

# *Thread*

KINGDOM RISING - OPENER

OPHELIA KEE



OPHELIA KEE

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*For the Passion for Writing and all the bits that fall  
onto the Cutting Room Floor*

# *Introduction to Draoithe*



*Draoithe Saga*

**Steamy hot, wickedly delicious paranormal romance, magical realism, and urban fantasy stories set in a dream to live for!**

Those who come to Draoithe aid in the fight to restore the magical balance of the dream, one couple at a time.

Grab a good drink, curl up in a good seat, choose a book from the Saga, and escape into the dream while you meet the men and women who call it home.

Draoithe is a world in which myths, legends, and fairytales walk among the strange and wonderful.

They often find balance in a lifemate, and the magic from the past lives again!

*Welcome to the dream...*

**Steamy Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance Stories with Fated Mates 18+ HEA! NC!**

**\*\*\*Warning: Adult Themes, Fantasy Violence, and/or Explicit Sexual Situations. Intended for a Mature Audience.**



*A Note from Ophelia Kee*

*Note to the Reader:*

A saga is defined as a long story of heroic achievement, especially a medieval prose narrative often found in Old Norse or Old Icelandic. It's a form of the novel in which the members of a social group chronicle a long story detailing a dramatic history.

Compartmentalized in several miniseries for easier reading, the Draoihe Saga tells the story of the founding of an immortal kingdom in the Leaindeail to combat those responsible for unbalancing the magic of the dream. It's told through the eyes of those connected with its creation and the readers see the story through tales of couples who find hope through their connection to Draoihe.

The central time frame is the year 2016, although pertinent information from the past reveals itself as the characters understand it. The central place is

## THREAD

an eerily familiar yet magical realist, Tyler, Texas. As the tale draws out, other kingdoms set in other locations interact with the Druid pack to bring about the end of Peter Elliot and restore the balance of magic, so those tales, too, became a part of the Draoithe Saga as well. Cameo appearances of characters from other tales are common. Overlapping scenes from the events often relates alternate perspectives as the story unfolds.

Watch the trailer, research videos, vlogs, and more on YouTube.



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YouTube*

# Book Description



*Thread*



## **Thread**

### **Kingdom Rising**

#### *A Draoithe Saga Beginning*

A thousand years ago, chaos escaped into the dream. By 2016, shadowy evil forces using madness are wreaking havoc on the balance of magic, and erasing necessary parts of an ancient prophecy. In danger of losing its magic, the dream attempts to use broken pieces and replacement parts to weave a new tapestry. Only choosing the right building blocks isn't easy.

In this exhilarating prequel tale, meet Luke and Eli, two characters with fascinating pasts and complicated secrets, before they meet one another. Luke Mendez is a retired, disabled military man. Having anxiety, he spies the beautiful girl next door, but then struggles to introduce himself. Eli Miller, the high school history teacher, worked tirelessly for years to break free from a terrible relationship. She moved to Tyler to start over.

Thread is the story of a lonely direwolf and a lone shifter in a time before the two of them meet each other. It sets the stage for *A Pack Forms*, an enthralling urban fantasy with paranormal romance tale in the epic *Draoithe Saga* by Ophelia Kee.

Welcome to the dream...

OPHELIA KEE

**Urban Fantasy with Steamy Paranormal Romance and Fated Mates 18+ HEA! NC!**

**\*\*\*Warning: Adult Themes, Fantasy Violence, and/or Explicit Sexual Situations. Intended for a Mature Audience.**

# Character Introduction 1

**Eli Miller**



*Eli Miller*

Elizabeth Miller was merely a high school history teacher until she was thirty. That's when she shifted into a tiger for the first time and her life fell apart. After a sad breakup, she felt a new start was in order. On the trip to Tyler, Texas, looking at homes for sale, the threads of destiny began weaving her into the fabric of the dream. Her lifemate would find her and together they would set out on a grand adventure fraught with danger, love, and great magic. But first she had to find out what it meant to be a shifter and find the man crafted to walk through eternity with her. That wasn't so easy for a solitary apex hunter.

Elizabeth Miller

AKA: Eli

Smells like: shade in the summer

High school teacher/Writer

Mate: Luke

Dark blonde hair

Olive green eyes

5'2" tall

130 lbs

48 years old/ stopped aging at 30

Tiger shifter and dream walker—Alpha

## THREAD

Eli is a closet writer and would love to publish her work. If she joins with her lifemate and buys into his dream, she could have hers, too. Finding Luke is the beginning of a pack, a kingdom, and a life she never dreamed of having.

# *Character Introduction 2*

**Lucas Mendez**



*Luke Mendez*

## THREAD

Luke Mendez was career military until his last mission left him discharged, disabled. Losing his men and watching a shifter commit suicide messed him up. He was looking for a quiet place to land when he stumbled over the sexiest woman he'd ever seen living two doors down. She was the one; he knew it. When the shadowy evil which had marked him while he was still in the military caught up with him stateside, it was she who paid the price. He needed to win her, and protecting her became paramount. There was the issue with her ex to solve as well. But maybe it was time for the lone wolf to settle down.

Colonel Lucas Mendez

AKA: Luke

Smells like: sunny sandy beach

President of Draoithe

Mate: Eli

Chocolate brown hair

Green eyes

6'2" tall

225 lbs

53 years old

Direwolf shifter and dream inverter—Alpha

Luke is the quintessential knight-in-shining-armor good guy. What he finds when he discovers his mate changes his understanding of his existence and sets him on a course to lead the immortals who need his help to overcome a shadowy evil and correct the imbalance of magic in the dream.



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# *Newsletter Friends*



*Magic Scroll*

OPHELIA KEE

Dear Reader,  
Ruined Lion is Volume 2  
in the Lyons Gate Miniseries.

I hope you enjoy it all.  
For more information,  
please join my group of  
**Newsletter Friends**



*Newsletter Friends*

*Welcome to the dream...*

# CHAPTER ONE

*Eli Miller*

*S*ummer of 2013

Sometimes a girl just had to do what a girl had to do. It was simply time to move on and move out of El Paso. She'd waited long enough to put the wheels in motion on getting a new start.

It likely wouldn't happen overnight. It had to happen, eventually. A trip was the first step along that journey. She had the money that she needed. There'd never be a better time to buy her dream house in the forest of East Texas.

The drive to Tyler was long. The Moonlight was a nice comfortable ride.

Eli liked her truck. Hands down, it had to be the best vehicle she'd ever owned. There was no chance she was trading it in. The nearly paid off truck ran like a dream.

She'd left in the early morning hours so she could arrive before it was dark. She drove through the desert. Nothing to see except a few more cacti.

Eli wanted to see a bit of the town of Tyler and its inhabitants. Maybe she'd have time to take some pictures.

She'd been to Tyler twice in the past. It was just big enough to offer her what she needed as far as employment and city life went, and just small enough that she could get away from all of that as well.

She was excited. Her realtors had lined up quite a few prospective properties for her to look at. Surely one of them would be the right one.

The realtor team who offered to show her the houses worked around her crazy long-distance relocation needs. Her financing was all in place. She hoped it was enough to get what she needed.

She drove straight into the downtown area. The old bricked streets were quaint. She was a historian and taught history to high school students, so the quirkiness of old-world charm meeting present-day travel needs appealed to her.

## THREAD

Eli parked, plucked a loose thread from the lapel on her blouse, and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger before letting it fly away on the light breeze. She walked around the old downtown and took pictures of the skyscrapers, the square, and the old churches. After the long drive, she needed to move around a bit to get rid of the stiffness.

She found herself some dinner and got hit on, which was flattering. He was handsome, not her type, and probably a bit too young.

She flirted with him under a false name for a bit. She wasn't staying and felt that leading the man on was wrong.

So she politely let him off easy and skipped out of the restaurant after going to the Ladies'. She'd already paid for her meal before 'handsome' showed up.

The last thing she needed was to go from one failed relationship to another. It was time she focused on Eli Miller for a change.

After dinner, she located her hotel and checked in. For the first time in a very long time, she was truly alone. She'd traveled by herself. The relationship between herself and her children's father had soured to a point where she'd just needed an escape.

Catching Javier cheating seriously wounded her heart. The constant going out, partying, and staying gone whole weekends had ruined it all long before that. The cheating had led to ugly fighting, bickering, and so much tension between them that neither of them spoke often with one another, even though they occupied the same residence as they had rented her house. It was far better not to be in El Paso.

The forest of East Texas with the towering pines interspersed with maple, oak, sweet gum, poplar, and other deciduous trees made the tiger inside want to purr. She could roam the forest at her leisure.

Eli could almost feel the dappled light of the shadowed forest floor and smell the leaf litter as it moved beneath her clawed paws. That appealed to her far more than any offer any man might make to her at the moment. Her tiger didn't like the desert.

Eli shivered with unrestrained delight at the prospect of finally being able to regain her freedom and start her life over in a place as beautiful as Tyler. The next week was going to be great.

She showered and dressed for bed. She set her alarm so she wouldn't be late to meet the realtors. Then she read a book on her phone for a while before she turned in for the night.



Eli had a week to explore before anyone would miss her. That would give her plenty of time to look at properties and think over any offer she wished to make. She hoped the trip was a successful one, and she left Tyler with a house.

The next day, she saw several properties in the morning. None of them seemed like what she was after. That dampened her enthusiasm. She was sure her realtors felt the change in her energy.

They took a break and had lunch before looking at some more houses. The third house after lunch was it. She knew it as they pulled into the driveway.

It was huge and perfect. The brick was gorgeous. It had a beautiful oversized front entry door with leaded glass in the window. She looked at the two realtors and demanded to know what was wrong with it before they ever got inside.

There was no way it was possible for her to buy a house that size at her price point unless it had structural issues, needed an entire renovation, and might collapse into a sinkhole or something equally negative.

“The older lady who lived there passed away in the house. Ms. Ellington is the neighbor that makes sure everyone knows it. The children could not sell it. It isn’t a murder scene or a suicide. The lady sim-

ply had a heart attack. She called for help, but when the paramedics arrived, she couldn't be revived."

"If you don't want to see it, we'll understand, but this house has everything on your wishlist right down to the swimming pool, the fireplace, and two office spaces." The quieter realtor spoke up to convince her to at least look the house over.

"Okay. Let me see it." They walked into the foyer, and Eli was home. When she saw the kitchen with the breakfast bar, she smiled widely. The master bathroom was exceptional.

"They professionally cleaned the house. All the floors had tile. They repainted the walls. This house comes with a warranty, and everything works."

Her realtors were nodding and offering her more information. They'd pointed out things throughout the entire tour.

Eli chewed her bottom lip for a minute. "What is the lowest offer you think they might entertain? I mean, I'm not afraid of ghosts, just don't tell my daughter about any of it. I like this house."

The two realtors smiled. They gave her a few minutes to walk back through the house and take pictures of everything on her phone. Satisfied, they headed back to the realtor's office to write up an offer.

## THREAD

Eli toured the town and visited the tiger sanctuary, the zoo, the state park, and the lake over the next several days as the negotiation went back and forth. She had time to be her tiger. Her vacation was amazing.

By the end of the week, they'd settled on a price. It was far below the appraised value of the house, and she felt she negotiated the best deal.

When push came to shove, her realtors reminded the seller that the house could either go to Eli or sit vacant for two more years. As she was preparing to drive back to El Paso, Eli knew that life was finally going to change for the better.

A month later, she was driving back to Tyler to sign for her house at closing. The excitement over having the keys was too much. It took a couple of years before the house became her full-time residence, but Eli had started along the path toward a different life that summer, and that felt good.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Luke Mendez*

*M*arch 2015

That was it. Just like that, he was no longer in the military. What was he supposed to do with his life?

He'd spent the night on his sister's couch. His nieces and nephews were teenagers and had their own lives. They were in school.

Uncle Luke wasn't interesting except that he looked the same. That was going to be a problem.

No way could he stay in Chicago. He hadn't aged a day in years. His sister wouldn't like it, but she wouldn't argue with his decision on the matter.

## THREAD

He was sitting at his sister's dining room table, staring at a picture of his parents. It was fading now. He knew it would be on the wall in that same spot when his sister passed away.

She'd used some of her inheritance to buy her house in Chicago after their parents died in a car accident. She was never moving.

She kept it up and worked full time. She didn't have to work. It was just something to do to keep from being bored and to talk to other adults.

He'd spent not one dime of that trust-money. Maybe it was about time.

He had a good idea about what he wanted to do with it. When he met Fox out in California years ago after he bailed his friend Ryker out of jail, he'd hit upon an idea for a retreat.

The question was, where? Tyler was big enough at 100,000 people to meet his needs. He could live just outside of town and enjoy the peace as well.

"Will you at least think about staying here for a little while, macho man?" His sister was kidding him like she'd done when they were kids.

He looked at her over the rim of his mug of hot tea and shook his head as he put the cup to his lips. The first signs of grey were in her hair at the temples.

She wasn't that old, but she'd buried her husband a few years after their parents passed away. The life

she'd dreamed of was a bit marred. Too much loss and heartache. He wasn't about to cause her more.

"I can't, sis. I love you and the kids, but you don't need me under your feet. The kids are too old and involved in their own lives. If I stayed, you'd just get pissed off with me when I kicked the ass of every guy you dated when he wasn't good enough for you."

She rolled her eyes at him as if she had not expected him to stay, but had hoped he might.

"Stay the weekend at least? Let me take you to buy civilian clothes. You can't wear your uniform for the rest of your life, you know."

She looked pointedly at his Army t-shirt, making him look down at it too. The hem was unraveling a bit, and a piece of thread had come loose at the bottom. He'd worn it once too often.

"Yeah, bad habit. I need a few things. Alright. The weekend. Come Monday morning, it's adios muchacha. I have a meeting with a realtor in Tyler, TX. I'm finally going to go get me some forest."

That was one thing about the military. A man didn't have to worry about what to wear. The uniform was his regular wardrobe.

He couldn't live like that anymore. His therapist would agree with his sister.

Plus, he should look like a human being when he met the realtor. A few button-down shirts with collars and some jeans and dress pants would be good. Maybe he should buy a new suit.

He wanted to buy a house. It had taken him a long time to grow up, but maybe he was finally there. Buying a house seemed like a step in the right direction. After that, he could think about looking for his lifemate.

“You always have everything all planned out, Luke. You haven’t changed a bit. I took the day off today and tomorrow. Let’s go grab you some kind of decent wardrobe. This afternoon there’s someone that I want you to meet.”

“Am I gonna need to kick his ass? If so, forget the clothes. Blood washes out of the uniform easier.” Luke practically growled at her.

He shouldn’t be irritated that she was finally moving on with her life. She was entitled.

He just had two issues with that. No one would ever be good enough to date his sister. She was his sister! And why did she have luck in finding a mate not once but twice, when he rarely ever found a woman he wanted a second date with?

“Luke. I thought you’d be happy for me. He’s nice. He has a big heart. I don’t think he needs my money.

I've been seeing him for a few months now." His sister practically whined.

She wasn't like him. She was born human. He wasn't. At thirty-five, he'd traced in the light for the first time and was a very large direwolf.

It had scared the shit out of him at first. Then it was super cool. Later, it made him nervous. He kept his secret hidden until he sniffed Artie.

Fox felt sorry for him, filled him in on what he was, and he learned he was an immortal shapeshifter who held powerful magic.

Direwolves were always born male. He'd need to find his mate and turn her into a canine to face immortality.

His sister was mortal. She would fade. He didn't want to watch that happen.

First the house, then the retreat, and when he had things all set up, he'd hunt the one woman he needed. He'd slowly cut ties with his sister and her kids and keep his secret.

He broke eye contact with his sister and stared at the image of his parents. Had his father been a canine shifter?

Things would have been different if he had been and survived the car accident. He missed them. All the more reason to get out of Chicago.



He looked back at his sister and smiled. “I’m happy for you. You deserve a good man to love you. The kids are old enough to be respectful and treat him as just for you, rather than disrespecting him as an unwanted father figure. I’ll be a good brother to you. If he fucks up, then I’ll kill him.”

She grinned at him and touched his face across the table.

She loved him. He loved her, too. It was time that he put distance between them before he had to explain the unexplainable. He couldn’t tell her, but it was likely the last time he’d ever seen her.

“Thanks, Luke. I love you. I’m glad you’re here, even if it’s just for the weekend. Let me get dressed, and we can get out of here.” She was still wearing her fuzzy slippers and faded-worn bathrobe.

The entire scene felt bittersweet to him. He’d been career-military and gone most of his adult life. After he found out what being a direwolf meant, he’d known that his time with her was limited. He’d accepted it.

That didn’t make walking away from her or the kids any easier. They were all the family he had left. This visit was his last goodbye.

He nodded at her, then rummaged through her fridge for a bite before they left. His sister would be

a while. She didn't rush. That meant he had time to feed the magic.

# CHAPTER THREE

*Eli Miller*

*June 2015*

That was it. She rubbed the back of her hand across her sweaty forehead and pushed a bit of the blonde hair back that had fallen from the bun she tied it in. She needed a break.

The last of the furniture that she'd brought from El Paso to furnish her new home was finally off of the rental trailer. She could return it to the U-Haul store in the morning.

She walked into the house she'd purchased a few summers ago. It was spacious. Maybe a bit too big. Oh well, a tiger could never have enough room to

room. The kids would be comfortable when they came home, but mostly the house was all hers.

She smiled at the entryway and her door. Eli liked the door with leaded glass. She frowned at the old worn-out welcome mat with the threads all frayed at the corner. She needed to replace that.

She'd worked hard for years and bought the house alone. She wanted to keep it looking good while it also needed to be comfortable.

The frayed rug fibers grated on her sensibilities. She felt the need to shred the fabric with her claws. Eli needed to be her tiger soon.

Javier was finally, sadly, a historical footnote. It had taken a long time. They'd tried to fix the relationship. It was just too damaged.

She was free. Free, single, and seriously determined to stay that way. She'd keep her life neat and sewn around the hem. No loose ends. No more frayed edges.

Eli had the summer to settle in before her new position at the local high school began. She'd landed the job the year before.

She wanted to be teaching college-level courses to her nerd students. This year she got her chance. It was going to be fun in a way life hadn't been for a long time.

Her kids were both at university. There'd been no reason to put off the move any longer when the job offer came in May last school year. She'd sold off the appliances she had in storage from her house in El Paso, along with most of the big furniture, and started over.

Not entirely. No way was she leaving her cast iron cookware or her antique vanity with the wooden caster wheels. Some things weren't replaceable. What she kept had finally made the trip out of El Paso.

It was time to stop paying two mortgages. Her house in El Paso was empty. She was putting it up for sale. She'd put it off too long.

It was too bad that Javier had never seen her as irreplaceable. Eli had loved him once before she shifted into her tiger. He was a good man.

He just turned out not to be *her* man. It was all water under the proverbial bridge. It was sad but inevitable.

She simply could not stay with a man who would cheat. The lies pissed her off, and the party had stolen him away from his family. She was no saint, but there was no way he could have saved their relationship, not after all that floated on the river between them.

The tears had been shed a long time ago. She had a new home, a new job, and a new life. It was time to make the most of it. As she walked through her living room strewn with boxes and furniture, she laughed out loud.

What it was time for was a glass of iced tea. Her past needed to stay just that, the past. She had to put things away.

Unpacking would be way easier than packing had been. Olivia would be along in a few days with Monty to help her. That would make it easier.

She'd used her pile of sick days to leave her previous position a little early to get the move handled. Eli had turned in all the grades after the state exams, so none of her students had suffered.

It was not earlier than when the school's dual credit courses ended, so as long as the students showed up and claimed attendance credit, their credits were assured. She was eager to close out her old life.

She sat down at the barstool at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, sipping a glass of iced tea as she looked out the window at the backyard. There was a greenbelt beyond the creek at the back of her property. Eli could step into the cool shade of the trees at night and prowl around as her tiger with no one being the wiser.

## THREAD

The house was perfect. There was a pool, a small fruit orchard, and space for a greenhouse and a chicken coop out past the pool. Urban homesteading on her tiniest of farms was going to be more fun with the recent additions.

She almost couldn't wait. She'd already ordered the chicken coop online and was waiting for it to be delivered before she purchased her hens.

She was determined to fill her life with people and things who loved her and mattered. It might be lonely, but that was better than giving her hard-won freedom away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Luke Mendez*

**JUNE 2015**

*June 2015*

The house was perfect, even if it had been a bit too big for him alone. He'd lived there for several months when the U-Haul trailer appeared in the house's driveway two doors down. He was idly curious, but paid it no mind. It wasn't his business what his neighbors did.

He was more intent on getting dressed, starting his day, and completing his retreat plans. Luke yanked a loose thread from the cuff of his shirt as he rolled up the sleeves the way he liked them. He needed to seal the deal with an architectural



designer. He'd met with the realtor and made his offer on the land with the lake.

Once he was sure he had the deed in his hand and he had an excellent design, he'd find a contractor and order the log house from the Mennonites in Missouri. It had to be quality. It was going to be home for a very long time. The search for a talented designer was the order of the day!

He was waiting for the mail carrier just after lunch a week later to be sure that his letter would arrive on time. He'd found the perfect design. If Luke could get Ursala Knowles to design the house, he felt he'd be winning.

She was young. Being deaf had made her determined, and her designs had been the best he'd seen. She'd bid an excellent price as well.

Luke wasn't dumb enough to believe that there wouldn't be overages, or that she wouldn't charge him every time she changed the design because he thought of things he hadn't thought of at first. He paid for the charges upfront, so she'd be happy to make them for him.

He'd sent a deposit check along with his request that she take on the job just to stitch the deal closed. He'd already changed the doorknobs to handles, and the kitchen was going to need to be much bigger.

Luke wasn't worried about the size of the structure. He had enough land that it wouldn't matter, so long as the damage to the environment was kept to a minimum.

He might even oversee the construction himself. He talked to Jimmy when the postal jeep stopped before his box a couple of weeks after he'd seen the U-Haul.

The man wasn't bad as far as mail carriers went. Maybe it was the direwolf in him, but most mail carriers rubbed his fur wrong. Jimmy was relaxed and country. He was nice.

"How's it going, Jimmy?" Luke asked as the jeep pulled over to the curb in front of his mailbox.

"It's good, Mr. Mendez. I got me a three-day weekend coming. No mail delivery for me on Monday. I'm going out of town for a wedding. There'll be a substitute carrier." The mailman grinned as he handed Luke his mail.

"Weddings are always fun. I'll be sure to wait for you to return before I mail out anything important in that case." Luke smiled back at the man.

He was distracted from the conversation when the white truck belonging to his neighbor two doors down the street passed his house. The blonde driver was singing a bit off-key with the radio and never looked his way.

Luke tracked her progress to her house. He watched her get down from the truck, carrying a few grocery bags. She entered her house.

She was fine. Like too gorgeous to be real.

He shouldn't have been looking at her. For all he knew, she was married, but damn, what living man didn't look at a woman like that?

Blonde, green-eyed grace walking. That was what that was. How the hell he'd missed that before. He was positive he didn't know.

Luke hadn't been with a woman in nearly two years. His neighbor suddenly reminded him he wouldn't mind being with one again, especially if she wanted to apply for the position.

"Mr. Mendez, you might want to rethink all that ogling. She has grown children. Likely, be a serious age difference between you, no matter how good she looks," Jimmy observed.

Jimmy did not know how old Luke was. Luke still looked like he had in his middle thirties.

Canine shifters stopped aging after they shifted around the age of thirty-five. Being in his early fifties, he should have gone grey, had some facial wrinkles, or put on the middle-aged paunch, but it had never happened to him.

"What, no. I mean, she *is* pretty. Grown children, hunh?"

Luke turned back to face the postal worker.

“Yeah, I’m surprised she’s still here. She must like the position she got in the schools here. She’s been living here year round for going on a year. Elizabeth Miller teaches. She bought that big old house two or three years ago. She used to only live in it during the summer.”

“You don’t say?” Luke waited for the mail carrier to fill him in on the gossip. Jimmy was full of information.

“Yeah, I think I heard she was a high school teacher. Tough lady to do that kind of work. I wouldn’t think about it even if they educated me enough. Kids these days are packing knives and guns in their backpacks instead of lunch boxes and books.”

Jimmy shook his head, denying the idea that teaching high school might not be scary.

“Tough lady indeed. I don’t think I’m cut out for that job myself.” Luke nodded his agreement.

“I gotta run, Mr. Mendez. If you need more information on Elizabeth Miller, then you best ask Ms. Ellington. She keeps up with everything and everybody during daylight hours.”

Jimmy pointed at the house diagonally across the street from Elizabeth Miller’s house and then drove

away as Luke waved his thanks. He took his mail inside his house.

He was still thinking about his neighbor, Elizabeth Miller. Jimmy had read his interest for sure, but she had to wait. He had some work he had to do, so he put the beautiful blonde out of his mind.

He had to speak with his lawyer about finally taking some serious money out of the trust fund. It was when he fell asleep that night that he knew he needed to know more about the pretty blonde woman.

The blonde teacher invaded his dreams rather scandalously. He might be a gentleman, but he damn sure wasn't an innocent man.

For the first time since he was a kid, he woke up needing to relieve himself with his hand to get back to sleep. He was going to have to pay closer attention to Elizabeth Miller.

The song *Hot For Teacher* by Van Halen ran through his mind as he showered off in the middle of the night, making him laugh. He felt alive. It was good.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Eli Miller*

*November 2015*

She left work, heading for the gym. It was mostly stress relief. The semester was drawing to a close as they neared Thanksgiving. She needed to let the aggravation from the workday ease away in a good workout.

She didn't need the workout for any kind of weight management like most women who went to the gym in their forties did. She hadn't aged or put on any weight since she turned thirty. That was when she shifted into a tiger for the first time.

She kept the secret, mostly. The two male feline shifters she'd run across over the years hadn't been

very helpful when she approached them, trying to learn more about what she was. They'd been afraid to speak with her about it.

It was so cool to be a tiger and walk through the woods. She could laze in the sun without getting burned, just soaking in the heat. She could scent mark a few trees and leave some claw marks. If she was frisky, she even stalked the small game animals for fun.

Maybe the male feline shifters she'd met hadn't shared her fascination with being able to shift forms.

Outside of legends and myths, there wasn't much nonfiction available for research. Shape-shifting was a Hollywood goldmine for fiction, fantasy, and horror. There was always a thread of truth in the myths and legends the movie industry could distort for profit. Ever finding a complete and accurate tapestry that told the facts wasn't happening.

Unfortunately, if a woman suddenly became a tiger shifter, there wasn't much help in learning anything about it except through accidental discovery, trial, and error. That had to be done very carefully and in secret.

She'd learned some things. The scents and sounds were magnified along with her vision and sense of touch when she traced in the shadow to

be a tiger. The heightened senses even worked in her human form.

Sharing that with someone else was just too risky. Not like there was anyone to share it with. There wasn't.

It didn't matter if she got lonely once in a while. Men were off-limits. She'd put that part of her life behind her. She was almost fifty.

The last thing Eli wanted was to find herself in a mental institution or locked away for scientific experimentation. Even if she met some man she fancied, she doubted he'd want a tiger as his lover.

She'd once had a relationship that was filled with secrets. Not doing that again. No, it was better to just hide in plain sight. The lack of aging concerned her, though.

She was getting close to fifty, and she had no grey in her hair. There were no wrinkles on the skin of her face. She couldn't remember the last time she got sick or even needed over-the-counter cold medicine.

No middle-aged weight gain like her friends battled, either. Not that she was complaining. No one wanted to get old, but if she still looked like she was thirty when she was seventy, it might create a few problems.



How to get around that? She wasn't sure. She just casually lied about her age to her coworkers. It wasn't as if they were going to ask to see her ID.

What if she didn't die or lived a long life? These questions bothered her a bit more as time passed. It wasn't a serious issue yet. At some point, it might become one.

As she changed into her workout clothes at the gym, she promised herself for the hundredth time that she'd look into investing her money in banking somewhere offshore.

Not that she had much money. She knew she'd have to move to keep her secret safe. When that happened, she was going to need to be ready.

If it never happened, she was just being cautious. Eli could add her accounts to her will for the kids, and they'd just inherit some money that they weren't expecting. No big deal.

She climbed onto the elliptical machine and put her earphones in. She set up her phone to play the music she wanted to hear and opened her book on her reader app. The stress would go away. She'd unwind.

Her friends thought she kept her figure because she went to the gym. Truthfully, she used the gym to waste energy and fill her day. No kids, no man, and no love life was boring sometimes.

Her secret was much safer that way, but she'd felt claustrophobic again. It was time to write her novels. That helped with the peculiar issues that being a tiger brought with it.

On the plus side, she could enjoy the pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving and never worry about overindulging. She should be happy with that and stop worrying.

Life was lonely since the kids went off to school. Maybe she should consider a roommate or dating.

She shook her head at that last thought and focused her thoughts on something else. No way was she giving up her freedom yet. A man would cause her problems she just didn't want.

The house in El Paso had been listed. She hoped the offer she'd accepted this time went through. The last deal collapsed because of a lack of funding. The one she had signed that morning would be a good omen for the future if it worked out.

Paying two mortgages was getting old. Selling the house would help her kids pay off their trucks and anything left was going toward the house she currently lived in.

The pace of the machine sped up, and Eli got lost in the pages of her book. The stress and worries poured out onto the elliptical machine in sweat. For an hour, she forgot about all of it.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Luke Mendez*

*N*ovember 2015

He'd been watching Eli Miller for a few months. She left for work every morning and was usually home at about the same time every evening.

On Saturdays, she often went out with her daughter when she was in town and came back with shopping bags, freshly manicured nails, and a radiant smile.

He watched her with an ever-increasing need to learn more about her. She was close.

She lived only two houses down. She owned the house, so there was not much likelihood that she'd disappear on him. So he simply watched.

She often came home with her hair pulled up in a ponytail, wearing workout clothes. It wasn't too hard to guess that she went to the gym after work. She looked like she went regularly, too.

He was sure she should feel his eyes on her as he watched so intently, but she never seemed to notice. Was he wrong to stalk her? Maybe, but that didn't stop him.

Sometime over the summer, she'd put up a chicken coop and then had a small crew build a greenhouse next to it. Elizabeth Miller had become a bit of an interesting puzzle.

Luke wasn't sure about how to approach her without looking like a creepy stalker. He waited, but he felt compelled to watch her comings and goings.

Keeping track of Elizabeth Miller fitted into his life like the strings that people tied around their fingers so they'd remember something. Only she reminded him of different things every time she passed through the fringes of his life.

She passed his house, and he remembered he was a man who liked women. She became a new thread when she passed by again and reminded him he hadn't slept with a woman in a long time.

## THREAD

Another string tied around him when he saw her sitting by her pool or walking into the trees behind her house. He wanted to be sitting next to her by the pool and holding her hand as she walked into the woods. He desired her companionship the way a man wants a woman to exist in his world solely for him to love.

He was pretty sure the thread that was Elizabeth Miller was slowly wrapping him up like a mummy, but he still tracked her. Maybe he wanted to be a mummy and transcend time and space. Then he could simply exist with her. She'd become a living fantasy.

He blamed the ankle and his habit of carrying his cane, even though he didn't need it anymore. Then he blamed the fact that his psych counselor hadn't signed off on him yet, so he couldn't get a job.

She was beautiful and made him feel alive in a way that was frightening. Could she be the one? If she wasn't the one, he hated to ruin the way it felt to have her passing through his life.

When he spotted Ms. Ellington raking her leaves just before Thanksgiving, he couldn't resist offering to help her just so he could wheedle information out of her. He needed more threads, like a patchwork quilt.

“I can do it. It will take me a while, but I’m still capable.” She narrowed her eyes on him as if he’d implied that she wasn’t capable of raking her leaves.

“Ms. Ellington, please let me help. I got my yard all done. I’m a little bored. See, until I get my paperwork cleared with the military, I can’t get a job. Come on. You’d be doing me a favor.”

He grinned, and the older lady who had to be nearer to her mid-seventies cocked her white-grey head at him.

“Alright, Lucas, but I’m helping you. This is my yard. If my kids think I can’t keep the place up, they’ll start talking about putting me in a home. I ain’t ready for that.”

She laughed.

“I swear. It will be our secret. Thanks, Ms. Ellington. Let me just grab my gloves and my rake. I’ll be right back.”

Luke grinned at her as he crossed his heart.

He walked across the street and grabbed his gloves and the leaf rake from his garage. Ms. Ellington liked to talk. Jimmy said she’d lived there since he started delivering mail on that street. She watched the neighborhood in the daytime, so she’d know a lot about things.

They worked on raking the leaves. He raked them into big piles, and she picked up the piles

and crammed the leaves into the leaf bags, talking the whole time like that was more important than clearing the lawn. For Luke, it was.

Ms. Ellington needed to talk to people as much as Luke needed to learn what she had to say. In April, he'd be glad she'd befriended him when she passed away in her sleep. If he hadn't raked her leaves, he might have missed his chance to learn what she knew.

"You haven't lived in the neighborhood for very long. That Miller lady is newer, too. Mr. Jones used to live in the house between the two of y'all. He got that Alzheimer's disease and his family moved him to a retirement community. The Younger family that owned your house moved because the gentleman got a better-paying job in Florida."

She told him about his house finally, after she'd told him about nearly every house on the block and how the greenbelt was never to be developed.

He paused the raking and helped her stuff the leaves into the bag.

"Really! What about the other houses? Who lived in Miss Miller's house before?" he asked to keep her talking. She seemed to know a lot more than he expected.

"Winifred lived there. She died. The realtors told Elizabeth that. She just told the ladies as long as no

one told her kids about it she didn't care. She wasn't afraid of ghosts."

Luke thought his neighbor was a tough lady. Ms. Ellington just smiled. She continued with her storytelling, and Luke soaked up her knowledge.

"She lives alone. Maybe she isn't afraid," Luke offered.

"She teaches high school. She has to be tough to do that. I tell you, I wouldn't want to cross her. She's smart. Eli has the chickens and that little orchard. She put that greenhouse in because she likes to live frugally. She has kids. Her son is away at university in Austin. Her daughter is studying in Waco and visits more often. A woman who raised two kids to be smart too and worked the whole time. No, she sure doesn't live in fear."

She paused then to take a break and watched him continue raking leaves.

"You know, I think she's lonely. She's always waving at me, and she brought me tea and cookies several times. I've never seen a man with her except her son."

"She cooks?" Luke asked.

"What woman with kids doesn't? I bet when her children were teenagers she probably thought she'd go broke trying to buy enough food. She cooks well. She brought me a ham plate at Easter. I wouldn't



turn down an invitation to her table after I tasted that. I even shared my recipe for making the pineapple upside-down cake and the pecan pie I sent over to her last Christmas. She's a good woman. She copied my recipes exactly, and she even sent me a slice of cake to try it when she made it."

Ms. Ellington liked Elizabeth Miller. The two women knew one another. Ms. Ellington used to work at the hospital as a nurse until she retired. Her husband had passed away eight years before.

Most of the other houses had stories, too. Ms. Ellington shared them all, along with snippets from her own life. Then she circled back to Elizabeth Miller.

"I wonder why Elizabeth drives that truck of hers? A woman as pretty and smart as she is. It seems odd, don't you think?" Ms. Ellington asked while the two of them took a break to drink tea when she insisted.

Luke had finished his glass, and Ms. Ellington had set them on the porch railing to take back inside later.

"I don't know. I haven't met her, but it seems odd," Luke told her as they moved to the side of the yard near the driveway on the other side of her walkway to the mailbox.

It was smaller. They almost finished the lawn, and his head spun with her knowledge. Especially everything that had to do with one very sexy school teacher.

“Come to think about it, get to know her. She might like you. Y’all ain’t married. You look like you could take care of anything that went bump in the night.”

Ms. Ellington wagged her white eyebrows up and down at the insinuation that he should talk to his neighbor.

He just shook his head at the old lady’s attempt at matchmaking and laughed. He couldn’t just go introduce himself to her like that. Luke needed a good reason to talk to her first. He wasn’t in high school where he could approach any pretty girl just because he thought she was pretty.

“I promise if the opportunity ever arises, I’ll introduce myself to her,” Luke promised the older woman.

“You do that. Elizabeth Miller is too young to be so alone.” Ms. Ellington nodded as if in agreement with her statement and went back to stuffing the leaves in the bag.

Luke just shook his head and continued to rake up the leaves. She was telling him about Jimmy next. By the time the lawn was clear of leaves, Luke was

sure he knew more about the people who lived on his street or passed through it regularly than he'd ever cared to learn.

Raking the leaves had given him a brand new insight into his teacher neighbor, though. And he was definitely into her. He thought about her a lot.

No way was his shrink at the VA going to learn about that. He was getting cleared, not getting his head examined for obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Ms. Ellington thanked him, and he put the rake back in his garage, along with his work gloves, before he headed into his bathroom for a shower. He had to wash the debris from the leaves out of his chocolate hair before it started to itch.

He hadn't lied to Ms. Ellington either. Raking her leaves gave him something to do. It also added fuel to the small fire burning in his mind for one sexy, smart lady.

A bit of staff practice tomorrow, and a quick trip to the gym would not hurt him. He didn't need it. Rather, it helped make him appear more legitimate. Continuing to look thirty-five at his age was dangerous.

At least workouts offered a plausible excuse. He'd better go. If nothing else, he could waste some more energy and get out of the house.

What his mind returned to was Elizabeth Miller. When he closed his green eyes to lather his hair, he got lost in the fantasy of showering with her.

Once again, he handled his junk over a woman he still had yet to meet. It was ridiculous how much damn jizz he was wasting on her in his shower every day.

He had to get a grip. Or figure out a way to convince her pretty pink lips to kiss him. Yeah, seriously needed to get a grip, and not on his shaft anymore. Luke seriously thought he might rub all the skin off if he didn't get control of his crazy, fired-up fantasies.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

*Eli Miller*

*E*arly January 2016

She sighed as she waved at her kids backing out of the driveway. They headed back to their lives at their universities. After having them around for the holidays, it was difficult to find her routine again.

What she needed was a real man to show up and sweep her off her feet, spin a web of desire for her, and wrap her up in silk threads too sticky to escape so he could have his way with her.

Eli dreamed of romance even though she could admit that even if the dreamboat lover showed up, she'd probably push him away.

Lately, the fantasy was dark. Maybe it followed her mood. Spider webs and silk threads? Yeah, she needed to get laid.

She was a tiger. That was too much of a secret. So getting laid wasn't happening, no matter if silk threads were involved. Although a bit of masculine attention occasionally was nice and flattering.

Oh well, at least she had time to work on her novel again before school started back. Imaginary book boyfriends would have to suffice. She'd already prearranged for her substitute so she could make the drive back to El Paso to sign her house over to the new owners.

She popped a frozen meal into the microwave. Maybe she'd run a bath and soak in the bubbles with a good book first. No need to cook a proper dinner with the house empty. She wandered through, straightening up after the kids after they left and closed their bedroom doors.

Eli sat down at the breakfast bar and ate her lunch alone. It wasn't bad. She could already feel that familiar quiet that accompanied freedom for her. That was nice.

It felt good. She was suddenly very sure that she had everything she wanted. She wasn't willing to trade that for the company of a man. Especially not

if she had little guarantee of it working out well. Maybe she was just too fearful of being hurt again.

Not unless he could be a temporary thing. No. She wasn't that kind of girl. Even as upset as she'd gotten with Javier, she'd never lied to him or cheated on him. She'd kept her tiger hidden as her secret, but never anything worse than that.

Playing with a man no matter how heavy his balls might be or how thick and long his hard cock could get was still wrong. Her book boyfriends were still her source of sexual release. Getting caught up in a man wasn't something she was ready for, but she was less opposed to the idea than she'd been when she first bought the house.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Luke Mendez*

*January 5, 2016*

He walked out of his shrink's office with a signed release. He had a clean bill of health. If he wanted to work, he was clear. That was good. He'd gotten bored and wound up spending a lot of money watching football and breaking televisions when Dallas lost.

As he made his way to his Jeep, he realized he was smiling because he knew that the last stumbling block on the road to him introducing himself to Elizabeth Miller was gone. It had never been a real thing. It was more like an excuse to avoid the po-



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tential situation out of an irrational fear that she'd reject him if she learned he was mentally inferior.

He'd even stepped onto the path of stillness in his mind to look for the proper way to approach her. Along with his direwolf, the path in the stillness was another secret he refused to share. It helped him build a highly successful military career. It had aided him when he'd been required to kill as well.

No emotion could touch him while he was on the path. Everything was silent and still, like death. The threads of life, which the Fates cut, were placed in his hands.

He felt nothing if he used their scissors to end a life that interfered with him. He simply cut the thread and ended the threat. So long as he stayed on the path, the way he needed would present itself to him as if he were the master tailor.

Stepping off the path wasn't a good idea. He avoided that. It felt as if he were dying when he did that. If a man wasn't walking the path of his life, then he must be dying, right? Best to stay on the path and simply choose the outcomes he desired to happen.

He'd avoided his neighbor during the holidays while her children were home. When he finally met her, he needed it to be on his terms with no distractions. Any other option ended in results he didn't want.

Luke would wait. She didn't even know he existed. He'd wait until the timing was perfect before he let his prey know that he was stalking it. There would be no chance that he'd let her go. He shook his head at that thought.

He had his seatbelt on and was shifting the Jeep into gear. If it wasn't his cock, then his direwolf kept getting into his mental conversations about his neighbor, the hotter-than-sin teacher who'd confiscated his nights.

A week later, she rolled out of her driveway and was gone for days. Where had she gone? Had he waited too long? Had she found another man? Was that what kept her away from home?

His swirling thoughts went around his mind in circles like a thread that was haphazardly wrapped around an old wooden spool so that it tangled into useless knots. If she returned, he was claiming her as his.

Luke had to shake the direwolf out of his head. He wasn't claiming a woman who didn't even know he was alive. The long-overdue introduction he needed only happened if she came back.

He sat on his porch sipping his brandy late Saturday night at fifteen after midnight when her truck rolled back by his house, winding him with one

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more thread connecting his mummified body to her as if to an ancient Egyptian doctor.

Maybe she had the skills to make eternity feel like something he could face, just as the ancient Egyptians did. Maybe she was the cure he needed, the *Thread*, to bandage his tattered life, and the beginning of something new.

# *Sneak Peek at A Pack Forms Chapter 1*

*Eli Miller*

An icy rain drizzled out of the January night sky, illuminated by the streetlights of a quiet country neighborhood. The sprinkling rain made strange halos around the streetlights.

No classes on Monday for Martin Luther King Day meant Eli could sleep in and enjoy a bit of a break. She opened the chest of drawers near the bed, pulled out an old faded cotton nightgown,

pulled it on over her head, and was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

The Moonlight cruised silently along. There was no radio playing. Eli was tired. It was late, almost midnight.

Everything was eerily silent as she cruised past her neighbors' homes. She was almost home. The drive had been too long, but worse, she was lost in thought for most of it, reliving the past.

Eli missed her farm. Well, it wasn't really a farm, more of a suburban homestead, only an acre with a creek outback. She was still teaching high-school social studies full-time, but in the summer, Eli was an avid gardener. The chickens got fed every day and laid their eggs. The small orchard gave a variety of fruits, nuts, and berries. She spent very little at the grocery store on produce. She was an urban homesteader, sort of.

The kids were both at university. Her son was working on his Master's. Her daughter was in the last year of her Bachelor's.

She'd made the trip alone, leaving on Thursday evening after school. The substitute handled her classes on Friday while she finished the drive to El Paso and made her title loan company appointment that afternoon.

The tiger inside just wanted to get down from the truck and stretch.

The trip she was coming home from wasn't the travel she'd always dreamed of. Eli had gone back to El Paso to sell her house there.

It wouldn't bring much cash, but it would help her tie up the loose ends of her previous life. Maybe she could finally move on. She could put the past firmly behind her.

She was forty-eight. It was time to live by her own rules. The time for answering to someone else was over. She'd raised her children, and she had her life back. Things were finally good.

It had been emotionally hard to move forward alone after Javier moved back to El Paso, but she was happier; freedom was wonderful.

Eli had known it was likely to happen, but that didn't mean it hadn't hurt when she saw him with another woman in the house where they'd raised their children. Maybe she'd secretly hoped he'd stay when she moved to Tyler, that she'd be able to win the competition for his affection.

If she was honest with herself, she was never the jealous type. She was extremely territorial and had a possessive streak a mile wide, but Eli knew who she was, and what she wanted. A man who couldn't make her his 'one and only' was certainly not it.

Competing with another woman for a man's affection was pointless. If a man wanted a woman, she'd receive all of his attention. He wouldn't have time for anyone else. The consolation was that Javier didn't love the other woman either. She was just a distraction for him.

Her ex had never acknowledged it. She knew. The kids knew. His family had known. Javier and Eli had two children together, but the last seven years of their relationship had been sex and business.

Eli took pleasure from him and used him to help the kids. Eli had stayed so her children could finish high school. There would never be a stepfather. She'd never brought another man into her children's home. She'd made a promise, and she'd kept it. It was a point of pride for her.

She bought the house in Tyler at the end of her son's junior year in high school. When her daughter graduated from high school, she resigned from her teaching position and withdrew some of her retirement money. She moved to Tyler and applied for a teaching position there.

Eli had been teaching in Tyler for almost two years. God had blessed her, and she was teaching World History to sophomores, working in a career she was passionate about, and living in a veritable paradise of forest, farmland, lakes, and streams.

She shouldn't have passed by her old home while she was in El Paso, but it was a long trip. And after she signed all the papers selling the house, she had little to do but go back to the hotel, which held no appeal to her.

Eli had toyed with meeting some old friends, but her mood was black. She felt as if she wouldn't be good company. El Paso had brought out the cynic in her, hardcore. So, she took one last look at the past instead.

Eli had gone for a late dinner alone, avoiding the empty hotel. She'd driven by her house one last time, pausing for a while as she said her silent goodbyes. Then she'd turned left two blocks up and driven by her old home. The one that should have been hers forever.

It was late, going on ten o'clock, when she stopped on the street across from the chain-link gate. She hated how he'd painted the outside. Eli had liked the dark gray trim she'd chosen all those years ago. The new red did nothing for the brick.

She sighed and started the Moonlight after a few minutes, but as she took a long look for the last time, they came out. He was laughing at something the woman said.

The sound cut off as Eli rolled the window up and drove off down the street. Eli had known Javier



wouldn't be alone, but she could have done without that mental picture.

She drove back to the hotel, checked in, and tried to get a good night's sleep. A person could always hope.

Eli met an old friend for brunch the next morning after checking out of the hotel. They chatted for a bit, and Eli thanked them for monitoring the house.

After about a half-hour of catching up, Eli was making her apologies to her friend about needing to hit the road. Eli was soon leaving El Paso and her old life behind.

It was done. She'd sold her house and left the pieces of her heart that had once belonged to Javier in the street in front of her old home.

Eli bought a Mountain Dew, filled up the gas tank on the Moonlight, and rolled out of town, headed east on I-10. She was rolling out of El Paso for the last time, around eleven in the morning.

She was finally free.

Her son and daughter would talk crap about how she should have rested longer before starting the drive back, but Eli just felt better leaving the desert and all the painful memories behind. Javier had truly been the best man she'd ever met, but their differences had come between them.

Whatever they might have had once, it was long since gone. No crying over spilled milk. She had no tears left; clean it up and move on.

Eli had been Tyler-bound for the last twelve hours. Desert had given way to grassland after she rolled past Odessa on I-20. Eli had kept on I-20 until the piney woods outside of Dallas. She was bound for home and a new life.

Eli loved the Moonlight and thanked God for giving the truck to her. It was just as comfortable to sleep in as it was to drive. It was paid for and still drove like a dream.

The cream-colored 2008 Ford F-150 was the Lariat edition. With heated leather seats and a moon roof, the 5.4-liter v8 engine had less than 180,000 miles.

She guided the Moonlight into her driveway, slowly rolling to a stop in front of the house as the gravel crunched under the truck's weight. Eli would get the oil changed soon. She'd made it home, finally.

The house was dark, silent. There was no one home except her. Eli breathed in the damp, country, winter air as she got down from the truck. She stretched and yawned for several long minutes, hit the lock button out of habit, and shut the driver's side door.

She prowled up to the house as she pulled her wrap tighter against the cold January drizzle. Eli noted everything was as she'd left it. She'd get the luggage down tomorrow.

She stopped on the porch, taking in the peace and serenity that she'd always loved. She could smell smoke in the air from a neighbor's chimney.

Eli smiled to herself as she put the key into the lock and pushed open the heavy wooden front door into the foyer. She slipped off her shoes and left her wrap on the hall tree as she locked the front door behind her.

She breathed deeply again. She was home.

Eli headed down the hall to her room, enjoying the cool tile floors through her socks. She didn't turn on any lights. She lit the fireplace in the bedroom, added a log, and closed the fire screen. Eli padded barefoot into the adjoining bathroom, turning on the water to fill the tub.

A nice soak sounded good. She lit the candles and added the bubbles to the jetted tub. She stripped off her clothes and left them on the rug. Then she stepped into the tub and sank into the bubbles, sighing as the stress and tension from the drive faded away.

Eli stared out the window at the forest behind her house. The leaves were gone on the deciduous

trees, but the pines still silhouetted nicely in the dark.

Her property backed up to a green belt that wouldn't be developed. Tomorrow, she would go for a long run. It had been too long.

It was half-past one on Sunday morning when she released the cooling water, stepped out of the tub, and toweled off. A good night's sleep was in order.

# *Sneak Peek at A Pack Forms Chapter 2*

## *Luke Mendez*

Luke sat on the porch swing, finishing his brandy, when her truck passed by. The mist from his exhaled breath floated in the frosty air. Eli hadn't been home since Thursday morning.

It wasn't his business, but she intrigued him. He'd been marking her comings and goings for a while. Who could blame him for noticing a beautiful woman, especially when she passed his house every day?

He'd asked around and learned that she'd purchased the house several years ago, and used it as a summer home for about two years before becoming a full-time resident.

Luke also knew she had two college-age children and that he hadn't seen a man other than her son and her brother enter her home. He wondered about her story. What had kept her out for two nights?

He wondered if he could be the third man inside her house. There was something about her that made him sit up and take notice.

He'd moved to the neighborhood last year after retiring from the military. Luke was trying to live a quiet life.

He'd gotten used to the cane. The physical therapy was over. He'd even thought about looking for some part-time employment lately to relieve the boredom.

His therapist had signed off on him two weeks ago. He'd dealt with PTSD well. A few nightmares here and there, but overall he was on the mend. His career had been long and boring, mostly.

He'd never spoken of the calm stillness that he endured to kill. It was his secret, the stillness. No more missions to go on meant no more killing. No one needed to know.

Luke didn't need the money from a job, just a way to keep busy. His parents were gone. They had left him a nice inheritance. He was only recently even discussing the trust fund with his lawyer, the one he'd never withdrawn money from.

His sister and her kids were in Chicago. They'd wanted him to stay with them or near them. He didn't want to be cooped up in the city.

He'd always liked the East Texas area. Tyler was big enough at 100,000 people to meet his needs. He could live just outside of town and enjoy the peace.

At fifteen after midnight on Saturday night (or was it early Sunday), he grabbed his cane, set his brandy glass on the porch railing, and stepped off onto the lawn for a walk. He headed down the road in the cool damp air, making his way toward the high school teacher's house.

It was too late to speak with her, but he could ensure that she was safe. Luke still hadn't introduced himself to her. Yet Eli stayed on his mind.

Luke tried to tell himself that he couldn't sleep, and his curiosity about why Eli had been gone so long had him moving rather quickly past the empty neighboring house and down the road towards Eli's house. He told himself that he just wanted to be sure she was okay.

He'd pass by, turn around, and head home at the end of the block. Maybe spending energy and brandy would help him sleep. He didn't believe the lies he told himself.

As he drew closer, Luke saw her step down from the truck. Her long, leisurely stretch had his attention glued to her.

He raked his eyes over her curves as he watched her ease the ache in her muscles. She had a shape to her that set his heart pumping faster.

He was quick to note that she seemed unharmed, just tired and perhaps stiff from a long ride. Luke told himself to keep walking.

When Eli locked the truck door and prowled towards the porch, he stood transfixed. The way she moved was beautiful in the shadows. It was a graceful and silent motion towards the house. Her muscles showed off nicely in the moonlight as she was wearing stretchy yoga pants.

Luke was standing in the shadows. A nearby street lamp cast an easy light on the path to her front door. He watched her as she moved, light and sure-footed, like a cat. He was alert as he realized she was analyzing the grounds, ensuring that everything was still as she left it.

As she moved into the house and shut the door, Luke let out the breath he hadn't realized he was



holding. He could smell the oily heat from the cooling truck engine and the wood smoke from a neighboring chimney. The smell of shade in the summer still hung in the air where she'd been.

Luke's heart was racing as he shook his head at himself. He started walking again as he tried unsuccessfully to clear his mind of the image of Eli walking away from him.

Was he fifteen years old again? He was so hard in his jeans it was uncomfortable to walk. Damn, she was sexy. The way her hips moved as she stepped upon the porch was so graceful.

It puzzled him. Why was she so alert? Was she just playing it safe because she lived alone, or did she have a reason to fear? That last thought had him feeling edgy. He had an unsettling need to make sure she was safe.

Before he thought twice, Luke walked down the edge of her property along the fence line beneath the leafless trees of her small mixed orchard. He stayed in the shadows and did a thorough check of the front and side yards.

Was she afraid of something? He growled at the thought that someone might harm her. He paused; when had she become his responsibility?

When he rounded the backside of the house, he checked the chicken coop and the glass greenhouse

that had seedlings in it for spring planting. It was all clear.

Luke continued even though his ankle was complaining a bit and checked along the creek and around the other side of her house, all clear. The pool and the patio area contained only some empty planters and a few stray leaves.

The woods behind the property were all quiet. There was no scent of any other human.

Luke was about to head around the house and start back down the road when he looked up as a dim light came on in a room at the back of the house. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the scene in the window.

Eli was disrobing in her bathroom before the tub. He almost reached down to rub his erection on seeing her. He needed to relieve the pressure in his pants. Luke needed to get a grip before he lost control of himself.

The window faced the creek. She hadn't closed the blinds. The property backed onto a green belt. She probably didn't think she ever needed to close them. Who would see?

Luke couldn't move, even though he knew things would not go well if they caught him trespassing. The whole town would think he was some perverted voyeur.

Eli was gorgeous. She worked out regularly. She had to be at least forty. Luke had seen her college-aged children coming and going several times.

As she sank into the tub, he tore his eyes away. Luke eased away from her property and headed home.

Even though it was damp and cold, Luke's blood was boiling in his veins. He was fifty-three years old, wandering through his house at half-past one in the morning with a serious hard-on for his neighbor and unable to quit thinking about her.

He moved into his bathroom, stripped off his clothes, and got into a cool shower until he had control of his body again. Luke seriously needed to check for long-term side effects of the pain medication he'd recently stopped taking. What was he doing, peeping into the window of his neighbor like a horny teenage boy?

Luke dried his shoulder-length chocolate hair with a towel, then wrapped it around his waist as he stood in front of the sink vanity after exiting the shower.

He grinned as he realized he still had a full head of hair with no gray. He could easily pass for thirty. Water dripped on the floor as he picked up his toothbrush and then rinsed with mouthwash, getting ready for bed.

He hung the towel on the bar and shut off the bathroom light. Luke padded into his bedroom naked and climbed into bed. He set his alarm to get up to go to the gym to work out and drifted off to sleep.

Luke suffered no nightmares. The sheets were a tangled mess from his erotic dreams of Eli when he woke the next morning. The nightmares, however, seemed banished.

Luke was hooked on Eli. He was dreaming about her at night and randomly fantasized about her during the day. She was under his skin, for sure.

On his way to the gym the next morning, he wondered again what her story was. He was going to get to know the lady.

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*Newsletter Friends*

# *Deleted Scenes from the Cutting Room Floor*

Dear Reader,

The following scenes never made it into the Main storyline, but for those who found Thread after A Pack Forms, this information may help with understanding who Luke was as a military man and presents several characters in the past before the Druid pack exists. For those reading Thread first, the Draoithe Saga is definitely a hero-gets-the-girl group of stories. These scenes present some heroes

and their personality traits from future members of the Druid pack.

Enjoy.- OK

*Luke*

*8 years before he met Eli (2007)*

Finally, a couple of weeks of relaxation. He might sleep for days or at least sleep for a few days. His men deserved it after that last mission. He needed to shift. The direwolf inside growled, aggravated, and wanted freedom. That meant he went nowhere near his sister's place. Chicago was out of the question. He was far too much animal.

“Luke, be safe.”

Ryker saluted him as he picked up his duffle bag and walked out of the airport into the sunny skies of southern California. The beach was where he needed to be, too.

Ryker was a great guy. It was too bad what happened to his wife. The man would have surely left the service for her a long time back if she hadn't died in an accident. Luke wound up with the benefit of having a competent man working with him on most of his assignments. But still.

Luke grabbed his luggage when it came around on the belt and headed out to hail a taxi. He went

straight to the house he rented for the next two weeks. He spent too much money on the place, but hell, he spent none of his money otherwise, so why not?

Luke sat on the back deck above the sand, watching the surf and listening to the people walking on the beach and the seagulls when he saw her. She was almost too small to be a woman. Platinum blonde hair that did not look bleached. But it was the smell of *snow on the pines*, which wafted up to him as she passed the house, that got him moving. She smelled like a dog, the way he smelled like a dog. She was a shifter. There was no doubt about it. No way could he let her get away from him.

By the time he got down to the beach, she was long gone. But he tracked her enticing scent to a house down the beach. It was privately owned and gated. He saw the security cameras watching him as he approached the property. It was dark. He was tired.

He turned back to the rental house and found his glass of brandy on the porch where he had left it. Luke drained the glass, walked into the house, toed off his shoes, stripped off his army t-shirt, and let his body fall onto the bed. Tomorrow, he would find out about the mysterious woman. He was deep

asleep when the phone rang at nearly three in the morning.

*Ryker*

He dropped his bags in his hotel room and took a cab to a bar near the beach. He needed a drink and to look at some women. Maybe he would get lucky. Even if he did not, seeing a few feminine faces would be a sight for sore eyes. He was sick of looking at the men on his crew. They were good guys, but women were special, soft, and beautiful. They smelled good. That was a good enough reason to look at them alone.

Luke thought he stayed in the military because his wife had died, but it was all he had going for him. His marriage fell apart and headed toward divorce court before the accident. She hadn't wanted him to stay in the military, but what else did he know? Nothing.

He was better off working with Luke and following orders than trying to make it on his own. But it didn't mean he liked the men he worked with the same way he liked a pretty woman. Too bad there wasn't one who would claim him as he was.

Cars. That was what he was good at. Why did the universe not just make women like automobiles?



If his skill with all things driving transferred over to his love life, his life would be simple. Oh well, maybe he should be happy, loving cars and watching beautiful women. If that was his lot, so be it. No car ever tried to change him.

He had a few beers at the bar and watched a ball game with little enthusiasm. It was getting late, and he had decided that he had enough booze in him to unwind and sleep well. He paid his tab, stepped out of the bar, and pulled out his phone to call a cab back to the hotel when he heard a woman scream.

Ryker moved. Women should not scream. He scanned the parking area, looking for the enemy. He saw her struggling with an asshole twice her size. The fool punched her.

Ryker saw red. No one should beat on a woman. They were delicate. They made men want to be men, and they made homes. The man needed to learn some manners.

He was bigger than Ryker, but it didn't matter. He needed to save the girl.

“Let her go.”

Ryker demanded the fucker let the woman go free. Even half-drunk, he wasn't worried that he could take the man down. Years of training made him good at that, even if he was older.

The abuser turned her loose to face Ryker.

“Call the cops, ma’am.”

Ryker's fist connected with the jerk's face.

Ryker kept the man moving, ducking the punches and landing body blows. The asshole got in a couple of lucky hits only because Ryker had a few too many beers. He should probably drink less when he was off duty, but he never drank on assignment. So he made up for lost time only to have a fat lip because of it.

A few minutes later, the squad cars showed up. They all took a ride downtown. The woman corroborated his story. The cops wanted to ensure he stayed out of trouble, or they kept him from public intoxication. That meant he spent the night in jail, or he called Luke. He needed his commanding officer to bail him out.

When the man picked up, Ryker felt bad. He had been asleep. It was almost three in the morning.

“Hello?”

A deep, sleepy male voice came through the line.

“Luke, man, I need your help. It's Ryker. I'm downtown. There was a girl... And an asshole. I lost my shit. Can you pick me up? I don't want to spend the night in the holding cell.”

The man laughed.

“When are you ever going to learn to stay out of other people’s fights? Yeah, I’ll be there. Give me a half-hour.”

Luke was great.

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

Ryker grinned.

“Good. I’ll cash it in later.”

Luke hung up. The cops took off the handcuffs, and when Luke showed up, they released him into his friend’s custody.

“Let me guess? An asshole hit a girl in front of you?”

Luke asked as they left the station.

“You know me well, man. You know me too well. Sorry to bother you. But shit, I can’t watch a guy beat on a woman. I just can’t. Makes me sick. I might throw up thinking about it.”

Luke clapped him on the back.

“It’s cool. At least with you, the reason’s always legitimate. Where are you staying?”

Luke called a taxi.

He rode back to the hotel. Luke headed off. Sleep. Ryker needed sleep.

*Luke*

Just before the sunset, he remembered the woman from the evening before and stepped off the deck onto the beach just in time to see her walking by. He followed her, caught up to her, and called out to her.

“Ma’am, ma’am. Wait. I need to speak with you.”

The woman turned to look up at him as she reached her gate.

She had startling grey eyes. She was beautiful, almost like a porcelain doll. The lady was smaller than he preferred a woman to be, but only a fool wouldn't see how strikingly gorgeous she was.

She waited for him expectantly.

“I’m sorry. I hate to bother you. You’ll probably think I’m crazy, but could you give me a minute? See, I think you could help me. I think you might be like me.”

Luke tried to explain, but he tripped over his tongue.

How did a man ask a woman if she might be a dog? It wasn't a normal conversation.

“Artie, who are you talking to?”

A man’s voice came from inside the gate as it opened. Luke turned to see a man shorter than himself but with a regal bearing standing there, waiting, no doubt, for the pretty little lady who smelled so enticingly like *snow on the pines*.

“I’m not sure, Duncan. I think he’s confused.”  
“Come inside. I’ll deal with him.”

Duncan never looked at Artie. His focus remained on Luke. Her fingers trailed through his hand as she passed. There was no doubt they were a couple. She loved him, and he protected her like a treasure.

“What do you want, Wolf?”

The man practically growled the words. Luke grinned. This man smelled like Artie. It was canine to him. He wouldn’t have known if she hadn’t had that hint in her scent.

“How do you know I’m a direwolf? That’s what I want. I’ve met no one like me before. Will you talk to me, please?”

Luke admitted what he was for the first time to another person. This man, Duncan, knew. Luke needed to know more.

The man eyed him for a moment.

“Never look at my Artie again. She is mine. I will never share her. Do you understand?”

Duncan waited.

“No, I don’t understand, but I don’t want Artie. She just smelled very much like a dog. No offense. I need to understand. Will you help me?” Luke asked.

The man finally nodded and reached out his hand. He clasped forearms with him and invited him into the house.

“I am Duncan O’Sullivan. Please call me Fox. This is my mate, Arturista Jonsdottir. Please, have a seat. What do you drink?”

Fox offered him a seat on an expansive deck overlooking the beach. He had a glass of scotch on the rocks on the table next to his deck chair. He had been watching Artie as she walked along the beach.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Luke Mendez. Brandy, if you have it. Neat please.” Luke spoke as he took the offered chair.

“Military man. Well, that fits. Direwolves are usually pack leaders. You seem like a bit of a lone wolf to me. Why are here seeking information?”

Pack leader? There were enough direwolf shifters like himself to build a pack? That was news.

“It’s a strange story, but when I was thirty-five, I shifted into a direwolf for the first time. At first, it was scary, but it was cool too. I could see better, hear better. The scents and touch were crazy better. I set up a camera to film it. That was how I figured out what I was. But until I smelled snow on the pines, I had met no one else like me. I need information.”

Fox laughed. Then he told Luke the price. Luke nodded and promised to keep the information to himself. Fox spent hours answering questions. Artie brought more drinks. They talked into the night and exchanged contact information. When Luke left, Fox clasped forearms with him again.

“It was good to meet you, Luke Mendez. You are welcome to my home anytime. Just don’t look at my Artie as if you have any interest in her. Truly, she is *everything*. For her, there is nothing I wouldn't do.”

Luke thanked the man and walked back to his rented beach house with his head swirling with information.

He was not ready to walk away from the military, but when the day finally came, he thought he might like to help others like himself. He could not be the only one lost without a clue.

Maybe he could build a retreat. It could be a sanctuary for other canine shifters, a place where they could get help and information, as well as be what they were. He would have to think about it, but eventually. It wasn't as if he had any better use for the trust fund his parents had left him.

*Want more from the  
dream?*

*That you have read one of my stories is humbling to me. I sincerely hope you enjoyed your experience in the dream. Please be kind and leave an independent author an honest review. Your kind words about my stories help other readers decide to read in the dream as well and support the creative effort of one self-publishing tiger. Thank you, -OK*





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# Acknowledgments

## **Thanks, Everyone!**

I want to say thanks to my mom for always supporting me.

Thanks to my sister who has always been my first beta reader.

Thanks to my dragon for encouraging a tiger to play with books.

Thanks to my lost wolf, who provided inspiration.

Most of all, thanks to my readers who always ask the hard questions, which means I have to write more stories.

I love you, -OK

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# About the Author

Not who everyone thinks she is.  
The product of someone's imagination.  
The end result of a lifetime wishing to get out.  
Do not buy the lie.  
If you live in fear, you give up freedom.  
Taking the risk and making the leap.  
Too much of anything is a bad thing.  
Innuendo floating on mist rising above water.  
Walk away and leave it all behind.  
Telling the story that haunts a fantasy.  
Catching a dream.  
She does not exist.  
*-Ophelia Kee*

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*Ophelia Kee*