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IN *sheep's*  
CLOTHING  
a short paranormal romance

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## IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

a short paranormal romance story by

Meljean Brook

Five years ago, Emma Cooper would have thought a blown tire in the middle of a blizzard was bad. But *bad* was the small, spiked metal ball her fingers found embedded in the rubber—and *worse* was the truck, its headlights on bright, pulling off the two-lane highway and onto the shoulder twenty yards behind her Jeep.

The tire iron in her hands rattled against the one lug nut she'd had time to crack loose. She hadn't even raised the jack yet; it lay on the icy asphalt behind the flat front tire.

No, not much time had passed at all. He must have been waiting off the road for her to drive by, his truck concealed by the dark and the snow.

*Don't panic*, Emma told herself, and pulled in a long breath between her chattering teeth. Now was definitely not the time to panic.

Still gripping the tire iron, Emma rose from her crouch. The rattling rumble of his diesel motor cut off. The pounding of her heart filled the sudden, snow-muffled silence.

*Stay calm*. She tugged open the front door of her Jeep, slid into the driver's seat, and hit the locks.

Emma had been living in Seattle the past five years, but she'd kept up on the local news. In the last eighteen months, four vehicles—each with flat tires—had been found abandoned on this rural stretch of an Oregon highway. Each time, searchers recovered the body of a woman from the surrounding woods. Each woman had been raped and strangled.

The truck door slammed shut. *Oh, God.* She squinted against the glare of headlights in the rearview mirror, but couldn't see anything. With her right hand, she rummaged blindly through her purse on the passenger seat and found her cell phone.

It had been years since she'd dialed the number, but she still knew it by heart. Nathan Forrester answered on the third ring. She spoke over his sleep-roughened greeting.

"Hey, Sheriff Studly." Emma could see the dark figure in her side mirror now. The silhouetted shape was tall, and wearing a thick coat and a cowboy hat. She couldn't tell if he carried a gun. "I'm on the side of the highway with a flat tire, and I could really, really use a lift."

"Emma? Oh, Christ. Emma, listen—*don't accept any help.*"

"I didn't plan on it." She stared at the mirror. He'd walked half the distance to her Jeep. Her fingers tightened on the tire iron, her nails drawing blood from the heel of her palm. *Stay calm.* "But I think he plans to offer help anyway."

She heard Nathan swearing and running across a wooden floor. "Where are you? You still have your Jeep?"

"About ten miles before the Bluffs turnoff. And, yes. I still have it."

"Okay, Emma, I'm on my way, but you've got to drive. Stay in low gear. The flat tire will pull hard at your steering wheel, but your Jeep will go. So you start it now and get the hell out of there."

Emma jammed the phone between her cheek and shoulder, turned the ignition key. The engine fired up. A shadow darkened her window.

She looked over just he swung her jack through the glass.

#

It was worse than the others had been—the window shattered, the door hanging open, blood splashed in the snow. Gun in hand, Nathan jumped from his Blazer, his unlaced boots skidding on the icy road. He slid into the side of the Jeep, glanced inside.

The seats were empty.

The breath he drew to roar her name felt like the first he'd pulled into his aching chest since he'd heard the breaking glass and her aborted shriek.

“Emma!”

The echo faded, leaving the whisper of falling snow and the low growl of his truck engine. A trail of blood and thrashed snow led behind the Jeep. Nathan followed it, the freezing air biting at his face, his uncovered ears.

From the pine trees alongside the road came the snap of a breaking branch. Nathan swung around, scanning the night. The light from the half-moon barely pierced the tree line, and the shadows between the pines danced in the flashing red and blue lights from his truck. His muscles tensed; something was moving through the woods, its eyes reflecting the strobe lights like a cat's. He aimed his flashlight, switched it on.

The high-powered light flooded Emma's pale face before her hand flew up, shielding her eyes.

Oh, thank God. Thank God. His knees almost gave out, but through some miracle, he remained standing. He skimmed the light down her body, and his heart lurched. Blood stained her sweater and jeans. He pushed into the snow drift on the highway shoulder, began to wade toward her. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” She lowered her hand. Her voice was steady. “He's gone. Toward Pine Bluffs.”

And must have turned down a side road. Nathan hadn't met anyone on his way here. "Is that his blood or yours?"

"His. I panicked and bit him." Her head tilted back as he drew closer, and he could see the trail of blood under her jaw, the faint smear on her chin.

"Good," he murmured, and lifted his cold hand to her warm cheek, gently turning her face. A livid bump had formed beneath the short dark hair; the skin was broken.

"Biting him was *not* good, Nathan. Not good at all." She sighed, then winced when he brushed his thumb over the bump. "He whacked me with the jack."

Hit in the head with a jack, and she was still upright? There was no chance that that was going to last; she must be running on pure adrenalin. He slipped his arm around her shoulders, turned toward the road. "Let's get you back to town."

*Back. Finally.* But he hadn't imagined her return would be like this.

And God only knew why she'd left in the first place.

#

Emma waited in Nathan's truck while he spoke with the deputy who pulled in behind him a few minutes later. She warmed her hands in front of the heater as Nathan grabbed her suitcases from the back of her Jeep. Melting snow darkened his brown hair to black, and plastered the short strands to his forehead. He'd come without a hat, without tying his boots, without changing out of his checkered flannel pajama pants. He'd remembered to button his sheepskin jacket over his bare chest only after Deputy Osborne had arrived.

"Once word of this gets out, your deputies are never going to let you live it down," she said when Nathan slid into his seat.

He glanced over toward Osborne. When he looked back at Emma, his broad grin kicked her heart against her ribs. “Word *isn't* getting out. Last year, I caught Osborne in the break room singing—and dancing—to Britney Spears.”

“How’d you know it was Britney Spears?”

“It’s a damn good thing *he* never asked me that, isn’t it?” Nathan made a U-turn, lifting his hand as he drove past Osborne. “How’s your head?”

She prodded the bump on her scalp and grimaced. “Not bad. It only hurts when I touch it.”

“Then—”

“Don’t touch it.” She met his eyes. There was warmth and laughter there, just as there’d been six years ago when she’d fallen off one of his horses, bruising her pride and her elbow. Her aunt Letty had given her the same advice then—don’t touch it. “Yes, I know.”

His smile faded as his gaze swept over her again. “We’ll stop at Letty’s, have her look at that bump. Then I’ll take you both to my place.”

Aunt Letty’s old farmhouse shared a lane with the Forrester property. “Do you think that’s necessary?”

“Yes.” The instrument panel cast a faint green light over his hard profile and the grim set of his mouth. “We’re pretty sure he’s local. And even if we try to keep your identity quiet, word *will* get out.”

And everyone knew where Aunt Letty lived, where Emma would be staying. “Will he come after me?”

“If he thinks you can identify him, yes. No one’s gotten away from him before.”

Nathan had already asked if she'd recognized her attacker. Emma hadn't. She'd know him if she saw him again, though. Or smelled him.

With luck, however, she wouldn't have to taste him again. "I bit his hand pretty hard," she said.

"I can see that." His gaze dropped to her shoulder. The blood soaking her wool sweater overwhelmed almost every other odor in the Blazer, so that beneath its metallic scent she only detected a faint hint of coffee, vinyl seats, the earthiness of male skin, and his lingering fear. "We'll keep a look out for any hand injuries. But this time of year, everyone's wearing gloves. Even if you took a good chunk, he could hide it."

More than a chunk. Nausea churned in her stomach. "His truck had a diesel engine. It was a pickup truck.. I know it was one of the big ones, because the lights were high up."

"Good. That's good, Emma. That'll help us." He rubbed his hand over his face before flipping the windshield wipers to high, whipping away the heavy flakes. "What the hell were you thinking, driving through this mess in the middle of the night?"

She'd been thinking that even if her Jeep had gotten stuck, even if it had slid into a ditch, she'd be fine. Running the distance to Aunt Letty's would have been no effort. It would have been *fun*.

"Well, I wasn't thinking that a murderer would give me a flat tire." She waited until he glanced over, met her eyes. "You're only pissed at me because you were scared. Believe me, I was scared, too. Out of my freaking wits."

Nathan clenched his jaw, looked through the front windshield again. "You're calm enough now."

And barely holding onto that calm. Her senses were filled with blood, with Nathan.  
“Trust me,” she said softly. “That’s a good thing.”

#

Even waking her at two in the morning didn’t trip Aunt Letty up. Telling her about Emma’s run-in with a serial killer didn’t either, but Emma hadn’t expected it to. No, not Aunt Letty. Her only reaction was one similar to the reaction she gave the first time Emma had changed into a wolf in front of her: she stared at Emma with eyes like steel, but with softly pursed lips.

Then she’d ordered Emma to sit at the kitchen table while she collected her first aid supplies from the pantry. Her white hair was braided for sleep; beneath the mint green terry-cloth robe, Emma knew there would be a sprigged flannel nightgown with a bit of lace at the hem. Her cool fingers were all wrinkles and knuckles, gentle as she cleaned the wound.

“So, young man,” she said to Nathan as she unwrapped a bandage, “you’re moving us to your place because you’re worried he’ll come after my Emma.”

“Yes, Miss Letty,” Nathan said from the kitchen entrance. If he’d had his hat, Emma thought, it’d have been between his hands. Before retiring last year, her aunt had been both teacher and nurse at the tiny Pine Bluffs high school. Emma hadn’t met anyone in town below the age of fifty who didn’t speak to Letty with the same deference that Nathan did.

“And what did Emma say to that?”

“She didn’t argue.”

Letty arched her white eyebrows. “Well, isn’t that something?” she murmured. “I thought for sure Emma would have said she’d handle any threat on her own.”

“I bit him,” Emma said quietly, her gaze locked with her aunt’s. “He’s dangerous—and going to get worse.”

“Then it seems to me that, before things get worse, you’ve got some explaining to do.” Letty straightened up. “Maybe you can get started on that while I pack.”

Emma sighed, and watched Nathan step aside to let her aunt pass into the hallway. Of course Letty was right. But knowing was easier than doing. Knowing was *always* easier than doing.

But that was why she’d come back, wasn’t it? There were things to do, and to explain.

She just hadn’t realized she’d be starting this early.

“You might as well change now, too,” Nathan said, his deference going as easily as it had come. His fear had passed, too. And his anger. In their place was speculation. His eyes narrowed as he assessed her from head to toe. “I’ll need your clothes as evidence. It’s unlikely that you’ll be getting them back.”

“That’s fine.” Emma hooked her fingers beneath the hem of the blood-stained sweater, and paused. “You’re going to watch?”

“I will if you take them off here where I can see you.”

In answer, she pulled the sweater over her head. He’d been teasing her, she knew. But now his smile froze in place as Emma took off her t-shirt and threw it on top of her sweater. Then she began to shimmy out of her jeans.

She heard his approach, the racing of his heartbeat. His hands flattened on the table on either side of her hips, closing her in with his wide shoulders and tall frame. “Stop it, Emma.”

The growl rumbling up from her chest stole her response. She kicked the jeans free of her feet, and stood in front of him in her bra and panties.

Nathan's face darkened; his breathing deepened. "We got along before, pretending we could just be friends. I can't do that now, not after that phone call, not after hearing you scream and not knowing—" He bit off his words. His throat worked and he leaned in, forcing her back against the table. "So you should think a little before stripping off in front of me."

Off balance, she grabbed onto his biceps to steady herself. "I've thought more than a little. I've been thinking about you for five years."

"Not hard enough, obviously." He backed out of her grip. "Because for five years, you've been up in Seattle."

She crossed her arms over the scratchy lace of her bra. "You haven't exactly been burning up the highway between here and there."

He stared at her for a long moment before he turned toward the door, shaking his head. "You always ask the one question I don't have an answer to."

"I didn't ask anything."

"Yes, you did. Which suitcase do you need?"

She blinked. "The small one."

She listened to the heavy tread of his footsteps on the front porch, then to the snow crunching beneath his boots as he walked to the truck.

Winter in Pine Bluffs. Emma knew the summers better. When she was sixteen, her mother had sent her to stay with Letty over summer vacation, arguing that time away from the city would do her good. Emma had chosen to come the next six years. Nathan had only been part of the reason, because her mother had been right—time in Pine Bluffs *had* done her good. She loved the forests with their thick mats of pine needles over red earth, loved the town with its three stoplights and not a single chain restaurant.

So she'd visited, first in high school and then throughout college, fully intending to make it a permanent move after she'd earned her degree. But she'd changed her plans, that last summer.

Apparently Nathan had been thinking of that summer too, and the hike they'd taken around the lake, the tension simmering between them. "Your leg didn't scar," he said, setting her case on the table.

Automatically, Emma glanced down at her right calf. Smooth skin stretched over muscle that, five years ago, had been mangled, bleeding. "It turned me into a werewolf. So I heal faster now."

His short burst of laughter was exactly what she'd expected. No, she couldn't tell him straight out. She'd have to prepare him, so that he could more easily accept the unbelievable. After dropping Aunt Letty and Emma at his house, Nathan would have to return the highway and help Osborne go over the scene at the Jeep. It would be a simple thing to follow him in wolf form and offer help...and then hope he didn't shoot her, as he had the werewolf who'd attacked her.

A lead bullet between the eyes killed a werewolf just as easily as it did a man; unfortunately, death hadn't changed him back to his human form. If it had, she might have known what was happening to her. She might have known where the cravings came from, and why she'd woken up naked in the woods just outside Nathan's bedroom window.

But she'd probably have been just as frightened, and run just as fast.

"Your Jeep was packed full," he said, and she could feel his gaze on her as she unzipped her suitcase. "Are you staying a while?"

"Forever, probably."

“Why now?”

She stepped into her jeans. “Aunt Letty’s getting older, there’s an opening for a science teacher at the high school, and I need a place to run.”

His eyebrows drew together. “Are you in trouble?”

“Not a place to run *to*. A place to run. The city isn’t good for that.”

His frown remained, but he only nodded. Emma pulled on a sweater as Letty came back into the kitchen, bundled in her coat and knitted cap. Daisy, the yellow Labrador who’d been Letty’s companion for as long as Emma could remember, had ventured downstairs and now sat at Letty’s heel. The dog’s body was taut, shaking. That was another reason Emma had left. But she’d since learned that, with time, a dog would get over its instinctive fear of her. It just took a lot of dog biscuits.

Letty’s steely gaze landed on Emma’s face. Emma shook her head.

An aging aunt, a job, a place to run. All true. And Nathan was another reason—but she couldn’t tell him that until after she showed him the rest.

#

The snow let up just before dawn. Nathan walked the highway shoulder, sweeping his flashlight over the ground, hoping for even a foot of tire track that hadn’t been filled in. Emma had helped narrow down the type of vehicle, but a matching tread would go further in court.

Two hundred yards from her Jeep, he gave up. Turning back, he saw Osborne standing beside the deputy vehicle, lifting his hand. Nathan waved him on. There was nothing left here. He’d have the Jeep towed into town, and the snow and the plows would erase the rest.

Then he’d spend a good portion of the morning bucking through the logging roads that turned off the main highway between here and Pine Bluffs, searching for the route Emma’s

attacker had used. Cold, boring work, which would give him too much time to spend in his head. This meant he'd probably spend a good portion of the morning obsessing over Emma.

And wishing that he was with her in his old bedroom, in that old double bed heaped high with blankets, instead of trudging through the freezing backwoods.

He glanced into her Jeep as he passed it. An inch of white snow covered the driver's seat, and the black powder from the fingerprinting kit dusted the door handles.

Not much hope there, either. Emma had been certain her assailant had been wearing leather gloves.

Yet she'd still managed to bite through the gloves hard enough that his blood had splashed all over her. Terror lent her strength.

A hot ball of anger settled in his gut. Nathan looked away from the Jeep, staring blindly into the tree line. They were going to get the bastard this time. If the son of a bitch knew what was good for him, he'd walk into the sheriff's office now and turn himself in.

But Nathan hoped to God that when the time came, the bastard resisted arrest.

Of course, they had to identify him first. With a sigh, he banged his fist against the roof of the Jeep, turned back to his vehicle. And froze.

A wolf lay in front of his Blazer, like a dog stretched out before a fire, but twice the size of any dog Nathan had ever seen. He'd seen a wolf this large before, however; he'd killed a wolf this large after it had attacked Emma on a hiking trail.

But this wolf wasn't snarling, hackles raised and fangs bared. Its thick, dark fur lay flat over its back; its head was raised, amber eyes watching him steadily, pointed ears pricked forward.

He rested his hand on his weapon, but didn't draw it. Not yet. He edged to the side, began making a wide arc that would take him to his vehicle without directly approaching the wolf. He stopped when the wolf cocked its head, rose to its feet and trotted toward the Jeep.

It sniffed at the snow by the flat tire, then began to work its way back. Scenting the blood, Nathan assumed. The tension began to leave his shoulders, and he watched as it began to dig through the small drift that had piled beside the rear tire.

Then it turned, looked at him, and sat. When Nathan only stared back, the wolf made a chuffing sound, pushed its long nose back into the drift, and nudged.

Something small and black rolled out of the drift, leaving—Nathan realized with a strange, swooping sensation in his stomach—specks of pink ice in its wake.

The wolf backed up a few yards, then sat again.

Slowly, Nathan approached the Jeep. He kept his gaze on the wolf, then dared a glance at the object on the ground.

His stomach did another swoop, and for a second he thought his head was going to go with it. He crouched, sitting on his heels, waiting for the light-headedness to pass.

It was a thumb, still inside the leather of the glove.

He had a fingerprint. Holy shit. Disbelieving, he took off his hat, pushed his hand through his hair. He looked up at the wolf.

“What the hell are you?”

Its mouth stretched into what Nathan would have sworn was a grin. For an instant, he remembered Emma in Miss Letty's kitchen, joking about becoming a werewolf.

God. Was he actually entertaining the idea that this wolf was a human? That it was *Emma*?

He was obviously lacking sleep or caffeine. Shaking the ridiculous thought from his head, Nathan stood. The wolf trotted past him, its shoulder brushing his leg.

He watched it break into a lope down the highway, and turned back to the thumb on the ground. He could think about the wolf later. Now, he had a job to do.

#

Fifteen minutes later, Nathan slammed on his brakes when the wolf appeared on the highway shoulder. The Blazer fishtailed before the chains caught and gave him traction. It took a long time for his heart to stop pounding.

He climbed out of the truck, pointed at the wolf. “Do you know how dumb that was?”

Probably not any less dumb than talking to an animal. And definitely not as stupid as feeling chastised when it gave him a *look*, then trotted a few yards up the highway.

To a logging road. It sniffed at the snow, moved farther off the highway, then looked back at Nathan expectantly.

“You’re kidding me,” he said.

The wolf shook its head. *Answering him.*

And there went reality. Nathan trudged forward. “No jury is going to buy this story.”

#

Emma was still half-asleep when she heard Nathan come home. She turned, buried her face in her pillow, and listened to Letty ask him about the investigation, the status of the Jeep, and whether he preferred rolls or biscuits with the beef stew she was making. Then she sent him from the kitchen with an instruction to wake the princess who’d slept the day away.

The princess thought she deserved all the sleep she'd had. Emma had run more than thirty miles that morning. After she'd left Nathan by the highway, she'd searched through a quarter of the town, trying to track down the murderer by scent.

Unfortunately, she hadn't found any sign of him.

Nathan didn't knock. She held her breath as he came inside the room, locked the door, and moved to the bed. He pulled off his boots and slipped in next to her, drew her back tight against his chest.

"You're awake," he said, his voice low in her ear.

She nodded, fighting the sudden need that was tearing through her, the growl that came with it.

"We got closer to him today." Nathan shifted slightly, snuck his arm beneath her ribs, hugged her to him. "We found where he pulled off the highway and waited, got the imprint from a tire track. We even got a fingerprint, sent it in to the state lab. Hopefully they'll come up with a match. Any guy with a missing thumb is going to have some explaining to do."

Emma forced the need away, found her voice. "It won't be missing for long. It'll grow back. And that story will be a lot harder to sell to a jury than the one you have for this morning."

The silence that fell was heavy, painful. Nathan didn't move. She couldn't see him, had no idea what he was thinking. But at least he didn't let her go.

Finally, he pulled her closer. His jaw, rough with a day's growth of beard, scratched lightly over her cheek. "This morning, I thought I was having some kind of spiritual experience. The kind people have a few weeks before they play naked chicken with a train. So if you're saying what I think you're saying, it's a lot less worrying than thinking I've gone crazy."

Emma could only nod again, her relief a shuddery ache in her chest.

But Nathan didn't let her off the hook. "If you're saying it, Emma, then *say* it."

She swallowed past the tightness in her throat. "It was me. This morning, the wolf you saw was me. I showed you which logging road he drove down, and I dug his thumb out of the snow."

"Christ." He muffled a laugh against her neck. "You've got one hell of a bite."

"Yes. But it also means that he's going to become what I am. Just like I changed after I was bit by that wolf five years ago."

His fingers drifted over the unblemished skin at her temple. "You do heal fast. Does it hurt now when I touch you here?"

"No." She caught his hand. "It would only hurt if you *didn't* touch me."

"There's no chance of that." His lips ghosted over her ear, her jaw, then her fingers, where she held his hand against her neck. His other arm tightened around her waist. "This is why, five years ago, you didn't come back."

"I was afraid," she admitted.

"General fear, or are there specifics I should know about?"

"There *were* specifics. I'd lose whole chunks of time, wake up outside. And it was harder to fight myself when I wanted something." Like Nathan. "And I didn't want to accidentally hurt anyone."

"But now?"

"I learned to control it better. And the more I let it—the wolf—out, the more control I have when I'm human." Unable to help herself, she arched a little, rubbed her bottom against him, then choked out an embarrassed laugh. "But my control still isn't perfect."

His hand moved down to her hip, stroked the length of her thigh. “That isn’t exactly a turnoff.”

From the evidence blatantly present, she’d already realized that. Emma let go of his hand, twisted her fingers in the sheets. She didn’t have much practice at controlling arousal, but her nails didn’t rip the cotton, thank God. Her hips worked back against him and she panted. “We can’t.”

Nathan stilled. “Now, or ever?”

“Now. I hear Aunt Letty coming up the stairs.”

He groaned against her neck. Emma laughed, but it was cut short when he rolled her over, fastened his lips to hers.

Oh, God, he tasted so good. Smelled so good. *Felt* so good. She pushed her fingers into his hair, opened her mouth to the slick heat of his tongue. His hips pushed between her thighs and he rocked forward once, twice; her breath caught on each movement, her body aching for completion.

But it wouldn’t be now. With a growl that sounded as feral as hers, Nathan lifted himself away, and pushed off the bed. He stood in his khaki uniform pants and shirt, his hair disheveled, his breathing ragged and heavy. Not even a werewolf and he had to fight himself as hard as she did.

Warmth swept through her, curved her lips. “Sheriff Studly.” She turned onto her side, propped herself up on her elbow. “That does have a better ring to it than Deputy Studly.”

A teasing nickname she’d given him her first summer here, when they’d met and had an instant, strong connection with each other. But at sixteen, she had been too young for anything except a platonic relationship with a man just out of college. No wonder they’d fallen into the

‘we’re just friends’ rut; both of them, afraid to change and risk the friendship they’d formed that first year. And both of them, longing for that change.

And they’d both gotten change in a big way.

Nathan dragged a hand over his face, finally looking away from her. “You knew to call me that last night. Letty told you about the election?”

“I kept up on the news here.”

“Well, what they didn’t mention was that most people voted me in on name recognition. They saw ‘Forrester’ and checked the ballot, forgetting that my dad was heading off to Arizona to retire, so they were actually getting Junior.” His smile became wry. “The past eighteen months haven’t been such a fine addition to his legacy, have they?”

Emma sat up. “What does that mean?”

“It means there are four women dead, and their murderer is still out there.”

“So your dad just retired at the right time.” She cocked her head, studying him. There was more than just anger and frustration in him, there was shame, too. “So is this why you weren’t burning up the highway to Seattle?”

He stared back at her. “You tilted your head just like that this morning. Gave me the same damn look.” When she didn’t answer, he shoved his hands into his pockets. “All right. So I wanted to have something to offer you first.”

If he’d just walked through her door that would have been enough. But she’d stayed away because she’d had her own demons to fight—demons that he’d easily accepted—and so she couldn’t just tell him that his demons didn’t matter.

She slipped off the bed, rose to her toes to press a quick kiss to his mouth. “So we find him.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. And don’t argue,” she said when he looked ready to, “because I bit him. That means, right now, he’s probably fighting himself. And the urges to do what he craves, what he enjoys—which is apparently raping and killing—will be hard to resist.”

Nathan watched her, his expression dark. “He’d already been waiting less time between attacks.”

“So it’ll get worse. And then *worse*, because he’ll be stronger, faster. And he’ll have new ways of going after the women. And new ways of getting away.”

“So what do you propose we do?”

Emma tapped her finger against her nose. “Sniff him out. I know what he smells like, and this is a small town. I can cover a lot of ground in a night.”

“I bet.” He paused, considering her. “How much did you cover this morning?”

She grinned. “Only the houses south of Walnut Street.”

#

Of course, he didn’t let her go alone. His Blazer moved slowly down the darkened streets, and from the driver’s seat, Nathan watched her flit between the houses, sniffing walkways and doors. Her appearance was raising hell with the dogs in town, more than one running along a backyard fence, barking its head off. He’d have a bevy of noise complaints to deal with tomorrow.

He put in a call to Osborne, who he’d talked into staying at the house with a promise of a home-cooked stew. The deputy reported that Letty had already gone to bed and that he was working through his third bowl.

Nathan would probably be rolling him out of there come morning.

He watched Emma trot down a side street, staying in the shadows. Now and then she'd lift her nose, smelling the air before shaking her head and continuing on. Nathan sighed, took a swig of coffee. They'd likely be out here for hours. And even if Emma identified the bastard, bringing him in could be tricky. No judge would issue a warrant based on a wolf's sense of smell. With luck, the print from the thumb would do it. But if not, Nathan would have to work backwards, find a solid link in the evidence that could have led him to the murderer's front door.

He frowned. Bringing a *werewolf* in was going to be tricky, regardless.

It was just past two when Emma returned to the Blazer, her breath billowing in the freezing air. Nathan leaned over, opened the passenger door. She leapt onto the bench seat, and lay down with a heavy sigh.

"Done for the night?" That sense of unreality hit him again. Knowing this wolf was Emma was one thing; talking to her in this shape was another.

She looked up at him, turned onto her side. The whine that escaped her sent chills down his spine. Her jaw cracked and bulged.

Oh, Jesus. He cut the Blazer's headlights and pulled off to the deserted roadside. He slid toward her on the seat, but didn't touch her for fear that his hands would add to the pain of the transformation. The change took less than a minute but felt like forever; an eternity filled with her whimpers, the groans of her flesh, and his murmurs that he prayed were helping, soothing. Finally she lay naked on the seat, her short hair and skin glistening with sweat.

"It's not so bad," she panted. "Once the pain starts, you just ride with it."

Speechless, Nathan shook his head. He reached into the back seat for a blanket, tucked it around her shoulders.

“Thanks.” She gratefully accepted the coffee he offered, raised it to her lips with shaking hands. “I just need another second.”

She wasn’t exaggerating; by the time she’d swallowed the lukewarm drink, her shivers had stopped. She stared unblinkingly out the front windshield, her fingers tapping against the mug. “I get a whiff here and there, but it wasn’t concentrated anywhere. I think he must move around the town. Maybe he does repairs, or some kind of work on call.”

Work was a reality Nathan could get a grip on. “We covered most of the town tonight. It might be he’s on one of the farms or rural properties outside of town, and just comes in...for whatever it is he does.”

“I can start running those properties tomorrow night.” Her lips curved. “I’d go during the day, but someone would probably shoot at me.”

“It might be over by tomorrow anyway, if the state comes back with a name on that print.”

Emma’s nod wasn’t too convincing. She was thinking, he imagined, exactly what he had been earlier: arresting a werewolf wasn’t going to be easy.

She tilted her head back and finished off the coffee, placed the mug carefully in the cup holder. “Did it help—to see me change? Or make it worse?”

He didn’t even ask how she’d known he was having trouble reconciling his Emma with the wolf. “Helps. I’m not saying I’ve got my head around it yet. But it helps.”

“The transformation is grotesque.”

His gaze ran up her pale, perfectly human legs. “Maybe for a few seconds. What you’ve got on either end isn’t.”

Her eyes locked with his. “You were afraid to touch me.”

“I didn’t know if it would hurt you.”

“Oh.” Her mouth softened. Her fingers, which had been clutching the blanket at her neck, loosened. “I thought we’d established that it only hurts when you don’t.”

The slice of skin and the pale curves of her breasts showing between the edges of the blanket undid him. Nathan pulled her toward him; she came eagerly, straddling his lap. Her mouth found his, then moved to his jaw, his neck. Her skin was hot beneath his hands. Her fingers worked frantically down the buttons of his shirt.

He thought about putting a stop to it. Thought that he’d always intended a bed for her, roses and wine—not the front seat of his truck. But thought that he’d never heard anything sweeter than her soft gasps and moans, nothing sexier than her growl when he slid his fingers down her stomach.

Her hips rocked, her back arched, her hands gripping his shoulders. She cried out his name when he pushed inside her. He offered himself to her just as he was, and took her just as she was.

#

Running a hundred miles couldn’t have wrung her out as completely. Emma hadn’t moved since she’d collapsed against Nathan’s chest, her body limp. Didn’t want to move.

But knew she needed to. With a soft groan, she slid from his lap. Nathan smiled, but he looked as shaken as she felt. Emma reached over the back of the seat for the bag she’d stuffed there before they’d left his house, not even trying to suppress the swelling emotion that constricted her chest, her throat. It was a sweet pain, knowing that it came from the wonder of fitting so perfectly with him.

It had been good between them. Better than good. Amazing.

Nathan finished buttoning his shirt, shoved the tails into his trousers. “I’ll call Osborne, let him know we’re heading back. You think Letty will notice if you sleep in my room?”

“Yes.” Emma fished out her panties and jeans. “But she’ll get used to the idea.”

Actually, Emma would have been surprised if her aunt didn’t already think that she and Nathan had been together all those years ago. She listened idly as Nathan spoke with Osborne, to Daisy’s faint bark in the background.

Emma hurriedly shoved her jeans back down to her ankles. “Oh, my God. Nathan. Get out to your place. As fast as you can. Tell Osborne to get to Letty’s room, and take his gun.”

He didn’t ask; he swung the Blazer immediately onto the road, repeated her instructions to Osborne.

As she removed her clothes again, she explained. “I can hear Daisy barking. She doesn’t do that—she *never* does that. Except the night after I was bitten. She barked like crazy the first night.”

Nathan nodded, his lips tight. Despite the two inches of snow that had fallen, a fresh set of tire tracks led down the lane that her aunt shared with the Forresters.

“Oh, shit,” Emma whispered, then turned to Nathan. His gaze was fixed on the road. “I’m going to change. I’m faster that way, quieter. He’s probably still in human shape.”

“And he might have a gun,” Nathan said grimly. “So don’t you think you’re going anywhere yet. Emma! Dammit.”

She heard his curse, the slam of his fist against the steering wheel, then the agonizing crack of her joints as she began her change.

#

Letty's place rose up out of the darkness like a gingerbread house frosted with white icing. Nathan glanced over at Emma, sitting up with her ears pricked forward. "Okay, I agree. You're safer in that form. Harder to argue with, too—which I'm sure you love."

Emma turned her head and grinned at him before facing forward again.

"There's his truck," he said, unsure if Emma's wolf eyesight had picked out the extended cab pickup parked just off the lane. "He drove past the house. Then did he walk back to Letty's or head out on foot to my place?"

Emma gave an uncertain whine. Nathan pulled up behind the truck and drew his weapon. "Stay behind me."

He approached the truck slowly and noted the magnetic sign stuck to the door. Fuller's Plumbing. He pictured its owner, Mark Fuller—tall, sandy-haired, easygoing—and shook his head. Jesus Christ. He'd played ball with Fuller in high school.

In all the years since, he'd never heard a whisper of trouble connected to Fuller. In a small town like Pine Bluffs, word got around. If Fuller had even looked at a woman strangely, had an argument, or made an unwanted advance, Nathan probably would have heard of it. But Fuller had managed to stay squeaky clean.

Footprints led away from the pickup, heading further off the road, into the pine trees. "Do you hear anything from inside the cab?"

Emma shook her head. Nathan checked the truck, found it empty. A bandage, crusted with dried blood, lay crumpled on the passenger's seat.

What had Fuller thought, Nathan wondered, when the bleeding stopped so quickly? When his thumb had begun to heal over? Did he understand what was happening to him?

"This guy has the right smell?"

In answer, Emma put her nose to the ground, began following the foot prints. They lead to his place, Nathan realized, jogging beside her. Fuller must have parked here rather than risk anyone at Nathan's house seeing the truck's headlights or hearing the engine.

Nathan dialed Osborne's cell, and was putting his phone to his ear when the gunshots cracked through the night. He broke into a run. Emma streaked ahead.

He didn't slow to catch his breath when Osborne answered the phone. "Who fired?" Nathan asked.

"I did. It's Mark Fuller, hopped up on something. He took off, out of the house."

"Injuries?"

"Not me or Miss Letty, sir. I hit Fuller but it didn't slow him down."

"Did he have a weapon?"

"If he did, he didn't use it."

All right. "Hold your position. We're coming up on the house now."

Or *he* was. Nathan disconnected, searching for Emma. Her tracks followed the footprints across the wide, moonlit clearing that separated his house from the woods, but he didn't see her or Fuller.

He stopped, used the wide trunk and low branches of a pine at the clearing's edge for cover. The shadows around the house were deep; movement near the back porch caught his eye.

Fuller. Hunched over, and using an eerie, loping gait that sent prickles of dread down Nathan's spine. That gait didn't look human or wolf, but simply *inhuman*. Moonlight reflected in Fuller's eyes as he turned his head.

He stopped, straightened—and stared directly at Nathan.

Nathan held his breath, but his hopes that Fuller had just been searching the tree line and couldn't see him were dashed when he hunched over again and began loping toward him. An eager, hungry growl carried across the clearing.

Nathan stepped out of the trees, set his feet, steadily aimed his gun. "Drop to the ground, Fuller! Get down, or I *will* fire!"

The werewolf kept running—grinning, panting.

Nathan squeezed the trigger. Blood sprayed the snow behind Fuller's left leg. But he kept on coming.

Cold sweat trickled down the back of Nathan's neck; he fired again: an abdomen shot that twisted Fuller to the side, briefly, before the bastard righted himself. If anything, he seemed to run *faster*. Nathan had time for one more shot. The chest was a bigger target than the head. The head was a kill shot.

His next bullet ripped through Fuller's scalp, laid white bone open to the moonlight. He didn't miss a step.

Nathan stumbled back, searching for the tree branch. He'd get higher, defend himself from a better position, if he had time.

A dark form raced across the clearing and launched at Fuller. Nathan heard the impact of flesh and bone, saw the wave of snow that flew back from the two bodies hitting the ground.

Nathan sprinted toward them. Growls filled the air, yips of pain. Emma's?

No, Nathan realized with relief as their twisting battle came to a halt. Emma pinned Fuller on his back with her large forepaw pressing into his bloodied chest. Her teeth closed over his throat.

Fuller wheezed, his eyes opening wide. He flailed at Emma with his right hand. The thumb was gone, but a tiny protrusion of pink flesh had already begun to grow in its place.

Nathan aimed his weapon at Fuller's head. "Don't move, Mark. Just stay still."

Fuller obeyed, dropping his fists to the snow at his sides. His chest heaved as he tried to draw in air. His frantic gaze met Nathan's. "Can't...stop."

"We'll try to get you help," Nathan promised. But he had a feeling they weren't going to get Fuller out of this field. Madness filled the other man's eyes, and Nathan didn't trust that Fuller would stay down if Emma let him go.

But he was staying down now, so Nathan asked, "Did you kill those women? Rape them, and leave them off the highway?"

As if in ecstasy, Fuller's eyes rolled back into his head. He ran his tongue over the grin that stretched his lips. "They were...so good. Want more."

Emma's snarl echoed Nathan's own rage.

"And what were you planning to do here?"

Fuller raised his right hand. "Knew...you'd find...fingerprint. Knew...you'd stop me. I can't...don't want to stop."

Nathan shook his head in disbelief. No, he wouldn't have found a match. Fuller had never been charged or booked. His prints wouldn't have been in the system.

Fuller's hips lifted and rocked. Emma shifted her grip on his throat. Fuller's voice rose an octave, took on a sing-song rhythm. "But when I came to your house, I smelled her. Oh, Miss Letty, Letty, Letty—"

Emma tightened her jaw, cutting off the sick refrain, but the bastard's hips continued to thrust up and down.

“Hold still,” Nathan ordered.

Fuller lowered his hand again, but his other hand moved beneath his waist, pulling out—

“Gun, Emma!” Nathan shouted. “Get back!”

Her jaws clamped around Fuller’s neck as she twisted away. The rip of flesh was drowned by the roar of a gunshot.

Emma yelped. Nathan shoved her to the side, stomped his boot into the bloody cavity she’d opened in Fuller’s throat. He aimed between the bastard’s eyes and fired.

Nathan whipped around. Emma lay on the ground, blood spreading over and melting the snow beneath her.

“Emma, Emma, Emma.” He fell to his knees, lifted her head onto his lap, stroked his hands over her fur, searching. It was a belly shot. Bad. Really bad for most wolves. “Tell me you’re going to be okay.”

He heard the crack, felt her ribs bulge beneath his hands. “Jesus Christ, Emma.” He tore out of his coat, covered her with it, held her through the transformation. As soon as she lay panting and sweating in his arms, he said, “I just meant for you to nod your head.”

She laughed breathlessly, showing him her pale stomach. Blood stained her skin, but the wound had vanished. “Nice trick, huh?”

His relief grabbed him by his throat, and took away any response he might have had. He hauled her up, sealed her mouth with his kiss, let her feel every emotion rushing through him. She clung to him, returned everything he gave.

He stood and swung her up against his chest, her bare legs dangling over his arm. They stared down at Fuller’s body for a silent moment, then Nathan began carrying her toward the house.

He took a long breath. “So, in a little while, once we’ve got everything settled, maybe you’ll take a risk with me.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “Marry you?”

His stomach dropped, but there wasn’t a bit of him that didn’t like the idea. “Well, that, too. But I’m thinking more along the lines of you...biting me.” He brushed his lips against her mouth which had fallen open in surprise. “I’d like to run with you.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes before she buried her face against his neck. “Yes,” she said. “Of course it’s yes. We can be our own little pack.” Her lips kissed his skin; her teeth followed it with a nip.

He laughed, pressed his lips over her hair. “Let me get you home first.”

“I’m with you,” she said simply, and her arms tightened around his neck. “So I’m already there.”

END

**For more information about Meljean Brook’s paranormal romance series, The Guardians, and her steampunk romance series, The Iron Seas, please visit:**

**<http://meljeanbrook.com>**