

# Checkmate

*Portage and Main fifty below.* The lyric kept running through my head as I stood on that very corner, known as the coldest intersection in Canada. Tonight, it was living up to its reputation.

Even in a fur coat, I was shivering. I'm not a big advocate of fur garments, but this one wasn't likely to get me in trouble with PETA. In fact, if they knew about it, I'm sure they'd find a way to work it into a campaign. *Wolves are people too...at least some of them...part of the time.*

Of course, this particular subspecies—numbering only a few hundred worldwide—was responsible for more deaths than the hundreds of thousands of real wolves, so one could argue they *should* be exterminated. But that wouldn't make good ad-copy.

I was on the trail of one of my murderous brethren right now...or I would be, once my nose defrosted enough to find his trail.

I stood in the shadows between two office towers. The streets were deserted. It was Saturday night, and the smart Winnipeggers were hunkered down in their warm homes, enjoying the reliable spectacle of the Leafs attempting to play our national sport.

Clay stood a few feet away at the mouth of the alley. Though the empty streets meant we ran little risk of being seen, it wouldn't matter. We Changed into wolves, not Hollywood-style wolfmen. If seen, we'd be mistaken for dogs.

Clay surveyed the street, his nose turned straight into the bitter wind, golden fur rippling, blue eyes slitted. He glanced at me, huddled behind the windbreak, and gave a soft chuff of a

laugh. Cold never bothered him, even in human form. I always swore he was really one of those medieval werewolves, believed to wear their fur under their skin.

I snorted and huffed, hot breath streaming through my nostrils. Then I set out. Clay fell in behind, letting my better nose take the lead. After two blocks, I caught the distinct smell of a werewolf.

I broke into a lope, Clay at my heels, our nails clicking across the pavement. There's nothing like a city run to get our hearts pumping—the tantalizing smells, the unexplored nooks and crannies, the constant threat of exposure. Tonight, though, we were here to work.

We'd come to Winnipeg to check out a growing number of missing prostitutes. Hookers are the favored victims for man-eating mutts, who can take a slow stream for decades without raising alarms. They are equally popular victims for human monsters, though, and we rarely turned up any sign of a werewolf. This time, we had.

I followed his scent on the wind until we arrived in one of the more rundown sections. The street stretched in an endless, straight ribbon. The old joke is that the prairies are so flat you could watch your dog run away for three days. That means you can also safely surveil your mutt quarry from three blocks away.

As the lone figure strolled along the sidewalk, women slipped from the shadows. Dressed in ratty fur coats and short skirts over long bare legs, they tottered forward on stiletto heels, like deer leaving the safety of the trees after the wolf has passed.

In this case, though, the wolf was what drew them out. Your average werewolf makes an attractive john. Delayed aging keeps him young. A heightened metabolism keeps him active and physically fit. A sensitive nose keeps him clean and well-groomed. Even if the guy had Quasimodo's face, he was probably the best thing these girls had seen in a month.

As they clustered around him, he stopped to talk. Their voices reached us as murmured words and laughter.

Clay bumped my flank, then jerked his muzzle to the south. In wolf form, communication isn't easy, but we'd been together a long time—lovers, partners, mates—so I knew he was suggesting I return to our clothing and Change back. If we had to rescue a girl, it would be easier if one of us was in human form. Not that Clay particularly cared about some anonymous victim, but I would. In this, too, we understood one another.

By the time I finished, I was worried the mutt would have already culled his prey from the herd, so I ran back. There'd been no need to rush, though. He was still chatting up the hookers. As I crouched in the shadows, Clay moved beside me, fur tickling my cheek, body shielding me from the wind's icy blast.

In this form, it was easier to understand human speech. And retaining a wolf's sharper hearing meant I could pick up snatches of the distant conversation. The mutt just seemed to be chatting the girls up, as if he knew them. A regular, I guessed, but when they teased and cajoled and offered him "deep discounts," he only laughed.

Then, abruptly, he said good-bye and he walked on alone. The reason for his speedy departure? An approaching car.

The mutt swung onto a side-road. The car slowed for a lone girl farther down, and she got in. As it rolled away, I waited for the mutt to return. Then I caught the thump of running footsteps...heading the other way.

We followed for three blocks, certain we'd lost our chance to catch him in the act. If we didn't, Clay would be happy to kill him anyway. To him, a mutt was a mutt, and if he wasn't

causing trouble now, he would eventually. But that's why our Alpha put me in charge. I understood that there were decent mutts, those who just didn't choose to join the Pack.

Without proof, we'd have to stay longer and dig some up. We'd already been here four days just trying to find the mutt, and were ready to get home to our kids.

We followed the mutt to an empty lot guarded by buildings, a private spot littered with used condoms. And there, parked in the shadows, was the car we'd just seen pick up the girl.

"He waits for a john to bring a girl here, then nabs her after the guy takes off," I whispered. "That way, no one can link him to the missing girl. Smart."

Clay snorted. "Smart" wasn't a word he'd use for mutts.

We watched as the girl climbed onto the driver's lap. I was about to suggest we get into position, surrounding the mutt, when a *whump* and a strangled cry made me jump. I looked over to see the prostitute flailing in the car, the john's hands around her throat, choking her as she battered the window.

"Shit! Where's—?"

I spun to where the mutt had been. His hiding spot was empty.

Clay sailed past me. As I followed, I caught a movement on the lowest rooftop. It was the mutt, seeing us and stumbling back from the edge.

Clay ran full-tilt toward the car, leapt and landed on the roof with a crack. I was already at the passenger door. One sharp wrench and I broke the lock. The girl twisted to see Clay snarling through the windshield. She screamed. The man did some shrieking of his own before shoving the girl off and reaching for the ignition.

From the passenger seat, I wagged the car keys. He stared, wondering how I got there, then yanked open the driver's door. The girl scrambled over him, kicking and clawing her way out first. Clay leapt off the hood and into the man's path.

He could have taken the man down there, but killing him wasn't the goal. We weren't vigilantes. As I watched the girl crawling away, battered and crying, and thought of the others he'd killed, and I could have happily treated him to the same fate. But the Law was clear—only kill humans if they are a direct threat. In this, Clay was the one who acted as a check on *my* worst instincts.

Clay tore after the man. Just because we couldn't kill him didn't mean we'd let him go. We'd take him down, grab his ID, turn his name over the police and hope they did something about it.

As I raced down the alley, a figure dropped from the fire escape and landed in my path with a pained grunt, one knee buckling. It was the mutt. As my fists flew up, he lifted his hands and backed off.

"We're on the same side," he said, through teeth gritted in pain. "Some hero I am, getting spooked like that. Did you get that bastard?"

"We're working on it."

"Good. Just tell me what I can do." He took a step and faltered. "On second thought..."

"Wait here, in case he circles back."

By the time I caught up with Clay, our prey had gone to ground, which was fine, because the den he'd chosen was his own apartment, where he felt he'd safely escaped the crazy dog chasing

him. Taking his ID might have scared him into skipping town. This way, we could return and case his place for proof to give the cops. It still didn't guarantee justice, but it would do.

While I followed his scent to the apartment door, Clay took off to Change back, returning as I stepped from the building.

"Where's the mutt?" he asked.

"Seems he was hunting the hunter," I said. "We spooked him and he twisted his ankle."

"So he's still there? With the girl?"

"Yes. Why?"

One look at his expression and I broke into a run.

We found the mutt still in the lot, rifling through the car's glove box. As we approached, he backed out.

"Stolen, like I figured. He used a different car every time, so the girls wouldn't make him."

"Where is she?" I asked, striding over.

He cocked his head to listen. "Back with her friends, it sounds like, trying to decide whether to call the cops and leaning toward 'no,'"

He was right. I could hear the girl, and hear her friends urging her not to report it. Why bother if she was safe? And this story about being rescued by a blond chick and a huge dog? What the hell was she on, anyway?

I glanced at Clay, expecting a shrug of "okay, I was wrong," but he kept studying the mutt, making him shrink back.

“So I guess we should thank you,” Clay said, his drawl stealing the sarcastic snap from his words.

“Hey, I’m happy to help the Pack. Maybe you guys can do the same for me sometime.” He caught Clay’s look and hurried on. “Not that you’d need to. I’m just doing my part, finding a worthy outlet for that...”

“Killer instinct?” I said.

“Exactly.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “So I guess you guys will be leaving town now...?”

“Soon. And you?”

A noncommittal shrug.

“No reason to,” Clay said. “Now that you’ve taken out the competition and earned yourself brownie points with the Pack, instead of the shallow grave you were heading for.”

“Wha—?”

“You didn’t throw out your jacket after you disposed of your last victim. I can smell her blood on it.”

The mutt’s mouth opened, as if to argue. Then he wheeled and ran.

We stood outside the mutt’s motel, watching his silhouette as he frantically packed, convinced he’d lost us. Killing him in his room would be messy, but once he came out we’d find a spot and finish this.

“There was no blood on his jacket,” I said.

“Your nose is frozen, darling. Or maybe you’re just losing your touch.”

I jostled him hard. He grabbed me around the waist and headed for the nearest snow bank.

When I struggled, he said, “What are the magic words?”

I kept struggling until he had me suspended over the snow, the cold making my eyes water.

“You were right, okay?” I said. “You were right. I was wrong.”

He set me down. “Wasn’t that easy?”

“Sure, because it happens rarely enough that I don’t mind admitting it.”

He laughed, scooped me up and pitched me into the snow bank.