

DRIVEN

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SUBTERRANEAN PRESS 2016

Prologue

FUCK THIS SHIT,” Clay muttered as he surveyed the landscape. He might have been referring to the immediate situation, but those three words summed up everything about this predicament. Two months ago Malcolm Danvers had called to tell us he’d killed two mutts who’d been after our kids. He didn’t want a thank you or any other reward. He wanted back into the Pack.

Malcolm Danvers. The guy who’d made his son’s—Jeremy’s—life a living hell. The guy who went into self-imposed exile when Jeremy beat him in the Alpha race. For over twenty years, we’d thought Malcolm was dead. Then he turned up, a bigger sociopath than ever. One we could not kill. Could not even catch. Round and round we went, until Malcolm himself said, “Fuck this shit.” And, “I want back in.”

Let him back into the Pack, he said. Where we could keep an eye on him. Where he'd be a threat only to our enemies.

With that, he put me in the worst predicament I'd faced as Alpha. An unwinnable situation.

Fuck this shit, indeed.

I was here to let Malcolm know our decision. "Here" was Bulgaria, where he'd been, first in self-imposed exile and then under my orders to stay in one place and as far from us as possible.

Malcolm said he'd chosen a forest clearing, with enough open space that we could talk without constantly glancing over our shoulders, anticipating attack. That's what was before me. And yet...

It was an almost perfectly cleared sphere, like a crop circle in the middle of a forest, with no crops for miles. It looked ritualistic. That was what had our hackles rising, as if by stepping into this circle, we'd accidentally summon a demon. Which wasn't far off from the truth. Except for the "accident" part. We *had* summoned this particular demon.

"We know he hates magic," Clay said.

True. He only partnered with other supernaturals when the Nast Cabal forced him to, and he'd usually killed them before the job began.

"Power is tooth and claw and fist for Malcolm," Clay continued. "Anything else is cowardice."

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Also true. That's one reason he hates Jeremy—because he has other powers, more mystical ones.

I peered around. “Which means there's zero chance this is a ritual circle that will incinerate us the moment we step into it.”

“Zero might be pushing it.”

I glanced over at Clay. He shrugged. As my mate and my beta, his job is to be truthful with me. Which he is, even when I'd really rather he wasn't.

We surveyed the clearing again. It was about a hundred feet wide, and completely flat, leaving no room for anyone to hide. A table with two chairs incongruously waited in the center of it. As we watched from the edge, a man walked out from the tree line. Broad-shouldered, powerful build, graying hair. Malcolm is in his eighties, but a combination of a werewolf's slow aging, a lifelong attention to his health and some Cabal cryogenics experiments means he's no weak old man. Unfortunately.

Malcolm pulled out one of the chairs, sat, folded his hands on the table and waited. He didn't look my way. He knew where I was—I wasn't hiding. He just waited.

“Give me a reason not to go over there,” I whispered to Clay.

“I can give you fifty why we shouldn't even be here.”

When I turned toward him, he sighed, ran his hand through his short curls and then sighed again.

“Fuck,” he said. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“I know.”

“This is the only solution. We both agreed. Jeremy agreed. Hell, you’re the one who wanted to do this the *least*, so I have no right to complain now that we’re here.”

I said nothing.

“I hate this,” he said finally.

“We all hate this.”

But the only alternative was to tell Malcolm to stick his request up his ass, and let him keep killing anyone who got in his way. Just continue chasing him, and pray I didn’t lose any of my Pack doing it, because we’d already come close to that more than once.

No. This was the only solution. And it burned because of that. Burned so bad. I’d failed to bring him down, and so it had come to this.

“It’s about taking control,” said a voice behind me. “Not giving in.”

I looked over my shoulder as Nick stepped out of the woods, where he’d been patrolling. He came up behind me and put his arms around my waist and I let myself lean back against him, relaxing for a split second before I straightened.

“He came to us,” Nick said. “To you. A female Alpha. In asking for it, he had to admit you’re in charge. That you have the job he once wanted more than anything. I might not have

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managed to kill him, but you beat him down to this. Coming to us with his tail between his legs.”

Fine words. Empowering words, and I loved Nick for them. But Malcolm never put his tail between his legs. This was just another move in his chess game.

“I know you don’t want her alone out there,” Nick said to Clay. “But if he vaulted across the table, she’d see him coming, and she’s good enough to take him down.”

“Hmmm,” I said doubtfully.

“At the very least you’re good enough to hold him off until Clay can take him down. Which is all you need to be, because Clay will fly across that field at the first sign of trouble.”

“You’ve taken him down before,” Clay said. “You’re a match for him. Hell, even...” He glanced at Nick.

“I appreciate that you actually didn’t finish that sentence,” Nick said.

“Didn’t need to.”

Nick flipped him the finger, but it was good-natured. Nick would be the first to admit he isn’t the Pack’s best fighter. He doesn’t want to be. But he had taken on Malcolm and sent him running. I’d taken him on and put him down. I just had to remind myself that those victories didn’t guarantee one here. We could never underestimate Malcolm. We’d done it too often.

A man slipped through the trees to our left. He stopped and motioned to me. It was Andrei, one of the Russian

Pack. The Bulgarian Pack had refused to let me bring more than two of my wolves into their territory. The Russians announced that they had four wolves who really wanted to vacation in Bulgaria, and would the Alpha mind? Of course the Bulgarian Alpha knew exactly what was going on. But his was a small Pack in a small country, and the Russians were neither. So four Russian wolves were scouring the forest under my orders.

Malcolm rose from the table and said, his voice echoing across the open clearing, “You can call off your Ruskie hounds, Elena. I didn’t bring backup. I don’t need it.”

He emphasized the “I” in that last sentence, and Clay growled under his breath.

“He’s taunting you,” Nick said. “Trying to get you onto the playing field before you’ve done a thorough sweep.”

“I know.” I motioned for Andrei to finish his search. It took another fifteen minutes. Then he came out and said the forest was clear.

“We will take our positions and watch,” he said. “Удачи.”

My knowledge of Russian was still rudimentary, but I knew that word, having heard it from Roman Novikov—the Alpha—and every Russian wolf helping me on this mission. Удачи. *Good luck.*

I started across the clearing. Clay followed at my shoulder, a half-step behind. When we were twenty paces from the table,

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he stopped. I continued until I was close enough to touch my chair. Then I said, “Stand.”

“But I brought chairs. And a table. Can you imagine the trouble I went through to get them into the Bulgarian forest?” Malcolm twisted and poked the back of his. “I even got padded ones, so you’ll be comfortable. I’m guessing we’ll be here a while.”

“Stand.”

He let out a deep sigh. “I understand you feel the need to exert your power over me, Elena. Might I point out that if you actually *had* that power, you wouldn’t need to prove it? And that you embarrass yourself with these petty displays?”

“So that’s a no?”

“If you insist on me standing, then I will, but understand that it’s only to humor you. And the fact you’ve had to ask multiple times proves you aren’t really Alpha material.”

“No,” I said. “It proves you aren’t really Pack material. I wasn’t telling you to stand to exert dominance and make myself look good. I wanted you on your feet where I can see your hands, and where you can do the same for me. I wasn’t making a point; you were. You stayed sitting to prove that you still have the power.”

I put my hands on the table and leaned toward him. “You did not consider, even for one second, that I might have a valid reason for asking. As a Pack wolf, you’re supposed to trust

I have a valid reason, and as a recruit, you had the right to ask that reason. You just ignored me. That's why, Malcolm, the answer is no. You are not getting into the Pack."

His lips twitched. "And you came all this way to tell me that? No. You're like every other woman who finds herself in a position of power. You're always looking for an insult, and the minute you think you see one? Instead of fighting back, withdraw in a snit. 'Sorry, Malcolm, but I never had any intention of letting you into my Pack. I just traveled thousands miles and called in a favor with a foreign Pack for fun.'"

"Mmm, no. Not for fun. Although, yes, this next part *will* be fun." I lowered my voice. "Do you really think you're walking out of here alive, Malcolm?"

He blinked. That's all he did, but it was enough to make me smile and straighten.

"Oh, now you see," I said. "I didn't get pissy and dismiss you. I set you up. Double-crossed you. And that's what you didn't expect. Because no matter what you think of me, you expected at least one thing: honor." I stepped back. "Honor doesn't protect my Pack and my children. I brought you here to kill you, Malcolm."

I waved to my sides, and the three other Russian wolves stepped from the forest—two on my right, and Andrei and the other on my left. Nick stayed at the forest's edge behind me, with Clay between us.

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“Blocked on three sides,” I said. “But the fourth? The fourth is open. We’re giving you a chance.” I moved clear of the table and stopped right in front of him. “Run, Malcolm. Run as fast as you can.”

He was close enough to grab me. To take me down. But he just rose and stood there. Seconds ticked by. Then he said, “No.”

“I don’t think you have a choice.”

“Yes, I do. I can run or I can refuse.” He met my gaze. “I don’t run. Ever.”

I laughed. “Is your memory failing? I seem to recall you running from Nick a few years ago. Running as fast as you could.”

“I wasn’t running from him. I was leaving to avoid killing him. Yes, I threatened to, but as I’ve pointed out, I did not. Nor have I touched anyone from your Pack without being attacked first, and even then, I haven’t done any lasting damage.”

“Through sheer nobility. Not because you’re past your prime and can’t do any *lasting damage* to a real werewolf.”

He rolled his shoulders, as if struggling not to rise to the bait. “I can still fight. I’ll provide a map of shallow graves if you’d like the proof. But the point, Elena, is that I choose not to run. I choose to fight.” He looked over my shoulder. “I’ll fight Clayton.”

I snorted. “Right. With a poisoned pin or other deadly trick up your sleeve. Not a chance.”

"I have nothing up my sleeve." He started unbuttoning his shirt. "And to prove it, I'll honor the ancient Greeks and disrobe before we fight."

"You're not fighting—"

"Because you think I'll win?"

"Because I don't trust you to fight fair."

"But I will. Otherwise, I'd have to deal with you."

"Which is so much scarier?"

"It is if I kill your mate. Do you think I missed that flash of fury in your eyes when I even suggested fighting him? If I cheated, you'd kill me. No quick break of the neck either. I'm sure you cringe at what Clayton has done, the stories of him torturing mutts. You think you're better than that. You aren't. You're just different. He kills for a purpose, as a warning to others. Cold and methodical. If I cheated in a fight and killed him, what you'd do to me would make me beg for what he did to those mutts. And you'd enjoy every second of it."

"As much fun as it is to stand here and let you psycho-analyze me—"

"A fair fight. Without clothing, there's no way for me to trick him."

"Without a trick, there's no way for you to win."

He shrugged, and behind me, Clay said, "He doesn't care."

I glanced back. Yes, I looked away from Malcolm. That wasn't an accident, no more than stepping within reach was

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when I told him to run. I provided a chance for him to strike so we'd have the excuse to cut him down where he stood. But he didn't move a muscle.

He was fucking with us.

"Whatever," I muttered and started for the woods, as if I'd given up. I walked past Malcolm. Right past him, with Clay on the opposite side, too far to charge to my rescue. I put my back to Malcolm, giving him the chance, with one lunge, to snap my neck. And even though I was ready for that—muscles tensed for counter-attack—it still took every ounce of courage I had to put my back to him.

And still he did nothing. I took another couple of steps and then turned and called to Clay, "You want this?"

He nodded and started to undo his belt—dropped his gaze, looking away from Malcolm as I turned aside again. Everyone else was fifty paces away. Malcolm could kill me, throw my body aside, run into the forest and be gone before anyone could catch him.

Malcolm didn't move.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Malcolm unbuttoning the rest of his shirt. Clay looked up and caught my eye. *Good enough?* he was asking. With sincere reluctance, I nodded.

I walked back to Malcolm. "You can stop undressing. There isn't going to be a fight."

He twisted toward me as I approached. “I won’t run, Elena. No matter what you—”

“You get your wish,” I said. “You’re in the Pack.”

Something flickered across his face. Not a look of self-satisfaction, pleased that I’d capitulated. It almost seemed like disappointment. Then he said, carefully, “That was...a test?”

“I said I don’t care about honor. I don’t. What I care about is my Pack, and being the kind of leader they expect. Which is not the kind of leader who’d break her word to a former Pack member, even a psychopathic piece of shit like you.”

I’d known he wouldn’t run. What I’d wanted him to do was attack me. I’d given him increasingly better opportunities, hoping he’d provide the excuse I needed to kill him. And, damn him to hell, he had not.

“Sit,” I said. “We have rules and stipulations to discuss. And you’re about to be very happy you brought comfortable chairs, because this could take all night.” ~

Davis

*F*IVE MONTHS LATER...

Davis Cain glowered at the gas gauge, as if he could intimidate it into fluttering, at least far enough above empty to get him home. Naturally, it didn't budge.

You've got to work on that glower, he imagined his cousin, Curtis, taunting with a laugh. *It doesn't even scare rabbits.*

Davis got out of the car and slammed the door. If this wasn't the fucking capper on a fucking shitty night. He opened the door and slammed it again, for added effect. Not that there was anyone around to hear it. Not on this dirt road, without a house in sight.

Of course there wasn't a fucking house in sight, because that would be too easy. Why the hell did his uncle need to live out here anyway?

Because he was a werewolf. Because they all were—Davis and his uncle Lonny and Curtis. It made sense to live out here, where they could run and hunt in peace and safety.

That was the logical explanation. Davis did not want logical explanations. He wanted to be at his uncle's place now, stepping out of a car that had enough goddamned gas to get him there.

Except, once he did get there, he'd have to listen to Curtis razz him about being home so early from his date.

Should have taken me up on my offer, Curtis would say. I've told you before, I can fix you up with a guaranteed score.

But Davis didn't want a guaranteed score. He didn't want a score at all...well, okay, that would've been nice, but all he'd really wanted was a good first date. A chance to make an impression on a girl he really liked. A girl who'd spent the entire meal checking her phone.

He'd told himself maybe she was expecting an important call. Which she was, apparently, and it came right when they'd been walking to the movie. A call from her recent ex. Who was really, really sorry and if she'd just talk to him, maybe come by, and grab a drink at the bar where he worked? Soon? Like, tonight?

Oh, Davis, I'm so sorry to cut tonight short. Dinner was great, but my friend, she's sick and she really needs me to come over.

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Sick friend? Seriously? He'd had to accept the excuse and smile, not letting on that his werewolf hearing had picked up both sides of the phone conversation.

It was, Davis had to admit, his own damned fault. He knew she'd just broken up with the guy last week. He'd leapt in, hoping to woo her away before her ex could try winning her back. A risky gamble. One Davis had known he'd probably lose, but he had to try anyway, because he liked her. Damn it, he really liked her. And now she hadn't just ditched him—she'd proven she wasn't the kind of girl he thought she was.

Davis checked the truck for a gas can. He knew there wouldn't be one—that would require foresight on his uncle's part. But he checked anyway and still slammed the trunk when he found it empty. Then he kicked the tire, just because, and that was fucking stupid, leaving him dancing around on one foot, having forgotten he was wearing dress shoes instead of his usual steel-toed boots.

Fuck it, fuck it, fuck!

That didn't really help either. He'd been injecting more profanity into his language since coming to live with his uncle last year. Toned down the college-boy diction, too, because, well, he wasn't a college boy anymore, was he? He'd just started his sophomore year when he got his first Change. It might have taken its sweet time, but when it came, it hit with a vengeance. He'd struggled to control the timing but

there was only so much he could do. He'd barely made it to the nearest patch of forest, which was also where kids were hanging out, partying.

He hadn't hurt anyone. But he'd been spotted, and it hit the local paper—Big Wolf on Campus, ha-ha. His great-uncle Theo heard about it and hauled Davis's ass back home before the Pack noticed the article and eliminated the problem. Because that's what the Pack did—one screw-up and you're dead.

Or that's what Uncle Theo said, and since he was the Cain clan patriarch, Davis listened to him, even if...well, even if Uncle Theo wasn't the brightest bulb. Theo was, however, the brightest elder in the clan, which was, yeah, kinda sad, but Davis always felt disloyal thinking that, so he reminded himself that they were family and they were good to him. They just weren't always *right* about stuff. Including the Pack.

At Christmas, Davis had gone to New York state on a dare. Really stupid, considering it was Pack territory, but with his late Change and his year of college and the fact he'd lost the only two challenges he'd ever fought... His cousins razzed him. A lot. They'd all been drinking and Carter dared him to go up to Pack territory and get a picture of the house to prove he'd been there. Davis had been drunk enough to say yes... and proud enough not to change his mind when he sobered up.

He'd gone to Stonehaven and been trying to figure out how to get a photo of the house without setting foot on the property

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when he bumped into one of the Alpha's kids. The boy, who wasn't more than eight or nine and smelled like he was already a full werewolf, which wasn't possible. Anyway, the kid's dad came by, and the kid's dad was Clayton Danvers, the psycho his father used to threaten him with when he was little. *Do what you're told, boy, or I'll take you up to Stonehaven and drop you off on their front porch. You know what Clayton Danvers does to trespassers? Cuts them up with a chainsaw. While they're still alive.*

Obviously Clayton had not cut Davis up. He'd gotten his story and rolled his eyes and called him an idiot. A dumb kid making a really dumb life choice, one that could have *ended* his life. Clayton made sure Davis hadn't actually set foot on the property—and hadn't touched his kid—and then he let him off with a warning. He'd even given him some advice for fighting challenges: hit the books and wise up. Which was ironic, considering that Davis wanted nothing more than to hit the books, go back to college and finish his degree. That wasn't happening, though. Not anytime soon. *Cains don't need no stinkin' education.* He'd been lucky Uncle Theo let him go to high school—other Cains were home-schooled.

As for Clayton Danvers, Davis hadn't told anyone he'd met him and lived to tell the tale. If a guy gives you a second chance, you don't kick him in the ass for it.

Still, he couldn't blame Uncle Theo for hating the Pack. They'd killed his son, Zack, about fifteen years ago. And they'd

messed up his youngest, Ford, leaving him with a missing ear and a whole lotta scars.

Right now, Davis's problems were far more mundane: a shitty date and his own stupidity in not filling the gas tank. And the stupid car, running out of gas.

Sure, Uncle Lonny had said. Take my car for your hot date, Davey-boy. Just remember to fill 'er up in town. She'll be running on fumes by the time you get there.

Davis had been heading to the gas station when he'd passed a florist and decided to buy flowers. Then he didn't have time to stop for gas. Afterwards, he'd been so upset about getting ditched that he'd totally forgotten the necessity. Which left him with time to reflect and ruminate on werewolf politics, given that he had a five-mile walk back to Uncle Lonny's.

He was less than a hundred feet from the driveway when he realized his uncle's house was silent. That wasn't possible, not when his uncle and cousin were both home. It was almost midnight on a Saturday. Time for both to be roaring drunk, TV blaring, and enjoying the fact they were too far from the neighbors to deal with noise complaints.

They hadn't gone out for the evening. He could see Curtis's truck in the lane, beside his rusting Honda. Had they Changed and gone running? Highly unlikely. They'd done that just a few days ago, the three of them.

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He reached the driveway and peered up at the small rented house. It was totally dark, without even the bluish glow of the big-screen TV lighting up the windows. Of course, if the TV was on, he'd have heard it before he got this far. His uncle and cousin might have werewolves' sensitive hearing, but everything they did was loud, from talking to moving to watching TV. Hell, they even snored at a hundred decibels.

Every cell in his body said that silence spelled trouble. Big trouble. The problem was... Well, Davis remembered hearing his clan talking about him last summer, after he failed the second challenge they'd arranged.

When God was giving out brains, Davey-boy got himself in line twice. Problem is, he was so busy making sure he was smart that he missed the line for backbone.

You think too much, Davey, Uncle Theo would say. That's why you can't win a challenge. You're thinking while they're swinging.

True. He could fight, but when it came to werewolf challenges, he just couldn't stop thinking, "What's the point?" To earn a rep. He knew that. But they were werewolves, not professional boxers. They had to know how to survive. And maybe part of that was fighting, but just because a guy could take on all comers in a fair bout didn't mean he'd survive in the real world.

Stop thinking. Start doing.

Davis growled under his breath, his family's influence warring against the part that didn't give a shit if he was caught creeping in the back door, jumping at shadows while Curtis laughed at his cowardly little cousin, because caution was the better part of valor. Or something like that.

So he did what he usually did. Embraced his cautious side. He backed up and crept through the forest around the house. The woods started less than ten paces from the door, which was one reason his uncle rented this place. Even in West Virginia, winter nights got cold. Best if you could Change inside, prop the door open and make a run for it. It wasn't like there were neighbors around to see you.

Davis stopped to sniff the rear steps. Obvious, right? Not for other Cains. They'd ask what he was going to do if he *did* scent an intruder. Run? Well, no—he'd be forewarned. But they didn't understand that, even when Davis tried to explain it. Caution equaled cowardice. Better to just barrel on in, confident you could handle whatever might lurk within.

He picked up only the scents of his uncle and cousin and himself. Very recent for Uncle Lonny and Curtis, suggesting they *had* gone out back. Maybe got drunk enough that they forgot the pain of the Change and said, "Why not?" It was a good night for a run. Warm and clear with a full moon. That full moon didn't force a werewolf to Change, but it was a bonus, the extra light boosting their night vision.

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Davis climbed the steps. The back door was open. Not just unlocked, but cracked open.

He went inside and listened. The house was silent and dark.

Okay, so they must have left. And actually remembered to turn everything off first—as he reminded them so often that they'd begun calling him Mr. Greenpeace, which, yeah, pretty much summed up their knowledge of conservation. They got better at it after he pointed out the difference in their electrical bill.

As Davis headed from the back room into the kitchen, he stumbled over his cousin's size twelve work boots.

"Damn it, Curtis, we're going to kill ourselves tripping over those. Put them in the closet."

"But I'd have to get them out every time I want to leave."

Grumbling, Davis picked up the boots. Sometimes he felt like the adult, with both his uncle and thirty-year-old cousin serving as the juvenile delinquents.

He was setting the boots on the mat when he stopped. Uncle Lonny's boots were there, toppled over as usual. As were Davis's, neatly straightened at the side. But if their boots were here...

His uncle and cousin didn't own other footwear. They didn't see the point. Davis had even once watched Curtis dress for a date in Davis's "job interview" suit jacket and tie with jeans and work boots.

“Hey, she’s a classy chick. I can’t go looking like a slob.”

Curtis’s boots. Uncle Lonny’s boots. Inside.

If they Changed form before going out, there’d be discarded clothing on every kitchen surface. Even in the near dark, Davis could see only the usual soda bottles and beer cans and takeout cartons, all accumulated since he’d tidied up this morning.

God, I want to go back to college. Give me the worst roommate ever. I’m ready for him.

He walked into the kitchen and looked through to the TV room. No sign of them. Bedrooms? Bathroom? Nothing.

At the front door, he dropped and sniffed. Again, it was just his family.

He stood in the kitchen, arms crossed.

Okay, Sherlock. Figure it out.

It was a prank. Had to be. Let’s give college boy’s brain a workout. Except to come up with a prank that would stump Davis they’d actually need to think up one and... Yeah. *Sorry, guys, I love you, but that’s not happening.* Not when, as the “smart one” in the family, he’d still barely squeaked into college, aided by a football scholarship.

He missed football. Fuck, how he missed it. Football, college, college pubs, college towns, college girls...

Stop feeling sorry for yourself and solve the mystery.

He did another circuit of the house. Even checked under the beds, as if his six-foot-four, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound

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uncle or cousin would fit under one. Hell, Davis was two inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter and *he* hadn't been able to hide from his father under a bed since he was twelve.

Finally, he opened the front door, ready to shout for his uncle and brother to come out, come out, wherever they were. That's when he smelled it. The fresh scent of strangers on their porch.

He backed up fast and closed the door.

Um, Davey...?

He ignored the little mental voice that called his bravery into question, went into the front room and peered through the half-drawn blinds. Then he returned to the door, opened it and carefully scanned the darkness. He dropped to all fours. Three separate scents. No, four. Shit, no—five. Five men on their porch. One of them...a werewolf? He thought he picked up the musky scent of werewolf, but it was hard to tell with all the other scents, including those of the three werewolves who lived here.

But there had definitely been five strangers on their porch, and the chances that any of them had been canvassing for cancer research was less than zero. In the year he'd been here, only one person had knocked on their door— a neighbor's kid selling Girl Scout cookies and knowing the Cains were fine customers when it came to consumables.

This was no Girl Scout troop.

He paced back and forth on the porch, committing the scents to memory as his brain kept looping through the question, “Why would Uncle Lonny and Curtis run?” Even against five men, he could not imagine them fleeing.

But they had. And the men *had* pursued—they just hadn’t gone through the house. Davis followed the strangers’ trail around the side and into the woods. Then he found his uncle and cousin’s recent trail crossing it.

A straight trail.

A trail of panic. Two big men, knocking down everything in their path, like bears charging through the forest.

Then he realized it wasn’t panic. It was determination—the kind of thinking that ran in an equally straight line from thought to execution, from plan to goal. That goal became apparent when the trail led to the thicket they used for Changing. Inside, he found their clothing, yanked off and thrown aside, with paw prints in damp ground leading out.

Davis was stepping from that thicket himself when he caught the acrid smell of gunpowder. That’s when he understood.

Five men. Armed with guns. At the front door. That was a fight his uncle and cousin couldn’t win. Slam the door. Run out the back. No time for footwear when it’d come off in a few minutes. Hightail it to the thicket. Get inside. Change forms. And the hunted becomes the hunter. Circle back and start picking off your prey.

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It was not the best plan. But it was a shrewd one.

Davis listened. The forest was eerily silent. He glanced at the scattered clothing and considered Changing to help. But if there was a fight in progress, wouldn't he hear it?

Not if his uncle and cousin were still stalking their prey. Or if they'd driven them deeper into the forest.

As he walked a few more steps, he heard a branch creak in the wind. He tried to pick up a more distant sound—a grunt or a growl. But once he heard the damned branch, it was all he could hear. That constant *creak-creak*. Pause. *Creak-creak*.

Davis rolled his shoulders. Ignore that and find his uncle and cousin. He wouldn't Change. Not yet.

With every step, he swore that damned branch got louder. *Creak-creak*. Pause. *Creak-creak*.

He finally gave up and headed in that direction. At least it gave him a point of reference.

He was almost there when the wind changed direction, making the branch give a triple creak...and blowing a scent into his face. The coppery smell of blood.

He rubbed his hand over his nose. At least that much blood meant he wasn't smelling the result of a gun wound. This was violent death, by ripping fangs and powerful jaws. His uncle and cousin hadn't just broken a few necks. They'd separated a couple of men from the group and torn them to

shreds so when the others stumbled over the bodies, they'd get the message: Don't screw with the Cains.

He took a few more steps, still following that creaking branch. The blood-laden wind blew straight in his face. Shit, that was bad. Blood and shit and piss and every other stench that accompanied violent death. Enough to make his stomach churn. He put his hand over his nose and took another step and...

His gaze rose...

"Fuck."

He said the word before he could stop himself, and then looked around quickly. But there was no one here. No one except...

Fuck.

His uncle and cousin hadn't settled for slaughtering a couple of their pursuers and leaving the bodies for the others to find. They'd strung one up. That's what he'd heard—a body hanging from a tree, making the branch creak in protest.

It was heavily wooded here, the moon passing behind clouds. He could just make out the shape of the corpse. Long and lean. Weirdly shaped. And...naked? The figure was pale against the darkness. Definitely stripped naked. With something behind it.

With another body behind it. He saw that as he continued forward. Two tall and lean men, stripped and

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strung up by their arms. But the shapes were just...weird. What the hell was...

The cloud cover passed and the moon shone down, filtering through the trees, illuminating the bodies, and he saw it wasn't two men. It was two giant wolves, hanging by their forepaws.

Two skinned wolves. ~

