

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Christine Warren

*Fur Play*



FIXED: FUR PLAY

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# **FIXED: FUR PLAY**

**Christine Warren**

## **Chapter One**

Logan Hunter and Rafael De Santos strode up the wide, granite steps to the front door of Vircolac's, braced to plunge headfirst into the heart of the enemy camp. Well, Logan was braced. Rafe's step possessed a suspiciously eager spring to it, and his expression looked more lazily amused than wary. He'd recently defected.

Few people had been more surprised than Logan when Rafe decided to take a mate, especially a human witch. Actually, Rafe might have been slightly more astonished, considering he'd spent most of his adolescent and adult life demonstrating where the expression "tomcatting around" came from. But he had taken a mate, and apparently it didn't matter to Rafe that he was supposed to be one of Logan's closest friends. In matters of marriage and mating, not even friends could be trusted.

"Last week they somehow managed to rig the door of Graham's office to lock from the outside." Logan held open the door for his companion and checked the hallway to be sure none of the perpetrators he was currently griping about lay in ambush. "Then they sent me in there to wait for him. As soon as I stepped inside, the door slammed shut and trapped me in there with Annie. Annie, of all people!"

Rafe grinned at Logan's obvious dismay. "I thought you liked Annie. She is a very attractive woman, after all. And intelligent. I would think she'd make some lucky Lupine a fine mate."

Logan growled. "She's Silverback, man. It would be like sniffing my sister."

"Right. You and your pack mores. It's not like she's actually any blood relation to you."

“That’s not the point.”

“Right. Because the point is that you probably humiliated a beautiful and sensitive young woman by tearing down the office door just to get away from her. How do you think that made her feel, you insensitive clod?”

Logan scowled. “I didn’t tear it down. I just kicked it in. But Annie knew it wasn’t about her. She’s cool with it. She’s not interested in me either.”

“Right, puppy. She just smiled and thanked you for opening the door and told you to have a wonderful day.”

Logan paused and grimaced. “She told me to shove the door up my ass and shit splinters.”

“Precisely. Logan, you need to learn that whether she’s a werewolf, a shapeshifter, a witch or a human, women are women. They all need to be flattered and coddled and made to feel special.” Tipping the attendant who took their coats, Rafe led the way down the main hall and toward the club library. “It’s a wonder you’ve ever managed to get laid.”

“And that’s such a sophisticated observation,” the Lupine scoffed. “Don’t bother to pretend with me, De Santos. Under that pampered, nancy-boy Casanova image you like to project, you’re just as much an animal as I am.”

Rafe’s dark brow shot up toward his hairline. “I might be an animal, my friend, but I am not, as you might be, a dog.”

“Very funny.”

Rafe smiled a feline smile.

“You can’t tell me they didn’t drive you crazy.” Logan sniffed the air in the hall outside the library, and his keen senses caught the faint but unmistakable odors of breast milk, perfume and female skin. *Damn it.* Bracing himself, his muscles tensed as he reached out to open the door. “They were after you almost worse than me.”

“They meant well.”

“I don’t care what they mean. I want them to leave me alone.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be happy about the idea of finding a mate and settling down with one, single female forever and ever and ever? At least you canines seem to take to the idea.”

Rafe pushed ahead of Logan and entered the room. The fire crackling in the hearth at the far side of the room cast a very becoming glow on the skin of the two women standing beside it. Logan shook his head as he saw his friend’s gaze shift and fix on the curly-headed urchin of the pair. He was still getting used to that possessive gleam that sparked in Rafe’s eyes every time they turned toward Tess Menzies De Santos.

“And you took to it just fine, Morris. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to do my own finding, damn it.” Logan had lowered his voice, and he looked carefully away from the women at the hearth. “They just don’t seem to understand that mating is a whole different ball game from just getting married. Maybe if they weren’t all so...human.”

Rafe shrugged. “Regina isn’t human. And Tess might be human, but she’s a cut above the average, you have to admit.”

“Regina has been Other for less time than it takes me to mark a fire hydrant. And Tess doesn’t count. She’s a witch. And she’s taken.”

“Damn right.”

Logan heard the possessive note in Rafe’s voice and watched him stalk toward his wife. He fought the simultaneous urges to snicker and roll his eyes. A couple of months ago, Logan would have bet his left canine tooth that Rafe would never settle down with one woman, let alone a human woman. Good thing for him no one had taken him up on that bet, because the marital bliss that followed Rafe and Tess around like a cloud would have meant some seriously tough hunting for Logan.

He still really didn't get it. Not that he had anything against taking a mate—he was Lupine, for God's sake—but he liked for there to be a certain sense of order to his world. And in his world, a Felix did not settle down with one woman and look happy about it. Of course, in the ideal version of his world, the only woman he'd wanted for himself in longer than he cared to think about didn't up and marry his best friend and pack alpha, either.

*Shit.*

Tearing his gaze away from the blonde head on the other side of the room and plugging his nose to the warm, milky scent of new motherhood that wafted from the same direction, Logan turned on his heel without bothering to say hello to the ladies. Damn Graham for getting to Missy first and damn himself for caring. Graham Winters was like a brother to Logan. For all intents and purposes, the men *were* brothers, and Logan did not poach on his brother's territory. Even if it didn't go against every fiber of his loyal body, it also meant risking a fight to the death with an outcome that he honestly couldn't predict.

He swore again and then again, quietly, because in this house, you never knew who might pick up on it. Some of the folks who frequented this club had sharper ears than he did. And that was kind of scary. He took a firmer hold of his self-control and tried to beat back the restlessness that seemed to be constantly stirring inside him these days. He had been called to a meeting with his alpha about pack business, and he'd present a business-like demeanor if it killed him. Graham did not need to know that his beta had the hots for his mate.

Graham kept an office on the first floor of the club in the heart of the action. He said it helped him keep an eye on the happenings, and when your clientele consisted mostly of werewolf, vampires and other assorted creatures of the night, keeping an eye on things made a heck of a lot of sense. Technically, it should have been Logan's job as head of security, but Graham was the owner *and* the

alpha, and that made him the boss. Logan suppressed the urge to growl and stuffed the thoughts aside. Bad thoughts.

*Puppy, you have got to get a hold of yourself. You are not the alpha here, and your best friend is. So quit trying to sniff on his wife and do your damned job.* He paused outside Graham's door and took a deep breath while he repeated those words a time or twelve. He took another one before he raised his hand to knock.

"Come on in."

Logan pushed open the door with his game face on. His brown eyes took in the office, empty except for Graham, and he met the other Lupine's gaze for a second before he shifted his own to stare politely over his alpha's shoulder. "Sorry I didn't come earlier today. I was at the gym until after two, and I didn't get your message until I got back."

"Don't worry about it." Graham pushed back in his chair and closed the folder he'd been working on. He waved Logan to a seat. "It was your day off. I didn't expect you to be on call."

Logan settled himself in the leather armchair that faced Graham's desk, but he didn't relax. He sat coiled and tense, the way he always did these days, and he felt Graham's gaze on him. The sensation made his hackles rise, and he fought back the growl that wanted to rumble low in his chest.

*Damn it, this is not happening. You are not challenging your alpha in his own damned home, moron, so shut up and play nice doggie. Now.*

He clenched his teeth so hard, he thought he heard the grinding sound echo in the quiet office.

"All right. That's it." Graham leaned back until his chair threatened to tip over backward and crossed his arms over his chest. "What the hell is your problem lately?"

"I don't have a problem."



“Right.” Graham’s eyes narrowed, and Logan looked at the alpha long enough to guess his own were probably sparking with an eerie amber light. “That’s why in the past month you’ve been in four fights, broken three pieces of gym equipment, driven six waitresses to tears and destroyed the door to my office. Because you don’t have a problem.”

“That’s right. No problem.”

The nasty little voice inside Logan’s head was telling him to go ahead, pick a fight. Let him and Graham have it out and finally see who deserved to be alpha over this pack. To hell with the Winters line, to hell with Silverback tradition. Alpha was about strength and ruthlessness and power, and Logan had more than enough of it to make the pack his own.

If only his conscience didn’t scream a denial every time he thought about it. Damn it, Graham was his *brother*. The closest thing he had to family, closer than any other member of the pack. He’d die for that man.

But damn it if he didn’t really want to kill him right now...

“Fine.” Graham’s voice indicated things were anything but. He sat forward again and picked up a piece of paper, which he tossed across the desk to Logan. “You say you don’t have a problem, that’s terrific. Because I do.”

Logan caught the letter in one hand, but didn’t bother to glance at it. He snarled in satisfaction. “Perfect. Who do I get to kill?”

“No one. It’s not that kind of problem.”

*Well, shit.*

Suppressing another growl, Logan got up to pace around the office. The restlessness inside made it impossible for him to sit still for long. “Fine. Then what do you want me to do?”

“If you’d read the damned letter, you might have a clue. There’s been a death in Connecticut. The White Paw Clan has lost its alpha.”

That bit of news actually managed to get Logan's attention. He turned toward Graham with interest. "Ethan Tate is dead?" He paused, letting it sink in. "Challenge?"

Graham shook his head. "Cancer. And apparently he managed to hide it from the pack until the end."

Logan let out a low whistle. That was old school, and a hell of an accomplishment. In the old days, any sort of illness that might have compromised an alpha's ability to lead would have been punished by a swift challenge and the likely death of the sick or wounded Lupine. Knowing that, the toughest alphas would hide any sign of weakness, using whatever means necessary to camouflage their vulnerability and maintain control of their pack. But with an illness like cancer, it was damned difficult. Most Lupines could smell the taint of the disease and would have known immediately. He wondered how the old alpha had done it? Tate had been a tough old bird, but hiding cancer... That took balls.

"So no one guessed at all? Not even his beta?"

"That's probably one of the things that helped him fool everyone." Graham nodded to the letter in Logan's hand. "The email I got is from his beta, who was also his daughter. She probably didn't want to think her father was ill, so she denied it, thus making it even easier for him to deceive everyone else."

Again, Logan perked up in interest. Female alphas weren't unheard of in the Lupine world, but they were unusual enough to stir considerable interest. "Do you think she can hold the pack?"

Graham shrugged. "I have no idea. I haven't visited the White Paw since I first took the reins from my dad. Since they're one of the clans under the Silverback protection, I paid a courtesy visit. But she couldn't have been more than nine or ten at the time. I'm sure she was introduced, since she was Tate's daughter, but I didn't pay her much mind."

“All right. So what’s the situation right now?”

“Tate was supposed to be buried this morning, and according to the daughter, there were already two male pack members making noises about a challenge.”

Logan growled a little at the thought of the males calling a young female beta to an alpha challenge. There were just some things a Lupine didn’t do. “You want me to take care of the challengers?”

Graham shook his head. “Not necessarily. What I need you to do is go up to the clan center and assess the situation. If the girl can’t hold her pack, I need to know so I can oversee the open challenge. That’s what would have to happen.”

“Is that what the girl asked for?”

“Not exactly.” Graham paused. “She asked for me to formally acknowledge her succession to alpha.”

Logan couldn’t help the eyebrow that shot up at that. “If she wants the burden, why not let her take it?”

“Do you want to see a female in alpha challenge? It hasn’t happened in thirty years for a damned good reason. The last woman who took a challenge ended up gang raped and under nursing care for nearly a month.” The snarl that passed over Graham’s face at that thought would have scared most people half to death. It just reminded Logan of why he considered this man his brother. “Besides, Tate’s daughter can’t be more than twenty-four or so. She’d be like a rabbit in the wolf’s pen. If I can keep that from happening, I will. Or rather, you will.”

“Damn right.” Logan growled again and finally glanced down at the printed email in his hand. “So you also want me to make sure the girl doesn’t get into trouble while I scope out who’s likely to take Tate’s place.”

“Yeah. And I want you keeping an eye on it until it’s settled.”

Something about Graham's tone made Logan look up and meet the other man's gaze. He felt his mouth quirk in a reluctant smile. "What you want is to get me the hell out of your hair until I calm down, brother."

"Well, there is that." Graham's expression turned rueful. "I don't know what's been eating you, brother, but I'm hoping a week or two in the country will settle your damned nerves or something. 'Cause you're starting to get on mine."

Logan clenched his teeth, drew a deep breath and blew it out threw his nose. "Hell, I'm starting to get on my *own* nerves. I don't blame you for making me go stand in the corner."

"It's not like that. You're the one I want handling this for me. Period. That would be true even if you were acting perfectly normal."

"But I'm not."

Graham didn't answer, and Logan flipped him an obscene gesture on his way out the door. Just because Graham was right, didn't mean Logan couldn't call him a dick.

## Chapter Two

Honor Tate bolted through the front door of her home and straight into the bathroom where she proceeded to throw up her breakfast, lunch and several of her internal organs. It didn't help. The taste of blood in her mouth was strong and metallic. It should have been familiar. Instead, it was sickening, sweet and sticky and coating her tongue in thick, persistent layers.

She clutched the rim of the toilet bowl and heaved again, so violently she almost missed the sound of footsteps echoing across the wooden floor of the big cabin's great room.

"Honor? Honor, are you okay?"

She bit back a moan, her fingers clenching as another dizzy wave of nausea swept through her. Her cousin's voice sounded as soft and concerned as always and it was next to the last thing she felt like dealing with right now. She spit into the toilet, trying to rid herself of the taste of blood and bile.

"I'm fine, Joey." As fine as a Lupine could be after chewing off the hand of one of her oldest friends and pretending to enjoy it. "I just wanted to wash off some of this grime."

She heard a pause, then a soft question. "Why don't you go upstairs, then? Take a proper shower? I can make you some dinner and bring you up a tray."

The word dinner set her stomach racing toward the back of her throat, and she quickly shoved on the faucet full blast to mask the sound of more retching. Trembling violently, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and forced her voice to sound steady as a rock and calm as Sunday church. "Well, I was going to finish up delivering this week's wood to the cabins on the lumber road..."

She let her voice trail off and crossed her fingers that her tenderhearted cousin Josephine would reply in form.

“Don’t be silly. You’ve done enough today.” Joey’s voice sounded firm and soothing, and made Honor’s shoulders sag in relief. “Michael can finish the deliveries. You should take a shower and relax this evening. Or if you have to, work on the books. But stay in and get some rest. It’s been...a difficult few days.”

Honor stifled a laugh and flushed the toilet, grabbing a neatly folded towel from the bar beside the sink. A difficult few days? Why? Just because her previously healthy, arrogant, indestructible father had died, she had inherited his position as alpha over the White Paw Lupine pack, and had fought three alpha challenges in the same number of days? Pshaw.

She cupped her hand to her mouth and rinsed away the last taste of bile. Then she wet one end of the towel and used it to wipe her pale, chalky face. Damn it, she looked like hell, and that was not the sort of face she could let anyone in the pack see. Not even Joey. If Honor was going to assume the title of Alpha, she would need to act like an alpha at all times. Even when she felt more like crying.

Stuffing down those very dangerous thoughts, she draped the towel around her neck and used one hand to hold it to her face as if she were cleaning up, then reached for the doorknob with the other. One deep breath later, she stepped out into the great room with a false smile and the towel half concealing her face.

Joey stood just beside the door, her hands clasped nervously together, her brow wrinkled in concern. “I’m sorry it was Paul,” she said in that soft, come-down-from-the-ledge voice of hers. “I know how close you two always were.”

“Don’t be.” Honor forced her voice to come out casually as she turned and headed for the stairway. “If it wasn’t him, it would have been someone else. That’s just the way it goes.” As soon as she had her back to Joey, she let the towel drop and reached for the banister instead. She made it a point to barely touch it

rather than clutching as she wanted to as she walked up to the second floor. "Go ahead and tell Michael to finish the wood deliveries. I'm going to go take that shower. Send up a tray whenever it's ready."

Her steps remained brisk and measured all the way down the hall to the master suite and did not vary until the door closed securely behind her. Then she leaned back against it, squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself not to cry. Pallor she could handle with a little make up, but red, puffy, bloodshot eyes would take a lot more effort to conceal than she felt capable of just now.

"Damn you, Dad."

The curse had somehow become her mantra over the past three days. Damn him for dying, damn him for leaving her his business, his pack and his problems all in one fell swoop, and damn him again just on general principles. The bastard deserved every extra second he spent in whatever passed for hell these days.

Pushing away from the door, Honor paused for a few seconds, swaying gently with the rush of fatigue and nerves that seemed to plague her constantly now. She could barely remember what it felt like to relax. And to think the fun of leading the pack was just beginning. Wheeeeeeeeeee!

She padded across the floor toward the bathroom, thinking that a shower sounded better than sex or chocolate. Or sex involving chocolate. The smell of blood and sweat and soil lingered on her skin and clothes, and she felt pretty sure she carried enough small twigs and dried leaves in her hair for a decent fire. She doubted the ability of soap and hot water to make her feel clean, but at least it could get rid of the surface detritus.

Ignoring the cavernous room, looking even bigger now that it had been stripped of all her father's personal possessions and the stamp of his decidedly masculine tastes, she pushed into the bath and flipped on the lights. She turned on the shower and let the water heat while she stripped. Her clothes landed in

the wastebasket rather than the hamper. She'd never be able to bring herself to wear them again, so why bother scrubbing out the stains?

When she stepped under the stinging spray, she hissed at the scalding heat and felt her skin immediately pinken to a rosy glow. She kept her eyes squeezed shut as the water sluiced off the worst of the blood and dirt, not wanting to see the water turn as pink as her skin as it circled down the drain. The steel fence she had erected to cage in the memories of this afternoon still had a few weak spots, and she couldn't afford to encourage any escaping thoughts.

She lingered in the shower, scrubbing herself from head to toe with a loofah three times before she could stand the feel of her own skin. That's when she opened her eyes and reached for the conditioner. She applied it liberally to the mess of knots and debris that passed for her hair and let the thick liquid ease everything free. When she couldn't feel any more pieces of bark or clumps of mud, she rinsed and applied a generous handful of shampoo. She lathered, rinsed and even repeated twice before she could make herself stop. Then she conditioned again and turned off the water.

Hesitating for a long moment on the bathmat, dripping water onto the porous rectangle, she contemplated grabbing a towel, but found herself heading for the bathtub instead. She still didn't feel really clean, but the shower had done the best it could. Time to give the big Jacuzzi and her favorite scented bath salts a shot.

She set the tub to fill, grateful for her father's ridiculously large water heater, and wrapped a towel around her hair before dumping two huge handfuls of spicy-floral salts into the tub and turning on the jets. She slipped in before the tub was full, leaning back against its sloped side and left the water running until she was submerged up to her chin. Then she used her foot to turn off the water and let the rumble of the jets lull her into a half-trance.



That was her first big mistake. As soon as her body began to relax from the pounding streams of water around her, her mind began to wander. And, of course, it went directly to the places she didn't want it to go.

Damn Paul Clarke, anyway. Why had he needed to play the big man with her? Why now? They'd been friends since they were whelped, for God's sake. They'd spent their childhoods playing fetch and chase together, their teen years learning to hunt side by side. They'd even brought their first deer down together. She'd considered him a friend. So why then hell had he chosen now to challenge her? What the hell had he been thinking?

*That he could win.*

The thought echoed in her head, mocking her with the simple fact that it was completely true. That was exactly why Paul had challenged her now, when stress clouded her thinking and grief slowed her reaction times. As the beta, second in command of her father's pack and a young Lupine in her prime, Honor had been too much for him to take on. But as an unprepared and insecure new alpha, she had been ripe for a challenge. Three of them as a matter of fact, so the one coming from Paul never should have surprised her.

But it did. It shocked her to her toes. She hadn't known what to do at first. Not until it became clear that even if she didn't want to take the challenge seriously, that's exactly how he had meant it. Deadly serious. He had gone for her throat, and as tough and strong as Honor was, she couldn't underestimate a male Lupine who outweighed her by a good fifty pounds and had several inches on her in reach. Her father had taught her that every challenge needed to be dealt with swiftly and decisively, and he had made sure she knew enough to make her moves count. If she couldn't compete with strength and size, she could use speed and treachery and use them well. Her father had pounded that into her until it became instinct. He had preferred the traditional end to a challenge—death—

something Honor hadn't been able to do. She had held back at the last minute and taken Paul's hand instead.

She hadn't wanted to. She'd tried stopping at a pin, as she had with the first challenger, but as soon as she let up, Paul had attacked again. So she'd hamstringed him, thinking if he couldn't walk, he couldn't fight. But he had still come for her, launching himself toward her throat with his good hind leg and suddenly there hadn't been any other choice. It was his hand or his throat, and Honor had chosen his hand. He wouldn't thank her for it, but her conscience did.

She laughed at herself, not with humor so much as disbelief. Like she could afford a conscience. That item now counted as a luxury in her life, and would until the challenges stopped. She knew exactly when that would happen, too. When she died.

Or when the Silverback Alpha came to Connecticut and formally acknowledged her as the White Paw Alpha.

Right. And that would be the third Tuesday after he named her Queen of the Oompaloompas.

Honor sighed again and reached up to turn the jets to a lower setting, no longer quite in the mood to be battered. At first, she had thought sending that letter to Graham Winters was the solution to her problems. The Alpha of Manhattan's legendary Silverback Clan commanded respect from just about every Lupine east of the Mississippi River, and she suspected from a few of those out west, too. She had only met him once, when she was nine, but she remembered him vividly. He'd been a handsome young man then, only a decade or so older than her, but worlds apart. He had known his place as Alpha and lord over the Northeastern Clans. She'd heard he had a good heart as well, and recently, rumors of his marriage to a human had circulated their way. They said he had a son now, another Winters cub to lead the Silverback Clan into the future.

Good thing someone's future was secure.

She made a face and turned the tap with her toes to let more hot water flow into the tub. The temperature had dropped below scalding while she brooded over Paul. If she made a habit of this, she'd need to get a second job to pay her water bills. The way things looked, Paul wouldn't be the last childhood friend to try their luck with the new, female Alpha. Not unless the Silverback Clan finally got around to answering its frickin' email.

"Argh!"

"Honor? Are you okay in there?"

What spawn of Hades gave Joey her sense of timing?

"I'm fine," she called out. "Just enjoying a soak."

"Oh." A pause. "I brought you a supper tray. I made venison chili. And cornbread."

Honor's stomach launched a violent protest at the thought of food, reminding her exactly how badly she needed to brush her teeth. "Just leave it near the chair, Jo. I'm almost done in here."

"Okay, then. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

*Some Ovaltine perhaps?* "Nothing. Thank you."

Grateful for her Lupine hearing that could pick out the sounds of Joey moving around the bedroom even over the roar of the tub jets, Honor listened until she heard retreating footsteps and the sound of the bedroom door opening and closing. Only when she was sure Joey had gone did she sit up in the tub and turn off the jets. Time to brush her teeth and flush that dinner down the toilet so Joey would think she'd eaten.

She dragged herself dripping from the tub and wrapped herself in a huge towel before padding over to the sink and the comfort of her toothbrush. The cinnamon flavor of the paste improved greatly on the lingering traces of blood

and bile in her mouth. She scrubbed for several minutes, making sure to brush her tongue thoroughly before she rinsed out her mouth and reached out to unwind the towel from her hair. The long, dark strands, almost black with the weight of the water, fell down her back in ripples that would dry into semi-wild curls. She ran a comb through them quickly then left her hair to dry and headed back into the bedroom.

As she had expected, Joey had turned down the bed, lit a couple of lamps, and touched a match to the fire laid in the hearth. The tray of chili, cornbread and chilled Mexican beer sat next to her father's over-stuffed armchair. It looked like a room well prepared for the lord of the manor routine, except that she didn't feel a bit like a lord.

But the man staring at her from the door to the hallway certainly looked like he did.

## Chapter Three

Logan watched the slim, young brunette emerge from the bathroom in a cloud of steam and placed an immediate stranglehold on his need to pounce. And sniff. And lick. And maybe taste. Even through the perfume-y fragrance cloaking her natural scent—bath salts?—she smelled nearly good enough to eat. He inhaled deeply and considered whether or not to try a nibble. Suddenly she turned and noticed him standing in the door, and he revised his plans.

*Definitely nibble.*

“How did you get in here?”

Logan tore his eyes from the plane of creamy pale skin rising from the top of the woman’s towel and saw the weary suspicion in her gaze. He also made note of the long, fresh scratch across her forehead and the bite mark in her right shoulder. It looked as new as the scratch. Seeing the obvious wounds, he made a surreptitious inspection of the rest of the skin he could see—which was quite a lot, praise be!—and noticed a good dozen bruises. Some looked a few days old, some just pale shadows, not yet fully formed. She also had one skinned knee and a slowly bleeding cut on her left shin. This would-be alpha had clearly had a rough couple of days.

“Your housekeeper let me in.” He looked her in the eye as he answered her question, curious to see how she would react to the aggressive expression. It also helped him ignore the stirring of involuntary interest he had immediately felt in her. She met and held his gaze, but made no other show of force. “She also offered me dinner but I stopped in town and ate while I got directions up here. You aren’t exactly easy to find.”

“She’s my cousin, not my servant. And who the hell are you?”

Logan raised an eyebrow. "I thought they were all our servants these days."

She didn't answer.

"My name is Logan Hunter." He watched her face for a reaction. "I'm beta of the Silverback Clan. My alpha has requested that I offer you his condolences on the recent death of your father."

She blinked; wide, chocolaty eyes seeming slow to focus. "Beta. Sent to offer his condolences. Right. Tell him to shove them."

Then she turned her back on him and walked to a closet.

Logan tore his eyes from the point where her towel barely hung down far enough to conceal what looked like a truly luscious bottom. Before Missy, he'd never really been an ass man, but as Graham could tell you, that little human had an ass that could inspire men to poetry. It had inspired Logan to a thing or two over the last few months, but now the image of this stranger's *derrière* had all but supplanted Missy's from his mind.

And with all that going on in his head, it took Logan a few extra seconds to register what she had said. *Shove them?* "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Tell him he can shove his condolences up his ass with a pogo stick. I don't want them, and I didn't ask for them."

He watched as she pulled some things from a drawer inside the closet and tried to keep his mind off the possibility of that towel coming loose and landing on the floor. And of him coming loose and landing on top of her.

"He knows that. He doesn't offer you sympathy because you asked for it. It's just the right thing to do."

"No, the right thing to do would have been to come here himself instead of sending his lackey. And to have agreed to my very sensible request for a formal recognition of my new position as Alpha of this pack. Since he has done neither,

he can go take his pogo stick and have a little moment of privacy with his thoughts.”

She began pulling on clothes with that peculiar talent women have for dressing without undressing first. She pulled a pair of loose cotton pants on under the towel and topped them with a tank top that she managed to don without displaying one additional millimeter of skin.

Logan bit back a curse and shoved his hands into his pockets while he dragged his attention back to the question at hand. “The Silverback alpha has not yet decided whether he will agree to the request or not. That’s why I’m here. Before he makes a decision, he wants to hear an outside opinion of the workings of the White Paw Clan.”

“The White Paw Clan works just fine,” she growled, turning to face him and tossing aside the towel. “You can tell your alpha I said that. And you can tell him that if he will not honor the request of his fellow alpha, then he and his pack members are not welcome in our territory.”

Logan heard the fierceness in her tone and scowled. “That sounds like a hasty decision. Breaking ties between the clans cannot benefit either of them. And in your current situation, frankly, it can only make your position in the pack even more precarious. Your people are not going to like hearing you bu-fued three hundred years of cooperation between our clans because of a fit of pique.”

He hadn’t expected her to move so quickly, and only instinct kept him from jerking backward when he blinked and found her about three inches from the end of his nose, snarling up at him.

“This. Is. Not. Pique.” The low rumble in her chest told him she meant every word she spoke. “And I am not the one who ‘bu-fued’ anything between our clans. That would be *your* alpha who has denied our request in our time of need.”

Logan did not back down, but he willed his hackles not to rise to the bait she presented. He could make her regret taking this attitude with him, but he was here on a diplomatic mission and pinning and mating the alpha of another pack with no warning, no invitation and no permission stretched the bounds of allowable behavior. Actually, it was out of bounds. But it would have been satisfying.

“If you would listen more carefully to my words, you wouldn’t need to make an ass of yourself by making groundless accusations and hurling unnecessary insults.” He spoke through clenched teeth at first until his jaw began to relax. “Graham Winters has denied you nothing. What he has done is to send me to observe the situation in your pack and conclude which option will result in a positive long-term outcome for both our packs, and which jeopardizes the tenuous peace we currently enjoy.”

She sneered at him, her tempting pink lip curling up to expose her white canines. “Right. And what is your conclusion, sir?”

“I haven’t yet drawn one.” He tried not to make it a growl. “It’s not something you can rush, Ms. Tate. In fact, the alpha and I estimate it will be at least a week or more before any conclusions can be drawn.”

She laughed then, though the sound had not a trace of humor that Logan could detect. “Right. In a week or more, I won’t need your alpha’s endorsement, Mr. Hunter. Because I will already have been forced to cripple every adult male in my pack. So don’t you tell me about waiting for a royal blessing from his majesty, the King of Indecision.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Honor turned her back on him then, but not before she saw his nostrils flare and his lip curl at the insult. She really couldn’t have cared less. Her day had



already been for shit. This just topped the cake. She had been counting on Graham Winters, and now she found out her problem wasn't even important enough to get his personal attention. He sent a worker bee instead. Well, fuck him. She'd been dealing this long, she could deal longer. As long as it took.

She stalked back toward her closet, determined to don a pair of fuzzy slippers, find a bottle of Valium and dose herself into oblivion at least until morning. She didn't want to hear one more thing about Lupines, packs, alphas, challenges or even the remotest connection to reality for at least eight hours. After that she'd go back to coping, but damn it, she needed a break.

It was a lovely thought, but it didn't last much past the foot of the bed. She got about that far before she sensed his movement. She spun around just in time to avoid being tackled to the carpet, but not fast enough to prevent his getting a good grip on her upper arm. She felt his fingers digging into her skin, nearly bruising her, and she instinctively bared her teeth.

"I just took off one man's hand, Silverback. I don't have a problem with taking another."

"And I don't have a problem with putting you in your place, White Paw." She saw his golden eyes snapping and felt her stomach knot at the knowledge that he spoke the truth. "I came here as an impartial observer, but if you want to make this personal between us, feel free. No one dismisses me but my alpha. Understand?"

She growled at him. "Oh, I understand perfectly well, *beta*." She spat the title like a curse. "But *you* need to understand that no one gives me orders in my own territory. I don't care how big, bad and wolfie you might think you are. *I* am Alpha here, and I don't take lightly to insults."

"You might be alpha of this pack, but you still answer to the Silverback Clan. Don't forget that."

"I *respect* the Silverback Clan, beta. I *answer* to no one."

Their gazes clashed for a long moment, a heavy silence of rapid pulses and the sharp smell of temper. Neither of them blinked. Then the Silverback beta's hand slid from her arm to the back of her neck and he hauled her forward, mouth descending on hers for a rough, violent kiss.

It lasted no more than a handful of seconds, but it seared her senses with lips, tongue, teeth and hunger. She tasted the thick, spicy flavor of him, smelled the musky, woody scent that clung to his skin and felt the sharp edge of his strong, white teeth. When he pulled back, she blinked up at him, silent.

"We'll see, honey. We'll see what happens once I get around to asking the right question."

Then he turned on his heel and strode out of her bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Honor stared at the white wooden panel for a long time before her knees unlocked enough for her to sink to the bed, where she sat for a while longer, trembling.

## **Chapter Four**

*Damn him and the horse he rode in on.*

Honor lay in her father's huge sleigh bed and stared at the ceiling in frustration. The clock on the bedside table gave off an eerie green glow announcing three a.m. and Honor's fifth unsuccessful hour of attempted sleep. She blamed it all on her unexpected visitor from Manhattan.

Next, she planned to blame the instability in the Middle East on him as well.

She really could kill him for...well, for nothing that was actually his fault. But far be it from her to buck the long-standing and honorable tradition of killing the messenger. In reality, her father was the one to blame, but he was inconveniently dead, and therefore a much less satisfying target than the arrogant, sexy beta from the Silverback Clan.

*Sexy? Shit.*

Honor groaned and rolled onto her side. The second to last thing she needed in her life was to form a mad crush on any man, let alone the beta of another pack sent to evaluate her leadership capabilities in the first week of her rule. Because no matter how politely Logan Hunter had phrased it, that was exactly why he'd come to this remote corner of northwestern Connecticut to mingle with the White Paw Clan. He'd come to grade her like a teacher on report card day, and Honor didn't like it one bit. She didn't like it because no alpha's earned position in a pack should ever be called into question, especially not in any way so transparent to subordinate pack members. And because she really wasn't all that confident that she would be given a passing grade.

She didn't doubt her ability to lead the pack, to make decisions that would benefit them as a whole and help ease them in to the twenty-first century in a

way her father had never been willing to attempt. She didn't doubt her ability to hold her own among the international council of packs, where decisions affecting Lupine society as a whole were discussed and debated and voted upon once every five years. Honor didn't even doubt her ability to win an alpha challenge that presented itself to her. Lord knew she'd won three since the moment her father had drawn his last breath.

No, Honor didn't doubt for a second that she had the ability to become as confident and capable an alpha as the White Paw Clan had ever seen. What she doubted was her desire.

Honor had been happier being beta. Though her personal relationship with her father had been rocky and even tumultuous at times, their working relationship had functioned as if it had been designed by a Swiss watchmaker. Ethan Tate had given the orders and Honor had seen them fulfilled. She had guarded his back, his pack and his privacy, and she's done a damned good job of it, too. She had helped keep the White Paw Clan running smoothly and fluidly, but she'd still had time for her own pursuits. She had been on call twenty-four hours, true, but in a well-managed pack, those calls had come rarely.

Over the years, Honor had taken up kayaking and snorkeling. She had studied Native American and Lupine mythology and taught herself how to throw pots. She had earned a degree in business administration with a minor in environmental management and spent most of her spare time in the studio, spinning her wheel and stoking the fires in the brick kiln she had herself helped build. In other words, before her father had died, Honor had been a normal woman with a life of her own. Now she began to understand that as alpha, the pack would *become* her life.

She didn't want that. Her sense of duty to the pack ran just as deep as any Lupine's, but the need to serve it did not consume her. She had the willingness to give, but not the willingness to give up that which the position of alpha required.

Why then was she fighting to stay alpha of the White Paw Clan?

Good question, and one she had begun asking herself almost hourly.

Gods knew it wasn't for the glory of it. Honor snorted at the very thought. There was very little glory these days in being alpha of any clan, and less in one of the small, subordinate clans like this one. Being the Silverback alpha might float Graham Winters' boat, but the Silverback was the overpack to the entire Northeast. All the packs from Maine to New Jersey said their thank yous to the Silverback. The White Paw Clan had less than five hundred members, and that generous estimate included the pups and the elders. There wasn't a whole hell of a lot of glory to be found in "ruling" a group the size of the local regional high school's graduating class when most of them could run their own lives just fine without any interference from her.

To be honest, the only answer that had come to her had been that she wanted to lead the clan by default. Hardly a rousing answer, but a truthful one. It wasn't that Honor wanted to lead the pack; it was that she didn't want anyone else to do it.

She didn't think it was a power trip. After all, given the lack of glory, one could rightly assume that the power of the position didn't exactly shake the earth. So, not a dog in the manger routine. She just honestly didn't see how any member of the pack could make a decent White Paw Alpha.

It hurt her to think it, actually. She hated thinking so badly of her family and friends, the group of people she'd grown up with, that she knew and loved. Or at least tolerated out of a sense of familial loyalty. She wanted to believe every one of those people had the strength and intelligence and fortitude to lead the pack into prosperity, but the sad truth told her none of them did.

If there had been anyone, it might have been Paul. Paul was smart. At least, she'd always thought so, before he decided to challenge her earlier that afternoon. He had a good head on his shoulders, and a sense of humor that had

seen him out of more than one scrape in his life. But he also had a temper that could get out of hand if he wasn't careful, and for all his considerable intelligence, the man couldn't form a long-term strategy if it came with illustrated instructions. He could barely manage to plan what his next meal would be, and often didn't even bother with that. The pack just couldn't afford that sort of leader. This was a critical time for them, and if they didn't have an alpha who could lead the pack in a new direction, Honor felt certain they would stagnate themselves into extinction.

The pack needed a leader with vision. Someone who could see the future and lead them to it. And failing that, they needed someone who would at least keep them from regressing into the past or standing stock-still as the world progressed around them. Honor didn't delude herself into thinking she knew best for every member of the clan, or even that she knew best for the clan as a whole, but she thought she had a good idea of what would be worst.

The pack desperately needed to move forward. They needed to learn how to survive in an increasingly urban world. Their little compound in the forests of Connecticut provided them with a momentary oasis, but every day, developers moved a little bit closer to their retreat, and every day, they got one step closer to the sprawling metropolis of Manhattan, less than a hundred and fifty miles to the south. If the White Paw didn't learn how to function in the society of the modern human city, they could kiss their lives and their sanity goodbye. Progress would not be stopping for them.

Honor wanted to see her pack move from a culture of reclusion to one of integration. She wanted pack members to become computer geeks and businesswomen and police officers and engineers. And if the pack continued to wallow in its stagnation, none of those things would ever happen. The world wouldn't just pass them by; it would bulldoze over them and plow them under.

Now if only she could manage to convince the rest of her pack of this. And quickly, before Mr. Snooper-Sexy decided to support another Lupine's bid for her job.

The recollection of Logan Hunter made Honor groan. He was the absolute last thing she needed in her life. Perhaps tied with a frontal lobotomy and Chinese foot binding. All three promised to cause her intense pain, considerable inconvenience and no few worries while accomplishing nothing useful.

In fact, while she was having fun with analogies, the man reminded her of French fries, one of her biggest weaknesses. Like the junk food, the Silverback offered no nutritional value and promised to do little more than weigh her down and leave her hungry for more a few hours later. And also like French fries, her craving for him came out of nowhere and refused to be pushed from her mind no matter how hard she struggled.

Damn him.

Honor kicked off the light cotton blanket, suddenly way too hot to tolerate even the minimal covering. Unlike some of the Lupines she knew, Honor didn't just keep a blanket on her bed, she even used it on occasion, just not tonight. Not while she was obsessing over a sexy stranger, and definitely not three days before she was due to go into heat.

Of all the rotten luck. Her father couldn't have died immediately after her heat when her hormones would settle down and make her life and her interactions with every male on the planet a hell of a lot easier. No, he had to time it so that her alpha challenges were just as likely to turn into attempted rapes as attempted murders. *Gee, thanks, Dad.* To add insult to the injury of her past few days, she'd been forced to start using the scented bath salts, which gave off a scent way too heavy for her sensitive nose, to try and mask the beginning of the changes to her body chemistry any Lupine worth his salt would have known indicated her approaching heat.

And while she was at it, she thought she'd throw in a few menstrual cramps and a case of boils. That sounded like fun.

*Right.* Sitting up in the bed, Honor ran her hands over her face and groaned. She figured she could either sit here 'til dawn and brood, or she could get up, go downstairs and make up for the dinner she'd never eaten. Now that the taste of blood had finally faded from her mouth, her Lupine metabolism had reared its head to let her know just how wildly it disagreed with the notion of her skipping a meal.

She swung her feet over the edge of the bed and onto the floor, ignoring the chill of the boards. Her stomach overruled her soles. She paused long enough to pull on the pajamas she'd never intended to sleep in and made her way down the hallway to the stairs.

The house sat silent around her. It always seemed silent since Ethan's death, but especially at night. With just her and Joey there now, silence almost came with a guarantee. Joey barely made noise when shouting at the top of her lungs, and Honor only seemed to get into the house just long enough to fall unconscious for three or four hours a night. Since she didn't snore, that meant things stayed pretty quiet.

She heard little more than the sound of her own breathing and the rattling of the bare tree branches in the yard as she made her way through the house. The glow of moonlight silvered the floor in front of the windows, making it look almost as cool as it felt against her bare feet. She ignored the chill as she headed for the kitchen. If she was lucky, Joey had left a snack or two in the fridge. A half calf or twelve would go down fairly smoothly right about now.

If she hadn't been so hungry and so tired, she probably would have heard the soft sound of breathing coming from inside the kitchen. She *knew* she would have noticed the smell; that musky, woodsy smell she'd detected earlier in her father's bedroom when she'd emerged from her bath. The smell of the stranger.



But she didn't notice a thing, not until she turned on the overhead kitchen lights and found her eyes focusing on the half-naked male form standing beside the center island.

"Care for a snack?"

Logan wanted to make a snack out of her.

He stifled the urge to bare his teeth and inhale deeply, since it wasn't precisely the polite thing to do, but damn he wanted to. There was something about her scent...something indefinable and elusive.

Either that, or he had a cold.

"What are you doing here?"

Okay, not exactly the hey-sailor-buy-me-a-drink he'd been hoping for, but he figured that might be pushing things a tad.

"I got hungry. The diner in town's not bad, but their idea of all you can eat and mine aren't precisely the same." He held up a chunk of the sirloin he'd been munching. "Your housekeeper told me to help myself."

"She's my cousin. And she should have told you to help yourself to the opposite side of the front door."

He watched her cross her arms over her chest, figuring it gave him the perfect excuse to stare at her breasts without being caught staring at her breasts. How was that for smooth? "Ironically enough, she decided to go with the whole polite thing. She put me in a guestroom overlooking the woods. Private bath. Pretty homey."

"Really, and did she leave a mint on your pillow?"

"Chocolate. I had it before I came downstairs."

She rolled her eyes and stalked past him toward the refrigerator. "I'm surprised you didn't just call up for room service."

Logan seized the opportunity to reevaluate the ass he'd been so struck by earlier. He almost choked on the beef. Lord, but it looked even better than the last time he'd seen it.

He quickly finished swallowing and shook his head in amazement. He still didn't quite get why he found this woman so compelling. She pretty much defined "not his type." Dark-haired and dark-eyed, she should have had dusky, tanned or olive skin. Instead, her complexion looked pale and milky and perfect, especially in the silver light of the waxing moon that had illuminated the kitchen before she'd turned on the lights.

She'd looked like a shadow as she slipped through the dark house. Her form, slender and tallish, looked almost too delicate to be Lupine. He was used to woman of his species being sturdy and athletic, but this girl looked as if a good strong handshake might do her an injury. Her cousin had certainly seemed convinced that Honor could hold her own as alpha, but Logan found himself even more skeptical after meeting her. Somehow, he could not picture this woman facing an alpha challenge, let alone winning one. Or three, as Joey had told him. Just this week. It boggled his mind.

Of course, part of that might have had something to do with the fact that he could picture a whole lot more appealing things to do with her than fight, once he got his hands on her.

She slapped a plastic container down on the island and peeled off the lid, reaching inside for a bite-sized piece of pork. "So what time are you leaving in the morning?"

The pointed question made him smile. He had to give her points for effort. "About a week from next Tuesday, I figure. If everything goes smoothly."

"Perhaps I'm not making myself clear, but you really aren't welcome here. I want you gone. Now."

“No, I actually think that’s pretty clear. The problem is that what you want really isn’t the issue. For the past three hundred years, the White Paw Clan has been swearing fealty to the Silverback alpha. That makes your clan *his* responsibility, and from where Graham Winters stands, there are two things that could happen here.” He ignored her glare and stole a piece of her pork, more to keep his hands occupied with something other than her breasts than because he was still hungry. “Either way, the White Paw alpha will need to renew that vow of fealty at the next Silverback howl. The only remaining question is whether the White Paw alpha will be you, or someone else.”

He watched her while he spoke, so he saw the muscles in her jaw clench and her eyes narrow when he made that statement. He tried to ignore the way the spark in her gaze made his jeans fit a little too tightly.

“I am the White Paw alpha. And I will remain the White Paw alpha for a very long time to come.”

“That’s what I’m here to determine. Maybe you will hold the title, maybe you won’t. The Silverback is not so much concerned with who keeps your pack as with the knowledge that the pack is well kept.”

He could almost see her hackles rise. “I. Will. Hold. My. Pack. Did you get that? Or do I need to use smaller words?”

Logan clenched his teeth to hold back the growl he could feel reverberating in his chest. “You need to watch your mouth.”

“Make me.”

## **Chapter Five**

She knew almost before the words formed on her tongue that saying them would be a mistake, but they launched themselves into the quiet room before she could stop them. They hung between her and the sexy stranger like the ripe scent of heat and she couldn't take them back. She felt the words pulse between them for all of three rapid heartbeats before she made her fateful mistake.

She blinked.

He was on her before her eyelids completed their upswing, launching himself over the island in a leap at least four feet high from a standing start. She had the vague impression of muscles tensing and shifting under tight denim, the image of tanned skin and dark hair moving toward her, and as fast as her reflexes were, she couldn't outrun him. He caught her just as she turned her back on him in an instinctual flight response. Even her subconscious mind knew she had pushed him as far as his limits would allow, but her subconscious wasn't fast enough.

He carried her to the tile floor, one hand outstretched to catch their weight as they tumbled to the cold, hard surface. She tried to flip them, but he had surprise and brute male strength on his side. He pinned her almost immediately, both hands above her head, legs parted around his granite-hard thighs. She felt helpless and decided she didn't much like the unfamiliar feeling.

She repeated that thought to herself like a mantra while she tried to ignore the way her body softened instinctively beneath him. She didn't need to be thinking about the rapid pulse beating in her chest or the restless heat pooling between her legs. She knew perfectly well that he was aware of both, and she didn't have a chance of controlling him if she let them control her.

The air stirred around them as he lowered his head to her throat and sniffed. He drew breath like a starving man drew sustenance, as if he could take in her essence as it floated in the air around her. The act made her shiver, and he growled, low and rough, above her.

"I'd be happy to watch it for you," he rumbled, pressing his body down over hers, not enough to crush her, but enough to remind her who had the upper hand. "I can keep very," he paused to nip her lips. "Close." Lick. "Track."

Then his mouth closed over hers, and he feasted.

She wanted to hate it; waited for the rough surge of rage that had consumed her the last time any Lupine had dared to touch her uninvited. She braced herself for disgust and outrage and fury to come to her aid, but all she got was melting and hunger and greed. She wanted to devour him as surely as he devoured her.

She cursed her body for its betrayal, her hands that clenched into fists instead of sprouting claws to tear him to shreds. The thighs that spread and knees that lifted to cradle him closer. The lips that softened and parted under his, clinging and encouraging. God damn it, but her life would have been so much easier if this man had repulsed her. Even just a little. A mild sort of nausea whenever she got too close to him. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently.

Instead of feeling her stomach roll, she felt her body shiver when his tongue tangled with hers. She tugged at it, let her teeth scrape the surface, and struggled in vain to suppress the moan building in her throat. It boiled out of her, a muted sound swallowed in the fever of their kiss. Still, even muffled it seemed to excite him. He answered with a growl of his own and shifted his grip on her wrists until he pinned both of her hands with one of his own. She could have broken the hold if she'd tried, but she was too busy trying to remember how to breathe when his newly freed palm closed over her breast and squeezed.

When she gasped in reaction, she breathed in the air he expelled on a satisfied grunt. It carried the taste of him even deeper inside her; the rich, warm taste of heat and spice and passion. She wanted more of it, wanted it filling her up and making her blind to everything else in the world. The luxury of the thought went to her head almost as fast as he did.

Then he went for her skin even faster and she forgot such a thing as the world even existed. He caught the center of her tank top in his fist and yanked, and the garment shredded in his grasp. He threw away the tatters in an impatient motion, then paused for a breathless moment to stare down at her. His gaze fixed on her breasts, nipples already tight and beaded in arousal and she could almost see his mouth watering. His scent intensified, drowning her in the heady fragrance, and she knew hers must be doing the same to him. Not only was she at least as aroused as he was, but her heat was now only forty-eight hours away.

If he knew, though, he was already too far gone to process the information rationally. All he seemed to know now was hunger and urgency. He pulled her hands, forcing her to straighten her arms more, the action lifting her breasts higher until he could lean down and set his mouth to one tightly beaded peak.

Honor screamed.

She didn't mean to. In fact, she'd have given her left incisor if she could have caught the sound before it emerged, but no such luck. It tore from her throat, low and raw and hoarse, like an animal's cry. He heard and answered, not with a matching sound, but by taking her nipple between his teeth and tugging. Then his mouth closed over the entire peak and began to draw on her. The hot, wet suction sent her body bowing beneath him, bending in a taut arch in response to the unbearable pleasure of the sensation.

He growled a low, tense response and she felt his hand shift from her breast where it toyed with her other nipple down over the smooth expanse of skin of

her belly. She felt a nail catch in the soft fabric of her pajama pants before it slid beneath. His palm glided over the softness of her stomach to tangle in the damp curls at the apex of her thighs. One long finger dipped, parting her slick folds and finding the center of her pleasure.

Again she screamed. This time the sound of her frustration shook the cabin, but she couldn't have cared less. She began to fight him in earnest, not to escape his touch but in her fever to do some touching of her own. She ached for the feel of his slick skin under her fingers, and she intended to have it. Rearing up, she turned her head and sank her teeth deep into his bicep, the nearest bit of his flesh she could reach. He yanked his mouth from her breast and snarled down at her. She met his gaze fiercely.

“Want. More.”

His eyes narrowed at her hoarsely panted demand, but his expression only turned more predatory. He didn't seem to object. Instead, he slowly pulled his hand from between her legs, letting it stroke every individual nerve ending it could reach along the way. The entire length glided along her clit, making her buck and shudder and curse him. Then his nail caught it in a wicked flick and she yelped.

He flashed her a feral grin, raising his glistening fingers to his mouth before he growled, “So do I.”

Honor watched as he licked her moisture from his hand. She saw the way his eyes narrowed as he tasted her, then saw the knowledge light them and she swore.

“Heat.”

She had rolled out of his grasp before the word cleared his lips. Damn it, she should have known all the bath salts in the world couldn't disguise the flavor of her heat from a mature male Lupine. He'd known the minute he lifted his fingers to his lips that the new White Paw alpha was just hours from the start of her heat

cycle. It was irresistible to any male Lupine, but to one with as much dominant tendencies as her Silverback visitor, it was like the proverbial red flag in front of the bull. She might as well have tattooed, "Come and get me, big boy" across her forehead.

"Here," he snarled, even as she sprang to her feet and looked for a clear path to the door. "Come. Here."

She growled in response, bearing her teeth at him, body coiling in preparation for flight. If she could make it around him and out of the kitchen, she might have a chance of outrunning him. If not, then she could definitely lose him in the woods. He wasn't familiar with them like she was, and there were ways she could mask her scent at least well enough to confuse him.

"Now."

She shook her head and crouched. She wished she still had her tank top on, or that she dared to take the seconds it would cost her to shift to her wolf form. Running bare breasted through the woods at three-thirty in the morning hadn't made her top ten list this year, but it looked just about inevitable.

"Yes. Here."

She opened her mouth to defy him again, but she never got the chance. Before she could speak, Joey stepped into the room, wide-eyed with concern. "Honor? What's going on here? Is everything all right?"

Honor nearly burst out laughing. She might have, if the tension weren't thick enough to choke the sound out of her and she weren't keeping her gaze glued to Logan's face in anticipation of his next move.

"Get out."

Logan barked the order as if he had every right, but what pissed Honor off was that Joey actually started to obey.

"I didn't say leave, Joey. And you still take your orders from me. Don't you."



It wasn't a question, and Honor didn't bother to look in Joey's direction to gauge her answer. She refused to so much as blink. She didn't trust the Silverback visitor not to use the slip to his advantage.

Logan snarled. "You'll take them from me."

"I'll take them from *no one*." All the days of tension and struggle and uncertainty suddenly overwhelmed Honor, and she struck out where she could. At Logan. "I am the White Paw alpha. Not you. Not Winters. No one but me. And the alpha does. Not. Answer."

They stared at each other, teeth bared, eyes narrowed. Honor could feel the skin between her shoulder blades shift and tighten, raising the hackles she didn't actually have in her human form. She bet Logan could feel the same subtle crawling beneath his skin. She almost said a prayer of gratitude for it, since if they'd been in their were or wolf forms, they'd likely have already been locked together, either ripping out each other's throats, or mating furiously on the kitchen tile. Which one it would have been counted as a toss up.

"Can I get anyone anything? A cup of tea? Or I could make cocoa..."

Honor snorted. If the tension had been any less thick, she might have laughed. Instead, she straightened her spine and reached out a hand to her cousin, never taking her eyes off Logan's. "No. We're done. Give me your robe."

Joey didn't hesitate, but untied the thick, terry cloth robe she wore and shrugged out of it, laying it over Honor's outstretched arm. She shivered a little in the thin, cotton nightgown she wore, but she didn't say a word.

Honor pulled the robe on and belted it closed, concealing her bare breasts from the two people in the room she felt really didn't need to be seeing them right now. "I'm going to bed. Because the White Paw Clan is an honorable one, I won't ask you to leave tonight, Mr. Hunter, but I expect your bags to be packed in the morning."

Then she did what she never would have done if Joey hadn't been there. She turned her back on Logan Hunter and walked out of the room.

## **Chapter Six**

Like he needed this to get any more complicated.

Logan rounded the corner into the kitchen still brooding over the incident the previous night. Developing a severe case of the hots for the alpha he had come here to evaluate did not sit well on his stomach. Doing the evaluation promised to be complex enough as it was. He didn't need the added complication of a constant erection. Nor did it help much to find out that the alpha he had the hots for, the one he was here to evaluate, tasted like she'd be hitting her heat on the night of the next full moon.

Could you say, "shit hitting the fan," maybe?

"Good morning, Mr. Hunter. Can I get you some breakfast before you leave?"

Logan glanced in the direction of the question and saw Honor's cousin, the small, quiet one who had interrupted them last night, backed up into a corner where two sides of counter converged. She held a pair of tongs before her like a weapon and shifted nervously when his gaze fixed on her.

"I'm making bacon, but there's some sausage as well, and plenty of eggs. Steak, too, if you prefer."

"What makes you think I'm leaving?"

She shifted again, her eyes darting nervously about the room. "Well, Honor said. She said Greg would be taking you into town as soon as you finished eating. How do you like your eggs?"

"Sunny side up." He pulled a chair away from the small table and sat down. "With bacon. But I'm not leaving today."

“But Honor said –”

“Honor is mistaken.”

Joey didn't say anything else, just placed a mug of steaming coffee on the table in front of him and turned back to her frying pan, but he could feel the way she kept shooting him suspicious glances while he ate. Needless to say, he didn't linger over the meal.

He took the last slice of bacon with him, munching as he left the house and followed Joey's nervously worded directions about where to find her cousin.

*She'll be down at the stoneyard. That's where the howls happen. She and some of the men will make sure everything is secure and safe for the pack. But I don't think she'll be expecting to see you.*

Logan disagreed. He knew that if Honor Tate had half the intelligence he credited her with, surprise would not be her first response to seeing him again.

He followed the trail that Joey had indicated through the woods. The scent of the pine trees and the crisp chill of winter air lessened a little of the tension inside him. Usually he didn't mind the city. He'd lived there for as long as he could remember, so it felt comfortable and familiar to him. Like home. But there was something about the forest, the crunch of packed snow beneath his boots, the tang of pine and soil in the air. The smell of game and the rich sounds of a living ecosystem all around called to his primal instincts.

He snorted to himself and ducked beneath a low-slung branch. Primal instincts? If he wasn't careful, he'd be scratching behind his ears in public soon.

The path wound through the woods long enough for him to stretch his legs, but he wasn't worried about getting lost. He could smell the years of Lupines winding through the trees, concentrated on the path ahead of him. It guided him more surely than signposts. Every pack had its own scent, and he thought he was beginning to recognize the White Paw, but he didn't particularly care. The only scent he cared about was rich and earthy and still bore the faint trace of flowers.

Honeysuckle, he thought. And clover. But even the scent of flowers couldn't mask the trace of her approaching heat. Now that he had tasted her, he knew what that trace of spice to her scent had signified, and it made the fit of his jeans tighten uncomfortably.

He swore under his breath and kept walking. Speaking of complications he didn't need, this had to be the biggest. Adjudicating the right of an alpha to lead his—or in this case, her—pack was a touchy subject to begin with. Not many people appreciated an outsider settling pack business. Heaven knew he'd have bitten the face off anyone who tried it with the Silverback Clan. Yet here he stood, ready to do it to the White Paw. He didn't blame Honor for being a bit miffed with him.

From the little bit of information he'd managed to pry out of her cousin, Honor's brief tenure as alpha had not been a peaceful one. At the pack meeting she'd called to announce her father's death, she'd received her first challenge from a young male who thought a female beta could be overlooked, but a female alpha should be overstepped.

Honor taught him the error of his ways, fairly bloodlessly, by accepting the alpha challenge and pinning him by the throat in less than ten minutes of combat. She had thought a swift display of strength would cement her position and demonstrate to the pack that she intended to keep the position that had come to her. No such luck.

Two days later, the second challenger had stepped forward. According to Joey, Honor had almost welcomed it. The Lupine who called her leadership into question was a bad apple in the pack. Less intelligent than he was brawny, Chet had needed to be taken down a peg or two, and if Honor had to be the one to do it, so be it.

The fight hadn't been a quick one. While Honor had been fighting to the surrender, Chet had been fighting to the death. They had wrestled across the

pack ceremonial grounds, the stoneyard, for almost three hours before Honor had given in to the fact that Chet would not surrender unless forced. She had applied that force to his hind legs, slicing through his hamstrings with razor-sharp teeth and leaving him alive, but crippled. The injuries would heal, but not quickly, and Chet would remember the bite of alpha and humiliation for a long time to come.

The final challenge had apparently been the worst for Honor, and it was the one about which Joey had said the least. It had occurred just the night before, only a few hours prior to Logan's arrival on White Paw lands. The challenger, he gathered, had been one of Honor's childhood friends, and his bid for alpha had shocked her. Even more shocking to her had been Paul's insistence on turning their challenge into a death match.

She hadn't killed him, Logan knew. Joey hadn't given him any specifics, but it sounded as if Honor had again gone for a crippling wound instead of taking her challenger's life. It didn't speak well for her in terms of her ability to lead the pack. Logan admired compassion from a theoretical point of view, but he knew it had little place in the hierarchy of a Lupine pack.

For all the veneer of civilization their human forms lent them, at their core, a Lupine pack functioned in much the same way as a wolf pack. The strongest led, the others followed, and the weakest either made themselves useful or they didn't live to see another winter. To humans it sounded brutal; to Lupines it was the way things worked. They didn't make the rules out of cruelty. They simply knew that the survival of the pack was more important than the survival of any one pack member, and a hell of a lot more important than manners.

He made no effort to silence his footsteps as he strode toward the stoneyard, and he wasn't surprised to break through the tree line into the clearing to find Honor and two teenaged males staring at him.

Honor thrust the tip of her shovel into the dirt at her feet and pointed toward the west. "Town is that way."

"I'll keep that in mind." He smiled pleasantly and walked toward her and the fire pit she and the teens looked to be repairing. "For when I'm ready to leave."

"You're ready now."

"Not true. *You're* ready for me to leave, but me? I prefer to stay a while." He turned toward the two boys who watched the interplay avidly. "You guys might want to go now."

Both boys turned to look at Honor who scowled, but nodded curtly. "Go. Head up to the offices and tell Mike I want you to go along when he looks at that pipe work we want to replace in cabin twelve. I can finish here."

This time the boys nodded and moved off, heading back along the same path Logan had used. At least the young ones knew enough to take orders only from their alpha. But teenaged boys were one thing. He still wasn't sure about her qualifications for leading the entire pack.

As soon as the sound of the boys' footsteps had faded from their sharp ears, Honor turned on him with a snarl. "What the hell are you still doing on my land? I thought I made myself pretty damned clear last night. I want you gone."

"Oh, you were clear. And so was I." He met her gaze squarely, not bowing to anyone else's alpha. "I'm not leaving until I finish the job I was sent to do. That means I'm not leaving until I see for myself whether or not you have what it takes to run this pack."

She threw down her shovel and planted her hands on her hips. "Who the hell are you to tell me if I have what it takes? I grew up in this pack, and I've been its beta since I was fifteen years old. I know the way things work around here a hell of a lot better than you do, so who the hell do you think you are to give me orders?"

“I’m the man who intends to see them carried out.”

She laughed at him. Literally threw her head back and laughed, but when her eyes met his again, the look in them had very little to do with humor. “You go right on thinking that, city boy, and I’ll tell you what my father told me. ‘A White Paw leads the White Paw, and everyone else can go hang.’ You can make any damned decision you want, and you can go carry your news to your boss back in New York. But I am telling you right now, what you two think won’t make one bit of difference to this pack. We do things the way we do them, and to hell with you both.”

Logan smiled, which was the only way he could think of to keep from snarling. Not that he disagreed with what she was saying, because it made sense—although in the end it wouldn’t make any difference to his decision or Graham’s—but he did have to exercise every iota of self-control he possessed not to jump her where she stood. In the heat of her anger, her scent had intensified. It trailed across the space between them and teased his senses. The spicy note seemed even stronger today, confirmation of how close she was to her heat. He wanted to lick that fragrance from her skin and nibble his way up the insides of her thighs until he could feast on her, unimpeded.

Shit. Why the hell had he decided to wear button-fly jeans?

Dragging his mind off his crotch for a good five seconds, he imagined his feet nailed to the ground beneath him. And if that didn’t work, he’d have to try real nails. “I understand your feelings, Honor, but they don’t change the fact that I am not leaving until my job here is done.”

Honor threw up her hands and all but howled. “What fucking part of ‘get the hell away from me’ do you not understand?”

Logan was on her before she got it out. So much for his imaginary nails. “The part about ‘away,’” he growled and closed his mouth over hers.



## Chapter Seven

*Oh, shit. Not again.*

*Yes, please, thank you.*

Honor couldn't seem to make up her mind. Was he the best thing she'd ever tasted and the one thing she needed more than breath right now, or did she need to kill him and leave his carcass for scavengers more desperate than the pack?

Then that little roll of his hips against hers really threatened to turn the tide.

Hell, it threatened, promised and carried out. One minute she was contemplating how his head would look posed on a spike in the flowerbeds next to the front door, and the next, she clung to him like a honeysuckle vine, arms and legs twined around him as she tried to get as close as she possibly could to the source of her arousal. Damn heat. Why Lupine women couldn't have a normal female menstrual cycle, Honor had never understood. No, she had to go through a monthly bout of nearly uncontrollable lust and a frantic desire to mate every single time she ovulated. How was that right?

Logan didn't seem to mind. His arms closed around her and hitched her higher against him, until her legs wound around his waist and his hips could grind directly between her legs. That felt good for all of seven milliseconds before Honor wanted more. She gritted her teeth against the urge to sink them into his flesh—something a male Lupine usually took as an invitation—and concentrated on remembering to breathe. That lasted five milliseconds. At that point, she gave up on good sense and reached for his shirt collar, grabbing hold and wrenching her hands apart until his buttons popped open and scattered about the floor of the clearing.

Three milliseconds later, she felt the impact of her back hitting the rough bark of a tree trunk and a distinct draft as her T-shirt tore down the middle and fell to hang limply off her elbows. If the man kept this up, she'd have to live permanently in her wolf form for lack of clothes.

That didn't seem so bad, though, not when he was nibbling a path from her mouth, down her throat to her breasts. She felt the little stings of his teeth against her skin, followed by the heat of his tongue laving the wounds, and the pressure of his mouth as he sucked her skin against his teeth. She'd look like a hickey map of the Milky Way by nightfall, and she couldn't have cared less. All she cared about was getting her hands on him and easing the burning ache between her legs.

Her hands clenched in the material of his shirt, and she shoved it off his shoulders and arms, tugging furiously until it gave up and fluttered to the ground beside them. Then her hands were on him, exploring the smooth expanse of muscle and skin, the furring of hair across his chest, the tight, flat discs of his nipples. She wanted to taste him, but he was too bloody far away, so she memorized his textures as if she were blind and he was her very own form of Braille. When her hands slipped below the waistband of his jeans and her nails scraped intricate patterns in the skin at the small of his back, he roared and shifted, tearing open the fly of her own jeans until he could slip his hand inside and plunge two long fingers deep into her slick heat.

"Logan!"

Her cry sounded choked and harsh to her own ears, but it was the most she could manage when her world was exploding behind her eyes like summertime fireworks. She tilted her hips to take him deeper and then moaned in frustration when he pressed knuckle deep inside her. It wasn't enough.

"More. Now."

He didn't answer, but the rough rumble in his chest sounded like approval to her. Shaking with need, she reached between them for the button on his jeans and popped it open, only to encounter another one. Her eyes widened incredulously.

*"Button flies?"*

He growled in frustration and used his free hand to yank open the next button. "I know. Never again."

The third and fourth buttons gave easily, practically leaping out of their holes to avoid their owner's ire. As soon as the stiff denim parted, his cock sprang free and Honor all but wept in relief. Her hand curled around it, stroking down the length and back again. He felt amazing, hot and thick and aching hard and she needed him inside her. Now.

Giving up the last of her restraint, she ducked her head forward and sank her teeth into Logan's shoulder, directly over the spot where she'd bitten last night in the kitchen. Holding on, she released her grip on his cock only long enough to unzip her own jeans. The rasping sound seemed to echo around them, then her jeans fell away under his hands and her legs were winding back around his waist. She reached again for his cock, but he was there before her, guiding himself to her liquid entrance. He paused briefly, his hot gaze capturing hers, before he tightened his hands on her hips and plunged deep.

Her cry, all hoarse triumph and blatant challenge, rang through the clear air around them. Logan grunted and leaned into her more heavily, pinning her to the rough tree trunk as he began thrusting inside her.

Honor squirmed to get closer, ignoring the scrapes and patches of raw skin the rough tree bark left on her back. Her awareness encompassed no more than him. Logan. The man against her, around her, inside her. The man who felt like home, whose body had been made to fill hers.

She thrust back at him, frantic to take him, all of him. His cock stretched her wide, filled her to the heart, and still she wanted more. She braced her hands against his shoulders and pushed, trying to get the leverage to increase the force of his thrusts. He growled a warning and pushed her hard against the tree. She snarled in his ear, but before she could bite, he shifted. His hands snaked down between them and spread her thighs even wider. He hooked his elbows behind her knees and pressed her legs up and back, and she felt his next thrust in the back of her throat.

God, he felt incredible inside her. Hot and thick and hard and so perfect her head spun with it. She felt the truth pounding at her in time with his movements, but she shoved it back in fear. She did not need or want this right now. Sure, her life sucked these days, but it sucked on her terms. If she gave in and accepted the truth she could feel haunting her, her terms would cease to exist. She knew it as surely as she knew her own name. The only terms Logan Hunter intended to play by were his own, and Honor knew that giving in would cost her more than she was willing to pay.

She could feel his muscles tensing beneath her clutching hands. She felt the slickness of sweat and of blood where her nails had bitten deep and carved furrows in his broad back. He began to thrust harder, if that were possible, to quicken his motions until he moved with blurring speed and force and Honor had to abandon her efforts to keep up. She simply held on for dear life. Higher he drove them, and faster, until Honor could feel the tension twist in her belly like a tightened rubber band, ready to snap.

She forced her eyes open and met his gaze. His eyes looked hot and wild, glowing a feral gold with hunger and instinct. She knew what he was about to do, and she couldn't let it happen. Her body tensed, the first wave of orgasm gathering inside her, preparing to break. Logan growled in response to her body's instinctive tightening and his hands bit deeply into her hips, leaving

bruises where tanned fingers gripped creamy flesh. He shifted abruptly and forced her hips to tilt upward until the base of his cock rubbed against her clit as he thrust, and Honor broke.

The climax seized her by the scruff of her neck and shook her like a disobedient cub. Her pussy clenched around him, milking his cock in hot, slick motions, dragging him into ecstasy behind her.

She felt the moment of his explosion and twisted her torso to the side, raising one arm to deflect his bite, catching it on the muscular flesh of her bicep, rather than on the shoulder where he'd been aiming. She heard his muffled roar, but his jaw had already clenched shut around her arm and he couldn't pull away. He mouthed the skin as his body emptied itself inside her, a growl rumbling low in his throat. Honor hung there, pinned between the tree and his shuddering body for endless minutes until his tension eased.

He raised his head to glare at her, brown eyes still glowing an amber gold with the aftermath of his climax. "You shouldn't have done that."

"You shouldn't have tried to mark me." She shivered, suddenly aware that they were all but naked outside in the stoneyard in the middle of winter. Never mind that steam billowed off them in a hazy fog; she wanted her clothes.

"You are mine." Logan shook her, staring into her eyes as if he could will her to agree with him.

"I don't belong to anyone. Least of all you. I bear no man's mark, and I intend to keep it that way."

He snorted. "What are you? The Virgin Alpha? I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but your name isn't Elizabeth."

"It doesn't need to be." She shoved hard at his shoulders, and he grunted, but didn't release her. "Let me go and get the hell off my property. We've said everything we need to say, and I need to go take a frickin' shower."

His jaw snapped shut loud enough for Honor to hear the click. When he spoke from between clenched teeth, it sounded as if it came from a wolverine larynx, not a human one. "Not yet. I'm not done. You *will* be my mate, Honor. No matter what I have to do to convince you."

He carried her to the floor of the clearing and went ahead with the convincing. All Honor could do was moan.

## Chapter Eight

"This doesn't change anything, you know."

Logan sighed and stretched, shifting his weight partially of Honor's limp body and onto the rough ground. "I never thought it had."

He might have hoped, but he hadn't really let himself believe any different. In the twelve hours or so that he'd known Honor Tate, he'd come to realize she could teach stubborn to Missy Winters.

Logan winced at the reminder of his own pack and why he'd come to Connecticut in the first place. It unfortunately hadn't been to roll around the forest with the mouth-watering alpha of the White Paw Clan, but to decide if she had what it took to lead her pack. Something about which he hadn't yet made up his mind.

"Just so we're clear." She pushed him off of her, forcing him to roll onto his back so she could sit up and brush the bits of leaves and dirt from her skin. "Now when are you leaving?"

He groaned and covered his eyes with his forearm. "Look, I think we've come to a Mexican standoff." He shifted to look at her and tried desperately not to get distracted by the sight of her bare breasts and the marks he'd made on them, most of which were already fading. "You're not going to change your mind about having me here, and I'm not going to change my mind about staying. So I have a proposal for you."

"Does it involve you catching the next train back to the city?"

"No. And that's not just because I drove here, either." He saw her looking around for the remains of her T-shirt and felt a ping of conscience. He handed

her his mostly intact, if buttonless, shirt and watched her shrug into it. "I intend to stay until I find out what I came here to find out."

"It doesn't matter what you say. No one here will cooperate with you no matter what you think your job is." She tied the ends of the shirt into a knot below her breasts and reached for her jeans. "You're wasting your time."

All of a sudden he realized she'd never been wearing a bra and his body responded in a pretty predictable fashion. He drew one knee up to his chest and rested his forearm across it. "It's my time to waste, but I don't think that's what I'll be doing, anyway. But here's what I'm thinking." He waited until she fastened her jeans and turned to him with an impatient expression. "The full moon is in three days." Along with the peak of her heat, but he wasn't thinking about that. "And it will be the first howl since your father's death. It would be a perfect opportunity for me to see the dynamics of the pack and to get the answers to the Silverback alpha's questions. If you can put up with me for another seventy-two hours, I'll leave after that without a fuss."

"Why? Give me a good reason. I have every right to order a non-pack member out of pack territory. I don't have to let you stay."

"You do if you want to avoid a clan war."

He saw her pause, saw his words sink in and make her think. He kept his gaze level, but unthreatening. He needed her to know he meant what he said, but he didn't want to come across as any more hard-nosed or unyielding than he had to. He walked a delicate tightrope, but his balance had always been good.

"Winters would really take it that far? That's insane. It shouldn't matter to him who leads this pack, so long as they aren't intending to lead it into his business. And trust me, I'm not. So why does he care?"

"The White Paw pay fealty to the Silverback. It's his job to care."

Honor rolled her eyes. "I so don't need this shit. Not now. Not here. Not a fucking chance."



Logan shrugged. "You've got it anyway. Now what are you going to do about it?"

She slammed her feet into battered hiking boots with a snarled curse. "Right now, I'm going back to the house to change, and then I'm going back to work. Some of us have real jobs where we have to be constructive and accomplish things."

He suppressed a smile at that dig. She was cute when she was mad. And she'd probably rip his intestines out through his nostrils if he mentioned that fact. "Gotcha. I think I'm going to go get a shirt at least, and then maybe take a look around. See if I can meet some of the pack. You know, basically stick my nose in where it doesn't belong. See you at dinner?"

Logan watched her stalk off back toward the house, grinning a wolfish grin. He hadn't come here expecting to find his mate, but damned if it didn't appear that was exactly what he'd done. He wondered what she'd say when he informed her they'd be getting married and having cubs together. If he knew her at all, he guessed what she'd say didn't bear repeating. But what the hell? Logan Hunter loved a challenge. And this one looked to be a doozy.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Logan gathered and donned what was left of his clothes—namely his blue jeans, his boots and one sock—and made his way back to the main house, Honor was long gone. He hadn't really expected anything different, but some days, he just couldn't quell that involuntary burst of optimism.

He jogged up to his room, which he'd learned was across the hall and down three doors from Honor's, and grabbed a change of clothes. It took a second to brush himself free of the debris he'd picked up from the ground in the stoneyard,

but he figured better to take a moment now than spend half the day fighting with a twig in his trousers.

He was still buttoning up a new shirt as he made his way downstairs and into the kitchen. All his exercise from this morning had made him hungry, even if it was still technically an hour or so 'til lunch. He didn't find Joey in the kitchen as he'd expected, but he did find a brief note on the counter explaining the timing of meals, the contents of the refrigerator and that he was free to help himself to anything that wasn't on the neatly printed menu beside the note. He took Honor's cousin at her word and foraged in the fridge, emerging with a half a rabbit and a full duck breast, cooked beautifully rare.

Sitting at the small kitchen table, he made short work of his snack before he wiped the grease off his hands with a dishtowel and pulled out his cell phone. He noted gratefully that he still got a pretty good signal out here in the woods and dialed Graham's direct line at Vircolac.

"Vircolac," a perky feminine voice announced. "We bring good things back to life."

Logan snorted out a laugh. "What, is that a new ad slogan?"

"It's still in testing. The first focus group yielded mixed results. How are you, Logan? Arrived safely in the wild, untamed north?"

"Missy, I'm only a hundred and thirty-six miles north of Manhattan, and the last yeti from these parts became a stockbroker back in eighty-seven. But I'm fine. Thanks."

"Spoilsport." She sounded remarkably unfazed by the correction. "How are things going so far? Did the new alpha make a good first impression?"

Logan's mind instantly conjured up the sight of Honor silhouetted in the bathroom doorway the instant before she had noticed him. The light and steam behind her had outlined her in lush detail, emphasizing the soft curves of her

breasts, those long legs, and the luscious flare of her hips. He felt his body stirring at the memory and cleared his throat. "I'm reserving judgment."

Missy snorted. "Just like a man. I assume you called to talk to my mate, not to me, right?"

The question caught Logan unaware. Not because the answer wasn't yes, but because he realized that for the first time since he'd originally met Missy Roper Winters, he really would rather talk to her husband than to her. The epiphany almost knocked him over. Missy hadn't caused the erection he could feel straining against his jeans – zip front, this time – as they talked; Honor had. He'd been fine until his mind had conjured up that image of the lithe brunette poised in the bathroom door wearing nothing more than a towel. And when he let his mind wander along its favorite path, he imagined Honor's pale, creamy skin and dark, curling hair, not Missy's blond, curvy figure. It amazed him.

"Logan?"

The quiet question shook him out of his meditation. "Right. Sorry, Miss. Yeah, I do need to talk to Graham. Is he around?"

"Sure. He was just showing Ava the door. She stopped over to see Roarke, and Graham never rests easy until he's seen her taxi pull away. I imagine he'll be back any second."

Logan could hardly blame Graham. Of all Missy's close friends, Ava Markham inspired the greatest sense of fear and awe. An unrepentant matchmaker, she'd tried her hand at setting up just about everyone she knew at one time or another. Now, her erstwhile victims spent most of their time praying for the day when someone would turn the tables on her. "Right. Should I call back?"

"No, don't worry about it. Here he is now."

He heard a shuffling sound as the receiver was passed from one hand to the other, then a rough growl replaced Missy's light, feminine voice in his ear. "What's up?"

Logan felt his eyebrow arching. "Nice to talk to you, too. I'm fine, thanks. Didn't sleep that well last night, but somehow I'm not feeling all that many ill effects. Must be the water up here."

"Can it, Hunter. It's been a lousy day."

"I heard. Ava paid a visit, huh? Having the place fumigated?"

"Not yet. Maybe when Missy takes Roarke to the park later. So what's the news?"

"I'm here."

Pause.

"That's it? That's the news?"

"Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Yeah, but they could at least say, 'we're here and we put down some rocks,' right?"

"Okay. I'm here, and I've met Tate's daughter."

Another pause.

"And?"

"There's not much else to tell. I've only been here," he glanced at his watch, "fifteen hours, and most people around here were asleep for a good eight or nine of those." He and Honor hadn't, but he saw no need to bog the conversation down with details.

"Yeah, but you've had time to form a first impression, haven't you?"

Logan paused, reluctant to say anything. On the one hand, he didn't want to hurt Honor's chance to prove herself, but on the other, he couldn't lie to his

alpha. "Yeah. She's pretty together, considering what she's just been through. I think she has potential."

"Potential or ability?"

"It's really too soon to make that kind of call."

"What about the pack? Have they settled in to the idea of having a female alpha, especially such a young one?"

"I'm going to start talking to them once I'm off with you. So far I've only met a couple of them, and I doubt that's much to go by."

"It's a start. What did they have to say?"

Logan gritted his teeth for a second before answering. "There have been three challenges since she took the title Alpha."

"Really? Well, she's alive, so I guess that means she can handle herself in a fight. How is she taking the deaths?"

"I don't think her father's death has had a chance to sink in yet. She's been too busy keeping things running to shed any tears over him."

"Understandable. But what about the challenge deaths? Is she holding up after those?"

*Shit.* "There haven't been any deaths."

Again, Graham paused. "What does that mean? If there were challenges..."

"She chose to end them without slaying her opponents. The first showed her his throat, and the other two she crippled. But she hasn't killed anyone."

"And you still think she has the potential to lead that pack?"

"I think it's possible. She's strong enough. Two of those challenges came from grown men, and she defeated both of them, death or no. She's also damned smart from what I can tell. True, she's got a bit of a feminine notion of mercy, but I believe she would do what needed to be done if it came to that kind of situation."

“She doesn’t believe an alpha challenge is that kind of situation?”

Logan felt the need to defend her, which was weird enough in itself, but coupled with the fact that his hackles were raising to his alpha, it crossed the line into surreal. “She did what she had to do, and she walked away from the challenges a clear winner. The last one was her closest childhood friend. Imagine how you would feel if you were faced with a choice to let me live or die. How easy would that death stroke be for you?”

“Whoa. We’re not talking about you and me, brother. We’re talking about Ethan Tate’s daughter. Aren’t we?”

Logan forced down his growl. “Yes. We are. And I think we need to give her the benefit of the doubt. The first howl since Ethan’s death will be this weekend. The day after tomorrow. The whole pack will be gathered and according to Pack Law, any outstanding challenges will have to be answered then or held ‘til the next Clans Moot.”

“Which is still three more years away. And it’s scheduled to be hosted in Silverback territory this time. So she and her clan will have to come here.” He was silent for a moment, and Logan could almost hear him thinking. “I won’t say I’m not concerned over what you’ve told me, but I trust your judgment. Stay through the howl. If you think she’s capable of leading the pack after what you see then, I’ll accept your word and leave her in power until the next Clans Moot. Then I’ll take a look for myself and make a final decision.”

Oh right. Honor would just love that little plan. Of course, he didn’t plan to tell Honor about it. “Agreed.”

“Good. Now get back to work. I’m thinking about trying to give Missy a new baby for her birthday.”

Logan rolled his eyes at the shriek he heard just before the phone disconnected. He flipped the cell phone closed and shoved it into his pocket. Let Graham have fun with his little blonde mate. Logan had a darker fish to fry.

## Chapter Nine

Honor couldn't remember a more exhausting day in her life. Who knew eluding one determined Lupine could take so much out of a girl?

Ever since that incident in the stoneyard yesterday, she'd devoted all her energy to being wherever Logan Hunter was not. Well, there had been that forty-five minutes she'd spent leaning up against a tree, trying to remember how her legs worked immediately after stalking away from him. But she wasn't counting that. Or the way it had taken a good two hours for the pleasant ache between her legs to fade to the point where she wasn't constantly having to press them together to ease the fluttering there.

She wasn't counting that either.

Instead, she concentrated on the monotony of the responsibilities she'd inherited from her father. She sent several boys back to the stoneyard to finish off the fire pit before settling into her father's office and dragging out his dog-eared old appointment calendar. He'd been meticulous about his business, and every scheduled task and due invoice had been neatly noted in the pages of the calendar.

Honor looked over the notes for this week and sighed. The chores and bills weren't onerous by any means, but she just didn't want to deal with them. The land had been her father's passion, not hers, and the cabins they rented to pack members, along with the commercial properties in town struck her more as a burden than a vocation. If she had her druthers, she'd be spending her time at a pottery wheel, not a computer. It was just one more sign to her that the fate she'd ended up with was not the fate she would have chosen for herself.

She looked around the office to be sure no one had entered to talk to her. Even so, she still took the precaution of closing the door and pulling down the shades before she gave in to her desire to lay her head down on the cool wooden surface and close her eyes.

What had she gotten herself into?

Intellectually, she had known this day was coming, but she'd had no idea it would be this soon. She had thought she had years yet. Maybe a decade or two before she'd have to think of a way to tell her father she didn't want to take his place when he died. But before she could get the words out, he'd been gone, leaving her with a mass of problems and no conceivable way out of them. Lucky her.

When she'd been a child, all the way up through her teenaged years, Honor had longed to please her demanding father. She'd done everything she could to get his attention. She'd tried being the obedient daughter, but he barely noticed. Then she'd tried being the top student in her classes, but that failed as well. Nothing had made any impact on Ethan Tate, not when she excelled and not when she rebelled. Nothing had seemed to make any difference to him until she'd begun to move up in the pack.

Her first challenge had been more of a lark than anything intentional. She'd refused to follow the orders of a slightly older male pack member—not surprising since he'd been trying to order her to let him grope her breasts—and had been faced with the decision to either challenge him for his rank or follow his orders. Honor had gone with the challenge. She had won, leaving the fight slightly bloody, but satisfied that the boy she'd beaten wouldn't be giving her any more grief any time soon.

That first challenge had earned her barely a passing glance, but the next one had merited a raised eyebrow. The next, a pat on the back. By the time she'd won her first challenge against an adult pack member, the day after her fourteenth



birthday, she had found the path to her father's heart—straight through his ego. Every time she won a rank challenge, it reflected well on her father and on the line of Lupines from whom she and he were descended. That was the only act he respected and so Honor had fought the battle over and over until finally it had won her a place at his side.

It took her a few years as beta before she realized how unhappy the title made her. While she now received her father's attention, and even his grudging respect, she had no love for the chores that accompanied the position. She took no joy in settling disputes between rivals, nor in enforcing the laws of her father's rule. She knew she had the ability and the respect of the pack, but she got no pleasure from it. She didn't relish the power of her station, just lived with it.

Not that she wanted to be omega by any means. She couldn't imagine being the lowest rung in the pack hierarchy, nor even being lost in the middle with the majority of the pack. She didn't want to drop in rank, she just wanted to not have so much of the responsibility that went with being in charge. And that really wasn't one of her options. So now look at her. Probably the world's only reluctant alpha.

She groaned and raised her head from the desk just far enough to prop it up in her hands. The real problem now was that her future stretched before her like a trap. The longer she spent here, doing the thing that made her unhappy, the tougher it would be to ever get herself out of it. The more the pack accepted her, the less chance she had to leave. So here she was, stuck in a place she didn't want to be, doing something she didn't want to do and telling everyone who tried to talk her out of it to take a flying leap. Not to mention maiming anyone who tried to force her out of the martyrdom she'd stepped into. Sure, that was sane.

The easiest way out would have been to just lose a challenge. It happened to most Lupines at some point. She could throw a rank challenge and let one of the members of her pack take over her position as leader of the White Paw Clan. The

plan had a few disadvantages, though, chief among them, the inability to control whether or not her opponent would let her live after the challenge. Traditionally, alpha challenges ended in death, and just because she had been lenient with her challengers did not mean that anyone else would offer her the same option. The second problem had to do with the fact that she could see no current member of the pack who was capable of taking on the role of alpha with any success. No one else had any experience or even enough good common sense to make a decent showing.

She sighed and tried to figure out a way to convey that idea without making herself sound like the world's biggest snob, and there really wasn't one. It wasn't that she believed every single one of her pack members was an idiot, just that none of them would be able to step into her shoes without disrupting the life of the pack to a fairly significant degree. While Honor had been trained for her current position since the age of fifteen, no one else had. It might be a harsh truth, but it was still the truth.

Honor had a vision. She had plans for how she wanted to see the pack join the twenty-first century. She wanted to see them integrating with the modern world, becoming familiar with technology and engineering and science and all the fields that made humans such a threat to the continued survival of the human species. Only by understanding how the human world worked could the Lupines hope to survive the ever-growing encroachment into their territory, but so few pack members had even begun to comprehend that. Most of them had gone reactionary and preached a policy of isolation, cutting the Lupine world completely off from the human one. They saw it as the only way to preserve their culture. Honor saw it as suicide.

The more isolated they became, the more people would choose to isolate them. And that's the sort of thing that led to witch trials and hangings and stonings and such things. Honor would prefer the stonings not happen, so the

Lupines would need to learn to live with the humans and to accept that sometimes, change became necessary. Already, their races were beginning to mingle, and she had heard rumors that the big wigs across the country (especially the Council of Others in Manhattan) had begun to discuss plans for revealing the existence of their kind to the human world. It posed a big risk, but Honor saw the necessity behind it. It now felt almost inevitable, so why not work to ensure it happened on Lupine terms?

Honor just couldn't risk allowing a new alpha to regress and take the pack with them. It wasn't an option.

The final reason why she couldn't bring herself to lose any of her challenges didn't exactly qualify as noble, but it was honest. Her pride wouldn't allow it. Period. End of story. After all these years of proving herself to her father and the world, she simply couldn't fathom the idea of losing a fight. It went against every fiber of her being. She fought to win, and to lose would not only be to lose her position—and potentially her life—it would be to lose face in front of the entire pack. If she did that, how would she ever be able to look at their faces again?

She couldn't. Therefore, she couldn't lose the challenge.

"Welcome back to square one," she muttered under her breath.

She also couldn't afford the distraction presented by her Silverback guest.

Somewhere, she figured, the gods must be laughing at her. She couldn't think of how she might have pissed them off, and that was the only possible explanation for why this must be happening to her now. Why else would the powers of the universe have sent her mate in the middle of the most complicated period of her life? Could they find worse timing? Not only did she not have the time for a mate, or the energy to dedicate to one, but how the hell was she supposed to stop fighting to save her pack so she could show her belly to the new dog sniffing around her?

This just was not going to work. She knew that. It didn't matter that the man made her heart race and her blood heat and her body clench. It didn't matter that he left her with rapid breath and damp panties. She couldn't have a mate right now. End of story.

The really inconvenient part, though, was that she didn't think Logan had read that memo. He seemed determined to take what he wanted, when he wanted it and damn the consequences. It was a pretty predictable Lupine response, especially coming from a man as dominant as Logan Hunter, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with, given the present circumstances. Honor had a hard enough time keeping her own raging hormones under control, without having to deal with the source of those hormones doing his damndest to incite further raging. It just wasn't going to work.

Yeah, and if she kept telling that to herself often enough, she just might end up brain-damaged enough to believe it.

Swearing, Honor flipped her calendar open and began leafing through the pages once more. Time to stop brooding and concentrate on some real work. She got as far as opening to the proper page before a loud knock on her door called her attention. She snarled. "Come in."

She looked up to see a tousled brown head poking through the slightly open door. It wore Max's puppy dog expression and just below it dangled a bag containing the local bakery's chocolate frosted donuts. "Is it safe?"

Honor checked the side of her mouth for drool. "It will be if you throw those donuts in first." Theobromide be damned. She wanted those chocolate donuts. Besides, the amount of chocolate an adult werewolf would have to eat to get a bellyache from the toxic chemical defied comprehension. It defied Honor's comprehension, at least.

She caught the bag as it sailed toward her head and had swallowed half of the first donut before Max even managed to park his butt in the chair in front of

her desk. She'd skipped lunch again to avoid running into Logan and skipping meals was *not* a good idea for a Lupine.

"So," Max said, lounging back in his chair, one ankle crossed negligently over the other knee, "what's up with the Silverback dude?"

Honor bit into donut number two and felt her eyes narrow. She barely forced herself to chew before she replied. "What do you mean, 'What's up'? He's here because his alpha sent him here."

"Well, duh. It doesn't exactly strike me that he's vacationing. But why did he come? What's he trying to find out? And don't tell me this is some sort of courtesy visit, because he's asking way too many questions for courtesy."

The younger werewolf met Honor's gaze with raised eyebrows, his foot bouncing up and down where it dangled off the edge of his knee. At twenty, Max had energy to burn and yet fell in that awkward stage between adult, when he would be assigned pack chores, and child, when he could run around the territory free of responsibilities. She would need to find a constructive way to use all that energy, but right now, other priorities preoccupied her mind.

"Asking questions? Asking who? And what does he want to know?"

"It's not polite to answer a question with a question."

"It isn't when you do it. I'm the Alpha. I get to."

"That is so not fair."

"Deal." She snagged a third donut and used it to punctuate her point. "Now tell me. Where is the Silverback poking his nose, and what has he been asking people about?"

"Everywhere and lots of things." The sneakered foot bounced and Honor chewed. "He's talked to a good sampling of the present pack. Elders, males, females. He even visited Molly Stevens' day care and talked to some of the little ones. Whatever he wants to know, he wants a pretty diverse perspective on it."

"Have you *asked* any of the people he talked to what he wanted?"

"Well. No."

"So, in other words, you have no idea about what I'm asking you."

"You could say that."

"I just did."

"True. But you could also say that you just didn't ask the right question."

Honor growled. "Max..."

"Hey, all I'm saying is, I don't know exactly what he's been asking people about, but I do know that there are some rumors flying around that something big is going to be happening at the howl this weekend." He leaned forward in his chair, blue eyes glowing. "Something bigger than an alpha declaration and a challenge or two."

That made Honor pause. "What does that mean? What's bigger?"

"If I knew that, I'd know what he was asking people about."

"Don't be smart with me, Maxwell."

He held up his hands. "I'm not being smart, Honor. I promise. I mean, I'm just as curious as you are. If something big is going down, it would sure be nice to be prepared for it."

She scowled and leaned back in her chair, mumbling, "You're telling me."

"Then I guess it would be pretty useless for me to ask if *you* had any theories about what that all means?"

She just looked at him.

"Right. That's what I thought."

Max opened his mouth to speak, but before he got the chance to utter a single additional syllable, the door to Honor's office slammed open and a clearly belligerent man shoved his way inside. He flew to Honor's desk, slapped his meaty hands down on the surface and inhaled deeply.

"It's true, you little slut." His growl was deep and menacing and Honor didn't even blink. "I can smell him all over you. You let a stranger paw you like a bitch in heat. You let him touch what's mine."

One eyebrow arched up, and when she spoke, Honor could have recreated the polar ice cap with her tone of voice. "Yours? There is nothing in this room that belongs to you, Darin Major. And the next time you call me a bitch, I will lunch on your liver. Now would you care to rephrase?"

"You heard me fine the first time, and I meant what I said. You let that Silverback cur rub his scent all over you. You reek of him. And now I'm going to smell it every time I look at you. When the call to mate the alpha comes, you're going to be mine, but I'll still be able to smell him on you."

Honor raised her left hand, curled into a fist with the back of her hand facing Max and Darin. Coolly and very quietly she ticked off her points on her fingers as she replied. "One, let me repeat nothing in this room can be called yours, least of all me. Two, what I do and with whom I do it is not, and never shall be, any of your goddamned business. Three, there will be no alpha mating at the next howl because I do not chose to mate right now." She ignored the protest between her legs and continued. "And four, remove your hands from my desk before I remove them from you. Understand?"

## **Chapter Ten**

Silence fell between them, brief, tense and marked by the meeting of two gazes, one brown and chill, one green and maddened. But it ended abruptly when the door to the office opened again and another male voice rang out in the now-crowded room.

“If I were you, I would do what the lady says, Major. Somehow I doubt she’s joking.”

Honor never broke her stare with Darin, but her jaw shifted and clenched. “The next one to walk into my office without knocking will find himself decorating the floor in front of my fireplace.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Logan’s lip twitching. “That sounds kind of nasty, Darin. I think I’d back off if I were you.”

“That promise wasn’t made exclusively to Darin.”

“Maybe not, but he’s the one who’s going to have to defend himself from both sides in about thirty seconds if he doesn’t back off.”

What started in a reasonable and slightly amused voice had become decidedly serious by the end of that statement. Honor clenched her teeth to keep herself from screaming. If she’d been human, she probably would have screamed a split second later when Darin obeyed orders by removing his hands from her desk, but then ruined the moment of sanity by swinging around and launching himself straight for Logan’s throat.

The force of Darin’s attack forced Logan back through the door to the office and down the front steps of the small cabin that housed it. The two figures landed on the ground in the bare front yard, teeth snapping and hands clawing as Darin made the stupidest decision of his life and challenged a man who was



not only stronger and faster than him, but also a hell of a lot smarter. As evidenced by the very attack itself.

Instead of screaming, Honor roared and leapt up out of her chair and over her desk to launch herself after the two combatants. By the time she found herself in the yard with them, she could already see blood, though she couldn't be sure whose it was, and the sounds of vicious growls and snarls seemed to echo in the air around them. If she'd had a water hose, she'd have turned it on the two of them, but as it was, all she could do was stand on the sidelines and recite every curse she'd ever heard and a few new ones she had just made up herself. Necessity being the mother of invention and all.

She heard the sound of Max thundering outside right behind her and braced herself for impact just before he skidded to a halt beside her.

"Holy shit! They're totally throwing down. Right here!"

"This is not WWE, Max." She figured if she clenched her jaw any harder it would shatter, but hey, she could still get the words out. "And I'm going to kill one of them if they don't cut this out in the next ten seconds."

"Gotcha. One. Two. Three—"

Honor howled then, not a happy sound, and leapt for the struggling figures. She landed on top of Darin's back and tried to yank the two men apart. When she couldn't do that, she sank her teeth deep into Darin's side and tugged. That at least got his attention. He snarled something obscene but mostly unintelligible and backhanded her across the face with casual force. A human might have been killed by the force of the blow snapping her fragile little neck, but Honor was neither human nor fragile. All the smack did to her was to piss her off. Royally.

Rearing back, she let the reins of her beast slip just a little and felt the razor-sharp claws springing from the tips of her fingers. Sturdy as metal and sharp as glass, they ripped through Darin's muscular flesh like a jackhammer through tissue paper, leaving deep, bloody furrows behind them. Darin jerked and

screamed in pain, momentarily losing his concentration and giving Logan the advantage. The Silverback didn't even hesitate. He grabbed Darin by the throat, lifted him off the ground and threw him into a tree forty feet away from where he stood.

She turned on him with a growl. *"My fight. Mine."*

Logan's hand shot out, wrapping around Honor's neck this time. But instead of squeezing and lifting, it curled around the back of her neck and yanked her forward until her breasts flattened against his chest and he growled possessively. *"Mine."*

Logan saw the way his possessive statement made her temper flare, but he really didn't give a shit. This was his mate, and every hour that passed brought her closer and closer to the peak of her heat and to ovulation. The changes in her scent maddened him, and after searching for her—unsuccessfully—all day, he didn't intend to let her go.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the lanky young man who'd rushed out of Honor's office behind them hurrying to the now unconscious Darin. If he'd looked to be tending the fallen challenger, Logan would have stopped him, but all the young man did was grab the moron by the ankles and begin dragging him away from the small cabin out of which Honor ran her father's business. Dismissing them from his mind, he shifted the struggling burden in his arms and growled in pleasure at the way her squirming rubbed all her softest parts against his most appreciative ones.

*"Let. Me. Go!"* Honor herself sounded less appreciative. *"Hands off, Fang."*

*"No."* He ignored her fighting, except that he grabbed her flailing hands in one of his and pinned them behind her back. Then he began backing her up toward the cabin they'd just left, his hips bumping against hers as they walked. *"Told you. Mine."*

She snarled. "Told *you!* No!"

He didn't intend to take that for an answer. He could smell the heat rolling off her in heady waves, making his heart race and his cock stand at attention. If he didn't have her soon, he'd explode. In more ways than one.

Ignoring her demands, he continued backing her to the cabin, one step at a time. He almost had her there, too, and was already imagining the things he would do to her once she had her bent over her daddy's desk when she got sneaky. Going suddenly limp, as in falling completely boneless in his arms like dead weight, she forced him to hesitate and look down at her to see what happened. That split second of inattention nearly cost him all his grand plans for fathering cubs with this woman. As soon as his hold loosened a fraction, she brought her knee up hard between his legs. She might have damaged him permanently if he hadn't been quite so fast. As it was, he ended up with a baseball-sized bruise high on his thigh and a howling bundle of rage and frustration in his arms.

She yanked so hard at the arms he had pinned behind her that he started to fear she'd break her own wrist struggling to get away from him. He shifted his grip to take one hand in each of his, and she fought even harder. She threw herself bodily against him, disrupting his balance until the two of them went crashing to the ground not three feet from the cabin steps. Snarling like a she-wolf guarding her den, Honor launched another attack, surprising Logan who had thought she must be nearly done. She went for his eyes with her curving claws, but she got shoulder instead, tearing several wide strips through his thick hide. She threw herself forward, trying to get her teeth around his throat, but found herself flat on her back instead.

Logan pinned her carefully, making sure not to use too much of his weight and strength against her, but she made his gentlemanly behavior nearly impossible. She fought like a cornered badger, only meaner. She was going for

his eyes yet again when he finally got fed up and flipped her over onto her stomach where it would be harder for her to reach his vital areas. He covered her from behind, weighing her down, but it still didn't deter her. She began to buck like a Brahma bull at a rodeo, nearly unseating him twice.

The third time she did manage it. She bucked and twisted so hard and fast that Logan lost his balance and fell, tumbling off to the side of her. Luckily he managed to keep his hold on her arm or she'd have been part of the ether before he could so much as sneeze. Still, she writhed like a snake and managed to get to her hands and knees and crawl for the cabin before he fell on her again.

She'd gotten as far as the second step when he took her down, draping himself over her back like a blanket and pressing her stomach against the rough, wooden boards of the steps. She growled something obscene and tried to claw her way out from under him, but he held firm. He could smell the sharp, spicy sting of her arousal perfuming the air around them and inhaled deeply. For all that she pretended, Honor felt the attraction between them as deeply as he did. He knew that if he reached between her legs just then, he would find her warm and wet and dripping with the honey that he had drawn from her. The idea made his mouth water, and he licked his lips.

"You ran away from me this morning, Honor love. I don't think I'm going to let you get away again. This is too important to let that happen." He leaned down and let his tongue tease the shell of her ear. "You smell much too good to let that happen."

"Not...your...decision...bastard." She panted the words out, as if she had trouble drawing breath, but considering he had her pinned beneath his considerable bulk, anything was possible. "Let. Go."

He shook his head and nuzzled through the thick curls of her hair to get to the skin beneath. He drew her in, savoring that spicy fragrance and ignoring what it did to his self-control. Who needed self-control?

With that in mind, he shifted his weight slightly and slipped his free hand beneath her body to the spot where her T-shirt had ridden up to expose the soft skin of her belly. He felt her flinch when he touched her, heard her gasp when his finger circled her navel before dipping inside. Her hips bucked against him, but this time it had more to do with reaction than with any attempt to get him off of her. Things were looking up, but that still didn't mean he had any intention of testing that by letting her go just yet.

He caught her hands in his and drew them up over her head, so she stretched out underneath him like a picnic blanket, and pinned them there. The position made her T-shirt draw up even further and Logan rumbled his approval at the extra inches of bare skin it exposed. She felt smooth and soft and hot to his touch, and in the cool winter air, he bet anyone looking at them from a distance would see steam coming off them in waves. Of course, it wouldn't have stopped him if the entire Lupine population of North America had been watching. This woman was his mate, and he intended to have her. Now.

When he unfastened her jeans, she gave a growl of protest, but when his hand slid between her legs to her dripping core, all she could do was moan. His fingers parted her slick folds and stroked delicately, searching for every nuance of her reaction, the tightening of muscles, the faint trembling, the quiet hitch in her breathing. Sometimes those acute Lupine senses came in very handy indeed.

"Hands. Off." She growled the threat, but the words lacked a certain authority.

Logan's fingers slid a fraction deeper and teased small circles around her opening, drawing even more moisture from her body. Damn, but she was responsive. It made his mouth water almost as much as her scent did. "Somehow I'm not convinced that's what you really want, honey." He leaned forward and nipped at her earlobe, savoring her small intake of breath. "Are you sure you don't want something more like this?"

His hand shifted and two long fingers slid inside her, filling and stretching her eager body. She felt tight and hot and incredible around his fingers and he moaned, nearly drowning out the soft sound of her cries. He could imagine few things more perfect in this world than the feel of her slick pussy closing around his cock and milking him to completion. And if he didn't get his mind off that memory right now, he'd complete right there in his jeans.

Quickly withdrawing his hand from between her legs, he used it to shove her jeans down until they tangled around her ankles. She growled a protest, but his urgency drove him, and he didn't bother to pause to let her kick them off. Instead, he ripped her burgundy satin panties into shreds, not even taking time to appreciate the smooth, silky feel of the material or the contrast of the rich color against her fair skin. All he cared about was getting inside her, and the panties stood in his way, so they had to be destroyed. It was that simple.

Logan threw away the scraps of fabric and reached for his own jeans, racing to get them out of the way before he died of a critical build-up of sperm. The top button defied him, refusing to slip from its hole, and he snarled in frustration. He released her hands so he could use both to tackle the issue, but the second she shifted and braced them beneath her as if to push herself up and drag herself away from him, his hands slammed back over hers and he growled, a low, dark warning.

Honor growled right back. Shifting her weight, she braced her hands on one stair and her knees on another. The jeans still around her ankles and lower legs forced her to keep her legs together, but it made no difference. Pushing herself into place, she dropped to her elbows in front and thrust her bottom out behind her, raising her hips and curving her back until her pussy presented itself to him like an offering.

Logan froze in place. He recognized the mating stance for what it was, but he hadn't been expecting it. For all the lust he could smell on her skin, he'd thought

Honor meant to play the reluctant mate to the bitter end, and now here she was, presenting herself to him like a lusciously unwrapped birthday gift. For a few seconds all he could do was stare. Then she reached back and drew her hair forward over her shoulder and out of the way, turning to look back at him. She invited him with a look, and when she raised an eyebrow and canted her hips a fraction higher, he gave in to his instincts and covered her.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Honor fought fiercely, but in the end she was overpowered. Not by Logan, but by her own fierce desire. She needed to feel him inside her again and damn the consequences. She had done enough fighting her instincts lately, enough self-denial, enough of what was good for the pack instead of what was good for her, and she was done. This time, this one time, she would take what she needed and damn the consequences.

If she was lucky, maybe he'd fuck her to death and there wouldn't be any consequences.

By the time she decided this, though, and made him a clear offer, it was evident he barely remembered what to do with her. How quickly they forget. Drawing her hair over her shoulder, she put a little wriggle in her hips and looked back at him with one brow raised as if to ask how much clearer she had to make it.

Not much.

He fell on her like a starving man on a feast table, with the same greed and the same touch of fear that the bounty before him was only an illusion and would fade away if he hesitated even a moment.

She heard his rough growl of hunger and approval, then felt his large hands gripping her hips, holding her in place while he positioned his cock at the mouth of her cunt. She felt him savoring that moment of quivering anticipation before sliding home with one deep, forceful thrust.

Honor threw her head back and screamed. He drove into her, the momentum of his body carrying him hard and high in side her. He parted her body and made a place for himself in her heat. Her internal muscles quaked and



shivered and protested, but in the end they softened, letting him force his way inside. He repaid the kindness by stroking every nerve ending with the flared head and thick shaft of his cock. He reached deep inside her, to the heart of her and paused there before drawing back for another assault.

She whimpered and dropped her head to the cold, wooden step. The sensations threatened to overwhelm her, so intense she could barely draw breath. The denim around her ankles forced her to keep her legs pressed together, and that made her pussy tighter, forcing it to clamp down hard around him and milk him from the very first. She wondered what it felt like to Logan, if it could possibly feel as amazing to him as it did to her. Her entire body seemed on fire, shaking and twisting like a flame as he rode her hard there on the steps to her father's office.

She felt his fingers bite deeply into her hips, then he shifted, falling forward on top of her, his chest pressed tightly against her back, his hands coming down to pin hers to the rough wood. His hips continued to thrust against hers, his cock working a hard, regular rhythm inside her. She shivered wildly and the tremor passed from her flesh to his, making him growl softly right into her ear.

"More." His voice touched her like another hand, and abruptly Honor found that she wanted to give him more.

Dropping her chest to the steps, she drew her knees in until the tops of her thighs were digging into the front of one of the stairs and lifted her hips higher. The change in position shifted his cock inside her, sliding him a fraction deeper when she'd thought already that he filled her to overflowing. Now she could feel him so deeply, she thought her heart might explode.

Logan rumbled his approval and increased the speed and force of his thrusts. In her position, Honor had given up all of her leverage and now all she could do was kneel before her mate and take him, however hard and fast and deep he wanted to go. The knowledge of her position sent another shiver through her—

one of delight—and she could have laughed at how positively un-alpha she was in this moment. She couldn't have cared less. She'd have cheerfully agreed to be omega at that point if it meant this man would never stop fucking her.

Whimpering with the impact of his thrusts, wanting to give him everything he needed, Honor reached up behind her, hesitated a moment, then swept her hair to the side and pulled it taut, exposing her back and the nape of her neck to the Silverback beta. She felt him freeze, hesitating as he stayed buried deep inside her. Then her ears rang with his roar as he nudged ever deeper into her pussy and claimed the right she had given him. His teeth sank deep into the tender exposed nape of her neck, definitely deep enough to leave a mark. That was the point. Honor had given this man permission to mark her as his mate, and she would deal with the consequences later. Right now, she operated on pure instinct, and her instincts told her she would never do anything more right than she did at this moment.

She felt the breaking of her skin, the warm, slow trickle of blood from the wound, and it made her pussy clench around him. His cock leapt inside her, as excited as he was by the dark eroticism of the moment. She felt the tightly coiled tension inside her begin to break, and all she could do was brace herself for the wave.

It nearly dragged her under; the force of it caught her so strongly. She threw back her head and howled to the skies as she came and came and came beneath him. The climax seemed endless and painfully intense, shaking the foundations of her world. She felt him tense and explode as well, pulled along not by the force of her pleasure, but by the sweetly tight contractions of her body around his cock. He echoed her howl, the sound muffled against her neck, and poured himself into her body, quivering in ecstasy.

The world slowed and blurred and the only stable point in the swirling riot became the place where his teeth joined to her flesh, making them one in a way

even his cock buried in her hadn't been able to accomplish. As the tension of arousal and climax began to fade, they remained locked together, shivering with the faint ripples of aftershock. She bowed her head, feeling with acute awareness that faint trickle of blood against her skin, and she shivered again. This was joining, in the truest Lupine sense of the word. Logan had become her mate, and she had become his.

And what the hell was she supposed to do now?

## Chapter Twelve

She still hadn't figured it out an hour later, when they were separated, cleaned and clothed and sitting in her father's office, eyeing each other warily. Well, *her* gaze remained wary. Logan's had gone all wicked and focused again as he stared intently at her neck, waiting for her to turn her head so he could admire his handiwork.

Silence stretched between them for several long moments. Logan looked too self-satisfied to speak, and Honor wasn't quite sure what to say. Was there etiquette about how to handle this type of situation? Did Emily Post have a chapter on *Post-Coital Small Talk for the Modern Werewolf*? If she didn't, she really should.

Honor shifted in her seat and tried to ignore the raw, liquid feeling between her legs. As hard as he'd just taken her, she ought to be screaming at him to never lay another hand on her as long as he lived, and here she was trying to keep him from noticing how damned horny she still felt. Was *that* in Emily Post?

"You can relax, you know." His drawling tone sounded sleepy and rough and sexy in the small cabin. Honor couldn't suppress a shiver of reaction. "I'll give you a couple of hours before I attack you again. I'm not entirely uncivilized."

She drew a deep breath. "See...about that 'again' thing..."

He raised an eyebrow and settled into a deeper slouch. "You surely don't intend to tell me, *your mate*, that I can't touch you again, do you? You couldn't be quite that foolish, honey. Tell me."

She scowled. "You know, I really hate those casual endearments. Ones like 'honey.' It always makes me wonder if you just can't remember my name."

“Oh, I remember it. It just don’t think ‘Honor’ is something I can hear myself yelling out in a heated moment. It would be like yelling ‘Mother Teresa’ or something.”

She rolled her eyes. “Now that’s just nasty.”

“That’s what I thought. So you have two choices. You can have ‘honey,’ or you can have ‘Nora.’ Up to you.”

“Those are my only choices?”

He shrugged. “They are if ‘Honor’ is your only name.”

She grumbled and crossed her arms over her chest.

Logan cupped his hand to his ear and cocked his head to the side. ‘Sorry, what was that? I couldn’t quite catch it.’

“Honor Strength.” She bit it out like a particularly vile curse and then glared, as if it was his fault. It was actually her father’s, but if she could have a few minutes to think, she’d find a way to make it his fault.

He blinked. “Right. Those are your only choices.”

She opened her mouth to protest, then caught herself and shook her head. “And that is so not important right now. We have other things we need to discuss, don’t you think?”

“Not if those discussions are anything like the one you were about to start where you tell me I can’t touch my own mate anymore.”

She frowned. “It’s not ‘anymore’ as in never again. More like, ‘anymore’ as in not for a while until I have this mess in my pack cleaned up. Which I really think is perfectly reasonable, given the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?”

“The ones where it’s my body and I decide who gets to fuck it, and I could cut you off from paradise forever if you pissed me off a bit too much.”

He didn't move a muscle, but Honor got the abrupt impression of tightly coiled Lupine just itching for a fight. "I think that would be a very bad idea. Given the circumstances."

This time, she was the one quirking the eyebrow. "What circumstances?"

"The ones where I am your mate, and at the howl in two days there will be an alpha mating declared. And in order to keep the blood of your pack from watering the plants around here into the next century, you might want to rethink the idea of making your mate jealous."

She cleared her throat. "See...about that 'mate' thing."

"Honor—"

"Hold on." She held up a hand to forestall the bellow she could hear building. "Let me finish a sentence, would you? I'm not saying no, and I'm not denying anything, okay? But right now, the important thing is not me or you, it's this pack. And if I have to do a lot of unpleasant things to keep the peace around here, I won't blink an eyelash. That includes putting a temporary hold on—" She broke off, paused, and waved her hand awkwardly between them. "On...this...then that's what has to happen. I'm willing to do it."

"But I'm not willing to let you."

"Did I say something that would indicate this could possibly be your decision?"

He ignored her pointed glare and leaned forward in his seat. "I think you're forgetting some very important points, honey. Ones it seems to be my job to remind you of. First off, you seem to be forgetting that this howl is going to be the biggest thing standing between you and making this job as alpha permanent. And second, you need to brush up on your knowledge of Lupine traditions, or you would know that an unmated female alpha does not go over well with our kind."

Honor scowled. "What are you getting at, Logan? If you have something to say, just go ahead and say it. I'm a big girl. I can take it."

"I'm not sure if you can, and even if you could, I'll be damned before I'd let it go on." He stood and crossed to perch on the edge of her desk, leaning forward until his intent, golden eyes filled her vision. "I'm talking about the Luna's Mating Rite, honey. Did you really think you could get away without it? That someone wouldn't bring it up and remind you and the pack about our traditions whether you like them or not? Admittedly, it's not the prettiest of our legacies, but it exists, and I guarantee you it's going to come up at this howl."

*Not the prettiest of their legacies.* Now that was an understatement to end all understatements. As proud as Honor might be of her heritage at the best of times, the Luna's Mating Rite did not qualify as the best of times. It qualified as one of those times when it sucked to be a female Lupine in a culture where masculine traits like strength and speed and stubborn stupidity were valued above everything else.

"It's archaic." She felt compelled to protest, but her voice sounded weak even to her own ears. "No one in their right mind could think we should still be carrying on with a tradition of condoned rape in this day and age."

"The Silverback Clan ran a mate hunt just last year," he reminded her. "The alpha and seventeen other males chose mates that day, by running them down in Central Park and fucking them where they caught them. It didn't seem archaic when the males carried their mates out of the woods over their shoulders. It just seemed real."

She sputtered. "That's crazy! This is the modern world. Our females are allowed equal rites to the males in the pack. They get to vote on issues where the opinion of the pack is weighed. We educate them alongside the males. They live in a world outside their homes, have lives and careers of their own. They're treated as equal members of our culture. And yet you say that when a female

alpha calls a howl to assume her rightful place at the head of the pack, that pack will refuse to grant her their obedience unless she has a mate to protect them in case she turns out to be too weak? That's just frickin' asinine!"

"It's the truth."

She pushed out of her chair to pace the length of the small room. She hated to be still when she needed to think. She had to pace and prowl and roam around. Lupines always thought best on their feet. "I don't agree. I think that things are changing all around us, and it's time this pack kept pace with the world we live in. It's my main platform as alpha—'Progress and Preservation.' I thought giving it a title made it a little snappier. But anyway, we need to change. We can't keep clinging to the old ways like this, especially when the old ways are so entirely repulsive. I won't let it happen."

She stopped and turned to glare at him, fists clenched on her hips, chin lifted high in the air. "I'm the Alpha here, and I lead the pack. When I make a decision, it stands. If I say there will be no Mating Rite, there will be no Mating Rite."

"No, if you say there will be no mating rite, there will be a riot. I've talked to some of your pack today, honey. I know what they expect to see at this howl, and they expect to see you take a mate. If you try and deny them what is their right according to Pack Law, you can expect them to rebel. And since I'm here to evaluate how well you manage your pack, I can tell you right now, that would not do much to bolster your claim of being the right alpha for the job."

"You mean to tell me that if I refuse to go along with this, you'll report to the Silverback that he should come down here and appoint a new alpha for *my* pack?" She leapt toward him, stopping to glare up at him with her face only inches from his. "Is that what you're telling me?"

Logan shook his head very slowly. "No. I'm telling you that if your pack rebels because they don't get what they want from you, then *I* will appoint a new alpha for this pack." She opened her mouth to blast him, but he held up a hand



and stopped her. "You know who I am, Honor, and you know why I'm here. I'm not making threats. All I'm doing is telling you that I will do my job, but you can prevent my having to do so by doing yours."

She drew in a deep breath, shaking with frustration and fear. "It's disgusting. No female should have to go through that just because of her sex. Male alphas aren't forced to take mates when they assume their titles. Why should I have to because I don't keep my brain swinging between my legs for an easy target?"

His mouth quirked. "A very good question. But not one you can answer today. The time to make changes is when your power is secure, not when there's any room for your enemies to take advantage of your actions."

"Wait and change from within, is that what you're telling me?"

"Pretty much."

She blew out a tense breath. "Fine. That's all well and good, but it doesn't get me out of my current problem, now does it? I've still got a howl happening in another forty-eight hours, and according to you, my pack is still going to demand a Luna Mating Rite."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Got any brilliant suggestions?" She folded her arms over her chest and glowered at him. "As someone who might have a teensy vested interest in my taking another mate—unless I'm very much mistaken about the mark I now carry on the back of my neck—I thought you might want to offer a word or two of wisdom."

His eyes narrowed, and he crossed the small space between them to tug her into his arms. She softened reluctantly against him, and didn't even bother to protest when he tugged her head back until he could look her in the eyes. "You are not mistaken at all. What you are is mine."

“Right.” She pressed against him and slipped her hands into the back pockets of his jeans, unable to resist the temptation. The bond between them made her restless any time that she couldn’t have her hands on him. “So, if I already have a mate—”

“You do.”

“—does said mate have any brilliant ideas about how to get out of the Luna Mating Rite? I mean, it’s not just the having to choose a mate that’s bad. It’s the whole having to mate with him in front of the pack that’s a wee bit repulsive as well. And if I’m remembering the bits of Pack Law that you haven’t mentioned, I think there was something in there about other males in the pack being able to challenge the mating in lieu of challenging the female alpha.”

He made a gravelly, rumbling sound low in his throat and leaned down to nibble at her neck just below her ear. “That is *not* going to happen. I’ll work it out.”

Honor shivered and arched her head to the side to give him freer access. “Work fast. Because I prefer that this thing between us stay a wee bit more private. I’m an old-fashioned girl, and I was raised to believe that it’s wrong to show off.”

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Logan left Honor alone in her office a little less than an hour later. When he took one last look at her, she'd been slightly mussed, entirely breathless and staring at her father's big, mahogany desk as if she'd never seen it before in her life. She probably hadn't, he thought, smirking. At least, not the way she was seeing it now.

While things with his new mate seemed a bit more settled—though by no means entirely taken care of—he had an outstanding issue to deal with. It involved a very stupid Lupine who was lucky Logan had been more interested in claiming his mate than in claiming his pound of flesh.

Make that ten pounds, he thought, snarling. Inflation and all.

He stopped by the small group of cabins Joey had told him about shortly after his arrival, the one that served as a sort of community center for the Lupines who lived on Ethan Tate's land. There were almost always people there, he'd heard, and if you wanted to hear the latest gossip or locate someone in a hurry, it was the place to go.

The group of teenagers playing basketball in front of the house stopped what they were doing when he approached, and the women chattering away on the front porch fell silent. He ignored the scrutiny and prepared to ask his question when the door to the cabin opened and the young man who'd dragged Darin Major away walked outside.

"Max." At Logan's deep rumble, the women all followed his gaze and turned to look at the young man still poised in the doorway. "I'd like to talk to you, please."

Max hesitated, and one of the women on the porch shot Logan a baleful glare. "He's busy. And he doesn't have to go anywhere he doesn't want to."

Logan didn't bother to acknowledge the rudeness, and Max quickly brushed the protective woman away. "It's all right, Cindy. I'll be back later on." He jogged down the porch steps to join Logan in the yard, shoving his hands into his pockets and hunching his shoulders as he looked up at the much larger man. "What's up?"

Logan jerked his head away from the house and began walking toward the path leading back to Honor's house. "I wanted to ask you a question."

Max's eyes widened. "Dude, I swear there's nothing going on between us. Honor is like a big sister to me. I mean, sure she's beautiful and all, but I would never—"

One look at the kid's earnest and slightly panicked expression and Logan burst out laughing. He laughed so long and hard that he had to stop walking to bend over and catch his breath. It was a good thing they were already in the cover of the trees and out of sight, or it could have gotten really embarrassing. As it was, it took him close to five minutes to calm down. By the time he could stand up straight and look Max in the eyes, the younger man had his arms crossed over his chest and a truly irritated expression on his face.

"It's not *that* funny a concept," Max snapped. "Sure, she's a few years older than me, but I'm not exactly repulsive, you know. I've had more than a couple of older women find me very appealing over the last few years, if you know what I mean."

Logan sobered abruptly and scowled at the young man. "Watch it, kid. Believe me when I tell you, it's better for you if I find the whole thing funny, okay?"

Max smiled sheepishly and let his arms drop back to his sides. "Right. So, then...um, if it's not about Honor, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Logan's eyes narrowed, his jaw set and his mouth curved into a smile that probably would have scared women and small children. It certainly made Max's eyes widen a bit more. "Darin Major. Where is he?"

"Dude, he's okay. I dragged him back to his cabin and got him into bed. He's got a knot the size of a golf ball on the back of his head, but his head is harder than most tree trunks. Probably, he'll sleep it off and be as good and as obnoxious as new when he wakes up."

"Where is his cabin? I'd like to talk to him."

"Um, yeah. So, um...d'you really think that's such a good idea? I mean, him being a member of Honor's pack, and you looking like you want to kill him at all? 'Cause I can see her giving you all sorts of noise over it if you, like, ripped out his spleen or something."

"Where is he?"

"Dude, fine, it's your lecture. Just don't say I didn't warn you. Darin's place isn't far from the big house. This way. I'll show you."

Shaking his head, Max turned and led Logan to a fork in the path and then east for a while until they came to the old logging road that ran through much of the property. They walked another quarter of a mile or so, past a couple of the small cabins Honor's father had rented to members of his pack, until Max stopped in front of one of the buildings and pointed.

"That one's Darin's. I gotta tell you, though, the headache he's gonna have when he wakes up is going to look like a stubbed toe compared to the one Honor's gonna give you when she finds out you came out here and hassled him some more. And if you rip him open or something, then she's going to get really steamed."

Logan turned to his companion and asked very, very quietly, "Are you telling me what to do, Maxwell?"

Max jerked back and raised his hands, palms out in the universal gesture for 'don't hurt me.' He shook his head. "Dude, maybe you need to get a pair of glasses or something, 'cause do I *look* that stupid to you? I'm just offering a little friendly advice is all, and I'm even done with that. See you later."

The young man turned and loped off down the forest path, still shaking his head. Logan watched until Max faded from sight before he put his hand on the railing and began to climb the front steps of Darin's cabin. He paused to knock at the front door and a flash of movement from inside caught his attention through one of the windows. There were no lights on in the small building, so it was difficult to make anything out. He stared for a few moments, then raised his hand and knocked again. Getting no answer, he reached for the knob and let himself in. One distinct advantage to this place over Manhattan, he thought as he stepped inside. No one bothered to lock their doors.

The cabin was quiet and empty. And surprisingly clean for an uneducated man who lived alone and seemed to have been raised in the Stone Age. Somehow Logan couldn't picture Darin doing his own laundry or washing his own dishes or even just picking up after himself. Maybe he paid a local female to come in and do it for him. The jerk probably pinched her ass and called her sweetheart while she did it, too.

He couldn't keep his lip from curling as he made his way through the darkened house. Logan might be an old-fashioned kind of guy—he believed in opening a woman's door for her, paying for their dates and always treating her with respect—but he had no patience for those who called themselves men and yet treated women like objects or emotionless possessions. Logan himself was possessive, but he always remembered that the women he felt possessive toward had their own thoughts and feelings and opinions and brains, and that sometimes their brains reached more intelligent conclusions than his own did. He'd seen the way Darin had tried to treat Honor and he hadn't liked it.

It wasn't just that Honor had become his mate, it was that she deserved better simply because she was a better person. Hell, even cats didn't deserve the lack of respect Darin had shown to Honor. And so, Logan thought it might behoove him to teach the flaming idiot a thing or two about manners.

He moved quietly down the cabin's short hall to the master bedroom. He could tell where Darin spent most of his time by the scents permeating the small building, and since he wasn't in the stinking recliner in front of the battered television, Logan thought it a pretty good bet that the next strongest pool of scent would be the man's bedroom.

The door swung open with a minimal squeak, but from what Logan could see, it could have made the sound of a dying antelope without doing much damage. The figure stretched out on the rumples excuse for a bed remained solidly unconscious, slack-jawed and drooling. Logan felt his lip curl in distaste and decided to make use of his visit here for something. If he couldn't take his frustration out on Darin's motionless body, he might as well accomplish something worthwhile.

As places to snoop went, the small cabin left much to be desired. As he could have predicted, the refrigerator didn't hold much more than half a case of beer and an opened Styrofoam tray of ground beef, beginning to brown on the edges. It made Logan's stomach rumble, but he closed the door and kept searching. The cabinets were all but bare, but again, neatly tended and relatively dust free.

The small living room looked neat, for all of its shabby furniture. Someone must come in to dust fairly regularly, because the coating of powdery dirt he'd expected to see didn't seem to be there. The *TV Guide* and remote had been stacked neatly on a battered end table beside the easy chair, along with a coaster and a half-empty tin of peanuts. The coaster settled it. This cabin definitely saw the presence of a woman more often than he imagined Darin the Dapper could manage to get lucky in the local bar.

Making his way back into the bedroom, Logan glanced wistfully at the still unconscious object of his frustrated anger and sighed. He turned back to searching and had checked under the bed and in all the dresser drawers before he actually found something interesting in the man's closet. Women's clothing.

Judging by the sizes—all six petites—Darin didn't have a guilty little secret, nor a desire to be a certain kind of lumberjack. There was no way he could fit his beer-bellied bulk into those dresses. But the fact that they hung in his closet shot Logan's theory about an occasional housekeeper totally out of the water. This was no maid who endured an occasional game of slap and tickle. This was a relationship, or at least evidence of one.

He felt his lip curl as he closed the closet door. What poor woman could be desperate enough for company that she chose to mate herself to Dull-Witted Darin?

Just as the door cleared the window it had blocked when open, Logan caught a glimpse of dull, sandy-gray fur and a brushy tail as a wolf disappeared into the woods behind the cabin. Clearly, someone had been spying on Logan as he snooped around Darin's house. He wondered if that might have been the flash of movement he'd seen through the window when he'd been standing on the front porch. It was possible a Lupine could have been in the house and let itself out through the back when Logan entered. Then it would have been a simple thing to shift in the woods or behind the house in order to keep an eye on what the stranger was up to.

Logan would have done the same. It was only smart. He'd been through more introductions since arriving in Connecticut than he'd done in most of the last five years, and he still hadn't met every member of the White Paw Clan. Those he had met had all been introduced in human form. The best way to remain anonymous to him would be to take wolf form. It was hard enough to keep a hundred new faces straight, let alone a hundred furry muzzles. These



days, all but the most traditionally minded Lupines considered human form to be the politest one for introductions. It cut down on the need for immediate dominance challenges and therefore on the likelihood of bloodshed. So a Lupine in wolf's clothing, so to speak, would be the perfect way to conceal his or her identity.

Instinct told Logan it was a 'she,' not a 'he.' Maybe even the 'she' who at least occasionally shared Darin's cabin. The intriguing question, then, became who would Darin be that intimate with if he still had feelings for Honor like the ones he'd expressed in her office earlier? If those qualified as feelings, anyway.

He stared out the bedroom window for another minute, but the wolf did not reappear and the light was beginning to fade. It had been a long day. He needed to get back to the house and maybe call Graham with an update. Then he'd work on his plan to keep his mate as his mate and defend her claim to her alpha status. It wouldn't be the easiest thing he'd ever done, but if it was what she wanted, then it had just become what he wanted for her.

He closed Darin's front door behind him and started off down the old logging road toward the main house. He'd even gone a good few strides when the truth kicked him in the chest and he had to pause to catch his breath.

If Honor was his mate now, and she assumed her position as Alpha of the White Paw Clan, that meant she would be staying here in Connecticut. And that wasn't where he lived. He lived in Manhattan, with the Silverback Clan. Where he was beta, a position he had grown to resent more and more with every passing year.

Well, shit.

As adaptable and urbane as Logan liked to consider himself, he still had a bit of the basic Lupine dislike for change lurking down there in his soul where he could mostly pretend it didn't actually exist. Right now, he had to stop pretending. He *did* hate change. He hated it fiercely and unrestrainedly. If he

could, he would turn back the clock to the days when he and Graham were a team, when the position of alpha in the Silverback Clan was about tradition, not strength or dominance. When Logan had been able to pretend that Graham only held the title because his father had held it before him, and his father before *him*; that it would have belonged to Logan if he had been born a Winters instead of a Hunter.

Back before Missy, when women had been women, fun and beautiful and delicious, but for the most part interchangeable. Before he'd smelled her scent and seen her mate take her on the floor of their library. Before he'd seen and smelled the changes pregnancy made in her body, and smelled the scent of fresh milk on a woman's skin. Damn it, things had been so much easier before any of this had happened.

Logan threw back his head and howled at the injustice of it all. If he could, he would go back in time and change things that way, make things the way they were before those feelings of dissatisfaction had begun gnawing at his insides. But he couldn't go back, and only now he finally began to realize it. The only thing he could do was to go forward.

At least forward had its advantages. Forward meant Honor—a *very* distinct advantage, especially during her heat when she smelled so good he could get drunk on just her scent alone—and Connecticut and going from beta to Sol, the mate of the Luna, with no distinct position in the pack but the one he had by her side. He swore again, hands clenching into fists at his sides.

He'd been having a hard enough time lately dealing with being beta, being second to the leader of the pack. Could he honestly deal with being Sol of the pack? With deferring not only to the alpha, but to his own mate on every decision that had to be made? Would he be okay with that because the rewards were so great, or would it grow on him and make him resentful and bitter, strangling the love he had for his woman?

Double shit.

Shit with a side order of fuck, no less.

It all became very plain to him, as if written out before him in black and white. He had a choice to make. He could have Honor, or he could have his pride. Now he just had to decide which of the two things he loved the most he could most easily live without.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

The house was quiet when Honor finally made her way back to it. What would have been an early evening spent with Logan trying to figure out what to do next—and spent trying to figure out what to do with Logan next—had turned into a mammoth project repairing an enormous section of the barricade fencing that kept the Clan property separate from that of their cattle ranching neighbor. While most Lupines much preferred the taste and entertainment value of wild game, when the spirit of a hunt was on them, they occasionally forgot to exercise their better judgment. So it kept the farmers happy to know that the “timber wolf” and “red wolf” populations on the supposed wildlife sanctuary next door to them stayed safely contained behind a stout ten-foot-high wooden fence.

Trouble only came when said stout, ten-foot wooden fence wandered directly into the path of a bunch of rowdy teenagers who had decided to do a little cow-tipping and four-wheel mudding to entertain themselves. Their truck had spun out of control and slammed sideways into the fence, which was already twenty years old and in need of repair. It had collapsed under the strain, and forty of the neighboring cows had stampeded through the opening, enlarging it quite a bit in the process.

Although all this had happened last night, Honor hadn't heard about it until late this afternoon when the farmer in question had given her a call. While pack members had returned all of the cows relatively unharmed, the farmer had a few concerns about that line of fencing and wanted to know what she intended to do to secure it until a new, permanent barrier could be erected. It had meant a lot of sweaty hours, clearing up all the broken timbers and debris of the accident. Thankfully none of the kids had been hurt and the truck had been operational

enough to limp back to town under its own steam, so she didn't have to deal with the headache of insurance claims, just clean up and repair.

Until she could get the materials to replace that section of the barricade, they had to make due with materials at hand. On the farmer's side of the old fence, she and a handful of the pack had dug temporary postholes and hammered in posts made up of scraps of the former fence. Then they'd strung and stapled razor wire to keep the cattle in their field. Keeping curious Lupines *out* of said field proved to be a sight more challenging.

The only real barrier was a fence at least as high and strong as the one the truck had taken down, and that just wasn't going to happen without time and the proper materials. Actually, even a fence that tall did more to soothe the farmers than it did to actually contain the Lupines. An adult werewolf could easily clear the ten-foot barrier with room to spare. But it did generally serve to make them think twice about leaving the pack's territory, and that was its primary job.

This time, since she couldn't rely on that job being done by wood and post, she had the pack members kill the truck headlights they'd been using to see by while they worked, and she shifted out of sight in the tree line. The she walked down the perimeter of the patchwork-fenced area and marked the whole thing with her scent. On the one hand, the smell of a mature female close to heat might end up drawing more males than it repelled, but the smell of Alpha was the important part of the equation. If she marked the barrier and therefore the field beyond as her private territory, then any members of the pack would know she meant, "this is mine. Stay away and don't touch." It would have to do until she could order wood and posts for the new fence.

By the time they finished and everyone piled back into the two pickups and were dropped at their respective homes, Honor didn't pull to a stop in front of the big house until well after midnight. She climbed out of the truck slightly sore

and extremely grubby, dreaming of nothing more than a nice hot shower. All thoughts of the upcoming howl had been pushed to the back of her mind and locked away. That problem belonged to tomorrow and she would deal with it tomorrow.

She climbed the stairs to the second floor, moving more like a ninety-year-old woman than the twenty-four-year-old Lupine, but she just felt battered. She knew enough to realize that at least half the sore muscles had less to do with wrestling barbed wire than with wrestling a male Lupine, but she didn't mind those aches nearly as much. She knew very well they'd be gone by morning, and for now she almost savored the reminder of this morning...and this afternoon on the stairs...and a little bit later on her father's big desk.

She shivered and found herself suppressing a grin as she padded down the hall to her bedroom. Who knew things would work out like this? When she'd complained that this wasn't a good time to find her mate, she hadn't realized what a fine mate he would be, or how irresistible she would find him. She'd thought all those old Pack legends about one perfect mate for each Lupine had been hogwash—romantic, but useless. And yet here she was, finding herself drawn to one man and one man only, not even able to picture touching another man as long as she lived. She'd even found herself holding her breath at times while she and the five young men had been working on the fence. Their scents had been offensive to her, something she'd never experienced with any other Lupine who bathed. It was just weird.

Grinning a goofy little grin, she stepped into her darkened bedroom and didn't bother with the lights. The moon was all but full, since it wouldn't go officially full until the upcoming howl, and it cast more than enough light for her to see around the familiar room. Everything looked pretty much as she'd expected. The dinner tray and clothes from the night before had been cleared

away and tidied up by Joey; the furniture had been dusted and the floor vacuumed. Honor's cousin was a model of domestic efficiency.

The one thing that didn't appear quite as Honor had anticipated was the large, still form reclined across her bed. Logan had apparently decided to wait for her, but had fallen asleep while she worked late, and now he rested limp and boneless atop her sage green comforter. His dark hair looked tousled, as if he'd run his hands through it several times before falling asleep, and his bare chest rose and fell in a deep, easy rhythm. His chest wasn't the only thing he'd left bare, she noticed, her gaze traveling appreciatively from his large bare feet, up over his hair-dusted legs and across his smooth hips to his belly. Everything was bare, and Honor allowed herself a very good look at all the parts she hadn't had time to examine earlier, when they'd been half-dressed and preoccupied with other things.

The temptation to just climb into bed with him and help herself to a taste nearly overwhelmed her, but then she felt the grittiness of her skin and sighed. Shower first. Then her treat.

She moved through the quiet bedroom and into the master bath, closing the door soundlessly behind her before flipping on the lights and preparing the shower. She didn't feel like waiting to test the temperature of the water, so she just turned it on and let it run while she undressed. She dropped her clothes in a pile on the floor, and when she saw steam she stepped under the shower spray.

The stinging hot needles of water pounded down over her, rinsing away the worst of the debris and splinters and mud splatters. When she felt the nastiest grime sluice away, she reached for a washcloth and her soap and began lathering her skin. She lathered and rinsed twice, but the need to rub off her skin had not reappeared since the day she'd bitten off Paul's hand. It boggled her mind that the incident might only be a day ago. So much seemed to have happened since her father's death. She felt as if she'd lived an extra lifetime in that one week.

She shampooed and rinsed her hair, leaving the conditioner in while she washed her face with a moisturizing cleanser. Being a werewolf didn't excuse a girl from a skin-preserving regimen. When she was clean and rinsed, she stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in an enormous towel, using a smaller one to wrap in a turban around her hair. She still had to moisturize, or all that nice clean skin of hers would end up dry and chalky before her hair even dried.

She nearly laughed at herself as she spread the milky cream into her legs. She'd always been a bit too much of a girly girl for a Lupine beta, not to mention an alpha. That might have been part of the reason why it took so long for her father to start paying her any attention. Before she'd begun fighting challenges, she'd been too busy playing with her dolls, and then later painting pretty pictures and decorating the dollhouse her nanny bought her to interest a man who lived and breathed the eternal combat of strength. What use did he have for a pretty little girl who preferred to make things rather than destroy them? Not much, as she'd found.

As Honor had grown she'd developed into the sort of daughter her father could love, a woman who could challenge a grown male and win, who could bench press a small bus and bite a hole through a sheet of stainless steel. She'd had to give up all of her more feminine hobbies and traits to please the man who refused to be pleased. The only thing of her own she had kept was her pottery, and it was the only area of her life where she truly felt at home and at peace. She didn't feel it when playing Alpha or beta, when managing the business or ordering people around. So why was she still doing those things, and why was she planning to fight for the right to continue doing them for the rest of her life?

The answer came easily, but not prettily. Pride. She was too much her father's daughter in that one respect, too bloody proud to admit she'd been wrong her whole life in struggling to make someone else happy by doing things that made *her* miserable. How dumb did that make her?



Sighing, Honor unwrapped the towel from her head and combed through the mass of curls. She squeezed out all the excess water she could, then left it to dry naturally. Leaving her other towel on the floor in front of the sink for Joey to get tomorrow, she turned off the light, then padded silently back into her bedroom and over to the side of the bed.

She stood there for a long moment, watching the rise and fall of Logan's chest as he slept peacefully before her. He should have looked softer, she thought. More innocent and less dangerous, but that wasn't the case. He still looked huge and strong and lethal, even in sleep. His muscles still bunched and rippled when he breathed, and occasionally his arms or legs would flex as he dreamed unknown dreams. She smiled at that and reached out to touch him, her fingers settling light as a feather on his shoulder.

She hesitated for a moment, watching his face intently in the moonlight, not yet wanting to wake him. She *did* want to wake him, eventually—already the hunger built again inside her—just not yet.

His breathing remained smooth and even, though, and Honor grew bolder. Her hand settled on him more fully, her palm tingling with the heat of his skin. It stroked down across his collarbone and over his chest, marveling at the sculpted muscles she found. She leaned down, needing now to taste him, and pressed her mouth against the skin at the base of his throat. She laved her tongue against him and felt his heartbeat in her mouth, then drew at the flesh until it reddened from the suction.

Her hands slid slowly over his chest, savoring every texture, from smooth skin to rough hair. She felt him stir and lifted her head briefly, but his eyes remained closed and his breathing even so she lowered her mouth back to his skin and continued to explore.

She drew a moan from him when her thumbs found his tight, flat nipples and circled them with teasing pressure. She smiled against the center of his chest

where her tongue drew intricate patterns on his warm skin. She let her thumbs and fingers and mouth play over his chest for long minutes before she decided to begin easing him from his dreams.

Climbing up onto the bed beside him, she settled on her stomach with her head even with his chest and her breasts pressed up against his belly. She let her hands glide down over his chest and ribcage to his stomach, nails ever so slightly scraping his skin. He inhaled deeply, and Honor waited for his chest to expand fully before she lay her mouth over his nipple and drew deeply on the little disc.

Logan groaned, loud and deep, and his body flexed beneath her. Honor moved her mouth in a slick trail across the center of his chest until it could close around the other nipple, her tongue teasing the taut skin. Raising her eyes until she could see his face, she watched very carefully as her teeth closed around the point of his nipple and bit down gently. She knew the moment the sweet-sharp sensation registered in his sleep-charged brain, because his eyes flew open and his hands shot up to grab her and pull her closer.

But Honor had been watching him and she was not so easily caught.

She shimmied out of his sleep-slowed grip and pushed herself further down the bed, licking a trail across his belly and hip until she could blow streams of hot, moist breath across his urgent arousal.

His cock stood eager and fully erect, straining against his belly in anticipation of her touch. But she didn't touch it. Instead, she braced her hands on either side of his hips and set her tongue against the base for a long, slow lick to the top. Logan's entire body tensed and then shuddered and he growled his pleasure, his hips lifting clear up off the mattress in search of the wet heat of her mouth. She eluded him, not yet ready to end her teasing. She loved the response she drew from him, loved this chance she had to explore him, now when he was too sleepy and aroused to take control as he had the other times they had made love.

She continued to lick him like a Popsicle, not taking him inside her mouth, just tasting his cock with the flat of her tongue from base to tip, over and over while he panted for breath. Finally, when he got enough air to groan her name in a nearly unintelligible rumble, she took pity on him and closed her mouth around the head of his cock, taking him deep inside.

He roared as if he'd just won a battle, and she felt his hands fisting in her hair, looking for something to hold onto in the midst of the mind-blowing pleasure. Honor shared that pleasure. She loved the taste and feel of him, stretching her jaws, pressing against her tongue, filling her senses with the salty sweet taste of him.

She hummed her enjoyment and he groaned again. If she could have smiled with her mouth full she would have, but instead, she pulled back, drawing on his cock with firm suction. When she held just the head between her lips, her tongue stroked the sensitive bundle of nerves just under the crown, and she listened to him fight for air. The sounds and flavors of his arousal incited her own, until she could feel her own moisture slicking the insides of her thighs with sweet cream.

She drew him back inside, lips sliding down the length of his shaft until she could feel the head of him butting against the back of her throat. Then she pulled back again, drawing deeply and establishing a rhythm that made him throw back his head, dig his heels into the mattress and chant her name like a mantra.

"Honey. Honey. Oh, shit...that's so good...God. A little more, honey. Just a little more... I know you can do it...shit...oh, yeah...that's a good girl..."

She glowed under his praise, working harder to please him, to tear those incredibly erotic words from his lips, the ones that made her pussy slicker and more needy with every passing second. The ache no longer mattered to her though. All she wanted was to hear those words, to feel his fists clenching in her hair, or his shaking hands release her to pull her long, damp hair to the side until he could watch her mouth moving over his cock.

She whimpered her own arousal and worked him faster, but he'd already reached his breaking point. Grabbing her under the arms, he pulled her up his body until they pressed hip to hip, then he reached down to pry her legs apart.

"Now," he ordered, his voice all dark gravel and need. "Ride me, honey. Want in you. My love. My mate."

She moaned and obeyed. Her legs parted around his hips, and she pressed herself into a sitting position, straddling his lap. He wouldn't let her tease him, though. Before she could even think, he had his hand between their bodies, guiding his cock to her dripping entrance, while his other hand gripped the flare of her hip and pushed her down to meet his upward thrust.

He sliced through her, pushing deep on that first stroke, but he satisfied neither of them. Suddenly both hands were on her hips and he forced her inexorably down, his cock surging high and hard inside her, filling every last corner and leaving her stretched and aching.

Breathless and nearly sobbing above him, Honor watched his face smooth from fierce scowl to a look of complete ecstasy as he found his home again inside her body. He paused for barely a minute before the urgency was on him again and he began thrusting hard and rhythmically within her. Honor met him, thrust for thrust, taking all he had to give and returning eagerly for more. They moved together as if they were two parts of the same machine, fitting perfectly together and working in tandem at their appointed task.

They struggled together for their pleasure, but it felt like more than that. They moved and slid and strained against each other, but it seemed like a cooperative thing. She shifted her hips to let him slide a fraction deeper. He changed the angle of his thrust until he could reach the sweet bundle of nerves inside her and make her shiver with joy.

She braced her hands on his chest to keep herself steady, and he cradled her hips between his hands to be sure she didn't fall away. They had become one.

His pleasure was hers, her pleasure was his. The burst of ecstasy they shared at the end of the journey left them both breathless and aching and sure that the only way to stay sane in the future was to never be further apart than the touch of the other's loving hand.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Honor slept late the day of the howl, maybe because she barely slept at all the night before. When Logan had remembered how to breathe, he had insisted on paying her back for her sneak attack. One thing had led to another, and they'd ended up collapsed in a puppy pile of two in the center of the demolished bed just before the sun rose.

She didn't wake again until after noon, when the sun found just the perfect angle to stream in through a bedroom window and burn the corneas right out from beneath her closed eyelids. It surprised her that she didn't feel at all sluggish when she awoke, though. Instead, she felt energized and fierce and ready to face whatever the day brought to her. Well, she'd have felt a lot more ready if the day had been ready to bring her a howl, but hey, those were the breaks.

She showered and dressed quickly, planning to track down Logan as her first chore of the day. She had a vague recollection of an annoying buzz and some fumbling as he searched for his cell phone shortly after nine a.m. She's heard some incoherent rumbling, then he'd slid out of bed, instructing her to go back to sleep and leaving her with a kiss. She thought she might also have heard her door closing and the sound of an argument right outside, but that could just have been her sleep-deprived imagination.

Either way, the only person who could tell her what happened was Logan, and she intended to seek him out. To satisfy her curiosity and so he could satisfy a few of her other needs as well.

She pulled on jeans and a long-sleeved top before stomping her feet into her favorite pair of battered hiking boots. A quick look at the thermometer outside

the window told her the warm front still lingered over New England, so she grabbed an insulated vest from her closet and left it at that.

The house seemed particularly quiet as she tromped down to the kitchen, and she saw when she got there that neither Joey nor Logan had waited for the sleepyhead upstairs to get herself in gear. Still, there seemed to be a few cups left in the thermal carafe of coffee on the counter, so Honor helped herself to a mug and downed it with less enjoyment than habit. She scalded her tongue, but it seemed like such a minor problem in comparison to the high spirits she found herself in this morning. It just amazed her what a little good sex with the man of her dreams could do for a girl's outlook.

Okay, so maybe Logan wasn't the man of her dreams. He was a bit too domineering, and maybe a touch stubborn. And she really didn't see much evidence of a poet's soul in there anywhere, but still, he seemed just right to her. There was a bit of a poetic streak in the way he made love, after all, and that seemed good enough to her.

If she could have whistled, she'd have sounded a jaunty tune as she headed for the front door, but as it was, she might have been humming something along the lines of a Disney theme song when the sight in her front yard brought her to a screeching halt halfway down her steps.

There stood Logan, looking as tense as a nun in a roomful of satyrs, clearly having a rather heated discussion with a man she had thought she wouldn't have to deal with for another three years. Graham Winters. And beside Graham, stood a small blonde woman with a baby balanced on one curvy hip and a very irritated expression on her pretty face.

"I told you over the phone, brother, this discussion is over. I've made my decision, and I'm not going to change it because you got a bug up your butt."

"A bug up my butt?" The Silverback alpha looked less than amused. "My best friend of thirty-some-odd years tells me over the phone that he's leaving and

never coming back home, and *I have a bug up my butt?* Excuse me, you giant idiot, but my butt is just fine! My problem is not my ass, it's you! The pain *in* my ass!"

"I can tell you right now that you're both being pains in my ass," the blonde snapped, though even from the stairs Honor could see that her arm around the baby remained relaxed and secure. "Can't we go inside and sit down to discuss this like reasonable human beings?"

"We aren't human beings, Missy. So back off."

Honor winced at the look on the Silverback Luna's face when her husband gave her that particular order. The alpha needed to count his lucky stars that he hadn't married a witch, because that look had 'HEX' written all over it in great big capital letters.

"True, and some of us damned sure aren't being reasonable, either. So don't tell me to back off, you great big pile of canine testosterone. I am trying to keep two good friends from killing each other. You want to give me a little bit of a break here?"

Graham snarled. "The only things I want to break are *his* legs." He pointed at Logan and his lip curled back with menace. "Followed by his arms, and then each of his ribs, in turn. After that, if I've calmed down, I'll moved on to clavicles, but if he keeps pissing me off, I'm going to forget those and move straight to his thick, useless, no good *skull!*"

"I'd like to see you try it," Logan growled back so low and menacing that Honor almost took a step backward. Instead, she caught herself and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I have a better idea." She raised her voice to be heard over the rumble of growls and the thickness of more than one skull. "How about no one breaks anything in my territory, and the people I don't know tell me what the hell they're doing here uninvited."



*All three heads turned in her direction. Well, all four, if you counted the baby's, but honestly as small as he was, she thought it would more fairly be called three and a half. She met each of their gazes with a level one of her own and raised one eyebrow in inquiry. Neither man spoke; they were too busy casting each other sidelong glances and maintaining their ridiculous growls. Missy stepped forward to the bottom of the stairs and offered Honor a polite bow of her head.*

“Hello. I assume you are the new Alpha of the White Paw Clan. I bring greetings from your cousins in Manhattan, the Silverback Clan. My name is Melissa Winters, but I hope you will agree to call me Missy.” She offered the formal greeting, but then turned to glower at her mate. “And if my husband weren’t a complete and utter dolt, he would tell you that he is Graham Winters, Alpha of the Silverback Clan. We’ve come and brought our son Roarke with us because my imbecile of a mate believes his friend Logan is incapable of making his own decisions about his life, despite the fact that he’s a grown man and has proven himself more than able in all things during his years as the beta of our pack.”

“Missy.”

The blonde ignored the warning tone in her mate’s voice. “Now, perhaps you can convince these two wonders of intellectual achievement that it would really be a better idea to take this inside and have a rational discussion, rather than airing all our dirty laundry out in full view of local passers-by. What do you think?”

Honor thought she liked Missy Winters already. She fought hard to keep her lips from curving and gestured to her front door. “I think that’s a sensible idea. If you’d all care to follow me, we can sit in the living room and have coffee or tea while we...discuss the issues at hand.”

She turned and began to lead them into the house when a flash of beige at the side of the house caught her attention. She paused and looked but saw

nothing and continued into the cabin. She expected Missy to follow behind her, but the human mate of the Silverback alpha was too smart for that. She waited until the men grudgingly made their way inside before she brought up the rear. Covering their lines of escape, as the case may be.

Missy did, though, take her seat first when Honor offered one. She perched on one end of the sofa, settling baby Roarke in her lap and dragging Graham over to stand beside her. Logan remained beside Honor near the entrance to the room, and Honor wasn't quite sure if she should be happy about that.

"Feel free to set him down," she offered, smiling into the baby's wide, hazel eyes. "It's been a while since we had a cub around here, but I doubt there's anything he can really destroy."

Missy laughed out loud. "You don't know Roarke the Wreck, then. Trust me, we'll all be happier if Wrecker stays here in my lap."

"Can I get anyone anything, then? Coffee? Tea? Milk for the baby?"

Graham launched his attack swiftly and unexpectedly. "You can get your claws out of my beta, bitch, and let him come home where he belongs."

"Graham Alexander Winters, I am going to *kill* you!"

"I beg your pardon?" Honor's words barely registered over Missy's shriek, but she knew Graham had heard them by the way he growled.

"Don't beg me for anything. I wouldn't spit on you to put out a fire. You've taken the best friend I ever had and all but cut off his dick to hand to him. He's going to give up his entire life for you, and you have the nerve to stand there as if nothing is going on. You make me sick."

"Watch your fucking mouth, you bastard." Logan's entire body tensed until Honor thought she'd be able to use his skin for piano wire. His voice came out as a growling hiss, forced from between clenched teeth. "Don't you *ever* talk to my mate that way again. Do I make myself clear?"

Missy leapt to her dainty feet and proceeded to stomp one violently on the hardwood floor. “That’s *it!*” If that wasn’t the Silverback Luna screaming at the top of her lungs, Honor didn’t particularly want to experience the real thing. “I am *sick* of you two morons acting like junkyard dogs! It’s disgusting, and I’m sure Honor’s not real keen on it, are you, Honor? I can call you Honor, can’t I?”

“Of course, Missy. I’m honored. But I’d be even more honored if someone would *explain to the alpha* of this pack just *what the hell* is going on the *middle of her living room!*?”

Graham opened his mouth on a sneer. “You—”

“Someone *other* than you,” she clarified. She could see the Silverback’s hackles rising, but his mate slapped him hard across the chest.

“Give it a rest, Silver Chief. This is Honor’s territory, and even if she does owe you fealty, she still has the right to tell you to shut up in her own house. So shut up.”

Missy turned to Logan and pointed an imperious, schoolteacherly finger in his direction. “You, I suggest, ought to begin explaining to your new mate just exactly why my husband got me in the car at nine-thirty this morning with a teething baby and made me drive three hours to another state because he was a little upset by a phone call.”

“What phone call?” Honor looked at Logan, her confusion plain in her face. “You mean that was your cell phone I heard ringing this morning?”

Logan nodded. “Yeah. Graham was calling for an update on my opinion about your fitness to run the pack.”

She stiffened. “And what did you tell him?”

“The same thing I’m telling you right now. That this is your pack, and you are more than able to run it as you see fit.” He drew back his shoulders and met her gaze, then shifted his up over her left shoulder in a sign of respect to a dominant Lupine. “And that it’s my hope that you will grant your mate the

honor of lending you any assistance you might need in the course of your duties.”

If it hadn't been for Graham's outraged roar, she figured the sound of her jaw dropping would have echoed to the ceiling beams. “You *what?*”

He clenched his jaw and drew a deep breath. “I hope you will grant your mate, grant *me*, the honor—”

“No, I heard you, you idiot. I meant what the hell are you talking about? I'm not going to be running this pack. You're going to tell the Silverback that I'm not fit to be Alpha—which I'm really not, by the way... Okay, so I'm fit, but I've realized I don't really *want* to be the Alpha, so it's really the same thing, isn't it? And then we're going to go back to Manhattan where you can be beta of your own pack and I can concentrate on my pottery. And on continuing to be madly in love with you and giving you mind-blowing sex at least twice a day.” She shrugged and smiled. “I had it all worked out.”

Logan was shaking his head before she made it to ‘idiot,’ and he didn't stop when she did. “No. You don't understand.” He met her eyes, this time, his own golden ones soft and warm like aged whiskey. “I have it all worked out. I already told Graham that I'm resigning my place as his beta and leaving the Silverback Clan. I'm going to move up to Connecticut, because this place is your home, and these folks are your family. Then we're going to go to the howl tonight and you're going to take your place as Alpha and proclaim me as your mate. I realized last night that even in the Rite of Mating, the female alpha's chosen mate has the right to fight off all other potential mates on her behalf so that their pairing can be made official.”

He paused and smiled. “So after I did that, we'd finish the ceremony and live here. You'd run the pack and I'd take care of the things you don't have the stomach to do and we'd get to be together, being madly in love and having

mind-blowing sex at least three or four times a day. It's a great plan. I had it all worked out."

Honor just stared at him. Her mind had been well and truly boggled. This man, this amazing man she'd fallen in love with faster than a lightning strike, had been willing to give up his entire life. To make himself submissive to her for the rest of his life, just because he thought it would make her happy. The very idea made her so happy she almost cried. "But you can't do it."

He scowled at her. "Why not?"

"Because it would make me miserable. I don't want to be the alpha. I never did. Being beta was all well and good, but alpha is too much. It's too much responsibility. It takes too much time. It doesn't leave any of me left for the things I love doing, like throwing my pots and having mind-blowing sex." She smiled and wrapped her arms around him. "My plan is much better. It allows for me to not be alpha, you to be with your friends, and still leaves lots of time for the mind-blowing sex."

"Clearly a superior plan." Missy laughed.

This time Graham smiled. "But I have a better one."

Everyone in the room turned to look at him. Missy's eyes narrowed. "It doesn't involve maiming anyone, does it?"

Her mate laughed. "Not at all. It's just that, although I like the spirit of Honor's plan, I feel it fails to address a couple of key points. Namely, that the White Paw Clan would continue to lack an alpha, which I would then have to appoint. And also that if Logan has to spend one more week reporting to me—or to anyone at all, I'm pretty sure—he's going to be the one doing the maiming."

Logan frowned. "What are you talking about? I have never been anything but loyal to you, brother. You ought to know that."

"Oh, I know it. I've never doubted it, but somewhere along the line I've lost the right to ask loyalty of you, brother." He held up a hand when Logan would

have protested. "Shut up and listen, because if you find this news surprising, you're even dumber than I've always said you were. You've outgrown your place in the Silverback Clan, Logan Hunter. You can no longer be beta to anyone. Which is part of why your plan sucked. You're Alpha, brother, and it's time you took your place at the head of the pack."

Logan shook his head. "No. I won't. I'm not challenging you, Graham. It's never going to happen, so just—"

Honor smiled and smacked Logan hard across the chest. "You really are dumber than he's always said you were. Logan, shut up for a minute and listen to what the man is telling you."

Graham shot her a grin that almost made Honor understand why Missy had shackled herself to the idiot. "Thanks, Honor. As I was saying, I think my plan is the best of the three. In it, I will accept Honor's decision to step down as Alpha of the White Paw Clan. I will then announce that I have chosen a new alpha for this pack by the name of Logan Hunter. Any challenges will be swiftly and, I'm sure, successfully dealt with, and Missy, Wrecker and I will return to the city, where we will proceed to have mind-blowing sex."

Missy blushed, but winked at her mate. "Yeah, I think I like this plan best of all, too."

Logan finally broke a grin, actually throwing back his head and laughing. "I only like it if Honor and I can have the mind-blowing sex, too. No way are you guys getting to have all the fun."

"Well, okay," Graham teased, "but you can't have any more mind-blowing sex than we do. You will, after all, still owe fealty to me, even if you will be an independent alpha."

"Not of this clan!"

The shrill cry took them all by surprise, but not nearly as much as the small form of the woman that launched itself into the room toward Logan, shifting as it went.

By the time she landed atop him, Joey Tate wore her were form, which was nearly six feet as opposed to her normal five-feet-three inches. Her body had bulked up with muscle and wore a covering of sandy-gray fur. Her face had elongated into a muzzle full of razor-sharp teeth; the claws at the ends of her fingers sliced cleanly through Logan's shirt and into the muscle beneath. He howled in shock, but it was Honor who howled in rage.

She shifted forms like water flowing from a tap, swift, liquid and effortlessly. If her audience hadn't been used to such transformations, it would have appeared that they blinked and Honor disappeared, leaving a six-foot-four-inch werewolf standing in her place.

Immediately she leapt for her cousin's back, tearing her off the form of her fallen mate and wrestling the other female to the floor. Joey fought back fiercely, her usually dull green eyes glowing with the fire of madness. She squirmed like a serpent, wriggling out of Honor's grasp and launching herself once again at Logan.

Honor roared in anger and grabbed her cousin by the ankle, her claws biting deep into the furry limb and drawing enough blood to mat the hair with sticky red fluid. Joey yelped in pain, but she didn't turn away from her target. She lunged, and if Honor hadn't pulled her up short by the grip on her ankle, she would have sunk her sharp teeth deeply into Logan's human throat.

Dragging Joey away, Honor threw her to the floor several feet away and leapt atop her, securing the smaller Lupine's hands beside her head, her powerful body pinning the woman's legs as well. Joey might have been spurred on by some rage of her own, but she was really no match for an alpha female, and Honor held her easily.

A moment later, she found herself holding thin air as Joey shifted back into her human form and slipped out of her cousin's grip to curl up in a fetal position and sob piteously.

"Not supposed to be this way," she moaned, tugging at her disheveled hair and rocking back and forth. "Darin. Darin should be Alpha. Then I'm Luna. I get to make the rules and that slut of a cousin gets to do what *I* tell her to do. That's what's *supposed* to happen."

Stunned to her toes, Honor fell back onto her haunches, shifting as she went. She landed buck-naked on the wooden floor, her bottom making a loud thump on impact. Logan took one look at her, one look at Graham and practically dove over Missy to get the blanket from the back of the sofa to drape around his mate's naked body.

"Graham, cover your damned eyes."

Graham laughed, then turned it into a cough when his wife smacked the back of his head. "Not to worry, brother. I didn't see a thing. Not a single, pale, creamy-looking thing. Ow!"

Missy glared at him, but Honor was too busy staring at her cousin to notice the melodrama behind her.

"Joey, what are you saying? You and Darin conspired to take over the pack? What were you going to do? Were you planning to have him challenge me? Because according to what he told me yesterday out at my office, he planned to challenge for the chance to be my mate."

"NO!" Joey screamed and launched herself at Honor. "No! Darin loves *me!* Not everyone in the world loves you better than me! Some of them love *me* better. Darin loves me better. He does!"

Honor just shook her head as Logan plucked Joey out of the air inches from her throat and secured her hands behind her back with the spare jumpsuit Missy pulled from Roarke's diaper bag. "She's out of her mind."



“Yeah, I’d say that’s a safe bet.” Graham watched as Joey dissolved again into tears, collapsing to the floor at Logan’s feet. This time she looked as if she was staying put, so he draped the baby blanket Missy handed to him over her shaking form. “The question is, what do we do with her now? A non-challenge attack on another Lupine with the intent to kill is a death sentence. But it seems a little cruel to do that to someone not in her right mind.” He turned to Logan. “What do you say, Alpha? She’s a member of your pack, now, so she’s your responsibility. What do we do with her?”

“Well, we can’t just put her in an institution, can we?” He frowned. “It would be like a death sentence anyway. I mean, one full moon, one shift, and she’d either be in a lab somewhere being vivisected, or she’d be killed outright as a monster.”

The men fell silent for a moment, thinking. Then Missy piped up. “I have an idea.” The all turned to look at her. Well, all but Joey, who was having a conversation with her hair. “Let’s ask Ava and Tess to help. Tess’s granddad is a witch and he went nutso. I’m sure between the two of them they must know someplace where she can be confined to keep her from hurting anyone, but where they’d be sympathetic to what she is.”

Logan groaned. “We’re asking Tess first. The last person on the face of this earth that I’m willing to be indebted to is Ava Markham.”

Honor frowned. “Who are Tess and Ava?”

Logan and Graham groaned in unison and rolled their eyes, but Missy just laughed loud and long. She looked from Honor to Logan and must have seen something she liked, because when she spoke, her eyes were twinkling. “Oh, Ava is one of my closest friends. And she loves a happy ending to a good romance. I’m sure you’ll be meeting her sometime soon.”

“Over my dead body,” Logan scowled.

Honor laughed. "Don't be a spoilsport, Alpha. She sounds like fun. I'm sure if Missy likes her, I'll like her, too."

"No. You won't. Trust me."

She laughed again and reached up to wrap her arms around his neck, tugging him down for a kiss. "I do. Always. But I don't think Ava matters right now. We have some mind-blowing sex to catch up on before we go out and meet new people. Don't you think?"

Logan growled softly and took her mouth in a breathless kiss that lasted four and a half years and turned her brain into tapioca pudding. And left her smiling like a loon.

"Absolutely. A good alpha always knows when his Luna is right."

## **About the author:**

Since her early days of hiding the luridly covered paperbacks under her pillows so her parents wouldn't catch her reading past her bedtime, Christine Warren has suffered an addiction to romance novels. Discovering Ellora's Cave turned her into a positive junkie by introducing her to the world of Romantica, but it also proved to be an inspiration for the long-time writer. After penning everything from poems to short stories to screenplays, she discovered her real calling in erotic romance and happily penned her first e-book about a sexy Russian vampire and a woman with too many friends.

Christine spends most of her time thinking about sex—which is really no different from what she's always done—but now she puts those thoughts into her computer screen and hopes her audience enjoys reading them as much as she enjoys writing them! She loves to hear from readers...

Christine Warren welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.

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