



His
TO CLAIM

PIPER STONE

HIS TO CLAIM



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His to Claim

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This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

~

There is a legend, one grown of darkness and strife, rage and abomination.

Creatures so powerful, they are feared above all others.

Predators whose hunger knows no bounds.

The Wolfen.

But as legends go, the stories become tall tales told around campfires.

Until no one believes them any longer.

That is until they are faced with the truth...

CHAPTER 1



*M*_{ax}

*You can run, little girl, but you won't be able to hide from me.
You belong to me and always have.*

Issuing a howl, I took off racing through the trees, the scent of her rich and delicious. I dragged my tongue across my lips, savoring the moment as wind whipped through the forest, rattling trees and underbrush. She had no way of knowing she'd been found, the hunt an incredible feeling, the rush more intense than anything I'd ever known.

I could see her long, beautiful hair whipping in the breeze as she raced through the dense fog, trying to find salvation.

Attempting to secure safety from a monster.

I could smell her desire, the longing she'd fought for months, perhaps years. Even hearing her sweet voice, the lilt echoing in my ears was enough to force my cock to full attention. My balls were drum tight, aching to a painful level.

There would be no holding back.

I would sink my cock into her wet little pussy.

Then I'd claim her tight ass.

"No!" she yelped as she raced deeper into the forest, her legs pumping.

I stopped long enough to take another whiff as I slid my hand down to rub my cock. *Soon, my sweet girl. Soon.* The thought reverberated through my mind, soon to be said aloud. Still human, although my beast had taken over my body. I sat back on my haunches, growling huskily.

I pawed the ground, my claws digging into the earth, muddy from the recent rains. Then I began to encircle her, closing in.

The hunger brimming.

My cock aching.

My desire ignited to the point I would never let her go.

I took off trotting, weaving my way through the forest that I owned. My playground. My hunting ground.

And she'd become my prey.

Suddenly, the sound of her running ceased. I crouched down, taking a deep whiff of the humid air. Dear God, the fragrance of her was intoxicating. My incredible Kathleen. My heart and soul.

My mate.

Another growl slipped past my lips, reverberating in the trees as I padded closer, not bothering to mask my approach. The moment I broke through the trees, the sight of her was electrifying.

She swung her head in my direction as she clung to a tree, her eyes beseeching as I stormed closer until I was mere inches away. "Get away." she said, her lower lip quivering. She hugged the tree, her eyes wild from terror. What she saw in front of her was the thing her nightmares were made of.

A big, bad wolf.

After issuing another keening scream, she took off once again, desperate to find somewhere to hide from me.

I lifted my head toward the sky, baring my sharp canines as I willed the reverse transformation to take place. Now was my time. Now was my destiny as well as hers. As the ground beneath me began to rumble, a flash of lightning broke free

from the swirling clouds, electrifying the air. I stood on all fours while my body began to shake, accepting the change.

I'd entered into the forbidden, allowing my true self to take hold.

Perhaps a mistake, but it was a chance I'd had to take. Now though, I was required to be very human.

I continued to hear her cries as my claws retracted, fingers forming, breaking through the matted fur. When my spine lengthened, pain tore through me, the ecstasy I would soon face worth the moments of sheer anguish.

I released another intense roar, legs and arms breaking free from my canine skin. Seconds later, I was able to rise to my full height, my breathing ragged as my heartrate continued to soar. I closed my eyes as the transformation was completed, stretching my limbs until the aching ceased. I still had her scent filling my nostrils and within seconds was able to locate her position.

There would be no getting away from me.

I took off running, still unable to feel the rough terrain or the briars that attached to my skin. Pain meant nothing to me. Pleasure was the only thing that mattered.

I could feel her exhaustion as she finally was forced to rest, cowering behind a set of scrappy bushes in an effort to disguise her lovely body. When I shifted through the underbrush, my eyes locked on the woman I adored, her face registered shock.

“What... A monster was following me, a wolf. Did you kill it?” she asked in her usual defiant tone.

I cocked my head as I inched closer, daring to get within a few inches. While there was trepidation in her eyes, there was also a knowing.

We were meant to be together.

“I am many things, including the man you've craved,” I whispered as I cupped her face, rubbing my thumb across her lips.

“No, I... It was just a dream,” she whispered.

“Dreams are merely a taste of reality.” My chest rose and fell as I prepared to ravage her, every muscle in my body bursting from the flames burning within.

“You. I’ve seen you.”

“You’ve always known me, and I’ve come for you, but you’ve been a very bad girl. You know you can never run for there is no place on this earth where I won’t find you.”

Her eyes were lit with fire, the beautiful hellion no doubt ready to struggle against me. When she pursed her lips, every cell in my body erupted, ignited from the mere touch of her alone.

She smiled pensively, tilting her face toward me. Even in the darkness, the sheen of her porcelain skin was irresistible, driving me to the point of madness. She nuzzled against my hand, purring, “My beast. You *are* nothing but a nightmare.”

“Yyyeeesss. That and so much more.”

As unexpected as the woman standing in front of me, she bit down on my thumb just as she kicked out, able to lift and slam her knee into me. While the pain was significant, forcing me to let go of my grasp, the game was far too delicious.

She took off running once again and within seconds, I’d caught her, yanking her against my chest.

“A very bad girl indeed. I think you need to be punished,” I said in a husky tone, towering over her.

As before, she struggled, hissing and beating my chest with her other fist. “You’re a bastard.”

“Yes.” I planted one foot on a fallen log, dragging her over my knee and yanking up her dress. When I wrapped one finger around the thin elastic of her thong, she yelped. The simple snap of my wrist freed her of the dazzling lace. “I’m going to spank that beautiful bottom of yours to remind you of your place. I am your master.”

“You’ll never be my master. Never.” Her yelps continued as I planted my cupped hand against her rounded buttocks,

caressing for a few seconds. My cock had swollen even more painfully, the longing almost too much to bear.

“I already own you.” I smacked her several times, moving my hand from one side to the other. The feel of her skin was far too enticing, my heart racing with every brutal slap. I continued with her spanking, taking my time to cover every inch, moving rapidly in an orchestrated manner.

She wiggled and moaned, lashing out for several minutes until she finally stopped fighting altogether. She was wet and hot, her pussy lips slickened and juice trickling down the insides of her thighs.

My mouth watered from the thought of licking her.

Taking her.

Fucking her.

Stars floated in front of my eyes, the beast dwelling within clawing at the surface. I could barely contain my raging desire as I punished her, adoring the slight pink turning into a bright crimson. “I can tell how wet you are and how much you’ve craved my touch.”

“You must be joking,” Kathleen spat, struggling once again.

I slid two fingers down the crack of her ass, sliding them up and down her swollen folds.

“Oh... No, I...”

“Yes, you’ve hungered long into the night. Haven’t you, sweet Kathleen? You’ve longed for the monster to bring you pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Am I?” I spanked her long and hard, alternating with sliding my fingers just inside her hot little pussy, savoring the way her juice slickened the tips. I was almost to the breaking point, unable to focus or think clearly. She had no way of knowing what she’d done to me, the nights I’d hunted for her.

And I would never allow her out of my sight.

When she lay limp in my arms, I eased her to a standing position, brushing stray strands of hair from her face.

“What do you want? What?” she demanded, still rebellious in every way. Her eyes had changed, her pupils dilated, the ring of gold surrounding them iridescent.

“All of you. Every delicious inch. You will surrender to me. Your body. Your heart. Your soul.”

She opened her mouth to object before clawing at my neck. “Never.”

I broke the connection, running my hands down my chest and stroking my cock. “Undress, sweet Kathleen.”

“What if I say no?” Her words were blatant, yet her body quivered from excitement as she gazed down the length of me.

“Then the consequences will be severe.”

“What... What are you going to do?” she huffed.

“I’m going to fuck you in every hole, filling you with my seed. Then you will truly belong to me. Forever.”

Her mouth twisted in frustration, yet she knew better than to try to run. After another hesitation, she dragged the dress from one shoulder then the other, shifting her hips back and forth until the material fell to the ground. The look on her face was riddled with hatred, her gaze locking onto mine.

I wasted no time, yanking her into my arms and holding her aloft. She beat her fists against my chest, whimpering as she twisted in my arms, but the second I yanked her down, thrusting the entire length of my aching shaft into her, she threw her head back and moaned.

“No. No!”

I ravaged her body, driving into her in long, savage plunges, taking exactly what had belonged to me. There would be no turning back. She’d crossed my path. Now she would surrender to my every need.

For I was Wolfen.

* * *

“Did you hear about the recent horrific murders? They think it’s some freaking animal attack.” My partner’s voice cut into my thoughts, forcing an actual snarl from my throat.

I hesitated at the traffic light, still able to feel the touch of her hands on my skin. Damn it, the vision seemed far too real and I wasn’t a man who drowned in fantasies.

“Yeah, I know. We have our own shit to deal with like facing a bunch of knucklehead bikers before coffee,” Logan offered, no doubt grumbling given my silence.

I shifted in the seat as I pulled into the parking lot, still thinking about the vision I’d had more than once. I could swear I tasted her on my tongue, could feel her wetness as her pussy muscles clamped around my cock. I gripped the steering wheel, twisting my hand.

“Whoa, buddy. Pull it to a stop!” Logan snapped, smacking his hand on the dashboard.

I slammed on the brakes, barely avoiding hitting a parked car. “Shit,” I could hear my partner mumbling under his breath.

“What the fuck is wrong with you today?” he demanded, glaring at me from the passenger seat.

Sighing, I edged the car into the only parking spot available, feeling the burning eyes of the owner of the shop from fifty yards away. My hackles were raised. I knew the meeting would turn into a damn confrontation. I kept the engine running as I turned toward Logan, calming my nerves. Logan Parker had been a good friend, although we’d never be drinking partners and the man would never know the truth regarding my past.

Or my heritage.

“I’m fine. Just trying to figure out where our suspect might run to,” I answered as I cut the engine.

“Well, Mr. Miller has very few friends. From what I’ve learned, the asshole who owns this joint is our best bet at hunting him down,” Logan snarled as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

Brody Miller had escaped from a maximum-security prison, which had shocked the entire law enforcement system given his level of incarceration. I wasn’t the only one who suspected he’d had help. The heinous murders he’d committed were ones for the record books. While Logan was right, the few friends Brody had were almost as dangerous.

Especially the man who owned the mechanic’s shop. Stone Keeler had a violent history, a man with no conscience.

And he was a wolf.

“Let’s just grab information. I’ll know if he’s lying,” I said offhandedly.

“And how the hell is that, partner? You have a history with this dude?” When I didn’t answer, Logan huffed, “Fuck. You do. Is that why you’ve been so damn surly this morning?”

I had my reasons, the least of them having anything to do with an old friend like Stone. My visions meant far too many damaging aspects to my current life, one I’d worked hard to achieve. “Come on, partner. We have work to do.”

I adjusted my weapon in the holster as I climbed out, studying the expansive shop. I’d been shocked to learn that Stone had returned to Denver and that he’d accepted a position as a mechanic. I knew he was dealing with some shit, but I wasn’t a damn psychologist. If he was harboring a criminal, then his ass would be tossed in jail.

In truth, the fucker deserved nothing less.

Logan trailed behind me as we headed for the open bay. Every mechanic in the place made certain we realized we certainly would never be welcome in their establishment. They were all bikers, hard core in every manner, although only one other was a wolf. I shifted my gaze in the beast’s direction, giving him a commanding look. I was able to tell he knew exactly who I was and what I was capable of.

Ripping his head off without a second thought.

My reputation as a Wolfen remained solid, even if I hadn't been an active member of the community for years. "Where is Stone?"

The entire group remained silent.

"I don't think you want me to ask you again," I said under my breath, the tone laced with darkness. I allowed an unearthly guttural sound to echo in the space.

One of the men pointed to what had to be the office. I took long strides in that direction, not bothering to knock. This wasn't a social call. The second the door was flung open, Stone pointed a gun in my direction.

"Stone Keeler," I said casually. The man had changed significantly since the early days, bulking up at least fifty pounds, his arms and neck covered in colorful tattoos. A far cry away from his days as a scholar.

"Maximillian Cordero. I knew you'd come a-knocking on my door one day," Stone growled. He glanced up and down, disdain in his expression.

Logan looked from one of us to the other, remaining quiet, although his service revolver was in both hands and pointed directly at Stone's forehead.

"I know you pay attention to the news, so you know why we're here. I don't have time for crap, so I suggest you tell me if you know where Brody Miller is." I glanced around the shop, almost surprised the place was well organized, an updated computer system humming on the massive wooden desk. Stone was nothing if not professional.

"Yeah, I figured you'd stop by and no, I haven't seen the jerk since he broke out. I wouldn't harbor him if he did. I don't allow shitholes in my place. Just a thing about me. Thought you knew that, Max," Stone answered, finally lowering his weapon.

I hadn't bothered unfastening my gun, knowing that Stone wasn't going to shoot me, no matter the hatred we had for each

other. He didn't have the balls to face an entire Wolfen pack. "Not even a phone call?"

"Brody isn't stupid. He knows I'd tear him from limb to limb." Stone finally grinned, his eyes twinkling. The muscular, oversized man could certainly do it, even in his human form. Brody would have no chance at survival.

While the Wolfen were forbidden to transform into their beasts unless threatened, the Nightwalker pack had no such commitment. They followed their own set of rules, no matter the destruction they caused.

Danger lurked at every corner.

I nodded, finally turning toward Logan. "See if any of the others have seen Brody."

Logan hesitated, finally sliding his weapon back into his holster. "If you say so, partner."

I waited until he left before inching closer to Stone. "You better not be lying to me, Stone. I'm in no mood for bullshit. None."

"You never were, Max, which is one reason you never stayed close to the pack. What a shame." His grin pissed me off but now wasn't the time or place to start a fight.

I could tell he wasn't lying. For a few seconds, we both remained quiet even as the tension continued to grow. We'd once been friends, blood brothers in more ways than being a part of the Lycan species. He'd meant everything to me, part of the three amigos who'd ruled the city of Roselake with honor as well as vengeance.

Now we were bitter enemies.

"Just keep in mind what I said and if you do see him, you damn well better call me." I yanked a card from my pocket, tossing it in his direction. As if the man would ever call me for anything.

We weren't only enemies by choice; our two packs had required us to never speak again. The Nightwalkers were considered armed, dangerous and deadly to members of the

Wolfen. They'd once been considered security for our pack, men capable of the type of violence the Wolfen abhorred. They still had incredible numbers, many now living in the Denver city limits instead of staying close to their pack. That in itself was unnerving.

"ATF. You certainly made something of yourself," Stone said, laughing as he pocketed the card.

I shot my look toward the open mechanic's bay. "So did you." I was instantly sorry I'd sounded so damn caustic.

He narrowed his eyes and for a split second, I could see extreme sadness in them. The man was haunted by demons. Maybe we both were.

"We all have our reasons for living different lives. Now don't we, Max?"

I couldn't deny the truth. I wanted nothing to do with my past, although I had the distinct feeling I wouldn't be able to hide from it for much longer.

As I walked out, I felt a pang of remorse.

And guilt.

But I knew I could never return to the past for any reason.

Including death.

CHAPTER 2



M^{ax}

“Open your legs for me, Kathleen.” The moment she hesitated, I delivered a series of hard smacks on her naked bottom.

She moaned, blinking several times, finally succumbing. “Yes, sir.” As she opened her legs, her hands flew to her breasts in an attempt to cover her hard, rosy nipples.

I growled, my thirst growing as I climbed onto the bed. “I’m going to feast on your pretty pink pussy. Then I’m going to fuck you in the ass.” As I hunkered down, dragging my rough tongue along the edges of her swollen folds, her whimper and her quivering body were my reward. I couldn’t wait to fuck her.

“Jesus,” I hissed, almost disgusted from the vision, vivid images floating through my mind in a constant reel. I’d thought about nothing but taking her in a primal manner, a match to the beast I truly was. I’d awakened from yet another dream, soaked in sweat and my hunger off the charts. I’d almost transformed in an effort to find some sense of satisfaction.

Control was getting to be difficult.

A growl remained in my throat, low-slung and husky as the beast hungered to breach the surface. Here I was, stalking her like some damn predator.

You are...

I heard every sound on the busy street as I rounded the corner, the ridiculous conversations as people scampered to their required destinations. I noticed every nuance of the men and women walking hundreds of yards away, my keen vision able to detect the pulsing of their throats, the very lifeblood they had flowing.

At this point, I needed a couple of shots of bourbon to squelch the increasing thirst.

I fisted my mouth, shoving aside what many considered to be my natural tendencies. If what I suspected was correct, I would need every ounce of control in order to keep my promise to myself.

I was a fool to think taking her would be that easy. Kathleen Kelly would indeed fight me every step of the way. I rubbed my hand through my hair before holding it into the hint of moonlight, although I didn't need any light to hone in on every line and pore. Every sense was heightened, even on edge. I crossed the street, heading down the sidewalk. She lived close to the city in an area that most would consider dangerous, yet she didn't seem to care. The woman acted fearless, refusing to acknowledge any safety concerns.

After moving past several of the homes, I remained on the corner, still able to easily gaze into one of her windows. I could tell she'd recently moved in given the number of boxes piled against one of the walls, the reason I hadn't seen her in the neighborhood before.

My father told me everything happened for a reason and only when we could handle the significance.

I'd been reduced to a man stalking a woman I barely knew. What the hell was wrong with me?

The big, bad wolf indeed.

You will succumb to me in every way, surrendering your body, your heart, and your soul to my darkest desires. There will be no turning back, no escaping my savage needs. And you will be punished for every infraction.

I snarled after thinking the words, although every one of them was true.

Predator.

An animal that naturally preys on others.

The definition was one I knew well, a brutal desire I'd felt my entire life, the kind of hunger that burned deep within my very soul. If it weren't for centuries of evolved humanity, my kind would live on their primal needs alone.

Still, there were some who would call me a dangerous man— correction, a monstrous beast. I thought about my earlier confrontation with Stone, knowing my interrogation wouldn't go over well with the other Nightwalkers, but my visit had been necessary. I'd never allowed a criminal to go free and I wasn't about to allow that to happen now. I snickered at the thought.

While Brody Miller was still on the run, it wouldn't be long until he was apprehended. If Stone was lying, he'd connect with Brody within hours. Stone's mechanic's shop would be under twenty-four-hour surveillance. He wouldn't dare allow the fucker to come within two miles of the Nightwalker village for fear of my wrath.

I was ruthless in both my profession and my personal life. Others would simply say I had an innate gut instinct for my job, my hardcore abilities necessary in a profession I'd come to love. I took no shit, refusing to allow anyone to engage in excuses. Because of my fierce nature, I was considered a top notch detective, yet I alienated almost everyone I came into contact with.

As if I gave a shit.

Yet I was damn proud I was extremely good at my chosen profession. I collected human monsters with ease, shoving them behind bars of steel, stripping them of their ability to destroy any additional lives. But I was even worse.

Brutal.

Savage.

Unforgiving.

Which member of my team would be required to hunt me down?

And they would if legends were to be believed, one day our kind would all return to our primitive state.

Then everything would change.

We had our share of enemies, certain factions of humans who truly believed in the prophecy of werewolves, although the term was one we loathed. There were also other species of wolves who would fight us to the death for superiority. And the legend lived on through the eyes of authors and movie producers.

I chuckled as I gathered a whiff of the light breeze. The wondrous stories told over copious glasses of wine grew larger than life with every telling. If the ancient scrolls and the myths were to be believed, we were only years away from that occurrence. Hell, no, not on my watch. I'd heard all the rumors about the disease that had brought us into existence rearing its dormant head, forcing us back into creatures of the night. Sighing, I closed my eyes briefly, my gut telling me everything was about to change.

On this dark and chilly night, I was on edge, much more so than normal. Although I was unaccustomed to giving in to my own nature, I was forced to admit the various fragrances from exotic perfumes to cooking oil were a pungent reminder my senses were highly sensitized and had been for hours.

The reason was simple—a beautiful woman.

All I could think about was taking her, tasting her.

Fucking her.

Ravaging her.

My true destiny.

I remained where I was, watching as one light was switched off, another turned on. She was preparing to exit for the night, leaving a warm glow to fend off would-be criminals. Little did she know the devil himself was hiding in plain sight. I pictured

her kitchen, the exquisite yet stark appliances, so very much like the woman hiding behind the mask. I knew the layout of the tidy little space, every dimension and exit by heart.

And I'd never been inside the quaint single-story house.

As the swirl of clouds swept past the almost full moon, every inch of my body was alive. Every blood cell sizzling from extreme heat. Every muscle aching. Every tendon stretched to the snapping point. I was close to turning, but it had nothing to do with a ridiculous gothic myth, a grizzly ghost story told around campfires in the middle of the night. The full moon meant fucking nothing to our kind.

My entire system was tingling from arousal, atoms ready to explode for a reason that even I had difficulty comprehending. The calling was irresistible and would not be denied.

If what I felt inside was true, the electricity sizzling my senses to the point of combustion, I'd found my mate, the very one I'd searched for my entire adult life.

Only she was very human and completely off limits.

The text in the ancient book my father carried didn't make any sense. I knew for certain. We'd always been told that Wolfen couldn't mate with humans. It had been forbidden.

"My son, once you find the one who can soothe the savage beast, there will be little else you can do. You will not sleep or eat without thinking of her. You will do all you can to protect her, including losing your own life if necessary."

"What if I'm not ready?" I'd asked my father all those years ago when I was barely eighteen. His solemn look had been telling. I would have no choice but to follow my calling.

"You are the future of the Wolfen. Do not take your destiny lightly. So many have died in an attempt to keep our pack together. You will one day lead us into the light."

"But you're our leader, Father."

His smile had been telling. "One day I will fade into the darkness. You will know when it's time to take over."

The light. I'd been told all the stories over the years, the ancient babbling of our elder pack members. We were true beasts, but I'd refused to live my life in that manner. I was human first, the call of the wild something that I barely tolerated. I hadn't turned in years and only then for a night of running through the mountains, free from the earthly chains and laws. Wolfen were a civilized breed, unlike the majority of others. We had rules to follow and I was supposed to be the keeper of the peace. The last thing I needed was to become any more primal than I already was.

The thought brought another round of desire, fresh and raw, nagging at my insides.

I took a deep whiff and even the cheap thick brick and mortar of the building, the sheathing and wallboard couldn't inhibit the scent of her. I dragged my tongue across my lips, my cock twitching at the mere thought of driving my shaft deep inside her pretty pink pussy. I savored the thought, my emotions running high as the carnal testosterone filled every synapse.

I could take her.

I could fuck her.

I could mark her.

That's all the creature clawing at the surface hungered to do and I was almost overcome by the thirst that wouldn't be quenched until she was in my arms. Thank God I still had some elements of constraint. At least that was my nature, a training perfected by decades of practice.

But she was ripe with desire and as I envisioned her luxurious flaming red hair, her voluptuous body and aristocratic features, my yearning only increased.

I shifted even further into the darkness as a group of young women walked by, every one of them reeking from the stench of marijuana. By all rights I should arrest them, performing my job as required by the oath I'd taken. I chuckled at the thought. The wayward women meant nothing to me.

After they passed, I walked closer to her home, surveying the exterior. I'd spent my entire life being exactly the opposite of tonight's behavior, perhaps avoiding my true lineage, proud of the fact I'd become an officer of the law. My job was to defend and protect.

As my skin began to crawl, I took several gulping breaths, staring down at my shaking hands. I'd been warned by my father, the moment of being awakened by my mate more powerful than anything I'd ever endured. He'd been right. There would be no more holding back, no way to hide from the monster I'd been born as.

I was Wolfen.

Soon to be king of my people.

Heir to an ancient throne.

And if she was my mate, I would take her as my queen.

I watched as she exited the premises, looking both right and left. I could swear I almost felt her skin crawl as she pulled the coat more tightly around her, immediately heading down the dimly lit sidewalk. She glanced over her shoulder only once, but something told me she sensed my presence.

I crossed the street, keeping my distance as I headed in the same direction, thinking about the day before, the moment that the revelation of finding her had become cumbersome.

Meeting her in the coffee shop had been unexpected but explained the number of dreams that had occurred during the last week.

Our connection had been instantaneous, jarring in every manner.

“God damn it!” she yelled, catching her foot on a leg of the counter as she shifted sharply. “Watch where you’re going, asshole!” A snarl pushed past her luscious lips as she swung around, venom in her eyes. She raked her gaze up and down as if she was ready to snap me in two.

After losing the grip on my cup of coffee and allowing it to tumble to the floor, I snapped my hand around her arm, keeping her from falling. The force of my hard pull yanked her quivering body against my chest. There was a moment, fleeting but significant, in which I was able to see into her eyes, crossing into her very soul. The light of recognition was there, although one she'd forget within seconds.

I knew mating with a human was rare and powerful, no matter that the act was forbidden by our customs. Was this merely a test of my control, the first of many before I was called into position? My spirit animal couldn't be so cruel.

I was shocked, shaken to the point I had difficulty breathing. A fire erupted deep within, nearly knocking me onto my ass.

"The fault is mine, although it's been some time before a stranger called me an asshole," I said with ease. The girl was a spitfire, a woman who refused to be possessed. My entire body was humming like a live wire.

"Well, maybe you deserve it and yes, it is entirely your fault," she huffed, jerking to get away from me. "Look at my skirt. Damn it!"

I dragged her even closer, breathing in every scent she was wearing. Shower gel. Hair spray. Perfume. I was intoxicated from the assault on my senses. "You have a savage mouth on you for such a beautiful woman."

She blinked several times, pressing her hand lightly against my chest, her fingers kneading my shirt. "Yeah, well, I don't deal with assholes very well. I'm pretty certain that I hadn't planned on wearing an entire cup of coffee." When she mumbled under her breath, the husky sound created a wave of chills shifting down the back of my legs.

I wanted her. I craved her. I...

I smiled, chuckling darkly and releasing my grip. I had to be very careful. Even as I attempted to speak, my breathing was ragged, husky from the desire racing through me. "I cut in on the line. Entirely my fault." I didn't need to secure her in any way. There was no denying our instant attraction. I could tell

exactly what she was thinking by the warm flush creeping up from her long neck, the beautiful blush of pink highlighting her cheeks.

My balls were drum tight, my heart racing.

“Might I suggest a truce?” I asked in passing. I moved away, giving her space, watching her intently as she rubbed her hand aimlessly across her clothes.

“Fine. Whatever,” she snapped then closed her eyes, her hand fluttering to her lips. She took a step back, her demeanor visibly changing. “Damn it. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take my shitty day out on a stranger. At least allow me to purchase you a new coffee. Please. For my caustic mouth if nothing more.” She finally took two steps away, biting her lower lip. I couldn’t help but notice she allowed her gaze to slide up and down the length of me. This time with desire on her mind.

“Not necessary and apology accepted. I really should get to work. Maybe I should cut back on the caffeine anyway.” She had no idea the vile and evil things I wanted to do to her.

Her eyes drifted to the badge located on my belt, a slight sigh pushing past her lips. As if she could trust me. As if I wasn’t going to hurt her in any way. “I really would feel better if—”

“You were punished for your infraction, the nasty mouth you have, the very one getting you into trouble at every turn?” The words seemed to come out of nowhere, a ridiculous question that had no bearing on the conversation. But I could tell I was right. I wanted nothing more than to drag her over my lap, giving her a hard spanking. My mouth watered at the thought, my cock pinched to the point of sheer anguish.

“Um... Yes. I do have a... rebellious streak.” Laughing bitterly, she lifted her gaze, finally holding out her hand. “I’m Kathleen and again, I’m very sorry. Perhaps one day I’ll be able to make it up to you...” At least she wanted my name.

“Maximillian.”

As I took her hand, every primal thought that I’d been born with swept into my mind, images of ravaging her body almost debilitating. The scent of her feminine wiles was intoxicating,

adding fuel to the fire. My throat was tight, my gums aching as my canines longed to be released. All I could think about was stripping Kathleen of her clothes and sucking on her tight little nipples before impaling her with every inch of my cock.

“Maximillian,” she repeated, the way she said my name drawing me into a delicious web of her own. I dragged my tongue across my teeth, the adrenaline flow nearly cutting off my air supply. She pulled her hand away, pressing her fingers against her lips for a second time and for a few precious seconds, I could read her mind, her longing almost as intense as my own.

“Perhaps you will, Kathleen. Until then, be careful of strangers vying for your affection. You never know the kind of monster lurking in the shadows.”

The memory was far too appealing. The aching increased, ripping away at my insides. I was losing control. My father had been right. I'd been unable to sleep or eat, barely functioning at my job during the day. Today had been the worst. At minimum I needed a taste of her to calm the raging beast. There was no turning back.

I will taste you, sweet Kathleen, feasting on your beautiful body. I will revel in your beauty, providing sheer ecstasy, but only as long as you obey my every command.

I'd gathered another scent on her, one that troubled me almost as much as the draw of her feminine wiles. Death covered her like a warm blanket. I'd know the stench anywhere, the canine blood that also coursed through mine. My thoughts shifted to something Logan had said earlier. Murders attributed to animals.

There was evil in the air, a darkness that I hadn't experienced in years, but my desire for the woman was all I could concentrate on.

Tonight was the night.

Tonight, I would take her.

Tonight, she would become mine.

And there was nothing any human could do about it.

CHAPTER 3



*K*athleen

You will succumb to me in every manner.

You are mine. I will taste you, sweet Kathleen...

The words had remained in my mind for the entire day as if he'd actually said them to me, the hunk of a man who'd almost trampled me. Maximillian. Even his name had a sexy and dangerous appeal.

Goosebumps popped along every inch of skin, electrifying all my blood cells. He'd figured out I was a bad little girl within a few seconds of the interaction. Wait a minute. What the hell was I thinking? The arrogance of the man, the sheer self-indulgence was blasphemous. Why the hell did he think I wanted a spanking? And why was my mouth dry, filthy thoughts racing through my mind?

This was ridiculous. I took a sip of my drink, savoring the liquid sliding down my throat.

Until a stranglehold seemed to wrap around my throat like long fingers squeezing. Suffocating me. Hungering for me.

He was here, the complete stranger who'd tingled every one of my senses. I could feel him, the pulse ticking rapidly in my throat, and my pussy aching as it had never done before. Even my nipples were rock hard, scraping against the lace of my

bra. I found it difficult to breathe or concentrate on anything around me.

Other than him.

The mysterious, shadowed man I'd fantasized about for several nights. Only then, the man's face had been hidden.

Until now.

The stranger I'd met in the coffee shop earlier in the day.

And I wanted to be taken by him.

No. No. I'd merely been working too many long hours, fueled on stale coffee and maybe three hours of sleep.

I wasn't that kind of girl. I'd never hungered for any man after only meeting him briefly, let alone a figment of my imagination. I was a rough and tumble girl, capable of killing a man with my bare hands.

And all I wanted to do was spread my legs for him, allowing him access to every inch of me.

Maximillian.

A warm flush of embarrassment crept up from the base of my neck. I felt ashamed at my lurid thoughts and I certainly knew his line of thinking had to be entirely different given my dreadful behavior. I'd been a complete asshole to him, taking out my elevated anger based on the case I was working on. The very reason for taking time with a girlfriend had been to get my mind off the violent aspects of the case in the first place. The man hadn't deserved my wrath.

I bit my lower lip, struggling to lift my martini glass.

"Are you okay?" my bestie asked, her voice booming over the loud music of the bar.

I took a deep breath, envisioning his face, the dark eyes that hadn't left me since the moment we'd met. My God, I was losing my shit. All over a man. I swallowed twice before being able to glance at Amber. My best friend knew me better than anyone, every secret divulged over copious amounts of liquor and terribly unhealthy food. This was different. This was...

A dangerous secret.

There was absolutely no reason for my thoughts, but as I shifted in order to scan the room, I caught sight of him and my legs began to shake. Or maybe I was willing him to be here. Christ. What the hell was wrong with me? “Just... fine.” I purposely turned my head, snarling under my breath. *Cut the crap, girl. You have no time for this.*

“Fine. Right. Are you sick?” Amber asked imploringly.

“No. No! I’m fine. Really. Just thinking about a case.” My answer was far too perfunctory and immediately she lifted her chin, perusing the perimeter of the bar.

“Uh-huh. You’re a terrible liar. I think you are hunting. Did you finally decide to join the land of the living?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Sighing, she rolled her eyes. “That means that you haven’t been on a date in decades.”

“Very funny. You know my captain is a slave-driver and this latest case is... time-consuming.” If she knew any of the details of the horrific crimes, she’d keep her doors locked at all times.

“You say that every time I ask about dating in general,” Amber huffed. “I know you love your job, but trust me, girlfriend, you need a man.”

No one ever *needed* a man, at least in my opinion. And still, I dared to glance over my shoulder, trying to calm my nerves.

Grumbling under my breath, I took a careful sip of my drink as she feigned anger. I had to get my mind out of the damn gutter.

When she leaned closer, I closed my eyes briefly, still envisioning Maximillian’s carved body. “Not going to happen,” I snapped.

“I see one beautiful specimen of a man walking in this direction, the very one you were gawking at a few seconds ago. I must admit, your tastes are improving.”

Her words created a gutted feeling in my stomach even as I laughed. “You may think you know me far too well, but as I told you, I don’t need a man.”

“Need and want are entirely two different things,” she half whispered. “Just go with it. You’re the most responsible woman I know. You deserve a night of passion. You’ve been working yourself to death, Kathleen.”

Passion. I hadn’t allowed that kind of experience in months. Oh, why lie? A solid two years. My work was my life, something I was very proud of. Yet this man had not only unnerved me. He’d basically shattered my resolve. “I don’t have the time for a relationship. You know that.”

“Who’s talking about a relationship? I’m talking about a hot night between the sheets,” she purred, laughing.

I rolled my eyes, even though the thought was delicious enough. Still, my head ached from the images that would forever be captured in my mind. “I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t look now, Miss Prim and Proper, but dark and dangerous man is merely ten feet away. I think I’ll go freshen up. If you’re not here when I return, I’ll salute your courage. And your prowess.” Amber eased her drink onto the bar, grabbing her purse and winking.

Thoughts of kicking her ass raced through my mind.

I took another deep swallow, savoring the way the vodka slid down my throat in a slight burn and refusing to turn completely in his direction. He would need to be the one to chase me. Not the other way around.

“And we meet again, lovely Kathleen. I do hope under more positive circumstances.”

His deep baritone was smoother than velvet with a dark and husky vibe, my panties damp from the sound alone. *Get a fucking grip.* “Maximillian. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were following me.” I carefully placed the drink on the bar, applauding myself for not knocking over the glass. When I turned to face him, I was just as taken aback as I had been before. He was gorgeous in a roughhewn way, masculine and

rugged. Even in the dimly lit bar, his carved face seemed to be illuminated, highlighting features that were gorgeous with a dash of sensuality.

He was much taller than I'd remembered, at least six foot four, his curly yet shaggy midnight black hair far too enticing. Fingers were meant to be tangled in the thick strands, tugging as he...

Fucked me.

Jesus. Hell, no, I wasn't going to think this way.

I eased as far against the edge of the bar as possible, sweeping my gaze up and down the length of him. Maybe I'd allowed my guard to fall too easily. The badge I'd seen from the day before was no longer positioned on his belt, but anyone could purchase fake credentials from some internet site. I was no fool.

He smiled, his perfect white teeth and full lips captivating, which was truly ridiculous. While he wore a sculpted leather jacket hiding most of his upper torso, I'd been able to see his luscious form; long, muscular legs and chiseled hips, a broad chest, and massive shoulders. He was sex and danger wrapped up in a tempting package.

"The sad truth is that I come here far too often after work," he said as he motioned to the bartender, crowding my space.

The heat was intense, more so than I'd remembered. There was no place for me to go, no ability to shift even inches away from him. In the seconds our bodies touched, every nerve ending was on fire, my heart thumping wildly. I couldn't understand my reaction. This just wasn't like me.

"And I do hope your day has gotten much better," he added.

"Hey, Max. Haven't seen you in a couple of days. Whatya have?" the bartender asked as he leaned over the bar.

"Tonight, a quick shot of bourbon," Max answered.

The bartender chuckled knowingly. "You got it, my friend and oh, this one's on the house. Appreciate all you do for us."

"Not necessary. You know how I am, Buddy," Max told him.

Buddy held up his arms, backing away with a grin on his face.

“Seems like he knows you well,” I said as casually as I could manage. If he was friendly with the owner, then he had to live around here. I wasn’t certain whether I was happy about that fact or should file a restraining order. I bit back a laugh at my overreaction, reminding myself at the nasty shit I’d tossed at him for no good reason. Seeing him here was almost as embarrassing as it was titillating.

“Buddy and I have been friends for a couple years. He’s a nice guy.”

“You say that as if you’re the complete opposite.”

He turned his head, studying me intently. “No one has ever called me *nice*.”

I shuddered, hearing the way he muttered the word.

He kept his dark stare for a full minute before continuing. “Anyway, his bar is basically on my way home. I make certain there aren’t any assholes climbing down his throat. And there are always worthless pieces of shit who deserve to have my fist shoved into their mouths.”

“I’m not certain if you’re attempting to impress me or scare me off.” I knew I should just walk away. The guy could be far too dangerous.

“Just telling the truth.”

As Max shifted, I took a deep breath. Even the scent of him was a sheer indulgence, the fragrance a mixture of absolute testosterone and heady spices. I was almost drunk from the single inhale. “A tough guy, huh?”

“Actually, I’m a cop. I live a few blocks from here and I protect my own,” he stated in a husky tone, his eyes locking onto mine.

Dominating.

Possessive.

I’m going to lick your sweet pussy after giving you the discipline you deserve.

I fought a series of shivers, taking another sip of my drink. “A cop. Interesting.”

“A necessity.”

I wasn't ready to grill him on any specifics and I wasn't certain he'd offer any details. Besides, I didn't need to. I sure as shit wasn't going home with the man.

Not now.

Not ever.

Then why is your mouth watering and your pussy quivering?

“Finish your drink,” he commanded.

“Why?”

He slowly turned his head, his gaze more penetrating than before. “Because you're coming with me.”

* * *

There'd been little conversation and in truth, neither of us had found any need, our body language doing all the talking.

The way he flung open the door of his apartment was powerful, just like the mysterious man. I heard the intense growl pushing past his lips and all I could think about was he would devour me. I wasn't frightened, just aroused in a manner I hadn't anticipated. I wasn't drunk, yet I felt high on the blood pulsing through my veins. I couldn't want this.

A stranger.

A man who'd told me almost nothing about himself. He could be a monster, a stark raving mad lunatic hiding behind a convenient, safe mask. Willing me to succumb to him. Tempting me with his dark commands.

But I was here.

In his apartment.

And in his massive arms, locked behind closed doors.

Max yanked me closer, fisting my hair as he lowered his head. Even his hot breath was exciting, lighting every fire that I'd thought long dead.

"I want you and I will have you. Period. You now belong to me."

Every emotion from anger to humiliation shot through me like a tidal wave, forcing butterflies into my stomach. I belonged to no one and never had. My instinct was to push away from him and I tried, shoving both my hands against his chest.

But the amazing draw of the man was far too intense, stealing my resolve to resist him. His grip remained firm; large fingers entangled in my mass of hair, husky growls pushing past lips meant for kissing the night away.

"You will not deny me," he commanded as he dragged me closer once again. Our lips only centimeters apart, he blew a swath of hot air across my face as he towered over me, bending me until my back was at a complete arc. There was no way I was getting away from this brute.

His breathing remained ragged as his eyes roamed my face. Everything about this man was demanding, a force to be reckoned with and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was going to devour me.

Every. Single. Inch.

When he crushed his mouth over mine, pulling me onto my tiptoes as his tongue thrust past my lips, I could no longer focus. It was as if he'd placed some kind of spell over me, our worlds and bodies meshing together by some unseen force. I became lost in the kiss, the way his tongue dominated mine. The heat of his body became oppressive, sparks of electricity fueling my already jazzed blood cells.

There wasn't a part of my body that wasn't exploding from the raging fire, leaving my senses on edge and any rational capabilities tossed to the side. My fingers, which had attempted to shove him aside, now clung to him, grasping his shirt as if hanging on for dear life. I couldn't want this man. I shouldn't be here.

But I couldn't refuse.

As the explosion of passion continued, our teeth gnashing together and his tongue drinking in every ounce of my essence, I found myself melting.

Max shifted his hand until he was gripping the side of my face, nails digging into my cheek. He held me tightly as he broke the kiss, every raspy sound erupting from his throat more animalistic in nature than before. He dragged his lips to my chin, licking the underside before blowing his scalding breath across my neck. He broke the connection long enough to chuckle darkly then engulfed the area over my pulse of life, biting down like a true savage. A whimper escaped my lips, my mind reeling from the realization that he had my life in his hands.

Just when fear wrapped around me with a strangulating hold, he eased back, taking several deep breaths.

"I'm going to punish you now for all your sins," he whispered, issuing a raspy growl.

His words were frank, stated with a controlling flair.

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. You need a firm hand," he answered, sliding his fingers from my face to my wrist, dragging me behind him as he took long strides toward his massive leather couch. When he faced me again, his dark eyes appeared luminescent, his pupils dilated. "Remove your clothes."

"What?" I felt like some misbehaving child, uncertain of what was wanted from me, guilt and shame rocketing through my entire system.

He let go of my hand, nodding slowly toward the floor. "Every piece of clothing."

"Punish? What are you talking about?"

His upper lip curled provocatively although his eyes were deadly serious. "You told me that you needed punishment for being careless. Caustic. I'm going to honor your request. I'm giving you a very. Hard. Spanking." The way he drew out the

last two words, both stated in a husky tone, sent chills slithering down my spine.

I was floored, blinking several times as a rush of heat crept along my jawline as well as between my legs. I was actually aroused by the fact a man I didn't know was going to give me a spanking. I'd never been spanked before in my life. I was completely conflicted, tingling from the thought even as my mind rebuffed the concept altogether. I was a strong woman, taking zero shit from anyone.

"I'm very serious. The punishment fits the crime. Don't you agree, Kathleen?" He reached for the buckle on his belt, his eyes never leaving me as he unfastened it in a slow and seductive manner.

Crime. Punishment. My thoughts were all over the place, shifting from scratching out his eyes to obeying him. For a fleeting moment, I could swear this had occurred before. In the end, I was barely aware my trembling hands had slid down the front of my dress, tugging at the silky material.

Obey me.

Blinking, I swayed on my feet, staring at the belt.

Another smile curled on his lips as he jerked the first few inches of the thick leather strap from the tight loops. "I always discipline a woman completely naked. The pain should be felt without the confines of clothing."

"Uh-huh. Yes." Why the hell was I answering him or buying into this bullshit? Yet I slowly pulled the dress over my head, allowing the material to slide through my fingers before dropping to the slick wooden floor.

"Beautiful. Perfect." His words were smooth velvet.

Now standing in only a bra, panties, and heels, I glanced at the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows, holding my breath. His apartment was housed in an old factory, the open air feeling expanded by the incredible number of windows located on three sides. I'd driven by the building dozens of times since moving to the neighborhood but had never given it a second look.

The trouble was he had no window coverings of any kind, the second floor location allowing other apartments ample view directly into his living space. I was mortified, utter embarrassment keeping my fingers numb and my heart racing.

“Now, Kathleen. I don’t want to have to tell you again or your punishment will be much worse.”

I snapped my head in his direction, trying to recoup some of my normal hard-headed personality. This... man didn’t have any right to command me. Sadly, when he had the belt completely in his rugged hands, running his fingers along the coarse grain of leather, I did the unthinkable.

I obeyed him.

Turning slightly, I unfastened my bra, dropping my head as I eased the crimson lingerie away from my body. After swaying back and forth, I kicked off my shoes, struggling to turn away from him as I slipped my fingers under the thin elastic of my thong. The second I pushed my panties past my hips, my mouth became bone dry, apprehension and excitement nearly tearing me apart.

I could feel his eyes burning into me, searing every nerve ending. I could also hear his heavy breathing, guttural just like the beast I imagined him to be. I kicked away the panties, shivering to the point my teeth were chattering. God, I had to be crazy, unhinged for doing this. What was I thinking? All the training I’ve received as an officer of the law had been tossed out the window. All my secure methods of remaining safe—gone.

Poof.

And I was standing here.

Fully naked.

Prepared for a spanking.

As if in a hypnotic state, I walked toward him, entranced by the sparkle in his eyes as well as the belt in his hand. When he slowly sat down on the couch, patting his lap, I swept my gaze from his chiseled face to his broad shoulders, my thoughts turning filthy. And I continued to creep forward until I was

merely a few inches away. My nipples were swollen, hard, and aching, the longing I felt extreme, the scent of my pussy juice tickling my nose.

Another round of guilt shifted into my system, but I knew without a doubt I wouldn't resist.

Or couldn't...

"Mmm... I think you realize you need this, Kathleen."

Even the way he said my name as if he'd known me his entire life created waves of tingles.

Max ran his fingers down the length of my arm before grasping my fingers into his, gently pulling me over his lap. As my hair fell past my shoulders, I planted my palms on the floor, taking several shallow breaths.

His cock throbbed against my tummy, another reminder that he was all male and one I was dangerously attracted to. I closed my eyes once again as he brushed the tips of his fingers down my spine, caressing first one side of my bottom then the other. God damn, the man made me feel like some wicked woman, prepared to give him anything he demanded.

When he tapped his hand on my ass, I sucked in my breath.

When his fingers pushed between my cheeks, I issued a single whimper.

When he slipped the tips past my swollen folds, I wiggled, grinding my hips against him.

"You're wet for me. Hungry for me," he said with a dusky vibe.

I couldn't answer. I shouldn't answer. He didn't deserve an answer.

The first smack of his hand and I jumped. The second and I gulped in air. There was no pain, merely another flash of embarrassment. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh... God. This was really happening.

"Do you enjoy the feel of leather?" he asked as he rolled the thick strap back and forth across my bottom.

“I... I don’t know.” I shuddered to the point goosebumps popped along every inch of naked skin and I realized I’d parted my legs. As he rubbed the strap between them, I almost lost it, my pussy clenching and relaxing several times.

“The strap is the ultimate in providing required discipline. I think thirty will do for today. Such a dirty little girl you are.” He wasted no time, bringing the implement down in an aggressive manner, slapping first one side then the other.

I yelped from surprise, shocked that there was no hint of pain, no blinding moment of anguish that I’d anticipated. Okay, I could do this. I could handle the round of discipline.

He exhaled as he kneaded my skin. “You’re going to wear my marks, just as you should.”

The cracking sound wafted into my eardrums a split second before he brought down the strap several times, moving in rapid succession. I was thrown at the dichotomy of sensations.

Until the moment when anguish found a home, exploding in a flurry of electric shots pummeling up and down my legs.

“Oh, fuck!” I threw my hand back, my chest heaving as I gulped for air. Tears sprang to my eyes, the single moan turning into a ragged whimper.

He grabbed my wrist, pinning it against the small of my back. “Stay in position or I’m going to take my time starting over again and I assure you, I’ll add to the number you receive.”

My God, this wasn’t sexual foreplay of any kind. He was really punishing me for acting like such a bitch. Did I blame him? Not necessarily. I was pitched into a vacuum, ready to plead for leniency. As he brought down another volley, two of the strikes hitting me on my upper thighs, I thought I would die from the pain. Everything became intense, including the rapid beating of my heart.

I wiggled uncontrollably, scooting back and forth on his lap. His cock continued to twitch, pulsing against my leg. He was hard as a rock, adding to the wildness of the event.

“You need to learn to control yourself,” he commented, rolling the strap between my legs. “I’m just the man to make certain

you obey.”

Obey. He was serious, as if this was going to happen again.

Never.

I shifted once again, blinking furiously as he allowed his fingers to tickle my pussy lips. I was so wet, the building heat almost suffocating in nature. All I could think about was having his thick cock pressed between my folds, driving in and out in a crazed manner. I held my breath as the spanking continued. There wasn't a part of me that wasn't shaking, the combination of pain and pleasure unthinkable in my mind.

But here I was, the throes of pleasure pushing me into a moment of raw ecstasy.

Bad girl. Bad... girl.

He threw his head back and roared, tossing the belt aside as he thrust his fingers into my pussy. The act was so brazen, so blissful that I bucked, riding his hand like some crazed wanton woman. Flexing his fingers, he drove them in and out. Even the sound of my juice slickening his fingers was a powerful aphrodisiac.

“Oh, God. Oh...” I could no longer feel my legs as the electrified sensations exploded like a vibrating blanket, pushing me further and further toward a raging orgasm.

“Good little girls, they receive pleasure unlike anything they've ever experienced. For bad little girls, there's only severe punishment. Which will you be, Kathleen?”

“I... I...” Words failed me as he plunged brutally. I was close, so very close. “Please... Please...”

“Please allow you to come?”

“Yes. Yes!”

His chuckle was as dark as before, sensual in every manner and bringing almost as much pleasure as his savage actions. I had to be in a dream. This couldn't be real.

“Then I'll give you exactly what you've been craving,” Max muttered in a scattered manner as he pushed his thumb past

my bruised bottom, finding my dark hole. The moment he thrust his thumb into my asshole, I clenched, unable to hold back the orgasm.

Lights floated in front of my eyes as the climax jetted through me. I opened my mouth in a silent scream. The single climax turned into another.

And another.

His fingers worked magic, drilling into me hard and fast. I couldn't breathe as stars floated in front of me, leaving me limp and almost desperate for more.

White-hot heat seared into my skin and I fell into the most incredible state of bliss. When he lifted me into his arms, jerking to his feet, I realized I was drunk on the moment. He stared down at me as he took long strides, moving his lips luridly, his breath coming in scattered pants.

“Now, I fuck you.” Max eased me down onto my feet, using both his hands as he ripped his shirt over his head.

I backed away, taking gulping breaths and licking my lips as I gazed on his physique. Every muscle was toned to perfection, chiseled out of the finest stone. His broad shoulders shifted into long arms, veins popping along both, six-pack abs that had seen months of long days at the gym.

His eyes never left me as he unzipped his pants, peeling them over his carved hips. A savage smile crossed his face as he yanked them down, merely kicking off his shoes before tossing away the beautiful linen. When he was fully naked, he crowded my space, walking me against the hard surface of the glass.

Trembling, I darted a look over my shoulder, peering down onto the road, imagining all the people walking the busy street—neighbors and coworkers.

Watching.

Hungering.

He slapped his hands on the window on either side of my head, his upper lip curling as he growled. The sound was far

too primal, sexual in every manner.

I crawled my hands down his torso, my fingers digging into his chest. Even the feel of him was intense, scintillating.

Max lowered his head, brushing his lips across my cheek. “Do you want my thick cock buried deep inside of you?”

“Yes.” My answer was far too easy.

“Do you hunger to have my shaft thrust deep inside your tight little ass?”

“Uh-huh.” A single whimper escaped my lips as I allowed my fingers to fall to his cock, running a finger down the underside. The moment I wrapped my hand around his balls, squeezing, he threw his head back and roared.

I was shocked the sound echoed in the heightened space, reverberating in my ears, exciting in every way. I kept the pressure on his testicles as I rolled my other hand around the base of his shaft, creating a wave of friction. My heart raced to the same beat his shaft throbbed, leaving my mouth watering to taste him.

To lick him.

To suck him.

When I glanced at his face, his expression was dark and dangerous, his eyes penetrating into mine. His chest heaved as I stroked up and down, twisting my hand back and forth.

“Such a tease,” he hissed.

“Mmm...” He allowed me to play, tempting him for a full minute. Now I knew I was guilty as sin and should be ashamed for my behavior.

Finally, he’d had enough of my mischief, wrapping his hand around my throat and jerking me around to face the window. “I want everyone to watch me fucking you, using you. I want them to know that you belong to me.”

He had no way of knowing how thrilling his words were, the effect they were having on me. I couldn’t stop trembling as he kicked my legs apart, immediately thrusting one hand between

them, cupping my mound. When he rubbed his fingers up and down vigorously, I knew he was repaying my actions, enticing me until I couldn't stop moaning.

“Keep your hands on the glass, my sweet Kathleen. You are mine to play with.”

When he yanked me by my hips, forcing my back to arch, I dragged my nails down the glass and closed my eyes. I wasn't entirely prepared for his brutal behavior, the single ravaging thrust of his cock inside my pussy.

“Oh!” My scream filtered around us, my heart racing as my pussy muscles clenched tightly around the thick invasion. The man was huge, long and thick and perfect. Panting, I slapped my hands against the glass as he pulled out, driving back inside in even more savagely. I was tossed into ecstasy, the rapture all consuming.

“Do you see them, every man and woman studying you?” he asked, his mouth positioned by my ear. “Open your eyes and watch as they gawk. As they... hunger.”

I obeyed him without question, staring down and blinking and a moment of guilt and shame rolled through me as I could swear a crowd of people had formed. All with their heads tilted. All with their eyes pinned in our direction. I shuddered, moaning as he thrust in and out, the force pushing me hard against the glass. My hot breath skipped along the window's surface, creating a fog. I almost laughed, praying to God the light foam would hide my identity.

As the hard fucking continued, I knew I wouldn't be able to control myself, or the raging orgasm that was already rearing its beautiful and sensuous head.

He rolled onto the balls of his feet, one hand wrapped around my neck, the other gripping my hip. With every barbaric plunge, he growled and tossed his head from right to left. All I could think about was he was a wild animal, claiming his mate.

“Oh. Oh. Oh...”

“Come for me, little one. Come on my cock for me. I want your juices soaking my skin, your scent covering me for days.”

His command was one I couldn't ignore or deny. Within seconds, the climax raced up from my toes, shooting straight into my womb. “Oh, God!”

He picked up the intensity, powering into me like a crazed beast, pushing me into a climactic wave that shattered my last resolve.

I could no longer think or breathe, focus or care whether the entire city was watching us. This was simply far too superb.

“You are mine, all mine,” he whispered.

And dear God, I believed him.

Only when I lolled my head, struggling to relearn how to gasp for air did he slow down. When he removed his cock, running the tip up and down the crack of my bruised bottom, I was forced to suck in my breath once again.

“And bad girls get fucked in the ass.”

I could swear I'd dropped into nirvana as he positioned the tip of his shaft at my dark hole, pushing only an inch inside. Oh, God. Oh...

Max slid his cock in an inch at a time, pushing my muscles aside as if meant to be buried inside my ass. The pain was incredible, creating white-hot heat searing every nerve ending. As the sheer bliss took over almost instantly, I'd never felt so full and so dirty in my entire life.

I opened my eyes, studying my shimmering face over the foggy haze billowing against the window. Were my eyes dilated? Then I shifted my gaze, staring into his. The iridescent glow had shifted, flecks of gold burning around his irises. I was so drawn to him, mesmerized by the intense beauty, stunned how different they appeared. “I... I...” As I stuttered, trying to form any rational words, I noticed a smile crossing his face seconds before his nostrils flared. The face of a famished man.

Or beast.

The sound of skin slapping against skin interrupted my gleeful reverie, driving me to an even higher plateau of pleasure. I sensed he was close to coming, spewing hot cum deep inside. The moment I squeezed my muscles, the joyful sound of his husky howl was delicious and sweet.

A primal man.

A sinful interlude.

A secret...

Minutes later, Max wrapped his hand around my hair, twisting as he jerked my head. As he leaned over, the guttural whisper he issued was one I would never forget, ones that would haunt me long after the night was finished.

“You belong to me. You always have and you always will. There is no place you can run where I won’t find you. You are my possession.”

“Um...”

“But remember, Kathleen, I am a very dangerous man.”

CHAPTER 4



*K*athleen

Predator.

I'd seen dozens of them through the years. I'd arrested some of the most loathsome excuses for human beings on the face of the earth, the kind of vile creatures who deserved to burn in hell fire for centuries. Nothing disgusted me any longer.

Except for the sight of the two victims from the recent case I'd been assigned. The method of killing wasn't just horrific. It was heinous. Now there was a third.

As I drove into the park, I realized my grip on the steering wheel was firmer than normal. Perhaps from terror of what I'd find. Or perhaps I was just frightening myself. I glanced into the rearview mirror and even though it was impossible to catch a glimpse of my eyes in the darkness, my gut told me they were laced with a haunting sadness.

Then for a fleeting moment, my thoughts drifted to two nights before. The same chill shifted down my spine as it had several times, creating a lump in my throat. I hadn't planned on ending up at Maximillian's apartment nor had I anticipated the rather perverse events that had occurred.

A damn spanking.

Then fucking like wild animals.

The arrogant man had made good on his promise, taking me in every manner he desired.

I took a deep whiff, realizing his scent still covered me even after a long, hot shower. Maybe my imagination was working overtime. My nipples hardened again, my legs trembling.

Maybe the entire ugliness was nothing but a rich fantasy brought on by one hefty bottle of cabernet. I could at least hope. Thank God, I never had to see him again. I thought about Amber's encouragement and there was no denying I enjoyed the wicked tryst, but I couldn't allow extreme pleasure to interfere with this case.

Lives were at stake.

My gut was screaming that the kills would soon escalate in both brutality as well as timing. The first murder had occurred a little over two weeks ago, the second nine days later. Now this one.

The beast is hungry.

I rolled my eyes, shoving the little voice back inside my head. A human was behind the heinous crimes.

The moment I shifted in my seat, I was given a harsh reminder of the punishment I'd endured from the rugged man. I was exhausted from lack of sleep, visions of his face filling my mind every time I closed my eyes. I'd been so damn attracted to him, more so than any man I'd been with my entire life.

As if I could actually remember what passion felt like before him.

A hoarse chuckle pushed past my lips, although the sound was hollow. My life was nothing more than long days hunting down suspects as well as the dreaded paperwork every officer of the law was required to do. I hadn't even had time to unpack from my recent move and living out of boxes was getting old. I obviously had no business thinking about a man I hardly knew.

Last night had been particularly brutal; four arrests that had kept me working long into the wee hours of the morning. I

wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a tall glass of bourbon.

That was going to have to wait. I was following a tip that no one else had taken seriously.

Except for me.

As I turned down the gravel road, heading toward the supposed scene of the latest murder, I couldn't help but shudder given my own stupidity. I hadn't even bothered to learn Maximillian's last name, although there was no law enforcement officer located within the surrounding towns and cities by his name. He'd played me, making certain I'd seen his badge in an effort to seduce me—to make certain I felt safe with him.

I was hot with anger at myself for falling for his bullshit. The man could have killed me.

Instead of giving you several sizzling orgasms.

The inner voice needed to die a bloody stinking death. The man who called himself Maximillian had taken advantage of me in every manner. And I'd allowed it to happen.

I pulled the car to a stop, hesitating before killing the engine. Even with my powerful headlights, I could see nothing out of the ordinary. I'd driven way out of my jurisdiction but the closest officer on duty was several miles away. My cop instinct had asked if the second call made held any merit. The dispatcher had forwarded the message, raising my hackles. If the female caller was correct, the victim's body was just over the knoll through the bank of trees. There was no way to get there from here other than on foot. The entire area was wet, the powerful storm from the night before leaving soaked terrain and a light fog in its passing. This wasn't going to be a picnic by any means.

I had no business being here alone, but at least reinforcements were on their way. While technically I was off duty, this was my case and I refused to allow another precinct to interfere at this point. Sadly, even my partner was AWOL tonight. I only

hoped Mark's case of food poisoning or whatever had caused his medical emergency hadn't landed him in the hospital.

I checked my weapon before grabbing my flashlight and exiting the vehicle, scanning the area before heading up the grassy patch. The wind was whipping through the trees, making every crack of a twig or rush of leaves larger than life. The pattern of the two previous kills had been the same, the victims found in a lonely, dark, and secluded area of town. I took several deep breaths, calming my nerves as I hunkered down, swinging my arms from right to left as I advanced.

Within minutes, I noticed what appeared to be a body and took another deep breath, preparing myself for what I might find. As I crept closer, the shimmer of the trees became more ominous, keeping me on edge. I flashed my light in a circle, searching for either broken limbs or another type of disturbance. There was nothing overt, indicating the perpetrator had been calculating in every manner.

I rubbed my eyes before crouching down, moving the beam from the flashlight up and down the length of the latest victim. The kill was fresh, only occurring within the last two hours. At least the department had gotten a tip for the first time, the poor girl who'd called in the attack hysterical. I'd been minutes away, attempting to grab a cup of coffee when the call had come in.

"Jesus Christ." I swallowed hard, my nerves rattled. This attack seemed more violent than the others. Just as I'd envisioned. The stench was ungodly, a mixture of blood and gore along with... I forced myself to take another deep whiff, the acrid stench filling my nostrils. Animal. Almost like a wet damn dog. It was entirely possible the murder scene had been compromised. There were homeless cats and dogs all over the city. I rubbed my nose, struggling to keep the bile down.

Fuck. *Fuck!*

The victim was well dressed, in a rather expensive suit, if I knew anything about men's attire, although it was difficult to tell what brand given the amount of blood. I studied the slash marks covering the man's unrecognizable face, my stomach

churning from the stench. While the carnage had all the indications of a brutal animal attack given the level of violence inflicted on the body, I knew better. My gut told me that every single one of the murders had been calculated, not random.

I'd bet my badge on my instinct.

However, my views weren't widely accepted. Everyone in my department believed we had a bear or perhaps a pack of wolves on the loose, animal control officers scouring the local parks and other areas of heavy foliage. That's why the public hadn't latched onto the term 'serial killer,' the limited reports barely denoting any occurrence at all. For that I should be grateful since reporters had yet to camp out at our precinct or the murder scenes. I lowered my hand, extending my fingers as I kept it hovered over the man's face. Granted, the slash marks were crude and jagged, much larger than any human hand, but they were from no animal in existence.

For some crazy reason, my thoughts drifted to a legend, one my grandmother had told me about when I was a small girl. The Wolfen. Half man, half wolf, but not just an ordinary beast. They were primal wolves, said to be the oldest continually living mutated species in the entire world. Mutated. From what? I'd read enough werewolf stories to understand the disease of lycanthropy, but I'd grown out of believing in fairytales and ghost stories when I was ten. However, the Wolfen were also said to be extremely powerful, their predatory skills and ability to shift at will widely accounted for but a single specimen had never been captured.

My grandmother believed the Wolfen were true monsters, their hunger and mating instincts often turning them rogue. When I was eight, the stories had terrified me.

Now that I was an adult, I laughed at her utter belief in them.

And her need for protection.

I glanced at the wounds again, studying the angle, forced to admit that the horrific slash marks appeared to be made by sharp claws. I closed my eyes, praying exhaustion was the single reason I'd even consider the option. I was a woman of

science and information, requiring solid answers in order to solve a case.

Not some Halloween tale meant to terrify children.

Whoosh.

What the fuck?

Sucking in my breath, I shifted the flashlight toward the trees, scanning the area once again, listening for any other sounds. I'd never felt this raw fear in any of my other cases over the years.

Until now.

An eerie feeling slithered down my spine, my stomach rolling.

This particular location in the park was isolated, a solid one hundred yards from any of the walking trails, but it was obvious the body had been dragged at least a hundred feet if not more. The slither of blood leading up to the body indicated the attack had occurred elsewhere. As I reached for the gloves in my back pocket, a second cracking sound occurred less than twenty feet away in the dense patch of trees.

I swung both the beam of light as well as my service weapon in the direction of the noise, calming my nerves. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was being watched. Every instinct kicked in, telling me in no uncertain terms that I was in danger. The hair stood up on the back of my neck, my throat constricting. I moved to a standing position, taking cautious steps in the direction of the trees. My flashlight was powerful, but the eerie darkness kept goosebumps popping along every inch of skin—clothed or otherwise.

Another sharp crack drew my attention to the right and for a split second, I was able to shine my light on a pair of eyes.

Only they weren't human.

They couldn't be, the sharp yellow irises almost iridescent in nature. I took a step back, my foot catching on something slick. Within seconds, I went down hard, immediately sliding down the rain-soaked hill. I tumbled several times, losing my

grip on the flashlight. When I slammed against one of the few light posts, the pain was almost blinding, stealing my breath.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I shook my head, trying to remove the cobwebs before scrambling up the hill. Shaking, I hunkered down, reaching for the light. Then I heard a keening cry followed by a primal growl unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

“What the...” The words died in my throat as some creature lunged for me, the uncanny snarl erupting as if the beast was coming from several directions. I managed to get off a single shot before my survival instinct kicked in.

I didn't want to die out here in these fucking woods and the fucker had cornered me. There was no way I could make it to the car.

After cutting off the beam, I took off running, my heart racing and every nerve standing on end. The darkness was overbearing but I couldn't afford to take the chance on using the light. I was a sitting duck where I was. *You can do this. Go, girl. Go.* I heard snapping and crunching behind me as I raced through the darkness, the husky growl turning into an actual howl. This wasn't any kind of bear. After jumping over several fallen limbs, I dropped onto all fours, taking aim.

Pop! Pop!

The creature issued another howl, only this time out of pain. Then the sound stopped, as if cut short. At least I'd managed a direct hit. After a few seconds of nothing but quiet, I rose to a standing position, taking careful steps in the direction of the beast. When the hairs stood up on the back of my neck once again, I felt its presence only closer this time and from an entirely different direction. This time the creature's growl was more... personal.

The moment I took off running, I realized the fucker was trying to corner me again. I was being herded toward the river. Oh, fuck me. The bastard wasn't going to get the better of me. I zigged and zagged as I raced through the woods, swearing I

could feel hot breath on my heels. This was insane. I had to find somewhere to hide in order to regroup.

Think. Think!

I knew this damn park. I'd enjoyed jogging through almost every section over the years when I lived close a few years ago. There had to be somewhere safe. I was near the river. I remembered seeing an old abandoned caretaker house, but that was years ago. What were the chances the place hadn't been torn down? I had to take the chance. The fucker was getting closer.

I weaved through a series of fallen trees, the terrain becoming almost impassable. When I stumbled, I heard the creature's snorts and snarls, as if frustrated he couldn't find me. I hunkered down, catching my breath, swallowing bile as the fear threatened to close off my air supply. Suddenly, everything was eerily quiet once again, only the sounds of crickets and other night creatures.

Another whoosh. I shifted, falling on my ass after swinging my arms toward the sound, getting off another two rounds. This time, there was no cry of success, only a fevered and very close snarl. God help me. I prayed my memory served me. The river was on my left, which meant the abandoned building should be just through this patch of trees. I'd never been one to pray, but at this point, there was nothing left to do. I knew in my gut I'd been able to get two shots into the beast, but it wasn't slowing him down in the least.

Fuck. Me.

I took off running, my head nearly splitting in two. I could do this. I would do this. With no light of any kind, the trek was treacherous. I could lose my footing and fall over the steep ravines. There'd be no way I could survive the fall. As I reached for my flashlight, daring to take the chance, suddenly a flash of the moon appeared like magic, shining just enough through the trees to give me some perspective.

I could swear there was a building just up ahead. I had to be right. I had to be. There was no holding back, no second guessing. If it was an animal, the building might keep me

protected until the other authorities showed up. In the next few seconds, I darted back and forth, concentrating on my breathing instead of the wretched noise. There it was, exactly as I remembered.

After fighting my way through heavy underbrush, I could just make out the corner of the building. Everything seemed to shift into slow motion as I raced around the side. A door. A fucking door. Yes. Yes! Locked. Fuck.

Wham!

The hard shove I gave did nothing to jar the door and I felt the killer approach. I heard him. No. No! I had one last chance, or I would be the creature's next victim. I reared back, using every last ounce of strength I had.

The intense growl was only feet away, creating a slither of vibrations dancing up and down my spine. The fucker was point blank. The next shot would be right between its eyes. The gun in both hands, I shifted. "Die, you fucker!"

While the shadows surrounding the abandoned building were significant, fear frazzling my mind, what I witnessed in the next few seconds was something that wasn't a product of my imagination.

There was a second beast.

The roars and growls were intensely powerful, riddled with rage. One of the beasts was attacking the other. The monsters quickly disappeared from my line of sight, although the sounds echoed in the trees. It was now or never. I took several long strides away from the door, gulping several deep breaths before racing forward once again, launching myself into the air. My feet slammed against the door dead center.

And the last sound I heard was riddled with darkness.

And possession.

He was coming for me.

* * *

Run! Run!

“What the hell?” I yelped, struggling to crawl away. The visions were horrible, disturbing but the realization that someone stood over me was much worse.

“Whoa, hold on.”

I could swear I recognized the husky tone. Where was I? What... The bastard killer. Oh, no.

Coughing, I blinked several times, feeling for my gun. “I have a gun and I’m prepared to shoot.” *Find the fucking gun. Find it.* The figure standing over me was some hulking monster.

The second the beast turned on a light, shining the beam over his face, I was thrown into some kind of nightmare. Then I was shaken to the core. “Max.”

“Yeah, you’re lucky I found you. This building was padlocked and condemned for a reason. You could have killed yourself,” Max huffed, hunkering down. “Are you all right? What the hell are you doing all the way out here alone?”

Wincing, I struggled to move, thankful a hint of morning light was coming in through the open door.

“What?”

“You heard me. Jesus. Fucking. Christ,” he spat, glaring with those damn deep blue eyes of his.

“I think I need to ask you the same question.” The gun now firmly in my grasp, I pointed it directly at his chest. “Oh, yeah, there are some questions you need to answer since I know you lied to me.”

He narrowed his eyes, cocking his head. “What are you talking about? How did I lie?” When I didn’t answer right away, he shoved out his hand. “Let me help you up.”

I avoided taking hold, huffing until I was able to get to my feet. “Just back off. We’re going outside then you’re going to tell me exactly what you were doing in these woods in the middle of the night.” The moment I took a single step, the pain shooting up through the ball of my foot pitched me forward.

And straight into his arms.

His grip was firm, the same devilish grin as he'd had in the bar crossing his gorgeous face. I hadn't imagined the situation after all. I'd slept with the man. "Let me go."

"You're hurt. I need to get you out of here," Max insisted.

Why did he have to have such a sultry scent? Why did he have to look so damn delicious? I swallowed and pushed against him, making certain he was fully aware of the gun. There were no coincidences in life. This man could be the killer.

Jesus. I was stupid as shit. Had I turned into some prom date? He'd played me and I'd fallen smack into it. He thought that by telling me he was a cop I'd confide in him about the case, find out what evidence I had on the killer.

Or maybe killers.

What kind of sick game was he playing?

There'd been no discussion about the possibility of two calculating killers working together. That could account for the horrific nature of the murders, the ugly violence and rage.

What if there were two rabid wolves in the woods? What if the Wolfen had descended on Denver?

What if you need a CAT scan?

"Just let me go and back away, Max. Do you understand me? I will not hesitate to use this. Trust me."

"Jesus, Kathleen. You're covered in blood. You're scaring me. What happened to you? Was someone chasing you? Why would you break into this building?"

"You're grilling me? You happen to have scratches on your neck." I looked down, grimacing at the sight. Even my boots were covered in a substance that disgusted me. That must have been what I slipped on in the first place. "I have my reasons."

He released his grip, holding up his hands and taking long strides back and out of the building. When he touched the side of his neck, he winced. I made mental note of that fascinating fact.

“You have a good reason that you’re in a desolate park in the middle of the night? Interesting way to get your jollies. Are you a danger junkie and why do you have a gun in your hand, Kathleen? What are you doing here?”

I hobbled forward, straightening my arms as I shifted from right to left quickly. “I’m going to be the one asking questions. Were you following me, Max, whatever your name is?”

“No, I was actually working a case. A fugitive is on the loose and I had a tip he was in the area.” When I smirked, he pulled out his badge, holding it in front of my face. “Remember, I’m a cop.”

“Bullshit. I had you checked out. There’s no one by your name working in any law enforcement agency in the damn state. Whatever game you’re into, I’m not playing.” I heard several other voices and a flood of relief entered my system. “I think the cops are on their way.”

“You don’t believe me,” Max said wryly.

I shook my head. “I know a liar when I see one.”

“Kelly!” the deep voice boomed from the trees, creating a wave of relief.

I’d been found.

“Over here, Captain,” I called.

“Captain?” Max asked, lifting his eyebrows. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“I don’t owe you a thing. Why did you lie to me?”

“I didn’t lie,” he insisted.

I huffed, disgusted with the entire situation. “Uh-huh. Like I said, you’re nobody. I doubt your name is even Max.”

“Jesus Christ, Detective Kelly. What the hell do you think you were doing? Going off on your own without your partner is against protocol. I should stick your ass behind a desk until you turn fifty for this shit.” Captain Walters was a by-the-book kind of man and it was obvious I’d broken just about every rule in the book.

I stood my ground, the Beretta still pointed at Max's chest as the captain, my partner, and several police officers barreled through the trees.

"*Detective Kelly?*" Max asked, laughing before mumbling under his breath, "You're a damn cop."

"Kathleen, are you all right?" Mark's voice held worry.

I'd worked with Mark Chevis for almost two years. He was an excellent partner, a man of true integrity who kept me on the grid more often than not. Sadly, he looked like shit, dark rings surrounding his eyes.

"I'm just fine, but the killer is still on the loose. We need to establish a perimeter around the park. He could still be in close proximity. I got off several rounds, two that I know hit the target." I could tell by the way the police officers looked at each other they were buying into the animal story. Then there was the curiosity Max had regarding the fact I'd managed to shoot the bastard.

"We have a team collecting evidence and we'll talk about the case later, Detective Kelly." My captain's answer was canned, his meaning clear. I wasn't supposed to say jack shit at this point for fear of shoving my foot into my mouth even further.

When Captain Walters flanked my side, he stared up at Max, absolute recognition crossing his face. The shake of his head was telling. They knew each other fairly well. "I'm surprised to see you working this case, Cordero. Aren't you a little out of your league?"

Was there discord in my captain's voice or respect? That I wasn't able to tell, but it was clear I'd been wrong.

Dead wrong.

"Just in the area working a case and heard a scream. I have my own fugitive on the run. Any of your boys run into Brody Miller in the last few hours?" Max kept his tone light and his eyes locked onto me.

I'd never felt so stupid in my life. I was a trained detective, a woman with two commendations. Right now? I was acting like nothing but a rookie.

“Brody Miller? Sounds like you’re the one with your hands full. A truly sick bastard. We’ll keep an eye out for him. Hang around for just a second and before I forget, make certain and say hello to your father for me, will you?” The captain grinned before turning his attention back in my direction, his expression hardening. “And what the hell, Kelly? I told you to wait for backup,” the captain snapped. “You’ve gone off the rails a few times before, but this shit isn’t going to fly any longer. Do you know how many manpower hours have been used on hunting down whatever kind of animal did this sick shit?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I was only three blocks from here. Thought I might be able to track the bastard down.” My answer wasn’t going to fly and I knew it. However, it did seem to amuse Max. Hearing him chuckle fueled my increasing anger. “Who are you again?” I demanded, glaring at Max.

“As I tried to tell you earlier, *Detective Kelly*, I *am* a cop. You couldn’t find me in any normal database because I work for the Justice Department. I’m an agent with the ATF.” Damn, he was amused at my misgivings.

I accepted his credentials, staring down at them as I chastised myself for the fifth time. Since I’d run into him at the coffee shop, I’d lost all common sense. “Special Agent Maximillian Cordero.”

“That would be me,” he said, grinning.

“I can see you two know each other but that shit doesn’t matter right now. We have a murder investigation to work and in case you haven’t noticed, Chevis is under the damn weather. Get to know each other better on your own time. And take a damn shower, Kelly. You stink,” the captain huffed between clenched teeth. “Since you’re here, Cordero, I need to know everything you might have seen in these woods. We have one fresh dead body and from the looks of it, the poor bastard was eviscerated at minimum. Same shit as the others—torn apart.”

“Torn apart?” Max asked, narrowing his eyes.

I could swear the man was hiding something and fairly significant given his intense stare. For even the hardest cops,

hearing that a victim had been ripped apart usually brought surprise. Max's reaction was fake as shit. "You might have seen on the news recently? Two dead bodies before tonight, both ripped to shreds?" I snapped.

He took a step back, rubbing his jaw and darting more than one glance into the forest. The man knew something all right. "I admit I've had my head stuck in hunting the fugitive the majority of the time. I wasn't paying attention to some glorified news program."

Or your head in something else. "Maybe I should ask you a few questions about anything you could have possibly seen." I spit out the words.

Max sighed and I noticed that he'd fisted both hands. I took the time to glance at the wound on his neck. I could have sworn it was much worse before. Barely a damn scratch now. I definitely needed a strong cup of coffee.

"Anything I can do to help, I'm happy to, Detective Kelly."

"Fine. Then we'll talk later. Why don't you give me your card?" I held out my hand, refusing to take no for an answer. The asshole would talk to me one way or the other. If my instincts were correct, he'd not only seen the killer but knew him.

The thought produced a wave of chills settling into my system. As he walked away, I could swear I heard him mutter a word under his breath that made me shiver to my core.

"Wolfen."

CHAPTER 5



*M*_{ax}

Ravenous hunger.

Only this time, the feeling wasn't mine.

A wolf.

I'd been inside the beast's mind for a brief moment but enough time that my blood still ran cold. The desire to kill was strong, yet the actions had been controlled. The need to hunt was innate. I closed my eyes briefly, images of the forest floating in the periphery of my vision. Even my heart continued to race the same way as the creature's had as he'd run, free of the constraints of being a human. Jesus.

I'd chased the bastard through the woods, tangling with him seconds before he'd reached the abandoned building. I reached toward my neck for the fourth time, thankful my healing powers were phenomenal, although Kathleen had noticed the slight injury.

I could tell the bastard wolf had been hurt as well by the stench he'd emitted, only his injuries would take additional time to heal. If only I could find him quickly. The fact Kathleen had wounded him was extraordinary, which also troubled me. The bastard would likely hunt her down.

What I hadn't been able to confirm was whether the animalistic smell was coming from the Wolfen or from another prominent pack of wolves, including the Nightwalkers. They

were particularly difficult, running their organization more like a biker club than a civilized community. I wouldn't put anything past them, including hunting for leisure.

Since the mandate almost twenty years before that they were our sworn enemy, peace had been kept between the two packs. While a few of the pack members had been involved in petty crimes and skirmishes, none had ever performed such a heinous act. Had something changed in their organization or was I grasping at straws, praying to God the attacks hadn't been done by a Wolfen?

Stone Keeler was by any term a true barbarian, although I still found it difficult to believe the various stories I'd heard since his return. What I did know for certain was that he was slick and highly respected, his pack more like lapdogs than associates. The pack believed he was a true leader. I loathed that kind of power.

Or maybe a small portion hungered for the exact same thing. There were those in my community who would agree.

I'd curtailed my anger while protecting Kathleen, but whoever the wolf was, he'd certainly gathered her scent on my body. That and her attack on him placed a target on her back. Now I wasn't certain if she was the intended victim or if the attacks were a complete loss of his control. Either way, I would be required to hunt him down and kill him prior to any additional attacks occurring.

That meant I needed to speak to my father, and perhaps the other elders or the city councilmembers. They would know how best to handle this. That would come later and after my discussion with Kathleen.

God damn it, the stench of the beast remained. I'd smelled it on her, much like my own, almost like an indelible ink. The asshole had gotten too close, even before I'd found her, although I hadn't noticed any wounds or scratch marks. Perhaps the wolf still had some level of rationality left. If his killing spree had more to do with a disease that had fully taken over, he would kill indiscriminately without allowing any of his humanity to interfere.

If this rogue asshole was simply a murderer, he would likely alter his killing grounds and his methods.

Jesus, I was beginning to sound like my father and a believer in the old ways.

Hissing, I stared at the information on the damn fugitive, barely able to concentrate. I'd been fucking careless in taking her so soon, putting her life in danger. I should have followed my instinct instead of my cock. Even now my balls were tight as drums, desire spilling into every synapse. I hadn't simply happened on the park in the middle of the freaking night. I'd gathered a whiff of her from miles away and followed her to the kill zone.

Like some wayward fool.

Now everything had changed. I'd been tossed into the middle of a nightmare.

While I wanted nothing to do with the Denver Police Department, I would remain close. I needed to make certain none of the detectives pointed a finger toward the Wolfen or another pack, including Kathleen. Christ. What a freaking mess. Her curiosity was keen, her attention to detail spectacular.

She was like a dog with a bone with regard to the case. That much I could already tell. After checking her out, I realized I had my hands full on several levels. And I still had my own job to do. I refused to back away from my assignment, even as my mind drifted to the old ways and teachings of our kind. The aging stories had been shoved down my throat as a child, something I'd balked against like any teenager and young man would do. My father had been so patient.

I'd spent the previous two days doing my job, tracking Brody with my partner of three years, hunting down what had ended up being unreliable sources. The last tip we'd received indicated Brody had skipped town, which wouldn't bode well with the brass. So far, there'd been no communication between Brody and Stone.

Still, something didn't smell right.

As a fugitive, Brody was considered armed and dangerous, in a league all his own. But he was somewhat predictable in his actions, which meant he'd be forced to secure some kind of help. The fucker would be caught eventually. Humans were careless in their actions.

A rogue wolf was something else entirely. Intelligent and cunning, they were considered one of the most dangerous creatures on the planet, their capabilities and skills unequaled. Only humans had no idea how close in proximity they lived, performing the same jobs, children going to the same schools. There would always be myths about the existence of what the fables called werewolves, only Wolfen were far superior.

Wolves in general were exceptional in every manner.

There hadn't been a story of a rogue attack in almost three decades, even though the pack elders continued to insist that any day the disease could begin to take over. I'd heard nothing about the murders from any member of the pack, although having refused to live close to any of them, I was often kept out of the loop. The attacks were something I couldn't ignore, even if it meant placing my job in jeopardy.

Fuck. Fuck!

I checked my watch, thankful the second team had taken over the hunt for Brody. I was bone weary but had far too much work left to do.

Given her obvious distrust of me, I hadn't expected a call from Kathleen, but she'd established a meeting at her convenience, the call short and efficient. She'd been convinced I was lying to her. I should have known she was a member of law enforcement. Her manner of speaking and a few of the words she'd said should have led me to the correct conclusion.

If I hadn't been thinking so damn irrationally, my desire blinding me from almost anything else, I wouldn't be in this position. While the hunger continued to burn deep within, my reason for taking her once again tonight would be more about protection and little to do with sexual gratification.

Or so I wanted to tell myself.

I found it humbling being forced to return to the community, four thousand plus acres owned by the Wolfen. As far as anyone who knew about the area, the families were considered ranchers and nothing more, providing for their families off cattle and sheep. Over the decades, the beautiful location had been turned into a rather bustling small town, even drawing in tourists who provided needed income. The return would be bittersweet.

However, I needed information and the best source was my father and the elder members who ran the city council. If anyone knew what was going on, they would. Now I had to file a damn report, and I loathed being stuck in the office for any length of time.

“Hot date?” Logan asked, grinning as he grabbed his jacket.

I gave my partner the middle finger before rolling my eyes. “Maybe.”

“Woo-hoo. About damn time. I kinda thought you were going to enter the ministry.” He laughed heartily. I could feel his weighted gaze as he glanced over my shoulder at a picture of Brody. “We’ll catch the asshole. He’ll be back in his locked cage in no time.”

“If he doesn’t end up with one of my bullets between his eyes.”

“Always the lone wolf, aren’t you?” Logan chastised.

I shot him a nasty look before turning off my computer. “I have my reasons.”

“Last time I checked, you had a partner. I know you think you’re better than me, but Jesus, Max.”

“That’s not what I think, and you know it. I’m just... This case is bugging the shit out of me. Okay? This has nothing to do with your skills.”

“When are you going to tell me how you know Stone Keeler?” he asked, lifting a single eyebrow.

“Nothing to tell. I went to school with him a hell of a long time ago. I don’t know jack shit about him now.” Logan knew

my tone. Back the fuck off.

He backed away, hissing under his breath. “Have it your way but that lone wolf shit is going to get you killed one day.”

I bristled hearing the truth, the tension between us something I hated.

“Don’t look now but the wicked witch of the West is headed in our direction,” Logan muttered a minute or two later.

Great, just what I needed. I grabbed my keys, anxious to get the visit over with so I could leave. I noticed she was already standing in the doorway with a pensive look on her face. Sheila Finley, the director of field operations, was tough as nails, considered on the fast track for the director of the ATF. Her assignment to the Denver field office hadn’t set well with her plans. And she absolutely hated me.

“Cordero. Parker. I need to see you both in my office before you head out for the night.” Sheila turned on her heel, keeping her head high as she headed back to her office.

Logan whistled. “She’s in a mood today. Bet she’s getting heat that we haven’t located the fugitive.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve done everything we could to track the bastard.” My anger roared to the surface.

He gripped my arm before walking by. “Just play it cool, my friend. I don’t know what’s going on with you lately, but this surly attitude of yours is going to get you canned one day.”

Surly attitude. He had no idea what the hell he was even talking about. While we were partners, had even shared a few six-packs of beer and several games of pool at the local dive, he could never be my friend. There was far too much danger surrounding maintaining a friendship of any kind.

He’d never survive the aftermath.

I waited for a few seconds before following behind him. I’d never been good at playing politics and as with any organization, there was the importance of numbers. While our field office had outperformed a huge percentage of others,

Denver wasn't considered a huge player in the game of numbers—at least as far as promotions went.

Sheila stood at her window, her arms crossed. “Close the door.”

Logan lifted his eyebrows and performed the task, both of us moving toward her desk. We knew better than to open our mouths before she began the conversation.

“The Brody Miller case is out of your hands,” she said casually.

“Wait a minute,” Logan started. “We’re making headway.”

“Don’t bother. It’s in the hands of the Feds now. He was seen late last night in Montana,” she answered, still not bothering to turn in our direction.

“Then what case are we being assigned?” I asked, almost grateful the case had been ripped from our hands.

Sheila finally turned, locking eyes with me and I could tell she was attempting to garner a read of my mood. What was she looking for? She leaned over her desk, placing her fisted hands on the surface. “Parker, you’ve been assigned to work on an evolving case with several of the local bars. Seems like they’re running some pretty terrifying things through them. I’ve sent all the information to you. You start right away and you’re going undercover.”

This was unusual.

“You’re splitting us up?” he asked, darting a glance in my direction.

She exhaled, half chuckling. “It would seem that Agent Cordero has been asked for specifically to work with the Denver Police Department on a particularly gruesome case they have.”

“Why would they ask for Max?” Logan asked.

I shifted from one foot to the other, remaining silent.

“Imagine my surprise when Captain Drake Walters of the DPD called me directly, letting me know that one of our agents

might have information in a murder case and could prove to be very helpful given his level of... expertise.” Sheila’s words were laced with criticism. She slanted her hardened gaze in my direction. “Care to explain?”

“I was in the right place at the right time, Director Finley. Just searching for Mr. Miller. Nothing more,” I said with no inflection.

“Without your partner,” she said, half laughing. “Well, funny how Captain Walters credits you with saving one of his detectives’ life. I would think that was worth mentioning this morning at our usual meeting. Wouldn’t you?” She rose to a standing position, disgust crossing her face. “Is there more you need to tell me about this case? Some animal mauling people?”

I felt Logan’s heated gaze. “There’s nothing to tell. Three horrific murders. I don’t know anything else. I’m not certain how I can help them.”

“That murder in the park last night? Why the hell didn’t you call me?” Logan insisted.

“You were checking out another lead,” I answered, even though I’d lied to him about where I was going, and I was miles away from where I was supposed to be.

She shook her head. “Well, it would appear that Captain Walters has friends in high places. Even the mayor called me this morning. As it was explained to me, this case isn’t something they want the press to get ahold of in an election year. It also wouldn’t be good for my personal aspirations. So, here we are.” She tapped her fingers on the desk. “What else reeks of interesting coincidence? Oh, yes. The lead detective’s partner is going out on medical leave for an extended period of time. Funny how that works so neatly together,” she huffed as she walked around her desk, sitting on the edge and handing me a signed piece of paper. “I’m releasing you to work with them, Cordero. For now. Keep in mind, I don’t like being pressured. By anyone. If I find out you engineered this, I’ll have your badge.”

“I had nothing to do with getting assigned to this case, but I’ll do what I can,” I answered, uncertain how the hell Kathleen would react. However, working closely with her was optimal. Adrenaline rushed through my entire system, creating a wave of energy. Suddenly, all I could do was think about her.

“You’ll damn well do more than that. Keep your nose clean and find this bestial killer. I don’t want a single blowback on our department. You got it?” Sheila looked from one of us to the other. “Now, get the hell out of here.”

Logan backed away, offering a respectful nod as he reached for the door. When we were outside, he shot me a look. “This wouldn’t happen to be the same girl you might or might not have a hot date with, would it?”

“Just a detective in need of a helping hand,” I snarked. “Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“Uh-huh. You’re hiding something. I can smell it on you, partner. We’re going to need to work on our communication. Have fun with the boys in blue. Who knows. Maybe I’ll run into you in my undercover assignment.” Logan shook his head as he walked away. Hell, who hadn’t I alienated over the last few months?

But this time, maybe karma was working in my favor.

* * *

As I headed down the road toward Roselake, the snowcapped mountains looming in the background, I realized my hands were shaking. When I’d left the community a few years before, it was under the understanding that I’d return, using my training as a specialized police officer to protect our two thousand inhabitants. After I’d left, I’d refused to take my place at my father’s side, angering the entire city council. To be stuck in a life with no real connection to outsiders held no appeal, no matter the circumstances.

I’d remained close out of respect to my father and the way of life, at least by way of telephone and email. I’d offered advice, even breaking up a few skirmishes in town here and there, but

I'd refused to live on site. I would protect my pack, if only from afar, something a huge majority of our people had never given me credit for. To many of the elders, I was an outcast, incapable of leading the pack.

Lead.

"One day you will be king."

How many times had my father issued those words when kissing me goodnight as a child? After my mother's death, he'd done everything he could to provide a normal life, just as my human mother had begged as her dying wish. I shuddered merely thinking about her. She'd been such a rare exception to our world, my father breaking rules he'd rallied behind his entire life.

Everyone in the pack had looked the other way at his disobedience.

Not with me. I was the black sheep of our world.

I'd balked at the lineage for years and while there would always be an alpha male leading, there hadn't been a king in centuries. We weren't some warring organization, preparing to take over humans. We were another species coexisting in peace.

"But the time is near, the ancient prophecies indicating a new coming."

How many times had I heard that line before as well?

I had to give our ancestors credit. They had been wise in their actions, buying up parcels of land long before Denver was built. Even the design of Roselake had been strategically done, providing for maximum protection from all sides.

Especially since the well-established city backed up to the mountains.

As I drove into the far edge of town, the scent was strong, much more so than I remembered. Dozens of children had been born recently. New blood. New life. From what I'd heard, there was significant happiness amongst the ranks. Maybe a part of me was longing to settle down. Sadly, if the

murders were connected to the Wolfen, the lingering pall would alter their lives.

My grip on the steering wheel became tighter as I headed toward my father's expansive ranch. He owned a huge parcel, a beautiful house with several barns and an exquisite view. It had been an incredible place to grow up.

I even owned a smaller piece of property at the bank of the mountains, a quiet place that I used to love. I'd even spent countless hours renovating the log cabin to be exactly the way I envisioned.

Then I'd left, hiring a caretaker to look after the place from time to time.

A moment of fresh guilt slipped into my system as I pulled down my father's long driveway. I honestly couldn't remember the last time I'd been here. Too long. Everything appeared the same, including the broken stairs on the front porch I'd promised to fix at least four times.

My father had taken me at my word.

I eased out of the truck, rubbing my hands down the front of my jeans. Michael Cordero, known by everyone as Blackhawk, was a formidable man. He'd been strict, doling out punishment for the slightest infraction. He'd been the reason I'd wanted to go into law enforcement in the first place.

Honor.

Integrity.

Respect.

That had been ingrained into me. I took a deep whiff of the air, delighting in the scent of the hundreds of cattle he'd continued to run through the ranch. He adored what he did, refusing to retire, a true leader for our pack. As I walked onto the porch, the creaking sound of the old timber shoved another round of guilt into me. I would fix the damn stairs within the week.

I hesitated before knocking. This was no longer my house. I'd give up that right the day I moved out.

I heard the thunderous sound of his heavy boots, smiling from the memories it produced.

The moment he opened the doors, his dark eyes lit up. “Son. It’s good to see you.”

“Hey, Pops.” I held out my hand, rolling my eyes when he pulled me in for a bear hug. “Sorry I haven’t been here in such a long time.”

“Did the precinct teach you to forget your family, to dishonor your ancestors?”

“No. Just...” I couldn’t finish my sentence.

His eyes twinkled once again, a teasing look on his face as he pulled back. “I know how much you love your job, son. I guess an old man can just miss his only living relative. I went by your place the other day. Johnny’s doing a great job keeping it in order. Looks pristine.”

My father had always known when to yank on the heartstrings. “Sorry, Pops. I’ve been busy.”

He backed away, ushering me inside and immediately walking toward the bar. “I was actually prepared for your visit. I even purchased your favorite bottle of bourbon. Might be a little early but what the hell.”

His Cherokee heritage made him one of the most powerful Wolfen in the entire world, and he’d rightly been deemed the alpha years before. He held certain abilities that were much greater than almost any other wolf. I’d been told I had the same gifts, although I rarely used them.

Until recently.

Sighing, I stole a glance around the place. Maybe the expansive timber home had lost some of its luster, but it would always be grandiose in my eyes. “I take it that you heard about the murders.”

He poured two tumblers half full of bourbon before answering, his expression more of a grimace as he turned around. “I’ve heard about them and I’ve sensed them. The blood. The

violence. The hunger. This is serious, son, and very bad for our pack. I'm sure that's why you're here."

"They were done by a damn wolf, a fucking rogue."

"That's what I was afraid of. How was this confirmed?"

I rubbed my brow, reliving the fight in my mind. "Because I wrestled with another wolf who reeked of human blood."

Blackhawk hesitated, tipping his head in my direction. "Very brave of you and potentially very stupid."

"I'm an officer of the law, Pops. I can't allow some goddamn wolf to kill humans in a city park."

He walked closer. "You were protecting someone."

"Absolutely. That's my job."

"And you do it well, Max. I only wish you'd make certain that doesn't happen here."

"Does that mean there have been any attacks in Roselake?"

"No, but the scent of death lingers in the air. Others have smelled it. They taste the blood. That's not good for our people." My father kept his voice even, but I could tell he was worried and angry.

"Which means that the killer lives in our community and not another pack," I groused, my heart racing.

He smiled in a knowing manner. "Perhaps." He offered me a drink, his eyes darting back and forth. He was searching mine.

If one of our own was the murderer, I would kill him with my bare hands. His curt answer meant my father had much more of a handle on what was going on than he wanted to tell me.

I accepted the drink, swirling the liquid before taking a sip. My nerves remained on edge. "I have to catch this bastard. There is no other choice."

"Yes, you do. You need to lead your pack out of danger."

"That's not my job, Pops." I almost hated saying the words. "But of course, I'm going to protect the pack. That is my... requirement."

“Then you must use your skills, son, and I’m not talking about your police training.” He studied me as I thought about what he was saying. “Learn from this monster. Understand his needs. Hone in on his desires. This is the beginning of a new phase.”

“I’ve already learned from the bastard. You knew that would occur, didn’t you, Father?”

He chuckled, his dark eyes more like the blackness of my very soul. “I could only hope. You are special, Max, much more so than you are aware of. Your gifts will be called into this battle.”

“Battle. I don’t like to be used.”

“This is your destiny and one you can no longer run from. Now, tell me what you saw, what you gathered from your meeting with him.”

I took my time before answering, frustrated about my own heritage. “When we were fighting, I could feel his anger, could almost see through his eyes from minutes before during the attack on the victim. He’s rational, or at least that’s what I gathered from our connection.”

“The sight, my son. You are gaining more of the sight once again. I’m very pleased.”

I was half Cherokee. The ‘sight’ as he called it was one of the gifts; an attribute that I’d explored as a child but had seemed to grow out of. The ugly truth was that I’d shoved them aside, loathing being different than the other boys. I wrung my hands, still able to see a partial vision, although the details were fuzzy. “I don’t know how remembering what few details I do is going to help me or my ability to catch him.”

“Nurture the sight and trust in your instincts. Feed off everything you learned. In time, you will see two distinct visions at the same time. What occurred and what is. That will guide you to him.” Blackhawk patted me on the shoulder, obviously a proud man. “You will become our hero as you should be.”

Hero. I almost laughed at the notion.

“Any idea who it could be?”

“Son, we have almost twenty-five hundred people living in our little town. While I try and keep up with basic politics and social news, I can’t any longer. There have been discussions on the council, but no evidence found.”

In other words, the rogue wolf could be anyone, including people who were closest to the upper echelon of the pack.

“While that may be true, if you can see two different visions at all times, then why can’t you tell who it is?” I asked, grinning afterwards. The challenge was one I knew he’d relish.

“Because I’m an old man,” he said, laughing, then his expression turned serious. “The sight only works for a period of time. Hours, maybe a full day, but no more. The visions fade. That allows for protection of those with the gift given they have no memory of what they saw in their mind.”

“That means this fucking killer could have dinner with you after twenty-four hours and you wouldn’t be the wiser as to the fact he has blood on his hands,” I huffed, my thoughts drifting to Stone. He had his own reasons for wanting revenge on the Wolfen. “We need to hunt this fucker down.”

“Unfortunately, you are correct and there is also something else. Certain wolves have the ability to mask their own actions within seconds. They are very powerful in mind and spirit, their capabilities endless. You have that ability, Max. You must use it wisely.”

Another gift I didn’t realize I’d inherited. I sighed, my heart and mind heavy. “From what I could tell, the wolf I fought didn’t have this extraordinary ability. I was able to see far too many horrible fucking things, including horrific visions from his past crimes. The bastard enjoyed every moment of the kills.”

“Then try and remember every detail,” he advised. “When a wolf is in a killing mode, it is much harder for them to hide behind the mask.”

“Does anyone else within our community know about this ability?”

He took another sip of his drink. “The councilmembers as well as a few other high-ranking officials.”

Fantastic. If the wolf was simply a killer, he could know how to hide.

“You truly believe the disease is no longer dormant,” I countered.

“That is a possibility to consider and another reason why we need your help and leadership. There is growing fear amongst our people, fabrications beginning to shift throughout social circles. We can’t have that,” he continued.

“There’s no cure for this disease?”

“If there had been a cure thousands, even hundreds of years ago, do you not believe our scientists wouldn’t have altered our DNA?”

My father had a point. “Understood.”

“However, you can’t be certain that’s what we’re dealing with. If this wolf is from another pack, they do not have the same desire to maintain their full humanity, but you are correct. We need to hunt the wolf quickly and only you have the capabilities of leading that cause without drawing unneeded attention to our people and our city. You must return home to Roselake and take your rightful place,” he commanded.

“Let’s not start this, Pops. I have a life and a career I love. However, I’ve been assigned to work with the Denver police to help find the murderer. That will allow me to work closely on this.”

“That might not be good enough.” Blackhawk lifted his head, inhaling as he walked closer. “It would seem you also have a woman that has become special to you.” He snarled, baring his teeth.

“My personal life is not why I haven’t returned home, and you know it,” I snapped, instantly regretting the harsh tone. He knew I’d avoided any concept of a personal relationship my entire life. “Look, I have a job to perform. If there is a rogue Wolfen, he will be brought to justice one way or the other. I promise you that.”

“Justice,” he said as he glanced up and down. “The wolf needs to be absolved of his sins.”

I knew the code of honor within our pack. We handled our own indiscretions. The wolf would need to be killed in a manner where his spirit animal couldn't find another host—at least according to my father's beliefs. The truth was that every Wolfen was terrified of the disease, necessitating the burning of the body after its execution. Bile formed in my throat at the thought. “The pack must be careful with this case unless you want the police department to learn of our special skills. We also don't need to anger the Nightwalker pack with accusations. You know how volatile they can be.”

“You are correct, the Nightwalker pack is also a concern, Max, as it would appear they hunger for more control.”

“Stone Keeler is challenging the Wolfen?” I spit out laughter until I noticed the change in his eyes. “You're serious.”

“Yes, although they do not have the numbers at this point to be able to challenge us.”

At this point. “Have you spoken with their *leader*?” I should have known Stone was up to something.

He closed the distance, moving around me in a complete circle and I could tell he'd gathered even more of Kathleen's scent covering every inch of my body.

“I have had no occasion to talk with Mr. Keeler because there has been no solid evidence they are involved, but I am aware that you have spoken with Stone recently.” He gave me a knowing grin.

“I can't put anything past you,” I said, laughing softly. “Yes, a former human friend of his remains a fugitive.”

“Then you will talk to him when the time is right, Max.”

“I will do what is... necessary.”

The tension was palpable. The ways of the Wolfen and the requirements of law enforcement had always been at odds.

“At this point, we must hunt our own as required. This female is... unusual, Max. She is human, yet you have already begun

the mating process with her.” He reared back, his eyes narrowing. “You must weigh your decisions carefully. You are by all rights the next leader of the entire Wolfen species. You must act accordingly. You are fully aware of Gregor Fenton’s attempts at usurping your control.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. The man was a pompous asshole, although his number of pack followers was growing. “I’m aware of his activities, Father.” The three amigos. I allowed the past to enter my mind, a time when Stone, Gregor, and I had been so damn close. The ways of our people had forced us apart but our collective desire for power had taken on an entirely different meaning than when we were younger.

“He is formidable, son, and not the same man as you knew. Something for you to keep in mind.”

“Much like Stone Keeler has changed, I suspect.” I was already tired of the banter.

“Stone is... angry. That will fuel him.”

I had no idea how to counter that. Stone had been given a raw deal in several ways, but he’d stepped up to the plate. How things had changed. “How can you be certain Kathleen is my mate?”

“Don’t kid yourself, Max. You are hungry for her, the kind of famished needs that you’ve never experienced before?” he asked.

I weighed the answer. “Very much so.”

He pressed his hand against my cheek, closing his eyes. “Your eyes are different, my son, the rings of fire surrounding your pupils burning brightly. In turning to fight the beast, you tasted his anger as well as experienced it, but I suspect he also tasted yours. That also means this wolf is well aware of her possible importance. The scent of her disturbs me. I do not like what is happening. The timing is... bad.”

The timing. The entire situation was horrific.

“You once told me that we don’t choose our mates, that they’ve already been preselected for us. The ancient ways of our heritage. If she is truly my mate, how can I deny what I am

hungering for?" I threw the words back at him. I didn't believe in what so many of our young people, including myself called the true curse of our people.

"You must try until we know what we are dealing with," he spat, taking a gulp of his drink.

"And what if I can't? She draws on me every minute of the day. When I'm near her I feel stronger, more alive. When I'm no longer close, my hunger becomes insatiable." I dropped my gaze to his shaking hand before looking at my own. Even at this moment, the longing was almost too much to bear, the beast yearning to breach the surface. What the hell wasn't he telling me? "You mated with a human, Father."

He walked away in a stilted manner, moving toward one of his massive bookshelves. He was searching for a book. "The truth is that I was a fool, Max, and my love for your mother could have cost me everything."

"Are you suggesting that I am not allowed to mate with her?"

"I'm telling you that if you turn her, she could die. We are born into what we are, Max, not turned as in some terrifying ghost story. I am also telling you that if you fully mate with a human and especially if you turn her then you will never be accepted as the alpha."

But you were. I thought about what he was saying and shook my head. "That's a chance I am willing to take."

Blackhawk shook his head once again, tugging on one of his ancient books, the very one he'd taught lessons to me from. The book I'd shunned when I'd reached my teenage years. "You burn deeply with a hunger that I haven't seen in you before. You should read the various marked passages, my son. They will be important in your upcoming leadership and with the decisions that you make."

"You already sensed that I'd discovered a mate even before I did. What aren't you telling me?" I wasn't shocked. My father was far more powerful than anyone truly realized. He was also the keeper of the peace, a man who'd encouraged harmonious

living amongst humans from as long ago as I could remember. I understood his concerns.

But not about Kathleen.

Death.

I'd already sworn to protect her with my life.

He had a faraway look in his eyes as he headed back in my direction, the book firmly placed in his grip. "I know many things, my son. My father once told me that knowledge is the key to our survival. My perceptions are very strong at this point. Be certain of what you learn, Max. If this woman is your mate, then the curse that was foretold centuries before has been unearthed. That would explain the rogue wolf and the anger burning within the Nightwalkers. If that is the case, you can expect blood to run in the streets of Denver. I should have seen this coming. I should have warned you."

I glared at the gilded book, the musty smell of it assaulting my senses. "What the hell are you talking about? You believe the attacks will continue." The term curse had been tossed around along with the various untrue stories about werewolves.

"The attacks will continue because the hunger pangs will grow within this wolf to the point nothing will stop him. There is the foretelling of a curse placed on our kind. In truth, I didn't believe in what I was told as a child, but now, I'm not so certain." He took several deep breaths, his hand shaking even more as he took another gulp of his drink. I'd never seen my father this way. He was always in control, always providing answers.

"A curse."

"Yes..." he hissed, elongating the single word. "We've evolved so far, our lives joyful. Now this."

"What will I find in this book?"

He moved toward the couch, sitting down with difficulty. "There is an ancient burial ground that is not to be disturbed by anyone. If the location is destroyed, the wrath of every pack will be set forth, the beginning of the end. Our kind will return to their primal state, hunting and feasting on humans."

“The end of our kind?”

He lifted his head. “Or humans. The ultimate fight for control.”

I realized at that moment that whatever I might read in the ancient journal could change the course of history. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Lead, my son. You are the future. You must come back to the community. It is vital that your presence is known. There are so many who respect you.” My father’s imploring voice was haunting.

The future. I was beginning to believe that there would be no future, but I knew he was right. Above all, my people needed to trust in their environment and their leaders. They had the right to feel safe. I would find a way to fulfill my commitment on both regards. The decision weighed heavily on my mind. “I will return within twenty-four hours, but it will be on my terms. I will fulfill my duties as a law enforcement officer first and foremost.”

My father’s face flushed with relief. “Understood. That makes an old man very happy, my son. We will have many things to discuss when you return.”

“I gotta go, Pops, and give me some time to see what I can find.” I polished off the drink before heading to the door. A damn curse. I prayed to God that this was just an ugly fairytale and that we merely had a basic murderer in our midst. When he spoke again, they were words that would remain with me for some time.

“One piece of advice. If this woman is your mate, Maximillian, you must not turn her, but you do need to protect her at all costs. She could be the key to our survival.”

CHAPTER 6



*M*_{ax}

Survival.

Protection.

While I embraced the necessity, I held back on forming any distinct opinions. There were too many questions that needed answers. My training negated such methodology.

I would follow through with my promise, returning to the pack, but not until after tonight. My only method of limited protection was covering her with my scent. By all rights, as my mate, I should take her to our city, and keep her locked away in my cabin. I half laughed at the thought. If I knew anything about Kathleen, she would attempt to kill me for even trying.

And she wasn't ready to learn the truth about the man who'd already fucked her.

I was playing a risky game, but I had to buy some time in order to put additional pieces together.

I sat back in my seat, mulling the options. Given the rather brutal fight I'd had with the rogue wolf, if the creature was diseased, the near taste of her would fester in his mind and his loins, embroiling his increasing hunger. He would make an attempt on her life sooner versus later.

My grip on the glass of bourbon was so tight that I heard the thick crystal cracking, fissures forming on every inch of the surface. Exhaling, I released the firm hold, curtailing my rage and scanning the room for anyone who might be of concern.

The book my father had provided had proven to be interesting, although the stories were more like fables told to children in order to prevent their misbehavior. I remembered only some of the pages, pretending as a child I'd listened to the teaching. While I'd had little opportunity to do anything but scan over the chapters, the detailing of how our kind came to be was fascinating reading. Humans called what we had lycanthropy, a mythological disease that had an almost cult-like following.

If the stories penned in the ancient script were correct, the disease was similar in nature to the stories told, although deadlier and certainly contagious. From what I'd learned, the disease had gone dormant, but was always predicted to return in order to replenish the Wolfen population, possibly attacking the human population as well. Christ. I shook my head. The only reason I gave the bullshit any credence were the factual stories of rogue wolves, but even then, there were bad wolves just like humans. I was beginning to wonder what the hell to believe any longer.

What I could buy is that darkness had enshrouded the earth thousands of years before, and the violence encompassing every aspect of human life had nearly destroyed civilization. The accounts in history books corroborated the Wolfen stories.

A brutal and fast sweeping disease had taken hold, pitting man against beast. Although other animal species had been protected, wolves hadn't been immune to the terrible malady, the disease altering their DNA structure. I fiddled with my drink, laughing at the various representations, all told through the eyes of a priest who'd lived long enough to tell the entire story.

But a single word had been used since that time and always would be. Predator.

The holy man had also predicted a curse after the first Wolfen had been murdered, almost to extinction by a faction of human

hunters, their bodies laid to rest in true honor, as well as secrecy.

If their bodies were ever disturbed, bones touched by human hands, their wrath would be unleashed, seeking revenge.

I didn't believe in curses, although the priest's story was at least a fascinating read. However, the fear about some unknown disease rearing its ugly head again was certainly plausible. We'd come into existence in some wretched manner after all. There was even a remote possibility that other animal species could be affected this time, altering their DNA much like the wolves. I tapped my fingers on the table, swirling the tip of my index finger back and forth. What there hadn't been was any mention of this infamous burial ground that I'd been able to find. I would search again later.

I'd read the book more as an officer of the law than a Wolfen, realizing the stories could be just that. If not, then what were the chances there were at least duplicate pages, allowing for some elaborate ruse in order to obtain some edge? The possibilities were endless.

As well as outlandish.

I was still a special agent, which meant I had a job to perform.

The bar was quaint, but not the one I'd met her in the night before. The location was her choice, far enough removed from where either one of us lived that she believed herself to be safe from my clutches. I swirled the glass in front of me several times while I stared out the window. She had no idea what she was in store for. I dragged my tongue across my canines, feeling the sharp points already exposed. Additional control was needed. I shifted in the seat, my nerves on edge and my cock aching as it had for a solid twenty-four hours.

I'd had little time to investigate the prophecies and in my opinion ramblings of one of our ancestors within the book, but my father remained rattled, even calling an emergency council meeting for the moment I returned. I would look at this rationally.

The possibility of wolves abandoning their humanity, killing humans for no other reason than sport sounded like the Nightwalkers. I knew many wolves in both packs would enjoy living like animals once again, if only for a little while.

If the murders had been performed by a rogue wolf with potential followers, as there always were with alpha dogs, there was the remote possibility others would go into a killing frenzy of their own. That sounded more like the Nightwalkers' behavior than Wolfen, but then again, I didn't know my own pack very well any longer. Whatever the case, the evidence could bring a lockdown to our city. There would be questions asked, press breathing down our necks. I couldn't afford to allow that to happen.

If Kathleen was the key, I would find out why.

But at this point I had to assume the alpha role, curtailing any disobedient behavior. I'd gather those around me who were not only aware but believed in my leadership abilities. Then we would begin hunting within our own community.

I could smell her already, the fragrance one that I would never forget. I was immediately excited, desire forcing my hands to shake.

Get fucking control.

I snarled, rubbing my hands across my mouth.

The very second she walked into the bar, the light over the entrance highlighting her gorgeous features, I was thrown into another carnal moment. The beast that had been called to the surface only hours before was ready to strike again. Had I made a mistake turning earlier in order to fight the wolf? In order to save her life? No. I'd broken the rules and I would do it again.

She had no idea how close she'd come to becoming the wolf's latest victim. If I hadn't intervened, the creature's feast would have been considered a true victory. If she was my true mate and was taken, my leadership would possibly be challenged by the Nightwalkers, as well as every other pack. Fuck the rules.

My father had mated with a human and remained leader and so would I.

The decision was agonizing but one that had to be made.

It was time I accepted my rule, taking over the reins since my father was ready to relinquish control. The rumble in my gut told me I was doing the right thing.

I took a sip of my drink, enjoying the view for a few more seconds as she absently brushed her hand through her hair. God damn, I was overwhelmed with her magnificent sensuality. I hadn't anticipated anything but business attire, but her gorgeous red dress caught every red-blooded male's attention. I could hear what they were saying, buddy to buddy, their longing to fuck her, stripping her of her will. Over my dead body. The light coat she was wearing certainly couldn't hide her voluptuous curves or the way the silky material hugged all of them in a provocative manner.

She was a feisty minx in wolf's clothing. A temptress. I allowed a dark chuckle at the thought.

With my better than twenty-twenty eyesight, I could see the nervous tic on the corner of her mouth. I could also hear her rapid heartbeat, the blood pulsing through her veins.

She was nervous.

She was also excited.

Another moment of dousing the fire with gasoline. As she walked closer, a slight growl pushed up from my throat, the sound entirely that of an animal. Fighting my urges to take her here would be difficult.

Kathleen stopped a few feet from the table, giving me a onceover. Her expression was pensive, even pissed. She must have learned we would be working together. "Agent Cordero." The tone of her address was husky, sensuous, and very much on purpose. She was actually trying to unnerve me. I had to give her additional points of respect.

"I think given our less than formal initial meeting, we can certainly go by first names. Don't you, Kathleen?" I moved to

pull out her chair, refusing to back down until she eased onto the seat.

“Fine, Max. Or would you prefer Maximillian?”

“Max is fine. What would you like to drink?”

She leaned over the table, studying my glass, lifting it into her hand. If she'd noticed the cracked exterior, she didn't comment before gulping the remainder. “My, my, Jefferson's Presidential Select. You are a man of expensive tastes.” She wiped her mouth with her arm before placing the glass on the table.

“A refined woman who knows her Kentucky whiskeys. I'm impressed.” I lifted my hand and two fingers toward the bartender, ordering two.

I could see the hint of surprise in her eyes before she laughed and eased her coat from her shoulders. Leaning forward, she folded her hands and stared straight into my eyes. “Let's get this straight, Max. I realize that we shared an... experience, but now that we're working together, that's never going to happen again. Ever. Do you understand me? Do I need to explain it any clearer?”

The woman had no idea the kind of reaction her angry words created deep within. Every vile and nasty thing that had entered my mind would happen. *Period.*

I would chain her.

I would whip her.

I would train her.

I would use her.

In the end, she would enjoy every moment of surrendering to me and the passion that we'd already shared.

I leaned forward until I knew that she would be able to hear every word I said in little more than a commanding whisper. There was no sense for anyone else to know our business and given the circumstances, I had to force our connection, cognizant of exactly how she would react. “Now allow me to make myself clear, Kathleen. You belong to me.”

“Please, go right ahead. Indulge me with the reason for your ridiculous statement.”

“You have been mine for months and while you couldn’t understand the dreams you experienced night after night, the dark and filthy fantasies that kept you awake and in need, now you do. The moment we touched, the very passionate kisses we shared were a clear indication of your intense longing.”

Kathleen laughed although the sound was filtered with nervousness. “You are so damn arrogant.”

“I have every reason to be given I’m going to give you exactly what you need at all times. Domination. Discipline. Pain. Pleasure. Agony. Ecstasy. I know the woman inside better than you know yourself. You can only impede the woman lurking inside, the beast clawing at the surface. And I assure you, I will catch you when you break free.”

I knew the words stung as well as fueled her fire. I eased back once more, waiting for her nasty reply.

She pursed her lips, amusement in her eyes and she simply waited until the drinks arrived before uttering a single word. “Is that why we’re working together, Special Agent? So you can control me or is this more about the actual case?”

“I assure you that my desire is exactly what you’re sensing. Tell me I’m wrong, Kathleen.”

Her wry smile indicated that she refused to acknowledge what she was feeling even though her pulse had increased, her heart racing even more than when she’d arrived. “We had an attraction, Max, nothing more. You are merely a colleague now.”

“Then why are your nipples pressing hard against your dress and why is the fragrance of your exotic perfume laced with a subtle yet powerful hint of your feminine wiles?”

Her reaction was swift, her open hand managing to come within a few centimeters of my face before I snagged her wrist. I bristled, resisting dragging her over my lap for a reminder of who was dominant. “Do not attempt that again, Kathleen, or you will be punished.”

“I didn’t realize earlier you were an arrogant prick, Max. Correction, I did know but chose to ignore it. I won’t allow that to happen again. You’re also a liar, Max.”

I kept my hold firm, pulling her several inches over the table until our lips were almost touching. “I never lied to you about anything and I promise that I won’t in the future. I am an honorable man.”

“You think I’m going to fall for your lines of bullshit.”

“I think you want me to be demanding, ripping you away from your comfort zone.”

She huffed although the sparkle in her eyes gave her away. She’d longed for a dominating man. “Not a chance in hell.”

“We shall see about that. You are very beautiful, Kathleen, but in need of a strong man in your life.”

“I don’t need anyone, Maximillian, and you are an asshole.”

I released her, laughing softly before grabbing my drink. “As I said, we shall see, but you’re right. Work before pleasure. Tell me about the case since we are indeed going to be working together.”

She dragged her tongue across her lips, looking out the window and sipping on her drink before answering. “I found it interesting that you were right there at the scene of a vicious crime. I also *find* it fascinating that the deep scratches you had are completely healed. And don’t tell me it’s all about the lighting in this bar. Who and what are you?”

I hadn’t been expecting her statement or her question and lifted my glass. “Very nice, Detective Kelly. You are very observant. As I mentioned earlier, I was in the park looking for a suspect, a runaway fugitive. As far as the scratches, they were very superficial and I heal quickly. Just so you know, working together wasn’t my idea, Detective. Your captain made that decision entirely on his own.”

She shook her head, twisting her lovely mouth. “The fugitive you were after hadn’t been seen anywhere near the park. In fact, he was miles away. Don’t you think that’s a bit curious?”

Her hand fluttered over her mouth. Still nervous. Very much excited.

“I had a tip and one I thought I should follow. Brody Miller is a killer. He has connections in the city as well as several outlying counties. In fact, he’s all but disappeared. I will track down every lead until I find him.” I laughed bitterly, remembering I’d been pulled off the case. “Well, another ATF agent will at least.”

“You were pulled off the case to work with me,” she mused. “What assholes. Or did they grow tired of your attitude?”

I glared at her, shaking my head. “I was pulled off a case I worked very hard on because this case is evidently vital to some important people. You bet it pissed me off. However, we both follow orders, Detective Kelly, whether we like them or not.”

She mulled over my answer, finally nodding. “Fair enough. I’m sorry you were pulled off.”

“Don’t be. Neither of us have control over politicians. Have you ID’d the last victim yet?” My answer seemed to amuse her.

“His name was Michael Beals. I was able to locate his sister who lives in Florida. While I didn’t explain the graphic circumstances, I did get her consent to allowing us to perform an autopsy.”

“What are you hoping to find?”

Kathleen shrugged, her gaze shifting to the street. “I’m not entirely certain. It’s obvious how he was killed. Maybe I’m hoping for a miracle.”

“Kathleen, I have to ask, why were you in that park alone?”

“I told you, I heard the call come in.”

“Uh-huh. Your captain was certainly displeased with your behavior. That seems to be an issue that you have, not following rules. The most intriguing aspect is that you certainly didn’t seem to be afraid of an attack from the wild animal tearing people apart.”

Kathleen burst into laughter. “Believe what you want, and an animal? So, you’re one of those.”

“Meaning?”

“You honestly believe an animal attacked those people? Ridiculous. Trust me, those poor innocent people were attacked by a disgusting human disguising themselves as a monster. Now, from what I’ve been able to determine, I am talking about a very large and powerful man, capable of crushing a man’s windpipe with his hands alone. From the angles of the attacks, I would say at least six foot four, maybe two hundred and fifty pounds. Granted, the claw marks mutilating the victims’ faces are original from other killers, I will give him that, but the necessary equipment is easy to create in any garage setting.”

I was floored at not only her assumptions but her ability to assess the murders in an entirely different manner than I was used to. “Fascinating. You believe some crazed killer premeditated the kills. Okay,” I mused, tapping my fingers on the table. “Then I assume you have evidence to back this rather creative theory up.”

“Oh, absolutely.” She swirled her glass before taking a sip, acting as if she had all the answers.

What bothered me was that I knew she’d caught a glimpse of both my beast as well as the rogue wolf. Maybe her psyche refused to acknowledge what she’d seen. Then again, was she denying or simply goading me into providing answers because of her distrust of me? “Then I will come by your office in the morning. I will be very curious to see what you’ve gathered.”

“You seem surprised, Agent Cordero. You don’t think a plain little Denver detective has the skills to find answers so quickly?”

Every word that came out of her mouth was intended to fuel my anger. “Not at all. You are very good at what you do, Kathleen.”

She seemed to be weighing my words against any concept of sincerity. “Thank you. I work hard and take pride in my job.”

“As you should. What do you really think is happening with these murders? Have you found any connections?” At least we were far enough from anyone else not to be overheard.

“I don’t have a theory yet and no, there are no connections.”

“Tell me what you do know.” When she hesitated again, I offered a genuine smile. “You might be surprised how much I can be of help.”

She sat back, toying with her drink. “The three victims are of various ages, different nationalities and work in three entirely diverse fields, although all three were highly successful. On the surface, I see nothing in common.”

“And the conditions of the bodies?” I tried to keep the question casual as to not raise yet another red flag.

Her jaw tightened before she answered. “They were all similar in nature. They were attacked from behind, dragged at least a hundred yards to a more secluded location before being mauled.”

“Which follows the animal attack theory.”

“But that’s not right,” she insisted, leaning so close I was able to catch a glimpse of her rounded breasts. I swallowed hard even as my cock twitched. “I understand why some of the early police officers would think it was an animal attack, but their faces were clawed, their necks ripped out.”

“Like an animal.”

“Listen to me, Max. The claw marks were... unusual.”

I watched as she opened her hand as wide as possible, flexing her fingers as if mimicking the killer’s hand. “How do you mean?”

“Like a man’s hand with claws on them, as if they were fake.”

I could tell she firmly believed what she was saying. “And how did this killer rip out the victims’ throats?”

“The first two lab reports indicated there was saliva in the wounds. It would appear they were bitten. I’ve asked the

medical examiner assigned to dig deep on this and find out everything he can.”

I took a deep breath. That last thing I needed was for the medical examiner to cite an anomaly. “Animal?”

“Inconclusive. Additional tests are being run and compared, but the report did mention the saliva didn’t come from any known animal he was aware of.”

“Human saliva?”

“That’s just it. No. Maybe I am crazy to think this way but there’s intelligence in how the victims are being stalked. You’ll understand better when you see the pictures.”

She was actually extremely good at her job and nervous about the findings. Very few other officers of the law would pick up on the mannerisms of a Wolfen. “There are several predatory animals with keen abilities to stalk their victims, some even for days.”

I expected an outburst of anger, but she simply nodded. “I’m aware of that but why couldn’t the M.E. make a connection? If it was a bear or even a wolf, they are well-known species. I’ve spent some time doing research. I have a nagging idea and one I am going to follow through with.”

“Then you need to run those ideas past me.” I hadn’t been prepared to tell her about my follow-up phone call with Captain Walters. I could tell the man was under significant pressure from the mayor and other prominent members of the Denver city council. These kinds of murders were bad for tourism. And for the upcoming elections. The captain was well aware of my background and training, knew what I was capable of. He wanted me to make a connection to an animal, hunt one down and kill it.

And so, he’d made a calculated decision and placed me in charge.

His parting words were with regard to yanking Kathleen down from the rafters, helping her understand that the case should be in animal control’s hands. While I didn’t want any part of this case, I was well aware I might be the only one capable of

hunting down the true killer. Whether the rogue wolf was Wolfen or from another pack, his hunger would continue to grow.

“What? We might be working together, but I’m the lead on this case. I don’t care what anyone attempts to tell me, including you. I am doing my damn job the way I see fit.” She shook her head as her mouth pinched out of frustration.

Her fury added another layer of one intense aphrodisiac. “I can see I was correct in my earlier assumptions. You have difficulty with authority. That could end up getting you killed, Detective. You’re right, we will work on this case *together*. Do you understand?”

I could feel the heat of her blush creeping up along her jaw, moving to her cheeks from where I sat. I was ready to take her into the bathroom and defile her in every manner.

“And I think our conversations are better suited to the office. I’m finished here.” She moved to grab her coat, preparing to leave.

“Is that why you came here dressed in such a gorgeous dress, to merely entice me or throw it in my face that you are no longer interested?” I immediately regretted saying the words, but the woman could rile me like no other.

This time, her anger was full blown, her lovely mouth twisting. I’d pushed too far, but she riled every emotion in me to the point I was losing control. There was too much at stake to allow that to happen.

She jerked up from the table, tossing the contents of not only her glass but mine as well in my face. “How dare you, Agent Cordero. How. Fucking. Dare. You. You don’t rule me.” This time, she didn’t bother to use her open hand in an attempt to slap me.

She cold cocked me, managing to catch me in the jaw before I had the chance to react.

I heard the gasps from onlookers, the titillating laughter that only fueled her mischievous animosity, a husky giggle slipping past her lips.

My reaction was just as quick as before, grabbing her by the arm at the same time I moved to a standing position. I could tell she was fighting with her inner desires as well as demons that had plagued her, but enough was enough.

“You just crossed the line, Kathleen. What did I promise you before?”

“Oh, you are *not* going to punish me. Not a chance in hell. If you dare try, I will have your job.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen, Detective. It seems you were the one who went off the grid, going into a closed park in the middle of the night against your captain’s orders. That calls for serious punishment.”

“As I said to you before. Fuck. You.”

I pulled her close to my chest, lowering my head and drinking in her incredible scent as I fisted her hair with my other hand. I was literally intoxicated by her fragrance, my heart racing as the adrenaline pumped in a frenetic manner. “Would you prefer that I spank you here in front of everyone or that we go to the bathroom? It’s entirely your decision.”

She was befuddled, blinking several times, finally accepting that I was serious. “No. Way. You have no right.”

“Oh, I have every right. What you don’t know is that I was placed in charge of this case.”

Kathleen gasped, openly shocked until anger took over, another flash of bright red flushing her cheeks. “No way. My captain wouldn’t do that to me. I’ve worked tirelessly on this. Nights. Weekends.”

“Well, he did, and he obviously had his reasons that you can discuss with him later. Right now, you have three seconds to decide or I’m going to pull you over my knees right here and I assure you, every person in this bar will be watching. Or is that what you crave, sweet Kathleen? Do you hunger to be humiliated in front of one hundred people?”

“Uh. Uh. You are...” She swallowed hard instead of finishing, her eyes flashing a combination of rage and shame.

“One. Two.”

“Fine, you asshole. The bathroom. But trust me, I will take you down for this.”

“I will enjoy seeing what you are capable of.” While I’d kept my voice low, every eye in the establishment was on us, watching what the two obvious lovers would do. I kept my promise, pulling her behind me the few feet toward the darkened hallway, selecting the women’s bathroom.

We were both on fire, the jolts between us humming like a live wire. Once inside the small room, I closed and locked the door, pushing her hard against the solid wooden panel. “You are one bad girl. You require harsh discipline.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, you think you own me, but I assure you, no man owns me,” she whispered, her tone dangerously provocative, further igniting the beast inside.

“The truth is. I do. I own every. Single. Inch. I’m going to spank that tight little ass of yours. Then I’m going to fuck you. Do you understand?”

“Never.” She slammed her hands against my chest, almost managing to get away from me.

I wrapped my hand around her throat, pushing her once again. “Then you’re in for a rude awakening. I’ll ask you once again. Do. You. Understand?”

She laughed, her eyes darting back and forth. “Fuck you.”

“That’s exactly what’s going to happen over and over again.”

I crushed my mouth over hers, thrusting my tongue instantly inside. The taste of her, along with the smooth hint of bourbon was a powerful aphrodisiac, sending a roar of hunger into my system.

She pushed hard against me, struggling and moaning for several seconds. My cock was in anguish, my balls ready to explode. Everything about this woman drove me to the very edge of my sanity.

As the kiss continued, she clawed my shirt, arching her back and leaning closer in. Her hunger was as insatiable as mine

even as she continued to fight me.

I shifted my hand to her hair, tangling my fingers in her long strands, keeping her exactly where I wanted her. When she jutted her hips, grinding them back and forth, I could no longer breathe.

I jerked back, issuing a series of growls before dropping my head to her neck, biting down. Every muscle in my body was on fire, longing for more than a superficial taste of her. Then I remembered what my father had told me. I couldn't risk even the slightest scratch until we knew what we were dealing with.

But taking her, filling her with my cum and covering her with my scent would send a powerful message.

She was off limits.

I licked down the length of her neck then took her by the hand once again, pulling her toward the sink and pushing her over the edge.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a breathy voice.

“You know exactly what I'm doing. I'm giving you a spanking. I was very clear about the rules.”

While she laughed, her eyes full of venom, her breath skipped. “You won't get away with this.”

“With what exactly? Giving you what you need?” I kicked her legs apart and lifted her dress, exposing her rounded bottom that still held a hint of the earlier spanking I'd given her. The way the G-string floated in the crack of her ass was a powerful draw. I took gulping breaths, resisting yanking her panties entirely off. I fisted and yanked her hair once again, peering over her shoulder before beginning.

“You really are a bastard,” she hissed between clenched teeth.

“I'm many things, Kathleen, and all of them powerful by nature. You'll soon learn that.”

She slapped her hands against the glass in an exaggerated fashion, giving me a vile look before smiling in such a pretty little plastic manner.

The moment I smacked my hand across her bottom, she bit back a yelp, her body rocking forward. When I repeated the move, she managed to smile even more brightly. By the third, fourth, and fifth strike, she was breathing heavily.

I kept my rhythm even, moving from one side to the other. The buildup of heat as well as the way her rounded cheeks fit perfectly in my hand was breathtaking, more appealing than almost anything.

Almost.

Even with the lovely crimson thong she was wearing, I caught a glimpse of her swollen pussy lips pushing against the lacey material. All I could think about was sucking on her tender tissue, licking up every drop of her delicious cream.

Perhaps I would after I was finished providing a necessary reminder.

The cracking sound of my wrist matched her guttural moan as I picked up the intensity. I wanted her to feel the round of punishment for days, to know that this kind of behavior wasn't going to be tolerated. I also wanted her wet constantly, ready for me. I was indeed the bastard she claimed but she had no way of knowing what a true monster I was beneath the savvy clothing.

She would soon learn.

I heard the sound of the doorknob, someone attempting to get inside, to interrupt our sinful moment. I almost let them in, allowing them to see the carnal intensity being played out. Instead I willed them away, keeping my attention focused on finishing the discipline. "Ten more."

"Ten?" she repeated, her mouth twisting in frustration. "One day I will repay you and my way."

I didn't bother to answer her threat, merely jerking her hips further away from the counter, forcing her to bend all the way over. I shoved my hand under her dress, pushing against the small of her back. Even her skin was on fire, searing the tips of my fingers.

Moaning, she slowly dropped her head, taking several deep breaths. “Aren’t you going to pull out your belt?” she goaded, her shoulders heaving.

“Be careful what you ask for, Kathleen.” I smacked several fingers against her pussy four times in rapid succession, startling her to the point she whimpered loudly.

“Oh, God.” She crouched even lower until her cheek almost rested on the dirty glass. And in yet another brazen act, she opened her legs even wider.

Asking for more.

Begging for more.

But in her way, as if she truly was in control.

I issued four more slaps to her pussy, marveling in the way my fingers were slickened by her juice before moving back to her spanking. I wasn’t going to be able to keep my patience much longer. The last ten smacks were harder than the ones before and the second I was finished, I slipped my aching fingers down the crack of her ass, wrapping them around the slender string.

She pushed up from the counter, a wild look in her eyes. “Go ahead. Rip them off. I dare you.”

The snarl slipping from my mouth curled my lip as I wound my finger around the string three times. There was no fanfare, no advance warning. I merely twisted my wrist, the hard snap echoing, her panties floating freely into the air.

She took that moment to slam her hands against the glass, using all her might to push backwards. I was unable to keep her in position, the two seconds allowing her time to shift in order to face me.

I cupped both sides of her face, yanking her once again toward me and as I towered over her, she bared her very soul for me. There was no fear in her eyes, only a lust-filled look, the same thirst that would never be quenched. I captured her mouth, digging my fingers into her lovely skin as I dominated her tongue.

Kathleen rocked her hips against mine then threw one leg over my thigh, clawing at my shirt with one hand while she gripped the edge of the counter with the other. I hiked her dress up once again, grinding against her until she moaned into the kiss. I knew exactly what she was attempting to do: break my concentration, usurp my authority. I was having none of it.

I kept her pinned into place as I struggled to release my cock, immediately thrusting the entire length of my shaft inside. Her pussy yielded immediately, opening up like a beautiful flower. She was so wet, scalding hot.

I broke the kiss, struggling to breathe, shifting back and forth as her muscled clamped around the thick invasion.

“Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.” She clawed at me, slapping her hand against my chest, her ragged breathing animalistic in nature.

“Mine. All mine.”

Her entire body began to shake as I pulled out, plunging into her again. And again. The force was savage, rattling the cheap mirror against the wall. She juted her hips, meeting every brutal thrust with one of her own, still jockeying to take the lead.

I lifted her off the floor, pushing her hard onto the counter, splitting her legs far apart as I leaned over. “You’re not in charge and you never will be. The sooner you get that into that pretty little head of yours, the better.” I began rocking my hips, driving in and out in long, hard drives.

She gasped for air, planting her hands on the counter and arching her back, her eyes never leaving mine. A smile curled on her lips as she wrapped both legs around mine, laughing softly as if still winning.

I fucked her long and hard until we were both panting. Beads of sweat dripped off my brow, sliding onto her face and neck, two onto her luscious lips. When she licked them off, dragging the tip of her tongue back and forth, I threw my head back and roared.

I became the wild animal, slamming into her. I was insatiable, hungering for more and more. There was no ability to focus or

even think clearly. I was merely feasting on a precious gift, fueling the beast inside.

She clung to me, her entire body shaking yet accepting every hard plunge. When she lolled her head against me, moaning loudly, I could no longer take the pressure of my swollen balls.

“Look at me,” I commanded, the words nothing more than a raspy growl.

Her fingers dug into my arms and when she finally obeyed, her eyes were glassy, her face shimmering from the intensity of our passion. “What?” she managed.

“I’m going to fill you with my seed. Then there is no turning back.”

“Uh... huh...”

“Come for me. Come with me.”

Whether or not she understood no longer mattered. The adrenaline flowing through my body was like jet fuel, rattling every sense, sizzling every nerve ending.

She crushed her arms around my head, tugging at my hair as if holding on for dear life. As she drew me in closer, until our lips were almost touching, the feel of her heartbeat matched my own. She wrapped her feet together, tossing her head back and forth.

“Oh... I...” Kathleen murmured, her body undulating against mine, our combined heat explosive.

“Come, baby.” My voice was little more than guttural as stars floated in my periphery of vision, a tightness in my chest occurring.

Her pussy muscles clenched and released several times, drawing me in even deeper. Everything became a blur as I tried to hold back. I wanted this moment to last.

Taking her.

Using her.

Fucking her.

But as a climax rushed into her system, her moans becoming muffled screams, I lost all control, powering into her like some crazed barbarian. There wasn't a muscle in my body that wasn't aching from the rawness of the actions, the sensations overwhelming.

And I issued the command one last time.

“Come!”

She tossed her head, her mouth opening to a perfect ‘O’ as her entire body trembled in my arms. An orgasm swept into her system with enough violence she clawed at my neck, moaning huskily, “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

I was finished holding back. Done. Incapable of any rational thoughts whatsoever.

As I erupted deep inside, I could almost feel a change in my system, one so powerful it took my breath away. I closed my eyes, concentrating as my cock continued to throb. The extreme heat and the wetness of her sweet little pussy threw me into another reality. I issued a bedraggled growl as she clung to me, burying her face against my neck, her heartbeat echoing in my ears.

I could almost taste her.

The wolf was close to the surface, far too damn close. I fought the urge to turn, my heart racing from the rush, the frantic energy surfacing. The growl pushing up from my throat was no longer my own, but in those next few seconds, I willed the beast into his cage, rattled as fuck from what had almost occurred.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The count was all I needed to regain absolute control, furious I'd allowed my guard to fall. No one had prepared me for the extreme shift of need or the lack of willpower. No one. When I was completely in charge, I finally opened my eyes, blinking

from the harshness of the man in the reflection. My eyes were no longer human.

They were canine.

CHAPTER 7



*K*athleen

Darkness.

I loathed storms, lightning and thunder always driving demons to the surface. At least the ugly storm had passed, leaving behind thick gray clouds and enough wind to bring a chill in through the old bathroom window.

The phone call was a reminder I was embroiled in a true moment of horror.

“Hello?” I yanked the towel around me, hovering in the chilly bathroom and glaring out the small window at my unkempt yard. “Hello? Is anyone there?” All I could hear were crackling sounds, which was completely abnormal. There were fiber optic cables close to my little house. I waited another few seconds before glaring at the screen on my phone. The number wasn’t one I recognized, but I was used to receiving scores of unwanted solicitation calls. “I’m trying one more time, asshole, and if you’re selling, I’m not buying. So, is anyone there?”

The crackling all but stopped, leaving silence.

Dead silence.

Not dead air, but the kind of eerie quiet that created goosebumps. Snarling, I ended the call, waiting for a full minute for the person to try again. Then I’d give them a piece of my mind. I finally slid the phone on the counter, glaring at

my reflection, my pinched face highlighting exactly what I was feeling.

Anger.

What I felt was rage boiling deep inside. I was more than just incensed that my captain had taken me off as lead. I was furious to the point I couldn't think straight. Then again, I'd allowed an arrogant prick of a man like Maximillian to touch me.

Spank me.

Fuck me.

Tossing the towel, I grimaced as I stepped into the shower, standing under the steaming hot water as chills continued to race down my spine to my legs. I couldn't deny our explosive attraction, or the way Max made me feel.

Desired.

I'd never felt so filthy or wanted in my life. I'd also never felt the level of shame I had as when he announced in front of an entire bar he was going to spank me. I'd actually heard at least five people clapping. As if I'd deserved such an egregious action. I groaned, slapping my hand against the dense tile. I hadn't been able to sleep, nausea finally kicking me in the stomach somewhere around three in the morning.

That's when I'd resorted to a tall glass of bourbon. Even the smooth liquor hadn't erased the cramps or the visions of the hard fucking in the middle of a dingy bathroom.

And I'd loved every second of being taken savagely, the few minutes dirty and unforgiving.

I had to be losing some of my senses, or my mind entirely. I'd sworn once that being with him wasn't going to happen again and I meant it this time. We would be working together. Oh, goody. He would be... my superior. God! I couldn't believe it. What had I done to deserve such treatment?

You almost got yourself killed.

Well, there was that. The captain had barked at me for thirty solid minutes when I'd arrived at the office. Finding out Mark

had requested an extended leave of absence had been gut-wrenching, his medical condition potentially life-threatening. Then hearing the identity of my new partner hadn't gone over very well. To say I'd expressed livid tendencies was an understatement.

Everything about this case was off, terrifying because I hadn't been able to get a handle on the killer in any regard. I stood by my instincts. There was a calculating killer in the midst.

I shuddered as an entirely different kind of vision flashed into my mind. I'd seen Max's eyes in the bathroom. The change in them had been both erotic and eerie and so damn similar to whatever I'd seen in the forest. Or so I thought. The lighting in the dingy bar had certainly sucked, but I knew what I'd seen. There was something strange about the man and I was resolved to find out what.

I honestly couldn't tell if Max had bought the entire concept of an animal attack. He didn't seem swayed one way or the other. I was determined to prove a human was responsible. I was meeting him at my office in less than an hour. Sadly, I couldn't spend the entire day on the case and I also couldn't get out of the damn lunch I'd been wrangled into attending. The last thing I wanted to do was take any time away from hunting down the vicious killer, but the catered soiree was for my baby sister's upcoming wedding.

And it was a family affair.

I slunk further under the water, suddenly hating my life. I wanted nothing to do with seeing my parents right now. My father would likely grill me on the case, as if I had a choice in working it. He was ashamed that I'd decided on law enforcement.

Damn him.

I wasn't going to follow in his footsteps. I wanted nothing to do with my father's company and no matter how often he ridiculed my job, I would never give in. I almost laughed at the thought. I'd wanted to join the police force for as long as I could remember. Too bad my father didn't have a son to become his protégé, although he did have a second in

command, a man I'd heard from my sister was one hot bachelor. Today would be our first meeting. How wonderful.

I grabbed the shower net, yanking a bottle of gel off the small ledge. This morning I had no time to lament over family issues. With the murders escalating, catching the fucker before another kill was a race against time.

As I began to scrub my naked body, my thoughts drifted back to Max. Our attraction was close to being feral, carnal in nature. I felt more alive this morning than I had in a long time and after no sleep. The nausea was gone, electricity soaring in my body. The sensations had to be about adrenaline and nothing more.

When I grabbed the shampoo, I allowed the naughty visions to filter into my mind, remembering his utter domination in the way he touched me. He'd held me as if I was a prized possession, a woman truly belonging to him in every way. While I adored powerful men in certain regards, his prowess was riddled with a dangerous quality that I couldn't seem to process.

I took several deep breaths, finally relaxing enough to close my eyes as I rinsed my hair. After a few seconds of the water spray dancing off my skin, the stream became pinpricks, more discomforting than soothing.

"Ouch. Jesus." The water was way too hot. Even reaching for the faucet moved from being uncomfortable to providing an actual hint of pain. I jabbed my hand at the lever until I was finally able to shift it to cooler water, staring down at my blotched skin. Great. Now I needed to get the water heater checked out. Granted, since purchasing the tiny cottage almost two months before, the one I'd promised myself I would renovate when I had time, I'd done almost nothing.

Including handling various maintenance projects that the inspector had said needed my immediate attention.

Or unpacking.

I'd purchased the home on a whim, resisting the warnings I'd heard from my family and my partner regarding the area of

town. Maybe I wanted to be in the thick of crimes. Laughing, I turned off the water, yanking open the shower curtain and noticing the screen on my phone glowed with the tropical beach screen saver.

Someone had called once again.

Only I hadn't heard the phone ringing.

Annoyed, I quickly dried off, reaching for my dress on the back of the closet door. The ring I'd chosen sounded again, now an annoyance. Another damn phone call. I caught it on the third ring, this time saying nothing when I accepted it.

Another round of silence coming from the other end. There were no call center noises or heavy breathing. Just a whole lot of nothing.

"Look, asshole. Take this number off your list. Got it?" I didn't bother waiting for an answer before ending and tossing the phone. I wrapped the towel around my head, reaching for my makeup bag when a flash caught my eye. After grabbing my Beretta, I inched toward the window, darting a glance outside.

I'd never been a believer in ghosts or other fairytale monsters, but the case certainly had me spooked enough to think I'd seen something.

A figure standing outside my first floor window.

My cop instincts kicked in. After yanking the towel off my head, I rushed to the back door, quietly opening it and easing outside. In my opinion, I'd been lucky to find a piece of property close to the city with a small yard, massive trees surrounding me on three sides. The limited privacy had sold me on the little house, even though there were neighbors close by. At this moment, the shadows coming from every direction did nothing but creep me out.

The aging back deck steps creaked as I walked down in my bare feet, the moderate breeze tossing two limbs from one of my unruly trees against the gutter. I hissed, chastising myself for feeling jumpy. I was a big girl with an even bigger gun, capable of handling any perpetrator.

From where I stood, there was no sign that anyone had been in the back yard, clomping through the dense underbrush. I cautiously rounded the corner closet to the bathroom. There were no footsteps underneath the window or attempts to break in, but what did catch my attention was the pathway of broken limbs leading directly into the bank of trees.

With the gun in both hands, I inched closer, staring through the opening. “What the hell.” I moved carefully through the foliage, scanning from right to left the entire time, listening for any sounds. Other than the breeze, everything was almost as quiet as the phone call.

I took a deep breath, calming my nerves. *Get yourself together.*

My rational mind told me that a small animal, like a deer or a fox had run scared into the woods, even if we were in the middle of the city. My irrational mind told me otherwise. However, I wasn't going to test my luck. I backed toward the opening, still searching the perimeter.

Crack!

The harsh snap was enough I almost lost my balance. I swung the barrel in the direction of the sound, sucking air in rapidly as the shadows of the trees became oppressive. Suffocating. Darkness enshrouded my periphery of vision until I was frozen.

Sometimes darkness is the only thing we see. Look beyond to find the light and the truth.

I'd heard the words more than once while training at the police academy, the saying one I would never forget. I was a fool for buying into the fear. I pushed away the strangling demon, standing at my full height. There were no monsters lurking in the darkness, only beasts crowding my mind.

I laughed softly, turning to head back to the house when I sensed the presence; however, this time I wasn't afraid. As I turned my head, my eyes were able to lock on another pair, only they glowed in the darkness.

* * *

The whistles started the second I walked into the office. Granted, none of the other detectives had ever seen me in a dress. Even the few Christmas parties I'd attended, I'd remained in my normal work clothes—pants, an unflattering shirt, and a jacket.

“Vava voom!” one of the detectives called out, making a crude gesture that allowed me the joy of promptly lifting my middle finger in his direction.

“Sensitive,” another hissed.

I merely gave the asshole a hard glare, continuing to head toward my desk. I hadn't noticed Max's presence, although I'd felt him almost immediately after walking into the room. A single bead of perspiration trickled between my breasts, a clear indication that I hadn't been able to purge the man from my system.

He was apparently my kryptonite.

I ignored the rest of the crew and slid onto my seat, only seconds later darting a glance in the direction of where Max stood merely twenty feet away. He'd watched and from what I could tell by his expression enjoyed my arrival.

And the men fawning over me.

Max slowly inched closer, swaggering like some demi-God. Who the hell did he think he was? When he reached my partner's desk, which was backed up against mine, only then did I hear a sound coming from his massive chest.

A raspy growl.

I stared into his eyes, unblinking. They were completely normal, the light adding a hint of cobalt blue to the otherwise dark intensity. I had to chalk off the morning's experience to my lack of sleep and nervous stomach.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his face pinching with concern.

“Fine. Just a long night going over evidence.” Whether or not he believed me, I didn’t care. I shook my head, firing up my computer. I wanted to get this over with.

“What do you have, a hot date?” he finally asked as he moved to sit on the edge of my desk.

“You are welcome to use Mark’s chair so you don’t have to be so close,” I commented, trying to remain as nonchalant as possible.

“I don’t have access to your computer systems.”

I almost whispered the word ‘yet,’ but I kept my mouth shut.

“Interesting. It would appear that you have other plans for the day. I thought we were working on the case.”

“While it’s none of your business, I have a lunch meeting that I was unable to get out of.” I heard the disdain in my tone and noticed almost immediately that every other detective seemed far too interested in what we were doing. I shifted the cursor, moving quickly to the pictures that had been taken of the various crime scenes. “You might want to take a look at these.”

He leaned over, dangerously close, allowing me an intoxicating whiff of his scent. He wasn’t the kind of man to wear cologne, but he didn’t have to. Everything about him reeked of testosterone and pheromones. I gripped the mouse with enough force I was afraid I’d crush it. Why did I continue to think anything sexual about the man?

“You look beautiful. I hope he’s worth it.”

The comment seemed far too inappropriate, even though we’d had sex more than once. I shifted closer, pointing toward the computer screen, my mouth dry. While he was my partner, I had no intention of telling him about my earlier scare or what had to be hallucinations. I didn’t need to be taken down another notch or two.

Max was instantly intrigued, even placing his hand over mine and forcing a change to another series of pictures. The instant electricity was startling, a second bead of perspiration threatening to give away my nerves. I was fully aroused, my

panties instantly damp and my nipples aching. I bit back any kind of reaction, doing everything I could not to inhale his... delicious smell.

“I can understand why other officers continue to believe the attacks are from an animal,” he said quietly, keeping his voice low.

“I’m no fool, Max. For an untrained eye, you might think that but take a look at the way the bodies are positioned.” With his hand still attached to mine, I flipped through a series of images, only stopping on each one briefly. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He eased back, chuckling under his breath. “You’re good, Detective. I missed what you were saying at first. The bodies were placed in the same manner, almost in a ritualistic approach.”

“Exactly.” I was suddenly excited, my breath skipping.

Exhaling, he rubbed his jaw and I was cognizant he had the most sensual two- or three-day stubble, only adding to his provocative image. “This changes... everything.”

What I found interesting was the catch in his voice, almost as if he’d expected something of this nature.

“What do you make of it? Some vampire-type group hunting victims at random?” I sat back in my chair, folding my arms across my chest. My action drew his gaze, his eyes falling from my face to my chest then back up. I could swear the man was sneering.

“There are several active cult-style groups that are listed in and around the Denver area so that’s a remote possibility.”

“Why remote?”

“Because wannabe vampires drink blood. Some have altered their dentistry with implants in order to perform whatever bloodsucking act they think will garner them mortality.”

Sighing, I glanced at the pictures again. “Instead of ripping out their throats.” I studied the images, trying to make sense of

what I was seeing. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say we were dealing with the paranormal.”

Max laughed, folding his hands together. “Meaning what, Detective? Ghosts? Demons?”

I swallowed before answering, unable to look into his eyes. “Werewolf.”

“There are no such things as werewolves.” There was such defiance in his tone, such certainty.

“Of course there isn’t. But there are dangerous criminals hell bent on crushing people’s lives.”

“Said like a woman who knows from experience.”

I laughed softly, once again unable to look him in the eyes. “My life is my life. Okay?” He didn’t need to know that every man I’d dated had faded into the woodwork the moment they learned I was a cop.

“I’m your partner and as such, we’re going to stay in direct communication. I want you to call me tonight when you get home and check in. Do you understand?”

“My God. You think you’re my keeper. That’s insane.”

“What I know, Kathleen, is that if you’re correct in your assumptions this is a very human killer, then you already got too close. The murderer likely knows who you are and given the nature of his crimes, he won’t appreciate having any loose ends. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

I didn’t answer right away.

“Do you?” he snapped.

“Yes. Fine. Okay? I get it. I’ll let you know I’m all right.”

He took a deep breath before moving away. “You’re one rebellious woman determined to go it alone. Just remember that monsters like the one who murdered these people feed off easy prey.”

As he walked away, his words haunted the hell out of me, and I shivered to the core.

* * *

“There you are!” My mother’s gleeful voice was full of happiness, her eyes lit up from the joy of the day as well as at least two glasses of wine. I couldn’t blame her. My father took every opportunity to gloat about his good fortune to anyone who set foot over the threshold. Today would be no exception.

“I’m sorry I’m late. Traffic was a bear.” I wasn’t lying. Just getting out of the city had taken me twice as long as normal but the real reason for my tardiness was the time I’d spent with Max. While he hadn’t laughed me out of the police precinct with my idea, he had attempted to undermine my theory.

There were no such things as werewolves.

Okay, so my rational side knew that, but what other explanation could there be? I thought about my grandmother’s beliefs and the stories I’d heard for a few seconds before shaking them off. The call we’d received from the medical examiner with his promised update only added fuel to my fire. Sadly, he’d been unable to identify the saliva found in the wounds. While he did mention it was possible the substance had been tainted by some unknown drug, he wasn’t willing to add a label stating either animal or human. The inconclusive findings could fuel whatever news reports were issued later on.

Which could start a citywide panic.

The call I’d placed to animal control hadn’t offered any help either. They’d caught four foxes, a bear, and shot two wolves, but their autopsies hadn’t revealed any human remains.

We were at square one with no other evidence. Captain Walters hadn’t taken the news very well either. The killer was brilliant in my mind, performing the kills without so much as a single drop of his, her, or its blood found at any of the crime scenes.

“Are you with us, darling?” my mother asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m sorry. Just working long hours.”

She eased a strand of hair behind my shoulders, her sigh exaggerated. “I hate the line of work you’re in.”

“Please don’t, Mom.”

Shrugging, she took a step away. “Just try and enjoy your sister’s special day. All right?”

It was always a crapshoot about how much or if I could enjoy the time when I came. I barely tolerated holidays, refusing to come for any other reason.

I glanced around the foyer and into the living room, noticing the dozens of fresh flowers placed in strategic locations. Nothing too good for my baby sister’s engagement lunch.

“Well, everyone is in the sunroom. Your father is just about to give a toast.” My mother winked before squeezing my arm and moving toward one of the vases to adjust. Brenda Kelly was a consummate host. She’d certainly had enough practice over the years. There’d been countless dinner parties, corporate functions for my father’s bursting-at-the-seams business, and holiday events that made the society pages.

I loathed every one of them.

“Well, this should be fun,” I muttered under my breath, smoothing down my dress given I knew I’d receive a critical eye from my father upon my grand entrance.

“Just grab a glass of champagne on your way in, sweetie,” my mother suggested. “This is a celebration. Hopefully one day soon we’ll be throwing a party for your engagement.”

Her lilting laughter made me cringe. I was unlikely to ever take the plunge and both of my parents knew it. Another reason I was the black sheep of the family. I grabbed a flute from one of the four waiters hovering like vultures, moving just inside the doorway to the sunroom, praying not to be seen.

As maid of honor, my duties would soon begin and I couldn’t wait. I snickered at the thought. What did I know about planning a bachelorette party or helping with the selection of

fluffy bridesmaid dresses? I'd been a tomboy my entire life, preferring guns and horses to Barbie dolls and nail polish.

Unfortunately, my wish wasn't granted, my sister noticing me immediately. Her squeal of happiness drew everyone's attention.

"Kathleen!" As Celia rushed toward me, I felt the weighted gaze of my father as well as his immediate disdain. Maybe my choice of red for my dress hadn't been my best decision, but I enjoyed seeing the great James Kelly riled.

I also noticed a man standing just off to my father's side. This was no doubt the man my father had hired after the last time I'd turned down his job offer. Tyler Ridgefield had an impeccable reputation working with failing companies, his financial savvy perhaps exactly what my father needed. While I had to admit the man was remarkably handsome, I had a bad feeling my father would try to use him as leverage.

Another engagement attempt, perhaps?

"Hiya, sis. I've missed you," I whispered, hugging her tightly. We'd always been close and even though I hated the pomp and circumstance, I was determined to make certain my little sister had a fabulous wedding.

"How are the plans going?" I asked casually, studying the group of people who'd been invited. Senators. Congressmen. Judges. Corporate moguls. Standing in the room were the who's who of Denver society.

And I could see maybe two other guests under the age of forty. The party had been entirely orchestrated by my parents. Another glow and show moment.

She shrugged, giving me her usual mischievous expression. "You know how Mother and Father are. Maybe you and I can get together next week over nachos and beer to really talk about plans."

I laughed. Her engagement hadn't stripped her from her spunky personality. "I'll see what I can do. If I can get away from this case I'm working on."

“I heard about it. I’m so sorry. What a horrible case for you to have to work on. The murders are so violent. Any idea who the killer is? Is it possible there’s some wild animal on the loose?”

I gripped her hand, pulling her closer to the door. We’d kept everything under wraps in an attempt not to terrify the public. “Where did you hear that from?”

“You know Father,” Celia said dourly. “He knows everything. He mentioned it in passing last night when I had dinner with them. I think he’d had a chat with your captain.”

What. The. Fuck. Seething, I snapped my head in my father’s direction. “Asshole.”

She squeezed my hand. “Remember, big sister of mine, this is a party. If I have to endure getting all dolled up, then you can promise me you won’t start a fight.”

I wasn’t certain I could promise her anything at this point. I’d known for years my father had gone to school with Captain Walters, had even kept up a cordial friendship, but if my father had interfered, I would never speak to him again. One thing was for certain. I was going to confront him before I was forced to endure leg of lamb for lunch. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Don’t let him get to you, Kath. You have your life and he has his. He’s just never gotten over the fact you continue to refuse to work with him.”

I lifted an eyebrow, taking a huge gulp of the champagne before answering. “You mean work *for* him. Speaking of which, how’s the new job?”

I could see a glimmer of unhappiness followed by a huge smile. “It’s going okay. Not certain how much longer I’m going to be there though.”

“Why?”

She darted a glance over her shoulder at her fiancé. “Zane wants to start a family.”

As if on cue, Zane Sadler noticed my entrance. He was well aware I didn’t like him. When he walked closer, I could see

bruises on his knuckles.

“Did he hit you?” I hissed.

Celia narrowed her eyes, glancing from me toward Zane. “Don’t be silly. He was trying to do me a favor and hammered his hand. Jesus. Let it go. I know you don’t like him, but damn it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. Still, I was ready to yank out my sisterly claws when our father cleared his throat, immediately drawing almost everyone’s attention.

My father tapped his crystal flute with one of his very expensive rollerball pens, his eyes burning a hole into me. “Excuse me. Ladies.”

Zane stopped in his tracks like the good boy my father was grooming him to be.

Celia took me by the hand, yanking me in the direction of Zane. I’d done my homework on the man but now I knew I had to keep a watchful eye on him. If he’d touched my sister in any manner, I’d have no issue cutting off his hands. I smirked at the thought as Zane gave me a respectful nod.

The guy was handsome and perfect for the family fold—Harvard educated, captain of the lacrosse team, and an all-around athlete. He was a basic Colgate commercial in the making. Maybe he’d become the son my father always wanted. Or maybe he’d spar with Tyler. At least the two of them might be able to keep my father out of my hair. What did bother me was that Zane seemed too perfect, as if he was hiding a terrible lie.

Stop being a cop for once.

That wasn’t going to happen. I only half paid attention to my father’s pontificating speech, congratulating his special little girl on her accomplishment. Since when did marriage become a business achievement?

After the round of clapping and good wishes, the crowd broke up almost immediately, no doubt heading for the massive bar display that had been set up. I waited in the sunroom until my

father walked out, likely headed to his office for yet additional business before lunch.

He'd been the kind of father to work eighteen-hour days, missing dance recitals and school functions. To his credit, he'd gone from barely making a living to becoming a multimillionaire. Sadly, he'd never learned that money didn't buy happiness.

"You're sitting beside me at lunch," Celia said in a teasing voice. "We can make fun of the other guests."

I couldn't help but smile, remembering how often we'd gotten in trouble for doing that very thing over the years. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You garnered the attention of Daddy's sexy employee," Celia whispered in my ear.

"I thought you were engaged," I admonished, watching as Tyler approached.

"Marriage doesn't mean I'm dead, you know. I'll leave you two alone. He's very nice so please don't bite his head off." She walked away before I could grab her even though she knew I was terrible with small talk.

"Very funny," I said between clenched teeth.

Tyler studied me intently as he walked closer, finally holding out his hand. "Kathleen Kelly. I've heard a great deal about you from your father. I'm Tyler Ridgefield."

The moment I shook his hand, I felt a rise of heat in my system. "I'm certain you have. I hope you find working with my father... enjoyable." I had the distinct feeling he was a wolf in sheep's clothing. I'd prided myself on being a keen observer.

He offered a genuine laugh, his eyes lighting up. "Your dad is formidable, I'll give him that, but I enjoy a challenge, much like what I've heard you are."

Why did I have the feeling he'd been directed to talk with me? My hackles raised, I took a decided step away from him. "I'm the kind of woman who doesn't play games very well,

something that you should keep in mind. I do hope you enjoy the party. I need to have a chat with my father before lunch.”

“Of course. I hope we’ll have a chance to talk again.”

His grin would be considered boyish, charming by others. I could see right through him. “I’m certain we will.” Huffing, I finished off my champagne, placing the glass on one of the side tables and heading down the hallway toward my father’s office. The door was cracked and I could tell he was already on the phone.

I knocked once before walking inside, closing the door behind me with a hard thud.

He swung around, as if prepared for a fight. There was such coldness in his eyes, but this time not because of my interruption or anything I was wearing he deemed inappropriate. I could tell that whoever he was on the phone with had riled him completely. He motioned me in and turned his back toward me. “No, goddamn it!”

My father rarely lost his cool.

I noticed an easel near his bookcase and walked closer. The architectural drawings were exquisite, truly exceptional and no doubt his latest project. I stole a glance in his direction, concerned just how tense he seemed to be.

“I’ll have to call you back,” he stated gruffly, rubbing his eyes when he couldn’t immediately disconnect the phone. “No, this is my daughter’s engagement party. I will call you when I’m available.” He slammed down the desk phone, lifting the receiver once again as if ready to smash it against the base unit. After gently placing it down, he grabbed his drink from the desk and when he took a swig, I noticed his hand was shaking.

“What’s wrong, Father?”

He didn’t answer me right away and when he did, he’d turned around wearing his usual half smirk. “Nothing at all. Just contractual differences. Nothing for you to worry about today.”

‘Today’ seemed to be weighted. “You seem pretty angry.”

He eased his glass down, taking several deep breaths. “Is there something you need from me, Kathleen, or have you come to goad me on something as you usually do?”

His agitation was even more aggressive than normal. We’d pushed each other’s buttons for years and this afternoon, I wasn’t in the mood for the round of bullshit. “I came to ask you a direct question, Father, and hopefully you’ll give me a straight answer. Do you think you can do that?”

While his face reddened initially from anger, he quickly relaxed, even shaking his head as he chuckled. “You are so intelligent, Kathleen, and the most tenacious woman I have ever met. No wonder you are thought of so highly at the police department.”

“Hmmm... That means you were talking with Captain Walters. Weren’t you?”

He frowned before walking around his desk. “He and I are old friends. You already knew that.”

“Maybe,” I said, darting another glance at the glamorous set of buildings. “However, the timing seems odd since I was pulled off as the lead on a fairly gruesome case, one that certainly has political implications if it’s not handled well. Tell me, Father, are you running for office and asked that I be removed from that case?”

He seemed genuinely surprised. “How dare you, Kathleen.”

“How dare I? You’ve been trying to get me to work for you for years. Did you finally decide to derail my career so you could have your way? I would think your new lackey would be exactly what you need.”

“If you mean Tyler, he was an important find for the firm and I would never derail your career, although you should learn to make better decisions for yourself. You’ll wind up dead if you’re not careful.”

While a certain portion of my accusation might be overblown, I could tell that I was right about the topic of conversation they’d had. When he remained silent for longer than thirty seconds, I closed the distance until we were only inches apart.

“How dare *you*, Father. I’ve worked very hard to get where I am. This case is one of the most disturbing I’ve ever worked on and for some reason, there are people who want to sweep it under the rug. I can only imagine why. Is this about Captain Drake Walters running for office? Given your deep pockets, I would think that fits right into various strategies you have for your company.”

I’d never said anything like this to my father in all my years, but this was the last straw.

I expected him to lash out, but he slumped against the desk, once again rubbing his eyes. “It’s not like that, Kathleen. I would never do anything to hurt your career. As far as Tyler, he’s exactly what I’ve needed to keep the expenses in line, but he doesn’t have your skills.”

“My skills. Interesting word since I think you’ve already asked him to try and entice me into coming to work for you.”

He shook his head vehemently. “He is his own man. Not like that at all.”

“Then what is it?” I’d never seen him this uncomfortable. “Tell me, Father. I really do want to know.”

“Kathleen, you’re very important to me and I need you working with me. In fact, I was hoping to talk with you today about taking over as VP.”

“Vice president?” He’d upped the ante, which shocked the hell out of me. “I’m not qualified for that job.”

“You’re more than qualified and I need you by my side. I can offer you two hundred thousand starting salary with full benefits of course. I need you, Kathleen. Together, we’ll make Kelly Industries an even bigger player.”

I was absolutely floored, uncertain of how to react. “You know I can’t do that. I love my work.”

“I thought you might say that.”

“So you did everything you could to wreck my job.” When he didn’t deny it again, I knew the truth. “I don’t know what to say to you any longer. I love you, Father, very much, but I

can't stand the sight of you right now." I backed away, tears forming in my eyes. Whatever he'd said had actually influenced my own captain.

While something didn't make much sense, I could tell by his reaction a heck of a lot more had been said. I shuddered and almost tripped in my effort to get to the door.

"What about the party?" he asked.

A nasty retort almost left my mouth, but I pulled back, taking a deep breath. "I'm not hungry. I'm certain Celia will understand." I closed the door with a hard thud behind me, furiously wiping tears that had slipped past my lashes.

As I walked toward the front door, another intuition snapped into my mind.

There was something that several people were hiding, lies that had cost lives. What I realized at that moment was that I had no way of knowing who I could trust.

Except for Max.

And there was no rational reason for me to say that except I knew instinctively.

I also knew bodies would begin to drop.

And I was suddenly terrified.

CHAPTER 8



*M*_{ax}

“You will be the king of our people one day, but you must accept the responsibility. Then and only then can you rule.”

My father’s words had been said at least a dozen times but until recently they’d been met with deaf ears.

I glanced up and down the street at the unsuspecting people living in what they believed to be a protected environment. They had no way of knowing they were little more than food.

That is if wolves decided to go rogue. I’d come to believe that was far too much of a possibility.

Werewolves.

For Kathleen to come to that conclusion wasn’t surprising; however, I had to find a way to steer her in another direction. Fortunately, she had to leave for whatever meeting she had before she’d had a chance to explore the option, but not before hearing updates from the medical examiner. It wasn’t going to be long before the press gathered a hint of what we were dealing with.

I was actually shocked the Denver police had been able to keep the horrific murders quiet up to this point. My instinct told me everything was about to blow wide open.

I sat in my truck at the stoplight, unable to take my mind off Kathleen. She was absolutely beautiful in every manner, but

her complete distrust of me was another aspect I'd have to deal with sooner versus later. I needed her. I craved her.

Her scent covered me.

I glanced into the rearview mirror, doing everything humanly possible to curtail the hunger. While she would have no way of knowing, she was intensely fertile, drawing me closer. I shifted in my seat, forced to rub my hand across my aching cock, driving my thoughts toward the images I'd seen of the murders.

The pictures of the victims were telling. I'd managed to snap a few shots of her computer screen with my phone, even taking the time to enlarge a few. The evidence would prove useful with the other pack members, as if I needed to convince them a wolf had gone rogue. What I couldn't understand was the reason the wolf had placed the victims in a certain position after their murder. The ritualistic mannerism was unlike anything I'd ever heard before, but there certainly had to be a reason.

However, my gut told me that the wolf's actions were more for the Wolfen and not for an unspoken ritual. My father would likely know. I was even beginning to fear an onslaught of the upgraded disease, its dormancy building strength and potency. If we found the rogue, his blood would be tested prior to his required elimination.

As the light turned green, I glanced at my two duffle bags. I didn't intend on staying at my cabin for long even though initiating the hunt was necessary. And I'd made a promise to my father. I'd told Director Finley nothing regarding the change in my living quarters. There was no need for her to know. I would have enough time to drop off my things before the planned meeting in the town hall. I had to admit it would be good to see some of my old friends.

While I had a certain amount of guilt for breaking most of my ties, I couldn't afford to reminisce about the past. There were too many skeletons.

During the remainder of the drive, I debated how much I could tell Kathleen. She would continue to dig into a trail that would

only lead her closer to the pack. Whether or not she fully became my mate, now wasn't the time to introduce her to the community, although protecting her from afar could prove to be difficult. She was highly skilled, and capable of defending herself. I would likely learn soon enough whether the rogue had his sights set on her. If he did, I would kill him with my bare hands.

I'd forgotten how lovely the small city truly was. The pack took pride in building a bustling economy, a city that was often visited by vacationers spending time in the mountains. As I drove through, I wasn't surprised at the number of people who stopped on the street to stare, their eyes blackened from what they considered my betrayal.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened the closer I got to the cabin. I'd called Johnny, preparing for my arrival and as with everyone else, my caretaker had already heard about my return. I made the turn onto my long driveway, gritting my teeth. I'd had other reasons for leaving the community, not just because of my budding career or my disdain for the old ways.

The heartache had been too much to bear.

I shifted forward in my seat the moment the cabin came into view and I was so shocked a smile actually crossed my face. I realized how much I missed living here, the peace and quiet creating tranquility in my otherwise tumultuous spirit. From what I could tell, everything had been well maintained.

I barely had time to open the door, tossing my bags inside before turning around, ready to head in the direction of the town hall. The late afternoon sun was already shifting behind the mountains, leaving me with a bad feeling about tonight. I had a terrible premonition there would be another murder.

Before the morning dawned.

I grabbed several clips of ammunition as well as my rifle on my way out the door, my instincts on high alert.

The moment I walked back outside, I could see another truck parked in my driveway. I'd recognize the nearly rusted-out old Ford anywhere. Politics were a necessity it seemed in every

community, including the Wolfen pack. My father's warning about my old friend was coming to pass. Gregor Fenton continued to harbor anger at my departure. Now we were two men determined to rise in the rankings, grabbing full leadership after our fathers had retired.

Or succumbed to their old age.

Only Gregor had changed, becoming a brutal and unforgiving man, much like Stone. To think the three amigos had shared everything for years seemed like a dream. Gregor had gained followers over the last few years in my absence, pontificating about his abilities to the point the villagers believed he was more of a god than a wolf.

I walked slowly toward my truck, giving the man an opportunity to show himself. I could easily sense his anger and frustration at my return. The electricity churning in the fifty yards between us was intense, almost suffocating. Bad blood the pack didn't need, not when we were facing a crisis.

I could see his pensive face, the way his eyes bored into mine even as another round of light rain began to fall.

He revved the engine, as if I'd take the bait he was offering. I wasn't the kind of man or wolf to fight a duel, vying for top dog, a position I'd never revered. I simply wanted to hunt and capture the killer, squelching the rumors regarding some ancient curse.

Let alone ending the bloodshed.

I'd spent my entire life fighting for good versus evil. From what I knew about Gregor, he'd completely shifted his life, terrorizing weaker members of our pack in his effort to become the alpha. Perhaps I had spent far too much time away from my people, which my father had warned me could potentially harm our community.

Accepting the role would only add to the discourse.

I lifted the rifle, not in warning but a blatant attempt at some kind of solidarity. Gregor hesitated, idling the massive block engine before shifting the gears into reverse and accelerating. I

glared after him as he rolled out, fighting the urge to go after him. A confrontation was also not in my best interest.

Yet.

It would come as a necessity soon enough. The simple fact was, given his number of followers, I needed his help in order to develop a tracking party if we hoped for any chance of finding the rogue wolf. I eased inside my truck, waiting until the dust cleared before turning over the engine. How I handled this meeting would determine if I could gain any level of support.

For some reason, the drive was emotionally painful.

There were hundreds of vehicles parked near the town hall, every available parking space and the surrounding fields filled. Except Gregor's truck was nowhere to be seen. By the time I found a space, it was well after the announced start of the meeting. I could hear my father's voice when I finally managed to enter the building. I studied the faces of the others on the city council, their expressions oddly bland. Seven powerful men had successfully maintained peace as well as sanity for decades. Every one of them would soon vacate their positions.

How had the time gone by so quickly?

The group barely noticed my arrival, yet they were already fueled with anger and fear, tossing out innuendoes and questions in a fast and furious manner.

"Be quiet!" one of the councilmembers yelled before motioning my father toward the microphone.

I noticed my father's slow gait as he approached. Only his eyes registered my arrival, happy that I'd kept my promise.

"We are here to develop a plan in order to locate the person responsible for heinous acts of violence. There are indications of an animal attack; however, a wolf has been sighted," my father said in his usual commanding tone.

The initial hush was followed by another round of insinuations. Another one of the councilmembers slammed a gavel on the desk several times.

“We will have order!” the councilmember snarled.

I inched closer, feeling the hatred and fear tingling every portion of my skin.

“What if these murders have nothing to do with the Wolfen? What if we draw unnecessary attention to the situation?” the voice called out from near the back of the audience.

“You know better, Markel,” my father answered, always using first names, his gaze shifting in my direction. “What we are facing is a situation that must be controlled immediately. You’ve all smelled the blood in the air and while the attacks have yet to be committed within our community, it is only a matter of time. What this wolf is doing could destroy our peace and prosperity. We simply can’t allow that to happen.”

“And how do you plan on controlling the situation, Blackhawk? From what I’ve heard, there is a curse placed upon our entire community. Even your... *son* won’t be able to help us.” The man’s deep voice and his utter disdain rocketed throughout the room, creating a wave of dissent, a solid two dozen people supporting his claim vocally.

My father had always been a stoic man, reserved in every way. He didn’t respond initially, merely giving his fellow councilmembers a quick glance.

The curse. How the fuck had this gotten out amongst the pack? I bristled, pushing my way through several lines of people. I could tell I’d been seen by a solid dozen or so, their expressions of contempt evident.

“Curse?” at least ten people called out in horror.

“The curse is real,” my father finally said.

The crowd seemed stunned at his admittance.

“And what about the disease? Are we all going to die?” I could see the young girl’s face who’d asked the question, creating another rumble within the group.

“There is no indication the rogue wolf’s actions are from anything other than his own desire and hunger to feed,” my father insisted.

“We will kill the bastard!” one of the men chanted.

“We hunt tonight!” at least two others commented.

The entire group seemed ready to bolt. Jesus. This was already getting out of hand.

I walked to the front of the crowd, bristling as a hushed atmosphere descended upon the entire group. “You must listen to reason.” I knew my words wouldn’t go over well.

“Just what do you plan on doing, Maximillian?” The first jab came.

“You no longer belong here.” The second was spit out with hatred.

“Yeah, you left your own people.”

I took long strides in the direction of the stage, taking my time to climb the three stairs. While I gave my father and the other councilmembers nods of respect, I had little patience for the same barbs I’d heard since the day I’d agreed to accept the position with the ATF.

And I was sick of the bullshit.

“The last time I checked, I was one of you, a Wolfen and a man of honor.” I kept my tone even as I walked to the center of the stage.

“You have no honor. You’re a traitor!”

“We don’t want you here!”

“You betrayed us!”

The taunts came fast and furious. While my father showed his anger by the blackness in his eyes, he remained silent. This was my fight, taking my rightful place as the upcoming alpha male, the true leader. “I am one of you through and through. I’ve spent my entire adult life attempting to protect you. All of you. My people. My world. We all deserve a chance at happiness, a life worth living. You made your choices by staying here and I applaud you for following your heart. I made an entirely different choice, but I have returned. I will fight by your side to eliminate this nightmare.”

I walked from one end of the stage to the other, catching and almost immediately losing the eye of several of the members. Sighing, I returned to the center, closing my eyes and taking several deep breaths. “As my father, your leader mentioned, what we’re facing is horrific, possibly destroying all we’ve come to love and protect with our very lives. I refuse to allow that to happen. Curse or no curse, disease or no disease, a wolf is in our midst defying our laws.”

“Our laws?” a female voice shot out from the side. “The bastard could be a Nightwalker for all we know.”

“And you’re smarter than that, Angela,” the voice from the left answered. “The smell of a Wolfen is strong.”

“That’s not true,” another male voice huffed. “The scent is nearly unrecognizable.”

“Or masked in an attempt to throw us off. All of you should know better!” another voice yelled, the tone riddled with rage.

“Enough!” I roared as I faced the crowd. I couldn’t have another volley of rumors moving like a firestorm throughout our city. “Hear me. I’ve seen this killer! I’ve gathered his stench, which will never leave me.”

My statement echoed in the fully packed auditorium, silencing the remaining naysayers if only for a few minutes.

“How?” the young woman asked.

I nodded several times. “That’s an ongoing investigation and one I’m not privy to discuss but I have pictures as proof. The murders were not committed by a human. The wolf will kill again unless we stop him.”

“Jesus Christ. You’re still an outsider, Max!”

“Leave him alone and let him speak, William,” another voice shouted from across the room.

“Yeah!” several people chanted.

I gave my father a slight glance, seeing his expression of approval.

“Then what do we do?” This time, the question was laced with fear of the unknown.

“We gather a group to find out the answers and hunt down whoever is responsible. And whether you like it or not: I. Am. Alpha. I will take the helm on the very day my father is ready to relinquish his command. I will be here by your side as necessary. I need all of you to understand what we are doing is vital to our community. To that end, I need volunteers who are excellent trackers. We leave for the hunt tonight. And we will find the asshole responsible.” I allowed the deep rumble of my voice to resonate throughout the entire room, growling more than once as I shifted my gaze from side to side. I allowed the slight change to occur, veins in the side of my neck popping, my muscles bulging as I tipped my head toward the ceiling.

The sound of raucous clapping was followed by boisterous and bitter laughter.

Gregor had entered the room, challenging my authority as I’d anticipated. “Very nice speech, Max. I must admit, you almost had me with your bullshit. Almost.” He pushed his way through the audience, moving directly toward the stage. “Just how do you propose that we track this would-be killer? We are no longer savages foraging for food in the wilderness. We’re forbidden even to turn unless absolutely necessary. However, if we rummage through the forests, following our natural instincts, I guarantee you that desires will be brought to the surface.”

Desires. I was incensed at his accusations. “Only if you allow them to breach the surface. We have been in control of our beasts for centuries,” I retorted.

“I guess some of us don’t have as much *control* as you purport yourself to have.” Gregor walked even closer, his confrontational tone pissing me the hell off. He knew better than to challenge my past decision or my leadership, yet he was doing both. He’d certainly become a true rival for control of the pack. “And my instincts tell me the killer is a human, a vile monster but certainly not a wolf.”

“Then you would be wrong,” I said without reservation. “The stench of our kind lingering in the air means we need to initiate tracking. We have a significant amount of ground to cover and we will begin with the areas surrounding the three murders.”

“And what if we can’t catch his scent?” Gregor asked condescendingly.

“He will make a mistake and we will capture him.” I kept my answer succinct.

“I daresay your tracking skills are much more human than Wolfen. You should allow someone who knows what they’re doing to lead.”

Gregor’s retort had a portion of the group buying his crap.

I turned toward him, hissing under my breath, sweeping my arms out to the others. “You can either assist in the hunt or stay behind, Gregor. The choice is your own, but know if you refuse, you will be judged. And for the rest of you, I have the pictures to prove that I’m not wrong in my knowledge we are chasing a powerful and cunning wolf, not one with failing mental faculties, which makes him incredibly dangerous.” I yanked the group of photographs from my jacket, smacking them down on the table where the councilmembers sat.

Each councilmember tentatively glanced at the pictures and I was surprised at their lackluster reactions. As if they’d known for days, perhaps weeks a rogue wolf had been attacking humans.

“It is the council’s decision on how this is to be handled,” Gregor insisted, storming up on stage and yanking the pictures from the table. I could see utter surprise in his eyes as he hissed under his breath. When he lifted his gaze, he’d seemed to accept my findings. “What a bastard. Jesus. We have to catch him.”

“And he will kill again,” I offered.

“Gregor is correct. A hunt of this magnitude and one that would expand outside of our city limits is the council’s

decision only and must not be taken lightly,” my father affirmed.

“Then please decide, Father, other councilmembers,” I stated firmly. “My gut tells me that he will kill again very soon.”

“The wolf must be found,” my father stated. “The council will discuss tonight.”

“Tonight. Fine. Please call me when some decision has been made. In the meantime, I’ll be investigating in another manner.”

I walked toward the door, pushing my way through the crowd. I could still hear the rumblings of so many who had no idea who to believe. What I did know is that a new war was set to begin. I slammed my hands on the door, storming outside. The entire meeting had felt more like a monkey show than anything else. While there were rules to follow, waiting could allow for another human to be killed.

I took long strides toward my truck, admonishing myself for even trying. The night air was chilly, a light fog forming low to the ground and the sliver of moon fully obstructed by the swirling clouds. A perfect night for a murder. I took a deep whiff, filling my lungs with scents of the forest.

“You really think you can track this fucker?”

I heard Gregor’s voice and stopped in my tracks. Why the hell was he bothering? “I think I have a better chance than most. Humans have no idea what they’re dealing with.”

“That is true.”

There were so many things I’d wanted to say to him over the years, to attempt to mend the broken bridge. Perhaps there was no chance of doing so after all this time. It was time to at least begin the process. “I’m sorry about Kayla. I would have done everything in my power to save her.”

He hesitated and I could hear the rumble in his chest, the same vicious growl I’d heard the day his fiancée had been found dead. I swallowed hard, remembering the wretched case, the very first one I’d worked on. The murders had been horrific,

the end result coming too close to home. If only I'd been able to save the woman he'd loved.

"Yeah, I know you are," Gregor said as he glanced toward the sky. "I know you did your best."

My best. I'd always questioned that concept after being unable to save her. "I'm just..."

"Time to let the past go." He shook his head and even in the ugly darkness, I could see the tears sliding down his cheeks.

"Time to ensure our future."

The tension remained between us. I wasn't certain if he would ever forgive me, no matter his words or the time that had elapsed.

"You reek of a woman," he said as he inched closer.

"I have a female partner," I countered, finally turning to face him. Even in the barest of light, I could clearly see the continued contempt in his eyes. "She is very good at what she does."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Have it your way, Max. I really don't give a fuck who you sleep with. What I do care about is keeping this monster away from my community."

"*Our* community. I care very much about what happens."

"Hmmm... You have a funny way of showing it."

"I'm not your enemy, Gregor, no matter what you think. If we can't work together, this killer will have an advantage. He is far more cunning than anyone understands."

Gregor studied me for a few seconds. "You mean he's planning his kills for a reason."

"I have no doubt. I've seen through his eyes, read his thoughts."

"Which means you turned. How interesting." He took a step back, hesitating for a full minute. "We will never be close friends again, Maximillian, and I am uncertain I can trust you, but I do believe you have an idea of what we're facing."

“Then you’ll agree to work together.” I remained unyielding, my tone more demanding than anything else. It was his choice to accept my role as alpha or face scrutiny. He was no fool, although we’d never be able to trust each other.

He took a deep breath before holding out his hand. “For now, we are blood brothers and we will hunt side by side, you and I.”

“If we do this, you will no longer threaten weaker pack members. Are we clear? We go by the book.”

Gregor’s upper lip curled. “Fine. I can accept that.”

I took a gamble, one I knew would be criticized but a chance I was willing to take. As I accepted his handshake, I shifted my gaze toward the forest surrounding us. “Then we should begin tonight, you and I. Just like before. When we work together, we are damn good.”

Gregor lifted his eyebrows, shooting a glance toward the trees before grinning. “I will admit I didn’t expect you would have the guts to come here, let alone accept your place among us. I will accept. Let the hunting begin.”

I’d experienced remorse over the years, but the aching in my gut at this moment would forever change our future. My desire to protect the pack was stronger than ever. No matter the circumstances or the outcome, I would fight for our people to the death.

To. The. Death.

* * *

Predator.

The term had never entered my mind during any of the times I’d shifted, although tonight everything seemed to have a different meaning. Merely shedding my clothing held an entirely different reverence than ever before. Our laws were strict, preventing a shift for the majority of our lives. Yes, I’d violated the rules on more than one occasion, enjoying the freedom that running uninhibited through the darkness of the

forest had provided. Had I succumbed to my natural instincts, killing a number of smaller animals in order to feed? Yes.

Had I enjoyed the experience?

Without a doubt.

But I'd never considered myself a slayer until now.

What I had the capability of doing to this rogue wolf was violent, and as I released the beast I harbored inside, I felt freer than I ever had before. As my muscles lengthened, bones cracking from the force of the transition, the pain was almost exquisite. The moment I dropped to the ground, hunkering on all fours, scents became stronger, my sight perception heightened to the point I could see every night creature within a mile range.

No matter that they were hiding from the monsters ready to forage and feed.

I felt Gregor's presence beside me, his massive body matching my own. And we were both hungry.

As the claws finally erupted from my paws, I tipped back my head, drinking in the fragrance of the wild. The moment I dragged my rough tongue across my canines, a sound erupted from my throat, the ragged growl permeating the night air. There were no instructions needed. Gregor would follow my lead.

I pawed the ground, digging in the mud for a few seconds, gathering additional smells. There was no indication that the wolf I'd seen before had been anywhere close to the proximity of the camp, although the distinct and rich scent of blood created turmoil. The hunger to feast was ripe, rippling throughout every cell. I snarled, moving further toward the trees. While I certainly didn't want the rogue to be a Wolfen, identifying him as a Nightwalker would be even worse.

The notion of a fresh kill couldn't be denied.

Gregor flanked my side, sniffing the underbrush. His low-slung growl indicated he'd gathered the same scent. When he swung his head in my direction, the cold look in his eyes was telling. There was something worth investigating.

We both took off running, weaving our way into the denseness of the forest. The fog had increased, the heavy dew lifting like fingers from the depths of hell. There was at least fifteen miles of forest surrounding Roselake, the location home for at least a dozen species, all able to live without fear.

Until now.

Within seconds, the stench of blood was overpowering, creating bile in my throat. We were both easily capable of controlling our thirst, the rumbles in our stomach, but the desire was already increasing with every yard gained. The sound of smaller animals scattering to protected locations mixed with the rapid beating of my heart pounding in my chest. I was almost overwhelmed by a longing I hadn't experienced in years, fearful of surrendering to the need that was innate to every Wolfen.

After all, we were carnivores.

We continued racing at full speed, barely cognizant of where our trek was taking us, so consumed by finding the source of the blood flow. Minutes later, we achieved our goal. The deer carcass was fresh, the animal eviscerated violently. I growled at Gregor, forcing him to retreat several feet. This was my hunt, my find.

As I moved closer, I took several deep whiffs. The ravaging effects hadn't been caused by a wayward hunter or another human venturing into the woods. The kill had been exacted by another wolf. I moved in a full circle around what was left of the deer, swinging my head in both directions even as I salivated from the remains.

Tonight, I refused to partake, no matter how great the hunger pangs.

As I lifted my head, Gregor approached, allowing a deep-throated growl to shift into the darkness. A warning. We'd always been able to connect, capable of reading each other's minds. His was full of questions and more concerns than I'd originally noted before. For all his bravado, he knew that what we were facing was dangerous for several reasons.

The trail of blood leading even deeper into the forest indicated the deer had been brought to the location for the feeding. And from where we stood, the Nightwalkers' village was a mere three miles away. That was too close for comfort.

As my nostrils flared, I took another deep whiff, able to catch a distinct but nearly unrecognizable scent. Not just a wolf. Not just partially human. There was a metallic stench that created a wave of nausea. What the fuck were we dealing with?

Gregor obviously captured the vile odor as well, raking his paw across his muzzle. He moved in absolute silence several feet away and in the direction of the Nightwalkers' village, turning his head only once.

While I wasn't prepared for a battle, the knowledge we would gain was necessary. After snorting, we took off again, following the droplets of blood to an actual den that had been created by a family of deer. We were both disgusted by the findings, the horrific scene that would never leave my mind. How could any Wolfen or other shifter for that matter act in such a heinous manner?

I stopped long enough to touch one of the fallen does, trying to gather a moment of 'sight.' There was nothing, not a trace. While Gregor watched me silently, I could tell he was curious, although he refrained from asking any questions.

My stomach churned as we both forced ourselves to pass by, continuing on our path. The moment we reached the outskirts of the other wolf village, we sat back on our haunches.

The scent had ended, as if there'd never been a wolf crossing through the forest. I inched closer, gathering several whiffs of the closest homes on the outlying perimeter. There was no indication of any of the Nightwalkers having turned, shifting in order to hunt or kill. We were facing yet another dead end. I could read the rage surfacing in my companion as he advanced, communicating words that had no need of being spoken, our connection that strong.

"What the hell is going on?" Gregor asked in silence, a snarl curling his lip.

“I have no fucking idea.”

He inched several feet ahead of me, sniffing the ground. *“The fucker responsible couldn’t have disappeared.”*

“He’s playing a vicious game,” I hissed.

“Then we will find him and when we do...”

I swung my head in his direction, nodding in affirmation, remembering my father’s words. It was our requirement to handle the situation the Wolfen way.

And a part of me couldn’t wait to tear him limb from limb.

“We have to be careful,” I added, turning purposely away from the Nightwalkers’ village. The last thing we needed was one of their sentries finding us close to their people. The tenuous hold we had on perceived peace could be crumbled with the slightest infraction.

“For once, I do agree with you. What now?”

“We do things my way.” I inhaled once again and another scent filtered into my nose, one that was more horrifying than anything from before.

Kathleen.

The bastard knew we’d hunt and was well aware of how the pack would react first.

She was the rogue wolf’s prize and the fucker was using her to get to me.

My mate.

My woman.

For the ultimate control.

And she could lose her life in the process.

I would tear the city apart in order to protect her.

CHAPTER 9



*K*athleen

“Do you know what I hunger for?” he asked, the ruggedness of his voice skipping along my skin, goosebumps following in its wake.

“Tell me,” I whispered as he fisted my hair, dragging my lips to within centimeters of his.

“Every inch of you.” Growling, he continued to hover over me as I pressed my hands against his chest, marveling in the electricity soaring through every cell and muscle. I was breathless, my heart racing and all I could think about was his cock filling me.

He rubbed the flat of his hand down my back, cupping and kneading my tender bottom, the earlier spanking leaving me sore and spent. The rush of adrenaline was powerful, the feel of his heated skin unlike anything I’d ever experienced, leaving me burning with extreme desire.

“Then take me.” I barely managed issuing the words and as I stared into his eyes, I could see nothing but blackness, danger. The scent of him filled my nostrils; a muskiness of the forest, the dampness of fresh mud, and the bitter copper of stale blood. When he curled his lip, sharp canines protruded from his reddened gums.

But I wasn’t afraid.

“Forever.” As he crushed his mouth over mine, he lifted me off my feet, thrusting his cock all the way inside. The kiss was savage, brutal in every manner, his tongue dominating mine.

I was captured by a predator, a dangerous and primal man.

He issued several growls as I moaned, undulating against him and the harder he plunged his shaft inside, the more lightheaded I became. I belonged to him. I was his woman.

Required to surrender.

Required to... mate.

He threw his head back and roared, the sound wild and reeking of testosterone, and his cock began to swell.

Bang!

“What the fuck?” I hissed, yanked out of the fantasy.

The hard clunk forced me to jump, my nerves completely on edge. I’d remained agitated the entire evening, no amount of wine capable of calming my anger or my angst. I jerked up from the chair, nearly knocking over the third glass of merlot. I snapped my hand around the dense crystal a mere second before it flooded the various files I’d grabbed from the office. I’d wanted time alone to work on the case, free from prying eyes, questions, and...

Max.

A man of danger.

A man who would take me again and again.

“Damn it.” I half laughed, pressing my fingers across my mouth. I could swear my lips were swollen from the last heated kiss, only that was impossible. I’d allowed the man to get under my skin. I was just as pathetic as Amber accused me of being. I shook my head, staring at my laptop, hissing given the lack of evidence I’d found. Freaking nothing I’d found was helpful.

He really thought I was going to call him, checking in like some wayward high-school girl. To hell with that. I was

perfectly safe as long as I had a gun by my side. I took a sip of my wine, thankful to be home. I'd changed into jeans and a flimsy little shirt, finally comfortable. I could do anything I wanted without anyone telling me what to do.

Take that, you incredibly sexy, dominating man.

I groaned before rolling my eyes.

Whoosh! Bang!

"Shit!" I jerked around, scanning the entire room. Given there was almost no wind outside, I wasn't hearing a twig smacking against the gutter. *Get a grip.*

I shuddered as another rattling sound occurred, taking cautious steps toward the window. I realized my hand was automatically reaching for my gun, even though I'd left it in my bedroom when I'd changed clothes. Christ, I was terrified of being alone in my own damn house. The recent events, including continuing to believe I'd had an earlier intruder, were weighing heavily on me.

Plus, there was the fact that Max was hiding something significant from me regarding his involvement with the case. I rubbed my mouth before reaching for the blind and peering out. Everything was pitch black, the ugly fog keeping the entire city enshrouded in a blanket of doom.

I bit back a laugh at the ridiculous thought. I was a cop, for God's sake, capable of protecting myself, which I'd done on more than one occasion. Why the hell was I spooked tonight?

Because you know someone else is going to be murdered.

Slaughtered.

I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth. I'd felt the stabbing notion in my mind for hours. I still had been unable to make any direct connections between the three victims. Nothing. They'd simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Or so the killer wanted us to believe.

Us.

There was no ‘us’ in this case, no matter what my captain had ordered. I couldn’t trust Max in any way. Here I was, frightened to be alone. I took quick steps into my bedroom, grabbing my Beretta. As I walked out, I checked the ammo, sliding the gun into the back of my jeans. I was ready in case some asshole decided to make me his next meal.

I swallowed hard and headed back to my desk, nearly jumping out of my skin the moment I heard the sharp ring of my cell phone.

“God!” I barked out the word as I took long strides toward the dining room table, almost pitching the phone across the room in my effort to glare at the screen. While the number wasn’t one I recognized, at least the listing didn’t state ‘unknown.’ “Detective Kelly.”

Whoever was on the other end of the line said nothing, but there was a hell of a lot of heavy breathing.

“Okay, jerkoff. I’ve had just about enough of the bullshit games. I’m hanging up now!” I snapped, still holding the phone against my ear.

“Wait! Kathleen?”

I recognized the voice but from where? “Yes?”

“I’m sorry,” the male said, laughing. “I was thrown by you being all business. It’s Tyler. Tyler Ridgefield.”

I glanced at the time, another pang of anger slicing through me. “Look, Tyler, you seem like a nice guy and all but my advice to you is to stop being my father’s lackey. That’s not going to get you anywhere. I already told him I wouldn’t accept his generous offer and if you find it necessary, you can relay that to him again.”

There was ten seconds of dead silence.

“Um... I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. Your father has no idea I’m calling, and I assure you, it has nothing to do with making you an offer, at least not in a professional manner.”

I slapped my hand against my forehead, biting back laughter. “Then what else is there?”

“I wanted to see if you’d consider grabbing a cup of coffee or a drink with me. Nothing nefarious, I assure you.”

I was so taken aback, I had no idea what to say. “That’s very... sweet of you, but I’m not certain it’s a good idea.”

“I promise you, we won’t discuss business,” Tyler insisted.

For some crazy reason, my thoughts drifted to Max. I wasn’t in a relationship with the special agent by any means, yet I felt guilty for even remotely considering accepting. Even my throat tightened up. “I’ll be honest with you—”

“You’re seeing someone. Of course you are. I’m so sorry,” he interrupted.

“No! Yes. Maybe. Hell, I’m not certain but it’s more about the time. I have to work on this case.” I heard the disappointment in his voice and he did what men usually resorted to when they were shut down. They formed an edge. “I really appreciate the offer.” In retrospect, I had the feeling he was information gathering more than anything.

“Well, maybe we can do something at a later time. I’d really like to get to know you.”

“That’s very sweet, but I have to go, Tyler. Thank you for calling.” I ended the call far too abruptly, but I simply wasn’t good with dating and I definitely wasn’t giving him any information.

When the phone rang again, I bristled, ready to snap at the man. I breathed a sigh of relief seeing the number of the coroner’s office. “Detective Kelly.”

“Kathleen, Lois Smyth. I’m glad I caught you although I know it’s late. I just wanted to touch base since I’m now going to be working with you.”

If the chief medical examiner had been assigned to the case, then there was a hard push from the mayor and the police commissioner’s office to secure a suspect.

“You know I work late, Lois. How is the third autopsy going?”

Lois exhaled. “Against my better judgment, I went back and took a look at the autopsies for the first two victims as well as performing the work on the third.”

“Cause of death the same as the others I assume.” The first two reports indicated the carotid arteries had severed, but not until after the victims had endured massive trauma.

“Not what you might expect.”

I grabbed a pen and a piece of paper, her words catching me off guard. “Meaning?”

“It would appear your murderer thankfully has a conscience. The victims were suffocated prior to their throats being ripped out.”

“What? Why didn’t the other coroner catch that?”

“There was no reason to assume otherwise, Kathleen. The horrific trauma the victims received would indicate a brutal ending,” Lois said quietly.

“This places the entire murders into another scenario altogether. Your findings eliminate an animal as the attacker,” I said through clenched teeth. The news wouldn’t be taken kindly by almost everyone else involved with the case.

“You are correct.”

“And you’re certain of this?”

“Absolutely. There is bruising on the back of all three of the victims’ necks that would indicate they were attacked from behind and strangled with significant force.”

I was almost giddy with excitement. “Any idea of the weapon used?”

“That’s just it, it would appear the victims were lifted off the ground before being manually strangled and I don’t mind telling you, that would take a very strong individual.”

Two of the three victims weighed in excess of two hundred and fifty pounds if not more. For the killer to be able to lift the victims off the ground was... phenomenal. “Wow.”

“That’s exactly what I thought. I also took another look at the saliva I mentioned before. Unfortunately, I still haven’t been able to clearly identify the source, which likely means the samples are contaminated. What I did find is blood on victim number three that is inconsistent with the crime scene.”

“Meaning possibly the killer’s blood.” A mistake. Halle-fucking-lujah. My entire body tingled. This was huge.

“Maybe.”

I heard the hesitation in her voice. “What’s wrong?”

“The characteristics of the DNA are... unusual. I took the liberty of putting the file through the database and I’m afraid there were no matches. I’m going to send you the file so you can see what I’m talking about. I’m sending that over to you now.”

“Can’t you be more specific?”

Lois laughed for a few seconds. “Have you ever heard of a werewolf?”

“I’m sorry. We must have a bad connection. I could have sworn you asked if I’d ever heard of a werewolf.” I was shocked to hear the word. Maybe someone had overheard my conversation with Max and was playing me for a fool. Why?

“That’s exactly what I asked you, Detective. I know it sounds crazy, which is another reason I think the killer could be purposely tampering with the crime scenes.”

“I’m confused.” I eased back onto the seat, staring at my email, extremely uncomfortable. It was unusual as hell to pull another coroner off a case. Something didn’t feel right.

“There are various cults who believe in werewolves and vampires, even going as far as having a dentist implant canine teeth.”

I sucked in my breath, convinced the conversation had been overheard. “There are weirdos everywhere.”

“Some of these cults are fairly active and dangerous. I’m no expert, but I think that’s what you might have with this case,” Lois said, huffing afterwards. “I worked on another case where

the victim had their throat ripped out by a vampire. Damn kid was hyped up on drugs and had no idea that he'd killed the poor girl. Anyway, I hit send so you should have the file shortly. I'll finish up the autopsies tomorrow and try and get you a full report by day's end. If there are no other high-profile cases tonight."

"I appreciate you putting a rush on them." As the email came in, I realized my hand was shaking. I could swear she was trying to convince me of her idea.

"The mayor was very convincing. Just so you know, I had some damn reporter snooping around when I came in."

"At the morgue?" Great. Now the press had found out about the case.

"You can find some of your best information amongst dead people," Lois chuckled. "I'll give you a call. Oh, have you heard of Roselake just outside of Denver?"

"A little village that's supposedly Cherokee. Right?"

"Well, yes and no."

I was no mood for guessing games, my patience wearing thin. "What should I know?"

"The Cherokee do own a significant portion of the land in and around the mountains, several thousand acres to be exact. They run a city with their own government system, shops, bars. Truly quite a beautiful and flourishing little town."

"But..."

Lois hesitated. "But there have been rumors for years of reported wolf sightings near and around the area."

"That's not unusual."

"I'm talking about very unusual creatures, the depictions the stuff of legends. Beasts with super human strength, keen eyesight and hearing."

I'd never known Lois to fall trap to any kind of legend, but I was forced to admit that I didn't know her that well.

“Interesting but you can’t honestly tell me you’re buying into the stuff of legends.”

“No, but a clever killer might be using the information as a method of creating terror in the community. There are locals who refuse to set foot in Roselake City limits because they believe the land is holy.”

“You mean haunted.”

Lois laughed for a third time. “I’m not even entirely certain why I told you that, except one of the victims had recently paid a visit there.”

“How would you know that?” Every scrap of information had been collected. I’d seen to that myself.

“You’ll never believe this but there was a receipt rolled into a ball in the victim’s mouth.”

“You are kidding me.”

“I only wish I were. Take a look. I heard you had a new partner.”

“Yeah, some asshole from ATF,” I managed without sounding too bitter. I was determined to follow my hunches. She didn’t need to have any idea that Max and I were working together other than by force. Everything felt very... orchestrated. “I can’t stand the jerk.”

“Maximillian Cordero. He’s a good man, one hell of a special agent. You’re in good hands working with him. Look, I gotta run. I’ll call you if I find anything else that’s unusual.”

“Thanks, Lois. I appreciate it. Oh, Lois, what happened to Randy? He was doing a damn good job on the autopsies.”

“Oh, I should have told you,” she said without hesitation. “He had a family emergency.”

“I’m so sorry. Give him my best.”

“Absolutely. Good luck with your investigation,” Lois said brightly.

Although I hadn’t been a good judge of characters as of late, my stomach continued to churn. While I also wasn’t one to

believe in conspiracy theories, it certainly seemed as if Lois was pointing fingers at the people living in Roselake for the murders.

Exhaling, I opened the attached file, praying I was wrong. What I did know is that Lois was very detailed and thorough, traits I appreciated in working with her. A cult. What I knew about cults was that they followed the orders of their leader no matter what was asked.

Or commanded.

Possibly including murder.

What I would do was look at this logically and find out exactly what Max might or might not know.

The pictures she'd taken during her examination were almost as graphic as the original crime scene, although the detail was much clearer. I leaned closer to the computer screen, unable to take my eyes off the ragged tears in the victim's neck. As my hand fluttered to my throat, the pulse thumping against my fingers was powerful.

A werewolf, a person who changes into half man, half wolf normally during a full moon.

I blinked several times, hissing under my breath before shifting to another screen. I could see exactly what she was talking about with the bruising on the back of Mr. Beals' neck. While the markings could be a clear indication of a handprint, the ragged tears indicated...

Claws.

Another shiver trickled down my spine.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

This time, the loud noise was enough so the wineglass went down, shattering in dozens of pieces. I hissed as I yanked for the files, slicing my hand with a shard in the process. "Damn it!" No one came to my door unannounced. The truth was that other than a select group of people, no one knew where I lived. I preferred my privacy and I'd learned a long time ago that my profession kept me in harm's way.

I tossed the files to the side, clenching my fists as a trickle of blood oozed down my hand. Only after yanking the Beretta into my hands did I head toward the front door, my breath ragged as I glanced through the peephole.

Max.

“What are you doing here?” I turned on the light, shrinking away from the door. What in the hell was I afraid of?

“I needed to see you. Please let me in, Kathleen.”

I heard the change in his tone. Gone was the arrogant, self-possessed man from before. He had actual concern in his voice. Something must have happened. I unlocked the door, realizing the moment I opened it that my hand was half covered in blood, remnants now clinging to my front door.

His gaze immediately fell to the discoloration and within seconds, he'd pushed his way in, slamming the door behind him. When he yanked me closer, cupping the side of my face, I remained in shock at his chivalrous actions.

“What happened? Did someone hurt you?” he demanded, his fingers digging into my skin.

“Whoa,” I huffed, doing everything I could to push back from him. “I’m fine and it was an accident. You can let me go.” Even though I was holding my weapon, seeing the Glock positioned in a well-worn sidearm holster under his arm gave me the chills.

“The blood.” While he took a step away, he took my hand into his, examining the cut then turning his hard glare toward my weapon. “It’s deep. Where’s your kitchen?”

“Um...” I glanced at the clean slice, shocked to see there was still a sliver of glass imbedded in one of my fingers.

“Where. Is. Your. Kitchen?” his voice boomed as his eyes darted back and forth across my face. “The piece of glass is just about to cut through an artery. I don’t think you’d like to see that happening.”

“Around the corner.” I finagled until I was able to shove the gun back into my jeans, loathing the fact he was forced to help

me in any manner. "I'm sure it's fine."

He didn't bother turning on a light before moving directly to the sink, jerking the water faucet. "Just stay still."

I studied him as he addressed the cut, picking away at the glass with his fingers.

In the dark.

I could swear his eyes were almost luminescent, glowing in the dark. Just like they had before. "Ouch!"

"Almost. Just stay still!" he commanded, throwing me a look that I knew was stern.

"Yes, sir."

My words brought a slight chuckle. When he seemed satisfied, he grabbed one of my kitchen towels, wrapping it around my hand. "I think you'll be fine, although if you have some antiseptic, that would be good to use."

"Fine." I reached around him, turning on the light over the sink. There was such intensity in him, such an incredible energy and there was no doubt he'd been worried about me. "Honestly, nothing happened."

"Good." He took several deep breaths before slamming his hands on the counter. "You just had to ignore my request. Didn't you?"

"I... Look, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. You should know that." I took a deep breath, realizing instantly that he was wearing the most seductive cologne. Every part of me tingled at the realization. Was he trying to seduce me again? I bit my lower lip as a stupid moan threatened to give me away.

"You're..."

God, the man was demanding in every manner. "Just say it, Max. Whatever you think of me, just tell me. Trust me, I can take it."

I took a step away, cognizant that his cologne was far too intoxicating. Everything about this man was overpowering, yet in such a desirable manner. I was almost breathless, my

nipples aroused and aching. He ran his hands through his hair and the move seemed so damn intimate, forcing me to gaze up and down the length of his body. Damn, he looked good tonight dressed in all black, the tight jeans highlighting exactly why God made man in the first place.

“Infuriating. Pushy. Spiteful.” He hesitated, shaking his head. “Intoxicating. You need to learn to trust me, Kathleen. The last thing I want to happen is for anyone to hurt you.”

“I... I need to be able to trust you, Max. I want that more than anything, but you have to trust me as well.”

He shot me a look, his lower lip curling. “I trust you with my life. You mean more to me than you can understand.”

I had no idea what to say, no concept of how to feel, but I knew in my gut that some force of nature had put us together. And something horrible was trying to force us apart. My entire mind swirled with endless possibilities and none of them seemed plausible or realistic.

His voice dripped of innuendos, the same as it had been from the moment we met. I could no longer deny our attraction or its explosive nature, but I wasn't ready to surrender to anyone.

“Trust is difficult for me,” I managed.

He turned quickly, his chest rising and falling. With very deliberate intentions, he unsnapped his holster, removing the harness and placing on the counter. He walked toward me, sliding the weapon from behind my back. His eyes never left mine as he checked the ammo then secured the safety, placing the gun beside his.

I was shocked as shit when he yanked out the kitchen chair, plopping down. There was no further discussion as he took my unhurt hand, yanking me over his lap.

“What do you think you're doing?” I demanded, huffing and struggling to get off his lap.

“Giving you exactly what you deserve. One. Hard. Spanking. You need discipline every day.”

“I will kick your ass.” He had to be joking.

“You can certainly try. You’re going to learn that placing yourself in danger isn’t in your best interest.”

As his hand came down hard and fast, I was shocked how much the spanking hurt through the dense fabric of my jeans. “That hurts. Stop!”

“Not until you learn your lesson,” Max huffed. He refused to stop, smacking me in raw and heated actions.

My breath was taken away, my mind full of utter confusion. Why did he care about me so intently? The moment I kicked out involuntarily once again, he wrapped his muscular leg around mine, keeping me in place.

There was no getting away from him.

Not now.

Not... ever.

I cinched my eyes shut, digging my nails into the cheap tile floor, biting back moans that had nothing to do with pain. I was fully aroused, my skin tingling from the vibrant hum of jolts of electricity. The dazzling sensations were as if I was on fire, consumed by the flames. As I finally lay limp, merely concentrating on the wild beating of my heart, visions floated into my mind.

The same ones from before, being taken and used over and over again.

His breathing was just as ragged as mine and the way his cock throbbed in his skintight jeans was far too enticing. We were both on the edge of losing it and I knew neither one of us cared.

Max administered six more, each one harder than the one before and I was barely cognizant that he’d eased me onto his lap. He brushed just the tips of his fingers across my heated skin, moving them ever so slowly down the length of my neck. “I was worried.”

“As I told you, I’m fine.” I struggled to open my eyes, the vibrations from his touch pure bliss.

“You’re not a good liar,” he murmured before crushing his mouth over mine. He slid his hand to the back of my neck, digging his nails into my skin as the kiss became a passionate roar of insatiable need and burning desire.

Everything about this man was uncontrollable, as if he would always push every boundary. I fisted his shirt with one hand, clawing at his skin with the other. Our tongues entwined, the wildness of the moment forcing our teeth to gnash together. The moans I issued were almost unrecognizable, matching the pitch of his savage growls.

He pushed me onto my feet, still holding me in place, towering over me. I’d never felt so safe or warm and when I wrapped one leg around his, all I could think about was having his cock thrusting hard and fast.

I ripped at his shirt as he sucked on my tongue. I was more desperate to get to him than I’d been before. Within seconds he finally broke the kiss, making animalistic sounds as his fingers easily ripped apart my tee shirt.

I gasped from the action, repeating the move with his shirt, laughing as buttons flew everywhere.

His eyes twinkled, his mouth twisting savagely as he crowded my space, cupping my breasts. As he pinched my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, I struggled to remain standing.

The pain was intense as he twisted my tender tissue, pulling and plucking them brutally. “Oh, God. Oh...” I slapped my hand on top of the counter even as I continued to reach for him, trying desperately to find his belt buckle.

Max dragged me onto my toes as he hunkered over, pushing my breasts together. He whispered hoarse and filthy words before sucking on my nipple, pulling the hardened nub between his teeth. The moment he bit down, stars floated in front of my eyes.

I wrapped my arm around his head, holding on for dear life as I gasped for air. “Yes. Yes!” I could feel my heart racing, the blood pumping vigorously.

Growling, he rubbed his lips across to my other breast, mouthing my skin before sucking on my second bud. The combination of sheer ecstasy and a hint of anguish created tingles shooting all the way up from my toes. As I tugged on his hair, he licked up between the cleft, peppering kisses along my collarbone.

I resumed fumbling to release his belt, my fingers almost numb as I tried to release the thick button and unzip.

He pushed back, taking over and tearing at his clothes, pitching them to the side then dropping to his knees. As he yanked me forward by the edge of my jeans, I was forced to grip the counter, watching him intently as he peeled away the edges of the denim. He blew a swath of hot air across my tummy then tugged the material down my hips, yanking them until they hit the floor. The panties were no match, merely ripped away in pieces.

I almost laughed at the realization I'd need to purchase more.

The moment I was freed of the tight confines, he rolled his hands up along the insides of my legs, spreading them wide open.

I'd never felt so naked in front of a man or so very free. "Oh, my... I..."

"I own every inch of you," he breathed as he licked along my thigh, creating another wave of excitement. I gathered a scent of my pussy as juice trickled past my swollen folds. Every part of me was wet and hot, anxious to have his mouth and tongue pressed against my clit.

"Yes."

"You will do what I say," he mused.

"Uh-huh." A quick snap of his fingers against my pussy was all I needed as a reminder. "Yes, sir!"

He chuckled darkly before giving me a heated look then swirled the tip of his tongue around my clit in slow and deliberate actions. His massive hands kept me spread wide open. Ready for him, for his use and his playtime.

I swallowed hard, lolling my head as he sucked and licked, driving me almost immediately to a state of nirvana. He was an expert at eating pussy, driving me so close to an orgasm then pulling back.

“Jesus. I...” Everything was jumbled in my mind as the sensations became pricks of lightning shooting through me. I found myself opening my legs even farther, arching my back and falling into a beautiful abyss.

He licked up and down the length of my pussy before burying his face in my warmth, his tongue plunging deep inside.

“Shit!” I gripped his shoulder with one hand, trying desperately to keep from falling. I held my breath until he reared back, smacking my pussy with his fingers once again. I couldn’t imagine this kind of pain would be anything but pure agony, but I was wrong. He was driving me closer to the most incredible climax then pulling back and starting all over again.

I tossed my head from side to side as he thrust two then three fingers inside, flexing them open. The way he sucked on my clit was powerful, stimulating in every manner. The moment he added a fourth finger, I almost lost it.

I sensed he was watching me, studying my every move, determining whether or not I’d been a good enough girl to be allowed to come. I wanted to beg, to plead, but I wasn’t that kind of woman.

Was I?

I couldn’t stop a series of moans floating up from the very depths of my being, the sound bedraggled and raspy.

When he pulled back completely, the cool air was enough to make me cry out. “No! Don’t stop. Please...”

A sly smile crossed his face as he rose to his feet, lifting and pushing me onto the counter. My bottom slid into the sink and as he splayed me out once again, I realized the window blind was open.

“Now, I feast. You will not come until I allow you or trust me, Kathleen. You. Will. Be. Punished.” His gravelly voice was inhuman, his actions like a wild beast as he licked me

fervently, growls and husky deep breaths following every swipe of his tongue. He pushed my legs all the way back to the edge of the sink, the angle forcing me to rest my head against the cool glass. This was pure sin, dirty in every manner.

And I loved it.

I could almost envision someone peering in, watching our sinful act and couldn't help but smile. Let them watch. I closed my eyes once again, trying to keep from climaxing. When I heard a jangling sound, I peered down, shocked to see a wooden spoon in his hand. "What?"

"Shush," he instructed, twirling the wood several times before using his thumb and forefinger to push aside my pussy lips.

I was thrown when he smacked the wood against my soft pink tissue not once but four times. "Oh. Oh!" I jerked up, my entire body shaking.

He immediately switched his actions, lowering his head and licking in a ravaging fashion.

"Oh. My. God." He had no way of knowing how close he was driving me to insanity. I shuddered, biting back a high-pitched scream as he repeated the move, leaving me drained and breathless.

"Every hole is mine. Keep your legs wide open for me," he instructed.

I pushed down on my knees, trying to obey. Trying to be a good girl. Panting, I could no longer focus but the second he shoved his thumb into my asshole, there was no chance I could hold back. The climax rushed up from my toes, skittering along the insides of my thighs before exploding deep within my pussy. "Oh!" The scream was little more than a muffled moan, floating above us.

My lover and the man who required my obedience hissed his displeasure, smacking me several times with the spoon even as he thrust his thumb in and out of my asshole.

I could see the feral look in his eyes as he bent down once again, opening his mouth wide before licking up every drop. No man had ever licked me this way,

Or driven me wild.

Or made me want to beg for more.

When the single orgasm turned into a second, he used his fingers to swirl around my clit before pinching. At the same time, he added a second finger, plunging both in and out of my asshole. I was finally spent, my body jerking from the electricity buzzing like a live wire. I was exhausted, unable to think clearly.

I was given no time to recover, merely pulled to the edge of the counter. After blinking several times, I locked eyes with his, savoring the look of sheer desperate hunger. “You want me?” I whispered.

“Oh, I will have you.” His upper lip curled as he guided the tip of his cock to my still quivering folds. “As often as I want.” When the tip was inside, he gripped my hips, yanking me forward.

“God. Oh, God.” I wrapped my legs around his hips and rocked with him, tilting back as he plunged in savage motions. The sex was more intense than before, his muscles straining as he fucked me, thrusting in fast and furiously.

I struggled to hold on, kneading his chest with one hand as I kept my back arched, staring out the now foggy glass. In those few moments of wild passion, I could swear I noticed a pair of eyes.

Watching.

Waiting.

Planning.

I snarled, the sound more like an animal than the sated woman I’d become, refusing to buy into the bullshit. There were no such things as vicious creatures, no monsters waiting in the darkness to rip away tender flesh and bone.

He yanked me up until I was straddling him, his hand firmly planted on the back of my neck. As he jutted his hips forward, rocketing hard thrusts inside, he gave me the most intense look.

One of power.

One of possession.

I was amazed at his level of strength as he kept me aloft with ease, plunging into me with wild abandon. There was no perspiration on his brow, no beads of sweat rolling down his face. It was as if he'd been born to do this. To take me. To fuck me.

To own me.

I allowed myself to fall into the place of sweet oblivion, barely aware as he finally walked toward the kitchen table. When he eased me down with tender loving care, he pressed his lips against mine, moving them back and forth. His cock still firmly nestled inside, he held the stance, dragging his tongue across the seam of my mouth several times.

I darted my eyes across his, searching his very soul. I could swear we'd known each other our entire lives, our connection so damn strong. I no longer wanted to question why. I simply wanted more.

Max slid in and out, moving in a rhythmic fashion, taking his time to devour every inch of me. Within seconds, another orgasm threatened to push me into another punishment plateau.

I bit back a moan, clamping down my pussy muscles then releasing, squeezing once again.

“Come for me, little one. Come.”

I wiggled under him, clenching once again, whimpering as he threw his head back and roared. But I couldn't hold back any longer. The orgasm came in an almost violent wave, driving me straight to pure ecstasy.

“Oh. Oh. Oh!” This time, my scream was loud and crazed, shooting out in all directions. I realized he'd slowed down but the look on his face screamed of his need to come. I clamped down a third time and the moment I did, he shook his head, pulling all the way out.

“Bad!”

I grinned, reaching for him but soon realizing I would never be in control. As he thrust me onto my stomach, he jerked my arms over my head, using one hand to keep my wrists together. There was no further hesitation and I held my breath the moment he slipped his cockhead into the crack of my ass.

“Mmm... Oh. Oh...” This time, he wasn’t gentle, plunging the entire length inside. “Fuck!” I undulated and fought as my muscles constricted, pulling him in even deeper.

He rested on top of me, shifting back and forth. “So tight. So fucking tight.”

The few seconds of discomfort turned into such a beautiful bliss, my legs quivering and my heart racing. I pressed my cheek against the cool wood of the table, gasping for air. I wasn’t certain I could ever walk again.

The heat of his breath and the weight of his body felt so right, perfect in every manner. As he nuzzled into me, he nipped my neck several times, as if marking me as his. This was different, more intense yet intimate. We were as one, if only for a few beautiful moments in time. Even the way he filled me was special.

He began to rock, rolling his hips up as he thrust in and out my aching bottom, still keeping my arms prisoner. I tried to meet every hard drive by shifting my hips, but the man was fully in control. I felt his entire body begin to tremble, his breathing even more ragged than before. He was on fire, the heat from his skin searing mine. I felt like we were combusting together.

As he issued a series of low and husky growls, I could swear the tone changed, even more dangerous. Even more possessive. I simply closed my eyes, floating in freedom.

I knew he was close to coming and the moment I tried to usurp my only method of control, I could swear he was swelling. Within seconds, the feel was entirely different. I was so full, my muscles being stretched. “Oh...”

He huffed, pushing up and letting go of my hands, leaning over me as he powered in and out in rapid succession. The

strength of the man was incredible, the force of his actions scooting the table back and forth across the kitchen floor.

And he was swelling even more, leaving me gasping for air, my muscles aching as they accepted the extra girth. How could he grow any larger? I blinked and moaned, smacking my hands on the table as the tingling sensations inside shifted from tensing to opening up like a flower. This was insane. This was nuts. I could swear I was having an orgasm.

I could barely recognize his voice as he plunged harder and faster, his hands white-knuckled from the strength used to grip the edges of the table.

The single cracking sound wasn't imagined. He was breaking the table apart. Within a few more seconds, he was nothing more than a barbarian, taking exactly what he wanted. I could feel him expanding even more and I now struggled to breathe as I clenched down once again.

The roar erupted from his throat seconds before I felt the spew of hot cum filling my ass. He shook violently for a full minute, his fingers still wrapped around the wood as if holding on for dear life.

Then everything was quiet.

I took several deep breaths, shocked he was still so hard. So very hard. As he eased his massive body down on mine, I found his hands with my own.

Max finally let go, intertwining our fingers and together, we remained exactly like we were for several minutes.

And all I could think about was that we'd been mated.

CHAPTER 10



*K*athleen

Mated.

The word hadn't left my mind since he'd come inside of me. Even an hour later, wrapped in a fuzzy robe and sitting on the couch holding a new and very full glass of wine, the word hovered at the forefront. I darted a look in his direction. Jesus. He looked different to me, more primal in a crazy manner.

I rubbed my temple, finally forcing myself to close my eyes. He'd barely said two words since that most amazing sexual event, but I knew we had to talk. The other word that had entered my mind was trust.

Yes, for some crazy reason I did trust him.

"What are you really doing here, Max?" I finally asked, trying to break the ice.

"I told you before, checking on you. Why are you asking?"

"Because I didn't call you," I said quietly.

He exhaled, glancing around the room. "Are you all right otherwise? I have a feeling you're not telling me something."

"Why? You sound like you know something I don't."

I licked my lips, looking the other way as I waited for his answer. I knew I'd have to confide in him what Lois had told me and my growing suspicions. I was beginning to think he

was the only person who might be able to shed some light on what the hell was going on.

“I had a premonition that you were... in harm’s way,” he finally answered.

“A premonition. You’re serious.”

“I’m very serious. Have you had any issues?”

I bit back my reply for a few seconds. “A couple of weird phone calls. Nothing out of the ordinary in my profession. Well, in our profession.” I laughed nervously.

He glanced around the small living room, moving to a standing position. “Let me check.”

I trailed behind him, watching as he opened the closet and the washer and dryer room, moving to the hallway bathroom.

“You’re checking for the boogeyman?” I asked, half laughing.

He snapped his head in my direction, narrowing his eyes. “You and both know the killer could have your scent and if so, will be coming after you. Now, tell me. What is down this hall?”

“My bedroom and master bath. The guest room. Okay?”

He stormed down the hall, his hand on his weapon.

I waited, shaking my head as I heard the doors being thrown open. When he returned, his expression was more relaxed, but only slightly.

“My scent. You’re still convinced we’re talking about an animal attack.” He was serious about his concerns. My thoughts shifted to the jerk who’d been in my yard.

“What I’m convinced of doesn’t matter. We’re talking about evidence and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Maximillian? Who are you really?”

Growling, he took several steps toward me, taking several deep breaths. “You don’t want to know.”

“Maybe I do. Maybe I need to know why we seem connected and why...” I swallowed hard, unable to finish my sentence.

“You’re right. We need to talk. I’ve learned a few things that trouble me.”

“What things?” he asked as his gaze fell, his glorious dark eyes narrowing.

“I was right, this was no animal attack. The killer snagged his victims from behind, crushing their windpipe. They suffocated before they were... brutalized.”

His breathing was heavy and I could almost feel his mind churning. “Calculated.”

“Yes, and there’s no animal on the planet that can lift a two hundred and fifty pound man off his feet with one hand.” I let him go, nodding toward the dining room table. “Plus, the M.E. sent a few details from the latest victim including details on a foreign substance she found.”

Max followed me toward the computer, huffing when he noticed the broken glass.

“I’ll clean it up in a minute. This is far too important.” He leaned over me as I moved from screen to screen, studying the pictures of the claw marks intently. When I pulled up a shot of the receipt Lois had found in Michael’s mouth, I heard a slight hiss coming from him. “What?”

“Roselake.” He seemed startled as well as angry.

“Yes. Even the M.E. thought it was odd. Something about the lure of werewolves? Funny she would think that. Right?” I didn’t expect anything but chastisement as a reaction. When he was dead quiet, I turned to gaze into his eyes. “You know the place.”

“Who doesn’t? A town of people who keep to themselves.”

“Yeah, well, at least we have a clue, perhaps a place to look.”

He reared back. “That’s farfetched and the ghost story is just that, something to keep the tourists coming in.”

“I’m no fool, Max. I understand, but the M.E. also mentioned that she knows of certain cults where the members believe themselves to be werewolves. She thinks we could be dealing with some initiation.”

He shook his head, glancing in the other direction. “Plausible. Sick but plausible, just as we talked about before.”

“Yeah, and that bothers me.”

“You think she knows more than she told you?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m not certain of anything any longer. We need to see if any of our databanks find anything on the blood she found, although it might be tainted and certainly not admissible as evidence even if we find anything.” I typed in the information, pulling the slide she’d sent and using my secure credentials to access every database the department used.

Once again, he leaned over me, studying everything I was doing. The feel of his heated breath across the back of my neck was far too stimulating, creating a pulsing wave between my legs. When my pussy began to throb, I almost jerked up from the chair.

Be a professional.

I bit back a cry when his hand brushed over mine.

“I have access to some national sites that I doubt the Denver Police Department is connected to.”

“Be my guest.”

When he hesitated, I took the opportunity to move away. Apparently, he didn’t feel he could trust me just yet. I moved back to the couch, grabbing my glass of wine.

“What else are you thinking?”

“The original M.E. was pulled off the case.”

Max turned his head, studying me. “That bothers you.”

“Yeah, along with the fact she’s trying to steer the investigation toward Roselake, convinced that the people there having something to do with the murders.”

“She said that?” he demanded, shaking his head.

“It was her insinuations, not what she said, but I have to believe someone must have overheard our conversation. It’s

too odd that a woman of science would suddenly put any credence in wolves.”

He typed on the keyboard and I could see the wheels turning in his mind. “Let’s think what we have regarding this case. We have attacks that were obviously calculated.”

“Yes, even the killer having some kind of a conscience.”

“I was dragged into this case with you out of the blue, the original M.E. pulled off,” he continued.

“Don’t you think that’s a little odd? Granted, it’s an election year, but I find that far too coincidental and I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“I agree with you. This receipt. Where was it found again?” he asked.

“Supposedly in the victim’s mouth, as if he wanted someone to find it, leading law enforcement to his killer.”

“I know the place, a small restaurant on the outskirts of Roselake. I also know that what she described couldn’t have happened.”

I moved to the edge of the couch, leaning over. “Tell me why.”

“Because they use an old style of cash register where the tape is imprinted with actual ink.” He shot me a look.

“Fuck. His saliva would have dissolved the ink. Jesus. What are we dealing with?”

He hit enter and eased back, moving back toward the coffee table, grabbing the glass of whiskey I’d poured him. “You’re right. We’re being steered toward Roselake for some reason.”

“That’s crazy. Why? What’s so important about the little city? The land?”

The expression on his face was pensive. He was still holding out on me. “It’s valuable but for what reason?” he asked. “To expand Denver? A casino?”

“I…” I sighed, wondering if I might have an idea. “I can make a few calls in the morning and see if I can find out what developments are in the process with the Denver city council.

Approval is needed before any development can move past the initial planning stages.”

“Sounds like a subject you know all about.”

“Enough to know that the names of those involved will be evident on the legal documents.” I eased off the couch, walking toward the window and leaning against it. The entire case had been rigged, more than one person hiding something.

“That sounds reasonable and could provide a few new leads. However, we keep what we talk about to ourselves. It doesn’t go into the report. Got it?”

“You want people to think we’re following the leads we’re being given.” I sighed, peering outside into the darkness.

“Exactly. If there is a conspiracy of some kind, we need time to know who we can trust and who’s involved,” he said in his usual dominating manner.

This time, I knew he was right. We were being used and I would go through hell and back to find out by whom and why. He took a sip of his drink and I could tell he was studying me intently. He’d seemed so disturbed after we’d... made love. So distant for a time, at least after he’d left me. It had taken his cock a full ten minutes, maybe longer to go soft. I’d never known a man like him.

In any regard.

I watched as he walked back to the computer. When he stiffened, I tilted my head. “Did you find something?”

“This blood that was found. You said the new M.E. discovered it?” he asked, his tone husky. I could tell he was angry.

“Yes. Let me guess, another plant.”

“While the match is only seventy-five percent accurate, the sample belongs to a man I interrogated regarding the fugitive I was chasing.”

“Wait a minute. That’s insane.” The sharp crack against the window forced me to jump. “Not again.”

“What are you talking about?”

Bristling, I clenched my fist. “Someone’s in the yard.”

“Back away from the window.” Max rushed forward, pushing me aside with enough force I was tossed into the wall. He grabbed his weapon, darting glances out the window before yanking the blind. “This happened before. Didn’t it?”

“Well...”

“Didn’t it?” he growled.

“Yes. Okay? Someone was in my yard this morning. And no, I didn’t see anyone in particular. I just... The bushes were trampled.”

“Fuck! And you didn’t tell me?” He swung his head in my direction, his eyes full of fire.

“I honestly just thought it was kids or something. Happens a lot in this part of town. I didn’t want to jump to irrational conclusions. You know better than that, Max. Could be nothing.”

“Don’t be stupid, Kathleen. You’re many things but not that. A monstrous killer tracked you for two full miles, almost able to kill you. If this is a conspiracy, then don’t you think the perpetrators might be concerned that you saw the person responsible?”

“But... But I described nothing more than...” Hell, I hadn’t followed through with describing the beast I was certain was in my imagination. In fact, I’d said very little. “Shit. You’re right.”

He moved into the kitchen and I didn’t bother following him even though I jumped once again when I heard the sound of the window blind being slammed closed. When he returned, the Glock was in one hand, my weapon in the other. He shook his head as he handed me the Beretta, holding his hand over mine for a few seconds before pulling back. “I’m going outside.”

“You’re crazy.”

“So my director keeps telling me. If for any reason I don’t return, call 9-1-1.” He moved into the living room, turning off

the lights.

“Max, wait.” I closed the distance until we were mere inches apart. “Don’t go.”

He cupped my face, his thumb moving aimlessly back and forth across my skin. Even in the darkness, I could feel the wild beating of his heart matching mine. The pulse ticking on the side of my neck was almost as terrifying. “I have no problem protecting myself, sweetheart. Trust me. No one wants to fuck with me.”

There was something different about him, the protective mode even more dangerous than any other persona. “Who the hell are you, Max?”

Exhaling, he glanced over my shoulder. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? I’m going out the back. Lock the door behind me and make certain there’s no other easy access for the asshole.”

I nodded, shivering as he walked toward the back door. I trailed behind him, barely able to see his features but I could tell he gave me one last look before easing into the shadows. After locking the door, I shifted backwards, trying to listen for any sounds. I heard absolutely nothing except for limited street noise, but my nerves remained on edge.

Only a few minutes later, the light tap on the door gave me a sense of relief. The moment he walked in, I gripped his arm and immediately felt the heat of his breath cascading down the length of me. “Anything?”

“Nothing that I could see,” he said in a troubling manner, moving past me toward the desk lamp I’d positioned over my computer.

I stood frozen, shifting the gun from hand to hand. When the light was turned on, I could see just how pensive he remained.

“Now, you are going to hear me and you’re not going to argue. I’m going to close the blinds in the bedroom and you’re going to pack a small bag. Then you’re coming with me.”

“I’m not leaving my home.”

“You will do as I say. Period.” The conviction and the utter command in his voice was not to be denied. Besides, I had the feeling that he’d simply toss me over his shoulder and do what he wanted.

“Fine. Okay.” I suddenly realized just how much danger both of us could be in. If this was some conspiracy disguised as a brutal cult killing, then I could be the next victim. I moved into the hallway, finding it difficult to breathe.

He returned, gripping my arm. “Stay low and don’t take more than a few seconds. If there is someone outside, then he knows I’m here. They could be calling for reinforcements. We need to get the hell out of here.”

“Grab my computer and the notes. No one can get ahold of them.”

He nodded, waiting until I crouched down before going into the bedroom. I was shaking as I attempted to grab some clothes and makeup, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. I couldn’t believe I’d been such a fool. Why had I been assigned the case? My guess is someone figured I could be led down a certain path. That was insane. I managed to throw on some clothes, struggling into a pair of hiking boots.

I grabbed everything I could think of, including every box of ammunition I had, and found Max waiting by the door.

“We’re leaving the lights on, except for the hallway light,” he said quietly. “My truck is just outside. Stay directly behind me and keep low.”

I nodded, still shaking. I pulled my weapon into my hand and as he grabbed my bag, I yanked my keys from the hall table.

We made it to the truck without incident, but I could swear there were eyes watching us. I was still shaking as he climbed inside the driver’s side, immediately revving the engine. He rolled out of the parking spot before turning on his lights and the second he switched them on, my eyes were drawn to something standing near my house. The all-black figure was crouched low. Was I insane seeing a glow coming from a pair of eyes? No. No. Now I was hallucinating.

“What the fuck is that?”

He didn't bother looking, merely accelerating. “As I told you, they might have called in reinforcements and if they have any connection to law enforcement...”

He allowed the sentence to drop. “Then they'll be dressed in sniper gear. Jesus.”

“Just sit tight until we get out of the city limits.”

I shifted my gaze toward him. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere safe for both of us.”

“Where?”

He said nothing as he slammed his foot down on the gas, weaving through the streets at over sixty miles per hour. I didn't press the issue until we were on the interstate, heading out of town and I suddenly knew exactly where we were going.

“We're going to Roselake,” I muttered, my hand gripping the door handle as if I was ready to escape.

Still, Max said nothing.

“Tell me. Tell me, god damn it!”

Sighing, his grip on the steering wheel tightened. “Yes, we're going to Roselake.”

“Why? Do you really think these people have anything to do with the murders? Please don't tell me you're buying into that crap.”

“I'm not buying into anything, Kathleen. I own a cabin there.” He yanked out his phone, hitting a single button.

“What?” I was shocked. Then I realized that I hadn't thought about his obvious American Indian heritage. I was one lousy fucking detective. “They picked you because you were from Roselake.”

“That's what I'm guessing. We'll be safe there. I have friends and my father lives in the community. He serves on the city

council. Trust me, we'll get all the help and protection we need."

I swallowed, shrinking into the softness of the leather seat. Still terrified. Still on edge. But I knew what I'd thought earlier was correct. Max was likely the only person I could trust. Was my partner in on this? Was his? There were too many questions and zero answers.

I huddled in the corner as the miles flew by, processing the information as well as everything that had occurred between us. "I'm scared, Max. For the first time in my life I feel like I have no control."

"I know, but everything is going to be all right." He spoke softly, easing his hand to my leg.

"How can it? We have a serial killer either finding victims at random or... Shit. There has to be a connection between them."

"I agree. We'll work on that first thing in the morning. Tonight, we're going to get some rest."

Rest. As if I would ever be able to close my eyes again.

"Do you believe in monsters?" I asked as I noticed the first interstate sign for Roselake. I'd anticipated his hesitation.

"I believe monsters come in all forms, Kathleen. Whether they are primal animals hunting for food or humans who refuse to accept humanity, they will always live in close proximity."

"That's very sad."

"But a part of our lives."

I nodded, as if in the darkness he could see my acknowledgement. I hated the fact I was shaking all over, my fear resonating from the basic realization that the horrors would continue. And there was nothing we could do about it. I closed my eyes, yanking the thin coat around me and falling into the hum of the massive engine.

"You belong to me, Kathleen. Never forget that."

“Why?” I demanded, confronting him as I’d done several times.

“Because fate brought us together.”

I shifted, almost laughing at the thought. Fate. The warm hum that had surrounded me earlier seemed different, forcing me to open my eyes. I realized almost instantly that I’d been dreaming. “Where are we?”

“Almost there,” Max said in the kind of hushed voice that indicated remorse or perhaps guilt.

I sat up, fighting to push away the exhaustion. The darkness surrounding the truck was palpable, creating another wave of doubt as well as apprehension. When a few lights appeared in the distance, I was relieved. “Why did you move away from where you grew up?”

He chuckled and I heard the twist of his hand around the steering wheel. The man was as tense as I was. “My job. I wanted to be closer.”

“What did your family think?”

“There’s just my dad and he understood my decision.”

“What happened to your mom?” I wasn’t even certain why I asked.

Max took a deep breath before answering, scanning the rearview mirror as he talked. “My mother died almost twenty years ago. Her heart gave out. Nearly destroyed my father.”

“I’m so sorry.”

The silence was horrible, the tension almost as wretched as the rapid beating of my heart. “Did you ever have a family of your own?”

He turned his head slowly, the shimmer in his eyes stealing my breath. “I cared about someone a long time ago. She wasn’t the one. She needed to be safe.”

Safe. The single word was very odd, much like the man himself.

“I understand. No man could tolerate the fact I was a cop,” I laughed bitterly.

I could tell I wasn't getting anything additional. As he drove through what appeared to be the main street through town, I couldn't help but smile. Even at an ungodly hour in the middle of the night, the small shops and restaurants were brightly decorated, every location inviting.

Then he drove into another realm of darkness, the headlights highlighting a narrowing road. Even the terrain was bumpier, jostling the truck as he drove toward the mountains. I had difficulty keeping my eyes open.

I was only somewhat aware the rumble of the engine had ceased. Then I was in his arms. I was able to lift my head as he took long strides into some structure. He didn't bother turning on a light before easing me down onto a soft surface. I was able to hear his boots as he moved around the room, wincing when the warm glow of a lamp filtered into the space.

He didn't bother addressing me as he moved back outside, bringing in my two bags. When he closed the door, the hard thud of the lock being positioned into place was a reminder that this was no vacation. He remained quiet as he moved out of sight, carrying my things, walking up an ornate set of stairs. After watching him for a few seconds, I took the opportunity to survey my surroundings.

He'd called where we were going a cabin. From where I sat, the house was incredible; a massive stone fireplace leading up toward a cathedral ceiling, wooden floors that glowed even in the dim lighting, and beautiful yet very masculine leather furniture that reeked of the man himself. The expansive room was adorned with stunning area rugs and woodwork that must have cost a fortune. I had no idea why he wouldn't want to live here.

When he returned, he didn't waste any time, moving toward the fireplace and grabbing several pieces of wood positioned on the massive hearth.

“This is beautiful,” I said quietly, as if my voice would disturb his reverie.

He didn't bother looking in my direction, merely continued building a fire. "My dad helped me build this place a few years ago. I always knew I'd come back one day."

"I don't blame you."

The big, brooding man remained silent and when he was seemingly satisfied with the flames, he moved toward a cabinet on the other end of the room. He bent down, opening one of the doors, chuckling before pulling out a bottle. "Wasn't certain you'd still be here. Damn good whiskey." He seemed to notice my hard stare. "I've had a caretaker looking after the place in my absence. This was a special bottle of whiskey my father bought me. I wasn't certain if Johnny had found it."

When he walked into another room, I crossed my legs on the couch, chilled to the bone. Nothing was going to keep me warm at this point. The fire was mesmerizing, the bright orange flames licking at the thick pieces of wood. I was surprised just how comfortable I felt, even though there were far too many questions racing in the back of my mind.

Max returned, handing me a glass and sitting down in the oversized chair across from me. He remained on the edge of his seat and for some crazy reason, I couldn't stop staring at his chest, the open and torn shirt a reminder of our passion. I forced myself to look away, fearful that the desire would return.

"You saw something outside of my house. Didn't you?" I asked, my tone more accusatory than I'd wanted.

"Nothing that matters."

"Why do you keep doing that? Why? You want me to trust you so damn desperately, yet you treat me as if whatever detail you're going to tell me about yourself will turn me away or worse."

"Maybe it will."

Huffing, I snapped my head in his direction. "Are you so dead set against keeping everyone at arm's length?"

He swirled the drink before taking a gulp. I wasn't a damn patient woman and watching the almost contrite expression crossing his face pissed me off once again.

“What the hell are you hiding? And I know you are,” I hissed between clenched teeth.

“You know very little, Kathleen.”

I shifted forward, leaning over and attempting to grab his full attention. “That's where you're wrong. I'm a damn good observer of people. I know that whatever reason you didn't want me to know that this little town is where you're from is bothering the hell out of you. I also know that you didn't just happen on that park where I was. If I had to venture a guess, I'd say you were there to find me. Why? That I don't know, but I will figure it out. I also gather that you have a rather interesting past that prevents you from getting close to people.”

He took another sip of his drink, holding the liquid in his mouth. The fucker was hiding behind a glass of whiskey in an effort to avoid talking to me. I couldn't understand what was so important that he had to hide from everyone, including himself.

I studied the amber liquid in the glass, my stomach churning. “Fine. I realize that you're not going to talk to me and while that pisses me off, what does it really matter? You are dead set on protecting me, so that's fine. You got me here.” I was ready to slam the thick tumbler down onto the table. Instead, I gently placed it on the beautifully carved wooden design, admiring the inlay before yanking back my hand. “I actually do like you very much, Max, and for some crazy reason, I know we're connected. I can't explain it, but I know you feel that way too.”

I hesitated, hoping he'd say anything, but as usual, he remained his sullen self, simply staring at the fire.

I jerked to my feet, rolling my eyes. “As I expected. A whole lot of nothing. What bedroom am I staying in?”

He took yet another sip before bothering to answer me. "Second door on the right. There are fresh towels in the guest bathroom. Help yourself."

I was absolutely floored at the macho arrogance of the man. I skirted around the coffee table, my legs just as heavy as they'd been before. The moment I was on the landing to the stairs, I swayed back and forth, just as nauseous as I'd been a couple of nights before. "I told you before that trust goes both ways, but it's earned, not forced. We all have demons, Max. God knows I do, but I'm not foolish enough to keep them all inside. They will eat you alive. From what I can tell, you're a good man and one I'd like to get to know. But you have secrets you refuse to tell me. Don't you?"

Tick. Tock.

The silence was deafening.

"Let me in, Max. Whatever you have to tell me won't frighten me. I'm tougher than I look. I want..." For a brief second I could see the same gorgeous eyes that had drawn me in, pulling me into the most incredible moments of passion. Then they changed. I blinked several times, a slight moan slipping from my mouth.

Max quickly looked away, snarling under his breath. He could never trust me with whatever he'd been harboring inside for so long. Whatever it was had pushed almost everyone out of his life.

"And I know in my heart that you're never going to let me in," I half whispered. "What a shame. What a real... shame." As I walked up the stairs, my heart was heavier than it had been in a long time.

And I honestly had no idea why.

CHAPTER 11



*M*_{ax}

Trust.

Respect.

Honesty.

Fuck. All the requirements of a good relationship. I huffed at the thought, taking another swig of my drink. The bourbon had aged, much like I had, although my age wasn't relevant to anything or anyone, my lifespan almost twice that of a human. I'd lived long enough that at some point questions would begin to be asked why I wasn't aging.

I'd seen the way she'd looked at me, the longing to just let go, but only if I shared with her something that she wasn't ready to hear. How do you tell someone that you are the beast meant for horror stories and nightmares?

I'd already lost someone special in my life and I couldn't allow that to happen again. The woman I'd allowed myself to care about had found out who and what I was. Her departure in the middle of the night had been devastating but a clear indication I couldn't let my guard down. I'd been lucky she hadn't raced to the cops. While Kathleen was my mate, my true destiny, I couldn't force her to stay. I wouldn't force her. I wasn't that kind of man. Huffing, I realized in truth I had no idea who the hell I was any longer. I'd once thought I was a good man, one with honor.

And now?

“Fuck.”

I fisted my hand as I leaned against the mantel, staring into the brightness of the fire. The warmth of the flame did little to stop the chills skating down my spine.

We were in serious danger.

While the information Kathleen had provided was disturbing, I couldn't shake the fact that there was a wolf behind the murders. There wasn't any doubt and I needed to find out the council's decision. The hunt should still go on. If there was any truth behind the idea that a group of humans had garnered an alliance with a member of either pack, utilizing their 'special' skills to line their pocketbooks, I wasn't certain I could hold back a number of beasts.

In my eyes, the bastards would deserve to have their throats ripped out. Still, we needed to proceed with caution, developing a foolproof plan. Had bringing her here been a mistake? Hell, I wasn't entirely certain of anything at this point but the fact there were clear indications that she was being watched couldn't be ignored. She'd been right that I'd sensed something outside of her house, although if I had to venture a guess, the intruder was entirely human. She was also getting too damn close to uncovering details about my past that would eventually lead her to a conclusion of her own.

What I had been able to gather was that there had been at least two separate visits from the same entity to her house. And there'd been the same almost metallic stench as the forest, but I would swear it as from a different wolf. Nothing made any damn sense. There were no overt signs of destruction or a camera of any kind, but whoever it had been had cased the entire exterior. The fact she'd seen a figure in the darkness while we were leaving would only add fuel to her ignited fire. She'd never stop until she found the truth.

Hissing, I concentrated on the flames, my heart racing. I wanted to share with her every aspect of my life, including information about the pack. Hell, I craved everything about sharing some kind of a life with her, but the timing wasn't

right. My father was correct. Unfortunately, she would continue to dig into my past until she found some kind of answers.

There were far too many unanswered questions regarding the murders. Who would go to such intense lengths to point the finger at Roselake and why? Perhaps the real question was why did I believe my father had more knowledge of the possible reason than I knew he'd admit to? Another volley of anger rushed into every muscle and cell. I was no different from Kathleen. I needed to know the truth.

I was a fucking hypocrite. I refused to let her in on any aspect of my life even while I was fucking her.

Mating with her.

Grimacing, I couldn't believe I'd shifted enough to allow the knot to form. I closed my eyes, savoring the way she'd felt in my arms, the longer coupling more intense than ever. My cock ached once again, the hunger almost maddening. I was angry with myself. Shit, I was furious with the world.

I held the glass into the limited light, studying the crystal facets as they shimmered. Seeing the blood on her hand had almost put me over the edge. Knowing some asshole was out to get her had brought out the predator in me.

And nothing and no one was going to change that.

Visions of racing through the woods in my bestial form filtered into my mind swirling with the humanity that I'd clung to my entire life. My instinct was on high alert. The Wolfen had a powerful enemy and it had nothing to do with the Nightwalkers. I'd bet my life on it. As the images continued of the wretched slaughtered deer, I heard the cracking sound as the glass succumbed to my strength.

The rage became all consuming, threatening to strip me of my control. I snarled, my entire system rumbling as the beast clawed to the surface. I couldn't allow that to happen, at least for now. In a fit of anger, I tossed the glass into the fireplace, biting back a primal roar as it shattered into hundreds of pieces.

“Come to me, Max. I need you. I hunger for you.”

I closed my eyes, her lilting voice swimming in my head. How I longed to hear her say the words. While her body had succumbed, her heart remained on edge. She was afraid of me even though her desires were almost as uncontrollable as my own. I wanted nothing more than for her to surrender to me in every manner.

I sneered given the ugly realization. I was a true barbarian. As I closed my eyes, the sweet vision of her standing in front of me, dressed in nothing more than a white gown, was so damn real. I reached out with my shaking hand, the image allowing me to brush my fingers across her lips.

“You are my lover, my husband, and my mate.”

The guttural sound that erupted from my throat was pure beast. I gripped the mantel to keep from falling, my chest rising and sinking, my throat constricting. “Yes, and you belong to me.”

How many times had I issued the statement?

“Yes, my love.” She tipped her head, a look of utter adoration on her face as she slid the silky material down from one shoulder then the other. As the billowy shift flowed to the floor, I was left breathless and in awe of her extreme beauty.

“This isn’t real,” I whispered, taking gulping breaths. Dear God, I could still see her; the way her flaming red hair cascaded down to her rosy nipples, her slender waist moving to exquisitely rounded hips and her long legs that seemed to go on forever. “Fuck. Fuck.”

I wiped away beads of perspiration from my forehead, struggling to push the fantasy away.

“I am all yours, my love. Command me. Take me. Use me.” As she dropped to the floor, lowering her head, I could take no more.

The urge to have her, to take her was too strong to ignore. I shot a look at the staircase, trying desperately to control my breathing. That just wasn’t going to happen. I took long strides, taking the stairs two at a time and the moment I’d reached her closed door, I’d shucked my clothes. Using every

ounce of restraint I had left, I opened the door slowly, but with every passing second, the longing shifted into a compulsion.

I wouldn't be able to hold back for long.

"Kathleen..." I whispered, my voice raspy from desire.

Her sleeping form was nestled under the covers, the scent of her filtering into the room even more concentrated than before. My senses were heightened to the extreme, able to detect her rapid heartbeat, her increased pulse.

Even her body temperature was higher than normal. As I walked forward, I gathered a whiff of our earlier sex, the moisture trickling between her legs. I could almost taste her on my tongue. The raspy sound of my breathing grew louder as I walked toward the bed.

Control. You must have control.

I issued a slight snarl as I reached down. "Kathleen." When she finally opened her eyes, staring directly into my own, the myriad emotions were almost too much to bear.

Fear.

Curiosity.

Frustration.

Hunger.

Kathleen eased into a sitting position, covering her breasts, her gaze directed and full of heat. She remained quiet, the pulse in her neck pumping her life's blood raggedly.

"I want you." I knelt onto the bed, drinking in her sweet essence before ripping away the sheet. Nothing was going to keep me away from her. "And I will have you."

While she didn't utter a sound, her lower lip quivered. Seeing her completely naked body was a powerful aphrodisiac, my cock aching and my balls swollen.

She eased her arms behind her and arched her back in a blatant offering. My mouth watered as I moved closer, lowering my head until our lips were almost touching.

A slight whimper slipped past her lips, but she lifted her head even more, taking several deep breaths before closing her eyes. “Yes.”

I cradled both sides of her face with the flats of my hands, a series of raspy growls permeating the dense space. I allowed our lips to touch, hungry to bite into her tender flesh, to taste her blood of life and truly make her mine.

She reached up, placing her hands over mine, darting out her tongue. As she drew a lazy circle around my lips, I realized that beyond just our electric connection, I was falling hard for her. I shuddered involuntarily as she slid the tip of her tongue across the seam of my mouth, her breath so sweet as she blew across my face.

As our fingers tangled together, she managed to calm the savage beast. I rubbed both thumbs across her cheeks before capturing her mouth, savoring the sweet flavor of her. I could drink her in for days, taking my time to explore every inch of her body. Every part of my skin was on fire and the sight of goosebumps popping along her naked skin was breathtaking. Even the slight hint of the moon cascading in from the partially closed blinds added to the romantic moment.

For tonight, I was simply a human.

The kiss was sweet at first, but I wanted so much more. I rolled my tongue against hers, my grip tightening.

She slid her fingers down the length of both arms, kneading my chest with one hand as she slowly lowered her other to my throbbing cock. When she moaned into the kiss, I shuddered from the way blood pumped through every vein. The way she touched me, wrapping her lithe fingers around the base of my cock was almost overwhelming.

I was so damn hungry, so aroused that I was forced to break the kiss, taking several deep breaths. “God.”

She offered a mischievous smile as she slid her other hand between my legs, rolling my balls between her fingers. “So hard. So swollen.”

“Yyyeeesss...” I chuckled darkly as she pumped my shaft, moving up and down in a very deliberate manner.

“Be careful, little girl.”

“Or what?” she whispered, lowered her head until she was able to press a series of kisses on my chest.

“Or you might find yourself...” As she twisted her hand, moving up and down, the friction forced me to lose concentration.

“Or what, Maximillian?” she murmured, licking around first one of my nipples then the other. She squeezed her hand around my balls, clamping with enough pressure that my entire body shuddered.

“Fuck. Jesus.” I fisted her hair, tossing my head back. The sensations rocketing through me were white hot, searing every nerve ending.

“Mmm... Speechless.” She dragged her tongue down the center of my chest, finally pushing me back aggressively.

“You’re not in control. You need to remember that.”

As she straddled my hips, rubbing her wet pussy across my aching cock, it took everything I had not to impale her, taking everything I wanted from her.

Kathleen shifted between my legs, lowering down and blowing another round of hot air. As she brought the tip of my cock to her lips, rubbing it back and forth, a trickle of pre-cum was immediate. “Mmm...” she purred, licking the few drops as she closed her eyes.

I hadn’t anticipated seeing her in a playful mood, allowing the ravages of the case to fall to the side. Maybe she felt protected around me. Maybe her hunger was increasing. What I feared was something else entirely. I blocked out every negative thought, preferring to close my eyes as she taunted me, rolling her tongue around my cockhead in lazy circles.

Her fingers drew zigzags down the underside of my shaft, teasing my balls with gentle scrapes of her nails. She knew exactly what she was doing, driving me utterly insane. I would

hold off for as long as possible even though I wasn't a patient man.

The thought gave me a smile, my body relaxing from her touch alone.

She licked up and down, taking her time as she continued to squeeze my balls. The slight pain was sensational, driving a series of electric jolts into every muscle and tendon. I was thrown into a pit of fire the instant she pulled the tip into her mouth, using her strong jaw to suck. All the while she stroked the base, moving up and down rapidly.

Damn, the woman had a powerful hold over me, the kind that would forever keep the beast far too close to the surface.

My legs began to shake involuntarily as she took my shaft down an inch at a time, sucking and licking. She held the position for a few seconds then pulled back, blowing across the tip. I heard her raspy purring as she licked down until she was able to take one of my testicles into her mouth. The heat and the extreme wetness yanked me up, roaring into the air.

I gazed down at her with lazy eyes, remaining on my elbows. "Such a bad girl."

"And I think you like that about me." She sucked on my other ball, her tongue laving in zigzags and circles.

I'd never felt so damn alive, every sense heightened. "Yes, but you will learn to behave."

"Or what?" she asked before rearing back, undulating her hips provocatively.

"Don't tease me, little girl. A fair warning."

"A dangerous warning." She blew me a kiss before engulfing my cock once again, this time going all the way down until the tip hit the back of her throat.

"Fuck!" I reached for her head, entangling my fingers in her long strands and keeping her in place. The feel of her lip pressed against my balls was pure ecstasy. I kept her there for a few seconds and when I released her, she sucked up and down vigorously.

Within seconds, I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back for long. I took several deep breaths, trying to maintain control, to keep the amazing experience going, but I refused to come this way.

Not yet.

Not until I'd explored every inch of her.

With another keening cry, I yanked her away, dragging her up until her sweet little pussy was over my face.

"Oh. Oh!" She threw her arms back, gasping for breath as I pulled her down, dragging my tongue around her clit. "My, oh, my."

I wiggled my head, savoring the sweet taste of her, licking in a fervent manner. She was so wet, her juice instantly filling my mouth. I sucked up every drop before driving my tongue past her slickened folds. As I gripped her hips, pumping her up and down on my face, the mere sight of her voluptuous breasts yanked out the savage in me.

"Oh, God. Oh!" Kathleen tossed her head from side to side, her head lolling forward. But her eyes never left mine.

Watching.

Searching.

Learning.

I'd known she'd seen the golden ring around my eyes and there was nothing I could do to hide the portion that harbored passion.

And need.

And hunger.

With every swipe of my tongue, I was pulled further into my beast. The promise I'd made to myself was nearly being broken. I fought with the inner beast, refusing to change. I closed my eyes, feasting as her pussy muscles clamped around my tongue, drawing me in even deeper.

I was surprised when she clenched her legs against me, pushing hard until she was able to break the connection.

Laughing, she scrambled off, far enough away that I couldn't reach her.

Or so she thought.

She raked her hands through her strands of hair, the look on her face wild and free. "Not so fast."

"Hmmm... I think you need a lesson in who's boss." There was no hesitation. I simply grabbed her wrist as I sat up, pulling her over my lap. While she squealed and wiggled, I peppered her ass with several hard swats, moving from side to side in a rapid motion.

"Oh, no. You're not... You're not doing this." She fought hard, laughing as she attempted to take back control.

I continued to smack her beautiful bottom, enjoying the heat building in my hand. I'd never felt this playful or free, the moment more vulnerable than I could ever imagine. Suddenly, I was unable to let the controlling side of me go. With ease, I pushed her down onto the bed, dragging first one leg over my shoulder then the other before leaning over.

Panting, she smacked her hands against my chest, her breathing raspy. "That's no fair."

"Everything is fair because it's my choice." The guttural rasp of my voice was followed by a series of growls, but something happened in the few moments I held her in place.

This was no longer just about carnal attraction, a connection that neither one of us could ignore or explain. This was about much more. A coupling. Sharing.

I planted my hands on either side of her, hovering.

Waiting.

This was her choice.

A slight smile crossed her face as her eyes darted back and forth across mine. She slid her hand down, easing the tip of my cock to her pussy, rubbing my cockhead up and down for a few seconds. When she finally placed my shaft just inside, she seemed embarrassed, as if allowing me to see her vulnerability was more troubling than anything we'd experienced before.

“I promise that I won’t hurt you,” I said quietly.

“But you will never let me go. Will you?”

“Not unless you ask, but I hope you won’t.”

She nodded only once, lifting her arms over her head in a moment of surrender. Her lower lip continued to tremble as I slid my cock in an inch at a time. The way her muscles expanded, accepting the thick invasion pulled on my heartstrings. I’d never felt this way before, had never allowed myself to be this close.

Even with the single woman I’d cared about, I’d never been able to let go. There was something cathartic about our closeness, an absolution that few of our kind ever received. At least not from a pure human. We were always guarded, never far from our beast. With Kathleen, I knew that I could train my beast.

Mate. She’s your mate.

The words filtered into my mind. Suddenly, I didn’t want to change her, to force her to live her life as a monster. I would do everything in my power to protect her in more than one way. Another tug at my heart reminded me that with one single mistake, I’d take the life she knew away from her.

For a few seconds, I was pulled into despair until she cupped my face.

“It’s okay, Max. I want you. I need you. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I just... I crave everything about you. Make love to me. Please.”

Her words were said with such softness, every word reeking of passion and...

Love.

I closed my eyes, resisting the woeful howl that gurgled in my chest. Now was the time for joy, although we might never share it again. Tonight, she did belong to me.

I thrust into her again, the feel of her muscles surrounding me sizzling every nerve ending.

“Oh. Oh. Yes!” She trembled underneath me, her face twisted in pure ecstasy and in those few moments, I realized nothing had ever felt better.

* * *

“While no one within the law enforcement community is talking, it is evident that Denver could have a serial killer in its presence. All efforts at finding the detectives in charge have proven futile, further indicating that the good people of our city should be concerned.”

“Turn that shit off,” Kathleen barked, cursing under her breath. Every news station in the city had finally been tipped off to certain elements of the case. At least the medical examiner hadn’t lied about her exchange with reporters. I had to wonder whether she’d given them insider information, which would further fuel the conspiracy theory.

“They’re just doing their jobs,” I said quietly, even though I had no intention of listening to any more of the bullshit.

“Their jobs. Yeah, which makes ours more difficult. The killer is likely basking in his glory right about now, no doubt powering back shots of tequila and laughing.”

“I doubt the killer is paying a damn bit of attention.” After turning off the television, I crouched by the fire, warming my hands for a few seconds.

“You can’t know that. Most of them want attention, their grand fifteen minutes of fame.” She tossed a file, huffing as she glared at the computer screen.

While I hadn’t been able to gather any additional ‘sight’ from the killer, my instincts had created a heightened level of sensitivity. The killer was close. Too close. “This killer has a special agenda in mind.”

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?”

“Revenge.”

She inhaled, her brow furrowing. “All right. For what?”

“That’s what we’re going to have to figure out.” I thought about the fact that Stone’s blood had turned up. I didn’t buy the fact he’d had anything to do with the murders. Every aspect of what we’d discovered was tidy and convenient.

“This Stone Keeler you mentioned. Good guy or bad guy?”

I chuckled at the question. “Both but he’s no killer. I would bet my life on it.”

Evening had already settled in, the hours spent savoring every aspect of her body unexpected and perhaps far too indulgent. Yet I smiled as I dragged my tongue across my lips, still able to taste her sweet pussy. Every muscle in my body ached from the rounds of heated sex. I flexed my fingers then clenched them, cognizant that we’d taken far too much precious time away from the case.

I had the same premonitions that I knew Kathleen continued to have. The killer was lying in wait, the next victim on the horizon.

And we had no freaking idea who it might be, but I was certain the kills were for revenge, which meant the wolf was completely cognizant of his actions.

I could feel her utter frustration, sensing her increasing anger in every pore of my body much like her scent continued to filter into my nostrils. I shifted forward, ignoring the growing desire. I was also angry I hadn’t heard a single word from either my father or another councilmember. What the hell were they waiting for, another murder?

Proof.

They wanted to make certain that they didn’t drag any attention to the city, no matter the consequences. While I couldn’t blame them for being cautious, they had to know we were risking far too much. Eventually, fingers would be pointed, even if the cause was more about hiding the truth. I bit back a snarl and shoved down my anger. Cool heads were needed in order to figure out a plan.

I remained hunkered over the fire as she worked, stoking the wood as her fingers flew across the keyboard. Files were

strewn everywhere, and we'd gone over every detail, the evidence leading to a dead end, and we both knew it was on purpose. We were nothing more than mules being led down a path. As I studied the flames, I realized just how drawn to her I'd become, and not because of a connection that shouldn't be allowed by nature. I admired her tenacity and diligence, her verve for life and her strength.

"Ugh!" Kathleen hissed and the sound of her hands slamming onto the desk meant another dead end. "This is hopeless."

I chuckled, shaking my head before grabbing another piece of wood and tossing it into the fire. "Which part?"

"Everything. Every fucking thing." She jerked into a standing position, pacing back and forth in front of the computer. "There is absolutely no connection to the three victims I could find. Three completely different professions. Three different areas of town where they live. Hell, none of them even grew up in Denver. Their colleges were different. Different ages. Different hobbies, at least as far as their social media presence indicates. One had a dog, another a cat, and one had been a firm hater of animals in general. Fuck! There has to be something we're missing."

"Then we'll find it."

"How can you be so damn calm? You tell me that someone is out to kill me, we have no clues on to how the killer might be, and we have a conspiracy involving several respected members of law enforcement and God knows where else and you're tossing wood on the fire as if it's no big deal."

I shook my head as I rose to a standing position, weighing my answer. I walked toward her, keeping my gaze steady. "We keep trying. You're right, we're missing something. Perhaps the killer is out for revenge or righting some wrong. Maybe there is another professional connection we haven't been able to locate."

"Another professional connection, like being involved with a glee club?" The way her eyes slanted in my direction mocked me. When she laughed, I could tell it was out of frustration. She glanced at her watch, tapping the dial. "We've been at this

for almost five hours. I don't know what you think we're going to find without going back into the field. I need a drink." She walked to the bar, pulling out the bottle of whiskey. She stormed toward the kitchen, muttering under her breath.

"And you know that's dangerous."

"You can't keep me here, Max. I have a life and so do you. I appreciate your concern, but I'm not fragile." She rubbed her neck, grimacing before heading into the kitchen.

I waited for her return, moving toward the computer and shifting from screen to screen. Everything was far too clean, the evidence the medical examiner had provided all pointing fingers at a resident within Roselake. It was only a matter of time before her captain tightened the vise.

"I never said you were." As I closed the distance, she shivered all over as she handed me a drink.

"Why do you have that effect on me?" she whispered the question, her actions more timid than I was used to. She hid behind her drink, taking several small sips.

"What effect?"

"Driving me... crazy." Kathleen issued another nervous laugh, barely darting a glance in my direction.

I reached my hand up to touch her, hissing as I heard the knock on the door.

Her hand immediately went to the gun she'd placed on the table. I placed my fingers on top of hers, shaking my head. "You forget, no one knows about this cabin outside of members of this community."

She nodded, swallowing hard before moving away.

I took a sip of my drink before taking long strides toward the door. I was almost surprised seeing my father standing on the front porch.

He immediately looked past me, taking a deep whiff. "The woman is here."

“Yes. It was necessary.” I noticed he was alone, his face pensive. “You have news?”

He nodded, darting another glance. “We need to talk.”

“You can come in.” I held the door open, sensing his concern at talking in front of her. “Detective Kathleen Kelly, this is my father, Blackhawk Cordero.”

She eased her drink onto the table before walking forward, her arm extended. “Sir, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

In my father’s typical fashion, he merely gave her an obligatory smile before turning his attention in my direction. “As I said, we need to talk, son.”

I exhaled, lifting a single eyebrow as I gave her a look. Whether or not she was offended was difficult to tell, but I was angry. I nodded toward the kitchen, heading in that direction then noticing he’d remained where he was, even inching closer to her.

“You are... special to my son,” my father said.

“I am merely his partner,” Kathleen answered.

“That is not accurate.” My father took a deep whiff before finally walking toward the kitchen. There was no sense in chastising him. He was from the old ways.

“Has the council decided?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“They have been unable to come to a conclusion.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“They are deadlocked.”

I snorted. “Unless you give the deciding vote. You are well aware of what needs to be done.”

He didn’t react in any manner, although his eyes remained imploring. “And you know what’s at stake if we’re wrong.”

“What the fuck do we need to do to help the council understand we’re facing a crisis?”

“Find additional evidence.”

I laughed bitterly, almost choking on his words. “You mean another body closer to our community. That’s bullshit, Father. Bullshit. In protecting our community, you may very well damn our souls.” I started to walk out, more enraged than I’d ever been with my father. When he grabbed my arm, the strength of his hold surprised me.

“You will need to explain things to her.”

“I will if necessary.”

“You have selected her as your mate.”

I opened my mouth, bile forming in my throat. “No. I haven’t made that decision yet.”

My father lifted his head, a smug look on his face. “Your desire made the decision for you, much like what occurred with your mother. You must speak with her. She needs to understand, or we will be required to make certain she doesn’t talk to anyone.”

He said nothing else, merely giving me a respectful nod before walking out of my kitchen and my house. I was shaken, more so from my own stupidity for ignoring the signs. I closed my eyes, unable to fathom how the fuck to deal with this.

As I walked back into the living room, she stood with her arms folded, her face pinched.

“Your father doesn’t like me very much.” Kathleen’s voice held no animosity, merely a sadness that I hadn’t anticipated.

“My father doesn’t know you and he’s very old school.”

“Meaning I’m not part of the community.” She sighed and her façade seemed to fade as she sagged against the table. She seemed more forlorn than before, exhaustion furrowing lines into her lovely face.

I knew what my father was saying was difficult for him but necessary. We couldn’t have any outsiders. If she learned too much or couldn’t accept my answers, decisions would be taken out of my hands.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, walking toward me.

I held out my hand, shaking my head. “Nothing. Just...”

“Just what? You’re angry. Don’t be. Your father has every reason not to trust me. Law enforcement hasn’t necessarily been a friend to Roselake.”

I grabbed my drink before moving toward the front of the house, staring out the window at the display of colors splashed across the sky. The sun was setting and my gut was telling me that time was running out. The guilt sweeping through me was tremendous, unearthing far too many emotions. I’d been able to protect her from a murderer, but I wouldn’t be able to keep her safe from the big, bad wolf.

“What’s wrong, Max? What did your father say to you?”

I could feel her presence far too close and I pulled the glass to my forehead. “As I told you, my father is a part of the city council in Roselake.”

“Yes, you told me that.”

“He came to tell me that the city isn’t prepared to help us with our investigation.”

“Um. I’m not certain what they could do. The murders weren’t committed here and from what we’ve been able to tell, there is no actual connection to Roselake, no matter what the fucking M.E. said.” She inched close enough I could see her reflection in the window. “What aren’t you telling me?” she continued.

“There are things about Roselake that you don’t understand.”

“I know there is a significant Cherokee population. What else?”

I half smiled. Of course she’d check on the city. How could I expect any less? “Yes, but there’s more.”

“Some spiritual grounds?”

I tipped my head in her direction. “How do you know that?”

A warm flush swept up her face and she looked away. “I found a book while you were asleep.”

I shifted away from the window, a cold chill shifting down my spine. “What book?”

“The one written by a priest.” Kathleen took a step back. “Don’t worry, I didn’t read very much and I’m sorry if I did something wrong.”

If she read almost any portion of the book, she must have read about the Wolfen. “What else did you read, Kathleen? This is important because we need to talk.” I hadn’t realized I’d moved toward her, gripping her arm until fear crossed her face.

“You’re scaring me, Max. Is this about the secret you’re hiding from me? Some ancient custom? Is this why fingers are being pointed toward Roselake?”

“You don’t understand, Kathleen. This city is... special, the people who live here different.”

“Then talk to me,” she hissed, jerking her arm away. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“You need to sit down.”

“Oh, hell, no. I’ll stand.”

There was no time to waste, no holding back any longer. I’d inadvertently crossed a line that couldn’t be altered, but I refused to fuck up her life forever. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“That much I gathered,” she whispered then took several steps away from me. “Who and what are you?”

“Look...”

“Tell me or I swear to God, Max.”

I noticed headlights coming in through the window and hissed but I could feel Gregor’s presence. “I will tell you. That much I promise you but wait just a minute.”

Kathleen studied me carefully before nodding, turning away from me in obvious disgust.

I headed outside before Gregor even had a chance to leave his truck. As I walked off the stoop, I could see his gaze moving toward the cabin. He could smell her on me. “Something is going on.”

Gregor nodded, a haunted look crossing his face. "One of our scouts found another body."

"Where?"

"Just inside the city limits. It's bad, Max."

I almost stumbled forward, my gut churning. "One of our own?"

"No. I have no idea who it is but there is no doubt the kill was by a wolf."

"Nightwalker?"

He shook his head. "No. This was a kill meant to teach both our packs a lesson. Trust me, Max, you need to see this."

The scent of him was riddled with both fear and rage.

"All right."

"We need to hunt," Gregor said through clenched teeth. "Come with me. I'll take you there. You cannot bring the woman."

He was right. There was no other recourse. "Call the council and tell them. Whether they like it or not, we are hunting. I'll come with you, but first I have something to do. Just wait. After that, we're going to see Stone."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"It's what I've decided to do!" My words reverberated in the darkness. "They are part of this nightmare and we're going to need to work together. Period."

"Understood." Gregor nodded as he leaned against the front of his truck. "You love her."

"I..."

"It's obvious, Max. You should have let her go when you realized that."

I knew exactly why he was offering this advice. Another wave of sadness shifted into my system, one that I feared would never leave. "I'm not certain I can do that. Human or not, she is my rightful mate."

He shook his head. “You never wanted to follow the rules, Max, yet you were always the leader. There was never any question about you being the alpha. I was so damn angry when you left. You were my best friend, a man that I trusted more than my family.”

“And you know exactly why I left.”

The tension was far too intense.

“Yeah, I knew why. You made something out of your life and I was jealous.”

“Jealous?” I asked, half laughing. “Is that why you blamed me for Kayla’s death?”

Gregor took a deep whiff, glancing toward the sky. “My own father told me that I would likely never find a mate, that I wasn’t good enough or strong enough. When I met her, everything in my life changed. Suddenly, I was important to my family. Imagine that.”

The guilt hit me hard again. “I’m so sorry, Gregor.”

“I know you did everything you could, Max, to keep her safe, much like I can tell you’ve kept this woman safe. I learned the hard way that men like us aren’t allowed to have happiness. The sooner you learn that, the better. If you do not let her go right now, she will likely die, whether by a rogue wolf or one of our enemies. Whoever is toying with us has his sights set on destroying everything that we hold dear. She is your weakness and you can’t afford one. You must protect the pack at all costs.”

“And I will protect every member of the Wolfen with my life, but I will not be questioned.”

“I’m not questioning you, Max, but you must choose.”

I couldn’t handle what he was telling me. As I walked back into the cabin, I braced for her anger. I found her in the kitchen, staring out the window.

“I like it here,” she said in such a melancholy fashion. “This is very much you, Max. The apartment in the city, the arrogance

you toss around like a huge chip is on your shoulder is a mask. You're hiding from the world and I want to know why."

"I have to go, Kathleen. There's been an issue in the community and the people look to me."

"As their leader?" she asked without looking in my direction.

"Yes. I won't be long. When I return, we will talk. Fair enough?"

She remained where she was for a full minute before tipping her head in my direction. "I'll be here, Max. Why? Because I care about you. In fact, for some crazy reason, I've fallen in love with you. Just do me a favor and don't get yourself killed."

I'd spent my life hoping that I would find happiness, work my only solace. Hearing her words made me realize that Gregor was right. I should have let her go.

If I wasn't careful, she could pay the ultimate price.

CHAPTER 12



*K*athleen

Love.

Had I actually meant that I was falling in love or was I simply trying to garner information? I clenched my hand around the glass of whiskey, hearing the rumble of an engine. I didn't want Max to go. I needed to know the truth about what the hell was really going on. I didn't require my cop instincts to heighten the trickles of apprehension I'd felt since arriving.

My heart raced.

My skin was clammy.

My pulse skyrocketing.

Shit. I was in love with a man I barely knew, although everything about him was comforting, protective, and he allowed me to feel so alive. Groaning, I rubbed my forehead and walked into the living room, moving toward the window and peering out. Max hadn't taken his truck. Interesting. Whoever had arrived had issued an urgent need. What the hell wasn't he telling me? What little I'd overheard during his father's visit had been unnerving. The city council hadn't approved some action. What could it be? And why did Max seem so distraught? Damn it, the questions that raced through my mind were unnerving.

Max had been entirely far too disturbed that I'd found the very old book. While a part of me wanted to curl up on the sofa and

try to figure out why he'd been so perturbed, I knew what must be done. The cop in me screamed that what answers I needed had nothing to do with some odd script from what had to be a rather disturbed individual who actually believed in monsters sent from hell.

What could I do instead? I could still see the headlights as the visitor backed out of the driveway. Max's truck. Was it possible he'd left the keys behind? I half tossed my drink on the table, racing first into the kitchen then up the stairs to what had to be the bedroom where he'd changed clothes. There was no sign of them.

Think. Think!

He hadn't taken the time to put on the coat he'd worn when we arrived. I flew down the stairs, realizing that I had no knowledge of Roselake and given the darkness that was encroaching, I could easily get lost. I found his coat, slapping at the pockets. When my hand wrapped around a set of keys, I wasted no time, flying out the front door and toward his truck.

But not before grabbing my weapon.

I hated the fact I felt it necessary to carry a gun, but no matter how much trust I'd gained with regard to Max, I wasn't a stupid woman. There were still dangers surrounding us, the killer obviously dead set on tracking me down. The fucker had another trick coming. I had no issue putting a bullet between his eyes.

My fingers fumbled, actually dropping the damn set of keys on the floorboard. Jesus. I was some freaking amateur. "Calm down." I counted to ten as I eased the key into the ignition, exhilarated when the engine turned over then jerked the gear into reverse, the tires churning up the gravel as I turned around.

As I flew down the driveway, I said a silent prayer that I wasn't making a huge mistake. There would be no decent way of explaining my actions to him. Max was a private man, whatever horrors or heartache he'd experienced in the past keeping him on edge and trusting almost no one. When I

reached the end of the gravel path, the road appeared to be dark, no sign of a vehicle of any kind.

How could they have gotten away that fast? I rolled down the window, listening. Praying. This was my single chance of finding out the truth. There was nothing at first, merely the sound of the light breeze whipping through the trees. I craned my neck, smiling. The rumble I heard was the distinct sound of an older engine. I took a chance and headed in the direction of the noise, driving way too fast until I was able to see taillights in the distance. I slowed my speed and decided to see where this adventure would take me.

Adventure.

I felt like I was driving into a time bomb, a vault of ugly secrets that I likely didn't want to learn. A terrible feeling remained in the pit of my stomach, a knowing that what I would learn could alter the course of my life.

What I hadn't expected was for them to leave the Roselake city limits. I didn't know a single thing about the area surrounding the city, had never been to the remote location. I'd seen on a map that there was another village of some kind, but I'd never met anyone who'd ever been there.

I kept an even pace behind them, only allowing for a brief line of sight. When the driver made a turnoff, I waited before easing the truck down the narrow road. After a few seconds, I was certain I'd lost them. Frustrated, I picked up speed, almost giving myself away. The remote area was heavily wooded, the pine trees overbearing, the barely two-lane road narrowing even more. Whoever the driver was had parked in front of a fairly large house and both he and Max exited the vehicle.

Cutting the lights, I hung back, barely able to see anything. A diffused light was turned on, illuminating only a few feet of the front door and small porch. I was finally able to see someone standing on the front porch and talking to Max and his companion. Whatever they were saying wasn't going over well, an argument ensuing.

Five minutes passed then ten, the disagreement almost coming to blows. I could hear Max's angry voice from inside the cab.

What the hell was going on?

When Max and his friend rushed back toward the truck, I nearly panicked. There was little room for me to maneuver the truck. I yanked the gear into reverse, unable to see a freaking thing behind me, merely praying I wouldn't get the tires stuck in the mud. Everything remained wet, another light fog shifting over the rough terrain.

"Shit. Shit." I managed to shift the truck successfully, although a slight thud against the back bumper meant I could go no further. Thankfully, the trees were just enough of a cover, or so I hoped. I hunkered down, holding my breath as their headlights flashed inside the cab.

Please. Please.

The lights were far too bright. There was no way I hadn't been seen. When the headlights dissipated, I breathed a sigh of relief, finally moving to a sitting position. As I rolled out of the hiding place, I had a clear shot of the house.

And the man.

And his expression.

And I could swear the stranger was staring right at me.

I kept the lights off for only a few seconds, narrowly avoiding hitting a large oak before deeming it necessary to have light. I was a fool for doing this. Damn it. By the time I reached the main road, I could swear another set of headlights was coming upon me fast. I'd come too far now to stop what I was doing.

Within a couple of minutes, I noticed the truck once again making a turn. As I slowed down, I knew for certain that whoever Max had visited was following me. Great. I had to make a quick decision. Slowing down, I drove past what appeared to be little more than a gravel path, struggling to read the sign. A park. I decided to keep going, glancing into the rearview mirror every so often. I'd been right about the other vehicle. However, whoever was behind the wheel made the same left turn into the park after shining his brights in my direction.

Luckily, I found a turnoff only a few hundred yards from the park entrance and pulled in, counting to five before cutting the engine and venturing out into the night. I'd been foolish enough not to grab a jacket and the chilly night air immediately caused goosebumps. I eased the Beretta into the waistband of my jeans against my back. The area was freaking dark. With a last thought, I checked the cab of his truck for a flashlight, finding one almost immediately. Maybe luck was turning in my direction.

And maybe pigs flew in the winter.

I'd set myself up with this case, eager to work on something grittier than the unusual fare the captain had given me and my partner for months. Granted, even though I'd had three solid years on the force prior to making detective, my partner almost five, we were still considered probies as far as the captain was concerned. Being forced to work our way up the food chain had been the fuel to leap into this case with a vengeance.

Why did I have the feeling I'd been played from second one?

I loathed the fact I was no longer certain of who in the system I could trust. Every aspect of what I'd searched for had come up to one huge dead end, although I was even more certain Roselake was the center of the mystery.

I trekked through the woods, finding the gravel entrance without any issue. The beam of the light was strong, allowing me to see a solid thirty feet in front of me at a wide arc. While I could no longer hear the sound of anything but the wind and swishing trees, I could feel Max in close proximity.

Within seconds, the fog had increased, still floating low to the ground but creating an eerie atmosphere that gave me the heebie-jeebies. Every little sound from night creatures to the slight snap of a twig caused me to react, swinging my light in the direction of the noise.

What the hell are you doing out here by yourself?

The question was one I should have answered before starting this. I grabbed my gun, feeling more secure as I continued walking, likely having traveled at least a solid mile. Maybe

more. When my flashlight finally caught something metallic, I shrank against the tree line, taking cautious steps. The truck wasn't one that I'd seen. Within a few steps, I realized there were several others, all lined up in a row, although there was no parking lot to be seen.

I turned off the light, feeling my way forward, the hackles on the back of my neck raised. Using the vehicles as a cover, I moved forward, listening for any sounds. When I heard a deep male voice, I felt somewhat vindicated. There was a second voice, then I recognized Max's. I crouched even lower, creeping toward the voices and when I was likely a hundred yards out, I eased behind a tree merely listening.

"Jesus Christ," Max muttered, obvious distress in his voice. "This was meant as a warning."

"Who is she?" a female voice asked.

"Not from around here. It's obvious she wasn't killed in the woods, merely placed here for us to find," a third said.

"Then we need to hunt while the scent is fresh," and a fourth, another female voice chimed in, the tone full of anger.

I shrank back, closing my eyes. Another murder had already occurred. What in the hell was going on? And how could they see anything in the utter blackness?

I heard the crunch of limbs before Max's voice appeared closer. "I appreciate you changing your mind, Stone, and joining us. We need you and your pack."

Pack? What the hell was he referring to? I shifted further into the open, biting back a hiss as a group of headlights appeared on the horizon. I was forced to shrink back several feet, almost tripping over a fallen limb. The darkness was suffocating, another wave of anxiety pooling into my stomach. No, something was off. Way off.

"Look, I thought about what you said, Max. If we're being threatened in any way, then we need to find out who's behind it," Stone answered. "Doesn't mean we'll be the best of friends."

"Understood," Max said with a hint of sadness.

I heard the slam of several doors, the thudding sound of heavy bodies moving toward the group of people. I had no way of knowing how many there were, but I could assume by the number of vehicles there were at least twenty, maybe more.

“What the hell is so important, Stone?” one of the newcomers demanded.

“Take it easy, Carter. There is a legitimate reason we need to work together,” Stone answered.

I realized that Stone was the name of person Max had told me about who he’d questioned. Now I was confused as hell.

“What in the fuck is going on here, Gregor?” another voice asked, snarling in an animalistic manner.

“Look, we have to work together, Josh,” Gregor answered.

“Yeah, well, what about the fucking laws?” Josh hissed.

“Fuck the laws,” Max stated in a dominating tone. “I’m now alpha. Our two packs are working together in order to catch the killer and figure out why our community has a target on its back. No one is going to destroy our way of life or challenge everything we’ve built. No one.”

There was a moment of hushed silence before several of the men actually growled. I was beginning to think I’d dropped into some kind of a nightmare. My hands were sweaty, my pulse racing, and I knew I was way in over my head.

“You speak of taking control, Maximillian, but you betrayed your own people,” another new voice piped in. I heard the murmurs of approval, the tension palpable. “And your father isn’t dead.”

“My father had mandated that I take control and I never betrayed our people. You all know I would die to protect us,” Max answered. I heard such sincerity in his voice, yet his entire being was riddled with angst.

“I believe him,” Gregor stated clearly. “He wants the best for the packs, both of them.”

“I agree and stand with him,” Stone said, and I could swear he tipped his head back and howled.

A chill swept through me, forcing bile into my throat.

The same ugly snarls and grunts permeated the dense forest. Who were these people?

“You’re certain, Gregor?” Josh finally asked.

“Absolutely. We work together and we follow our alpha. The council has spoken, approving the hunt. We have a true traitor in our midst, a wolf attacking from all sides. We cannot allow that to happen.” Gregor’s tone was full of his own level of command. “I relinquish my control to Maximillian and ask that everyone here do the same. Nightwalkers, you are a part of us. You’ve always been.”

“Gregor is correct. The feud between our packs ends tonight. We hunt together. Do I have your alliance?” Max asked. I could feel his presence, his aura as if he was suddenly larger than life.

I shrank back even more, taking shallow breaths as the fear constricted around my throat like sharp claws.

“You have the full allegiance of the Nightwalkers. Anyone who disregards my acknowledgement or the allegiance that has set forth will pay penance. Am I clear?” Stone’s deep voice carried into the night sky.

“Yes.”

“Fine.”

The men mumbled, a few growls ensuing.

“What is the plan?” Stone asked.

“We search the woods and surrounding area for any sign. Josh, I need you to protect the body and the crime scene. Do not allow anyone to fuck with it.” Max shifted once again, obviously moving through the crowd of men.

“I can do that,” Josh answered. “Although I doubt the fucker will have the nerve to show his face here again. If this was a warning, then he will wait to see what we are going to do.”

Max exhaled. “Agreed.”

“What if we find this traitor?”

“Then we bring him to justice. Our way,” Max answered.

The roar within the group was more positive.

“And we are sanctioned to turn?” the first female asked with a lilt in her voice, almost joy.

I blinked several times, trying to process what the hell I was hearing.

The rumbling sound coming from Max wasn't human. It couldn't be. I was sickened, floored, and uncertain of what I was facing.

“This is our right and a necessity,” Max growled.

“Then it begins. We hunt.” Stone issued another howl and everyone who was in the group did the same.

The sound was unnerving, sending a wave of nausea into my system. I crept closer, my entire body shaking. Even the gun felt slippery in my hands. There was no way I could see anything but in the next few seconds, I heard sounds.

Rumbles.

Growls.

Cracking sounds that were unearthly, like twisting bone and... Horrified, I was paralyzed, unable to will myself to get the hell away. The terrifying noises continued, cries of anguish floating into the night. I bit back a scream, the beating of my own heart echoing in my ears. What was happening?

One minute passed.

Two.

Three.

Then silence.

And howls. Dozens of savage howls surrounded me, no longer human but something else entirely.

My actions were no longer my own, adrenaline taking over. I hadn't realized I'd turned on the flashlight until I swung the beam in the direction of the group. What I saw couldn't be explained.

Or denied.

Wolves.

There were dozens of wolves, their luminescent eyes shimmering. I was mesmerized, if only for a few seconds, the sight of them a dream. It had to be. Only they weren't simply wolves, their massive bodies far more dangerous in appearance than any wolf I'd ever seen.

My presence was immediately detected, every single beast snarling as they snapped their heads in the direction of the light.

The spell was broken and I took off running, racing through the woods with only the thought of survival in my mind. I could no longer feel my legs and the pulse rushing throughout my body keeping me racing forward. I ran faster than I ever had in my life, jumping over limbs and fighting my way through thick underbrush.

I had to get to the truck.

I had to get the fuck away from here.

All I could think about was what my grandmother had told me. For a few seconds, I had to fight laughter from floating free from my lips. This was crazy.

There was no way of knowing whether they were following me, no ominous sounds, nasty snarls, or creatures nipping at my heels. The moment I broke free from the trees, I could just see the truck up ahead.

You can do it. You can do... it.

As shock began to settle in, I finally made it to the driver's door, fumbling for only a second before being able to jump inside. I immediately locked the door, trying desperately to start the engine. As I flipped on the headlights, I could see their eyes. They'd made it to the edge of the forest. They'd chased me. They were going to...

I couldn't finish the thought, finally slamming the gear into drive and taking off. I had to be imagining things. I had to be losing my mind. Bile remained in my throat as I hunkered over

the steering wheel, pressing down on the accelerator until I was going in excess of sixty miles per hour.

Seventy.

Eighty.

Please. Please let me get out of here!

Everything was a blur as tears finally formed. I would not succumb to the madness or the fear.

I had no realization of how far I'd gone but within seconds, there were headlights coming from behind, speeding toward me. I pushed the truck harder, darting glances into my rearview mirror every few seconds. When I noticed more headlights coming from the opposite direction, my gut told me they were trying to box me in.

They.

Humans?

Monsters?

I heard the strangled whimpers pushing up from my constricted throat, the adrenaline rush slowing. No. I had to get out of here. Suddenly, there were more vehicles, seemingly coming from every direction. When I noticed the roadblock, there was nothing I could do. Trees on both sides, vehicles almost on my tail.

Oh, God!

I slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop and throwing the gear into park. I placed the gun in my hand, ready to shoot the first fucker who dared to be caught in my headlights.

Nothing happened for a few minutes. Nothing. What the hell were they waiting for? I cringed, blinking away tears, my hands shaking. "Come on, you fucker. Come on!"

Finally, a door opened and I could see human legs climbing out. When the person walked toward me, I lifted my weapon, ready to fire.

Max.

His eyes burned into mine as he walked closer, his gait slow and deliberate. He was completely naked, his massive body shimmering in the light. Fuck. I couldn't think, had no ability to focus. None of the others left their vehicles but they remained surrounding me.

I closed my eyes briefly then gathered what courage I had left, managing to climb out of the cab without falling onto my face. "Don't come any closer, Max. I will shoot you."

Max stopped, slowly lifting his arms. Then he began to take long strides toward me once again.

"Don't do it, Max. I don't want to have to shoot you. Please don't." I heard the agony in my voice along with such sadness. I held the gun out in both hands, but he continued to walk closer, unafraid of my actions.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't do my job. I sagged against the truck as he closed the distance, every action slow and gentle as he removed the gun from my hand. He eased his other toward my face, but I jerked back, turning my head away from him.

"Don't. Don't you fucking touch me," I hissed, thrown into another moment of shock, taking gulping breaths. I was lightheaded, my stomach churning.

"It's going to be all right, Kathleen. You're safe with me."

Safe. There was no way I would ever be safe again.

The moment I snapped my head in his direction, studying his eyes, the ones full of love and understanding, fear and trepidation, my body faltered. As a shroud of darkness took over, all I could think about were wolves.

* * *

There was no swimming up from a glorious dream leaving me wet and hot. There was only panic when I finally opened my eyes, jerking to get out from under whatever covers had me locked down. "No!" I struggled, finally able to move to a sitting position, my heart racing just like it had been before.

Wolves. I couldn't get the vision of dozens of them out of my mind. They were everywhere.

"You're safe, Kathleen."

His voice. Max. A freaking... wolf. Werewolf. I'd witnessed werewolves. Everything finally came into focus. I was in the cabin on the couch in front of the fire. Max sat opposite, now fully clothed with a drink in his hand. "Who the fuck are you?"

Max exhaled, taking a sip of his damn drink before nodding toward the table. "That's brandy. I think you need it."

I wanted nothing more than to rip out his eyes. Instead, I reached for my gun, biting back a snarl of my own. He'd taken it.

"If you're looking for your weapon, you're not going to find it. At least not until we've had a chance to talk. However, two of my men are guarding the premises. We can't be certain the killer wasn't looking for you."

He was so freaking calm, as if he'd been anticipating I'd find out about him. Find out what exactly? That he was some monster? Jesus. I must have been hallucinating, my drink spiked. The man was trying to terrify me. Hell, he didn't need to. I was already long past that.

"If you're wondering whether you were seeing things, you weren't." He studied me, leaning forward in the chair.

"I repeat. Who. Are. You?"

He sighed for a second time, turning his attention toward the roaring fire. "I am Maximillian Dante Cordero, son of Blackhawk, current alpha of the Wolfen."

The words were said in such a matter-of-fact manner that I was more intrigued than terrified. I studied the drink, realizing my throat was scratchy. I was still woozy as I reached for the glass, tingling all over. "Wolfen. What is that?" My God, I was feeding into this fantasy—this nightmare—my grandmother's belief.

“Wolven are an ancient species, born from a disease that wiped out much of civilization.” He tipped his head, studying my reaction.

I wasn't certain whether I was supposed to applaud or laugh, but everything I'd feared as a child seemed to be coming true. “You're a werewolf.”

“Not in the traditional sense, no, but a wolf nonetheless.”

“A wolf. Right. Okay.” I took a sip of the brandy, thankful the liquid soothed my throat. He remained quiet. “What else? You kill people for a living? Is that what the whole meeting in the forest was about, to hunt new victims?”

He took his time, sipping on his drink and raking his hand through his hair. He looked the same as before, gorgeous in every manner, those damn beautiful cobalt blue eyes dazzling. There was no hint of the golden ring I'd seen before. I forced myself to look away, fearful I'd be caught in his web once again.

“We do not kill humans. In fact, we are not allowed to turn into our beast unless absolutely necessary,” he explained, his voice so smooth, velvety soft.

“You expect me to believe that shit?”

“You are highly skilled in several areas, Kathleen, your investigative skills top notch. Trust your instinct. What did you see in the forest?”

“A nightmare.”

“Be more specific.”

“Wolves. Where there were men and women then there were wolves,” I whispered, as if saying the concept out loud would make it true. I grabbed the blanket, pulling it over my shaking body and studying him intently. He was the same in all aspects. “How?”

“The ability to turn is innate, natural for us from the day we are born.”

I allowed his words to sink in although they remained swimming in my mind.

“What happened to this woman you mentioned?” I finally managed.

He rolled the glass from one hand to the other. “She was killed in the same way as the others, only her arms were crossed in front of her and she was positioned on a bed of thorns.”

“Thorns? What? What does that mean?”

“A statement. More for effect, a warning for our people.”

I couldn't help but scoot closer, leaning over. “A warning. So, the other murders were a warning to your... species?” Was I actually buying into this shit?

“I'm certain now. Yes.”

“Why and who would have the audacity?”

“That's a good question. Someone who wants to see the end of our kind, annihilation of the Wolfen.”

“You mean you have enemies? The big, bad wolf that you are.” I couldn't help but mock him, even though I had a pang of guilt for doing so. He didn't deserve my wrath entirely.

“We have many enemies, Kathleen. Men. Beasts. There are at least a dozen species of wolves that would stop at nothing to hunt down the Wolfen. They will always attempt to destroy our peace, which is why these murders are so disturbing. I can't gather a clear scent of this creature.”

“Uh-huh. So, let's just assume another type of wolf is doing this, what do they hope to gain?”

He took another look at the fire. “I'm uncertain. Perhaps the spiritual ground. Maybe they believe that if they destroy our ancestry then they will become more powerful.”

“Ancient burial grounds. Various species of wolves. Oh, and isn't there an ancient curse? What about the disease?” I threw out. What little I'd read made more sense, even though I knew I'd fallen into some kind of fantasy.

“There is much for you to read in the book, Kathleen. Everything will make sense.”

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. “You’re crazy. You know I don’t believe any of this. Don’t you? You’re right in that I work with facts, not some fiction that an entire group of grown men and women seem to buy into. What total bullshit.”

He closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling. When he opened them again, he leaned forward, his upper lip curling and his eyes... Oh, God, his eyes. They weren’t human.

I jerked back, taking several deep breaths. “Don’t.”

Max inhaled, holding the breath, his nostrils flaring. “I can smell your fear, but I also know you’re excited.”

“Excited? You’re insane.”

“Am I?”

I realized my nipples were aroused, my pussy quivering from being so close to him. “Why are we connected? Was the electricity and the passion we shared a lie?” I couldn’t catch my breath.

“No. What we feel between us is powerful, more so than any two humans who... mate.”

“Mate?” I repeated. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m your mate?” I laughed when he didn’t say anything even as a cold shiver trickled down my spine. “You’re serious.”

Nodding, he finally looked at me once again, his eyes entirely human. “While it’s rare, when I found you, I had to have you.”

“Oh, my God. *You* orchestrated everything. Running into me. Suddenly appearing at the damn crime scene. You lied to me. I fell for your bullshit.”

“I did not lie. I found you the day in the coffee shop. Until then, I did not know you existed. Even though a Wolfen’s senses are far superior to that of a human, we’d never been in close proximity. As far as the crime scene, yes, I followed you there because every instinct told me you were in danger. By then, your scent covered me.”

“My scent. If your senses are so damn superior, then why didn’t any of you detect me in the forest earlier?” I threw out, once again lightheaded. This was nothing but a fairytale. I

closed my eyes, remembering every time we'd been together, the intensity of the sensations and the closeness. Even now, I hungered for him. I thought about his cock, the way he swelled inside of me, keeping him... knotted to me. No. No! I lowered my head into my hand, ready to pass out.

"There is a reason."

"A reason. I'm already floating on some trip, so you might as well tell me."

He slowly lowered his glass onto the table, moving beside me. When I bristled, pulling away, he simply turned toward me. "I'm the same man as before, a man who has vowed to protect you and care for you. You are my destiny. I must lead my people out of this or what could be unleashed will threaten both our kind as well as every human on this earth."

"The shit I read in the book wasn't just some ramble of a madman," I said more to myself than anything.

"No."

"I..."

He gave me a stern look before brushing the tips of his fingers across my cheek, moving ever so slowly down to my neck. I tried to resist him, to shove him away, but the scent of him alone dragged me into the wildfire that had burned within us from the moment we'd met.

"You do belong to me, Kathleen, and there is no turning back." His words were husky, so damn sensual.

"I can't do this, Max."

"You have no other choice."

"Why? Tell me why?"

A haunted look appeared in his eyes as he slowly moved his hand to the back of my neck but the second his expression changed, I could no longer breathe.

"Because you are becoming one of us."

CHAPTER 13



*M*_{ax}

The rage swelling within me was dangerous, more so than ever before. I hadn't intended on changing her. I'd seen the scratch after she'd collapsed in my arms, the very reason she'd been able to see the transformation without one of us detecting her presence. The only scents I'd been able to grab were wolves. I couldn't imagine the horror she'd experienced or what she would feel she was forced to do. My father had smelled the change; that much I knew.

He'd warned me of the possibility and I'd been careless. Protecting her was now vital. The fucker who'd placed the warning was taunting us, using the concept of our own disease against us and for what reason? All I could think was it was a ploy in order to grab our land.

She'd spent a solid two hours reading from the ancient book, never once asking a question or even making a sound. When she'd finished, she'd gingerly placed the text on the coffee table before grabbing my bottle of whiskey and heading into the kitchen. I'd heard nothing more than the sound of ice cubes being tossed into a glass.

As my phone rang, I sighed, uncertain I wanted to answer it. Seeing Stone's number, I was surprised. I hadn't believed he would listen to anything I had to say. His initial anger was understandable and by all rights, his blame for what had happened in his life was almost as justified as Gregor's.

“Stone. Were you able to find anything?”

“Not a single thing. There were no track marks made by a vehicle or any scent that was detectable. That doesn’t make any sense. A wolf always leaves a trail,” Stone said, huffing.

I thought about the attack, my ability to see what the wolf had experienced. “Keep looking until daybreak. I’ll need to deal with the murder scene soon.”

“And the woman?”

I noticed she’d walked to the door, her gaze hard-edged. “She has an understanding.”

“Be careful, Max.”

“I don’t need to hear it, Stone. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

He laughed bitterly. “And you know trust is difficult for me.”

“As is with all of us. Keep me informed. We need to make certain every member is accounted for.”

“Already in the process. This wasn’t a Nightwalker. I could smell it,” Stone insisted.

I wasn’t certain any of us would be able to. “Let’s just hope the person responsible isn’t a part of either pack.”

“I hear you, brother.”

I ended the call, taking a minute before turning toward her.

“Why does one pack hate the other?” she asked far too casually.

“An incident that occurred many years ago.”

She lifted a single eyebrow, her expression one of disdain.

“My father has never forgiven Stone’s father, who was a local renowned doctor, for being unable to save my mother’s life. The blame and resentment festered until my father mandated that the Nightwalker pack was our enemy.”

“And you two used to be friends.”

I nodded. “We used to be very close. Now, I don’t know.”

“But he’s sworn an oath to follow you like a pet dog.”

She was doing everything she could to rile me, every beautiful aspect we’d shared lost in the truth. “He was always aware I was considered the up and coming alpha of our community, taking over when my father retires.”

“Or is killed by one of your enemies,” she snorted.

“Kathleen, I realize you don’t completely understand. It will take time. Right now, we must focus on the investigation. The hunt discovered nothing, no trace of the killer, but now you’re keenly aware of his capabilities.”

“What other special gifts do you have? The ability to heal, right?”

“From the majority of wounds, yes.”

She inched closer. “What will kill you? I’m just curious of course.”

“A spinal break or a shot to the head. If you’re debating on whether to kill me, I’m certain you’ll have an opportunity.” My frank words seemed to surprise her.

“I don’t want to kill you, Max.” She sagged against the door, looking up at the ceiling, a full minute passing by.

“I care about you very much.”

“You mean I belong to you, right?” she chided. “That’s what you really believe. I was actually attracted to that for some crazy reason, a dominating man. That isn’t like me in the least. Now I realize that you really believe you have some magical power and that I’m required to mate with you. You can’t imagine how much that turns my stomach.”

I knew she had to hate me in her effort to fight off the truth she’d seen with her own eyes. “I meant what I said. I care about you and intend on protecting you with my life.”

“And I meant what I said. I can handle myself just fine around assholes and monsters.” Her face flushed the moment she said the words.

“Fair enough.”

Another awkward silence settled in.

“The wolf followed me that night in the park, didn’t he? He was going to kill me then. And you fought him. That’s how you got the scratches on your neck.”

“Yes.”

“I know I shot him twice.”

I nodded. “You did, but that did little to slow him down. We fought. He got in several hard punches.” I laughed bitterly, wishing everything could be different.

Her brow furrowed, her eyes shifting. “If I’m truly your mate, that’s why he wants to kill me. That’s why you took me from my own house.”

“Yes.”

She inhaled, her gaze shifting up and down the length of me.

“Can you handle remaining as my partner until we finish this?” I finally asked.

Hesitating, she stared into my eyes, remaining unblinking. “Yes. But after that, I don’t care what you told me, there is nothing wrong with me. I will never see you or this place again.”

“If you are entering into the transition, you will feel nauseous at first, your body temperature increasing. You will feel as if you have the flu.”

“Then maybe that’s all it will be,” she challenged. “The flu. Then what, I turn all furry at the hint of a full moon?”

“You read the pages in the book, Kathleen. We aren’t forced to turn. Unfortunately, until you can control the change in your body, you will be incredible hungry, your desire for red meat increasing. You will need more rest at first as well. What you will require is someone to mentor you on curtailing the urge to change.”

“Let me guess, you’re that person.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her. Perhaps I was wrong and the scratch had come from another source. I knew better. I’d

sensed it before but had refused to believe I could be so careless. “We will need to handle the murder like the others without giving anything away.”

“Trust me, Max, for whatever reason the Wolfen... pack has an enemy, I will treat the case as diligently as I would any of my others. That is my only promise to you. I’m going to change clothes.” She headed for the stairs then stopped, not bothering to turn back in my direction. “This ancient burial site. Is it really true that if it’s disturbed some horrific curse will be unleashed as you call it?”

“That’s what our elders all believe.”

“And you have no idea of the location?”

“No one does. Why?” I asked, able to tell she’d shifted into detective mode.

“Just curious. While you can buy this wolf creature is on some grandiose power trip, there’s always a reason. People are greedy and tend to do things for money and clout. That would account for the reason that there just might be several people working behind the scenes, willing to give up their decent way of life. Money and lots of it. Something for you to keep in mind.”

I watched as she stormed up the stairs, realizing she had a very good point and one that hadn’t been considered. The horrific scheme could be about a method of obtaining our land. The best method of doing so? Hire a wolf.

* * *

The bloody murder scene was more troubling as the morning light dawned. The poor girl’s eyes remained open, her mouth twisted as if in the moment of death. She was also naked, claw marks covering a portion of her body. The murder had been done in a fit of rage. If I had to guess, I’d say it was because the killer hadn’t been able to capture Kathleen. The killer had taken the time to pull together piles of underbrush and thorns, the scene reminiscent of something far too religious.

As if taken directly out of the ancient book, which was equally troubling.

The fucker was toying with us. I glanced around the perimeter, noticing Josh remained on duty as he'd been for hours.

He studied Kathleen before finally walking closer. "There hasn't been anyone here since she was found."

Kathleen gave him a hard glare before turning her attention to the victim.

Josh inched closer, curiosity covering his face. "Do you need me any longer?"

"There's going to be some visitors from the outside, crime scene investigators and other officers. Show them where to find us."

"You sure that's wise, Max?" he asked.

"We can't keep them out."

He nodded, taking another glance in her direction.

"Let it go, Josh," I hissed.

He finally backed away, giving me a nod of respect. I sighed, feeling his anger. There were several who were furious I'd brought her into the community.

"Jesus," Kathleen muttered, taking a step away and covering her mouth. I knew exactly what she was thinking, that every Wolfen was a true monster.

I bent down, taking several photographs. She'd taken the liberty of calling it in the moment we arrived on scene, which gave us maybe twenty minutes to spend with the body ourselves. As I tipped my head back, inhaling deeply, she watched me with a sneer on her face. The only scent was the sweet copper stench of blood and the dirt.

"Your little soldiers don't like me very much," she said absently.

"They don't know you."

"And they're not going to."

I moved to the edge of the forest, studying the trees. “The killer came in from the road on the outskirts of Roselake.”

“That could be a ploy,” she countered.

“True.” The killer had a full day to plan and execute his plot. He’d known exactly where I would take her. Another troubling bit of information.

She yanked a pair of latex gloves from her pocket, tugging them on with obvious anger filtered into her system. When she finally crouched down, she lowered her head, glancing at the visible portion of the girl’s neck. “There are no ligature marks as with the other kills. The bastard simply ripped out her throat but if I had to guess, not before terrorizing her.”

“As I said, this was meant as a warning.”

Kathleen exhaled, coughing several times. “The killer was angry. Perhaps you were right, and I was his intended victim.” She studied the girl’s face, shaking her head. “I swear I know her.”

“From where? That could be important.”

“I don’t know. Let’s get what we can. This place is creeping me out.”

We gathered as much evidence as possible, although I knew we wouldn’t find anything from the killer. He wouldn’t be that careless. As I heard the crunch of tires on the gravel at the road, I motioned toward her. “They’re here.”

She moved to a standing position, narrowing her eyes. “Over-sensitized hearing,” she muttered. “I’ll keep that extra special sense in mind. I need to call Captain Walters. Whether or not he’s involved no longer matters. We have to continue pretending.”

I waited as she called the captain, moving to the outskirts of the area, still searching for any sign of the rogue wolf. I was no longer buying the disease in any manner. This was pure method killing, very human in design.

“We need to ID the body as soon as possible,” she said into the phone as she paced. What she didn’t tell him was that we’d

already sent the fingerprints off to someone I trusted, the crude ink on paper good enough to garner an identity as long as the victim was in the system.

“I know. There have been no connections made unfortunately, but we’re still working on it.” She hesitated, glancing in my direction. “The call came in from one of the locals here. We’re going to interview a few of them.” A sly smile crossed her face. “Yes, sir. I know the mayor is breathing down your neck. We’re doing everything we can.” She held the phone to her head for a few seconds after ending the call. “I hate lying to him.”

“Do you trust him?” I asked, curious as to her answer.

“I don’t trust anyone, including myself. We play this just as we discussed. Now get me the hell out of here.”

As she gathered the items she’d brought, I could tell she was putting certain pieces together. Now she was the one keeping secrets.

And there was no way I was allowing her to leave the community under any circumstances. It was only a matter of time before he would strike again and this time, I knew he would take the prize he’d wanted all along.

A taste of the woman I loved.

* * *

Kathleen didn’t try to argue when I took her back to my cabin, but she refused to discuss either the case or anything about the pack. However, I would never forget the haunted look on her face when she remained on the porch, her grip on the railing firm. I’d lost her to my arrogance and inability to share any truths.

I’d spent my life attempting to shove aside who I was, refusing to accept that I’d been born into a place of what so many called honor. Wolves were fearful creatures, capable of killing without conscience. At least that’s what the majority of humans believed. Even the growing group of hunters who

believed in the concept of werewolves refused to acknowledge any good in our kind. I'd had to learn the hard way that I was very proud to be a Wolfen.

She was well aware two members of the pack had been stationed just outside the cabin. With no access to a vehicle, she wasn't brazen enough to try to get away on her own.

Besides, the wolves would be able to track her easily.

"If she gives you any trouble, call me," I said to one of the men.

"Don't worry, Max. She won't be going anywhere."

I nodded, taking another glance at the cabin before heading off.

I'd called both Stone and Gregor to meet me at my father's. I had to believe he knew more than he'd been willing to tell me before. If these attacks were really about greed, then my father should have an inkling who on the outside could be trusted.

The town was much quieter than normal as I drove through, news having traveled fast. Wolves also protected their own, preparing for a possible onslaught of law enforcement. We didn't need questions being asked or probes into our city. That would only result in fingers being pointed or possibly worse. What concerned me the most was the moment the press got ahold of the news regarding the recent murder.

I was the first one to pull into my father's driveway, but both Gregor and Stone were seconds behind. It had been one hell of a night, the morning giving none of us comfort. With our inability to gather any important details, everyone would be on edge even more. What kind of wolf could mask their scent?

Stone approached first, scanning the perimeter of my father's ranch as if uncertain why he'd been called to the meeting. What my father had always told me was that in order to be an excellent leader, one had to believe in those he worked with, trusting them implicitly. I suddenly knew exactly what he meant. In order for the Wolfen to move into the future, it would take a different form of leadership, one that provided additional skills.

And respect.

“Any new information?” Stone asked.

“Nothing that helps us hunt down the bastard,” I answered.

“How is the mood of the people in the village?”

“As you might imagine, concerned but willing to help. At least at this point.” He allowed the statement to linger. “However, if you fuck with us, you’ll have me to answer to,” Stone hissed then broke into a grin, moving to give me a bear hug. “I was worried the other day you came into the shop. You’ve changed one hell of a lot.”

“So have you, my friend.”

“You ever find Brody?”

“Not my case any longer.” I laughed, shaking my head.

“He’s a chump. They’ll find him,” Stone chortled.

Gregor cleared his throat on purpose as he swaggered toward us. “While I understand reminiscing, I don’t think we have time for conversation. What the hell are we going to do with this?” His aggressive tone was understood. Now that blood had tainted our city, the scent likely awakening certain hungers, a plan of containment and control was absolutely necessary.

Additional rogue wolves we didn’t need.

“We talk with my father. There are answers here.” I glanced from one to the other. I could sense their hesitation, even disbelief. “We have no choice but to prepare for war if necessary.”

“You truly believe this wolf is that dangerous?” Gregor asked.

“Without a doubt. If he’s working with unscrupulous humans, his hunger for domination is just the beginning.” I truly believed what I was saying. My thoughts drifted to Kathleen. I would be forced to grill her later in order to find out whatever secret she was harboring. She might be under my protection, but she would soon learn that she would follow my rules.

For now.

“We also have no way of knowing how many other wolves might follow his lead,” Stone offered. “There are rumors that another pack has descended on Denver, laying a trap of sorts.”

I snapped my head in his direction. “When did you know this?” My demand was harsh. I moved to within a few inches of him, snarling. “When?”

“Only this morning, Max. I wouldn’t keep something like that from you.” Stone bristled, clenching his fists. Even in the past, we’d sparred on several occasions, his need for leadership a natural born tendency. I couldn’t accept anyone fighting my authority at this point.

Or in the future.

I was the alpha.

“This had better be the truth, Stone. We are under duress and must work together. I will not tolerate anyone, including you, usurping my command.” I tilted my head, allowing my beast to breach the surface. For a man like Stone, backing down in any manner was difficult if not impossible. While he’d been forced to take over for his father, accepting the alpha position without question, the Wolfen would always be considered top dog. “Who is this pack?”

“I did not hear a name, only that they are almost as ancient as the Wolfen,” Stone snarled. “I am no historian, Max. I simply keep the peace.”

Gregor flanked my side, his breathing ragged. “Max is right. We have to work together. The shit going down is just the beginning. We fight this together or we perish.”

Stone’s nostrils flared, the veins popping along the side of his neck. “While you were free to choose to live your life differently, Max, I was pulled out of everything I’d worked so damn hard to achieve. Your father is to blame for that alone. While you refused to accept your role as the prince of your people, preparing to take over, I was suffering from losing everything I gave a fuck about. You need to keep that in mind.”

Gregor hissed and to my surprise was prepared to fight for superiority, his body shaking from anger. I pushed my way in front of him, shaking my head. "Stone is correct. I took what was granted to me by birth for granted. That can no longer happen. Together, we'll forge a new way, but not until we hunt down this fucker."

His mouth twisting in anger, Stone had to make his choice right now. Either stand with the Wolfen or be banished completely. When he finally took a deep breath, taking a step back, his decision had been made.

"Then we do this. My instinct tells me that we must flush out this wolf soon." I didn't want to add that I had a terrible feeling we were bait in the killer's hunt, another way of ridding the city of the Wolfen. An ancient pack. I racked my mind, trying to remember what I'd been taught as a child.

"Agreed," Gregor said first.

"Yes, agreed."

"Good." I motioned toward the front of the ranch. My father wouldn't agree with my decision, but he'd wanted me to step up to the plate and I was doing just that. It was time to end the feud.

I knocked on the door and the moment my father answered, the anger I'd expected was immediate, but to my surprise, relief also flooded his face. He glanced from right to left, taking several deep breaths.

"We may be at war soon, Father. I'm certain you're aware of the body found on our soil," I stated, staring him in the eyes.

Blackhawk was a very proud man, whatever sickness he was facing something he'd refused to give into until I formally accepted my role. "The young woman was not of our world."

"No, but she was selected for a reason. That's why we're here. I believe you may know than you've told me." I knew the accusation wouldn't sit well, but it was one he needed to hear.

He'd always been a harsh taskmaster, a man refusing to allow me to get away with antics of any kind. I'd learned the value of hard work early on. While other Wolfen children were

playing, I was tending to the ranch. “Understood. You have healed wounds that I’d long since forsaken. You have grown to be a wise man, my son.”

I darted a glance at the others, hoping they realized they were in the presence of a true leader, the kind of man I could only hope to be.

As he walked closer to Stone, he held out his hand. “I am very sorry for the loss of your father. He was a good man, a proud man, and one who didn’t deserve to be dishonored.”

Stone was rock hard, his face stoic. He certainly had every right to hate my father, but I only hoped that he realized just how much my father had sacrificed. Exhaling, Stone accepted the shake, lowering his head out of respect. “My father was a difficult man, Blackhawk. That much you already know, but he was a damn good doctor.”

My father remained quiet for only a few seconds. When he spoke, I was surprised his tone was apologetic. “I was a fool for far too long, taking out my personal sadness on an entire pack. My son is perhaps more intelligent and humble than I ever gave him credit for. Please come in. There is much to discuss.”

I remained on the porch for several seconds, staring out at the rugged terrain; snowcapped mountains and a massive forest surrounding what I considered to be paradise. What I knew in my heart was that a force unlike anything we’d dealt with before was preparing to strike, humans merely being used in a violent game.

“Tell me about Captain Drake Walters, Father.” I could tell instantly that my father did indeed know more than he’d told me. When he began to speak, I gathered a boulder had been ripped from his shoulders.

We’d been fools to sit on our laurels for all these years and now the biggest, baddest wolf had emerged from our nightmares with a taste for power.

And for blood.

The hunt was truly on.

CHAPTER 14



*K*athleen

Danger.

That's the only word that remained in my mind. I could no longer think about what Max had finally confided or the consequences for believing his story. I'd read enough of the fascinating old book to realize why a hell of a lot of people bought the legend. But real-life werewolves? Hell, from Max's reaction, it was easy to tell that this special community didn't appreciate the moniker, but what else was I supposed to call them?

Creatures so powerful, they are feared above all others. Predators whose hunger knows no bounds.

The Wolfen.

The very start of the book was engaging and powerful, yet my rational mind refused to believe, no matter the stories told by my grandmother.

But you've been nauseated for a few days, hungrier than normal, although you can't eat. You feel hot to the touch constantly.

I snorted as my little voice rattled off inside my head. I was an intellectual woman who'd spent years training to learn special skills, including sorting through lines of bullshit.

But what if the legend is true?

I glared out the window at the two men who were guarding me, both wearing side holsters and both acting like soldiers in the trenches, preparing for a war. I dealt with facts, not fiction and right now, we had another murder to solve.

As if we were actually getting any closer to figuring out the killer.

My conversation with the captain had been terse, his anger evident, questioning where the hell I'd been. I hadn't given him an answer. When he'd barked that the press was hounding the department, I'd simply pulled the phone away from my ear. What the hell was I supposed to tell him?

At least Max had a friend expediting the latest victim's identity. I would never forget the haunting look in her eyes, the stare of terror remaining even after she had slipped into death. Shuddering, I rubbed my arms and walked toward the computer. There was no way of knowing how fast this source would work, but since I'd been given access to Max's email, I would watch it very carefully.

I moved toward the computer, feeling some level of guilt for not telling Max my suspicions. They were almost as difficult to buy as the crap Max had spewed off.

Almost.

I had to find the truth before I went about possibly ruining the lives of people I'd once trusted. Sadly, if my instincts were correct, and they usually were, then I'd been lied to for years. Or maybe the person responsible was merely in over their head. I rubbed my eyes and sat down in front of the computer, my hands still shaking from the horrific find. I couldn't seem to dig my way out of the fog surrounding my mind, or my heart for that matter.

For all the strong feelings I had for Max, were any of them true? I bit back a laugh as I hit the spacebar. If I even considered the possibility that our relationship was contrived from an ancient belief held by this Wolfen group, then being his mate had drawn us together.

Bullshit.

Fucking bullshit.

Yet I couldn't deny the strong attraction, more like the same ravenous need I suddenly felt for food. I hungered for him, desired him in an insatiable manner. My skin prickled at the thought of him alone.

His touch.

His kiss.

His thick cock riding me hard.

"Fuck. Fuck!" No amount of exclamation or antics was going to get me out of this. I had to figure out what was going on and who was really behind the murders. Then the rest might come. An actual laugh escaped my lips. I doubted I would ever learn the real truth. I had to believe the people of Roselake were the kind of cult that Lois had mentioned. Maybe she was one of the good guys after all.

But you know what you witnessed.

"Fuck."

I moved back to the names of the first three victims. They had to be connected. Maybe I hadn't valued my life or my family enough. I realized that every family held secrets, mine included, but I did love my parents and especially my sister. I wanted to continue living my life as a human, not as some monstrous beast merely refraining from eating people. Granted, that part was still a myth. Right? They merely turned into a wolf to protect their friends and... family.

"What the hell are you thinking, Kelly?" My fingers continued to shake as I made a promise to myself that whatever the ultimate truth was, I'd face the aftermath with the same dignity and honor as I always had.

Then I'd crawl into my bed with a gallon of ice cream and several bottles of wine.

Sighing, I maneuvered to a fresh internet page, typing in a few important key words. When I pulled up the website, my stomach churned. I couldn't be right. I just couldn't.

I shifted through the first two pages when I noticed a new email had come in—Max’s email. The moment I pulled up the screen, I was both impressed as hell and terrified at the outcome. Max’s connections were definitely more impressive than mine.

I hesitated for a full minute before opening the email. It was now or never. The fingerprints were one hundred percent conclusive. Now I knew exactly why I remembered the girl’s face. I’d met her before, albeit only once. Max had been right. The murder was a warning but if I had to guess, it had nothing to do with the Wolfen.

I grabbed my cell phone, realizing I had little charge left. What I was planning was risky on several levels and possibly impossible, but one way or the other, I was going to find out the truth.

“Hey. I need a favor and it’s one that could be considered dangerous. Are you game?” I closed my eyes, waiting for the answer. I breathed a sigh of relief after a few seconds. “No, I’ll text you where I am. Get here as fast as you can and text me when you’re near. I’ll meet you there. And don’t tell anyone you heard from me and I do mean anyone.”

I ended the call, shoving the phone into my pocket, inching back toward the front windows. The two guys were still in the front, waiting as if prepared for the worst. I had one shot at this and figured they would check on me soon enough. I eased upstairs, grabbing another round of ammunition as well as a jacket.

I was ready to head down the stairs when I found myself walking toward Max’s actual bedroom. I knew he hadn’t been here in years, but the cabin wasn’t devoid of some personal possessions. While the place had been well taken care of, I had the feeling he’d left in a hurry and not because he’d entered law enforcement training.

His room was exactly like the man, rugged in every manner, the furniture larger than life. The massive bed was made of exotic wood, carved in an intricate design. What surprised me was the headboard held an almost romantic feel.

I turned on a single light, studying the dresser, my curiosity piqued. For some crazy reason, I glanced over my shoulder before daring to open the drawers. There was nothing of real interest, until I opened the last drawer. The small cardboard box was kept closed by a rubber band. I pulled it into the light, chastising myself for invading his privacy.

But I couldn't resist.

The box held photographs, dozens of them, many actual Polaroids from years before. The much younger version of Max's father was entirely different than the man I'd met. He was happy and the woman standing beside him beautiful, her blonde hair shimmering in the bright glow of the sun.

And I knew instinctively that she was very human.

You are my mate...

The realization was interesting, although I wasn't certain what meaning it did or should have. I continued to dig for a few seconds until found a picture of Max, likely from only a few years before. The photograph was similar to the one of his father, the girl another gorgeous female. This had to be the girl Max had mentioned.

Sighing, I glanced around the room once again, finally putting everything back and shoving it in the drawer. I had to find the real answers. Maybe Max had been brainwashed or drugged.

After turning off the light, I crept down the stairs, checking on the two guards one last time. I had one shot at this. I was ready to leave when a thought occurred to me. I moved to the computer, quickly pulling up the gruesome pictures of the crime scenes, selecting one. After printing the photograph in vivid color, I folded and shoved it into my pocket. This should do the trick. The moment I walked out the back door, a shiver ran down my spine. I was either losing my mind or had a death wish, but I refused to remain in some kind of nightmare.

As I crept into the woods, I prayed the limited level of cell phone power would guide me to my destination. If not, I was shit out of luck.

I half expected that I'd hear the call of men chasing me, possibly even being captured within a few hundred feet of the cabin. When that didn't happen, I knew without a doubt that what Max believed about his life and his past was a lie.

However, there were still murders to solve.

* * *

I stood in the shadows, waiting. Biding my time. I knew the timing like the back of my hand, could predict the moment of his entrance down to the second. This was golf game day, the one excuse he gave himself for taking time off. Not to be with family. Not to give a shit about his wife or kids, but to drink with his buddies while swinging a golf club.

I folded my arms as I leaned against the wall, listening to the tick-tock of the old-fashioned clock he'd insisted on keeping in his office. When the door opened only two minutes later, I couldn't help but smile.

"Hello, Father."

"Shit." He jerked around to face me, his chest rising and falling from actual surprise. I noticed he closed the door immediately, as if he knew there would be a confrontation.

"Kathleen. What are you doing here? You look terrible."

"Why, thank you so much, Father. You truly expect me to believe you didn't anticipate I'd figure it out?"

"What are you talking about?"

I exhaled, taking a minute to observe his body language; the slight but definite nervous tic in the corner of his mouth, the two beads of sweat that had already formed near his hairline, and the shake of his hands as he walked closer. I pushed away from the wall, moving toward the easel that remained like a beacon of glory. I took my time, looking through the pages, finally laughing when I noticed the name scrolled on the bottom.

"Roselake, Father. You have plans to bulldoze the majority of the city, replacing the quaint buildings and homes with high-

rise condominiums and hotels, restaurants and gambling facilities. A multimillion-dollar project and one that would certainly bring a very high return. That is, if you were able to find the right investors.”

I darted a glance over my shoulder, studying his reaction. There was a good deal of surprise as well as something I hadn't expected. Fear. However, my father was excellent at masking his emotions and within seconds, he was stone-faced as usual.

“I'm a real estate developer, Kathleen. I've developed projects for years. Why does this surprise you?”

“Because I'm well aware that the people of Roselake won't sell. Not a chance.” I walked closer to him, a smirk on my face. “Now, if they were to be run out of their city by either a tanking economy or perhaps some ancient secret that would be exploited, then my guess is that you and your investors could buy the land for a song. The profits would be huge, but only if you're willing to destroy the lifestyle and livelihood of some decent people.”

He twisted his mouth, huffing in his usual arrogant manner. “Those are very tall accusations. I am many things, Kathleen, but I'm not a monster nor am I unscrupulous.” Why did the words seem to catch in his mouth, as if lying actually bothered him?

“That's crap and you know it. What I can't figure out is how the murders of innocent people fit into all of this, or at least I couldn't. Until now.”

“Murders?” He walked closer, swaying just enough I knew I had caught him off guard. “Now you're accusing your father of being a murderer?”

“Oh, I don't think you have the balls to do something as heinous as committing the vicious crimes, although I do believe you're a monster.” I laughed bitterly as shame, guilt, and anger mixed with adrenaline. I was sick at heart and mind but seeing the look on his face meant I'd been right, at least to some degree. “Why, Father? Why would you allow people

who supported you for years to be killed? Murdered. They were ripped apart.”

“What? No, I...” He faltered, stumbling against the front of his desk.

“Your buddy Captain Walters didn’t explain to you that the case I was working involved the victims of this scheme you have going on?” I shook my head.

“You don’t have any right to talk to me that way. I’ve done nothing wrong. Nothing!”

I yanked the picture from my pocket, unfolding and shoving it in his face. “Does she look familiar, Father? She was someone who believed in you once. She even supplied one of the first loans you had, vowing to support your endeavors. What happened, Father? Did she balk at your latest project? Did she tell you that you were wrong so you had her killed?” I felt a level of rage that I hadn’t in years, my entire system flushed as heat wrapped around every tendon and muscle.

He looked away, his mouth moving but no sound coming out.

“Look at it, Father! Her name was Darcie Miller. She had a family including four grandchildren.” When he remained like a damn statue, I rounded the desk, throwing the photograph into his face. “Look. At. It.” I almost didn’t recognize my own voice, the husky tone ravaged by sadness and fury.

“I had... nothing to do with that. Nothing. I swear to you!”

“Oh, yeah?” I rubbed my shaking hand through my hair. “Another murder occurred last night, Father. This time, the girl was someone who doesn’t work for you, but her father does. In fact, he’s on your board of directors.”

“What?”

“Sara Miller was murdered, her body dragged to Roselake of all places. You do remember Robert Miller, I assume?”

“Robert?” He faltered, blinking several times. “Sara was... killed?”

I realized at that moment that my father had no knowledge of the murders, at least not in the way I’d expected. “The other

two victims were also a part of your organization.”

“Why?” He moved to one of the chairs, barely making it onto the seat without falling.

“That’s why I’m here. What the hell is really going on?” I sat on the edge of his desk, trying to calm my emotions.

“It’s not what you think. I promise you that. The bastard.”

“What bastard, Father? What are you talking about?”

“The one blackmailing me as well as others!” he snapped, his breaths so scattered and his face reddened to the point I was fearful he was having a heart attack.

Whoa. This I hadn’t expected.

“Then talk to me.”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. He has a hold over us. You just don’t understand. I didn’t believe it either. How could some... creature do this?”

“A creature?” I shrank back, holding my breath. I allowed my mind to shift to what little I’d learned. “What kind of creature?”

“The kind nightmares are made of.” He jerked up from the chair, fighting to get to his bar. He poured a half glass of whiskey, downing the entire amount within thirty seconds. When he wiped his mouth, I heard the whimper slipping from his throat. “I had no choice, but I didn’t believe.”

“You didn’t believe. That the murders are ones you’re responsible for?”

“No. I didn’t do it! I had nothing to do with those murders. I did everything I could to fight him. I tried. You have no idea how hard I tried.”

“Who? What are we talking about here?” I demanded.

He shook his head several times, pouring another glass of liquor. “You won’t believe me. Hell, I don’t believe it myself. It couldn’t be. It just... couldn’t be. He’s close. Too close. He knew things. He learned things. He...”

“Try me, Father. I’m open to just about anything.”

He took his time, gulping for air. “A wolf. A murderous, monstrous wolf.”

For some reason, I was shot into vivid images of everything from the murder scenes to the ugly moment in the forest. Then I saw Max’s face, could hear his words. They healed quickly. They had extraordinary senses. The bruises on Zane’s hand. The fact Max had been punched by the asshole chasing me. Oh. God. “Where is Celia?”

“Celia?”

“Where is she?”

My father appeared confused, opening and closing his mouth several times. “I don’t know. I swear to you.”

“God damn you. If anything happens to my sister, I will fucking kill you with my bare hands! Give me your keys!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Give me your goddamn keys.” I’d called Amber to pick me up from Roselake and to her credit, she’d been a trooper, but I refused to involve her in this. She would be in too much danger. “Now!”

He tossed me his keys, still shaking, still having difficulty breathing. “You don’t know what is really happening. You could be in danger.”

“Oh, I think I do, Father, and I’m going to end this nightmare. We’re long past the point of my life being threatened.”

I rushed out of his office and the house, refusing to look back. The moment I started the engine on my father’s massive SUV, I pulled out my phone. The fucker had one percent left. I slammed my hand on the steering wheel several times, rolling out of the driveway and praying to God I wasn’t too late. As I dialed her number, I held my breath. When I got nothing but the damn voicemail, I talked quickly.

“Celia. Listen to me. Get the fuck away from Zane. He’s going to hurt you. Go anywhere and just stay there until—”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“Damn it!” The battery was completely dead. No. No.

Whether or not I believed in the bullshit regarding the Wolfen didn't matter. Zane had decided to use the fucking legend to benefit his own greed. I was sick, unable to think clearly except for one thing. I would save my sister.

I pressed down on the accelerator, not caring in the least about obeying the traffic laws. I knew that Zane would use her against me, furious that I'd sought help. Protected. I'd been protected while my sweet sister had lived with the enemy. Oh, God. Oh... God. Tears formed in my eyes and no matter how furiously I wiped them away, they continued to roll.

I was desperate, screaming at anyone who got in my way and when I finally rolled down her street, the screech of the tires actually gave me comfort.

Her car was in the driveway. Thank God. Thank God! I pulled the SUV to the curb, jamming the gear into park and not bothering to cut the engine. I was taking her out of here. As I raced to the door, I felt a presence behind me and managed to draw my weapon. “Fucker. Get the hell away from me.”

The laugh was dark, laced with danger and the moment I turned, I...

* * *

Ping. Ping. Ping.

“Mmmm...” I took a deep breath, trying to move my arms at the same time. What the hell? I struggled, doing everything I could to open my heavy eyes. There was limited light and I had difficult focusing. After blinking several times, I realized I was in some kind of a cellar or basement, the sweeping cold I could feel all the way into my bones.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

I shifted again, finally realizing that my wrists had been tied behind me. A slice of fear crept into my system and when I

was finally able to focus, I realized where the sound was coming from. Water dripped off the ceiling, splashing down on the concrete floor. What the hell happened?

As the disjointed memories began to settle in, I bit back a moan. I'd seen little other than a rag smashed over my face. Where the fuck was I? I struggled, realizing instantly that I wasn't getting out of my bindings. There was almost nothing to indicate where I was, except that I was located partially underground, the limited light coming from two very small windows over my head. From what I could tell, the cavernous area was large, the ceiling fading into the shadows.

The only thing I could see given the darkness was a couple of steel shelves. I kicked out, attempting to move forward. Whoever had kidnapped me had another trick coming if they believed I was going to give up that easily. When my foot hit something, a clang of metal made me wince.

I took a deep whiff, trying to calm my nerves. That was the moment I realized I wasn't alone. I gathered a scent of another presence lurking somewhere in the darkness. "What do you want?"

There was no sound for a few seconds then something that sounded like a scraping noise. Like claws being scraped across the cold, concrete floor.

I refused to cry out, merely attempting once again to scoot away from the wall. "You don't scare me. I'm not buying the bullshit you're feeding the public. There are no such things as boogeymen." I laughed finally, thinking back to the conversation with my father. He'd been terrified, fearful of whoever was putting the screws to him.

Had he really not known about the murders? I had no way of knowing nor did I want to learn the truth. He was my father, the man who'd at least given me a sense of pride about my family. I stared into the near blackness, trying to ascertain if there was anyone hiding in wait. Maybe I was just hearing things.

My answer was almost immediate, the slight huffing noise following by another series of scraping noises.

“Come out. Come out wherever you are.”

“You shouldn’t prod the beast.”

The voice was definitely male but not one I could recognize, the husky tone slightly garbled. “Then show yourself. Let me see what I’m dealing with.”

The asshole went quiet for a full two minutes.

“Why did you kill those people? Money? Power?” I asked, still trying to keep an edge, although I knew I was in danger.

Another snort was followed by what sounded like a growl. God, whatever drug I’d been given still had effects.

“If you think you can get to my father through me, you’re dead wrong, Zane.” I tried a different tactic.

My words were answered with a laugh, one that created another round of intense shivers penetrating every pore and muscle.

“I’m certain... he wouldn’t want his... daughter killed,” he snarled. It wasn’t his words that bothered me, it was the ragged breathing in between them. As if he had difficulty speaking.

“Then what do you want? Who are you?”

“Someone... you should... fear.”

“Show yourself!” I demanded, doing everything I could to control my breathing. I blinked several times again and I could swear my vision became clearer. As I peered into the abyss, the asshole only had to creep forward another inch for me to gather a look. “No. No!”

The tap-tapping as the being approached was unlike anything I’d ever heard before but the sight of him—of it—was exactly what I’d seen in the forest. As he moved closer still, his yellow eyes glowing in the darkness, I tipped my head back and screamed.

Monsters were real.

CHAPTER 15



*M*_{ax}

“You must take the reins and your rightful place as leader of our people. Only you can bring peace, keeping the Wolfen safe.”

My father’s words burned into my mind, my heart heavy with the realization of what we could be facing. Very few of our pack had ever faced true battle, the kind of bloody wars told in Wolfen history. I still hadn’t been able to sense other wolves in close proximity. Either my senses had been dulled or this particular pack had managed to garner the masking abilities sacred to the Wolfen.

Or the killer was a member of the Wolfen pack.

Greed.

Power.

I’d spent enough time around criminals who used one weapon or another to terrify their victims. Often, the majority had never fired a gun in their lives. In this case, the monsters didn’t need guns. They had a beast handling the dirty work who was much more dangerous than any AK-47 or Glock handgun.

My father had been approached on two occasions by a consortium that had wanted to purchase a portion of Roselake, the offers very generous. Fortunately, Captain Walters had remained his friend, finally giving him a warning that several

prominent citizens were being investigated and that my father should watch his back. It seemed the consortium hadn't planned on being turned down. Then again, they hadn't realized the kind of people they were dealing with. What my father hadn't anticipated was the involvement of a different pack.

Or so he'd said in front of the others.

Between the rumors Stone had heard as well as the basic information my father had provided, we had to face the fact that another pack was ready to try to move in. While the move wasn't unprecedented, the timing was terrifying given the Wolfen's peace and the fact other packs had been pushed away, leaving us with no backup.

The enemy pack would have no way of knowing we'd reconciled with the Nightwalkers. Would it be enough to fight them?

As I stood on the back deck of my father's house, I thought about the book he himself had given me to read. Why did I have the feeling that my father wanted me to find the answer, to locate the burial site? While disturbing the remains would push every pack into a primal state, none would be able to best the Wolfen in battle.

Perhaps the best kept Wolfen secret.

Or was there more to the legend than he was telling me?

I heard the door, sensing my father. He flanked my side, staring up at his beloved mountains. He leaned over the railing, folding his hands. For some reason, he appeared even more frail than he had only a few minutes before.

The quiet moment was something we hadn't shared in so long. I'd been brought up to appreciate my heritage and my spiritual side, my father taking the time to nurture Cherokee rituals. If only I'd paid closer attention. I'd lost touch with my spirit animal and a certain amount of my abilities. And my father had never pushed, had never fully admonished me for forgetting my lineage.

“There is a legend regarding the eagle that you haven’t heard,” he said quietly, his eyes searching the heavens.

“What is that?”

“For every eagle that crosses the path of a truly righteous man, another year of his life will be protected. But if two eagles pass, then one soul had reached an end, the other ready to soar.” He turned his head ever so slowly in my direction just as two of the most beautiful eagles flew out of the trees, their wings spread wide. The bright rays of sun created a glow around them, the most incredible sight I’d witnessed in some time.

However, the weight on my heart was crushing. “Father. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What good would that have done? You are your own man and you had to find your way back home. I believe you have. Do not shed a tear for me, son, for it is my time. I have lived a long and prosperous life. I have loved and had the love of two very important people. Now I want to go home, to be with my wife.”

I gripped his arm, trying to keep my emotions at bay. “When?”

He smiled, lifting his arm as the eagles disappeared. “When the eagles find a resting spot.”

Another moment of quiet settled between us.

“You gave me the ancient book for a reason.”

“Yes. Within the sacred book you will find all the answers you seek. For honor. For integrity. For leadership. If only you open your heart and your mind.”

Sighing, I tried to figure out what to say. “The burial ground. That’s the very reason this land is so valuable.”

“Very good.” My father’s face seemed to glow.

“If this land belongs to another pack, they will have the power, perhaps this ancient pack rumored to be in the area.”

“Aw, but is that the truth?” He tipped his head in my direction.

I laughed. The stories told were just that, incorrect details that the elders knew would be told to other packs to keep our enemies at bay. It had worked for thousands of years. “Any pack who attempts to claim the right of the Wolfen will be destroyed.”

His eyes twinkled. “But if they are aided by another species and not of canine blood, the sacred ground unearthed, then what will happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think, my son. You were taught this as a child. Along with being given the gift of sight, you were allowed the truest gift of all.”

“Knowledge,” I whispered. I’d been groomed for this my entire life.

“Yes...”

I rubbed my eyes, struggling to remember. I watched as a single eagle circled again, hovering close. I was shaking from the understanding. “Then they can gain the power to destroy the Wolfen, becoming the supreme leader.”

He turned and in those few moments as the eagle soared toward the heavens, his face seemed gilded with gold. “Then you must not allow that to happen.”

“But how can I stop it?”

“You have already begun. You fought for what you believed in and found what you needed. You asked me if humans can mate with Wolfen. My answer was not entirely correct. You must find the answer and you must remember what you were taught as a boy. The key is your knowledge, my son.”

As he walked away, I was stunned, trying to figure out his cryptic message. What I did know was that whoever this rogue wolf was had to be stopped. This wasn’t about starting a war, but creating another wave of peace as an elimination of an enemy. In order to be a leader, I had to promulgate peace, also protecting humans.

I fell against the railing, realizing that my father was even wiser than I'd realized. The riddle regarding a mate I wasn't entirely certain of, but I did know it had everything to do with Kathleen. I took another look at the sky, marveling in the beauty of nature. While the eagle circled one last time, I tipped my head out of respect. I knew I'd see him again one day.

Choices. The ultimate power of our community, our pack was having the ability to choose. And my choice was life as a human, not as a predator.

The moment I was ready to walk back inside, the door was flung open, Gregor's face pensive. "She's gone. Kathleen has disappeared."

* * *

I let out a primal howl as I stormed into my cabin, tossing almost everything in the room in my anger. Her scent was still in the room, but there was no sign of her. I rushed upstairs, searching her room then mine. When I noticed the dresser drawer was slightly open, I yanked it the rest of the way out. She must have seen the pictures. Maybe she thought I was lying about the girl I'd once cared about.

I flew downstairs, furious with myself.

"Calm down, Max. We'll find her," Stone said from the doorway.

"How? She is part wolf."

His eyes opened wide. "You turned her."

"Not by choice," I hissed, moving toward the computer. There had to be a distinct reason she left.

"That is why the pack members couldn't detect she'd left, and weren't able to track her."

"Yes." I'd been a fool to think she'd continue to trust me enough to wait for my return. I smacked my hand against the spacebar. Immediately the email regarding the identity of the

last victim was displayed on the screen. Was this what had disturbed her so badly?

“What do you want me to do, Max?” Stone asked, walking closer.

“Get your men together and guard the perimeter. If anyone tries to breach, let me know. I need you and Gregor coming with me along with at least three of your best men. We’re going to find her.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

I snapped my head in his direction. “She is my mate and I have a feeling the very answer to what we’re facing.”

He held up his hands, his attention drawn to the book on the coffee table. “The book we made fun of as children.”

“One that is supposed to give us answers.” At this point, I was beginning to doubt my leadership.

“Then you will find them, Max. I’ll make certain no one attacks our home.”

I gave him a half smile before turning my attention to the computer, ready to start a search on the girl. I noticed the open website. As I flipped through the pages, I realized Kathleen had made a connection.

To her father’s company.

“What the hell?” I skimmed the mission statement and a list of projects before typing the company’s name in Google. “Shit.” The recent newspaper article on his firm had indicated an interest in Roselake, something owner James Kelly had neither confirmed nor denied. She truly believed that her father was behind the murders.

Which meant she had no belief in the Wolfen.

“Fuck.” She was purposely placing herself in harm’s way. I used my ATF standing to easily find her father’s home address.

There was no discussion as three vehicles headed in the direction of the home of James Kelly. Stone rode shotgun,

constantly getting updates from several of his men. While there had been no direct sightings of another pack in the vicinity, Stone had wisely sent out a few sentries to investigate the possibility. If they were out there waiting for the killer to make the ultimate move, I was determined to learn that first.

I floored the engine as I headed up the long driveway, barely taking the time to kill the engine before jumping out. “Keep one on the front, one in back. No one leaves here without my permission,” I instructed.

“You got it,” Stone answered, moving directly to his men.

I yanked the weapon from the holster, checking the ammunition as both Gregor and I prepared to burst into the house. I was surprised the door was unlocked. I waited just inside the massive foyer, listening for any sounds. I didn’t like this at all. It smelled of an ambush. Stone soon flanked my side, both he and Gregor checking out the side rooms. I inched down first one hallway then another. There was no sign of a disturbance.

I could hear what sounded like distress coming from behind one of the closed doors and moved to the side, opening it slowly. With the weapon in both hands, I stepped inside, scanning the room. A single man sat at his desk, his head down and a gun in one hand.

And he was weeping.

“Mr. Kelly,” I said quietly.

He jerked up, immediately flashing the gun in my direction. I didn’t need my heightened senses to tell that he was drunk. “What do you want? Who the hell are you?”

“I’m a close friend of Kathleen’s. I believe she’s in danger. Have you seen her?”

“As if I would tell you!” he snapped, wiping sweat off his brow with his shaking arm. Whatever he’d been through had nearly destroyed him, thoughts of suicide written all over his face.

Exhaling, I pulled out my credentials, holding them open as I walked closer. “I’m Special Agent Max Cordero. I’m working

with your daughter on a murder investigation. I'm very concerned about her welfare."

He narrowed his eyes, blinking several times in an effort to focus. "Then it's my fault. Mine." He started to weep again, the gun slipping from his hand.

Both Gregor and Stone walked closer, Stone sliding the weapon out of Mr. Kelly's reach. The man didn't react in any manner.

"What are you talking about, Mr. Kelly?" I asked, still scanning the room. I gathered a scent of her. It had been a solid hour since she'd been in the room. Where the fuck would she have gone?

"He's going to find her. He's going to kill her just like he promised. I tried to keep him from her, to give him what he wanted but I didn't kill those people."

"Mr. Kelly. You need to calm down and talk to me." The last thing I wanted to do was to use the wolf, but I would if I had to. "She is in danger."

"Why?" He jerked his head up, his bloodshot eyes boring into mine. "Do you know what he is? Do you? He's a freaking monster."

I glanced from Stone to Gregor, lowering my weapon. "I know exactly what he is, Mr. Kelly, and you need to tell me right now where she is."

"You don't know. You can't know!" he exclaimed.

There was no time to waste. I sensed she was indeed in extreme danger. I closed my eyes, allowing the beast to rise to the surface. After taking several husky breaths, I leaned over the desk, opening my eyes and growling.

To Mr. Kelly's credit, he didn't panic, merely sat back with a hard thud, his entire body trembling. "I thought I was hallucinating. You're one of them."

I tipped my head from right to left, allowing the beast to remain. One of them, which meant he knew exactly what the killer was. "Yes. Where. Is. She?"

A slight commotion could be heard in the foyer. I threw my gaze in Stone's direction, yanking back the wolf as he walked out of the room. The sound of a female's voice was far too disturbing, the tone and inflection almost identical to Kathleen's. I only yanked back from the transformation the moment she stormed into the room.

"Father. What the hell is going on? Who are these people? They didn't want to let me in." While she was younger, the closeness in resemblance brought a pang of anger that I almost couldn't control.

"Business associates, Celia," he said, laughing in a cackling manner.

"I don't like this. First Kathleen's message and this." She backed away, only to be stopped by Stone.

"What message?" I demanded, the rasp still in my voice.

"Tell them, Celia," James commanded.

Her hands were shaking as she yanked out her phone, hitting play. Kathleen's voice was shaking yet full of anger. "See? What is going on here? She thinks Zane is going to hurt me? That's crazy."

"Who is Zane?" I asked, shifting my gaze back to James.

"Not the one you seek," he said as he reached for his drink.

"Then who is?" When he ignored me, I threw my hand across his desk, tossing everything onto the floor. I leaned over once again as Celia squealed. "I'm the only one who can save your daughter's life. Tell. Me."

My father was right. The key was in my memory.

* * *

The house and massive rundown garage had been rented in a location with enough land surrounding that no one would notice any sounds, including screams. There had been no need for the wolf to disguise his true identity and while there was

some surprise at his methods, I was beginning to realize that there were true criminals in every walk of life.

Including canine.

We rolled into the compound, realizing the wolf would sense our presence immediately. I moved to the front of the rather dilapidated house, taking a deep whiff. This time, he hadn't bothered to mask his scent. The place reeked of him along with the blood of his victims. I also gathered Kathleen's scent and from what I could tell, she was still alive.

I'd instructed the others to leave their weapons in their vehicles. This wasn't a fight that would be won with weapons. I tipped my head back, letting off a primal howl, the sound echoing into the trees.

Within seconds, the sounds of wolves could be heard coming from every shadowed corner of the forest. I threw out my arm, forcing the others to hold back from transforming. I would face the fucker man to man. We were supposed to be civilized after all.

We were surrounded, a solid two hundred wolves waiting for the command of their leader. None of them were bothering to mask their scent, obviously a trait they were lucky to have. I knew little of this pack, the difference in their appearance almost indistinguishable from the Wolfen.

They were an ancient pack, a group that had been banished thousands of years before, much like the Nightwalkers had been in this century. If what my father had told me was correct, the crimes had been heinous but in a sense, history had repeated itself. What I had no way of knowing was how many there were in and around the city. Simply called the Lycans, they'd fought for power more than once and lost, realizing the Wolfen's sacred ground was more powerful than any force they could use.

As the door opened, the Lycans snarled, inching even closer.

"Shit. There's hundreds of them," Stone hissed, turning in a complete circle.

"Trust me, Stone. You must place your trust in me."

“Yeah, well, I hope you know what you’re doing,” he said under his breath.

So did I. I walked closer as the monster stepped out onto the front porch. “Tyler Ridgefield, ancestor of the very first Lycan.” At first, Mr. Kelly hadn’t known anything other than he’d found an excellent employee.

Until all the pieces were in place.

“Maximillian Cordero, your father is a legend in our pack, but he is a dying man. Unfortunately, his son appears to be too weak to take the leadership. That’s why we’re here. We will rule.”

“Over my dead body. You are a murderer,” I said in a formal manner. “And you will be brought to justice.”

“Only I’m not the wolf you seek,” he said, laughing. “But I do think you know the real killer.” As the door opened again, I heard Stone hissing from behind me.

“What the fuck? Brody,” Stone said under his breath. “Bastard.”

The wild look in Brody’s eyes meant he’d enjoyed every second of the kills, trained to do just that.

“He was very helpful in providing information. I enjoyed teaching him the ways of being a good little wolf.” Tyler grinned, his eyes twinkling. “I must admit, I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed training a fresh blood.”

Dear God, Tyler had pulled out all the stops in planning, but the man was also lying. “From what I know about your laws, you are not allowed to kill the mate of another alpha.”

“Your mate is very much alive,” Tyler hissed.

“You were the one who made an attempt on her life. You made certain the call was made, drawing her to the park. It was you I fought, not your lackey.” The sight had given me the answer even then.

I heard both Stone and Gregor inching closer, snarling as their beasts inched toward the surface.

Tyler allowed a slow growl to form, baring his teeth as his eyes began to shift. “You happened to come along. To protect her.”

“And I will protect her to the death.”

“You can no longer protect her. I’ve claimed her as mine, the beginning of the end of the Wolfen.”

“Tell me, do your elders know what you’ve done? Do they know you had innocent people in your attempt to rise to power, turning a human into a wolf for that purpose alone?” I was taking a chance, hoping that the Lycan would go against one of their own.

“What is he doing?” I heard Gregor whisper.

Tyler shifted his gaze to the circle of wolves, giving them a nod. “What I did was necessary in order to take back what belongs to us, what was stolen centuries ago.”

“By using extortion and murder. We are not to blame for the sins of our past. Only in peace can we flourish.”

He narrowed his eyes, laughing conceitedly. “You must be joking. We plan on eliminating the Wolfen breed for what you did. You all deserve to die. My pack is prepared to destroy you and your ugly little town.”

I tilted back my head once again, issuing a keening cry, allowing the transformation to begin. “And as told in the ancient scripts, the Lycans were released from the protection of the Wolfen for abducting and killing almost every female in an effort to drive the Wolfen to extinction. Unfortunately, the sins of a few were paid for by an entire pack. That will never happen again. Not as long as I am alpha.”

“You can’t save her.” Snarling, Tyler allowed his beast to rise.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said quietly.

A massive rustle of trees floated throughout the field as thousands of Wolfen and other packs transcended on the location. They would help protect the peace that had been built. I continued the transformation into my wolf, embracing the spirit animal that had always been with me. The earth

beneath my feet began to rumble, the thunderous noise of the others as they roared their appreciation echoing.

Within seconds, Tyler had also transformed, immediately lunging for my jugular. As we began to fight, the other Lycans retreated, yet remained on the outskirts. Within those precious seconds as the fight ensued, claws ripping into skin, I gathered the sight, able to see exactly what the monster had planned.

And what he would do to my mate.

I'd tried for so many years to push aside who and what I was. As the sun began to dip along the tree line, highlighting the glorious beasts, I knew my wolf would always be a guiding spirit, a part of me. I kicked out, thrusting him down, standing over him as I bared my teeth, releasing a battle cry.

Tyler responded, rolling to the right, raking me with his claws, his growl as intense as mine. Within seconds, I lunged, propelling him against a tree, knocking the wind out of him.

He refused to be defeated, roaring as he thrust his body in my direction, landing several punches into my kidneys and jaw. My anger swelled and I lashed out, the hard blow catching him just under the chin. Once again, he was tossed onto the ground, his breathing ragged.

I moved closed, wiping blood from my mouth before dropping to my knees, wrapping my hand around his neck. I lowered my head, snarling. Time to finish this.

The carnage and near war hadn't been about perceived noble revenge for the past or fear for his people. Tyler had broken the trust of his pack as well as what was left of his humanity and for that, I sentenced him to death.

As I bit down on his skin, twisting and turning my head, visions of Kathleen were a reminder of the man inside, the passion and joy I'd shared with her. Then there was blackness.

Nothing.

As if she was gone.

The rumble of the earth wasn't brought on by another swarm of wolves, but an explosion entirely manmade in nature. As I

swung my head in the direction of the garage, flames licked into the air, the entire building erupting from a fire meant to destroy my life.

And my future.

And as I threw my head back, the cry of desperation and pain was no longer wolf but entirely man.

Her lover.

Her master.

Her protector.

Her wolf.

“No!”

CHAPTER 16



M^{ax}

Death.

Destruction.

Anger.

I knew all three well, far too much so. I also knew something else that had become my friend.

Whiskey.

The damn liquor tasted better today than it had in some time. I'd been responsible for the avoidance of a war, but in my mind, that was little comfort. I wanted nothing more than to drown my sorrows in a damn bottle of booze.

I dropped my head, closing my eyes.

"Come here, little pet," I growled, pointing to the floor.

Kathleen dropped onto all fours, purring as she crawled forward, her eyes never leaving mine. "What do you hunger for?"

"From you? Everything. Every. Damn. Thing. Including your full submission." As she wrapped her hand around my cock, I threw my head back, howling into the wind.

"Yes, sir."

“Fuck,” I snarled, slamming my fist against the railing. The fantasy was bittersweet.

As I heard the rumble of a motorcycle coming up the driveway, I wanted nothing more than to retreat to the cabin, but it wasn't something I'd been able to do. I was alpha after all. Besides, there could be some news about my father. He lay close to dying, the strongest wolf I'd ever known reduced to a shell of himself from the frailties of a disease I thought only humans were capable of getting.

Cancer was really the ugliest beast.

I'd laughed more than once at the irony. There was no rogue wolf, no disease lying in wait, at least from what I'd been able to ascertain with the help of the leaders of other packs.

Including the Lycans.

Perhaps my idea of a summit meeting of sorts was too conventional, but I didn't believe there was a Wolfen prepared for life on the run. There would be peace among us as long as I was in charge. I felt sorry for Brody, his taste for blood preventing him from being reformed. There was no chance he could walk life as a human again. For now, he was imprisoned in a safe location until I made the determination what to do with him.

As far as the rest of the Wolfen, they'd returned to normal, going about their day to day lives as if an actual war hadn't almost ensued.

It was only their new leader who would never see life again in the same way.

As Stone eased out of the cab of his truck, he shoved his hands into his pockets. “You just going to sulk for the rest of your life?”

“It doesn't appear I actually have a life,” I said, half smiling. I had my work, still maintaining a presence as a special agent. Still pissing off my boss. I was also working with the local police in the investigation that had ensued on Kelly Industries.

Tyler's blackmail scheme and his threats had been fairly widespread. At least I'd been able to protect Kathleen's father from criminal charges. The poor man had merely been worried about his daughter's life.

In other words, there was a hell of a lot of work yet to do in cleaning up the mess. At least it would keep me busy for a few weeks if not months. That would protect my mind to some degree from thinking about Kathleen, the heartache keeping me awake at night.

"You need to move on with your life," Stone said as he glanced up at the sun. While I couldn't see his eyes given the thick, dark shades, I already knew what he was thinking, the admonishment clear.

"Not that easy, my friend. You've never been in love."

He laughed, kicked his boot against the dirt. "You don't know that, Max. In fact, you don't know me at all."

I offered him the bottle of whiskey, half surprised he grabbed it out of my hand, taking a long swig. "When I was in medical school, I was a playboy at first, until the sweetest girl dragged me to my knees with a single look one day in class. That was it for me."

"And what happened?"

He took another long pull before answering. "I realized that she was far too fragile for a man like me. She deserved a hell of a lot better."

His words troubled me, another forced realization that we were truly animals in our own eyes. "I wish I could offer words of wisdom."

"Yeah, well..." He allowed the words to linger before yanking off his sunglasses. "That's why I'm here. You just got to get over this."

"But she was my mate."

He took a swagger closer, planting his steel-toed boot on the bottom stair. "Then you do what any wolf must do."

I yanked the bottle out of his hand, taking a hard swig myself. This wasn't the good stuff my father had bought. This was rotgut shit, the only thing I was in the mood for. The burn was exactly what I needed to feel. "And what's that?"

He fisted his hand, holding his arm in front of me. "You fight. You take what belongs to you."

I sucked in my breath, barely hearing his words, the wolf inside of me clawing at the surface once again.

"You. Are. Wolfen. The alpha. And she belongs to you."

* * *

Kathleen

"You belong to me."

The word, his words lingered in my mind. I hadn't been able to get them or the man out of my thoughts for days. I stood at the window of my apartment, holding out both arms. By all rights, I should be dead, the fire nearly consuming me, stealing away a life I'd fought so hard to save. But I was healed. No scars. No burn marks of any kind.

And the only reason?

Because I was a wolf.

I shivered, holding my arms and trying to drown out the lovely jazz music my sister had insisted on playing. She deserved to have her happiness and I was in no mood to play maid of honor. The damning events had taken a significant toll, and not only on my physical body but my heart and soul.

I'd pushed Max away, fearful of what I was becoming, terrified that I'd succumb to some desire to kill people. Eat them. I half laughed at the thought. I'd read everything I could find on the Wolfen, although there was very little on the internet. They weren't true werewolves, or so Max had told me.

Then what the hell were they? Even all the memories of what my grandmother had told me didn't seem real.

“Do you think red roses or white?”

Somewhere in my mind I heard Celia’s question, I just found it difficult to respond.

“Or how about black?” she added.

I finally bit back a moan before forcing a chuckle and turning in her direction. The look on her face was the same as she’d given me every time before. “I like black. Black is perfect.”

“In your world,” she huffed, reaching for her glass of champagne. “The last time I checked, we were supposed to be celebrating.”

Celebrating. As if I felt any desire to. “Of course. What was your question again?”

Celia lifted a single eyebrow then patted the cushion on the sofa beside her. “Get your ass over here.”

I found it difficult to drag myself away from the window. The damn case had been blown wide open, several highly respected people arrested for what was little more than a Ponzi scheme. While my father’s name had been mentioned for indictment, there’d been no push to arrest him. The poor sucker had been blackmailed by a true monster, falling into an abyss after further being pushed by several prominent citizens. I rubbed my eyes, trying to keep from laughing at the ridiculous nature of the reason my father would continue to be a free man.

He’d been blackmailed by a wolf, the threats horrible and extreme. I understood his fear, his loss of sleep and sanity. How could there be wolves living as humans issuing threats in a savvy manner?

At least the proposed development for Roselake was off the books—so to speak. The various investors had distanced themselves given the murders. Sadly, Kelly Industries stock had taken a significant hit, my father losing a good portion of his fortune. Even the majority of the board members had resigned. The fiasco was a terrible blow for the city.

Even the medical examiner had been indicated, although her involvement was little more than faking a few tests. Her very

sick daughter had been threatened by Tyler in his disgusting drive to take over the world.

Or at least the Wolfen.

I shifted closer, my feet heavy, finally sitting down beside my sister. Celia had asked very few questions, commenting little on the fact I'd healed from my significant injuries within days. She'd merely remained by my side in the hospital along with my mother, fawning over me as the two women usually did when I was sick or had fallen into some level of despair.

This was entirely different and I had no words to explain anything I'd been through.

Celia grabbed the bottle of champagne, topping off both glasses. The hard thud as she placed the heavy crystal back onto the table was an indication of her mood. "Take a glass. We are freaking celebrating whether you like it or not."

"Yes, ma'am." I laughed as I grabbed the glass, lifting it into the air. "I'm very glad that Zane is such an incredible man." I'd been completely wrong about him and was happy to admit it.

She moved her glass from one hand to the other before even clinking together the crystal stems. "You're miserable."

"I'm... fine." I realized my hand was shaking even offering the words.

"No, you're not. You're my big sister and I know you better than anyone. I realize you're worried about Dad, but he'll regroup. He always does. You need to concentrate on you."

"Celia, I'm working on finishing the case and trying to move on."

She tipped her head in my direction, her face scrunching. "You miss Max. You need Max. He was the only person, the only man to make you happy in your entire life."

His face shifted into my mind; the dominating yet gorgeous smile, the way his eyes raked over me the moment I walked into a room. "We're not good for each other."

"In what language?"

“You don’t understand.”

Celia took a gulp of her champagne, keeping her face tilted away from me as she spoke. “Because he’s Wolfen?”

I was floored beyond belief, words stuck in my mouth for a full five seconds. “How... do you know that?”

She glanced in my direction. “Father. He told me some things I didn’t believe. Then I started paying attention and reading. When you almost died yet miraculously healed within days, I knew. Max turned you.”

“No. It’s just a myth, some crazy legend.”

“And you know better.” She finally turned toward me, taking my hand. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on and God knows I still find it difficult to believe, but I know you love him. You are meant to be with him.”

“I can’t.” I shivered at the thought once again.

“You mean you won’t.”

“Yes.”

Sighing, Celia stood, moving away yet sweeping her arm around the room. “I’m engaged. I’ve never been happier. I found the love of my life. Don’t you deserve the same thing?”

“Um... Yes, but reality has to set in. There are no such things as wolves or creatures of the night.”

“Why can’t there be? And how do you explain the fact you healed? Every doctor in the hospital said you should be dead right now, your burns were that extensive. Here you are, my beautiful and intelligent yet hard-headed sister. Tell me how to understand that.”

I had no words, even though I did get it. I knew. I was Wolfen.

“Go to him, Kathleen. He is the love of your life. Whether or not he’s some magical creature that we don’t understand just can’t matter.” She laughed softly, shaking her head. “I know how crazy that sounds, but you two belong together.”

“I just... I can’t.”

“Why?” she demanded.

I had no honest answer. “Too complicated.”

“Then uncomplicate it. Period.”

The knock on the door forced a growl from my lips but as soon as I stood, I found myself lightheaded, my heart racing.

Max.

He was here.

He’d come to find me.

To take me.

I pressed my fingers across my lips. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Follow your heart, sister. That will always be the answer.”

I gave her a look before walking toward the door, hesitating for a few seconds before opening it. There was no hesitation, no understanding really of why I craved this man.

My lover.

My mate.

But there was no turning back. He was everything I’d ever wanted, the force of nature behind my excitement, and the man who would be in my life forever.

Come hell or high water.

While I might not understand what I’d become, the dark cravings and longings that I couldn’t seem to get away from, I knew what I needed.

Max.

“You are mine. Period. And you’re coming with me,” Max said in a husky voice, his penetrating eyes more intense than I’d ever seen them. As he reached out, yanking me against his chest, I’d never felt so protected or loved.

And I wanted this.

This man and this life.

God help me, I was a wolf.

* * *

A spanking.

He was serious. Again.

“You know you deserve this. You left me without talking to me. You refused to believe anything I was telling you. And what was worse, you couldn’t trust me,” Max said in a dominating tone.

“I do trust you,” I whispered. I trusted him more than anyone. More than any human at least. We’d spent two days sequestered together, the passion swelling to the point we were little more than ravenous animals. And still, I hungered for him.

I moved slowly to the table, forcing my gaze in the direction of the implements he’d positioned on the beautiful wood. And the anal plug. He’d promised I’d be forced to endure training, exactly what he wanted. I was both excited and apprehensive as he pointed toward the couch.

“You’re getting a hard spanking, but first,” he huffed as he lifted the anal plug into the air, “something to remind you that you belong to me.”

Everything about this man was so controlling yet every part of me wanted nothing more than to obey. I couldn’t rationalize that any more than I could my acceptance at being transformed into another creature, yet I was at peace, the strange urges something he was helping me control. Even the golden eyes of my reflection I’d seen more than once were no longer terrifying.

Every part of my naked body was quivering as I moved to the couch, planting my knees in the soft cushions and leaning over. I still cringed at the thought of being punished, but this was the Wolfen way.

I felt his presence behind me, could hear the rapid beating of his heart, my senses heightened more than I could ever

imagine. As goosebumps popped along my arms and legs, I closed my eyes, envisioning his naked body. Even the visions were much richer, so vivid that every dream felt real. I dragged my tongue across my lips, waiting with the kind of anticipation that electrified every cell in my body.

“You deserve thirty strikes tonight,” Max stated, with a single growl afterward.

“Thirty?” I whined on purpose.

“Forty if you don’t behave.”

I clung to the back of the sofa, staring out the window at the snowcapped mountains. The sky was dimmed by a flurry of gray clouds, the air chilly. The scent of the oak burning in the fireplace was comforting, the crackle and sizzling sounds echoing in my ears. While he’d explained every aspect of transcending into becoming a wolf, everything continued to be surreal. Time. It would take time to adjust, or so he told me.

“But first the plug.” His voice was so husky, dripping with sensuality. “Open your pretty little ass cheeks for me.”

I leaned further over the back of the couch, reaching around to obey his command. There was something deliciously sinful about his request. My nipples ached, fully aroused and I wanted to beg him to twist and pluck, even using the strap on them. The dark cravings I felt were so damn intense, pulling me into the kind of kinky desires I’d never thought of before.

He brushed two fingers down the full length of my spine, tapping first one side of my bottom then the other. As he dragged the rubber plug back and forth across both ass cheeks, I shuddered. “You’re going to wear this all the time.”

“Every day?”

“Yes, until you learn to obey.”

As he twisted the tip of the plug against my puckered hole, I realized I’d clenched my muscles. The sharp smack of his hand against my pussy lips was enough to remind me to relax. I took deep breaths, trying hard not to hyperventilate as he twisted the thick piece of rubber, pushing it inside an inch at a

time. I felt so damn full, my muscles tensing even as they spread wide open to accept the invasion.

He patted my ass, another series of growls erupting from his throat and the dark and dangerous sound was such a powerful aphrodisiac. “A plug suits you.”

For a minute, my rebellious side almost took over, one leg kicking out. The second he placed his palm on the small of my back, the beautiful level of peace I’d felt before flowed through me. The connection we shared was unlike anything I’d ever known. Uplifting. Magnificent.

Exciting.

Crack!

The snapping sound of his wrist as he flung his folded belt across my bottom was just as exaggerated as every other noise, sending chills racing through me. I bristled, anticipating pain only to find the hard smack sent another round of humming vibes into my system. I took a deep breath, arching my back as he gave me two more, both hitting exactly across my sit spot.

I was so damn alive, every synapse and blood cell on fire. I bit back a cry as he smacked me again and again, the pain finally rushing up from the tips of my toes, shooting straight into my heated ass.

“Oh. Oh!”

I could tell just how excited he was as I gathered a scent of his woody cologne mixing with his bursting testosterone. My mouth watered at the thought of sucking on his cock, but I knew he had other plans tonight.

The whooshing sound of the thick leather strap was something I could concentrate on as it rushed through the dense air, connecting with my sizzling skin. I jerked up, tensing as the anguish exploded like rocket fire, searing every nerve ending. I tilted my head toward the ceiling, pursing my lips as the spanking continued. There was no way I could explain the dazzling sensations to anyone, let alone myself. I was riddled with ecstasy even as the pain continued, tearing through every muscle.

“Five more,” he barely managed, his voice almost unrecognizable. I could detect his beast, the massive gray wolf creeping close to the surface. And for some crazy reason, the thought was comforting.

“Yes. Sir.” I bit back a smile, spreading my legs even further open.

“Such a bad girl.”

I was and we both knew that wouldn't stop.

As the belt landed across my upper thighs, I felt the trickle of juice from my aching pussy along my inner thighs.

“You drive me insane,” he huffed, finally issuing the last three strikes, one coming after the other.

“Yes...” I undulated my hips, knowing my actions were driving him crazy. The second I felt the strap between my legs, I jerked up once again. The two hard snaps gave me a smile.

I heard the sound of the belt being tossed, felt the weight of his body on the couch. “Now, I fuck you. My woman. The love of my life.”

Love. I'd never thought I could find love with anyone. Now I knew better. The second he fisted my hair, yanking back my head as he leaned over, absolute euphoria set in. The way he crushed his mouth over mine, immediately thrusting his tongue inside forced my pussy muscles to clench and relax several times.

His dominating side always threw me close to pure ecstasy.

He pressed his throbbing cock against my bruised bottom, shifting back and forth several times before easing the tip past my dripping folds.

The savage kiss continued as he thrust the entire length of his shaft inside my pussy, grinding his hips against mine. I pushed back against him, meeting every brutal plunge as he mated with me. I no longer feared the concept but relished the beautiful connection.

He was more animal than man, breaking the kiss and biting down on my neck, no fear of tearing my skin.

“Oh. Oh. Yes!” As he drove deep inside in an almost crazed manner, I let go of all my fears and inhibitions, allowing the powerful orgasm to rush up from the very tips of my toes. “Yes!” My muscles clamped around his cock, pulling him into a tight weave of my power and all I could do was smile.

I felt his beads of sweat dripping against my shoulders as the hard fucking continued, the entire room rumbling. His guttural sounds were the most beautiful music, filtering into the air around us.

As another climax rushed into my system, I allowed a howl to escape my lips, clenching tightly until he roared. The feel of his cock erupting, hot cum spewing into my womb was nothing but pure bliss. And I said the words that had haunted me since the first time, the ones that filled my heart with joy.

“I love you.”

Max held me tightly as the knot formed, expanding my already aching muscles. He pressed kisses along the back of my neck as he continued to swell, nipping my earlobe several times. There was nothing like the feel of his massive arms surrounding me, holding me and for a few precious seconds, we both forgot the rest of the world.

The danger.

The sadness.

The trepidation of the future.

Until the hard knock on the front door.

And Max gasped in anguish.

* * *

Max

I'd called myself a dangerous man my entire life, shying away from almost every aspect of my past for fear my proclamations would come true.

Perhaps they already had.

Were the Wolfen creatures to be feared? Only for those who considered themselves enemies. At least for now. Was there a dormant disease waiting in the wings, to one day resurface and challenge our humanity? Of that I had no doubt.

Was there a need to keep the peace in order to maintain the lifestyle we'd surrendered to after long centuries of strife?

Absolutely.

"It's time," Gregor said as he moved beside me, barely able to look in my direction.

"I know." I took a deep whiff of the air, the day chillier than normal, the blanket of white exactly what my father had loved about living in Denver.

I walked into the clearing, shifting my gaze to the crowd of wolves that were in attendance in honor of my father's life. Wolfen and Nightwalkers, Lycans and other packs had come together in respect of a higher being, a man who'd fought to keep our kind civilized. I could feel the strength of my mother, her hand on my shoulder as I walked closer. This was his favorite place on the mountain he so adored, the very spot where he'd married my mother so many years before.

While there was great sadness at my father's passing, I took comfort in the fact he'd spend his eternal years by her side.

Just as I would with the woman I adored.

Kathleen's acceptance of our kind had eased a burden, removing the ache from my heart. I'd vowed to protect and love her until the end of our days, and I would keep that promise, no matter what I had to do.

There was still no knowledge of exactly where the ancient burial grounds were, but one day I'd find them and I had a feeling the great book would lead me to the exact spot.

As I walked closer to the cradle of birch, hand woven by several of our wolves, I was in awe of the artistry and care taken to send my father on his way. I sensed her presence, my sweet Kathleen, waiting in the closest group of Wolfen, giving

me space as I once thought I needed. This time, I required her strength and her love as I fully accepted the future. I held out my hand, waiting until she grasped my fingers.

Together, we walked closer. I kissed her hand before letting it go, turning slowly in a full circle and giving my respect to the thousands of wolves. When I finally faced the altar once again, tears slipped down my face.

A quiet hum began from the back of the group, shifting forward as if in a gentle wave. As the wolves lowered their heads in reverence, I placed my hand on my father's heart and said the words he'd muttered at the passing of my mother.

“From the darkness you shall be lifted to the light. From the ashes of hell, you shall be set free.” The rumble of the wolves increased, the husky vibrations soon becoming thunderous. “And as the eagle soars, you will never be forgotten. My father.” The moment I placed my hand on the torch, I stood in honor as the wolves began to transform, leaving their human bodies for the freedom of their true selves. I shifted the torch under the altar of twigs, igniting the pallet. My father was free.

And in that moment, I was proud to be a Wolfen.

An alpha.

A leader.

A lover.

And soon to be a husband.

May there be light, honesty, and integrity for our future...

For we are the Wolfen.

The End

(But keep reading for a preview of the next book in this series...)

CHAPTER ONE OF HIS TO POSSESS, BOOK TWO OF THE DARK WOLVES SERIES

Stone

Temptation.

Burning to the point that the predator in me had become famished, hunger unlike anything I'd ever known.

Except for a single time in my life.

I wanted to chain her to my bed, feasting on her pretty pink pussy for hours. The thought alone had kept my cock throbbing for far too long.

Vanessa...

I usually succumbed to every libation I craved and had for my entire adult life. Some might call it a weakness. I called it enjoying life. Hell, even when I was a kid, you couldn't keep me out of a candy store. I'd graduated to more indulgent items after that, reveling in the thrill of the hunt. I'd stolen more than a few items in my life, my hunger for danger finally landing my ass in juvenile court once. The only difference was that my adult temptations were entirely made of darkness.

Hard liquor.

Steel Harley.

Savage sex.

Hunting prey.

And not necessarily in that order.

I was consumed by a ravaging hunger very few humans could understand, except for those considered sick in mainstream society. I'd been around individuals whose dark proclivities were hidden; powerful and rich men and women who held their secrets dearly for fear of retribution. They were dangerous in their own right, capable of doing vile, heinous acts in order to protect what they held dear.

I was dangerous for an entirely different reason.

I was Wolfen.

I was a beast created in nightmares, a monster to all those who'd even encountered a member of our pack. I'd been taught about our ancestry, earlier generations succumbing to a horrific sickness that had killed thousands of humans. After our creation, we'd survived heinous battles, becoming stronger and faster, our abilities superior to those of any human. Once, we'd been considered kings. Now we were living in mainstream society, forbidden to turn into our natural state unless absolutely necessary. Was I bitter? Hell, yes, but life moved on. We all had to make a living somehow.

Love and mating were something else entirely.

She'd never learned that I was Wolfen and she never would. I was mandated by our laws to keep our world secret. While there were packs of Wolfen scattered across the world, one of the largest packs had settled just outside of Denver in a town created to keep our people safe. Roselake was self-sufficient, many of our elders serving on the town council.

I'd made the mistake of telling my father about her, but only once. He'd forbidden me to see her again, simply because she was human.

A rule that I'd ignored.

Vanessa...

Even the way her name slid across my tongue brought out the beast in me.

I'd once thought of her as my mate, the hunger burning so deeply within me that I hadn't been able to sleep or eat, my college grades suffering because of my longing. While it

hadn't made any sense given she was human, she'd felt the same burning need, even for the short period of time. Only her departure had ceased the intensity, although her actions had altered the man inside in several ways.

Bitterness had taken over, shutting down a significant portion of everything I'd thought I wanted. Now I had no desire to procreate in any manner. Why bring more shifters into this world only to force them to live like outcasts?

Then again, even if I took her as mine, I could never turn her. The rules.

While I had no belief in bullshit karma or coincidences, literally running into the only woman I'd ever cared about had been... cathartic.

The electric event had aroused the kind of brutal desire that few women could handle, the same craving that gnawed at my insides from the very second I'd looked into her gorgeous emerald eyes. Even now, my heart raced from the beast hungering to the point of near insanity. Being around her would take every ounce of control I had not to transform.

My indulgence in Vanessa Bridges had started with one night of sultry, filthy sex in the middle of my dorm bathroom, the experience one I'd never forget. The meeting then had been similar in nature, bumping into each other at the college bookstore. From that moment on, we'd forged a bond, spending additional time sweltering in moments of passion, writhing in ecstasy.

A single argument had forced us apart, her nasty words creating a barrier deep within me. Then she'd disappeared, leaving school altogether. Not a fucking word of any kind. I'd sworn on that day never to give a shit about anyone else and I'd kept that promise.

I'd never heard from her again.

Then she'd made a wrong turn on the right street, running smack into my Harley.

Now she had consequences to pay for damaging my prized possession.

And for ripping out a part of my heart.

I wanted to continue hating her, tossing her away like she'd done to me years before, but it seemed my body had other ideas in mind.

What the hell. Another fling might do my psyche some good.

I remained in the darkness, able to see every nuance on her gorgeous body perfectly. She'd matured in all the right ways, her voluptuous figure a thing of perfection. While she was just as exquisite as I'd remembered, there was a hardness to her, as if life hadn't gone exactly as she'd intended.

All I could think about was taking her.

Fucking her.

Mating with her.

She stood in the middle of her perfectly organized, pristine condo located in a highly secured building, every piece of furniture matching, pictures placed neatly in a row. There were even fresh flowers in a high dollar crystal vase located in the middle of a dining room table that likely cost more than my beloved and damaged Harley.

She hadn't turned on a light. I could tell she preferred the darkness so as not to stain her sophisticated life with the likes of me.

But I could smell her intense arousal as well as I was able to see every square inch of her, my wolf dangerously close to the surface. I remained near the door, drinking in not only her French perfume but the intoxicating scent of her sweet pussy, her juice likely to leave a stain on her expensive suit. Well, perhaps I'd need to take care of the pleasurable action for her.

But only after she was punished for her sins.

"Remove your clothes," I said, the husky tone more like a growl.

The nervous tic in the corner of her mouth continued and she swayed back and forth, the pulse in her neck driving me absolutely crazy. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her succulent lips before biting down on her skin.

However, I couldn't leave a blemish. Rules of the Wolfen. Tonight, I would come precariously close to breaking at least one of them and enjoy every moment of doing so.

Thou will not change into Wolfen form unless your life or the life of others in the pack is threatened.

Thou will not turn a human for any reason.

Thou will not mate with a human.

Thou will not kill a human for any reason.

There were countless others, all requiring memorization by every wolf. I almost laughed at the thought. Fuck that.

I would take her as mine.

I would keep her.

I would taste her.

I would own her.

The electromagnetic sensations were a powerful draw, boiling my blood.

“What?” Vanessa asked, obviously startled at my command.

I took two long strides in her direction. “If I need to ask you again, your penance will be much worse. Undress. You ran a red light. You crashed into my vehicle. I think you are well aware that you deserve severe punishment.”

“But you know I didn't mean to. I was... distracted.” She said the words provocatively, as if her seductive tone would get her out of the hard spanking she was going to receive.

I'd been waiting for eight years to smack her rounded bottom. The moment was perfect.

I allowed her to hear an exaggerated sigh, remaining in my position with my eyes pinned on her.

“You don't own me, Stone. You never did,” she stated, the rebellious woman I remembered returning.

“I can certainly call the police if you'd prefer. I know several law enforcement officers who wouldn't take kindly to the fact you left the scene of an accident.”

“You. Wouldn’t. Dare.”

I chuckled softly, enjoying the way her eyes flashed even in the darkness. “Are you so certain about that?”

She studied me for a full minute, obviously debating whether to believe me.

The electricity had sparked between us the moment I’d ripped off my helmet, ready to light into the idiot who’d run the red light. Then I’d seen her face, her incredible green eyes staring back at me and I’d almost lost my shit. The blonde highlights of her copper-colored hair had shimmered in the late afternoon sun, accentuating her flawless skin and pouty mouth. Just like I’d remembered.

While the damage to her car hadn’t been extensive, my Harley would need a hell of a lot of TLC. Thank God, I’d recently purchased the mechanic’s shop, the cost for repair minimal. A smile crossed my face at the thought. Still, she would pay dearly for her infractions. With every inch of her delicious body.

Every part of her was nervous, her hands shaking as she slowly removed her suit jacket. The drinks we’d consumed after the accident hadn’t seemed to squelch her concerns. What the time in the darkened bar had accomplished was to rekindle the longing that had been unbridled, the memories of the fantastic nights we’d shared. Yet during our conversation, she hadn’t mentioned a word about why she’d left or apologized for leaving me in the lurch.

In fact, she’d said very little about her life.

And I hadn’t asked.

My needs were far more carnal at this moment.

“Fine, but you’re going to pay for this.” She fumbled with the buttons on her silk blouse, turning ever so slightly as she pulled the material away, gently laying it over the back of her couch.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Huffing, she kicked off her shoes next, her head hanging low as she reached around to unfasten her skirt. There was nothing more delicious than watching as she shimmied until it fell to the floor.

My cock ached, pushing hard against the tight restraint of my jeans, the pain something I hadn't felt in one hell of a long time. I wasn't the kind of man to lament over the past, but her departure had thrown me for a loop. I'd buried myself into my remaining years in college, medical school following.

Now I was a mechanic, returning to take over leadership of the Nightwalker pack after my father's death. I remained bitter, no matter the perceived glory of being an esteemed leader. What the hell did being a Wolfen really mean any longer?

When she stood in her bra and panties, I took another deep breath, all the same savage desire rushing to the surface. "Finish," I commanded.

Another slight whimper of surprise left her mouth and there was no doubt she was utterly embarrassed, likely fighting the guilt wrapping itself around her mind. My keen senses had noted that she'd been in distress and I doubted the basic fender bender had been the reason. She remained a woman of mystery. Perhaps it was time to rekindle our romance and not merely in carnal manners.

Vanessa turned completely to remove her bra, once again gingerly laying it across her blouse. The thin string of her thong was barely visible, forcing my mouth to water. I couldn't wait to quench my thirst on her sweet juice.

She hesitated long enough for me to clear my throat. As she tossed her head over her shoulder, she gave me a defiant gaze before sliding her fingers into her panties. I noticed how she trembled as she slid them past her hips, pushing them down her long legs then kicking out of them.

When she was fully undressed, she turned to face me, still modest in every way. One arm covered her breasts, the other hand positioned in front of her pussy.

Damn, the woman was hot as shit, and I was ready to consume every inch of her.

I finally removed my jacket, tossing it over the chair positioned near the door. Then I folded my hands in front of me, widening my stance. “Come here, Vanessa.”

This time there was no hesitation, although her actions were stilted. “What are you going to do?” The edge in her voice was distinct. She wasn’t used to being commanded by any man.

“I’m going to give you one very severe spanking. I think that will do for starters.”

“Starters?” She slowed her advance, her eyes darting back and forth. “You really think I’m going to obey you.”

“Yes, I do, or the consequences will be much worse.”

My balls tightened, my heart racing. My wolf was clawing at the surface, begging to be set free. Few women, if ever, gave me this reaction, requiring my full control. I allowed a growl to erupt from my throat, the sound permeating the room.

She hissed in response, finally closing the distance. “Who do you think you are?”

“A man who knows you better than you know yourself. Now, I suggest you learn some manners and respect.” The challenge with her was only making my balls tighten even more.

“Respect. Let me think.” Vanessa’s breathing was ragged, her blood pressure increasing from her arousal.

Every part of me wanted to dominate her. “Should I dial the police department?”

“No. Fine. Yes. Sir. Whatever you say, sir.”

“Remove my belt.” This was entirely too satisfying, a slice of just revenge.

“Um...” Her gaze flitted down to my belt buckle, the shiny brass catching a hint of the moonlight streaming in through the blinds. “O-kay. You’re really going to spank me?”

“I’m definitely going to spank you. You are one sinful girl.”

Her hesitation was followed by a mumble under her breath. She'd turned into a wildcat, enticing me even more.

I inhaled her fragrance once again as she did what she was told, struggling to release the buckle. She was nervous, more so than I would have imagined given our history. My instinct told me that only a part had to do with our reconnection. I'd gathered more than just a hint of fear, prompting the beast in me to find out the reason why. What was going on with her to make her so distracted?

I'd learned at the scene of the accident that she'd moved back into town, another shocker as far as I was concerned. I subsequently learned she'd been in Denver for three months. Three fucking months and she hadn't thought to see if I was around.

Jesus.

As she tugged on the leather strap, every cell in my body exploded in fire, white hot and sizzling. I was more alive than I'd been in years, my bones and muscles stretching. I'd never lost control of my beast, had never accidentally turned. In fact, other than recent events involving several murders, I hadn't shifted in years. I'd felt no need, or maybe the simple truth was I'd attempted to hide my true identity. Living as a normal human certainly had its perks.

And its downfalls.

As leader of the Nightwalker pack, I was completely aware changes were coming, continued unrest building amongst our combined packs. While we were considered Wolfen, our group had been banished years before based on bad blood.

We were now one big happy family.

Or so Maximillian Cordero ordained it, a man who'd been my childhood friend turned instant enemy because of bitterness and anger shared between our fathers. Since taking over as Wolfen pack leader, he'd tightened the reins, making certain none of the pack members went against protocol or the damn rules.

But hell, I'd been a troublemaker my entire life. That wasn't about to change.

Especially not because of a woman.

She jerked the last of the belt from the tight loops, holding the strap in her hand like a nervous kitty cat.

I took it from her, sliding the end of the strap against her cheek, moving ever so slowly between her luscious breasts. "Do you know what bad girls receive?"

"A spanking?" she asked, her entire body tensing. "Which is ridiculous. Grown women aren't spanked."

"In my world they are. There are other forms of punishment as well if necessary, but I don't think you want to find out."

"That sounds like a threat. Sir."

The feisty woman had no idea what she was doing to me. "Hmmm... I only make promises, Vanessa. First things first. Move to the couch and lean over the back." I nodded toward the supple leather, giving her a commanding look.

"Sure."

"What do we say, Vanessa?"

She narrowed her eyes then half laughed. "Yes, sir. I have to be crazy for doing this."

"Much better."

I waited until she was in position before advancing, feeling more like a predator than anything else. When I moved closer, something grabbed at my mind, another instinct that I couldn't seem to push away.

She was in danger.

Hmmm... The realization was one I'd have to come to grips with. We weren't starting a relationship. She didn't belong to me.

Except for tonight.

I rubbed the leather between my fingers, my cock continuing to twitch. I was fully aroused, the hunger explosive. I kicked

her legs apart then brushed the tips of my fingers down her spine. She mewed, her body tensing. When I tapped her bottom, the buildup of heat in my fingers was dramatic. She'd ignited embers I thought long since dead.

She dropped her head, her grip on the back of the couch firm. I could even hear the scratching sound her perfectly manicured nails made against the leather.

"Now, for such an egregious situation, you're going to receive thirty strikes."

"Thirty?" she huffed, jerking up from her position.

"You're going to stay in position as well. If you don't, I'm going to start over. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Sir."

I smiled hearing the continued discord in her tone. I remembered her as the rebellious girl, one who'd try anything at the drop of a hat. I'd adored that about her, given I was considered the bad boy. We'd fit perfectly together.

Or so I'd thought.

I folded the strap, my upper lip curling as I took my position. The first crack was centered smack against her sit spot. Her moan was like music to my ears.

The second and third were only slightly lower and the moment she kicked out, she whimpered as if realizing she'd disobeyed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It hurts."

"Yes, of course it hurts." I ran my fingers down the crack of her ass, daring to slide the tip of my index finger against her swollen pussy lips. The wild jolt of current skipping into my heart was damn hot.

I continued the spanking, moving in a slow and easy rhythm, the cracking sound almost as delicious as the act itself.

Vanessa wiggled back and forth, her body arching as she tried desperately to keep her position. "Oh, God. Oh..."

"You're doing very well. Only twenty more."

“Twenty? Oh, no. God. I mean... I mean yes, sir.” She beat her fists against the back of the couch, cursing under her breath.

“If you continue cussing like a sailor, I’m going to be forced to wash your mouth out with soap.”

“Not a chance in hell! Sir.”

“I’m adding five more for your insolence.”

I brought the belt down five times in a rapid fire fashion, holding my breath as she squirmed.

“Oh. Oh. Oh,” she moaned, although I couldn’t help but notice how she undulated her hips, the action far too seductive.

I caressed her already heated bottom, my keen eyesight able to see the warm blush building on her lovely porcelain skin. She was truly magnificent. Standing at almost six feet, her hourglass figure was only one of her amazing attributes. Her extreme level of intelligence was something else entirely.

Goddamn it, I wanted this woman.

Once again, I slipped my finger up and down her swollen folds, gathering several drops of her pussy juice. I couldn’t resist sliding the tip into my mouth, salivating over the taste of her. I wasn’t going to be able to hold back for long.

I smacked her again and again, one immediately after the other. She tossed her head several times, but to her credit, she maintained her position. I was impressed, especially since I was well aware she’d never been spanked before. The moment I caressed her bottom once again, she jutted back her hips, as if begging me for more.

As if hungry for me to take her. I planned on doing just that.

I slid the belt through my fingers, taking several deep breaths before continuing. I wanted this moment to last all night long.

When I reached the required number, I dropped the thick strap. “Do you know what other kinds of punishment bad girls receive?” I straddled her legs, fisting her hair then yanking. I wanted her to know exactly what was going to happen to her.

“No, sir. What?” She was breathless, her face flushed.

“Bad girls get fucked in the ass.”

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AFTERWORD

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BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

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Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

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Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

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Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

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Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

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BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

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Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

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Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

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BOOKS OF THE RUTHLESS EMPIRE SERIES

The Don

Maxwell Powers swept into my life after my father was gunned down, but the moment those piercing blue eyes caught mine I knew he would be doing more than just avenging his old friend.

I haven't seen him since I was a little girl, but that won't keep him from bending me over and belting my bare backside... or from making me scream his name as he claims my virgin body.

He's twice my age, and he's my godfather.

But I know I'll be soaking wet and ready for him tonight...

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The Consigliere

As consigliere of New York's most ruthless crime syndicate, Daniel Briggs rules with an iron fist. But here in Los Angeles, he's just my big brother's best friend, forbidden in every way.

This stunningly handsome billionaire may be the most eligible bachelor on the West Coast, but to him I'm still just a little girl in need of protection from men who would ravage her brutally.

Men like him.

But he'll soon realize I'm all grown up, and then it won't be long before my teenage crush finally shows me the side of him he's kept hidden from me—the savage side that will blister my bare ass for talking back and then take what has always been his with my hair gripped in his fist.

I don't know what comes after that. I just know everything he does to me will be utterly sinful...

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The Underboss

When Francesco Arturo helped me escape an unwanted arranged marriage three years ago, I didn't know he was the underboss of the most powerful mafia organization in New York.

I was just an eighteen-year-old virgin on the run, and he was the handsome savior mesmerizing me with eyes the color of the Aegean Sea before carrying me off to his bed to make me his.

He could have taken my innocence that day, but he didn't.

I gave it to him.

But this isn't a fairy tale. When that perfect night came to an end, I was still the daughter of a Chicago crime boss with a father set on marrying her off to whatever vile man paid the most.

Now he's finally found a suitor for me, but there is something the brutal bastard doesn't know.

I already belong to someone else, and he's coming to take me back.

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BOOKS OF THE TAINTED REGIME SERIES

Cruellest Vow

D'Artagnan Conti was born into poverty, raised to be a soldier in my father's savage regime. I grew up in luxury, longing to escape my family's cruel machinations, and the young man with sapphire eyes and the voice of an angel became not just my forbidden crush but my everything.

Then he was taken from me, killed in a brutal attack by our enemies. Or so I was led to believe...

For twenty years I did my best to forget him, until a devilishly handsome stranger awakened my desire in a way that I hadn't thought possible, baring my body and soul and setting them both ablaze with passion so intense it burns hotter than the lash of leather across my naked backside.

Every taste of his lips, every whisper in my ear, and every quivering climax pulled me deeper into this dark, twisted rapture, and only when I was already under his spell did I learn the truth.

The man I thought I'd lost is the one who has made me his.

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Twisted Embrace

Enzo Lazaro is my best friend's brother, yet the fact that it was taboo only left me even more desperate for him to undress me with those piercing eyes and then strip me bare and ravage me.

But until he found out a secret I hadn't even known myself, I never thought I'd be screaming his name in bed with my belted ass still burning because he decided I needed a lesson in obedience.

...or that he'd be claiming me as his bride.

It turns out I'm the daughter of a Russian mobster, and even though my adopted parents never told me, that means I have dangerous enemies. He says he's making me his wife to protect me.

But we both know he would have taken what he wanted eventually anyway.

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Captured Innocence

When Mattia DeLuca paid my father handsomely for the right to claim me as his bride, it didn't matter that I wanted nothing to do with my own Cosa Nostra family, let alone someone else's. Long before he put a ring on my finger, my own screams of climax told me I was his forever.

Even when I ran away, hoping to leave my family's mafia world behind, I always knew Mattia would track me down one day and take his belt to my bare ass before taking me to his bed again.

But when he came for me, it wasn't just to punish, ravage, and then wed me.

It was to rescue me.

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BOOKS OF THE CARNAL SINS SERIES

Required Surrender

My first mistake was agreeing to participate in a charity auction. My second was believing I could walk away from the commanding billionaire with a brogue accent and dazzling green eyes.

It was supposed to be one date, but a man like Lachlan McKenzie plays by his own set of rules.

As the owner of Carnal Sins, DC's exclusive kink club, his reputation is as dark and demanding as his desires, and before I knew it I ended up his to enjoy not for just one night but a full week.

I fought his control, but I knew I wouldn't win... and in my heart I don't think I even wanted to. Not after he called me his good girl, stripped me bare and spanked me with his belt, and then made me blush and beg and come so hard I forgot all about being his only for a few more days.

That didn't matter anyway. We both know he's keeping me forever.

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Demanded Submission

When he came to my aid after a head-on collision that seemed not to have been an accident, Jameson Stark offered me a ride, help with my car, and a job at the most exclusive club in town.

He also bared me, spanked me until I knew better than to argue with him again, and then showed me what it means to be in the debt of a billionaire who isn't afraid to take everything he's owed.

But as the owner of the Miami branch of Carnal Sins, it isn't just Jameson's wealth and good looks that draw attention, and I knew a man like him must have enemies. I just didn't care.

Not when his every smoldering glance all but demanded my submission...

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Compelled Obedience

Grant Wilde is as arrogant as he is rich and powerful, and if I didn't need his help so desperately I'd tell him exactly where he ought to shove his money, his exclusive club, and his cocky smirk.

But I do need his help, and it will come at a price...

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BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

King of Wrath

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

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King of Cruelty

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

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King of Pain

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Depravity

When Brogan Callahan swept me off my feet, I didn't know he was heir to a powerful Irish mafia family. I didn't find that out until after he'd taken me in his

arms... and over his knee.

By the time I learned the truth, I was already his.

I went on the run to escape my father's plans to marry me off, but it turns out the ruthless mob boss he had in mind is the same sinfully sexy bastard who just stripped me bare and claimed me savagely.

He demands my absolute obedience, and yet with each brutal kiss and stinging lash of his belt I feel myself falling ever deeper into the dark abyss of shameful need he's created within me.

At first I wondered if there were bounds to his depravity. Now I hope there aren't...

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King of Savagery

I knew Maxim Nikitin was a man to be reckoned with when I went undercover to help the FBI bring him down, but nothing could have prepared me for his raw power... or his icy blue eyes.

He caught me, and now he's determined not just to punish me, but to tame me completely.

Every kiss is brutal, every touch possessive, every fiery lash of his belt more intense than the last, yet with every cry of pain and every scream of climax the truth becomes more obvious.

He doesn't need to break me. I belong to him already.

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King of Malice

When I met Phoenix Diamonds, I didn't know anything about him except that he had a body carved from stone and a voice that left me hoping he'd order me to strip just so I could obey.

By the time I learned he's the head of a Greek crime syndicate intent on making me pay for the sins of my father, he'd already mastered me with his touch alone, belted my bare ass for daring to come without permission, and ravaged me thoroughly both that night and the next morning.

All I can do is try to pretend he isn't everything I've always fantasized about...

But I think he knows already.

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BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

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Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable.

The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

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Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

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BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS
SERIES

Dark Stranger

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dark Predator

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

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BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again.

Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

Buy on Amazon

Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

Buy on Amazon

Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

Buy on Amazon

Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

Buy on Amazon

Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

Buy on Amazon

Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

Buy on Amazon

Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bed of Thorns

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Morally Gray

Saxon Thornburg is known to the world as a reputable businessman, but I knew his true nature even before he kidnapped me, bared, bound, and punished me, and then shamefully ravaged me.

He is not just the billionaire boss of a powerful crime family. He is the Patriarch.

Women drop to their knees on command for him, but he chose me because I didn't surrender.

Until he took off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Vicious Intentions

Cain, Hunter, and Cristiano were heirs to some of the richest and most powerful families in the world, men who might as well have been kings. Ten years ago they caught me eavesdropping, and when they were done setting my bare ass on fire with a belt they claimed and ravaged me.

Or at least that's what happens in the fleeting memories I still have left after the car accident...

Though I'm a successful musician now, wealthy and famous myself, in my heart I know if one of those brutes—let alone all three—ordered me to strip and surrender to them in the most shameful of ways, I wouldn't even need the threat of another humiliating punishment to obey immediately.

I never expected to see them again, of course... or to find myself naked, wet, and blushing as a ruthless Chicago crime boss takes his time enjoying me along with two of his closest friends.

But even before the memory of their faces returned, my body remembered its masters.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

Phoenix

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Snake

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Maverick

When I found her trapped in a ravine, I thought Lily Sanborn was just another lost tourist. Then she tried to steal my truck, and I realized she was on the run... and in need of a dose of my belt.

Holed up in my cabin with her bottom burning and a snowstorm raging outside, there's no denying the spark between us, and we both know she'll soon be screaming my name as I take her in the most shameful of ways.

But when her past catches up to her, the men who come after her will learn a hard lesson.

She's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

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Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Sacrifice

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

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MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

Buy on Amazon

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

Buy on Amazon

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

Buy on Amazon

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

Buy on Amazon

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

Buy on Amazon

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

Buy on Amazon

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

Buy on Amazon

Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

Buy on Amazon

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

Buy on Amazon

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

Buy on Amazon

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

Buy on Amazon

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

Buy on Amazon

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

Buy on Amazon

ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

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