

Chapter One

“You should leave. Now.” My father’s growl of warning resonated in some dark, primal part of me, and suddenly I craved torn flesh and fresh blood glistening in moonlight. Wave after wave of bloodlust crashed over me and I swayed beneath the onslaught, struggling to control it. We would have justice for Ethan. But this was not the time. Not the place.

Though my father’s office practically sizzled with the rage that flowed through me and my fellow enforcers, Paul Blackwell, acting head of the Territorial Council, seemed completely unaffected. I watched him from my place near the closed office door, both arms—my right still in a cast—crossed over my chest.

Blackwell planted his old-fashioned wooden cane firmly on the Oriental rug and leaned on it with both hands. “Now, Greg, calm down... I’m only asking you to consider the greater good, which is exactly what you claim you’ll honor, if you’re reinstated as council chairman.”

Unfortunately, that seemed less likely with each passing day. In the week since we’d buried my brother, Nick Davidson had announced his support of Calvin Malone as council chair, which meant that my father now needed the last remaining vote—from Jerold Pierce, my fellow enforcer Parker’s dad—just to tie everything up.

And a tie wasn’t good enough. We needed a clear victory.

My father sat in his wing chair at the end of the rug, and his refusal to rise was—on the surface—an uncharacteristic show of disrespect toward a fellow Alpha. But I knew him well enough to understand the truth: if he stood, he might lose his temper. “You’re asking me to let my son’s murder go un-avenged.” His voice was as low and dangerous as I’d ever heard it, and I swear I felt the rumble deep in my bones. It echoed the ache in my heart.

“I’m asking you not to start a war.” Blackwell stood calm and steady, which must have taken considerable self-control, considering my father’s comparative youth and bulk. And his obvious rage. Even in his late fifties, Greg Sanders, Alpha of the south-central Pride and my father, was a formidable force.

My dad growled again. “Calvin Malone started this, and you damn well know it.”

Blackwell sighed and glanced around the room, and as his tired gaze skirted the three other Alphas grouped near the bar and the scattering of enforcers along the walls, I got the distinct impression that he would much rather have been alone with my father.

The other Alphas and two enforcers apiece had arrived early that morning for one last strategy meeting before the south-central Pride and our allies launched the first full-scale werecat offensive the U.S. had seen in more than six decades. It was Saturday. We planned to attack in three days—just after sundown on Tuesday night. Anticipation hummed in the air around us, buzzing like electricity in my ears, pulsing like passion in my veins.

We could already feel the blows, every last one of us. We could taste the blood, and hear the screams that would soon pierce the still, cold February night. We were living on the promise of violence in answer to violence, and several of the toms around me teetered on the thin edge of bloodlust, riding adrenaline like the crest of a lethal wave.

Surely Blackwell had known his mission was a failure the moment he walked into the house.

Our allies were expected, but Paul Blackwell’s arrival had been a total surprise. Just after lunch, he’d pulled into the driveway in a rental car driven by his grandson a cane in the old

man's hand, determination in his step. But that wouldn't be enough, and neither would the authority of the Territorial Council, which he wore like a badge of honor. Or more like a badge of shame, considering that nearly half of the council's members were present, and not one looked happy to see him.

Blackwell shuffled one foot on the carpet and closed his eyes, as if gathering his thoughts, then his heavy gaze landed on my father again. "Greg, no one is happy about what happened to Ethan, least of all me. Calvin has been formally reprimanded, and the enforcers involved—" *the surviving ones, presumably*—"have been suspended from duty indefinitely, pending an investigation."

"Who's leading this investigation?" My uncle Rick spoke up from across the room, a half-full glass of brandy held near his chest. "And who will be allowed as witnesses? Do you honestly think the council is capable of justice, or even impartiality in its current state?"

Blackwell twisted awkwardly toward my uncle—my mother's older brother. "Frankly, I think the current state of the council is nothing short of a disaster. But abandoning the very order that defines us is no way to repair the cracks that have developed in our foundation." Then he turned to face my dad again. "Fortunately, I believe you dealt with the actual guilty party yourself."

In fact, my father had torn out Ethan's murderer's throat with one swipe of unsheathed claws, before my brother had even breathed his last. The offending tom was disposed of in the industrial incinerator behind our barn, his ashes dumped unceremoniously on the ground several feet from the furnace, then stomped into the dirt by everyone who tread over them.

But that small act of revenge did little to ease the blazing wrath consuming all of us.

"Calvin Malone is ultimately responsible for Ethan's death, and he will pay that price." My father's words came out cold, as if he didn't feel a word he'd said. But on my right, Marc's hands clenched into fists at his sides, and Jace went stiff on my left. From the couch, Michael was nodding grimly. We were ready. Vengeance was overdue.

"The council has taken official action on this matter," Blackwell continued. "I know you're not satisfied by that action, and that's understandable, but if you strike at Malone after he's accepted censure, *you'll* be throwing the first punch."

"Are we children, playing this blame game?" My father finally rose from his chair, and Blackwell had to look up to meet his fury. "Are you so focused on who's at fault that you can't see the larger picture? Calvin Malone is out of control, and if the council can't rein him in, we *will*."

On the other side of the room, Uncle Rick, Umberto Di Carlo, and Ed Taylor nodded in solidarity. They'd thrown their support behind my father and pledged their manpower to fight alongside us.

"The larger picture is exactly what I'm looking at." Blackwell held his ground as my father stalked toward him. "You're talking about civil war. How does that benefit the greater good?" He glanced down at his cane, but when he looked up, resolve straightened the old man's thin, hunched spine. "My eyes may be old and weak, but I see this clearly, Greg. The U.S. Prides *cannot* afford to go to war."

My father met his gaze steadily. "Neither can they afford to be led by Calvin Malone." He stepped around the older Alpha and took the glass his brother-in-law held out to him, sipping from it as Blackwell turned slowly, leaning on his cane while he scanned the room.

The council chair's gaze fell finally on my mother, who sat stiff and straight in a leather wing chair in one corner, half hidden by the shadows. Long before I was born, she'd sat on the

council, but I couldn't remember her ever taking active part in council business during my lifetime. Yet no one had objected when she'd filed into the room behind our unexpected guest, after showing him into the office.

"Karen..." Blackwell said, and the irony of his appeal to her irritated me like a backward stroke of my fur. The old man's record on gender equality was solidly *con*, yet he had the nerve to address my mother in her own home. "Would you really send your sons to die at war, if it could possibly be avoided?"

My mother's eyes flashed in anger, and my breath caught in my throat. She stood slowly, and every face in the room turned toward her. "In case you haven't noticed, Paul, I don't have to send my children to war to watch them die. Less than two weeks ago, Ethan was murdered on our own land, the result of an action *you* sanctioned." She stepped forward, arms crossed over her chest, and suddenly the resemblance between me and my mother was downright scary. "Yet you stand here, in my own house, asking me to speak against justice for his death? Asking my support for a council leader who stands for everything I hate? You're a bigger fool than Malone."

Blackwell stared, obviously at a loss for words, and the tingle of delight racing up my spine could barely be contained.

And my mother wasn't done. "Furthermore, if Calvin Malone takes over the council, the status quo will sink to an all new low. What makes you think I want you, or him, or any other man to tell my daughter when and whom she should marry, and how many children she should bear? Yes, I want to see her married, but that's because I see in her—sometimes *deep down* in her—the same fierce, protective streak I feel for my own children. And because I want to see her *happy*. That's a mother's right. But it is not *your* right. And you won't convince a single soul here that you bear the least bit of concern for her happiness."

"Karen..." Blackwell started, but my mom shook her head firmly.

I squirmed, in both embarrassment and pride, but my attention never wavered from my mother's porcelain mask of fury and indignation. "Hear me now—I won't say this again." She took another step forward, her index finger pointed at the council's senior member, and those spine-chills shot up my arms. "Do *not* mistake my even temper and my contribution to the next generation of our species as either docility or weakness. It is that very maternal instinct you're appealing to that fuels my need for vengeance on my son's behalf, and I assure you that need is every bit as great, as driving, as my husband's.

"Now," she continued, when Blackwell's wrinkled jaw actually went slack. "You are welcome here as a guest. But if you ever again insult me or any other member of my household, I will *personally* show you the exit."

With that, my mother tucked a chin-length strand of gray hair behind one ear and strode purposefully toward the door, leaving the rest of us to stare after her in astonishment. Except for my father. His expression shone with pride so fierce that if he hadn't still been mourning the loss of a son, I was sure he would have called for a toast.

Silence reigned in my father's office, but for the clicking of my mother's sensibly low heels on the hard wood. Without looking back, or making eye contact with anyone, she pulled open the door—and almost collided with a pint-size tabby cat.

"Kaci, what's wrong?" My mother took her by the shoulder and guided her away from the office, obviously assuming she'd been about to knock on the door. But I knew better. Kaci wasn't knocking; she was eavesdropping.

At least, she was *trying*. But I could have told her from personal experience that she wouldn't have much luck. The office door was solid oak and beneath the Sheetrock, the walls were cinder block and windowless. While those features didn't actually soundproof the room, they rendered individual words spoken inside nearly impossible to understand. Even with a werecat's enhanced hearing.

"I..." Kaci faltered, glancing at me for help. But I only smiled, enjoying seeing someone else in the hot seat for once. "You guys're talking about me, aren't you? If you are, I have a right to know."

My mom smiled. "Your name hasn't come up."

Yet. But now that Blackwell had been shot down on the uneasy-peace front, I had no doubt he'd start in about Kaci. Calvin Malone was desperate to place her with a Pride that supported his bid for control of the council. His own Pride, if he could possibly swing it. In fact, Ethan had died defending Kaci from an attempt to forcibly remove her from the ranch.

And Kaci knew that.

"What's going on, then? Is this about Ethan?" Her chin quivered as she spoke, her gaze flitting from face to solemn face in search of answers, and my heart broke all over again.

Kaci had been closer to Ethan and Jace than to any of the other toms, and though she'd known him less than three months, she was taking my brother's death every bit as hard as the rest of us. Maybe worse. At thirteen, Kaci had already been tragically overexposed to death and underexposed to counseling. And in addition to the grief and anger the rest of us suffered, she felt guilty because Ethan had died defending her.

"Come on, Kaci, let's get you something to eat." My mother tried to herd her away from the office, but the tabby shrugged out from under her hand.

"I'm not hungry. And I'm tired of being left out. You keep me cooped up on the ranch, but won't tell me what's going on in my own home? How is that fair?"

I sighed and glanced around the office, loathe to miss the rest of the discussion. But now that Ethan was gone, no one else could deal with Kaci as well as I could except Jace, and I wasn't going to ask him to leave. The impending war had as much to do with him as it did with me; Calvin Malone was his stepfather, and Ethan was his lifelong best friend.

"Come on, Kace, why don't we go kick the crap out of some hay bales in the barn?"

She looked at me like I'd just gone over to the dark side, but nodded reluctantly.

Marc took my hand, then let his fingers trail through mine as I stepped past him toward the door. Then I stopped and deliberately brushed a kiss on his rough cheek on the way, inhaling deeply to take in as much of his scent as possible, lingering for Blackwell's benefit, as well as my own. To reiterate for the old coot that I would choose my own relationships.

But on my way into the hall, my gaze caught on Jace's, and the tense line of his jaw betrayed his carefully blank expression. As did the flicker of heat in his eyes. We'd agreed not to talk about what happened between us the day Ethan died. There was really no other way to keep peace in the household, and keep everyone's energy and attention focused on avenging my brother. And I'd sworn to myself that Marc would be the first to know. That I would tell him myself. He deserved that much, as badly as I dreaded it.

And there had been no good time for that yet. Not even an acceptable time. Every time was a *rotten* time, in fact, and each time Jace looked at me like that—each time I felt myself respond to the connection I wanted to deny—my internal pressure dialed up another notch.

If I didn't break the tension soon, I was going to explode. Or do something we'd all regret.

I forced myself to walk past Jace with nothing more than a polite, sad nod—exactly what I would have given any of my other fellow enforcers—and closed the door as I stepped into the hall.

My mother was already standing there with my leather jacket and Kaci's down ski coat. Sometimes I forgot she could move just as fast as the rest of us, if she chose.

Sometimes I forgot she had a mouth on her, too. *Guess that's where I got mine...*

"Thanks." I took the jacket and shrugged into it. "Mom, that was...awesome." There was just no other way to describe it.

Her lips formed a straight, grim line. "It was the truth." She pulled Kaci's long chestnut waves from beneath her collar and forced a smile. "Come in and warm up in half an hour, and I'll have hot chocolate."

On the way down the hall, Kaci shoved her bare hands into her jacket pockets and glanced up at me, her frown almost as stern as the one my father typically wore. And in that moment, I wanted nothing more than to see her smile. To see her look—just for a moment—like any other thirteen-year-old. Like a teenager who knew nothing of violent death, and soul-shredding guilt, and spirit-crushing fear.

"What was awesome?" she asked, shoving the front door open.

I grinned, my mood momentarily brightened by the memory of my mother's bad-ass monologue. "My mom just handed Blackwell his shriveled old balls in front of everyone."

Kaci's eyebrows shot halfway up her forehead. "Seriously?" I nodded, and for an instant, I caught a glimpse of what a happy Kaci could look like. "Cool."

We stepped onto the porch and I had actually gone two steps before I realized we weren't alone. Mercedes Carreño—Manx—sat in the wrought-iron love seat with my brother Owen. They both looked up as we approached, but their easy smiles said we hadn't interrupted anything. No conversation, anyway. They were simply sitting there together, enjoying the winter silence. And somehow their easy comfort seemed more intimate than many kisses I'd seen.

"Hey," Kaci said, oblivious as I raised a curious brow at my brother. "Where's Des?"

Manx shrugged deeper into her wool coat. "He is sleeping."

My eyebrow went even higher, and Owen flushed as he slid his cowboy hat back and forth on his head. Manx never left Des. *Never*. The baby slept in her bed, and she sat with him when he napped. And she wouldn't even go to the bathroom until she'd found someone she trusted to watch him while she was gone.

Yet here she sat next to my cowboy-gentleman brother, doing nothing, her hands resting easily in her lap, butchered fingernails concealed by stretchy, crocheted gloves.

"Can I play with him when he wakes up?" Kaci asked.

Manx smiled. She seemed to realize that playing with the baby—though that amounted to little more than letting the one-month-old grip her finger—set Kaci at ease as little else could. "Of course."

Kaci's shoulders relaxed. Her gaze roamed the yard in the direction of the barn. Then her eyes narrowed and a frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. I knew what she was looking at without turning.

Ethan's grave.

We'd buried him beneath the apple tree, halfway between the front yard and the eastern field, and his headstone forever changed the familiar landscape. But that was the plan. We wanted to see him every day. To remember him without fail. To mourn for as long as we saw fit.

“I’m goin’ on ahead,” Kaci mumbled, then jogged down the steps without waiting for a response.

I hadn’t intended to linger with Owen and Manx, hesitant to interrupt...whatever they had going on. But Kaci clearly wanted a moment alone with Ethan, and I had to respect that.

“How are the digits?” I asked, sinking into a wicker chair at the end of the porch.

“Pardon?” Manx frowned until I nodded at her hands, then held her fingers up, as if to check on them. “Oh. Much better. They only hurt when—” she paused, searching for the right word in English “—bump things.” She pushed her hands forward against nothing to demonstrate.

Nearly two weeks after being declawed, her hands had almost completely healed, but the scar tissue where her fingernails had been was still bright red and puffy. She hated the sight of them, and wore thin gloves whenever possible, only taking them off to care for the baby or herself.

I turned to glance at Kaci—halfway to the apple tree, and loping at her own pace—and idly noticed a pair of hawks circling overhead.

“How is your arm?” Manx asked, recapturing my attention.

I held up my cast, frowning good-naturedly at the small doodles Kaci had drawn between the enforcers’ perfunctory signatures. A flower with purple petals and X-shaped eyes in the center. A pink skull and crossbones. I’d sat still for several of her masterpieces. Anything to make her smile. Though, I threatened to paint over them with black nail polish if she plastered any more pink on my arm.

Still, I had to admit that thinking of Kaci when I looked at my cast was much better than thinking about how I’d broken it. About the bastards who’d stolen Marc and beaten him to get information out of me—when beating me hadn’t worked.

“It’s fine. Dr. Carver says I can try Shifting in a couple of weeks.” I was already itching for the transformation—and from the cast, which somehow made my arm sweat, even in the middle of February.

“She really misses him.” Owen nodded at something over my shoulder, and I twisted in my seat to see Kaci on the ground beside Ethan’s headstone, one knee brushing the freshly overturned earth.

“Yeah, she—”

“What the hell?” Owen demanded, and I leaned to the side to peer over the porch railing. “Have you ever seen hawks that big? They must have their eyes on something, from the way they’re circling...”

I followed his gaze and was on my feet in an instant, a sick feeling of dread churning in my stomach. “Those aren’t hawks...” They were too big, for one thing. And their wings were all wrong. Especially the tips. Even from a distance, the ends looked...weird. The birds must have been really high up before, because now that they’d flown lower, swooping in from over the woods behind the eastern field, they looked huge.

My heartbeat suddenly felt sluggish, as if it couldn’t keep up with my body’s natural rhythm. The birds were *too* huge. And too low. And too *fast*...

Oh, shit... “Kaci!” I screamed as the first bird dove toward her. She looked up and screeched, and I was already halfway across the yard.

Kaci leaped to her feet, then ducked as the first bird swooped, huge talons grasping perilously close to her head. She screamed again, and when the bird rose effortlessly into the air, beating giant wings so hard I could hear the air whoosh from two hundred feet away, she stood and took off toward me.

Kaci raced across the dead grass, screaming at the top of her lungs.

I kept moving toward her, unwilling to waste energy on screams of my own. But in human form, neither of us was fast enough. I was a heartbreaking fifteen feet away when the second bird swooped, his powerful wings displacing so much air I was actually blown back a step. His talons opened wide, then closed instantly around her upper arms.

For a moment, as he regained his balance with his new burden, I had a breathtaking view of the magnificent creature. Smooth, brown wings. Terrible, curved beak. Powerful, horrifying talons. And long, sharp wing claws, protruding from beneath the feathers on the tips of his wings.

An instant later, the bird was aloft again, and I came to a stop with my fingertips grasping air three feet beneath Kaci's dangling sneaker.

My heart raced along with my feet as I followed them, knowing my chase was futile. I couldn't fly, and I couldn't run fast enough to keep up. Because Kaci hadn't been picked up by hawks. Our new tabby—my own beloved charge—had just been kidnapped by the first thunderbirds seen by werecats in nearly a quarter of a century.