

# Prologue

Shae trudged through the snowdrifts, her feet sinking nearly to the knee with each step. Cold seeped into her bones, but she didn't dare stop. Holding the bundle high against her chest, she pushed harder. It wasn't far now. Another mile through the trees. Maybe less.

If only she knew what chased her. It had been following, though she couldn't say how closely, since she left the road. That she knew of. It could have been following since the last checkpoint, even, and only revealed itself now. Sparing another fearful glance over her shoulder, she looked past the mist of her own breath on the night air for some sign of the person, maybe even the thing, that had come with her into the forest.

Nothing.

But she sensed it... Just because she couldn't smell it or see it in the shadows of the black trees or hear it crunching through the white snow didn't mean it wasn't there. She could feel it. It was nothing good.

She gave a shriek as her foot suddenly dropped deeper into the snow, throwing her off-balance onto her hands. The bundle at her chest wriggled desperately. Gasping, she gathered it close, peeling back the blanket layers to check the baby's face for signs of pain.

Once again, she wondered if this was the right move to make, but the second-guess was gone almost before it formed. The baby would have a better chance this way. Freedom was the only gift she could give to her.

Thankfully, the sleeping infant was more startled than hurt. She settled again when Shae made shushing noises. It took time, precious time, but she got the baby back to sleep, tightening the straps that bundled it to her chest before finding her footing again.

She made it five more steps before the first sound scared her nearly out of her skin. An angry hissing roar that echoed in her ears long seconds after it passed. If she didn't know better, she'd swear the sound had circled her, inches from her face. She had only time to gasp, her throat preparing to scream, and it was gone.

Panting, adrenaline rushing like an overflowing river through her veins, Shae did the only thing she could think of. She ran.

Arms tight around the baby, she skidded, crunched and sloshed through the snow, barely finding solid ground before she rushed to the next step.

*Too much noise.*

She wanted to obey the Instinct, but fear ruled her. This hunter was no pack of lustful wolves. Not even a death squad determined to end her. She didn't know what this was, but it was toying with her. She lurched backward at another hissing threat from between two trees, already changing direction.

*South. Head south.*

Half a mile. That was all. But Shae could feel the truth in her soul as the terrifying noise struck her spine, the sensation more frigid than the snow, nearly overturning her again. She wouldn't reach the last stop on the Underground, wouldn't have the chance to plead with the new Alpha she'd heard about. The one rebuilding the packs. To have come so far, escaped being caught over

and over again because the dream of safety—a future for her child—kept her going despite the dragging hunger and exhaustion, only to know she'd never had a chance to get there tore the few remaining pieces of her soul.

She pulled the strap at her shoulder, loosening the bundle. There wasn't much time left. She was almost to the cottage. A few hundred yards more and the Alpha would hear her if she screamed. He'd hear, but not with enough time to do anything about it. The animosity she tasted in the air wouldn't end in anything but death. Her last seconds, though, would be spent ensuring that the only death would be her own.

She pulled the baby free, spotting a small gap between two roots of a nearby tree. She yanked off her wrap and added the layers around the infant. Her bag joined the small, pitiful pile. It would have to be enough. She didn't take even the time to say goodbye. She simply ran.

The sounds, ricocheting like echoes in a cave, nipped at her heels, pelting her like stones. Still, she ran. The pressure came from the left, then the right, broadsiding her with force enough to send her spiraling into the snow. She didn't care. As long as it followed her, the baby had a chance. Instinct demanded she roll onto her knees, scramble forward and move again. *Shift.*

She considered it. The Instinct was never wrong, but it was striving to keep *her* alive. If she shifted, she might outrun this hunter, but who knew if she'd be fast enough to circle back in time to save the baby from his wrath. No. She remained in human form.

Icy air surged in and out of her lungs, burning and sharp as blades in her throat. *Is this punishment?* she wondered in the back of her mind. For not wanting the

child that had been forced on her? She'd done her best; it wasn't good enough. She was weak and couldn't protect the pup.

She crested the last hill, able to see a cottage in the distance. Smoke rose from the chimney, steady and dark. Relief surged through her.

No, not punishment. This was a chance to save the baby. The last gift she'd been given in this harsh existence she'd known. The Alpha would make sure her daughter knew a better one.

Before she could take another step, something grabbed her arm, spinning her around. Her eyes went wide in horror at the sight in front of her. She'd known it wasn't human, but she'd never imagined *this*.

The scream that tore from her lips was not from fear. Her body jerked at the impact of the bones in her chest breaking, sinews and flesh tearing in a single, vicious strike. Blood speckled her lips, dripping from her chin even as life left her eyes.

Her body fell in a discarded heap. The snow beneath her turned dark, melting under the heat of the still-warm flow. Moments later, half of her heart dropped to the ground, forgotten.

# Chapter One

“They’ve called in the Sibile.”

The words silenced what had been a bustling roomful of homicide detectives for a full second. Someone at the back of the squad room swore amidst the sudden rush of groans and whispered objections. The crashing sound of a heavy folder being tossed haphazardly to the desk scraped Pale Rysen’s ears almost as much as the news.

If there was one thing he didn’t need right now, it was one of those damn witches underfoot.

He shook his head and sighed, closing the file he’d already read countless times. Complaining wouldn’t do any good. The higher-ups resorting to the Sibile—basically robbing him and the rest of the Violent Crimes Unit of their case—wasn’t much of a surprise. A Sibile with the right kinds of “gifts”—sometimes psychic, sometimes just fucking creepy—could crack a case in seconds flat. With the killer’s sudden acceleration, part of him had expected it. Dreaded it, but it was only a matter of time before the city’s political leaders became desperate. He couldn’t even blame them.

But he could sure as hell resent them.

“When?” he asked, attempting to sound unconcerned but his gruff voice still cut through the increasingly pissed protests. No one had seen a real bed in three days. Just parts of dead bodies, countless people in the area of the body dumps, and rivers of shitty coffee. Jake Kennison, the captain Pale liked about as much as an itch on his ass,

had been on duty just as long, getting by with naps in his office chair every twenty hours or so.

“Sometime tonight. Any minute, really. But don’t give me any shit about it, they didn’t ask my opinion. I just work here.” At least Kennison didn’t seem to be looking forward to it either. But Pale figured at least one part of the man’s unease was the knowledge that the woman existed at all. In that respect, they were on the same page. “The chief offered to let her come in the morning, but apparently she prefers to work nights. Whatever the hell that means.”

“Maybe she’s too ugly for daylight,” Jorgensen called out from the back of the room, refilling his coffee by the sounds of it.

“Like that ever stopped you.”

Laughter drowned out any response Jorgensen could have made, not that Pale paid more than cursory attention. His mind stayed on the incoming Sibile.

Why would she prefer nights? Unless she was stronger at night, which didn’t make a whole hell of a lot of sense. Phases of strength meant phases of weakness, and the Sibile didn’t admit to having those. Rumor had it the weak didn’t live long in the enclaves.

Kennison’s gaze darted in Pale’s direction. The captain didn’t like him much as a rule. His near-smile didn’t bode well. “Since you’re already on point for this case, Rysen, you’ll be her liaison, reporting to me directly. Understood?”

*Well, fuck.* Not that he gave the captain more than a lazy shrug.

Kennison’s eyes narrowed. He hated it when Pale pulled that shit. Of course, he’d hate it a hell of a lot more

if Pale gave in to the urge to show him which of them was truly the dominant, so Pale didn't bother with guilt.

"This is the Woodsman's third victim," Kennison continued to the room at large, still bristling. "We've got nothing but three unidentifiable bodies, and the bastard knows it. We need help if we're going to stop there from being more. The Sibile might be our only chance so I don't want to hear a goddamn word out of anyone in this unit but *please* and *thank you* when she gets here."

Only an idiot would put being rude to the Sibile high on their to-do list. Not even shifters liked to mess with mercenaries trained to be powerful, vengeful and remorseless. Still, the guys in the VCU weren't exactly on good terms with the formality the Sibile were so dedicated to. They could accidentally offend her just by offering to shake her hand with sticky fingers.

That alone could get Old Carter killed. Jorgensen would probably hit on her at least twice because the man was a compulsive womanizer. Graves and Henlen would probably be okay. They were married so at least had a clue how not to talk to women. The kid, Tallson, could be a tossup. For himself, Pale knew right away he'd be offensive as hell. He didn't have it in him to kiss a Sibile's ass.

"Anything she wants or needs, you do and you give with a smile. Pissing off the Sibile in any way is an automatic suspension, without pay. Am I clear?"

More grumbling filled the room, but the captain took it for the agreement it was and headed back into his office. Not for the first time, Pale wished he could head into a room with walls and a door too. It wouldn't do, though.

"Hey, Rysen!"

Pale rotated his chair so he could eye the new kid silently. Victor Tallson had only been on the squad for four months. Young, fairly smart, if a little too interested in women to concentrate hard enough on his cases. He'd grow up. At least, Pale hoped he would. One could never say for sure in a place like Moonridge.

"You ever worked a case with one of the Sibile before?" the kid asked conspiratorially.

"No." Proof that luck failed everyone eventually.

Victor made a disappointed noise.

Belatedly Pale realized the kid was probably more interested in the fact that any Sibile outside the enclave had to be female. Would it even help to warn the kid that pretty faces and red robes generally hid nothing but treacherous souls and selfish intentions?

Not likely.

After a few seconds, Victor was back. "You think she can really help?"

Probably. Pale could hate them, hate every last one of them, but even he couldn't claim they were ineffective. "Depends on what she can do."

"They're a bunch of fuckin' gypsies," Carter, the oldest of the squad, offered just as Pale felt a strange tingle down the back of his neck.

Not the bad kind, where his hair stood on end, but some kind of warning all the same. He turned his head toward the open double doors across from his desk, inhaling a deep breath. A new scent drifted to him, distinct from the usual grime and wear inside the department. Warm honey. Cloves. Citrus soap under the light salt of sweat. *Female.*

He narrowed his eyes, forcing himself to remain still. That scent. It grew stronger, more intoxicating. Drugging. His body went rigid in response, a hunger he didn't allow himself to feed roaring to life.

No, not just female. Shifter. Wolf.

A female *without* imprint.

The scent was causing the warning and not just because she wasn't imprinted. The driving surge streaking down his spine came from something else on her scent, the musky tang so faint but hypnotizing to any male Wolf who came within a mile of her.

Good God, she was in season.

He almost preferred the thought of the Sibile. At least with one of them, he had a minute chance to avoid detection. But with Heat filling his senses, hiding his Wolf nature was practically impossible. Much longer and it would hit rock bottom on his list of priorities—everything would come second to claiming her.

He reached for the cell phone clipped to his belt. She needed transport. *Now*. He stabbed the autodial. It only rang once before his brother picked up. "I've got a stray," he said quietly, knowing Aaron would hear it far easier than anyone in the squad room.

"I'm due in court in ten minutes."

Shit, Pale knew that. In his haste, he'd hit the code, dialing Tate instead. Or his hands were shaking, an effect of the female moving closer. "In season."

"I'll call Aaron. Try not to breathe." Tate rang off, his ridiculous advice as useless as it was sobering. A stray female without imprint should be celebrated. Protected. It was what they'd all been working toward for fifteen long years. Someplace safe, where shifters could be free, where a female had a chance. A *choice*.

What they hadn't worked toward was the idea that one would find him in the Moonridge police station, threatening all they'd built by being a walking, talking, shape-shifting grenade. How the hell had a stray even found him *here*?

Reason finally cleared his mind, gave him room to breathe again. No way a stray was there *looking* for him. She couldn't even be searching for the Alpha. She might just be in custody. Or simply looking for help. In either case, she had to be young. Fourteen or fifteen at most to still be unmarked. Even inebriated by Heat, he was a better Wolf than to forget that.

Still, the scent beckoned, growing stronger. Richer. He shuddered in his seat, fighting to keep his mind moving. She had to be coming closer. Up the stairs, maybe. All the way to the third floor. But the scent wasn't right. Muddled. Covered by something else. Something...*other*.

Instinct rode Pale to find her. Taste her scent right from the source and claim her as quickly as possible. As thoroughly as possible. Until neither of them could move. His vision blurred at the thought, imagination superseding reason. Pressing deep into wet depths, losing himself in the sweat and the scent of her, silken thighs and womanly groans...

He kept his seat—and control—by the skin of his teeth, reminding himself this would be no passionate adult, eager for his touch. This would be a terrified child, fleeing from rape, who would most likely be horrified by the sight of him.

The growl from his throat escaped before he realized he'd even meant to make a sound.

Carter, far enough back, didn't hear it over his own tirade. "A Sibile ain't no guarantee we're gonna catch this guy. For all we know, the city just paid out the ass for some ugly bitch who has to touch the guy to tell if he's guilty. What's she gonna do, give a hand job to every unlucky bastard she meets?"

"Well, there goes *my* surprise for the night," came a feminine dose of disgusted sarcasm from just outside the doors, tamping down the male chuckles like a fire extinguisher. She walked out of the shadows from the hall, dressed head to toe in black, no humor at all in her stunning face.

Pale's senses began to ring, zeroing in on her.

That *is no child*. He sucked in a breath, the tightness of his body turning painful at the sound of her husky voice. A woman, fully grown, untainted by the scent of a male embedded in her skin. A *beautiful* woman, ripe and incensed, the room all but vibrating with her presence. Her Heat...

In this day and age, he'd have said it wasn't possible. But there was no mistake on the scent. Honey, cloves and Heat. Sweet, mind-numbing Heat. But even as he separated the flavors of her, he knew there was something more. Something he hadn't scented in years... Confusion warred with Instinct.

She smelled like a Sibile, he realized, recoiling inwardly.

His stomach clenched with irrational anger. How could *she* be the stray? Her hair, bound up in those strange braids and that weird bowl-shaped thing at the back of her neck, should have been a giveaway. But it hadn't. Because he'd been getting drunk on her scent.

Because he'd been so busy looking for a child, expecting a flowing red cape to only interrupt his search.

How the hell was he supposed to deal with a stray who happened to be *Sibile*?

"Which is really unfortunate," she continued, oblivious to how closely she courted danger by moving any closer to him, "because I was just thinking how much I've been looking forward to sexually servicing an overweight, over-aged, loudmouthed fool." Her golden gaze swept over Carter—noting his lined face, receding hairline and widely expanded middle—and clearly found him lacking. "I suppose I'll learn to live with the disappointment."

Someone dropped a pencil, someone else brought his dropped jaw back into place with a clap of his teeth and, unwisely, Victor Tallson began to snicker. The solid slap sound Pale attributed to Carter smacking the back of Tallson's head in retribution. Voices started again, meaning the squad had shifted to business as usual rather than deal with the newcomer.

Her gaze darted from man to man, a frown drawing her fine brows together. She was searching for something. Him, most likely, given the tension in her stance. Or any male Wolf she deemed worthy. He drew a deep breath, no longer concerned about the drugging effect. He'd need a hell of a lot more than Heat to consider imprinting a *Sibile*.

Pale eyed his phone briefly. Aaron would need to be called and rerouted. But this wasn't the place for those instructions.

She wiped her brow with her sleeve, bringing his attention to her flushed cheeks and the fine sheen of sweat

on her face. She tugged at the high-necked collar of her knit sweater, nearly panting. Despite the snow outside, she looked as if she were burning alive. Was it the effect of the Heat? Or had she come from a fight to defend herself? His revulsion gave way to unwilling concern. She didn't look damaged, no scratches or bruises. Could she have traveled here on foot? Unprotected, in this state?

Instincts he was more familiar with demanded he check the perimeter and see that she hadn't been followed, hadn't attracted one of the few other Wolves in the precinct. It wouldn't be unreasonable to expect an ambush in place as she left, even if another male picked up on the Sibile flavor to her scent. Hell, in a Heat situation, another male might not even notice it.

This just got worse and worse.

She scanned the room as he scanned her, taking advantage of his advance knowledge. Thinking clearer now, he had no question in his mind that she was a Sibile. Power radiated off her like a solid force. Ten feet away and he could feel it pushing against him almost as hard as the scent pulled. A scarlet in Wolf's clothing. What would be the point? Did her precious Order even appreciate the danger she was in?

Probably not. The Sibile were too damn arrogant. They'd learned nothing from the Cataclysm.

This one, though, tempted him to teach her a lesson she'd never forget. Snug black pants and a turtleneck hugged a small but compact frame. Lushly curved with strong lines from head to toe, including the sleek calf-length black boots. Black hair, thick as his own, slicked back into intricate braids from either side of her head, disappearing into that large bowl-shaped clamp at the back of her neck. Fair skin, light as the moon, a heart-

shaped face with a pert chin and a slim nose. Brown eyes, so light they could only be called golden, glittered with intelligence. Anger.

And they'd settled on him. "Hoping for a strip search?"

Damn. Caught and he hadn't even noticed. Pale met her gaze, arrested in a completely new way. She didn't startle. Women always started around him, even his own kind. Especially his own kind, though they'd come to him for help. All she did was cross her arms and give him a mutinous lift of her chin in challenge. Interest flared brighter in his gut.

She definitely had no idea how precarious an edge she stood on.

Her red lips trembled as she glared at him, her eyes narrowing and her power pushing harder against his skin. No, not a tremble. One side lifted in a feminine snarl he had to focus over the din of his heartbeat to hear. She was *growling* at him.

She probably meant to be threatening, but the effort only struck him as...cute.

Tate would never let him live it down if he found out Pale had even thought such a word, but there it was. The supposedly frightening and deadly Sibile was about as menacing as a newborn pup. He leaned his head to the side, trying to decide what to think of her beyond the instinctive desire to drop her to the ground and mark her.

Her beauty was a given, the Sibile's stock in trade, but there was something hotblooded to her fine features that appealed far more than the perfect symmetry. Her lack of prissy decorum set her apart the way nothing else could. The color in her cheeks, the faint parting of her

lush lips, the flash in her eyes. Every aspect of her face expressed frustration and defiance. She'd never pull off that haughty façade the Sibile were known for.

Too much temper, he decided, surprised to note his own appreciation. Next to the tilted, glittering eyes, he liked her upper lip best, just the tiniest bit fuller than the bottom. He noticed something peculiar then. Tips of her teeth were peeking out near the corners.

“You *can't* be talking to Saint Palentine.” Jorgensen's oh-so-appealing remark interrupted their mutual stare, leading to a loud laugh that grated on Pale's eardrums. It also reminded him there were others in the room, something the female seemed to remember as well, because she blinked suddenly and glanced around.

Her gaze returned to him, though, with a questioning squint as she looked him over again.

A chair wheeled backward with a squeak, which meant Jorgensen was on the move. A little older than Pale, a lot friendlier and apparently everything women found attractive, Jorgensen rarely had to work to grab a woman's grateful attention, so Pale knew it wouldn't take long for this Sibile to become equally captivated. He waited to be relieved. All he felt was a decidedly strong desire to tear out the other detective's throat and lay it at her feet for a gift.

“Lady, you're barking up the wrong tree. No one around here is even sure this guy's human.” Jorgensen winked at Pale as he passed in front of him to get closer to their visitor.

Pale gave him the finger.

The other man stumbled, surprised, but he quickly turned from the gesture, regaining his composure in the blink of an eye. “He's on the clock, which means you're

not registering anywhere on his radar as anything other than animal, mineral or vegetable.”

The oversize blond man circled the desks, hand extended toward the Sibile. There were better reasons to hate a man than disliking his success rate with women, but in that moment, it was a good enough excuse. Damn Heat.

“On the other hand,” Jorgensen added, deepening his baritone, “*my* radar sees you just fine.”

The Sibile stared, taking Jorgensen’s measure as he came closer, pointedly ignoring his hand. Eventually, he got the clue and put his palm back in his pocket. Pale felt something in him thrill at the rejection. Not a good sign.

“I’m Detective Chris Jorgensen.” The introduction rang hollow without the oozing charm. “You must be our Sibile.”

Her gaze flickered with dislike, whether for the idiot or his casual reference to her race, Pale couldn’t be sure. She edged away from him like a bad smell. “I’ve been instructed to report to Detective Palen Rysen.” Her gaze sought Pale again, this time from the corner of her eye.

A muscle ticked in Jorgensen’s jaw, but the man admitted defeat easily enough, with a casual sweep of his hand in Pale’s direction. “Looks like you’ve got your man then.”

Her hot eyes locked on Pale, her scent seeming to bloom around her in a burst, pulling at the leash he kept around himself with a near-vicious tug. If he didn’t know better, he’d even swear the whole room took on a fine red haze, spiking his need. Just like that, his defenses to the pheromone pull cracked.

This had to be some kind of game the Order was pulling. A trap.

For a heartbeat, he couldn't dredge up the ability to care.

She moved like silk in water. Smooth, rippling with possibilities. She'd be strong enough for him, he could tell. She wasn't fragile, wouldn't break. Those long legs were made for wrapping around his waist, holding on tight while he feasted.

The Instinct all but roared, pounding in his ears like a chant. *Take her.*

His blood thickened, his body already hard and heavy with need. He could almost taste her, and his teeth ached to test her nubile flesh. The ways he would bend her, drive her to satisfaction, flashed in his mind.

*Claim her*, it demanded without mercy, each thought textured with sensation until he almost swore he could feel her wrapped around him in every way a woman could.

The Instinct had no care for the pains he took in public to build his life or the people he protected with it. For the vow he'd made long ago to never take a female's choice from her. It saw a fresh young woman, ripe and ready to take his seed.

*Make her yours.*

He strained to keep his hands spread on his desk as she came closer, each step measured, each breath heightening his senses until they arrowed to a point set firmly on her. Then she stood there, in front of his desk, her amber irises taking in more than his expression. He could practically feel her tasting the air around him, scenting him for suitability.

*Choose*, he willed, not sure if he wanted to be found worthy or not. Sane thinking said no. But he wasn't exactly sane right now, not by human standards and, many would say, not by Wolf. A strong male in his prime should be stalking *her*. Taking her and any challenger fool enough to interfere. Pale only sat in his chair, perfectly still, waiting to be judged.

A long second later, she put out her gloved hand carefully, purposefully. "Jade-Scarlet." Her red lips parted to reveal even white teeth.

Except for the slightly lengthened ones, top and bottom, that he'd mistaken for slightly longer-than-usual incisors. Definitely not, he realized as her eyes turned sleepy. Inviting. Hungry.

*Canines.*

Her voice softened until only he could hear. "In case you were wondering, you can classify me as...*animal.*"