

# *Triumvirate*

## *Book 6*

*By Paradox*

### **Wolf Springs, Wyoming, Downtown Area**

Aiden shifted in her seat, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs as she futilely tried to subtly tug the skirt of her dress down a little more. While she'd certainly worn clothes that rode just as high on her legs before, the light, open feeling of the skirt had her feeling much more vulnerable. This was compounded by how her date never missed an opportunity from the time he'd picked her up to the moment they'd sat down in the restaurant to ogle her legs. Even when her parents had strictly laid down the law to the young man about how he was to treat their daughter, his gaze had constantly flicked over to where Aiden had sat and roamed over the length of her crossed bare legs. It was enough to have her squirming a little, though she wasn't sure if it was due to discomfort or...other things...and she was pretty sure her Dad had seen it too. Perhaps the only thing that prevented him

from tossing the guy out was the fact that he knew Aiden was more than capable of taking care of herself.

And if she was going to be honest with herself, knowing she caused such an obvious reaction in a boy gave her a delightful little thrill. She wasn't planning on jumping in the sack with him by the end of the night, but the knowledge that she turned him on felt nice and kind of empowering. It had also been nice the way he treated her like a lady, holding open the car door for her as well as the door to the restaurant. He had even pulled out her chair for her. All in all, other than the obvious appreciation he had for how she looked, he was being quite nice. Hell, the desire in his eyes when he looked at her was pretty damn nice too.

"Aiden?"

Blinking, she shook herself from her introspection and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, I guess I kind of drifted for a second there."

"I'm not boring you am I?" he asked with concern and...annoyance? There was definitely the scent of it. Well, anyone might get ignored if they thought you were ignoring them, she supposed.

"No, no, not at all," she assured him, taking his hand resting on the tabletop and giving it a quick squeeze, "It's just...this is my first real date so I'm kind of out of my element."

The flash of delight in his eyes matched the smile that curved his lips...his oh so kissable lips. *Down girl*, she admonished herself, *No mating on the dinner table, bad manners*. "It's okay, first dates can be a pretty big for a girl huh?"

"I suppose," she allowed, "Though really I never put a whole lot of stock in the whole girly girl thing."

"Yeah," he acknowledged, "I didn't get that feeling from you. You probably don't spend a lot of time wearing dresses and makeup."

It wasn't even close to an insult. In fact, it wasn't even a dig at her femininity. So Aiden couldn't understand why she blushed in embarrassment and looked down at the tablecloth in shyness. "Not really. Dresses don't really go well with hammering out and shaping hot steel."

"They could," he suggested with a light-hearted grin, "I bet that would make for a great competition reality T.V show: Forged in Style. You'd get a bunch of bladesmiths together, make them wear a dress, and see who makes the best knife."

“I’d win,” she said with a confident smile.

“I bet you would,” he readily agreed, “You’d also be the hottest one there too.”

“Well those forges do put out a lot of heat,” she told him earnestly, then laughed at the blank look on his face. “Gottcha.”

Realizing he’d been had, Jake laughed as well and shook his head. “I guess I had that one coming, huh? So anyway,” he said, picking up the menu before him and glancing over the choices, “I was asking what you were planning on doing in the fall.”

“Well, school of course,” she said in a tone that said such a thing should have been obvious.

“Well I know that,” he said with a roll of his eyes, “I meant were you planning on taking any specialized courses? I’m not familiar with the school here but maybe they offer some kind of elective you’re interested in.”

Aiden shrugged and took a sip from her water glass, noticing the faint red mark left behind from her lipstick. Damn it, she’d have to go to the bathroom and fix that now. Stupid makeup. “I’m not really sure yet. Me and my friends applied to a private school up north and we’re waiting to see if we’re accepted before checking out the courses they offer.”

“A private school huh?” he noted with interest, “You must be just as smart as you are pretty.”

It was cheap flattery, Aiden knew that, but it still made a pleasant little shiver zing up her spine. “I’d like to think so,” she allowed before taking another sip from her water and noticing the stain on the lip had grown even darker. *Damn, damn, damn.*

*He looks with lust. He is ready to mate.*

Biting her lip to keep from vocally berating her inner wolf, she smiled and scooted her chair back from the table. “I need to run to the girl’s room real quick. Could you order me the strip steak, bloody, and a glass of iced tea when the waiter comes back?”

He seemed surprised by her choice of how she wanted her steak cooked before smiling and nodding agreeably and Aiden hurried off to the restroom at the

back of the restaurant. Once inside, she decided to kill two birds with one stone and used the facilities before undertaking the much more daunting task of repairing her makeup. Thankfully, it was only the lipstick that needed fixing and she remembered enough of Kitty's lessons to be able once again make her mouth enticingly red without looking like a psychotic clown. Satisfied with her work, and admitting to herself that yes, she did indeed look hot, Aiden tucked the tube into her purse and headed back to the table where her iced tea and Jake's coffee had already been delivered. It wasn't until she drew closer that she saw he was typing away at his phone until he caught sight of her approach and quickly put it away, obviously so he wouldn't miss out on a chance to look her over once again.

"I miss much?" she asked as she slipped back into her chair.

"Herd of elephants just stampeded through," he replied without missing a beat, "And you just missed the magician going table to table."

"Damn," she grumped sarcastically with a snap of her fingers, "Think he'll come back?"

He shrugged and smiled, clearly delighted with their little game, "I think he said it was a one time only thing, sorry."

"Well hell," Aiden pouted as she took a sip from her iced tea, "That just--"

"What's wrong?" Jake asked with concern as she broke off and looked at her glass strangely.

"Nothing, this just tastes a bit weird," she said, more to herself than to him. It had an odd scent to it as well, she noted.

"Want me to get you another one?" he asked and Aiden noticed a very faint...something in his voice. Was that a quaver?

*He smells of two-legged 'nervous'.*

"No, it's fine," Aiden said, taking another sip of her drink and chalking up the odd taste to just being a more high-end brand of iced tea. As far as his nervousness went, she guessed he was probably wanting the night to be perfect and not to screw up a chance of getting into her panties, like that was going to happen. "So how are you liking Wolf Springs so far?" she asked with a smile.

"Well I haven't gotten a chance to see much of it yet," he admitted before looking at her pointedly, "But I have to say the scenery is outstanding."

Her blush was quick and warm and she felt it all the way to her toes inside her high heels. Without question this guy was definitely a smooth one. “Tell me you haven’t been just sitting around in your room pining away until tonight.”

“No I’ve gotten out a bit,” he assured her, “The shops around here are really great. You don’t see hand-made things like they sell here anymore in the cities.”

“Yeah,” Aiden agreed with a heartfelt sigh, “It’s getting harder and harder to find good quality, hand-made anything anymore. Most of it just comes from some assembly line in a factory.”

“Is that why you’re so passionate about knife making?” he asked, watching her closely as he sipped from his coffee.

“Partially,” she admitted after another swallow of the hoity-toity iced tea, “But for me it’s more like a family calling since we’ve been doing it for generations. I love doing it, but it also kind of highlights how things have become so industrialized lately.”

His eyebrows lifted a little when she said that, “Pretty good vocabulary usage there.”

She could have taken it as a dig at her age, but Aiden chose to instead take it as a compliment regarding her intelligence. Besides, it was sooo nice seeing him looking at her so closely and earnestly. “Not just a pretty face,” she giggled as the waiter chose that moment to bring them their meal. “Mmmm, yummy,” she muttered at the sight of the rare steak, her mouth practically watering. Lifting her gaze to his, she found her vision waver slightly and shook her head. *Must be from hunger*, she reasoned, *Haven’t hardly eaten all day I’ve been so nervous*. “Don’t think badly of me for pigging out here,” she begged, “I haven’t really eaten much and I’m *starving*.”

Chuckling, he waved his fork in her direction by way of granting permission. “Have at it, I much prefer a woman to have a good appetite than eat like a bird.”

Grinning, she dove into her steak with gusto while also remembering that she was on a date and not to make a mess of herself. She especially took pride in the fact that she cut the steak into bite-sized pieces and made sure to dab her lips with her napkin with every bite. That isn’t to say it wasn’t easy maintaining such restraint. The wolf in her wanted to just grab that steak with both hands and cram as much into her mouth as she could bare at one time.

“Is it good?” Jake asked after taking a bite of his chicken.

“Delicious,” Aiden practically moaned after swallowing her latest bite. Hey, at least she didn’t talk with her mouth full. “How’s your chicken?”

“Great,” he said with a smile, though it seemed to falter around the edges.

By the time she’d finished every last scrap of meat on the plate, and even a few of the veggies that had accompanied it, along with her iced tea, Aiden was pleasantly full and that thing going on with her vision had vanished. It actually took some effort not to sit back, slouch in her chair, and pat her still flat and taut belly. Instead, she made sure she was still sitting straight and proper with her legs crossed like a good girl. “You know,” she said while Jake took another swallow of coffee and was definitely starting to show traces of concern in his eyes, “I’m having a really great time tonight. Thanks for asking me out.”

He smiled, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes when he did it. “It’s been my pleasure, though I hope you’re ready to do some serious dancing.”

“As long as you don’t mind getting your toes stepped on,” she countered with a giggle, “I’ve never danced before so I’m probably terrible at it.”

“Oh I think we’ll manage,” he grinned. “And besides, I’d much rather have you dancing in my arms and stepping on my toes than twiddling my thumbs like Jeremy.”

Aiden paused in the middle of the pair of them rising from the table to tilt her head curiously. “Jeremy?”

“Yeah,” Jake said as he laid down enough cash on the table to cover the bill and a decent tip as well, “He, Tom, and I all drove up together.”

“Is that the same Tom going out with my friend Ashley tonight and the same Jeremy that had a date with my other friend Kitty?” she asked as she started out of the restaurant.

“Yeah,” he said distractedly as he guided her towards the club down the street with a firm hand at the small of her back that felt a bit too possessive, not to mention aggressive. “He was pretty pissed about getting stood up so Tom told me he said he was going out to climb some gorge a few miles away.” He nearly crashed right into her when Aiden came to a dead stop in the middle of the sidewalk. “What the hell?”

“He said he was climbing a gorge?” Aiden asked carefully, deliberately ignoring the annoyance in his tone even though the way his hand was tightening on her arm was sending warning signals flashing through her mind.

“Yeah,” Jake said, not bother to hide his annoyance anymore as he gave her a small tug, “What’s the big deal.”

Yanking her arm out of his grasp she looked at him with eyes narrowed with growing suspicion. “There’s no gorge anywhere near here that would be worth climbing,” she told him, “The closest place is the mountains twenty miles away.”

“So he’ll end up getting disappointed,” the man said, the anger trembling finely in his voice when it was starting to become clear things weren’t progressing the way he’d planned, “Big deal. Now why don’t we just go to the club and enjoy ourselves and maybe get a little closer.”

When he tried to wrap his arms around Aiden’s waist she slapped them away and took a step back. “Look, I need to get going.”

“What are you talking about?” Jake nearly shouted, once again making a grab for her onto to have Aiden nimbly spin out of the way. “Look,” he said in exasperated anger, “We had a really nice dinner, let’s not wreck the evening and go enjoy ourselves at the club. I’ll buy you whatever kind of drink you want.”

When he tried to grab her again, and actually succeeded in getting a hold of her wrist, her eyes flashed with a dangerous and inhuman anger. “Listen asshole,” she growled, letting a whisper of the wolf creep into her voice, causing his eyes to widen in surprise, “You can either let go of me or in the next two seconds have about five different bones in your arm broken. One...”

Whether it was because of the sudden, unaccountable fear he had of the wild girl or merely from surprise, he released her wrist and stepped back. Without even missing a beat Aiden spun and took off down the sidewalk in a run, moving surprisingly fast for a girl in high heels. He started to take up chase when she ducked down an alley a few blocks away. “Shit,” he snapped, digging out his cell just as he rounded the corner into the alley and skidded to a halt.

The only thing he saw in the alley was a set of large garbage cans neatly lined up with one another. That was it. There was no sign of the girl who had rushed in there only moments ago and with the high wall at its end there was no way she could have jumped over it, not in that dress and heels anyway. “What the

fuck?” he whispered and quickly started dialing. After a few rings the line connected and he quickly said, “Tom, it’s Jake, we have a problem.”

As he started rambling about how badly his plan had failed that evening, he never even noticed the shadowed form perched atop the one of the buildings the alley sat between watching him in cold, deadly silence.

### **Wolf Springs, Wyoming, Two Miles from the McKinnon Residence**

There’s nothing quite like the sounds of nature welcoming night across the land. Even though there was still light in the sky, the birds and insects were already singing their songs that would soon become a lovely lullaby that had often accompanied me to sleep at night. What made it even more wonderfully magical was the man walking beside me holding my hand and smiling at me as though we’d been doing this for years.

“What are you smiling at?” I asked while sporting one of my own.

“Just thinking how lucky it was that I happened to run into you the other day.” He said, giving my hand a squeeze.

“Maybe I was the lucky one,” I replied coyly, fluttering my lashes shyly at him as we arrived at our destination, a small clearing covering in grass within a grove of trees. While he took care of laying out the classic red-checked blanket I sorted through the insulated picnic basket and started taking out Styrofoam containers that were still quite warm.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said as he set out a few china plates and removed the tops from one of the containers, revealing baked chicken breast that was still steaming, “I got takeout from one of the places in town. I’m a terrible cook,” he admitted with a self-deprecating smile.

“No it’s fine,” I assured him as I settled myself on the blanket and slipped off my boots before tucking my feet beneath my skirt, “But if you want I can show you some really easy recipes that are pretty much foolproof.”

“That’d be great, thanks,” he said as he distributed the food and by his smile he seemed genuinely appreciative. “I just hope it’s translated into idiot because I have no clue how any of those measurements work when it comes to food. I mean, how much is in a pinch?”

I couldn’t help but giggle at his typically male helplessness when it came to the kitchen. Yes, it was pretty sexist since there are tons of male chefs and I myself used to be male as well, but what can I say, I’d long since embraced the girl that was me. “It’s just that,” I told him, “A pinch of whatever between your fingers.”

“Okay,” he said with a serious nod, “One down. How many more obscure measurements to go?”

“Oh lots,” I told him grandly before laughing and reaching for my silverware...

And stopping dead when he pulled out the green empty wine bottle with the red candle stuffed securely in its mouth. “Oh my God,” I whispered in delighted astonishment, “I was only joking about that.”

“No you weren’t,” he said confidently as he set it up and lit the candle with a lighter from his pocket.

“No I wasn’t,” I admitted quietly with a pleased smile, “But it wasn’t a deal breaker or anything.”

“I knew you wanted it,” he told me, spearing a piece of chicken from my plate and gently feeding it to me, “So I was more than happy to get it for you.”

Moaning softly at the delicious taste of the chicken, I opened my eyes slightly and looked at him from beneath my lashes. “Mr. Borland,” I purred, “You’re trying to seduce me.”

Taking a bite of chicken for himself he smiled, but it was a pleasant one, not a sneer or a grin one would expect after getting a line like that tossed at them. “Maybe a little,” he admitted, “But no pressure here,” he said, holding up his hands, “Anything you don’t want to happen, won’t. I just want you to be comfortable and happy.”

Reaching out, I took one of his wrists and, working off an instinct that I didn't know I possessed nor knew where it came from, drew his hand towards me before pressing a soft, feathery kiss to the palm. "Just keep being so sweet," I told him softly, shifting on the blanket so I was tucked against his side and we were pressed hip to hip. When his arm draped across my shoulders I happily snuggled up against him and eagerly accepted another morsel of chicken that he fed to me.

When I sighed in contentment he looked down with a touch of concern. "You okay?"

"Mmmhmmm," I mumbled with eyes half closed, "I'm just so..." It took me a few moments to search for the right words, "Happy," I finally decided. "I didn't think I'd be able to do something like this with anyone."

"What about your friends?" he pointed out around a bite of chicken.

"Not the same. They're my friends but more than that they're girls. I haven't exactly had the best luck when it comes to men that have been in my life. Well, except for two," I corrected.

"Well you don't have to worry," he assured me, lightly playing with a lock of my hair, "I'm not going to do anything to hurt you and I won't let anyone else do it either."

"Thanks," I told him gratefully and turned my head to give his fingers a little kiss before eating another bite of my dinner, by my own hand this time.

"I'm still amazed that some guy hasn't already swept you off your feet," he marveled, almost to himself, "I mean, you're beautiful, sweet, caring, compassionate. You're like a Disney princess come to life. How is it you don't have guys beating down your door?"

I smiled, but there was some sadness to it this time. "I've kept myself closed off for the most part," I admitted. "The things that have happened in my past really messed me up when it comes to social situations."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked gently, his voice indicating there was no pressure to do so.

I did, but there was too much history, too much pain there to really unload all of it on a guy I'd only really just met, regardless of how sweet he was to me. "Not right now. Let's just say I haven't had a day like this in a very long time and boy did I need it."

The feeling of his lips pressing against my temple sent a quick little flush of heat low through my belly and had me squirming a little from it. “Well if I have anything to say about it, you’ll get plenty more before I have to head back to Laramie.”

Smiling up at him, I opened my mouth to tell him that I looked forward to it when the harsh ring of a cell phone shattered the romantic air. Swearing softly and offering me a look of apology, Tom dug his phone out of his pocket, looked at the caller ID, and thumbed the answer button. “What?” he asked harshly. “Whoa, whoa, Jake, slow down. What happened?”

Jake? That was the guy Aiden was going out with. “Is Aiden okay?” I asked worriedly.

He shook his head, his expression darkening as he listened to the other end of the line. “How is that possible? How much?”

Not having gotten an answer to my question I started getting pretty worried. Had something happened to Aiden on their date? Had she gotten hurt? That seemed pretty unlikely given her powers but we’d never really discussed the extent of them. “Tom what is it?” I asked anxiously.

Before he could answer my own phone started chirping in the pouch at my hip. Scrambling with the snap I yanked it out and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Aiden on the caller ID. “Aiden,” I breathed after answering the call, “Thank God, are you okay? Tom just got a call from Jake and it sounds like he’s upset.”

“I’m not surprised,” came the breathless voice from the other end of the call, “The son of a bitch ended up turning rapey on me after dinner.”

“What?” I cried, getting a quick but unsurprised look from Tom, “He didn’t hurt you did he?”

“No,” she said before grunting from exertion, “But I’m pretty sure now that he spiked my drink with something at dinner.” I caught Tom wince at my shocked gasp. “Too bad my healing took care that in a few seconds. Threatened to snap his arm like a twig when he grabbed me and added a little wolf to the threat. He backed off pretty fast.”

“Where are you now?” I asked quickly, “And why does it sound like you’re running?”

“Because I am,” she said emphatically, “Jake told me that his buddy Jeremy was going to go climbing at a gorge about three miles out of town.”

For a moment that statement made absolutely no sense to me. Then my brain picked up on the name she’d tossed out and it clicked. “As in the Jeremy that Kitty was supposed to be going out with?” The panicked look Tom sent my way after I said that made it clear he knew exactly what I was discussing with Aiden. “And there’s...no...gorge,” I finished slowly as it dawned on me what Aiden was trying to explain.

“Oh my God,” I whispered in horror.

“I’m on my way there now,” Aiden said, picking up on my sudden awareness.

“I can get Mom’s car and pick you up,” I said quickly, already scrambling to my feet and shoving them into my boots.

“Don’t bother,” she said, her voice rapidly devolving into a feral growl, “I can get there a lot faster on my own.”

As the line went dead I shoved my phone back into it’s pouch Tom was already getting to his feet. “Ashley wait,” he started.

“No,” I told him firmly, pinning him with a furious glare and wishing at that moment that I had heat vision. “Your friend is on his way to do God knows what to Kitty and your other friend tried to drug Aiden, and you knew about it!” I accused, stabbing a finger at him.

“I had no idea Jeremy was planning to do something to your friend,” he defended, though his voice was weak when he did it. “I thought he really was going climbing. He does it all the time back at school.”

“And Jake trying to drug Aiden?”

There was no hiding the guilty look in his eyes, nor the way he quickly averted his gaze while mine bore into him. “Yeah,” I growled, “I thought so,” and turned to make my way back through the forest.

“Ashley wait,” he said, grabbing my wrist to stop me.

What happened next was purely instinctual, not from survival or fear, but from raw anger. The moment I felt his fingers close on me I spun and drove my fist into his face as hard as I could. Even as furious as I was at the moment, I still only

had the strength of a sixteen-year-old girl who didn't exactly partake in upper body strength training or martial arts. Still, it was enough to make him stumble back, from at least shock, and cause a little blood to dribble from his nose. When I realized what I'd just done, the betrayal I'd already felt towards this man spiked so high and was so sharp and painful it was almost like someone had shoved a needle into my heart.

With tears burning at my eyes I whispered in hoarse fury, "You made me fight, you fucking son of a bitch!" Before spinning and racing into the forest.

### **Wolf Springs, Wyoming, Buckman Rental Property**

Kitty hummed happily as she pulled her car up the drive before parking in front of the house. Not only was she going to be having an impromptu date with her friend and lover, not only was said lover going to have made herself up to look ravishing, but she'd been able to easily find every ingredient she needed to make what promised to be a delicious baked venison in a succulent cream sauce. In what according to Ashley's recipe would only be a half hour of cooking, she and Angela would be sharing a gourmet meal, hopefully followed by an even yummiier, and naughtier, dessert. Just the thought of tasting Angela's sweet, damp flesh with teasing little nibbles and long, wet licks had her squirming deliciously and growing damp with desire. She hoped she'd be able to contain herself at least until they'd finished the meal.

Bouncing out of the car and gathering up the bags of groceries, she smiled as the sounds of a romantic ballad floated through the open living room window. So Angela had already taken steps to set the mood hmmm? Wonderful. That would make the seduction that much easier. Not that she needed to do any seducing, Kitty reminded herself, but it was just so much fun watching her lover's eyes darken with pleasure while she teased her with a little caress here or a double entendre there. By the time she was finished, the lovely blond would be squirming and begging for Kitty to just take her and the thought had her grinning.

That smile was still on her face when she flung open the door and practically danced inside. “Honey, I’m home,” she sang before freezing as the sight of her lover waiting in the middle of the living room. She had chosen the sexy little red number and red stilettos Kitty had convinced her to buy back in Indiana and just like back then it looked scrumptious on her, hugging every delectable curve like the wrapper on a tasty candy. And she was squirming, oh was she squirming, and moaning as well, but it wasn’t due to any wanton lust or desire.

It was because her hands were tightly bound behind her back with colored rope while her ankles were cinched tightly together as well. She was up on her toes, but that was due to the fact that another length of rope had been looped about her throat and drawn tight in a hangman’s noose. Its rope had been drawn so tightly up into the rafters that any relaxation on Angela’s part to be on more comfortable and solid footing would have resulted in strangulation. The question as to why she hadn’t called out upon hearing Kitty pull up in the car was clear when she saw the large, red ball that had been shoved into her lover’s mouth and buckled behind her head with a leather strap. Even now as she squirmed in her bindings she tried to say something but was only able to utter a whimper.

“Angela!” Kitty cried in horror as she leapt to help her friend. She hadn’t even taken one step when something large wrapped around her from behind, pinning her arms helplessly to her side.

“Hello bitch,” hissed in her ear as the damp cloth clamped tightly over her nose and mouth.

**Wolf Springs, The Wild**

Trees were nothing more than a blur as she raced through the wilds as fast as her legs could carry her. All around, prey animals scattered in fear as the hunter sped through the night with a singular, lethal goal. Trees, brush, logs, none of this slowed her for even a moment as she navigated the terrain with the speed and fluidity that was only possible to one possessed of the primal instincts that transcended two-legged memory. Other predators called out their greetings, only to be ignored as they were passed. The hunt would not be denied.

From within a grove, a large bear lumbered forth, snorting at the perceived challenge to its territory. When there was no answer to its proclaimed offense, it lifted to its full height and let loose an angry roar, bearing its dagger-like teeth. The hunter only responded with a low, dangerous growl as she continued to race at full speed towards the huge, furry predator. As she drew closer, fangs were bared and a snarl issued a clear indication that she would not hesitate to tear the bear apart and not even bother to feast on its corpse before being on her way. The predator came to understand the truth in this and dropped to all fours once more before moving out of the way of the dark blur, bowing its head in acknowledgement of the apex predator. The hunt would not be denied.

As the moon began to reveal itself to the evening sky, the hunter's tongue lolled from her mouth in eager anticipation of finding her prey. This two-legged dared to think he could wage war against her pack and suffer no consequences. He would soon learn what such foolishness brought.

*The hunt would not be denied, and the hunter would show no mercy.*

### **Wolf Springs, Wyoming, Near the Buckman Rental Property**

I was gasping for breath by the time I started getting close to Kitty's house. Initially I had planned to run to my house, tell Mom what had happened, and race over in her car. About five seconds into the plan I realized that in the time it took to get all the way home, try to explain everything to Mom and not be able to answer the flurry of questions she'd probably ask, and then finally drive over, it would be too late to stop that psycho from doing something terrible to my friend and her girlfriend.

So, I'd changed course and instead raced through the woods towards Kitty's house directly, thanking Aiden the whole time for the tips and tricks she'd given me when it came to wolf running. If it hadn't been for her guidance, I'd have likely fallen on my face over a dozen times during my fifteen-minute flight through the woods. As it was, I'd only stumbled a couple of times and gotten more than a few tears in my skirt when dodging through brush or vaulting a log. The irony of my warning to Aiden about the very same thing happening to her just a few days ago was not lost on me, I just didn't care at that moment. The racing of my heart matched the growing fear I had that by the time I made it to Kitty's house it would be too late. I had no idea what that sick bastard Jeremy might do but if it was anything like what Jake had tried to do to Aiden I knew I had to get there as fast as possible.

Every moment I ran, getting closer and closer to the house, my imagination flashed a new horror being inflicted upon my friend through my mind. Rape,

torture, mutilation, and so much more urged me to push myself harder and faster. Considering how overactive my mind already was when it came to taking fear and giving it visual imagery, the possibilities it came up with regarding Kitty's fate were enough to have me nearly sobbing with despair that I would be too late.

By the time I broke through the line of trees at the edge of Kitty's property, my skirt looked more like rags than a kerchief and my top had a bad tear in the midriff as well as one right along my right breast, providing a generous view of my lacy bra. Still, the damage to my clothing didn't even slow me down as I sprinted for the front door even as I hear a muffled cry of pain and a high pitched feminine squeal. I didn't even hesitate as I ran full speed and put every last ounce of strength I had left into slamming my shoulder the front door, causing it to fly open and sending me spilling into the house just as the window to my right shattered from a large, dark shape exploding right through it. At that point, as I lay on my hands and knees in the entrance of Kitty and Angela's house, I became aware of several things at once.

The dark shape that had come through the window was Aiden in full wolf form. Had she not shown it to Kitty and I a couple days ago at the beginning of our workout, I would never have imagined that the huge, black, snarling wolf that looked ready to devour the world could be my courageous and protective friend. Her nostrils flared rapidly even as her mouth was parted to reveal gleaming white fangs ready to sink into and tear apart flesh.

In a chair close to the center of the living room area was Angela, looking lovely if a little disheveled in a snug red dress and heels sitting casually, if not a bit seductively, with her legs crossed. She was watching Kitty, also clearly dressed for date night in the quintessential LBD (little black dress) and heels, gleefully whacking at what looked like a human-shaped piñata dangling from the ceiling with what appeared to be a black leather riding crop.

When the latest blow landed, the moan of pain made me realize that actually *was* a human dangling from the ceiling. More to the point, it was the dreaded Jeremy, stripped down to his rather dirty underwear and strung up by a perplexing arrangement of ropes and carabiners with his hands tethered to his ankles behind his back to the point they nearly touched. He barely seemed to be able to twitch from his suspended position when Kitty gave him another good swat on the thigh. The reason why he only moaned instead of yelled or screamed was due to the fact

that his mouth had been stuffed with some kind of large red ball attached to leather straps that were buckled around his head.

At the dual sounds of the door crashing open and the window shattering, both Kitty and Angela screamed in surprise, with Angela leaping from her chair and Kitty reflexively slashing out with the riding crop in my direction. Unfortunately, Jeremy's shoulder was directly in the way of her erstwhile attack, eliciting a muffled cry of pain as an angry red welt formed at the site he was struck. "What the hell guys!" Kitty yelled.

I tried to respond but by this point I was completely out of strength and breath and could only lay there trying desperately to reintroduce oxygen into my lungs. Aiden, in the meantime, shifted back into her human form, revealing her lovely, yet furious expression. "What do you mean 'what the hell'?" she yelled back, pointing at the suspended man, "We thought you were being raped or tortured by this guy!"

"What made you think that?" Angela asked innocently, though she had a decisively impish gleam in her eye.

"Oh I don't know," Aiden said with sarcastic casualness, "Maybe the fact that the guy went off with a backpack full of ropes telling his buddies a bullshit story about climbing some gorge."

"Don't forget," I gasped, finally having drunk enough air that I could finally speak again, albeit in short, panting chunks, "His friend...Aiden's date...trying to...drug her."

"What?" Kitty yelled in outrage.

"Yeah," Aiden said biting, "The idiot tried spiking my drink."

"Well clearly it didn't work," Angela observed.

Pointing at her own chest with her thumb, the wolf girl grinned. "Werewolf healing."

It was at that point that all eyes turned to me as I got to my feet and tried to brush the dirt from my ruined clothes. When no one said anything I realize they were all staring at me with shock and horror. "Oh," I said, realizing just then how bad I must have looked, "Tom didn't do this to me. This happened from running here through the woods."

“So he didn’t try to hurt you?” Aiden asked carefully, clearly looking for any kind of excuse to go after him since she couldn’t justifiably eat Jeremy anymore now that he was completely subdued.

“No,” I told her with a shake of my head and worked on picking out several leaves that I now realized were tangled in my hair, “He tried to stop me from coming here after Aiden called me and I realized he knew what had been happening all along with all of you guys.”

“What did you do?” Angela asked with concern that was echoed in my friends’ eyes.

“I...punched him in the face,” I said, looking down in shame, which in your typical movie or T.V show would be the point when everyone would laugh and the idea of a timid little girl punching a guy would garner a round of applause.

However, this was real life and my friends knew exactly how significant my actions were to me. Without saying a word, Aiden and Kitty crossed the floor in a heartbeat and were tightly wrapping their arms around me. I didn’t cry, which I count as a victory, but I will freely admit that it was soooo comforting for them to hold me like that while I coped with the fact that someone had enraged me to the point that I had violated one my most sacred morals.

“Ummm, guys?” Angela called from the other side of the room.

Looking over, we saw her pointing at hers and Kitty’s dangling captive. More specifically, she was pointing at the rather large erection he was sporting that had created quite the distortion in his briefs.

“Ewwwww,” I squealed, though I did it more because it was the expected reaction from a teenage girl rather than actually being offended by it.

“What’s got him so turned on?” Aiden wondered aloud with disgust.

“Ummm, Aiden?”

When she turned to look at Kitty, the brunette gave the wolf girl a once over from head to toe and waggled her eyebrows suggestively. That was when Aiden realized she was standing completely and utterly naked in front of everyone, including the trussed up and clearly aroused pervert.

“You motherfucker!” she roared, racing over and ramming her fist squarely into his crotch, causing a rather feminine-sounding scream to erupt that was quite ear-piercing despite the gag filling his mouth.

While she might not have been exactly timid, the notion of the girl punching the guy got more than its share of laughter and applause this time around.

\* \* \* \*

As the girl’s head broke the surface of the water beneath the dock, she looked around frantically to try and determine if she was safe. Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t prevent the desperate, gasping breaths from exploding out of her mouth as her arms and legs worked feverishly to keep her head above the surface of the lake. From above, she could hear the thudding, unhurried steps of booted feet slowly approach until they stopped directly above where she floated beneath the wooden structure. While she clenched her teeth and tried to keep the sound she produced to under a whimper, her eyes rolled up towards the few fragments of dirt and splinters that rained down upon her head as a result of the heavy footfalls.

For several moments there was absolute silence as she pictured a cold, dead gaze slowly scanning the surface of the water for any signs of bubbling that would indicate a person attempting to hold their breath and avoid detection. There was a slight scraping sound indicating a pivoting foot and a long, slow breath feathered from between her lips as she realized she hadn’t been found...

Just before the large, heavy blade shot through the dock, plunging brutally through the top of her head and spraying the wood and lake with a mixture of blood and chunks of brain as her eyes rolled up into the back of her head as death claimed her in an instant.

The scream I uttered was sharp and horrified as I whirled and buried my face against Aiden's shoulder, curling up tightly against her even as she let out an impressed, "Whoahhhh-hahahaha!" while draping a protective arm around my shoulders.

"Oh God," I moaned, only brave enough to peek out from between my fingers as I watched the hulking brute of a man in a hockey mask rip his machete from the dead girl's head, causing her to slam into the underside of the dock she'd been hiding beneath before sinking beneath the water's surface. "How did I let you talk me into watching this?" I whispered in horror.

"Oh come on Ashley," Kitty teased from the other couch where she lay snuggled up in Angela's arms while the blond stroked her lover's hair, "It's just a movie. Besides, Friday the Thirteenth is a classic."

"Maybe the old Eighties and Nineties versions," I countered as I watched Jason Voorhees slowly turn around and lumber back into the woods, "This Rob Zombie remake is just..." I couldn't find the right words to express just how disturbing I thought the movie was and instead just shivered, prompting Aiden to give me a squeeze.

"Just think of it as exposure therapy," Aiden quipped, crossing her ankles sheathed in dark, patterned tights on the coffee table, "The more you're exposed to it the less it'll bother you. It worked for me didn't it?"

"Dressing more girly to help you get over being such a tomboy isn't exactly the same thing," I countered.

She shrugged with a grin but didn't refute my argument. In point of fact, in the three days since our 'triple date disaster', as I called it, Kitty's and my efforts to get Aiden to dress more girly was actually meeting with some success. She wasn't exactly glamming it up on a daily basis like Kitty did, but the fact that she was sitting there not only wearing the black patterned tights, but had matched it with a pair of little denim shorts and a black top with a dusting of lace along the somewhat low neckline and hem was more girly than she'd looked since I'd met her. No, her wearing a dress on her date most certainly did not count since we had to practically harass her into wearing it.

"And what about Kitty?" Aiden pointed out with a grin, "Screwing Angela's brains out every night won't exactly reduce her sex drive."

“Hey, who says she’s the one who always does the screwing?” Angela protested.

“And it’s not like you guys found me riding Jeremy like a crazed cowgirl that night,” Kitty countered after she’d stuck her tongue out at her blond lover.

“You know,” I said, sitting up and momentarily forgetting about the gore-fest on the big screen T.V, “You never did tell us how you managed to keep him from grabbing you like he did Angela. I mean, you said he surprised you and tried to chloroform you just like he did with her before tying her up.”

“God I am *never* going to live that down,” Angela muttered dejectedly.

Kitty laughed and gave her a light kiss on the lips. “It did give us some great material to work with in the bedroom though,” she purred, causing Angela to blush furiously. “And he was an idiot when it came to using that stuff,” she told me. “He probably saw some guy do it on T.V and thought ‘Hey, I can do that’. The problem is, chloroform takes probably like a few minutes to actually knock someone out, and that’s only if they actually breathe it in.”

“I gasped when he surprised me,” Angela explained in a tone that clearly said she was embarrassed about it, “So I sucked in a nice big lungful of it. By the time I tried to fight back my arms and legs felt like jelly and I was done.”

“When he tried to use it on me, however,” Kitty said, picking up the explanation, “I held my breath before he got the rag on my face so I hadn’t breathed any of it in. A good, solid nut shot later and he was on the ground. After that, trussing him up like a stuffed turkey was easy.”

“It really was very gracious of him to bring all of that rope and climbing gear to make hanging him from the rafters so easy,” Angela remarked approvingly.

“I’m surprised you didn’t cut his dick off with an energy blade,” Aiden noted with raised eyebrows.

“Temp-ting,” Kitty sang, “But I had way too much fun whacking him with that riding crop he had stuffed in his bag. Besides, after that cock shot you gave him I’m surprised the cops were even able to walk him out instead of carrying him.”

“He’ll live,” Aiden waved offhandedly, “But his kids will be stupid.”

The got a good laugh out of all of us before I turned my face back into Aiden's shoulder so I wouldn't have to watch another gruesome death on the T.V. "What about your guy?" Kitty asked, "I'm surprised you didn't rip his throat out after he tried to drug you."

"Someone beat me to it," she said, stroking my hair soothingly, "From what Dad told me, just after I took off he got a royal ass-beating. No one knows who did it, but the rumor mill is it was one of the workers at the restaurant who saw him spike my drink. He hightailed it out of town with his buddies the instant Jeremy made bail."

"I'm sorry your date turned out to be a loser too, Ashley," Kitty told me sympathetically. "Out of the three, he at least seemed to be genuinely nice."

"Maybe," I allowed, resting my head on Aiden's shoulder more comfortably now instead of hiding from Hollywood gore, "But he at least partially knew what the other two had planned and didn't do a thing to stop them. Who knows, maybe his nice guy routine was just an act to get my guard down. If I hadn't taken off when I did to come rescue you, he might have tried to spike my drink too."

"You know all guys aren't like that," Aiden assured me, "Right?"

I nodded and sighed. "I know, and believe it or not I'm not all that broken up about that night. Yeah, it was really disappointing, but I'm not completely shattered by it like I was after San Francisco. I know there's good guys out there, I've met them, I just haven't been lucky enough to meet one that wants to date me yet."

As the credits started to roll on the movie I leapt off the couch and raced over to where my oversized shoulder bag lay on one of the chairs by the window. Digging through it, I came up with a thumb drive and grinned before racing over to the TV, pulling Aiden's drive out of the connection port and plugging my own in.

"What are we watching next?" Aiden asked suspiciously.

"Oh, just a nice romantic comedy," I told them innocently, eliciting a bevy of pained groans that caused me to grin. "Oh come on," I protested in a hurt voice as I flopped back down on the couch to cuddle against Aiden once more, "We got to watch your icky horror movie, it's my turn."

"Fine," Aiden grumped, "At least it's not a porn like Kitty suggested."

"I said that as a joke," she protested.

“Sure you did,” Aiden countered with a knowing look that had her blushing and looking away.

“Well you’ll just have to suffer because it’s my turn to pick,” I said grandly, just before grinning as the title for the sci fi comedy Paul appeared on the screen and cheers erupted through the room. Well, it had romance and comedy in it after all.

### **Wolf Springs, Wyoming, McKinnon Residence**

“I’m amazed that she’s gotten through this so well,” Rowen said as she handed her guest a cup of tea. “I was so worried that she would regress back to how she was when she first came here.”

“You don’t give her enough credit,” her guest replied evenly, “Ashley is much stronger than even she realizes.”

“I’m actually surprised you didn’t intervene that night. Riding to the rescue tends to be your modus operandi,” she observed with a smile.

“I would have if it had been necessary,” he informed her, “But I won’t always be there and all of them need to have the strength and confidence to live their own lives and handle whatever life throws at them, not depend on someone else.”

“Even Ashley?” Rowen challenged with a knowing look.

“Especially Ashley,” he countered. “And she proved that she’s more than capable of not only doing that, but defending her friends as well.”

“I still don’t know what she expected to do rushing in there like that,” Rowen sighed, thinking back on the girls’ recounting of the events from three days ago. “It’s not like she has any combat training or offensive powers.” At the look

she received from her guest she waved away the unspoken rebuttal. “You know she won’t do that again for a very long time, if ever. That aspect of her power terrifies her.”

“As it should,” he agreed, “Having that kind of ability could turn her into a true monster if she allowed it.”

“You know that won’t happen, not with her,” Rowen told him evenly and confidently.

“No, not with her,” he acknowledged.

“I suppose I don’t have to worry about reprisals from those bastards they dealt with,” she said, abruptly changing topics and shifting one of the magazines on the coffee table to reveal the morning paper that practically shouted the headline: **THREE U OF W STUDENTS DEAD IN FIERY CRASH ON INTERSTATE.**

The eyes of her guest barely flickered to read the headline before taking another leisurely sip of tea. “Was it really necessary?” Rowen asked tiredly, “Did they really need to die? The way that boy Jake was beaten should have sent a clear enough message.”

“Are you aware of their history?” he challenged in a deceptively inquisitive tone. When the witch shook her head he continued, “Between the three of them there have been over twenty sexual assaults induced by the very substance he attempted to drug Aiden with. The only reason they weren’t charged is due the courts claiming there was a lack of substantive evidence or because the victims were too scared to come forward because all of them are heads of a very powerful fraternity and even more powerful families. If she didn’t possess her healing ability Aiden would have likely been number twenty-one.”

“And she would have actively hunted him down and ripped his throat out,” Rowen pointed out, “That one doesn’t need you defending her.”

“Not defend,” her guest corrected, “Protect. She shouldn’t be forced to endure the guilt that would have haunted her for the rest of her life by taking revenge.”

“But it’s okay for you to endure it?” the woman challenged.

“I don’t feel the slightest bit guilty,” he told her candidly, “If they’d been allowed to continue, those boys would have left a string of shattered lives behind them for years.”

“Are you so sure about all of them? What about Tom? Ashley told me that despite him knowing about what the other two planned, he had been nothing but kind and gentle to her the entire time.”

The shadowed man took another sip from his tea before sitting back in his chair. “That was not the true Tom.”

“What are you talking about?” Rowen asked in confusion. “Please don’t tell me he was some kind of a robot or a clone.”

“Nothing like that,” her guest assured her, “What I mean is the personality traits and characteristics he displayed with Ashley are a direct contradiction to his pattern history and psychological profile.”

“Maybe he was just very good at reading people and presented himself to Ashley in a way he knew she would respond,” the witch suggested.

“You’re starting to think like me,” the man said in approval, “But no, Thomas Borland doesn’t possess the knowledge or instincts that would allow him to study a person and then manufacture a compatible persona at such a rapid pace. His preferred method of ‘seduction,’” he said, making the word sound filthy, “Is to use testosterone-fueled charm coupled with displays of his wealth. The kindness he displayed towards Ashley was such a distinct departure for him it was tantamount to a complete psychological reversal that is simply not possible in such an abbreviated period of time.”

“So what does that mean?”

“I don’t know, yet,” the guest admitted grudgingly, “But there are a few theories I’ve been working on and this latest incident has provided me with more data. I can work on it once I get back, but there are three less sexual predators in the world now.”

“So you would have gone after them regardless?” Rowen asked suspiciously, “That the girls were involved didn’t matter at all?”

He didn’t answer right away, instead taking a moment to sip his tea and compose his answer carefully. “It brought their activities to my attention,” he finally stated.

“Ashe,” she sighed, setting down her cup and resting her arms on her knees while leaning towards him, “You know that Ashley wouldn’t approve. She cherishes life, all life.”

“Which is why I don’t boast about what I do,” the dark vigilante explained. “My work needs to be done, regardless of how abhorrent it is, and I don’t have any problem taking that responsibility on my shoulders so people like Ashley don’t have to.”

“And what if she asked you to stop?” Rowen challenged, “What if she asked you not to continue shouldering that responsibility?”

“She won’t,” he said in a confident, yet saddened voice, “As much as she hates what I do, deep down she knows it’s necessary to keep this world from collapsing into chaos.”

The witch wanted to argue that point, but unfortunately she couldn’t help but agree with the man’s logic. While she also shared her daughter’s belief that people were good for the most part, she couldn’t ignore the evil that would always be there, lurking in the darkness. She also couldn’t ignore the fact that Ashe, along with his methods, were the only real way to stop such evil. Many had tried over the years. Police officers worked continuously to prevent crime and bring its perpetrators to justice. Courts operated on a broken system of law that saw more criminals set free than punished. Even superheroes, with all of their vaunted powers and abilities, could only do so much within the confines of their moral codes the necessitated incarceration and inevitable escape as opposed to elimination. Ashe was one of the few in the world that truly understood what it meant to destroy evil, and he did so without compunction...or mercy.

She was about to try and pose another admittedly flimsy argument to try and persuade him away from his life of solitude and death when the front door to the house flew open and a red-haired beauty danced into the room. “I’m home,” she sang, “Do you happen to know a spell to make an illusion of Jason Vor-Ashe!” she practically screamed in utter happiness as she spied the man rising from his chair. In the blink of an eye she was across the room and wrapping him in a hug so tight it seemed to nearly take his breath away. “Oh my God I haven’t seen you in so long,” she cried, looking up at him with tears of happiness shining in her eyes.

“I thought I might come for a visit,” he told her, affectionately running his hand through her bright red tresses.

“Can you stay long?” she begged, gripping him as though afraid if she let go he might simply vanish.

“Just until tomorrow night,” he informed her in a disappointed voice that truly surprised Rowen as she couldn’t recall him ever expressing that kind of emotion towards anyone.

“Well, I’ll take it,” she said firmly, guiding him to the love seat and forcing him onto it before sitting closely beside him, not once releasing the firm grip on his hand. “I have so much to tell you.”

As her beautiful daughter began to regale her dark avenging angel with tales from the passed week, Rowen silently rose and slipped from the room to clean up and put away the tea cups. As she did, the witch realized that Ashe had been completely right in everything he’d told her. Dark things, things most only prayed they would experience in their nightmares, needed to be done so gentle souls like Ashley would have a chance to make life better and brighter.

Not for the first time, Rowen thanked the goddess that the world had the Ghost Wolf.