

"Let us into the house," Jack asked. "You don't have to look at the bodies. You do have to let us in and have a look around."

"The front door is open. It was open when I got here."

"It was open?" Jack asked in disbelief. "You didn't use your key?"

"It was unlocked and slightly ajar."

"That's unlike your parents."

"Tell me about it. The open door kicked up my fear level. I wish it had been an unfounded fear."

The photographer from the local newspaper pulled up in her ancient Volkswagen Beetle.

Emily saw this and sighed heavily. "That's just what we need."

"In the house," Jack urged. "You don't need to deal with this. Ignore them. They'll go away."

Emily walked towards the house, carrying the golf club.

* * * *

God, even now, she carries herself with dignity. She's too good for you, Holtz. But that's nothing new. She always was too good for you. You were just too horny to see it. Get over her. You're just going to get hurt. You're going to hurt her again. More than that, you will hurt Jennifer. Remember Jennifer, the woman you're supposed to marry

next week, the woman who is pregnant with your baby? Don't screw that up too, like you've screwed up so much else in your life. There are people counting on you.

"Emily?"

She turned to face him. "Yes."

Jack swallowed hard at the pain written on her face. She'd never been shy in assessing a situation and taking action, so he guessed he shouldn't have been surprised at her carrying one of Patrick's thousand dollar golf clubs. "It's really going to be okay, Emily."

"Nothing will ever be okay again, Jack."

"Let the team into the house."

He walked into the house behind her. Death. Yep. He'd smelled that before, more times than he wanted to think about.

"They're in Mother's parlor. I won't go in there again." Emily carefully replaced the golf club in the bag. "We should all be on guard. You don't want to end up like my parents."

Jack nodded. "I'm with you. Just let me see the bodies. Malanaphy, stay with her for a few minutes."

"You don't want to see that, Jack," she warned.

"No. I don't. But I have to."

She nodded and smiled but that smile that wasn't reflected in her eyes. "I remember. It's part of your job."

"One of the bad parts of my job. I can't fully investigate this unless I can see how they died."

He looked at her. Her struggle for control was obvious. Jack wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. But he couldn't. There were too many witnesses. Besides, she'd not welcome any

gesture of support from him. He'd ruined this between them.

She told him, "Just go. The sooner I'm out of here, the better I'll like it. I'm going to look in Dad's study for anything out of place."

Jack nodded. "Go. Be careful."

He watched her walk down the hall to Patrick's study. Man, just the way she walked was enough to fill his mind with memories of how good they once had been together in bed. The woman still made him ache, and probably always would. But that was over, for good. They'd hurt each other so badly there was no cure for it, except divorce and totally staying away from each other.

The photographers and the State crime lab technicians were already at work. Jack forced himself to view the bodies.

"Lieutenant." Joe Schneider, one of the technicians called out to him. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"A couple of times," Jack said. "We had a string of murders of bums, probably ten years ago with similar wounds. Never did find the animal."

"Over on Mason Street. I heard about that, but never saw the bodies."

"I'll want to be at the autopsies."

Emily's scream split the air.

Jack reached for his sidearm in his shoulder holster. *Emily never screams.*

She was collapsed in a black leather wing chair, in the corner of her father's study, sobbing as though her

heart was breaking, her face in her hands, when he came through the door.

Seeing no danger, he reholstered his weapon. "Dammit, Malanaphy. What the fuck is wrong?"

"Lieutenant. Look." The uniformed officer said as he pointed to a piece of wire mesh and a round piece of bloody body tissue about an inch in diameter with a ragged edge that looked like it had been worried over by an animal's teeth.

He walked over to the chair where she sat. Sinking down on his heels, he reached out for her hands and gently peeled them away from her face. The anguish etched on her face told him more than he wanted to know about her mental state. Jack brushed away the tears from her eyes with the pads of his thumbs. Yet, the tears continued to fall. "Emily. Talk to me. What freaked you out?"

"God, Jack! The metal mesh on the floor is a stint used in cardiac arteries," Emily said, her voice full of pain and tears. "Do you understand?" her voice broke in pure misery. "That tissue is a bovine pericardial stinted valve." She drew a ragged breath, trying to steady herself without any real results. "He ate Dad's heart and left everything that wasn't human!"

Chapter Four

After stopping at the pharmacy to acquire the silver nitrate, Emily went in search of wolfbane. That herb would be the only thing she knew of that would lock the rogue into base form. The last thing she wanted to explain was why she had a dead, naked, man lying around, if she killed the rogue and the corpse reverted to human form. That wouldn't be fun at all.

Emily stopped her car in front of the local health food store. Bette, the owner, was there working on her books, although the store wasn't open for business on Sunday afternoon. Emily felt relief. At least, she wouldn't have to break into the store. She had to have the herb, now. She couldn't wait until tomorrow. Although she seldom used any of her Pack skills, Emily overcame her normal hesitancy. She carefully bent the shopkeeper's will to her own, acquiring and paying cash for four ounces of dried wolfbane and placing a deep suggestion in Bette's mind that the shopkeeper forget the details of this transaction.

Arriving home, she changed out of her "church" clothes and threw on an old set of surgical scrubs.

She removed her .357 revolver and her precious cache of silver bullets from the locked case in which she kept it in the bottom of the china cabinet. The gun and shooting lessons had been a gift from her father on her fourteenth birthday. He'd always said every woman should be able to defend herself.

Illinois didn't have a concealed carry law. She'd carry the weapon anyway and hope that she didn't need to use it. If she got caught with the gun, she'd have to make the person forget they'd seen her with the weapon. Most of the time, that wouldn't be a problem.

God, Dad! You were paranoid, always thinking that people were out to get you. There was no denying that. Obviously you weren't cautious enough, today. How the hell did that monster get in the house? How did he get to you? Am I going to make the same lethal mistake?

Five bullets. That was all she had. It should be enough. God, she hoped it was enough. Anything she needed more than four bullets to take down would be more trouble than she could handle by herself. The fifth bullet, in that case, would be to end her own life and deny the rogue the pleasure of eating her alive. *God, I don't want to even think about that. But I can't hide from it, either. It's going to be him or me. I don't intend for it to be me.*

After loading the revolver, and making sure that she had an empty chamber beneath the hammer, she clipped the holster onto her back waistband. She'd wear trousers and blazers exclusively until this was resolved to disguise the fact she was armed.

Emily began working on the poison. There might

be little time until the rogue came for her. She had to be ready to take him down. Between the revolver and this poison, she'd feel safer. Only seeing his dead body would make her feel really safe. And she wasn't at all sure she'd feel safe then.

She put a kettle of water on to boil. *Just like the old movies, the first thing I do is boil water.* She couldn't help the chuckle. *Well, hon, at least you've kept your warped sense of humor, even in the face of this tragedy. That's good.*

If it wouldn't have raised too many questions, she'd have headed over to the college to the chemistry lab to do this work there with the proper equipment, but the president of the college was a vampire. There was no way that Emily could bend Judith Halliday's will to her own, to make her forget. Even though Judy was a good friend, Pack business had to stay within the Pack. Emily was in enough potential problems with the Pack for letting the police be involved. She didn't need the hassle of the Council's reaction to bringing in vampires as well. That would be completely beyond the pale in many minds. *But, how would that be anything new?*

I just can't figure out why I actually care what the leadership thinks. Heaven knows, there's no place in the Pack for a half-breed like me who can't morph. If I could morph, it would be a different matter. Then, I'd be accepted as a full member of the Packs. Pack law deals more with ability of an individual than with bloodlines. If it didn't, there was no way that Nathan who is of three-fourths blood, having a full blood father and a half-breed mother, would be in leadership.

She cleared an area of counter, laying out a series of hardcover textbooks to form a well in which to work, then threw a plastic tablecloth over the area. She had to contain any spills. Nothing less than her life depended on keeping this contained. While the resulting poison would kill the rogue, it would also be lethal to her if she mishandled it.

But, then, she had handled dangerous substances before. She'd always liked lab science and was good at chemistry. She'd need every bit of her skill now.

Emily laid out the ingredients and equipment she would need to prepare the injectable poison, then settled in to do the necessary painstaking work.

The kettle whistled. She put the wolfbane in a cheap glazed ceramic teapot, something she could gleefully toss when this was done. She'd always hated this teapot, anyway. Jack's sister Sarah had given it to them as a wedding gift. Emily had wanted to throw it away after the divorce. But, she'd kept it just in case she ever needed to brew poison. That seemed a fitting enough use considering it had been a gift from the wicked bitch of the midwest.

After putting on a paper respirator mask and donning latex gloves to protect her from the chemicals, she emptied the plastic bag of the herb into the teapot then added enough boiling water to barely cover the herb. Emily sat that on the stove top to steep. The scent of wolfbane was noxious. She turned on the stove exhaust vent and all the bathroom vents in hope that any of the fumes could be immediately expelled from the house. How Singleforms could stand this herb was beyond her.

Oh, she could have left it to steep outside. She just didn't want the exposure of running in and out of the house. Working inside was much safer, right now.

After an hour's hard work of purifying the silver, she had two lethal-to-Packmembers twenty-five cc doses of silver in a wolfbane base. She filled the special "pen" dispensers with the poison, careful not to spill any of it, careful not to get any of it on her.

One dose would kill any Packmember. Depending on where it was injected into the attacker, it could either be a slow very painful death or a relatively quick agonizing death. Giving the injection IM would eventually get the poison into his blood, after killing off the muscles surrounding the injection site. She'd have inject it into a vein, to get the blood returning to the heart, for the resulting tissue necrosis to fairly rapidly end his life.

He'd made her parents suffer. While she wanted him dead, she didn't want him to die peacefully. She wanted him to experience great pain. This drug would make sure of that.

Great keeping of the Hippocratic oath here, Emily. First, do no harm. Well, this will do harm. This poison will kill any among the Lupine. There's no antidote, only certain, painful, death. And I can't think of anyone who deserves it more.

This poison would be a more certain of a way of dealing with the rogue than firing a bullet at him. It had been a while since she'd gone to a firing range. Generally, she hit what she aimed at with a revolver. Still, she'd been known to miss. In a stressful situation, facing the prospect of actually killing

someone, even someone like the animal that killed her parents, she wasn't sure her hand would be all that steady.

The problem with the poison was that she would have to be up close and personal with the monster who killed her parents, to use it. If Nathan was right, if she was on the rogue's target list, getting up close and personal with this animal would not be a problem. He'd be coming for her. When he came, he was going to get far more than he bargained for.

Capping each of the "pens" securely, she placed them in one of the patch pockets of the scrub top. Her cell phone was in the other pocket. The next job was cleaning and picking up her kitchen.

Emily took the four corners of the rectangular plastic tablecloth and tied them together, leaving the glass and other equipment inside. The tied bundle, along with the zippered "Biohazard" bag containing teakettle and soggy wolfbane, went inside one plastic garbage bag that she closed with a wire tie. That bag went inside a second bag that she also tied tightly closed. That resulting bag she placed into a third heavier bag.

Covering her gloved hand with a kitchen towel, she turned on the faucet. With care, she rinsed off the long latex gloves she wore. Then she scrubbed out the sink. She removed the paper respirator and peeled off the latex gloves. Those went on top of the double-bagged equipment, along with the towel she'd draped over her hand to turn on the faucet. She tied off the third bag.

After scrubbing the kitchen surfaces and sinks free

of any sign of the poisons, she headed for the door to throw out the trash. The sound of the proximity alarm stopped her.

Fear hit her in the gut. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV in the living room. She changed the input source and watched the feeds from the security cameras.

* * * *

Chuck stood at the edge of Emily's property.

Surely, this was a mistake. He double-checked the address.

No mistake. This is where Parks said she lived. Why would a successful doctor live in this neighborhood? After seeing her parents' home and the car she drove, he didn't expect her house to be this small and in a working class neighborhood at the edge of town.

Chuck walked around the small, ranch style house, looking for problems. It was a neat house, well kept. The doors seemed secure. There were four deadbolts, good locks, on the heavy steel doors at the front of the house.

There was something odd about the windows. Then it hit him that they were all single pane and fixed. None of the windows opened. More than that, the refraction was just a little off. Armored glass. Why in the world would she need armored glass? Along the back corner of the house, there were no windows at all. The back door was just as secure as the front

door.

Chuck hadn't missed the motion sensors and the security cameras strategically placed around the perimeter of the roof of the house. The equipment was state of the art, small, and placed correctly for maximum coverage.

The house was a fort. No one built like this without expecting trouble. No one built like this at all, not residentially. There were states, and this was one of them, that it was a felony to fortify a residence such that you prevented the entry of the authorities. Obviously, she hadn't ever had a problem with the police.

The largest security problem was that this subdivision abutted the open fields of a farm and a park, her back yard open to a large lake. Beautiful, but very dangerous. Anyone could get access to the back of her house, or this neighborhood for that matter easily.

Her personal security arrangements were clearly schizophrenic. The dwelling was secure, but with an open carport, in a neighborhood whose security was full of holes big enough to drive a truck through. He didn't know what to make of this. That made him profoundly uneasy.

He continued walking around the house, with the full knowledge that Emily was likely watching him make this assessment. He chuckled and waved at the camera.

Lucy, I'm home. Nathan had said she didn't want a bodyguard. Chuck had a feeling she would fight him every step of the way. It wouldn't do her any good.

He was here, and he would keep her safe, even in spite of herself.

* * * *

He'd looked right into the camera and waved at her! Who did he think he was? If she had to describe him for a police report, that description would be caucasian, six foot one, one hundred ninety pounds, salt and pepper hair, dark eyes. His black jeans hugged his muscular thighs. That soft black cotton t-shirt molded itself to his broad chest. The black leather jacket with the slightly turned up collar disguised the bulge of the shoulder holster. He was not only dangerous, but he was armed and dangerous.

And handsome to a fault. Her awareness of him grew, flowed like warm honey through her veins until her breasts felt heavy and her pussy suddenly spasmed, filling with moisture. What the hell was that? She tried ignoring her immediate reaction to him. She didn't do this sort of thing, had never felt an instant turn-on with any man other than Jack. This man could be a real threat to her. For all she knew, this was the animal who killed her parents.

How could she react sexually to him? *I'm damned if I know how to handle this.*

The skin between her shoulders itched and her scalp tingled. It was the same sensation she'd when she had walked up to her parents' house before she found their bodies. *God, I don't like this. I feel like prey.*

He turned away from the camera, walking around the house. She watched as he came up to the front door. Just the one man. Was this the bodyguard that Nathan threatened her with? Or was this the Packmember who had killed her parents?

The doorbell rang.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she stated through the intercom.

"Doctor Matthews?"

His rich bass voice flowed over her, semi-hypnotic in effect. She shook her head. He was trying to use voice control of the Packs on her. Well, she was on to that trick. It wouldn't work on her. The fact that he'd tried made her wary. What if this was the rogue who killed her parents?

Emily assessed him again. Strong, tall, and with a great voice. It really wasn't fair. "You know who I am. How about returning the favor?"

"Chuck Mooney. Can we talk?"

"What do you want, Mister Mooney?"

"I've been tracking the man I believe may have been responsible for the murder of your parents."

"You apparently haven't listened to what the police say. They believe the deaths were caused by the family pet."

"You don't believe that for a moment."

"What I believe or fail to believe is utterly irrelevant."

"You don't believe a word I'm saying."

"Oh, the words are fine. It's the way they're strung together that I have trouble with. Again, who are you?"

Emily watched his reaction in the monitor. She saw the laughter dance in his eyes. Oh, hell, handsome *with* a sense of humor. Bad, this was bad.

Who was this man? Why was she reacting to him?

"Well, Miss Emily, like it or not, until I run Whitfield to ground, just call me your second shadow."

"Whitfield?"

"Parks said to tell you, '*Verba mea auribus*'."

Give ear to my words, her brother's trouble code. So, *this is the bodyguard? Good Grief, Nathan! Could you have found someone less sexy?*

"Stay right there, while I check out your story."

Emily removed the cell phone from her pocket. No she couldn't make this call on the cell. She went to the corded phone on the end table near the sofa and dialed her brother's number. Emily wedged the phone between her ear and shoulder, not taking her eyes from Chuck Mooney's image on the monitor for a second.

"It's Emily," she announced as Nathan answered on the third ring.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"I'm on a landline. Describe Chuck Mooney for me."

"Good. I'd hoped he'd be prompt. What do you think of him?"

"I don't even know if this is Mooney. I need a description, though he gave the trouble code."

"Chuck Mooney's a Defender, a really tough son-of-a-bitch. Do you understand me?"

Chuck Mooney is a Packmember; more than that, a Defender, one of the elite corps of Lupines charged with the protection of the Pack with all that entails; a combination of cop, judge, jury, and when needed executioner. She sighed. "Yes, I understand. How do I know this is Mooney and not Whitfield standing on my front stoop?"

"He should have identification."

Emily glared at Mooney's image on the monitor. "Get real, Nathan. If you think I'm going to let him get close enough to show me identification, you're crazy. I haven't even let him inside my house."

"For heaven's sake, Em! Chuck is a good man. I sent him to help you."

"I have no intention of ending up like Mom and Dad. Give me something."

"Whitfield is missing both the little finger on his right hand and a chunk of his left ear lobe."

Emily looked at Chuck's hands on the monitor. Then she looked at his ears. All those parts were intact. She relaxed a bit. Whether this was Mooney or not, at least he wasn't Whitfield.

"Chuck is tall, strong, retired military, and a general badass. He looks like every father's worst nightmare of a suitor for their daughter; rough and dangerous."

"Not to mention sexy-as-hell."

Nathan cleared his throat. "Personally, he does nothing for me."

Emily couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up in her throat. She could imagine Nathan's face as he had said that. "Brother dear, I should hope not."

"You could do worse than to take Chuck Mooney as a breeding partner. You'd have fine cubs together."

"Yeah, right. He's a Defender. He's not allowed to mate and still function in his role."

"It's time for Chuck to step down and make a life of his own. He's a very good man who deserves a good woman. The two of you would march along well together."

"Did you send him here in a matchmaking attempt?" she asked, her voice tight. "Damn it, Nathan, I really don't have time or energy for this."

"No. I sent him because he's the best there is. He's been tracking Whitfield since the day of the escape. You can trust him. If anyone can keep you alive, he can." Nathan coughed. "He'll grow on you."

"Oh, that's nice to know," she drawled as she rolled her eyes. "He'll grow on me? Like mold on a wall, perhaps?"

Nathan laughed. "You're a target. And he's going to stay as close as possible to you until Whitfield is caught. Get used to the idea."

"I don't have a choice in this?"

"Sure you do, Emmy. You can move home to Montana. Right now. If you stay there, Chuck will be your shadow."

"Hell of a choice you're giving me. I have a life here. You can forget that idea, Nathan."

"Then you have no choice. Chuck is there to protect you."

"Not to bring down Whitfield?"

"I need to keep you safe. Whitfield escaped from

my custody. He's killed a lot of people in the last two weeks. I don't want you to be listed among his victims. He wants revenge against me. Why do you think he moved against Christine and Patrick? Don't add to my midnight regrets. I've got enough of those concerning this matter as it is."

She sighed. "You don't play fair, Nathan."

"No. But I win. That's the only thing that really counts."

"You're such a pragmatic soul, Nathan Edward Parks."

"You say that like it was a bad thing," he teased.

She sighed. "I'll talk to you, later."

"On a land line. No cell calls until this is all over."

"Yes. Bye."

"Be careful. I want you to come through this alive."

Suddenly, she was listening to an electronic tone, not his voice. "Yeah, Nathan. Me too."

She hung up the phone. Still cautious, she removed the revolver from the black leather holster, she cocked the weapon. Emily didn't like one bit how she reacted to this man.

"Mr. Mooney. I'm going to unlock the door now. After you hear the fourth lock open, count at least three seconds then come inside. If you move faster than that, I'll take it as a sign of aggression and put a silver bullet in between your eyes, no questions asked. I trust that you understand me?"

"Yes, m'am," he said.

Emily unlocked the door and stepped back.

He came in as her count reached five, closing the door behind him.

"I'll shoot you if you make any sudden moves towards me."

"I'm no threat to you, Emily."

"So you say. I'm not convinced."

"Good Lord, woman, don't you know you should never point a pistol at anyone if you aren't prepared to shoot, and never shoot unless you're prepared to kill!"

"Yes. And I'm delighted you do, too," she told him in a voice more steady than she felt. "I'm taking no chances. I'd suggest you don't, either."

He nodded, once. "Okay, I understand where you're coming from. I don't like it. But I understand."

She could smell his wariness, mixed with a hint of frustration. There was also a large amount of male hormones. Of course, it didn't take a half-breed's nose to pick up on the interest. All it took was a pair of eyes looking at the sizable bulge in his jeans.

"I don't want a bodyguard. Nathan knows this. But he's not giving either of us the choice. Now show me some ID. Put it down on the table here and back away against the door. Any sudden move towards me will prove lethal for you."

He nodded and complied. "I understand why you're so careful. But it pisses me off to have this much hostility directed at me."

"Tough. My father was terribly careful with strangers. Yet, he's dead. So if you're Chuck Mooney, forgive me for being so cautious. If you aren't who precisely you say you are, you're dead."

"Cautious is understandable in the circumstances."

But you're obviously cautious about security at all times. Not many people have security systems as elaborate as yours. Hell, I've been on military bases that had less security."

She nodded. Emily picked up the wallet he had put down on the table. She raised it to eye level and glanced at the identification. "Okay, Chuck. You can take your ID back now."

"You planning on holding a gun on me permanently?"

"Not real practical of an idea," she admitted with a small smile.

"No. It's not." His answering smile took her breath away.

She carefully lowered the hammer on the revolver, made sure that an empty cylinder was under the hammer, and replaced the weapon in the holster at the small of her back.

* * * *

"Would you have really shot me?"

"In a New York minute. Nathan says you're okay. That has to be good enough for me. You want coffee or something stronger?" she asked him as she turned to walk away from him. "Lock the door behind you, okay?"

"Coffee will be fine," he told her as he followed her through to the kitchen. "I don't drink. Aren't you lonely, here away from the Pack?" he asked as he entered her kitchen.

The room was clearly a working kitchen. Rich

cherry wood cabinets meshed with top of the line commercial stainless steel appliances. The countertops were all gray marble to match the floor. The room was a study in contrasts between practical and luxurious. It reflected the woman who stood before him. Practical, beautiful, high quality, down to earth, and profoundly sensual.

"No. I've never really been part of the Pack. Besides, I don't have the time to be lonely. My practice and the courses I teach at the college keep me very busy," she answered as she flipped the switch of a coffee maker. The machine hissed to life and began pumping out coffee.

He sniffed. *Holy Shit! Wolfbane.* The scent was unmistakable. It wasn't strong. But it was present. "What the hell are you doing working with wolfbane?"

* * * *

"You don't have to raise your voice at me," she frowned at his tone. "Most of the scent was pulled out by the vent fans."

"I can still smell it, slightly. Seems to come mostly from this garbage bag. What were you doing with wolfbane?"

She put her hands on her hips. She didn't want to deal with this very domineering male. But she wouldn't let him run her over. She'd had her fill of bossy, dominant, men. One of those in her life was one too many. "Okay, let's get one thing clear. I owe

you no explanations and you don't order me around or question me like a suspect. Use whatever few brain cells you have. DUH. My parents were murdered this morning by a Packmember. There's the odor of wolfbane in my house. How *could* these things be connected?"

"Lose the sarcasm, woman!" he practically growled at her. "I'm not your enemy."

"What do you think I was doing with the wolfbane? I want to hurt the son-of-a-bitch who killed my parents. I want to hurt him badly. The wolfbane is part of that."

"Working with wolfbane is dangerous," he said in a tone anyone would have used with a particularly stupid child. "Even as a half-breed, you have to know that."

"It's not as dangerous as working with silver. Which, before you scream at me, I did today as well, refining silver nitrate into a form so that it became injectable in a solution with wolfbane."

She watched him shudder.

"You're either uncommonly brave or surpassingly stupid. I'm reserving judgment."

"Are you? How sweet," she drawled, fighting back the urge to order him from her home. The only thing stopping her was the knowledge that he wouldn't go. "Do you have any idea how little I care what you think?"

"It's been my experience that doctors are often rude, possessing a God complex. Are you this rude with everyone, or do I just rub you the wrong way?"

She closed her eyes and sighed. "It's been a day

from hell. I found my parents dead this morning. Makes me a little testy."

"If this is a little, I don't think I want to be around you when you're royally pissed off."

In spite of herself, she laughed. "Probably not. I've got a temper that could scorch steel. I'm doing the best I can to cope with this threat. So, get the hell off my back."

"I'm here to protect you. You don't need to arm yourself with lethal poison," he said, his voice gentle.

"I don't want your protection."

He nodded. "Acknowledged. However, I've been detailed here. Until I'm ordered off this detail, here I'll stay."

"I could call the cops and have you arrested."

He snorted. "Sure you could."

God, how I want to slap him! Then she reined that in. He was bigger, stronger, and probably faster than she was. Hitting him would open herself up for retribution. She had no doubt that he'd extract payment for any insult or injury. He didn't strike her as the forgiving type. What form that retribution would take, she didn't know and didn't want to learn first hand. She knew too well how helpless a woman could be against a larger, stronger, man intent on hurting. Her marriage had taught her that lesson only too well.

"Don't try to push me around, Chuck. I won't tolerate it," she warned, her voice both tired and fierce.

"I'm here to protect you. I won't have time to argue

with you if things start to go sour. You have to obey me, if you want to stay alive."

"Obedience isn't my strong suit."

"No. I don't suppose it is. You're a helluva strong woman. But, I'm the expert here. I've got far more experience in dealing with this sort of thing than you do. If you want to stay alive you need to take my word as law, not argue with me, not double guess me, not try to think around me. That's going to be hard for you to do. It is essential to your survival."

"I don't want a bodyguard."

He shook his head. "I know you don't. Tough. I'm here. And I'll protect you in spite of yourself. It will be easier if you don't fight me."

She clenched her hands at her sides in order not to hit him. She'd never been given to physical violence, but there was something about him that brought it out in her. "Nathan is going to pay for this."

"Without a doubt," Chuck replied, his eyes narrowing. After a short pause, he said, "You obviously know Nathan Parks well."

Emily smiled at him before she poured and handed him his cup of coffee. Her fingers lingered just a second too long as she delivered the cup to him. His eyes met hers. Sexual awareness sizzled between them. She saw the depth of his reaction to her in his eyes. She smelled the pheromones on him. What would it be like to give into this, to take him as lover? Startled at the strength of the attraction, she turned away.

* * * *

He let her walk away, even though the only thing he wanted was to pull her into his arms, kiss her boneless, and make love to her until the shadows in her eyes were nothing but a distant memory.

She broke into his thoughts as she turned to talk to him once more. "You could say that I know Nathan as well as anyone does. He's a very self-contained man. I'm a bit surprised you even have to ask about the relationship. I thought everyone knew the story."

"Just what is your connection with Nathan Parks?"
It isn't reasonable to be so jealous. The hell it isn't. This is my life-mate. I don't want to have to fight Nathan for her. I'd hate to kill him. He's a good man. Of course, Nathan is just tough enough he might end up killing me instead. Is she worth it? Hell, yes!

"My connection with Nathan? That's easy. I'm his sister. Technically, half-sister. We shared the same mother. The woman whom Whitfield killed today was Nathan's mother as well as mine."

"I see."

* * * *

The smell of relief assaulted her nose. "I'm not sure I like what I smell on you. What did you think I was to Nathan? A breeding partner?" she glared at him.

"Or a potential life-mate. He is rather protective of you."

"Yeah, right. A potential life-mate," she dismissed. "When Nathan takes a life-mate, the woman will be of full-blood and strong in the ways of the Packs."

She'll probably look down her furry nose at Nathan's half-breed half-sister. But then, that's nothing new. Most people in the Pack look down on half-breeds like me."

"You have a major chip on your shoulder where the Packs are concerned, don't you?"

"I prefer to think of it as being realistic. No full Packmember in his right mind would take a half-breed who is incapable of morphing as a life-mate."

"You aren't incapable," he denied, setting the coffee cup down with a thud on the breakfast bar. The liquid splashed over the rim of the cup onto the counter.

"I've never been able to morph."

"Your senses are definitely Lupine. You just smelled the relief on me. You recognized when you were being watched this morning. I wasn't making any noise that could have been easily picked up by anyone other than a Packmember. You turned then looked directly at me this morning, although I was a good hundred feet from you. That, my dear Emily, is a wolf."

"God, I could *feel* someone looking at me. But I blamed it on my imagination, on how jumpy I was. That was you?"

"Yes. I had tracked Whitfield there. I was just a little too late. You showed up before I could clean up the mess."

She drew a ragged breath. "If you'd gotten there long enough before me, what would you have done?"

"The same things I've done for the fifteen other half-breeds Whitfield's murdered in the last two

weeks. Clean up the mess and report it to the Pack authorities."

"Seventeen people in two weeks? That son-of-a-bitch has to be stopped!"

Chuck nodded. "Precisely. We'll get him."

"How can you get him if you're babysitting me? Surely stopping him is more important than protecting me."

"Right now, keeping you safe is the most important thing to me."

Emily swallowed hard at the intensity of emotion she saw in his eyes and heard in his tone. She didn't want to believe this. Believing this would be dangerous to her. This man could take her heart and break it into a thousand pieces. There was no future here, not for her and this Defender.

Defenders had to be single. That was one of the prime rules for his job. Defenders had to have no romantic ties. Most were orphans, without siblings, the original lone wolves. From her experience with human cop types, this one was likely married to his badge. Even with Nathan's explanation that it was time for Chuck to step out of the office and settle down, she wasn't at all sure there was a potential for a future with this man.

But then again as far as futures went, she wasn't at all sure she had any sort of future, not with Whitfield out there looking for vengeance against Nathan. She was the next logical target for him to strike. What would it hurt to indulge her attraction for Chuck?

What would it hurt? When he left, and he would

leave, she wouldn't have a heart left. But then again, the chances were good she wasn't going to be alive when he left here. Maybe neither of them would survive. So, what did something as minor as a broken heart matter in relationship to actual death?

God, I wish I had the courage to go after him. But, I'm such a coward.

"Chuck, no," she said but her voice was much weaker than she wanted it to be.

He stepped towards her. "Emily."

She backed up one step, and would have backed up more, except she couldn't. The corner "lazy susan" cabinet and counter were just behind her. "Just keep your distance."

"A man might think you didn't trust him."

"I don't trust many men."

He stepped towards her. She growled at him from the back of her throat. Chuck stood there toe to toe with her. "You're going to have to learn to trust me. I'm the only way you're going to stay alive."

"Don't you know never to back anyone into a corner?"

"You need to be backed into a corner. That's the only way you're going to listen to me. You're too damned proud for your own good. It's all well and good to be self-reliant. But you're in over your head dealing with Whitfield. He's like nothing and no one you have ever had to deal with. The man is a psychopath and a sociopath."

She laughed.

Chuck looked at her for a long moment. "Why is that funny?"

"Did Nathan tell you what my specialty is?"

"No."

"I'm a psychiatrist. I do a fair amount of forensic work."

Chuck smiled at her. "Okay, you might have dealt with something like Whitfield. Now just unbend and take my help. It's important to me to keep you alive."

Emily sighed. "That's rather important to me as well."

"Look at me, Emily," he commanded in the voice of the Pack.

"Damn you, don't use that tone with me," she demanded as she glared at him. "I'm wise to all the voice tricks. I use them myself. They won't work on me."

"Then you aren't an incapable are you? You do have Pack skills," he said with satisfaction in his voice.

"I've never been able to morph. Neither of my parents could morph. If either of them could have done that, they wouldn't have died as they did. They would have been in a better position to fight back instead of being slaughtered like they were."

She blinked back the tears. She didn't want to cry anymore. She'd cried today more than she cried since her divorce. But then, those had been tears of humiliation. Today's tears had been simple sorrow, rage, pain.

"Just because they chose not to morph is not any reason to assume you can't, with proper training. You might just need the right nudge to do that."

"And what's the right nudge?"

He smiled at her as he stepped back. He retrieved his coffee and refilled the cup. "You aren't ready to hear that, right now. So, let's talk about something else. Do you like being a psychiatrist?"

"Do you really want to know, or are you just trying to make small talk?"

"If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't have asked. I have no patience for small talk."

"Actually, yes. I do enjoy my work. I help people live fuller lives."

"Helping people is important to you?"

"If it wasn't, I wouldn't have spent all the years in medical school, internship, residency, and fellowship. Being a doctor is just too hard if all you want is an income. I am what my training made me. Just as you are. Nathan said you were ex-military. Special forces, I presume?"

* * * *

Yes, the woman is sharp. He removed his jacket and hung it over the back of one of the barstools. He didn't miss the way she took in his appearance, right down to the shoulder holster that held his .44 Magnum loaded with silver bullets. But, he neither saw nor smelled revulsion from her. The largest scent was still one of sexual awareness. He still aroused her. Good. At least, this was very mutual.

"Yes. I was Special Forces. That's quite a car you have parked in the carport. You like fast cars?"

"I bought that to celebrate my divorce, two years

ago."

Chuck nodded. "So, the car was a declaration of independence."

"More like a tangible symbol of freedom. Speaking of the carport, do me a favor."

"Sure. What?"

"Take out that garbage bag there and put it in the metal trash can. Put the lid on it, tightly. Be very careful."

"Why?"

"The bag contains the remains of the equipment I used to extract wolfbane and purify the silver nitrate in order to fill the medication pens. I was on my way to take the garbage out when you started walking around the house."

He shuddered. "Woman, you don't mess around." He put back on his jacket. "No sense in scaring the neighbors."

"Most of my neighbors are either out right now, or sleeping. The man to my west works nights in his pathology practice and sleeps days."

"Is he anyone to be concerned about?" Chuck demanded, his voice careful.

Emily bristled. "He's a vampire, if that's what you mean. But he doesn't give anyone any trouble."

"You seem nonchalant about that."

"I don't make trouble for people. Some of my best friends are vamps."

He smiled, tightly. "Are they? Including the neighbor?"

"Pete Graddy is a good person. We've gone out

together a few times."

"Gone out, or stayed in?" Chuck asked, his voice quiet.

"There's nothing romantic between Pete and me, if that's what you're asking. But sometimes, when we both need to go to a medical society dinner, or a hospital association function, we'll go together. He's fun and he makes me laugh. I judge a person by who they are, not what they are. Pete's okay."

"There is a considerable amount of wariness among many in the Packs where vamps are concerned."

"Oh, but I'm not a member of the Pack. Not really. I have no vote."

"True...for now." And before she could protest, he changed the subject again. "Let me take out the trash for you."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Hey, I'm used to taking care of garbage," he teased.

"As a Defender, I have no doubt of that. Only you usually deal with Packmember trash."

* * * *

He laughed. That sound touched her to the depth of her soul. She had a feeling laughter didn't come easily to him. Then he took the garbage out of the house for her.

"I'm making dinner. It will be a couple of hours before it's ready. Will you be hungry?" she asked, changing the subject when he returned. Emily really

didn't want to discuss his life and status within the Pack with him. She wanted him too badly to think about the things separating them.

"Is that an invitation?"

She nodded. "Not a very elegant one, I admit. You're lucky. I only cook on weekends," Emily said with a self-conscious half-smile. This man made her smile, even after everything that happened today.

He smiled in return. It was a smile guaranteed to melt a woman's heart. It certainly melted hers. "Yes."

"Okay, then pull up a barstool at the breakfast bar and tell me about Chuck Mooney."

"Do you really want to know, or are you making small talk?" he challenged, throwing her words back at her.

"Like you, I don't have the patience for small talk today. If we're going to be spending time together, then we need to know things about one another," she said as she went to the refrigerator, removing the two boneless legs of lamb she'd planned to roast today.

She'd just brushed the meat and put it into the oven when the phone rang. Emily set the timer for an hour. She picked up the cordless handset from the counter. "Doctor Matthews... Yes, Pastor Johnson. Thank you for getting back to me... Yes... No, I'm okay. Sad. Angry. I'll work through it."

Chuck gave her a thumbs up sign and a smile.

"Tuesday evening, seven p.m., at the Church would be fine with me. This will be just be a service for those who loved them to say 'goodbye' and try to get some comfort. I doubt the bodies will be present.

The coroner probably will still be holding them. I don't know what comfort can be had in this, though."

Chuck rose from the barstool and walked towards her.

Emily swallowed hard. "I'll talk with you tomorrow. Thanks for calling."

She turned off the phone and laid it down on the counter.

"You're handling this all very well, all things considered."

She blinked back tears as she shook her head. "I don't know about that, at all. I feel like I'm just barely holding on. Things are spinning out of control so fast I just want to scream."

He stroked her face with the back of his hand. Emily swallowed hard and took a step back from him. "I'm okay. You don't need to worry about me. I'm not going to fall apart into a gazillion pieces. I'll hold it together. I'm not going to leave you open to being hurt while you are protecting me."

He smiled at her and shook his head. "Why don't you let me worry about that?"

"Why don't you sit down and tell me all about this Whitfield character, since you don't want to tell me about yourself? If he's coming for me, I want to know why."

Chuck nodded, but he didn't sit down. "Lucas Whitfield is truly an evil man."

Emily shuddered. Somehow, she doubted that evil was a word he used lightly. "You want to explain that?"

"He's a eugenicist. He considers it his role in life to

eliminate the old, the sick, and the weak from among the Packs. And he's not above applying his standards to the Singleform population as well."

"Nathan said something about Whitfield wanting revenge. Said that you would tell me the whole story."

"Revenge? Yeah, that makes sense. Or as much sense as anything can be made of senselessness," Chuck allowed. "Five years ago, Whitfield committed a series of murders of half-breeds. All except the last one, we managed to keep out of the human justice system. That one got away from us. Much in the same way that the murder of your parents got away from us today."

She sighed. "Sorry about that."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. You couldn't help being sick at seeing the mess Whitfield made of your parents. I've felt sick when I've seen the mess he'd made of others, and I didn't know them. I probably would have lost it, too, if I had known any of the people I found. That you're even functioning now, instead of being curled up on yourself and babbling in a corner says a lot about the strength of your will to carry on."

"Now, you're being entirely too kind. I've seen a lot of terrible things while I was training to be a doctor. I haven't been that sick over a sight since the first autopsy I attended," Emily said as she walked over to a bin and removed a ten pound bag of russet potatoes. "Keep talking while I work. I need to know this stuff about Whitfield."

"You really only cook on the weekends?" he asked.

"Most of the rest of the week, I'm too busy. So, I cook on the weekends and reheat food during the week. If I didn't cook at least once a week, I'd be eating fast food all the time, and then I'd be even bigger than I am."

"You say that like you think you're fat."

She looked over her shoulder at him, then she returned her attention to scrubbing potatoes. She had to do something to keep herself from touching him.

"No. Not fat. Just more round than is fashionable."

"Beautiful is what you are."

She fought back the wave of pleasure at his appraisal of her. "You still haven't finished telling me about Whitfield."

"As far as the authorities knew, one of Whitfield's wolf crossbreeds attacked an old man and killed him. The body was found near Whitfield's property. They couldn't locate Whitfield. Because he disappeared, they put out a warrant on him. He was put into the NCIC database. The whole thing blossomed way out of control."

"That old warrant is still around someplace, I presume?"

"Yes, and we'll use it if we have to."

"Of course."

"We caught up with Whitfield before the police did, and brought him before the Council. He received a life sentence, locked to remain as a wolf while confined in a solitary run at Nathan's compound."

"This was five years ago? So why is he free? I can't believe that Nathan freed him."

"No," Chuck said, his voice full of disdain. "Parks had nothing to do with it. He was out on a call at the time of Whitfield's escape. A human, a young man named Tom Anderson, who worked for your brother let Whitfield free. Anderson is traveling with Whitfield and we assume is under his control. Anderson wasn't particularly bright, by all accounts."

"All of this makes you long for the good old days, doesn't it?"

Chuck nodded. "That's very true. There are times the Packs have to defend themselves. Leaving him alive was nothing less than creating a ticking time bomb. It's now exploded, leaving the Defenders to pick up the pieces."

She sighed and shook her head. "God. So, he thought to harm Nathan by murdering his mother. That would be funny, if it wasn't so damnably sick."

Chuck cocked his head slightly, looking at her with a profoundly curious expression. "Why would this be funny?"

"Long, sad, story. I really don't want to tell it."

"Everyone has at least one long sad story in their lives."

She changed the subject again. This was getting way too personal and she wasn't going to give him any advantage over her. "I didn't ask you. Do you like lamb?"

* * * *

Chuck couldn't contain the laugh that bubbled up

in his throat. *There's absolutely no doubt she's my life-mate. This means I'll have to resign from the corps of Defenders. I'll gladly give up the work in exchange for a life with her.* "Yes, Emily, I like lamb. I'll eat almost anything."

"You'll want to stay here?"

"Yes."

"You can have the second bedroom."

"No, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"You better rethink that. I have no intention of showering under your direct supervision."

He smiled. "Honey, I can think of a lot of things we'd both enjoy more without clothes."

He watched as her face infused with color and heat.

"You've been married and you can still blush like that?"

"You normally make passes at women you've known only for a period of minutes?"

She was trembling. *God, is this because she wants me, or because she's afraid of me?* "No."

"So, why me?"

"That's a very good question. You aren't ready to hear the answer."

"Try me, anyway."

"Okay, but you can't say I didn't warn you."

"Just say it."

"You're my life-mate."

Chapter Five

*H*is what?

"Just like that? You've made this brilliant determination in just these few minutes we've been talking, and naturally without consulting me?" she asked in utter dismay.

"No. I knew you were my life-mate this morning as I watched you walk to your parents' house, before you found their bodies."

Emily closed her eyes and swallowed hard. *This morning is the last thing I want to think about.* "Let's not talk about that, please."

Chuck nodded. "Okay, honey."

"Don't call me honey!"

Chuck pulled her into his arms. "Emily, sweetheart, do you know how lucky we are? Listen to your body, listen to your Lupine soul."

Emily leaned into him and kissed him. She didn't want to think! She simply enjoyed the taste of him, the subtle textures of his mouth. He was one of those men who needed to shave often. His afternoon whiskers were a sensual abrasion under her fingertips and against her lips.

He held her so tightly she could barely breathe. She had no defense against him. Nor did she want to, at the moment. Emily gave herself wholeheartedly into the embrace, moving her tongue over his in a duel almost as old as mankind, tasting him more deeply each moment until neither of them was certain who was kissing whom.

Her body screamed for more. Emily trembled in his arms. Trembled. Desire quickly gave way to ravening hunger.

He cupped her ass in his hands, pulling her closer to him. Even through the cloth of his jeans and her scrubs, the strength of his arousal was apparent.

A small sane corner of her mind was screaming that she should stop this. But she ignored that. This was simply too delicious. But she was scared. Finding one's life-mate within the Packs meant both would shift involuntarily into wolves at the moment of release when making love to their life-mates. *When that doesn't happen, he'll forget all about this life-mate nonsense.*

Somehow, that didn't make her feel any better.

She arched against him as his fingers found and circled the hard nub of her nipple through the scrub top and bra. He pinched just hard enough to send shivers through her.

Chuck stepped away from her. "I need to know that you want me."

"You stopped to ask me *that*?"

"This is anything except casual. I'm very much involved. You're my life-mate. I will care for you from now on and forever. I think you care a little

about me, too."

"You fascinate me."

He smiled at her. "That's a start. I'm a hard man."

She ran her hand over the bulge at his crotch. "And then some," she teased.

"Don't tempt the wolf or I might lose control."

The starkness of his voice made her back away from him slightly. "Is control so important to you?"

"Right now? God, yes."

Emily nodded. She stepped back towards him. "And I turn you on?"

"More than any woman ever has. I don't want to scare you, but it'll be a miracle if I don't rip those scrubs. I want to strip them off your body, peel them over your breasts, slide them down your gorgeous legs. Then I'll ease you into one of the chairs at your dining room table, spreading your legs wide by looping them over the arms of the chair, all the better to see you. To feast on you."

Emily swallowed as the images he painted with his soft, almost whispered, words found their way into her soul.

"I'd just look at you till I had my fill, staring at that thatch of glorious red hair between your legs. Then I'd kneel down, spreading gently your swollen folds and lick your sweet juices. Ah, Emily, I can already taste you and feel your pussy as I bring you to climax over and over again. You'd beg me to fuck you, to bury my cock deep inside your pussy, so I'd lift you up and turn you around until you're kneeling before me on your hands and knees with your perfect ass in

the air. And that's when I'd thrust hard deep inside you, pushing hard against your womb while I anchor myself, my hands encircling your breasts, my thighs pushing against you so hard you, my balls slap between your legs until your body shivers and spasms, coming so strong you take me along." He paused a moment, his eyes fathomless pools. "And that, Emily, is how I'll claim you while pumping my seed deep inside you."

Emily found herself trembling and she licked her lips. "Oh...ah..."

"Does that scare you?"

Emily smiled. "No, but after that maybe, instead I'll just knock you to the floor, straddle you and fuck you."

Chuck laughed. "As long as I get to be inside you, who cares about the logistics?"

She chuckled. "Spoken like a man."

"Spoken like a man who loves you."

She looked at the need on his face and without a word, she took his hand and led him down the hall to her bedroom.

* * * *

He knew they should wait till they weren't in danger, but he couldn't. In the corner of his mind that wasn't overwhelmed by the anticipation of making love to her, the Defender still registered several things about her bedroom. There were no windows, and only one way in and out. A person could get cornered here with no way out.

"Tell me you have another exit apart from this door!"

She looked at him, obviously surprised at his tone. "Yes. There's a way out. Let's not talk about that just now, though, okay?"

The bed was vintage Victorian; an almost seven-foot tall headboard, gorgeous wood. Handmade quilt. The woman was a closet romantic.

She looked up at him. "Are you just going to stand there?" she asked, her voice uncertain.

"Be sure about this, Emily. I keep what's given to me."

"You may not want me when you see me."

He heard the pain and uncertainty in her voice. "I can't imagine a time that I won't want you. What is it, Em?" He crossed over to her. "I know today's been hard. You are alive. Life is for those of us who are living. Will you make love with me? Will you give yourself to me for now and for the rest of our lives, as I give myself to you, for now and forever?"

* * * *

Those are the words that will bind me to him, the promise of forever. He'll hate me when I can't morph. I can't say those words.

"Let's just worry about now, and let forever take care of itself, Chuck. Please. I'm not sure I believe in forever." She smelled the sadness on him. "I don't want to hurt you. But I can't say those words, right now."

Chuck nodded. "Okay. You will be able to speak

them later. It's unfair of me to push you right now."

Emily forced a smile. "Good, because I'll push back."

He laughed. "That's one of the things that makes this a perfect match."

"Don't," she warned.

She smelled the joy coming from him, the love. Both of those lay atop a complex mixture of caution, fear, banked anger, lust, and several other emotions she couldn't quite identify.

Chuck removed his holster and laid it with his revolver on the nightstand. Then he pulled off the t-shirt and let it drop to the floor.

Looking at him made her mouth go dry. His chest was perfect; well muscled and covered in a mat of dark hair with threads of silver.

"Your turn," he urged.

Emily removed her holster from the small of her back. She placed it beside his on her nightstand. The two pens of silver and wolfbane went next to the pistols.

She swallowed hard seeing the real reminder of the danger. But she didn't want to think about that. All she wanted was the man standing before her.

Emily pulled the scrubs top off over her head, revealing her breasts enclosed in a silk bra.

She watched his face as he clearly reigned himself in. "Gentle is not what I want."

"Good. I'm not sure gentle is in my capacity right now. I want to take you, hard and fast."

"Do you hear any complaints?"

He pulled the bra open, his mouth closed over one

nipple, his tongue circling and flicking while his fingers teased the other.

Each tug of his mouth sent flames of desire swirling through her. The tension grew, expanded, swept her along as his lips and tongue and hands aroused her. Her breath exploded in tiny puffs of air, her hands clenched against his hard body and she trembled, teetering on the edge of orgasm, her body crying out for release. This wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. She wanted him inside her when she came. She unfastened his pants, and lowered the zipper. He moaned as she cupped his cock in her hand through his boxers.

He lifted his head from her breast. The need on his face made her smile. "Emily. Don't, unless you want me inside you right now."

"Sounds damned good to me."

The remaining clothes were thrown about and he trembled when her hand closed over his cock.

"God, you better be ready."

"Yes, Chuck. Now! Please."

Emily arched against him. She moaned as he licked her neck. Chuck pushed her down on the bed and sank down on his knees before her.

She thought she would die with the pleasure of his hands on her, but that was nothing in comparison to the feeling of his lips on her thigh. As his tongue teased her clit, Emily told herself that breathing was over rated. She pulled his head closer, needing this, needing more.

"Chuck, fuck me. Please, oh please..."

He lowered himself completely over her.

She wrapped one leg, and then the other around his hips, embracing him, opening herself up to his possession. She felt his cock, hard and ready, against her pussy.

"Now, Chuck, fill me. Fuck me. Hard. Fast," she demanded in a breathless voice. Emily closed her eyes, just letting the sensations sweep over her. Full, empty, full. Deep. His cock slid in and out of her, pounding at her, unrelenting in the drive towards completion. Her nipples rubbed against his furry chest. The only sounds were the sounds of their breath coming fast and the slick slap of hard against soft flesh.

Sweat dripped off her forehead and beaded up all over her. He made her hot, hotter than any man ever had. Her breath came harder and harder. God, she needed this, needed him, in a way she couldn't explain.

His lips and tongue teased her neck and ears as he drove his cock into her. She thought she'd die if he didn't stop. She knew she'd die if he did.

All she wanted was to be right here, with him, possessing him, being possessed. Love, yes. This was more than just sex. Tension threatened to explode. But this would be different from any other orgasm she had ever had, she didn't know how, just that it felt *more*.

"Emily, honey, look at me," he commanded as she felt the spasms of her orgasm begin.

"Look at yourself. Look at me. Look at us. Know the truth. You're mine." And then he bit her shoulder,

a tease of a love bite.

"Chuck!" she cried out, her voice overwhelmed, as the spasms of her climax swept her away.

"Don't close your eyes. Keep them open."

Emily felt her body take on heaviness. Momentarily, she felt pain everywhere with sensations of stretching and prickling. Yet, the pain quickly changed into overwhelming pleasure.

"Look, Emily," Chuck said, his voice hoarse as the speed of his strokes increased.

She looked at her own arms, finding them changed into wolf limbs. She looked down her own, now elongated, nose and saw fur.

"Chuck!" she called out, her voice human, though nothing else about her was.

Chuck moaned loudly as he came, then in the blink of an eye, he was a wolf as well and he howled. He collapsed on top of her, licking her furry ear and the side of her face. *Mine, Emily. Forever.* She heard him in the mind link common to life-mates.

I can't believe this. She tried moving her tail.

Believe. Just believe.. We're life-mates, my Em. You see it. Believe the evidence of your eyes.

She closed her eyes and visualized herself in human form. Yet, when she opened her eyes, she was still a wolf.

* * * *

Chuck smelled the fear on her. *Don't be afraid. As soon as you come down from the orgasm, the morph will fade.*

She licked his ear. *I never could do this. Why now?*

All you needed was the right stimulus. As long as recorded history, life-mates have morphed at climax. Rest. Your body has spent a lot of energy today. When you awaken, you will be in human form again. Sleep deeply. Rest well."

Chuck moved away from her as she fell asleep. He sat there watching her. Now, all he had to do was to keep her safe from Whitfield.

Chapter Six

Emily woke up feeling refreshed. Her body was human again. *Dammit, the meat.* She jumped out of bed, and pulled on her scrubs.

"Who gave you that scar? On your back."

Emily didn't turn to face him.

She felt his hand on her back, and lifted her top.

Chuck's voice was full of barely controlled menace. "That scar came from a beating. A pretty serious beating. With a whip. Emily. Look at me. Honey, who hurt you?"

Emily shook her head. "Better to leave the past in the past, Chuck. I've got to save our dinner."

She walked out of the room without looking at him.

Chuck, wearing only his jeans and his holster, walked into the kitchen as she pulled the roasts from the oven.

"I hope you like your lamb a little more towards well than rare. This cooked a little too long."

"It will be fine. I'm sure."

"Here I am trying to impress you and I destroy our meal. I'm usually a good cook and I never burn food."

"Until today, you've never made love to your life-mate, either."

She felt her face grow hot.

He laughed then spoke to her. "We can have the celebration of our mating at your brother's with the Pack around us. My mother will be delighted. She'd given up on the thought of grandcubs from me."

Emily shook her head and sighed. "I've never been able to get pregnant."

"You've never been with your life-mate until now. Humans and half-breeds frequently have sterile unions. No one quite knows why. Genetically, it makes little sense. On the other hand, we should have strong, fine cubs. If not, well, it won't be for any lack of trying. I doubt there will be a time either of us will be able to keep our hands off of one another."

She bit back a laugh. "Okay, I'm not touching that."

Emily put the potatoes in the oven and set the timer for one hour. "These should have been in the oven already so they would have been done with the lamb. Guess we'll have to have something else with dinner."

You know, I'm not going to forget about that scar on your back.

Her eyes popped open. "I'm not sure I like how easily we slip into each other's mind."

"One of the marks of life-mates is telepathy. Get used to it. We'll have it with one another for the rest of our lives."

The proximity alarm went off. "Someone's on the place," she said in a panicked tone.

"Take it easy. We'll handle it."

The doorbell rang. That ring was followed by a solid police style pounding.

She picked up the remote and clicked on the video. Standing at the door was her ex-husband.

"God, this is all I need."

"Who is it?"

"Jack, my ex," she said as she went to the door.

"Let him in. I want to talk to him," Chuck said, menace in his voice.

"Chuck, don't. You really don't want to deal with him."

"You need to trust me, Emily."

"I do trust *you*."

"Jack?" she asked through the intercom.

"There's been another death, a bum in an alley over on Center Street."

"And this is my business how?"

"I want you to come with me in a cruiser and call out for Caesar on the PA system. He might come to you. You're our last hope of catching him before he kills again."

"I doubt that Caesar is alive. He wouldn't have let anyone do that to Mom and Dad, if he could have stopped it. If you weren't blinded by your hatred of me, you might realize that."

"I don't hate you."

"Could have fooled me."

"How are you holding up, Em?"

She sighed heavily. "Not very well. But, I'll handle this."

"Let me in, Emily. We can talk about it."

"No, Jack, go away."

"Who, or what, are you hiding in there, Emily?" Jack's voice held the same old suspicion that had been poison to their marriage. "You've got Caesar in there, don't you?"

"No. I don't. Go away, Jack."

"I can get a search warrant, Emily."

"Then get it. You aren't coming into my house without a warrant."

"I'll be back."

Jack turned and walked away.

"Yeah, I know, just like MacArthur or Arnold, more like Arnold really, as MacArthur had a good reason to return," she thought aloud.

Behind her, Chuck laughed. "I do love you."

Her phone rang. She answered it. "Matthews...It's Doctor Azucar's weekend to take calls... Fine, I'll be there in ten minutes."

She hung up the phone. "The hospital wants me there. They need a preliminary evaluation of a young man the police just brought in."

"I'll come with you."

* * * *

Almost exactly ten minutes later, they walked into the emergency room. Jack had followed them from her house.

The nurse looked up from the desk. "Thank God you're here, Doctor Matthews."

"Fill me in," Emily said.

The nurse looked at Chuck. "Can I help you, sir?"

She used the voice of the Pack. "He's with me. Fill me in."

The nurse nodded. "Of course, Doctor. The young man is in four. He attacked a police officer and bit one of the nurses. The police have him in restraints. We're short staffed enough with the nurses' strike that we don't need this."

Jennifer Greene, a local cop, walked over to the desk. Emily always felt like the ugly stepchild standing next to Jennifer, who possessed a tall, nordic, blond beauty.

Yeah, sweetheart, sure. A man can see how anyone would prefer bones and skin instead of a real woman who's soft in all the right places.

Jesus, I really have no privacy. Am I not to have even the privacy of my own thoughts? I'm not sure I like this.

Again, you'll get over it. What's going on with this woman and you?

She and Jack, my ex, had an affair. She's probably as close to the love of his life as he'll let any woman be. In fact, they're getting married next week.

Was this affair before or after he beat you?

They were lovers before we got married, and the marriage was no impediment in either of their minds to their continuing their affair. Hey, I didn't say anything about Jack beating me.

Scars on a woman. Animosity towards the ex-husband. It isn't hard to put together. That man and I have some serious talking to do.

Leave the past in the past.

The Hell I will.

It's over and done with.

But you live with the scars. Physical and emotional. And those emotional scars are standing between us. Don't ask me not to seek retribution for that.

Don't psychoanalyze me, Chuck. And everyone has scars of one sort or another. Some of them are visible. Others are hidden. We live with them.

I'll do what I have to do to make a life for us.

What would you say if I told you it no longer mattered to me?

That would depend on why it no longer mattered, I'd suppose.

Let's just leave the past in the past and move on with our life.

Life? Not lives?

We have only one life as life-mates. I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to. Where would you like to live?

My family's in Montana. I'd like that. What about your practice here?

My partner can buy me out.

Is this what you want?

We deserve a fresh start. We'd never get it here. There are just too many old ties, too much sadness. The only reason I stayed here was because my parents wanted me to. They're gone now. And I'm alive. For once, I want to do what's best for me.

Okay. I think it's a great idea to make a fresh start.

Jennifer spoke. "Emily, thanks for coming. It's obvious that he wants people to think he's crazy. We pulled him off a ledge after he threatened to jump. He's in restraints after he knifed Phil Cobden. We're holding him on attempted murder charges. He hadn't

been questioned yet. We're waiting on his court appointed attorney."

"How's Phil?"

"In surgery. That's all I know."

Emily sighed. "Sorry. Give Mary a hug from me."

"Will do. Back to the perp, he's rambling on about wolves talking to him. He obviously wants people to think he's crazy. The fact he was on the ledge is enough for us to doubt his sanity."

"Does the patient have a name?" Emily asked.

"Tom Anderson."

Emily schooled her face. *Chuck, isn't the name of the man who freed Whitfield, Tom Anderson?*

Yes.

Emily nodded. "Okay. I'm going to go see him."

"I'll come with you," Jennifer offered.

"No, you won't. This is a privileged consultation."

Chuck, I need you with me.

Just try to stop me.

Chuck followed her into the small room in the ER.

Emily looked at the police officer sitting in the chair. "Wait outside," she told him.

The officer left the room and closed the door behind him.

She got a good look at Tom Anderson. He was average height, slimly muscular, as thought used to hard physical work. He was agitated.

"Hello, Mr. Anderson. I'm Doctor Matthews. This is Chuck Mooney."

"Get me out of these cuffs!"

"I can't do that. The police say you're dangerous."

"Not nearly as dangerous as the wolf. It's going to

come for me. I have to be free to defend myself."

"No healthy wolf has ever been known to attack a person," Emily said.

"This isn't a normal wolf. I tell you. It's bigger. He had to be six and a half feet long, not counting the tail. The head was different from a wolf. Teeth bigger, jaw bigger, just different. I've been tracking that animal for weeks since it attacked me in Montana."

"Attacked you?" Emily asked. "And you survived?"

"Came at me while I was cleaning its cage. Knocked me down flat, stood on my chest, told me that it was going to kill me. Then it ran off. Normally, a wolf is shy. This thing never was. I've been tracking him since he escaped. He ran down a drunk in the alley and took him to ground. Then he looked at me, spoke, saying that I couldn't stop him and to leave him alone or else he'd kill me. That's not a normal wolf."

"You've been tracking the wolf since Montana?"

"Yes, ma'am. Doc Parks had him in a run. I took care of him daily, fed, watered, and cleaned his cage. The week before he got out, he was off his feed. Doc kept him half sedated, so it wouldn't be much of a threat to the workers. Doc warned me not to get too close to him. But I grew fond of the mutt."

"Why have you been tracking it?"

"Because I was responsible for letting him go."

"Have you told anyone this story about why you're tracking the wolf?"

"No."

Chuck, could this be true?

Not a chance. I've been tracking them. Anderson's been with him, not following him. If Whitfield had attacked him, he'd be dead. Leaving witnesses is not part of Whitfield's MO.

"Don't tell anyone that part of your story," Emily said her voice quiet and hypnotic. "You will say nothing to anyone about Nathan Parks or your connection with this animal in Montana. You don't have to worry about the wolf anymore. It's over."

"Yes. Doctor Matthews, thank you."

"It's no problem, Tom. We'll talk again soon."

* * * *

"What the hell are you doing here," Patricia Azucar said to Emily as she walked into the doctor's lounge at the hospital.

Emily needed a cup of coffee very badly. A headache threatened. One way of holding it off was caffeine. Chuck went to the pot and poured them both a cup.

"I could ask you the same question, Sugar. I took your call because they told me that you were on another case," Emily said to her petite Hispanic friend and practice partner. Sugar was Doctor Azucar's nickname as her surname meant sugar in Spanish.

"Alvin Ramirez committed suicide."

Emily sighed. "Crap. How's Esperanza taking it?"

Patricia sighed with a shake of her head. "Badly. She did love the old fart."

"I know."

"Why do good women fall for assholes?"

Emily sighed as she took the cup from Chuck.

"Don't ask me. At various times in my life, I might as well been the poster child for bad choices in men."

Emily watched Patricia look at Chuck, before her partner looked at her again. "Past tense?"

Emily smiled. "Very much so. This is Chuck Mooney."

Patricia extended her hand to Chuck. "Any man who can get past Emily's defenses has my undying gratitude. She needs a good man in her life. Are you a good man?"

Chuck shook her hand. "Doctor," he acknowledged. Then he sipped the coffee. "Offhand, I'd say I was a better man than this brew was a good cup of coffee. But, that would depend on what you wanted me to be good for, I'd suppose."

Patricia laughed boldly. "I like you."

He smiled. "Good. I'd really be in trouble if her practice partner hated me on sight."

The other doctor nodded. "That's very true." Then she turned to Emily. "I saw that Jack was investigating your parents' deaths. How is that going?"

"He's still the same old Jack."

"Same old Jackass, you mean," Patricia replied, rolling her eyes.

Chuck laughed. "You're a fine judge of character, Doctor."

"You only say that because it's true," Patricia teased.

"I always speak the truth."

Patricia laughed, then looked at him for a long moment, clearly assessing. "No one always speaks the

truth. We varnish and spin things out to suit ourselves. Truth is a rare commodity."

Chuck looked at her. "You're too lovely to be that cynical."

"I've dealt with people too long not to be cynical."

Emily finished the coffee. "That hit the spot. I think I'll fight off the headache now."

"What are you doing here, Emily?"

"You were busy. I took the call to evaluate a young man. The police had a jumper. The man knifed Phil Cobden."

"Shit. Is Phil okay?"

"I haven't checked on his condition."

"The young jumper?"

"Classic signs of delusion. Maybe too classic. I don't know at this stage. I'd prefer it if you'd take over the case."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"Your parents' deaths, a new love...Yes, I can see your life has gotten very complicated," Patricia offered.

"This guy claims that wolves can talk to him," Chuck dismissed.

Patricia rolled her eyes again. "Is this a case of lycanthropy? Does he think he's a wolf?"

"I don't think so. He doesn't believe he changes into a wolf, just that wolves talk to him," Emily dismissed.

"No problem. I'll see him. Did you have him admitted for observation?"

"Yes. He'll be on six in one of the jail ward rooms."

Emily finished her coffee, letting the warmth and the caffeine soak in. "I'm going home. I still might be able to salvage dinner. We have to talk sometime, Sugar. I'm not at all sure that I want to stay here, now, with Mom and Dad gone. Except for a few friends, there's very little here for me except bad memories and people I'd rather not have to deal with."

Patricia nodded. "That's understandable. Where would you go?"

"I don't know yet. I have family in Montana. They've been trying to talk me into coming out there for years and setting up a practice. Probably family practice. Maybe psychiatry, if I'd land in Helena. Out in the rural areas, though, I'd imagine that I'd do a general practice. I'm still kicking it around. I haven't made any decision. But, you deserve to know what I'm thinking."

Patricia looked at her. "I'll miss you if you go."

Emily sighed. "I think it's time for me to do what I want to do with my life for a change. Almost all my life, I've been the good daughter, doing what Mom and Dad expected of me."

Her practice partner nodded. "Except for when you married Jack."

"That was my one major rebellion," she admitted. "And look at how that turned out."

"Well, everyone's entitled to one mistake," Chuck said his voice dry.

"True," Emily agreed. "And we all know how much of a mistake my marriage to Jack was. We don't need to discuss this any further."

"Let me know when you've made up your mind about staying or going, okay?" Patricia asked. "I'll need a little time to come up with the money to buy you out."

"You'll be the first to know. And we can work out the money issues. It's not like I'm going to be broke."

"As for the knowing," Patricia answered. "You'll be the first to know. And Chuck will be the second. I might come in a distant third."

Emily sighed. "Okay, you'll be the first person besides Chuck and I to know."

"You better invite me to the wedding."

Chapter Seven

Emily sat down with Chuck over roast lamb sandwiches and looked at the man she had fallen in love with. Nathan had called him a badass. That was as good of a definition as any. He was strong, hard, and she sensed a strand of ruthlessness in him. But he was also tender in unexpected ways. He would always take care of her. She knew that she could trust him. That surprised her. She never thought that she'd trust any man.

The proximity alarm went off.

Emily clicked on the television to look at the camera feeds.

Jack stormed up the front walk with four uniformed policemen and an animal control officer. Her ex-husband didn't look happy.

She shut down the television and went to the door, throwing it open, before he knocked. "I take it you have a warrant?"

He handed her the document. "This gives us the right to search your house for the dog Caesar and kill him."

Emily read the warrant. "So, you've told the courts I'm suspect in the deaths of my parents," she

observed. "Jack, I've heard of vendettas. This is going entirely too far in your quest for causing me pain."

"You trained those dogs. Caesar killed your parents. That means you're involved up to your armpits, Emily."

"Dammit, Jack. Those paw prints were too big for Caesar. They had dew claws."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Caesar's dew claws were removed by the breeder's vet before the pup was delivered to me. Those things don't grow back. Check with Mom and Dad's vet if you don't believe me."

"I will check with both the vet and the crime scene team. Trust me on that."

Emily shrugged. Chuck placed a hand on her shoulder. She turned to look at him.

"Easy, sweetheart. Let the officers in. They have a legal right to be here, even if the warrant is based on lies. We'll fight this in court if we have to. And we certainly can have a badge or three, if we need to go that far."

"Who the hell are you?" Jack practically growled.

"Charles Liam Mooney, Colonel, US Army, Retired."

Jack bristled. "Just what are you doing here, Colonel?"

"If my business were any of yours, you'd already know," Chuck said in a matter of fact voice.

"Don't get into a pissing contest with me, Colonel."

Chuck stepped to her side. He wrapped an arm around her waist. "Of course not. I never engage in

battles of wits with the unarmed."

Several of the officers failed to bite back their laughter.

Chuck, cut it out.

No, I don't think I will. I won't let this needle-dicked asshole hurt you again.

"I could arrest you for obstruction of justice," Jack warned.

Chuck smiled a feral grin. "Really? Good. I'd love to explain to the judge about how a vindictive asshole of a detective is trying to use circumstances surrounding the death of her parents to harass his ex-wife. Then I could explain how the detective cheated on her from the beginning of their marriage and beat her so severely that she will bear the scars on her back for the rest of her life. Do we really want to go there, Detective?"

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Jack bit out through his clenched teeth.

Emily watched the faces of the other officers as her own face flamed with embarrassment. She could see doubt and suspicion blooming in their eyes.

Chuck's smile became colder, more threatening. She saw that out of the corner of her eye. "And since the truth is an absolute defense against slander, neither of us has anything to complain about to the courts, do we?"

Emily felt her face grow even warmer. She had never talked about any of this and she felt ashamed to have anyone know about this private sorrow.

Chuck, please.

I've had it with this jerk. If he wants to play hardball,

we'll play hardball.

This will just make Jack more angry.

Good. I just want an excuse to put my fist through his face. If he loses it and attacks me, that will be an excuse. I'll have his fucking badge. Since that's the only thing he loves, seems appropriate.

God, you'll get arrested and we can't afford that. Not with Whitfield out there.

I won't get arrested. But I will make Jack pay for hurting you. Count on it.

It's over, Chuck. Leave it be. Please. The past should be left in the past.

But this asshole's hurting you now. I will make him regret that.

Emily spoke to the officers, "Your warrant gives you the right to search for a Rottweiler. See that you confine your search to those areas in which a dog that size could reasonably be. I won't stand for this becoming a free for all, trashing the house in the process. So, you can look in closets and under beds. But, if you start going through my drawers, or cabinets, you will be exceeding your authority and I will file complaints. I want that understood. Come in, look for the dog, and leave. Caesar isn't here."

The officers finished their search and left. Jack remained behind for a moment.

"This isn't over, Emily. The more I think about this, the more I know you're responsible for this. You were the only one to profit from your parents' deaths. The only child. The only heir. And your family had lots of money. I'll nail you on this. Count on it. There's nowhere you can hide. Nowhere at all. I'll prove you

did this and see you executed because of your premeditated cold blooded slaughter of your parents."

"I can give you the name and number of a good therapist who can help you over these delusions," Emily offered, her voice angry and tight.

"Bitch," he bit out and turned to walk away.

The proximity alarms went off again.

A wolf, a big wolf, loped around the house from the back. The animal was missing part of its left ear. Whitfield!

I'll handle this. You go to the bedroom and lock yourself in, Emily. You'll be safest there.

I'm not going to cower.

Emily, I don't have time to argue. I've got to stop Whitfield.

I'm coming too. I don't want to lose you.

Stay out of the line of fire.

Emily saw Whitfield leap at Jack.

Whitfield's paws hit Jack's chest. Her ex-husband screamed and reached for his service revolver as he began to fall backwards. Jack hit the ground jarringly hard. Whitfield stood on Jack's chest, growling.

Chuck had drawn his pistol and was trying to get a clean shot.

Emily, stay back!

Jack used his left hand, trying to force the animal away. Whitfield-wolf bit Jack's arm.

A shot rang out. Two shots. Now three. Four. Five. Jack quickly emptied his service revolver into the wolf as the animal attacked. The wolf staggered and yelped after each shot's report, but he kept attacking.

The other officers turned to see the commotion. All of them drew their firearms and came running.

She heard the soft pffttt of the animal control officer's tranquilizer gun. A dart, then a second, went home to Whitfield's chest. The wolf shook them off.

Emily grasped one of the poison pens from her pocket and uncapped it as she followed Chuck, moving quickly towards Jack and Whitfield. She screamed at the wolf. "Hey, you son-of-a-bitch. Off him."

Teeth bared, growling, the animal went for Jack's throat. Emily saw it all as through slow motion. Jack turned his revolver around and began pistol whipping the wolf's nose, forcing the animal's teeth away from him.

She screamed at Whitfield again and threw a baseball sized stone from the landscaping around her house at him. The rock hit the animal in the back of the head and bounced off, landing at Jack's right side.

Whitfield turned from a terrified Jack to look at her. Jack grabbed the stone and used it as a weapon, hitting the wolf in the ribs with it.

Emily. Chuck demanded. Let me handle this. Back off, honey. As your life-mate, the right of vendetta is mine. I don't want you hurt. Back away and let me do this. Trust me.

Emily stopped. Trust was important. Chuck could handle this. It was important to him to handle it. And he was right. Vendetta was his right through her. He was better equipped, of the two of them, to do the battle with Whitfield. But, it scared her to think about

his getting hurt. She'd far rather that Whitfield attacked her than to hurt Chuck.

Whitfield growled and backed away from Jack. Turning, the wolf lunged at her.

Emily felt gut-wrenching fear as Whitfield-wolf leapt at her. She threw herself out of Whitfield's path at the last moment. Chuck straddled the wolf, clamping the lupine shoulders between his knees. He grabbed the wolf by the muzzle, clamping the Lupine jaws firmly within Chuck's single-handed strong grasp. Placing the barrel of his revolver at the side of Whitfield's head, Chuck fired, sending a single silver bullet into the animal's brain.

The animal crumpled. Whitfield was still breathing. Chuck reholstered his pistol. Emily walked over and handed Chuck one of the poison pens.

"Die! You son-of-a-bitch," Emily said as Chuck injected Whitfield's neck with the poison pen, hitting the vein to take the poison directly to his heart. Chuck dropped the empty pen and held out his hand for the second injectable which she gave him.

The animal convulsed and whimpered, dying only after the second injection.

Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to feel sorry for Whitfield. Not in the least. Emily watched as he stopped breathing.

It's over, Emily.

Except for damage control.

We'll handle it.

She sighed. *I know.*

Chuck took her hand in his. Jack's arm was bleeding seriously. Emily could see that from here.

His coat sleeve was already blood-soaked.

Will you go get the black bag from my hall closet? I need some stuff to deal with his injury. Please?

She didn't have to ask twice.

Chuck was back with her bag by the time she had knelt besides Jack. She opened up the bag, and took out her scissors, making short work of both his jacket and shirt sleeve. She pulled the cloth from his arm. Blood spurted bright red from several arterial puncture wounds.

"Damnit, Emily, that's my best suitcoat," Jack groused.

"The blood wouldn't have come out anyway. You got off easy. That animal could have left you in the same shape it left my folks and the bum, instead of just chewing a little on your arm."

Jack shuddered. "It really wasn't Caesar, was it?"

"No."

"I'm sorry."

She looked again at his arm. He really had gotten off easy, but the damage could kill him if it wasn't treated soon. They'd be able to stop the bleeding at the hospital. There wasn't much she could do here.

"You," she ordered one of the younger uniformed officers. "Give me your hand. Keep pressure on the artery until the doctor on duty in the ER tells you to release it. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Get him to the ER, now. Don't wait for an ambulance. He could bleed to death if you don't move now. GO!"

"Emily," Jack began.

"Just go now, please."

Everyone answered her in the affirmative, carried Jack to the patrol car and left with sirens blazing.

The county animal control officer came over with a zippered body bag for the remains of the animal.

"Please make sure the boys from the crime lab get a chance to compare this animal's bite to the bites on my parents and the homeless guy, okay?" Emily instructed as he left.

Chuck stood beside her, after everyone had left. "Come on, my love. Now that it's over, your happiness is my principal goal in life."

"Suppose I can never morph voluntarily?"

"You can. You're strong. You'll learn."

"And if I don't?"

"Won't matter to me at all."

Emily smiled at him. "It scares me how much I love you. Do you know how much I love you?"

He nodded. Then he kissed her temple. "And that's how it should be. You're doing just fine, babe. You're strong, brave, and beautiful."

"I wish I were all of those things. I feel weak, cowardly, and ugly inside. All I can think is how much I wanted Whitfield dead, how much I really wanted him dead before he killed again. And now, I don't feel anything; no elation, no shame, nothing but a detached sense of a threat being gone."

Chuck nodded. "Oddly enough, that's a good thing. You're looking at it with the right degree of detachment. You did what you needed to do."

And frankly, he's forced me to face the darkest part of

my soul, the feral side that has no compunction about killing. I don't like this.

I understand that. The feral side has to be faced, but it must also be controlled. Or else, we end up like Whitfield.

All I know is that I'm terrified of myself. I've told myself again and again how I've only done what I need to do to survive.

Her next-door neighbor, Pete Graddy, moved towards her. She put some distance between herself and the officers still on her lawn, meeting Pete near his property line.

"Quite a show, Emily. I would have impaled him on a silver spear, poured starter fluid down his throat and set that ablaze, then skinned him with a dull knife, if he had harmed you."

She looked at the vamp and sighed. "I'm a big girl, Pete. I usually handle my own problems."

He smiled at her. "Yes. But your problems aren't usually related to a member of your own kind wanting you dead."

"Do me a favor?"

"Sure thing."

"Don't talk about what you've seen here. It's best if it simply dies, as he has."

"After two thousand years, I've learned not to talk about things that Ephemerals won't understand," he said, his voice both quiet and amused. "So, what's the story here? Obviously, you had a rogue set to create havoc. I'd say he'd done a hell of a good job today. Swift work taking him down. What did you inject him with? Silver?"

"And wolfbane."

Pete nodded and smiled. "You could have asked for help, you know."

Emily took Chuck's hand. "I had all the help I needed."

"So, I see," the vampire acknowledged. He sized up Chuck. "You take care of her. If you ever make her miserable, you'll answer to me. You wouldn't enjoy that. She possesses the heart of an Eternal."

"She has a Lupine heart," Chuck countered. "And her happiness is my principal goal in life."

He nodded. "Then we will both count ourselves among the truly blessed to have loved such a woman." Without giving either of them time to react, he turned and walked away.

Did you know he was in love with you? Chuck asked.

Not a clue. God, not a clue. He was always a gentleman. He never even kissed me. Not once.

Probably didn't trust himself not to kill you if he ever let the passion free.

Emily shuddered. Poor man. God, I feel so stupid.

He could have given you eternity.

I'll settle for love.

That, my dearest Emily, you have, now and forever.

You're giving up a lot to have me. What will you do for a living?

I have my pension. It's enough to live on. My degree from West Point is in civil engineering. I can always survey land for a living. Don't worry, we won't starve.

Emily smiled at him. I do love you. It scares me how much I love you.

I don't know I like the sound of that. I don't want you to be fearful of anything about me.

I'm overwhelmed by everything. It's been a terrible day.

He nodded. Then he kissed her temple.

I understand that.

All I know is that I'm terrified of myself. I've told myself again and again how I've only done what I need to do to survive.

Come on, sweetheart. What do you do to relax? What takes you out of yourself?

Watching old movies.

Okay, after we call your brother, let's watch an old movie, eat popcorn, and relax.

* * * *

With cushions on the thickly carpeted living room floor, they lay side by side on their stomachs watching an old Billy Wilder film, "Midnight" with Claudette Colbert, Lionel Barrymore, Don Ameche, and Mary Astor. A large wooden bowl of buttered popcorn lay within easy reach as did a couple of glasses of homemade lemonade.

Chuck laughed so hard during one of the pivotal scenes that he literally howled and morphed into a wolf. He shook off his clothes and stretched before settling back down to watch the film. Emily smiled and pictured herself as a wolf. As before, she felt the stretching, pins and needles, and some pain that shifted into pleasure and contentment as she shifted into her own base form. She shook off her clothes.

Yeah, Emily! I knew you could do it.

I can, can't I? I thought it had been just a fluke. Damn, I really am a wolf.

You have a Lupine heart and grow stronger in the ways

of the Pack. He licked the side of her furry face. *I love you, my mate.*

She began to lick his ear, behind his ear, down his neck.

Chuck lay down on his side. Emily as a wolf continued to lick and tease him, working her way down his body. She licked his hard underbelly and teased his balls with her tongue.

Chuck moaned, morphing into a human. "Keep licking," he sighed as he reached down and stroked her ears.

Emily changed into human too, and sucked his cock deeply into her mouth, moving her head up and down the length of his hard shaft. She pulled away from him when he showed signs of being close to coming.

"My turn. Lover, use that wolfen tongue on me."

He smiled at her. Changing into a wolf, he laved the side of her throat, down her shoulder.

She screamed out his name as his rough tongue teased her already hard nipples into tighter peaks.

He moved his head away from her breasts, leaving a trail of highly sensitized licks all the way down her ribcage, down to her belly.

She spread her legs for him wide.

He stuck his muzzle between her thighs. His rough tongue darted out to tease her clit. She nearly bucked him off of her with her reaction to the touch of his tongue.

She felt her orgasm threaten. "I'm going to come."

He pulled away from her. *On your knees, chest on the floor, with that sweet ass of yours in the air, open to me.*

She scrambled to obey.

Her wolf mounted her. She felt his paws on her back.

The feeling of his long cock pistoning wildly, taking everything she could give him, drove her over the edge. With her orgasm, she morphed into wolf form.

His teeth bit gently into her shoulder, a love bite, as he continued fucking her hard, the warmth of his sperm shooting into her.

They curled up together on the floor and fell asleep. Her last thought before sleep overtook her was that life with him would be anything but boring.

THE END

About the Author

Cassie lives quietly, caring for her children, husband, and Alzheimer's patient mother-in-law. She escapes as often as possible in her writing with the hope that her readers also find her tales at least a momentary escape from the utter craziness that is the life of the modern woman.

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