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TO POSSESS

PIPER STONE

HIS TO POSSESS



PIPER STONE

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Published by Stormy Night Publications and Design, LLC.

www.StormyNightPublications.com

Stone, Piper

His to Possess

Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

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...

There were beasts in the night, and they are ready to rule.

PROLOGUE



*V*anessa

Home.

It was supposed to feel good to be back at the place where I'd grown up, the city where I'd nurtured my dreams. But even after being back in Denver for three months, the city felt foreign to me, as if I'd fallen off a cliff. I was here with a purpose in mind, but lately I'd been terrified to leave my way too expensive condo for fear of the unknown.

Threats.

I'd had a few of them in my past life as a prosecutor and had taken them in stride. This was different, but it felt very much the same, unnerving. I stared down at my cell phone for the umpteenth time, glaring at the request, uncertain of what I wanted to do. Hissing, I tossed my phone, raking my hand through my hair. It almost felt damp, as if I was sweating profusely.

My heart was certainly racing, pounding to the point the sound was echoing in my ears. I couldn't concentrate, the ugliness of the reason I'd returned to Denver coming back to bite me. I clenched my fingers around the steering wheel, constantly looking in the rearview mirror, utterly terrified someone was following me. I knew I was being childish, but my nerves were raw, completely on edge. I just wanted to get home and lock my doors. I'd slip into something more comfortable, like a

Kevlar suit, and drown my fears and sorrows in a glass of wine. Maybe I'd make it a bottle.

I'd never been very good at lying, which was why I was jumpy all the time, fearful my boss would figure out I was deceiving him.

When I noticed headlights suddenly appearing close behind me, I almost freaked out, gasping for air as I tried to figure out where I could go just in case I was being followed. I waited as I headed down the road, making a sudden sharp turn to the right on a road I wasn't familiar with.

As I glanced into the rearview mirror again, I pressed down on the accelerator, trying to get as much distance as possible.

A split second later, I realized I made a terrible mistake, the crimson hue of a traffic light looming over my vehicle as I passed under it a clear indication I'd run a red light. I slammed on the brakes, but it was too late, all four thousand pounds of steel and a powerful engine slamming into a motorcycle. As a scream erupted from my throat, I struggled to maintain control, finally coming to a hard stop after skidding, the tires squealing. I'd spun around, now facing the opposite direction, my headlights shining brightly on the horrible scene in front of me. The wreck was unimaginable, bad enough I was fearful there was no way the driver could have survived.

Even wearing a seatbelt, I thumped forward, gasping for air. Shaking all over, I fought with the very belt that had likely kept me alive, finally managing to wrangle myself free. I immediately reached for the handle, praying the poor driver was still alive.

Oh, please. Oh, dear God, please don't let me have killed this person.

Swallowing hard, I stepped onto the pavement, unable to glance directly at the scene again for another few seconds. When I did, I sucked in my breath. There was no movement at first and I was trapped in a horrible realization of what I'd done. I took a step forward, fighting tears threatening to form.

The moment I noticed movement, I breathed a sigh of relief, my steps more purposeful. As soon as the person started to stand, I could tell the driver was male.

A tall, extremely muscular male. Thank God he'd been wearing a helmet. When I was within a few feet, he turned around to face me. I stole a glance at the motorcycle. It was totaled, pieces lying all over the street.

I pressed my hand against my mouth as he walked closer, taking his time to remove his helmet.

"I'm so sorry. So terribly sorry. Are you okay?" I asked, daring to walk even closer.

There was no reaction at first, but I could sense his rage by the heavy rise and fall of his chest. Very slowly, he lifted his head.

During those few seconds, all time stopped as I recognized the one person that I'd prayed I'd never see again. Standing in front of me was the man who'd awakened the darkness and passion of the woman buried inside, the one I'd run away from.

And the very man who'd captured my heart.

CHAPTER 1



*H*ours later...
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 shimmed 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.”

CHAPTER 2



*V*anessa

“Bad girls get fucked in the ass,” he whispered in a husky tone, his hot breath skipping along the base of my ear. He brushed his hand along the length of my spine, using the tip of a single finger as he slid it up and down the crack of my ass. The single man who’d ever fucked me in my dark and forbidden place had been Stone and only once, but it was a powerful moment that I’d never forgotten.

Stone Keeler, suddenly the original bad boy, the kind of man women swooned over given his vibrant tattoos and gorgeous muscles.

“I’m a good girl. I always have been,” I countered, purring seductively, still asserting my control. My natural reaction was to spar with him, fighting his authority. Everything about this man exuded dominance and the way he’d taken power over me was both scintillating as well as humiliating.

It also pissed me off. I wasn’t the kind of woman to surrender to anyone, not even the man who’d been smack in the middle of my fantasies for years.

Unfortunately, I was drawn to him in a toxic way, even though I knew he wasn’t good for me. When the corner of his mouth had shifted into a seductive smirk, I’d agreed to discuss the accident over a drink.

Stupid girl. Stupid.

The spanking had been unexpected, leaving me flushed all over, my pussy aching. I was disgusted at the way my body had reacted, even though we had a history.

Besides, I'd returned home to Denver to find my father, a man enshrouded in a horrible mystery. Not to crash into the only man I'd ever hungered for, surrendering to his command after only a few hours.

Damning temptation.

Dark. Dangerous. Delicious.

"Not a chance," he countered. "You are a woman in need of a firm hand."

"That's not true. I don't need anything from anyone, including from you," I countered, the tone of my voice defiant. I ached all over, the stinging sensations crisscrossing my bottom nothing more than a reminder of Stone's intense prowess. My entire body shook, my pussy and nipples throbbing from raging desire. Even as the words he'd issued continued to stun me, I opened my legs wider, the brazen and uncontrollable urge to beg for his cock to fill me, to fuck me a pure sin.

"That's where you're wrong," Stone stated in an authoritative tone as he shoved his thumb into my asshole. "Maybe I should spank your pretty pink pussy."

The pain was delicious and blinding, a moment of raw bliss quickly taking over. Oh, God. Shivering, I couldn't hold back a moan as I struggled in his hold even though my body betrayed me, my back arching.

There was something merciless about Stone Keeler, predatory in a way that aroused every one of my senses, igniting the embers that had been crushed the day I'd walked away. Yet now, he was even more intimidating, as if he'd embraced an entirely different persona—a man with no conscience. Even when I looked into his beautiful blue eyes, I'd been able to see haunting sadness as well as anger.

What in the hell had happened to him in all these years?

"Yes, I think you need another lesson, sweet and wild Vanessa." His husky words skated over me, sending a series of

chills down my spine. He forced my legs open even wider as he pumped his thumb in a brutal fashion.

The scent of my hunger was unmistakable, as if I had a desperate need for him.

For control.

For a man's dominating touch.

No. Fuck, no. I was a woman who didn't need a damn thing, including a man.

The smack of his fingers against my pussy lips threw me into a state of shock, the pain blinding. When he repeated the move, his fingers slapping in rapid succession, I was pitched into another realm, unable to think clearly. I'd never experienced anything so bold, the anguish making my pussy throb.

"Oh. Oh." I couldn't stop my cries or the way my entire system responded, my head spinning and my heart rate increasing.

"Exactly what you deserve." Stone ran his fingers down my spine before repeating the stern actions several more times.

I closed my eyes, envisioning his face as his intoxicating scent inflamed the embers I'd long since thought were dead.

The man standing in the darkness had no idea what kind of hold he had over me. He'd awakened the woman inside, a feat I'd thought impossible. My entire body trembled from the rawness of his actions, the dominance he had no trouble asserting.

Dreams. My entire life had been enshrouded by a series of repetitive dreams, molding me into the woman I was today.

One night they were all about fear; running from an unknown beast, the terror of knowing he'd catch me foreboding, as if was really going to happen. The next night they were all about the very man who'd spanked me until the arousal had been too much to bear, forcing me to grab my vibrator.

"You belong to me."

He'd whispered the words in my sleep over and over again until I'd awakened in a cold sweat, my pussy aching.

Just like today.

I'd been shaken to the core not once but twice in the last few hours, the danger surrounding me palpable. There'd been two phone calls with nothing but dead air. Now, this. I didn't believe in coincidences or karma. I'd run into Stone for a reason. The 'why' I was terrified of finding out.

My life was currently shit and I'd been forced to face the fact I was a fraud on a wild goose chase, altering my entire life because of a dream. Now I was pretending to be someone else, earning a living working alongside a dangerous man.

My days were at least fifteen hours of grueling, unforgiving work. I had a boss who hated me, an assistant who was constantly late, and clients who were... horrible. I wasn't even at an executive level, yet I was expected to nail every detail for my boss, able to read his mind at a moment's notice. The man was ruthless, nasty, and in my mind, a monster. The money affording me the beautiful condo was all about my past, my savings account already taking a huge hit.

I'd been in town for three months, risking everything I'd worked for in order to find the truth about my heritage. I was at the point of questioning not just my rationality but my sanity.

My nights weren't any better. Paperwork, cheap red wine, and frozen meals. Distractions of any kind could derail all that I'd worked to achieve including securing information from the very secured computer systems where I worked.

Every bit of what I was doing, including my beautiful but cold surroundings had been all about a well-planned lie, pretending to be someone I wasn't.

On top of everything, I had two hundred thousand dollars in student loans hanging over my head for a profession I loved and one I wasn't currently working in.

At least not directly.

Until recently, I'd been considered a tenacious and unforgiving prosecutor, the majority of criminals calling me an absolute bitch. I'd had the ugly word spray painted on my apartment door, scratched into my car. Threats had never bothered me, but I'd also always had the backing of a prominent DA's office as well as members of law enforcement who had my back.

Now I was all alone, facing my own demons in an effort to put together the pieces of the past. A return to my hometown. Putting my previous life on hold. Risking everything I'd worked for, possibly my life.

Against my former boss's judgment, I'd become an amateur sleuth, digging into the only clues I had regarding my father's existence. Sadly, I was in way over my head. That much was certain. I would never forget his words the day I'd asked for a leave of absence.

"Be careful about opening up Pandora's Box. You have no idea what monsters might be dragged into the light."

I was beginning to think I should have listened to him.

When the job with the Montenegro Corporation had opened up, I'd thought I was doing the right thing in going for it. Now I wasn't so certain. My boss was a treacherous man, capable of violence. While I'd never experienced anything directly indicating I should fear him, I'd read enough of the old newspaper articles and snippets online to realize I was playing with fire.

And there was a full can of gasoline ready to sweep me straight into hell.

What I didn't need was to run into the one man who'd sparked every ounce of electricity coursing through my veins, igniting not only my body but my mind. I couldn't let my guard down.

Yet here he was, larger than life.

All six foot four inches of him.

And I craved everything he had to offer.

I'd never forgiven myself for the last words I'd said to him, although for years I'd allowed myself to believe he'd deserved

them.

You're never going to give a shit about anyone but yourself.

All because my mother had convinced me Stone Keeler was bad news. There'd been no reason for it other than there would never be a suitor good enough for me. I'd been far too young and naïve to push back, even buying into her bullshit. My ruthless cold fish of a mother cared little about what I'd heard her call spawn more than once. While I'd understood early on that my mother had an ax to grind with my father, she'd taken out her sadness and vicious anger on her only child.

Self-pity wasn't going to get me anywhere, but the truth would.

What was I supposed to say to Stone now?

I'd seen the look on his face just a few hours before, the way his mouth had pursed as he'd lifted his sunglasses immediately after the accident. He hadn't been thrilled to see me. In fact, his level of anger had surprised me. Then he'd softened, making certain I hadn't been injured. One thing had led to another and he'd convinced me to catch up on old times.

Maybe I shouldn't have consumed the first glass of wine.

Or the second.

Ugh, or the third.

And I definitely shouldn't have suggested that he come up to my condo. I had to be out of my mind.

For some crazy reason, I'd thought he'd moved away from Denver, securing a high dollar job in one of the finest hospitals in the country. He'd been brilliantly talented, excited to begin his life as a doctor. Why he'd left the industry was the story behind his darkness. The shock of running into him, smashing his most prized possession had been surreal.

Now I was paying the price for ignoring the road.

Ignoring life.

Hell, attempting to find some level of safety.

I didn't need this shit right now. I had enough on my plate, the request I'd received only two minutes before the accident the reason I'd been distracted. Now my phone was toast and I owed the one man I hoped to never see again.

I shivered at the thought.

That wasn't entirely true. I'd wanted nothing more than to reconnect one day, attempting in some fashion to apologize for my childish behavior. I'd had reasons besides fear of getting too attached for leaving, but Stone hadn't deserved utter silence.

Although contacting him would have created even more of a bitter rift with my mother, a woman destined for importance. I'd heard those words dozens of times as well.

And now I'd just been spanked like a bad little girl, which had my nerves on edge.

I shouldn't allow myself to take even a single night away from my endeavor, my instincts screaming to concentrate. Not. One. Night. But as I'd experienced eight years before, I couldn't resist Stone in any way. Granted, we'd both changed, but the man he'd turned into physically was spectacular in every manner. While he'd always been athletic, his physique long and lean, the four-inch growth in height, shaggy hair, and rippling muscles gave credence to the dark and dangerous look he'd personified. Every aspect of him was sculpted, as if he'd taken a page from a Greek myth.

Vibrant tattoos crawled from his neck down the length of his arms, the serpent detail almost holographic in design. And the way he fit into tight blue jeans was exactly why God made males in the first place. There was one surprise.

His eyes.

They were cold and distant, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. I'd remembered his lighthearted albeit dominating nature fondly, as well as his eagerness to face every day. The man I'd run into on the busy street held an aura of dominance, merciless in every manner.

For all the wrong reasons, that excited the hell out of me.

I could barely catch my breath, my heart racing, goosebumps popping along every inch of my naked skin. The spanking was completely out of order, unexpected, and I'd never been so embarrassed in my life.

The pain had been as unbearable as it was exhilarating, igniting a fire deep within. I'd longed for nights of passion instead of lonely fantasies, heroes who easily saved the damsel in distress.

Just not now.

“Are you ready, sweet Vanessa?”

As he fisted my hair, tangling his fingers in my disheveled strands, he ground his jean-covered cock against my bruised ass. Another series of dazzling sensations rocketed through me, sending a shower of shimmering light dancing in front of my eyes. He seemed to hunger for the darkness, perhaps giving him yet another edge to his authority. For me, the eerie shadows were oppressive, my throat tightening.

At least I felt safe in his presence. There wasn't a single soul on earth who could best the man who had full control over me.

Or at least I hoped.

I shivered to my core thinking about seeing Stone in a suit of armor, a sword in his hand, blood coating the blade after a vicious battle. Maybe I'd been reading too many novels late at night, trying to find a way to sleep off thoughts of monsters who were absolutely real. I inhaled, the scent of the forest and dark spices covering every inch of his body making me swoon.

He chuckled in an evil manner, patting my bottom before pressing his thumb past my swollen folds.

A moan escaped my lips, my body tensing as he pumped into my wetness only twice.

“Do you think you can handle a man like me?”

“Uh-huh.”

Two hard smacks cracked against my ass, a hard tug on my hair quickly following. “What did you say?”

I bit back another moan, closing my eyes. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s better. You’re going to learn to obey me and if you don’t, your punishment will be exceptionally painful.” Stone darted his tongue inside my ear before dragging it down the side of my neck. Everything about him was different. He was even more dominating, taking exactly what he wanted.

There would be no denying him.

“Yes, sir.” I clawed the back of the couch as he shifted his fingers back to my pussy, thrusting deep inside. “Oh. Oh!”

“Imagine all the dirty, vile things I’m going to do to your body. You deserve every one of them.” His actions were brutal, pumping deep inside savagely. He emitted a low rumbling growl, the intense sound floating all around us. All I could think about was that the husky vibe didn’t seem human.

I couldn’t stop trembling even as I opened my legs as wide as possible, hungering for his touch.

“I should bind you, cage you, and keep you as my pet,” he continued, nipping the nape of my neck then licking toward my shoulder. “Would you like that, little princess? Imagine serving my every pleasure no matter what I asked.”

Another moment of utter shame washed through me and not because of what he was saying but because my pussy was clenching at the thought.

“Yes. Perhaps I will,” he added, removing his slickened fingers then smacking my pussy with several hard slaps.

“Oh...” The slice of pain was so unexpected, and I could swear I was going to explode in a raging orgasm.

He untangled his fingers from my hair, immediately wrapping them around my neck. “To have your very life in my hands, forcing you to suck my cock, taking every inch of me.”

The words were startling, adrenaline rushing into every cell and muscle. I was shocked how exciting the crude words truly were, leaving me breathless with anticipation. I jutted my hips, realizing I was begging for him to finger fuck me.

“Mmm... It would seem the little princess is hungry.” I hadn’t realized just how strong he was until he flipped me over, my head and shoulders now hanging over the back of the couch, his massive arms wrapped around my legs. I had absolutely no control and no way of getting out of his powerful hold. His guttural sound was entirely animalistic as he lowered his head, burying his face in my pussy.

“Oh, God. Shit. I...” I slapped my hands against the sofa, my fingers clawing into the leather, straining in a useless effort to see him. I was totally exposed and at his mercy, the man able to do anything he wanted. All I could do was stare out the floor-to-ceiling window, studying the lights of the city and the glow of the stars. I was completely thrown, my mind reeling at the realization I was actually his prisoner.

At least for now.

He moved his head back and forth, feasting on me savagely, thrusting his tongue inside while he rolled his thumb around my clit. The moment he pinched my tender tissue, I let out a series of bedraggled moans, tossing my head from side to side.

Nothing had ever felt this good.

There was nothing to prepare me for the intense smacks to my swollen lips, one coming right after the other. I was shocked, struggling to hold on as anguish washed over me. Everything was a blur until he licked up and down once again in languishing motions, taking his time to lap up every drop of my cream.

The dichotomy was breathtaking, leaving me weak in the knees and unable to think clearly. I fell into a moment of rapture as he drove several fingers inside, curling the tips as he finger fucked me. The moment he hit my G-spot, I almost climaxed, forced to take several deep breaths. He swirled his tongue around my clit before sucking once again, the sounds he emitted barbaric.

Then he issued another series of hard smacks.

I was pitched into utter bliss, the man bringing me to the edge of a climax then pulling back. He repeated the move several

times, chuckling in a dark and almost sadistic manner. I wasn't going to be able to take much more.

"Please..." I heard myself moan, another surreal moment. I never begged anyone for anything.

"Please what, my little princess?"

"Let me come." He'd called me his princess all those years before, something I'd never learned to appreciate. The way he said the single word tonight was entirely different.

As if he was king of the jungle.

"Hmmm..." He resumed his duties, licking me feverishly, his fingers thrusting harder and faster.

I knew I wasn't going to be able to take it much longer.

"Oh, you're bad. Oh, so bad," I exclaimed, trying to hold back but I knew I was losing all sense of control.

"You can't come unless I allow you to," he muttered, once again burying his face.

He was crazy, out of his bloody mind. "Please!"

A few seconds ticked by. Then a few more as he continued the delicious process and I was spent, exhausted to the point I could no longer feel my legs.

"Come, my little princess. Come."

There was no holding back. The climax soared into me, searing every nerve ending as the wave came crashing down. "Ah!" I slapped my hand over my mouth, trying to hold back another scream. I could only imagine what my neighbors thought.

Stone continued to hold me, his rough tongue licking luxuriously. Meanwhile, my mind was spinning, my body still succumbing to the rapture.

I was still shaking as he brought me upright, caressing my cheek with the pads of his fingers. I wanted desperately so see his eyes, to be able to tell what he was thinking, but I could only hear his ragged breathing. He inched closer until our lips were only centimeters apart.

“You are still one. Bad. Girl.” The husky sound of his voice was thrilling, the electricity shooting back and forth between us intense. When he crushed his mouth over mine, the taste of my juice filling my mouth, I slipped my arms around his neck.

He held me close as the passion erupted even more, the kiss wild with raging desire, two animals mating. I was thrown by how aggressive I was, wrapping my arms around his head and pressing us tightly together. He thrust his tongue past my lips, dominating mine as I knew he would do.

Everything about this man was all about taking control and I could swear he was never going to let me go.

What seemed like minutes later, he broke the intimacy, nipping my lower lip then my jaw. Once again, his whisper permeated every cell in my body.

“Now, I fuck you.”

As he pressed my tummy over the couch, one hand remaining on the small of my back, I heard the sound of his zipper. When I felt his throbbing cock rubbing up and down my heated bottom, I couldn't help but smile, arching my back.

There was no moment of gentleness, no more foreplay. He merely thrust his shaft inside my pussy, plunging in and out several times before pulling all the way out.

I bristled, knowing exactly what he was going to do.

Stone slipped the tip of his cock against my puckered hole, pushing until my muscles relaxed, accepting the thick invasion.

“Oh. Oh. Oh!” I clawed at the leather once again, scratching feverishly as anguish rolled all the way down to my toes.

“Relax, princess.” He gripped my hips, sliding another inch inside, waiting until the tension in my body eased.

The pain was an instant rush, further fueling the fire burning within, but the moment ecstasy rolled in, I was lost in a sea of pleasure.

He moved in slow and methodical actions, taking his time to enjoy the moment. I met every thrust with one of my own, still

arching my back until he began to drive into me more savagely.

I could feel everything about him changing, even the sounds he emitted completely different. I fell into a beautiful zone even as his entire body began to shake. He was close. So close. I squeezed my muscles, yet there was no stopping him as he powered into me, driving harder and faster.

Our combined ragged breathing mixed with the slight creak of the couch from his fevered thrusts. As seconds turned into minutes, it was as if we'd become one.

I could no longer think or see clearly, the series of sensations amazing. When I heard the change in his breathing, I knew he was close to coming. I clamped down on my muscles again, smiling when he threw back his head and roared.

Breathing was still difficult, but as he pressed the full weight of his body against mine, intertwining our fingers together, I was forced to gasp for air.

Not from the heaviness of his chest.

Not from the sinful act we'd just committed.

But from the level of intense sadness that clawed at my throat.

Even though we stayed locked together for a few wonderful minutes, I sensed our closeness was shattered.

I felt his body tense, his scattered breathing returning. He eased off the couch, the sound of him adjusting his jeans, the zipper being tugged with ferocity telling. He had no intention of staying, spending the night and rekindling whatever romance we might have thought we'd had.

I was suddenly embarrassed as hell, even more cognizant of my nakedness and I hated myself for it. I'd fallen into my own trap, longing for something to steal me away from the drudgery and the nagging trickle of fear. My legs still shaking, I couldn't look at him as I climbed off the sofa, moving quickly into my bedroom and grabbing a robe from the back of the bathroom door.

I stood in the darkness of my room for a few seconds, pretending I could see my reflection in the dresser mirror. Maybe I honestly didn't want to for fear of being forced to accept where my life had spiraled down to. All the admonishment I could muster wasn't going to change the fact we'd just had sex.

And I had no idea what to say to the man.

I walked out, still fumbling to try to tie the sash on my robe. When I rounded the corner, the sight of him staring out the window, his hands shoved into his jeans allowed goosebumps to form.

He didn't feel any less awkward than I did. I wasn't certain if I took comfort in that or hated that we had nothing to say to each other.

I crept closer, able to catch the side of his face. His upper lip was curled, his eyes remaining unblinking as he stared out onto the street below. I'd never felt so damn uncomfortable around anyone.

"I'm going to have a glass of wine. I also have whiskey. Would you like something?" There was a level of odd defiance in my voice, the same shield I used every day at work.

He tipped his head slightly, the hesitation exactly what I'd expected. "I think I've had enough for the night."

"Okay. I understand." I was still tingling all over as I moved into the kitchen, uncertain I wanted to turn on the light. This might be the only time the darkness was comforting. I felt his presence and marveled how he'd moved so quickly across the room. I could feel his hot breath even from the four feet separating us.

"I missed the fuck out of you, Vanessa. I ain't gonna lie to you about that, but I can't go back to where we were. I'm no longer the same person." His words were stilted, incapable of emotion. I wasn't shocked at his bluntness, but I couldn't help but feel a slight stab in my tummy, butterflies swarming.

"Neither one of us are," I said absently, fiddling with the bottle of wine.

He chuckled in the same dark manner as he had before. “Yeah, well, things are different now. I’m not the kind of man you want to get to know.”

I wanted to ask why. What had changed so dramatically in his life, but what purpose would that serve? I wasn’t going to drag him into my life any more than he was going to allow me into his.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Stone. I just...” How could I be honest with him? He’d never understand.

“You have your chance to tell me now.” Stone’s words were a challenge.

My God. How was I supposed to tell him that I was searching for a nonexistent man, the mystery surrounding him sounding more like a horror story than the truth? What would he think of me when I mentioned my curiosity in an ancient lore regarding wolves? I bit back a bitter laugh, remembering passages in a book I’d read in one of the oldest libraries in New York.

“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.”

I’d been ten years old at the time, my love of all things scary keeping my imagination alive. I couldn’t get enough, reading every story about werewolves I could find.

Until the nightmares had kicked in, the fear becoming real.

What was even worse were the words on a paper I’d found in my mother’s possessions.

Wolfen.

I knew it held an entirely different meaning to her, a fear she’d never been able to explain. My curiosity had only increased since then, now more of a crusade.

Stone could never know I’d gone on a wild goose chase hunting not only my father but beasts of the night. In the

process, I was investigating an actual criminal, one just as dangerous as a ravenous beast.

“All I can tell you is that my mother needed me, and she wasn’t happy with who you were,” I managed, hating myself instantly after issuing the words.

“Happy with me?” Stone snorted, shaking his head. “What the hell was wrong with a young man determined to get to med school?”

“This was a mistake, Stone. I was a stupid and naïve young woman back then. I’m not that any longer. I am a woman of means and I make the decisions for my life. We aren’t good together. I don’t think we should bother seeing each other again. Just let me know how much I owe you for the repair. You’ll get your money.” I knew the words were cold, but I was terrified of falling for him, losing my concentration and my drive. Maybe karma would allow us to meet again.

The way his eyes burnt into mine was haunting. He took a deep breath before walking close enough I could feel his heated breath.

“You know what, Vanessa? Perhaps you’re right. You did what you thought necessary at the time and I’m going to do the same.” This time, I heard the hard thudding of his boots as he moved out of the kitchen.

I slumped against the counter, my hand wrapping around the bottleneck. I was ready to pitch the damn thing against the wall. When he stopped once again, I forced myself to turn toward the door.

“I will offer to fix your car if you’d like.” His words were breathless, riddled with... lust.

“Just a few dents and scratches. I’m not going to worry about it right now,” I said quietly.

“Suit yourself. Nice to see you again, Vanessa. Take care of yourself.”

I pressed my hand against my lips as he finished the walk to the door, the soft click more like a booming thud in my mind. This time, he’d gone out of my life forever.

* * *

Beast

They called me the Beast, a vile and heartless monster. I'd often laughed at the insinuations, especially given those spewing the nickname had no idea how accurate they truly were. I enjoyed being a Lycan creature, even if the culture prevented my transformation into my true predatory self the majority of the time.

As if I followed useless rules created with man in mind instead of the almighty wolf. I snickered at the thought. No, I'd moved into the world of humans, for the most part keeping my hungers in check, my wolf satisfied with small game hunting.

There was nothing I enjoyed as much as the feel of the cool earth against my paws or the wind showering over me with scents of the forest. I also craved the lingering taste of blood spilling down my throat.

Given my work schedule, it had been far too long since I'd hunted, and my beast was famished.

It had been even longer since I'd known the protection of a pack. I didn't mind being a lone wolf the majority of the time and this was one of them.

While tonight would sate my desire for the chase, there would be no opportunity to feast, something that pissed me off. However, the requirement was one I'd agreed to, the assignment dicey even in human form.

I was paid well as an assassin, never remaining in the same city twice. It had been months since I'd dared enter the hallowed grounds of the Wolfen. No one who hired me knew what I truly was, with the exception of the person responsible for this 'special' mission, as it had been called. It had been one of the reasons I'd accepted the job, against my ingrained instincts. However, this particular assignment was much more personal, in a sense killing two birds with one stone. I couldn't

help but smile at the thought. I was about to right a wrong from years ago to boot. Maybe that would save my soul from the devil's claws.

Naw. I doubted it.

While I knew the wolves would be unable to detect my scent, I was risking one or both of the intended victims being able to turn prior to their death. A chance I would have to take.

The bar was packed with bikers and transients, the dingy space reeking of stale cigarettes, sweat, and sex. I'd long since become accustomed to the possible intoxication from my exaggerated senses, but this time, I was disgusted by the stench. Even in the darkness, I was able to see the man in question, his dark eyes constantly scanning the rowdy crowd. It would see the bar's owner was working serving booze.

I could wait until the shithole closed in a little less than an hour, but what fun was there in doing the easy thing? I snickered as I pushed my way through the crowd, prepared for one of the drunk assholes to dare shove me out of the way. It would seem they were either all too inebriated or had other things on their minds, including the half dozen babes hanging all over several of the guys.

While at least two of them had pretty eyes and voluptuous bodies, neither were my type. I preferred my women more sophisticated and savvier, hungry to taste the beast. When I managed to clear a spot directly in front of the bar, I simply waited my turn. There was no reason to lose my patience at this point. Points would be deducted if I made a scene, my payment lowered.

A smile curled on my lip as I scanned the room. There was no one in the joint who could possibility challenge me.

As the owner finally managed to walk closer, I stared directly into his eyes, perhaps daring him to uncover the secret. I was a horrible fuck, a man who deserved his reputation.

Obviously exhausted, he simply glanced up and down, taking a single whiff before deciding I was no threat. "Whatdya have?"

“Budweiser. That and a tequila chaser.”

The owner nodded, giving me another onceover before yanking a shot glass from behind the bar.

I studied him as he poured. He reeked of the kind of danger the lore suggested, a monster capable of ripping apart a human within seconds. What the poor unsuspecting humans didn't understand was that tall tales told to children were actually true.

He slid the drinks across the bar at the same time I pushed a twenty-dollar bill in his direction. “Will that do it?”

“That'll do it,” he answered in passing, snarling when he heard the sound of breaking glass. Within seconds, I could tell fists had been tossed. “God fucking damn it. I'll have to get your change later.”

“No need.” I lifted an eyebrow, watching as he jumped over the bar with ease, storming toward the assholes who'd started the fight. Like any drunk crowd, a cheering section developed, several of the men crowding around whatever melee had ensued.

I remained where I was, enjoying the cold brew and the way the tequila burned as it slid down the back of my throat. Goddamn, I was itching to turn, perfecting the kill in the manner only a wolf could handle. I dragged my tongue across my aching canines, their sharp points the only indication of how close I was to losing control.

The damn stench seemed to be getting worse or maybe I was just on edge. I did enjoy the floor show as the owner wasted no time in breaking up the fight, forced to toss one of the burly men out the door himself. No one in close proximity seemed to think it was odd the owner had been able to lift a three-hundred-fifty-pound man off the floor with ease. I admired the dude. He was living large and pushing boundaries.

Just like every wolf in existence was. I polished off the beer as the owner took a few minutes to clean up the broken bottles before heading back to the bar. I could almost read his mind. I slipped out the front door with no one paying a damn bit of

attention, shoving my hands into my jeans as I headed around the corner. This particular area of Denver was a real shithole, the houses run down and dozens of businesses boarded up. At least the single bar in the neighborhood seemed to be thriving.

I could hear the rustle of trashcans as I shifted around the corner. I could only hope the owner had prepared a will, maybe leaving the place to one of his relatives. I wasn't here to ask questions or give a shit about the consequences of what I'd been hired to do.

I was here to perform a job.

I eased the weapon from under my jacket, the cold steel having pushed hard against my spine all night long. There was no sound as I approached yet the owner's hearing was as good if not better than mine.

He snapped his head in my direction, immediately issuing a husky growl as a warning. I could already see by the change in his eyes he was prepared to transform if necessary. "I suggest you leave."

"Well, that's not going to happen."

"What do you want?" He was prepared to lunge, allowing me to easily see the change in his eyes. His beast was dangerously close. What the hell? I didn't mind toying with him.

"What do I want? Vindication."

I walked closer, allowing him to see the luminescent golden flecks encircling my irises the second before I pulled the trigger not once but twice.

I'd been told the kill was foolproof, but I wasn't a trusting man. I stood over him as he slumped to the ground, waiting for his beast to claw its way toward the surface, healing his human form.

I waited for a full thirty seconds as I peered down at him. The vacancy in his open eyes was telling. One down, several to go.

Time for round two, only this time wouldn't allow me a single moment of satisfaction, at least not as a wolf. A little kink of

my requirement to follow a strict list as mandated by my employer.

Then again, what was wrong with hunting a beautiful woman?

I turned sharply, walking into the shadows.

After all, I was the thing nightmares were made of, even for damsels in distress.

CHAPTER 3



*V*anessa

I will whip you.

I will chain you.

I will keep you.

Had he even spoken the words?

I shuddered, licking my dry lips as I shifted my thoughts to the dream from the night before. Stone had infused every fantasy with his intense command, his dark and demanding methods leaving me covered in perspiration.

“There is nowhere you can run where I won’t find you.”

I almost knocked over my coffee, the statement in Stone’s voice the very one the monster from my nightmares said every time. I had to be losing my mind, my anxiety from what I was attempting to do crushing what was left of my sanity. I swallowed several times, trying to pull my shit together. Stone and I had agreed there was nothing left between us and that’s where it was going to remain. I had work to do.

I’d done the right thing.

He would have never understood my craziness.

Secrets.

My mother had lived with them her entire life, which meant I’d been forced to as well. I’d hated her for years until

recently, turning off my emotions and anger of the past. She had no control over me or my destiny. She had her life and I had mine. I was still firmly convinced that the only way to find any information about my father was through my current employer.

A freaking needle in a haystack.

Maybe I'd turn what I'd found over as state's evidence. That was if I didn't get myself arrested in the process. I hissed at the thought.

Now I was embroiled in secrets held closely by Chris Montenegro as well as a heightened level of danger. A spy I wasn't, no matter my background and training. While the patriarch had been in charge twenty-some years ago, his son was cut from the same cloth.

Brutal.

Ruthless.

A liar.

I'd spent enough years prosecuting animals to spot a sophisticated criminal, the kind who could hide behind suave attire and a polished demeanor with ease. Meanwhile, I had the feeling he hired people to do his dirty work.

What little I'd already discovered about the man and his company had turned the dreams I'd had for years into chilling nightmares, the images so bloody and vivid that I awakened often in a cold sweat. By all rights, I should contact a friend from the FBI, a man I'd worked with on and off over the years. He'd know exactly what to do with the clear indication of extortion I'd found.

But that wasn't the information I'd been looking for, just a bonus.

Or a catalyst to end my life.

I was at my final straw in an attempt to find my father after all the years of nagging my mother. The last bitter argument we'd had almost two years before had set my wheels in motion, becoming desperate to learn anything. She'd simply tossed out

that my father had been a horrible man and deserved every day he rotted in prison. After that, she'd forbidden me to ever bring up the subject again. With no details or even his name, no other relatives to try to glean information, I'd used my position as an attorney to begin my search. At first, I'd found nothing to even corroborate his mere existence, let alone her accusations.

Then accidentally I'd run across two love letters addressed to my mother from a man named Lucas. The words had been so beautiful, full of passion. He'd loved her so much. Meanwhile, she couldn't tolerate the memory of him. There was even a single photograph, albeit from a distance, showing a dark-haired man. The strange connection I'd felt at that very moment had been electric. After some additional searching through her things, I'd found an envelope with a note. The words had obviously been scribbled in anger and a portion torn away, but I'd been able to recognize my mother's handwriting.

Lucas Tremaine.

Montenegro Corporation, Denver.

Full discovery.

The Wolfen.

I'd never discussed my findings with my mother, honoring her ridiculous request. I'd merely taken photographs of the various items, using both private and professional time to search every internet site, newspaper article, and police file I'd been able to get my hands on.

It was if Lucas had never existed. There were no birth, employment, or DMV records I'd been able to locate. While my mother had insisted he'd been a horrible criminal, the very reason we'd left Denver, I'd also found nothing to indicate he remained incarcerated in any state or federal prison.

Her resistance to talking about my father had ultimately driven us apart, not that she'd lost any sleep over it. My intense need to find the truth regarding my past had turned a fascination into an obsession. And here I was. Had I asked myself if I had

lost my mind more than once? Absolutely. I was well educated, had a good head on my shoulders, and had been on my way to a promotion when I'd made the decision to chuck it all, a leave of absence turning into a resignation.

I shivered, my mind racing at the darkness filtering like a festering pool. I was teetering on the brink of disaster and at this point, I had no other choice. There was something hidden in the very bowels of the Montenegro Corporation that could at least provide some answers. I would bet any amount of money on it. Sadly, my instincts told me Chris Montenegro was onto me, my acting abilities less than par. I felt so close to uncovering the mystery. I didn't want to leave Denver, not again for any reason, but I'd already realized there was a possibility that I might have no other choice.

If I wanted to live.

The text I'd received from the man himself had shocked me, a command to meet with Mr. Montenegro in his office. Sighing, I glanced at my watch. I was almost out of time.

I tapped my fingers on the table, waiting as my laptop pulled the information off the jump drive.

I hissed, willing the latest contract to appear on my screen. My red flags had been raised, yanking me out of my comfort zone when I hadn't been asked to polish up the details before the contract was sent out. That was more than just unusual. I did everything involving contracts for the man.

Chris had been edgy as fuck lately, keeping the majority of records under lock and key. I'd read about his latest troubles with the law, an indictment for the very type of thing I'd found in his records. Did I honestly believe he was going to end up behind bars? Not a chance in hell.

I could swear I'd been followed leaving the office more than once. Along with the unknown callers, I was absolutely spooked.

I'd already spent a significant amount of time learning about Chris' past and his connections to vicious crimes. While he'd been arrested on at least four occasions, the man able to hide

behind what appeared to be a steel curtain, that only dragged my tenacity closer to the surface. If he had anything to do with my father's disappearance, I would find a way to take him down.

At any costs.

I'd certainly keep the jump drive with all the juicy details of high priced extortion by my side just in case.

There was no doubt my friend at the FBI would salivate over such a high profile case, although what I was doing to obtain information was bordering on criminal activity. Jack Barlow had already given me some assistance, searching certain secure records that I'd had no access to, finding absolutely nothing on the same Lucas Tremaine who could be my father. Another dead end.

While he'd known better than to ask any questions, I'd confided in him. Maybe I'd just wanted someone to know where I was. What a crock. I had no real friends and had never considered a serious relationship. I was pathetic.

Jack had suggested strongly that I let the whole thing go, that perhaps my mother's story had been just that, an embellished account of who my father really was in order to keep me from searching. Maybe she had her reasons, or so he said. My gut told me that more than one person had gone to significant lengths to cover up what had happened to my father.

I'd decided to follow my gut. I'd made a promise to myself to find out everything and I intended on keeping it.

And that directly involved the Montenegro family.

While I'd smuggled the single jump drive from the office, my sixth sense told me that Mr. Montenegro had suspicions of files being viewed that weren't within my scope of employment. I'd applied for and been hired as an office manager. Of course, I'd known from the day I'd accepted the job that much more had been expected of me.

Evidently, my background in law had been the main attractor, something Mr. Montenegro leaned on every day. I knew I couldn't lie to the man. He had enough connections that my

ruse would be uncovered quickly. I told him I'd had a particularly horrible case and that had tainted my view of practicing law. Besides, my birth certificate had my mother's maiden name.

He'd bought my story, especially since I'd been able to bring a tear or two to my eyes. Maybe I could act after all.

Now, I prepared contracts, negotiated others, often the terms heavily riding in the gray areas. For the money I was making, I'd pretended that certain aspects of the negotiations weren't unscrupulous at minimum.

I gripped the edge of the table, scanning the latest addition. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary that I could find, but I'd have to compare it to the others I'd helped prepare. I was weary from looking. When my phone rang, I groaned. How had an additional fifteen minutes passed so damn fast?

"Ms. Bridges. Mr. Montenegro is waiting for you. He doesn't like tardy employees and he certainly doesn't like to be kept waiting."

I hated the grating voice of his personal secretary just as much as she hated everything about me. "I'm on my way." I ended the call without hearing another lecture about following the rules.

Rules.

My thoughts shifted immediately to Stone. His commanding ways. His dominating attitude. The draw to the man was irresistible. As I took a deep breath, I could swear his scent remained covering my skin. I rolled my eyes, preparing myself for whatever Montenegro was going to say. I doubted he had the balls to kill me in the middle of his office.

I snatched up my things, shoving the drive into a secret compartment I'd created in my purse. Chuckling, I slid my brand new cell phone into my purse as well, pressing down my skirt before heading out of the coffee shop. Montenegro's corporate headquarters was only two blocks away and while I walked, I did everything I could to plant a smile on my face, even whistling as I walked back into the office.

“Vanessa, Mr. Montenegro has been waiting for you in his office.” The receptionist lifted her eyebrows, her face pinched as she nodded toward his posh surroundings located at the end of the very long corridor. The rumor mill had likely run amok. There were two reasons anyone was called into his office, one having to do with holding court with soon to be clients.

The other was for firing wayward employees.

Sighing, I headed for my basic broom closet, dropping my purse and laptop, gazing at the pile of work on my desk as well as the single plant I’d neglected for far too long. There was no way he could have found out I’d copied files, unless he had a sophisticated program on the network checking for possible hackers. I knew enough about firewalls and software that I’d been cautious, checking for a solid week before attempting to copy a single file.

Now I was questioning everything I’d done, realizing my eagerness could have made me careless. Mr. Montenegro had no patience, including with his own family, so he certainly wouldn’t like being made to wait for a disobedient employee.

I held my head high as I moved down the hallway, acknowledging two of the other employees, their surprised expressions giving me a round of shivers. I tapped on his door, expecting a gruff voice barking at the interruption.

When he opened the door himself, he was actually wearing a smile. “Come in, Vanessa. I’ve been looking forward to talking with you.”

“Yes... sir.” What the hell was he up to?

He chuckled as he closed the door, moving directly toward his desk. Instead of sitting down behind the massive mahogany piece, he stood in front of the triple window, staring down at all the little people on the street.

A full minute ticked by. While I tried not to be nervous, the lump in my throat remained. I dared glance around his office, looking for anything that might be useful. A picture with family and friends. Another set of files. There were no outward signs he even had another life.

“Do you like working here, Vanessa?” he asked in a husky and even tone.

The question only partially startled me. “Very much, Mr. Montenegro. I enjoy what I do.”

He shot a look over his shoulder, shaking his head. “You’ve worked for me for a little over three months now. I think you’ve earned the right to call me by my first name.”

“Thank you, Mr., I mean, Chris. I appreciate that.” Where the hell was this going?

He shifted until he faced me, taking a deep breath as he leaned over his desk. “I’m glad to hear you enjoy working with the team. That’s vital.”

I wasn’t certain if I was supposed to ask him a question at this point, but I remained quiet.

“I’ve paid attention to the work you’ve been doing. You’re organized, fastidious, and more efficient than three other employees combined. You also have no personal life from what I can tell.” Turning toward me, he grinned and shook his head in a chastising manner. “You’ll need to work on that. Balance is truly everything.”

I was more confused than ever but managed to smile. “I agree.”

“Well, I know you have work to do so allow me to cut to the heart of it, as they say.” He moved around his desk, sitting on the edge. “I value people I can trust. In my world, I need to be able to rely on good people, those who respect what I’m attempting to achieve within my organization. You have certain attributes that I honestly couldn’t find elsewhere.”

From the day I’d met Chris, I’d known he was a formidable man. He was impeccable in his dress, never anything but a crisp white shirt and a dark suit. The power tie he wore was always colorful, normally accenting his lavender eyes. While he was extremely attractive, considered one of the sexiest catches in the entire city of Denver, he was rarely seen with a woman on his arm.

At least so the tabloids had said.

Right now, he made my skin crawl. The fucker was playing some kind of game with me. Was he questioning my loyalty or attempting to get me into bed? Neither one would ever happen, but I could play along with ease.

“I agree with you, Chris. In order to value your work, you must trust in those around you. Anything less is unacceptable.” I said the words with more conviction than I believed in the moment.

His eyes lit up, his chest rising and falling as if excited. “Excellent. We do see eye to eye. To that end, I believe you’re in the wrong position within our company.”

I wasn’t entirely certain what he was getting at. Swallowing, I tilted my head even higher. “I’m not following you.”

“It’s simple, Vanessa. I’d like to offer you a position as vice president of the company.” I could swear the grin on his face was laced with evil.

What in the hell was going on? I resisted reacting in any manner, although a cold shiver had already trickled down my spine. I had the distinct feeling what he was offering was hush money.

Created from the blood of others.

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally managed, struggling to act as if I was really touched by the gesture instead of being sickened by the offer.

“As you might imagine, the position comes with all the perks. Three times your current salary, an expense account, and of course stock options. The usual.” He seemed bored with his own offer.

I was finally able to garner the correct reaction, a nice hint of shock and awe, but I was no fool. There was more to this *generous* offer. “That’s... exciting.”

“Yes, I thought you might think so.” Chris was obviously pleased with himself, his eyes boring into mine.

“What’s the catch?” I asked, keeping any concept of utter disdain out of my voice.

“The catch? You mean what do I require in return?”

“Yes. Generous offers usually mean there are certain... rules to follow. Protocol.”

He laughed, swinging his leg back and forth. The man was actually attempting to make me feel comfortable. “Yes, you are extremely observant as well as intelligent. What I expect in return is utter loyalty without question. There will likely be times that you are questioned as to why we’re so successful or perhaps even indirectly about terms of our contracts. As you might imagine, there is a need for utmost confidentiality.”

“As I’ve always known, Chris.” I was having difficulty curtailing my tone.

He eyed me carefully, raking his gaze down the length of me. “Yes, I suspect you have. Would you like an opportunity to think about the promotion?”

I wasn’t certain whether he was testing me but either way, my new position would allow me greater access to exactly what Chris wanted me to hold in confidence. “I don’t need to think about your generous offer. I accept.” I was the one who held out my hand, ready to shake on the deal.

There was yet another glimmer of surprise registering on his face before he eased off the desk, gripping my hand. Even his handshake was dominating, the contact a few seconds too long to be just a business transaction.

“I’m very glad you accepted my offer and I’ll make certain everything is prepared for your start fresh and early tomorrow morning, including your new office.”

“New office?” I asked, taking a decided step away. The man truly sickened me.

“Absolutely. As a woman I can trust, you will have the office right next to mine since we will be working very closely together.” This time, his smile was more of a smirk.

Trust. Loyalty. The buzz words were making my head ache. All I wanted was a hot shower to rid me of the slime oozing down my arms and legs. The man was slick.

“That is amazing,” I managed, pretending to be upbeat and perky. He had to know what was going on with my deception. Perhaps he wanted to find out who I was working with. I could feel a series of shivers threatening to give me away.

“Why don’t you take the rest of the afternoon off, allowing the movers time to prepare your office?” He lost the gorgeous smile, walking behind his desk and sitting down. I’d been summarily dismissed, likely to have the opportunity to search through my things. Thank God, the jump drive was in my purse. “Besides, I’m certain you might need some time to sort out things with your car.”

“I’m sorry?” The hair stood up on the back of my neck.

He offered a sly smile, his eyes suddenly coal black as they bore into me. “I understand that you were involved in a car accident yesterday. I do hope you are all right.”

How in the hell had he learned about the accident? I hadn’t told a single soul, including my best friend. I’d known more than one man like him, their threats disguised as nothing more than caring. “Nothing to worry about. Just minor dents.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad to hear that. You are truly a valuable employee. Still, take some time for yourself.”

“I would like that. Thank you again.” I heard the snide tone slipping out of its cage. He’d already turned his attention to his computer, his fingers flying over the keyboard, or I might have given myself away.

I suddenly felt ill, terrified my legs wouldn’t be able to move, but I was finally able to turn around, walking slowly toward the door. When my hand was on the knob, I heard his voice, the deep baritone one I would never forget.

“There’s one more thing, Vanessa. As you can imagine, there will be a contract for you to sign. If any of the terms are broken in an egregious fashion, I assure you that there will be significant consequences. I’m certain you can understand.”

There it was, the real threat. My guess was that he used this exact method to crush anyone who dared cross him. I knew I had decisions to make, or maybe I simply needed to have my

head examined. I wasn't certain if he was waiting for an answer or not, but I decided not to give him one. When I was safely out of his office and a few feet down the hall, I leaned against the wall, doing everything I could to calm my nerves.

Whatever Mr. Montenegro was hiding had to be significant. While he was street savvy and highly intelligent, I could be cunning when necessary. Perhaps it was time to jump headfirst into the game.

Only I wasn't sure which side I wanted to be on.

* * *

“Sex.”

I fiddled with the napkin in front of me, waiting for the drink to arrive. I was still in a fog, analyzing every word Chris had said earlier. I wasn't entirely certain why I'd agreed to leave my condo, even if it was for a celebration of my promotion.

Was there really anything to celebrate?

I was also even more determined to find answers. At least with my promotion I would have access to additional files, including those stored in boxes in the basement of the building. After signing the contract, I'd received various codes allowing access. That had been the only pleasant aspect of signing my name on the dotted line.

The contract itself had made me sick to my stomach.

“Hot sex with three men.”

I vaguely heard my best friend's chirping voice, although I wasn't into small talk at this point. The sickness remained in my stomach, a foreboding feeling I hadn't been able to get rid of. Nothing else had occurred after I'd left the office, other than a congratulatory phone call from the receptionist.

There was no reason for me to be nervous, yet I was.

“Butt fucking by all three men.”

“What?” I jerked my head in Tanya’s direction, tossing a handful of peanuts in her direction. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, come on. Aren’t you just a tiny bit kinky?” She winked as she swirled the tip of her finger around the rim of her wineglass, giving me her finest seductive expression. She’d been the first person I’d met only five minutes after arriving on the first day with the corporation. As head of the HR department, she’d shown me the ropes, making certain I had everything I needed.

Sadly, my Spidey senses were on overload. What if I couldn’t trust her, or anyone for that matter? I’d even made a few notes on conversations I’d had with her but from what I could tell, she was merely an employee.

My thoughts drifted to Stone, my skin tingling.

“Bad girls get fucked in the ass.”

I bit back a sigh, still able to feel him inside of me, thrusting brutally as he took everything he wanted.

“I’m very kinky, thank you very much. However, I don’t think every person in this bar needs to hear whether or not I enjoy butt fucking.” I kept my voice low, darting glances on either side of the bar. The place was crowded, a colorful hangout for the dozens of high-rise offices that were in the area.

“I don’t know about that.” She rose to her feet, clearing her throat. “Attention, everyone.”

“If you utter a single word, I will rip out your heart with a spoon and enjoy every minute.”

Laughing, she flounced back down on the barstool, opening her eyes wide as the bartender placed my drinks in front of me. “A beer with a tequila chaser? Since when do you drink beer?”

Since I wanted to don my shit-kickin’ boots and brandish my gun. I laughed softly, nervously sliding my hand through my hair. I was going to start carrying from now on. “It’s a celebration. Remember?”

“Oh, I remember, including the fact I had to beg you to leave your perfect little condo to do so. What gives?” Tanya

hammered on.

“What are you talking about?” I didn’t bother wasting time with salt or a lemon, downing the shot within five seconds. The burn wasn’t enough to dull my senses.

Or my trepidation.

“Don’t give me any shit, my friend. I know you too well. You should have on your dancing shoes, partying until the wee hours of the morning. Instead, you seem antsy. My God, the salary alone should make you giddy.”

Sighing, I glanced at the television, not caring what I was even looking at. “Did Mr. Montenegro run the contract I signed by you?”

“Um, no. That’s not unusual though. Chris normally handles the executive contracts himself. He simply provides the paperwork with the required changes.”

“So, all the other executives are required to sign the same type of contract then.”

“Absolutely. That’s standard procedure in the majority of large firms. What are you getting at, Vanessa?”

“I’m not getting at anything. I guess I’m just worried I won’t be able to handle the job,” I answered, giving her a tight-lipped smile. Maybe I was making too much out of his last words, but my instinct was almost never wrong. Why would he pull me into the executive realm if he had any qualms about my performance, or my loyalty? *Keep your enemies closer...* The thought wasn’t far from my mind.

I thought about my handgun, the one I should have brought with me.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. You work harder than anyone else in that office. Chris is lucky to have you.”

“I’m curious. How long have you known him?” I’d never considered grilling her before. Perhaps I’d made a mistake in not doing so.

She took a sip of her wine before answering. Suddenly, it seemed she bristled. “What else is bothering you?”

“I don’t know. Just... cautious.”

“All right. Let’s be straight with each other. I’ve heard the rumors, Vanessa. I’m certain you have as well. And yes, there are several old newspaper reports indicating that there is a certain amount of criminal activity within the company. He’s actually under indictment right now. I’ve even heard Chris is dangerous, capable of murder if necessary.”

I studied her eyes. It was obvious that she cared for Chris very much. That didn’t bode well for our friendship. “He’s under indictment?” I acted as if I hadn’t known.

Tanya leaned in. “All bullshit if you ask me. You’re a smart girl. If you honestly believe that Mr. Montenegro is involved in illegal activities of any kind, why are you still working there?”

The question was one I hadn’t anticipated coming from her. “The money.” My hackles were raised more than they should be. She had been the one to call me for a drink, not the other way around. If I had to guess, she was his eyes and ears. Thank God I had never told her why I was really in Denver. She studied me for a full thirty seconds, finally relaxing.

“That I can understand. I’ve known Chris only as long as I’ve worked at the company, which is almost five years. As you might imagine, I’ve talked with every employee and several of the clients who’ve come through our doors. Have some of the various business ventures been difficult, tense on myriad levels? Without a doubt. Chris has his share of enemies, some even accusing him of stealing from them, but that’s simply not the truth no matter what has been reported. He’s one of the most honorable men I know.”

“Honorable. That’s what I needed to hear.” I gave her as genuine a smile as I could, trying to act relieved. Chris had to buy my act for as long as possible.

“That’s something that was instilled in him by his father. Chris took over the company when his father retired, but I assure you that Thomas Montenegro continues to hold interest in the firm on several levels.”

“Chris is certainly an interesting man.”

“Chris has always been very nice to me, although he refuses to tolerate anyone who isn’t loyal. I don’t think you have to worry about your job description.”

“I guess I’m just a worry wart.” I laughed, trying to shake off the odd vibes swarming in my stomach. She was certainly his protector.

“Good. Then let’s celebrate. Oh, sexy bartender. I think we need more drinks this way.” Her eyes lit up. Perhaps I’d passed the test.

“I am driving, you know, and I will need to make a good impression on the first day of my new job.” I winked for effect. What I’d read during the afternoon regarding the company certainly hadn’t squelched my fears. They’d been civilly sued on three occasions, none of which had come to any fruition any more than the criminal indictments had.

“I’ll take you home if you need, sugar. You’ve been working way too hard. A little hunting will do you some good,” Tanya purred, twisting on her barstool in order to observe the customers.

“Hunting? What would I be hunting for?”

“Hot men, of course. I figured you haven’t been laid in a long time.”

I burst into laughter again. For as prim and proper as Tanya portrayed herself to be from eight to five, her wicked side was the one I’d come to at least appreciate. “Not loud enough for everyone to hear.”

She gripped my wrist, doubling over in laughter. “I’m serious. There is nothing like a warm body to do a girl some good. Let’s see what we can find for you.”

“Not a single man in here is my type.” I could tell she was determined to find me a sexy man for a sizzling one-night stand. My thoughts shifted to Stone, an instant flash of electricity shooting through me. I hadn’t been able to get him off my mind the entire night, my dreams filled with images of him.

“You look flushed. See someone you want me to snare?”

“Uh, no!” I dropped my head, studying the beautiful but scarred wood covering the top of the bar. I could almost feel Stone’s hand wrapped around my throat, his cock buried deep in my ass. Every time I’d moved during the day had been a reminder of the hard spanking. My bottom had still been red that very morning.

“Wow. Now, he’s a sight for sore eyes. I could do him in a flash.”

“Then go right ahead.” An odd sense shifted into every cell, my nipples tightening to the point they ached. I didn’t need to lift my head to know that Stone had walked into the bar. I dared glance over Tanya’s shoulder toward the door, biting back a moan.

I’d been right.

Stone stood just inside the doorway, his dark eyes sweeping the perimeter, obviously looking for somewhere to sit. When he shifted his gaze in my direction, he took a deep breath, giving me a single nod.

“Whoa. Do you know him?” Tanya asked, leaning in closer.

“We’ve... met.”

“How? Details.”

“I kind of totaled his Harley.”

She shot me a look, narrowing her eyes. “You did what?”

I nodded, unable to take my eyes off him. I wasn’t certain what to expect. “I ran a red light.”

“Jesus. What were you thinking? Better question, I hope you got his number.”

“He’s not my type.”

“Girl, he’s anyone’s type. Have you been living under a rock?” she admonished. “Take a look at the way those jeans are riding his ass or maybe it’s the other way around. Whew. Is it hot in here?”

Her voice seemed to travel just enough, even though I had no idea how, but it was obvious Stone had heard her sexy proclamation. The smile crossing his face was smug. I turned away on purpose, fisting my hand in my lap. Every nerve ending was on fire, the desire the same as the night before, perhaps even stronger. I found the air stagnant, my breath catching in my throat.

“If you don’t want to go for him, I certainly will give it a try. He’s gorgeous in a bad boy kind of way.”

When he walked by, his gaze remained directly on me, his expression one of extreme lust. I immediately felt my pulse increasing, my mouth becoming dry. I was just as shaken as I had been the moment I’d seen him, only now my body craved the passion we’d shared. I wiggled in my seat, instantly given another reminder of his extreme domination.

And the fact he was all male.

“And he’s very into you,” she said, her tone full of disappointment. “Who wouldn’t be? You’re gorgeous.”

“Well, we didn’t have a very good exchange after the wreck, as you might imagine. I think he actually wanted to wrap his hands around my throat.” As Stone and I locked eyes again, suddenly there was no one else in the room, the crackling electricity we’d shared before soaring.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine and my car is merely banged up. His Harley... well...” I waited until he sat down at the opposite end of the bar before turning my full attention back to Tanya. Every inch of my body was tingling but I refused to fall into my desires. After today’s events, I felt like I was running out of time.

“I mean you’re flushed,” she continued.

I forced myself to look away, flexing my fingers, completely embarrassed by my reaction to him. We weren’t a match made in heaven. “I’m fine. Just a little warm in here.”

“Mmm... You can say that again. What a shame but a man’s Harley is a part of his manhood. We’ll find you someone suitable.”

I almost choked on my sip of beer, wondering how Stone would take her comment. I knew she wouldn't give up. The woman was even more tenacious than I was.

During the course of several minutes, she managed to point out a solid six other men who she believed were suitable. What I realized is that I'd never had a relationship that had lasted longer than a few months. I'd been comparing every guy to Stone. Why? What we'd shared had been a blip in time and nothing more.

However, I still wasn't interested in any of them, three of whom seemed to hover close, watching everything we were doing. When fresh drinks appeared, I had a bad feeling.

"Compliments, ladies, of the three gentlemen behind you," the bartender said as he put the drinks in front of us.

"Shit," I muttered. I was terrible at the singles scene.

"Oh, just go with it. They're pretty cute. You take two and I'll take one," Tanya teased, turning in their direction and lifting her glass.

I glanced over my shoulder, offering a slight smile and nothing else. The last thing I wanted to do was egg them on at this point.

Suddenly, a rush of heat swept through me, more suffocating than before. I didn't like the vibe but there was no reason why. They were three guys dressed casually in jeans and tee shirts. Other than the fact they were all dressed in black, there was nothing odd about them.

Yet a knowing trickled into my system.

Danger.

"I think I need to freshen up," I said in passing, moving immediately from the barstool.

"You go, girl. Why don't you just say hello to Mr. Muscle Man since you're going to walk right by?"

"Very funny and not going to happen." While I had few options, I managed to avoid seeing Stone or coming anywhere

close to the three men. I finally moved into the darkened hallway, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Well, sugar. A man buys you a drink and you’re not going to say thank you?” The voice was gravelly and the man was standing right behind me. I could swear his hot breath was dancing across my skin.

“I do appreciate it. I just have an early day tomorrow.”

The stranger crowded my space and even as I dodged to get around him, he pushed me hard against the wall. “Not good enough. I think you owe me and my friends an apology and a dance.”

I glanced down at his hand, hissing. “Get your hands off of me. You won’t like it if you don’t.”

“Oh, the little lady is a tiger,” he said, his grip tightening. “Do you know what happens to little fillies who try to take control?”

I was ready to knee him when a tremor rushed down the back of my legs. Stone. I would be able to sense his presence anywhere.

“I think you better do as the little filly says and take your hands off her,” Stone commanded.

The stranger snapped his head in Stone’s direction, chortling. “Yeah? Says who?”

I hadn’t even seen Stone’s hand move until his fingers were digging into the asshole’s neck, jerking him away from me and slamming him not once but twice against the wall. The force was enough that the entire hall seemed to rumble from his fury.

“Says a man who could break your neck with one slight twist of my hand,” Stone hissed, getting in the man’s face. He snarled in a way that was more animal than man.

The stranger tried to cough, the sound he emitted nothing but a harsh wheeze.

Even in the darkness, I was able to see Stone’s grip was even more forceful, completely cutting off the guy’s air supply.

“Stone. Don’t. He’s not worth it.” I wrapped my hand around Stone’s arm, keeping my tone soft. We’d drawn enough attention that everyone who’d filtered into the hallway stood back, gawking in silence.

Stone growled before slowly turning his head in my direction. My God. His eyes were glowing. “He. Hurt. You.”

The words echoed in the dense space and I was pulled in, unable to think clearly. The flecks of gold surrounding his irises were beautiful, but they couldn’t be real.

“I’m fine. Really.” I blinked several times, trying to focus on what I was seeing.

He seemed to be debating himself, returning his attention to the choking man. When he let go, the stranger slumped down, immediately scrambling to get away. Stone followed him to the doorway, his shoulders heaving. God, the man was furious.

“You didn’t have to do that. I can take care of myself, Stone. I told you before, you don’t own me.” I knew my words were biting. I was rattled, more so than I wanted to let on. There was something about the stranger that bolstered my fear, as if the three men had been sent to watch me.

Stone didn’t bother answering but when he turned his head, I sucked in my breath. After a few seconds, he simply walked back into the bar.

I took a deep breath, hugging my arms. In those moments, I could swear that Stone Keeler wasn’t human but a beast of the night.

Canine.

And I was utterly terrified.

CHAPTER 4



*S*tone

Fuck.

I'd repeated the word ten times since returning to the bar, pushing the whiskey away. I hadn't planned on running into Vanessa tonight or any other night for that matter. I wasn't her protector, although I'd sensed she was in real danger the moment I'd noticed the assholes hovering near her. I'd overheard enough of their conversation to know that they were working for someone, paid to watch and report back.

But to whom?

My skin remained on fire, my beast having shifted dangerously close to the surface. I could even feel the way my blood flowed through my veins. I'd never experienced the kind of burning rage that had overtaken me in the hallway. I'd always controlled my emotions with ease.

When you find your mate, everything will change.

Your desires.

Your tolerance.

Your hunger.

Everything...

The words burned into my mind, ones said by my father many years before. I glanced down at my forearms, studying the way

my veins continued to pulse, bulging from the amount of blood. This wasn't normal. I took a swig of my beer, trying to calm my nerves. There was no damn way Vanessa was my mate. Not only was she human, but she was a pain in the ass, a woman in need of taming.

As the hammer of my heart echoed, I was forced to do everything to shove my beast back into his cage.

I'd heard every story told by the elders, had been forced to sit through the history of our kind more than once. And why? To make certain the Wolfen were never pushed into extinction. Everyone in our pack continued to fear the damn disease that was destined to return, especially after an incident only a few months earlier.

Destiny.

I refused to believe in such crap. Neither did the Lycans I led in the Nightwalkers. While the majority were true soldiers, prepared for almost anything, not one of them had ever fallen into the fear of the curse.

And I planned on keeping it that way.

One way to make certain? Stay away from Vanessa.

There were even those on the council who believed mating with humans would bring our demise closer. The last thing I needed was to tangle with members of the Wolfen.

Sighing, I couldn't take my eyes off her. The vile and indecent thoughts I had regarding my desires were darker than any I'd had even years ago. I could almost taste her from before, her scent still lingering. I'd wanted to take her in every hole, claiming her as mine. I'd almost lost control, allowing my knot to form, my wolf even hungrier than the man.

I shoved the thoughts aside. I'd been able to control myself easily all those years ago. Why had I had such difficulty the other night?

Because you're close to Wolfen land.

"Fuck," I hissed under my breath. Was I starting to buy into the curse bullshit? I turned my concentration back to watching

her.

It was painfully obvious she was involved in the middle of something, but I doubted she'd be inclined to share the information. I growled and nursed my beer, attempting to keep my lurid thoughts to a minimum.

I stayed in the background for the few minutes she'd remained in the bar, obviously bothered by what she'd seen in the hallway. When she shifted on her stool, staring me straight in the eyes, she clenched her jaw. Sadly, I didn't think the way she continued to shiver had anything to do with the asshole who'd accosted her. My beast had clawed its way to the surface, coming dangerously close to exposing who I really was.

I'd seen the flash of fear in her eyes, the haunted look that had remained seconds later. She was terrified of me.

When she attempted to pay the tab, the action waved off by her friend, I slid two twenties across the bar. If my instincts were correct, the assholes would make another appearance, likely following her home.

I'd driven my second bike, the restored Harley my true baby and one I rarely drove. However, the method of travel allowed me to venture into spaces often refused to a full-sized vehicle.

She was smart, scanning the parking lot before getting in. I gathered her anxiety was riding high, her emotions rousing my curiosity, but I was forced to admit the woman was ferocious in her own right.

I kept my distance, studying the cars on the busy road. Within seconds, I located them, the large black Dodge Ram maintaining a wide berth behind her. If she had any indication of being followed, she certainly didn't show it.

Her building was very secure, the underground parking the only area where the fuckers had a chance to attack her. Once she was in the elevator, there was no way for them to get to her. At least not without permission.

When she turned down her street, the truck immediately followed, but three blocks away, the driver turned off on a side

street. What their actions told me was that they already knew where she lived and were merely making certain she went directly home. The shit in the bar had been about something else other than the woman herself. What could Vanessa be involved in?

I rolled the bike to a parking spot across the street, able to watch her a good portion of the way as she drove in. I killed the engine, easing off and securing my helmet. My instincts were still on high alert, the hair standing on the back of my neck. With my exceptional hearing, I was able to detect the closest vehicles, none of them with a large block Hemi.

After crossing the street, I debated my actions. The last thing I wanted to do was terrify her again, but if I was right, she needed protection.

The parking area was well lit, at least for a solid one hundred feet. That's when my hackles were raised even more. Several lights were out, enough to create a wave of ominous shadows. The parking spots were numbered and while they didn't correlate to the units, I had the distinct feeling that Vanessa's particular spot was somewhere in the middle of the darkness.

Basic assholes wouldn't take the time or risk being seen preparing to such a degree. They thought themselves impervious to the police. Interesting.

I stopped long enough to listen, able to hear the sound of her engine maybe two hundred feet ahead. The moment she stopped the car, I scanned the area as I crept along the side, taking several deep whiffs.

The stench of the asshole who'd touched her was evident. My instincts had been right. While I still had to be careful how I handled this, I would stop at nothing to protect her. The sound of her high heels clicking on the dense concrete created a wave of heat and trepidation, my heart racing. My beast was on high alert, still glancing around the perimeter of the garage for a sight of them.

Even the light over the elevator was out, her annoyed hiss an indication she was close. I took long strides, rounding the final

corner and within seconds was forced to face the assholes as they approached from the darkness.

Her scream was cut off by one of them as he grabbed her, snapping his hand around her mouth. I moved quickly, grabbing one of the men by the arm, tossing him over a bank of cars. The hard thud reverberated in the space, drawing the attention of the other two. Within seconds, the barrel of a Glock was placed against her neck, the asshole who'd grabbed her dragging her several feet away.

Vanessa kicked out, almost managing to escape, her yelp cut short as the asshole smashed the gun against the side of her head. She went down and that was all I could take.

There was no holding back the beast, my wolf breaking through the surface.

Every synapse was on fire, blood racing through my veins. The pain was almost unbearable as I began to transform, bones and muscles stretching, the crackling sound filtering all around me. My fingers curled, forcing me to take a deep breath. Within seconds, I was pitched forward, dropping hard onto the concrete. Claws ripped at my clothes as bones shot out through my legs. As my blood continued to boil, my heart thudded, ready to explode. The anguish continued as my spine twisted, reforming, my eyes shifting into their canine state.

I noticed the paralyzing look of the third man as he prepared to fire in my direction, yet his hand was shaking. I could smell his fear as the fur grew in length, the final transformation taking place. I dragged my tongue across my sharp canines, strings of saliva dripping to the floor.

Vanessa moaned, struggling to sit up then collapsing.

Rage unlike anything I'd ever known shot through me. I let out an intense roar, before lunging in the man's direction, my teeth ripping into his neck.

The single shot he was able to get off slammed into one of the cars. I tossed the bloodied man away, resisting the urge to kill him and took a flying leap at the asshole who'd dared lay a finger on Vanessa.

Pop! Pop!

The two shots managed to catch me in the upper chest, both going clean through. While the pain was wretched, the adrenaline flowing through me was enough to keep me going. I tackled the asshole, the force ramming him into the wall. He slid down the surface, slumping to the side. The fucker was still breathing.

At that moment, the presence I felt brought rage into my system in an entirely different manner. I took a deep whiff, issuing a series of low and purposeful growls as a shadow popped up from several car lengths away.

I let out a keening growl, rage ripping through me.

Another wolf.

Why hadn't I been able to detect him before? What the fuck?

Everything I'd been taught seemed to be tossed away. I'd heard that certain wolves were capable of masking their scent, but only for a period of time. I padded closer until he came into view. There was no holding back, no time to calculate the damage that would be caused by initiating a fight within human territory.

The unknown wolf was out for blood.

I would claw out his heart, feasting while the light passed from his eyes.

We both lunged, the bitter snarls and growls permeating the denseness of the parking garage. As the fight ensued, we rolled several times. He matched my strength, able to keep my canines inches away from his neck. I managed to rake my claws down the side of his neck, howling at the instant stench of blood permeating the air.

He pushed himself backwards, his low-slung growl and shimmering eyes preparing for a fight to the death.

In the periphery of my vision, I noticed a car approaching, slamming on the brakes at the sight of two vicious beasts brawling.

I'd been able to see the look of horror and disbelief in the man's eyes seconds before he threw the gear into reverse, tires screeching and rubber burning as he attempted to exit.

I shot forward, flying several feet off the floor. The wolf reared back, grunting as he attempted to breathe, unprepared for the harsh slash raked down his chest. He stumbled, howling as he fell to the concrete. I raced toward him, hovering over the massive beast as I prepared to issue a killing blow.

A wave of sirens was only two precious minutes away, time I couldn't afford to waste.

Get out and don't come back.

The warning was issued and it was one the asshole knew better than not to take.

The beast moved away, stopping long enough to turn his head in my direction, the look in his eyes alarming. He was out for more than just blood.

As the creature scampered off into the darkness, I hissed, moving from one assailant to the other, inhaling deeply. They would all live, although there would be serious questions regarding the injuries. What the hell was going on and why was a wolf after Vanessa?

The sirens drew closer and I was taking more than just a significant chance, but I had to know if she was all right. Still, I couldn't be caught in the carnage. Vanessa moaned, struggling to push herself up from the cold concrete. The rage continued to sweep through me as I moved to her side, making certain she was all right. When she opened her eyes, blinking several times, I was forced to slink into the shadows.

I would answer for my careless attacks, the Wolfen pack leader likely requiring punishment. At this point, I didn't give a shit. I'd vowed to protect her and I would.

No matter what was done to me.

Her whimper was mournful, drawing my attention once again. I took one last longing look and knew she was staring in my direction, searching for the monster she'd seen in the darkness.

I had little time left, swinging my head in both directions until I found my tattered clothing. I knew better than to leave evidence.

I resisted howling as I lumbered out of the garage, staying low and close to the building. Two police cars swung around the corner, their lights flashing. Several people had ventured into the street, cars slowing and shifting to the curb. The last thing I needed was to be sighted by a single human. I found my way to a back alley, taking a chance I wouldn't be cut off. At least I was able to dump the remnants of my human life into the dumpster. The adrenaline flowing through my body was significant, preventing me from returning to my human form. I would be forced to return for my Harley.

There was no freedom as incredible as shifting, being allowed to run as my wolf. Various scents were amplified, filling my nostrils as I headed out of the city.

Every stench of garbage, cigarettes, perfume, and dozens of restaurants assaulted my senses, intoxicating in every manner.

Pork. Beef. Italian.

Human.

I could feast for days, my hunger knowing no bounds.

I was so alive, tendons stretching, muscles dragged to their full extent. I ran faster, my keen hearing catching every nuance from passion to anger, laughter and joy.

My eyesight snagged every sign and scrap of foliage, neon lights nearly blinding me, the dozens of humans unsuspecting a monster was in their midst. They had no idea how easily it would be to take them, savoring the moment as I fed until I was bloated.

Yet I had control, decades of learning to live with the beast always crawling at the surface. There was no hesitation, no burning desire to go against my pack or my beliefs, although fleeting thoughts did enter my mind.

But only of killing those responsible for harming Vanessa.

I would be their worst nightmare.

Brutal.

Savage.

Violent.

There would be no rules that could stop me, no pack leader to prevent what was necessary. I'd never believed the various legends, stories about our kind made famous in books and movies, bad representations of horrors inflicted in unsuspecting humans. We only killed for a reason.

And I had a damn good one.

I made it out of the city limits minutes later, the ache in my chest intensifying. I was able to ignore the pain as I shot into the protection of the forest.

As I ran, the building pain continued, the injuries significant enough that they hindered my speed. I would recover, as all Lycans did, but it would take time. Within a few minutes, the anguish was biting, something I hadn't anticipated.

A moment of raw hunger shifted into my system, completely different than I'd experienced before. The elders continued to believe an ancient disease was ready to explode once again, the very one that had brought us into existence. 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. Only this time, we would be reduced to the predators that we'd been created as, taking over as kings, destroying all those in our way.

Including unsuspecting humans.

A brief moment of actual terror shifted into my system. Had the injury pitched me into becoming nothing more than a rogue beast, incapable of maintaining a human conscience? Fuck. I was losing it, my vision suddenly clouded.

While the plague was another fabrication that I refused to believe, my behavior could spark another internal war.

The leader of the Wolfen pack couldn't allow that to occur.

Perhaps the Wolfen alpha male would know why a rogue wolf had purposely attacked a human. Maximillian Cordero wasn't only considered the king of our lineage of our species; he was an ATF agent, just as brutal as he was fair.

I kept my course, struggling with every step but within a few minutes, I was finally headed directly to Roselake. The safety surrounding the town was exactly what I needed in order for my beast to finish his run. I needed time in order to calm the combination of rage and hunger.

I only prayed the now brutal pain wouldn't stop my transformation back into human form.

The scent of her remained in my system, coating my loins in a way that could never be extinguished. She was everything that I craved and nothing that I could have. Why couldn't I simply push her out of my mind? Why did I have the innate need to keep her under my protection? That was reserved for mates only. The pain continued to increase, making movements labored. I could feel the difference in the way my blood pulsed in my veins, my heart hammering as it struggled to grab enough air.

The bullets had to be tainted; either that or something had been slipped into one of my drinks. Fuck. I'd fallen into some kind of trap.

I was forced to rest not once but twice, the carnal hunger nagging at me, drawing my beast into fulfilling its natural desires. I was tossed into darkness by the ugly realization that the Wolfen could face another crisis.

And I would be the one to blame.

Taking gasping breaths, my eyes found it difficult to focus. Why the hell weren't the injuries healing? *Breathe and continue. Move on.*

The forest was ripe with fresh kills, larger animals feasting on smaller ones, the way of all beasts. I dragged my tongue across my canines, my stomach rumbling from an entirely different kind of need. While I wouldn't partake, another forbidden act, I would relish the moment.

Slowing, I padded toward the lake near the village, hoping to quench my thirst. I dropped my head, savoring the cool water sliding down my throat. At least some of the agony had subsided, my vision clearing. I took several deep breaths, thankful for the amount of air moving into my lungs. While the injuries were more significant than I'd originally thought, I would survive.

Then I would hunt and kill the fucker.

I sensed him, the same fucking wolf from before. Tossing my head to the side, I searched the darkness as I issued a warning snarl. No other pack was allowed on this turf.

Not if they wanted to live.

The moonlight allowed me to catch the fucker's silhouette easily enough, the dark-haired wolf with a solid white streak from his forehead to his snout not one I'd seen while helping the Nightwalkers and Wolfen packs only a few months before. I was keenly aware of the other packs within close proximity of our protected city, had even met several of their members.

This was a lone and possibly rogue wolf, a true master of disguise.

In my mind, he was a direct threat to the pack.

I padded around the perimeter of the lake in order to get a better look. The wolf was definitely on Wolfen ground, hallowed by every other breed. They knew the rules and the danger of rebuking the allegiance that had been in place for centuries.

The wolf stood his ground, pawing at the earth before throwing back his head and issuing his own warning howl. The eerie sound was entirely different than I was used to, a threat in every regard.

If I were the man I'd been only months before, I would handle the situation my way without regard to consequences. I'd realigned with my old friends, promising peace no matter what occurred. Now I hated myself for the assurances made, although honor was still important.

When the wolf turned, racing off into the night, I knew he'd be back. If I didn't know better, I'd say he'd been brought here by a human, someone who was targeting the Wolfen.

I remained where I was for a few minutes before continuing on my way. As I neared Max's cabin, my muscles had finally relaxed, allowing for the transformation back into human form. As the change occurred, the pain once again turned into anguish, stealing my breath. I remained crouched on the ground, the agony even more blinding than it had been before. I was winded, the shift as well as the injury sapping my energy.

I had difficulty focusing, my eyesight much blurrier than it should have been. The moment I touched my chest, I doubled over, every cell in my body riddled from the intensity of the injuries. A normal clean gunshot would have allowed for almost immediate repair. Something was wrong, different bullets used.

I lifted my head, noticing the lights were on in Max's house. While he'd limited his duties with the ATF, a career that had angered both his father and the elders, he was still proud of his involvement with enforcing the law.

Even if he was now considered a king.

Maybe he did have some freaking idea what the hell was going on.

I snorted as I rose to my full height, taking winded breaths before venturing toward the cabin. Fuck. I continued to stumble, forced to stop and rest twice. With any luck, his mate would be on duty, also serving law enforcement in her capacity as detective with the Denver Police Department.

The single knock was all I needed, the door opening quickly.

Maximillian Cordero was only an inch taller, but his prowess as well as his presence was formidable by all accounts.

Max took a deep breath, shifting his gaze around me before opening the door wider. "Jesus Christ, Stone. What the fuck happened?"

As I fell against him, losing my balance, I could barely formulate words. “A shooting but we have... issues.”

“Wait a minute,” he huffed, taking a deep whiff, his nostrils flaring. “Fuck! You shifted. What the hell is wrong with you and who did this to you?” He wrapped one arm around me, half carrying me to the couch, easing me down in front of the fire.

“I don’t... know. Lone... wolf,” I managed, able to hear the wheezing pushing up from my chest.

“A wolf. I don’t like this. You’re sweating like a pig,” Max muttered under his breath as he placed his palm over my forehead. “You’re running a fever. Just stay right the fuck here.”

Doubling over, I attempted to catch my breath as I heard the sound of glasses being pulled, liquor being poured. I waited to say anything until he returned, his glare harsh and cold.

“Shifting was... necessary,” I struggled to say. “A woman was about to be abducted or possibly killed.”

“A woman. Uh-huh. I guess you took the bullets for her. Goddamn it, Stone.” He took another deep and exaggerated whiff, growling after doing so. “While I am well aware that you have your own life, I didn’t know you were involved with a... female.”

“I’m not involved. She was... someone I used to know. She is...” I was thrown by a weird electricity shooting through me, my entire body on edge.

“You know better than to get involved with a human. It never ends well, Stone.” He growled under his breath, anger riding his face. “There is something odd about the woman’s scent and my instinct tells me that you’ve begun to mate with her.”

“What? Not a chance. I’ve tasted... her... before. We are just... friends.” Every word was agonizing to say. As he handed me the drink, I realized my hand was shaking. My thoughts drifted to all the years before, the strong connection we’d shared. “That’s not possible.”

Max exhaled, shaking his head. “Evidently the fates think otherwise.”

“You mean them or the devil himself,” I croaked, struggling to take a sip. As a man who’d come within an internship of becoming a doctor, I knew the symptoms I was experiencing weren’t positive, but they also shouldn’t be occurring because of two clean bullet holes. My system was attempting to shut down. Damn it, there had to be some kind of poison flowing through my system. Nothing else could cause this kind of agony.

“I can smell her all over you, brother,” Max hissed.

“Then why didn’t I know earlier? Not possible, Max.”

He lifted his eyebrows, shrugging. “That I do not know. However, there is no denying who and what she is. And she is human.”

“As is Kathleen, or she was until you turned her against the rules.”

“Kathleen is none of your concern. You are well aware what she means to me as I suspect this woman does to you. That doesn’t answer the question of why you turned.” He dropped to his knees in front of me, narrowing his eyes as he studied the wounds. “The wounds are already swollen. Clean shots but I could swear they’re getting infected. Tell me as much as you can about what happened.”

“Listen to me. I turned because Vanessa’s life was and still is in danger. While some damn thugs accosted her in the bar, one of them was much more.” As I took a breath, I wheezed, coughing several times. “The asshole was another wolf.”

He lifted his eyebrows, his upper lip curling. “One of ours?”

I shook my head. “Another pack and not one I know of. A black wolf with a white stripe?”

Max tipped his head toward the fire, slamming his drink on the table. “I would have heard of such a wolf from my father. He knew every breed. I’ll search his things. Fuck. Why the hell would humans work with a wolf?”

Blackhawk Cordero had been dead for only a few months, but his death had affected Max greatly. The Cherokee had been a true believer in the old ways, concerned the disease would return, wiping out our very humanity. He was a powerful leader, a man I'd learn to hate until recently.

"Maybe they didn't know initially. I also couldn't gather the creature's scent. What I am certain of is that the wolf was hunting, Vanessa the target."

"You need to hear me, brother. I don't like the sound of what you're telling me. If we have some rogue wolf out there pretending they're one of us, they need to be dealt with. There's still a significant amount of animosity from the last bullshit."

"Yeah, I know that," I huffed, forced to sit back against the couch. My arm wasn't strong enough to lift the damn glass. Something was terribly wrong, my body not responding like it should to a typical gunshot.

"Fuck. What the hell is happening to you? We need to get you some goddamn professional help."

"I'm beginning to go into shock from a wound where the bullets went through. I'm going to guess the bullets were covered with a substance of some kind."

Max huffed. "Why in the fuck go to all that trouble? Where are the weapons?"

"I have no idea, but I'm going to guess that all three of the men had guns with them." I took a deep breath, further evaluating my condition. "My temperature is way above the normal range for human and my heartrate is spiking. In other words, I could be going into septic shock. I'm a fucking doctor, remember?" I retorted, wincing.

"Not tonight." He moved to a standing position, yanking out his phone.

"This can't... get around, Max. You know that." I almost dropped the glass in my effort to take another gulp. I finally gave up, sliding the drink across the table before leaning back and staring at the ceiling.

“And I’m not going to allow you to die.” He shook his head, turning his attention to the call. “Yeah, it’s Max, Doc. I need you at my cabin.” He studied me, narrowing his eyes. “Just bring your bag. We have an issue and do not tell anyone where you’re going.” He ended the call. “Are you able to talk?” He grabbed his drink once again, pacing the floor.

“I don’t know what the hell you want me to tell you. There were three males, only one a wolf and I was unable to detect him initially. I was close enough to smell his liquored-up breath, yet I had no idea he was a wolf. Only after the humans could no longer fight did the wolf take his true form. The beast and I fought before we were forced to run given the arrival of the police. Later, I noticed him on Wolfen property and damn close to your cabin.”

“Which one of them shot you?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. The man was forever a cop first. “One of the humans. Does that mean they are aware of their companion’s... abilities?”

Max tilted his head, huffing. “We can’t rule that out.”

“My gut tells me the wolf will go after her again. You could tell by the look in his eyes, the burning desire that filled him.” As I began to cough again, I pressed my fist against my mouth. The moment I pulled it away, I noticed blood. What in God’s name was happening to me? I could tell Max had noticed my hand, the sound of his heart hammering against his chest echoing into mine.

The grip around his glass became crushing. He issued a slight snarl before closing his eyes in order to calm his rage. “We need to find this beast and annihilate the danger. We have peace finally, rumors abating. We can’t have some rogue creature walking our streets.”

“You’re going to kill this wolf?” I whispered, taunting him more than anything.

He snarled, his beast coming dangerously close to the surface. “I will do what’s necessary in order to protect our pack.

However, we might have a larger problem than simply a single rogue wolf.”

“That’s one reason I came.” Max the protector. Max the papa bear. I was getting weaker by the minute, the solid chill settling into my extremities frightening the fuck out of me.

“And the other?”

“The woman needs to be protected but first, we must find out the person responsible for her attack. There’s something much larger going on here, Max. I can feel it in my gut. I’m gonna need your help.”

“Yeah, and we’re going to talk about that, Stone, but after the doctor fixes you up. Just fucking rest. I need to make some calls in order to find out what we’re dealing with. Do you think you can do that?”

I’d tried to move into a sitting position but was instantly woozy. I finally managed to grab the glass after three tries, nausea rolling into my stomach. “I don’t think I can wait. I need to talk to... I need to talk to her.” I struggled to stand, the room spinning. As the drink dropped from my hand, the sound of shattering glass was nothing but an echo.

“Stone. Fuck. Stone. Can you hear... me...”

A wave of warmth swept over me and as my body pitched forward, all I could think about was Vanessa.

Someone meant for her to die.

* * *

“I don’t know what the hell to tell you, Max. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“But you’re a fucking doctor, Jonas,” Max hissed.

“That’s just it, Max. I’m a general practitioner, not an internalist. This isn’t my specialty and whatever is going on with him reminds me of whatever poison Stone mentioned, not a gunshot wound. Now, you tell me, how the fuck is that possible?”

“He thinks the bullets were coated,” Max answered. “I’ve heard of the military attempting to do something of this nature but from what I know, they were never put into mainstream circulation.”

“That would make sense to me,” Jonas said quietly. “Crazy as shit but it fits.”

I shifted, immediately moaning. Every part of my body ached and the moment I tried to open my eyes, I winced at the daylight streaming in. “It has to be the bullets.”

“Shit, buddy. Why don’t you take it easy?” Max moved closer, hissing as he adjusted whatever covering he’d put over me.

I tried to sit up, but the pain was immediate, forcing another groan. At least I could tell whatever the doctor had done was helping. “What the hell happened?” As the doctor walked over, I could see the look of concern on his face. Dr. Riker had taken over when my father could no longer practice, the illness my father had faced stripping him of his life far too soon. It was the very position that I should hold, the one my father had begged me to take years before when I’d wanted nothing to do with the pack. I’d been bitter, angry at what had been requested of me, but at this moment, I couldn’t care less about what had occurred.

I could barely breathe.

“This is the best that I can figure out without the test results. And don’t quote me on this. I’m just an old country doctor, for Christ’s sake. I think you’re right about the bullets and from what I can tell, the poison is fast acting. You were lucky they went clean through or in my opinion, you’d be dead by now,” Jonas said, shifting his gaze from Max to my direction.

“You said you don’t have any test results yet. Any idea of the substance?” I managed to sit up, grousing at the numbers of bandages covering my chest and arm.

“Not like I can run down to the local emergency room. I have some testing instruments back at my lab so I’m going to see what I can find by testing your blood first. I cleaned the wounds so if there was any residue remaining, there should be

something to run under the microscope. If that doesn't work, I know some people who won't ask questions. Until then, we need to be vigilant in keeping a low profile. Whatever this is could terrify our people."

The doctor's answer wasn't just disconcerting. It was infuriating. I nodded, realizing I was able to breathe much easier. "What did you do?"

Jonas grinned. "An old-fashioned concoction that just us country boys know how to do." He rolled his eyes when I narrowed mine. "I gave you a round of steroids and antibiotics and you're going to keep taking them for now. Took about three hours to work and you were out of it, even hallucinating. Didn't think the shit was going to work at first. At least your fever is down, your heartrate more like a freaking human's."

"And if it doesn't work?" Max asked quietly.

Jonas wiped his brow and grabbed his bag. "Then we're going to have to rely on the test results. I'm going to go back now and start on them. I'll call you as soon as I have anything."

"Okay, Doc. Thanks for coming so quickly," Max said quietly.

"Just make certain he takes the damn medication," Jonas admonished before walking toward the door.

At least Max offered a waning smile. "You know how I can be, Doc."

"That's what I'm hoping for."

We both looked at each other as Jonas walked out the door. When Max turned to face me, his expression was grim. "If what the doc said is true, if the bullets had remained inside of you, he doubted you would have made it back here."

"That freaking poisonous." *Jesus.*

"Yeah, and as you can imagine, if those bullets are tainted and poisonous, our entire pack could possibly be wiped out. We have another war on our hands."

The news was just as terrifying as I'd suspected. "What the hell is going on here, Max? Does this mean the damn curse

everyone is so terrified of has returned? Or is this about some act of revenge?”

“From what my father taught me and the teachings from the time I was a boy, neither the curse nor the disease has anything to do with poison-covered bullets. This is entirely new territory. Revenge is an excellent thought, but who and why?” He tipped his head, offering a slight smile. “One thing is certain, I’m going to need to talk to that girl of yours. Maybe she knows more than you realize.”

“She’s not my girl, Max, but I’m not going to watch her die because of a vendetta against our kind.”

“Then why does her scent remain? Why did you lose all rational behavior around her? We have no way of knowing if anyone witnessed this attack and if they did, you better believe the hunters we’ve faced in the past will feed off the revelation, perhaps finding new recruits in their endeavor.”

I heard the disgust in his voice and knew the dangers we faced were greater than from what up until now had been a ragtag group determined to hunt and kill our people. They’d been quiet as of late, perhaps too much so. “And I’m not going to allow that to happen.”

“There may be no way to stop it at this point.” He gave me a hard-edged look before heading toward the kitchen, stopping short the moment we sensed a presence. “We have company.”

The heavy feet on the front porch indicated anger. The fisted knock meant urgency. At the same time, his cell phone rang. He jerked it out, glaring at the screen. “It’s Kathleen. She’s on duty tonight. My guess is the attack is all over the news.”

I headed toward the door, noticing Max’s hand immediately moving to the shoulder holster he’d put on since I’d passed out. After taking a deep whiff, I opened the door, leaning against the doorjamb.

“Hello?” Max said, answering the phone, shifting away from us.

“Why in the hell are you here?” Gregor asked, lifting a single eyebrow before glancing toward Max.

“Long ass story. What’s wrong?”

“I have some news you’re not going to like.”

Gregor was also an old friend, a man I used to look up to, even considering him a brother. We’d called ourselves the three amigos, as tight as boys could be. Now he was a man whose anger and bitterness had almost pushed him over the edge. Hell, we’d been close enough to be able to read each other’s minds. Then life had happened, difficult challenges that had nearly broken us. While he remained somewhat standoffish to me, Gregor and Max were tight again.

I eased away from the door after giving him a long onceover. “Spill it. I’ve had about as much shit for news as I can take tonight.”

Gregor glanced up and down at my condition, shaking his head. “Two Wolfen are down.”

“Down?” I asked, as Max moved closer, sliding his phone into his pocket.

“Two shooting victims and the shit is bad,” Max stated. “Kathleen is at the morgue now and as expected, a story about a wolf has already leaked. Some asshole swore in front of the press that a vicious man wolf nearly attacked him in his car.”

I hissed, looking away. “What else?”

“From what I heard, both of the pack members are dead from wounds that shouldn’t be fatal,” Gregor added.

“Poison-tainted bullets,” I said under my breath.

As Max glanced in my direction, his face bore the weight of being pack leader.

We were indeed facing a crisis and one that could destroy our kind.

CHAPTER 5



*S*tone

Annihilation.

As kids, the three of us had talked about the improbable concept of the extinction of our kind. Mention of the return of the disease had brought fear into the heart of the pack, altering their seemingly normal lives. We'd been told stories by our parents and our leaders, the elders who truly ran Roselake with iron fists. There were reasons for their strident rules, the ugly punishments for those who disobeyed them. Perhaps that's why the majority of pack males were dominating as hell.

Gregor had been assigned to security after the death of Max's father. He'd made it his business to pay attention to anything that occurred to the Wolfen, whether on Roselake turf or off. There were hundreds of Wolfen living outside of the little town, preferring to pretend they weren't beasts of the night. I'd never really thought about just how precarious our lives were until now.

Someone was out to speed up the annihilation process.

Max had brought in dozens of soldiers, doubling up perimeter security. He'd already contacted members of the council, putting them on notice an emergency meeting would be necessary. We could all feel the wave of growing fear within our community, further igniting my anger. While Max had made no mention of a proposed punishment for my infraction,

I knew it was only a matter of time until I'd be forced to face the consequences, including the possibility of banishment.

I'd contact my best wolves in the Nightwalkers, their protection of our village vital, my second in command a woman I trusted implicitly. She would do what was necessary without question. Gregor had been instructed to meet Kathleen at the scene of the second murder, hoping to keep the Wolfen secret locked away.

Although once the news had the wretched story, it would go viral quickly.

My concentration would be on the wounds both victims would certainly have, attempting to ascertain what we were dealing with.

There was no telling what would occur with the body given the foreign substance. It was entirely possible that the human forms would transform into their wolves for protection, an ability we all had. We just couldn't take the chance. From what Max had heard, the victim we would see first had been dead at least twenty-four hours, his staff finally reporting him missing only hours before.

I overheard only some of the conversation he'd had with his mate. Kathleen Kelly was a formidable officer, her tactics often questioned, but I'd already realized she was damn good at her job. Max had put her on notice about Vanessa's attack, asking her to obtain as much information as possible.

We were all teetering on thin ice.

I rode with Max and as we approached the first scene, the number of Denver PD cars tremendous. "Who the hell is this guy?" The entire house was blocked off, scores of people standing everywhere, including members of the press.

"Damn it," Max snarled as he passed by the group. At least they'd been cordoned off, several police keeping them at a distance.

Every local station had already heard about the news. Whoever the victim had been, his popularity had brought out the big guns.

He hissed as he pulled his truck as close to the house as allowed, immediately cutting the engine. “Trevor Holland lives here.”

“I’ve heard the name. He’s been in the news several times. Married, kids?”

“Yeah, you’ve no doubt heard of the man, at least his bulldog reputation. No kids. His wife died a couple years ago. He balked at the idea of living in Roselake from day one, fighting with my father on the concept alone. He wanted nothing to do with the Wolfen. He’s a high-powered prosecuting attorney in town. I’ve worked with him before on a couple cases. He’s one tough man. And he’s damn popular with the workforce, not so much with the criminal faction.”

“Doesn’t he prosecute some of the most ruthless assholes?” As we got out of the truck, I took a deep whiff. There was no sign of any other wolf with the exception of the owner. I also gathered the stench of blood as well as an unknown source, although the hint of acridness was not anything I’d come into contact with before. “I can smell the substance.”

“Ruthless isn’t the word for it. Dangerous fuckers. Don’t say anything about that until we have a handle on what we’re dealing with. As far as the ME and the police officers know, you were consulting on another case with me.”

“As what?” I asked, taking a quick glance at the clothes he’d allowed me to borrow. At least we were close to the same size.

“A medical professional. Leave it at that.” Max gave me a stern look before we eased under the crime tape, walking straight toward the house. “What the hell is my partner doing here and why didn’t he call me?” He kept his voice low, but I heard the concern in his tone. Everything had already gotten out of hand.

“Unusual?”

He snorted. “That must mean that Mr. Holland had certain... connections, his death raising more than just a few red flags.”

I trailed behind him and into the house. I’d met his partner on a few occasions, none of them on friendly terms. Logan Parker

was at least trustworthy in Max's eyes, having come as close as a human to learning the Wolfen secret as anyone.

"Logan, what the hell? You didn't call me on this?" Max snapped, his eyes scanning the perimeter.

"I was on my way home and heard it on the radio," Logan answered, which I could tell Max knew was a crock of shit. ATF didn't respond to traditional criminal cases, not unless asked to come onto the scene.

And from the looks of the cops, they weren't too thrilled to have another law enforcement agency interfering.

"That doesn't tell me why you are here," Max countered.

"The dude was important. You know?" Logan answered, his voice kept low. "Look, he was out of the office working on a case and didn't return phone calls. His staff got worried and started making some noise. The case he was working on was..." He glanced in my direction, unsure if he could talk in front of me.

"Uh-huh. This is fucking perfect," Max chided. "You need to tell me exactly what Mr. Holland was working on."

While Logan pulled him aside, I was able to hear their conversation easily. It would seem Mr. Holland had caught a difficult case attempting to prosecute one of the local business owners for extortion, the man considered dangerous. That was certainly a qualified reason for murder.

He turned his back toward me, obviously giving instructions to his partner. I glanced around the room, able to gather a sense of uncertainty in the room. As the two concluded the conversation, heading once again toward the body, I could tell Max wasn't happy with the situation.

"Okay, what do we have?" Max asked his partner as he pulled out a pair of gloves.

"Nothing special. That's for sure," Logan said as he scratched his head. "Although I'll be honest with you. I'm not entirely certain why the guy died, unless he had an underlying health condition. You'll know what I'm talking about when you take a look at the wounds." He led us through several police

officers, who said nothing but made certain we knew they weren't pleased at our interference.

The medical examiner was just arriving on scene, the guy looking green around the gills. He was a new hire since the former chief had been arrested only months before. That was the extent of what I knew about the guy, except he had no knowledge of the lore that seemed to be showing up more often within the city limits.

Do werewolves exist?

I could only imagine tomorrow's news headlines.

I knelt down next to Max, careful to keep my distance. I could tell instantly what Logan had indicated. The two shots, while crippling in nature, certainly didn't need to be deadly. My initial conclusion held merit. The poison must have leached out from the bullets. Christ. While I wasn't feeling one hundred percent, I did feel damn lucky to be alive.

"From the looks of it, 9mm," Logan said.

Max sucked in his breath, darting a glance in my direction. We had a connection with the caliber used. "He was dressed for bed. Any sign of forced entry?" He directed his question to a group of officers.

One of them cleared his throat, finally coming over. "No, sir, but we did find two bullet holes in the kitchen window."

"See what you can get from the wounds while I take a look at the window," Max said, keeping his voice low. He handed me a pair of gloves from his back pocket, growling slightly under his breath, his gaze penetrating as a warning. Be careful what I allowed others to see.

I nodded, glancing around the room before inching closer and slapping on the gloves. I eased the pajama top aside, studying the two wounds. The skin was inflamed, the veins near the points of entry appearing almost black. And if I didn't know better, I'd say the poison was still crawling through his system. Fuck. This wasn't a good situation. There was no way of knowing whether the bullets would have the same effect on humans, but if I had to venture a guess, they would.

Or worse.

While I'd come prepared with a makeshift collection container, there would be no way of obtaining samples at this crime scene. There were too many cops who would ask questions.

Max returned only a few minutes later, lifting a single eyebrow. "I'm going to let the police do their jobs from here." He turned toward Logan. "You and I need to have a conversation later."

"That's fine," Logan said, giving me a respectful nod. "I know you have other things to do."

"Yeah. Other things," Max huffed. As we walked out of the house, I could sense the man bristling. "Short range shot."

"Definitely a 9mm," I confirmed, keeping my voice low. "The poison is spreading even after death."

"Which means that the instant the bullet makes contact, the poison begins to enter the system."

"Exactly. That's why even a clean through created a septic reaction in my body." I climbed into the truck, wrestling with everything I'd seen.

When he closed the driver's door, he peered out the windshield. "I'm going to need to establish a council meeting and you're going to be there. We will deal with this shit together, for now, but Stone, you're not going off halfcocked on anything at this point. We need to get a handle on this."

There was no question of whether I could be there and I knew why. Fear would begin almost immediately, panic following soon after.

"Understood. What about this wolf?"

"You need to give me a detailed description of the third perpetrator. The first two are in the hospital, one in critical condition with a goddamn slash opening up half his veins on his neck and chest." He allowed the words to sink in. "As you can imagine, that particular perp isn't doing any talking. From what I was told, the second asshole hasn't said more than he

wants a lawyer. Hopefully, Kathleen is aware of the attack and has access to their names and who the fuck they are.” As he started the engine, I wanted nothing more than to talk with Vanessa, but that was going to have to wait.

For now.

“What do you want me to say, Max? The wolf would have killed her if I hadn’t intervened,” I snapped.

“Jesus. What a fucking mess,” he said under his breath, checking his rearview mirror several times. I’d never seen Max truly fearful. Tonight he was under duress.

“If we’re not careful, the ME involved with the autopsy will likely want to call the CDC.”

He tipped his head in my direction. “You really think this is some foreign substance?”

“What I think doesn’t matter, but what I know is that there is no known metal or other element that has a lasting effect on the Wolfen. You are well aware of the two ways our kind can be killed.”

“Now, we have a third way.”

“Unfortunately, and I need to take samples to augment what Jonas has. I know you’re pissed at me, but I might be the only doctor who can provide true information.”

His grip on the steering wheel tightened. “Agreed. Keep in mind that Kathleen knows how to instruct the medical examiner’s office. She’s not new to our issues.”

Issues. While Kathleen was now Wolfen, Max turning her months before, she had yet to fully embrace the issues revolved around our kind. I only hoped his love for her wasn’t blinding.

“Good to know.”

“In addition, she’s going to find out what Vanessa knows,” Max finally said after several minutes.

“I need to protect her. I have to.” I kept the snarl from reaching my lips. He was doing his human job as well as protecting the

Wolfen.

“You need to stay away from the scene of the crime, at least for a few hours. I don’t think you understand what kind of jeopardy you placed not only yourself but the entire pack in. I get why you attacked that bastard, but everything needs to be handled by the book right now. No exceptions. We need to find those damn guns.”

“Goddamn it, Max, three assholes tried to kill her!”

He shifted a single gaze in my direction. “Are you certain they wanted to kill her? Could you have possibly been the target?”

“For what reason?” I wasn’t certain of anything other than I’d seen the look in the wolf’s eyes, the kind of hunger that had stripped away his humanity. “We have to find the identity of this wolf.”

“And we will in time. Kathleen is going to find out what evidence was collected from the scene. Just keep in mind that from what little you’ve told me, your damn DNA could be all over the place.”

Hissing, I smacked my hand on the dashboard. “Yeah, well, I tossed my clothes. Damn this shit. Why the fuck do they want to hurt her?”

“Why and who? Nothing is going to be ruled out, including the possibility of another rogue wolf and the disease,” Max insisted.

“Vanessa will need protection.”

“She already has it, Stone. I sent two of our pack members to watch the place at least for tonight.”

I nodded, grateful for his assistance. I was flooded with emotions I had difficulty handling. “What if she is my mate?”

He sighed, twisting his hand around the steering wheel. “As you know, it’s rare but can happen. All I can tell you is that you have to know for certain. You feel it in your gut, a pull that refuses to be denied, your beast clawing at the surface almost every minute you’re around her and when you aren’t, you hunger in a way you’ve never experienced before. The

time spent with her intimately will be... explosive. Breathtaking. There will be no denying your needs or hers.”

I leaned my head against the seat, trying to figure out if what I was experiencing was due to being a man or a beast. I wasn't certain.

As he drove into the Denver city limits, we remained quiet. Dawn was just peeking over the horizon. Still, the morgue at this hour was more ominous in nature.

Even for creatures of the night.

Tires screeched as Max pulled into a parking space, the truck still lurching as he jumped out, storming inside. Kathleen met us just outside of the main autopsy room, her face pensive.

“What do we have?” Max asked

Kathleen made certain no one would be able to hear. “What we have is a shitstorm. We have a dead body of a man, Carter Wimmer, who was attacked outside of his bar night before last. While one of the bullets entered his shoulder, the other nicked his lung, which could be the cause of death. Glock 9mm.”

“Carter Wimmer?” I asked, taking a deep breath.

“Do you know him?” Max lifted his eyebrow.

I nodded several times, running my hand through my hair. “He owns a shitty little bar near Stapleton. It's a biker bar. Not going to lie, I've been there more than once. Nice guy with a good head on his shoulders. Just doesn't like being a wolf.” I looked away, pissed as fuck.

“I'm sorry,” Kathleen said softly.

“The ME refuses to rule on the cause of death. Right?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“You're right. She wasn't able to rule the damage to his lungs as conclusive, especially given the odd circumstances of the condition of the body,” she answered.

“Spider-like formations in the veins exploding from the entrance wounds as well as enflamed tissue that is likely beginning to degrade?” I asked.

She opened her eyes wider, half laughing. “I always forget you’re a doctor. You’re exactly right. As you might imagine, the ME is... concerned about her findings.”

“Yeah, so are we. Stone was shot earlier tonight by the same weapon, only the bullets didn’t remain in the body.” Max’s body was tenser than before.

“Shit. What are we dealing with here? Three Wolfen attacked.” She shifted her gaze from one to the other.

“How did you get the call?” Max asked.

“Gregor called me after he learned about Mr. Wimmer’s death. I just happen to catch the call about Mr. Holland and confirmed his identity with Gregor.” She gave him a heated gaze when Max glared at her. “I’m sorry, Agent Cordero. I knew you had the night off.”

“Any names of the perps?” Max asked.

She shrugged. “I made a call to the arresting officer. From what he’s been able to find, the two guys are drifters with no known addresses. They both have records, but nothing more than petty shit. They acted like they were just having a night on the town. They can’t get a single thing out of the one guy who can talk. Nothing. Both of them did have wads of cash in their pockets.”

“That means they were hired in the spur of the moment. If I had to guess, the third man is the ringleader, but we won’t know that for certain until we find him.” Max rubbed his jaw.

“We?” I asked, giving him a look.

“We will go hunting if necessary,” he half whispered.

“From the description Vanessa must have given the officers on the scene, there’s an APB out for his arrest.” She smirked after saying the words. “I’m not holding my breath. Her descriptions were... interesting.”

“A wolf,” I said, sighing.

“Actually, two.” Kathleen tipped her head in my direction.

“He’ll make certain he isn’t found,” Max countered even as he gave me a harsh glare.

“What about Vanessa? What is her condition?” I heard the demanding tone in my voice, but I had to know. While my connection with her was strong and I knew she was still alive, there was no way of knowing the extent of her injuries.

Kathleen stole a glance at Max before answering. I had the feeling she was holding something back from me. “She’s tough, already insisting that she be released from the hospital even though the emergency room doctor wanted to keep her for observation. Her injuries aren’t extensive, mostly cuts and bruises. I have a feeling she had a hero come to her rescue.” Her eyes lit up as she tipped her head, a smile crossing her face. “That’s all I was comfortable finding out without questions being asked. Not my case.”

Max huffed and pointed toward the examination room. “We need to see the body.”

“And I’ll need to get a few samples,” I added. While I was relieved, I couldn’t fight off either the guilt of not remaining by her side or the rage I had for the asshole who’d placed Vanessa in that position. The attack certainly hadn’t been random, which left the fact they’d been working for someone, taking orders.

Kathleen nodded, pushing her way in through the double steel doors. “The ME on duty, Dr. Douglas, is taking a break for a few minutes, but you’re going to need to hurry if you want to get any samples. That’s not something I can explain.”

While Max pulled down the sheet, I found what I was looking for in two of the drawers. No sense using crude implements given what we were dealing with. When I walked toward the body, I was shocked at the level of discoloration, the spider-like formations having crawled all the way to the man’s arms and up along his neck. “Christ.” What a way to go, buddy. The man was tough and mean, the only kind of guy to be able to handle the rough crowd he served.

“From what the ME said, the man died almost instantly. How could the poison continue to travel without a heartbeat or a

pulse?” Kathleen’s question was a good one. She was yet to be completely versed in the alterations in structure within a Wolfen.

“The heart remains beating for a solid two minutes after every other organ dies, allowing blood flow to some degree. My belief is that the ability is another form of protection for the Wolfen body and possibly other breeds. If he’d been able to transform into his wolf, there is a chance, albeit slight, that he might have survived. The drug itself attacks the nervous system, worming its way into the blood supply and finally the organs.” I’d learned the majority of what I knew regarding the composition of wolves from my father.

“You seem to know a hell of a lot about this,” Max suggested.

“I have detailed pictures in case you need those,” Kathleen added.

“You mean other than from my father? I worked with a prominent doctor at Duke who gave us hands-on training with certain infectious diseases and fast-acting poisons.” I didn’t have time to inspect the wounds to notice the blue tint in the skin surrounding them. I snipped several samples of tissue as well as pulled four vials of blood. I only hoped that was enough to give us some kind of answers.

“You should go,” Kathleen encouraged after checking the clock on the wall. “I still have some work to do. I’ll check with the officers who responded to the call for additional information. I’ll also look into Vanessa Bridges and her attack, including going to see her, but I might not be able to do much else. The last thing I need to do is interfere with another detective’s case.”

“Thank you. You know, Carter had a wife and two small children.” I tipped my head to look at Max. We took care of our own.

“I’ll make arrangements to have her brought to Roselake,” Max stated as if it was his decision to make.

I wasn’t in the mood to argue. In fact, I wasn’t in the mood for anything but taking Vanessa to safety. I couldn’t help but have

the distinct feeling that she'd stumbled into something that would get her killed.

Along with dozens if not hundreds of Wolfen.

A new battle had begun.

When Max dropped me off at my Harley, I stood by my bike for a full fifteen minutes staring up at what I knew to be the windows of Vanessa's apartment. The morning light was beautiful, the glow of the sun banking off her building creating stunning reflections.

I'd gathered the scent of the two pack members the moment I'd driven down the street. Max had made good on his promise. For that I was grateful. However, from what I'd seen in the beast's eyes, I doubted the rogue wolf was finished with his mission.

Or his desire to feast.

I would return within hours to protect her, and while I'd been called to a council meeting later in the day, I would find answers and when I did, my retaliation would be swift.

There was no doubt in my mind, no need to question the beast who was indeed clawing at the surface, my heartrate off the chain. Even my blood pressure had skyrocketed, the need so intense. I could gather her scent even past the stench of gasoline, plastic, and steel.

I craved her.

I longed for her.

She belonged to me.

She. Was. My. Mate.

* * *

Beast

Fuck.

Damsel in distress. The woman had ignited every cell in my body from the moment I'd walked into the bar. Sighing, I stared at the morning light, taking several deep breaths even as my cock remained hard. Why the fuck were my cells so alive, a ravaging desire something I wasn't used to?

Not my choice to work with the two assholes but an insistence from my employer. My instinct told me I should have finished them off. The necessity was already evident. Eventually they would talk. All fucking humans squealed like pigs. The assignment was becoming an irritant, more like a damn game than a quick easy in and out.

I stood outside on the back deck of the little house I'd rented, remaining completely naked. I tipped back my head, taking a deep breath and holding it in. The morning was spectacular, every smell and sight more beautiful than I'd noticed before. I'd spent the entire night as my wolf, enjoying the spoils of being a powerful creature.

However, I'd evaluated my performance far too many times. I'd failed on several counts, infuriating me even more. I couldn't allow the loose ends to remain, including the damn wolf who'd caught me in the act. While he wasn't on the list, there was no doubt he'd already alarmed his pack.

Goddamn wolves.

I dragged my tongue across my lips, her scent still crawling all over me. I'd heard of such a thing, but I wasn't prepared for the ramifications or the level of thirst. I certainly wasn't a damn family man, had no intentions of settling down. The concept actually made me laugh.

My grip on the railing was firm, the strength in my fingers denting the salt-treated lumber as if the substance was nothing but rubber. I felt glorious in body and mind, more alive than I'd been in years. The joy of allowing my wolf freedom was almost perfect.

Almost.

Then I'd gotten careless, the transformation into my beast not calculated but stupid. For all I knew, two of the three guns

used had been found. I'd at least managed to circle back, snagging the one I'd used and tossing it where the cops wouldn't find it. I had plenty of weapons. That wasn't the problem. The bullets were.

And my employer would be pissed at the possibility of discovery.

I was a trained killer, not a damn fool. I should have known there could be complications, but I hadn't anticipated a wolf protecting the female. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

I was the descendant of the most powerful breed of wolves, born and bred from the fires of hell. I shook my head, snarling. The assignment was crap.

I took another whiff as a moment of anger rushed in. Our kind had seen the beginnings of Earth, the evolution of man making us extremely dangerous, although the Wolfen believed they were superior. Only because of their numbers. Only because we were facing extinction. Well, I'd do my part to eliminate as many of them as I could. I chuckled darkly as I rubbed my hands down my chest, marveling in the structure. When I heard my phone ring, I hissed given the interruption.

What I couldn't stand was being kept on a chain like some damn puppet, money or no money. Maybe I would need to do something about that.

I stormed inside, yanking the phone from the counter. "Yes?"

"You weren't successful and two of the men are down."

The fucking voice was just as grating as always, driving my rage to the surface. How the fuck did the news travel so damn fast? "The humans you selected were inept. It was my understanding that you didn't want her killed, did you? Simply terrified."

"You knew the instructions. You knew this was important. Now, you need to handle cleanup."

"I'll get the damn guns back."

The laugh wasn't something I'd expected.

“While losing them was stupid, there is no way to track the bullets. That makes you one lucky man in that I don’t have to have you exterminated like the fucking beast you truly are. Christ. What the hell did I expect? Now, you know what you need to do, and I expect you to be on track again by tomorrow night. Period.”

“Or what?” I allowed my beast to growl, imagining my claws ripping through perfectly porcelain skin. I hadn’t been this riled in one hell of a long time.

The laugh was the same, superior in every manner. I wanted nothing more than to reach through the phone, allowing my wolf to handle the situation.

“You’re a good boy. I have no doubt you’ll do exactly as you’ve been hired to do. You have a formidable reputation; however, I won’t accept another round of stupidity or I’ll be forced to take matters into my own hands. And I assure you, wolf or no wolf, you won’t be a match for me.”

The call was ended abruptly, as if my assistance didn’t matter. I slowly placed the phone on the counter, taking several deep breaths. I’d like to see the asshole try.

The rage took over, unbridled. As my shoulders began to heave, my chest becoming tight, I unleashed my fury, sweeping my hand over the counter. The sound of shattering glass and the dinging of metal was just the beginning. I moved through the kitchen, ripping away at everything I could get my hands on. A stream of red floated in front of my eyes as I yanked and pulled, tearing away at cabinets, tossing the refrigerator into the middle of the kitchen.

There was nothing I couldn’t do.

There was no one who could beat me.

There was no turning back.

I slumped over the counter, controlling my breathing, waiting for my beast to calm. I had to think about this rationally. I lifted my head, allowing a guttural sound to erupt from my throat.

First things first. I'd already done my research, finding out who and what I was dealing with. The lovely Vanessa Bridges was important to Stone Keeler, a rogue wolf in his own right. My skin tingled, the wild pumping of my heart indicating a connection I wasn't certain could be avoided. Perhaps I would begin my personal foray that would lead me straight to hell with her.

And I would enjoy every minute.

"Yes..." I whispered.

I would exact my anger and my hatred on more than just the list I'd been provided.

When I was finished with my task, everyone would know my name.

Beast.

CHAPTER 6



*V*anessa

“Run, little girl. Run.” The wolf’s laugh was vicious. “There’s nowhere you can hide.”

Screaming, I raced through the empty streets, searching for signs of anyone who could help me. “Please. Please!” My voice echoed even in the openness as the wind whipped around me, a storm quickly approaching. I was shocked there was no movement, not a single car moving in the busy downtown. I turned in a full circle, terror clawing at my neck until I had difficulty breathing.

That’s when I was able to see his yellow eyes peering out of the shadows, sharp canines dripping of saliva as he snorted. When he lumbered forward, pawing the ground, I was shocked at the size of his massive frame, the protruding muscles as he padded toward me. He issued a low growl, the sound rumbling in my system.

No. No.

I took off running once again, tripping over the curb as I struggled to find an open door. Every one of them I yanked was locked. I tried another and another, pounding my fists on several until my hands were bruised. Were there faces peering at me from inside? Why wouldn’t they help me? Save me?

“I will enjoy feasting on you in every way.” The wolf laughed again as he cocked his head.

He was coming closer, the intense growls seeming to come from every direction, echoing in my ears. God help me. Please. Please! I could no longer speak, my mind reeling as the horror unfolded. I was his prey.

I bolted down an alley, praying for anywhere I could hide, glancing from side to side. There were no doors, every window out of reach, but I could swear there were people staring down at me. Watching. Waiting for the big bad wolf to tear me to shreds. I ran blindly until there was nowhere else to go, a massive fence blocking my path. I smashed my hands against the surface, desperately trying to climb the dense wood. It was no use. I was trapped.

I heard an intense howl, more malevolent than anything I'd ever heard in my life.

Then I felt his presence, the predator desperately hungry.

And his hot breath as it skated across my naked skin.

"You now belong to me."

"No!" I jerked up, clawing my throat as I struggled to take a single breath. Blinking several times, the glow of light only fueled the terror continuing to build in my mind. He was coming for me. He'd found me after all these years, the very monstrous beast I'd seen in my nightmares.

Buzz...

"What?" I jerked the sheets around me, gasping for air. *Slow down. Breathe.*

The phone. I turned my head, glaring at the screen, able to see the caller ID for a split second before it went dark. Then I registered the identity in my scattered mind.

Chris Montenegro.

What the hell was he doing calling me so early? It was barely seven in the morning.

I was woozy, my head aching. Every detail was fuzzy and all I could grasp onto was the image of the wolf. But... Another set

of visions rushed into my mind, sending a shiver all the way down my spine. The garage. The three men. That's why Chris was calling.

He must have heard about the attack. Wait. There was no way possible. Or was there? *If he was the reason for the three men accosting you then he would know.* Then again, there was no doubt he had connections everywhere, minions doing his biddings, even in the police department.

I bit back a whimper, still clutching my throat, the visions of the wolf remaining in the forefront of my mind. *A dream. A dream. A dream.* While I repeated the words over and over again, nothing seemed to help the creepy crawly feelings surging throughout my body. I suddenly felt like there were hands touching me, reaching out from the shadows in every direction.

I couldn't get the wolf's eerie eyes out of my mind, the flickering yellow irises somehow leaving a permanent mark.

There'd been two wolves, including...

"Whew."

I tumbled out of bed, my feet tripping on the covers. I managed to make it to the window, smashing my hands on the glass as I struggled to focus. "Just calm the fuck down." The words managed to echo, forcing me to roll my eyes. I was in my condo. It had just been a dream, nothing more. There were no creatures hiding under the bed, waiting to drag me into hell. Still, I needed air. A strangled laugh pushed up from my throat as I fumbled to unlatch the sash, beating on the window until I was finally able to break the seal. The flow of air was wonderful, dragging some of the cobwebs away.

I took several deep breaths, drinking in the cool air until my head was no longer swimming, my vision mostly cleared. As the light breeze floated across my face, I no longer felt the tightness in my chest. The warmth of the morning sun began to strip away the imaginary claws that had been wrapped around my neck.

In all the years I'd had them, the nightmare had never been so intense, leaving me with prickles covering every inch of my skin. Another series of sensations suddenly rocketed through me. Although they were entirely different, they were just as powerful, my skin suddenly on fire. Within seconds, I was completely aroused, my nipples aching and my pussy juice slickening my inner thighs. What the hell was going on?

A rush of heat swept up from my neck, blossoming on my cheeks. A series of uncontrollable urges rushed to the surface, the hunger unbridled. The sudden desires were jarring, but it was more about my mind's need to reach out, making a connection.

As my vision completely cleared, my body swaying, I gathered a delicious scent that was all masculine. I shrank back for a few seconds, chastising my behavior. As I glanced out the window once again, a word became clear in my mind.

Mate.

He is your mate.

The powerful statement lingered as I stared out the window, narrowing my eyes. I could swear Stone was standing in front of a motorcycle, gazing up at my window, able to see every inch of me.

I want you.

I need you.

He also hungered, the longing he felt even more intense than mine.

I stood still, mesmerized by the moment, the sound of my heart pumping wildly echoing in my ears. I could feel him, his rapid heartbeat and the rush of his blood flowing with mine. I could smell him, the scent of his testosterone and exotic spices filling my nostrils.

You belong to me.

Then I felt the brush of his fingers dancing across my skin, electrifying every inch.

I closed my eyes, savoring the moment of raw passion as if it were really happening. Jarred by my reaction, I shrank away, breaking the connection, a moment of shame yanking at my conscience. This was ridiculous. How could I have such an intense attraction to a man I hadn't seen in years?

Because you belong with him.

The shout out from my inner voice was unexpected, leaving me feeling clammy and out of sorts. That wasn't possible. I wasn't going to succumb to something I'd dreamt about. I refused to listen to my body and I wasn't going to surrender to the fear, or to any man.

No matter how intoxicatingly sexy he was.

After taking several deep breaths, I dared to move back toward the window, searching the entire area. He was gone.

Had I imagined the whole thing? No. The rumble of a motorcycle was unmistakable. I doubled over, holding my stomach as I tried to rationalize the last few moments. The dream had been troubling, the attack challenging my senses. That had to be all that had happened. I was allowed to feel out of sorts.

Then why did his scent continue filling my nostrils, lingering as if staining my skin?

I was a rational woman, one who'd spent years staring at black and white, digging through files to find the truth. The attack had spurred the nightmare, altering the events because of the horrible men who'd accosted me.

And the wolf who'd stood over you, protecting you.

"No!" I refused to believe anything other than my mind had played tricks on me then. I'd been smacked in the head with a gun, for God's sake. There was no possibility anything I'd seen at that moment was remotely accurate.

Think like an attorney.

The three men from the bar had followed me back to the condo. That much I knew. I also remembered several lights were out in the garage. Then...

An arm sweeping around my neck.

A hard blow.

Several... growls.

His face.

The wolf.

No. No. I pressed my hand over my mouth, the single laugh creating a wave of pain. There were no such things as freaking werewolves. While the doctor had said there was no concussion, I was beginning to wonder. Maybe I should have remained in the hospital overnight, although all I'd wanted to do was get home and take a long, hot shower. Ridding myself of the filth of their hands was first and foremost in my mind. I'd finally closed my eyes close to five.

Two hours of restless sleep, dreams that were overpowering. Wonderful.

I thought about the statement I'd made to the poor police officers. They must have thought I was heavily intoxicated or worse. I'd actually stated that two beasts had been fighting, creatures of the night. That much I could remember. When they'd asked if I'd possibly seen two dogs, I'd challenged them.

I couldn't blame them for rolling their eyes.

I took a tentative step away from the window, still trying to calm my breathing. Every muscle was aching and stiff, my body covered in scratches and I knew I would have a heady number of bruises at some point. I still felt unclean after scrubbing for fifteen minutes, but I needed some answers more than anything else.

Who had attacked me and why?

My suspicions revolved around Chris, although I couldn't wrap my head around why he would bother doing something so heinous after I'd already signed the contract. Perhaps to keep me in line?

I didn't believe in coincidences, allowing my instinct to take hold. Had the thugs been sent to harm or just terrify me? My

mind was still foggy, unable to process all of the events. As I walked into the bathroom, turning on the light, the reflection staring back at me already appeared battered and bruised.

If mostly in my mind.

Well, I certainly had a legitimate reason to miss work for the day. I'd spend the time researching in an effort to find any answers.

As I quickly dressed, tossing on a pair of jeans and a sweater, my thoughts drifted back to the wolf. Correction, the Wolfen. Why had my mother saved the note for all those years? There was no point in asking her. She'd merely give me grief for going through her things. Besides, there was no freaking way I was telling her about my move or my endeavor. I was determined to do this on my own.

The nagging remained regarding the books I'd read as a child. If only I could remember the name of the one mentioning the Wolfen. After grabbing my phone, I walked toward the front door, studying the locks. They were still in place, no sign of an attempted forced entry. This was a secure building. I was safe. Safe. Yes... I stared at the door for a few seconds before shaking my head. I wasn't going to fall into the victim mode. I hadn't left my cushy job in Baltimore to go on a hunt without knowledge that there would be danger involved.

As I passed by the kitchen table, I noticed the wilted flowers, the half dozen petals that had fallen to the table. Another telling moment. I couldn't even keep something so beautiful and innocent alive.

I moved into the kitchen, putting on a pot of coffee then shifting to my laptop. Today, I'd use the kitchen table as my office, avoiding contact with all humans.

Humans. What if there were wolves in our midst? I rolled my eyes, at least allowing a series of lighter thoughts to enter my mind.

I stared at my phone, rubbing my finger back and forth across the screen. Chris had left a message. Why did the thought sicken me so much?

My hand was shaking as I maneuvered to the saved voicemail and once I pressed listen, I held my breath.

Vanessa (long pause)

I wanted to check on you. I heard about the attack. I'm truly sorry. Of course, take the day off to recuperate and if there is anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate. I do care very much for you.

There was no real sincerity in his voice, except for the last sentence. He cared for me? I wanted nothing more than to delete the voicemail, but my same nagging inner voice told me to keep it. I'd make an official call to the office later. Groaning, I slid my phone across the table, moving toward the coffeepot. After pouring a hefty cup, I sat down to make notes.

Including what little I could remember about the attack.

With the majority of victims I'd talked with over my years as counsel, these kinds of attacks left the victim jarred, unable to remember even the most egregious details. I was no exception. Almost everything that had occurred was still a blur. I could blame it on the darkness or the amount of alcohol I'd consumed, but from the second I'd felt an arm wrapping around my neck, everything was a fuzzy mess. Fortunately, from what I'd been told, two of the attackers were recovering in the hospital, the third still at large.

One of the bastards had serious injuries.

There'd been a hero in the garage, a man who'd attempted to save me.

A wolf prepared to kill for you.

I eased back from the computer, realizing I hadn't taken a single sip of coffee and an hour and a half had gone by. I had a few minutes to leave a message on the office answering service prior to it being turned off. At this moment, I didn't want to answer any additional questions and I certainly didn't

want to run the risk of being forced to have any kind of conversation with Chris.

Not until I had my ducks in a row.

What I needed was to get into the basement of the building, searching the paper records for anything having to do with Lucas. Until I figured out what Chris knew, I'd stay off the computer system. I wasn't here to find evidence to turn in the company.

Even though that would be an excellent perk.

I'd offloaded a hefty volume of data from the first time I'd taken information, details on Chris' business that would incriminate him in several ways. The second batch only added fuel to the ever increasing fire. I tapped my fingers against the table, my instincts shifting to my years spent in law school. I was an officer of the law after all.

I navigated to Jack's email, keeping my words short and tight. If the FBI wanted to pursue filing charges, he could certainly do so, especially since international wire fraud was involved. Before hitting send, I knew my decision would bring a round of questions or worse, but at least my conscience would be clear.

While you pursue a hopeless task.

I bit back a groan as I leaned back in my chair, somehow shifting to the pictures stored on my phone. Maybe I needed some reassurance that I wasn't completely out of my mind. Even after enlarging the photo of a photo, I could barely tell what my father looked like. Still, it had comforted me over the past few years, giving me a needed anchoring point.

I belonged to someone, maybe had additional family somewhere in Denver.

I tossed my phone, rubbing my eyes, just as lost as before. My thoughts drifted to the night before and the hulking man standing outside my window. Had Stone followed me home, attempting to protect me once again? I rubbed my arms as I remembered the look in his eyes the moment he'd cornered the

asshole. No, it wasn't the look but his actual eyes. They were shimmering in yellow gold.

Inhuman.

Wolfen.

As I glanced at the computer screen again, I took a deep breath before opening a new window on the Internet.

And I began typing.

I'd searched several key words and variations of them over the last few years, finding every story and lore on wolves, werewolves, shifters, and other beasts of the night. I'd even searched for actual sightings, finding mostly nutcases with a desire for their fifteen minutes of fame.

Another hour had gone by and in my mind had been wasted. I was angry with myself for almost every decision I'd made over the course of the last few months. Everything was heading for a dead end. In frustration, I added the word Denver to my search, expecting nothing but another goose chase. I was surprised to see several pages pop up on Google, although the first two pages were little more than ghost stories.

But a single entry on the third page forced me to sit up in my chair. A newspaper article from almost twenty years before. The headline? *Are There Wolfen Living in Denver?*

I was eager yet skeptical, counting to three before I pressed on the link.

As I began to scan the article, the first part brought me back to the very book I'd read as a child. Every part of me tingled as I continued, moving onto the meat of the story. I could only imagine the rebuff the reporter had received, his insistence that there was an ancient breed of humans with the capability of transforming into wolves living just outside of Denver in a town called Roselake.

I was shocked the reporter was convinced he'd talked with several Wolfen during his investigation, wolves who wanted nothing to do with their... pack. The article was thorough, detailed enough that it put the fear of God into me. I grabbed a bottle of water then read through the article again. When I was

finished, the hair stood up on the back of my neck. Not because of fear.

But because I believed every word the man had written.

As I stared at the screen, I couldn't help but wonder if the reporter was alive. If so, what were the chances he was still living in Denver? I chewed on my inner cheek. If I could even talk to the man on the phone, maybe I could get the kind of answers I was searching for.

While the newspaper was no longer in print form, the online version listed several names for their reporters and editors. None of which matched the name I was looking for.

A call made to the newspaper only helped somewhat, the receptionist transferring me to an editor's desk where I had to leave a message. Somehow, I didn't expect a return call. When I typed in Randy O'Rourke's name, there were dozens of articles that came up. What I could tell from scanning was that what he'd written over the years was rather disparaging articles about several of the politicians in town, including the then mayor.

There were also two articles written on the Montenegro Corporation. As I read through them, I realized he'd been pointing fingers at their methods of industry long before a single official accusation had been made. Randy O'Rourke had been a true whistleblower.

The article on the Wolfen appeared to have been his last. Another coincidence I certainly didn't buy. Had he been pushed out of his job and why? Was there a direct link between the Wolfen and Montenegro? I printed out the three interesting articles and proceeded to see if Mr. O'Rourke was even alive.

After forty-five minutes of searching, I narrowed it down to two possibilities. One was living in California and the other just outside of Denver. Another ten minutes and I was forced to realize there was no way I could obtain any additional information easily. Frustrated, I pulled up the article one more time. There had to be a connection.

The knock on the door was one I'd dreaded all morning. Another round with the police. I'd either have to change my story, or find a creative way to back off on the wolves. I moved closer, hissing under my breath.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Bridges? I'm Detective Kathleen Kelly of the Denver Police Department. I'd like to ask you a few questions about an incident that occurred last night."

After peering through the peephole, I unlocked the door, taking a step back and scrutinizing the woman's credentials. I certainly knew how to spot a fake. She was the real thing, although I had an odd sixth sense about her, as if she had more skin in the game than a normal officer of the law. "Detective. I'm not certain I can tell you much more than what I told the officers a few hours ago."

She scanned the perimeter of the living room as I closed the door. "You'd be surprised how much you can remember after just a few hours of being in your own space."

I nodded, folding my arms as I stood in front of her. "Would you like to sit down?"

"This won't take very long. Can you run through the details of what occurred last night?"

I took a deep breath before answering. "I went to Rusty's Bar on the corner of Second and Main to meet a friend for a couple of drinks. I arrived at nine-forty-five. At approximately ten-ten, we were approached by three men after they'd purchased us drinks. After thanking them for their gesture, I went to the bathroom to freshen up where one of the men accosted me in the hallway. After returning to my seat, I decided I was uncomfortable remaining with them still inside the bar, so I left. I arrived at my underground garage at ten-fifty, where I parked my car, proceeding to the secured elevator. Within three feet of my destination, I was attacked by an armed man, although I was able to see two others. I recognized them from the bar. After I was hit against my right temple, I blacked out. When I came to, the police had already arrived."

I noticed immediately that the detective hadn't taken any notes. I also realized her gaze held a look of surprise. "That is very comprehensive for a woman who wasn't able to remember almost any details last night."

"Perhaps you're right in that being home jogged my memory."

"Hmmm..." She surveyed the room again. There was no doubt she believed I was hiding something. "I'm curious about two things. How did you get away from the man you said accosted you in the hallway?"

I faltered only slightly, giving her a slight smile. "It's amazing what a little knee action will do."

"Ah," she said as she walked further into the room. "Why do you think the men attacked you, out of spite?"

"That I don't know. You'll have to ask them." I watched as she walked toward the kitchen, merely peering in.

"Yes, I believe two of the men are being questioned now." As she took a step inside the kitchen, I bristled. I'd left the damn article regarding the Wolfen on the computer. Had there been there enough time for my screensaver to engage?

"That's good to hear. And the third?"

"There's an APB out for his arrest. I'm confident he will be caught."

No, she wasn't. I folded my arms, unable to keep my glare from being full of disdain.

"And I'm certain you would like to press charges." Kathleen walked all the way into the kitchen, shifting her gaze from right to left. Although she stopped in front of my computer, she didn't seem to react, turning almost immediately.

"Absolutely."

"Tell me, where do you work, Ms. Bridges?"

"Where do I work?" I repeated. "I'm not certain that actually matters at this point but I'm with the Montenegro Corporation."

"Oh. Excellent company."

I narrowed my eyes as I studied her. “They are... interesting to work for.” Why the hell was she lying to me? I wanted nothing more than to turn the tables, grilling the fuck out of her. My instinct told me she had nothing to do with the case, merely garnering information. For what source?

“Yes.” The detective remained quiet for a full minute as she glanced down the hallway. “Do you have any idea what happened to the assailants after you were hit?”

“No. None. I understand they were hurt, but I have no idea by whom.” Like I was going to offer a damn thing to anyone at this point.

“That was going to be my next question. Do you have a guard in your building?”

“They are more like gatekeepers at the front entrance, nothing more.” I’d worked with detectives for far too long not to realize she was fishing.

“Understood. And you have no idea who came to your rescue?” She snapped her head in my direction, locking eyes with mine. Her stare was just as intense as mine.

“None whatsoever.”

After lifting her eyebrows, she nodded several times before walking closer. “Just one more question, Ms. Bridges. Do you remember you mentioned to the officers that you saw two massive wolves fighting in the garage?”

I coughed, pressing my hand against my mouth for effect, finally laughing nervously. “Not at all. I guess the blow to my head was more significant than I thought.”

“I guess it was. You’re very lucky, Ms. Bridges. Whoever came to your defense likely saved your life.”

“I’m well aware of that and grateful.”

The tension was awkward even as she continued to glean information from everything in my condo.

“Well, that should do it for now. There is a chance I’ll be pulled off the case given a recent string of murders. You may have another detective visiting you.”

“Understood.” She hadn’t been assigned the case. I’d been correct and her visit had been nothing more than a fishing expedition.

The detective took direct steps toward the door, stopping short and tipping her head in my direction. “Oh, one last question. What did you do before you came here?”

“I’m sorry?” The detective had already looked into my background.

“Well, as you can imagine, I’ve done my homework. I’m aware that you’ve only been in town for a few months. What kind of work did you do?”

I made certain there was no surprise on my expression. “I was a prosecutor in Baltimore.” If I had to guess, I’d say she’d already found out everything about my former life.

“Interesting switch in careers, but I can understand how difficult prosecuting monsters can be. Denver is a wonderful place to live. Thank you for your time today. You were very helpful.”

“Yes, moving here was a personal choice, one I don’t regret.” I kept the edge in my voice.

“Be careful, Ms. Bridges. There are monsters out there, even more dangerous than the ones you experienced in Baltimore.”

I took her words as a caution instead of a threat. Interesting.

As I closed and locked the door behind her, a cold rush swept over me. Was it possible the police were hiding something? My nerves rattled, I moved into the kitchen, glancing at the computer. The swirling colors of the screensaver allowed me to take a deep breath.

The mystery deepened, the players growing. Why did I have the distinct feeling that Stone was embroiled somewhere in the middle of it? Even thinking about him brought another round of desire to the surface. I couldn’t react this way and yet all I wanted to do was take comfort in his arms. There was no doubt he’d been my savior the night before. I knew what I’d seen, even if it didn’t make any sense.

There were secrets in this town, ones that I imagined everyone from law enforcement to the top politicians wanted swept under the rug. If Chris knew someone had searched his files, then he could be afraid the can of worms from years ago might be ripped wide open. If that was the case, then he'd make certain that every loose end was buried.

And I was quite possibly one of them.

The sound of my phone ringing made me jump. While the number wasn't one I recognized, I was hopeful the editor was returning my call. "Hello?"

I'd been threatened on more than a dozen occasions, criminals who believed they could coerce me into dropping their cases. I'd never succumbed once, even taking steps to protect myself. As the dead air continued for several seconds, I finally laughed. "If you think you're scaring me, you have another think coming, buster. I don't scare easily."

Another ten seconds passed by.

"What's wrong, cat got your tongue?" I couldn't resist. All the training I'd been through had been about listening, not goading the asshole making the threat. I was far too exasperated to take heed of the experts.

I could hear the sound of heavy breathing. God, the fucker thought he was going to get to me this way.

"Okay then. Nice chatting with you."

The single growl was enough to send several chills racing through my body. The sound wasn't... human.

Then I heard laughter, deep and rich and exactly like the dark and ominous chuckle I'd heard in my nightmares.

And when he spoke, what he said I knew to be true.

"Be careful, little girl, for I'm the big bad wolf and I'm coming for you."

CHAPTER 7



*V*anessa

Evil.

There was no other way to describe the caller's voice. I could swear I felt his breath skating over me, his eyes penetrating my clothing. I was still shaking after I dropped the phone, backing away. I took his threat more seriously than the majority I'd received before and not because of what he said but the way he'd said the words.

As if he'd already taken me.

I swallowed, moving out of the area toward my bedroom. I hadn't bothered to carry my handgun with me. The danger hadn't seemed real.

Until now.

Things were about to change. I snagged my Beretta m9 from the shoebox in my closet, grabbing a box of ammunition. I'd learned how to shoot as a teenager, practicing often. I'd continued going to the shooting range after accepting a position almost immediately after passing the bar. My weapon had come in handy more than once.

As I knew it would now. No asshole was going to scare me into leaving. Forget it. I was much stronger than that. Smirking, I headed back into the living room ready to make a plan of action.

A strange wave tore through me, my entire body tingling. I was thrown by the surge of sensations, heat prickling every inch of my skin.

The hard pounding on the door was even more jarring but I knew without bothering to look who stood behind the door.

Stone.

Oh, God.

I could feel him. I could taste him. I could... I pressed my hand over my mouth, fighting the moan slipping to the surface. Nothing about the connection we shared made any sense.

Damn it. I wasn't able to deal with him right now, not until I had a chance to figure out what the hell I was dealing with. "Go away, Stone."

"I'm not going anywhere, Vanessa. The sooner you realize that, the better."

Hissing, I pressed my palm against the door, the electricity pumping through me like a wildfire. I found myself panting, unable to rationalize why I wanted the man. No, I refused to give into ridiculous primal desires. This was nuts.

"I will break down the door, Vanessa. Trust me," he growled.

"You wouldn't dare."

"I suggest you do *not* cross me."

I heard the anger as well as the conviction in his voice. I also felt the rumble of his aura even through the door. I didn't need help. I refused to accept his domination.

Yet there was no denying the desire to see him.

Touch him.

Taste him.

I hated my body's betrayal, the way my nipples ached to be plucked and twisted painfully. I loathed the fact I'd already gathered a scent of my pussy juice slickening my thong, no doubt soaking my jeans.

Yet I was overwhelmed with yearning, the kind that soared through my body, blocking out every aspect of rational behavior. I fumbled until I managed to disengage the lock and the second I threw open the door, he stormed inside, refusing to take no for an answer.

“Tell me what happened,” Stone demanded, slamming the door behind him. The sight of him was larger than life, his usual dangerous demeanor even more so in his faded blue jeans and leather jacket. Even the stunning ink of his tattoos seemed to stand out more, personifying a man to be reckoned with. He took a step closer until we were mere inches away, his chest rising and falling.

There would be no denying this man.

This... beast.

A moment of rational thought settled in, the rebellion that had kept me strong my entire life. My instinct was screaming over and over again that Stone was dangerous. I did everything I could to block out the longing, gritting my teeth.

“Nothing for you to worry about. I can handle my own life.” The look on his face was predatory, screaming of possession. I was pulled into a moment of darkness of his making, the connection we shared unbridled.

As if we were mates.

As if I belonged to him.

“You will not lie to me, Vanessa. I will know every single time you lie, and you won’t like the consequences if you do.” He glared at the gun, his nostrils flaring. “What. The. Fuck?”

“Just some asshole attempting to scare me. Nothing more.” I moved to the coffee table, easing the gun onto the glass. I was still shaking, his presence more troubling than I could dare admit.

His breathing ragged, when he spoke his command was more demanding than ever. “You will tell me who and I will hunt him down.”

“Jesus Christ, Stone. You’re not my hired gun, thank you very much.” I folded my arms, taking cautious steps toward him.

He shook his head once, his entire body tense. “Tell me.”

“I don’t have to tell you a damn thing.” The flash of anger in his eyes created instant tension.

“I hear you almost got yourself killed by those men in the bar.”

“Funny how you know what happened.”

He hesitated, huffing as he looked away. “I have friends in the police department.”

“Do you mean the officers who rushed to the scene or the detective that was here just a few minutes ago questioning me?” I studied his reaction as he clenched his jaw.

“As I said, I know people.”

“I just bet you do.”

I’d riled him even more, his chest heaving. I maintained my ground, refusing to allow him to challenge me. He had no right.

You’re a fool. He can protect you.

The voice inside my head was already pissing me off.

“You don’t want to fuck with that kind of a man, Vanessa.”

“What kind is that exactly?”

He inched closer, shaking his head. “Goddamn it. What are you doing in Denver, Vanessa?”

“I already told you, I accepted a position with a firm in town. Is that okay with you?” I hated fighting with him. I loathed even feeling the need. He wasn’t my enemy.

“You told me nothing. As a matter of fact, you refused to even mention the name of the company you’re working for.”

“That’s because it’s none of your business. We aren’t lovers, Stone. We also aren’t friends and I doubt we’re ever going to be.” I hated what I was saying to him, but I refused to involve him in whatever was happening. This was my fight.

The nagging voice inside my head reminded me that he'd been my protector, keeping me safe from the assholes who'd accosted me.

All while being in wolf form.

My God, was I really buying into the ridiculous lore? I expected him to snap at me, telling me how very wrong I was. Maybe I wanted him to chastise my ridiculous behavior, reminding me that of the passion we'd shared.

He tempered his anger, closing his eyes for a few seconds. When he spoke, his tone was even. "Why are you in town, Vanessa? I checked on you. You're a prosecutor with a very powerful influence in Baltimore. From what I read, your conviction records were outstanding, your ability to take down dozens of heinous criminals making you a near celebrity. Since I know for certain you don't have a license to practice law in the state of Colorado, I find your decision to take some kind of job here more than curious." When he opened his eyes again, I could swear they were glowing.

"You've been checking up on me."

"You weren't forthcoming. In fact, you were cagey as fuck. I make it my business to find out everything I can about the people I sleep with."

"Not to coin a phrase, Stone, but we're not sleeping together. We just had sex."

"Damn it, woman! You were attacked and while you are incredibly beautiful, those three men came into that bar searching for you in particular. I can guarantee you that their mission had nothing to do with your stunning good looks. What the hell do you have yourself mixed up in?"

His arrogance had returned with a vengeance, jerking out the bitchy side in me.

"You don't own me, Stone, and yes, I appreciate your help in the bar. Still, I don't have to tell you a damn thing. In fact, I think you should just get the hell out of here."

A smile curled on his upper lip as he advanced like a true predator, his hand wrapping around my wrist. "I'm not going

anywhere, Vanessa, and that's where you're wrong. You do belong to me. Every. Single. Inch."

"Why? Why in God's name do you think that after all this time I would want you back into my life? I can't handle it right now. Yes, I find you sexy as hell and yes, what we shared was exciting." I took gasping breaths, a clenching feeling wrapping around my heart.

After taking a single long stride in my direction, he lowered his head, his gaze intense. "Why? Because you've hungered for me all these years. From the very minute we touched, the passion between us exploded. You haven't been able to find another man who could give you what I was able to for only a short period of time."

"That's crap, Stone, and you're showing me why my decision is the right one. I don't like men who think they own me." I jerked away from him, glaring in a hateful manner. The audacity of the man was incredible. He was entirely different than all those years before.

Because he's protecting you.

Oh, God. A part of me wanted nothing more than to let go, stop pretending.

"Am I?" he asked, forcing me to back up two steps. He was dangerously close, our lips threatening to touch.

I hissed, remembering his damn eyes, the ones that had burned a hole into my very soul. "Who do you think you are, Stone? My protector? I don't need anyone to protect me. I've done just fine my entire life."

"Have you? Have you really? Then why are you running? Why are you terrified?"

"I'm not terrified, I'm just... tired." I laughed softly, shaking my head.

His grin was wry. He took two more steps closer, the heat of his body all consuming. "As I already told you, I know when you lie to me. I could see your face in the bar, the terror riding through you. I could hear the pounding of your heart, your quickened pulse."

“That’s not true.” There was no way he could know. None. Still, I was taken aback by his conviction, as well as his protective stance.

“Are you afraid of me, Vanessa, terrified of what I can do? Or are you simply afraid of finding out just how delicious we can be together?”

“Should I be afraid of you, Stone? Should I be petrified that from what I remember of the attack, you bested three men all on your own?” I could see the look of shock on his face. “Yeah, I do remember some of the details. You beat the crap out of those men singlehandedly and you know what’s even stranger? You were shot at least twice.”

He snarled, purposely looking away. “While you may believe you know what happened, you honestly have no idea.”

“Really? How does a normal man do that, take two bullets and not spent a minute in the hospital? What are you, Superman?” I shuddered, my mind reeling at the possibilities. Wolf. I’d seen a wolf. Jesus Christ. I was losing my freaking mind, the terror of the night before filling me with fireside stories.

“Yyyeeess...” he said hoarsely, elongating the single word. “You should be very afraid of me. I am the darkness you seek, the hunger that keeps you awake at night. I am the man you’ve longed for, one who refuses to allow you to remain disobedient. I am also the man who will fulfill your every fantasy, as long as you’re a very good girl.”

His words burned within me, driving past the series of locks I’d placed on my emotions. “Oh, my God. Don’t fool yourself, Stone.”

The bastard actually issued another deep chuckle, raking his eyes over me once again as he crowded my space. “Then why don’t you tell me why I was able to gather your sweet scent the moment I walked into the door? The fragrance of desire covers every inch of you.”

“God! What did I ever see in you?”

“The very man who could keep you in line.”

I swallowed, holding my head high, laughing softly. “You really must think you can control my life when you don’t know a damn thing about me. I’d call that arrogance, Stone.”

He chuckled in a husky manner, smirking as he if knew something I didn’t. “I know you’re hiding something significant, Vanessa, and whatever it is almost got you killed last night. I also know you came back to Denver for a reason other than accepting a job.”

My lower lip quivered and all I wanted to do was slap him across the face.

He brushed his two index fingers down the sides of my arms. “If you are thinking about striking me, sweet and luscious Vanessa, I would make another decision.”

“And what if I do?”

“Then you’re going to regret it for a long time. I’ll not only spank that pretty rounded bottom of yours, I’ll drive you close to an orgasm over and over again without giving you any relief.”

The words were so unexpected I shivered visibly, unable to think of anything to say.

“Now, as I said before, you belong to me.” He yanked me into an embrace, fisting my hair and pulling me onto my tiptoes. His breath was scattered, the heat sweltering as he blew across my face, the snarl curled on his lip igniting the fire burning deep within.

Yet every part of me refused to succumb, my hand pushing hard against his massive chest. There were no words to describe the sensations roaring through me as he lowered his head ever so slowly. I was captivated by his eyes, the intensity swimming around his dilated pupils. I was thrown into a vacuum, my mind swirling from far too many questions that could have no real answers.

He tilted his head slightly, taking a deep whiff. The slight chuckle trickling past his lips was a powerful draw, the scent of him sliding into my system only heightening the animalistic thirst we shared.

Every move Stone made was calculated, his lips now centimeters apart as he leaned over me. “I will take what belongs to me.”

There were no words to say, no amount of rationalization that could break the spell he had over me. I gripped his arm, digging my fingers into the suppleness of his jacket. I was overwhelmed with emotions, all the pent-up desires from years before bursting to the surface. I slid my hand up to his neck, swirling my finger around the face of the serpent tattoo as he smiled.

So knowing.

So dominating.

He issued another low-slung growl before pressing his lips to mine, grinding his hips against me. The feel of his throbbing cock sent a shower of light floating past my field of vision. I was drawn into his world, if only for a brief second, able to see into his very soul. Everything about this man was trouble, but there would be no further denial.

He used his lips in a soft and sensual manner, opening mine until he was able to slip his tongue inside. I was shocked at the gentleness he possessed, the ability to hold back even for a few beautiful seconds. As our tongues moved back and forth together, his hold became stronger.

Shuddering, I dug my nails into his skin, pulling him even closer. The taste of him was even more incredible than before, so masculine in every way.

The guttural sounds he made and the way he slid his hand down, cupping my bottom left me wet and hot.

As if unable to hold back, he crushed his mouth over mine, dominating my tongue. Every inch of my skin, my muscles and blood cells were bursting with energy. I'd never felt so alive, the passion he exuded brutal yet undeniable.

Stone swung me around in a full circle, the kiss becoming frenzied in nature. The way he sucked on my tongue created a wave of dark fantasies, filthy and kinky, dragging out the animal within me. I was stunned at my body's reaction, my

hands now ripping at his clothing, struggling to yank the jacket from his shoulders.

He refused to break the embrace, jerking off his jacket as he walked me further into the room.

I was overwhelmed by his aggressive actions, my nipples aching from the way my sweater sliced back and forth. When he finally broke the kiss, he cupped both sides of my face, nipping my lower lip, his breathing even more ragged.

I tugged at his shirt, jerking it from the tight confines of his jeans. The moment I slid both hands underneath, able to touch his naked skin, my fingers were instantly seared from the white-hot heat. Gasping, I closed my eyes as I marveled in the feel of his muscles, the heat of his body.

He brushed his lips across to my cheek before darting his tongue back and forth over the base of my ear. And the whisper was one that left me quivering in all the right places. When he jerked my hands away, he gave me an admonishing look.

“You seem to forget who’s in control.”

I swallowed hard, trying to regulate my breathing.

“I can’t wait to be inside of you,” he growled.

“Mmmm...” I laughed softly as he pulled at my sweater, finally yanking it over my head. The look in his eyes was powerful, as if he was intoxicated from the sight of my naked breasts. He dragged his tongue over his lips before using a single knuckle and sliding it down the side of my neck. Another snarl erupted from his throat, creating a wave of goosebumps popping along every inch of my skin.

I took scattered breaths as I reached out, rubbing my fingers up and down his cloth-covered cock. I hungered to have his shaft in my mouth, sucking on his cockhead until he released his seed. I was crazed with the notion, fumbling to unfasten his belt.

He shoved me hard against the wall, immediately lifting my arms over my head. “You aren’t in charge. That’s something you will need to learn.”

“Or what?” I asked, my heart racing.

A smile crossed his face, the kind that left me shivering to the core. “Then you’ll be taught a lesson. Again. And again.” He wrapped one hand around both my wrists, flexing the fingers of his other open. As he brushed the tips down my face, I closed my eyes, merely savoring the moment.

He crawled his hand down further, slowly grasping my neck. Once again, I could feel his hot breath skating across my skin, only adding gasoline to the roaring fire. The hold was one of possession, a mere reminder that he was in charge. I heard his husky chuckle as he continued his travels, using a single finger to slide it into the cleft of my breasts.

How could such a simple touch drive me to such a heightened state of arousal? When he swirled the same finger around my nipple, I arched my back, struggling to move closer.

He snapped his fingers against my hardened bud, another growl floating around me. “Bad girl.”

The pain was nothing more than a taste of what was to come. Even though I whimpered, the sensations were dazzling.

After sweeping his hungry gaze down the length of me, he lowered his head, dragging his rough tongue around the same nipple. The relief was instantaneous, my pussy quivering from the wave of sensations. He took my other nipple between his thumb and forefinger, pinching and twisting.

This time, the wash of anguish was pronounced, driving a live wire of current down my legs. I opened my mouth in a silent moan, trembling all over. As he began to suck and lick my nipple, I fell into a beautiful lull. The blinding pain quickly moved into the most extreme pleasure until I bucked forward, wiggling in his hold.

I could feel the vibrations in his body as his desire continued to build. When he very slowly began to crawl his fingers down my stomach, kicking my legs apart, I took shallow breaths. Now I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He exuded passion and danger, exciting me even more.

Everything about this moment was so wrong, but there was no way I could resist him, the hunger too great. The moment he slid his hand between my legs, I couldn't stop the series of moans slipping past my lips. I was shocked at the swirl of sensations.

"Does that feel good?" he asked, his voice almost inaudible.

"Yes."

"Do you hunger for more?"

"Yes. Yes!"

He rubbed his hand up and down my pussy, the friction of the dense material against my tender tissue almost instantly bringing me to an orgasm. "Then are you going to follow my rules?"

"Rules?"

"Yes, there are always rules; ones that keep you safe, those to keep you alive, and several that can bring you either pleasure or pain. It's entirely up to you."

"Don't tease me," I managed, butterflies swarming in my tummy.

"I can do exactly what I want. I own you." He released his hold, moving his hand to his mouth and nose as he took a long stride backwards. "I can't wait to feast on you."

I slumped against the wall, trying to catch my breath as he yanked the shirt from his back, dragging it over his head. The rise and fall of his chest highlighted his muscular features; broad shoulders and long arms, a perfectly chiseled set of pecs, and a narrow waist. The slight hint of the deep V cut played into my wild imagination. I could only imagine the rest of his chiseled body.

Then I noticed the slight indentation on his upper chest, the realization forcing my throat to tighten. However, there was no way the wound could have healed to that level. It was just a scar. While he followed my gaze, a slight smile curled on his lip.

Maybe he hadn't been in the garage or maybe my recollection was tainted from the blow to my head. I shuddered, still thinking of him as Superman.

Everything about him had changed over the years, the creation standing in front of me mouthwatering. His nature was entirely predatory, a beast stalking his prey. He simply pointed to me, giving me a stern and commanding look. "Finish undressing."

I was shocked I responded almost immediately, obeying his command as if I believed he was my owner.

My mate.

The words skittered into my mind, forcing a strangled breath, yet I did as I was told. My fingers were shaky as I struggled with the button and zipper, shimmying my hips as I peeled away the dense material. Stone's eyes never left me as he pulled off his boots, his nostrils flaring from the intensity of his own desire.

When I was standing in only my lace thong, the look on his face was carnivorous, as if he was going to eat me alive.

I walked toward him, planting my hands once again on his chest. The tingling sensations shooting all the way down my arms were incredible, leaving me panting instantly. This time, the heat was scalding, attacking every nerve ending. I could feel the effects shooting into every cell and vein, clouding my thoughts.

He tangled his fingers in my hair, yanking back my head as he lowered his. When he dragged his teeth across my neck, I dug my nails into his chest. I could feel his rapid heartbeat against my fingers and knew he had the pulse of my life in his hands. The realization was cathartic, emotional in a way I'd never experienced.

Stone held the stance then dragged his teeth all the way up to my ear, nipping my earlobe as he slid his other hand down my spine, wrapping his finger around and around the thin slip of material of my panties. "Obedience, my beautiful girl."

I whimpered as he snapped his wrist, my thong floating away freely. As I brushed my hands down to his jeans, he chuckled

darkly in my ear.

“Not so fast, little girl.”

This time, I refused to obey, shifting my fingers between his legs, rubbing up and down in a slow and easy fashion. “Don’t you want me to touch you?” I purred, enjoying the feeling of being in control.

He closed his eyes, tilting his head back even as his hold on my hair became tighter. He was keeping me in place, controlling my every action. “Mmm...”

I continued stroking as I lowered my head, peppering his shoulder blades and chest with soft kisses. His body remained tense, his breathing ragged. I’d always loved a challenge, caressing his cock more aggressively until he issued a strangled moan, his hips jutting forward. I dared to risk it all as I touched his buckle, half expecting he would put an end to what I was attempting to do.

When he finally relaxed, I pressed on, undoing his belt and button, slowly tugging on the zipper. The moment I slid my hand past the edge of his jeans, he let out a husky, seductive growl. “Be careful what you hunger for.”

“I’m never careful.” I peeled away the edges, tugging on his pants until they slid past his hips. I kissed all the way down his chest, finally dropping to my knees. As I slowly lowered his jeans, he dropped his head, gazing at me intently.

“Things will change.” His voice was gravelly, every vein in his arms pronounced.

I tugged on his pants until he was able to kick them away, standing with his feet apart. The touch was the same as before, the heat level increasing. The sight of his cock was truly magnificent, the bulbous tip deep purple and throbbing. I rolled my fingers around his cockhead, dragging the tip of my nail over his sensitive slit.

The guttural sound he made was far more animal than human and a sweet reward. His grip became firmer, as if he feared me racing away.

I licked all the way down the underside, drinking in his musky essence. His balls were so swollen, hanging thickly between his legs. As I wrapped one hand around his shaft, pumping up and down, I eased my other hand around his testicles, rolling them between my fingers.

“Fuck,” he managed, rolling onto the balls of his feet.

I squeezed his balls before blowing a swath of hot air across them, finally darting my tongue back and forth across his sac. The taste of him was tangy, intoxicating. As I took a testicle into my mouth, using my strong jaw muscles to suck, his body began to sway back and forth. I continued stroking, moving my hand up and down, squeezing the tip then releasing. I shifted my lips to his other ball, repeating the action.

“Look at me,” he commanded in a gruff voice.

When I didn’t respond immediately, he pulled my hair, forcing me to tilt my head.

“Suck me, sweet Vanessa. Wrap your lips around my cock.”

Mewling, I opened my mouth wide, taking just the tip inside. As I sucked aggressively, his legs began to shake. I took him down an inch at a time, dragging my tongue back and forth. As a few drops of pre-cum slid into my mouth, I sucked even harder, relaxing my throat.

He placed his other hand on my head, rocking his hips forward until I was forced to take several additional inches. My throat was squeezed tight, the man’s cock filling my mouth completely.

I took shallow breaths, relaxing my throat even more. I could tell by the look in his eyes that my limited control was over. As he began fucking my mouth, driving in slow and easy motions, I shifted my hands to his legs, brushing them up and down the insides of his thighs.

My nipples ached to the point of pain, longing to have his mouth and tongue surrounding them, his fingers pinching to the point of sheer anguish. I was shocked at my own blatant desire, the level of darkness that had swarmed into my mind.

He pumped more aggressively, plunging savagely until the tip hit the back of my throat. I was shocked at his barbaric actions, the hard thrusting of his cock, but as he continued, I sucked harder. I wanted nothing more than to taste his cum, to have it sliding down the back of my throat.

As the hard face fucking continued, I could see the strain building on his face, his body tensing once again. He tossed his head from side to side, his growls even more pronounced. Just when I thought he was going to release, he pushed me away with enough force I tumbled backward. He wiped his mouth with his arm before lumbering toward me. I knew from the ravaging look on his face that he was going to eat me alive.

I was shocked, thrown into another state of mind when he reached down, pulling me off the floor. He was so strong, much more than I remembered, lifting me high into the air. "Put your legs around my shoulders," he commanded.

Thrown by his request, I did as I was told and the moment he dipped me down until my head was almost inches from the floor, a moment of utter fear washed into me. I scrambled to lock my feet together, fighting to touch the floor.

As he cupped my bottom with both hands, he brought my slickened pussy close to his face. "Now, I feast."

I issued a string of moans as he licked the entire length of my pussy.

"Oh, my. God. Oh." I was thrown into never-never land, smacking one hand against the floor as the other managed to wrap around his calf. Even as the blood rushed to my head, stars floating in front of my eyes, I was tossed straight into sheer ecstasy.

He growled as he ate me, licking up and down frenetically, shifting his head back and forth. When he slipped his tongue past my swollen folds, I almost lost it, panting and wiggling.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh." Stars floated in front of my eyes as he swirled his tongue around my clit several times, finally biting down until I screamed from the intense pleasure. I closed my eyes, allowing the rapture to float over me.

“Pretty little pussy,” he breathed, growling several times before he licked up and down the length of it several times. “Good girls get all the pleasure they can handle.”

“Mmmm... Please. Yes. Yes!” I was completely at his mercy, this man.

This... beast.

I couldn't get the notion out of my head, but as another wave of longing as well as extreme pleasure rocketed into every crevice in my body and brain, nothing else mattered.

He blew across my wetness, using his mouth and tongue in the most amazing orchestration. Every guttural sound he made, every stroke of his hand on my ass cheeks was almost overpowering.

As he pushed his thumb into the cleft of my ass, I tensed, whimpering several times.

“Every hole belongs to me,” he muttered before burying his face in my pussy. He slipped his thumb into my darkened hole, thrusting in slow strokes.

That was all I could take, the orgasm sweeping down from my toes. “Oh. Oh. Oh!”

“Do not come!”

There was no way I could obey his command. None. Panting, I shifted my head back and forth, struggling to hold back, to continue obeying him. But I lost. As the climax rushed into me, I bit back a cry even as I heard his low-slung growl. I twisted and turned my body, the pleasure so damn intense.

“Oh, God. Oh!” The single orgasm turned into a beautiful wave, shooting up and down my legs, the flames erupting into a firestorm. My entire body shook violently as he continued to feast, refusing to let me go.

When he began to walk toward the dining room table, I fell into a blissful state. The wave continued, shooting me straight into pure ecstasy. I closed my eyes, the echoes of our combined passion ringing in my ears.

He hoisted me up even further, his muscles bulging as he managed to ease me down on the table. As he leaned over, he dragged his tongue across my lips. “You will learn to obey me.”

“Mmm... Yes. I...” My eyes were hazy, my breath skipping as he stood over me. When he gathered my legs into his arms, immediately thrusting his cock deep inside my pussy, I pushed up from the table from the sheer force. I could believe he filled me so completely, my muscles aching to take the girth.

He grinned as he pulled out until only the tip was inside. When he plunged inside again, skin slapping against skin, I gasped. He slid me up and down the width of the table ferociously as he fucked me, driving his cock inside brutally. He was taking what he wanted.

He’d spanked me.

He’d tasted me.

He’d fucked me.

And I knew there was nothing stopping him from owning me.

I lolled my head from side to side as he dug his fingers into my skin. I opened my legs wider, bending them back and accepting his roughness, hungering for even more. I clawed at his arms, trying to meet every hard thrust with one of my own.

As beads of sweat slipped down from his face, falling against my skin, I studied his face, his chiseled jaw and high cheekbones.

And his glowing eyes.

Stone’s brutal actions took my breath away, his guttural sounds nothing more than a reminder of my dreams and fantasies. I allowed myself to fall into the depth of our mating, my pussy muscles clamping around the thick invasion and drawing his shaft in even deeper. With every savage stroke, I wanted to beg him for more.

He gripped my thighs, keeping my legs pinned against the table as he leaned over, swirling his tongue around first one nipple then the other. I remained surprised at his voracious

actions, the way he was using my body. So possessive. So demanding.

When he bit down on my hardened bud, I jerked up from the table, gasping for air. His laugh sent a shower of tingles dancing down my body. There wasn't a part of me that hadn't erupted into an electric storm, as if lightning had struck us both. There was no holding back an orgasm, no way to express the rapid fire of sensations that crested in one tremendous thrust of energy.

I opened my mouth, my breath catching in my throat. As the orgasm rushed into every cell and muscle, I squeezed my muscles once again.

His primal roar reverberated, the husky sound shaking my very foundation. He slowly leaned over me, until the full weight of his body was pressed against me. I could feel his cock swelling, stretching my muscles, the pleasure unlike anything that could be real.

And there was no doubt in my mind.

He was a beast.

CHAPTER 8



*S*tone

Danger.

The moment I'd gotten off my bike, walking within thirty feet of her condominium building, I'd sensed Vanessa was in extreme danger. I stood at the window overlooking the road below, the cold beer not nearly strong enough at this point.

The text from Max had been disturbing, the news highlighting the murders as if there was another serial killer in town. Trevor Holland had evidently been more of a celebrity than I'd originally thought. Montenegro had to be gloating. It was only a matter of time before the pack members started asking questions. What hadn't made the news was the attack on Vanessa since her name as the victim had yet to be released. Even that was only a matter of time.

I still had a taste of her sweet pussy on my lips and as I dragged my tongue across them, I reawakened my wolf, his hunger almost as insatiable as mine. I'd almost lost control with her, had felt the first moments of transformation. Struggling with regaining control had taken a hell of a lot out of me.

I could also see the reflection of the weapon still on the coffee table. I had no doubt she was capable of protecting herself. However, she had no idea what was really going on. I wanted to tell her, but that wasn't an option at this point. Even as my

mate, she wasn't ready to learn the truth. I snarled as I weighed the options.

Her pointed questions continued to bother me. I'd inadvertently exposed my true self to her. Given her tenacious as hell attitude, I knew she wasn't going to let it go. At least I could be grateful that the wounds had almost totally healed. The steroids must be the reason.

I'd spent some time with Jonas, performing test after test on the samples I'd taken as well as my own blood. Early indications were fairly clear. On their own, the various elements weren't dangerous to our kind, but combined in a certain way, they were capable of death. What struck me as odd was the time it must have taken in order to perfect the formula. Who did that? I'd left Jonas with performing the last experiments, an attempt to find anything that would counteract the poison. I knew the test results would likely come back later in the day. At this point, I wasn't certain what to expect but I wasn't hopeful for any kind of easy cure.

While I understood Vanessa's need for privacy, the fact she'd refused to tell me even a simple lie about why she'd chucked her former life raised far too many red flags. It had been easy to find details about her professional world, but her personal life remained a huge abyss. There'd been no smoking guns about why she'd leave her position, including some concept of going undercover. I only knew that whatever she was hiding had put her in harm's way.

What in the hell correlation did it have to the two Wolfen who were murdered?

I'd risked far too much being with her. Now I had no doubt about what Max had told me regarding a true mate. Every synapse and cell was on fire, my heart beating as fast as when I was in my wolf state.

I exhaled, hearing the continued rattling in my chest. My body had even begun the knotting process. My cock was still swollen and overly sensitive. As my grip on the bottle became almost crushing, she inched closer.

I felt her presence behind me, the subtleness of her exotic perfume driving my cock to a full erection. I gathered a hint of her reflection in the window, her long hair still tangled from our late morning tryst.

While I'd yet to be able to read her thoughts, I didn't need the ability to know she remained on edge.

"I'm working for the Montenegro Corporation and please don't ask me why. I'm completely aware of their less than stellar reputation but I have my reasons." She inched closer, the tone of her voice riddled with exasperation.

I instantly bristled. I was aware of the lengths they'd go to in order to close a deal. What the fuck was she doing working for them? When I remained quiet, she brushed hair behind her ear, taking a deep breath.

"Why are you telling me this now?" I asked, hearing the contempt in my voice.

"Because if you really do have friends in the police department, I'm certain they're going to tell you eventually. They certainly looked into my past, including the fact I was a prosecuting attorney in Baltimore."

"And now?"

She sighed. "Chris Montenegro recently promoted me to vice president."

"You are aware that he's been under investigation for several serious crimes including extortion?"

"I'm aware. I'm no fool, Stone. I actually know what I'm doing."

I shook my head, doing everything I could not to challenge her. She would always be rebellious, much more so than I'd anticipated. "An interesting change."

"I honestly wasn't planning on working at the company, merely investigating them for a few weeks, hoping to find certain... truths. An opportunity just came up out of the blue and I took a chance, trying to get as close to the snake as possible. Anyway, I'm not planning on being in town very

long and I don't want to hurt you again. That's the reason I tried to push you away."

"I'm a big boy, Vanessa. I can certainly take care of myself. Besides, we aren't even friends." I regretted the caustic words as soon as I'd said them. I clenched my fist as several seconds passed by.

"I deserved that. I do care about you, Stone. I find myself more attracted to you than when we were in college, but I'm here for a single reason. At some point, I plan on returning to Baltimore, trying to get my job back. I love being an attorney. Maybe I'm twisted, but when I win a case, I feel damn good about ridding the world of scum. I worked hard to get where I was and I don't plan on losing it."

"Then why the hell are you here?" I demanded.

"Being in Denver is just something I have to do, a plan I've had in motion for a long time. I don't know why those men were in the bar last night, but I suspect it's because..."

I slowly turned to face her. "Because why, Vanessa?"

She was definitely nervous, her lower lip even quivering. "I don't..."

"You can trust me if that's what you're worried about."

Laughing, she darted a glance into my eyes. "I think you just might be the only person I can trust."

"Then talk to me."

She folded one arm over the other, searching my eyes. "I'm searching for information, the kind that Mr. Montenegro likely wouldn't be happy for me to find. My guess is that's why those assholes were at the bar last night. A nice little warning."

I snarled and took two long strides in her direction. "What the fuck are you doing? Are you working undercover?"

"Only for me." She shook her head. "Don't chastise me, Stone. Since you seem to know all about my life, you have to accept that I'm damn good at what I do. I know the minds of criminals, how they think and what they hunger for."

“You’re certain about that?” I challenged.

A warm flush crept along her jawline. “I’m not certain of anything any longer.”

“If you’re not working undercover, what are you looking for? Do you have some personal vendetta against Montenegro? You must know what the owner and his son have been accused of in the past.”

“I know very well, Stone. I spent months researching them before I decided on this wild goose chase. Yes, this is personal, which is why I quit my job.”

“Jesus Christ, Vanessa. My father used to tell me that secrets were capable of destroying lives no matter how small.”

“Yeah? Your father was a wise man. Secrets have burned a hole in me since I was a child.”

“Then let me help you,” I said quietly. I could see the indecisiveness in her expression, the slight quiver of her arms. What had happened in her childhood that would continue haunting her to this degree? “I know people in this town. I can help you get answers.”

“Why are you back in Denver, Stone? You were on your way to an amazing career as a doctor.”

Sighing, I took another gulp of the beer, suddenly loathing the flavor. “My father asked me to come back and take over. He was very ill.”

“If I remember correctly, your father was a doctor, which would mean you needed to finish your education in order to take over.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Then you should be interning at one of the Denver hospitals. Being a doctor is all you talked about. It’s what you love. The hospitals are damn good from what I’ve heard,” she said, offering a slight smile.

“My life is just as complex as yours appears to be.”

“Secrets.”

I tipped my bottle in her direction. “We all have them.”

We remained quiet for almost a full minute.

“You do know the press will eventually find out your name. They will hound you for what happened.” I offered the words casually.

She laughed softly. “I have no intentions of telling them anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ve played enough games in my life with members of the press. I don’t need them on my back for any reason.”

I nodded, more relieved than I cared to believe.

“But I’m going to ask you something and I want an honest answer. Tell me about wolves.” Her voice was much stronger than before, her eyes lit up as if she’d just uncovered a deep, dark secret.

The question wasn’t one I’d expected, although I’d realized that if Max was correct, she would eventually succumb to our combined desperate needs, hungers that refused to be denied. “Wolves?” I allowed myself to laugh, even though the sound held no sincerity. “There are definitely wild wolves and other creatures lurking in the forest and mountains. Why?”

“I’m not talking about that kind of wolf.” She made the statement in such a matter of fact way I was unable to tell if she was jesting or not. There’d always been rumors about werewolves living in the wild surrounding Denver and other cities, mostly folklore that created fantastic stories and nothing more. However, there’d also been a group of people insisting that wolves were preparing to take over, destroying humanity.

Thank God, the majority of people thought those in the wayward group were nutcases.

My mind shifted to the concern regarding the onslaught of the disease. Given the news was out about the murders, I could only imagine what fear would occur within the pack. What in the hell could Montenegro have to do with this? I knew the CEO, Christopher Montenegro. I’d gone to high school with both him and his brother. The guy was a son of a bitch even in his brilliance. Like father, like son.

However, the bastard was dangerous and wouldn't appreciate a feisty female looking into his life or business in any manner. Something didn't add up. Now she was asking about wolves? Another series of red flags had risen.

I knew I had to be careful how I answered. "I'm not following you."

Vanessa eased onto the couch, tugging her feet under her. While she also had a beer in her hand, she didn't seem interested in it in the least, merely fiddling with the label. "The Wolfen. I've read about them."

"Them?" Where in the hell was this going?

"You know, dark creatures of the night capable of ripping a human into tiny pieces? That kind of wolf." She took a long pull on her beer, her eyes never leaving mine. "Creatures so powerful, they are feared above all others. Predators whose hunger knows no bounds. The Wolfen. I understand a huge number of them live in Denver." Her words seemed to linger in the air, creating a wave of heat surrounding my body.

"Whoa. Where did you hear that?" I managed.

She took a deep breath before answering. "When I was a child, I was drawn to a book, one that told the story of the Wolfen. Although I was merely ten years old, the words stayed with me, haunting me. I grew fascinated by the idea of them, wolves capable of living life as a human without detection. I read everything I could get my hands on, watching every television show. I just knew they were real."

I was shocked. If she had also read the very words Blackhawk had recited to the children of the pack eons before, then one of the ancient books was missing.

"What else did you read?" I couldn't believe I was asking. My throat was suddenly dry, a true level of concern building.

"The legend has it that the Wolfen were brought to life by an ancient disease that almost wiped out humanity and that eventually that same plague will return one day with a vengeance, creating an even more powerful breed. Humans

will no longer be superior.” She half laughed. “I know, foolish, right?”

“As children, we all long for a different world than the one we’re living in.” Jesus fucking Christ.

She inched closer to the edge of the couch, leaning over until I could feel her breath dancing across my skin. I was immediately aroused, my cock pressing hard against my jeans. The light shimmer covering her face indicated she felt the electricity surging between us, pulling us into a vacuum of need.

“But wolves are vile creatures, capable of killing indiscriminately. They are to be feared and hunted. At least according to the modern fables and movies.”

I could tell she was goading me. I inched forward until our lips were almost touching. “Do you fear creatures of the night, Vanessa? Are you petrified that you’re going to succumb to their dark and dangerous desires?”

“Should I fear them, Stone? What if the fables are all wrong, that wolves deserve to have the same chance at life? If they’re already here, shouldn’t we all find a way to live together in peace?”

“You think wolves saved you in that garage?” Fairytales and monsters. I knew Vanessa well enough to believe she was fishing for information.

“The truth is I don’t know any longer. My rational mind says I was in distress, but in my gut, I know otherwise. Here’s what I do know. I was dazed but I heard a horrific fight, not one involving men but beasts of some kind. I witnessed eyes that weren’t human, and I wasn’t imagining since I saw your golden eyes in the middle of the hallway. Now, I was certain you’d have two fresh wounds, but that’s not the case. Unless you’re a wolf. My guess is that if you are, wolves have an uncanny ability to heal faster. Isn’t that one of their many special attributes?” She seemed pleased with herself, even smug.

“Where are you going with this, Vanessa? Have you been reading about the near cult-like group from a few years ago?” I was floored she’d kept this from me.

“Cult?” Her eyes opened wide.

I allowed myself to laugh once again, attempting to ward off the seriousness of her questions. Meanwhile, my hackles were raised, my thoughts drifting to what I could remember about her family, which wasn’t much. She’d told me she’d used to live in Denver when she was a small child, but her words had been said in passing, a mere confirmation that we had oh-so much in common.

I found myself shaking. There were no such things as coincidences in life. At this point, while I’d temper the information, I wasn’t going to lie. While the group also believed in other demons, eventually she’d be able to find at least a few mentions of them somewhere on the internet.

“I don’t honestly know much about them. My father used to laugh and tell me about the craziness that he’d read in the papers when I was still at Duke. Some group who was convinced there was a faction of werewolves living outside of Denver, hunting humans at night.”

“Were any of their claims ever substantiated?” she asked. While she attempted to appear relaxed and casual, the strain her body was going through was easy to see.

“I have no idea. The last I heard about them, they’d disbanded, likely because they couldn’t get a larger audience. Why are you so curious?”

She peeled at the bottle, scraping off a portion of the label. “Something I found in my mother’s things a long time ago. The single word. Wolfen.”

I waited for her to continue, but she pressed her lips together, suddenly acting as if she could no longer look me in the eye.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I finally pressed.

“I think I’m just tired. I’ve been having nightmares lately.”

“Of wolves?”

“Yes, a huge and savage man chasing me, hunting me as if I was his prey. I knew even in my dream that he was going to catch me and when he did...” She hesitated, taking shallow breaths.

Dreams, a mark of a mate.

That much was part of the ancient lore of our pack.

She tipped her head finally, her eyes wide as saucers. “I could see him, his face even though his body was that of a monster. You know what, Stone? The face belongs to you.”

“When you find your true mate, your dreams will become interconnected, your thoughts as one. As you grow together, you’ll be able to sense every emotion, feel the same agony.”

The words of my father rushed into my mind, my heart hammering as I was forced to accept what I’d already known.

“Tell me, are you part of the Wolfen pack, Stone?”

She would soon learn the truth and on that day, there would be no turning back.

She. Was. My. Mate.

And I would kill any motherfucker who tried to take her from me.

* * *

Beast

Loose ends.

I would take care of at least two of them right now. The third could prove to be more... challenging.

My thoughts drifted to the girl, my desire for her remaining strong. I’d never been blindsided or sidetracked by the kind of longing flowing through me. Was this some test my employer had presented, a portion of the obvious game being played? My fury was increasing with each passing hour.

I walked into the hospital, smiling at everyone in close proximity. There was nothing wrong with being cordial, especially to keep their attention away from the large man dressed in all black. I'd made inquiry calls about my two... buddies prior to entering the place. One of the assholes was in ICU, his prognosis uncertain. I rolled my eyes as I pressed my hand against the weapon. This time, my work needed to be done in silence.

As far as the Wolfen from the garage, that was an entirely different story. He would suffer.

I'd purposely waited for the shift change before heading onto the Intensive Care floor. No one paid a damn bit of attention as I walked down the hall, scanning the area once before walking into the room. The myriad machines indicated just how serious his injuries were, the entire right side of his face covered in bandages. This particular extermination I could make easy, but I had no intention of doing so. I wanted to make a statement.

As I moved closer, his eyes opened, fear instantly kicking up his heartrate. I placed a finger over my lips as I withdrew my favorite knife, the one I used while hunting. I inched closer and as he began to whimper, I wasted no additional time, slicing across his throat. Then I simply pulled the covers over his neck, folded the knife, slipped it back into my pocket, and walked out.

No fanfare.

No remorse.

I kept my pace as I walked toward the stairs, finding the other room with ease. As I entered, there were no obnoxious sounds of the beeping monitors, merely a sleeping man unaware of his fate. As I prepared to slice the blade across his neck, he jerked his arm up, snapping his hand around my wrist. The few seconds of eye contact was exhilarating, at least for my wolf who made a subtle appearance.

He struggled, his will to live stronger than I'd imagined. The hard punch to his throat silenced his cries.

Then I finished my task with ease, the haunting look in his open eyes giving me satisfaction.

Two down, one to go, and killing the wolf would be on my own terms, even if I had to break some rules to ensure that the Wolfen beast would fall into my trap. I took a deep breath as I wiped the blade on my pants. A little hunting for the night would do my soul some good.

And perhaps I would feast...

CHAPTER 9



*S*tone

Secrets.

As I shifted gears on the bike, heading out of town, I couldn't help but think about the insinuations around the word. Secrets had cost the Wolfen dearly over the years, so many of the pack attempting to live a normal life among humans, pretending they didn't have the urge to transform into their wolf.

I was no exception, my hard push against my true nature masking my abilities for several years, including the time I'd spent with Vanessa. Maybe if I'd paid closer attention to the beast clawing at the surface, I would have accepted the fact she was my mate.

So many things continued to nag at me. I wasn't able to read her thoughts and she certainly couldn't read mine. There was a block between us, one created by nature, not man.

As I picked up speed, the rush of wind was exhilarating, the sights and smells rich and inviting. I could still feel the wolf clawing at the surface, more excited than usual, the pull toward Vanessa increasing.

Vanessa wasn't my prisoner, nor did I have the right to keep her in a cage, no matter if the bars were made of gold. There'd been no answer I could give her that would have made any sense. I could tell in her eyes that she believed I was truly a wolf, but there'd been no fear. I'd made her promise to remain

behind locked doors, insisting that I would find and give her some answers, even if I had to be creative.

I had her phone number and she had mine, promising to call me if there were any signs of disturbance. Hmmm... I wasn't entirely certain I believed her.

At least I had an idea of where to begin looking for reasons for the attacks. Montenegro must have a connection to the Wolfen, but in what regard? If anyone was to have a general idea, an older member of the council would certainly be the one to ask. They'd pinpointed everyone in close proximity, including every influential human who was considered an enemy. The cult had merely been a small issue, although they'd drawn unwanted attention to Roselake.

What I hadn't told her is that there was a group of hunters, their numbers increasing every few months, all of them hell bent on killing as many Wolfen as possible. While Roselake and the surrounding areas including the village where the majority of the Nightwalkers lived were heavily guarded, there was always a possibility that they would find a way to infiltrate our systems.

I doubted they'd consider using a wolf as a front man, which is why Max didn't even consider the possibility. However, if a man like Montenegro was behind the attacks, he had an entirely different reason for his actions and Vanessa had merely gotten in the way.

One thing was for certain. If what I suspected about Vanessa's connection with me was true, I had to devise my own security detail for her.

The road opened up, allowing me to press down on the accelerator. Riding was the only thing that seemed to make me whole, curtailing the demons that had plagued me for years.

I thought about my life, the man I'd become over the years. My father had been the one to convince me to go to medical school in the first place. Perhaps he'd done so to pull me back from the trenches, as he liked to call my desire for the open road, traveling to unknown destinations.

If the truth had to be told, I'd been running away from my own wolf, as if that was a remote possibility. What the freedom of backroads traveling had allowed me was the ability to shift more often, enjoying the autonomy. For me, there'd been nothing better than camping in the mountains, shifting at night to savor the scents of the forest. I'd even hunted on those occasions, returning to my true self in a way that was considered forbidden.

Hell, I missed it more than I cared to say, but my position as head of the Nightwalker pack was required, considered a true honor.

As with all Wolfen, I was much older than I appeared, having lived a cautious life around anyone who might question my youthful appearance. My decision to leave Roselake the first time had been out of anger, bitterness toward the Nightwalker pack being tossed out as second class citizens to the Wolfen. We were the same breed, the same wolves, only a separate pack created from the second wave of the initial disease.

I'd known the actions of my father had destroyed several friendships, including his close ties with Blackhawk Cordero. His inability to save Blackhawk's wife had been deemed unforgivable. The entire friendship I'd shared with Max and Gregor had been destroyed, leaving nothing to ground me.

The loneliness and the darkness became my friends.

Perhaps my life had come full circle, returning home to take my father's place as leader, only I wasn't capable of being Roselake's doctor. Maybe I was more bitter than I cared to admit, but I knew that life had a way of working itself out.

Or so my father had told me.

After working with Jonas, I'd spent some time earlier preparing my Nightwalker soldiers, making certain there was additional security placed around the perimeter of our village. While there was no cause to believe the rogue wolf would strike, I refused to ignore the possibility.

As I turned down the road leading to Roselake, my senses were on high alert. I wasn't a damn politician, loathing the

council meetings. Then again, Max was only beginning to accept his role as leader. He'd attempted to make changes to the council meetings, providing a place of leadership for both Gregor and me to partake in the decisions made.

While I appreciated the nod, I was happy working in my body shop instead of kowtowing to rules and ancient prophecies. However, this particular meeting was unavoidable, and I would speak my mind as requested. Unless this was all about punishment for my mistakes. The closer I came to the town, I couldn't shake the ominous feeling that enshrouded me. There was another dark cloud hanging over the Wolfen.

As I roared into the city limits, I realized I hadn't been in town since the string of murders had threatened to expose us. Up to this point there'd been no need to call a special meeting of the council. I slowed down, realizing the good people of the city had no idea their lives were in jeopardy once again.

The concept pissed me off.

I found a parking space close, the meeting itself private at this point. There was no need to get the town involved. However, given the number of vehicles in the parking lot, I was obviously late in arriving.

Oh, too bad.

I cut the engine, jerking off my helmet. The moment I did, the door opened and Gregor walked outside. He eyed me with disdain, shaking his head as he walked down the stairs.

"Just in time," Gregor said.

"What's your beef, Gregor?" I confronted him immediately, tired of being second guessed.

"Who says I have one?"

I walked closer, knowing he had something on his mind.

"Then why are you out here?"

He glanced around me, taking his time. "The woman."

"Is none of your concern."

“When it involves the security of our people, it is my concern.”

There was far too much animosity in his voice. I’d known the man my entire life, understood his anger perhaps more than Max, yet he’d found it difficult to trust me even after the battle we’d been through. While I had no problems stating my piece, tonight wasn’t the time or place. “While I agree, she is special to me. You will honor that.”

“Honor? Do you even understand the concept of true honor?”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Both our beasts were dangerously close to the surface. I fisted my hands, coming within inches of the man. Admonishment I refused to take from a man who I knew to have his share of secrets.

“You know exactly what it means. If you want to fuck her, then I suggest you go far away from the pack.” Gregor’s answer was tainted with animosity.

I quite frankly didn’t give a shit what he’d been through, the losses he’d endured. I was finished with being challenged for any aspect of my life. “You should take your own advice, brother.”

Gregor wasn’t the kind of wolf to back down from anything. I could tell by the iridescent yellow glow in his eyes that he wanted nothing more than to turn, allowing his beast to settle some score from the past.

I made certain he knew I was ready to fight, allowing enough of my wolf to breach the surface, my canines fully exposed. He could either back down or face my wrath.

The tension between us was chilling, my heart pumping to the point my breathing was strangled. I no longer cared he’d once been a friend, a man I could count on. I trusted almost no one and that would stand.

The only way to keep my mate alive.

His snarl permeated the night air, vicious in nature as he struggled to control his wolf. He took a step away, his chest heaving. When he spoke, his words were laced with hatred.

“Have you considered that she is a part of the reason two of our brothers were killed?”

His words pissed me off and I bristled once again. “She is a victim just as much as the men who were murdered, Gregor.”

“You can’t be certain.”

We were coming dangerously close to an impasse, one the Wolfen couldn’t afford to deal with. I cared about my pack, more concerned about the recent occurrences than a man like Gregor could understand. While I didn’t give a shit about his opinion, I knew that even considering bringing Vanessa into the fold would place the Wolfen in danger. Sighing, I looked away, ridding my beast from breaching the surface.

“What I know is that she’s working for and investigating the Montenegro Corporation. Does that ring any bells?” I asked offhandedly.

While I hadn’t anticipated any recognition, I could see immediately that the name more than just rang a bell.

“Why?” he chided, his lip curling in a sneer.

“I don’t know. She refuses to tell me.”

Gregor exhaled. “You will need to find out, Stone. Chris Montenegro is an asshole. He and I have sparred more than once.”

“Why? What the fuck do you know about him?” I could tell that he had no desire to share anything about his past or his life. He was a private man, one who held grudges. “Did you two cross unfortunate paths at some point?”

“Let’s just say a woman was involved.” He chuckled in a way that suggested the past was part of the reason for his continued fury.

“That’s enough!” As the door opened, Max moving onto the landing, I laughed softly at Gregor’s statement while Max gripped the railing, snarling at both of us. “Whatever the bullshit is between you two will stop now. We have a possible crisis on our hands and this crap isn’t going to be tolerated.”

Gregor issued a husky growl before giving Max a nod, his eyes darting in my direction. “You have no idea the kind of fuck head you’re dealing with.”

“A woman. I doubt, whatever the reason is, that two of our pack being killed has anything to do with a woman. Christopher Montenegro isn’t stupid enough to risk everything he’s worked to maintain and even build after his father’s retirement on some concept of revenge.” I laughed softly, disgusted we were even having this conversation.

“While that may be true, district attorney Trevor Holland was prosecuting Mr. Montenegro in an extortion case that was anticipated to receive a guilty verdict.” Max allowed the words to settle in.

I was floored at the news, even more so with the connection. Even Gregor inched closer. “Are you suggesting that Vanessa is involved?” I asked, thinking back to what little she’d told me.

“I’m suggesting,” Max said as he inched down the stairs, staring me in the eyes, “that if Montenegro has any idea that Vanessa is involved with you, then he has every reason to suspect she is a mole. Besides, Kathleen just called me. The two men involved in the attack on Vanessa were found dead in their hospital rooms. You might be right, Stone, that her life is in danger, but I will say this. The coincidence of her attack and those on our other pack members is more than just disconcerting.”

His words were chilling, even though I’d considered the possibility she had an ulterior motive.

“The wolf committed the act,” I commented.

Max snorted. “The men’s throats were slit by a hunting knife, so it’s anyone’s guess as to if the wolf was responsible.”

“Fuck. That could mean there are others involved. I need to bring her here,” I huffed, already prepared to leave.

“Hold on, Stone. You’re going nowhere. As far as the council is concerned, you placed our pack in danger. You will be

required to face the consequences of your actions and that includes an immediate lockdown,” Max stated.

I bristled. “Fuck that!”

Max walked closer, shaking his head as he stared into my eyes. “Listen to me. We will take care of this, but you are off the grid.”

“I’m sorry if I have difficulty accepting that as an answer,” I retorted.

“You need to, or you will be removed from your council seat and brought up on charges.” Max’s expression was stern. “I don’t think you want that to happen.”

Sucking in my breath, I knew there was no other option. “She needs to be protected.”

“And she will be.”

“Montenegro is a snake,” Gregor huffed. “He’s likely extinguishing loose ties. He’d know better than to allow his wolf loose in a freaking hospital. He certainly doesn’t need the extra and very special attention that would cause any more than the rest of us.”

“I realize that and agree,” Max huffed. “He is a dangerous man with a mission to take as much of Denver as he can into his fold. I’ve taken a crash course on the man over the last few hours since learning about Trevor’s case. Two of the Denver City councilmembers resigned recently given their connection to him. He is also responsible for several businesses closing their doors, others simply selling out to him. He has a firm hold on every manufacturing firm within three hundred miles and growing.” Max glanced back and forth between us. “What we are dealing with is significant and we need to work together.”

“What’s the connection to the Wolfen?” I asked, my hackles raised. If what Vanessa had told me was true and he was aware of her search, she was a sitting duck.

“The second victim might have run what some considered a two-bit joint in a bad part of town, but he was also part owner of one of the manufacturing companies Montenegro is

targeting. He and his brothers own the shares.” Max lifted a single eyebrow. “That is far too coincidental in my mind.”

I knew in my gut that Vanessa couldn’t care less about manufacturing companies getting the shaft, even if she was an attorney. There was a much bigger picture going on.

“Have the other brothers been warned?” Gregor asked.

“They have,” Max stated. “Two of them live in Roselake and they are eager and willing to cooperate. The third lives out of town. At this point, I’d consider them safe. You are both well aware there are extra patrols positioned on the outskirts of town, including protecting the Nightwalker village. The wolf wouldn’t dare breach our territory again.”

“If he does?” I asked, studying Max’s eyes.

“Then we will handle it the Wolfen way.”

“We need to find out what other businesses he’s targeting and find out if there are other Wolfen owners,” Gregor suggested.

Max nodded. “That’s already being done.”

“What about the rogue wolf? Why the coated bullets? Pretty elaborate to alleviate a few enemies when a single bullet between the eyes would do the trick.” I knew my words were harsh, but true. In my mind, the connections Max had already made were far too easy. A man like Montenegro wouldn’t go to this level in order to take what he wanted. That much I knew from my conversations with him in the past.

He was conniving in every manner, the kind of man who would sell his mother for a superior business position, but I’d never known him to play stupid games.

Even if a current employee thwarted his dominance.

I was unable to make sense of the logic.

“That’s the question that needs an answer.” Max patted me on the shoulder. “As far as Vanessa’s safety, I’ve already sent two pack members to her condo to retrieve her.”

“We can’t take the chance of having her in our city if she’s one of the targets,” Gregor insisted, closing the distance to Max.

Max bared his canines, allowing a low-slung growl to permeate the night air. “You will not challenge me. This is my decision.”

Gregor issued a growl of his own, his chest puffing. “You might be the alpha, Max, but you’re not God.”

“But I am your leader. If you want to leave this city, Gregor, feel free. No one is keeping you here,” Max said in a controlled manner.

Gregor huffed twice before taking two steps away. “You’re making a mistake if you bring the human here.”

“If that is the case, she will be dealt with, but only when I say,” Max stated as he glanced in my direction. “At this point, we need to find answers regarding the rogue wolf and only the councilmembers may have an answer. Then we will know what we’re possibly dealing with. You will both be at my side. You will both accept your position as leaders.”

I nodded out of respect, even as my hackles continued to be raised.

Gregor laughed softly before answering. “I’ve come to respect you, Max, including your style of leadership, but I will not stand by and allow our pack to be compromised. That is something both of you need to keep in mind.”

“Always the threats,” I said, half under my breath.

Max threw out his arms, as if prepared for both of us to fight. “As I said before. Enough. I fear the two deaths are only the beginning.”

The slight increase in the breeze allowed the leaves in the surrounding trees to shimmer, enough so a slight whistle occurred. In my mind, the moment was telling.

Danger was all around us, sweeping through our ranks in the form of fear. Even if only a few of our pack knew about the murders, it was only a matter of time before everyone realized what we were facing.

“We will form a plan,” Max said after sighing. I could see the concern on his face, his eyes no longer holding the same glow

as before. “We need to make certain the police don’t find some reason to direct their investigations here, including because of what the press has already distributed to the world.”

“Then we need to find answers. The tests we ran will be finalized tonight. Maybe then we can understand more of what we’re dealing with in order to find the manufacturer of the bullets,” I said, reining in my anger.

“Excellent. I’ve already sent out a few feelers to buddies of mine in the CIA to see if there’s any chance the bullets I’d heard were being manufactured were released, including the formula,” Max said before taking a deep breath. “It’s time we find out what the elders know.”

“That’s a good start.” Nodding, I walked closer to the stairs.

“You’re willing to risk our pack for this human?” Gregor asked again.

“Whether you like it or not, Vanessa is my mate,” I stated calmly. “You will honor my destiny.”

“Destiny,” Gregor countered. “You made a choice and one that could cost you everything.”

“You will learn one day that the mating process isn’t necessarily by our choice,” Max hissed, slowly locking eyes with Gregor. “I only hope you will find someone to tame your beast.”

Snarling, Gregor snapped his head in Max’s direction. “Neither one of you seem to understand the importance of keeping the Wolfen protected.”

Turning quickly, I wrapped my hand around Gregor’s neck, my rage off the charts. “As if you would understand protecting your mate.” The argument had come full circle, my need for retaliation something I found difficult to control.

Max merely moved by my side, his aura exuding the full power of the Wolfen. “What has occurred in the past will stay there, Stone. Do. You. Understand?”

I dug my nails into Gregor’s skin, wanting nothing more than to snap his neck. Exhaling, I pulled back, taking three long

strides away from both of them. “So be it. You are no friend of mine, Gregor.”

Gregor laughed. “As if I care.”

The fight was petty, similar to the sparring Gregor and I had done as young men. The three amigos. I’d missed the closeness we’d shared for years, being able to rely on each other no matter the circumstances. While renewing a friendship with Max had proven easier than I’d believed possible, I honestly wanted no part of Gregor’s life. He’d proven he trusted no one, cared for only himself and while his conviction for the pack was strong, I had to wonder if there were ulterior motives.

“There is to be no discussion of Vanessa as your mate at this point. Am I clear?” Max snapped, cursing under his breath.

I continued to stare at Gregor, the animosity refusing to go away.

“I said. Am. I. Fucking. Clear?” Max repeated.

“Fine,” Gregor commented.

“Yep. Agreed,” I answered.

“Christ. We’re supposed to be friends. I suggest you two bury the damn hatchet before your bullshit gets you killed.” Max stormed up the stairs.

Gregor tilted his head, his eyes gilded in gold. He wanted nothing more than to take me in a sparring match, trying to prove he was the best wolf in the forest. I also laughed at the realization.

Then again, was I actually any better?

I remained behind, watching as both Max and Gregor walked inside, yanking my phone from my pocket. I shifted to her phone number, studying the screen for a full minute. Every cell in my body, every muscle remained on edge. I curled my fingers, digging my nails into my hand as I tipped my head, listening to the sounds made by the wind.

Including the slight howl, the message clear.

Whatever had started was just the beginning.

CHAPTER 10



*S*tone

“You’re out of order!” one of the councilmembers shouted. As with two others, his appointment was recent. I knew nothing about him other than he owned a good portion of the land underneath Roselake.

The emotions in the room were volatile, the arguments heated and after well over an hour, nothing had been accomplished.

I’d described the effects of the gunshots with what information I’d learned, hoping that Jonas would provide the final analysis during the meeting. I could see the look of horror on the councilmembers’ faces, with one exception. Markel Wyatt. He was now the oldest member of the council, an honorable elder whom everyone in the pack looked up to. While he was particularly good in hiding his emotions, I was able to see how much the news troubled him.

“I agree with Kyle. However, we must figure out what pack this wolf is from,” another insisted.

“He is not one of record,” a third stated in a matter-of-fact tone, as if he was bored with the entire meeting.

“A black wolf with a white stripe, Markel,” Max said far too quietly for the others on the council to pay any attention to.

Yet they did.

Max turned his head toward the third Wolfen, narrowing his eyes. "If I remember correctly, my father mentioned a breed depicting that very description. I found notations in his things indicating a breed of wolves capable of challenging us."

I thought about what Max was saying, my memory suddenly jogged, visions of the roaming beast unfurling in my mind. I could see his eyes, the evil glint that was mesmerizing in their darkness. I would never forget his snarl, the sound laced with evil. Then I heard the words of a mighty Cherokee Indian echoing in my mind.

"We have many enemies, including our own kind, wolves that were formed from the earth as well as the devil himself. They fashion themselves to be superior in every way to the Wolfen, determined to rule the earth as they were promised the very day they set foot on the soil. There is one who is almost extinct, cursed to annihilation by beings far superior to any known to the Wolfen." Blackhawk swept his arms out in front of us, miming the earth and stars, creatures prepared to strike.

"Who are they, Papa?" Max asked, his eyes glued to his father.

"Not who they are, my son, but what they are," Blackhawk answered. "They are the sins of those sent to purgatory, monsters with no concept of right versus wrong. They are assassins."

"How can we stop them?" I asked.

Blackhawk turned in my direction, moving closer. As he crouched down, cupping my chin, he offered a kind smile. "We maintain our humanity."

I shuddered as I remembered other parts of the story. While Blackhawk's recounting of the passages in the ancient book wasn't meant to terrify either one of us, the stories at least remained with me.

Even though I'd never been good at following a righteous path.

"LaRue," I said in passing. The three amigos had heard countless stories over the years from Blackhawk, his knowledge of the ancient prophecies and legends notorious. He'd been the most educated man remaining in the Wolfen, although I was also aware Markel had at least basic knowledge of the great ancient reads.

The moment I issued the single word, Markel's reaction was noteworthy, a tic appearing in the corner of his mouth as he also remembered.

"Where did you hear that expression?" Markel demanded, the veins in his neck popping.

"It's not an expression. It's a breed of wolf," I countered, locking eyes with Max. "They are almost extinct yet still powerful in their own right. They are considered assassins amongst us, their oath to annihilate their enemies, including humans taught from birth."

Max furrowed his brow, then I could tell by the flash of gold rimming his irises that he'd remembered. "Yes," he whispered. "Creatures with no conscience, far more dangerous than a significant portion of our enemies."

"And we were never warned about this?" Kyle barked.

Markel merely shifted in his seat. "There was no need, their numbers dwindling."

"At least one has returned with a vengeance. The question is... why?" I allowed the question to linger, the discomfort on every elder's face evident.

I glanced at Gregor, who'd shifted to the edge of his seat, struggling to figure out what I was talking about. He slowly lifted his head, the recognition settling in, his eyes glazing over and his breathing suddenly ragged. Even his skin seemed clammy, as if the memory from a story ages ago had sparked something else. He'd been the one most affected by the detailed and brutal accounts of our enemies, his night terrors requiring counseling.

As a boy, I'd been horrified, clambering to find the truth from my father, searching through books to confirm what Nighthawk had told us was correct. Sadly, what I'd found in vivid imagery, drawing depicting various massacres and battles over the centuries indicated the Wolfen were lucky to now live in relative peace. So many species were nothing more than bloodthirsty pigs, only prevented from overrunning the earth by the curses placed on them by other supreme beings.

If only humans knew how fragile their ecosystem truly was.

The various councilmembers looked from one to the other, their gazes settling on Markel.

"I have never heard of them," one of the councilmembers insisted, although I had a suspicion the man was lying.

"If they are almost extinct, why are they of any concern?" another asked.

"Perhaps what Stone witnessed in the forest was incorrect, the moonlight causing him to lose focus." The third sneered, laughing softly.

As usual, I bristled, growling under my breath even as Max shot his hand in my direction, shaking his head.

"I believe the creature Stone came in close contact with in the forest surrounding our city was indeed a LaRue wolf," Gregor stated with such authority that everyone in the room turned their heads toward him.

"And how would you know that, Gregor?" Markel asked, tapping his fingers on the table.

Both Max and I looked at him.

"Because I've seen him," Gregor managed.

I nearly jumped over the table, my anger off the chart. As I jerked into a standing position, the force slamming the chair into the wall behind me, only Max was able to keep me from lunging toward Gregor. "You bastard. You've known all along this beast was in our midst and you said nothing?"

Gregor snarled as he too jerked to his feet, baring his teeth. "I didn't say any time recently, Stone. Several months ago, not

long after the murders terrorized Denver, I caught a glimpse of the wolf close to the city. He was never sighted again.”

“And exactly how did you come to see him?” I retorted. “Were you in wolf form?”

Gregor’s body language indicated I was correct. “One of our members raised a concern, mentioning the sight of this wolf. I was merely investigating as head of security.”

“Let it go, Stone. If Gregor saw him months ago, that means he has been living amongst humans, and perhaps members of our pack for some time. That’s what we must focus on,” Max chided.

“We should have known one way or the other,” I said, snarling under my breath.

“The LaRue wolves are easily able to disguise themselves,” Markel stated, as if the information wasn’t damning.

“What is going on? Who is this supposedly dangerous wolf?” Kyle also rose to his feet, pressing his fists against the table.

Markel cleared his throat, reaching out to wrap his hand around the glass of water. He took his time, taking several sips before easing the glass down onto the surface. I couldn’t help but notice his hand was shaking, the water sloshing.

“The LaRue wolf is considered highly dangerous as well as nearly extinct. From what I know, there are only three hundred of them left in the world. Within the cycle of our lifetime, they will die out as a life form,” Markel said with no emotion. “They are monsters, true enemies of everyone they come in contact with.”

Max narrowed his eyes. “Why will they be eliminated? Some disease?”

Markel didn’t seem to want to look Max in the eye. “They are unable to mate, whether with their kind or another. It would seem their curse has played itself out. The hand of the devil or perhaps merely karma.”

“Their curse?” the youngest of the councilmembers asked. Up till now, he’d remained quiet, although I could tell he hadn’t

missed a single word.

“Every wolf species has a curse placed on them, a method of keeping one breed from taking over another,” I said, longing for a glass of scotch instead of the cup of coffee I’d selected. “As a councilmember, you should already know this.”

“Which is why over two dozen breeds have disappeared already,” Gregor added.

The councilman seemed horrified. Perhaps the true elders had kept certain information from the new breed for fear others would leave the pack.

I chuckled to myself. Perhaps all the stories Blackhawk had told us hadn’t been forgotten.

The younger councilmember stood, walking toward the window. “From what I know about the breeds, when we are backed into a corner, we come out fighting. Perhaps this rogue wolf blames the Wolfen in some manner.”

“While an excellent thought, councilman, the truth is that the LaRue have nothing to do with the curse placed on them or the acceleration of their extinction. Their own violence and greed perpetuated their demise,” Markel stated slowly. “However, that doesn’t mean this particular wolf isn’t extremely dangerous. Their abilities keep them protected from their predators.”

“No one is able to detect their scent, including another wolf.” My statement seemed to echo in the open space.

“Exactly,” Markel answered.

“The bullets. Has this happened before?” I asked cautiously, the question directed at Markel.

He sighed, his expression bordering on contempt at being questioned. “Almost one hundred years ago and long before you were born, there were incidents of this same nature, but as you can imagine, the sciences surrounding the ability to test the substance were poor. What was consistent was the deaths in the manner you describe.”

“Why in the hell didn’t you mention this at any time in the past?” Max confronted him, his face flushing.

“Because there have been no other incidents, Max. None. The council believed the situation rectified.” Markel’s answer was vague as fuck, yet I could tell Max was ready to back off.

“We need to ascertain exactly what this substance is. Dr. Riker and I have come close. From what we do know, death is swift with little time for intervention. In a sense, a foolproof method for anyone unskilled at killing a wolf in another manner.” My words stung, the room suddenly quiet.

“Very true,” Max finally said.

“Let’s get back to the subject at hand. If what you said regarding Montenegro is true, why is a lone wolf working with him to murder Wolfen? Wouldn’t this wolf be concerned about retaliation, perhaps bringing their extinction closer?” Kyle scoffed, shaking his head.

Markel lifted his eyebrows. “LaRue wolves fear nothing, which is what makes them dangerous.”

I thought about everything Markel had said. “Which could make them excellent assassins.”

Max actually grinned. “Very good point. I wouldn’t put anything past Chris Montenegro. Why not hire a wolf to kill other wolves?”

“That was my question. How does Montenegro know anything about our existence, or any other wolf for that matter?” Gregor snorted, pacing the room like a caged animal.

I could see the quick exchange of glances between Markel and Max, a knowing that quite frankly pissed me off. Secrets. I’d been right in my assumption. Everyone kept them.

Markel shifted up further on his seat, taking a deep breath. “Thomas Montenegro and Blackhawk Cordero were once good friends. It is highly perceivable that Blackhawk confided in him some of the old legends and enemies.”

“That is bullshit!” Gregor snapped. “Blackhawk would never betray his people. Never!”

I was shocked that Gregor had come to Blackhawk's defense, although I had a feeling that his denial wasn't based on knowledge of the truth. Everyone at the table turned toward Max.

"There was a time that my father held no desire in following the laws of the Wolfen," Max admitted, although I could tell how damning it was for him to do so. "There was a time he preferred living entirely as a human. During that period of time, he became very close to Thomas Montenegro."

The sins of our fathers...

I shook my head, realizing that the Wolfen had just as much to hide as any human. Perhaps this was some old score to be settled.

The murmurs within the council were infuriating.

"Whether or not that is the case, the notion that Montenegro is using a wolf to handle assassinations is entirely possible and one that must be corroborated." I leaned over the table, planting my palms on the smooth wood and staring each one of them in the eye. "You've all heard the rumors regarding the kind of criminal activities that the Montenegros have been involved in for years. He should be considered an enemy on several levels."

"Agreed," Kyle said quietly.

"It is something we cannot rule out. From what you've said, the woman must tell us all that she knows," Markel stated as a directive. "She may be at the center of this."

I laughed, shaking my head. "My mate... has her own mind and will. I doubt she will readily tell this council anything. Besides, she's back in town for an entirely different reason."

"Do you even have any idea what that is?" Gregor challenged.

I could feel the heat shifting within Markel, as if he were annoyed or perplexed. I shot him a look, studying his pensive face. No, he was remembering something. "No, but whatever it is, her search for something pushed her into leaving her job and coming here."

All color drained from Markel's face. "What is her name?"

"Vanessa Bridges," I stated, my nerves on edge. The moment I noticed the slight shift in Markel's eyes, I bristled. "Why? Do you know her?"

"No. Her last name sounds familiar. Nothing more." Markel got up from the table, moving into the small kitchen.

I caught Max's eye as well as Gregor's. Markel was hiding something.

"If this wolf is dangerous and working alone, hunting him should be easy," Kyle suggested.

"Not from what I've seen; however, we may have no choice. He will strike again." Max kept his tone even. "Gregor, just make certain we have adequate security around Roselake. Stone, make certain your village has everything it needs."

"I will," I stated, able to see a glimpse of Markel as he stood in front of the window in the kitchen. What the hell did the man know?

"The cross-referenced list of those working or living in areas we believe are being targeted by Montenegro's corporation in some way should be ready tonight," Gregor stated. "Maybe we can figure out where the fucker is going to strike next."

"Excellent," Max half whispered as he rubbed his eyes.

"And the two men who were murdered in the hospital?" one of the councilmen asked, the question leading.

Max took a deep breath, turning his head toward me when he answered. "There will be a full investigation by the detectives involved in the case. I doubt they will find a connection to any pack. My guess is they were selected because they were desperate men in need of cash."

"Including to us?" Kyle asked.

Exhaling, I could tell Max was concerned. "We will continue to take protective measures."

Kyle laughed, tapping his fingers on the table. "From where I sit, too little too late."

“We must hunt this wolf,” Markel commanded as he walked back into the room. “Only he should be brought to us alive. There is much we can learn from him.”

“Agreed,” Max said after a few seconds. “But only if that’s possible.”

“You know her, Markel. Tell us how,” I challenged.

He turned his head slowly in my direction. “You will never question me again, Stone. By the grace of the man across the table, you were given a seat on this council. I assure you that it can and should be revoked given your egregious actions.”

“Do not threaten me, Markel. You know something about Vanessa.” I shot him a harsh look.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” Max stated, although he shifted his gaze in Markel’s direction as well. “However, there will be no secrets.”

As the outer door swung open, Jonas walking inside, the tension in the room increased. I certainly didn’t like the look on his face. I’d been prepared for the findings we’d both anticipated, but I could tell he was even more stressed than when I’d left him.

“Dr. Riker. Thank you for coming by. I’m assuming that both you and Stone have come to a conclusion with regard to the tests you performed?” Max asked, pointing to an empty chair.

Dr. Riker appeared nervous. “To the degree that’s possible at this time. Stone and I spent several hours attempting to analyze both the ongoing effects of the poison as well as determine what we were dealing with. The elements are commonly found. It’s the combination and amount that makes them toxic to the Wolfen including silver nitrate, copper, particles of gold and black onyx.”

“A silver fucking bullet?” Gregor asked, laughing in a disgusted manner.

“Not even close, Gregor,” Jonas countered. “The compound is very scientific in nature, the percentages precise. The interaction between them is what’s remarkable, providing a killing compound.”

“Which in turn is in a sense digested by tissues and cells within a Wolfen body, spreading quickly given the increased heartrate and blood flow,” I added.

Jonas nodded. “Exactly.”

“Dangerous to humans?” Max asked.

Shrugging, Jonas wiped beads of perspiration from his brow. “Probably, especially if an attending doctor had no idea what they were dealing with.”

“Fascinating. A substance that would have come in handy to the military,” Max said in passing.

“Yes, as long as the bullets could be mass produced. I will guess that given the substances used, they would be very expensive,” I countered.

Max exhaled. “Which is why the program would have been folded.”

“What we’ve also determined is that there is limited time to try and stop the effects, as in minutes,” I stated firmly.

The room was quiet once again, the ramifications startling.

“So, it’s entirely possible the two murders had nothing to do with the Wolfen but some kind of military operation?” Kyle asked hopefully.

“From what I’ve been able to decipher, and I would need to do a hell of a lot more testing, the compound wasn’t highly concentrated, which means that the chance of human survival is greater. To answer your question, I doubt it.” Jonas looked from Max back in my direction.

“In other words, if you were an assassin determined to kill a human, there are far more destructive bullets, but perhaps they were used to make a point.” Max exhaled, groaning softly. “We have a Wolfen killer on our hands; likely his hope is to bring hysteria amongst our pack. Now, the question is what can be done?”

Jonas appeared sheepish, the color draining from his face. “I honestly don’t know. While the steroids helped in healing Stone’s wounds, I can only assume that’s because the bullets

went clean through. Stone and I have performed several tests with various drugs from human to Wolfen on the blood you provided from the victims, and at this point, nothing has stopped the mutation.”

“Fuck,” Max hissed.

“What now?” the younger councilman asked, his eyes open wide.

“We continue to search for a cure,” I stated with authority. “In the meantime, we try and make certain our people are warned to be vigilant with their surroundings.”

Max exhaled, closing his eyes briefly. “I’ll prepare an email. However, I don’t want to cause more alarm than is necessary.”

“I think the time for that is over,” I said quietly.

I could feel the heat of Max’s gaze, but he knew I was right.

Kyle moved into a standing position. “What I don’t understand is, why not just shoot the victims between the eyes. That’s an effective kill for Wolfen.”

“A good question, Kyle, and one we’ve contemplated. My only guess is to make a point. As I said, to create fear in the Wolfen.” Max glanced around the table.

“That doesn’t make any sense. A lot of bullshit to go through to eliminate an enemy,” Gregor snorted.

While I agreed with him, I had the distinct feeling that whatever Markel wasn’t telling us came into play.

“We need to establish a hunting party,” Kyle suggested.

“At this point, that’s like looking for a needle in a haystack. The killer could be anywhere.” I knew my vote wasn’t going to bode well with all the councilmembers.

“Stone is right. We’re not going to go off halfcocked and leave ourselves wide open. We will have Mr. Montenegro watched. Before you ask, the single connection to Mr. Montenegro at this point is through Trevor Holland’s case. That is a Denver PD case.” Max shifted back from the table. As the grumbling in the room increased, he held up his hand. “However, we do

have an insider in the department. While Kathleen wasn't assigned to the case, she's certainly going to keep us informed."

"You know he's responsible," Gregor huffed.

"We don't know anything for certain." Max glanced at me. "But we must find out."

As my thoughts drifted to Vanessa, I reached out for her in my mind as I rubbed my forehead. I could feel her energy, could almost grasp onto her thoughts. She must be getting close to Roselake.

"We're finished here for the night," Max stated, reaching for his phone the second it rang.

Now I was ready for a cold brew and a shot of whiskey, and not necessarily in that order. I headed out the door, stopped just outside by Gregor.

"I don't want any shit tonight," I snarled.

"I'm not giving you any shit, Stone, but I will be eager to hear what Vanessa has to say. Maybe she can shed some light as to what the fuck is really going on." Gregor walked past me, laughing softly.

There were more questions after leaving the meeting than answers and one thing Gregor was correct about.

Vanessa was smack in the middle of what was going on.

I reached the bottom of the stairs when the door was flung open. Immediately a wave of fear and anger rushed into my system. "Vanessa..."

"Yes," Max hissed. "I'm sorry, Stone, she's gone, her car as well. Even her place was tossed."

I felt Gregor's presence behind me, heard the slight growl he'd allowed to escape from his mouth.

"She's not just gone, Max. Someone took her. I have no doubt."

"You can't be certain."

As I turned to face him, I allowed the beast to claw to the surface. “Yes, I can.”

“Let’s go hunting,” Gregor suggested, his guttural voice floating into the night.

“Neither of you are going anywhere,” Max directed.

I tilted my head, merely locking eyes with Max until he nodded. When Gregor flanked my side, I was surprised.

And for the first time, I felt his allegiance.

Now, our wolves were out for blood.

CHAPTER 11



*V*anessa

Danger.

More than once I'd been accused of enjoying putting myself in harm's way. My former boss had chastised me on more than one occasion for taking unnecessary chances, ignoring protective services after being threatened. I'd even heard that I had a morbid curiosity for death.

Maybe I did, or maybe I realized that I couldn't get anywhere by playing it safe.

Tonight was no exception; however, I wasn't a damn fool. I'd been in worse scenarios in my efforts to hunt down witnesses and find evidence.

When I'd left my condo, I'd had an eerie feeling of being watched, my skin crawling as it had before. I took additional precautions, taking side streets as an alternative route to where I was going. After several minutes, I realized my imagination was playing tricks.

Or so I hoped.

My gun was positioned under my purse within a single snap of my wrist. If anyone tried to fuck with me, they'd find themselves on the wrong end of a barrel.

The part of town I was headed for wasn't necessarily crime ridden, but it certainly wasn't posh by any means.

I hadn't anticipated receiving a return call from the editor of the newspaper. I also hadn't anticipated that the reporter was still living in town, especially since Randy had been fired from his job not long after the article he'd written about the Wolfen. From what the editor had said, Randy had become obsessed with finding out what he called the hidden secret within the darkness of Denver.

While I'd peppered the editor with questions, he'd been less than obliged to share much of anything. What I had been able to tell was that he was nervous about providing even a small amount of information. I'd finally gotten an old phone number for Mr. O'Rourke, expecting another dead end. When Randy had answered his phone, I'd been... elated.

I could easily tell Randy had expected another naysayer, some bitch who'd called him out of the blue to hassle him for his ridiculous article. My interest had piqued his, finally allowing me to obtain his address after agreeing to a brief meeting. I had no idea what I was doing in hunting this down. I could be wasting my time.

The little voice inside my head told me otherwise.

I'd seen the look on Stone's face even though he'd done his best to mask every single emotion. I realized my grip on the steering wheel was white knuckled, my heart racing. I'd disobeyed Stone's order. I almost laughed just thinking about where my thoughts had drifted. I'd been clear with Stone regarding my tenacity. The man, no matter the intense and out-of-this-world connection we shared, didn't own me.

Period.

The end.

I wasn't his mate.

Then why was my skin clammy, my nipples fully aroused, aching from scraping back and forth across my bra? A blipping light just under the turn signal pissed me off. Low on fuel. The last thing I wanted to do was to be out of my comfort zone and run out of gas. I scanned the road, praying for a sight of a gas station, hissing the moment one came into view.

I pulled in, grateful for the number of lights beaming down from the red and yellow canopy. The darkness surrounding the obviously popular station was still foreboding, what seemed like a light fog enveloping the property. I couldn't help but reflect on ridiculous horror movies as I eased out onto the concrete pad, my fingers stiff as I dragged out my credit card. There were several other vehicles, all in various stages of pumping gas. The selection of music blaring from the cars and trucks was somewhat comforting.

Denver had an eclectic mix of people, men and women merely attempting to thrive in a difficult economy. I was grateful for their presence and there was no reason for me to feel skittish like I did. As I shoved the nozzle into my gas tank, I couldn't help but wonder how many people had suspected they weren't living alone, that wolves were hovering in the shadows, prepared to do what was necessary in order to survive.

I closed my eyes, attempting to block out my thoughts, my hope that the reporter could shed some light on my father the only thing I should be concentrating on. At least I could take comfort in the number of people coming and going. I wasn't alone.

I froze as another sickening sensation rushed through me. I wasn't alone.

“Vanessa. I'm surprised to see you out.”

His deep voice filled me with a new wave of anxiety, the closeness suffocating. He was behind me, yet his aura seemed larger than life. I braced myself for the onslaught of questions, turning slightly in order to face the very demon I'd feared. “Chris.”

He stood next to his dark and shiny Mercedes, his clothing matching the midnight black color perfectly. Even his eyes held a level of darkness accentuated by where he was standing. He was all male, reeking of testosterone and danger, his tight-fitting jeans and silk shirt only personifying his arrogance.

As sick as it sounded, he reminded me of Stone. The only difference was that Stone reeked of honor and integrity while

Chris held an air of entitlement. I was suddenly sick to my stomach at the sight of him.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well after your attack,” he said as his eyes raked over me lustfully.

I absently touched the side of my head, wincing from the slight ache that continued. “I’m fine. Thank you for your concern.” As if I cared.

“I understand one of the men who attacked you is still at large.” He finally pulled his gaze away, sliding his credit card in the appropriate slot on the pump.

How the hell would he even know that? Whatever connections he had must include the police department. “That’s unfortunately true, but the detectives have an accurate description. I’m certain it’s only a matter of time before he’s caught.”

“Hmmm... Interesting.” He drew the words out as if disbelieving. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“I will be at work tomorrow, so don’t worry. I’m feeling much better.” I could see the hint of a sneer on his face after I said the words. The anxiety heightened, turning into a real moment of fear. This wasn’t a part of town I could imagine him coming to for any reason. There were no bars or clubs, five-star restaurants or theaters of any kind, just mile after mile of small businesses and older homes.

“There’s no hurry, Vanessa. I want to have one hundred percent of your attention.” He seemed to linger prior to lifting the handle, retrieving the nozzle.

“I’m a strong woman, Chris. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

He slowly tilted his head, his dark eyes glowing in the harsh lighting of the canopy. “Actually, I do. I know exactly what you’re made of.”

I was shocked how much his statement affected me, the husky sound reverberating like ball bearings pinging against my skin. “Then you know I always follow through with my assignments.”

Ten seconds passed. Twenty. He finally chuckled, the sound more like the husky vibe of a predator. “Yes.”

I pulled my attention away from him, studying the dollar amount of gas as it slowly poured into my tank. If the asshole thought he was going to scare me, he had another think coming. His veiled threats were getting old. When the pump clicked, I finally exhaled the deep breath I’d been holding, forcing my actions to seem at ease as I finished the transaction. “Good to see you, Chris. I hope you have a wonderful evening.”

“Do you know what I adore about you, Vanessa?” Chris asked in the kind of casual manner that made me want to dig my nails into his gorgeous face.

“I’m afraid to ask.” I refused to turn back in his direction, even though I was curious as to what he was going to say.

“You have a tenacity about you that’s rare, an almost desperate need to follow the rules. I demand that in those I work with, even more so with the women I care for. I would enjoy getting to know you on a more personal level. Your surrender would be... incredible.”

Surrender. My skin was instantly clammy, my face flushing even as my anger level increased. The man was exceptionally good at asserting his authority, his arrogance and superiority handled brilliantly.

I kept my cool as I turned to face him one last time. “Surrendering isn’t in my vocabulary, Chris, although I appreciate the compliments. I learned a long time ago that in order to get everything I wanted in life, I had to be in full control.”

He seemed more amused than anything, giving me a nod of respect. “Touché, Ms. Bridges. Completely understood. I also hope that you have a pleasant evening.” He sniffed the air as he scanned the perimeter. “Be safe. Just remember that there are creatures of all types hunting at all hours of the day and night.”

The threat was real. "I'll keep that in mind." I was shaking as I climbed into my car even as I kept the plastic smile on my face. The fucker wasn't going to get to me. No way. *Damn it.* As soon as I drove out of the parking lot, I glanced into the rearview mirror. The asshole was still watching me.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened as I pulled to a stop at a red light. I bit back a moan as I studied my GPS. I was closer to Randy's address. All the small homes had seen better days, the need for TLC screaming even in the ugliness of the streetlights. Still, I went around the block before I was convinced Chris hadn't followed, even pulling over to the side of the road for a few minutes.

At least the action allowed my nerves to calm down.

As I turned onto Randy's street, I couldn't help but feel sad for him. From what I'd read, he'd been highly acclaimed, a reporter on the rise. This was the worst street in the neighborhood, the tiny houses barely enough for a single person. While every one of them had a fairly large yard, they were all overgrown as if no one had taken care of them for years.

Randy's house was no exception.

At least he'd left his front porch light on. As I pulled into the driveway, I couldn't get over the same eerie feeling that had been with me since I'd left my condo. Someone was watching me. I was almost certain. I slid the gun inside my purse, taking my time to look out every window before easing out onto the cracked driveway.

Even the light breeze made me jumpy, the branches of the overgrown trees hitting gutters in almost every direction. Swallowing, I turned in a full circle before heading toward the front door. I was thankful I only had to knock twice.

As the door opened cautiously, the chain still firmly in place, I offered a large smile. "Mr. O'Rourke? We spoke on the phone. I'm Vanessa Bridges."

He glanced up and down, the single light behind him highlighting his expression of distrust. "Yeah, I remember.

Hold on.” The moment he closed the door briefly, creepy crawlies settled in, forcing a lump in my throat.

“Come in. Been a long time since someone asked me about the Wolfen.” Randy immediately locked the door behind me, adding the chain before taking me into his living room. “Sorry about the mess. I don’t get a lot of company.”

There were books located everywhere and from where I was standing, I was able to catch several of the titles. It wasn’t a huge surprise that they were all about wolves and the Lycan legend. The man was obsessed. I was beginning to wonder whether I’d get any kind of accurate information. It was worth a try.

“Here you go. You can sit here,” Randy said after moving a stack of books from one of the chairs, particles of dust spewing into the air.

“Thank you. I won’t take much of your time.” I sat down, keeping my purse at my feet, able to see the handle of the weapon from where I was sitting.

“Let me be frank with you, Ms. Bridges. I’m not going to take any crap about what I wrote. I stand by the article and the subsequent information I found on the Wolfen pack as well as other breeds living throughout the world.”

I swallowed again, trying to find the right questions to ask. “Why don’t you tell me about them.”

He smiled, sitting back against the couch. “I tell you what. Why don’t you tell me what you know? We’ll go from there.”

“I’ve read that the Wolfen were supposedly created from a disease centuries ago, one that killed a huge percentage of the human population. I also know that this disease is supposed to return at some point, making the Wolfen stronger, rewriting the balance of power.” With every word I said, I could see the light building in the man’s eyes.

“Very good, Ms. Bridges. You’ve at least read something on the Wolfen, although you could have gleaned much of that from my article. I’ll give you credit for taking your time to educate yourself. So, why are you here exactly?”

The million dollar question and one I'd mulled over during my ride here. "I know there are secrets to be told, the Wolfen doing everything to keep their pack protected."

"Yes. That is correct. Tell me again why you're here?"

"I'm very curious."

"Don't lie to me, Ms. Bridges. I might be a recluse, forced out of my job because of my beliefs, but I still have access to information from all across the world." He smirked. "Why would a high powered attorney from Baltimore quit her job for what so many would consider a wild goose chase?"

A strangling sensation wrapped around my throat, pinpricks of light floating across my field of vision. "I have my reasons."

Randy said nothing for a full ten seconds then shook his head. "Don't waste my time or yours, Ms. Bridges. If you aren't willing to tell me why you're here, I certainly won't provide you with any information. There are still people in this town who think I'm insane for my beliefs."

"They just don't understand," I managed, heat building across my jaw, sliding into my cheeks.

"No, they don't. They have no idea that I'm being watched from both sides."

"Both sides?"

He moved to a standing position, glaring down at me. "I'm a very good judge of character, Ms. Bridges, and if I'm correct, you've already had at least one experience with a member of the Wolfen pack. You know what they are capable of. What you don't know is that there are a group of hunters, mostly men who've made it their mission to wipe out every wolf they come in contact with, whether human or animal. In fact, they've eliminated a good portion of the natural wolves living in our woods, making the animal variety hungry to hunt their enemies. As far as those capable of remaining human? It won't be long until they strike, waging a necessary war of their own. They are beasts after all, their instinct to live and thrive first and foremost and they will stop at nothing to eradicate anyone who gets in their way."

My jaw clenched, my blood pressure rising. The conviction in his voice gave me the jitters. I found myself unable to respond, as if the words were sealed in a vacuum.

He huffed as he inched closer. “As I said, don’t waste my time, Ms. Bridges. I’m no fool but I do need to stay alive and I assure you, I will.”

I cringed as he stomped out of the room, his heavy footsteps reverberating in my ears. I finally let out the breath I’d been holding as I brushed my hand through my hair. I hadn’t trusted a single soul with my thoughts or my reason for returning to Denver. The man was a stranger, someone I shouldn’t share a single thing with. Right now? I had few choices other than to open up to Stone.

I wasn’t prepared to do that. Not yet. Not until I knew more.

I fingered my phone, shifting to my pictures. The grainy photograph was all I had of someone I didn’t even know. As I stared at it, I gathered a sense that the man posing wasn’t happy with the photograph being taken. I could even tell his eyes appeared unfocused.

But I could swear I’d gathered a sense of his thoughts.

Anger.

Fear.

Remorse.

And I shivered.

I found Randy in his kitchen, preparing two cups of tea, the dingy light over the sink showcasing another room full of clutter and debris. The stench reminded me of fried food and grease. I took shallow breaths before speaking. “I came back to Denver looking for my father.”

He didn’t bother acknowledging me, simply continuing his task. After he poured water in the two mugs, dunking both tea bags several times, he turned to face me. “Your father?”

I nodded, still uncertain of what to say.

“You have reason to believe he is in town?” He pointed to a pint of half and half, waiting until I shook my head before handing me a cup.

“I honestly have no idea. My mother barely mentioned him and only after I pressed for details. She said he was a criminal, a horrible person. I could see the hate in her eyes.”

He chuckled as he leaned against the counter. “Sounds like a love affair gone badly.”

“Don’t belittle this or my desire to find my father. He’s a part of my life, or at least I’d like to make him one. Trust me, Mr. O’Rourke, I’ve questioned my rationality and my judgment more than once, but the dreams have plagued me, the nightmares so intense that I’ve lost sleep for years.”

My God, the man was completely silent.

“I can see I made a mistake coming here and I apologize. Thank you for your hospitality.” I turned away, furious with myself.

“So, you admit you’re on a wild goose chase,” he finally said.

I held the cup in both hands, the warmth unable to take away the increasing chills. “Likely but this is something I have to do for myself, no matter the obstacles.”

“Why is it so important to you, Ms. Bridges? I can understand wanting to learn about your past, but you’ve given up a significant portion of your life in order to do so.”

“You can call me Vanessa.” I took a sip of the tea, savoring the flavor as I tried to rein in my anger. “You’re right, I have given up a hell of a lot. The truth is I’m honestly not certain why other than I’ve had dreams about him my entire life. Maybe I just need to understand my heritage. Maybe in my gut I know there are terrible secrets that a lot of people don’t want me to find out about. I’m tenacious, Mr. O’Rourke. Some would call me a dog with a bone. I will find answers.”

“Even if they’re not the ones you want to hear?” he asked, lifting his chin.

“Even if they aren’t, at least I’ll know the truth.” I eased the cup onto the only corner of the kitchen table uncluttered, reaching into my back pocket and retrieving my phone. I held it out, showing him the picture of my father. “This is really all I have of him.”

Randy hesitated before inching closer, narrowing his eyes. “That’s not much to go on. You’re certain he is from Denver?”

“My mother met him here. That much I do know. She took me away when I was little, claiming my father was a monster. There’s been no contact, no discussion about him, but obviously he exists.”

He took a gulp of his tea, the slurping sound floating into the room. “Last name Bridges?”

I shook my head slowly. “No, his name is or was Lucas Tremaine. I have every reason to believe he’s dead.”

I’d prepared myself for the fact that Randy likely wouldn’t recognize the picture or my father’s name. What I hadn’t even thought about was a complete one eighty, or the staggering reaction he had.

Jerking back, he darted a single glance in my eyes before walking around me and out of the room without saying a single word. Still, I could feel a heightened level of tension, even a hint of fear in the man. I trailed behind him, standing in the doorway to the living room. “You know my father, don’t you?”

He walked farther away from me, moving to the front of the large picture frame window, peeking through the closed blinds. “Did anyone follow you here?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

A strangled grunt pushed up from his throat, the sound in itself terrifying.

“Because, Ms. Bridges, if anyone knows who you are, you will be in danger.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, walking closer to him. My God, even his hand was shaking. “Wait a minute. You

did know my father. Who is he? Is he still alive? Have you ever talked with him?"

He swallowed several times before taking a sip of his tea, liquid sloshing out over the side.

What in the hell was going on?

"Tell me!" I said in a more demanding tone, attempting to reel in my desperate need to find out what the hell was happening.

"No, I didn't really know your father, but I knew of him."

"Then talk to me. I've done nothing but reach a damn dead end." When he seemed locked in his observation of the street, I pressed on. "I've already learned the Montenegro Corporation had something to do with his life, although I've tried to figure out what and haven't been successful so far. I even took a job there just to try and solve a portion of the mystery. I learned early on about their dangerous reputation, but where else am I supposed to look? Was my father an employee there? Did he fight with Thomas Montenegro for some reason? From all I've been able to tell, it was as if Lucas didn't exist. There are no records of him and I have my sources as you can imagine."

He cautiously took several sips of his tea, finally turning in my direction. "I've been very careful over the last few years while I continued researching my beliefs. I've made no overtures toward the pack or anyone living in Roselake."

"Roselake." There was the name mentioned in the article. I acted as if I had no clue, watching his expression.

He snickered, shaking his head. "You have so much to learn. Roselake is a city located outside of Denver created almost a century ago to house members of the pack. To any other human, the city itself is a flourishing little town of very nice people."

"But you believe otherwise."

Randy snorted. "I know differently, Ms. Bridges. I've been chased by wolves on more than one occasion."

I wasn't shocked at his revelation; I was excited at the thought of finding out more. "If they're so dangerous, why weren't you killed?"

"Because they only wanted to threaten me. You see, the Wolfen aren't allowed to kill humans unless they are concerned for their lives."

"Fascinating." My thoughts drifted to Stone. I continued to reject my fears, but what if he was a monster?

"Yes, and I can tell you still have your doubts. I will tell you this, Ms. Bridges, and nothing more. Stay away from Montenegro, the company and the men involved. They are bad news all the way around, extremely dangerous, including Thomas. He is truly evil. If either man has any inkling that you are searching for any information about Lucas Tremaine, you will disappear. As far as your father, you're going to need to learn about him yourself."

"That means you know him. Why won't you tell me? Why? Are you afraid of my father, what he will do if you tell me where he is?"

Randy inched closer, his eyes locking on mine. "I assure you, Ms. Bridges, as you suspected, your father is no longer alive. They wanted him dead. They made it happen. Poof. He's gone."

"They? What the hell are you talking about? Who is 'they,' Thomas? His son?" Chris would have been far too young at that point. Another lump formed in my throat, only this time of rage. Who would want to kill my father?

He closed his eyes, humming softly to himself.

"Wait. They. Are you talking about the Wolfen? They murdered my father? Or is this completely about the Montenegro kingdom?"

"I can tell you no more," he insisted.

"Damn it. You know exactly what the hell is going on and you refuse to tell me. Why? Are you afraid for your life?"

“My life doesn’t mean much any longer, Ms. Bridges. I think you only need to look around my house and see that I’m not lying to you. What I fear is the carnage and devastation that could be caused if the truth comes out.”

“Can you at least tell me if my father worked there at some point?” I was exasperated, my thoughts spinning. “Please?”

He exhaled in what seemed like an exaggerated fashion. “What I can tell you is that your father had a connection to them at one point. The reason why he kept very secret.”

“A connection. Great. I’m no better off. I’ve searched their files. I’ve looked for anything with his name on it. Nothing.”

He lifted his index finger, his face pensive. “Be very careful, Ms. Bridges. The Montenegros have powerful friends.”

I was sick to my stomach, my nervous system so on edge that I could no longer see clearly. I somehow managed to place the cup on top of a stack of books, glaring at the spines. My God, the man was so consumed that he believed absolute bullshit. “There’s no such thing as werewolves.”

“No, there isn’t, Ms. Bridges. The Wolfen and every other breed of wolves that have lived on this earth since the beginning of time are much more, a superior power. They’ve tolerated humans for the centuries, living behind a curtain of their own terror. I assure you that one day, they will take back control.”

His words filtered into my ears, but my mind refused to grasp the bullshit he was feeding me. “You refuse to tell me anything about my father?”

“You will find answers. What I can say is that your father was a powerful man.”

“Man or beast?”

He shifted his gaze back toward the blinds, as if able to see the road clearly.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. O’Rourke. I’ll see myself out.” I was stunned, refusing to accept what he’d told me, although the nagging inside my head told me the man wasn’t lying.

He was simply terrified for his life.

When I reached the door, I felt his presence behind me.

“Ms. Bridges. Please keep something in mind. Things aren’t always as they seem. Those we believe to be our enemies are often the only means of protection. There is significant danger in this town, more so than you can understand. The beasts will eventually win.”

“Win what exactly?”

Randy resumed drinking his tea, further fueling the anger building inside.

“I can feel your strength and your power, Ms. Bridges. You will find what you seek. Just be prepared for the answer. The truth will change your life.”

“I will find my father, Mr. O’Rourke. For some strange reason, I know inside I won’t be whole until I do.”

“That much I can understand and I wish you luck.” He gave me a slight smile, his eyes still searching mine.

As if he was looking through my very soul.

“One question, Ms. Bridges.”

“Okay.”

“What is your mother’s name?”

“Emilie Bridges.” I waited to see if there was a single sign of recognition. There was nothing, not even a glimmer in his eyes.

“What a lovely name.”

I could tell the man had shut down, either out of fear or consternation. I had to do this alone.

As I walked out the door, my entire system rattled, I could swear I heard an intense howl coming from the distance. Instead of being afraid, I was drawn to the sound.

He was right. I was powerful. Nothing was going to stop me from getting answers.

Nothing.

* * *

The beasts would win.

I couldn't get the statement out of my mind. Win the world? Win against humanity? I was still reeling from the limited information Randy had provided as I pulled into the darkened parking lot of the Montenegro Corporation. This was the riskiest thing I'd done, but now at least I knew that I'd been right about searching through the company's files. Either Chris or his father was hiding something significant.

I no longer needed my gut to tell me that.

I remained jumpy, my systems on high alert. I suddenly had the strong urge to contact Stone. The inexplicable desire to talk with him was even more uncanny than before. I thought about the city Randy had mentioned. Roselake. I certainly didn't remember seeing the location on a map. I also had no recollection of it from when I'd lived in Denver before.

I pulled into a parking space as close to a bank of trees as possible. While the thick foliage wouldn't hide me from either anyone looking out the building or in the parking lot, the semi-secluded area gave me some comfort. I tugged my gun from my purse, making certain the safety was on.

While I might be a crack shot, I refused to risk the safety of any innocent bystanders. I peered out my side window, staring up at the building. A few cars remained in the parking lot, several lights on in the ten-story aging brick building, but I doubted anyone was spending time researching records in the basement.

Or so I hoped.

I grabbed a flashlight, checking to make certain it worked. I had no idea what I'd find as far as light in the basement. My thoughts shifted to the exchange with Chris, the chill remaining. I'd been extremely careful to make certain I hadn't been followed, taking several side streets that took me out of my way. No one had followed me.

As I climbed out of the car, I shoved the gun into the waistband of my jeans in the small of my back, praying to God I wouldn't need a reason to use it. I walked along the bank of trees lining the street as I headed for the building, heading for the rear door as I jerked out my new access key card. If the promotion was nothing more than a setup, the cops would arrive within two or three minutes at my attempt to get inside.

It was a risk I was willing to take.

There were no bright flashing lights or sirens as the console moved from red to green, the soft click of the door allowing me access. I walked quickly to the door leading to the basement, repeating the move. I'd often wondered why a corporation with the kind of money that Montenegro had didn't invest in scanning their former records. If they were hiding something, why not simply destroy the records?

When I opened the door, the musty odor greeting me was exactly as I would have expected. As a series of LED lights popped on, my nerves remained on edge. The stairs were surprisingly wide, having been rebuilt at some point. When I reached the bottom, I was surprised at the clean, modern, and very organized space.

There were no darkened holes where monsters could hide or ominous shadows coming from corners. Everything in the oversized space was bright, only the smell giving away any age.

The area also contained a huge range of supplies from copy paper to toner. Everything was in order and categorized. I found the employee records in the back, the dozens of boxes positioned on steel racks. They were labeled by years and alphabetized, just as I would have expected. While I had no indication of what year to start, I chose the year before I was born.

I ran my hand over the long metal table, the work surface sleek and obviously recently wiped down. I tugged the flashlight from my pocket, carefully placing it on the table.

I was forced to grab a stepstool, the heavy box awkward to yank down from the top shelf. I dragged it to the table at the

end of the row, gingerly opening the lid. As with everything else in the space, the folders were neatly organized and labeled. What I did find interesting was that the labels themselves appeared to be new and without the yellowing effect I would have expected. Why would anyone perform the tedious task of replacing all the identification stickers?

As I sifted through the documents, forced to pull out several in order to search, I quickly realized there was nothing with regard to my father. Damn it. I wasn't quite as careful when I packed everything away, frustrated as hell. Another dead end. As I placed the box back in position, I realized that his disappearance could have happened over several years, including after my mother had left the city.

No, if I had to venture a guess, his disappearance actually prompted my mother's departure, a story made up to account for the move. How old had I been? Four or five. I took a chance, pulling down yet another box.

While the basement should be chilly as hell, my exasperation as well as a trickle of fear kept my heart racing and my blood pumping. Beads of perspiration trickled along my forehead and over my mouth, a reminder that I needed to finish quickly. That last thing I needed was a night security officer or a member of the cleaning staff to find me here at this time of night. I was certain Mr. Montenegro would be told.

Within seconds, I realized two things. There was no mention of my father but more important, it would appear that a handful of files were missing around the letter T. While I couldn't be certain, I highly doubted the records stopped at O and resumed at W. I quickly replaced everything, moving to the third box. By now, my arms were aching, my stomach churning, and my sixth sense kicking into some horrible overdrive.

I moved quickly, grabbing the last box I felt comfortable in looking through. I knew at least an hour had gone by. As expected, I found the same exact situation. Whoever had cleaned out the files appeared to have been in a time crunch. And I knew in my gut the reason the files were missing.

Hissing, my anger was heightened enough I shoved the box across the table. When it unexpectedly dropped to the floor, I cursed under my breath. The last thing I needed was to spend time cleaning up and sorting through files. I stormed around the table, yanking the box onto the surface and crouching down to grab the clutter of files, including the loose papers that had fallen out. There was no way I was taking the time to put everything back together.

As I dumped them onto the table, one of the pages caught my eye, forcing me to bite back a gasp. I blinked twice, shocked at what I was seeing, my fingers shaking as I pulled it close to my face. There in black and white was a piece of paper with my father's name on it, an employee record including the date of hire. Even his signature was right there in black and white. Tears sprang to my eyes as I rubbed the tip of my finger over his name, tracing the cursive writing.

For the first time in my entire life I felt close to my father, vindicated in my mind for my crazy plan that had taken me thousands of miles away from my home.

But this had once been my home, with my father, at least according to the employee file. I allowed my gaze to fall to the table, pushing through the other files in hopes of finding more. After several minutes of searching, I realized there was nothing else with his name on it. At least I had proof of his existence.

The paper itself told me very little other than his name, social security number, and an address I didn't recognize. It was enough. Giddy, I savored the moment, taking several deep breaths to calm my nerves. I would get to the bottom of the mystery one way or the other.

Click.

What the hell?

The lights went out completely, tossing me into complete darkness. Maybe they were on a timer at night or perhaps the electricity was out in the entire building. Everything was pitch black even after I blinked several times. An instant wave of fear rushed into me even though I hadn't heard another sound.

I waited for another two full minutes in case there was a generator of some kind.

Of course not.

Very carefully I folded the paper, sliding it into my back pocket. As I felt along the edge of the table, the darkness became suffocating, I calmed my breathing in order to ascertain the direction to the stairs as I reached for the flashlight. It took me three tries to be able to wrap my hand around the smooth cylinder. I was amazed how disorienting the darkness was, throwing me completely off. The instant the beam of light added a warm glow to a succinct area, I took a deep breath of relief.

I was a damn fool to have come here. Some sleuth I was. All I had to do was secure the box back in its position and get the hell out of here.

The task seemed to take forever, perhaps because my hands were clammy, even more so than before. I turned around one last time, making certain everything was in its place then moved quickly toward the door.

The single slight scraping sound seemed to echo in the massive space. While it came from behind me, the noise was far too close for comfort. I turned around slowly, swinging the beam in a basic grid I'd learned from self-defense classes. I could see nothing out of place. I was just jittery from coming close to breaking the law.

The thought gave me a smile and I shifted back toward the stairs, making it only three feet before I heard the noise again, only this time I homed in on what it reminded me of.

Someone purposely tossing a piece of metal against the concrete floor. Very gently I eased my gun from my back, holding both the flashlight and the weapon in two hands as I swung around another three hundred and sixty degrees.

A skittering series of sensations jettied down my spine, falling swiftly to the floor. I wasn't alone. Given the sound was still behind me, likely at least twenty feet away, I knew I had a chance to make it to the stairs. Suddenly I could hear what

reminded me of footsteps heading in my direction, only the gait was entirely different, as if the creature was walking on four legs.

Fuck.

Stop being ridiculous.

Was I?

I swallowed hard before biting my lip to keep from crying out. Was I really thinking there was a beast of some kind in the room? Oh, God. Oh...

Wolf.

I took a deep breath and the scent filling my nostrils was all testosterone, but there was also something else.

The coppery stench of blood.

Was I merely jumpy and nothing more, imagining lions, tigers, and bears? Possibly, but my hackles were raised, every synapse fully alive, my senses electrified but not in the same way as they were around Stone.

I was in danger.

I took two backward steps, moving from toe to heel in an effort to keep from stumbling over something in the darkness. And I could swear the creature mimicked my actions. I repeated the move, taking three steps. The beast did the same. What the fuck was going on? As I stood my ground, controlling my breathing, I could swear there was a low and husky growl permeating the blackness.

Vanessa...

Even though I knew my name hadn't been spoken out loud, the single word reverberated in my mind. The terror was real.

There was no holding back. I took off running, narrowly avoiding slamming into a several boxes. An intense howl rushed all throughout the dark, the guttural sound unlike anything I'd ever heard in my life.

He was dangerous.

He was threatening.

He was prepared to rip me to shreds.

Oh, God. Please. Please.

I sprinted the stairs two at a time, struggling to block out the snapping and growling coming from mere feet behind me. I could almost feel his hot breath cascading over me, could sense the beast nipping at my heels. He was right behind me, although I gathered a sense of him everywhere.

The second I reached the landing, I shot my hands out in an effort to grab the door, the flashlight falling out of my hands. I heard the bulb pop, shoving me into another moment of darkness, only the moon streaming in from the outside door providing any light. Where the hell were the building lights? Where were the parking lot lights?

Another snarl indicated the beast was within two feet. I slammed the door a split second before tumbling backwards as the creature's body thudded against the metal surface. I jumped away, struggling to breathe, clawing my throat with one hand as I aimed the gun smack in the middle.

What the hell?

I knew I had to get out of the building.

Stone. Stone, where are you? Help me. Find me!

There was no reason to call out to him in my mind, but if only he were here. I was shaken to the core, unable to think clearly. I called for him again, but in my mind, I knew I was going to die. Fear unlike anything I'd ever experienced before wrapped around me, dragging me into the very depths of hell I'd felt after every nightmare.

Only this time, it was very real.

Monsters do exist. Monsters do exist.

Nervous laughter floated from my mouth as I pushed my hands against the door, my chest tight from the paralyzing terror.

The moment I was outside, I heard an explosion and I didn't need to look back to know the door was been thrust off its hinges. Seconds later the sound of splintering glass erupted into the night. I was still thirty feet away from my car. The horrible grunting and growling permeated my eardrums. There was no way I would be able to escape.

I reacted to the training I'd received, turning as I removed the safety. I was thrown by the color of his eyes, the golden glow permeating my mind, digging into my very soul. He was powerful and vicious, his muscles bulging as he raced across the parking lot. Everything about him was regal, his fur glistening in the moonlight.

Come to me.

He couldn't be speaking. I blinked, almost paralyzed from the sight of him. Then my need for survival kicked in.

The beast was closer, maybe fifty feet. I took aim, both hands on the weapon. I could swear I heard the sound of the beast's racing heart, could almost tell what he was thinking.

The creature.

The wolf.

I'm coming for you, little girl. I told you there's nowhere you can run or hide from me. I am your true destiny. I am the one you will spend your life with. I. Am. Your. Mate.

"Fuck you," I said, my muscles tense as I aimed smack in the middle of his chest.

Pop! Pop!

The howl the wolf emitted was unlike anything I'd ever heard; so primal in its agony, so angry in its majesty. As the beast fell, collapsing on the pavement, a wave of emotions swept through me.

Painful.

Uncertain.

Despondent.

I forced myself to back away, my arms still shaking as I continued to point the gun in his direction. He howled for a full minute, writhing on the ground. I couldn't stand anymore, turning sharply and running toward the car.

There was a rush of wind directly behind me, another scattering of intense sensations rocketing through. I could feel the wolf's torment as he called to me, but I also sensed his presence. He was closer, only a few feet away. How the hell had he survived the shots?

As if everything had fallen into slow motion, I shifted once again, prepared to shoot, until I realized there was no need.

I felt him, the man I'd longed for during the long nights of loneliness. I sensed his rage, his almost desperate need to protect me.

Stone...

And I knew that my world as I knew it was gone, replaced with a magical reality. As I slowly fell onto my knees, the gun slipping from my hand, I was forced to embrace the truth.

Two wolves lunged toward the beast, their lips curled back, exposing glistening sharp canines. In the light of the moon, I witnessed the attack, creatures of the night prepared to fight to the death.

All for my protection.

Monsters from my nightmares.

Saviors from my dreams.

Beasts of the night.

The Wolfen.

CHAPTER 12



*S*tone

Exposed.

The word had never meant anything to me before, at least not in the sense of what I was feeling now. I took Vanessa into my arms, kicking the passenger door to Gregor's truck closed as he pulled Vanessa's car under the trees.

I stared up at the bright moon, issuing a slight growl. I'd sensed she was in danger the moment Max had walked onto the stairs.

I'd been connected with her to some degree, had felt the blood pumping through her veins. I'd also gathered a sense of her fear as well as a level of acceptance. She'd found a portion of what she'd been looking for.

As Gregor and I had raced toward the city, I'd been comforted by the fact she was still alive. Then there'd been nothing, as if she'd disappeared, but I'd known where to find her. I'd sensed exactly where she was, the peril surrounding her. Nothing was going to stop me from saving her.

My lover.

My angel.

My mate.

The moment she'd called for me, begging me to find her, my wolf had taken over. There was no stopping the

transformation, no denying the burning desire to rip the asshole into shreds. I'd been able to smell him from a mile away, the stink he wore entirely different than that of a Wolfen. He hadn't bothered to mask his scent. Why?

I was still shaking, the adrenaline flow keeping a portion of my wolf alive. Every sense was heightened, the golden glow still surrounding my eyes. I took scattered breaths as I walked toward my cabin, the rage still close to the surface. There was no doubt she'd seen everything, but instead of shock, I'd seen an expression of awe.

Gregor followed me inside, turning on lights as I moved immediately toward the master bedroom. As I eased her down onto the bed, brushing hair from her face, a stream of moonlight shimmered over her porcelain skin. She was far more beautiful at this moment than ever before, yanking at my desire.

I bit back a growl as I pulled a blanket from the end of the bed, placing it over her. She was still cold to the touch, but very much alive. I'd stood in the shadows for a few minutes, merely watching her sleep. I had no way of knowing what she'd remember when she awoke, the event likely highly traumatizing. I dragged my tongue across my still protruding canines, able to taste the blood of the beast.

At least for a few precious minutes, we'd been as one, able to feel the same things, communicate without speaking. She was such a tenacious woman, refusing to accept any direction. She'd disobeyed me on several levels, refusing to back down on her need to find information.

On her desire to hunt the truth.

One word continued to play in my mind that I didn't understand. She'd managed to shut it out of her mind more than once.

Father.

I would need to find out more and would, but only after she'd recovered. The situation was getting out of hand. Why had she been at Montenegro's building in the middle of the night? She

was highly intelligent as well as no fool. Whatever she was searching for, she'd risked far too much, even though I'd sensed her strong conviction even during the battle.

I was firmly convinced Chris Montenegro was behind the attacks.

The fight had been horrific although only lasting a few minutes, the stricken wolf able to race off into the night. He would survive, neither the wounds created from her weapon or the vicious attack causing permanent damage. It had been my decision not to follow him, one that I knew had infuriated Gregor. However, I refused to leave her side.

I took a deep whiff, allowing the sweet scent of her perfume to enter my nostrils, forcing the stench of the LaRue wolf out of my system. He'd been a voracious fighter, capable of doing significant damage; however, I'd sensed he'd pulled back.

As if the sparring was more to his liking.

A game.

The fucker was playing a game with us. Unfortunately, I was aware of the prize. Vanessa. I felt the twisting of my muscles, my wolf threatening to rise to the surface once again. I was forced to turn away, walking out of the room for fear of not being able to control my rage.

The mess had been left for someone else to clean, sirens already close as we'd rushed out of the parking lot. And how would Montenegro react to his wolf boy having been in the middle of a fight with Wolfen? I snickered at the thought.

I found Gregor in the kitchen with a beer in each hand, his expression blank. As he walked toward me, he searched my eyes, finally shaking his head.

"You need to back down, brother. Your beast is far too hungry," he said as he handed me the cold bottle.

I immediately pulled it to my head, rolling it back and forth in an effort to ease the tension. "And I will." I heard the defiance in my voice, the ugliness that had surrounded me for the last few days. Even a man like Gregor didn't deserve my wrath.

To his credit, he said nothing, merely lifting his bottle. “The bastard was strong.”

“He was playing with us,” I countered.

Gregor laughed. “You noticed that too. I could have easily snapped his neck. What bothered me was that he seemed to anticipate our moves. Perhaps I should have ripped his throat apart.”

“And you know as well as I do that if either one of us had, another could have been sent in his place. However, you are right. This particular wolf has sparred with other packs before. He was toying with us, daring us to kill him.”

“Why would he do that?”

Exhaling, I stared at the bottle before taking a gulp. Who could be certain of anything at this point? “I don’t know, but I have a distinct feeling this wolf feels superior, perhaps fueled by whatever payment he is promised. Did you gather his scent?”

He thought about my question, his eyes opening wide. “Yes, pungent in odor as if he was...” He shifted his gaze in my direction.

“Searching for his mate.” Fuck. Did he actually believe that Vanessa belonged to him?

“This isn’t good, brother, and it doesn’t make any sense; however, if Montenegro is behind this, it’s time we deal with him,” Gregor snarled.

“We are required to make certain.” I issued the words with absolute disdain in the tone.

“As if you give a shit, but you’re right and as you well know, there will be questions why the beast wasn’t captured. We had the single opportunity to stop the bastard from killing again.”

“I am aware of that, Gregor. And you know my answer. He’s also the only connection we have to who is behind the attacks, and I doubt the wolf is working alone.” I threw him a nasty glare, daring him to fight me.

He studied me for a full thirty seconds before nodding. “Understood. If that wolf believes Vanessa to be his mate, then

the girl's protection is far more important at this time and you are right that we need information. What she knows could possibly end this."

I was surprised as fuck at his change in attitude and I wasn't certain I was buying it. "I do agree. She has more knowledge than any of us realize. I felt it within her, could read a portion of her mind. She's on a mission that brought the Wolfen into this."

"You really believe her to be your mate."

"Yes. Strongly."

Gregor shook his head. "Well, then I guess there's a reason given she's human, but I still don't like the odds. First Max and now you. That's not what's supposed to happen."

"Perhaps the ancient texts are wrong, the elders keeping something from us."

"Do you really believe that?"

"You saw Markel's face, although what I believe doesn't really matter." I took another pull on the beer.

"Then we question Markel," Gregor suggested.

Sighing, every portion of my body ached. "You know, that wolf came to the Montenegro office looking specifically for Vanessa. He knew she was there, had sensed her presence. I would bet anything on that."

"Maybe his presence had nothing to do with Montenegro. We have to explore the possibility."

"Agreed. The attack felt... personal with the beast."

Sighing, Gregor stole a glance at the hallway. "What are you going to do now?"

"I have a plan in mind, including finding out everything she knows."

"Why do I have the feeling you're going to do something stupid?" Gregor studied me intently, taking several gulps of his beer.

“I know what I’m doing and it must be done. I am still alpha of my pack. I must protect them as well as keeping the Wolfen safe.”

He finished off his beer, moving past me and dumping the bottle in the trash. “You know there’s going to be an inquiry as to why we didn’t bring the wolf back for judgment.”

“I’m aware of that. I’ll take the full blame.”

“Don’t be a martyr, Stone. It doesn’t look good on you. I’ll have your back. Let’s just hope there aren’t any additional murders based on our decision.”

“Why did you help me, Gregor? After all the shit you’ve given me, why did you bother?”

“I have my reasons just like you have yours.” He walked toward the kitchen door, gripping the doorframe. “I admire you more than you know.”

His words caught me off guard. “And why is that?”

“After you and your pack were banished, you never retaliated. You also made certain the Nightwalker soldiers didn’t either. You took an honorable path while I allowed myself to fall into despair for decisions I’d made, consequences I’d been forced to face. You have a level of strength in you that I will never have.”

I heard his heartfelt words, perhaps the only ones he’d ever said to me, and contemplated what he was saying. Honorable. I’d never felt that way in my life. “The Wolfen are strong and you are no exception. You will find your place, but it’s not in Max’s shadow.”

He laughed softly, tapping his fingers on the wood. “I hope you’re right, my brother. I really do. I’ll let Max know what transpired. I’m certain we will all have a discussion in the morning.”

I knew that to be true.

I said nothing as he walked out, merely standing in the same place, sipping on liquid that suddenly had no taste. Another round of anger boiled deep inside of me, haunting me in ways

no one would ever be able to understand. I'd never really belonged. Not to the Wolfen. Not to the Nightwalkers, no matter my father's position as leader.

I gripped the counter, the adrenaline biting. I wanted nothing more than to live a normal life as a human, even though I honestly was no longer certain what that meant. As I closed my eyes, I could see the look of shock on her face.

"Can I get one of those?"

I snapped my head up, the sound of her voice chilling as well as yanking on my hunger. "You mean a beer?"

"Unless you have something stronger." She walked inside the room while I fought to control my beast, pushing away the burning desire to remain as my wolf.

"Tequila?" I asked, unable to turn around and face her.

"A shot would be nice. I'll also take that beer," Vanessa said with almost no emotion. There was no tremor of fear in her voice or even a hint of anger. Just... nothing.

I finished off the rest of my brew, tossing the bottle over my shoulder into the trash and grabbing two more out of the refrigerator. I was finally forced to face her, the hard thud as I placed the bottles on the counter causing no reaction from her. After grabbing two shot glasses, I reached under the counter, yanking out the bottle of tequila, pouring both full. "A woman after my own heart." As I pushed the bottle of beer and glass in her direction, she didn't hesitate, taking the shot within seconds followed by several gulps of beer.

She closed her eyes, purring slightly before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. As she moved closer, I could feel such energy within her, a vibrancy I hadn't anticipated.

I took the shot, savoring the burn as I eased the glass down once again.

Her eyes never left mine as she poured two more shots, lifting her glass as if in a toast. "To the beasts of the night."

I had no idea what to make of her statement or the way her entire body was aroused, her hard nipples pressing against her

sweater, the scent of her pussy unmistakable.

Vanessa licked the rim of the glass, pursing her lips together. "I needed that."

There was an odd tension between us, a moment where my entire body stiffened, including my cock. She seemed to sense my desire, a slight smile curling on her face.

"*Can you read my mind?*" she asked without opening her mouth.

"*Yes.*"

This time, her eyes opened wide and she took several steps away, her expression bursting with horror. "How?" Her voice continued to have an edge.

"Because of our connection." I said the words simply, without any inflection. Even as I watched her limited reaction, I could feel her ravaging emotions, the myriad questions that kept her on edge.

"I don't get any of this, why I can understand you or how there are beasts walking amongst humans. Creatures of the night. Wolves ready to rip people apart. I have to be insane to accept what I witnessed."

"Yet you've already embraced the truth. Is it so difficult to believe that humans aren't the only species with intelligence on this earth?"

Vanessa wrinkled her nose. "No, but I can't believe that there hasn't been more information about you or any other wolf breed for that matter."

"Wolves are loners by design and there are also rules to follow, ones that must not be broken." I tilted my head, taking shallow breaths.

"And why are you and I so close?"

The only answer to provide was the truth. "Because you are my mate." Her scattered breaths nearly ripped me apart.

"Because you are Wolfen."

I chuckled softly, pouring us both another shot. “Yes. I am Wolfen.”

“It’s not funny, Stone. I’m confused as hell and I’m honestly no longer certain whether I want to find any answers.”

“I’m not laughing and you’re right, nothing about this is funny. You already knew the truth years ago even though you found it difficult to believe. Whatever brought you here has everything to do with confirming the dreams you’ve mentioned, the deep hunger to find answers you’ve been seeking your entire life. That’s why you don’t seem surprised, only curious as to why you’ve longed for something you couldn’t explain. Tell me I’m wrong.”

She pursed her mouth, blinking several times. “I don’t believe it. I refuse to accept that there are monsters living among humans. There has to be another explanation.”

“For why men can turn into beasts or why your desires have intensified since you came back to Denver?” I allowed my voice to carry a whisper of a growl, the yearning building deep inside.

“Both,” she admitted as she inched even closer to the counter, twirling her glass back and forth. “And you’re right, I won’t acknowledge what my mind refuses to believe without the full truth. I can’t. I’m a damn attorney. How can I accept anything less?”

“Then don’t.”

“Where’s my gun?”

Another question I hadn’t anticipated. “I have it in my office.”

“That’s mine,” she stated firmly.

“And nobody is taking it away from you.” I’d admired her tenacity and strength before. Being able to aim at a moving target, hitting him not once but twice in the chest was more than admirable. It meant she had true skill. Too bad the asshole hadn’t succumbed to his injuries.

She gazed at me curiously, finally nodding once. “All right, I’ll accept that. Now, I’m curious. What does being a Wolfen

mean, exactly? That you turn into a creature every night, or forced to transform during the full moon? Do you hunt and eat people?”

“Somehow, I think you already know the answers to your questions.”

She gave me a slight shake of her head, her brow furrowing. “You give me far too much credit. I have no idea if what I believe is the truth or simply a product of my imagination fueled by a child’s fantasies.”

“Then tell me what you do know.”

“I know that a creature accosted me tonight, following me into the basement of that building, hunting me like prey. I was only yards in front of the beast when he burst through a metal door, his body smashing through thick glass before chasing me. I could hear his heavy pants, the growls he emitted as he came closer. Even though my heart was in my throat, his scattered pulse echoing in my ears, I was rational enough to know what I was experiencing. I’ll never forget the moment I finally turned to face the monster.” She pressed her fingers against her lips, taking several deep breaths. “His eyes. God, his eyes burned into mine.”

I took deep breaths, my wolf clawing once again.

“He was a damn wolf, but he wasn’t. I could tell he was a man inside. That sounds nuts, even though you’re right, I’ve been searching for the truth my entire life.”

“That’s why you’re here? To solve a mystery read in a book?”

“That is one of the reasons,” she said more casually. Still, I noticed the quiver in her bottom lip. She wasn’t telling me everything.

“Here is the truth, sweet Vanessa. What you read in the ancient book you found as a child is all true, although I assume the stories surrounding it were highly embellished. The Wolfen were born of disease and it is likely we will die that way. We are strong in numbers, our sister packs located in every part of the world. We fight our natural tendencies, our rules forbidding us to turn unless we are threatened, and I assure

you, that's becoming more of a necessity. There are factions of humans hunting us, attempting to take what rightfully belongs to us. There are different breeds of wolves determined to thwart our power. We will not be exiled, nor will we be executed like animals. We have a place on this earth." Snarling, I looked away, surprised at my own heightened conviction.

"Why are they hunting you?"

"Because humans fear what they cannot understand." I leaned over further, allowing my eyes to highlight the beast within.

She didn't back away even as her breathing became ragged. "You really believe your kind is going to die, succumbing to this disease? That's not what the book said."

I snickered. "The great ancient texts are mere stories in my mind, fables told to relieve some of the animosity of humans centuries before. However, I have my beliefs, our elders have theirs. They are certain the onslaught of the disease will be within only a few years."

"Which will kill humans as it did before?"

I merely nodded my affirmation.

Vanessa sagged against the counter. "My God, this is insane. You mentioned your elders. This house is located in Roselake. Isn't it?"

"This house is in a village to the west of Roselake, a community of a pack called the Nightwalkers."

"I... don't understand."

I lifted my bottle, chuckling once again. "A long story involving love and trust. However, I am still Wolfen, a leader in the community, alpha of the Nightwalkers." I could tell the information was difficult for her to process, her lovely eyes highlighting a growing concern.

Vanessa bit her lip. "Roselake, a city that's not on any map, one built to protect your kind."

The information she found wasn't written anywhere. "The city is on indeed on certain maps, although our elders have made

certain what information is known to the humans is guarded. After all, Roselake became a fucking tourist attraction. Now, you answer me. Where did you find this information?”

“I have my sources.”

“And you will tell me them.”

“Why should I trust you, Stone? Why? If you were Wolfen all those years ago when we were close, why didn’t you tell me?”

My answer was one that had haunted me for years. “Because I wanted you to live your life without discovering the truth. Because I cared about you enough to let you go, even after you nearly destroyed me.” I hadn’t planned on admitting how much her disappearance had bothered me, but the words needed to be said.

“I’m... sorry, Stone. I didn’t want to leave you. I knew what we had was special. You have no idea how many times I wanted to call you, just to hear your voice. I was a fool, pretending that I didn’t care about you, but I had to in order to protect my heart. I was wrong.” Her eyes misted over before she looked away, reaching for her glass.

I allowed her to sip on her tequila before speaking. Her words tugged at me, the passion we shared second to the way she’d made the man inside feel. I closed my eyes briefly. “We must talk honestly, Vanessa. There is much that I need to learn from you as you need to understand.”

“Am I your prisoner?”

“You are required to stay with me at this time.”

She tipped her glass. “My God, your words are stilted, practiced, Stone. That means I’m your prisoner.”

“That means I must protect you at all costs. The wolf you encountered tonight may strike again.”

“I am certain he will.”

“How?” I growled, gripping the edge of the counter. When she hesitated, I fought to keep my anger at bay. “Tell me how, Vanessa.”

“Because he also claims I’m his mate.”

I bristled more than I should have, my grip on the bottle threatening to crush the glass. “He told you that?” Gregor and I had been right.

“No, that’s the interesting thing, Stone. He didn’t use words, but I knew exactly what he was thinking.”

“That’s not possible.” She’d been able to read his mind or was she just assuming given the wolf’s aggressive actions?

“Just like any of this is possible? I woke up this morning not realizing I was going to fall into my nightmares. Werewolves are real?” she asked, laughing. “Wait, no, you’re not an actual werewolf, are you? You’re just some hybrid creature, or so I’ve been told.”

“By whom?”

“Does it matter?” she challenged. “Does any of this actually matter? When am I going to wake up?”

I took several deep breaths, calculating what I was going to say. “Why are you in Denver, Vanessa? Do not lie to me. You fell into the world of the Wolfen, but that’s not why you came back.”

“As I told you before, it’s none of your business.”

“Tell me!” I smashed the bottle down before I could stop my actions, hissing. “I need the truth in order to keep you safe.”

“I...” she faltered, looking away.

I took a chance, the only thing that made any sense. “Does this have something to do with your father?”

She narrowed her eyes, shaking from her own anger. “How would you know that? I never said a word about him.”

“I read your mind, although you blocked the majority of your thoughts extremely well. You are quite powerful in your own right.” Which also disturbed the hell out of me.

“Powerful? I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, Stone, other than pretending that if I find any information about my father I won’t be crushed by the truth. Maybe he didn’t want me.

Maybe he was the horrible person my mother told me he'd become." Her entire face twisted as she glared at me, finally pushing away both of the drinks and running her hand through her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm not making any sense. If you want to know the truth, yes, that's why I came here, to find my father. I made this search more important than everything else in my life."

I softened, stripping the anger from my voice. "What have you found?"

"Absolute crap. It's like he either didn't exist or doesn't want to be found."

"That's why you're working for that asshole and why you were at the company tonight. Isn't it?"

"You want another truth? I found proof my father lived and worked in Denver for the first time in my entire life. He was employed by Montenegro for at least a while, although someone went to great lengths to make it seem like he hadn't."

I had no idea what to say. "What are you talking about?"

She grumbled as she reached into her back pocket, thrusting a piece of folded paper in my direction. "A long time ago, I found a simple note with my father's name, alongside the Montenegro Corporation and a single word. Wolfen. There were a couple of love letters to prove my mother had been involved with him. Other than the fact my father was a horrible criminal, that's all I was told about him. Nothing more. As you might imagine, an attorney with a curious mind might find the lack of information intolerable."

As I took the paper from her hands, I was floored at the lengths she'd gone to in order to seek him out. There had to be more to the story than she was telling me. "Why is it so important for you?"

"You mean other than the obvious? Because I know my entire life has been a lie. Because I haven't felt whole since I was a small child. Because other than my mother, I have no family. How would you feel if your mother told you that your father was some kind of horrible criminal?" She shook from her

anger, her hands clenching into fists. “Have you heard of his name before?”

I unfolded the paper, glancing at the name. “Unfortunately, I don’t know him.”

“I’m not surprised. No one seems to, with the exception of a single reporter who wrote an article on the Wolfen years ago. Poor asshole. Mr. O’Rourke turned into some kind of freak, terrified to leave his house for fear the Wolfen will get him. He certainly wasn’t... happy when I asked him about my father, as if there was a burning secret he would take to the grave, but I could swear he recognized the picture I showed him.”

A reporter. I’d never heard there was an article written on the Wolfen. No wonder my father and the other elders had been so guarded over the years. Notoriety we didn’t need.

“You have a picture of your father?”

“On my phone.” She eyed me carefully before tugging the phone from her pocket, sliding her finger across the screen. “It’s a picture of a photograph so the quality sucks.”

I took the phone from her hand, zooming in on the man’s face. She was right, his features difficult to really see, but I was able to glean enough. “Not anyone I remember from the pack.”

“I could tell by the way Mr. O’Rourke acted that there is more to the story.”

While I couldn’t make sense of everything she was telling me, her frustration was palpable and very real. “Do you have reason to believe your father was a Wolfen?”

“I honestly don’t know, Stone. At this point, I’m terrified to find out, but I refuse to back down. I have to learn about him, if for no other reason than to let him go.”

“Then we will talk with the elders. Records are kept of every wolf.”

“The elders,” she whispered, rubbing her arm. “Then I look forward to meeting them. I know you feel the need to protect me, but I have a life. I need to determine what the hell this piece of paper means.”

“Do you honestly think that Chris Montenegro isn’t going to realize that you were involved in some way with the disturbance at his office?”

Huffing, she looked away. “You’re really going to keep me here.”

“Until I know your life is no longer in danger, absolutely. You disobeyed me, risking your life.”

“You don’t run mine.” Her defiance had returned.

“And you agreed to follow my command. You broke my trust.”

She snorted, shaking her head and backing away. “I lied. Okay? I knew if I didn’t that you would never leave. I’m sorry.”

“I risked exposure to the pack in order to keep you alive.”

Vanessa took a deep breath. “You didn’t have to save me. I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Damn it, woman. You’re infuriating. I risked being banished from my people because I give a damn about you. Because I love you.” I was shocked at the admittance, the words lingering in the air.

She seemed taken aback, her entire face twisting. “You love me?”

I shook my head, my hunger increasing. “I have since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Her features softened and she reached out, brushing her hand over mine. “I’ve loved you from that very moment as well.”

Love.

The word held an entirely different meaning for the Wolfen.

“That doesn’t erase the fact that you deserve to be punished.” Every raw emotion took over, my mind reeling from the thought that she could have been killed.

“Punished? No. Hell, no. You’re never going to do that again. While I appreciate what you did for me, I can’t surrender to

these rules and regulations that you seem willing to abide by. I am human. I do have a life.” She turned sharply, taking purposeful steps toward the door.

I caught her easily, jerking her closer, forcing her to face me. “You will obey me.” I was torn between my desire for her and the rush of fear that wouldn’t leave, as if the LaRue wolf had taken the upper hand, prepared to make her his own.

That was never going to happen.

“You’re not my master.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I crushed my mouth over hers, yanking her against my chest. All the damning thoughts and anger I’d had rushed through me, the horrible notion I’d almost lost her cutting through me like a knife. I thrust my tongue inside, dominating hers as the passion erupted between us. I was a man on fire, one in desperate need and there was nothing anyone could do to stop me.

She wiggled in my hold, beating her fists against me as the kiss continued. Everything about the moment was cathartic, every cell in my body electrified. I knew she felt the same, her entire body shaking from the current flowing between us.

I pulled her onto her toes, sliding my hand down her back and cupping her bottom. The feel of her in my arms was exactly what I needed, what I’d craved since the moment I’d walked out her door. I couldn’t get enough, my cock aching to the point I was in extreme anguish, my balls tight as drums.

Moaning, she pressed the palms of her hands against my chest, digging her nails in as her anger shifted to need. The moment she ground her hips against mine, I wanted nothing more than to drag her over the counter, fucking her like some wild animal. I could read her thoughts, her need to find a sense of home. And I wanted nothing more than to give it to her.

I finally broke the kiss, cupping her jaw as I took several deep breaths. “You are required to obey me. Do you understand?”

“Stone. I don’t know what’s happening here.”

“You will. You will begin to understand many things, sweet Vanessa, but you must first learn there are rules that must be

followed.”

“And if I don’t?” she mused, her eyes darting back and forth.

I shifted until I was able to grab one of the kitchen chairs, yanking it into the open. “Then you will be punished.”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“You will. Lower your jeans.”

Her mouth twisted once again, her eyes full of the same fire of rebellion I’d seen so many times. “That’s not fair.”

“Keeping you safe as well as alive is very fair. Lower your jeans or I’ll be forced to do it for you and trust me, you won’t like that.” I released my hold, taking a single step backwards.

She sputtered, her face flushing from anger as well as embarrassment. There was also a desire that couldn’t be denied and we both knew it. She belonged to me. She would forever be mine.

Not the beast.

Not the wretched monster who hungered to claim her.

She was mine. All mine.

“Vanessa...” I allowed her name to roll off my tongue, the deep and husky sound creating goosebumps along her face and neck.

She closed her eyes, taking another step back. “You’re such a bastard.” As she fumbled with the button on her jeans, her entire body trembled. Very slowly she lowered her jeans and panties, biting on her lower lip as she folded her arms across her chest.

I sat down hard, pulling her by the arm and placing her over my lap. “Everything you do has consequences, Vanessa. Everything.”

“So you’ve told me.”

I yanked on her shirt, jerking it up to the middle of her back as she slapped her hands against the floor, undulating back and forth across my cock. She had no way of knowing what she

did to me, the hunger that would never be sated. I slid my fingers down the crack of her ass, relishing the way the touch of her skin made me feel. As I caressed her bottom, moving from one side to the other, she moaned.

“One day you will understand why my protection is vital.” I allowed the words to sink in before smacking my hand down on her rounded globe, tingling from the single touch. When I brought it down several more times, my heart raced from a combination of fear and longing.

She threw back her hand, jerking up and tossing her head. “That hurts.”

“As it should.” I snagged her wrist, holding it against her back as I continued the spanking, moving my hand rapidly from one side to the other. The friction from her moves was driving me insane, but the need to keep her in line, to help her learn was a requirement. More so now than ever.

The damn wolf had his sights set on her and I would take pleasure in gutting him. As I brought my hand down over and over again, her cries of anguish turned into moans of sheer pleasure. Yet my thoughts remained rattled, the understanding that the LaRue wolf held some kind of connection with her damning. What hadn't the elders told us? What secrets were they hiding for fear their own pack could possibly turn against them?

And did Max have any idea what we were all facing?

The questions were daunting, keeping my anger and my wolf on edge. I rubbed my fingers up and down the crack of her ass, the sight of her swollen pink pussy making my mouth water. I slid the tip of my pinky past her swollen folds, savoring the way her juice slickened my finger. I was shaking from desire, doing everything I could to control my reaction to her.

She was such a powerful aphrodisiac, cutting through to my very core. “There are dangers outside of this city, ones that will find you. Hunt for you. Try and take you.”

“Why? Why am I important?” Her question was asked in earnest and one that I couldn't provide the answer for.

“We will learn,” I said gruffly, peppering her heated bottom with smacks, each one harder than the one before. She had to learn to listen, to heed my commands in order to keep her safe.

She shifted back and forth, opening her legs as far as the jeans would allow. I was unable to resist, sliding two fingers deep into her pussy. When she squeezed her muscles, it was all I could do to keep from ripping her clothes from her.

Control. You must learn control.

I no longer cared whether I would be punished by the council. What I’d done to protect her had been the right thing to do.

“Oh. Oh. Oh.” She tossed her head back and forth, no longer fighting me.

“You’re wet and hot for me,” I said in a low and husky voice.

“No.”

I exhaled, allowing my breath to slide across her skin. “You will not lie to me. I ask you again. Are you hungry for me?”

Her hesitation continued to dig at my wolf.

“Yes. God, yes and I hate myself for it.” Her answer was laced with a hint of bitterness.

“You long to have my cock buried inside your sweet pussy.”

“Mmmm... Yes. Sir.”

I knew she was challenging me, still trying to take the lead. I resumed the spanking, enjoying the way her skin reddened, the heat continuing to build. I tapped her pussy lips with my fingers before plunging three inside this time, driving in brutal strokes.

“Yes. Oh, God. Yes.”

“Only good little girls get what they want.” As I slid my fingers into the cleft of her bottom, she clenched her ass cheeks, moaning softly.

The moment I drove my fingers inside her dark hole, I could tell she was close to coming.

“Oh. Please,” she whispered, grinding her hips wildly.

“Not yet. We aren’t finished with your punishment.” I thrust deep inside several more times before resuming her spanking, taking my time to cover every inch of her beautiful bottom. Her ragged moans were a sweet reward. When I knew she’d had enough, I rested my hand against her skin, my fingers tingling from the connection. “You did very well.” I caressed her for some time until I could feel the tension return in her body.

“What now, Stone? Are you going to fuck me, taking me like a true wild animal?”

There was nothing that had prepared me for the sting of her words, the harshness with which she’d said them. I eased her off my lap, giving her a gentle but firm push backwards. “You don’t understand.”

“No, you’re right. I can’t. I need you to explain everything to me,” she whispered. “I do love you, but I can’t accept everything. You have to understand it’s not easy for me.”

“Yeah, I get it but you’re going to have to trust me.”

“And that’s exactly what I want to do.” There was so much anguish in her admittance. She placed her hand on my shoulder before moving away, tugging on her jeans.

“There is much more to the story.”

“As there is with mine.”

I nodded, rubbing my eyes. “Then we must trust each other. Can you do that?”

Vanessa hesitated, taking several deep breaths. “I want to, Stone. I really do. Tell me why I should.”

“Because there is a dark force at hand.”

“Meaning?”

I finally looked into her eyes. “Two of our kind have been murdered.”

“Murdered?”

“Yes. They were gunned down.”

“I don’t understand. You can be killed?” She laughed as if her question was ridiculous.

“While our bodies are impervious to the majority of human diseases and other frailties, there are ways we can be killed. What had occurred is something else entirely, bullets prepared with a coating that poisons our systems.”

“A coating? That’s... Odd. I’m sorry, Stone.”

I studied her eyes, the clear remorse infused with something even more damning.

Fear.

But of the situation or the monster standing in front of her?

“Someone has a vendetta against the Wolfen and I believe that you are right in the middle of whatever is going on.”

“You think I’m involved?” she huffed.

“I believe you are the catalyst, perhaps because of what you are searching for.”

She clenched her jaw. “Then you answer me this honestly. Is my father Wolfen? Is that why these murders are occurring?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple, but that’s exactly what we’re going to find out.”

“How do you plan on doing that, Stone? If these bullets mean your death warrant, then why? Why risk your life and that of anyone in your pack?”

“Because every pack member would risk their life for another. It’s called honor, Vanessa. It’s called respect. Our pack will go hunting.”

“My God, that makes you exactly like the bastard who’s murdering people.”

“The difference is that family means everything to us. I would die in order to protect you.”

“Why, and don’t you dare tell me because I’m your mate, Stone.”

The woman was able to rile me so damn easily, yanking on every chain. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, it freaking matters. Tell me. You want me to trust you when I can’t even trust my own mind, so why are you so dead set on protecting me with your life?” She stormed closer, her expression full of the same kind of exasperation that I felt.

“Because,” I growled, a mixture of raging anger and raw desire mixing to an explosive state. “I fell in love with you years ago, Vanessa. I couldn’t get you out of my mind. I couldn’t erase the scent covering me, your fragrance intoxicating me. I wasn’t able to find solace in anyone else because there was no comparison.” I yanked her into my arms, darting my eyes back and forth. “Why? I will die for you. My mate. My lover. My life.”

CHAPTER 13



*B*east

“Rrrraaawwrrr!”

I bellowed into the night, my fury overwhelming as I raced into the forest, heading away from the damn village. I’d seen them together, the two lovers embracing and all I could think about was plunging my canines into the Wolfen’s neck. That’s all he deserved. Hell, that’s the only thing any of the damn pack should receive. They were nothing but martyrs, pretending to be human.

She belonged to me.

Me!

She was mine. My mate.

My destiny.

I was almost blinded by the building desire, my cock still aching from the sight of her luscious lips and long hair, the curves of her body and the softness of her skin. I’d come close to tasting her, taking her in every way I’d imagined since laying eyes on her.

Mine.

Mine!

Mine!

Fury nearly drove me to madness, my heart hammering against the thick ribcage of my wolf, my thirst for her reaching new heights.

I'd witnessed the ravaging kiss the bastard had given her and the way he'd pressed his hands across her naked skin. I'd seen him disciplining her and heard her soft moans of delight from the brutal manner in which he'd punished her.

I took ragged breaths, confused as to my intense reaction. I'd been controlled all my life, able to avoid the kind of yearning that had led to the demise of so many of my pack. Why now? Why... her?

I closed my eyes, envisioning her, my cock throbbing to the point I would need relief soon.

Vanessa...

I called out to her once again. She'd heard me before. She'd been very aware of my connection. I laughed, rubbing my hand across my mouth until my sharp teeth pricked my paw. I had to get control. I took a deep breath, holding it until my lungs expanded fully. I was strong and virile I was capable of withstanding this bullshit. Yes, I would take her, train her.

Use her.

However, she would thrive in my possession. She would flourish with my training, begging to surrender to my every need. I dragged my tongue across my sharp canines, savoring the slight whiff of her remaining in my system.

Soon, Vanessa. I will take you soon and no one else will ever touch you again.

I issued a series of low-slung growls, enjoying the fear emanating from every creature of the night. I was a king and soon there wouldn't be a single beast or human who didn't bow down.

Every muscle in my body was tense, the blood pumping wildly as I raced through the darkness, the scent of small prey driving me to a famished state. I wanted nothing more than to crush their bodies with my hands, savoring the blood of their veins, but I had requirements to follow. I almost laughed at the

realization I'd sold my soul to another human monster, one capable of extinguishing my power with the wave of a hand.

I'd been a fool to accept the money, my need for revenge fueling my decision. Money no longer mattered in a world where members of my pack were dying, succumbing to the ancient curse no one had believed in. My mission was personal, a fact that had somehow been discovered and used against me.

I snarled as I raced toward the outskirts of the city, ignoring my increasing hunger even as every portion of my body shook from longing as well as rage. Tonight would be different. Tonight would bring about change.

Tonight, I would be king.

I continued on my path, slowing as I came close to the street where the bastard lived. I would take great pleasure in my actions, more so than any of the others. This kill was personal, a moment of retaliation that would be freeing in so many ways. I padded close to the house, studying the single street light almost a block away. All was perfectly quiet. While there were no lights on in the house, I knew it was only a matter of time.

Patience.

I'd learned the art of biding my time. I dug my claws into the dirt, taking a deep whiff of the other creatures in close proximity, their scents driving me to near madness. As I heard a series of howls, I lifted my paw, slathering my tongue across the swollen pads. The domestic animals had heard the cry, their innate need to run with the wolves something their human captors could never understand.

After only a few minutes, the stench of gasoline permeated the air as a car approached. I wouldn't have long to wait. As the oversized truck pulled into the driveway, I shifted closer, my keen eyesight able to identify the driver. Yes, he was the one, a monster in his own right. As he cut the engine, I waited. There was no reason to rush.

Only when he'd climbed out of the vehicle, closing the door and engaging the lock did I advance. The howling of the dogs suddenly stopped, as if they were aware the predator was about to strike. After the human walked toward the side door, fumbling with his keys in the darkness, only then did I choose to strike.

As I sliced my sharp claws into his neck, dragging him into the backyard, the shock kept him from screaming for help. When his instinct kicked in, finally struggling for his very survival, I clamped down on his arm, jerking him onto his back as he wailed, begging for help.

Adrenaline rushed through me, every muscle and tendon on fire, blood soaring through my veins. I was so alive and as I peered down at him, saliva dripping from my gums onto his face and neck, he began to understand there was no escape.

There was no way to avoid the monster.

"No. No!" he screamed, as if begging for forgiveness.

No one would be saved from my wrath.

I tipped my head back, the sharp howl penetrating the night before slowly lowering my head, allowing him to see the reflection of himself in my eyes. The single growl was little more than an acknowledgment of his terror seconds before I lunged.

* * *

Vanessa

Terror.

Desire.

Confusion.

There was no escaping the man who'd captured not only my body but my heart. I continued to shake as Stone pulled me into his arms, the roughness of his hold and the heat of our

combined desire only fueling the fire that burned deep within. There was no understanding of my feelings for him or the longing that refused to be denied.

I wanted him.

I craved him.

I couldn't live without him.

My mate.

The words were chilling even whispered in my own mind, the realization that the Wolfen truly existed far too startling. Ravaging and intense fear should be rocketing through my mind and my body, but instead, I was drawn closer to him, a secret revealed. Perhaps I'd known since the very beginning that he wasn't a typical man. I almost laughed at the ridiculousness of my thoughts. I slid my arms around his neck, entangling my fingers in his hair as he jerked me onto my toes, the kiss dazzling and uncontrollable.

He dominated my tongue, grinding his hips against me until the feel of his throbbing cock was almost too much to bear. I wanted to writhe beneath his rugged body, surrendering to his dark and intense needs. I longed to wrap my lips around his thick shaft, sucking until he erupted down my throat.

I was shaking as our teeth gnashed together, my pussy clenching and releasing over and over again. I no longer cared about rationality, my yearning too great.

Stone crawled his hands down my back, cupping my bottom and squeezing. The ache from the spanking had turned into a moment of euphoria, my system erupting with a shower of electricity.

He lifted me into his arms, taking long strides out of the kitchen as the kiss continued, guttural sounds slipping past his lips. As he carried me into the bedroom, I became lost in the moment, longing to feel the heat of his skin.

When he eased me onto my feet, breaking the intimate moment, he issued a series of growls. The darkness was surreal but the glow in his eyes stunning, his irises surrounded by the most beautiful shimmer of gold. He peppered my

cheeks with kisses, aggressive and hungry. He nipped my lower lip before biting down on my chin.

I shifted my hands to his shirt, ripping away the buttons in my effort to get to him. The moment I placed both palms on his naked skin, he threw his head back and roared, the sound permeating the dense space and leaving me with tingles. Panting, I dug my nails into his chest, jutting my hips forward until I undulated them back and forth across his.

As he slowly lowered his head, the look on his face was carnal, a beast ready to ravage his prey. He yanked at my sweater, roughly jerking it over my head, his eyes continually darting back and forth. "Mine. Forever mine. I want you." There was nothing like the iridescent glow in his eyes, stunning as they drew me into his very soul. For a few seconds, I was able to catch a glimpse of his wolf, the stunning revelation of seeing such a magnificent creature creating a skip in my heartbeat. I was mesmerized by him, the dual nature of his being that should be nothing but terrifying.

As Stone dragged his tongue across his teeth, a moan slipped past my mouth. An even huskier sound rolled from his throat as he lowered his gaze, his command clear.

"I will take you, defend you, protect and train you."

I pushed away from him, the unspoken words chilling in every manner. I tugged the straps of my bra down my arms, reaching around to unfasten the catch. As the lingerie fell to the floor, his nostrils flared, and he took a step closer.

"I will fuck you in every hole, satisfy you in every way just as you will fulfill my every desire."

My breath skipped as I fought to unfasten my jeans, struggling to kick off my shoes. When he took another step closer, I shifted backwards, still feeling the heat of his breath cascading along my flesh.

As I pushed the material down my hips, his chest began to rise and fall at a rapid rate, beads of perspiration sliding down his gorgeous forehead.

"Then there will be forever."

Forever. The single word meant nothing yet everything. My heart raced as I kicked out of my jeans, my ability to focus gone. He advanced, his upper lip curling, a true predator claiming his mate.

“Now, I will have you.”

His tone of voice was entirely different, more beast than man. Instead of fear, I was more aroused than ever, my nipples standing at full attention. He slowly lowered his head before cupping my breasts, dragging his tongue across his lips before baring his teeth. I could swear there were sharp points on his incisors, the creation of his wolf.

I could barely breathe as I caressed his skin, kneading his tender flesh as he pinched my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. “Oh. Oh...” The pain was incredible, my entire body tingling. I wanted more.

More anguish.

More roughness.

I was wild with my own desire, sliding my hand down between his legs, stroking up and down until he issued a series of guttural sounds. “Be careful, little girl.”

“Or what?”

“Or you’ll get everything you deserve.” His laugh wasn’t human, the heat surrounding his body all consuming, his skin searing my fingers.

“Then do it.” I squeezed my hand around his throbbing cock, watching his changing expressions. The beast was going to ravage every inch of me, refusing to take no for an answer.

He wasted no time, ripping away my panties in a frantic state, all the while growling in a husky manner. I struggled to release his shaft and the moment I was able to wrap my hand around the base, I shuddered deep inside. This was perfect. This was...

Inhuman.

As he tore off his shirt, I drank in the rich scent of him, the wild beast breaching the surface. He’d been my fantasy for

years, a calling that I'd never been able to understand. There'd been no rationalizing the attraction or the truth. He was a beast. There was also no way of controlling what we shared, the last remaining barrier shattered between us.

He became crazed, pushing me hard against the wall, the force knocking the wind out of me. "You aren't in control."

The words were far too delicious in their demand, his guttural tone gripping my heart. I became ravenous in the same manner even as he hovered over me, sliding both my arms over my head and intertwining our fingers. A slight smile curled on the corner of his lip as he leaned against me, the electricity soaring to the point I could no longer breathe.

He shifted his hips back and forth, teasing me relentlessly. My pussy ached, my nipples longing for his hot mouth.

"Are you wet for me?" he asked, his eyes flashing.

"Yes."

"Do you hunger for me?"

I rocked against him, struggling in his hold but there was no getting away. I was his. "Always."

He chuckled darkly, rubbing his lips across mine. "Then I'm going to devour you." He kissed me gently, darting his tongue just inside my mouth. The touch was enigmatic, tingling all over.

I was surprised at his tenderness, taking his time to savor the taste. I dug my fingers into his hand, closing my eyes as he slid his lips across my cheek, slowly moving to my neck. All the while he slid his tongue back and forth, the excitement building, juice slickening my inner thighs. Lights flashed in front of my field of vision as he nipped my earlobe, uttering several deep and penetrating growls.

"Ravage you," he whispered, licking all the way down the length of my neck. He dragged his tongue across my collarbone, swirling the tip to just above my breasts.

"Oh, God. Oh..." The sensations were incredible, the fire in my belly going wild.

“Mmmm... It’s time.”

He suddenly swept me into his arms, carrying me to the bed, his strong muscles keeping me aloft as he leaned over, gradually easing me all the way down. There was such control in his actions, a carefulness I hadn’t expected. When I was completely nestled against the comforter, he brushed hair from my eyes, allowing his fingers to touch and twirl my long strands of hair.

I studied his face, the emotions running so damn high as he flexed his fingers open, holding them over my face for a full five seconds before allowing his rough pads to touch. He slid his hand down, barely adding any pressure against my skin. Then he reached my throat, wrapping his fingers around the tender spots in my neck, his hold firm.

“Such a delicate flower,” he said absently, squeezing once before releasing, continuing his path down my chest ever so slowly. Every muscle in him was tense even though he was fastidious in his actions.

I couldn’t take my eyes off him as he explored, tickling my skin as he moved lightly past my stomach to my leg. Shivering, every touch was incredible, my skin seared from the heat of his fingers. I tried to remain still, enjoying the quiet of our shared peace, if only for a little while.

I had no doubt all hell would break loose, the true monster rearing his ugly head. Why was this happening? Why were there people being murdered in such a violent fashion?

I felt the weight on the bed change as he leaned over, pressing his palms on either side of my legs. His eyes never leaving me, he dragged his tongue up from my calf, taking his time as he swirled the tip.

A moan slipped past my lips as his tongue sent another round of current dancing down my legs. I realized my breathing was heavy as he repeated the move on my other leg, goosebumps now popping along every inch of my naked skin. I was thrown into a world of bliss, the moment surreal. I could hear the ragged noises coming from my mouth, even though I didn’t

recognize them. I tossed my head back and forth as he blew across my pussy, bucking my hips involuntarily.

Stone shifted to my other leg, this time licking and nipping as he moved closer to my wetness. Just when I thought I couldn't take the pleasure any longer, he ran his fingers along my thighs, pushing my knees up and out. "Now, I feast."

He wasted no time, pressing his lips against my swollen folds, lavishing my pussy as he licked up and down in an orchestrated manner.

The sensations were immediate, rocking my entire body as I whimpered, taking shallow breaths. He continued licking and I found myself opening my legs even wider, giving him access to all of me.

I'd never been so unabashed, as if the woman inside was breaking free, surrendering in a way she never thought possible. I bit back a cry as he swirled his tongue around my clit several times, finally sucking on the tender tissue. Stars floated in front of my eyes as he slipped a single finger inside, pumping in and out with the same control.

I was floored at his ability to hold back, seconds of licking turning into minutes until I was exhausted from the way he brought me close to an orgasm then backed off. I folded my arm over my eyes, fisting my hand until my nails dug into my palms. I was completely on edge, my muscles tense.

He thrust two more fingers inside, pumping harder and faster. I found myself struggling to meet every brutal drive with one of my own, arching my back.

"Mmm... Oh. I..." A nervous laugh floated from my mouth as he rubbed his thumb up and down the crack of my ass.

"Are you ready to come for me, my beautiful woman?" he asked, the timbre of his voice hoarse.

"Yes. God, yes!"

He toyed with me for several seconds, pumping inside my pussy then pulling out and swirling his thumb around my puckered hole. I lolled my head to the side, now gasping for full breaths.

“Please. Please let me come!”

His chuckle echoed in my ears, his fingers still teasing, driving into my pussy savagely. When I no longer felt anything, I jerked up, panting. He wasted no time, thrusting four fingers into my pussy, two from his other hand into my asshole. The pressure as he drove hard and deep was incredible, my muscles clamping around the thick invasion.

And at that moment, the orgasm swept over me, leaving me shaking violently and unable to speak. I stared at the ceiling as he plunged over and over again, my mind muddled from the sheer ecstasy. I heard my scattered scream, the high-pitched sound floating between us, yet I couldn't move, lost in the rapture.

I had no idea how many minutes went by before he gathered me in his arms, pulling me up from the softness of the bed, my legs straddling his hips. I felt the tip of his cock slide up and down the length of my pussy, my mind shattered from my intense feelings.

“Are you hungry to have my cock inside of you?” he murmured, pressing kisses against my flushed face.

“Uh-huh.” The hard smack against my backside only gave me a smile. “I mean, yes, sir.”

“You are so bad but soon you will be trained.”

Trained. The word wasn't anything of what I'd ever wanted yet I felt myself slipping into a need to obey. I finally opened my lazy eyes as I draped my arms over his shoulders, rocking slightly until he growled. “Yes, I am.”

Stone gripped my hips, lifting a single eyebrow before yanking me down, thrusting his entire cock deep inside. “Yes!”

I threw my head back, quivering as my pussy muscles stretched, spasming from his incredible size. “Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.” I pressed my knees against him, holding the position, savoring the intensity of the moment. Dear God, I wanted this to last, but he was having none of it, his desire too strong.

He dug his fingers into me as he took control, lifting until only the tip was inside then yanking me down, skin slapping against skin. “So tight. So wet.”

I could feel him expanding, filling me so completely as he fucked me. I squeezed several times, loving the way he gasped from the pressure. I slowly lowered my head until I was able to lock eyes with his. There was even more emotion, a level of despondency I hadn't seen before. He was such a warrior, a man who'd seemed lost for a long time.

He was also my temptation, a man who I knew would die in order to protect me. I only hoped I could be his salvation, freeing the pent-up beast. I shivered to the core as I realized that my life was forever changed.

Not because of a legend that had come true or because of a beast who'd claimed me as his own.

But because of the desperate love that had been rekindled, sparking into a true explosion. There would be no life without him.

As he let out a deep-throated growl, he rubbed his fingers down my spine, the swelling of his cock continuing. He remained unblinking as he slowed his actions, yet his expression was completely primal.

I was shocked as my muscles strained, trying to accept all of him. My pussy ached, clamping around his shaft yet stretching. This was more than before, his cock still growing inside of me, filling me. “What is...”

“You forget. I am wolf.”

I struggled to understand what he was saying as the pleasure became insane, another climax rushing into me. I couldn't breathe or think, focus or stop my body from shaking as the pleasure skyrocketed. “Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh...” I bit back another scream, shaking my head back and forth.

So thick.

So damn thick.

As the single orgasm shifted into a mind-blowing wave, he stopped moving altogether.

Still expanding.

Still growing inside of me.

I could feel his cock throbbing, his heart thudding rapidly in his chest. I could even hear the way his blood rushed through his veins. The moment was incredible, grasping at my sense of reality. As his breathing became ragged, I squeezed once again, immediately tossed into pure ecstasy.

Stone fisted my hair as he threw his head back, the roar unlike anything I'd ever heard before. In those beautiful moments, we were as one.

One heart.

One soul.

One... beast.

We clung to each other, my arms wrapped around him and my head on his chest. There were dozens if not hundreds of questions to ask, including about his anatomy, but I didn't want to break the beautiful spell. The simple joy of allowing my guard to fall enough to even attempt to trust him was important on several levels.

An intense shiver raced through me, cutting through the passion.

I had an innate sense of foreboding, my instincts screaming that something terrible was about to happen. Perhaps I had opened Pandora's Box, allowing the true monsters to crawl out on the earth. If I was to blame for the murders that had occurred, I wasn't certain I could handle the guilt.

Stone remained quiet after he released me, merely lighting several candles then retrieving a bottle of open wine and glasses. He studied me intently as he poured, finally crawling under the covers.

I honestly didn't expect that he'd wrap his arm around me, pulling me in close. We weren't an item. We weren't destined to be together, no matter his proclamations that I was his mate.

I knew better than to believe we could share a life. The notion was... preposterous. Still, just the softness as he rubbed his fingers up and down my arm made everything feel safe. For another few minutes, there was nothing but the sound of the wind blowing through the trees.

And the raggedness of our beating hearts.

“Are you afraid of what I am?” he whispered.

I thought about his question. The man deserved the truth. “I’m not afraid of you, Stone. I’m terrified of the fact you’re a wolf.”

“Fair enough. Do you trust me?”

I shifted until I was able to look into his eyes. “You have to understand that it’s difficult for me to trust anyone. It always has been. Even with regard to my career, or I should say my former career, precluded me from getting close to anyone. There’s never been anyone special in my life, friends few and far between. Hell, I’ve never even had many girlfriends. I was determined to work hard.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” he said, sighing.

“No, you’re right. I do trust you. Perhaps I always have, our connection so strong. I just... I hope it’s strong enough.”

“You will be surprised.” He took a sip of his drink, staring off into space.

“Did you know I was your mate all those years ago?”

“I suspected to a point.”

I shifted further away, studying his eyes. “Why didn’t you... tell me then or make me yours or...” I laughed as I shook my head.

He gave me a waning smile as he brushed his knuckle across my face. “I think because I’d reached a point in my life where I wanted to be strictly human and was bound and determined to follow through with defying my heritage. I did it damn well too for a number of years.”

“You were always so dedicated. I’m surprised you aren’t a doctor somewhere.”

“I realized that loyalty to my family and to the pack was just as important, even if I had a huge chip on my shoulder when I returned,” he huffed, closing his eyes. “Maybe I still do, but I made the right decision. I hope that you can truly trust me, Vanessa. I meant what I said. Whoever is doing the murders will strike again.”

“You think that thing that attacked me is taking orders from a human?”

He took a deep breath before answering. “If your theory on Mr. Montenegro is correct, I think it’s a distinct possibility. Who better than to claim the lives of a different species than one who knows? We would smell a human attempting a kill, sensing danger easily.”

“Why couldn’t you sense the wolf?”

“Because he is a different breed, capable of masking his scent.”

“A mark of a good assassin,” I said as I thought about everything he’d told me. I was beginning to believe I’d fallen down a rabbit hole of my own creation, one where the clues I’d been following were wrong. Stone was right. I had to trust someone. “I have evidence of several extortion attempts on some prominent businesses both in Denver and surrounding cities. While Chris Montenegro was careful to cover his tracks, he wasn’t good enough. However, that wasn’t what I was looking for.”

He shifted, lifting his eyebrows. “Where is this evidence?”

I could feel him tensing. “In my car on a jump drive in my purse. I realize I took a huge risk, but I know my way around security systems. I also knew the Montenegro reputation. I wanted it as a bargaining chip in case things got out of hand.”

“Was there anything on your father?” Stone turned his head in my direction.

“Not in the computers. When I was given the promotion, it included access to the basement, the location of the old

employee files. I figured maybe there would be something left from a time my father worked there.”

“But you’re not certain your father had anything to do with the Montenegro Corporation. The notation could mean anything,” Stone insisted. “Meanwhile, you go on a mission to try and find information that might not exist. For all you know, your mother could have had a one-night stand with a man who gave her a fake name. You said so yourself, he doesn’t even exist on any public records.”

“My mother is fastidious in all aspects of her life. She was brought up that way. There is no way she’d have a one-night stand.” I rubbed my eyes, my head swimming in memories. “Whatever my stupid reasoning for coming here, Stone, I found proof that my father existed. I wasn’t lied to, at least completely. However, someone went to great lengths to remove everything about him. There has to be more information out there and I don’t buy he was some great criminal. My mother would have sniffed that out from the beginning. You don’t know her. She’s perfect in every way, unlike her wretched daughter.” I laughed bitterly, the ache in my heart just as painful as it had been my entire life.

“There’s nothing wretched about you, Vanessa. You have a strong conviction, a need to find a missing piece of your life and you have that right.”

I swallowed the bile that had formed in my throat, doing everything I could to squelch the anger I felt toward myself. “Yeah, well, let’s just see how far it gets me. I just want to find out everything I can about Lucas Tremaine.”

“I can certainly understand,” he said in such a quiet and understanding voice. “I will need the jump drive. The two Wolfens who were killed have a direct connection to Montenegro. The pack leader is an ATF agent. You may be able to help bring down not one but two men who have never been convicted of a crime, including the most recent prosecutor on a case.”

“Jesus Christ. He is a monster and yes, you can have the disc.”

He nodded. “Which also could be the very reason the wolf came after you.”

“What about his words, the tethering to him I seemed to have?” When his eyes glazed over, I could tell his rage was just below the surface.

“I am not certain. We need answers as to the identity of your father. Only then will we have even a remote chance of determining what is going on.” He studied me, lifting a single eyebrow. “Something else happened to terrify you.”

“It doesn’t matter any longer.”

“Everything matters when it comes to you, Vanessa. The sooner you understand that the better.”

I took a sip of wine, debating what to tell him.

He leaned closer, pinching my chin. “In case you’ve already forgotten, you are required to obey me. Should I remind you with another spanking?”

“Don’t even think about it,” I said quietly. “I don’t believe in coincidences. Before I went to see the reporter, I had to get gas and not in a part of town that you’d expect Chris Montenegro to dare be seen. He was suddenly right there, getting gas at the next pump.”

“Hold on. What?”

I nodded, feeling the heat of his anger. “I certainly didn’t anticipate running into him, but I could almost swear he’d been following me.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“Not in so many words, but I do think he was trying to tell me to back off.”

He sat back, a low growl rumbling from his chest. “I’ve told you he’s dangerous. You aren’t going back to your job. You can’t.”

“You can’t keep me from going to work. I’ve barely gotten anything from months of investigation, weeks of enduring the

man's attitude." Granted, I wanted nothing to do with that world any longer.

"You have a target on your back, Vanessa. Until this is finished, you will not leave Roselake. Are we clear?"

There was so much fury on his face, but his eyes sent a chill down my spine. He was desperately worried for my safety. "Fine. You're right. Whatever I'm mixed up in has gotten out of hand."

"You promise me that you will obey," he challenged, his words certainly no question but an expectation.

"Yes. I give you my word." I had a nagging feeling that Stone didn't buy into everything I'd told him. If I had to continue going at this alone, I would. I tugged on the sheet, a muddle of thoughts swimming in my mind. "You don't buy the murders have anything to do with Montenegro. Do you?"

He snickered. "You are beginning to know me too well. Everything that has occurred is too... convenient. I believe the murders have everything to do with you."

A nagging feeling surfaced, a thought I couldn't get past.

"What if my father is a Wolfen, then who the hell am I?" I could tell by the burning look in his eyes that he wasn't prepared to answer the question. Then again, I certainly wasn't prepared to accept the possibility that my father wasn't entirely human.

I shivered, pulling my knees to my chest and lowering my head. Everything had gotten so out of hand, there were far too many loose ends and the majority of them didn't add up. I had a new and very sickening feeling pooling in my stomach, the consideration almost too damning to think about, but one I'd be forced to explore.

"Come here, little one," he said in a commanding voice, taking my glass from my hand and placing both on the nightstand.

As I curled up against his chest, closing my eyes, I envisioned the face of my father. What if he was a monster? What did that make me?

Images flashed in my mind, brutal and cold in nature, forcing me to cling to Stone as if he was my lifeline. Every one of the visions contained a wolf. I was so tired, exhausted from the events of the last few days, unable to think clearly.

But a shadow remained in my mind's eye, a creature more terrifying than any other and he was beckoning for me.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

CHAPTER 14



*S*tone

Risk.

I'd heard the term of risk versus reward more than once in my life. Right now, I was beginning to understand the full meaning. Vanessa was finally sleeping, her head resting on my chest, her arm positioned around me. She'd tried to absorb everything I'd shared with her; the story of the Wolfen, the rules the pack was required to follow, and the wretched disease and curse that continued to plague us.

While she'd asked questions, she'd seemed even more disturbed while attempting to process the details. Hell, I didn't blame her.

I rubbed her arm, staring at the blank wall, trying to make the pieces of the puzzle fit together. They didn't, no matter how I attempted to shove them together.

The pounding on the door was jarring but not surprising.

I sat up slowly, every muscle in my body tense, the feel of Vanessa's grip on my arm producing instant adrenaline. My keen senses were immediately on high alert.

Someone else was dead, murdered in cold blood.

The dread and anxiety kicked me hard in the gut, my emotions riding high. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that the situation with the wolf was escalating. I'd already felt that the

night before, the LaRue beast teetering on the edge of madness.

His hunger was off the charts, his need to feast similar to my own. And we both desired the same thing.

Vanessa.

“What’s going on?” she asked, struggling to sit up, her eyes open wide with trepidation.

“We have a visitor. Stay here.” I climbed out of bed, yanking my jeans from the floor. I purposely kept my back to her, easing the drive I’d found in her purse into my palm. While she’d given it to me sometime in the middle of the night, she didn’t need another reminder of the plausible danger.

And I had no doubt everything was coming to a head.

Another hard pounding made me hiss. I glanced at the clock, groaning under my breath. It was already the afternoon. I wasn’t going to apologize for needing time with her, not to anyone including Max. She deserved my attention and my care.

The last thing I wanted to do was to face interruptions, no matter the reason why, but I could already sense Max’s anguish. Whoever had died meant something to him.

“Be careful,” she whispered.

“As I told you, we’re safe.”

“We’re not safe anywhere, Stone.”

Her words were as chilling as they were unexpected.

I jerked on my pants, finally making my way toward the front door, slowly opening it. “Max.”

His grim face confirmed what I already knew, the sight of his full uniform another dead giveaway. “There have been two additional murders.” His statement was said without inflection, but I could see the haunted look behind his eyes.

“Two. Fuck.” I raked my fingers through my hair, noticing his face held a pained expression. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“One of them is a cop, a decorated detective who was about to retire. God damn this shit.” His eyes flashed his wolf, his chest rising and falling.

Max rarely lost his cool but today I could tell he was heavily rattled. For a cop to be taken meant the wolf had no fear, the most dangerous kind of creature.

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

Max huffed. “No, and there’s more. He was slaughtered, his body torn to shreds.”

I opened my mouth then took a deep breath. “Instead of using the weapon? Something’s off here.”

“Yeah, you could say that, Stone. Either there are two distinct killers or one of the murders was very personal.”

“The wolf is unsettled.”

“My senses tell me that there’s something you’re not telling me about this wolf you fought last night or the reason why you refused to bring him to Roselake as commanded?” The flash of anger in his eyes brought on his beast, if only for a split second.

“I had my reasons, Max, and the wolf is... angry as well as hungry,” I retorted.

He inhaled, glancing away. “He believes Vanessa to be his mate.”

“Gregor told you,” I snarled.

“He didn’t have to. I know you far too well, my friend.” He offered a kind smile, even though I could feel his continued discord. “Look, I asked around about the LaRue wolves. Some of the old timers had fascinating comments.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the legend says they are bred as assassins, their craving for violence unequalled. However, there are only a handful of reports indicating they’ve attacked other wolf communities. There are reports that several have been used as high paid assassins in very difficult situations, humans needing

a true monster who had no fear of dying. At least according to myth. As you can imagine, these reports are completely unsubstantiated.”

“If this wolf is an assassin, then you’ve just confirmed he’s nothing more than a hired gun.”

Max shrugged. “If that’s the case, why the brutality used? Why risk being exposed?”

“Unless he’s hoping it will draw more attention to the Wolfen.”

“A viable concept. Either way, I think his kills are escalating.”

“There’s been another murder, hasn’t there?” Vanessa’s voice immediately brought a huff of disdain from Max as he looked over my shoulder, shaking his head.

I glanced at my friend before turning in order to face her. “This is something Max and I need to deal with.”

“Wolfen business,” she whispered under her breath.

Max lifted an eyebrow, giving a slight shake of his head.

She shifted her gaze in his direction, sizing him up. While she’d found one of my tee shirts, there was no mistaking what had happened behind closed doors. She finally nodded, moving back to the bedroom but not before issuing a defiant glare of her own.

I directed him outside to the porch, closing the door behind us. As we both leaned over the railing, I thought about what to say.

“I guess you did have your reasons for not completing your job,” Max chided. “I can smell her all over you. You told her about our pack.”

“I told her what she deserved to know.”

“And took another huge risk.”

“Don’t fuck with this, Max. Her life was in danger, the bastard coming close to killing her. I did what I felt I had to, including sharing aspects of our life with her. She needs to learn sooner

versus later. Plus, I couldn't leave her alone after what she'd witnessed."

"So I heard. From what Gregor told me, she was raiding the Montenegro corporate offices in the middle of the night. That was a stupid move. She's lucky Chris didn't catch her there himself. You and I both know he wouldn't have been much kinder in his punishment. You also risked a great deal by fighting the wolf in the open."

I exhaled, clenching the railing. "What would you have done differently?"

"Honestly? I would have killed the bastard." After a few seconds, he grinned.

"Maybe you're right. I should have speared his head." We both laughed, some of the tension easing. "The fucker was toying with us. That much I could tell."

"Playing a game."

"I think so," I said quietly, staring out onto the scruffy lawn, one I hadn't bothered to care for. Nothing had really mattered with regards to my cabin until now. While Roselake had been my home the majority of my life, I'd never really established roots, at least not of my own making.

"While that may be so, what this wolf is doing is threatening our entire community. We can't allow that to happen. I obviously couldn't contain the scene of the murder, which means the speculation is going to start all over again about what is loose in the streets of Denver. The only reason I even found out about it this time was a buddy of mine over in the seventh precinct. He knew the lieutenant who was killed and I went way back a few years. The questions are already starting amongst the ranks given the condition of the body, let alone the excessive amount of blood. The damn press will be all over this."

"Jesus Christ. Any connection to the Montenegros?"

"Lieutenant Bigalo didn't own stock in any corporation that the Montenegros are interested in. He also had no part of the

arrest or subsequent case against Chris Montenegro that Trevor Holland was prosecuting.”

“Which means a dead end as far as the connections.”

“I have a fuck load of searching to do, but I have to be careful about asking too many questions. I’m already getting shit from the deputy director of the ATF for interfering with an ongoing investigation with regard to Trevor and Carter. I got a serious reaming out that lasted for thirty minutes this morning.”

I snorted, darting a glance in his direction. “How the hell would anyone find out you were asking questions? Did Kathleen mention it to someone?”

“You know better than to ask that. The ME must have seen us at the morgue. That’s the only thing I can figure. I’m frustrated as fuck, Stone. You know how I am. I have a list of the possible victims based on my original summation, but at this point, I’m not certain my instincts were right. This might not have a single thing to do with Montenegro or he could be the most cunning fuck in the entire world. I keep coming back to the question of why would he bother with an elaborate scheme?”

“He’s cunning all right, but he’s never gotten his hands dirty. Maybe he has a hidden agenda we aren’t aware of. Maybe his father is behind this, especially given his connection with Blackhawk. Now that your father is gone, maybe he’s the one with a score to settle.” I expected Max to bristle but he simply eyed me briefly before nodding, obviously resigned to the possibility.

“You’re right about Chris never getting his hands dirty. That’s been a huge problem for prosecutors for years. Thomas was far less inclined to use other people in his extermination efforts. I have no idea why my father believed him to be a friend,” Max said half under his breath.

“We’ve all had our doubts about being Wolfen, Max, including you. Give your father a break. He was an extraordinary leader.”

The smile crossing Max's face was genuine, but his face almost instantly clouded. "The guns were recovered from the scene at Vanessa's condo. At this point, no one is questioning the bullets, but I fear that's only a matter of time as well."

"That doesn't mean they'll lead to the pack."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Max stared off into the distance. "From what I heard, Chris did make certain he was seen last night. He went to several bars, had dinner with friends."

I nodded. "A damn good alibi." I heard the hitch in his voice and shifted my gaze. "What?"

"He was also spotted with Vanessa."

"Yeah, she told me. Evidently he threatened her in his subtle way."

Max sniffed, leaning further over the railing. "You sure about that? From what my soldiers said, they seemed to be mighty chummy."

"What the fuck are you insinuating?"

"I'm not insinuating anything, Stone, but you have to accept the possibility that she's working with him."

"For what reason?"

"Maybe to gather more information. I don't know."

I reared back, snarling. "Yeah, well, you might change your tune when you know what's in my possession."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The bastard could have several reasons for wanting our people dead and I think we might have a way of getting closer," I offered.

"We?"

I shoved my fingers into my jeans, holding up the bright orange drive. "Vanessa secured this from Montenegro's computer. She says it has damning information on several extortion attempts including several influential contacts. We might be able to narrow down what we're dealing with."

Max exhaled as he took it from my hand. “Very interesting. Depending on what she managed to obtain, I may be able to pull some strings and have Chris arrested.”

I lifted an eyebrow as I studied his face. “My guess is you’d be labeled a hero.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “At minimum, it would go a long way in honoring Trevor’s work. From what I heard, he came the closest to securing a conviction. I understand that the court case against Montenegro has been dismissed at least for now.”

“You’re worried a judge is going to dismiss the case altogether.”

He nodded several times as he slipped the drive into his pocket. “I’m not sure I’d blame them. The one Trevor was prosecuting was already round two. The first time, a witness and two jurors mysteriously died in violent crashes.”

“God damn it. What about the other victim? Any chance his death will shed some light?” I wasn’t holding my breath.

Max tipped his head, studying the morning sky, the bright sun making him wince. “His death doesn’t fit any profile, especially since he’s not a wolf, but I need to make certain they weren’t connected. All I know is the guy was some reporter from the *Dispatch*, but as far as I’ve been able to tell, he’s a nobody. He retired years ago. Poor bastard was shot twice, both in the heart. I’d yet to hear whether the bullets were covered with the same poison.”

“A reporter?” My red flags were immediately raised, prickles coursing down the length of my arms.

Narrowing his eyes, Max glanced in my direction. “Yeah. Dude by the name of Randy O’Rourke. Do you know him?”

I took a step away from the railing, smashing my fist against the banister. “Fuck.”

“What the hell is wrong?”

I lowered my voice, inching closer to him. “Vanessa went to see a reporter last night, one who’d written some article a long

time ago about the Wolfen. She said the guy was cagey with her but obsessed with the culture and the legend.” It was apparent by his expression that he had no knowledge of what the hell I was talking about.

“Shit, that makes sense,” Max said under his breath.

“What are you talking about?”

“Kathleen mentioned she was able to glimpse at Vanessa’s computer screen. Evidently, she’d been searching the internet, some article from the *Denver Dispatch*.”

“Shit. An article. Why didn’t we know about it?”

“My guess is that no one believed the reporter. You have to remember, there have been several crazy stories over the years, the majority pushed aside as fables. What was Vanessa fishing for?”

I lowered my head, shaking it back and forth. “First of all, she read about the Wolfen in some book as a child, but that’s not the most important reason. She was there hoping the man knew anything about her father.”

“What?” Max shrank back, his expression riddled with confusion. “She’s been trying to find her father?”

“She never knew the man, but he’s not only from around here, the word Wolfen was associated with what limited information she has on him.”

“Are you trying to suggest her father is a wolf? We would have known,” Max huffed.

“Max, something isn’t adding up about this entire situation and I’m not entirely certain Montenegro is the one behind the murders.”

He lifted his eyebrows, reeling back. “I’m listening, but all points lead to his interaction.”

“Yeah, well, you know how looks can be deceiving. Everything is too convenient as if this wolf is supposed to take the fall. Montenegro isn’t a game player to any degree. We’ve seen him in action for years. If he has an issue with anyone, they suddenly disappear.”

“What are you suggesting we do?”

I turned to face him. “First of all, I need to talk to the elders, specifically Markel. I could tell the other day he knows a hell of a lot more about the LaRue wolves than he’s willing to share. Why? Why wouldn’t he provide every scrap of information unless he’s hiding a secret?”

“Be careful, Stone. Markel has the power and influence to banish anyone who crosses him, and the council will back his decision. Besides, I doubt the council will be happy with the fact you allowed the very wolf in question to get away, especially since your reason has to do with a human mate.”

I accepted his warning, even though I knew in my gut I was right. “Did your father every talk about the LaRue wolves other than when we were kids?”

Max shook his head. “Not that I remember, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Blackhawk did mention over the years there were various packs who would always be our enemies. Perhaps he was talking about the LaRue wolves. He felt secure in what had been built in Roselake, confident that other wolves wouldn’t try and sabotage our power. Since the LaRue wolves seem to be loners, he may never have come into contact with a single one of them.”

“Your father was an honorable man, Max, but he was also naïve in certain ways. He believed in the good within all people. You and I know that’s not the case. If Vanessa’s father is involved in any way, Markel would likely know enough to recognize the name. It’s something we have to dig into.”

Max darted a glance back at the door to my cabin. “You believe in this girl.”

I took a deep breath before answering. “She means everything to me, Max. As crazy as she drives me and as much as we butt heads, I believe her story, and I can’t seem to stay away from her.” I laughed, closing my eyes. “She’s a part of my very spirit.”

“Jesus Christ. You’ve fallen in love with this girl.”

The notion remained unsettling, more so than I cared to admit, but I couldn't lie about my feelings any longer.

"You know what? I did the very first time I laid eyes on her."

He studied me for a few seconds before gripping my shoulder. "All right, buddy, but I don't like this shit any more than you do. I think this wolf is unhinged and while I'm not buying everything you're selling to me, we can't ignore any ideas that will help us catch him and the person responsible. I have a bad feeling that we're running out of time."

"I agree with you. As soon as the real perpetrator finds out that Vanessa is staying here, all hell just might break loose." I moved toward the door, trying to decide just how much to tell her.

"The soldiers are already prepared, but look, I think you know I have to say this. If Vanessa is involved in the murders in any way, she will be eliminated."

The anger rose from the very core of me. "Maybe you should learn to trust me, Max," I hissed. "While my instinct tells me she's in the middle of this even more than we understand, she's a victim too. And she's my mate, a woman I will protect with my life."

"Understood, Stone, but the ancient laws were put into place for a reason. Let's just hope she is as honorable as you believe her to be. I'll check on O'Rourke and see if I can find that article."

I glared at him, tamping back my rage. "Find out what's on that drive."

Max sighed before giving me a respectful nod. "If the information is incriminating, as an officer of the law, I have to act on it."

"Haul his ass in. We need to get rid of our enemies one by one."

"Now, that's talking like a leader. As I said, I'll pull some strings, see if I can at least have his feathers ruffled. That might force his hand even more." He moved around me, closer to the stairs. "Just remember, be cautious with Markel."

“Is there something you’re not telling me about our elder?”

He tipped his head as he grabbed his sunglasses. “I’ve seen firsthand Markel’s thoughts on punishment, Stone. It’s not something you want to be on the receiving end of. Just heed my warning.”

As he walked toward his truck, I shoved my hands into my pockets. At this point, I wasn’t certain I gave a shit.

I sensed her presence before the door opened.

“What’s going on, Stone?” Vanessa asked.

“There’ve been two more murders.”

“Linked to the monster from last night?”

“Yes.”

“It’s already all over the news, although they didn’t release the names of the two recent victims,” she said quietly as she flanked my side.

Growling, I shook my head. “Bastards. One was a decorated lieutenant with the DPD.”

“A police officer was killed? You’re kidding me?”

“Unfortunately.”

“And he was a Wolfen?”

I finally turned toward her, tilting my head. “Three Wolfen victims, yes.”

“The murders committed by this... creature?” she asked.

“That’s what is believed. However, the wolf who chased you is extremely dangerous, more so than the Wolfen. He is of a different breed, a natural enemy to the Wolfen.”

“I don’t understand. The news anchor stated the victims were shot to death, well, at least three of the victims.” She darted her eyes back and forth across mine.

“There’s a lot I need to tell you, but first, there are some things I need to do. You are very safe here, but do not try and leave. Do you understand?”

“Is that an order?”

I took her hands into mine. “You’re not a prisoner, Vanessa, but you are in significant danger. You have to know that given what you experienced last night. You’re only completely protected while you’re here. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I get it. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to ask one of the elders about your father.”

“Then I’m going with you,” she insisted.

“No, you’re not. He won’t talk if you’re with me.”

Her eyes lit up with fire. “Because I’m a lowly human.”

“Our customs. You need to understand.”

“And what if I am your mate?”

I chuckled as I gazed into her eyes. What a little hellion. “Things won’t change at first, but eventually you’ll be accepted as part of the pack. If you will allow me, I’m going to take a picture of the employment record you found as well as of your father.”

“Why?” she challenged.

“Because they will help me in obtaining factual answers.” I could sense her distrust of everything.

She eyed me cautiously before finally nodding. “I don’t like this at all, Stone. This is my mission. Mine. It’s important for me to find out everything I can about my father. For some crazy reason, I feel like it’s a necessity. I don’t like you’re doing this without me.”

“You need to trust me.”

“Don’t fuck with me on this. If you find out anything, I deserve to know. I’ve risked everything to learn about my past.”

“And if Montenegro is behind what is going on, he’ll likely stop at nothing to make certain you find nothing,” I insisted. “Then he’ll eliminate you as an enemy.” I knew the words were chilling.

“Which is why I have a safety net with the drive. Trust me, what’s on that bright orange stick could send him away for a long time.”

“I understand and Max is going to determine if what you found is enough to send his ass to the electric chair.”

“I really hope he can, Stone.”

I took a deep breath, wanting nothing more than to promise her what she so obviously needed. Max was capable of rattling Montenegro’s chain, although I’d make certain I was along for the ride. There was only one way to attempt giving her at least some peace of mind.

“Whatever is going on, Vanessa, I will figure it out. You’re going to have to trust me.”

The brush of her fingers across my cheek gave me shivers. We were coming close to the end and I knew in my gut that one of us wouldn’t survive.

“I trust you with my life, Stone Keeler, just like you have my heart.”

The words would forever haunt me.

To my grave.

* * *

Markel’s house wasn’t grandiose by any means. While he’d been one of the patriarchs of Roselake for almost one hundred years, he lived modestly with his wife. I parked along the outskirts, standing near my Harley for a solid five minutes before going to the door. I’d never been a patient man and certainly had no intent of starting now; however, I also wasn’t willing to risk his wrath at this point in time.

His recollection of history was sorely needed.

I could tell by his face as he answered the door that he’d anticipated my visit. He said nothing as he waved me in, taking me to a sunroom at the back of his house. The warmth

in the room was almost suffocating. Markel walked toward the bank of sliding doors, staring out at a lovely garden.

“I’ve been expecting you,” he said in his usual demeanor, very little emotion added to his words.

“What do you know about Vanessa Bridges?” There was no time to waste, my question pointed and sliced with a harsh edge. I could see his reflection in the glass, the slight smile curling on his lip.

“I know nothing of her,” he said after a full ten seconds.

“I don’t believe you. It was obvious that you recognized her name.”

“You would be wrong.”

I allowed a deep and very heated breath to escape, trying my best to keep my cool. “What aren’t you telling everyone about the LaRue wolves? Are you frightened of them? Do you have some belief that they are preparing for a strike against the Wolfen?”

He chuckled softly, finally turning to face me. “I’ve lived almost three hundred years, Stone. During that time, I’ve seen the Wolfen challenged by several of our enemies, humans included. There have always been breeds of wolves hell bent on taking our position, killing many of our pack in order to weaken our fold. While they created turmoil, even fear, they were never able to gain any level of success. Why do you think that is?”

“Because the Wolfen are superior.”

“That is your wolf talking. The truth is we have proven superior because of the strength of our humanity, our love of life including humans.”

I walked closer, narrowing my eyes. “But you refuse to accept humans as either mates or even our friends.”

He laughed, his gray eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “I’m no fool, Stone. Humans cannot be trusted. However, humanity is entirely different.”

I watched as he walked toward a small cabinet, lifting the lid on an exquisitely decorated box, retrieving a cigar. He took his time snipping the end, sniffing the rolled tobacco. When he lit the end, he took a deep whiff of the trickle of smoke before taking a full puff.

“Two more Wolfen were killed including a lieutenant with the Denver police department. Lieutenant Bigalo.”

“I am aware.”

“He has no particular connection to the Montenegro Corporation that Max was able to find. He was also slaughtered by the rogue wolf instead of gunned down. That makes his kill personal.”

“Likely,” Markel said before taking a deeper puff.

I was beginning to think it was a waste of time coming here. “Vanessa Bridges has been looking for her father, a man by the name of Lucas Tremaine. Is it possible that he has a direct connection to the Wolfen, perhaps even the catalyst for why members of our pack are being killed?”

There was no reaction for at least thirty seconds. Then Markel shifted his head in my direction. “Things from the past should remain there, Stone.”

“That’s bullshit, Markel, and you know it. If you have information that will prove to be helpful in finding the person behind these murders, then you have a responsibility to tell the council.”

“My responsibility is the protection of our pack, Stone. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

I closed the distance, unable to stop the fury gripping every portion of my rationality. “Damn you, Markel. I realize that you have the fate of my life and that of every wolf in this pack in your hands, but I refuse to trail behind the rules of the council like some lapdog. You do know something. You’re also well aware that Vanessa is my rightful mate. Whether you consider that right or wrong, I no longer give a shit. Her father has something to do with these murders and with or without your help, I’m going to figure out what the fuck is going on.”

The man remained stoic, taking another puff of his stinking cigar. I shook my head, backing away, resisting the urge to punch my fist into his face. This was getting me nowhere. I turned sharply, storming toward the door.

“As I’ve said many times, things aren’t always as they seem. The rules of our kind were put into place for a single reason. Survival. While I realize that the newer generation of wolves has no respect or honor for their elders, there is a reason certain Wolfen were tasked with enforcing the rules.”

“Honor? You know exactly why members of our pack are being murdered by a rogue wolf that is likely nothing more than a pawn in an evil plan. You also know that I have promised my life in exchange for the woman I consider my mate. Yet you refuse to tell me anything. Tell me, Markel, does that truly lend itself to honor?”

When he didn’t answer, I snorted and walked to the door.

“If you mate with the human, Stone Keeler, you will be banished from this pack.”

His words hung in the air, much like I felt my life hung in the balance. I stopped short, taking a deep breath before answering. “Then so be it, old timer.”

Nothing could have prepared me for the man’s stonewalling, his refusal telling me everything I’d already known.

He was terrified of the LaRue wolves.

I took long strides toward my Harley, unable to control my emotions. As I climbed onto my bike, the sound of my phone was nothing but infuriating. I ripped it out of my jacket, glaring at the screen.

“Max. This damn well better be good.”

“Stone, you need to listen to me and remain silent. What I’m going to tell you is... difficult.”

I listened and I heard. The ramifications were clear.

And they were terrifying.

CHAPTER 15



*V*anessa

Damnation.

Why did the word continually cross my mind? Why were every one of my senses so alive, my body riddled with anguish and fear? I knew damn good and well I was safe in the city. There were wolves everywhere. I didn't need to see them to know I was surrounded.

I could feel them.

I could smell them.

My skin crawled at the realization.

Had I actually accepted the fact wolves did exist, that my entire world as I'd known it had been the fairytale, not the other way around?

I rubbed my aching eyes, the headache almost blinding.

You've known the truth almost your entire life.

The little voice wasn't doing anything but creating bile in my throat. I'd been the dreamer, the notion of beautiful creatures stalking the night as riveting as it had been haunting, but I'd always believed.

Stone had somehow managed to turn my nightmares into something else entirely, the kind of longing that never seemed

satisfied. My mouth was dry, my heart racing just thinking about him.

About our connection.

A series of quivers shifted down my spine, sliding directly into my pussy. I'd released my own inner beast with Stone, had given him a taste of the very woman who I'd locked in chains. And I'd enjoyed every second of the raw passion.

I palmed the glass, the warmth of the sun tickling my fingers, the coffee I'd made tasting bitter. Only fifteen minutes had passed, yet it was enough that I was antsy as hell. I already missed him even though his scent covered every inch of me, the material of the tee shirt rubbing back and forth across my nipples until they ached. He'd been rough the night before, refusing to allow me even a moment of control.

And I'd loved every minute of it.

I'd remained at the window, watching Stone drive away, the roar of the Harley vibrating throughout my body. I'd overheard a small portion of his conversation with Max, their concerns increasing regarding the murders. There was no doubt in my mind that Chris was behind them.

I also had no doubt the horrible man had murdered my father. The crap I'd uncovered meant nothing to me. Not a single thing. Did I hope the man fried in the electric chair? Honestly, in my mind, that was far too good for him. If Chris thought he was going to scare me off, he had another trick coming. However, he would provide answers.

As I paced the floor, I couldn't get the visions of the wolf out of my head. Everyone assumed the beast was working for Montenegro. My sixth sense told me otherwise. Maybe I was the one who somehow needed to prove it.

The same nagging remained, clawing at my mind. I needed my computer in order to satisfy the ugly thought. That would mean leaving the safety net, defying Stone. I closed my eyes, envisioning my lover's face, brushing my fingers across my lips. He'd told me loved me, words I'd never expected to hear.

The moment of delicious desire was interrupted with thoughts about the beast wolf. Stone had been furious the wolf had called me his mate, horrified that I'd been able to read his mind.

As if the sentiment was true.

How the hell could that be?

At this moment, all I wanted to do was rip the other wolf's throat out.

My thought made me laugh. As if I could do a damn thing against the wolf. Disgusted, a cold chill shifted down my arms, forcing me to brush my fingers up and down aimlessly. I could also feel Stone's touch, his heated breath as it cascaded across my skin. Jesus. I was overwhelmed by a desire that couldn't adequately be explained.

Yes, it can. You're his mate.

I shoved it aside, turning sharply, my thoughts drifting back to what little of the conversation I'd heard between the two men. I was keenly aware Stone hadn't told me everything. While I knew in my gut that I was safe here, I also realized I'd feel a hell of a lot better if I kept my gun with me.

I walked down the hall, every step cautious for no other reason than he hadn't given me permission to explore his private office. There were three doors, all of them closed. The first was a spare bedroom, the musty smell indicating he hadn't spent any time cleaning the room in one hell of a long time. The second was a bathroom. When I finally stood in front of his office door, I honestly felt as if I needed to call him for permission.

Laughing softly, I rolled my eyes and walked right in. The dark paneling on the walls wasn't a surprise, the manly looking area fitting the rogue kind of man that he was. As I moved closer to the desk, what did take my breath away was the single picture positioned next to his desk lamp. I'd recognize it anywhere. As I lifted the frame, I was taken back to the very moment the photograph was taken, the only one of the two of us in existence.

Our time spent together had been all about our passion. Rarely had we gone out other than a quick bite to eat. I remembered begging to go to the stupid small town fair on one blustery Saturday, something Stone had groaned over and over again at being forced to do. Yet he'd gone with me, even going on a couple of the old-fashioned rides. The picture had been snapped by an unknown bystander.

We were so young, so innocent at the time but the joy on our faces was dazzling. I couldn't believe that Stone had kept the picture.

An odd sixth sense shifted into my mind, cutting off the moment of happiness. I fumbled to lower the frame, already scanning the rest of the room for my weapon, finally forced to pull out several desk drawers before finding it. I pulled it into the thin strip of light coming in through the blinds, making certain he hadn't pulled the ammo. Satisfied, I grabbed my purse from the floor in the living room, reaching inside for my phone then half jogging into the bedroom. As I pulled my jeans off the floor, I shifted my gaze toward the rumpled sheets, even able to smile.

More than anything, I wanted to be able to spend time with Stone, getting to know him all over again, including every inch of his magnificent body. I bit back a moan, rolling my eyes. Right now, I had to try to help figure out what was going on. There was only one way in my mind of doing that.

A visit to the asshole I knew to be responsible.

What I wanted to do might be nuts, but I'd played the victim for far too long. The moment I touched the screen on my phone, I realized I'd received a call, the source unknown. The bastard had even left a voicemail. Jesus Christ. My hands were shaking more than they should be. Whoever the bastard was couldn't hurt me here.

Even if the caller was the wolf.

A laugh bubbled to the surface. A part of me still believed I'd been hallucinating this entire last few days.

Creatures of the night exist, beasts ready to carve out and eat your heart.

“God.” I forced myself to put the phone on the nightstand, daring to maneuver to the voicemail and putting it on speakerphone while I attempted to struggle into my jeans.

“Ms. Bridges. This is Randy O’Rourke. Look, you seem like a nice girl. There are some things you need to learn.”

I shifted my gaze in the direction of my phone as I buttoned and zipped, easing down onto the bed. Randy’s voice was hushed, as if he was fearful of being overheard. I turned my attention toward the phone, staring down at the screen.

“I don’t like what’s happening. Things are getting out of hand once again. Your father. Yeah, I know who he is. I even talked to him a couple of times. He was a good man given a raw deal with no one backing him up. Damn fucking system. He was investigating a case that I’d written about before the whole Wolfen story hit the presses. A lot of shit was going down at the time, corruption involving high ranking members of the city government.”

No wonder Randy was terrified for his life. If he’d written even a single article on corruption in the government, he would have had a target on his back.

“Your father was my go to source, at least until he disappeared,” Randy continued. *“From what I know, they never found his body. Damn partner of his sold him out. Fuckin’ wol...”*

The remainder of Randy’s sentence had been mumbled. I played it twice, trying to grasp what he was trying to say. Fuckin’ wol...f. I cringed, my entire attempting to process what Randy was trying to say.

I listened again and knew I was right.

Wolf.

An investigation. A lump formed in my throat. What Randy was suggesting sounded like my father was some kind of law enforcement officer. Then why would my mother accuse him

of being a criminal? Maybe she only thought she knew my father. Hmm...

“Oh, God.” My father had been working undercover at the Montenegro Corporation. Wait a minute. Then why would he use his real name? That didn’t make a damn bit of sense. I started the recording again, listening intently. As Randy started to mumble, I had to yank the phone to my ear.

“There’s more. A hell of a lot more. You should probably...” Randy’s breathing became extremely heavy. What the hell was the other sound I was hearing? A door closing. *“I don’t have long. I have to get the hell out of here. I think the bastards are sick of me being a loose end. Listen to me, you need to know who you really are. They will also hunt you down, Ms. Bridges, now that they know who and what you are. Get out while you still can. I...”*

Wham!

The hard clanging noise was startling. “What the hell?” Suddenly, there was silence. The second I glared at the phone I realized the voicemail had ended. My fingers shaking, I replayed a portion of it again, turning up the volume.

“...Ms. Bridges, now that they know you and what you are. Get out while you still can. I...” Pop!

I jerked back, taking several deep breaths and just before the recording ended, I’d heard a moan. The sound was one I knew far too well. A close-range gunshot. I closed my eyes, taking several deep breaths, a mixture of anger and hatred rolling into my veins.

The questions rushed into my mind in a fast and furious manner. Who and *what* I was? Why did my mother believe my father had been a criminal? Who had he been working for? And what the hell did his partner have to do with it? I rocked on the bed, staring at the screen for a full minute before finding the courage to redial the number. When the call went straight to his voicemail, a knowing settled in.

I was shaking all over as I ripped off Stone’s tee shirt, searching the room until I found my sweater. This was crazy.

Had something happened to Randy because he'd talked to me? I was sick to my stomach, unable to think clearly. I grabbed the gun and my phone, rushing through the house and into the kitchen, moving back toward the television on the corner of the counter.

As I dialed Randy's number again, I grabbed the remote, my hands still shaking as I attempted to find any news program on. "Come on, Randy. Pick up the phone. You have a hell of a lot more information for me. I know you do." Fucking voicemail. I held the phone to my head, saying a silent prayer.

As I glanced at the faded employment record, I rubbed my finger across my father's name. "What were you investigating?"

I finally found a news program and was prepared to dial Randy one last time when breaking news flashed on the screen. I didn't even need the sound, Randy's picture popping up as being one of the victims.

I backed away, blinking several times, my instinct on overdrive. Chris had managed to follow me to Randy's house. He'd been the one to pull the trigger. I'd been a damn fool to try to solve some riddle on my own. In the process, I'd gotten at least one man killed.

Whatever Stone believed he knew had occurred, I was positive that Chris was behind Randy's assassination. Even if Stone's friend was able to find something of use on the drive, I knew law enforcement too damn well. It would take a solid week for the evidence to make a difference, warrants being issued. By then, Chris could destroy everything, leaving the investigators in the lurch.

I stood staring at the news report, unable to turn up the volume. I wasn't in the mood to hear anything else.

Including about wolves.

My stomach churned from the heightened level of bile, my rage turning it into acid. I glanced at my phone again, a part of me longing to reach out to Stone. I knew if I did, he'd make certain I couldn't go through with what was necessary. I stared

at the pictures on the television one last time, the faces of the victims burning into my mind.

Three of them were wolves, Wolfen to be exact. At least according to Stone. Did the medical professionals know? When an autopsy was completed, were the creature's structures so different that terror was born?

When I noticed Chris' face on television, a reporter catching him as he walked into the office building, I turned up the sound, lifting my middle finger.

"Mr. Montenegro. Can you tell us what happened?" As the cameraman panned to the damaged area, plywood already covering the broken glass, I smirked. At least I knew where the asshole would be for a little while. A chance I was willing to take.

"No comment," Chris huffed, blowing him off.

"There were unconfirmed reports of wolves in the area. Do you know anything about this?"

As Chris stopped, turning slightly, the smile on his face was exactly the same one I'd seen since day one. Superior.

Knowing.

The fucker knew of the existence of the wolves.

"Fuck you," I whispered, tossing the remote.

I paced the floor for a few seconds, finally unable to stand simply doing nothing. The single connection to my father that had been identified was Montenegro. The final piece of the puzzle, or so I'd thought. What if it was actually the beginning? Bottom line, I refused to allow the asshole to get away with his crimes. Even if Jack didn't give a crap about what I'd sent him, someone would.

In the meantime, the monster would answer my questions.

I glanced around the kitchen, attempting to find my keys. Someone had brought my car here, likely the second wolf I'd seen with... Stone. They had to be lying around somewhere.

The entire situation was ridiculous. As an attorney, I should know better than to allow my mind to play tricks on me. Everything was spinning, my muscles aching. If I didn't know better, I'd say I was coming down with the flu.

Christ. That was the last damn thing I needed.

I grabbed the piece of paper with my father's information from Stone's desk and folded it, shoving it into my back pocket, hesitating before searching for another piece of paper and a pen. My hands shook as I scribbled a note, a single tear forming. In some weird way, I felt like I'd found a life. Here.

With Stone.

No matter if...

I refused to think about it, even though I knew the truth, perhaps had always known. All the dreams. All the questions. All the conviction.

At least now I could end the nightmares.

After pushing my lips against two fingers, I pressed them against the note, praying he wouldn't have to find it. Then I stormed into the bedroom, finding my keys on Stone's dresser. I threw on my shoes, grabbing my purse. I could do this. I would find answers. Maybe I could return before my disappearance was noticed.

Right.

Wolves had eyes in the back of their heads.

Wolfen...

Randy's sickening words lingered in my mind. 'Who and what you are...' I had to do this on my own. There was no other choice. After grabbing my weapon, I left the house without looking back, moving quickly to my car.

No one was going to stop what needed to be done.

Including the man I'd fallen in love with.

* * *

I parked as far away from my normal space as possible. Before I climbed out, I slipped the gun under the waistband of my jeans, making certain my sweater covered the bulge. I eased into the late afternoon sun, glancing around the parking lot, my mind flashing to the ugliness of the night before. Just seeing the boarded-up window was enough to give me pause, my stomach lurching.

Hell. From what little I'd learned from Stone regarding wolves, I doubted the asshole was going to make an appearance in the middle of daylight. I took the back entrance inside, using the service elevator, which went all the way to the top floor and just down the hall from Chris' office. I walked down the hallway casually, running into no one. It was Friday after all, several of the employees having already left for the day. As usual, Chris' door was closed.

There was no pretense as I walked in, but I could swear he'd been expecting me, his proud form standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window.

I stood with my arms crossed, studying him before scanning the room.

"Vanessa. How good to see you. I hope you're well."

"I'm doing extremely well, Chris." I inched closer, still keeping my distance.

He only tipped his head slightly, allowing me to see his profile. Damn, the asshole was smug. "I'm saddened that you don't seem to trust me."

"Trust you? You're an extortionist attempting to steal the livelihood from dozens of people in several towns." I heard the edge in my tone, the increasing anger. Right now, I wanted to keep my cool.

"Interesting that you of all people would say that, Vanessa, given you deceived me from day one." He still refused to turn around, as if everything I was saying was simply a trivial matter.

"Well, perhaps I did, but I had very good reasons. To that end, I have one question for you and I want the truth, Chris. Who is

Lucas Tremaine?”

If my question shocked him, he certainly didn't show it, merely turning around slowly, a smile on his face.

“I'm not certain I've heard the name before.”

“I think you know exactly who I'm talking about. While your father was in charge of the company at the time, I don't have any doubt that you're well aware of who Lucas is since he infiltrated your company.” I tugged the paper from my pocket, never taking my eyes off him as I unfolded it.

“I'm not following you,” he said, the same sexy smirk crossing his face.

I moved closer, sliding the paper across his desk. “Look at it.”

He kept his gaze pinned on me.

“I said... look at it.”

Chris did as I commanded, taking the paper into his hands. “Doesn't ring a bell.”

“That's bullshit and you know it.” I hesitated reaching for my gun, even though I wanted nothing more than to shoot him between the eyes.

“Who are you, Vanessa Bridges?”

“I'm a woman who has no qualms in taking down your company, Mr. Montenegro. In fact, I have enough information to have you convicted of extortion, money laundering, and even murder charges.”

He laughed, sliding the paper back in my direction. “I doubt you have anything that can hurt me, Ms. Bridges. I'll ask you again. Who are you?”

I took a step away from his desk, staring him in the eyes.

“You don't really think I was stupid enough to hire you without checking into your background entirely. Do you?” he asked as he moved slowly around his desk. “You can't think I bought your bogus answer of why you left such a prestigious job? You see, I have very good friends everywhere. They

provide me with certain classified information from time to time, all in an effort to pay back what they owe me.”

I hated the fact a cold chill trickled down my back. Who the hell had he talked to?

“And I wasn’t stupid enough to come to work for you without complete knowledge of just the kind of man you are, including murdering anyone who stands in your way.”

“Huge accusations for a woman standing all by herself in my office.”

“Is that another threat, Chris?”

“I don’t make threats, Ms. Bridges. I already told you that.” He walked even closer, his smile remaining. “My father and I have had many enemies over the years, people who attempted to destroy our hard work.”

“Hard work? You only know how to take and destroy. I’m going to ask you one more time. Who is Lucas Tremaine?” I slid the gun from my back, easing it in front of my leg.

“Were you aware that your previous boss and I go back several years?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

I was thrown by the comment but to my credit, I flashed a plastic smile. “Why would that matter to me?”

“After your rather creative display at the gas station last night, I had a long chat with him. He mentioned that you were actually here searching for your father. Is that true?”

My God. I’d been completely betrayed. I blinked twice, enough to allow Chris to see I was troubled. “You have no idea if what I told my former boss was nothing but a lie. Now, do you?”

He seemed impressed yet relaxed, sitting on the edge of his desk. “I see you want to play games. All right. Lucas Tremaine was a man my father once considered a friend. Friends are very difficult to come by in this business. In fact, my father was the man who hired Lucas, of course based on several recommendations. Sadly, Lucas turned out to be a traitor.”

“You mean he turned out to be an undercover police officer who’d surreptitiously infiltrated your organization.” I could see I’d actually shocked him, at least for a few seconds, his calm and collected demeanor quickly taking over.

“What is it that you want to know, Ms. Bridges? Details about your... father?”

The man was pulling out all the stops. I was itching to shoot him right between the eyes.

“Did you have Lucas murdered?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I assure you, neither my father nor I have ever engaged in murder.”

“No, you’ve just hired your thugs to handle your dirty work.”

Inhaling, he folded his hands. “I’m not entirely certain what you think of me, Vanessa, but I’m not the monster you think me to be.”

“I think I do know you, Chris, and I will find a way to prove you murdered Lucas Tremaine.”

“I’d be careful, my dear. There are monsters everywhere in this town.”

His words were my cue to slide my weapon into my hands. “And I assure you that I can take care of myself.”

“Are you going to shoot me, Ms. Bridges?”

The man was far too cool, as if no one would ever be able to take him down. I took a minute to think about it, still pointing the barrel in his direction. “You know, while I wasn’t allowed the opportunity to know my father, my guess is that he was a truly honorable man, a person who fought for justice. While a small part of me would enjoy nothing more than to place a bullet in your brain, the act isn’t worth the waste of good ammunition.” I gave him a genuine smile. I would likely never find out what had happened to my father, but maybe there would be some small satisfaction in knowing I finished the job that he’d started all those years ago.

An honorable man.

Chris remained seated as he began clapping, a joyful look on his face. “Nicely said, Ms. Bridges. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a significant amount of work to finish today.”

I took a step closer, the smile remaining. “I’ll enjoying watching you writhe in prison, Mr. Montenegro, and trust me, that is going to happen. Have a fabulous day.” I gave him a slight nod before turning toward the door, my nerves completely shot.

“Well, that certainly isn’t going to happen soon, Ms. Bridges. I believe you know Jack Barlow?”

I froze, almost paralyzed at hearing my friend’s name. I forced myself to turn my head, controlling my breathing.

“It was very sad to hear about his horrific accident. Such a shame to lose a man in the prime of his life.” He chuckled evilly. “Oh, and if my memory serves me, his death was similar to your father’s. Such a tragedy.”

I refused to acknowledge him in any manner, taking my time to walk out of his office. The moment I closed the door, I knew in my heart that one day, I would meet Chris in a dark alley and he wouldn’t survive.

The taste of blood filled my mouth and this time, it was oh-so sweet.

As I walked outside, I noticed three Denver Police Department vehicles roaring into the parking lot, their lights flashing. I took a moment, tipping my head to stare at Chris’ window. I knew he was watching. I also knew that Max had found my information useful. I shielded my eyes from the late afternoon sun, hoping Chris could see the smile on my face.

Karma had a way of kicking ass.

* * *

I was still shaking as I parked my car in the very garage where I’d been attacked. It was still daylight, the late afternoon sun sweeping into the area enough to keep the shadows at bay. Yet I couldn’t avoid the wave of fear as I locked the car door,

scanning the perimeter not once but three times. There were no creatures waiting, no monsters lurking. Besides, this time I had protection.

I moved into the elevator, holding my breath until the doors closed. I was here to retrieve my laptop and nothing more. Then I would do exactly as Stone had asked, remaining behind the invisible walls of Roselake while trying to find additional details about my father. Max had to be able to use the information. I only hoped the indictment would stick.

What I didn't understand was Chris' use of hiring the wolf, but I suspected it was another aspect of truth I'd never learn. So be it. My guess was that Stone and everyone in his... pack would hunt the wolf down, eliminating him as an enemy.

I took small comfort in that even though I was tingling all over.

What am I?

I couldn't get the question out of my mind.

I was still trembling as I pulled out my keys, constantly looking behind me as I walked to my condo door. There were no outward signs of forced entry or any visitors for that matter. I slipped the key inside the lock, turning slowly. As I opened the door a crack, I took a deep whiff, making certain there were no foreign smells. I gathered likely the last hint of fragrance from the dying flowers and little else, the realization giving me comfort.

The moment I walked in, I was shaken once again. Everything in the place had been tossed. I could barely handle closing the door behind me. It suddenly seemed as if my entire world had been ripped away. My hands were numb as I pulled the gun into both, taking careful steps through the mess. I couldn't believe it.

Every piece of furniture had been turned over, the glass coffee table smashed. Pictures had been ripped off the walls, tossed across the room. As I took additional steps, the sound of crunching glass created a fake echo in my mind, my heart racing. Why would someone do something like this?

As I walked into the kitchen, flipping on the light, I knew instinctively that this wasn't about searching for something. The destruction was about pure evil, rage that the perpetrator hadn't found me instead. I was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. I couldn't imagine Chris getting this angry.

The wolf.

I could swear I gathered his scent, the same musky testosterone I'd experienced the night before. The bastard wolf had done this. He'd meant to... take me. Oh, Jesus. Every cabinet had been pulled off the walls, dishes and glasses everywhere. If the fucker thought he could ruin my life, he had another think coming.

I crouched down, noticing the article and other information I'd printed on the Wolfen. Slash marks had been raked down every page, but I had no doubt the wolf had read them.

I moved quickly into my bedroom, steeling my nerves, kicking through the various clothes that had been ripped out of the closet until I found the box where I'd stored my laptop. While the box itself had been pitched against the wall, the laptop appeared fine, still secured in the padded bag I'd placed it in. I yanked the handle and grabbed one of my suitcases, dumping both onto the floor. Even the mattress had been cut to ribbons, the jagged marks reminding me of claws.

I ignored everything, including the buzzing inside my head as I tried to gather some clothes, tossing them into the suitcase without care about what I'd chosen. Who gave a shit at this point? I knew it was vital I got the hell out of here. I didn't even bother turning off the light, struggling with both cases as I lumbered toward the front door, giving the area one last hard look.

The bastard would pay for what he'd done.

Hissing, I opened the door. The shock was complete, my world crumbling.

"Hello, Vanessa."

The voice wasn't one I'd expected to hear, the sound drumming in my mind. Everything was a blur. As I turned my

head slowly, I opened my eyes wide, a knowing settling in.
“What have you done?”

“What had to be done, the extinction of a vile species.” After taking a deep whiff, another command was given to the beast standing by. “Take her.”

CHAPTER 16



*S*tone

Danger.

I could think of nothing else as I revved the Harley, roaring down Max's driveway. I was antsy to get back to Vanessa, still incensed after the conversation with Markel. I jumped off the bike, half tossing my helmet before storming toward the front door, my fist slamming against the wooden surface.

Max lifted an eyebrow as he opened it, ushering me inside. "Jesus Christ, buddy. You need to calm down."

"Calm down? Markel told me nothing except that I would be banished if I mated with Vanessa."

Max sighed as he pointed toward the chair, sighing when I shook my head. "I think that might already be too late."

"I haven't attempted to turn her. I haven't brought her into our world. I've made love with her. There's a fuck load of a difference. But I will say this, that bastard can't tell me who I can mate with. Fuck him!"

He stood where he was, tilting his head until I looked away, reining in my anger. "Are you finished now?" he asked quietly.

I began to pace, running my fingers through my hair. "Yeah. Whatever."

“You need to listen to me. I did some digging and what I found is going to blow this thing wide open.”

“Okay. You found something on Montenegro.”

Max snorted. “Hell, yeah. Vanessa knew exactly what to look for. From what I know about Trevor’s original case, he had nothing on the corporation in comparison to the volume of evidence Vanessa managed to find. I think the man is going away for a long time, his father too. The indictment was processed very quickly once the police chief saw what I had. Amazing what sixty minutes worth of time will do.”

“That’s great. How the fuck does that help us with the wolf?”

Max grumbled and walked to his bar, pouring two glasses of scotch before speaking again. As he walked back in my direction, his expression wasn’t one I could identify. Except for contempt.

I accepted the drink, taking a deep whiff of the aroma.

“Lucas Tremaine wasn’t his real name. That was his undercover name. His real name was Anthony Drago. For about six months, he was Michael Bigalo’s partner. From what little I was able to gain in a short period of time, Anthony was a weapons expert, having served in the Marines for years. He was tapped by the FBI to go undercover in a sting operation against Montenegro, because he wasn’t widely known in the area. His real identity was wiped out, replaced by Lucas Tremaine.”

“What?” I exhaled, my nerves on edge.

“Yeah. He lived that way for a full three months, finally receiving an arranged meeting with Thomas Montenegro. The two actually hit it off.”

“Let me guess, about the same time your father was friends with Thomas.” I took a gulp of scotch, fearful where this was headed.

“It would appear so. My father was a wise man in several ways, knowing that the situation had to play itself out. Lucas never wavered from his undercover persona. Even his partner was told Anthony had transferred out of the state. From what I

could tell, Thomas was accused of some pretty heinous murders almost thirty years ago and no one had been able to put the man behind bars.”

“Let me guess, Anthony became Lucas.”

Max sighed. “Not at first. He reported back to his handler and evidence was garnered. Then he missed appointments, the information becoming less and less useful. Now, the captain I talked to was just a rookie at the time, so he’s going on what he remembers.”

“Montenegro eventually found out.”

“At the time, Lieutenant Bigalo was blamed for blowing Anthony’s cover since the FBI hadn’t authorized him to be in the loop. I guess it was a huge mess at the time. Thomas cornered Anthony and a single day later, he was off the grid. A body was never recovered so there was no way to arrest Thomas.”

“It’s possible Chris has no idea,” I said in passing.

“Possible, but I wouldn’t buy it. What Vanessa obtained has nothing to do with that particular case, as if everything involving what Anthony had been working on was erased.”

“That would explain why Vanessa could find so little about her father. I think she’ll be relieved. I appreciate you looking into it. So, her mother was working for the Montenegros?”

“We’re not finished with our discussion and here’s where the story gets messy and why Markel reacted the way he did.”

I watched as Max walked into the kitchen, returning with an envelope. “What’s this?”

“You’re going to want to sit down and read it. Just trust me.”

I eyed him for a few seconds before taking his advice, my feet heavy as I walked to the couch, placing my drink on the table. As I pulled out the documentation, I could tell that Max remained jumpy and I couldn’t help but think of what Markel had told me.

Things aren’t as they seem.

And within a few seconds, I knew exactly what he had meant.

* * *

“She’s gone.” I stood in front of my house, the note in my hand. I brought the paper close to my nostrils, inhaling her scent. The simple gesture allowed me to detect not only her fragrance but her raw emotions. She was all over the place, her mind reeling.

“What do you mean gone?” Max demanded.

“Her car isn’t here and she left a note. My guess is that she went after Montenegro.”

“He’s already in jail. Where the hell could she have gone?”

I took a deep whiff, my skin tingling as myriad sensations washed through me. The craving my wolf felt was nothing like before. The scent was rich and strong. “She’s close. I can smell her.”

“Wait... Do you mean...”

Max didn’t need to finish the sentence. “Yes.” I closed my eyes, my nostrils flaring. I also gathered the stench of the wolf. The bastard was baiting me, daring me to come and find her. “She’s been taken.”

“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely. She’s on our land and I know exactly where.”

“Then we hunt.”

I stood where I was for a solid minute before tipping my head back, allowing my anguished howl to be heard. The bastard had taken the woman I loved and he would pay.

There was no emotion left with the exception of anger as I mentally prepared, minutes later racing into the forest. Max and others would follow my lead. While we would have strength in numbers, the fight was mine alone.

I stood in the bank of trees as twilight set in, drinking in the sights and sounds of the forest, my senses already heightened.

I eased my hands down my chest, allowing my beast to begin clawing his way to freedom. Almost immediately, the rush of adrenaline ripped at my breath, my heartrate soaring. Within seconds, a slice of pure anguish settled in, forcing me to drop onto all fours.

I tossed my head from side to side as my muscles stretched, fighting the human skin surrounding them. Cells popped, my blood racing. Tendons lengthened, creating another wave of agony. I let off a series of growls as my spine shifted, breaking through to the chilly air. Blinking, I pawed the ground as the crackling sound of bones shattering filtered into the sky.

Then I could hear them, dozens of pack members as they all began their transformation. Within seconds, the sky was filled with the sound of battle cries, angry howls preparing for a fight.

I arched my back, struggling against the pain, my vision suddenly cloudy. My wolf was furious, his rage forcing the transition at a rapid rate. I had difficulty breathing, my throat constricting as my canines elongated, piercing through my gums.

As quickly as the anguish had surfaced, it was over, the joy of my wolf letting off a series of howls giving me peace. I pawed the ground once again, enjoying the cool earth before I took off running, darting through the trees in my search. The others soon joined me, their raucous cries a chilling sound for anyone who happened to hear.

We were beasts of the night.

We were protectors of the city.

We were Wolfen.

With Max and Gregor flanking my side, we raced into the shadows, the hunt almost as joyous as what we knew we'd find. The scuttling of other species was inviting, my jowls aching in an almost desperate need to feed, but tonight there was only one prey.

A wolf.

Vanessa's scent grew stronger, the mixture of fear and rage unsettling. Something else was wrong.

We raced through the trees, one mile turning into two until we neared the lake, the very location where I'd seen the wolf the first time. I padded toward the edge, swinging my head toward the others. Only Max and Gregor followed. When I took another deep whiff, the realization was unsettling.

A second human.

Confusion settled in.

The three of us moved closer, snarling as we gathered sight of him, standing on the knoll. He tipped his head back, allowing his own howl to float toward the heavens. He was beckoning us to follow.

I took off running, jumping through the water until I was able to race to the top of the hill. While Max and Gregor moved to my side, others within our pack formed a circle. There was no way for the wolf to get away.

Not without dying.

As I padded closer, I was finally able to see her, my beautiful mate. She'd been tied to a tree, her long hair flowing in the breeze. I sensed her increasing fear as well as her hunger, but I knew the longing had dual meaning.

"Stone..." she said in a calm voice, her face serene.

Growling, I shifted closer until I came face to face with the beast. Then I heard laughter and bristled, swinging my head in the direction of the sound. What I'd read on the paperwork had left me shaking.

"Don't come any closer, Stone," Vanessa encouraged. "She's insane."

I studied the woman who stepped from the shadows, her face almost exactly the same as my wonderful mate's, only kissed by the years of strife. Then I turned my attention once again to the woman I loved. And I knew she'd hear every word I said.

"Your father was an honorable man," I stated as I locked eyes with Vanessa, able to see into her very soul.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“Max. Your father was a police detective. He’d gone undercover for the FBI. He was never a criminal. Your mother fell in love with a man named Lucas. His real name was Anthony Drago. Their love was real and likely the reason he lost his life. He tried to protect her, the woman he called his beautiful flower. Angelic.”

“Anthony Drago,” she repeated before exhaling, a haunting look crossing her face. “You see, Mother, my father had integrity.” Her lilting voice rang clear in the night.

“You have no idea what kind of monster your father was. He was a murderer,” Angelic spat as she walked closer, completely unafraid of the pack. “He took my innocence. He stole everything from me, leaving me with some... freak!”

I hissed given the harsh words, moving closer, shocked as Vanessa’s face remained serene at learning the truth.

The wolf inched forward, snarling, his communication just as clear. *“Stay away from her, Wolfen, or she will die.”*

“A woman you consider your mate? You’re willing to kill her?”

He bared his teeth, issuing a deep-throated growl. *“You have no right to her.”*

“Because you do? As one of her kind? You long desperately for your own mate, the calling turning you into a monster.”

“We are far superior to the Wolfen,” he shot back.

“You are dying as a breed. Only with a successful mating will you begin to turn the cycle, except that’s not possible.” Max had found information belonging to his father. Even though a female had been born, a half breed, Vanessa would never produce a child with another LaRue wolf. The cycle of their curse could never be altered.

I shifted my attention once again to Vanessa to see if she fully understood what she was.

Half LaRue wolf.

I hadn't been able to detect her scent because she hadn't come into her abilities yet, no one able to teach her how to handle the wolf living inside. Yet she'd remained masked, awaiting an awakening. She'd never understood fully, though dreams had driven her close to madness. The call of her father.

She shifted, pulling against her bindings.

"No. No! She belongs to me," the wolf snarled. *"I am Beast, king of our people."*

Angelic hissed, pulling a weapon from her pocket. "You are nothing but a monster," she told him. "You were simply a hired thug."

"You had him kill those people. I may be a freak, Mother, a half breed. Part wolf, a creature you so desperately feared your entire life. However, I am much more human than you are. You are the true monster, Mother. Why? Why did you so desperately want to erase anything having to do with my father, a man you said you loved?" Vanessa threw out, her eyes wild with anger. "Why did you never care for me?"

"Because you're a freak of nature," Angelic yelled, her body swaying from grief as well as the obvious madness she'd surrendered to.

I could only imagine the horror of realizing her daughter was part wolf, the fear crippling her more and more every year. Instead of asking for help, she'd decided to eliminate anyone who could point fingers or identify her daughter as a half breed.

"Your father never loved me. He used me," she snapped, even as tears slipped from her eyes.

"I read the love letters, Mother. I know better. He was an undercover agent working with the FBI." The words seemed to hang in the air.

"That's not true! He was a criminal," Angelic said, faltering.

"Your mother was also FBI," I told Vanessa.

Vanessa tipped her head, nodding in my direction. "I know. My mother invented the very compound that was used to

cover the bullets. She was such a brilliant scientist, her work celebrated by the military and law enforcement.”

I wasn't surprised at her admiration of her mother. Angelic's work had been highly revered; the project she'd been working on when she'd met 'Lucas' had been touted as of great importance to the military.

“Until my work was shut down. I lost everything. The love of my life and my project. I was only left with... at least I perfected my compound over the years. Now, you ugly fucking beasts can be killed. Trust me, there will be others coming for you. They will hunt you. They will... kill you and then...” Angelic couldn't seem to finish, her shoulders slumping, but I could still feel her anger as well as her volatility. She swung the weapon toward the wolf, taking gasping breaths. “If you think you can have my daughter, you're sorely mistaken.”

The two popping noises were startling, even more so than the action her mother had taken. As the LaRue beast realized his fate, he reached out for Vanessa, his agonizing howl chilling. In the next several seconds, I was drawn into Vanessa's world as she struggled with her true identity.

I felt her anguish and her pain.

I experienced her remorse and intense sadness.

Her cries permeated my very soul.

And the knowledge of who she'd become stripped her momentarily of her humanity as her mother pointed the gun in my direction.

Suddenly, the cries permeating the night sky were those of a woman learning how to turn into a wolf.

A beast she'd feared her entire life, but one she was suddenly forced to embrace.

As a moment of confusion and fear wrapped around her mother's mind, she turned and there was no other choice for me but to lunge in her direction.

I would save the woman I loved.

Pop! Pop!

* * *

Vanessa

I stormed into the room, still gasping for air. Every muscle ached, including my heart, the transformation I'd gone through something I still wasn't able to comprehend, pushing the experience out of my mind for fear of losing it. I moved within inches of my mother, struggling to keep my anger at bay. "You will save him. Do you fucking understand me?"

"That's not something I can do," she said softly.

The hard slap I gave her did little to jar her attention. "Yes, you can and you will." As Max came closer, his expression grim, I held out my hand in an attempt to wave him off. "Don't. She can save Stone's life."

"Be careful," Max encouraged, a slight growl in his tone. "She is dangerous."

"You should listen to your friend, Vanessa. You think too much of me, darling daughter. I created the killing machine, not an antidote." My mother laughed. She actually laughed.

I felt my wolf crawling closer to the surface. I had no understanding of what I was facing or how to deal with keeping my body from changing. I felt Max's hand gripping my arm, could sense his concern. While we weren't in a hospital, I couldn't lose control, letting go of a beast I didn't understand. Tears suddenly overwhelmed me, the horror of what had occurred in the woods unfathomable. "Please. I know better, Mother. I know how you work. I know you can save him. You can save both of them."

"You want the bastard to live?" Gregor asked, huffing under his breath.

"The wolf was used," Max said under his breath. "He deserves a chance to live."

“That’s bullshit,” Gregor hissed.

I ran my hands through my hair, pacing the floor as I stared at Stone. What the hell was I supposed to do now? I could see the horrible spider-like formations that had appeared within minutes of Stone being shot. His breathing was already labored, his skin almost white. I glanced at the doctor they’d brought in and could tell by his face that there was little time left. I hated my mother, although I almost understood why she’d felt such animosity toward my father for years. While he’d never been able to tell her that he’d been undercover, he had confessed that he was a wolf, terrifying her.

Their love hadn’t been strong enough.

Would mine be for Stone?

“If something isn’t done within a short period of time, they’re both going to die,” Dr. Riker said to Max, shaking his head.

I couldn’t take it any longer, moving closer to my mother. I’d insisted her life be spared, the other wolves backing down. I only hoped I hadn’t been a fool once again. “You loved my father once. I know that you did. You suffered for years thinking he was a horrible man, killed because he was working for a true monster. But you never stopped loving him. I know you didn’t.”

“You don’t know that,” my mother whispered, fisting her hands.

“I love Stone. You may not understand or even care about me as your daughter, but you have to see how much love there is. Please don’t allow him to die. Please. I know you can help. You’re still the brilliant woman I’ve known my entire life.”

My mother swallowed, stealing a look at Stone. “I... can’t. I’m sorry.”

Anger swept through me and there was nothing I could do, the horror of what had been created too much to bear. I raced toward the front door, needing air. The moment I was outside, I allowed myself to scream. This just couldn’t be happening.

“Please, hold on, baby. I’ll find a way to save you.” I could feel the mental tethering slipping away. Stone was dying.

“I. Love. You,” he managed a few seconds later.

The strangled words in my mind brought a wave of despair, tears trickling down my face. I wiped them away furiously, no longer certain what to do. As I stood in the darkness, I realized just how improved my vision truly was. I could see clearly every creature scuttling through the trees. Every bat flying above. Every sound was magnified, filling my ears with sweet songs of the night.

And none of it mattered.

Not without Stone.

As the door opened, I was fearful that Stone was on his last breath. Max moved by my side, inhaling. “I’ve always loved the night. It’s my favorite time.”

I had no idea what to say.

“He loves you. He was willing to die for you,” he continued.

“Yes, but I’m responsible for his death.”

He chuckled softly. “I don’t think he’s going to die.”

“You have faith that I don’t.”

“Your mother is a remarkable woman, even though she was blinded by both her love and hatred.”

Now I was the one to laugh. “She’s a monster.”

“No, she’s not. She simply had no one to talk to and no understanding of what she’d gone through. Why don’t you go back inside?” he said gently.

“I can’t watch him die.”

“Then watch him recover. Your mother is trying.”

I snapped my head in his direction, gasping for air. “Is it possible?”

“I think he needs you.”

A slight whimper left my mouth before I raced back inside. While I couldn’t understand what they were doing, my mother was indeed working with Dr. Riker. I could only hope that

whatever they were attempting might work. For the first time that I could remember, I prayed.

And in those moments, I could see my father's smiling face.

CHAPTER 17



*S*tone

The growl left my lungs, the husky tone riddled with lust instead of anger. I stood on the knoll, studying the water below in a different way than I had before. Everything had changed in the last four days, including my perspective on life. I was no longer just a man in search of a reason to continue. I was a Wolfen who needed to accept my leadership of a pack who'd risked their lives in order to save not only me, but the woman I loved.

I felt her presence behind me, the richness of her scent reminding me of what had almost been lost. The moment she placed her hands on my shoulders, pressing her face against my back, I savored the shiver skating down my spine. The simple touch was more enjoyable than almost anything on earth.

Almost.

I dragged my tongue across my gums, the hint of my canines hungry to explode strong. Vanessa brought out the wolf in me. I snickered at the thought as I heard her soft purrs, the sound reverberating in my very soul. She'd snagged a part of me in her tough little hand that no one else had.

My humanity.

I'd almost forgotten what it meant to be human, my longing for brutal contact, savagery in order to protect her remaining in

my mind. I could have killed the wolf called Beast without question. As it was, he'd come close to dying, only saved by Vanessa's insistence. She was a much stronger and more amazing woman than I'd even realized.

As she slid her hands down the length of my back, kneading the skin under my shirt, I took another deep breath. The scents of the forest were nothing in comparison to the wafting fragrance of her delicious feminine wiles.

She was famished.

So was I.

I would ravage her.

But only after one stern and very harsh round of discipline.

A smile shifted across my lips, the taste of her sweet lips lingering on mine. The four days had mostly been a blur, the healing process longer than Dr. Riker had hoped. While I would never forgive Angelic for what she'd done to her own daughter, let alone the people of our pack, at least she'd found her own level of humanity.

Or so Vanessa had told me more than once.

My mate's capacity for forgiveness was much stronger than my own.

While the Beast was caged, awaiting trial from our own council, he'd provided some information regarding the LaRue pack. Max had learned a great deal about him, including his real name. Stryker Mason had never considered a single location a home, learning early in his life that being an assassin had its perks. I honestly had some pity for the man as well as additional respect for the Wolfen pack.

We protected our own while he'd never known the comfort or protection of a family.

I shifted my arms, wrapping them around her thighs as I swayed back and forth, grinding my hips against hers. The scent of her wet pussy was driving me crazy, the desire reaching critical mass. I would be deep inside soon enough.

“How are you feeling?” Vanessa asked quietly. She seemed more content, even though she’d only asked a few questions regarding her heritage. There were already some within the Wolfen pack who’d condemned her given her LaRue heritage. Thankfully, Max had made his position clear.

She was my mate and was to be protected as one of our own.

While Markel had remained aloof, so far, he had yet to challenge my mistakes or the coupling. I suspected one day that would come. And I would be prepared. No one was going to take her away from me. If they dared try, they would face a wrath unlike anything they’d ever known before.

At least Markel had provided more of a full account of the LaRue wolves to the entire council, allowing us to understand that there were still solid numbers of the beasts. The remaining pack had made it their mission to wipe out as many Wolfen as possible. They would strike again, but we would be better prepared.

“Amazing.” I squeezed my hands around her legs, allowing a single growl to slip past my lips.

Her ragged breathing was merely another reminder of her increasing hunger, an insatiable woman in her own right. As she eased her hands around me, brushing just the tips of her fingers down my chest, I closed my eyes. This was absolute paradise. The moment her delicate hands reached my cock, I found it almost impossible to control my beast.

“Yes, you do feel amazing,” she whispered as she stroked my shaft, moving in a deliberate manner. “Perfect in fact.” As her deft hands fumbled with my belt buckle, stars flashed in front of my eyes.

She’d had no way of knowing how important her investigation into Chris Montenegro and his company had been, even though he’d never confessed to any additional knowledge as to the whereabouts of Anthony Drago. I’d seen the resignation in her at the fact that she would likely never know what had really happened to her father.

Through Max's influence and contacts in the various law enforcement systems, not only were Chris and Thomas Montenegro under indictment for criminal activities going back several years, a half dozen of their board members were as well. The ugly story was still unraveling, details of their far-reaching attempt to destroy multiple companies incomprehensible.

At least the damning headlines had kept the press from barking at Roselake's door, the concept of dangerous wolves walking the streets of Denver shoved under yet another rug.

For now.

It was only a matter of time before our pack would be faced with full exposure. I only prayed that life would go on for a few years, allowing me to enjoy my acceptance of a beautiful, sensuous, and feisty mate.

After all, I needed a significant portion of time to train her.

"I need you," she murmured as she managed to unfasten my button.

I clamped both hands on top of hers, the husky sound erupting from my throat barbaric. "Not so fast, little girl. You seem to forget that you aren't in charge. In addition, I can tell you don't remember the hard spanking I promised you."

"I think I've paid for my sins."

I laughed, tipping my head back and enjoying the glimmer of sun on my face. As close as I'd been to death, I'd never given up on the hope a day like this would come. "Not a chance, princess."

"You haven't called me that in days."

"Many things are about to change. Now, I suggest you undress and prepare for your punishment."

A hoarse groan escaped her lips as her hands drifted away. "Can't I beg for forgiveness?"

"Always, but that won't get you out of your punishment. You've disobeyed me on far too many occasions, almost getting yourself killed." I turned to face her and was still

stunned at her level of beauty as the light breeze blew through her long strands, the shimmer of sun highlighting the copper in her hair. She was truly magnificent. Even the simple cotton dress she was wearing allowed me to indulge in the voluptuousness of her hourglass figure.

I was one lucky man.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a faraway voice, blinking several times as she glanced deep into the forest. “You know I never wanted you hurt.”

I moved quickly, gathering her into my arms and yanking her onto her tiptoes. “Baby, you were only trying to protect me and I love you for that. You are talented and vibrant, tenacious in every way and so very strong.”

“But?” Her gaze turned seductive.

“Nice try, sunshine. You’re not getting out of your punishment. If I have to tell you to undress again, your punishment is going to be much worse.” I released my hold, taking a decided step backwards as I tugged on my belt very slowly.

Vanessa gave me a pouty look even though her eyes drifted to my hands as I pulled the strap through the loops one at a time. “Fine.”

“Fine?” I snarled on purpose.

“Yes, sir.” She lowered her head, taking several deep breaths before tugging on her dress, pulling it over her head and allowing the wind to float it several feet away. Now she was completely naked, no longer humiliated at standing in an open forest for all the world to see.

This was Wolfen land.

Protected land.

I couldn’t help but smile at the thought. My mouth watered at the sight of her, my heart racing as I attempted to release my belt. The moment I did, a warm flush crept up along her cheeks, staining her already gorgeous face. I couldn’t get

enough of her; the vision of her loveliness and the scent that remained burning into my skin. She was mine.

All mine.

I pulled the strap under my nose, taking a deep whiff and all the while, she watched me intently. When I pointed to the massive oak tree, she bit her lower lip, allowing a single whimper to pulse up from her throat.

I couldn't help but notice she was fully aroused, her beautiful rosy nipples hard as perfect pebbles, her thighs already slick from her delicious pussy juice. I would ravage her like the true savage I was.

Vanessa gave me one last fleeting look before moving toward the tree, wrapping her arms around the thick trunk and pressing her face against the bark.

As I moved closer, my cock pressed hard against my jeans, making the movement difficult. Damn, the woman had no idea what she did to me. Very gently I eased her long hair over her shoulder before brushing the tip of just my index finger all the way down her spine to the crack of her rounded bottom. Every part of me was shaking from the increased adrenaline, the raging desire to thrust my cock deep inside her tight little asshole.

"I think thirty will do for today," I muttered as I took a step back, beads of sweat from my exacerbated needs forming along my hairline.

"Thirty? That's not fair!"

"If you question me again, it'll be forty."

She shot me a look, obviously prepared to spout off her usual rebellious remarks. I refused to laugh given her antics, knowing that she would be a tough one to train.

Oh, but I was up to the challenge.

As I brought the belt across her ass cheeks in a single swat, she bit back a whimper, fisting her hands.

When I delivered three more in rapid succession, she moved onto her tiptoes, arching her back. Every part of me was on

fire, the slow burn in my belly ready to ignite. I spanked her several additional times, the sound of the thick strap as it sliced through the air like sweet music.

Vanessa was unable to hold back a series of moans as she kicked out one leg then stomped her foot onto the ground. “Oh. Oh!”

“You’re doing very well.”

“How would you know?” The slight gasp coming from her mouth made me smile. “I mean, sir. Sir!”

I immediately cracked four more across her sit spot, two on her upper thighs, my hunger as well as my wolf clawing at the surface, my skin tight as a drum.

“Oh, God. I’ll be good!” she exclaimed, her body grinding against the tree.

I could barely focus from the intense desire rushing through every cell and muscle. “Yes, you will, or your punishments will be daily.”

“No. No!” She clung to the tree, taking gasping breaths. When I smacked her again and again, she pinched her face, her eyes clamped shut.

The blooming color on her skin was a powerful aphrodisiac, driving my hunger to the point I was too ravenous to think clearly. My balls were damn tight, driving me to the point of madness. I had to have her. I had to be inside of her.

I took a deep breath, continuing the round of discipline, my breathing coming in scattered pants. When I’d issued the final strikes, I once again pulled the leather under my nose, indulging in her intense fragrance covering every inch. I could stand no more. The moment I pulled her body away from the tree, cradling her warmth against mine, I cupped her breasts.

She moaned, wiggling against me in such a provocative manner I was left breathless. When I pinched her nipples between my fingers, she arched her back, pressing her head against my shoulder. I adored her cries, the sound filling my ears and driving straight to my hardened cock.

I half stumbled backwards with a keening howl. I wanted the entire pack to know how important she was to me. I craved the freedom of taking her as my mate.

But mostly, I wasn't able to keep my hands off her.

I ripped the shirt over my head, growling as she turned to face me, sliding her hands up and down her chest. Teasing me.

Taunting me.

My beast remained dangerously close to the surface as I finished undressing. When the breeze shifted across my exposed skin, I threw my arms back and roared.

She took that moment to take off running, her laughter filtering behind her.

I grinned like a damn kid, allowing her to dart into the trees. The hunt was on.

As she zigged and zagged her way through the dense foliage, I held back, only advancing a few steps to her dozen. She raced toward the edge of the water, her long hair flowing behind her. Everything about this moment was cathartic. This was the very location I'd seen the wolf the first time.

My senses were on overload and I took off running, my long legs stretching as my muscles ached to be set free, becoming my beast.

She shifted around to face me, her eyes lit up with fire. Now there was no holding back.

I tackled her, forcing us both to the ground and onto all fours. Her moans were exquisite, more beast than woman, dragging out the darkness from deep within. I wrapped my body around hers, yanking her backward as she continued to claw at the earth in an attempt to get out of my clutches.

There was no way she was getting away from me. Not now.

Not ever.

I wasted no time, wrapping my hand around my throbbing shaft and pushing the tip past her soaked and swollen folds.

“Oh. Oh!” She stiffened, taking several ragged breaths as her body continued to quiver at my touch.

The moment I plunged the entire length of my cock inside, her muscles reacted, clamping around the invasion like a vise.

“Yes. Yes,” she moaned, dropping her head.

We were only inches from the water, our reflection almost iridescent in the late morning sun. I held her tightly as my shaft swelled, stretching her muscles and filling her completely.

“So tight,” I whispered. “So wet.”

“Mmm...” She undulated her hips in a slow and easy fashion as she dug her nails into the cool earth.

My body began to shake, every muscle and tendon tense. I was suddenly unable to hold back, driving into her in long and hard strokes. Within seconds, I pumped like a wild beast, taking her savagely.

She met every brutal thrust with one of her own, her sounds nothing but her own beast begging to be released.

The sensations rushing through me were more intense than ever, the blood pumping through my veins driving my heartrate to a frenetic state. Even the sound of skin slapping against skin was perfect, the moment raw and unbridled.

For those incredible minutes, we were as one.

One couple.

One beast.

I fucked her long and hard, refusing to back down as her pussy muscles clenched then released several times. I knew she was close to coming. I lowered my head, dragging my exposed canines down her neck before biting down.

“Oh. Oh. Oh!” Vanessa’s entire body began to shake violently as a climax rushed through her. I refused to stop, pumping wildly as one orgasm turned into a second.

Then a third.

I'd promised to protect her.

Now I would promise to love her to eternity.

Only when she stopped shaking did I allow my release, even as my cock continued to grow. As I filled her with my seed, I could hear the distant howls of other members of my pack.

Acknowledging.

Accepting.

She was my mate.

* * *

Vanessa

Wolf.

The word no longer bothered me. After two weeks of learning about the Wolfen and being involved in the pack, I'd begun to understand. While I would always have questions, even concerns, I was no longer afraid of what I truly was.

My father had given me a gift, my mother attempting to take it away. I'd forgiven her, even though I'd never forget what had occurred.

At least we'd talked on several occasions. I'd even seen joy in her eyes learning the truth about my father. Would she ever be whole again? I doubted it, but I would certainly try to help.

I'd been asked to head the Montenegro Corporation by the remaining decent members of the board. While I'd politely declined, I was still being hounded. Who knew what was in store for the future. As far as right now? I was just happy learning about my past.

And more about my father.

"Where are we going?" Stone asked, issuing a slight growl under his breath.

I grabbed his hand, giving him my most defiant look. “Just be quiet. Please. Sir.” While I remained uncertain how much I could follow his rules, I couldn’t get enough of the man. He was my life.

Now it was time for me to give him back his.

“Just breathe,” I instructed as I dragged him along a path, moving closer to the lake. I’d realized how much peace he garnered through being close to the water. A new beginning. A connection to the past.

Hope for the future.

As I tugged him through a clearing to the beautiful grassy knoll that had been a moment of horror, I heard his breath catch.

Likely from the sight of seeing Max and Gregor.

I’d come to respect both men in different ways, their strength and leadership almost as incredible as Stone’s.

Almost.

“What is this?” Stone demanded.

“Time for you to be quiet for once,” I stated firmly.

“I’d listen to her, Stone. She’s one tough lady,” Max added.

Even Gregor was grinning, his once surly attitude replaced by additional respect for his friend.

Stone growled as he was dragged closer.

I took both his hands into mine, sighing before I spoke. “I love you, Stone. You have brought me peace as well as such joy.”

He seemed antsy, glancing back and forth between the men. “But?”

Max rolled his eyes before sliding an envelope from his pocket. “A hardhead as always.”

“Open it.”

Stone lifted a single eyebrow as he took it into his hand. “You guys better not piss me off.”

“Such a badass,” Gregor said under his breath.

I took a step away, tears forming in my eyes. I only hoped I’d done the right thing.

As he peeled away the flap, pulling out the group of papers inside, I held my breath. Only when his eyes narrowed did I allow my pent-up moan to surface.

“I don’t understand,” he whispered, rubbing his index finger across the paper.

“Your lovely mate was right. You’re wasting your talents. I had some connections at the Denver Memorial Hospital with friends of mine. You’re going to start your residency there immediately.”

Stone jerked his head up, scanning all three of us. “But why?”

“Because you deserve to be a doctor. Because you’re brilliant and amazing and I want you to be happy,” I said in a whisper.

“I wouldn’t fight the lovely lady. She’s damn tenacious. Even threatened us if we didn’t go along with this.” Gregor huffed playfully.

“But what about the Nightwalkers and the council?” Stone asked, a smile curling on his lips.

“You can do all three. I have faith,” Max stated in his usual authoritative manner.

As Stone looked into my eyes, his filling with tears, I realized even more so than before that I’d finally found a home.

As well as peace.

I lifted my head toward the sky, able to feel my beautiful wolf longing to rise to the surface. *Soon, my girl. Soon you will run free as you’re supposed to do.*

But only if allowed by the man I loved.

My lover.

My soul.

My mate.

The End

AFTERWORD

Stormy Night Publications would like to thank you for your interest in our books.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK WOLVES SERIES

His to Claim

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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...

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

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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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

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.

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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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