

## CHAPTER 1

The delicate lace cupped the mannequin's breast in a gentle bundle of black feathers.

Alicia Clarkson stepped back from her work and wiped a sweaty forehead on her sleeve as she eyed her latest design. The slate gray mannequin stood poised with one arm bent on its hip in a feminine gesture while the other still hadn't been attached.

Alicia knew better than to let the rush of excitement sway her more constructive judgment but she couldn't help it. She knew it was her greatest work yet. The bra was black with thin silk straps, nothing unusual. What made the bra stand out from anything she'd ever seen or made before was the glorious abundance of raven black feathers. The idea had dawned on her late last night while she'd been embarrassingly intrigued by some show on the history of birds. At one point, the camera had panned over to a chubby little bird with blue and brown feathers perched on a thin tree branch and the idea struck Alicia like lightning.

She hadn't slept since. She'd rushed to her workroom and had been working at this one design all day. Her fingers hurt from using the needle and thread; her nails had long been chipped and little cuts made her thumb and index fingers swollen. The muscles in her arms throbbed but still she had not stopped working. She couldn't. She'd been in the grasp of her muse and there was no way she was about to let it go so she could get some lousy sleep.

Black feathers shined with a luminous gleam under the fluorescent overhead light. It was the most captivating piece she'd ever created; she couldn't tear her eyes away from the way the feathers cupped the mannequin's breasts with a tender touch. The feathered tips frayed where the swell of the breast would be, fanning out along the skin to create a provocative sight.

She could almost see the completed design. The black silk, no, satin, panties with decorative feathers. Paired with stockings, pure black or maybe netted nylon. A shiver went over her and Alicia raced to her notepad to jot down the idea.

Fishnet stockings, black, with feather trim.

She could almost see the finished concept if she just closed her eyes. It was sexy, mysterious, intriguing.

Biting her lip, she smiled. This could be the one. The design that made her work popular. It was her most original idea yet. It just had to sell.

The sound of a woman's scream broke the rush of excited pleasure coursing inside her. Alicia ran to her window overlooking the street below. One floor up gave her a great view of her pack's neighborhood. She lifted the window and stuck her head out.

What she saw sent goosebumps across her arms and a chill down her spine. Two of the pack's highest lieutenants, Mike and Lawrence, had another packmate in their grip. She squinted to see who it was and nearly growled at what she saw. It was Sarah, a sweet, innocent woman barely out of girlhood. She was always practicing her acting skills, said she wanted to be a famous movie star one day.

Rage exploded inside her and she shouted before she thought twice about it. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Let her go!" She didn't stand there to see them glance up at her. Instead, she raced down her apartment stairs and flew out the front door.

"What's the meaning of this? Does Josiah know what's going on here?"

Lawrence leveled her with a cold look. "Yeah, sweet cheeks, he knows. Who do you think sent us to fetch her?"

"Mind your own business, Alicia. This has nothing to do with you," Mike said.

Alicia scanned the street to see several packmates coming outside at the commotion. Making sure she could be heard she raised her voice and said, "I think forcing Sarah to go with you when she's clearly scared out of her mind is a cause for concern. Let her go."

Mike's jaw flexed. He had a big head with a long forehead and a nose that looked like it's been crushed dozens of times. He looked exactly how a thug ought to look. "Why don't you go back inside like a good girl and mind your damned business, tramp?"

Alicia grunted. "Taking her is all of our business."

The rumble of tires came their way. "Great, Josiah's here. You can handle this with him yourself," Lawrence said.

Alpha Josiah's dark green Jeep came to an abrupt stop with a squeal of bad brakes. He hopped out and instantly Alicia lowered her gaze to show her respect.

"Josiah, they're trying to take Sarah and she obviously doesn't want to go wherever they are taking her."

A minute of silence filled the air.

Alicia chanced a glance at her alpha only to see him watching her carefully before his gaze slid to Sarah.

"Bring them both."

She jerked. "What? Take me where?" Her sharp question whipped through the air.

Lawrence left Mike to hold Sarah as he came for her. She didn't bother trying to outrun a lieutenant since it'd never work, though choosing to stay was hard enough when every instinct told her to flee. A tight fist gripped her arm, pinching.

"Alpha Josiah, what the hell is going on here?" she asked, panic beginning to creep into her voice.

Josiah shook his head as his shoulders pulled back in a commanding sign. "There's a new alpha in the Oregon pack named Gavin MacKellen. The old one, Joseph Harrington, died after some scrap with his mate, a Katagan."

"And?" Alicia said, words spoken from between tight lips.

At the sound of her anger, Josiah's eyes hardened. "Watch your tone with me, tramp. The new alpha's looking for a mate."

Shock and something that felt as though she'd eaten something bad filled her stomach with a lead weight.

"As a sign of our trust and happiness with the new leader, we're sending some of our women."

"Some of our..." she paused, then tried again. "So you're, what, sending Sarah to be his whore?"

Josiah took hard steps toward her until he got in her face. Whimpering, Alicia looked as far down as she could, bowing her neck in the process. "I'm sorry, Alpha." Her words, barely a whisper, sounded as loud as a gunshot in the tense atmosphere.

"Well, she's not going alone now. You both are. After all, I gotta send the pretty ones. Wouldn't want to pass up on the chance to send one of our finest would we, Alicia? Not to worry, he says he'll send back any he doesn't like. Maybe he won't like all that beauty you keep wrapped around yourself. Besides, it's not like you'd mind him, right, tramp?"

She sucked in a breath at his words. She tried to think of a way out of this but knew it was useless. Josiah nodded to Mike and he jerked back into the house where he ordered her to pack.

Only after they forced her to pack her belongings in a meager duffle bag, even after they drove her from Arizona up into Oregon with Sarah at her side, and after they were driven into MacKellen lands, blindfolded, and taken into a house, did her situation finally hit her. It hit her like a lead pipe to the head.

She was hungry, alone, on unfamiliar land with no friends, and blindfolded. She was completely at someone's mercy.

Someone jerked the blindfold off her eyes and shoved her forward into a darkened room. The door slammed shut behind her. Alicia raced for it and twisted the handle. Locked. Making a fist, she banged and screamed. The door shook and someone had to have heard her cries but no one came. What was going on? Where did they take Sarah?

Her fist hit once more then stilled. Only her harsh, erratic breaths answered her in the quiet room. Turning, she faced her room and took note of it for the first time.

It wasn't a big room but it was dark without windows or any light. She searched the walls for a light switch and only thanks to her heightened eyesight as a lykaen did she find it. With relief, she flipped it. Nothing happened. Cursing, she flipped back and forth again but no lights turned on.

A horrible thought came to her. Was this some sort of room where they stashed the women to be used in the dark?

Oh god, oh god.

She needed to find a weapon.

A deep mumbling sound came from the other side of the door, or maybe further away at the end of a hall. She couldn't really tell. They'd kept her blindfolded so she wouldn't know where they were taking her.

Using her hands to touch everything as she walked in baby-steps, she made her way through the room. She started to make out shapes: a big, upholstered chair in the corner by the door, a chaise sofa on the opposite corner with a rug in between and a few small tables with lamps that, when she turned the switch, refused to turn on. On another wall, she found a bookcase.

The male voices came closer, the words muffled. Her heartbeat kicked up into a fast tempo and she moved faster, fumbling to find a weapon. A book fell off, slamming into the floor like a small explosion and she jumped at the sound, letting out a little scream. *Get a hold of yourself, Alicia!* Finally, she felt a gap in the shelf where there were no books. Her hand closed around something. She squinted at it. It was some kind of little statue not even a foot tall but it felt solid and heavy in her hands. Maybe even a trophy.

She heard two voices as she raced to hide behind the door. The door handle jiggled and her breath caught. This was it. Someone was coming in here.

She raised the little statue above her head, making sure the door would hide her when it opened, and then she waited.

She did not have to wait long.

The door unlocked with a metal click and swung inward. No light entered which meant they were keeping her from seeing whoever came inside; no hallway light, nothing. A heavy footstep, another, and then the weight settled as someone stopped.

He must be wearing boots or be very fat because he sounded heavy.

A thick shadow stood in the door like a black mass. She couldn't discern much in the few seconds she saw him but she catalogued what she did see: heavysset shoulders, broad, tall at over six feet, feet braced apart, flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up, hair thick but not long. She could almost make out a spattering of gray though her eyes could be playing tricks on her.

She struck. As hard as she could, she yanked her arms down letting her muscles burn and connected with his head.

Then the consequence of what she just did struck her because he did not topple to the ground as she'd seen people do in movies. Heck, he didn't even make a sound, not so much as a peep or a grunt.

No, but he did turn around and not slowly, but fast as a fox grabbed the statue out of her hand and tossed it across the room. Before she could react, the big man grabbed her by the arms and pushed her away from the door.

"We'll have to tie her up," a new voice said.

Alicia stiffened for two different reasons. For one, another younger-sounding man came into the room, cursing as he bumped into something.

"Yeah," the big one agreed.

And two, the big man who spoke his one-word reply had a unique voice unlike anything she had ever heard.

The younger man came at her, grabbed her by the arms. Alicia didn't hesitate to shove him away. The man was young, maybe in his twenties. He had a skinny body and when she pushed he stumbled back a few steps.

The man turned to the bigger, scarier man still shadowing the door. "She won't let me."

The air froze at his words. Alicia's eyes bugged at his ridiculous statement. "Of course I won't let you, you idiot."

The man, whose skinny body felt more like that of a boy's, grabbed her again, this time getting behind her and wrapping her in an impenetrable bear hug.

"Try not to hurt her," said the man with the voice. What had happened to him to get a voice that sounded like that—like he'd had his windpipes crushed before?

As she fought in his hold, her eyes squinted to find focus on the man in charge, but she could no longer make out his impression. He'd gone.

"You should be doing this," the boy said, venom lacing his words. Was he mocking the big man?

"Please let me go." She tried begging; it was worth a shot.

The one holding her didn't say a word, but his grip did tighten around her with his answer—a resounding no.

Suddenly hard footsteps were coming straight for her as the big man came back into the room. She fought harder, pushing back and shoving her hips, anything, to find purchase.

"Hold her tight," the man rasped.

"Don't—" was all she got out before a screech and rip sound shut her up. Was that...? Cold, sticky tape was clamped over her mouth. Yes, yes it was. Duct tape.

Panic reared its ugly head; she bucked, putting her whole body into it and knocked the boy off her. Without hesitating, she ran for the door, but didn't make it far as her shoe caught the edge of a table and sent it tumbling over with a crash. She lurched through the air arms flailing, feeling nothing but empty air for bottomless moments, then her fingers trailed over a hard, flat wall and she flung herself toward it.

A moment later, he caught her. The big man, the man in charge. He did not say a word as he jerked her arms behind her back and began tying them. The material was scratchy and firm and she closed her eyes with the realization that she was now bound by rope and gagged with tape. A hollow, cold sensation settled in her chest and spread out to encase her limbs in a heavy, drugging feeling.

With a jerk on the ropes, he walked her backward. Even close up she couldn't make out his features. Just a tall, strong looking man. He pushed her back and she fumbled as her knees hit the sofa. She knew what he wanted and this time she gave in and sat.

He moved away from her. The room was so dark that even with her eyes as adjusted as they could be, she only knew he moved because the air around her became less stifling.

Her nostrils flared as she breathed in quick breaths through her nose.

The boy came back and she could no longer feel the bigger man's presence. Had he left or was he lurking in the shadows? The boy fidgeted with the lamp on the table beside her. She heard a distinct metallic sound and glared at the boy in the darkness. It sounded very much like he was screwing in a light bulb. So that's what they'd done, but why?

He turned the switch. At once, her eyes blinked fast to adjust to the new light. Then she took in everything about the boy and the room. He was about twenty-one, so younger than she was. He wore a pained grimace, had golden brown eyes, and shaggy blond hair.

"Mmmfff!" At her failed attempt to speak through the tape, he laughed at her.

"I'm Will in case you're wondering. Don't worry, he'll be back soon. I was just supposed to put the bulb back in the socket to give you some light. It ain't much but it's better than nothin'."

Her eyes flared. Why remove the bulbs? To scare her, Sarah, and others like them? What kind of freak was this alpha? Only a deranged, perverted creep would go to such lengths.

He looked back at the door. "Good, I hear him coming. Now, if I can give you some advice—" He looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to respond. When she could only glare, he continued. "He won't hurt ya, and it wouldn't hurt to beg to go home."

She glared so hard she could feel her eyeballs squishing. What in the world?

Boot steps sounded. The light was so dim and the room so large that it barely reached the doorway leaving it mostly in shadows. She could just make out an outline outside the door of a hallway which looked like a house.

Will gave her a mock bow then headed to the door to meet the Strange Man.

"I'm goin' out. If you need somethin' talk to Jo or Hart." This he said to the Strange Man who seemed to stand perfectly in the shadows so she couldn't see his face.

However, she could see the flannel of his shirt more clearly—red, green, and brown lines and boxes. He also wore a pair of torn, worn looking blue jeans with boots caked in crusty mud.

He took a step into the room and closed the door behind him. Alicia fidgeted in her seat then scanned the room for any possible means of escape but saw none. No windows, only one door which he blocked.

He walked toward her carrying something in his hands which rattled. Sucking in a sharp breath, she jerked backward nearly falling off the sofa as he approached.

Only, he never came close enough for her to make out anything about his face let alone close enough for him to touch her. From what she could see he had to be older than her, maybe late thirties or early forties with dark hair, but he moved out of the light so fast she couldn't be sure whether it was long or short, black or brown.

He set a tray on the coffee table in front of her but stayed on the other side of it, away from her. She thanked god for the small miracle. Peering at what he brought, she frowned. The motion pinched the skin around her lips, pulling the tape tighter at what she saw. He'd brought her a glass of water, a cup of hot tea, and a sandwich.

Really?

She tried to meet the Strange Man's eyes but failed to as he started moving around the coffee table toward her. At once her eyes darted for his face but he kept it averted, the light never quite catching it. He moved behind her chair and when she tried to turn to keep him in her sights, he touched her shoulder to keep her facing forward. With that one, firm touch she froze.

Warm fingers trailed across her cheek and her blood ran to ice. With a quick snap, he ripped the tape from her mouth.

"Ow!"

Relief at having the tape gone was met with a fiery burn around her mouth. She could feel a layer of skin go with the tape. Immediately, heat rose where the tape had been making her feel like she had a strange sunburn. She licked her dry lips, wetting them. He cut the ropes binding her wrists next and she hugged herself. He didn't give her long to enjoy her newfound freedom before he tied her wrists in front of her.

"Eat." One word and it made her stiffen. What was wrong with his voice? It was too scratchy, too deep.

"Who are you?"

He moved back to the door. In the light she confirmed he was tall, broad framed, and probably quite muscular. She had an eye for seeing such things since she made clothes. Proportions, dimensions, and sizes were how she saw clothes. With some fabric, a little thread, and needle, she could make him a better-fitted flannel. The one he wore was too long on him, dangling too far down his thighs, and the collar was too big around his neck as if it was meant for a bigger man.

"Just eat."

She didn't spare the food another glance. "No."

When he turned around she wished he'd come close enough to show her his face. It was too disconcerting not being able to see the person she was talking to. Besides, what game was he playing at with all the theatrics?

"I want you to eat it."

"Why, so you can drug me and make it easier on you to do your thing?"

Her breaths quickened. Oh god, how little control she had here. Face it, she told herself, you have none. He holds all the cards and right now he's only showing

you a few of them. She rolled her shoulders to try to ease the tension in them. Didn't work.

A long, eerily quiet minute passed, followed by another before he deigned to speak.

"You think you're here to get hurt?"

She could not keep her jaw from falling open. "Why else did my alpha tell me I'm so pretty and send me here to be the new alpha's...his, your, whatever. Josiah didn't offer me up to do the alpha's dishes, you know. How do you think that sounds to me?" Anger made her words sharp like snap-fire gunshots.

He stayed silent as if contemplating her words—or how best to kill her and dispose of the body. Her family was dead and her alpha had given her up so she'd bet he could do it easily.

"No one here will hurt you. Now eat. It was a long trip and they said you wouldn't eat."

Seriously, that's all he had to say? He took a seat in the chair behind the closed door. She sent him another of one of her glares. She was hungry, the food look downright delicious and smelled even better, but it was his food and damned if she'd eat it. Or maybe she could just have a nibble.

"You're going to watch me eat?"

"Yes."

She blinked. That voice...it was so unsettling but interesting at the same time. He had a voice that raised questions.

She sniffed the hot drink finding that it smelled like tea so she sipped it, found it slightly sweetened with sugar. She set it down then waited a few minutes to see if anything felt odd. She had no idea what she would or wouldn't feel if she were drugged but this was her only option.

She repeated the process with glass of water and sandwich.

A rough sound, something like a grunt, filled the empty space after several minutes. "I told you it's fine."

"And I don't trust you."

Another pregnant pause. "I need to ask you some questions."

He wanted to ask her questions. She chewed on a bite of the sandwich. This whole situation was getting more curious by the minute.

"Like what?"

"Do you have a mate?"

Her eyebrows shot up at that. "Excuse me?"

Something that sounded very much like a growl came from him. It was a deep, rattling noise from deep in his chest. The hair on her arms stood on end.

"Listen, I don't much like the situation we're in and I don't like havin' to ask a lot of questions. So why don't you just answer my questions?"

Food forgotten, she could only stare at the shadow of the strange man. An even odder sensation came over her. With a start, she recognized the feeling—security. He'd just made her feel some measure of safety and he did it without

offering any promises while she still had her wrists bound. She didn't entirely understand it.

"Well?" Impatience laced his words.

She swallowed, wishing she had more time to analyze this. He was so strange.

"Tell me who you are first." This could be a lieutenant, the alpha's brother, or any number of people though she had a feeling she knew. Only certain men packed the kind of power an alpha did.

"Gavin MacKellen, alpha of the northwestern pack of lykaens. I hold allegiance to none but my people."

"You're a new alpha."

Their lykaen species didn't shapeshift as movies and books made them out to, but they did have some unique traits. They were strong, stronger than vampires, but not as fast. They outlived humans but could be killed any number of ways. In other words, they weren't infallible.

They followed a hierarchy of strength just like pack animals. The connection between pack members was said to put human relationships to shame. Though, that also meant there was always one man that led them, protected them, and loved them. He was their alpha, a position obtained by battling the strongest men in the pack. Gavin had won that position.

Alicia's pack was from Arizona, one of the southwest packs, but even she had heard about the goings on in the Oregon territories. The previous alpha, Joseph Harrington, was an older alpha that mated with a young woman who didn't much care for him. She left him and fell in love with a vampire. The alpha went after her as most were obsessed with doing and he died by gunshot leaving the northwestern pack without an alpha. In stepped Gavin MacKellen.

"Yeah, I am. I answered your question, now answer mine. Are you mated?"

She answered honestly. "No."

He sighed and she sensed relief in the sound. "Do you know why you're here?"

Her back slammed ramrod straight. "You're looking for a whore. I won't be it."

"You disrespect me to suggest I would." He paused, clothes rustling as he moved. "I'm lookin' to mate."

A mate. Someone to share love and responsibilities with, to have children with. The mystery man wanted that. That seemed odd to her, though she didn't know why.

"Why?" she asked.

"Are you asking me why I want a mate?"

She bit her lip. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Why does anyone want a mate? I want it for the same reasons as anyone."

True. Then why did she bother to ask him in the first place? She had to stop and think about it. Maybe because so far with him he'd put tape over her mouth, tied her up, tossed her into a dark room and forced her to have this weird conversation with only the light from the dimmest lamp in the world.

“Why all the,” she waved to indicate the room, “theatrics then? Can’t you just seek out a mate like everyone else does? You know, by dating.”

She expected his answer so when it didn’t come she couldn’t help but frown and shift in her seat. This man was beyond ridiculous.

“When is the last time you were with a man?”

Her body jerked. “Excuse me?”

He sighed, the sound thick not with impatience. “I won’t repeat myself, Alicia Clarkson.”

She froze at the sound of her name even as a part of her understood that he had to know her name. The tone of his voice had changed though, the grating sound becoming a growl.

She answered as soon as she collected herself. “Seven months ago. No six. Yes, six months, I think.”

“Were you sleeping with him?”

She bit the inside of her cheek, jaw flaring as a blush covered her face. “I don’t see what that has to do with---”

“Just answer the question,” he said in that slow, measured voice. He sounded like someone who didn’t waste words but chose them with care.

“Yes.” Why that admission embarrassed her when she knew there was no shame in what she’d done annoyed her.

“You make clothes.”

She nodded since he already knew this.

“Do you sell them?”

Another nod.

“How?”

This was all too surreal. Now he wanted to know about her job? Losing patience, she snapped. “I sell lingerie online. I have my own little e-store. I don’t do as well as I’d like but I’m fine with where I’m at. I get by.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. Alicia fidgeted with the ropes by wriggling her wrists which seemed to make them itch more.

Then he spoke and every inch of her stiffened. Even her heart skipped a beat. “What do you look for...in a man?”

“What?” she asked, her voice as soft as a whisper. He sounded curious, maybe even a little embarrassed.

“Answer the question.”

She shook her head sending locks of hair snapping across her cheek. She came to a stand, teetered, then widened her stance to steady herself. “No, I’m done with this. I won’t play your little games anymore. You either explain what this is about or let me go. Actually let me go right now and show me the door. I’ve been ready to leave since I got here.”

He stood and she took an abrupt step back. Was it because she feared him? Damn right.

“Turn around.”

“Like hell.”

She could hear him sucking in a mighty breath, perhaps trying for patience, but she didn't feel bad that he suffered. Not when she was the one tied up.

“Turn around so I can untie you.”

Biting her lip, she debated his words. He could be lying. “Promise that's all you want?”

He grunted some sound of agreement.

She was loath to give him her back but she did, slowly. Better to show him her back than to keep the ropes on. He had to reach across her stomach to grab the rope binding her wrists and her heart jumped with fear. He could kill her; hurt her in so many ways.

“Stare straight ahead.”

Naturally, she tried to look over her shoulder but he grabbed the back of her head and turned it to face forward before she could catch a glimpse.

“Don't.” A warning.

It became difficult to breathe. This close, she caught his scent. It was fresh, masculine and smelled of something rugged and outdoors. The lykaen in her rolled onto its back and stretched, content. *Whoa. Reel it in, Alicia.*

She jumped at the sound of his voice so close to her ear. “I'm searching for my mate, not lookin' for no whore. I want you to stay here while we get to know each other. That means I'm goin' to have some questions you'll need to answer. You got that?” He had a gravelly, coarse voice, deep as a bass singer. He held the rope hostage as he spoke.

“Yeah,” she said instead, since she didn't see any other options.

Another grunt of approval, then she heard the metal swish of a switchblade coming out. She wiggled, tugging to get her arms free as fear rode her.

“Please don't hurt me.” She hung her head, arms trembling in his grasp.

“Stay still. I don't wanna nick you.”

Like that her fear passed. The blade passed through the ropes with ease and her shoulders sagged with relief. The itchy rope fell away. She smiled at the tiny pleasure of being free.

“You'll sleep down the hall. I'll have someone show you the room.”

He touched her forearms, strong and direct. His fingers began rubbing in circles, dipping into her muscle to massage it. She had to bite her lip to stifle a moan. She hadn't even realized how tight her muscles had become until he touched her. He worked her cramped muscles until they were loose and warm, then he did the same to her hands. His thumb dipped into her palm and rubbed in slow circles shooting pleasure through her nerves. She was biting her lip so hard she could feel it swelling.

His touch vanished in an instant.

Rubbing her arms at the sudden chill, Alicia turned back only to find he'd retreated back to the shadows.

“I'll send someone up.”

She didn't mean to ask but the words flew from her lips. "Why won't you let me see your face?"

He opened the door, stepping into the hallway. She was so certain he wouldn't answer her that she fiddled with her reddened wrists to hide her eyes.

But then he did answer and his words couldn't have shocked her more.

"I don't want you to see my face 'cause I'm an ugly son of a bitch and you're too pretty to be lookin' at that."

She gaped as he quietly shut the door behind him.

## CHAPTER 2

Gavin MacKellen climbed out of bed and dragged his heavy feet across the floor to the bathroom. His tongue felt like he'd been sucking on cotton balls wrapped with sandpaper all night long. He flexed his jaw to unglue the dried appendage from the roof of his mouth. Widening his stance, he straddled the toilet and did his business as he scrubbed the sleep out of his eyes with the back of his hand.

God damn.

This was going to be a bad day.

An incessant knock pounded at his bedroom door. He hadn't even finished his business yet. Whoever waited on the other side at little after six in the morning wouldn't be carrying a plate of bacon and eggs and a steaming cup of coffee. He just didn't have that kind of luck. Sucking in a deep breath, he washed his hands then opened the bedroom door.

A pair of angry blue eyes glared up at him. "You brought women here to choose from like cattle?"

Gavin tried to rein in a sigh but all that did was make a grumbling sound. His tired eyes peered at the doorframe and he couldn't resist leaning into it for support.

"I don't much like it either, Kaity."

She narrowed her eyes until they pinched. "Then don't do it." She threw up her hands. "Voilà! See? It's that easy. Just send them back, Gavin."

A fierce thumping began in his temple. He rubbed at it but it looked like nothing would be making the ache go away. Not for a long while.

"See here now, you know this is how it's got to be. I need a mate at my side. It's not for me, it's for the pack."

Her mouth floundered opened and closed. Finally giving up she shook her head, beaten. "This is wrong on too many levels."

"Don't I know it, but you and I both know there's no other way. None of the women here can stand to look at me anymore."

The flash of pity in her eyes jolted him awake. Damn, just what he needed...like a shotgun blast to the chest. He stepped back into his bedroom, readied his hand on the door to close it.

"There are plenty of women in the pack who will have you."

He looked at her. Just looked at her.

She couldn't hold his gaze for more than two seconds.

"I have to talk to the women tonight. I'll be sending some of them home. It'd be nice if you and Hanna could stop in on them, make sure they're taken care of," he said.

"Of course," she said, her voice much more subdued.

Now he felt like an ass for making her feel bad. "Come here, baby sister. Everything will be all right. I'll take care of it." He pulled her into a hug then let her go with a goodbye.

Gavin dressed then headed downstairs. Something stopped him when he reached the top of the stairs. No, not something, but someone. His gaze drew to the far end of the hallway where *she* was. The rest of the women that alphas from across the country sent him had been stationed in his sisters' houses, but the pack from Arizona had sent an extra woman Gavin hadn't counted on. As soon as he saw her, even with the dirty red bandana covering her eyes, he'd ordered her to be put in his house.

*You're a filthy bastard, Gavin.*

She was beautiful to look at, but he'd be lying if he said that was all there was. He'd found himself unable to resist asking about her. He wanted to know about her from her own words not those her alpha told him. He wanted to know everything about Alicia Clarkson. Something about her made him curious.

Shaking his head, he forced himself to walk away.

Gavin climbed into his truck and roared off down the dirt-strewn path to work. A dusty cloud billowed behind him.

What was it about her? Couldn't just be her pretty face or her knockout body. He wasn't as capricious as that. All anyone had to do was look at his two exes to see the truth in that. The first, Jana, everyone said was too plain, too straight-hipped and skinny, but Gavin had liked her just fine. They'd stayed together for a few years before she tired of him and moved on. As all his exes did.

His jaw set at the thought. That's why Alicia Clarkson wouldn't work. If he couldn't keep a plain-miss around, how could he keep a masterpiece like Alicia Clarkson happy? He couldn't and she'd soon be telling him the same story he'd heard over and over again. He was too boring, they never went out and did anything, and why didn't he talk more?

He'd tried to explain that he couldn't help how he was and that he didn't have a whole lot to say. Didn't mean he didn't feel like everyone else. But words didn't really come to him like that. Never did, in fact. Women loved to hear the words though, loved to talk. Alicia Clarkson looked like the friendly type too, could make friends with damn near anyone. That type of woman would befriend the whole pack in under a month. It'd take even less time than it took his exes for her to figure out that he didn't much care for going to parties and that he didn't make a great host. Especially not since the incident. People didn't much like looking at him now.

Gavin took a turn that'd lead him to the lake. He and his crew were constructing a new house for the Louis family. Theirs was one of the first built in the early 1900s and given the choice to renovate it or start anew, they chose new. They paid a percentage out of pocket that went to Gavin and his crew and supplies. The rest they'd pay out in monthly installments. After the cost of the

supplies and salaries was dished out, the rest of that money would go back into the pack's funds. They needed that fund for emergencies.

He spotted his crew already starting today's work on laying foundation. There was no road out here so close to the canyon which made it a bumpy ride. His truck handled it well.

Even the sight of his crew couldn't break his thoughts from her though. He had to give all the women a chance. He'd promised Will that much and he owed him so much more. Maybe after he talked some more to the clothing designer he'd realize something about her that wouldn't suit. Yeah, that'd be good. Then he could send her packing. He didn't like the idea. Hell, he liked her already. A strong woman not afraid to go after her dream even if it meant making little money for herself. At least she was putting herself out there and living by her own means. Damn, but he respected that. Maybe a bit too much.

He'd promised Will to give all the girls a chance. Tonight he'd sit with them and talk. Figure out which he could send back. He scrubbed a hand over his haggard face. Little worse in life than a bad day.

Gavin braked to a stop and looked out at the crisp blue lake glittering beneath the fresh morning light. The hairs stood up at the back of his neck and he rubbed a rough hand across it as he stepped out of his truck.

"Hey, boss," one of his team hollered.

He lifted a hand in a wave.

Two nagging questions refused to escape him. What if he didn't want to let Alicia Clarkson go? And how could he possibly show her his face?

One of his crewman, Alex, strode forward. He had a wrinkled cigarette clamped between his teeth and a hard look in his eyes. Something was up.

Gavin met him halfway. "What is it?"

Alex plucked the cigarette from between his lips with two fingers. "Have you seen Hart today?"

Gavin shook his head.

"Well, he came around here looking for you real early this morning. Said something bad happened and he needed to talk to you."

Gavin peered out at the great expanse of rising mountain behind them. Such a beautiful sight, never ceased to humble him. Until now. Now when he gazed at that glorious piece of earth with grass knee-tall and trees a hundred years old, he only saw in black and gray. The pulse at his forehead pounded.

"I was at home. He could have stopped by there." Strange he didn't.

"Seeing as he stopped by here, I'd say he thought you were already here. You are late." Alex paused to suck in a long drag. "How'd last night go?"

Gavin grunted in answer. Alex nodded as if he understood. No words were necessary.

"Take over my work for today. I gotta go find Hart."

"Will do."

Gavin hopped back into his truck, backed out, then drove back into town. His brother was looking for him and it wasn't to celebrate some good news. This was bad.

Today was turning out to be one hell of a day.

Gavin found his brother at the end of one of the patrol fields. Gavin's timing could have been better. Hart had his no bullshit-taking cop face on and another packmate, Marcus Graham, backed up against the wall to their headquarters.

"God damn," Gavin muttered.

He killed the engine and hopped out of his truck in one motion. He raced to get to them in time. Judging by the raised voices and tense postures things were getting nasty, quick.

He didn't make it.

Hart stepped back with his right foot. Gavin knew what that meant. He was about to throw down.

Gavin shouted, "Hart!"

Surprised, Hart looked over at him but damn if Marcus didn't wind one up and let it fly. He slammed a right hook into Hart's surprised face. A vein ticked in Gavin's forehead.

He locked onto Marcus, strode forward and jabbed him twice, hard, in the mouth. "You hit my brother in front of me, Marcus?" Marcus fell to one knee. Another hard jab and his lip split, blood running down his chin. Marcus smiled up at him with those smart, cold eyes. Gavin hated those eyes.

Strong arms banded around Gavin's waist, tore him away. "Let him go, Gavin. Bastard cheap shot me is all. It's nothing. Don't even feel it. We got bigger problems anyway."

Gavin breathed hard, had to get it under control. Marcus stood up, that smile still in place. The blood on his lips and chin only made the sight more grisly.

"I see you still have a strong jab, Gavin."

His abs clenched as if preparing for an attack. Ignoring the man, he turned to his brother. "I heard you need me."

"You might want to brace yourself for this."

He blinked once and his mind raced through the possibilities. Then, it hit him. "Someone's dead."

"Not just dead, murdered. We have a homicide." Hart looked away and tucked his hands in his coat pockets. Gavin recognized that look. He'd seen it many times before—unease.

"Who is it? One of ours?"

Maybe it wasn't one of his own. Kaity would have heard about it and been in tears at his door this morning instead of pissed off. No, it wasn't one of his. That didn't give him much relief.

"Emma. It was Emma, Gavin."

It felt like a cold spear pierced his stomach. It was one of his. "She's only twelve." What a stupid thing to say, he knew. Anyone could be murdered

regardless of age. Still, she was so young. Had so much going for her even with her shitty parents. With the support of her pack she was making the best of things, had a positive outlook on life. Even when one of the pack had to take her in for a night or two because Joan and Todd couldn't stop screaming at each other.

Hart nodded. He understood. He saw all kinds of sickness in his work.

"What happened to her?"

Hart looked away, fidgeted with something in his pocket. "Bludgeoned. The bastard beat her to death, caved her skull in."

Gavin's voice croaked. "Where?"

Hart pointed out toward the property line on the south side. Gavin followed where Hart pointed. Somewhere out in those woods he and his people walked through every day was a dead twelve-year-old girl who'd had her head bashed in. Blood rushed through his veins in a rapid pulse.

*On his land. Under his protection.*

His gaze flicked to Marcus and pondered for a serious moment drilling him in the face again. Didn't matter if he did the crime or not, he'd committed other sins. Enough that Gavin wouldn't despair breaking his nose.

"Who found her?"

Hart leveled his gaze on Marcus and lifted his chin in a nod.

God damn. Marcus found her. Of all the people...

Gavin kept his jaw still though it yearned to grind. "What time and what were you doing?"

Marcus ran both hands through his blond hair, curling it back against his skull. "I was on my patrol shift seeing as it's Sunday. Was walking the southern perimeter when I found her." He shrugged. "Didn't touch her."

Gavin noticed his brother also watched Marcus closely. Marcus wasn't exactly known for his winning personality.

"I'm going to have to bring you in and question you, understand?" Hart said.

Marcus nodded.

Gavin took a step forward, his body opening up, craving the fight he knew Marcus would give him. The skinny man smiled at him, that sick cold smile that always made Gavin's skin crawl as if hundreds of ants were marching up and down his back.

"Why all the smiles, Marcus? Did you know Emma Linchman? Are you happy she's dead?"

"Nah, I didn't know her. That's not what has me feeling all warm inside, Gavin." Marcus' eyes roamed over Gavin's face. "I see the scars have made a permanent home on your face. Not bad if I say so myself."

Gavin tensed but before he could pound the smile off Marcus' face, Hart beat him to it. He grabbed Marcus by the collar and slammed three brutal blows into his face. Bone crunched as it broke and a spray of blood gushed from his nose. Marcus dropped to the ground, laughing and looking like a mad man with his

watering eyes and broken face. Hart hovered over him like a shaking beast aching to really let loose.

Gavin tapped him on the shoulder before they had two deaths today.

“Leave it be, Hart. The man’s a coward.”

Marcus’ eyes flashed. “I’ve proven myself. I ain’t no coward.”

Gavin started away with his brother. “You proved you can fight like a coward, Marcus. That’s all you proved and everyone knows it.”

Gavin and Hart climbed into his truck. The seats sighed as their weight settled in. Marcus stood, his fists clenching then unclenching.

“A coward wouldn’t have challenged you,” he said. “A coward wouldn’t have done what I did.”

Gavin grew silent. Hart turned to look at him questioningly but Gavin ignored him. For a moment all he could do was remember. Remember waking up, feeling something wrong, then stumbling into the bathroom and flipping on that light switch. Some days he wished he’d never flipped that switch. But he couldn’t live like that. He had a pack to take care of, responsibilities. He wasn’t going to let people down over something so trivial.

It took him several hard, deep breaths before he closed the truck door and started the engine.

He met Marcus’ gaze through the windshield. “No, Marcus, only a coward waits until a man can’t fight back.”

Rage boiling inside him, he threw the car into drive and tore off. He had to get out of there before he threw himself out of the car and tore Marcus limb from limb.

After a moment, Hart spoke. “I waited to call the murder in until I talked to you. I’ll have to do that now.”

“Yeah.”

“You should let me take care of this instead of bringing in the Justicars. We’ll have some human cops on the property but that might be better than the Justicars.”

Gavin clenched his teeth. “Yeah, do what you go to do. I’ll get word to the lieutenants to let them in.”

Gavin pulled to a stop in front of a broken down house that had seen better years. Yellow paint had once coated the walls but long ago chipped and faded into something ugly. A busted porch swing hung from the front porch and Gavin knew the wood railing leading up to the door was broken. He’d offered to fix it but Todd wouldn’t have it. Didn’t like no one interfering with his business. What a fool.

They exited the truck and headed up to the house together.

“Knew this was gonna be a bad day,” Gavin was saying to himself. “Just didn’t know it’d be this bad.”

Hart didn’t say anything, only knocked on the door. It rattled in the frame and Hart shook his head in disgust, muttered something beneath his breath. Movement came from inside, footsteps and cursing.

“God dammit just get the fucking door, Joan!”

“You never get the fucking door, you lazy son of a bitch. Why do I always have to do it?”

The door opened on the end of her question.

Joan Linchman was a dour woman. Gavin’d lived in the same pack with her all his life and he couldn’t remember seeing her smile before. She wore a dirty muumuu that fell to her pale, knobby knees and her ratty hair stuck out at unevenly like she’d spilled something then slept in it. It wasn’t a good look for her. Made her face look too old, made the wrinkles in her forehead and around her eyes stand out in ways they shouldn’t. Hell, she was younger than he was yet managed to look older than him by at least ten years.

She peered at them, squinting against the sunlight blazing behind them. “Todd it’s the alpha,” she called back. She nodded to Gavin. “What you want?”

When she spoke he caught a whiff of stale cigarette smoke and liquor, probably from the night before. His stomach heaved.

“We got a problem, Joan. Me and Hart are gonna have to come in and talk to you and Todd now.”

Todd cursed from inside. “Fuckin’ hell. It’s barely seven in the morning. What’s the meaning of all this?” Todd ambled his pot-bellied form off the couch and lumbered over, hovering behind his skinny wife.

Gavin had to look away for a moment to take a deep breath. The rancid odors of foul body odor, beer, and cigarettes clung to him like a cloud. Gavin sucked in a deep breath then braced himself.

“It’s about Emma. Do you mind if we come inside?” he asked.

Joan realized it first. A trace of fear flickered in her eyes. Her mind was already running with ideas as to why the alpha and his detective brother was at her doorstep at seven in the morning on a Sunday. She surely already knew Emma wasn’t home last night since it’d been a Saturday and the Linchman’s had no curfew for the girl.

Todd was slower. Grumbling, he moved aside and allowed them into the house. Again, Gavin was assaulted by smells, though none of them were as bad as Todd. The house smelled of mold, rotted wood, and dust that had collected in crevices and on broken shelves that never got cleaned.

Todd and Joan sat but Gavin and Hart didn’t bother. They only had one sofa and it sat low to the ground and was covered in stains and god knows what else. So they stood and delivered the news.

Hart told them what happened. He kept his voice calm and professional, but with an edge of kindness. The sound wasn’t how Hart normally spoke, Gavin could tell this was practiced. He carefully chose his words as he told this family their daughter had been bludgeoned to death inside their own pack.

Gavin had to admit, he was surprised by their reactions. Joan broke down first in loud, anguished cries that squeezed his chest until it hurt to breath. Her wails

soon were followed by Todd's. The man's red-rimmed eyes watered and fat drops fell down his splotched cheeks.

Gavin's instincts drove him and he pulled Joan into a tight embrace, rubbed her back as she sobbed against him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Hart clap Todd on the back as the man sagged forward in grief.

They might not have been the best of parents, but they loved their daughter. Everyone loved Emma. There was so much about her to love.

Over Joan's bony shoulder, Gavin met Hart's hard eyes. Without words they exchanged a thought. They would find who did this, and he would pay on lykaen terms—by death.

## CHAPTER 3

They'd shut Alicia in what looked like a spare bedroom. It had hardwood floors, with some of the boards bowed from age. The paint on the walls had to be at least sixty years old; it had long faded and begun to chip. A small twin bed was pushed against the corner, a worn dresser stood on the opposite wall, and a small bathroom was connected. The house was so quiet she thought she might be going mad.

They gave her a room with a window but they dashed any chance at escape. Heavy metal bars covered the window. She'd opened the window up and pushed and pulled on the rungs until sweat dripped down her temples, but nothing gave. Had these bars always been here or did they install them just to make sure she didn't escape?

Aside from that, all she had was a small window. She'd been standing at it a long time, gazing out watching the morning come. The soft purr of a car arrived and a truck left. She caught voices or what she thought were voices.

Light footsteps, either that of a child or a woman came toward her door. She froze in the middle of the room with a nail file she'd found in the bathroom slipped up her sleeve. It was one of those metal ones with a point. It wasn't a knife but she could jab a man's eye out with it.

Metal slid against metal as someone unlocked the door. The rickety metal doorknob turned and opened. Alicia froze, her weapon hidden well in her sleeve. Today she'd plan her escape. She couldn't return to her pack if she managed to escape, but she could find a new one. Maybe even a better one. One where the alpha didn't simply turn over single women to some mysterious alpha.

A woman opened the door, stepped inside then shut it behind her. She had blonde hair cut around her neck in a bob so the ends flipped out. It made her look pixelike and cute. Her eyes were a vibrant dark blue.

"Who are you?"

The woman scowled, the act making her face scrunch. It looked cute on her. "I'm Kaity, Gavin's younger sister. Hanna, my older sister, is on the way. I already called her."

Alicia took a step back. "What do you want?"

Kaity held up her hands. "Just came to make sure you're all right. Gonna bring some food up soon. Can I get you a book, a deck of cards or something to kill time with? I know I'd be going stir crazy up here by myself."

Alicia sucked in a breath. A tingling sensation formed in her chest and her belly fluttered. "Can you get me out of here? Just get me to the property line and I'll run, please!" She rushed toward the young girl, desperate.

"Whoa, there. I can't do that. Gavin would have me raked over hot coals. Listen, I know this stinks but we weren't expecting you in the first place, and I just

heard about this. That's why I'm here actually. Came over to give Gavin a little piece of my mind." She laughed ruefully. "He has a way of making you see things from a different perspective, you know?"

"No, I don't know." Alicia ground her teeth. She spotted the key clenched in Kaity's little fist. She had to be about twenty-four-years old. She debated whether she could take her in a fight. Probably.

The girl flushed. "Yes, well, what did you think of him?"

Alicia's gaze narrowed. "Excuse me?"

Kaity rocked on her feet, unable to hold Alicia's glare. "I mean, just what did you think of him? Gavin?"

Alicia straightened her back. "You want to know what I think of the man who's practically kidnapped me? Who has blindfolded me, tied me up and stuffed me into a dark room to interrogate me? Who possibly wants to *mate* with me?" The girl's face grew white as a sheet. "You want to know what I think about him? Well, let's just say none of it's good."

Alicia twitched at her own lie. Some of it wasn't bad. He had an interesting voice and he did have a sort of genuine quality to him. He hadn't actually hurt her. She had no bruises or anything. She had been left alone all night. No one came and molested her. The night ended...rather boring really.

At the insult to her brother and alpha, the girl stiffened. "I didn't know he did any of that but I'd bet my college tuition you weren't hurt, were you? That you were probably treated kind of nice, considering." She paused, waiting. "So, am I right?"

Alicia refused to answer that, not even by a nod.

She smirked. "See, I'm right. Gavin would never hurt a woman. He won't hurt anyone unless it's really deserving and even then..." her words trailed off and a pained look came to her eyes. She shook her head as if to get rid of the thought. "Listen, my older sister Hanna will be here soon. What do you want for breakfast in the meantime?"

Instead of answering, Alicia fixed the girl with her own question. "What's wrong with his face?"

Kaity flinched as if she'd been struck. Then her face burned red and anger blazed in her eyes. "Nothing's fucking wrong with his face! You're no better than the rest of them!" Alicia actually took a step back, ready for the girl to swing at her.

Kaity spun around and left, slamming the door behind her, the wood cracking in the frame. The lock turned and that was it.

Alicia went back to the window, her mind working a mile a minute. She'd insulted the girl. She hadn't really meant to though she could have said things nicer. Who was the rest of 'them' and why did Alicia feel like a sack of garbage at being compared to them?

She didn't like that. She didn't like that one bit.

But why should she feel like the bad guy? She wasn't here of her own volition. Her alpha and Gavin forced her into this.

*All because of my stupid mouth.*

Her inability to keep quiet in the face of injustice usually worked out well. In this case both she and Sarah were victims.

About an hour later the other sister came. This one didn't bother to introduce herself. She opened the door, slid a tray of food against the wall, then slipped back out. Alicia had her features memorized though. She had dark blonde hair, not as light as Kaity's and a full, rounder figure, curvaceous. Her hair was longer too, but straight. She didn't bother to look at Alicia.

Alicia ate and tried to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Just what did Gavin MacKellen look like?

*Why do you care so much?*

Because no sane person had a conversation in pitch black like that! It was beyond weird and she wanted to know why. Why all the games.

The sisters both had blonde hair so she'd guess that he did as well. One had blue eyes and she didn't get a look at Hanna's but she'd bet they were about the same. Blond hair, blue eyes. He was tall and broad, looked like he worked for a living. Not a behind a desk kind of job, but on the land, hard work with his hands. A job that used muscles.

She was out in the mountains. The land was rich and beautiful. The air even smelled fresh and clean like it was new. A part of her liked it, wanted to run out to those rolling hills and climb the mountains in the distance. She didn't have scenery like that in Arizona where sunblock was mandatory for leaving the house.

With rich land like this he could be a farmer. Maybe a work incident had busted his face up pretty badly or he'd been in a car accident. Lykaens didn't heal well from major injuries like that even if they did live long lives. A chill ran down her arms. She didn't know what she'd do if she had to live the rest of her life with a face she was ashamed of. She didn't like to think she was that petty. She didn't make a whole lot of fuss over her own face, but she knew it was pretty.

What would she do if she lost that? If she had something so terrible she couldn't stand to show it to a prospective mate?

Alicia hung her head, weary. She was weakening. Actually wanting to hear him out, to see his face; maybe if she did all that he'd lose interest in her and she could go back home. Back to the design that would make her famous.

She went back to her position at the window. The sun rose higher in the sky then descended into nightfall. Later in the afternoon another knock came at her door and Hanna slipped in another tray with food. Alicia was finishing her last bite when she heard the rumble of a truck.

Excitement flashed through her veins and she ran back to the window, clinging to the rungs, her face pressed into the bars. She faced the side of the house away from the front that led up to the house so she couldn't see much. But

she could hear the door of a truck open and close, soft footsteps lead up to the house, then pause. Her heart fluttered. She just knew.

It was him. He was back.

Heavy steps beat against the front porch then the door opened. Alicia stepped back from the window and stared down at the ground as she focused all of her energy on listening. If she concentrated hard enough she heard a rumble of voices. A few minutes later the soft purr of an engine started and then the car took off.

Her breaths came faster. This was it. The sisters were gone and the alpha was home, possibly even alone, unless his brother, Will, was here again.

Bootsteps pounded up a staircase, the movement slow and tired sounding. Alicia's muscle flexed and stiffened, ready for action, though she didn't exactly know what. However, those heavy steps didn't come her way but disappeared into another room. She heard the door close. A minute later a shower kicked on.

Alicia ran to the window and tried pushing the bars again. She kicked at them but they didn't budge at all. Running back to the door, she tried the handle. When that didn't work she surveyed the door but it was sturdy and hard. No way could she kick that thing down.

She was stuck in this room and he was coming for her.

## CHAPTER 4

The hot water soothed his sore body but did nothing to ease the hollow ache in his heart.

Little Emma was dead. A family was devastated.

News would spread fast in the pack. By tomorrow everyone will know. Gavin toweled off and dressed, his movements slow like an old man's. On top of that he had to deal with the girls the alpha's sent him. All he wanted to do right now was climb into bed and maybe forget for a while, if he could even get to sleep that is.

But she was down at the end of the hall. How was she today? Maybe he needed to get her a TV in there. That shitty old guest room didn't even have a closet. A flush of embarrassment burned his face. He hadn't updated his own house, never saw need to. Now he wished he had. She should be in something pretty like herself. Not his old shit house. He liked its old charm and aged beauty, but the pipes didn't work like they used to and it needed a little work. Okay, a lot of work. He'd never bothered fixing things he could fix because he lived alone for all these years.

Would she still be awake? Hell, he knew he would be if their roles were reversed. He took a seat on his bed, sighing heavily.

He'd planned to get this done tonight. To go meet with all the girls and start eliminating ones he knew wouldn't match with at all. Fuck, but he was bone tired. He'd have to do it tomorrow.

He stood and pulled on a shirt. He never slept in one, but he wanted something else more than sleep right now.

*Fuck, don't do it, Gavin.*

He scrubbed a coarse hand over his face, scratched the back of his head. Fuck. *I'm gonna do it.*

Had to. Had to see her. No, no, couldn't see her. She'd see his face. He'd have to get her into the study that he and Will had darkened just for these meetings. Couldn't risk doing that by himself, she'd see him.

He was a sick bastard for not wanting her to see his face. He knew what would happen then. She'd run screaming and crying. She'd beg to go back to her alpha and plead with him not to send her back to Gavin. God, he didn't think he could stand it. That's why he had to things this way. He had to get to know her first. Had to try to show her his good qualities.

*And what were they?* said a bitter voice.

He had to have some, but he couldn't think of any. He needed hope to help him get through this. Hope and some faith. He needed to get to know these ladies first, let them get to know him, then he'd show them his face.

Show her what she'd have to look at for the rest of her life.

Shaking his head, he stood. He shouldn't do it, but damn, after the day he had, he craved a little pretty. Something nice and kind of sweet. She had all that in her. He could see it in her eyes. But there was so much more too. Strength and guts. Yeah, he appreciated that.

He stood in front of her door though he didn't remember taking himself there. With a long day on his shoulders and not much food in him, he really wasn't in the right place to do this.

Fuck. He was still gonna do it.

He knocked.

He didn't hear any shuffling, any gasps of surprise, nothing. But she was in there. He didn't know how to explain it, he just knew. This meant she'd heard him coming and had been waiting. Great. She probably thought he was a creep.

His fist was raised to knock again when she spoke. "What do you want?" Her voice was strong and hard.

He grimaced and took a step back, then another until he leaned against the hallway wall. What did he say now? Hello, how are you? He had the girl locked in a room she sure as shit didn't want to be in. It's not like she was going to warm to him any time quick, if at all.

Quiet footsteps crept toward the door. He could almost imagine her putting her ear to it and listening.

He cleared his throat again. Didn't make much of a difference; his voice still sounded like he'd had a truck run over his throat. "Just wanted to talk."

He stared at the white, chipped door. The wood was sturdy, he knew, it had come with the house and never been replaced. This was almost easier than looking at her. She distracted him, made longings surge in his chest with hope. Hopes of things he could never have.

*Then why are you even trying?*

He pushed the thought away, not wanting to think about it.

"I don't want to talk to you. Go away."

Sighing, he closed his eyes. Angry or not, he liked the sound of her voice. So feminine and pretty. Not like his. She wasn't anything like him. Maybe that's what he liked about her.

"A little girl was murdered. She was found this morning." The words started coming out. He hadn't planned on saying them. But the dark hallway and old white door towering before him almost made it seem like a confession. Like he could let out all his fears and sins to this door and his soul would be cleansed.

"What?" she asked, her voice much softer now.

"Emma Linchman. Good girl. Her parents weren't so good to her but they loved her anyway, I suppose. She was found beaten to death. She was a kid."

A soft sigh sounded, traveling through the door to his ears. The muscles in his back relaxed at the sound. "How old was she?"

"Only twelve. Someone beat her, beat her little head in. I keep wonderin' if I could have done something."

A moment of silence passed. "What would you have done?"  
Air gushed from his clenched lips. "Put on extra guards, guarded her myself. No one would have touched her."

"You can't predict when someone's going to get hurt."

"It happened on my watch."

He heard her move, sounded like she sat against the wall. "What happens next? Do you know who did it?"

"No, not yet. My brother Hart's a cop, works with the humans. He's going to do an investigation privately with some of his cop friends. He'll figure out who did it. Then it'll be pack justice."

"Good," she said.

"Yeah," he agreed.

They fell into silence again. A calming silence that relaxed his muscles and brought the heavy blanket of drowsiness that much closer.

"What do you do?"

The gently whispered question teased his ears. His eyes popped open. She wanted to know about him?

"Build houses for the pack, some handy work too, things like that."

"Oh, I figured as much."

His brow raised at that and even he took a look around his rundown house. It had character but that was about all it had. "How so?"

"Just did. How's Sarah?"

His mind raced to figure who Sarah was since the name didn't ring a bell. Then it clicked. That was the other girl Alpha Josiah from Arizona sent up. How was she? He had no clue but she was safe at his sister's house. "She's safe, comfortable."

"Where is she?" she asked, her voice getting stern.

He sighed; it sounded like their nice playtime was over. "She's at Hanna's house."

He heard her head thump against the wall. "Can I ask you something?"

His stomach muscles tensed. Nerves. God, she made him nervous and they weren't even having a normal conversation, face-to-face. It felt like being a kid again and having the attention of the pretty girl in class. His palms sweated.

"Yeah?" Anything, he wanted to say, you can ask me anything.

"Why won't you let me see your face?"

Cold icy fingers settled over his heart. He stood, his lips heavy and pulling down into a deep frown. "I already told you." That's it. Their little happy chat was over. He started away. He didn't much feel like repeating the words, reminding her of what an ugly bastard he was. Not even for her.

Her voice stopped him in his tracks. "I mean, I know what you said before but...I guess I'd just rather see who I was talking to than talking to a door or a dark shadow."

For a moment he considered unlocking that door and stepping into the room with all the lights on. Just letting her see his face and know what she was getting into. His fingers twitched and his chest ached with each breath.

He stalked to the door and grabbed the door handle. He could do it right now. Get it over with. Show her what he looked like. Then he could see the disgust and shock on her face and be over with it. He could send her packing the next morning.

But, no, he couldn't do it. Couldn't even bring himself to unlock the door. He backed up, sweat dripping down his back and his hands shaking. He didn't want to ruin it. He didn't want to lose her before he knew her. Not yet.

He wanted that chance, no matter how impossible it was. He wanted the hope that if he made her fall in love with him then it wouldn't matter how busted his face looked because she wouldn't care. She could love him anyway.

With a groan, he rubbed the throbbing ache over his heart. God, he craved it so badly his chest hurt.

"Sorry, Alicia. I can't do that."

He started walking away when her fist banged against the door. "Don't leave me in here, Gavin MacKellen! Let me go!" The door shook and rattled as she thumped it.

He braced himself. It took every ounce of willpower inside him not to go to her and free her like she asked. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"Are you a monster? A freak? What the hell is wrong with you? Just let me out of here!"

Her screams beat against his retreating back. He closed himself in his bedroom, breaths coming hard and fast. He had to sit down and get control of himself. When she broke down into tears, he had to force himself to leave the house. The sound tore him apart from the inside out. It made him want to run back to her room and show her everything, to let her see the monster he was, and then kiss her anyway.

*But she'll never kiss you.*

Because she was right. He was a freak.

## CHAPTER 5

Alicia stared out the window the next morning as Gavin left in his truck. She didn't have to wait long until the soft purr of a car pulled up.

Good, she thought, at least one of his sisters will be here.

Alicia went back to the bed and sat, calm for what she was going to do next.

She'd made her decision last night, had carefully planned it. Today she was getting out of here.

It wouldn't be easy. There would be guards to contend with among other variables she couldn't begin to suspect, but she'd do it. She had determination and bit of crazy on her side to guide her.

After last night, she couldn't stay here. That strange conversation with Gavin had stuck with her all night long. She'd hardly slept and when she did her dreams were filled with nightmares of running and being caught. She woke up with her heart racing and breathing fast.

What bothered her more than the bad dreams was the fact that she'd broken down and cried. All of her frustrations since Josiah sent her here had come flooding out and nothing she could do would stop it. Worse, she'd enjoyed, to an extent, her conversation with Gavin. She couldn't even think of him as 'the strange alpha' anymore. He had a name, though no face, a voice, and a personality that was coming through in his words.

She took him to be a kind, gentle man that cared much for his pack. Yet he wasn't a pushover. The fact that he seemed to dislike that he had her here, yet refused to let her go attested to that. He also had a story and she'd bet it was a good one; however, she didn't plan to stick around to find out.

The front door opened and banged closed. Alicia could hear almost everything in this house since it was so old. After some banging around in the kitchen, she finally heard soft footfalls coming up the rickety staircase. Alicia's body tightened with anticipation.

It had to be either Hanna or Kaity since he had only girls coming to check in on her. She hoped it was Kaity; she was smaller. That would make what she was about to do much easier.

The door handle jiggled as someone pushed in the key. "How you doin' in there?"

Alicia stood, her muscles taut. Excitement made the blood rush in her veins like a jolt of pure adrenaline. This was it. It was Kaity. "Good, good. Real hungry this morning."

"Yeah, I bet."

Downstairs, the front door opened and slammed closed. A voice hollered up. "Kaity, you in here?"

Alicia froze. Shit. That was Will's voice. *Please go away*, she begged silently.

“Up here,” Kaity yelled back.

The bedroom door started to open. Before Alicia knew it Kaity and Will stood in front of her. Kaity smiled and set her breakfast tray on the dresser.

“What do you want?” Kaity asked Will.

“Did you hear about Emma?” The tone of his voice killed the light in Kaity’s eyes.

Alicia really looked at him for the first time in good light. He had dark blond hair like Hanna’s but with brown tones in it and his eyes were russet not blue. Still, she could see the family resemblance start to emerge. They each had strong, broad noses, thick brows, and were all attractive in their own way.

“What happened to Emma?” Kaity’s voice shook.

Alicia quickly peered between brother and sister, spotting the keys gripped in Kaity’s palm. It was now or never, while she had surprise on her side.

Alicia walked to the dresser and started picking at her food, all the while calmly taking everything off the silver tray. She knew the tray had some weight to it, was sturdy. She had picked it up yesterday to test it.

“She’s dead,” Will said.

Damn, her chest squeezed tight. She did not want to listen to this. She’d already heard it from Gavin last night and even though she didn’t know this Emma girl, her heart broke for her. A part of her felt terrible for what she was about to do, but she had to remind herself that she wasn’t here of her own will. She’d been forced here, and she’d had enough.

Kaity started crying. The keys fell from her hands and clanged to the floor. Will moved to embrace his sister and that’s when Alicia struck.

Alicia gripped the heavy silver tray and swung it in a wide arch. She blind-sided Will and the blow banged against his skull, throwing him off balance and making a loud, ringing sound like a gong. Kaity jerked, shock marring her tearstained face.

But Alicia didn’t stop. The second she landed the blow and threw Will off track, she ducked down and snatched the keys. Heart pounding like horses galloping in her chest, she raced out of the room, slamming the door behind herself. She heard scrambling and quickened to get the key in the lock.

There were three on the chain. She stuck one in the keyhole to lock it and someone twisted the doorknob to try to open the door. Fear kicked up and she started breathing hard. She tightened her own grip over the handle as she tried the key. Wrong one. She tried the next one when Kaity yelled.

“Get over here, Will! She’s trying to get away. She’s holding the door shut!”

He grumbled, his heavier steps ambling toward the door. Alicia worked faster, putting the second key in and turning it. Again, nothing! God dammit, why couldn’t she work faster? Her hands shook like palm leaves in a hurricane.

Someone stopped trying to turn the door handle and then another grip came on. This one turned much harder and faster. Oh geez, Will was much stronger than

he looked. Fighting with the door handle, Alicia pulled back on it as he started to pull the door open.

It took her several tries but she finally got the third key in the hole and turned it. *Click*.

He cursed, turned the door knob, then did it again harder.

Backing away, Alicia stared at the door, waiting for it to fly open.

“Damn it all, I’m calling Gavin,” Kaity’s voice said.

Oh no. She had to move and now.

Alicia turned around blind to her new surroundings. She had to rely what she’d heard since she came here to guide her. She saw the stairs at the end of the hallway and raced to them, barreling down the steps. Adrenaline surged inside her making her heart race and blood pound in her ears.

A vehicle sounded outside, moving fast. It came to a hard stop out front. She heard doors open and slam closed. Gavin!

Backtracking, she raced back up the stairs and flew into the first room she saw, slamming and locking the door behind her. However, she knew an old lock on a door would never keep him away.

A voice hollered from down below, deep, masculine. “Kaity? Will?”

Shit, shit, shit, shit. She eyed her surroundings finding a bed, adjoining bath and two windows. The room looked plain, unused like a spare bedroom. She ran to the windows and checked her options. The drop to the ground was too far. She’d never make it without breaking something.

Footsteps bounded on the staircase. She froze, stilled her breath and waited. The footsteps boomed as they came nearer and nearer, pausing outside of the door.

“Kaity?” the voice said. It sounded like Gavin but different.

Oh god, maybe it wasn’t him. She didn’t know whether this made her feel better or worse. Wait, definitely better.

“In here!” Kaity’s muffled voice said.

The footsteps left, banging down the hallway to the bedroom. Alicia didn’t have any more time. She yanked up the window as quietly as she could, which wasn’t *that* quiet. Wind, cold temperatures, and time had aged the old wooden frame making the wood splinter along it, warping the wood. No way would this house keep heat in.

The drop was more than twenty feet to the ground so she ruled that out. All that left her was the tree outside it. The tree had to be old. But it looked sturdy and the branches were thick and not brittle. It was a good tree. She just hoped it was good enough to withstand her weight.

“Where is she?” asked the man.

“She ran away and locked us in here. I don’t know where she is. Find her!”

“God dammit,” the male cursed.

Alicia debated how to jump. The window didn’t leave much room and she couldn’t exactly get a running start. Her best bet would be to climb out then do

her best to leap onto it. Eyeing the distance, she figured she had a good chance of missing it.

Those heavy footfalls bounded down the hall. She stopped breathing when the door knob turned.

“Who locked this? Does Gavin normally lock this?” asked the man.

“No, no I don’t think so,” said Kaity.

Something heavy and hard slammed into the door. Wood cracked open in a busted hole as a big foot shot through it. Alicia spun around as her hand flew to her throat. The man struggled to pull his boot back out.

“Fucking piece of shit door, told him he needs to fix this junker up.”

“Not now, Jo!”

Alicia ducked out of the window, sitting on it so her legs swung against empty air.

She panted, eyeing the distance to the sturdiest and longest branch as more wood cracked and splintered behind her.

“I can see her. Call ’em and tell ’em she’s trying to go out back.”

Fuck, she had to man up here, didn’t have time to waste. It had to be now or never. She had to make the jump before they made that phone call.

Alicia counted down from three, then pushed off the side of the house. She knew the instant she floated in the air that she’d never make that branch like she wanted. Her arms scrambled, flailing for the branch but finding nothing. She started falling then. Everything went very quiet. All she could hear was the sound of blood rushing to her ears, her own heavy breathing, and the air whooshing past her as she fell. Leaves and branches passed before her eyes, as her gaze swung over the gray morning sky.

She fell past branches. They scraped at her legs and twisted her feet. She went down five feet, eight feet, then her legs caught one just right and she locked them around it. Her torso followed afterward slamming into the branch and knocking the wind out of her. Wheezing, she held onto the branch for dear life with her arms and legs twined around it. She felt like a monkey at a zoo.

Her eyes squeezed shut. She heard something slam in the house, then voices shouting.

Alicia forced her eyes open. She looked down and found herself within leaping distance of the ground. A truck rumbled in the distance. She knew that sound. Gavin’s truck.

Blood pumped fast as adrenaline surged once more. She unwrapped herself and leaped off the branch, softening her knees for the fall and rolling into it. Wasting no time, she picked herself up and ran hard and fast for the hills in the distance. She raced across the expanse of tall grasses and weeds for the hill because that hill had trees covering it. Trees meant cover.

But this was Gavin MacKellen’s land. He knew it much better than she did, that’s for sure.

Lungs burned with each painful breath. Her elbows jabbed back as she ran, legs pushing and pushing. She couldn't be sure, didn't dare to look behind her and risk it, but she swore she heard footfalls pounding after her, beating against the grass.

Was it Gavin? Was he coming for her?

Her heart fluttered, belly danced with nerves at the idea. She could see the trees getting closer now, even as her ribs ached from running. She could do this. Hope blossomed in her heart and she smiled. She could actually make it and be free.

*What about Sarah? Are you just going to leave her?*

Fuck! She hadn't thought of her friend. She'd get to the Justicars, the vampire and Lykaen authorities, and report what was going on. They'd take care of it. Surely once they heard of the wrongdoings going on at the MacKellens, they could come in and free her.

She made it into the trees but she had to slow her pace. She heard a soft sound. It was too late. He was already here, already on her.

A swish of air stirred behind her and she stumbled in fear. A heavy, large body slammed into hers, crashing her to the ground. The air squeezed out from her at the impact making her eyes water. More air wheezed out from between her clenched lips.

The male didn't move. She could smell him this close. Like fresh, healthy man. She knew that scent, had smelled him before when he'd come close—Gavin MacKellen.

"Get off of me," she wheezed.

The pressure eased up but he didn't completely remove himself.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he rasped in that strange voice of his. A battered voice like something had happened to it. People just didn't sound like that, so deep and scratchy.

She almost laughed, almost. "What does it look like? I was trying to get away." She buried her forehead into the damp earthy leaves as she caught her breath.

"Stupid." He didn't even sound out of breath.

"I am not stupid," she said from between her teeth.

"I didn't say you were. I meant what you did was stupid. I heard you jumped out my bedroom window. You could have hurt yourself."

Heat suffused her body where he lay on her. A blush burned her cheeks at the pleasant sensation it caused and she squeezed her eyes shut. That empty, plain room had been his bedroom? "Well I'm not hurt so you can get off me now."

The weight lifted off her taking the added heat with him. She held back her surprise that he'd listened to her but stiffened as a realization struck her. She was outside in the morning light with Gavin MacKellen. So fast she nearly twisted a muscle, she spun around. Her breath caught.

She sat up and stared at Gavin MacKellen.

Or, rather, the back of him. She'd take that at this moment because if she failed in trying to escape today then she wanted something else. She would see his face no matter what, and now nothing could keep her from seeing it. No doors to hide behind, no shadows to linger in. She'd finally see it, whether he wanted her to or not.

THE LONELIEST ALPHA

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T. A. Grey

Available June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013