

Stolen

Chapter One - Demonic

"Please tell me you don't believe in that stuff," said a voice beside my shoulder.

I looked at my seat-mate. Mid-forties, business suit, laptop, pale strip around his ring finger where he'd removed his wedding band. Nice touch. Very inconspicuous.

"You shouldn't read crap like that," he said, flashing a mouthful of coffee stains. "It'll rot your brain."

I nodded, smiled politely and hoped he'd go away, at least as far away as he could on an airplane flying at several thousand feet. Then I went back to reading the pages I'd printed from the believe.com website.

"Does that really say werewolves?" my seat mate said. "Like fangs and fur? Michael Landon? I was a Teenage Werewolf?"

"Michael . . .?"

"Uh, an old movie. Before my time. Video, you know."

Another polite nod. Another not-so-polite attempt to return to my work.

"Is that for real?" my seat-mate asked. "Someone's selling information on werewolves? Werewolves? What kind of people would buy crap like that?"

"I would."

He stopped, finger poised above my papers, struggling to convince himself that someone could believe in werewolves and not be a complete nutcase, at least not if that someone was young, female and stuck in the adjoining seat for another hour. I decided to help.

"For sure," I said, affecting my best breathless blonde accent. "I mean, like, werewolves are in. Vampires are so five minutes ago. Gothic, ugh. Me and my friends, we tried it once, but when I dyed my hair black, it went green."

"That's, uh—"

"Green! Can you believe it? And the clothes they wanted us to wear? Totally gross. So then, like, Chase, he said, what about werewolves? He heard about this group in Miami, so we talked to them and they said vampires were out. Werewolves were the new thing. Chase and I, we went to see them and they had these costumes, fur and teeth and stuff, and we put them on and popped these pills and presto, we were werewolves."

"Uh, really?" he said, eyes darting about for an escape route. "Well, I'm sure—"

"We could run and jump around and howl and we went out hunting and one of the guys caught this rabbit and, like, I know it sounds gross, but we were so hungry and the smell of the blood—"

"Could you excuse me," the man interrupted. "I need to use the washroom."

"Sure. You look a little green. Probably air sickness. My friend Tabby has that real bad. I hope you're feeling better, 'cause I was going to ask if you wanted to come with me tonight. There's this werewolf group in Pittsburgh. They're having a Grand Howl tonight. I'm meeting Chase there. He's kinda my boyfriend, but he switch-hits, you know, and he's really cute. I think you'd like him."

The man mumbled something and sprinted into the corridor faster than one would think possible for a guy who looked like he hadn't exceeded strolling speed since high school.

"Wait 'til I tell you about the Grand Howl," I called after him. "They're so cool."

Ten minutes later, he still hadn't returned. Damn shame. That air sickness can be a real son-of-a-bitch.

I returned to my reading. believe.com was a website that sold information on the paranormal, a supernatural e-Bay. Scary that such things existed. Even scarier that they could turn a profit. believe.com had an entire category devoted to auctioning off pieces of spaceship wrecks, which, at last count, had three hundred and twenty items for sale. Werewolves didn't even warrant their own classification. They were lumped into 'Zombies, Werewolves and Other Miscellaneous Demonic Phenomena.' Miscellaneous demonic phenomena? The demonic part kind of stung. I was not demonic. Well, maybe driving some hapless guy from his airplane seat wasn't exactly nice, but it

certainly wasn't demonic. A miscellaneous demonic phenomenon would have shoved him out the escape hatch. I'd barely even been tempted to do that.

Yes, I was a werewolf, had been since I was twenty, nearly twelve years ago. Unlike me, most werewolves are born werewolves, though they can't change forms until they reach adulthood. The gene is passed from father to son—daughters need not apply. The only way for a woman to become a werewolf is to be bitten by a werewolf and survive. That's rare, not the biting part, but the surviving part. I'd lived mainly because I was taken in by the Pack—which is exactly what it sounds like: a social structure based on the wolf pack, with an Alpha, protected territory and clearly defined rules, rule one being that we didn't kill humans unless absolutely necessary. If we got the munchies, we pulled into the nearest fast food drive-thru like everybody else. Non-Pack werewolves, whom we called mutts, ate humans because they couldn't bother fighting the urge to hunt and kill, and humans were the most plentiful target. Pack wolves hunted deer and rabbits. Yes, I'd killed and eaten Bambi and Thumper. Sometimes I wondered if people wouldn't consider that even more shocking, in a world where a dog thrown from a car garners more media attention than murdered children. But I digress.

As part of the Pack, I lived with the Alpha—Jeremy Danvers—and Clayton Danvers, his adopted son/bodyguard/second-in-command, who was also my partner/lover/bane of my existence But that gets complicated. Back to the point. Like everyone else in the Pack, I had responsibilities. One of my jobs was to monitor the Internet for signs that some mutt was calling attention to himself. One place I looked was believe.com, though I rarely found anything deserving more than a dismissive read-over. Last February I'd followed up something in Georgia, not so much because the listing sounded off major alarms, but because New York State had been in the middle of a week-long snow storm and anyplace south of the Carolinas sounded like heaven.

The posting I was reading now was different. It had the alarms clanging so hard that I'd read it Tuesday, left a message for the seller immediately and set up a meeting with her in Pittsburgh for Friday, waiting three days only because I didn't want to seem too eager.

The posting read:

'Werewolves. Valuable information for sale. True believers only. Two homeless killed in Phoenix 1993-4. Initially believed to be dog kills. Throats ripped. Bodies partially eaten. One oversized canine print found near second body. All other prints wiped away (very tidy dogs?). Zoologist identified print as extremely large wolf. Police investigated local zoos and concluded zoologist mistaken. Third victim was prostitute. Told roommate she had an all-night invitation. Found dead three days later. Pattern matched earlier kills. Roommate led police to hotel used by victim. Found evidence of cleaned-up blood in room. Police reluctant to switch focus to human killer. Decide third victim was copycat (copydog?) killing. Case remains open. All details public record. Check [Arizona Republic](#) to verify. Vendor has more. Media welcome.'

Fascinating story. And completely true. Jeremy was responsible for checking newspaper accounts of maulings and other potential werewolf activity. In the [Arizona Republic](#) he'd found the article describing the second kill. The first hadn't made it into the papers—one dead homeless person wasn't news. I'd gone to investigate, arriving too late to help the third victim, but in time to ensure there wasn't a fourth. The guilty mutt was buried under six feet of desert sand. The Pack didn't look kindly on man-killers.

We hadn't been worried about the police investigation. In my experience, homicide detectives are a bright bunch, smart enough to know there's no such thing as werewolves. If they found mauling with canine evidence, they saw a dog kill. If they found mauling with human evidence, they saw a psychopath kill. If they found mauling with both human and canine evidence, they saw a psychopath with a dog or a murder site disturbed by a dog. They never, ever, saw a partially-eaten body, footprints and dog fur and said 'my god, we've got a werewolf!'. Even wackos who believed in werewolves didn't see such murders as werewolf kills. They were too busy looking for crazed half-human beasts who bay at the full moon, snatch babies from cradles and leave prints that mysteriously change from paws to feet. So when I read something like this, I had to worry about what other information the vendor was selling.

The 'media welcome' part worried me too. Almost all believe listings ended with 'media need not inquire'. Though vendors pretended the warning was meant to discourage tabloid journalists

who'd mangle their stories, they were really worried that a legit reporter would show up and humiliate them. When I went to investigate such claims, I used the guise of being a member of a paranormal society. This time, since the vendor had no problem with media, I was pretending to be a journalist, which wasn't much of a stretch, since that was my profession, though my typical beat was freelancing articles on Canadian politics, which never included any mention of demonic phenomena, though it might explain the rise of the neo-conservatives.

Once in Pittsburgh I caught a cab, registered at my hotel, dropped off my stuff and headed to the meeting. I was supposed to meet the vendor—Ms Winterbourne—outside a place called 'Tea for Two'. It was exactly what it sounded like, a cutesy shop selling afternoon tea and light lunches. The exterior was whitewashed brick with pale pink and powder blue trim. Rows of antique teapots lined the window sills. Inside were tiny bistro tables with white linen cloths and wrought iron chairs. Then, after all this work to make the place as nauseatingly sweet as possible, someone had stuck a piece of hand-markered cardboard in the front window informing passersby that the shop also sold coffee, espresso, latte and 'other coffee-based beverages'.

Ms Winterbourne had promised to meet me in front of the shop at three-thirty. I arrived at three-thirty-five, peeked inside and didn't find anyone waiting, so I went out again. Loitering in front of a tearoom wasn't like hanging around a coffee shop. After a few minutes, people inside began staring. A server came out and asked if she could 'help me'. I assured her I was waiting for someone, in case she mistook me for a vagrant soliciting leftover scones.

At four o'clock, a young woman approached. When I turned, she smiled. She wasn't very tall, more than a half-foot shorter than my five-ten. Probably in her early twenties. Long curly brown hair, regular features and green eyes—the type of young woman most often described as 'cute', that catchall description meaning she wasn't a beauty, but there was nothing to drive her into the realm of ugliness. She wore sunglasses, a brimmed hat and a sundress that flattered the kind of figure men love and women hate, the full curves so maligned in a world of Jenny Craig and SlimFast.

"Elena?" she asked, her voice a deep contralto. "Elena . . . Andrews?"

"Uh—yes," I said. "Ms Winterbourne?"

She smiled. "One of them. I'm Paige. My aunt will be along shortly. You're early."

"No," I said, returning her smile full-wattage. "You're late."

She blinked, thrown off by my bluntness. "Weren't we supposed to meet at four-thirty?"

"Three-thirty."

"I was sure—"

I pulled the printout of our e-mail correspondence from my pocket.

"Oh," she said, after a quick glance. "Three-thirty. I'm so sorry. I must have jotted it down wrong. I'm glad I stopped by early then. I'd better call my aunt and tell her."

As she took a cell phone from her purse, I stepped away to give her privacy, though with my heightened auditory senses I could have heard the murmured conversation a hundred feet off. Through the phone, I heard an older woman sigh. She promised to join us as soon as possible and asked—warned?—her niece not to start without her.

"Well," Paige said, clicking off the phone. "My apologies again, Ms Andrews. May I call you Elena?"

"Please. Should we wait inside?"

"Actually, it's a bad place for something like this. Aunt Ruth and I had coffee there this morning. Food's great, but it's much too quiet. You can hear conversations from across the room. I guess we should have realized that, but we're not very experienced at this sort of thing."

"No?"

She laughed, a throaty chuckle. "I suppose you hear a lot of that. People not wanting to admit they're into this kind of stuff. We're into it. I won't deny that. But this is our first . . . what would you call it? Sale? Anyway since the tearoom turned out to be a bad choice, we had some platters made up and took them to our hotel. We'll hold the meeting there."

"Hotel?" I'd thought she lived in Pittsburgh. Vendors usually arranged meetings in their hometown.

"It's a few blocks over. An easy walk. Guaranteed privacy."

Big warning bells here. Any woman, even one as feminine-challenged as me, knew better than to traipse into the hotel room of a stranger. It was like a horror movie where the heroine goes alone into the abandoned house after all her friends die horrible deaths and the audience sits there yelling 'Don't go, you stupid bitch!'. Well, I was the one shouting 'Go on, but grab the Uzi!'" Walking headfirst into danger was one thing, walking in unarmed was another. Lucky for me, I was armed with Supergirl strength. And if that didn't do the trick, my Clark Kent act came with fangs and claws. One glance at this woman, barely five-two, nearly a decade my junior, told me I didn't have anything to worry about. Of course, I had to fake concern. It was expected.

"Umm, well . . ." I said, glancing over my shoulder. "I'd prefer a public place. No offense . . ."

"None taken," she said. "But all my stuff is back at the hotel. How about we stop by there and, if you still don't feel comfortable, we can grab my things, meet up with my aunt and go somewhere else. Good?"

"I guess so," I said, and followed her back to the street.