

Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct

Brandi Broughton © 2006

[www.cobblestone - press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

2

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

Copyright© 2006 Brandi Broughton

ISBN: 1 - 60088 - 006 - 1

Cover Artist: Cris Griffin

Editor: Roseann Armstrong

Excerpt from Breaking in Levi by Ann Cory

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

[www.cobblestone - press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

**Brandi Broughton**

3

## Dedication

First, to my parents, who taught me to dream big, love strong, and live life to the fullest. I'm eternally grateful. I love you. To my husband, who lets me hog the computer and overlooks my faults. Thanks for being my hero, lover, and friend. To my son, you are my heart. Words can never express how much I love you both.

To my writing buddies: Jackie, who found the picture that inspired me to write the Lycan Packs trilogy, I owe ya, girl! Leanne and the DARN IT ladies—past and present—thanks for all of the chats, ideas, advice, support, and your invaluable friendship. Raq, give that husband of yours a huge hug for me, for putting up with all of my crazy questions and for sharing his law enforcement expertise. Tammy, what can I say? Thank you for sharing the journey and loving my characters as much as I do. To Mark Donahue of Chicago's Fraternal Order of Police. Thank you for fixing all of my goofs regarding CPD procedures and hierarchy. (Any mistakes that remain are entirely my own.)

To my editor, Roseann, at Cobblestone Press, thanks for putting up with my stubbornness. To Sable and Deanna, thanks for believing in me. And to Cris G. for her artistic talent—you amaze me!

Finally to my siblings and friends—you know who you are—to list everyone who played a role in making this story what it is today would require its own full - length book. So suffice it to say, thank you all.

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

*"One owes respect to the living;  
but to the dead one owes nothing but the truth."*

*Voltaire*

## Chapter One

Some philosopher once said death is peaceful. What the hell did he know?

There was nothing peaceful about the body lying at Mackenzie Lyons' feet. Tragic. Gory. Even terrifying. Those words fit the crime scene perfectly.

"The perimeter is secured, Detective," a man's voice said, interrupting her thoughts. "Coroner and forensics are on their way." One look at his ashen face and she decided not to bother correcting his terminology. Only a rookie would call the Chicago Medical Examiner a coroner. "Thanks, Officer..." She read the nametag on the man's starched and perfectly creased uniform. "...Baker. Who found the body?" Staring at the victim's tattered flesh, she tensed against the shudder that raced up her spine. She dug her hands deeper into jacket pockets and blamed the chill on the autumn wind.

"A woman flagged me down. I called it in." Baker avoided looking at the corpse. His back was ramrod straight, eyes forward, but his breathing was too shallow. Beads of perspiration dotted his pale face.

### **Brandi Broughton**

5

Probably his first dead body, although he hadn't tossed up his last meal all over her crime scene. That alone was worth a point or two in his favor. He aimed a thumb at the building to his left. "She said she was climbing down the fire escape and stumbled over the deceased. I think she's a prostitute trying to avoid the manager of this joint." He paused, seemed to catch himself. "I stashed her in the back of my patrol car. She's not too happy about it, but I figured you'd want to talk to her." Yep, a rookie. A little uncertain, but good instinct. He'd get used to seeing death; learn to deal with it as she had, if he lasted on the force. When overwhelmed, fall back on training. But he'd never forget, never lose feeling something for the victim or his family. Not if he was a good cop.

"You're right. I'll take her statement after the ME arrives," she said, purposefully using the standard abbreviation for the medical examiner.

"Until then, keep her inside and away from any media that may show up."

"What...what do you think did that?"

"That's what I'm here to find out." Mackenzie looked at the body again. Male victim, older, his hair matted and gray with dark red, almost black, stains. Although he was bloodied, there wasn't much blood around him. None splattered on the stone wall of the nearest building or pooled under the body. He lay curled, in a fetal position.

“Was this the way he was when you arrived? Did you or anybody touch him?”

Baker’s gulp was audible. “No. I mean, yes, he was like that. It was obvious he was dead. I didn’t touch him. No need to check his pulse.”

The officer drew himself up straighter, forcing Mackenzie to tilt her head back further to look him in the eye.

“I thought it was more important to clear the scene and call it in.”

“Okay, thanks.” Using a rubber band, she yanked her shoulderlength hair back into a haphazard ponytail and then snapped on some latex gloves. She wouldn’t touch the body either, at least not until after crime scene photos were taken. “Keep the alley clear.”

Baker gave her a crisp nod, spun militarily on his heels, and left her

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

6

alone with the corpse. She dropped to one knee to study the condition of the man’s face and torso.

They couldn’t use his face to identify him, not enough of it left. No wallet. No clothes at all. For now, John Doe was just another crime statistic for Chicago’s Southside, but he wasn’t your average victim.

He was no casualty of a drive - by shooting or typical mugging, and he didn’t commit suicide. Such deaths offered signs easily recognizable to most law enforcement officers, even one new to homicide investigation, like Mackenzie.

“Shit. Somebody made mincemeat out of this guy, didn’t they?”

She rose to face Pete Tancock. His skin was pale, but not from seeing the results of a grizzly death. He spent most of his time in labs with dead people. She couldn’t recall ever seeing the nocturnal medical examiner in the sunshine.

“You have a talent for the understated, Tancock.”

“I do my best.” His grin beamed lightning quick, and he tugged her ponytail playfully. He stood a few inches taller than her five - foot - five - inch frame and several inches wider around the middle. Working with the dead made for a healthy appetite in Pete’s case, despite his wife’s efforts to keep him on a perpetual diet.

“Victim’s ID unknown,” she said. “Prints possible. Dental too.”

“Hmm, yeah.” They stepped back and watched the forensics team go to work, the camera flash popping in a slow and steady strobe - light fashion.

Pete’s thinning hair was combed back to unveil a smooth forehead over deep - set pale gray eyes, alive and penetrating. His gaze scanned the alley and settled on her. “He wasn’t killed here.”

“Vying for a detective’s badge?”

He snorted. “Hell no. I’d have to deal with living people then, and what fun is there in that?”

Mackenzie’s lips curved into a lopsided smile. “Don’t like for ‘em to talk back, huh?”

“Oh, the dead talk, if one knows how to listen.”

Mackenzie approached the body and squatted. “So, what is this one

**Brandi Broughton**

7

telling you?”

Tancock pulled on latex gloves before he examined the corpse.

“Can’t say for certain until I get him back to the morgue. On the surface, it looks like our friend here had a run - in with one or more four - legged carnivores.” He pointed to a particularly nasty gash near the right shoulder. “See here? This appears to be claw marks, and these wounds are consistent with bites. Strange. He’s been dead a while. Scavengers, maybe.”

The wounds were unusual for a death in the city, but Mackenzie had seen similar ones before. Wild. Brutal. Disturbing. Her pulse quickened as she focused on the holes gnawed into the man’s flesh. Panic gripped her lungs.

*Damn it. Not here.*

She tore her gaze from the body and stood. Her hands fisted as she fought the urge to rub the scars hidden beneath her jeans. Her teeth clenched against the memories. She wasn’t some frightened child in the wilderness, but a cop, a full - grown woman. Willing her system back under control, she stared at the buildings, the concrete, and the crime scene tape, illuminated by the patrol car’s flashing lights. She listened to the ceaseless rumble of city life, inhaled the stench of garbage overflowing a nearby garbage bin. Cheap booze, rot, and urine. The stench of decay.

“You okay, Detective?”

Mackenzie blinked. Tancock looked at her with curiosity. She pushed the memories aside and let the training take over. She had a job to do.

The victim had family somewhere. They deserved to know that whoever did this could never do it again. Nothing would stop the grief, Mackenzie knew, but not having the truth of what happened was like pouring salt on a wound that never healed. She would not let this one go unsolved.

“Last I heard,” she said, “lions and tigers and bears weren’t allowed to roam free on city streets.”

He shook his head. “I’m no expert on wild animal attacks, but I don’t think this was caused by a wild cat or bear. The claw marks aren’t

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

8

wide enough for a bear, and the bites are more like that of a large canine.”

“How large?”

“Similar to a wolf or German shepherd.”

“Like a guard dog?”

“It’s possible. Homeless guy gets caught on the wrong side of the fence when someone lets his dogs loose. Maybe the owner chose not to

have his pups' meal found on his property and dropped the leftovers here."

Mackenzie didn't like to draw conclusions too soon, but the hypothesis seemed feasible. She wouldn't rule it out. However, the theory had a flaw.

"A homeless guy with a tan line on his left hand?"

"What? Oh, the ring finger."

"Odds are our John Doe wore a wedding ring until recently."

"I see your point." Tancock sat back on his heels. "That's odd."

"What?"

"There are no defensive wounds. See? No marks on the arms at all."

Mackenzie studied the victim's limbs. The wounds inflicted on the body were on the head and torso. "Could the victim be downed suddenly and unable to fight back?"

"Maybe, if he'd been drunk, stoned, or knocked unconscious." He felt the head for signs of blunt - force trauma. "We'll see what turns up on Tox. I'd still expect to see at least a few scratches or something on the arms and legs."

"Most guard dogs growl and bark first as a deterrent. They make their presence known well in advance of an attack. Even our K - 9s are trained to go for arms and legs."

"True." He stood and shook his head, his eyes focused on the body as if it were a puzzle. "I'll check under the nails during autopsy. See what turns up."

Mackenzie was watching them load the black body bag for transport to the morgue when Steve Cooper flashed his badge and crossed the crime scene tape. She stuffed her hands in the pockets of her bomber

**Brandi Broughton**

9

jacket and waited for him to approach.

"Hey, Blue Eyes. Do you ever sleep?"

"Nope, and is it too much trouble for you to use my name?"

"Sure thing, Mac."

She gave up. "Glad you could finally make it."

"Would've been here sooner if I hadn't been on the L when I got the page."

"Taking the train? What happened to your car?"

"What do you think? Piece of junk's in the shop again."

She scanned her partner from scowl to shined boots. The thin, gold chain at his neck flickered, the only jewelry he wore with his snug knit sweater and black jeans. "Bet that puts a dent in your dating schedule."

"Hell no, but this does." He looked around the alley. "So, what do we have?"

"A very dead John Doe who appears to have been lunch for some hungry animals. Hooker stumbled over the body. She's waiting in the

patrol car over there. I was about to take her statement, but since you're here...." She smiled.

He rolled his hazel eyes. "You just want to be the bad cop."

"Just flash that famous Cooper grin and see how far it gets us." She headed for the car, with him trailing behind.

"Hey, you got a hot date tonight? Because seeing you in them tight jeans...Damn." His toothy smile was pure devil.

She'd worked years to earn a respectable reputation as a tough cop. All business, no nonsense, and then some wiseass teams her up with the precinct's playboy.

"Bite your tongue, Coop, before I grind it under my heel. We've got a job to do."

He winced. "You're all heart, Lyons."

She smiled but kept her face averted. "Compliments won't work either."

For all his quirks, he was a good cop. At least he knew how to take no for an answer, although she doubted his latest girlfriend knew the meaning of the word.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

10

When they stopped beside the patrol car, Officer Baker opened the back door, and a big - breasted blonde with about five pounds of makeup caked on her face stormed out.

"You son of a bitch."

She swung at Baker, but missed. Barely. When she reared back for another swing, Mackenzie caught her arm and yanked. The woman spun around, stumbled against the car, and shrieked as she toppled face - first across the trunk where Mackenzie kept her pinned.

"I'm gonna sue your ass for false arrest," she shouted, trying to twist free. "I ain't done nothin' wrong."

"Assaulting an officer isn't wrong in your book? Damn, and here I thought it was illegal. Spread 'em." Mackenzie kicked the woman's feet apart and slapped handcuffs on her.

"Damn fitness nut. She always ruins my chances of seeing a catfight," Cooper muttered to Baker. The officer smiled until Mackenzie cast them both a 'get serious' look.

The woman squirmed. "I just tol' him 'bout the dead guy, and asshole here with a badge locks me up like I off'd him. I didn't do nothin'."

"Yes, you did. You really shouldn't attack police officers."

Mackenzie kept the woman bent over the car while Cooper inspected the contents of her tiny purse.

"You bitch. You ain't got no warrant."

"Ever heard of probable cause? You have the right to remain silent.

Anything you say c—"

"I didn't hit him."

“Not for lack of trying. What do we have, Coop?”

“Lipstick. Flaming red. One ID, Patricia Hughes, age 21, address in the building behind you. Three foil packets...” He held up a small plastic bag. “...and a dime rock in a little baggy.”

“Cocaine, Patricia. Ten bucks worth won’t earn me any awards with the guys in Narcotics, but hey, I’m not greedy. Those charges keep adding up. You want me to add homicide to the list?”

“I didn’t do him. You can’t pin this on me. I don’t even know him.”

**Brandi Broughton**

11

The woman twisted to glare at her.

Mackenzie let her up. “Maybe you didn’t, but what about your pimp? Did he get pissed at a john who wouldn’t pay?”

“I ain’t got no pimp.” Patricia leaned a hip against the car and scowled. Mackenzie didn’t blame her for leaning, considering how high those spikes on her shoes were.

“Self - employed, are you?” Cooper asked with a grin that could charm an entire cheerleading squad out of its undies.

“Yeah, self - employed. I like that.” Patricia smiled, showing a missing tooth, and eyed Cooper from head to toe. “I don’t work for no one but me.”

Mackenzie barely stopped her eyes from rolling. “Did you see anyone else in the alley?”

“Just the dead guy. Damn near stepped on him.” She shuddered.

“That’s some sick shit.” She swung her cuffed hands around to Cooper, her voice suddenly laced with honey. “Come on. I tol’ ya all I know. You gonna take these off?”

“Now that all depends,” he said. “Can you keep your eyes and ears open?”

“I ain’t no snitch.” She scowled at Mackenzie, then eyed Cooper.

“Not for just anyone, but for you...”

Cooper stepped closer. “If you think of anything else, hear something on the street, give me a call.” When she nodded, he uncuffed her and then held out his card. After a surreptitious glance around, she took it with a sultry brush of her fingers across his hand and slipped it between her breasts.

“Since you ain’t gonna haul me in...These could come in handy.”

Fingering the handcuffs, she all but purred the statement.

*Save me from idiots.* “Soliciting a police officer? You want me to throw you behind bars, don’t you?” Mackenzie asked as she snatched her handcuffs and ignored Cooper’s attempt to hide a chuckle behind a cough.

The woman’s jaw dropped. “No, I—”

“Just see if anybody saw something unusual and let us know,”

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

12

Cooper said. "You can do that, can't you?"

"Anything for you, sugar." She reached for her purse and then for the little baggy in Cooper's hand, but Mackenzie was faster. She grabbed the bag out of his hand, dumped the contents on the ground, and crushed it under her foot.

"Bitch!"

"That's Detective Bitch to you. And consider it payment for taking a swing at a cop. Now beat it before I change my mind about doing paperwork on your sorry ass and haul you downtown anyway."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I checked with Missing Persons. No reports of anyone who meets our John Doe's description. Not yet, anyway." Steve Cooper propped a trim, denim - clad hip on the corner of Mackenzie's desk. His look was total mischief. "Carol said she'd keep an eye out for me."

"I'm sure she will." The Cooper charm strikes again, she thought.

Having a harmless playboy for a partner and half the female staff panting after him did have some benefits.

Mackenzie ripped open a bag of M&Ms, her typical snack. This morning it was breakfast.

"Someone clean out the pastries in the vending machine again?"

"Yeah." She rubbed her eyes and tried not to yawn. She'd spent the night canvassing the area around the dump site. "I talked to the manager in Hughes' building as well as every tenant I could find in the buildings on both sides of the alley. No one saw a thing. No one heard a thing."

"Typical. I got the same from those on the street."

"Chair not good enough for your butt, Coop?"

He grinned and leaned forward. "Your desk is more comfortable."

She narrowed her eyes and scooted her candy a few inches to the right. With the press of an arrow key, the list on her computer screen scrolled by. Squinting to keep the words from dividing in two, she tipped her can of cola, hoping the caffeine would reenergize her.

"What have you got there?"

**Brandi Broughton**

13

"The victim was mauled before being dumped in that alley.

Tancock said a large canine could've caused the wounds. A German shepherd or wolf - like dog." She took a pen from its place above her ear and gestured toward the screen. "Since I doubt there are wolves prowling Chicago alleys, I'm looking at a list of warehouses and other businesses in the area that reportedly use guard dogs."

"Guard dogs? Good idea. You ought to check with the Lykos

Institute. Maybe get them to consult on the case." Steve's hand inched toward her bag of M&Ms. "Ouch!"

He drew back sore knuckles, and Mackenzie holstered her pen above her right ear once more. "The Lykos Institute?"

"Yeah. Big nature - loving, protect - the - wildlife type group. If it



barks, they know all about it. The organization is Rafael Stone's pet project."

"Stone. Any connection to Stone Corporation?" She popped a couple candies and let them melt in her mouth.

"Of course. You know. Rafael Stone? He owns Stone Corp. and who knows what else. The man probably makes a million a minute."

Cooper crossed his arms, flexing muscles encased in a tight, ribbed blue sweater. "You don't have a clue who I'm talking about, do you?"

She ignored his biceps and sarcasm and scrolled back up the list.

Yep, Stone Corp. owned several properties with guard dogs.

"Don't you ever watch TV, read the paper? Grocery store tabloids?"

The paparazzi love him. If Brad Pitt posed nude on Hollywood Boulevard, he couldn't get more press than this guy."

"Stone's in California?"

"No. Well, he may have offices in L.A., but he lives here. Corporate headquarters are in the Loop."

The financial heartbeat of Chicago's business mecca. Billions in commodities changed hands daily in the Loop's trading pits. Apparently Stone's company had the might to survive the cacophonous roar of frayed tempers and unmasked greed.

"He maintains a suite in his office building but often flies a helo to that massive estate of his outside the city."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

14

"And he owns this Lykos Institute?"

"He founded it."

"Hmm. I think I'll have a talk with Mr. Stone. See what turns up."

She printed two copies of the property list and handed one to Cooper.

"I'll be surprised if you get within five miles of the man, but it'd be interesting to see how long it takes you. Should make for a great office pool."

She scowled and yanked her leather jacket from the chair's back.

"You suggested I contact him."

"I said check with the Lykos Institute, not Rafael Stone."

"Well, he founded the Institute and owns several properties on that list, including one fairly close to the crime scene. So he'll just have to fit me into his schedule."

He gripped her arm, and she stopped in the doorway. "You're not suggesting he's a suspect, are you?"

"Right now, anyone with a dog is a suspect, as far as I'm concerned."

"Hell, Mac, he probably owns half the city. I wouldn't be surprised if he owned the buildings on both sides of the alley."

Annoyed and letting it show, she pulled her arm away. "Give me some credit, will you? For the record, he doesn't own either building, but even if he did...I'm not going to arrest the guy for owning property and a

pet poodle. Last I heard, neither is illegal.”

He frowned. “I’m not questioning your abilities, Mac. I’m just saying I wouldn’t try to strong - arm him. We’re talking about a powerful man. This guy’s connections have connections.”

“I’m following a lead. It’s what detectives do.”

“Fine. But before we try the good cop - bad cop routine on this guy, we better have all our ducks in a row and wearing body armor, or he and his attorneys will be eating duck for dinner.”

“We’re not going to play good cop - bad cop.” She pointed at the list in his hand. “I need you to check out these other businesses. Talk to the owners. Find out about their guard dogs. I’ll take the ones owned by Stone.”

**Brandi Broughton**

15

She walked away but turned back with a smile after a few feet.

“Oh, Coop? Let me know what the odds are on that pool.”

“Aw, hell.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie found a parking place barely within walking distance of the steel and glass tower that housed the headquarters of Stone Corp. Near the end of her urban hike, she spotted one of the city’s finest hard at work, and smiled. Paula Martinez scribbled down the license plate number of a car illegally parked in a handicap slot.

“Ticketing the police chief’s car is not going to earn you extra points.”

The officer grinned. “This isn’t the police chief’s car, and for the record, he respected me for doing my job that day.” Paula ripped the ticket from her notebook and slipped it under the windshield wiper.

“What’s up, Mac?”

“The murder rate. I’m here to question some rich suit about the latest homicide on the Southside.”

“Question? Or stir up trouble?” Paula asked, her dimple showing.

Mackenzie returned the smile, remembering her colleague’s opinion of her often - unorthodox investigative techniques. Whatever works. “Maybe a little of both.”

“Maybe I should stick around and watch for explosions.”

“Ha ha. See ya ‘round.” She waved and jaywalked through traffic, heading straight for the front doors of Stone Corp.

The lobby was an architectural testament to lavish simplicity. Only money and impeccable taste could create such understated elegance. Huge beams formed an arch overhead, and on her left stood a wall of stone. The floor - to - ceiling water feature offered a peaceful trickling centerpiece between two rich burgundy sofas. A pair of massive granite columns framed a back wall of glass through which Mackenzie could see elevators and office doors. Cut into the center of the wall was a large door, closed and apparently locked. A sign directed guests to check in at the

## **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

16

security desk to the right.

Her sneakers squeaked on the polished marble floor as she approached the impressive mahogany counter.

“Rafael Stone’s office, please.”

“Your name?” the security guard asked, and then glanced at a monitor seated in a nook.

Mac slapped her badge on the countertop. “Detective Mackenzie Lyons, Chicago PD.”

“I’m sorry, Detective. I don’t see your name on the list of scheduled appointments.”

“I don’t have an appointment. I’m here to speak to Mr. Stone about a homicide, so if you’ll buzz me through, I’ll try to make this quick and painless.”

The guard’s face changed instantly, from warm cordiality to solid iceberg. “Do you have a warrant, Detective?”

“Not at this time, but—”

“No warrant. No appointment. No entry.”

A beep sounded before Mackenzie could respond, and the guard held up a hand. She bit the inside of her mouth to keep from snapping the man’s head off.

“Yes, Ms. Waters?” He released the intercom’s button.

“Have Simon bring the limo around front, Frank. He’ll be leaving for his next meeting at the Sears Tower in ten minutes.”

“Right away. Ms. Waters? We have a police detective here asking to speak to Mr. Stone.”

There was a brief pause before the crisp feminine voice returned. “I don’t see any scheduled appointment with a detective. Give him the main number. He can call, and I’ll see what I can do to pencil him in later this week.”

The guard slid a card with a phone number on it to Mackenzie. She took it, snarled at the guard’s smug smile, and left.

Outside, she searched for Paula. Mackenzie would see the elusive Rafael Stone today, or she’d eat her detective’s badge.

## **Chapter Two**

“The CFO called, sir. A problem in accounting.”

Rafael accepted the briefcase from his efficient assistant as he headed for the elevators. “Thank you, Sylvia. What kind of problem?”

“He didn’t say. He wanted to meet with you directly. I told him you were on your way to the tower.”

“I’ll call him from the car. Those papers for the attorney are on my desk. See that he receives them today.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I’ll need the final prospectus on that Las Vegas acquisition by tomorrow morning.”

"Yes, sir." Sylvia Waters hurried to keep up with his longer strides. "One other thing, sir. A police detective was in the lobby asking to speak with you. I had Frank tell him to call for an appointment."

Rafe stepped into the elevator. "Interesting."

It took less than a minute for the elevator to descend to the lobby. He spent that time pondering why the police wanted to speak to him. Soliciting for a law enforcement retirement fund most likely. There'd been no rogue Lycan activity in the Chicago area since he'd founded the Lykos Institute and clearly claimed this part of the country as his sole territory.

"Your limousine's here, Mr. Stone."

"How's the family, Frank?"

"Just fine, sir. Suzy's expecting again." The security guard stepped around his desk and pushed the door open before Rafe could do it himself.

"Again? What's this one make? A dozen?"

"No, sir." Frank laughed. "Six, unless it's twins again."

"A half dozen, then. You have my sympathies and heartfelt congratulations." He shook the guard's hand, bemused by an unexpected sense of envy. "Give Suzy my

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

18

best."

"Will do, sir."

Rafe nodded at Simon when he pulled open the car's door. He ducked inside, and then froze as the door closed. Seated across from him was a honeyed blonde vision in tanned leather and worn denim. With one arm draped across the back seat, her bomber jacket exposed a gun in a shoulder holster and a shiny badge tucked in at her slim waist.

"Rafael Stone?" The hair at his nape stood alert as the smooth, cultured vibration of her voice resonated through him.

He laid his briefcase aside and eyed the woman who'd so effectively slipped passed his security. He breathed deeply, taking in a pleasant, albeit unique, mix of scents. Leather, coconut, and aloe. Rafe's gaze lowered over the V - neck of her white, button - up shirt, past enticing breasts to the badge again. His jaw set. The call to his chief

financial officer would have to wait.

"Were you expecting someone else, Detective?"

"No."

Feeling the car pull away from the curb, he watched her ponytail sway and asked, "May I ask how you gained entry to my limousine?"

"Don't fire the driver over it. He doesn't know I'm here."

"But then, part of his job is to know who is in here."

"I had a fellow police officer hassle him about double parking. As far as distractions go, it was enough."

"Ah. Creative." He made a mental note to instruct Simon on the importance of keeping the doors locked. "You have me at a disadvantage, Detective. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Mackenzie Lyons, Chicago PD."

“Unusual police procedure, Detective Lyons. Should I contact my attorneys?”  
Her smile was subtle. Sly. “That depends. Have you committed a crime you’d like to confess to?”

Amused, he cocked an eyebrow. “I confess only to being intrigued by your presence here. To what do I owe for the pleasure of your company?”

“Homicide, Mr. Stone.”

“I beg your pardon?”

As if she sensed a challenge, she planted her sneakers on the floor, leaned forward, and propped both forearms on her thighs. The move hid her gun, but unveiled an alluring bit of cleavage. Annoyed that he’d noticed, Rafe kept his eyes fixed on her watchful blue gaze.

“I’m investigating an apparent homicide. Last night, a man’s body was found in a filthy alley on the Southside.”

**Brandi Broughton**

19

“And you wished to speak to me about this unfortunate individual because...?”

“He was dumped there after being a tofu snack for an animal, the four - legged variety.”

Rafe knew his face showed no sign of the sudden anger and surprise he felt. The anger he could deal with, but the surprise was an unusual sensation. Few people ever caught him off guard. But this curious detective seemed to have an uncanny ability for doing just that.

Could a rogue Lycan be hunting his territory without his knowledge? He’d have to call his brother immediately.

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand what that has to do with me. Would I know the man? Do you have his name?”

“I understand you founded the Lykos Institute.”

He noticed how she avoided answering his questions and wondered where she was heading with this interrogation, so he chose his words with caution. “My brother actually oversees the daily operations, but yes, I started L.I. and have an active interest in it.”

“And this organization specializes in knowing anything and everything there is to know about dogs?”

“Ah, I see. Yes, you could say that. Lykos is a non - profit educational institute that promotes the humane treatment of canines, both wild and domestic.”

“What about the kind that can kill a man?”

“I assume we’re talking about domestic breeds only? Like many of the larger domestic breeds, wolf packs are certainly capable of harming humans, although such attacks are rare. More so, here in Illinois...and in Chicago.” He let his skepticism show in both voice and look.

“Rare or not, at least one animal—maybe more—used a man for a chew toy last night. What about training a dog to kill?”

“That’s possible. There have been unscrupulous men who trained dogs for such brutal ventures as dog fights. Some animals have even been known to turn on their handlers, often with deadly consequences. The goal of most dog training programs, however, is far different.”

She leaned back in her seat again and crossed her arms. "Obedience training?"

Rafe nodded. "Among other things. For instance, we sponsor programs that teach dogs how to attack...to protect...for purposes such as those used by your K - 9 officers. They're taught how to track and subdue, not kill." He paused, watching for any shift in her expression. "Were you able to collect any physical evidence that could be linked to an animal?"

The change was subtle, but he saw it. The slight narrowing of her eyes, the tiny tilt of her head, the alert tenseness of her body. "Why do you ask?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

20

He shrugged as if the matter was of minor import. "Like humans, animals have unique DNA. That or hair samples could be used to make a connection between a suspected animal and your victim. L.I. has an extensive database, and our staff has years of experience in tracking and identifying various breeds of canines. If you'd like a professional consult concerning any evidence in the case, I'm quite certain we could assist." He would make sure of it.

"That's very generous."

"Why don't I have my brother contact you?"

The limousine slowed to a stop.

Mackenzie pulled out a business card. "His name is?"

"Gabriel." Rafe took the card from her and resisted the urge to touch her hand.

*Was her skin as soft as it appeared?*

"I look forward to speaking with him."

Yes, he must contact his brother very soon. If another Lycan was around, he doubted a cover - up would easily fool this detective. The door opened, and he reached for his briefcase.

"Mr. Stone, how many properties do you own in the city of Chicago that use guard dogs for security purposes?"

He paused, peering at her. She was good, and dangerous. He'd wager a million at least that she could already name every piece of property in question. Probably had the list in a pocket somewhere. "Quite a few. They are very effective as preventative measures. I'd have to check to be certain of the exact number, but if you like, I could fax you a list."

"Thank you. I'd like that."

Rafe exited the vehicle and ordered a surprised Simon to return the detective to her car, which was most certainly parked somewhere near his offices.

"That won't be necessary."

"On the contrary, I insist. Good day, Detective Lyons."

As he watched the limousine pull away, he flipped open his cell phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Courteous and sculpted to perfection, Rafael Stone made a memorable first impression. He also remained a puzzle for Mackenzie after their face - to - face meeting. He was younger than she'd expected, which added to her perception of vigor. A man needed ambition and discipline, backed by talent and intelligence, to reach such heights at his age. Some men spent years climbing over others' backs to garner an ounce of the captivating power that rolled off Stone in waves. Strong, smart, and no doubt

arrogant.

### **Brandi Broughton**

21

The latter usually turned her off, but she'd liked his smooth, casual demeanor. That slight curl to his lips. She wondered what would unsettle Stone's foundations. Despite his lavish choice of transportation and the tailored suits he wore, which probably cost more than a month of her pay, he was not just a handsome face. Something about those dark, mysterious brown eyes told her there was much more to the wealthy entrepreneur than he presented to the world. Still, with those features combined with that body and commanding presence... No wonder photographers chased him with cameras ready.

She was still thinking of jet - black hair and fathomless eyes when she reached her office to find her chair occupied by a hazel - eyed brunette with a crew cut and a badge. "Coop, get out of my chair." She shoved his size eleven snakeskin boots off the corner of her desk.

"You cost me twenty bucks, Mac."

"How much did you bet?"

"Five."

"Four - to - one odds? You should've had more faith in me."

She sat and picked up the fax draped across her keyboard. The man was efficient. She'd give him that. Stone's computer - generated list included a few properties that weren't on hers. Flipping to the last page, she smiled at the bold strokes of a handwritten note.

*Enjoyed our private chat.*

*Until next time.*

*Rafe.*

Cooper propped half his butt on the corner of her desk, his heel banging into the side. "One day, Mac."

"You put a dent in my desk, Coop..."

He ignored her. "Not even one day. Hours. Damn, what'd you do? Kidnap the man?"

"I'd have to get within five miles of him to do that, now wouldn't I?"

Cooper's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying you didn't actually see Stone today?"

"I saw him. He volunteered his services to help in the investigation."

He pointed at the fax. "What's that 'private' chat all about?"

"We spoke while riding in his car across town. And this is to let me know I'll be seeing him again."

"Yeah, well, you apparently made quite an impression. Gabriel Stone called before you arrived. He wants to see you, too, and left a number. Here." He handed her a note, but the phone rang before she could lift the receiver to make the call.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

22

"Lyons."

"Mac, you may want to come down to the morgue. I've got something on your John Doe."

She sensed, more than heard, the urgency in Tancock's voice. "I'm on my way."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Any new leads?" Rafe asked the moment his brother walked in the room.

"On the vanishings or the homicide?" Gabriel's face, so much like his own, showed serious focus in the firm lines and drawn brow.

"Either."

"No more missing Lycans. As for the murder? No reports of any rogue sightings in the metropolitan area. Could be someone new in the city, and the cops got the first call." A slight curve twitched at the corner of Gabe's mouth. "Not surprising, since they have 9 - 1 - 1 and our numbers aren't exactly listed."

"For good reason. Heard from Lucian?"

"Yes, he's heading home on the next flight." Gabe accepted a snifter of brandy and sat in the plush leather seat opposite him. "Another successful mission."

Rafe lifted his glass in salute. "Any fallout?"

"No more than your little confrontation with that politician last weekend garnered."

"Few gossip rags were interested."

Gabe snorted.

"What about the mission?" Rafe pressed, not wanting to discuss his daily dealings with the ever - present paparazzi. Such publicity was why he was no longer an L.I. field agent.

"There was a small article in that tabloid, *Global Examiner*. A villager claims to have given birth to a werewolf's baby."

"Oh?"

"Included a photo, obviously doctored, of a very hairy, chubby infant."

"Entertaining, I'm sure," he said dryly.

Gabe chuckled. "I'll give your compliments to our team. Seriously though, there were a few local stories, but nothing on legitimate global news sources. A couple in a remote village killed by a supposedly rabid wolf doesn't make international news, especially when that wolf is stopped."

Rafe rose to pour himself another drink. He faced the large glass wall that opened onto a spectacular view of the city, always changing but silent from the top floor of his corporate offices. "Let's keep Lucian stateside for a while."

"The homicide?"

**Brandi Broughton**

23

Rafe savored the taste of his own brandy before nodding. "Did you contact Detective Lyons?"

"Left a message. Nothing yet."

He felt Gabriel studying him and fought to relax the tension in his shoulders. His brother was often too observant for his own good.

"What am I missing?"

"There's nothing to miss," Rafe answered. "She's investigating the murder of someone apparently mauled to death. It would be in our best interest to consult on the case."

"She?" Gabe's eyebrows rose. "You never mentioned the detective was a woman. Is she Lycan?"



Rafe remembered her scent. Female, attractive, but definitely human. “No.”

“Is she pretty?”

His grip tightened on the snifter. For some reason he couldn’t fathom, his brother’s sudden interest grated. “She’s off - limits.”

“Possessive, are we?”

“Don’t even think it.”

“Yep. I bet she’s sexy.”

“What she is, is a homicide detective, the last person I’d want to uncover our secret.”

“Who says she has to know? There’s no harm in dabbling with a willing female, especially a pretty one. And if you aren’t claiming her, I might like to give her a try.”

Rafe shot his brother a quelling look.

Gabe wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Think of what she could do with handcuffs...”

“No.” An unexpected growl burned in Rafe’s throat. The thought of Gabe and Mackenzie together made him see red, which only infuriated him more because he knew he shouldn’t care. Although his entire being wanted to howl against allowing Gabe to “give her a try,” he hadn’t staked a claim on her. And he wouldn’t. He needed a mate, sure, but not a human—a female cop—who could jeopardize everything. The danger she posed to the pack outweighed all else.

“Hey, bro, you know I’d never risk...”

Rafe held up a hand, took a steady breath. The fierce tension in his body made him weary. He needed a weekend on his estate, a chance to run free, away from the city and all its demands. The older he got, the harder it became to postpone the search for his mate. But postpone the search, he must.

“I know.”

Gabe would never intentionally endanger the pack; neither could he.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

24

\* \* \* \* \*

The medical examiner removed his glasses and frowned at his paperwork when Mackenzie and Cooper walked in. His half - eaten chilidog lay within easy reach. Cooper eyed the body on the stainless steel table several feet away. “Jesus, Doc, how can you eat in here?”

“Why, you hungry?”

“What have you got for me?” Mackenzie asked.

“Your John Doe died about twenty to twenty - six hours before his body was found.”

“Saturday night.”

He nodded. “Sometime between eleven and five. I doubt he was in the alley long when found. Whoever did it stored him for the day. My guess would be a trunk. Found fibers on the body consistent with those you might find in a vehicle.”

That fit with the evidence gathered at the scene.

“But he wasn’t killed by a deadly animal attack.”

Mackenzie blinked. “Excuse me?” Those bites weren’t from a human.

Tancock tossed a small evidence bag to her. “Forty - five caliber slug. In the heart.

Bull's - eye. Probably dead before he even hit the ground. The other wounds were postmortem."

"You're telling me someone capped the guy and then fed him to the wolves?"

"That's what I'm saying. I'm still not certain what breed of animal inflicted the damage, although the bite marks and some hairs found on the body are consistent with canine." Tancock propped his arms on the counter. "What is certain is the identity of your John Doe. Sent the fingerprints through AFIS. Just got the results back."

Tancock's gaze locked on Mackenzie, which sent a chill down her spine. She had a feeling she wouldn't like his answer.

"Who?" she wanted to know.

"Victor Robertson."

"The state legislator?" Cooper asked, dumbfounded.

"Without a doubt."

*Didn't that bite?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie was unimpressed with the elegant façade of Victor Robertson's home or his pristine lawn. Professional lawn care was common in the more exclusive neighborhoods of North Chicago. She'd bet, for the right price, gardeners would stand watch to catch each leaf before the brilliant colors of autumn could mar the picturesque

**Brandi Broughton**

25

landscape. Money always bought pretty packaging.

She approached the house as if she were walking to her own execution. Silent.

Somber. This was her least favorite part of the job.

With a few words, she'd forever change the lives of those inside the house. There was little she could do to prevent the pain her words would create.

Stepping onto the porch, Mackenzie glanced at Cooper before ringing the doorbell. For once, the famous grin was absent.

"Hello." The woman who held the door open was a picture - perfect grandma from a Norman Rockwell painting. A tidy cap of short white hair topped a pleasant face with a friendly smile. She wore a conservative cotton dress with lace at the collar. Her only ornamentation was a silver band with delicate engravings on the third finger of her left hand.

"Mrs. Robertson?"

She cast a brief, puzzled glance at Mackenzie's badge. "Yes. Is something wrong?"

"My name is Detective Mackenzie Lyons. This is Detective Steve Cooper. We're with the Chicago Police Department. May we come in?"

"Of course, but it's a bit late." She moved aside, closed the door, and showed them into the front parlor.

The room had a very formal, Victorian feel. Light, floral, and airy, not unlike the woman seated before them. Mackenzie recognized the concern on her face, held at bay by the control of proper etiquette.

"Now, how may I help you?"

A man's voice, accompanied by the sound of footsteps, stopped Mackenzie from answering.

“Hang on. Mom, who was...” A young man spotted them as he walked into the room, a cell phone to his ear. “Let me call you back.” He snapped his cell phone shut. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Richard, come meet Detectives Lyons and Cooper of the Chicago Police Department. This is my son, Richard.”

“Detectives?” With a curious, somewhat wary expression, the son shook hands, his grip firm. Then he stepped behind his mother’s chair and placed a hand on her shoulder. Midthirties. A couple inches shy of six feet, Mackenzie guessed. He had cleancut

dark hair, which topped the vision of a well - dressed yuppie. When his cell phone rang, he cast an aggravated glance at the screen, and then pressed a button that silenced the call.

His mother smiled. “Could you tell me what this is about?”

“Mrs. Robertson—”

“Please, call me Pearl.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

26

Mackenzie’s hands were damp, her mouth dry. There was no simple way to do this. Nothing could lessen the blow. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. We’re here about your husband.”

“If you’re here to speak to Victor, I’m afraid he’s not home.” Her smile turned to a frown, her left hand slowly moving to cover her heart. “Is something wrong?”

“Ma’am, your husband is dead.”

Words. A few words, but they had the punch of a tidal wave. The woman flinched as if the impact was physical. Shock, disbelief, and dismay chased each other across her face. Mackenzie knew the unbearable pain of loss wouldn’t be far behind.

“No. That can’t be. Victor’s in Springfield. He was... No, you must be mistaken.

Not my Vic—” Her voice broke, her eyes pleading with the detectives to recant.

“I’m so sorry,” Mackenzie repeated.

Pearl blindly reached for her son’s hand, latching onto it like a lifeline. “Richard? Tell them they’re wrong.”

“I’m here, Mom.” His voice was barely a whisper. He stared at Cooper. “Are you sure?”

“We’re sure,” Cooper said. “I’m so sorry.”

Visual identification by a family member was unnecessary and would only cause more pain. Mackenzie withheld an explanation on the condition of the body, but added, “We confirmed his identity through a fingerprint match.”

She watched helplessly as Richard knelt in front of his mother and Pearl collapsed into his arms with convulsions of sorrow. They clung to one another for long moments. Mackenzie elbowed Cooper and pointed to a box of tissues on the end table. He grabbed the whole box and held it out until Pearl noticed and tugged several tissues free with fumbling fingers.

“Thank you.” Her voice was softer, weaker. She twisted the tissues as tears continued unchecked down her face. “He just had a physical a few days ago. He was fine. I don’t understand...” Then, the inevitable questions began to flow. “When? Wwhat happened to my Victor? How could he be dead?”

"Where is he? I want to see my father."

"That won't be possible at this time," Mackenzie answered, watching anger begin to boil in the son's eyes, "but I'll contact the medical examiner to find out when he can release the body to the family for burial."

"Medical examiner?" Richard asked.

"Standard procedure for unattended or questionable deaths."

"Questionable? What do you mean?" Pearl asked.

"He was murdered."

"Murdered..." Richard uttered an oath and pressed his palms to his eyes as he stood and turned away.

**Brandi Broughton**

27

"No! Oh, God, no." Pearl's dam of tears broke again, sending her into another fit of hysterical sobbing.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." The words felt like acid on Mackenzie's tongue. They would always be inadequate. "But we need to ask you some questions." Richard's expression changed from stunned fear to fury. "Can't that wait? My God, don't you see this is hard enough?"

Although tears poured down her mottled face, Pearl said, "N - no. Let them speak. If it'll help...I'll...I want to help."

Richard paused, then closed his eyes, and nodded.

"When was the last time you saw your father alive?" Mackenzie asked him.

"Saturday. He and Mom were leaving for a black - tie event that night."

"Th - that's right." Pearl sniffled. "We went to the Drake Hotel for a fundraiser for a group that helps gamblers overcome their addictions. Victor is opposed to any more expansion of gambling and recently made it a cornerstone of his political platform." While his mother spoke, Richard busied himself at a bar in one corner of the room. He returned with two glasses. "Here, Mom, drink this. It'll help calm your nerves a bit."

Pearl took the glass, adding it to the tangled wad of tissue in her grip. Richard sat and sipped his own drink, his hand a touch shaky.

Cooper pulled out a notepad as Mackenzie started the interview. "Did Mr. Robertson come home that night?"

"Yes. Victor and I arrived back home around ten thirty."

"Did you remain home after that?"

"Yes. I went straight to bed. He said he had some paperwork to do before coming to bed." Pearl stared at the full glass cradled in both hands on her lap. "He'd planned to be in Springfield for the week, so he left first thing Sunday morning. He's always been a morning person."

"What time was that?"

"Oh, well, let me see. He was already gone when I woke up, and that was around seven. I have to be at the church by nine to prepare for Sunday school. I'm a teacher."

"So you didn't actually see him come to bed or leave the next morning?"

"Well, no, I guess not, but his car was gone, so I assumed..."

"His car? He wouldn't have taken a cab to O'Hare and flown to Springfield?"

Mackenzie exchanged a look with Cooper. Outside of those working the case, nobody knew the murder had taken place elsewhere. They were searching for a second crime scene as well as the killer.

“No. He didn’t like to fly, although he’d never admit it.” Pearl’s smile trembled with tender sadness. “He always said, ‘A representative of the people should be well

### **Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

28

grounded, not prone to flights of fancy.’ He’d rent a bus when campaigning. He liked to visit people on their own turf...door to door. You can’t do that at thirty thousand feet.”

“He was campaigning?” Mackenzie asked.

“Not for office, but he was always campaigning for some issue he believed in.

And he still preferred to drive his car to Springfield...see the state he represented.”

“And you weren’t concerned when you didn’t hear from him?”

“Oh my no. I never thought anything like this could happen. He was a safe driver. I would’ve tried to reach him if I hadn’t heard from him by tomorrow night. He always checked in around midweek.” Pearl glanced from Cooper to Mackenzie. “I’ve been a politician’s wife for a very long time, Detective Lyons. Being separated for brief periods, because of campaigning or what - have - you, is nothing new to me. I’ve learned to entertain myself.” She gave her son a teary - eyed smile. “I had children to raise and, now with them grown, I have time for my charity work.”

Richard interrupted with a question of his own. “Do you have the person who did this?”

“Your help will go a long way to helping us catch the person responsible,”

Mackenzie reassured them.

“You haven’t told us where or how this happened. My father didn’t...he didn’t suffer, did he?”

Cooper’s pencil stilled as Mackenzie gave the son a sympathetic gaze. “I’m not at liberty to give all the details surrounding his death because of the ongoing investigation, but I can tell you his body was found in Chicago, on the Southside.”

Pearl asked, “The Southside? Why would he drive there?”

“We’re not sure he did. Can you tell us what kind of car he drove?”

Pearl watched Cooper take notes as she described the vehicle, then looked at Mackenzie. “Was my husband carjacked?”

“That’s why we’re investigating. Do we have your permission to have a forensics team check out your house and garage?”

“What for, if he was in his car?”

“It’s procedure, Ma’am. Your home was the last place he was seen alive.”

“All right. Yes, of course.”

“Do you mind telling me where you were Saturday night?” she asked Richard.

“On a date with my girlfriend.”

Cooper looked up from his notes. “Her name and address?”

“Is all of this necessary? I don’t want her disturbed.”

Cooper said, “We need to confirm the whereabouts of anyone connected with the victim.” He quickly wrote down the name and address Richard spouted.

Mackenzie asked, “Does anyone in your family own a large dog?”

Pearl looked confused by the question but answered, "My daughter and her **Brandi Broughton**

29

husband own a poodle."

"What about friends, employees, neighbors?"

"I don't know. Maybe, why? Oh wait, one of Richard's friends has a big dog."

He shook his head. "I doubt that'll help, Mom."

"Why don't you tell us anyway?" Mackenzie asked.

The son shrugged. "When Mom stopped by my place, I was keeping Anthony's dog temporarily while he arranged to move back East."

"They met at Princeton," Pearl added.

"Mom, please. That's hardly important. When he moved, he took the dog with him. He's not here anymore."

"When was this?"

"Week before last. Anyway, he's a friend of mine, not my father's. He and my father didn't know each other, never met, so I don't see how it could be relevant."

"Okay. Did Mr. Robertson have any enemies? Anyone who may want to hurt him?"

Pearl frowned. "No. My Victor is...was such a precious soul. He worked to help people. He was a good husband, a loving father, and a proud grandpa. I can't imagine anyone being so angry that he'd want to kill him." Silent tears streamed down her pale cheeks. She dabbed at her eyes.

"What about fights? Arguments? Did he seem disturbed about anything recently?"

"He was a politician, Detective. I know people don't believe in honest politicians, but my husband was an honest, caring man, and he liked what he did. He worried..."

Pearl bit her bottom lip, cast a quick glance at her son, and shook her head.

Richard said, "He was always arguing over this bill or that proposition. This was not his first term. My father knew how to play the game. His negotiations were always on the up - and - up."

"He did get a phone call," Pearl began, but her son interrupted with another suggestion.

"Mom, what about the guy he had words with at the fundraiser?"

"A minor disagreement is all. It was nothing, really." Pearl waved a hand as if she wanted to dismiss a bad idea.

"Do you recall the nature of the disagreement?" Mackenzie asked, her senses going on alert.

"Two contributors having a difference of opinion. That's all."

"Can you tell us exactly what happened?"

"We were at the dinner, having the worst chicken - fried steak I've ever tasted, but all for a good cause, if you know what I mean. It lasted quite a while, numerous speeches from counselors and former addicts."

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

30

"Ma'am, what happened between him and the contributor?"

"When the dinner broke up, everyone milled around, shaking hands and talking

politics. Victor took a phone call on his cell and afterwards, he motioned that he wanted to go. On the way out, I could tell he was upset about something. He saw the young man and got a bit steamed over him being there. As we passed, they exchanged words.”

“Can you recall what was said?”

“Victor called him a hypocrite and accused him of being no better than a loan shark, promoting an industry that takes fortunes from innocent people.”

“How did the man respond?”

“He was remarkably calm about the whole thing, considering.” Pearl looked apologetic. “It was such a minor thing, really. He’s normally much more circumspect, my Victor, never one to grandstand.”

“Do you know the man’s name?”

“It was just a disagreement. Nothing I hadn’t seen Vic have with any number of people whenever something got his dander up.”

Mackenzie summoned her patience and took a calm breath. “Any disagreement, any contact Mr. Robertson had with others recently, no matter how incidental it may seem, has the potential of being the clue that helps us track down his killer.”

Richard took his mother’s hand. “Mom, why don’t you tell them? It could be important. You do recall the contributor’s name?”

“Of course, I recall his name. I am not so old that I can’t remember a man’s name.”

“What is his name?” Cooper asked, with pencil ready.

“Rafael Stone.”

### Chapter Three

“A pleasure to meet you, Detective.” Dr. Gabriel Stone extended a hand.

“Welcome to the Lykos Institute.”

One glance at the man in the white lab coat convinced Mackenzie that dark, handsome looks were engraved in the Stone family’s genes. He was tall, tan, and fit, with chiseled features and a dry, firm grip.

“Thank you for seeing me so early.”

“Anything for Chicago’s Finest.” His smile was charming.

“Impressive sculpture.” She turned toward the centerpiece of the expansive atrium.

“Yes, isn’t it?” He glanced at the large marble carving of a wolf looking out over the edge of a rocky outcrop and read the engraving underneath. “*O praeclarum custodem ovium lupum!*”

“Latin.”

“Yes, a quote from a Roman philosopher. Roughly translated, it reads, ‘An excellent protector of sheep, the wolf!’”

“Humph. Interesting concept.”

He laughed. “Yes, it is. Why don’t I give you the VIP tour while we discuss your case?”

Mackenzie nodded and walked beside him down the hall.

“Rafe tells me that a man was found mauled to death.”

He didn’t know about the bullet, and she had no intention of sharing that information with the brother of a potential suspect. “There were wounds on the body consistent with animal bites and claw marks. Tell me about the Lykos Institute’s canine

training programs.”

He stopped. “Do you think one or more of our dogs did this?”

She looked him straight in the eye. “I’m not making any assumptions at the moment. Just seeking information about how one might use such animals as weapons

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

32

to kill.”

“I see.” He started walking again, pointing to large portraits on the wall. “We’ve worked with a variety of law enforcement and security agencies to develop successful training programs for drug enforcement, search and rescue, and guard dogs. Some of our graduates serve as K - 9 officers on your force.

“Dogs have a variety of talents that prove quite beneficial to humans. For the medical field, we train guide dogs for the blind, companions for paraplegics, and some can even detect cancer cells in patients. Remarkable really, when you think about it.”

She paused to study a picture of a mansion; two marble wolves guarded the front walkway. Rafael Stone stood in the center, a hand resting on a real wolf, large and black. Underneath the portrait, a brass plaque identified him as the Institute’s founder.

“A firm believer in ‘a dog is man’s best friend,’ isn’t he?”

“Certainly. We both are. Our training facilities aren’t here. This building houses our administrative offices, as well as the veterinarian school, laboratories, and public visitor’s center.” He motioned for her to precede him through a door. “We have numerous educational programs for children and adult enthusiasts. This is our most popular exhibit.”

Her gaze followed his lead, and she froze, her lungs seizing. Hair - raising panic sizzled along nerves, her body urging her to flee. But she couldn’t. God, she couldn’t move.

A natural woodland landscape filled one side of the room with a life - sized wolf pack encircling a large boulder. But the wolves, caught in midsnarl, didn’t hold Mackenzie in place. No, her focus locked on their prey. A fang - baring mountain lion sat atop the boulder, its sharp, painful claw raised...and ready to strike.

Her hand covered her thigh.

The wild golden carnivore remained motionless, while Mackenzie’s heart raced.

Her brain frantically tried to communicate to her terrified system that the cat wasn’t alive. Her pulse and gut ignored the signals.

“Detective Lyons? Are you all right?”

Gabriel’s voice shook her enough for her to break eye contact with the feline predator. She blinked, took a steadying breath, and tried to relax. Focus. On the man, not the cat.

“I—” Damn, she had to get out of this room. She cleared her throat. “I can see why it’s so popular. Very lifelike.”

He cast her a worried look, and she gritted her teeth. She rubbed her thigh, remembered, and tried to forget.

“Where are your labs?” she asked, hoping that would spur him to get her the hell away from the cat.

“This way. They’re upstairs. We can take the elevator.” He led her back through

33



the door and to the research labs.

"Is it possible to determine what type of animal is involved in the case from a few hairs found at the scene?"

"Yes, it's possible," he said. "Our researchers are experts in their field. We track wolves and similar breeds in the wild, both in the US and Canada. Our database is full of information collected from them as well as the domestics in our training programs." "DNA?"

"If DNA can be extracted from your samples, it's possible we could determine if there was more than one or confirm whether a suspected animal was involved."

She passed several classrooms filled with people and heard the rumble of instructors giving lectures on various topics. When they entered a large room that reminded her of a hospital, she noticed a couple men in lab coats hunched over microscopes. A woman in the corner caught her eye. Soft whines came from her lap as she fed some tiny puppies.

"They're doing well, Brenda?"

"A little cranky, Dr. Stone. But they've been through so much, that's understandable."

"Their mother was struck by a car in Wisconsin," Gabriel said. "She wore a collar, which emitted a death signal that helped us track her down and find the wolf pups. They would've died if we hadn't." He gently scratched one's head with a finger. "We're hoping to keep these two alive long enough to start a new pack here in Illinois."

Cute fur balls, Mackenzie thought, but how dangerous could they be when full grown? "What about the possibility of wild wolves being involved in the case? Let's say, the body was in the woods overnight before someone found it and moved it into the city." The scenario didn't fit in her mind. People usually hid bodies in the woods, not the other way around, but she wanted to know his thoughts, see his reaction.

"Wolves are virtually extinct in the remote regions of this state, so I'd have to say it's unlikely, although there are other scavengers in the woods. Are you suggesting the man was dead beforehand, that the animals weren't the cause of his death?"

"Just checking all possibilities, Dr. Stone."

He studied her a moment before showing her into an office, lavishly furnished in deep mahogany and leather. "We can talk more in here."

As she sat, the door behind her opened again. Soft footsteps on plush carpet made her turn around to see Rafael Stone. His unexpected arrival sent a jolt that made her spring from the chair. She clamped her teeth together in irritation at her speeding pulse.

Did he have to walk into a room like that? His muscles glided under a welltailored suit, smooth and powerful, like those of the predatory animals he championed.

Solid, dark colors complimented the solid body and dark features.

Mackenzie glanced from Gabriel's surprised - yet - amused expression to his

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

34

brother, who was better adept at hiding his emotions. His face, while striking, gave away none of his thoughts. No guilt. No surprise. No interest at all. Chiseled in stone, she thought. Calculating. Cold.

So why did his presence heat up the room? One look at him shouldn't make her

blood sizzle.

“Detective Lyons. We meet again.”

“Hello, Mr. Stone. I’d planned to call your office after I left here.” She shook his hand, agitated by the warmth in his firm grip and voice.

“Then it’s most fortuitous I stopped by. And, please, call me Rafe.”

Gabriel said, “I’m afraid I’m slacking in my duties as host. Why don’t I get us something to drink? Coffee, Detective?”

“That’ll be fine, thank you.” At least her voice was steady.

“The same, Rafe?”

He nodded without looking away from her.

While Gabriel fetched the drinks, she sat when Rafe did and studied the elder brother.

“You’re the older brother.” It wasn’t a question, although she wasn’t sure why she knew her observation to be true.

“I am, but only by a few minutes.” His smile softened his features.

“You’re twins?”

“Triplets, actually. I have another brother.”

That surprised her. “There are three of you?” She heard the words and immediately wanted to bite her tongue. Why hadn’t Cooper shared that little tidbit with her?

Gabriel laughed. “Actually, Rafe is one of a kind. And I only claim relations with the runt part of the time.”

Rafe’s smile warmed, widened to a full-blown grin, dispelling her initial thoughts of coldness. He was a multifaceted man and a puzzle in the extreme. “Don’t let Luc hear you say that, Gabe.”

Mackenzie took a sip of her coffee, using the opportunity to watch the brothers interact with a playfulness usually hidden beneath the powerful, icy fortresses the men erected for outsiders. A sibling comradery she’d observed—and occasionally envied—from the viewpoint of an only child.

Nothing in their mannerisms indicated any guilt or concern over an undiscovered connection to the murder. Still, she couldn’t rule out the circumstantial clues that pointed to a possible link between the man seated beside her and the body on a slab in the morgue.

“You’re quite the altruist, I understand,” she said, drawing the attention of both men.

35

“I wouldn’t say I’m completely selfless, but I help where I can.”

“What about gambling?”

Rafe’s brows furrowed, and he frowned at the sudden change in subject. “I’ve dabbled in it a time or two. But I prefer to make gambling a business rather than a hobby. You don’t get to where I am in the corporate world without taking risks.”

“One branch of Stone Corp. specializes in security products that are quite popular with casinos,” Gabriel volunteered.

“And yet I hear you attended an antigambling fundraiser last weekend.” She could almost see the light flick on above Rafael’s head.

“Antigambling, Detective? I was unaware you had such a keen interest in the

gossip rags, but to answer your question...yes, I attended a black - tie benefit for a nonprofit support group that offers a hotline and assistance to gambling addicts.”

“You make a profit on the gambling industry and support groups opposed to that same industry. Isn’t that like cutting your own throat?”

He finished the last of his coffee, eying her over the cup’s rim. “Some may see my actions as hypocritical. That accusation was made during the fundraiser, as I recall, but I see my contribution as an act of responsibility. The group is not antigambling so much as it helps those who take a form of entertainment to the extreme. I don’t deny that my company profits from its connection to the gambling industry. Why not use some of the money to help the people who indirectly contributed to that profit?”

“So you’re opposed to the antigambling platform of Victor Robertson?”

A sly curl lifted one corner of his mouth as he sat his empty coffee cup aside, and she couldn’t stop the tingle of awareness. “Senator Robertson and I do not agree on the government’s role as it pertains to gambling, of which I’m sure you’re quite aware. I doubt the government can effectively legislate morality. Especially when that same government makes billions each year off the industry accused of promoting the immoral act in question.”

“I believe we’ve veered off topic,” Gabriel said. “As much as I enjoy talking politics, I’d much rather hear more about how we may help you with your homicide investigation, Detective.”

“Oh, but your brother is helping, Dr. Stone.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.” Gabriel looked from her to Rafe and back again.

“I think the detective is saying she wouldn’t waste my time or yours.”

Gabe gave her a worried frown. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“The senator I had a disagreement with last Saturday is somehow involved, is that not so?”

“Very perceptive.” Mackenzie smiled. She had to give him credit. He was a keen intellectual.

“The question is, what does a well - to - do, leading conservative legislator like Robertson have to do with a homicide on Chicago’s Southside?”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

36

Mackenzie’s gaze locked with Rafe’s. He knew the answer. She could see it in his eyes. When he remained silent, refusing to implicate himself further, she said, “He’s the victim.”

Beautiful, he thought. Like a lioness stalking a vulnerable target, her eyes sparked with a passion for the hunt. And Rafe didn’t doubt for a minute she hunted him. He nearly smiled at the idea of turning the tables on the detective, of becoming the hunter instead of the prey.

“The victim?” Gabriel’s agitated voice interrupted Rafe’s musings. “I didn’t see anything in the paper about his death.”

“Keep reading. I’m sure it’ll make the front page soon. I notified the family late yesterday.” Although she spoke to his brother, Rafe noted she kept her eyes fixed on him.

*Focus too much on your quarry, darling, and you’ll miss the wolf pack hunting you.*

“Mr. Stone, could you tell me your whereabouts between ten thirty Saturday

night and seven Sunday morning?”

“Are you suggesting that Rafe’s a suspect, Detective?” Gabriel’s voice dropped to a deep rumble, but volume increased with each word uttered. “Is that what this is all about? You come in here—”

“Gabe.” As if a switch turned off, his brother settled down, but Rafe noticed the anger boiling under the surface. Despite the calm, professional demeanor Gabriel displayed in his lab, he’d always had a touchy trigger on his emotions, his temper. Especially when he sensed danger for a member of the pack. “Excuse us for a while. Please.”

After casting a ticked - off glance at the detective, Gabriel stalked out, and Rafe returned his attentions to the woman with the badge.

“You enjoy catching people off guard, don’t you?” *Like the very capable lioness you are*, he thought.

“You don’t look surprised.” She leaned back in the chair and crossed her long, denim - clad legs. He perused the sight from ponytail to sneakers and watched her knuckles tightening on the chair arms. He’d love to see that long, tawny hair down, falling along the contours of her strong back, to know what those miles of legs looked like in a thigh - high skirt. Or in nothing at all. Shame he had too much at risk to find out. “No.”

“It doesn’t bother you, being a murder suspect.”

He smiled. “I would profess my innocence, but that is so cliché. Tell me, are you good at what you do? I suspect you are but want to hear it for myself...from your lips.” He dropped his gaze to those supple lips. They parted briefly before pinching together in a firm glossy line.

37

“Nothing thrills me more than putting the guilty behind bars.”

He didn’t doubt that. After their first meeting, he’d done some investigating of his own. Mackenzie Lyons was true to her name, a predator who took pride in tracking down criminals and seeing justice served.

She graduated summa cum laude from the University of Illinois with a degree in Criminal Justice in just three years. Immediately enrolled in the police academy instead of law school and finished at the top of her class there, too. Distinguished herself as a tough cop, professional, driven. And when the Chicago PD recently reorganized its Detective Division, she was one of the first to complete the training for her detective’s badge.

“Yes, I’m very good at what I do,” she said.

“Then I have nothing to worry about.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“If you are as talented as I believe you are, then in time, you’ll no doubt draw your own conclusions about my innocence.” He rose and turned his back on her to make a point. “More coffee?” he asked, as he poured himself another cup.

“No, thank you. Just answers. I should instruct you that you have the right to an attorney if you want one.”

He turned and raised a brow. “Am I under arrest already, Detective?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll wait.”

“As you wish. Your whereabouts last weekend?”

He settled into his chair, set his cup aside, and pulled out a PDA before answering. “Let’s see. I attended the fundraiser, after which I decided to stay the night in my suite downtown. I arrived there around midnight.”

“Alone?”

He met her crystal blue gaze. “Yes, alone. I slept until about five thirty, worked out for an hour, and was in the office by seven to go over some paperwork for Monday’s meeting. The one at the Sears Tower for which I believe you provided an escort.”

“So someone at the gym could confirm a partial alibi?”

He shook his head. “I don’t go to a health club. I have my own workout room in the suite above my offices. Alone again, I’m afraid.”

“A housekeeper? Butler? Personal assistant? Anyone who could corroborate your whereabouts during the time in question?”

“Simon, my chauffeur, could confirm the time of my arrival Saturday night.

Sylvia came in around seven thirty. But otherwise, no.”

“Just one more question. Do you own an HK Mark 23?”

“A Heckler and Koch .45 caliber with a polygonal bore profile. Nice handgun, and yes, I have one. Among others.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

38

“At your suite?” Proud of her, he nearly smirked. She delivered the question so smoothly.

“Now, Detective, you and I both know handguns are illegal in the city limits of Chicago.” He looked at hers peaking out from underneath her jacket. “At least, for those without a badge.”

She nodded, acknowledging his point in their special game of chess.

“I suppose that firearm, rather than the animals, was the murder weapon?” he asked.

“Will you provide yours for ballistics testing?”

“And save you the trouble of obtaining a warrant?”

One of her finely arched eyebrows rose higher as they silently regarded each other. Gabriel walked in, and she stood. “That can be arranged.”

She turned toward the door, took one step.

“Mackenzie?”

Her eyes expectant, she looked back.

“You can pick up what you requested anytime, without a warrant. I have it at my estate outside the city. I’ll have Sylvia send you the address and directions.”

“I’ll be in touch. Soon.” She brushed past Gabriel and out the door.

“I’m counting on it, Detective.”

Gabe eyed him. “Counting on it? What the hell is going on?” He pointed to the vacant doorway. “That woman is dangerous.”

Rafe chuckled. “And you thought you’d ‘give her a try’. Isn’t that what you said?”

“This isn’t funny. You never said you had her in your sights. I saw the way you were looking at her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, big brother. You haven’t shown that much interest in a woman in years. You nearly snap my head off when I teased you about her earlier. And then you sit there like a lapdog while she accuses you of murder. What is it about her that has you so tied up in knots?”

“Detective Lyons is...unique.”

“Damn it, she’s not Lycan. We don’t need a homicide cop snooping around asking questions and trying to pin a murder on you.” He started pacing, but stopped abruptly. “Lyons. There’s an appropriate name. A woman scared of cats wanting to take down an alpha wolf.”

“Scared of cats?”

“You should’ve seen her. I thought she’d faint or have a coronary when she saw the mountain lion exhibit.”

“Interesting. Call Lucian. Get him to dig a little deeper. I want to know more

39

about Detective Lyons.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Where the hell have you been?” Cooper asked, slamming a file drawer closed.

“Why?” Mackenzie didn’t need a grilling right now. She wanted to review the victim’s financials and finish her report for the sergeant.

“Word’s out.”

“You knew it would be.” The words were uttered with nonchalance, but inside she cursed the greedy media. They could’ve at least done her the courtesy of waiting until after she’d fully briefed her superiors.

“The newshounds are scaling the walls and tying up the phone lines,” Cooper said.

“Like we have time to stop a homicide investigation to personally call each one so their egos aren’t bruised.”

“Yeah, well, Fuller wants us in his office ASAP.”

“Then we best hurry.” She snatched up a folder and headed for her sergeant’s office. “Got anything more on the alibis of family members?”

“Yes. Richard is clear. He was on a date, like he said, all night. The girlfriend confirmed it.” Cooper followed her into an elevator and pressed the button for the next floor up. “One daughter married a man like dear old Dad.”

“Young woman, older man?”

“Politician. Couple lives in Madison, Wisconsin. Their alibi checked out, too. The other daughter was in Europe until she got word. She’s headed this way at thirty thousand feet somewhere over the Atlantic by now, I imagine.”

“So the wife’s the only one without an alibi.”

“Yep. Do you really suspect her?”

“I haven’t ruled anyone out. Killers take all shapes and sizes.”

“What about forensics?”

“They’re at the house now.”

A ding sounded as the doors slid open. Isaac Fuller’s booming voice made Mackenzie straighten. A large African American man in his forties, and former MP, the sergeant was a force to be reckoned with on a good day. On a bad day...

“Detectives Lyons and Cooper, reporting as ordered, sir.”

“Get your butts in here. Shut the door, Cooper.”

Sergeant Fuller steepled his fingers and peered at Mackenzie while he waited for Steve Cooper to return to his place of attention beside her.

“Would one of you like to explain why I have my superiors, the State Attorney’s office, and every reporter in the city breathing down my neck for news on a homicide of a politician I didn’t even know was dead?”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

40

“Sir, I instructed the ME to keep a lid on it for another day, until I could get my report to you finished—”

“Well, you should’ve told the family to do the same. Instead, they just held a damn press conference, and now the Deputy Chief is calling for another one this evening.” He glared at them from behind his desk, and Mackenzie counted the drops of moisture trickling down the back of her neck. “Sit down and give me all you’ve got.”

Seated, she began the report. “Victor Robertson, age 62, married with three kids—all grown. Last seen at 10:30 PM Saturday after returning home with his wife from a charity fundraiser at the Drake. Wife went to bed. He stayed up. He was gone when she awoke at seven. She assumed he left for a planned trip to Springfield, so no missing person’s report was filed. Indications are he never left Chicago.”

When Mackenzie paused, Cooper added, “We have an APB out on his car. Nothing yet.”

“His body was discovered Monday morning around one,” Mackenzie said.

“He’d been dumped there, nude, with massive wounds to the face and torso, believed to be the result of a mauling by one or more animals. We were unable to determine identity at the scene. But we do know the death occurred somewhere else during the previous night.”

Cooper said, “Forensics is sweeping the victim’s house now, but we’ve yet to determine whether he left his home willingly or was forced. Location of actual murder scene is unknown.”

She handed the sergeant her folder. “The autopsy reports he was killed by a .45 caliber slug to the heart. Markings indicate an HK handgun, most likely a Mark 23. The mauling was postmortem.”

“Suspects? Motive?”

Cooper said, “The whereabouts of his immediate family members during the time in question have been confirmed. The wife is the only one without a verifiable alibi. Still working financials as a possible motive.”

“Mac?” Fuller’s attention turned to her. Something in her gut twisted at the idea of reporting the earlier conversation with Rafe, but duty demanded just the facts.

“Robertson had a confrontation with another contributor at the fundraiser on the night he died. We’re following that lead, but we have nothing concrete at this time. I spoke with the suspect and his brother this morning.”

“Alibi?”

“Nothing that can be substantiated. He spent the night at his place downtown after the charity function...alone.”

“Do we know whether he owns a handgun of this type?”

“He admitted as much.”

Fuller’s eyes narrowed. “And have you brought this individual in for  
41

interrogation?”

“No, sir.”

“Why the hell not?”

“We have absolutely no physical evidence connecting him to the crime.”

“He admits to owning a handgun in Chicago. We know he had a falling out with the victim the night he dies, and you don’t think that’s enough to bring him in for further questioning?”

“He readily admitted to having the firearm at his home outside the city. He’s agreed to let us run a ballistics test on it without a warrant. And sir, a political argument doesn’t seem like a strong enough motive for this guy to commit murder.” Fuller leaned forward. “I’ve seen kids shot for pocket change, Detective.”

Mackenzie’s muscles tensed. “I understand that, sir. But a high - profile victim is killed at some unknown location and his body found within hours of the crime. Something just doesn’t feel right. Why dispose of the body in a place that guarantees discovery? Why not arrange to have an ironclad alibi? Why use a firearm and then, without legal council, readily admit to owning the same?”

“Criminals make stupid mistakes all the time, Lyons.”

“This man isn’t stupid, sir.”

“Who the hell is he?”

“Rafael Stone.”

Fuller cursed, long and fluently.

## Chapter Four

“What are you doing here?” Mackenzie asked the moment she reached her office and saw her chair occupied.

Kenneth Hahn closed one of her files, which he’d been reading, and stood. “Now is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“You’re not my friend, Ken.” She snatched the folder, opened it, checked the contents, and squelched a sigh of relief. He was an assistant state’s attorney, but in his case ASA stood for A Supreme Asshole. “How’s Barbie?”

His jaw flinched. “Her name is Barbara.”

“Whatever. What are you doing here?”

She hated the way his lips curled. He was a handsome man, as long as you only looked skin deep. Underneath beat a selfish, ambitious heart.

“Why, I came to congratulate you on landing what I’m sure will be the best murder case this year. Pretty good for a rookie.”

Anger simmered inside. Her detective’s badge may be new, but she wasn’t a damn rookie.

His face brightened. “And the best part—”

“There’s nothing ‘best’ about murder,” she said. When his eyes dropped to the other folder in her hand, she knew congratulations had nothing to do with his visit. She sat in the seat he’d vacated and didn’t offer him a chair.

“We’ll be working together. I called in a few favors. This one’s mine.” He grinned like a dog with a bone clamped between his teeth.



"How wonderful for you." *Anything to get your face on TV, jerk.* "You got one thing wrong though."

"What's that?" He sat. *Damn it.*

"Actually, the case is mine, so I'm sure you understand why I can't chat."

"If you solve this one, maybe they'll give you a bigger office." He cast a look of distaste around the small, windowless room with its should've - been - hauled - to - the43

dump - two - decades - ago office furniture.

"I'm busy. Beat it."

"Look, Mackenzie. You're going to have to work with me on this case whether you like it or not. So you better start making nice or..."

"Or what?" She narrowed her gaze on him. "Get this straight, Ken. I have a case to solve. I don't give a damn about making it easy for you to get your mug on the nine o'clock news. Got it?"

"I got it. You're making this personal."

"Personal? This has nothing to do with *us*. There is no *us*. This is my job."

"And you intend to use that job to show me I was wrong about you. It's *your* case. You're the one in power now. Fine. I can take your stubborn anger."

"I'm stubborn?"

"You're still steamed over our breakup, but you became the cop. You knew you'd eventually have to work with me."

She wanted to scream. She broke up with him because he didn't want her to be a cop at all. He couldn't understand why she wouldn't be happy giving up her job to promote his career from the sidelines. He'd gone on and found the trophy wife he wanted, but he kept accusing her of not getting over him.

"I don't have a problem working with you, but we do this by the book or not at all. You want information on the case, you wait for it. When I have something to report, I'll do so through proper channels. Until then, keep your ass out of my office and your nose out of my files. I don't do favors...even for *old friends*." Her smile was intentionally shallow. All she needed was for him to leak the wrong thing to the press.

"Mac, you got a minute?" Cooper stuck his head in the door. If he'd been five minutes earlier, she might've kissed him. But his sly smile made her want to slap him instead.

"Yeah." She looked at Hahn. "Excuse us."

He stood and straightened his jacket. "I expect an update on the case soon. I suggest you see to it, Mackenzie."

"You'll get an update as soon as I have something to report. Good day, Kenneth."

When he was gone, Cooper took a seat. "So..."

"So, the next time you delay like that again, you're history."

"Come on, Mac. You know you'd skin me alive if I ruined all your fun. I figured you had some steam to let off after our visit to Fuller's office. And you must admit, stripes look better across his back than mine."

Mackenzie laughed and rolled her eyes.

"Did you file away the cold case that was on my desk?"

He held her gaze a moment. "Yeah. It's in the top drawer of the filing cabinet."

He grinned. "Locked."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

44

"Thanks, Coop."

"Any time, Mac. Any time."

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd spent most of his adult life in a box, Carl Shumaker thought. Stuffed in a cubicle. Surrounded by high - dollar, high - tech equipment, Dilbert comic strips, and useless desktop tinker toys that'd make a Star Trek fan drool. For years, he'd let his fingers run across the keyboard in a race to develop the next revolutionary breakthrough in the world of computer software. But not today.

This morning, he'd kissed the uneasy smile from his wife's lips and left home. But he headed to the park instead of the office. He wasn't welcome at work anymore, not since he'd been escorted off the property by a security guard who'd watched his every move as he packed up the Dilbert clippings and plastic space aliens.

He let his head drop as he knelt to tug his shoe strings tighter, then stretched in preparation for his run.

Em had been furious and scared. She ranted and cried over that damn pink slip well into the night. He'd told her that he'd think of something, and he would. A run always helped him think.

He started down the trail at a slow warm - up pace. This wasn't his usual place to run. He preferred the park closer to the office, but he couldn't go there now. He didn't want to risk running into anyone he knew.

He'd gotten his family into this mess, and he'd figure something out, some way to get the money he owed, even if he had to sell everything and move in with her parents. He just needed to convince them to give him a little more time.

Fallen leaves crackled under each step as he picked up the pace and pumped fresh air into his lungs.

Jimmy had warned him not to cross them, and he wouldn't if they'd just give him more time to pay.

Maybe he should've done what they'd said while he was in a position to accomplish it. A slight change in code. A well - hidden backdoor. It would've been simple. They would've written off his debt, and he'd still have his job. But they wanted him to help them cheat millions. What if they got caught? It would be his neck on the line. No, he couldn't do it; he just wanted out. Out of debt. Free and clear.

So he'd tried to get the money to pay them, and still lost everything. Mr. Stone had been furious...

A fierce growl stopped him in his tracks. Carl spun, trying to see through the thick brush on either side of the trail.

That dog better be on a leash. There were city ordinances about that sort of thing,

45

weren't there?

Another growl.

Deep.

Brief.

Where was he?

Sweat seeped through his clothes. Carl cautiously started down the trail again. A snap made him turn left. A blur of fur and sharp fangs came straight at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie ignored the overwhelming scent of floral sprays and focused on faces in the crowd. Politicians, staffers, celebrities, family friends, all dressed in somber colors, their faces respectfully blank, gathered around the hole in the ground, the final resting place of Victor Robertson. The reverend uttered words drowned out by weeping and whispers of sympathy.

Tissues clutched in hands, family members sat under a green canvas tent. Pearl Robertson sat front and center, her red - rimmed eyes swimming with tears. Her daughters sat on either side, both chic in their black dresses, their backs ramrod straight. Richard sat beside one of his sisters, his expression grim, head lowered, hands fisted. A second man Mackenzie assumed was the son - in - law held the other daughter's

hand and kept a protective arm draped around her trembling shoulders.

An honor guard's 21 - gun salute, synchronized with military precision, made many people flinch. More tears fell when soldiers removed, folded, and presented the American flag to the widow, as an unseen bugler played the haunting strains of *Taps*. A prickle at her nape alerted Mackenzie. While she scanned the mourners, someone watched her. She knew it, sensed it, but couldn't find the source. She studied the crowd again, looking for anyone who showed an interest in her. The service now over, some people milled around. Others gave last declarations of condolence before wandering off to their vehicles.

Mackenzie's searching gaze met Richard's eyes, suddenly cold and hard. He excused himself and approached her with a determined stride. His steps crackled amid the recently fallen leaves.

"My sympathies, Mr. Robertson."

"Have you caught the monster who did this yet?"

"Not yet, but—"

"Then save your sympathies, Detective. I want the bastard to pay."

"I understand wh—"

"No! You don't understand a damn thing."

He was wrong, but she let it slide. Grief could make people say anything. The pain felt by families of murdered victims often led to fits of anger, especially if the case

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

46

went unsolved.

"What the hell are you doing here? Why aren't you out there somewhere arresting the one who did this?"

Mackenzie kept her face blank, knowing his volume was attracting attention. "I am looking for your father's killer. Murderers sometime attend their victim's funerals."

"You think someone here killed him? His family? His friends? That a loved one could do what that monster did to my father and then come here with words of sympathy? Maybe shed a few tears? Is that what you think? You're wrong, and while you're wasting time here, he could be out there killing someone else."

"We will find the person responsible, I assure you."

“We already gave you his name. My father fought with Stone and then winds up mauled to death. What more do you need?”

“It’s my job to look at every lead, every possibility, Mr. Robertson.”

“The bastard has his own wolf pack, for crying out loud. It may be just a job to you, Detective, but my father is dead, and I want justice. You got that? I want that man behind bars.”

“Richard, please.” His mother’s soft voice made him spin around, stalk off.

“I’m sorry, Detective Lyons. Richard has been...well...not himself lately.”

“No need to apologize, Mrs. Robertson. I understand. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Her eyes welled with tears again as she patted Mackenzie’s hand. “Thank you for coming. If you’ll excuse me.”

Mackenzie watched Pearl Robertson walk away with a silent dignity that impressed her and made her heart ache. One other woman in Mackenzie’s life had shown a similar trait. A vision of the woman’s face swam in her mind as she walked across the cemetery lawns.

She stopped to glance down at a headstone. Her breath hitched. With a finger, she traced the words forever etched in cold, hard granite.

“God, I miss you,” she whispered. Then, after a long moment, Mackenzie straightened and headed for her car.

\* \* \* \* \*

Watching the homicide detective wade through the sea of reporters and drive away, the man stepped around the large oak tree. No need to hurry. He knew her destination and could find her anytime.

She’d sensed him, which both surprised and impressed him. He could tell the moment she became aware of his scrutiny. Her shoulders tensed, back straightened, and chin rose.

He approached the headstone she’d touched. What had held her interest?

47

Not dressed for a funeral, he carried a small bouquet of flowers and kept his distance from the green tent and media circus in the parking lot. To any observer, he was just a man visiting another grave.

He stopped, heard the soft sigh of leather as he knelt to lay the flowers by the headstone, and read the epitaph.

*Maureen M. Lyons*

*Beloved Mother*

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie spent the drive back to the station analyzing what leads she had in the case. Her mind replayed conversations with family, acquaintances of the victim, and suspects.

When she came to Rafe, her thoughts hit a mental brick wall. She knew he was capable of murder. Under the right circumstances, anyone could take a life. In his case, she suspected he’d be methodical, calculating, and stealthy. He wasn’t a man who’d make mistakes or be easily caught.

What would drive him to kill? Money and power? He seemed to have those in abundance. He’d been a primary contributor to the mayor’s last election campaign, which was the basis for her sergeant’s fountain of profanities when he learned the name

of her prime suspect. To Fuller's credit, he didn't try to sway her investigation, but he did want to clamp down on any potential leaks. All her reports were now for his eyes only.

Mackenzie didn't care about the political minefields. She wanted the killer caught and punished. Period. If Rafe proved to be involved, she'd go after him with everything she had, for her own reasons, not because Fuller demanded the case against him be as solid as granite.

Unfortunately, her case looked more like Swiss cheese. The only motive she had to go on was inadequate. A first year law student could dance circles around it in a courtroom.

She tried to picture Rafe blowing a hole in a man's chest because of a minor political disagreement. Why have the body mauled and dumped where it'd be easily discovered? The pieces just didn't fit.

She needed to pick up his gun and have it tested. But, since he readily agreed to the tests, she doubted there'd be a match. Still, she couldn't rule him out. He remained her only real lead, and she'd follow the trail to its end.

Mackenzie parked and headed for her office. On the way, she stopped off at the pop machine for a cold caffeine fix. She'd tossed and turned all night, getting little sleep, and that had left her a little bit shaky.

"Hey, Mac." Cooper caught up with her in the hall and matched her stride. "Got

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

48

a minute? You'll want to hear this."

She followed him into his office and sat.

"We found the car." He tossed her a file with some photos of the victim's Lexus.

"Where?"

"Abandoned near the docks. A CSI is sweeping it now for any trace."

She nodded. "Witnesses?"

He shook his head. "No cameras in the area either. A security guard at a warehouse called it in. Said it'd been there since Monday. He thought it belonged to the owner and kept an eye on it. But when it hadn't been moved in a few days, he asked and found out no one there knew where it'd come from."

He tapped a fingertip on one of the pictures. "Whoever dumped it wasn't after the vic's money. That's a Lexus worth fifty grand. It'd bring in a lot more at a chopshop."

So auto theft wasn't the motive. With the victim found stripped of everything, including his wedding ring, robbery may or may not have been the motive. No, the brutal condition of the body pointed to something more personal.

"Does that warehouse use guard dogs?"

"Not according to the security guard."

"Okay, I've got a report to file with the sergeant. After that, let's head over to see if they turned up anything." She rose to leave.

"Hey, how'd it go at the funeral?"

She thought of the sudden sensation she'd had of someone watching her. "Fine. I now have a few more names on the list I want to check."

"Any news cameras?"

"With all those VIPs there? Of course. Why?"

"You didn't wear that to the funeral, did you?" His gaze slid over her.

She looked down at her black blazer, V-necked, cream-colored blouse, and black thigh-high skirt. "What?" Did she have a stain on it from breakfast?

Cooper reached out to finger her collar, ran a thumb over it as if testing the texture. "Because I doubt the cameramen could focus on the funeral with you there in this getup."

She was about to take him down a peg or two when his eyes widened in surprise and his hand dropped to his side. The prickle at her nape erupted into blazing tingles.

"I agree." Although the statement was positive, the deep rumble of that voice held a touch of menace.

Mackenzie turned to find Rafe Stone standing in the doorway. His eyes, harder than she'd ever seen them, focused on Cooper.

"What are you doing here?"

To her ultimate irritation, he ignored her and stared at Cooper. "Who are you?"

49

"Mac's partner. Got a problem with that?"

Rafe made no move to shake hands. Coop didn't seem to mind since he didn't offer a hand.

"Lord, save me from testosterone," Mac grumbled. "What are you doing here, Mr. Stone?"

His golden gaze shifted to her and softened. "I thought I asked you to call me Rafe."

"You can ask. Answer the question."

"I came to save you a trip out of town." He held out a black case.

She blinked. "You brought a handgun into the police station?"

He shrugged. "You did request it for testing, and I agreed to cooperate, did I not?"

Besides, it's locked and unloaded. Although if you'd like some of my ammo, I brought a couple boxes." He grinned. "They're outside in the limo."

"Coop?"

"I'm on it," he snapped. "But I won't be long."

Rafe moved aside to let him pass. "Protective partner."

"We're cops. Friends. Nothing more." Now why had she felt the need to say that? What he chose to believe was incidental, and her personal life was her business, not his.

For a moment their gazes locked, then his slid over her body like a caress that both inflamed and unnerved her. Aggravated with herself, she returned the favor and pointedly eyed him from jet-black hair to shiny designer shoes. Liking what she saw and trying hard not to, she looked back at his face and forced her gaze to remain there. His knowing smile pissed her off more.

Frustrated, Mackenzie started to shift away from Rafe's intent look, but the sudden touch of his hand on her cheek stopped her in her tracks.

"You haven't slept well, Detective. I can see the weariness in your eyes."

"If that was an attempt at a compliment, you failed miserably." Irked, and a little embarrassed, she pulled away, moved around the desk, and shuffled some papers, not really seeing the words on them.

"You strike me as a woman more interested in the truth than in waxing poetic

prose.”

His accurate observation confounded her, so she lashed out with sarcasm. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m always in the mood for a little Keats or Byron.”

“How about Shakespeare?” He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, with a quirk to his lips. “I have seen roses damasked, red and white, but no such roses see I in her cheeks; And in some perfumes is there more delight, than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. I love to hear her speak—”

She couldn’t help herself. She laughed.

“Ah, light returns to eyes of blue when laughter is again renewed.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

50

Mackenzie quieted, flushed. When the silence became unbearable, she asked,

“And who do you quote now?”

“No one. Just speaking the truth.”

Cooper’s footsteps interrupted their exchange. Mackenzie returned her attention to the papers on her desk. *Wait, this was Cooper’s office.* She stuffed her hands in her pockets.

“I left a receipt for your property with the driver.”

Rafe nodded. The tension between the men thickened the atmosphere. She frowned.

Rafe looked from her to her partner. “Now that my civic duty here is done, I’ll say farewell. Mackenzie, a pleasure to see you again. Detective Cooper.”

“Mr. Stone—”

The phone rang and since she was closest, she snatched it up. “Lyons.” As she listened to the caller, her muscles tensed. When she hung up, she looked at Rafe and knew he’d noticed the change in her demeanor.

“If you’ll excuse us. Coop, we have to go.”

She started past Rafe but stopped when he caught her arm. “Be careful.” The concern she saw in his eyes made her flinch and nod stiffly before she walked away. Cooper remained silent until they were in her car, with the dash light flashing. “I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

“Don’t be an idiot. You didn’t like having to look up to him.”

“He’s not that much taller than me.” When she cast him a skeptical glance, he snapped, “Better an idiot than a blind fool. He’s a suspect, Mac.”

“I know that, damn it. Do you honestly think I’d jeopardize my career for a fling? Just because you play the field, Coop, doesn’t mean everyone does.”

Cooper winced, but his eyes blazed.

Mackenzie’s grip tightened on the wheel. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. I didn’t mean...”

“No, I’m sorry, too.” He rubbed his neck and sighed. “Mac, I know what this job means to you. I know you wouldn’t risk it for a one - night stand, but Stone isn’t just any man. A guy like that usually succeeds in getting what he wants. I’m just trying to be a friend when I say, watch your back.”

She braked for traffic at a stop light, and then continued through it as motorists moved aside. “There’s more to this than Stone. What is it you’re not telling me?”

“It’s nothing. Let’s just solve the damn murder before we both go crazy.”

“Coop?”

“There’s talk that the case may be given to more - experienced detectives.”

“What the hell—?”

“It’s a big case, Mac. You and I are rookies compared to some in the division.”

51

“We earned our badges the same as they did.”

“Yeah, it’s just rumor, and Fuller’s backing us on it right now. He doesn’t like the implication that any of his detectives are incapable of handling a murder investigation, no matter how high - profile the victim is.”

Who wanted them removed from the case? Mackenzie had some ideas where the pressure was coming from, but the second question was harder to answer. Could their sergeant hold out long enough for them to solve the case? Especially since that pressure was sure to increase now.

After they’d driven another block or so, Cooper asked, “So where are we going?

What was the call about?”

“To a park.” She glanced at him. “They found another body.”

## Chapter Five

The light of day unveiled the murderer’s brutality and tarnished the otherwise peaceful surroundings of the city park. The victim lay discarded amid leaves and brush along a jogging trail.

“Similar MO,” Cooper observed.

Mackenzie nodded. “But not exactly the same.”

The body was nude with the exception of socks and athletic shoes. Bite and claw marks marred the neck and chest, but this time, the face was left virtually untouched. And there were defensive wounds about the arms and legs.

As the forensics team processed the scene, Mackenzie looked for other clues in the vicinity. She hadn’t gone far when she discovered the first remnant of clothing.

“Over here.” She signaled to the crime scene photographer. “There must be more.”

Another hour of searching proved her words true. They found pieces of a man’s jogging suit, shredded and bloodied, scattered along a dirt path. Not as popular as the paved jogging trails, the path was more of a shortcut, overgrown from lack of use.

Cooper walked up, removing his latex gloves. “Medical examiner’s taking the body now. Says he’ll tag it priority.”

“He ran for his life,” she murmured, staring at the trail. “It’s almost like the killer was toying with him. Attack. Call off the dogs. Let him run, then attack again.”

“Judging from the trail of clothing, I’d say the fanny pack was the first thing to go.”

“Was there a cell phone inside?”

He nodded.

*Didn’t want him calling for help, did you?* she thought.

“Guess the killer got lucky there, huh?”

*Luck or training?* “Maybe. What else was in it?”

“Keys and a wallet with five dollars in cash, a debit card, a Visa, couple pictures,

53

and an ID for one Carl Shumaker.” He paused until she looked at him. “His address is



not far from here.”

“Let’s go.” They headed for her car.

“Detective Lyons. Can you give us a statement?” The woman shouting the question stood behind crime scene tape and held a microphone. The lens of a camera was visible just over her shoulder.

“Duty calls,” Cooper said with a chuckle. “No way around them. Your car’s on the other side of their news van.”

Sighing, Mackenzie approached the reporter.

“Evalyn Drake, Channel 9. Detective, what can you tell us about the city’s latest homicide?”

“The medical examiner will determine whether this is a homicide, Ms. Drake.”

“But a body was found here.”

“Yes, the body of a white male was discovered today in the park.”

“Any ID on the victim?”

“We are withholding the man’s name until his identity can be confirmed and relatives notified.”

“If this is not a homicide, why are you here?”

“Pending the outcome of an autopsy, we are treating the case as a homicide.”

“Can you tell us how he died? Do you have any suspects in the case?”

“In answer to your first question, I will not jeopardize the case by speculating on the cause of death. I’ll let the medical examiner determine that. As far as your second question, I have no names to give you at this time.”

“Can you tell us whether this case is related to Senator Robertson’s murder? You are the lead investigator on both cases, are you not?”

“I am, and no, I will not confirm any connection between the death of a man in a city park and the murder of a state legislator.”

“What about suspects in the Robertson murder?”

“I’m not here to discuss that murder. You have your statement. I have to go.” She turned to walk away.

“The Robertson’s case remains unsolved. Will having to work two cases not split your resources, Detective?”

Mackenzie stopped and faced the reporter and her cameraman. “We’re both professionals, Ms. Drake. You have a job to do, and I’m sure you’re quite capable of covering several stories a day. Except, when the ON AIR light goes off, you unhook your mike and go home. My job is a little different. My job is tracking down people who kill, and all victims are priority, no matter what they did for a living, how much money they had in the bank, or what their names were. I treat each and every case that comes across my desk with the utmost respect, and I will seek to solve every one of them with a tenacity that you can only dream about. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve got work to

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

54

do.”

Cooper waited only until she closed her car door. “Nice speech. Especially the tenacity part. Liked that.”

“Can it, Coop.” She cranked the engine, shoved the car into gear, and forced herself not to stomp on the accelerator and spin out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rafe stepped onto the patio and spotted Gabe lying face down on a chaise lounge by the pool. He'd been swimming nude again, his black hair still damp.

"Good thing I didn't bring home any investors. What would they think seeing the Lykos Institute's no - nonsense vice president in the buff?"

"That I dislike tan lines." Gabe rose up on his elbows. "You're late, but then so is Luc."

"I had business that required my presence."

"Oh?"

Rafe sat and watched the last rays of sunlight sparkle across the water's surface. He'd taken time out of a very busy schedule to turn his gun in to Mackenzie. He could've easily waited for her to come pick it up, but he'd wanted to see her. And that disturbed him. He felt like a gnat drawn to the flame. She was trouble, he knew, and yet, he found himself wondering at odd moments of the day what she was doing. After meeting her partner, seeing that appreciative look in his eye, Rafe's urge to know her every move grew. Her clarification of their relationship only soothed his male instincts a bit. The fatigue in her eyes, however, concerned him the most. What had put that haunted sadness there?

"Hello, brother?"

"Yeah?"

Gabriel shook his head. "Never mind. I can see what business kept you in the city."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means your mind is off tracking that detective again. What? Did she show up with a warrant for your arrest yet, or are you just hoping she doesn't forget the handcuffs?"

"Don't be an ass, Gabe."

"That might be hard to do since it's hanging out for the whole world to see." The feminine voice made Gabe wince and Rafe turn with a grin to see his elderly housekeeper bring out a fresh pitcher of lemonade and glasses.

Gabe played a hand over his heart. "Marge, you wound me."

"If I was your mother, I'd do more than that. I'd tan your backside so you

55

wouldn't need the sun to do it." The twinkle in her eyes belied the threat.

"And if I was a few years older, I'd give Ainsworth a run for his money." Gabe gave her a saucy wink, and she huffed.

"You'd run all right. My husband would chase you all over creation with a pitchfork." She laughed. "Kids these days! They don't know the meaning of propriety."

"Marge, why the extra glass?" Rafe indicated the additional one on the tray. "Is Lucian home?"

"You know that rascal won't drink lemonade. You have a guest. She's pulling up the drive now."

"She?"

"Said she's a detective. Made her show me a badge before I buzzed open the gate."

Mackenzie? Here?

Marge turned to Gabe. "So you best change into something more appropriate, young man, before she hauls that bare bottom of yours to jail for indecent exposure." "She's out of her jurisdiction, but I'll change."

"Gabe..." The warning died on Rafe's lips. Too late. A glow had already formed around his brother. The change started. He watched as Gabe's form dissolved in a sparkling brilliance, moved, shifted. The light brightened until Rafe had to blink. Then the energy faded, the particles reforming into a solid body of corded muscle and ebony fur.

"Humph. That wasn't the change I had in mind, but it'll do." Marge disappeared through the French doors.

"I ought to make her bring me a leash." Rafe chuckled when his brother growled.

"Behave."

*Don't I always?* Gabe's words slipped into his mind, the telepathic communication a comfort to his Lycan senses.

Mackenzie couldn't enjoy the drive to Rafe's home, which wound more than a mile into lush woods. Why would anyone want to live in the boonies?

"He works in the damn city, but is that where I find him? No. Why should he make it easy for me?" Frustrated and ticked, she mumbled to herself.

She'd left Cooper in the city trying to track down other relatives of the second victim. They'd gone to his house but found no one home. The wife and kids had left that morning to visit her mother in the suburbs, according to a very talkative, elderly neighbor.

The old lady was a fount of information. Carl Shumaker and his wife had been married for thirteen years, had two kids in grade school and one on the way. He was always so polite and helpful, but lately he'd seemed a bit distracted. She'd heard a few arguments next door, the houses being so close and all. But the clincher was when the

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

56

neighbor told them he worked in the Loop as a computer programmer for Stone Corporation.

Mackenzie had felt as if the woman's porch collapsed under her feet. Could she have been so wrong about Stone? Was Cooper right? Had the man, with as much charisma as he had money in the bank, blinded her to his guilt?

"No, damn it." She slapped the wheel and glared out the windshield as the sprawling log and stone mansion came into view. The trappings of wealth and fame had never impressed her before. She didn't care about his riches either, although if she were honest with herself, she could appreciate his looks and charm. Still, even serial killers could be quite charming when they wanted to be.

If Stone were the killer, her job was to take him down. She couldn't do that by making excuses for him or overlooking evidence, no matter how circumstantial. She was a cop. If she screwed up, murderers went free and more people died. Now, a second man with connections to Rafael Stone lay in the city morgue, and that, more than anything else, left her doubting her instincts. What clue had she missed?

Maybe she should've told Cooper where she was going. He would've demanded to come along. She shook her head, turned off the ignition, and got out. No. She'd do this alone; she had to. The job was all she had, her way to make a difference. If she

couldn't trust herself to read the signs of a killer, what good was she as a cop? She walked between the two mammoth wolves, recognizing them from the photograph at the Lykos Institute.

"Hello. Please, come in." A lady with grey hair and happy eyes that crinkled at the corners held the massive door open. "I'm Marge Ainsworth, the Stone family's housekeeper. Mr. Stone is on the patio. Right this way."

"The Stone family?" *Is he married?*

"Yes, Rafael and his brothers live here."

*Brothers...no wife...no kids.* Relief settled in her stomach, followed quickly by irritation. What did it matter to her that he was single? At least he wouldn't leave behind children when she carted his butt off to prison.

The tap of Mackenzie's flats echoed as she walked past a wide, sweeping staircase, the oak banister polished to a mirrored luster. "The place is certainly large enough for three men to get lost in."

The housekeeper chuckled, pushed open French doors, and motioned Mackenzie through. She spotted Rafe in an instant. He sat with his back to her in a hunter green, wrought-iron patio chair. She started toward him but froze when she heard a low growl.

"Behave." The command came sharp and quick. "Welcome, Detective. Please, join me for a drink."

"No thanks. I'm on duty." She scowled at the wolf, annoyed that his presence  
57

made her voice shaky. As she neared, the wolf's golden brown eyes followed her. He was huge, black, and had a lot of teeth. She unbuttoned her blazer for better access to her firearm. The wolf cocked his head and seemed to smile.

"The drink is lemonade, quite permissible for officers on duty, I believe, especially on what promises to be one of the last warm evenings of the season."

"Oh." She sat, thinking she'd been foolish not to bring Cooper along, no matter how much her pride had demanded otherwise.

The wolf, which apparently claimed the chaise lounge as his throne, continued to stare at her. He was panting. Wolves couldn't really smirk. Could they?

"I should've known you wouldn't have a normal pet."

The wolf growled, then lowered his muzzle to rest on his front paws.

Rafe laughed. "I don't think he appreciates being called a pet. G's more like a member of the family."

"G?"

"Yes, that's what we call him." He handed her a glass, and she sipped it, savoring the tart chill as the liquid slid down her throat.

"Does it stand for something?"

"That depends on how much of a pest he is at any given moment." The wolf yawned.

"He's the one in the picture, right? The portrait at the institute."

"Yes, but others roam my estate."

Her gaze shot to his. "You have more?" She remembered Richard's words about a wolf pack. She'd thought he was referring to the institute's animals, not that Stone actually had his own pack at home.

He nodded. "The property is vast, plenty of room for my family and a wolf pack. A personal nature preserve of sorts."

And a perfect place to commit murder, she thought, scanning the surrounding woodlands. No witnesses. Then why dump the body back in the city? Why risk discovery by attacking a second victim in a public park? He could bury the bodies somewhere out there, and no one would ever know. Maybe he thought he could flaunt it before investigators. Some killers wanted their work to be discovered, admired. Arrogance often led to a criminal's downfall.

The gentle caress of a finger along her temple startled her. "Back off." She swatted his hand away, angry that he'd caught her unaware...that even a brief touch could unsettle her.

Rafe leaned back in his chair again, his lips quirked in an amused lopsided smile. "You were frowning...still frowning. A headache?"

"I'm fine."

The wolf licked his lips and eyed her like a juicy piece of steak, but Rafe's penetrating regard made her shift in her seat. She bit back a curse. Why did this man

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

58

get to her? What was it about him that threw her off - balance?

"They take it as an ultimatum, you know."

"What?" Her gaze swept from the wolf to Rafe.

"Staring is a way for canines, wild or domestic, to assert their dominance in the pack."

"Really?" She lifted her lemonade to her lips without looking away from his stare. "Interesting."

"Yes. It...*arouses* their more aggressive tendencies. A challenge, if you will." His lips pressed together as if he were fighting a smile. "I don't believe you drove all this way for a taste of Marge's lemonade...or a lesson on animal instincts. And as much as I'd like to think you enjoy my company, I doubt that's the case either."

Mackenzie stiffened. "I should remind you that you have a right to an attorney..."

The wolf sat up, alert. Her hand inched toward her gun.

Rafe's focus shifted to her hand and then lifted to her face. She looked from the man to the wolf.

"Get lost, G, now." Silence stretched until he looked at the wolf, too. "I said, *now*."

Amazingly, the wild canine obeyed like a tamed puppy. Even more surprising, the wolf went into the house. "You let him stay in the house?" She hadn't meant to blurt out the question, but Rafe answered easily enough.

"As I said, he's part of the family. He lives here."

She shook her head.

"Now, Detective. Do you want to tell me what this is all about, and why you insist that I need an attorney?"

"The attorney is a matter of procedure. Contacting one is within your rights as a citizen before being questioned by an investigator."

One ebony brow rose. "So I've been informed. Why the interrogation,

Mackenzie?”

His use of her name made her grit her teeth. She could not let him get personal, as if this were a conversation between acquaintances, or something more. She shied away from that thought.

His long, well - shaped fingers wrapped around his glass. Strong hands. Capable of a tender touch, but were they the hands of a cold - blooded murderer?

She'd given him the advantage by confronting him on his own turf, and he'd maneuvered her to gain the upper hand. Now, she'd seize her turn and take it back.

“I need confirmation on the employment of a computer programmer who, I believe, works for you.”

He blinked but showed no other reaction. “I have thousands of people working  
59

for me in this country and others, but I'll be glad to help if you can be a bit more specific. May I have this employee's name?”

“Carl Shumaker.”

This time, his reaction was immediate and visible. Rafe's eyes narrowed, and his already - chiseled features hardened.

“No, Detective. He's no longer employed with Stone Corp.”

She knew that. Tough to maintain employment when you're dead. But before she could ask him to elaborate, he asked a question of his own.

“Is he somehow involved in Robertson's murder? Is that what this is about?”

Mackenzie peered at her prime suspect, saw the anger in his eyes, and let his words sink in. He was either very smart or innocent. Maybe both. For now, she'd give him smart, nothing more.

“When was his last day of employment?”

“Yesterday.”

“He quit yesterday?”

“No. He was terminated yesterday.”

Her breath hitched in her chest. “Terminated?”

“Carl Shumaker had a promising future as a very talented computer programmer.”

“Had?”

“He was the Team Lead on some new revolutionary security software Stone Corp. has been developing for some time now...until we discovered his attempts to circumvent the corporation's own security system. I fired him for trying to embezzle money from the company.”

“Embezzle?”

“Yes, by filing falsified expense reports and more recently attempting to hack into our financial computer system.”

“When did you report the embezzlement to the authorities?”

“I didn't.”

She blinked. “You didn't?”

“No.”

“You fired him.”

Those smooth lips curved again. “Yes. And suggested debt - management counseling.”

Did he seek his own personal vengeance on a man who'd crossed the line, broke a trust? Was Robertson's public challenge enough to trigger a murderous rage in Stone? "An employee commits a crime, and you let him walk? Or is that what you want me to think?"

Rafe's eyes sparked with anger. "What exactly do you think, Detective? You never answered my question, although I've responded to all of yours. What does Carl

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

60

have to do with Robertson's death?"

She met his gaze boldly. "That's what I'm here to find out. Both men are dead and so far, the only connection between them is you."

"Both men...?" He sat motionless, surprise clearly written across his face, but that expression soon changed to one of determination. His voice was cold and hard as steel.

"When?"

"You didn't know?"

"Hell no, I didn't know." His eyes locked on hers. "When?"

"We got the call—"

"When I was in your office," he interrupted. "I saw the change in you, as if an iron curtain fell into place. So full of purpose and spirit...you were magnificent." He stood abruptly, as if jolted by his own words, and started pacing. Mackenzie, however, collapsed against the back of her chair.

"Where? How?"

With the sun dropping below the horizon, its warmth receded. She watched steam rise from the heated pool and stared at the swirling ripples. *Magnificent...*

"Mackenzie, where?"

Shaken from her reverie, she looked up at him before answering. "His body was found in a park. He'd been mauled."

Rafe cursed. He paced like a caged animal. When he stopped and faced her, she recognized pain and fury in his haunted expression.

"His family. Are they okay? Did you find them?"

"They weren't home. Cooper's tracking them down now."

"Rafe?" Gabriel stood in the doorway. Unlike the last time she'd seen him, he'd discarded the white lab coat in favor of blue jeans, a green pull - over sweater and no shoes. He didn't look at her, his focus remaining fixed on his brother. "What is it?"

"Detective Lyons just informed me that another man I know was found dead today."

"Who?"

"Shumaker."

"The one who...?"

Rafe nodded.

Gabe stepped onto the terrace and moved toward her. "Forgive me. Hello, Detective. It seems we're always meeting under rather unpleasant circumstances."

She stood and shook his offered hand. As she released it, her cell phone rang.

"Excuse me." Stepping away, she flipped it open.

"Lyons." She listened to Cooper fill her in on the latest developments. "Uh huh.

Is she..." She could feel questions forming in the minds of the two men who stood

nearby, their stares prodding her back. “No. I’ll go. It’ll take me a while. I’m...not on

61

that side of town, but—No, I said, I’ll take it. You keep checking those other leads. Okay. Later.” The phone snapped shut.

She was tired. The sun had set, and tonight would prove to be another long night. Mackenzie took a deep breath and turned. “I have to go.”

“Tell me.” Rafe’s command was soft but competed with an engine’s rumble that made Mackenzie look toward the front of the house.

“It’s police business. I’ll need you to come in later for further questioning. Excuse me, I’ll see myself out.”

She headed through the house, keeping an eye out for the wolf. She could hear Rafe’s footsteps shadow her own. As she reached the front door, his arm appeared over her right shoulder, while his hand prevented her from opening it.

“You’re not going anywhere until—”

For a split second, panic raced through her system, and the cop took over.

Stepping to her left, she spun with her gun in her hand. “Step aside, now.”

A movement to her right made her realize just how outnumbered she was.

Gabriel stood at the corner of her periphery, muscles tensed. Rafe leaned against the door, arms and ankles crossed, yet his eyes shone with an alertness that contradicted his pose of nonchalance. She kept the gun aimed at his chest.

“Mackenzie, is all this really necessary?” he asked.

“I said, move. Now.”

“Tell me.” Rafe held his hand palm out toward his brother, who’d inched forward.

A crash ricocheted through the entrance hall as the housekeeper dropped a vase.

Mackenzie’s gaze bounced to the shattered crystal and flowers.

That was all Rafe needed. Before she could react, he had her wrist caught in a vise, the gun pointed at the ceiling, and her back pinned to the wall.

He squeezed her wrist, and she fought to hang on to the gun. He increased the pressure.

“Aaah!” Her grip gave way, and the firearm fell into the waiting hands of Rafe’s brother. “Son of a bitch.”

She struggled but only managed to insinuate herself more firmly between a rock hard male and an inflexible surface. The heated length of his body pressed against her, lifting her onto her toes. His hips wedged between her legs, a position that sent a different sort of panic through her bloodstream.

Then she felt the soft, soothing stroke of his thumb on her wrist. She looked at his face. The storm of concern and passion she saw reflected in his eyes puzzled her.

Mackenzie heard the front door open and tried to see past his expansive shoulders.

“Well hell, it seems I missed all the fun.” The deep drawl of a third man’s voice made Mackenzie shiver. “Or is this show just now starting?”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

62

“Tell me, damn it.” Rafe’s words were a hot whisper in her ear.

“Coop found Shumaker’s wife.”



Rafe released her so quickly she almost slid down the wall.

“Where?”

She rubbed her wrist and gave him her best go - to - hell look before glancing at their audience. Gabriel still held her gun, lowered toward the floor, his finger not even on the trigger.

The new arrival was a fashion model for Bikers - R - Us. He wore black leather pants, heavy boots, and a dark muscle shirt. One hand held a full - face helmet with a streaked design of red on black. The other held a leather jacket draped over his shoulder. His midnight hair was long and tied back, revealing a diamond in one ear lobe.

“Who are you?” she asked the man with a howling wolf tattoo on his bicep.

Rafe answered, “That’s my other brother.”

Her gaze ran the full length of the brother’s six - foot - plus frame, then she looked at Gabriel. “That’s the runt?”

“Gabe...” As if his fierce gaze wasn’t enough, the newcomer’s snarl promised retribution.

“Not now,” Rafe warned before telling Mackenzie, “His name is Lucian.”

“What? Your mom run out of angelic names?”

“I have been known to answer to Lucifer.” Lucian leaned against the closed door and sent her a grin that would make the devil proud.

She didn’t feel threatened so much as outnumbered and aggravated at herself for overreacting and letting Rafe get the best of her. If she still had her firearm, she might’ve been able to handle the three - to - one odds, but without it....

“Mackenzie,” Rafe said, drawing her attention away from his smirking brother.

“Where’s Shumaker’s wife?”

She glared at him. “She’s in the hospital.”

## Chapter Six

A stout nurse in pastel hospital scrubs looked up from a clipboard, her wispy bangs falling into her eyes. “Yes?”

“Emily Shumaker’s room?”

“I’m sorry. Visiting hours are over.”

Mackenzie slapped her badge on the counter of the hospital’s nursing station.

“I’m not here for a visit. This is police business. Her room number, please.”

“Is there some trouble, officer?” A frown formed on her face, but then her expression changed from concern to surprise as she glanced over Mackenzie’s shoulder.

Rafael’s voice was silky confidence. “It’s very important that Detective Lyons speak with the patient, if Mrs. Shumaker is capable of taking visitors.”

“Oh, Mr. Stone. I didn’t realize...” She pointed down the hall. “Her room is fourth door on the right.”

Mackenzie dropped her hands beneath the counter’s edge and fisted them until her short nails bit into her palms.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. “Is her doctor here?”

“No, sir. His shift ended a while ago.”

“You’ll want to inform the doctor on call then. Tell him we’re here. I’m afraid we have some troubling news. I’m sure he’ll want to check on her shortly.”

“Right away.” The nurse frowned but picked up the phone.

Grumbling about arrogant goliaths in Armani suits, Mackenzie stalked down the hall in the direction the nurse indicated. When she heard Stone's chuckle behind her, she asked, "What did you do? Donate a million to their memorial fund, or does everyone you meet just naturally jump to please you?"

"Not everyone. I'm on the board of trustees, and I donated two, not one."

She stopped to gape at him. "Million? No, wait. Don't answer that. Of course, million." She scowled at him. "Next time, try to remember you're a civilian, and no matter how much money you have in the bank, this is *police business*. I can handle it."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

64

"Progress."

"What?"

"You concede there will be a 'next time'."

"Ugh." She rolled her eyes. She was already breaking every rule in the law enforcement manual, and some that weren't even written, by letting him accompany her to the hospital. What choice had he left her? He'd demanded to come along and if she refused, he promised to wait for her at the hospital, since his helicopter could get him there long before she could drive back to the city.

So she'd agreed and tried to convince herself she was doing the right thing. Any contact he had with the victim's family should be monitored, she'd told herself.

Watching him interact with the family could provide some much - needed clues.

Now he was talking about 'next time'?

Arriving at the door, she took a deep breath and faced the man behind her. "If it weren't for this case, there wouldn't be a 'this time'. You're a suspect, and right now, you're at the top of my short list. Remember that before you even think of a 'next time'."

She pushed open the door before he could comment. At least he'd given her gun back. His disarming her still irked, and she didn't like him thinking she needed his help to do her job.

Emily Shumaker lay on the hospital bed, her body forming a slender lump down the center. Her red hair, spread in disarray, was a flaming contrast to the white pillow. She hung up the phone when she saw Mackenzie walk through the door. Her gaze immediately fell to the badge clipped at Mackenzie's waist.

"Oh, God. You're here because of Carl, aren't you?" Her voice was weak, shaky.

Tears formed on her lower lashes. "I've been trying all day to reach him, calling home, his cell phone. I knew something was wrong."

"Mrs. Shumaker."

"He wouldn't miss the baby's birth. He wouldn't, not unless something was wrong. Oh, God..."

Mackenzie let her ramble, understanding the woman's need to postpone the inevitable words. She felt her own insides churn at having to tell another wife that her husband would never be coming home.

"Please, tell me he's okay. He's just hurt somewhere. In a hospital, right? That's why he couldn't be here. But he'll be okay. Right? Please..."

Mackenzie shook her head slowly. "I'm so sorry. Carl's dead."

"Oh, God!" She closed her eyes, her already tired body wracked with sobs. "He'll

never know...oh, God...He didn't want to know...before the birth. He said he liked surprises. He'll never know now...never s - see his daughter."

Mackenzie jerked when a warm hand gently gripped her shoulder. Rafael gave

65

her a sympathetic glance before moving toward the woman on the bed.

"Emily." He held her hand between his.

"Oh, Mr. Stone..." Her eyes suddenly widened, and fear replaced the sorrow.

Mackenzie moved to the opposite side of the bed, watching Rafe closely.

"What am I going to do now? I don't have a job. Carl always worked." She wiped tears from her face and shook her head frantically. Her voice sounded panicky as she began to ramble. "I found his pink slip. We fought last night. He'd never have done it. Not if he hadn't been so worried about the children and me. He thought he could win. And then he...I'm so sorry, Mr. Stone. But he..."

"It's all right, Emily. Calm down. You won't have to worry about anything. I doubt the paperwork's been finalized." Mackenzie scrutinized him as he easily lied to the widow of a former employee. "His benefits are still in place. You and the kids will be taken care of. I'll make sure of it. Can you trust me to do that for you?"

Emily laid her other hand on top of his and gave him a watery smile. "Thank you. I'm so sorry. I told him he should go to you. He wasn't like that, you know. It wasn't like him at all. He was just so scared. I was so angry with him last night, but I...I s - still love him. This m - morning, he hugged me." Tears fell again in wet curtains over her cheeks. Rafe handed her some tissue.

After a while, she continued. "He said he'd take care of it. He'd find a way. He just needed more time...needed to think. He always thinks well when he runs, you know? But he's been so distracted lately. I feared he'd jog out in front of a car or something." She glanced at Mackenzie, her voice weaker, sadder. "Where was the accident? He didn't suffer, did he? I - I wouldn't want him to suffer."

Mackenzie's eyes met Rafe's and held for a long, frozen moment before she dropped her gaze to Emily. "It wasn't an accident, Mrs. Shumaker."

Emily scowled and sniffled. "What do you mean?"

"He was murdered."

"No!" She yanked her hands away from Rafe's and covered her face. "No. No. No..."

The door opening drew Mackenzie's attention as the doctor on call walked in.

Taking one look at the patient, he asked angrily, "What is going on here?"

Rafe exchanged a look with Mackenzie before he asked to speak with the doctor outside. When the door closed, she tried to calm the distraught woman, but Mrs. Schumaker curled up and cried. Realizing that she needed time to mourn more than an interrogation, Mackenzie left.

Thirty minutes later, she walked out of the hospital, still shadowed by the tall, dark man who left her with more questions than answers. His treatment of the victim's widow was admirable, inconsistent with the merciless violence the killer showed the victim. Was it all for show, or was the sincerity she'd glimpsed in his eyes real?

To save time, she'd agreed to take his helicopter into the city, so Rafe had

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

66

ordered her car driven to the hospital. The sedan now sat next to his limousine, like a rusty mobile home next to a million - dollar mansion.

Why would a man with that much wealth seek his own justice against a man probably living paycheck to paycheck? When he could've just as easily charged the man with a crime and let the courts handle it? No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make the motive stick.

"When was the last time you ate something, Detective?"

"Today." She faced him, knowing he read the weariness she felt despite her attempt to hide it. "Sometime...earlier...I don't know."

He stepped closer. Too close.

"Don't."

"What? Be concerned about you?" He stroked her cheek, a warm brush of flesh, soft as a whisper. "Too late. I already see how much that takes out of you, telling a person she lost a loved one. You could've let your partner do it, but you didn't."

"I'm the lead. It's my case, my job."

He shook his head. "You care. You feel—"

"I feel tired. It's been a long day. I've got to go." But her feet wouldn't move. She stared into the caramel depths of his eyes and tried to ignore the heat spreading through her body, sparked by his continued caress. "This isn't going to happen."

"Too late." His lips pressed gently against hers, a tender kiss that sent shockwaves slamming into her heart. He pulled away on a sigh, his other hand joining the first to cradle her face. "Sleep well, Detective."

She stood stunned, trying to gather her thoughts—any thought—as she watched him disappear into the limousine.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That's a daring way to say goodbye to a cop who wants to put you behind bars." Lucian's drawl held a hint of warning, punctuated by the sound of the shutting car door.

He should've known Lucian would be nearby. He'd been unable to give Rafe his report earlier, since the topic of his investigation was present. "The detective wants to put a killer behind bars, not me."

Lucian turned from watching the detective disappear in the distance and narrowed his eyes on him. "And you think she'll distinguish between pulling the trigger and ordering it done?"

"I didn't order those men killed."

"That's beside the point, and you know it. What the hell do you call the Lykos Institute? Maybe you should go on the next mission—pull that trigger yourself—to

67

recall what happens out there when we go after rogues. I don't just slap 'em on the damn wrist."

Rafe's anger boiled at the accusation. "Be careful, Luc. I know well the reasons for L.I."

"You know, and yet you risk it all over a human woman?"

Rafe poured himself a brandy, saw his brother already held a perspiring beer bottle, and leaned against the limo's back seat.

"Why don't you tell me what you've found out about her and let me decide how

much is at risk?"

"Born in California. Mother moved her to Chicago after her father died in a mountain lion attack. Made the paper. Article said the family was camping with others in the Sierra Nevadas. Father and daughter went hiking while the rest went fishing. Jeremy Lyons bled to death trying to get his daughter back to camp. She was hurt but survived. They started the search when the two hadn't returned by dinnertime. Didn't find her until late into the night."

Lucian drained his bottle of beer before continuing. "You think with a childhood experience like that, she'll be willing to strike up a relationship with a Lycan? To accept our existence without shouting it from the rooftops?"

As his brother's words sank in, Rafael stared out the window at the passing city streets, not really seeing anything. He thought of how she'd nearly pulled her gun on Gabe earlier today, how she had pulled a gun on him. He remembered the fear Gabe said she experienced at the wildlife exhibit.

When he didn't respond, Luc said, "She lost her mother a while back. Her grave's in the same cemetery where the Robertson's funeral was this morning. Now the daughter is a homicide detective. I'll give you three guesses why she chose that career." "Her mother was murdered?"

"Got it in one." He popped the cap on another beer bottle, took a long swig, and then tilted the neck toward the direction from which they'd come. "Your girl there found the body. Mother apparently surprised a burglar. Case went unsolved. Now, the daughter's got a badge and has a reputation for being a tenacious cop. A real ice - queen with a record for following the book to the letter. Kissing someone she suspects of murder is probably the first time she's ever broken a rule. But I wouldn't count on her breaking any others if she catches one whiff of our vigilante activities."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie closed her office door, sat, and flipped open the cold case folder. The crime scene pictures lay on top, forever capturing the end of life in stark color. She could close her eyes and still picture every harsh detail of her mother's final moments. Envision the faceless man break the back bedroom's windowpane. Watch her

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

68

mother come in from the garage, set the grocery bag on the counter, start to pull out the eggs. A noise or movement startles her. She spins. Drops the carton. He's on her before she can scream.

Mackenzie could feel her heart rip, thinking of the terror her mother must have felt as the man raped her, beat her, killed her. The violation, cruelty, senselessness depicted in the photos glared at her. Unsolved. Unpunished. Free to do it again, and again, to someone else's mother, daughter, sister.

"I'll find him, Mom. Somehow, someway, I'll find him."

She rubbed her temples and let the scenes of the latest murders flash through her mind. She thought of the widows who were counting on her, as she'd once depended on others to catch her mother's killer.

Her fingers trembled as she touched her lips, remembering the kiss Rafe placed there the other night. Had she kissed a killer?

She hadn't seen him in a few days, but that would change today. Shumaker's

funeral would begin at one o'clock. He'd be there. She couldn't avoid him any more than she could scratch his name off the list of suspects. Hell, he was at the top of the list. And she'd kissed him. He'd disarmed her with his touch as easily as he'd taken the gun from her hand.

She'd made a mistake. Let him get too close. But she'd had time to rebuild those walls he'd knocked down. She was prepared now. Knew what to expect. He wouldn't catch her off guard—find a weakness to exploit—again.

She stared at the photos. *Focus on the case. Concentrate on the victims. Stop thinking about that damn kiss.*

A knock sounded. She closed the folder quickly and stuffed it in a drawer.

Cooper stuck his head around the door. "Hey."

"Hi. Come on in."

"You got your report ready for Fuller?"

"Almost. Does Taylor have time for us this morning?" She wanted the profiler's input before speaking with the sergeant.

"Yeah, she said to stop by in about thirty."

"Okay, I want to go over some things with you." She sipped her coffee and almost choked when she realized it was cold.

He took a seat.

"Have you found any connections between the victims?" she asked.

"Other than our illustrious billionaire? So far, nothing. They ran in completely different circles."

That's what she'd suspected.

"Why the frown?"

"I just can't picture Stone taking out Robertson and Shumaker. Have the results  
69

come back on the gun?"

"Not yet, but Tancock says no gun was used in the second murder. That's a break from the previous MO."

"Two killers, maybe?"

He shrugged. "Unlikely with the other similarities. But of course, if Stone is the killer, he wouldn't want the gun to appear recently used if he was handing it in to the cops the same day."

"That's just it. Why hand it over at all? Why admit to having a gun similar to the murder weapon, unless you know it's not the right gun?"

"Good point. Maybe he owns two and has another stashed somewhere. He can certainly afford it. He still knew both victims and had confrontations with both shortly before their deaths. The embezzlement gives him a good motive for the second murder. And he has wolves roaming his property."

"We have no forensic evidence to connect him to either crime."

"That doesn't mean we won't find something. The labs are still working on trace evidence found at the second scene. And he doesn't have an alibi for either murder."

She opened the folder of the second homicide and pointed at the pictures of the body. "Can you picture Stone killing those men and then leaving them in public places?"

"Honestly, do I think Stone's capable of murder? Under the right circumstances?

Yeah, he could kill. But making stupid mistakes that would get him caught? No. He wouldn't do that."

She nodded, his statement confirming her instincts that she was trailing the wrong man.

"But that's the problem, Mac."

"What?"

"The killer hasn't made many mistakes. No witnesses. Very little, if any, forensic evidence to inspect. Unless we want to track DNA of every dog in the city—"

Her gaze snapped to him. "What did you say?"

"I said he hasn't made any mistakes."

"No, about the DNA."

"Unless we want to crosscheck the DNA of every dog—"

"That's it. We need the DNA of his wolves. If he's using them, we could connect them to the bodies. Call Tancock. Find out if he's got usable samples from the victims. I have a profile to discuss with Taylor. Then we push for a warrant."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bookshelves covered two walls of Taylor Phillips' office, the titles testifying to an A - to - Z interest in the minds of murderers. Taylor moved from behind her desk when

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

70

Mackenzie walked in. She was dressed in a crisp monochromatic suit, her near whiteblonde

hair pulled back in a controlled bun. She tucked a few loose strands behind an ear as she greeted Mackenzie with an outstretched hand.

"Thanks for seeing me," Mackenzie said, returning her handshake."

"No problem. I've been reviewing what Cooper told me about the case."

"And?" Mackenzie pulled out a pad and pencil to jot down notes.

Taylor sat in a chair opposite Mackenzie, crossed her legs, and folded her hands in her lap. "I believe you're looking for a white male, more mature, well educated. At least in his thirties, upper income, with an affinity for animals. He probably works with them or has access to them. The use of a gun in the first murder indicates the canine attack was an afterthought, a way to further insult the victim. The same goes for leaving the body nude in a public place."

"Humiliation."

Taylor smiled. "Yes, exactly. The mutilation of the face was another blow, removing what's easily recognizable, well known."

"A slam against a public personality?"

"Possibly."

"The second victim was no politician."

"No, but the second attack is different, more violent, and the face was left untouched. No gun. The killer is more certain of himself and his canines as a weapon. Otherwise, the attack would not have happened where it did. He's unconcerned about discovery. Wants the body found, I believe."

"To taunt the police?"

"Possibly. Or maybe he's making a point, not only for the victim, but also to others. A warning, if you will."

“So you believe the same killer committed both murders?”

“Yes, I think it’s highly probable. And I’ll tell you something else. I believe that boldness means he’ll kill again.”

Mackenzie stopped scribbling notes and glanced up. “His motive?”

“Evidence doesn’t substantiate greed as a motive. No robbery.”

“The first victim’s jewelry is missing.”

“True, but not his expensive car, and I understand nothing was taken in the second crime.”

“Correct.”

“The brutality usually indicates a connection with the victim. Emotions are involved. I would expect the killer to know the victims. Have you found anything linking the two dead men to each other?”

“Nothing financial. They socialized in separate circles.” She hesitated. “The second victim worked for a company owned by an acquaintance of the first victim.”

71

Taylor nodded, reflective. She tapped a French - manicured nail on the armrest.

“I’d recommend checking that connection further. The killer is most likely interested in vengeance. Somehow these two men wronged him or someone close to him.”

Mackenzie stood, offered her hand again. “Thanks.”

“Anytime, Detective. If something else turns up—anything you want me to consider further—let me know.”

“Will do.”

Mackenzie headed for Fuller’s office. She had a killer to catch, and Taylor had given her one more piece of the puzzle. In spite of her instincts telling her otherwise, Mackenzie would follow this new trail and deal with the fallout later.

In profiling the murderer, Taylor had described Rafael Stone in exact detail.

## Chapter Seven

“I’m only saying a case like this needs a more - experienced handler.”

The words and voice stopped Mackenzie in her tracks, just shy of the sergeant’s office door. She may have given in to the urge to eavesdrop if another cop hadn’t chosen that moment to notice her.

“Hey, Detective Lyons. Where’s Coop?”

“Around. Is Fuller in?” She decided now wasn’t the time to reveal how long she’d been standing there.

“Yep.” The cop pointed his thumb over his shoulder as he walked past.

There was a sudden silence from the office, but that ended when she stepped within sight of the men inside. “Lyons, get in here.” Fuller’s voice boomed, not an unusual occurrence, but the irritation in the tone was.

She stepped through the doorway and stood stiffly, not glancing at the attorney seated across from her sergeant. “Sir. If this is not a good time, I can—”

“Have a seat.” Fuller pointed toward the chair next to Kenneth Hahn.

“Hello, Mackenzie.”

“Hi, Kenny.” She bit back a smile when she saw him scowl at the use of his boyhood name.

“Hahn here believes we need to put more resources on the case. As lead



detective, what are your thoughts?" *More resources, huh?* A polite revision to the words she'd heard earlier.

"I'm sure all of our cases could be solved more quickly with an increase in forces." She faced Hahn. "You leading the drive against department budget cuts, or volunteering some of your own office's money to cover our overtime expenses?"

Something akin to pleasure settled inside her as Hahn's face reddened and the sergeant's lips curled.

"You've been on the case how long now? And you have no suspects, no arrests, nothing." Hahn's narrowed gaze landed on her. "The media is clamoring for an arrest.

73

How do you think it looks for me to go out there each day and admit you've failed to catch a killer?"

"No one's forcing you to meet with the media and say anything, Kenny."

"The family deserves closure. You've got to—"

"Don't talk to me about what the family deserves. Don't you dare." She stood, unable to stop the anger from boiling in her veins. "I told both wives they were widows. I was there while they sobbed and questioned why. *Not you.* I stood over both men's bodies. You remember that while you prance around before the cameras demanding justice. I don't answer to reporters or work the case according to their next deadline. And I don't need some lawyer with an oversized ego telling me how to do my job."

"Mackenzie." Fuller's softly uttered word was like a slap. *Damn it.* She knew better than to let Kenneth rile her.

"Sir." She sat.

What had she ever seen in him? No, she knew. She'd thought he was after the same goals in fighting crime as she was, but she'd been wrong. Despite his flattery when they were a couple...despite his lip service about justice, Hahn was only after whatever helped put his name in the headlines. She'd be damned if she'd let anyone else deceive her.

Fuller said, "I believe you have your answer, Hahn. If you are unable to express to the media the department's dedication toward solving these crimes, I suggest you inform the State's Attorney and the superintendent immediately, so they can find another person to assist with public relations."

Hahn's jaw ticked and his lips quivered in obvious suppressed fury. "What do you have on the case?" The question slipped through gritted teeth.

"Nothing that can be given to the press," she said.

"And the longer I have 'nothing' to say, the more they speculate on our inability to solve the crime."

*Our?* Mackenzie bit the inside of her mouth to keep silent.

Fuller interlaced his fingers before speaking. "As you are aware, the high - profile nature of these crimes requires tight reins on the flow of information to ensure the integrity of the cases. I'm sure you can inform the media of that fact in a way that will address their speculations and reassure them of the professionalism expected from their law enforcement officers. That will be all."

The dismissal was smooth. Mackenzie could see now why Fuller successfully climbed the ladder from beat cop to sergeant and would no doubt climb higher. After Hahn left and Mackenzie closed the door, Fuller said, "He may be an ass,

but he's telling the truth about the pressure building to solve the case. What do you have?"

"I have no forensic evidence linking our prime suspect to the crime. However, he doesn't have an alibi for either murder, he knew both victims, and the criminal profile I

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

74

just got from Taylor fits him like a glove."

"Stone?" When she nodded, he added, "Just so the glove doesn't fit like the one in the Simpson trial."

"I want a warrant to extract DNA from the wolves on Stone's property to see if they're connected to possible DNA found on the victims' bodies."

"Wolves?"

"Yes, sir. He has a large estate outside the city, so we'll have to coordinate with other agencies to serve the warrant. Stone lets wolves roam the property and even has one that comes and goes in the house. I'm uncertain of the total number of animals, but the Lykos Institute he founded also has a large DNA database on canines they've treated, trained, and so forth. I'd like to get that information as well."

She handed him her report and watched him flip through the pages.

"You do realize this will start the battle of attorneys. Stone is not a man to just step aside and let accusations fly. I doubt we can keep this under wraps." He closed the folder, his dark - skinned features firm and serious.

"Understood." She met his hard gaze with a resolve she was far from feeling.

Was she letting insecurities over her own objectivity cloud her judgment about Stone?

"If you get close to him, stay on him, do you think you can break him? Make him slip up?"

If he didn't break her first...maybe.

"He's smart. It won't be easy, but these warrants should shake things up."

"I'm sure they will. Stay on him. Keep the pressure up. And keep me informed. Dismissed."

Mackenzie headed for the door but paused when she heard Fuller call her name.

"Sir?"

"Hahn is unaware of how often even our coldest cases are revisited with hopes of unearthing new leads." He peered at her, his silent message coming through loud and clear. Unwavering reassurance. "He underestimates the abilities and long - term devotion of some of my detectives to solve murders, but I don't."

"Thank you, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie hated funerals. No, she hated the necessity of funerals. The ceremonial closure and final farewell to a life always taken before loved ones are ready to let go. The misery increased as the weather contributed its tears to the somber service amid cold, hard headstones and fresh - cut flowers.

She leaned against a tree trunk beneath the shelter of its branches and scanned the faces in the crowd, quickly spotting Stone beneath the canopy of umbrellas. He

75

stood at a respectful distance from where the family huddled beneath the tent. A solitary figure in a long black coat beside a sea of formally dressed mourners.

As the final words of solemnity drifted away, most of the gathering dispersed. Mackenzie took a step forward to watch with interest as Stone approached Emily, whispered something to her, and remained motionless as the widow clung to him. The tight embrace lasted a while before she finally pulled away with a nod and shaky smile. He touched her cheek and then knelt before her children, wiped away their tears, and hugged each one.

When he released the daughter, his gaze collided with Mackenzie's. A tremor threatened to shake the foundations of her resolve. She mentally reinforced the invisible walls she'd spent the past few days rebuilding.

Rafe rose to his feet with an earthy grace, carnal in movement, feral in purpose.

The pop of an opening umbrella preceded his first step into the downpour.

"You're getting wet, Detective." He moved close, too close, and held his umbrella over them both. Mackenzie blinked the rain from her eyes.

"I won't melt."

He leaned forward, his breath tickling her nape, the musky aroma of his cologne teasing her overly alert senses. "You would...under the right circumstances."

She went rigid and raised a hand to his chest. A big mistake she realized when his hand covered hers, holding it against his heart. She stepped back and collided with the trunk of the tree she'd thought of as shelter moments earlier.

She jerked her hand from beneath his and tried for bravado she didn't feel.

"Trying to seduce a cop, Stone?"

"When I seduce you, Mackenzie, you'll know it." He tilted her face to his. "And you won't be able to hide behind that badge."

Not *if*, but *when*. He'd said *when*.

"I have a job to do. I don't have time to exchange quips with you." She turned her head, refusing to look at him, but unable to ignore the electric heat emanating from his closeness.

"You don't strike me as a coward, Detective."

She bit back a curse, unsure whether she was angrier with him or herself. She put every ounce of conviction she could in her voice. "I don't fear you." The truth was she feared her attraction to him, but she'd be damned before she'd admit that. "I don't have the liberty to indulge myself with a suspect, even if I wanted to, which I don't," she lied.

"And I will not jeopardize my investigation. I have an obligation to the families, the victims—"

"I didn't kill them, damn it." The eruption of fury and frustration caught her by surprise. The rare sight of him losing control fascinated her. A mix of unhidden emotions washed across his face. "Deep down inside, you know it." He gripped her chin and forced her to meet his determined gaze. "You know it."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

76

Terror gripped her heart as she realized she believed him but couldn't be sure. Despite what he said, she didn't *know* beyond the proverbial shadow of a doubt. His hand moved to cradle the back of her neck and gently tugged her toward him.

"Excuse me. Detective?"

At the softly uttered words, Rafe released her, his hand dropping to his side.

Mackenzie stepped around him, back into the cool rain, and fought the shiver she felt, unsure of its cause. Emily Shumaker stood a few feet away, her cheeks wet despite the cover of her own umbrella.

"Mrs. Shumaker. My condolences."

"Thank you. Please, call me Emily. May we talk a moment?"

"Sure."

Mackenzie followed as she turned back toward the shelter of the funeral tent.

"Have there been any developments in the case?"

"We're following several leads." She sat next to the widow and glanced over her shoulder to see Rafe still standing beneath the tree, watching her.

"Does that mean you know who killed my husband?"

"Mrs. Shu—Emily—I'm not in a position to discuss the details of the case."

"I'm not asking for names." She twisted the tissues in her hand. Her voice cracked. "I j - just want to know that you're going to stop him. I need to know he won't kill someone else over a foolish mistake."

Mackenzie eyed the woman. "Foolish mistake?"

"Yes, I'm sure Mr. Stone told you my Carl tried to steal some money from his company."

"You think Stone killed your husband because he stole from him?" She glanced back toward the tree. When she didn't see him, relief flooded her system; at least, that's what Mackenzie told herself. She started to look for him, but Emily gripped her hand. Emily's eyes rounded. She shook her head. "No. Mr. Stone? No. He's been nothing if not an angel to my family. C - Carl told me...before, you know...He said Mr. Stone refused to press charges against him even though he could've. That would've destroyed our family."

"He fired him."

"Yes, but he said he wouldn't dispute Carl's claim to unemployment if he'd get treatment for his problem. He wanted him to get help."

"Problem?"

Emily's gaze dropped to the ground. "He always thought he'd win high stakes on the next roll and end his losing streak, if he could just keep playing."

That's why he needed the money, Mackenzie thought, to fuel a gambling habit.

"That's why I got so upset with him when I realized he'd gone to one of

77

those...what do you call 'em? Bookies?"

"Loan sharks."

"Yes, that's it." Her eyes watered anew. "I know he killed him."

Most loan sharks were small - time hoodlums who broke the limbs of those who welched on bets. They couldn't collect from dead men. And they didn't usually have ties with legislators opposed to their trade. Mackenzie doubted there was a connection, but she filed the thought away as she noticed an elderly lady step forward and put a hand on Emily's shoulder.

"We should go, sweetheart. Your dad's got the car warming up. The kids rode home with Ron, but the baby's going to want her momma when she wakes up."

"Okay, Mom. Detective Lyons, this is my mother, Beatrice Evans. Mom, this is the detective looking for Carl's killer."

“Mrs. Evans.” Mackenzie stood and gripped the woman’s brittle, age - spotted hand. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. You find the man who did this. Carl had his faults, but he didn’t deserve to be murdered on his baby’s birthday. My daughter didn’t deserve to lose her husband like that. The hurt that beast has caused this family...and my grandchildren... They should’ve had their daddy with them. Those poor babies...”

“I know, Ma’am. I’ll do my best to see that he doesn’t hurt anyone else.”

Teardrops welled on Beatrice’s lower lashes, but she nodded firmly. “See that you do.”

“One other thing, Detective,” Emily said. “Do you still have Carl’s PDA?”

“His PDA?”

“Yes. He never went anywhere without it, but it wasn’t among his personal effects. I thought if you were through with it, I could get it back. I’d like to give it to our son. It might mean something to him someday.”

“I’ll check with the lab.”

“Thank you.”

As mother and daughter supported each other on their way to the waiting car, Mackenzie stared at the casket, draped with a spray of lilies. She ran a hand over her damp French - braided hair, and then stuffed her chilled fists into the pockets of her slicker.

“You think I’m capable of destroying a family, Detective?” Rafe stepped under the tent and shook his umbrella before closing it.

Startled, she hid it by slowly scanning the area. They were now alone, except for the man in the casket. “What are you still doing here? Don’t you have a business to run, a country to buy, or something?”

His deep chuckle struck her in the gut. He shook his head with a cocky grin.

“That’s the benefit of being the boss. I get to set my own schedule. Have you eaten?”

She blinked at the change in subject but quickly recovered. “I’m fine.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

78

“I never said you weren’t, but that’s not what I asked.”

What the hell had he asked? Oh yeah, food. She couldn’t think with him looking at her as if she were dessert.

“If you aren’t hungry, you wouldn’t mind keeping me company while I ate, would you?”

She frowned. “I have work to do. I don’t have time to waste as an ornament on your arm.”

The vehemence in her tone must have surprised him, if his raised eyebrows were any indication. But then his mouth took on a sly curve that’d impress a fox.

“Good, because I’m not looking for mindless embellishments. However, I would enjoy some intelligent conversation. Since you said you wanted me to come in later for—how did you put it?—further questioning, what’s wrong with now?”

With a quirk of his lips, he held out his arm in challenge.

“You can follow me back to the station, then.” She kept her cold hands in the pockets of her slicker. He grinned at her silent refusal.

“Why waste time, Detective?” he asked, using her own words against her. He

flipped his umbrella above them, and gripping her elbow, escorted her from the tent toward the parking area. "Ride with me, and we can start the interrogation now. I can arrange to have your car brought to you."

She paused. "I am not riding in your limousine back to the station."

"Then don't." He smiled broadly, pulled a set of keys from his pocket, and pressed a button. A beep signaled the disarming of a car alarm and drew her attention to a platinum Jaguar convertible, with its top up.

Despite herself, she scowled at the rain clouds. He guided her to the other side, and before she could blink, she reclined in plush comfort.

After he'd arranged for the funeral director to hand over her keys to the driver he'd called, Rafe steered the powerful sports car through traffic with an ease Mackenzie reluctantly admired.

Her fingers brushed the supple, and surprisingly warm, leather seat before she realized what she was doing and forced her hands onto her lap. "I thought you only rode in cars the length of a city block."

He slid an amused glance toward her. "When I ride, yes. But I prefer something different when I drive."

His dark slacks hugged his thighs as the muscles flexed when he pressed the pedals. His strong hand caressed the walnut gearshift with a subtle familiarity that captured her imagination and made her squirm.

"You never answered my question."

His words intruded on her ruminations. "What question was that?" she asked to hide her embarrassment. *Had she really been ogling him? God, had he noticed?*

79

"Do you believe I can destroy a man's family?"

*Yes...No...I don't know.* "What I believe is incidental. The case is built on facts, on what I can prove."

"And right now, those facts point to me?"

"You're a link between the two victims. You had the means and the opportunity."

"And the motive?"

That had been her stumbling block all along. "You tell me."

His expression remained steady, as if they spoke of the weather or other trivialities. "I killed Robertson because he insulted me over a political disagreement, and then murdered a man for daring to steal from me. Interesting theory...although there's a serious flaw."

"And that is?"

"If I'd wanted to punish them for crossing me, I wouldn't kill them. I'd want them to live to regret their mistake."

He braked as the Jag hugged a turn, and Mackenzie twisted in her seat.

"This is not the way to the station."

His response showed a complete lack of concern for her accusation. "I don't recall saying that was our destination."

Had he? No, she'd suggested he follow her to the station and assumed that remained their destination when she agreed to ride with him instead. She narrowed her eyes on him. "Where the hell are we going?"

“As I said, I plan to enjoy a meal, and if you change your mind, you’re free to join me.”

“This is not a social call, Stone.”

“I’d never assume such a thing, Detective.”

Was that humor she heard in his voice? A call interrupted her thoughts. She extracted her cell phone from a pocket and flipped it open by the third ring.

“Lyons.”

Cooper said, “We got the warrant for L.I.”

“Great. What about the other one?”

“Not yet. But I expect the judge to give us the okay soon. If the funeral’s over, you want to pick me up or meet me there?”

“Actually, I need you to handle the first one alone.”

“Do you need me to take you somewhere, Detective?” She met Rafe’s curious gaze and shook her head.

“I’m following other leads right now. Let me know when the other one comes in,” she said to Cooper.

“Is that Stone?”

Mackenzie cringed at the sudden hardness in her partner’s voice. Cooper would

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

80

never understand. How could he? She didn’t entirely understand how she’d landed herself in a car that cost more than her annual salary, with the prime suspect in a murder investigation at the wheel.

“Yes. He’s agreed to submit to further questioning.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” Coop didn’t sound convinced, and his hesitation promised

Mackenzie a more in - depth debriefing later. “You can keep him busy while I take care of L.I. but keep your cell handy. I’ll call if we find anything.”

“Done.” She hung up and ignored the question in Rafe’s eyes.

A short time later, Mackenzie found herself in a suite high atop a tower, surrounded by the best that money could buy. A pleasing situation that irritated her. She sat across from Rafe as he shamelessly savored each bite of a meal, which tempted her to leap over the antique dinner table and snatch his plate before dashing from the room. The aroma of tender steak, juicy lobster, and steamed vegetables made her mouth water.

“If you’re guilty, Stone, I will take you down. Your luxury car, gourmet meals, and fancy trappings won’t change my mind.”

His fork paused halfway to his mouth, and one brow lifted over a penetrating golden brown eye. “I would expect nothing less, Detective.”

When her tummy rumbled, his mouth quirked. He quickly swallowed his next bite.

“The proof of your unshakable obstinacy is evident in the steadfast refusal to eat with a suspected villain...despite your obvious hunger.”

“Are you calling me stubborn?”

“I don’t recall using that word.” Regardless of his diplomatic response, she’d

swear his eyes twinkled.

He wiped the corners of his mouth, she assumed, to hide an impending grin.

"At least you got *villain* right," she muttered. She'd refused to eat as a matter of principle. She was here to question him, keep him busy, nothing more, despite his success in altering the interrogation's location. This was not a social call or a dinner date. The blame for this debacle, and her peevishness, fell firmly on his head. He laughed. "I said, '*suspected* villain'. That was not an admission of guilt." She eyed his amused features with unveiled suspicion. "Maybe not, but even you must admit, you fit the profile."

"Ah. We're back to the crux of your investigation...the profile of a murderer. A topic I believe better discussed in a more appropriate setting." Finished with his meal, he rose and gestured for her to accompany him through the door. "Shall we?" She followed him into what appeared to be a library. Bookcases covered the two

81

longest walls from floor to ceiling. Rails ran the length of the room, with sliding ladders at either end. Down the center of the room sat a variety of furniture, obviously designed to provide supreme comfort for quiet reflection. On the opposite wall, a lavish mantelpiece surrounded a gas fireplace and held a collection of unusual bric - a - brac. Mackenzie touched a bronze sculpture of a werewolf snarling at terrified villagers before turning on Rafe, who'd sat in one of two chairs before the fireplace. "I have two dead men, both mauled, and a wronged man with connections to both victims and a distinct interest in anything canine."

He took a casual sip from a crystal goblet, which he'd carried with him from the dining room. "The only thing wrong with that statement is the assumption that I'd seek deadly vengeance for having been wronged in such a manner."

"Are you telling me you're incapable of murder?"

"Not at all. I'd be lying if I denied my own ability to take a life...if necessary. I simply disagree with you that there was enough motivation to warrant murder in this case."

"Hmm." She studied the bronze figure, wondering what a man like Rafael Stone found so interesting about a sculpture that captured the cruelty of fear.

"Do you believe in myths, Detective?"

She glanced at him. "You mean like werewolves and other things that go bump in the night?"

He shrugged, but something in his expression said her answer was important to him.

"I believe in the reality of fear, in the deadly danger of men, and in the priceless value of life those same men view as cheap."

She studied him as he stared at the swirling colors of his drink, the sharp contours of his features frozen in silent contemplation. He was handsome, strikingly so, but in a dark way. She suspected that like the mystical sirens, peril lay beyond the attraction his looks engendered.

"Why the fascination with life's gruesome imagery?" she asked.

His bronze gaze snapped to hers. "Gruesome?"

She pointed to the sculpture. "Werewolves. A monstrous mix of the most vicious natures of man and animal."



The light must be playing tricks on her; that couldn't be sadness she saw in his eyes.

"You speak of only half the fantasy, the most obvious."

"What do you mean?"

"Untrue myths told to frighten children into obeying their parents. Exaggerated fables used to excuse man's responsibility for his actions. Which is more gruesome, Detective? The story's falsity or the reality of its resulting fear."

"I'm not sure I understand."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

82

"Although considered a myth, lycanthropy is a documented fact. Some cases are the result of delusions from insane minds; others are accused murderers' tortured into claiming to be killer wolves. But the truth goes beyond court records to mass hysteria that virtually wiped out a continent's entire wolf population." He approached her and touched the figurine's hind leg.

Mackenzie noticed for the first time the trap clamped firmly around the leg. She eyed the scene, seeing what she'd overlooked before. The villagers were not truly in danger. Armed with pitchforks and clubs, they outnumbered the lone werewolf, already wounded by the trap.

"Whether their claims were true or not, the blame falls on the feared animal," he continued. "All of them, thus excusing the man of responsibility for the crime he committed. And the panicked public seeks vengeance on an innocent species."

Mackenzie knew he spoke about more than the stuff of legends. But she wasn't after the dogs used in the murders. They were just one link of the chain that would lead her to the real killer. She was after the man who'd trained them, the one who'd pulled the gun's trigger.

Rafe's phone rang. "Excuse me, please," he said as he turned away to answer the call.

What was the moral of his parable? Beware of clues that point fingers of blame on the innocent? Could all the circumstantial evidence that she'd gathered so far be leading her toward an innocent man?

"I see. All right, Gabe. I'll handle it."

When he hung up the phone and turned toward her, she faced a man who looked far from innocent and much more likely to commit murder.

### **Chapter Eight**

Mackenzie's rigid posture told Rafe all he needed to know. She'd called for the warrant her partner now used to infiltrate the Lykos Institute's databases. Seize vital documentation. Snoop where he didn't want the law to go.

They wouldn't find any incriminating evidence related to the murders because none existed. The security measures would also protect the institute's shadow operations, but the reality of the raid shook him. Her part in it infuriated him. She knew officers were combing file cabinets, desks, and safes at the L.I. headquarters, while she consented to 'interrogate' him at his leisure. More like keep him busy, entertained, and out of the way.

"You're in the wrong business, Detective." He put the full force of his anger behind those words, making the title sound more like a curse.

“Excuse me?” Her thick-lashed eyes rounded with a confused air of innocence. He was surprised she didn’t look smug, since she’d succeeded in her goal of distracting him.

“With talent like yours, you should’ve been an actress. You had me convinced. I actually found your stubborn devotion to duty rather charming.” He stalked toward her with a determined stride, a small part of him feeling pleased to see her stand her ground. He preferred a woman with strength and courage.

“What the devil are you talking about?”

“How long did you plan to toy with me so your cohorts could raid my offices?” Hadn’t he offered to assist in the investigation? She could have asked for the DNA files, and he would have gladly handed them over. She could have told him about the warrant at any time, but she didn’t. Instead, she’d chosen to undermine him, circumvent him. Why?

“I’m not toying with you.”

“The hell you’re not! I trusted you.” He stopped, abruptly realizing he had trusted her. And she’d not returned that faith. That was why she’d kept him in the dark.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

84

“I’m doing my job.”

“Well, your job sucks.”

“You are not going to make me feel guilty for doing what I think is right.”

“Right? You call what you’re doing right? There’s a killer in this city, Detective, but I’m not him. When you realize that, then maybe you’ll find the *right* path, but until then, you’re *dead* wrong.”

When she shied away from him, her fearful uncertainty angered him even more.

He grabbed her upper arms and held her in place.

She attempted to twist free. “Let me go.”

“You think you can play me for a fool? Distract me while you go on some wild goose chase and tear apart everything I’ve built?”

“Let me go, damn it!”

“Do you honestly think I’ll stand by—”

She kicked out, hooking her leg around one of his and knocking him off his feet.

But instead of letting her go to catch his fall, he dragged her down, too, then rolled and pinned her beneath him.

She shrieked and cursed a blue streak that matched the spark of fury in her eyes.

She squirmed and actually tried to bite him.

Grudgingly impressed by her spunk, he leaned close enough to whisper a warning. “Bite me, and I bite back.”

Her eyes flared. With shock or anger, he couldn’t be sure. He sat up, straddling her slim waist, and kept her arms pressed to the floor, well away from the reach of her handgun.

“Now—”

She attacked with unexpected force. Before he could react, she’d wrapped her limber legs around him from behind and pulled him off-balance. Another several minutes of wrestling ensued before he regained the upper hand. By then, both were breathing heavily, and Rafe had the beginnings of what he was sure would be an

impressive bruise on the left side of his ribcage.

"Let me up, you son of a bitch."

Rafe didn't move from his prone position atop Mackenzie. He'd learned the hard way how quickly she could take advantage of a slight miscalculation. The physical effort he exerted to subdue her had exhausted much of his initial anger and stirred up his other alpha instincts.

Feathery tendrils of her hair escaped from her braid to offer a beguiling frame about her flushed face. As she caught her breath, her lips parted in an erotic invitation he desperately wanted to accept.

"Killing an officer will have every cop in Chicago out to fry your ass."

"Damn you, Mackenzie. I'm not going to kill you." He read the doubt in her eyes and felt his anger build again. She could try the patience of a snail.

"And I suppose you just assault officers for the hell of it."

"I did not assault you."

"Oh, right, my mistake. We both mistook the softness of your carpet for the pad of a wrestling ring."

"Did I hurt you?"

Her mouth formed a tight, closed line. He growled his frustration but didn't release her.

"At anytime, did I hurt you?"

"No."

"Then I didn't assault you."

She huffed and wiggled underneath him, which made him uncomfortably aware of how aligned their bodies were. He needed to focus, which became more difficult with each move she made. God, her soft curves could make a man forget his name.

"Then what are we doing on the damn floor?"

"Be still," he hissed. "We're getting to the bottom of why you exercised a search warrant against one of my places rather than coming to me."

"I will not discuss this with you on the floor. Let...me...up." Her hips bucked.

"No."

"What?"

"Discussion's over." His lips took action, pressing against hers, and swallowed her startled protest.

Rafe had wanted to claim her mouth from the moment he saw her at the funeral and watched lucky raindrops cling to that full, lower lip.

He thought once would be enough, but that was before he'd had a taste of her outside the hospital and discovered the truth. Not enough. He'd never have enough of her.

His grip turned to a caress as his tongue delved inside to explore her mouth's warmth.

His alpha nature made him want to claim her, all of her, here and now. But he fought the urge to take and tried persuasion instead. Running one hand up her body, he cupped a firm, round breast. His tongue tangled with hers, another wrestling match more enjoyable than the first.

He was a fool falling for a woman who didn't trust him. And because of that, he could never entrust her with his secret, never share everything that made him the man

he was.

Still, he wanted her. Even as he took what he knew he couldn't have, his spirit rebelled against the knowledge that he couldn't force her to believe in him.

He moved to give his lips better access to her neck and felt her hands press against his chest. With reluctance, he pulled away, just enough to see her face. Her

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

86

eyelids drifted open to unveil a blue as passionate and beautiful as the early morning sky.

"This can't be happening." Her words were but a whisper.

With one arm wrapped around her waist and one hand at her nape, he rolled until she settled snuggly on top of him. "It can, if you let it."

"I have a duty, a responsibility. I have to be objective and you're..."

"I'm not your killer." He tugged her toward him. "If you can't believe me, then trust your instincts."

"But you're a sus—" His kiss silenced her words, but not the groan of surrender that followed. He didn't want her thinking of him as a suspect or a killer, or anything other than who he was. A man strongly, albeit foolishly, attracted to her. He didn't want the cop so much as he wanted the woman.

Even as he tugged her closer, felt her body relax against him, he could almost hear the alarm bells sounding in her mind.

Suddenly she pulled away. He grunted as she scrambled to her feet and dug in her pocket. She fumbled with her cell phone, which he now realized was the source of the ringing in his ears.

"Lyons," she said breathlessly.

He couldn't hear the caller's voice, but he suspected it was her partner when he saw her wince.

"No, I haven't been running. I dropped the damn phone." The lie made Rafe quirk an accusatory brow and flash her a grin. Her luscious lips curled into a snarl that made him laugh and her cover the phone's mouthpiece and turn away.

"Was that Stone?" Cooper asked her.

"Just tell me what you found out," she ordered.

"That was Stone. You're still with him, aren't you?"

"Cooper..." Mackenzie ground her teeth. She didn't feel like playing twenty questions right now.

"I thought his brother would've called him by now and told him we were here."

"He knows. He got the call a while ago. Now, tell me what yo—"

"Then, what was he laughing about?"

"How the blazes should I know what the man is thinking..." Mackenzie's breath hitched.

*Oh damn.*

Rafe's hand slid around her waist from behind and his lips warmed the sensitive curve of her neck. She nearly groaned when he nipped her earlobe and his fingers brushed the underside of one breast, but Coop's voice snapped her back to attention.

"Mac?"

"I'm here." She slapped Rafe's hand. "What did you call to tell me?"

She covered the mouthpiece again and hissed, "Stop that."

"Mmm, you smell like coconut," he murmured, then nuzzled her neck one last time before pulling away with a chuckle. She gave him a look that promised there'd be hell to pay.

"...on you to give the word."

"Give the word?" *What had Coop said?*

"Yeah, Fuller says it's your call on when you want the team to go in and serve the second warrant."

"You got the second one."

"That's what I just said. Mac? Are you okay?"

She stared at the wall, wishing she could bang her head against it. "Of course, I'm all right. Are you done at L.I. yet?"

"Almost. This is a big place. But if you want to go in tonight, I'm sure we can arrange it with the guys over at State."

Mackenzie glanced toward Rafe and found his gaze locked on her. "No. Tomorrow's soon enough."

"Why the delay, Mac? We wait 'til tomorrow with him already tipped off about today, and—"

"Just finish up there, okay? I gotta go."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She hung up and fumed.

"The iron curtain's back in place," Rafe said, walking up to her. "Someone else die?"

"Huh? No."

"Someone going to?" Amusement crept into his voice.

Mackenzie shook her head. "Not yet, anyway."

She was stalling. Avoiding the inevitable. She'd postponed action on the search warrant, probably the dumbest thing she'd ever done in her life. No, the award for idiocy would go to her for what she was about to do.

"I know I don't have the right to ask this," she said, turning to face Rafe, "but did you mean what you said earlier? About trusting me?"

He peered at her, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. That didn't bode well, she thought, but his next words surprised her.

"Yes, but you disappointed me. You could've asked for whatever you needed, and I would've gotten it for you."

"As lead investigator, I'm supposed to accept your word that you handed over everything, hid nothing? How am I to know you wouldn't somehow tamper with evidence?" She held up a hand when she saw storm clouds brewing in his stare. "Even if I believed you, I couldn't do it. You're a suspect. I took an oath. I have to do my job."

"By the book, is that it?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

88

"I've already broken a rule on every damn page of that book, but if I don't follow it from here on in, a killer could go free." She reached toward his arms folded across his chest. "Or an innocent man could go to jail for a crime he didn't commit."

"You believe me then?"

She spun away from him. "I already told you, what I believe doesn't matter."

"It matters to me." The seriousness in his tone tore at her heart.

"To the courts, it's what I can prove that counts."

"Guilty until proven innocent. I thought it was supposed to be the other way around?"

"Don't be petulant."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Detective." He took a seat by the fireplace, the picture of distinguished composure.

"Eventually the evidence will fill in the necessary pieces of the puzzle but, until then, I have to follow every lead, check out every suspect. And right now, I can't cross you off my list."

He was silent for so long that she decided she'd follow her better judgment and leave.

"I'd better go. Where's my car?"

"You can pick up your keys at the front desk. The guard on duty will know where your car is parked."

She almost made it to the door.

"Mackenzie."

"Yeah?" She didn't turn around.

"What happens tomorrow?"

*Shit.* She bit her lip, stiffened her spine, and faced him. "Cooper and I, along with some special agents from the State Police, will serve another search warrant at your estate."

She searched for any change in his expression, but found none.

"I see."

Did he? She doubted it.

"I have to crosscheck your wolves' DNA with any found at the crime scenes. If there's no match, I can cross them and you off my list."

"When?"

"First thing tomorrow morning."

He nodded, and she turned to leave again.

"Detective?"

She gripped the doorframe and looked back over her shoulder.

"You may want to button up your blouse."

Her gaze shot to her chest. The top three buttons were undone. She cursed her stupidity for compromising the case even as she escaped through the doorway.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You want me to do what?"

Rafe set aside the quarterly report he'd been reading to watch his brother, Gabe, rant. A glance at the grandfather clock across the room told him the storm had been raging for about thirty minutes already. Now that he'd dropped the news of the second warrant, Rafe suspected he had another half hour of it to deal with.

"Although she doesn't know how many wolves are here, she's seen you as G. She'll expect to get a sample from you."

Gabe paced about the room with furious agitation. Rafe studied the imported rug to see whether ruts had formed. So far, it held up under the abuse.

“You told me there’s no risk in discovering a Lycan trait through DNA because it changes completely depending on the form we take. Was your research wrong?”

The insulted look Gabe gave him showed what he thought of having his work questioned.

“So, what’s the concern? You’re a veterinarian. You know the procedure’s harmless.”

“It is when I’m the vet doing the examination.”

Rafe fought to hide the grin threatening to break free. His brother had always been the scientific one in the litter, with a hidden strength that burst forth whenever he was angry, but Rafe had never dreamed he feared a needle.

“One chuckle, Rafe, and I don’t care what the consequences are...I’m outta here.”

“It’s just a little needle.”

Gabe cursed. “I know that. I don’t mind exams with a doctor. I just don’t like submitting to them as a wolf. Not when I can’t communicate with the vet. They don’t care for animals that make them feel like Dr. Doolittle.”

Rafe covered his mouth to hold back the laugh, his elbow resting on the armrest.

“You’re seriously going to let her come in here with her legal crap and take blood samples?” Gabe repeated the question he’d asked several times before. The answer hadn’t changed.

Rafe nodded. “I’m sure they’ll take hair samples, too.”

“This is bullshit.”

“What’s bullshit?” Luc asked as he walked in, plopped on the couch, and planted his boots, ankles crossed, on the coffee table.

“That detective raided L.I. yesterday afternoon. I only had a moment’s notice to lock down before they were everywhere. And instead of taking care of it, Rafe here is ready to let her ransack the estate, too.”

Luc cast a puzzled look around. “How’d she get to L.I. when her car was at Stone

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

90

Corp. headquarters all afternoon?”

“How’d you know that? You still following her?” Gabe asked.

Luc grinned. “No need now. Not when I can track her car.”

Gabe threw up his hands and again plowed his way across the rug. “You bugged her car? That’s just great! If she finds it, there really will be hell to pay. We’ve already got her crawling all over the place. Why not bend over and let her kick our asses all the way to prison?”

“Settle down, Gabe,” Rafe said before frowning at Luc. “I didn’t tell you to bug her car.”

“It’s a new GPS tracking device, not a bug. I’m testing it for our security division.” Luc toyed with the toothpick held between his straight white teeth. “You wanted me to check her out. That’s what I’m doing.”

“I asked you to find out about her past, nothing more.”

Luc shrugged. “Then you shouldn’t have asked me to drive her car to the hospital the other night. It was an opportunity I couldn’t resist. Besides, I figured you’d want me to keep a closer eye on her, especially if what I suspect is true.”

“Suspect what?” Gabe looked from Luc to Rafe. “What’s he talking about?”

Luc held up two fingers. "Two dead. Our big brother is the link. He didn't kill 'em. I didn't kill 'em, and you damn sure didn't do it. So, my question is, who'd want the cops to suspect Rafe?"

Gabe sat and stared at the portrait on the opposite wall. His words, when they came, were soft but menacing. "He's here."

"We don't know that for sure," Rafe said, "but it is a possibility." He walked toward the bay picture window at the front of the house.

"Why would he risk coming back now? We've had him on the run ever since..."

When Gabe's voice drifted off, Luc offered his opinion.

"Maybe he's tired of running. I nearly had him cornered in Atlantic City last summer...before the bastard slipped away."

Outside, the sun burned the eastern horizon. She'd be here soon. Rafe turned from the window. "Have you been able to pick up tracks at his former haunts? Any signs that he's back?"

Luc shook his head. "He's smart enough not to do that. If I'm right and Anton is behind this, he'll keep his eye on you, so I'd watch your back."

Gabe snorted. "He wouldn't confront Rafe face - to - face. If he'd wanted to do that, he would've done it years ago instead of running."

"Don't underestimate him," Luc warned. "Back then, he was a white - collar criminal. He's hanging with a seedier, much more dangerous crowd these days."

Gabe sneered. "I guess committing murder will do that to a person."

"I agree with Gabe in part. I don't think he'll attack me directly." Rafe leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "If that were his plan, he would've taken me out, not hit people I know."

"Which brings me back to that delicious detective." Luc smirked when Rafe scowled, then followed Gabe's gaze to the portrait and frowned. "Anton killed someone he claimed to love. What do you think he'll do to a woman who catches *your* eye? Hell, he gets one whiff of your interest in her and...bull's - eye."

"All right. You've made your point." Rafe struggled with a flood of emotions. He had vowed to make Anton pay for what he'd done to the Stone family. He'd expanded the Lykos Institute to accomplish just that. He and his brothers had spent months focused on the search for Anton and other rogue Lycans. And Rafe had postponed his search for a mate, not wanting to risk endangering another woman—at least not until Anton was gone.

Now, it seemed Anton had finally brought the fight to him. A challenge Rafe was more than ready to deal with. But that made the risk of a possible relationship with Mackenzie that much more perilous.

Rafe cast another glance out the window and sensed movement through the trees. Cars coming up the drive. Mackenzie was here.

"Gabe. Change."

"Damn it, Rafe, I don't think—"

"Now. She's coming. I don't have time for a debate. They won't leave until they get samples from all the wolves on the property, and since she's seen you as G, suspicion will fall more firmly on me if you aren't here."

"Samples?" Luc asked as Gabe cursed but started the change.

Rafe watched his brother's clothes puddle on the floor while sparkling light filled



the room.

“Samples of what?”

“G and the wolves are donating their DNA to the cause of proving my innocence.”

*I’m all for proving you innocent, Rafe, but if one person comes near my ass with a thermometer, I’ll hold you responsible for my actions.*

Luc laughed at Gabe’s telepathic warning. “You’re such a beta wolf.”

*I’ll show you beta, asshole.* With ears straight up and teeth bared, Gabe snarled.

“Roll over, Mutt. I don’t have time to play.”

“Stop provoking him, Luc.”

“He needs the practice after spending all his time with beakers, test tubes, and microscopes.”

“Not now. G...Be nice. Luc...Do something with his clothes.”

*Don’t you dare stuff ‘em under a cushion. I don’t want ‘em wrinkled.*

Luc sighed loudly but picked up the outfit, just as the doorbell rang.

## Chapter Nine

Mackenzie watched the state police agent press the doorbell. She kept her face blank, serious, official, and let the agent take point.

Her partner eyed her with concern. Cooper didn’t know the extent of her duplicity. He was unaware that she’d tipped off the suspect to this warrant. But he wasn’t an idiot either. Since he hadn’t specifically asked her about it, she hadn’t lied, at least not outright. She just hadn’t volunteered the information and hoped that omission didn’t come back to bite her.

The huge door opened to reveal Marge, the Stone’s housekeeper.

“Hello.”

Mackenzie stood almost at attention as the agent and housekeeper began the official conversational exchange. When Rafe appeared over the old lady’s shoulder, Mackenzie’s stomach flipped.

He pushed the door wider, smiled at the housekeeper, who stepped aside, and faced the agent. He didn’t glance at Mackenzie, but she wondered whether their awareness of each other was a tangible thing, easily noticed by others.

“I’m Rafael Stone.”

“Mr. Stone, this is a warrant to search your property.” The agent held out the official papers for him to see. “Please move away from the door.”

Rafe stepped back, holding the door wide as the officers filed in. Mackenzie expected to see a team of attorneys standing in the entrance hall, but was relieved to find it empty.

The agent was asking whether anyone else was in the house when Lucian entered through a door to the right, carrying some clothing in one hand.

“Here, Marge.” He gave the bundle to the housekeeper. “Gabe left his clothes lying around again.”

A harsh growl from behind Lucian made Mackenzie and the officers tense.

“G, come here.” The large black wolf responded to Rafe’s command, moving forward with sleek cautiousness, his tail high, ears back. When he reached Rafe, he nudged his hand and sat. His golden gaze settled firmly on Mackenzie and her pulse quickened. The animal made her feel as if she wore a shirt that said, *T - bone. Right here.*

*Bite me.*

“How many more of those are around here?” the agent asked Rafe.

“None in the house...at the moment, although a wolf pack has a den about a halfmile west of here, and they are free to roam the entire property.”

As the agent and forensics specialists who would procure the wolves’ DNA samples talked with Rafe, Mackenzie focused on the wolf. He continued to stare, almost accusingly, as if the beast was capable of such thoughts. She lifted one heel in reaction to an almost overwhelming compulsion to retreat from the fierceness in his eyes.

She vaguely heard Rafe explain that Luc could take them to the pack’s den. The wolf broke eye contact when one specialist pointed and suggested they start with him.

“Very well, but not in here. Come, G. Let’s get this over with.” Rafe walked into the room Luc had come from.

The wolf followed, leaped onto the coffee table, and sat. Mac walked through the doorway and took up a position beside Cooper.

Rafe glanced at the specialist who pulled some equipment from his bag. “No tranqs. No muzzles.” He aimed his gaze at each person circled around the room, as if he were daring them to argue his point. When he stopped at Mac, she felt sweat bead at her nape. “Detective Lyons, you’ll assist me, won’t you?”

Mackenzie blinked at the challenge in his tone. “Me? Why don’t you let the team handle it?” She gestured toward the wolf. “They’re quite capable of securing it to extract the samples needed.”

“Because G is not an ‘it’. He’ll submit to this voluntarily...not by force. But if you want the evidence, *you* will have to help get it.”

“You don’t need Mac’s help,” Cooper said, turning to point at Lucian. “The animal knows you. You can help hold him while the samples are taken.”

Lucian leaned against the wall with arms and ankles crossed and a smirk on his face. “Don’t look at me. I’m not on the city’s payroll. Besides, G and I annoy the hell out of each other.”

Cooper scowled and stepped forward. “Fine, I’ll do it.” A half step later, he came to an abrupt halt as the wolf snarled and his hackles rose in warning.

Rafe hadn’t moved. He gave no signal that Mackenzie noticed, but still the wolf made it clear Cooper was not welcomed.

“Call off the damn dog, Stone.” He grabbed the tranquilizer dart gun from the specialist.

“You don’t want to do that, Detective.” Rafe’s voice dropped ominously.

“Or what? Are you threatening me?” He snatched the warrant from the agent’s hand and held it up. “This is an official warrant. You want to face charges of interfering

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

94

with an investigation?”

The canine’s growls became more ferocious. The specialist looked around with uncertainty, while the agent’s hand crept toward his firearm. Rafe and Cooper stared at each other challengingly.

Mackenzie placed a hand on Coop’s shoulder. “Stop. It’s all right. I’ll do it.”

Cooper was one of the few people on the force aware of Mackenzie’s problem with ailurophobia, although she’d misled him into thinking she was allergic to animal

fur rather than afraid of cats. He was trying to cover for her, but things were getting out of hand. She couldn't allow that to happen.

Rafe placed a hand on G's head, and the wolf settled down. Mackenzie frowned at the pair. Didn't the idiot man know this made him look even guiltier?

"Damn it, Mac."

"I said I can do it." She met Coop's concerned expression. After a moment, he nodded and stepped backward.

"One false move though..." He held up the tranquilizer gun and eyed Rafe. Mac didn't know whether his intended target would be the man or animal, but she didn't have time to really dwell on it. The wolf was staring at her again.

Holding out her hand, Mackenzie made herself move forward, closer to that panting mouth filled with sharp teeth. Her breath caught in her throat.

*He's a dog, a pet, not a cat.* Her heartbeat raced, and her mouth felt like sandpaper.

She glanced quickly around the room, seeking assurance that she was not in the woods.

Not alone in the dark. Her gaze met Rafe's, and she saw he was smiling.

Her lips started to curve, until she felt a wet tongue swipe her palm. Her jaw dropped.

Another lick and Mackenzie's lungs collapsed as they released her pent - up breath. "N - nice wolf." Maybe she'd misread the animal's demeanor earlier. She must have. Wild creatures didn't understand suspicion or accusations, and the wolf certainly seemed friendly now. Maybe he didn't get along with men, other than Rafe, of course. Even Lucian appeared unwilling to get near the animal.

Rafe nodded to the specialist who approached with caution.

"He's not wearing a collar. How do I hold on to him?" she asked. The wolf licked the tips of her fingers as if she'd dipped them in his favorite dog food flavor. Maybe she had. She'd eaten some M&Ms on the way to the estate. Did dogs like chocolate?

"Enough, G." Rafe glowered at his wolf before looking at her. He took her hands, placed one on the wolf's neck and the other around one front leg. "Just hold him." He took the wolf's other front leg in a firm grip while Mac cocked a skeptical brow. If the wolf leaped into action, there was no way either of them would be able to hold him down.

The specialist used a brush to collect hair samples first. The wolf didn't move, except for an occasional flick of his fluffy tail. Mackenzie relaxed a bit, her fingers curling into his soft, thick coat. She rubbed the wolf's neck.

As the specialist collected a blood sample, the wolf didn't even flinch.

Rafe released his grip and turned to watch the vial disappear inside another container. The specialist packed up the rest of his gear and removed his latex gloves.

The wolf rolled onto his back and pawed her hand, causing Mackenzie to smile.

"I thought the 'G' stood for grim guy, but you're not such a grouchy fellow, are you?" She chuckled and rubbed his belly.

Lucian snorted something that sounded suspiciously like, "Goner."

"G!" At Rafe's sharp voice, the wolf kicked the air, twisted, and fell off the table.

Mackenzie winced. "For Pete's sake, woman, don't pet his stomach."

"Why not?" She glared at Rafe and scratched behind the ears of the wolf, now seated beside her.

"Why? W - well...because..." The look he gave her was almost comical. If she

didn't know any better, she'd think he was jealous of a dog. "Because he doesn't like it."  
"He certainly *seemed* to enjoy it."

Lucian suddenly went into a coughing fit, which drew Rafe's wrath.

"What the hell are you still doing here?"

Lucian held up both hands as his coughs subsided into obvious chortles.

"Enjoying the show." His mouth spread into a wide grin.

"Well, get out of here. Take these guys to the den. They can use the monitoring equipment to locate the pack. And take G with you."

As the wolf trotted out of the room, giving Rafe a wide berth, Cooper approached Mackenzie. "May I speak with you a minute." He motioned her away from the others. "You should've put gloves on beforehand," he whispered.

"I'll wash my hands. I'll be fine. I'm going to stay behind here...keep an eye on Stone while you guys take care of the other animals."

He frowned and leaned closer. "I understand you not wanting to press your luck with a pack of animals, but I don't like leaving you here alone with him."

"He's not going to do anything with you all somewhere on his property." She gave him a stern look. "Besides, I'm a cop. I can take care of myself."

"Damn it, Mac. I know that. You think I can't see something going on between you and Stone?"

"And exactly what is it you think you see, Coop? If you doubt my integrity—"

"You know damn well your integrity is not in question. You don't have to prove yourself with me. I know you're a good cop, and if you want to be known as the force's number one coldhearted, by - the - book cop bitch, that's fine. But I don't trust him, and you haven't been yourself in days. We're partners, Mac, and you're keeping things from me. Don't think I don't realize that."

"Detectives? Luc's waiting." Rafe stood across the room with the others.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

96

"We'll discuss this later," she snapped.

"You're damn right we will." Cooper stalked toward the door.

"Will you be trekking through the forest as well, Detective Lyons?" Rafe asked, curiosity written in his eyes, as he watched Cooper pass by without a word.

"No. Where's a bathroom? I need to wash my hands."

He peered at her a long moment before pointing to a door to the left of a large portrait hung as a centerpiece on the wall. "There's a half - bath through there."

"Thank you." She escaped through the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie was composed when she came out of the bathroom, but beneath that calm façade churned a volatile mix of emotions. She'd taken an extra few minutes to align her jumbled thoughts, but her nerves were another matter entirely. Her investigative efforts so far were like treading water, and it was getting harder for her to see over the waves. Her only suspect was a man who tempted her from across a line that she feared, once crossed, would prove to be a one - way trap. He made her second - guess her abilities, and was a distraction she couldn't afford. Her partner didn't trust him and was now suspicious of her. And she had no one to blame but herself. She should've included Cooper in more of the encounters with Rafe. Maybe

then she wouldn't be in this predicament. But she hadn't, and now, her boss ordered her to stay close to the one man who challenged everything she'd ever believed in. The one man who could destroy her if she was wrong about him...if Cooper's doubts proved accurate.

"I know Cooper is your partner, but I wonder whether he accepts your definition of that term." Rafe waved her toward a chair positioned at an angle to his. She crossed the elaborate rug and sank wearily into her seat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The television was on but muted, the latest stock quotes scrolling across the bottom of the wide screen. Soft instrumental music played from some hidden speakers.

"I sense a willingness on his part to become partners of a different sort."

Mackenzie snorted. "Your senses are off. Coop's a playboy, sure. But we're partners because he knows I won't mistake his harmless teasing for sexual harassment. And I don't have to worry about a partner trying to make business personal."

"I see." Disbelief laced his tone as he continued to watch the figures on the TV. His nonchalance irked. "Some of us don't have the luxury of mixing business with pleasure."

Those deep, honeyed eyes turned toward her, focused and steady.

"Besides, I think I know my partner better than you do. You've met him, what? Twice?"

"Care to make a little side wager?"

His question surprised her, but the challenge in his eyes made her say, "What do you have in mind?"

He glanced at a grandfather clock in the corner of the room. "I say Detective Cooper sees you first as a woman..." To punctuate his point, his gaze slid over her body, leaving behind an irritating trail of tingles. "And secondly as a fellow cop. I believe the evidence to back up my claim will arrive within the next five minutes. Your partner will check up on you."

Mackenzie smiled. Cooper might be suspicious of her recent actions, but he knew she could handle herself as a cop. There was no reason for him to pop in within five minutes or five hours. "The winner gets?"

"If I win...dinner with you at a location of my choosing. If you win, name your prize."

"You submit to a lie - detector test, with me asking the questions."

His eyes narrowed briefly, and she thought for a second that he'd back out, but then he nodded.

"You're on." She looked at the clock and saw the minute hand tick once.

"Starting now."

He watched the television. She watched the clock's hands. At four minutes thirty seconds, her lips curled into a small smile. At four minutes forty - five seconds, she heard

footsteps coming toward the room. Five seconds later, Cooper's face appeared in the doorway, and Mackenzie muttered a curse.

"Mac, I need your keys. Gotta get some gear out of the trunk."

*Bullshit.* There wasn't any gear in the trunk that he couldn't have gotten from the forensics specialist's kit. With a frown, she dug her keys out of the pocket of her blue

jeans and tossed them to him.

Cooper eyed her but cast glances at Rafe, who sat silently staring at the muted financial report.

“Did you need something else, Coop?” She didn’t try to hide her annoyance.

“Nope. Thanks. Back in a bit.” He left after one more look over his shoulder.

When she returned to her seat, her fingers tapped the padded armrest.

“His coming back for gear doesn’t make you right about him.”

Rafe grinned.

“It wasn’t like he could get into the trunk without the keys.” She could see he didn’t believe her logic any more than she did.

“Want to wager how long he’ll take before returning your keys?”

Mackenzie grimaced. Why couldn’t Coop have come up with a better excuse...or waited a few more seconds? Ten seconds. Just ten more seconds. Of course, the keys gave him another reason to come back.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

98

“Do you like Italian, Detective?”

She swallowed and shrugged. “I’m not going to have to dress up for this, am I?”

“Dress is optional...” Heat flooded her cheeks, and he flashed a straight set of pearly whites. “I mean, what you wear is your choice. I only get to choose the place.”

“Where?”

“My place.”

“Dinner. Nothing more.”

He nodded obligingly. “That was the wager.”

She’d go because she didn’t welsh on bets. Besides, Fuller had told her to stay close and put the pressure on; maybe she’d get the opportunity to do some more snooping around his place.

Looking around the room, her gaze settled on the portrait centered on one wall in an obvious place of honor.

“Who’s the woman?”

Something flickered briefly across his face. Sorrow? Anger?

“My sister, Ariana.”

“She’s beautiful.” The woman posed in a window seat, a serene smile on her rosy lips. A delicate pendant adorned her neck. Her midnight locks draped over one shoulder in a riot of curls. The artist had captured perfectly the sparkle of humor in her emerald eyes. But for some unknown reason, he’d left the portrait unfinished, and the painted colors faded into sketched outlines, then into nothing.

“She was, yes.”

“Was?”

“She died several years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” She reached out, laid a hand on his arm, but then pulled back. She shouldn’t be feeling sympathy toward him. She should be interrogating him, pressuring him into making a mistake. Seeing him stare at the portrait, with his jaw locked against any sign of emotions, tugged at her heart. He’d experienced a great loss; she could relate to that, the emptiness, the longing to hear a loved one’s voice one more time.

“She was murdered.” His soft words had the impact of a sledgehammer.

\* \* \* \* \*

The team took longer than Mackenzie expected, but she guessed catching up with a wild wolf pack on a vast piece of property wasn't the easiest of tasks for investigators more familiar with handling stationary evidence.

"We thought it best to call the search off for now," Cooper explained when he returned to the house. The agent had left moments earlier, but a few others remained outside, putting away equipment. Despite stopping twice during the day for meals, they'd managed to track down about half the pack. The rest proved elusive. "With the sun setting soon, it's unlikely we'd find the others before dark anyway." Cooper eyed Rafe. "There are only eight on the property, right? No more?"

Rafe nodded but remained silent and relaxed in a chair, as if falling under suspicion of murder and served a search warrant was a trivial inconvenience. A tick in Cooper's jaw evidenced his irritation in Rafe's continued placidity.

Stone had a talent for hiding his thoughts and emotions. He tapped into that expertise whenever he wanted, although he'd let her glimpse another side of him. A softer, more vulnerable side. He'd changed the subject after revealing his sister's fate, but not before she'd seen pain. When she probed his connection to the more recent murder victims, he displayed frustration and even a hint of anger. She preferred he remain reserved. Cold. Distant. She could better maintain her own aloof professionalism when he did. Seeing him as a man with feelings, a man who could be hurt, made it more difficult for her to view him as a coldhearted killer.

Cooper said, "The team will come back at first light tomorrow and try again."

Rafe further pricked Cooper's fury by addressing Mackenzie. "I won't be here tomorrow. Business requires my presence in the city. However, I can arrange for Lucian to be here."

She nodded and looked toward the door. "Where is he anyway?"

"When the house came into view, he left us to find our own way back," Cooper answered, sitting in the bay window seat to pick burrs off his pant cuffs. A fresh breeze played with the sheer ivory curtains through the opened windows. "He and that hound wandered off into the brush again."

Mackenzie frowned. "Whatever for?" She looked at Rafe, but he shrugged and turned another page of the newspaper he'd picked up to read. The crisp pages crackled as he popped it into position.

"Don't ask me," he said from behind the wall of newsprint. "Luc may be my brother, but even I wouldn't hazard a guess to what he's thinking half the time."

One of the specialists stepped into the room. "Detectives, we're all packed up. Gonna head on out, if there's nothing else today."

Mackenzie raised a hand in farewell. "That's fine. Thanks." As he disappeared through the doorway, she asked, "Where's Gabe? I figured he'd want to be here for this. Did you not call him?"

Rafe had left the room earlier to make a few calls. Business calls, he'd said. She'd used the opportunity to snoop but found nothing incriminating. When the housekeeper brought her a glass of iced tea and nearly caught her poking around in the compartments of an antique secretary, Mackenzie decided not to press her luck.

"No need. Besides, he has enough work to do dealing with business after the effects of your previous warrant. Your people seized a lot of equipment, apparently. All

that must be replaced so current projects aren't adversely impacted."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

100

Sorry she'd asked, she stuffed her hands in her pockets, then quickly pulled them free. She wasn't the guilty party here. She was just doing her job. If that inconvenienced him, he'd have to learn to deal with it. Surely that was better than waiting out the investigation from behind bars.

Bloodcurdling screams erupted from outside. Faint but clear. Female and urgent.

Both detectives and the civilian reacted alike. They ran for the door.

Chaos met them at the tree line about a hundred yards in front of the house.

The black wolf clawed the trunk of a tree and barked ferociously. His snarls replaced all prior evidence of the playful pet. A stream of male curses and female shrieks came from within the branches.

"G! What the hell? Luc?" Rafe beat the cops to the scene, and wasn't even breathing heavy when he got there, and that annoyed her.

Luc stood a few feet away in his usual pose, arms crossed and a smirk on his face, although his eyes held a fierce anger that made a shiver creep up Mackenzie's spine. Maybe she was focusing her investigation on the wrong brother?

"G..." The wolf paused, peered at Rafe a long moment, and then as if by silent agreement, he moved to sit beside him. *How did one train a dog to do that?* "You can come

down now, Ms. Drake."

Mackenzie gaped. How'd he know who was in the evergreen tree? She couldn't see anything past the thick foliage.

"How did you—"

"Didn't you recognize the voice?"

She pressed her lips together. No. She hadn't. Damn the man for pointing out her failed powers of observation. When a shoeless foot poked out, she glanced around for shoes. Sure enough, a red pump lay a short distance away. A pair of trim legs, encased within slacks in serious need of repair followed the foot, and soon, the entire reporter dropped agilely to the ground.

Evalyn Drake faced them, wiped her scuffed hands off on her pants and when she saw the wolf, took a step back.

"That thing is dangerous." She pointed to the wolf who sat calmly watching her every move.

"Reporter is his favorite flavor," Luc said with a chuckle.

"Knock it off, Luc," Rafe said in warning. "I may know you never mean a damn thing you say, but these detectives here might take you seriously."

Luc cursed.

Seconds later, Drake's photographer hit the ground. He immediately walked several yards away to where he'd apparently dropped his camera.

"Turn that on, and we'll sue you for trespassing on private property," Luc said in a tone laced with menace.

Drake held up a hand to her photographer, who mumbled that the camera may not work now anyway. Under watchful eyes, he busied himself with checking out the equipment.



“Mr. Stone, I thought we had an agreement. We only wanted to—”

“I’m aware of what you want,” Rafe said. “But as I’m sure my assistant informed you when she canceled our appointment, my schedule is rather full today. And although I tolerate the occasional imposition of the paparazzi, I refuse to submit to an interview with a person who illegally sneaks onto my property. I don’t like being ambushed.”

“I haven’t spoken with your assistant, but the guard at your office said you’d chosen to work from home today. I thought I’d just misunderstood the location. We were not sneaking through the woods. We walked down that road you call a driveway.” Still barefoot, she tugged her suit coat in place and straightened. Her gaze met Rafe’s boldly, but her hair remained disheveled and her face and clothes bore the signs of her dash for safety. “A van was pulling out when we arrived, and the gates were open, so we drove in, but our blasted vehicle broke down back there. God, I think I walked a mile before that beast scared a decade off my life.”

“You agreed to an interview?” Mackenzie asked before she could stop herself. Hadn’t Fuller warned her that the gloves would come off when she served the warrants? Had Rafe planned to fight her with a reporter instead of attorneys?

“Yes, the interview concerning my latest multimillion - dollar acquisition in Vegas was scheduled more than a week ago.”

“Actually, we’re planning to do a three - part biographical piece on the cornerstone, if you’ll pardon the pun, of an international empire. Stone’s accomplishments in the business world over such a short time are the stuff of dreams. With this latest acquisition, and the anticipated release of his security software package, his worth could rival that of Bill Gates.”

Mackenzie fought the cringe when she saw Drake’s demeanor shift into hound - dog mode. The reporter scented a story.

“But you know? I received a tip right before I came out here.” She looked at Rafe.

“I thought I’d wait until I got here to ask you about it, but now that I see the detectives here, I think it’s true. You’re a suspect in the canine murders, aren’t you?”

## Chapter Ten

“As lead investigator, I don’t believe I’ve named any suspects in the case, Ms. Drake.”

“Care to name one now?” When Mackenzie shook her head, Drake asked, “Then what are you doing here if he’s not a suspect?”

“I—” Rafe began.

“Stone is participating with the investigation as an expert on canines.”

Mackenzie showed no emotion, regardless of Cooper’s gaze boring into her back. She would face hell for this, if not from her partner, then from Fuller. At least the damn camera wasn’t on.

“An expert...” The reporter eyed the wolf still parked peacefully by Rafe’s side.

“So the tip I got about a search warrant served at the Lykos Institute yesterday is untrue?”

Rafe’s hand on her shoulder stopped Mackenzie’s response in her throat. “I’m sure Detective Lyons won’t mind if I explain that yesterday’s incident was simply a matter of formality. I’d already offered my assistance in her investigation of the tragic deaths of Senator Robertson and Mr. Shumaker. However, for legal reasons, I couldn’t

authorize the release of DNA information on the multitude of animals stored in the institute's database without an 'official' request."

"So—"

"Ms. Drake, it's getting dark. I'm sure the detectives would like to get back to the city and their investigation. Why don't we go inside?" He gestured toward the house, but she paused to glance at the wolf. "Luc, take G inside. It's been a long day."

"Come on, G. Maybe I can scrounge up a doggy biscuit or something."

As Luc and the growling wolf left, Drake retrieved her shoes and a bag she'd dropped some distance away, then headed for the house. Mackenzie followed with Cooper, who remained suspiciously silent, while Rafe picked up the conversation.

"I'll have Marge call an auto mechanic or tow truck, whichever you prefer, and postpone my other engagements for the next hour to answer your questions...concerning our original interview topic. That is, if your camera is working?" The photographer bringing up the rear gave a thumbs up.

When they neared her car, Rafe paused. "Detective Lyons. It's been a pleasure, as always. I'm sure we'll see each other again?"

"Yeah, right. Thanks again for the information."

"If I may help further in any way, you have my personal number." He faced Cooper and nodded. "Detective Cooper. Good day."

As he walked away, she heard Drake ask, "And what is your private number, again?"

Rafe's smile was evident in his voice. "Ah, that's classified information."

"But *she* knows it."

"Privileges of the badge. I never argue with cops...."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie let Cooper drive back to the city, hoping she'd get some rest, but he hadn't forgotten his earlier promise. The time for their talk had come.

"What the hell was all of that? 'I never argue with cops.' And you with your 'participating expert on canines'. We just served two search warrants against the prime suspect in a murder investigation, and you two are acting like a fucking tag team. I'm telling you, Mac, you better level with me."

Mackenzie sighed. If she told him she'd kissed their prime suspect, would he report her?

No, not Cooper.

Maybe not Cooper.

She settled on a different truth, thinking that might appease his sensibilities.

"If Stone wanted to, he could have a string of lawyers out to block our every move, pull in political favors, and who knows what else. You said it yourself. He's a powerful man. This way, we avoid that."

"We play along, keep him from using the media to drum up sympathetic support, and hope it plays on his ego?"

"Something like that."

"And what happens if we're right, and we have to arrest him. Don't you think he'll use what you just said against us?"

"Maybe."

"More than maybe."

“Okay. But we can deal with that if it happens, but what if we’re wrong about him?”

“We’re not. Didn’t you see that wolf in action?”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

104

Except for a nod, Mackenzie had no response.

“That still doesn’t explain what’s going on between you two.”

She let her head fall against the headrest. “Fuller ordered me to stay close to him.”

“The sergeant? What the hell was he thinking?”

That pissed her off. She hated knowing Rafe was right about Cooper thinking of her more as a woman. She was a cop, damn it. “That I’m a cop, capable of doing the job, which is more than I can say for my partner at the moment.”

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. “Well, maybe that’s because my partner hasn’t exactly been open and frank about the assignment.”

Mackenzie winced. “Okay, fine. Look, I’m to gain his confidence, if possible, while the team turns up the heat, hoping that he’ll make a mistake.”

She didn’t add that the closer she got, the more doubt she had about Rafe’s guilt.

She felt like a puppet, dancing to the music someone else played. The trouble was determining who pulled the strings. She did want to start looking at other possibilities.

“Well, he damn sure made one tonight, letting us see that wolf in action.”

That hadn’t been Rafe’s doings, but she couldn’t deny that the stunt with the reporter hadn’t looked good. So why had she felt the urge to jump to his defense when questioned about the warrant? Mackenzie faced the blackened passenger window and yawned. Her mind was too muddled to deal with that question. The heat from the vents blasted her into a lethargic state.

She’d have to tell Cooper about the bet, but that could wait until tomorrow. The day’s tension drained from her muscles and sapped her energies. As her eyes drifted closed, she asked, “What do you think of the gambling angle?”

“I didn’t think much of it at first. The senator ran on a strong antigambling platform, and Shumaker was a gambling addict. But Stone has ties to Vegas. You heard him. That makes three. It may be worth checking out...when you wake up.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Test results: No match.*

Mackenzie stared at the ballistics report and gave herself a mental *I told you so*.

Rafe’s handgun was not the murder weapon in the first homicide. Her instincts about him handing over the gun had been right. He wouldn’t have been so willing unless he knew it wasn’t the right gun.

“Hey, Mac. Sleep well?” Cooper propped his tight jeans - clad hip on the corner of her desk and tossed her a bag of M&Ms.

“All right, thanks.” She’d been so exhausted she’d slept like the dead. “A peace offering, Coop?”

He shrugged and bit into a honey bun. “What’s that?”

“Ballistics report on Stone’s HK Mark 23.”

He leaned forward, took another bite, and dropped a pastry crumb on the desk.

“Negative. Hmm, you called that one right.”

"Yeah. And I've got a feeling the DNA results on the wolves will be the same."  
"I might decide to bet on that."  
"I've had enough of wagering, thanks."  
Cooper somehow managed a smile while still chewing. Mackenzie dropped her bag of M&Ms in the back of a desk drawer for later.  
He shrugged. "Suit yourself. Meanwhile, I got good news and bad news."  
"What's the bad?"  
"Did you catch the morning news?"  
She shook her head. "Why?" Her question sounded wary, even to her own ears.  
"Drake promoted that exposé on Stone."  
"Any mention of the case?"  
"Yes. She scooped the other stations on the warrant. No mention of Stone as a suspect, but she paraphrased his response as to the reason for the warrant." He frowned. "They used video of him hugging the widow at the funeral."  
"And that bothers you."  
"Damn report made him appear like Daddy Warbucks trying to find the killer of one of his employees."  
"Maybe he is."  
"What he is, is a suspect, but instead of telling 'em like it is, you let him play the part of hero, while reporters question why the police have no named suspects, and no arrests."  
"We already went over this. I don't intend to try the case on the evening news."  
"We look incompetent, Mac."  
"You jump the gun on naming a suspect, especially one as famous and powerful as Stone, and the case turns into a media circus, never mind what happens if you're wrong."  
"It's already a media circus, and you may not have a choice soon. I heard Hahn has another meeting planned with Fuller."  
Mackenzie cursed. "I could really use that good news now."  
Cooper popped the last bite of pastry in his mouth. "You know I put feelers out with several snitches to see if anything would turn up."  
"Yeah?"  
"Got a tip today from that hooker you roughed up at the first crime scene."  
The chair squeaked as Mackenzie leaned back with a smile. "Miss Selfemployed?"  
"Yep. Seems she overheard some street chatter about Shumaker's bookie. He's a

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

106

regular with one of the other girls. You know how girls love to gossip."  
"Yeah, and all men's brains really are located between their legs."  
Cooper chuckled. "It seems our bookie likes sex, sleep, and chitchat...in that order. Apparently, he was real nervous the last time he stopped by for a little bang between the sheets. He tossed and turned and talked in his sleep more than usual. She wrote it off as effects of the bottle, until she heard the news reports on our jogger."  
"Got my attention."  
"Thought it might. According to my source, the guy kept mumbling something about a backdoor and a dumb computer geek getting them all killed."

“Backdoor?”

“Got me.”

“That’s slim. Shumaker’s bookie could’ve had any number of ‘geeks’ in mind.”

“Maybe so, but the hooker also said he talked about a shoemaker. That’s why the news report caught her eye.”

“Are we sure it’s the right guy? Did your snitch give a name?”

He nodded. “Jimmy Harden. I checked with a couple of beat cops I know who work that area. They told me the guy is a small fry, but he often brags about working for...get this...Ernesto Caprini.”

“The modern - day Al Capone?”

Cooper tiskied. “You know, I heard he hates that comparison. He’s a legitimate businessman, with strong union support.”

“And I’m Mother Theresa.”

Cooper grinned. “Who are we to judge him just because he enjoys casinos and living lavishly?”

Mackenzie rolled her eyes. The lead was a long shot. The reliability of the source was unproven. A lot of the information was hearsay. The bookie could be namedropping and not have any ties to Caprini at all, but the gambling connection made it worth a closer look. “What do you say we pay Mr. Caprini a visit?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Sculpted lawns fronted the white mansion, an expression of a meticulous gardener’s touch. Towering marble columns supported the portico and gave the place an old - world Italian feel.

“Racketeering is profitable these days,” Cooper whispered.

“Yeah, some people think the syndicate went away with the Tommy gun.”

Cooper chuckled. “Hopeful idiots.”

Mackenzie reached to push the doorbell, but the door swung open. A hulk in a three - piece suit blocked the opening. He either gorged on spinach or popped steroids like candy.

“No soliciting.” His voice was as deep as he was big.

“Damn, there goes free enterprise.” Mackenzie glanced at Cooper. “Good thing we’re not salesmen.” She flashed a badge. “Mr. Caprini, please.”

“Got a warrant?”

“What would we need that for?” she asked.

Cooper answered, “We don’t since we just want to talk to him, ask a few questions. You know conversation? Free speech? Sentences longer than three words.”

The hulk’s face shifted to form three slits of eyes and mouth. “No cops.” He moved to shut the door, but Mackenzie slapped her hand on it and stuck her foot in the way, hoping she wouldn’t lose it in the process.

“Look, forgive my partner here. He’s a bit irritable.” She leaned in further as if sharing a secret of some import. “He hasn’t had his coffee yet. Caffeine addict. Isn’t a pretty sight. So, why don’t you tell Mr. Caprini that Detectives Lyons and Cooper are here to see him? Let him decide whether he wants to talk to us here, or take a trip downtown and talk to us there.”

After a brief pause, he nodded. “Wait here.” The door closed.

Cooper leaned against the door as they heard the bolt slide home with a telltale click. "Man of few words."

"The quiet ones are the ones that worry me most. Try not to piss off 'Bruno' too bad, okay? His hands are larger than your head, Humpty Dumpty."

"Oh, now that hurts my ego, Lyons. Really, it does." He ran fingers over a thick buzz cut that never required styling.

She laughed. "You may not be bald or round, but you are breakable, wiseass, and I don't feel like walking around eggshells right now. So cool it."

A click warned them before the door opened again to unveil 'Bruno' with a decidedly sour expression.

"Come in." When he waved them in, Mac caught a glimpse of a holster.

The interior was a visual kaleidoscope of wealth. Marble floors. Antique furniture. Elaborate sculptures in stone and bronze. Fine art hung in garish frames on silk - covered walls. She wondered whether the paintings were real or replicas. All of it testified to prosperity, but unlike the subtle elegance of Rafe's home, the display was overpowering.

Cooper whistled and made his own show of gawking at the furnishings. "No way could I afford one painting in this place on my detective's salary."

"Would you want it if you could?"

"Uh no. My girlfriend might get ideas about diamonds then, and who needs that headache?"

"What's her name this week?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

108

He grinned and winked. "Babe."

"That's not really her name, is it?"

"No, but it's safe."

Mackenzie laughed but sobered quickly. Why the hell couldn't he have acted like his normal babe - magnet self at Rafe's place yesterday instead of a guard dog? Maybe then, she would've won the damn bet.

With a round face and receding hairline, Caprini could've passed for an Al Capone look - alike, if it were not for the pencil - thin mustache. Maybe that's why he grew it.

He rose when 'Bruno' escorted them in, arms spread as if greeting old friends.

"Come in. Come in. What a delightful surprise. Please, won't you join me? Get them drinks. Whatever they like, Bernardo." *Bernardo...Bruno...Close enough.*

"Coffee, thanks," Cooper said, giving Mackenzie a grin. "Black."

"Nothing for me, thank you." She shook Caprini's hand after he'd released Cooper's.

He waited until Cooper had his coffee and both detectives sat across from him.

"What did you want to speak about? I must say I had to interrupt important business, but you have me curious."

"I'm sure you know we've been rather busy in Homicide lately."

"Oh, yes. You're that detective handling the case for the senator. I saw you on the news. A tragic event, that...the murder, I mean, not you being on the news. Quite lovely, you are." He held up a cigarette. "You don't mind, do you?" Without waiting for a

response, he lit it, took a drag, and released a slow stream of smoke into the air.

“Robertson’s murder. That was what you meant by busy, wasn’t it?”

“His and the other one.”

He pointed at them with the two fingers holding the cigarette. “That’s right. The man in the park, what was his name?” He glanced at his bodyguard. The man responded in his typical few - word fashion. He shrugged.

“Shumaker,” Mackenzie said.

“Ah, yes. That was it. The media says they’re connected. Is that true?”

She shrugged, unwilling to share specifics.

“So what brings you to my door?”

“Did you know either of the victims? Have any business dealings with them.”

He laughed. “Bernardo, did you hear that?” The guard didn’t answer. “It almost sounds as if I’m a suspect. Am I? Please tell me our illustrious police force is not pinning their hopes for solving a murder on little ol’ me.”

“Please answer the question, Mr. Caprini.”

He peered at them, puffed his cigarette, and said, “Why would you ask whether I knew them? Of course, I didn’t know them. I travel in more liberal circles than did our dear departed senator. I may have met him once or twice, but that hardly qualifies us as acquaintances.”

Mackenzie could handle his abrupt coolness, but the sudden sensation of being watched made the hairs on her nape stand up.

“What about Carl Shumaker?” Cooper asked.

“Don’t know him.”

“Do you own an HK Mark 23 handgun?” Mackenzie asked.

His smile was sly, patronizing. “No. I’m a businessman. I have armed security. Why would I need my own?”

She ignored his question and asked another. “What about gambling? You like to gamble, Mr. Caprini?”

“Of course. Gambling’s a lucrative business venture of mine. It’s risky, but then taking risks stirs the blood, gets the adrenalin pumping. You should try it some time.”

He lifted a glass from the coffee table and sipped.

Cooper leaned forward. “Any of that business come through a bookie by the name of Jimmy Harden?”

The shift was subtle, but Mackenzie saw how Caprini’s body tensed, his senses on alert, in response to Cooper’s question. His smile slid into a grin, but it didn’t reach his eyes, which remained shadowed by heavy brows.

“Can’t say that I know him.”

“Where were you the night of the sixth?” Mackenzie asked. “That was a Saturday.”

“I don’t recall. Home most likely.”

“You must know Jimmy. He knows you,” Cooper pressed.

“A lot of people know me.”

“What about the morning of—”

“I really don’t have time for this.”

“Could you check your schedule?” Mackenzie could see the effect of their rapidfire questions on Caprini as his head began to bob back and forth.

“Or your Rolodex. He’s a bookie on the Southside,” Cooper explained. “He runs various rackets on everything from horseracing to sports. Says he knows you.” Caprini frowned. “I don’t care what some two - bit hoodlum claims. I said I don’t know him.”

“Actually, he’s a small - time loan shark, but he claims to work for a big fish... You.”

“If you’ve come here to do nothing more than make accusations, you can speak with my attorneys. I’m sure they’ll be more than happy to discuss this Hardball fellow with you.”

A slight movement, no more than a change in shadows to her left, drew Mackenzie’s attention, but she kept her gaze fixed on Caprini.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

110

“Now, if you’ll excuse me. You’ve wasted enough of my time with these pointless questions. I really must get back to my business.” He stood with a nicotine-tainted

wave of his hand. “Bernardo, show these officers the way to the door.”

The big brute moved forward, and Mackenzie chanced a glance toward the hallway. The shadow was gone.

“Mr. Caprini, don’t leave town. We will want to speak to you again,” she said as the brute shuffled them out of the room.

After the door slammed shut behind them, she and Cooper slipped into her car and pulled away.

“We’ve got a tail,” she observed after traveling about three blocks.

“Let ‘em follow. We’re headed back to the station, right?”

“By way of Harden’s residence. I want to see if we can bring him in, find out what he knows.” She slowed the car a bit. “If you can make out the plate, let’s run it when we get back.”

“Okay. Did you catch that back at Caprini’s?”

“The eavesdropper from the hallway? Yeah.” She braked for a stop sign.

“There was someone in the hall? No, I didn’t mean that. I meant his slip.”

“What slip?”

“He called the bookie Hardball.”

She glanced at her partner. “Yeah, so?”

“So if he doesn’t know Jimmy Harden, then why’d he use his street name?”

Mackenzie grinned. “Guess we riled him more than I thought.”

“That doesn’t prove he’s our guy though. I mean, sure, he’s a slimeball, but my bet’s still on Stone.”

She wove through traffic and slipped her sedan between a red semi and a taxi when her cell phone buzzed in her pocket. “Grab that, will you?”

Cooper flipped open the phone. “Yellow...yeah, this is Mackenzie’s phone...” He frowned. “Hmm. Yeah. She’s here. Hang on.” He covered the mouthpiece and looked at her. “Speak of the devil...”

Mackenzie gave him a questioning look.

“When did you give Stone your number?”

She snatched the phone and steered with one hand. “How’d you get this



number?”

“Hello, Detective.” Amusement tinged Rafe’s husky voice.

“Yeah, hi. Answer the question.”

“Let’s just say I have friends in the right places.”

She rolled her eyes. He probably owned the damn phone company.

“I wanted to thank you for last night.”

“Excuse me?” She nearly sideswiped a Volkswagen Bug.

His chuckle was deep, sensual. “For your handling of the Drake situation. You could’ve handled it differently.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like airing my cases on the nine o’clock news.”

“I want to see you tonight.”

“I’m kinda busy.” She wished she’d let Cooper drive. A glance in the mirror told her she hadn’t lost the tail, not that she wanted to.

“You have to eat some time, Detective. Why don’t I pick you up at eight? At the station or your place?”

“My place? How do you—”

“He knows where you live?” Cooper asked with a scowl.

“Shh.” She frowned at him, then slammed on the breaks before she ran up the tailpipe of an SUV. “No, the station’s fine. I’ve got to give you back your handgun anyway.”

“Wonderful,” Rafe said with a laugh. “You do know how to mix business with pleasure.”

“This is just business.” She’d fulfill the damn wager, nothing more.

“You handle the business then, Detective. I’ll take care of the pleasure. See you at eight.”

The line went dead. Mackenzie cursed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hey, I’m outta here...Damn, Mac.”

“What?” Mackenzie glanced up and frowned at Cooper’s goggle eyes. “Don’t start.”

“I thought you said this was just business.”

She shut the file cabinet drawer and returned to her seat, which helped hide her stocking - clad legs under the desk. “It is.”

“Is that a new outfit?”

“No.”

“You’re wearing lipstick.”

“Don’t make me hurt you.” She punched the buttons on her keyboard instead.

“You’re taking Fuller’s orders a bit far, don’t you think?”

“It’s just a damn skirt. I’ve worn them before, ya know?”

“Yeah, to funerals.”

She sighed. “I went to work out and needed a shower, so I changed clothes. Don’t make a big deal out of this.”

She’d needed the break today after drawing a blank on Harden’s whereabouts and coming back to learn Hahn’s meeting with Fuller had included the mayor, among others. He was calling for a task force to handle the case, a task force led by a more

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

veteran detective. Fortunately, Fuller had countered his efforts by pointing out that her team already had full cooperation from several other agencies, and that political grandstanding would disrupt any progress they'd achieved to date.

The sergeant cut the rug out from under Hahn by clarifying that because all of her reports were for his eyes only, a veteran detective was involved in the case. Fuller was aware of the leads being checked out and the efforts underway to find the killer. Any claim Hahn made about the case being mishandled would have to include Fuller, and no one was willing to go that far.

Mackenzie remained the lead investigator, but Fuller was increasing the pressure to wrap up the case, and he wasn't happy to learn the results of the ballistics report. So after her debriefing, she spent an hour pounding her frustrations into a punching bag. "That's where you went for lunch—the gym? Who'd you beat up this time?"

Cooper propped his butt on her desk. She really should invest in a potted cactus for that vacant corner.

"It was close. I pictured a certain assistant state's attorney. But sometimes the punching bag resembled Stone and other times it had a buzz - cut."

"Ouch. Okay. I get the picture. You can handle yourself. You don't need me to baby - sit you on your date with a suspect."

"It's not a date!" Her teeth would crack if she gritted them any harder.

Cooper stood up and stepped back. "Right. Dinner, business meeting, stakeout. Whatever you want to call it." His grin irritated her to no end. However, she couldn't totally blame him. She'd ribbed him often enough about his dates, and since she hadn't dated in eons, she hadn't given him the chance to return the favor. Until now, although tonight wasn't a date either. *It wasn't.*

"I wouldn't be going at all if you hadn't had more faith in me."

"So it's *my* fault? How was I to know you'd bet—"

"Forget it. Just drop it, okay? I'll get through it. Besides, Fuller ordered me to stay close. Maybe I can discover something that'll help wrap this up."

"You sure you don't want backup?"

"One of us has to check out that bookie again. I can't do it tonight, and we need to find him. I don't want to wait. By the way, did you run the tags on our tail?"

"Yeah, rental car. I'm going to swing by O'Hare and see if I can scrounge up a rental agreement, although it'll probably be leased to someone like John Doe."

She nodded. "All right. Let me know what you find out."

"Will do. Mac?"

She saved the file she'd pulled up on her computer and glanced at him.

"Be careful tonight."

She smiled. "I will."

After Cooper left, she spent the next hour going over the case files, looking for anything she'd missed before.

On the one hand, she had a suspect that fit the profile, but her instincts warred against the circumstantial evidence that pointed to his guilt. On the other hand, one of two victims had ties to a bookie who claimed to work for a man who'd been the focus of more criminal investigations than she could count. Racketeering, money laundering, loan sharking, and syndicated gambling. Now murder?

Suspicions and investigations didn't always add up to convictions. Nothing ever seemed to stick with Caprini. A misdemeanor for disturbing the peace when he was a teenager, but since then, his record was spotless. If one only looked at court records.

"You must pay your attorneys a fortune," she whispered.

"I do, but I was hoping to avoid including them in tonight's entertainments," a familiar, deep male voice rumbled from the doorway.

## Chapter Eleven

Why had she agreed to let him pick her up at the station? She should've said she'd meet him somewhere. Mackenzie nearly groaned seeing Rafe standing in her doorway. He wore a sleek black suit that had *custom - tailored* written all over it. If the man had that mile - long limo waiting outside, she'd beat the shit out of him.

"Did you have to dress up?"

"I didn't." He glanced down at a silk shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, black pants and suit coat. Removing the coat and tossing it over his shoulder, he grinned. "Would you rather I wore less?"

"No. Never mind. Forget I said anything."

He laughed, a rich masculine sound, which made her think of hot sands and warm waves. "Shall we?"

"Yeah." Mackenzie logged off her computer, approached him, and lowered her voice. "This is not a date."

"Of course not." But his smile said otherwise.

She slapped the gun case into his hands. "Here. We're done with this. It tested clean. You want to check it?"

"No need."

She felt like a nudist on parade as he escorted her through the station. She could almost hear the whispers starting and nearly collapsed in relief as the front doors came into view.

"Detective Lyons?"

Mackenzie stopped and turned as a fellow officer approached with a note in her hand.

"This just came in for you."

"Thanks." She took the paper, read it, and frowned. "Did you see who left this?"

"No. Sorry."

"Okay. Thanks." She pocketed the note and glanced at her watch.

"Trouble?" Rafe asked.

"No. It'll wait for later. Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

He should have used the limo, even though that would surely stir the detective's ire. Rafe tried to focus on driving, but a pair of long legs tugged his gaze like a compass attracted to magnetic north. Mackenzie's sapphire - colored skirt was a sleek number that hung to a modest length just above her knees when she stood. But when she sat... One creamy leg lifted, crossed, and the skirt slid a millimeter higher. His body screamed for the material to slide further north.

A blaring horn behind him signaled the green light. Rafe pressed the gas and silently cursed his own inability to control his growing urges. Her crystal blue gaze shifted to him. A tiny line formed between her delicately arched eyebrows. God, did she

not know what a challenge she offered?

"You continue to eye me with suspicion," he said.

"You're a mysterious man."

He smiled. "I think that's a compliment." When that line between her eyebrows deepened, he chuckled. "Are you so worried about any appearance of impropriety that you can't admit to a simple compliment?"

She licked her lips, and his mouth went desert - dry. "I don't care so much about what others might think as what I know to be true. I don't break rules." She glanced back out the passenger window.

Rafe frowned. Would she feel the same if she ever learned he was Lycan? What about the Lykos Institute's shadow operations? Could he trust her to keep their secret, knowing that to succeed in their mission to save lives they had to break human laws? She was attracted to him, he knew, but would that be enough to secure her silence? Her cooperation?

"I thought we were going to your place?" She looked at him. "You just passed the street."

He could fall into the blue depths of her eyes, but if he wasn't careful, she could be his downfall.

"We are." He reached out to caress the corner of her down - turned mouth with his thumb and almost smiled when she didn't pull away, but nibbled her lip instead. "I own many places. One of them happens to be the city's premier Italian restaurant."

"Oh."

A short time later, he pulled his Jaguar in front of the restaurant, gave the valet his keys, and escorted the detective inside. He had to force himself not to grin when he

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

116

witnessed her quickly suppressed awe. She was trying so hard not to enjoy herself.

The maitre d' showed them to his usual table in a quiet but public corner.

"Madam," he said as he held the chair for Mackenzie.

"Thank you."

Rafe watched her smile light her eyes and the room. So unexpected, she'd quite literally leaped into his life and turned it topsy - turvy. Her influence should have angered him, but instead, she stirred his alpha instincts to new heights. Why couldn't he stay away from her? She threatened his mission, his pack...not to mention his freedom. But he wondered if the real danger wasn't actually to his heart.

That thought surprised him. She was unlike his usual preferences. Not as tall.

Not as sophisticated. But she reminded him of a rose. Prickly backbone guarding a delicate beauty. A blossom drawing him nearer, while the thorns warned him away.

She was...a challenge.

She frowned. "You're staring."

"Yes."

His answer obviously disconcerted her as a precious blush bloomed on her cheeks, unmarred by her furrowed brow.

"Well, knock it off before I..."

A smile tugged at his mouth. "Before you what?"

She met his gaze boldly. "Before I do something childish like kick you in the

shins.”

He couldn’t help himself. He laughed. “You are positively delightful.”

“Yeah, a real ball of laughs.” She paused as the server approached with wine.

“The Château Latour Pauillac 1990, Mr. Stone.” He poured a bit for Rafe to savor, and when he nodded, the server filled their glasses.

Rafe watched her stare at the glass and was pleased when she finally lifted it to her lips. Her eyelids drifted closed in appreciation of the opulent flavor.

“I thought this vintage would suit you.”

“I’ve never had it before, but I like it.”

“I’m glad. I took the liberty of ordering in advance. But if you dislike anything, don’t hesitate to say so.”

She set the glass down. “Why are you doing this?”

Her boldness shouldn’t surprise him, but it did. “What do you mean?”

“This.” She swung her hand out in a small curve. “Dinner...with me?”

“As I recall, I won a wager.”

“You’re smooth, Stone, but not that smooth. Don’t dodge the question. Why did you choose dinner with me as your prize? Is it because of the investigation?”

*Prickly and infuriating.* “Do you always question others’ motives?”

“I’m a cop. That’s what I do.”

She always hid behind the badge. “And I’m a billionaire. I make and spend money. But I don’t let it run my life. I have other goals, desires, and interests.”

“Challenges to conquer?”

He almost nodded, but the flame in her eyes warned him that answer might not be beneficial to his health. “We aren’t at war...you and I.”

“But we are on opposing sides. I’m not your type, and you’re so far beyond my type, you might as well be in another galaxy.” She picked up her glass. “How much?”

“Excuse me?”

“For the bottle. How much?”

“It’s hardly the most expensive wine available.”

“How...much?”

“Around eight hundred, why?”

Her eyes rounded. “No wonder you’re supposed to drink it slow and savor every drop. Do you know what I have in my fridge? A couple cans of cola at fifty cents a pop and a leftover pizza.”

He grinned. “I knew you liked Italian.”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“I’ve heard every word.” He gripped her hand around the glass and slowly moved it toward her mouth. “And I also saw the joy on your face as you discovered something new.” He tilted the glass, letting just a taste trickle across her lips. “You wear the badge, Mackenzie, but it’s only one part of you. I see so much more. That’s the woman I want to know.” He released her hand and brushed a thumb lightly across her bottom lip before sitting back.

He did see more. Her gaze alone showed a riot of emotions, not the least of which was fear. He wouldn’t have blamed her if she chose to run, but then that wasn’t like her. She didn’t allow fear to rule her life. She acknowledged it and fought it every step of the way. He respected that. But he hadn’t meant to reveal so much of his own

thoughts about her.

A passing couple paused at their table. "Mackenzie. I never dreamed I'd see you here."

She didn't wince, but Rafe could see the light dim from her eyes as her protective walls fell back into place.

"Kenneth...Barbara, good to see you again." Her tone said just the opposite.

"You must be Rafael Stone." Kenneth held a hand toward Rafe, who rose to accept the introductions. "I'm Kenneth Hahn. This is my wife, Barbara."

The blonde beauty offered a perfected smile and a limp, well - manicured hand.

"Hello."

"A pleasure." Rafe would normally have offered the unexpected guests the

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

118

courtesy of joining them, but he decided against it after seeing the shallow smile frozen on Mackenzie's face.

"Barbara, honey, why don't you go freshen up and wait for me by the door?"

After his wife nodded and walked away, he explained, "We just had dinner with the mayor. She's a bit tired."

"I'm sure she is," Mackenzie agreed before taking a long sip of her wine.

"You've developed interesting investigative techniques, Mackenzie. I'm sure the mayor will be delighted to hear of your dedication to the case. You're willingness to devote personal time with an... 'expert' witness, and in such a fine restaurant, too."

Hahn turned to Rafe. "We finally meet, Mr. Stone. I've heard quite a bit about you lately."

"Is that so?" Rafe returned to his seat beside Mackenzie. He could sense the tension build in her body.

"Yes. Didn't Mackenzie tell you?" Hahn's smile was more of a smirk than a grin.

"I'm the lead prosecutor on the Robertson murder."

"Ah, now I see why she's determined to build a solid foundation of evidence in the case."

Mackenzie's lips pressed together.

"The families deserve to see the guilty party brought to justice and not go free because of a technicality, don't you think?" he asked Hahn, whose smirk had turned into a sneer.

"The guilty party will spend the rest of his life behind bars...or face the executioner. I can assure you of that."

"Then we are of an accord." Rafe smiled.

"We are?" The man appeared baffled that what he'd obviously intended as a threat could so easily be converted to imply agreement with a suspected murderer.

"I share similar beliefs in the need for the death penalty...when used justly. I'm sure you and I can also agree on our country's edict of 'innocent until proven guilty'."

"Of course." Hahn nodded stiffly. "Detective, have a grand evening. I'll see you tomorrow."

After the attorney left and their meal was served, Rafe watched and waited for Mackenzie's defenses to recede, but they didn't. Her mouth formed a perpetual frown as she pushed her food around her plate. Silence reigned, but soon Rafe had had

enough.

“If you can capture your thoughts, tell me.”

“What?”

He set his fork down. “You’ve eaten maybe three bites, which will cause the chef untold amounts of dismay, I’m certain. Your mind is scrambling to parts unknown, and you’re pouting.”

“I do not pout.”

He placed a hand on his heart. “I stand corrected.” When she continued to pout, he said, “You’re concerned about being seen here...with me.”

“No. Yes. I don’t know, damn it.” Her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

“Hahn and I have...issues, and being seen here with you complicates things. I really should leave.”

“I never thought of you as a coward.”

Fury flashed in her eyes. He preferred that to the uncertain anxiety he’d seen before.

“I’m not, but you...You think this is some sort of game. Like chess or some medieval fencing match. People like Hahn and you thrive on power plays.” She pointed at him. “Only I don’t have the luxury of playing games. One wrong move and it’s a minor inconvenience to you, sure, but this is not some grand adventure. For me, it’s about two murdered men. It’s my life. My career and reputation are on the line. And this thing with Hahn...” She shook her head and stood. “If he can use this to have me removed from the case, he will. I can’t let that happen. I won’t let that happen. Thanks for the drink, but I’m not for sale. Good night.”

Rafe caught up with her outside as she hailed a cab. When she moved to get in, he grabbed the door and her arm and followed her inside.

“Hey!”

“Drive,” he told the cabby.

“Where to, sir?”

“I don’t give a damn.”

“Stop the cab,” Mackenzie ordered.

“Keep driving. You had your say. Now you’ll listen.” He captured her chin, forcing her to look at him. “Fuck you, Mackenzie. If you think I’m trying to buy you for the price of dinner and wine, you sell yourself too cheap and insult me.”

“Then, what the hell are you doing? Besides wrecking any chance I have of salvaging my investigation? Is that it? You want me off the case as much as Hahn. Do you think you’ll get off on some technicality if you can seduce the investigator?”

“I’m going to say this one last time, and then never again. I did not kill those two men. I did not order their deaths. So I’ve no reason to need a technicality to prove my innocence.”

“Fine—”

He gripped her shoulders. “I’m not finished. I’m tired of you putting this investigation between us and using your badge like some damn shield, but you’re wrong if you think I want you off the case.”

“Why?”

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

"I know what solving this case means to you. I can see it in your eyes, hear it in your voice. Whether or not you can trust in me, I do believe in you."

"Then let me do my job. Don't jeopardize it." She looked at the driver. "Stop the cab."

"Keep driving," he ordered. The cabby shrugged, kept his foot on the gas and the meter running. "I never thought to see you run from anything, but you're doing just that. You're afraid to give us a chance."

She tried to knock his hands away. "Don't you get it? There is no 'us'. There's the case. I'm not putting it between us. It's always been there. The case is the only thing that's important."

"No. It's not the *only* thing. And if there is no 'us'..." He pulled her toward him.

"Prove it." He pressed his lips to hers. She tensed and flattened her hands on his chest. He continued to play with her mouth until her fingers curled into a tight grip on his shirt. His tongue slipped passed her lips as her defenses crumbled, and she leaned into him.

His need turned feral, but he held it in check. Barely. He pulled her onto his lap and wrapped an arm around her as he felt her fingers weave through his hair. His hand slid up one long leg while his mouth plundered her warm depths.

"I can't deny this any more than you can," he whispered before claiming her mouth again. "I feel it." He blazed a trail down the slender column of her neck. "You feel it." Her head fell back across his arm. He nibbled her ear. "I want you."

He pulled away to catch his breath, cradling her in his arms, trying to calm the fires that raged through his body. Orange beams of light swiped through the car's interior with each passing streetlamp. He needed her, but he didn't want to take her in a damn cab...with an audience. The driver's eyes shifted from the rearview mirror to the street ahead.

"Not here. Take us back to the restaurant."

He watched her eyes lighten, her breathing calm, as the haze of passion dimmed.

When Mackenzie sat up, without a word, a piece of paper fell out of her pocket. She snatched up the note and glanced at her watch.

"No. I have to get back to the station and pick up my car." She gave the driver the address as she slipped from Rafe's lap.

Before he could question her about the mysterious message, she gripped his hand, and he found himself staring at their interlaced fingers. Except for her brief show of sympathy over the death of his sister, this was the first time she'd willingly reached out to him. It was a start.

"I won't deny there's something between us. I can't, but I need more time. I just...I need more time. I'm being pulled in too many directions."

"There will always be cases."

"Hopefully not ones with you as a suspect." She gave him a bemused smile.

"Until this case is solved and the real killer is behind bars, I have to stay focused. You may not be guilty, but you are a distraction."

He chuckled. "You have a unique way with compliments, Detective." He cradled her jaw and ran a thumb over her lips, as soft as the petal of the rose he'd compared her to earlier.

When they pulled up to the station, she placed fingertips over his mouth as he



leaned toward her. "Time?"

He nodded, gripped her wrist, and pressed a kiss into her palm instead. "Where are you going tonight?"

Moving to get out, she glanced back. "Home, why?"

"You seemed worried about that note."

She stuck her hand in her pocket, which muffled the crackle of the paper. "It's just some police business. I'll handle it. Good night."

"Until later."

He waited only as long as it took the cab to pull onto the street.

"A hundred dollars bonus for you," he told the cabby, "if you can get me back to the restaurant in less than ten minutes."

As the driver floored it, Rafe pulled out his cell phone and pressed a button.

"Luc..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie watched the taxi until it disappeared from view. She glanced at her watch again. She had just enough time to change, contact Cooper, and get to the docks. She wanted to get there before the time on the note to check out the warehouse. Snitches often picked remote locations at odd hours for their contacts, especially those who wished to remain anonymous. Being pegged for a snitch in their own neighborhoods could prove painful or even deadly for some, but she didn't like going into a meeting blind.

After changing into a spare pair of jeans she kept in her locker, she strapped on her holster, checked the ammo in her firearm, and covered it all up with her bomber jacket.

Heading for her car, she tried Cooper's cell number and left a message when she got his voice mail. Where the hell was he? She thought about having dispatch reach him but decided against it. If he was out by O'Hare, he'd never make it to the rendezvous location on time anyway.

*This information better be worth the trouble.*

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

122

As she drove to the meeting, she pondered Hahn's veiled threat. His constant attempts to undermine her career pissed her off. Of all people, he should know how important the job was to her; she'd chosen it over him.

He'd claimed to have called off their relationship and then married the first bimbo he came across to save face. That was all fine with her. If he wanted to salve his inflated ego with lies, she could handle it.

Rafe had been right about her running. She'd let the idea that she'd finally given Hahn the ammo he needed send her into a panic. If he'd misread the situation between her and Rafe, she could fight it. But how did one fight the truth?

She was attracted to Rafe. She never would've let another suspect do the things he'd done to her. She'd compromised everything she believed in each time she let him touch her, kiss her, and plow past her defenses.

"What defenses?" she quipped to herself. Her weakness frightened her into lashing out emotionally when she needed to be calm, focused, and cool as ice. There was a killer on the streets of Chicago, and he wasn't going to wait around for her to get

her personal life in order.

The warehouse came into view, and Mackenzie pushed aside any stray thoughts as she studied the building and its surroundings. She drove completely around it before parking out front.

She was early.

No signs of life.

For several minutes, she inspected the dimly lit exterior and dark, shadowy spaces where vermin could hide. She reached up and flipped the switch on the car's interior light so it wouldn't come on when the door opened. After unzipping her jacket, she got out and made her way carefully toward the front door.

The salty scent off the lake permeated the air. The moon at three - quarters full helped illuminate the concrete yard around the area, but the glow gave the industrial landscape an eerie atmosphere.

Her breathing became more controlled, her senses more alert. Her heart raced, pumping an adrenalin rush through her body that she fought to contain.

Something didn't feel right, but she couldn't back out now. If there was the slimmest chance of getting information that could solve the two homicides, she had to check out the lead.

She pulled her Glock from its holster, put her back against the wall, and turned the doorknob. A squeak exploded from the hinges as the door swung open, then blessed silence.

Mackenzie entered fast and low, gun raised to fire, but nothing leaped at her from the darkness. Her back plastered to a large piece of machinery, she took several shallow breaths and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. Thin trails of moonlight pierced the blackness from dirty, cracked windows near the roof. The tiny beams cast the rest of the interior into the deepest pitch.

Her nose rebelled against the stench of oil, grease, and other unidentifiable odors.

She surveyed the area and decided on a spot where she could watch the door and wait for the snitch, if he showed. Cautiously, she moved to the new location and settled into the shadows.

Time ticked by at a snail's pace. Her butt was going to sleep. She wanted to check the time on her watch, but didn't dare chance the green glow giving away her position.

Another few minutes and she'd call it a night. A false alarm. Prank call.

She didn't hear it, but sensed it. A change. A slight shift of shadow, smooth and predatory. Mackenzie eased to her feet, which sent a team of angry ants crawling through her legs, restoring circulation.

Something darted across a narrow gap between machinery, a blur in the periphery that caught her attention. She edged forward.

One silent step.

Two.

With gun raised.

Three.

A stray cat's hiss sliced her heart and propelled her back a step.

The bullet grazed her forehead instead of penetrating her skull. Her move, made in fear, had saved her life.

At the sound of the gunfire, the tomcat darted for safer shadows. Dazed, Mackenzie turned to face the threat when another leaped out at her from the side. A dark figure, much larger than the cat, plowed into her as a second shot blasted the silence of the night.

## Chapter Twelve

She heard the second bullet impact flesh but had little time to process the information as she rolled on top of Rafe.

What the hell was he doing here?

Through the haze of blood in her eyes, Mackenzie aimed at the muzzle flash and returned fire. Despite fresh aches and pains all over, adrenaline kept her moving as time stopped. Forcing herself to leave Rafe, she ran after the perp. She maneuvered through the warehouse to close in on the shooter, and then heard the slap of fleeing feet on concrete.

She stopped at a back door as more bullets slammed into the doorjamb. When she heard him run again, she wheeled into the doorway and shouted, "Stop, Police!" But the man kept running. He spun, raising his arm to shoot just as a flash of brilliant gold light backlit her. Cursing, she dove for cover, rolled, and fired. The man stumbled from the apparent impact of a bullet, turned, and dove, or fell, off the docks into the murky waters below.

Mackenzie swiped at her forehead, smearing the blood that oozed down her face. She ran to the edge and searched for the gunman but saw nothing in the inky depths that slapped rhythmically at the shore.

She had to check on Rafe. She hadn't seen him get up from where they'd landed. Her forehead on fire, her eyes stinging, and her muscles burning, she raced back to the warehouse. She reached for her cell phone but cursed when she realized it wasn't in her pocket.

"Rafe!"

Panic lanced her chest when her cry went unanswered.

She dashed around a large crane and froze. Her gun came up, aimed directly at the huge black wolf that sat where Rafe should've been.

"No." She couldn't see. She wiped at her eyes. The killer—the wolf—she had to see. Find Rafe. Her mind and body screamed.

*Mackenzie. Don't shoot.*

Relief accompanied the sound of his voice. "Rafe, where are you?" Her head spun as she searched for him through the red fog. She kept the gun on the wolf, even though he hadn't moved. She'd shoot if he moved. "God, are you all right?"

*I'm fine. Mackenzie, please put the gun down.*

She blinked. His voice felt like it was inside her head. The pain throbbed. Was she losing her mind?

Blackness surrounded her. The night crept in to engulf her. Her hands started to shake.

"Rafe?" She hated the hint of terror in her voice.

The stray cat was somewhere in the darkness. Her gaze darted to the right, the left, and back to the wolf. Where'd he come from? Was the killer here? Was she seeing things?

*Mackenzie. Honey, please.*

One fist went to her temple, and she squeezed her eyelids shut. "You're in my mind, but... God, what's happening to me?"

*Nothing's going to happen to you. You're safe. Mackenzie, you're not alone.*

"Where are you? Rafe?"

*Honey, I'm right here. Don't shoot me.*

She blinked at the wolf down the barrel of her gun. He remained perched on top of Rafe's clothes, watching her.

His clothes. "Oh my God. Your clothes..."

As if he understood, the wolf looked down.

Mackenzie's gun fell to her side. Her knees collapsed beneath her. She sat, dumbfounded and unaffected by the cold, hard concrete floor.

*Mackenzie! Are you all right?* The wolf's ears perked up. One paw moved forward hesitantly.

Her voice was a whisper of shocked uncertainty. "Rafe? Is that you?"

When the wolf nodded, Mackenzie thought her eyes would pop out of her head.

Her mouth fell open, and she rubbed her eyes with the backs of both hands, smearing the blood that continued to trickle from her head wound.

She must have passed out. This was some kind of dream.

"This isn't happening. Rafe, come out here where I can see you. Now. This isn't funny."

The wolf's head tilted curiously. *Does it look like I'm laughing?*

She glanced around, seeking the origin of...her thoughts? She wasn't hearing his voice, yet it was so clear in her mind.

The wolf moved forward with head bowed low.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

126

"Stop." She forgot about the gun as she raised an empty hand toward the wolf.

He paused. *Mackenzie. I'm here in front of you. No joke. No hallucination.*

When she didn't speak, he moved again. Cautious. Wary. His muzzle nudged her hand, and air burst from her lungs. He was real. This was happening. Her fingers curved along his jaw and dipped into the silky softness of his pelt. She wasn't dreaming.

The wolf came closer, sat, and stared at her. And she knew the truth. Those were Rafe's eyes.

"How...How can this be?"

*You hold my life in your hands, Mackenzie. I told you I believed in you tonight. Now, I'm breaking one of the most sacred rules of my kind and entrusting you with a secret more*

*precious to me than anything I own.*

Her heart skipped a beat, but she couldn't look away from his eyes. Rafe's eyes.

*I'm a Lycan, a species that's been on earth for centuries. We take on two forms: one of man, the other wolf.*

"You're a werewolf?"

*No. I'm Lycan, not some mythical hybrid of beast and human that devours the innocent during each full moon. The Lycans are a race, not unlike humans but with special gifts...abilities.*

*We live in secrecy because of the dangers inherent in discovery. We live peacefully and according to the laws of both humans and the Pack.*

"You really are talking in my head." She didn't bother hiding the awe in her voice.

*Yes. It's how we communicate while in wolf form.*

She suddenly recalled thoughts she'd had about him while in his presence. Her eyes widened, and then narrowed to slits. "You can read minds?"

His ears perked up, and his head tilted in curious observation. Amusement tinged the voice that answered in her mind. *I wish I could. Then maybe I'd know what thoughts put that rosy color back in your cheeks.*

"This is so surreal."

The wolf...Rafe...walked away.

"Where are you going?"

He picked up his shirt in his mouth and brought it to her. *Here. Use this to stem the flow of blood from that wound.* He sat beside her. *You took seven years off my life tonight.*

She lifted the material and noticed the bloodstain on the silk. "Oh, damn it!"

Suddenly, her hands were all over him. "Where were you shot? Are you—"

*I'm fine. Mac... Stop. Mackenzie! That tickles.* The wolf leaped back. *I'm fine now. Really.*

"How is that possible?" She gave a shaky laugh. "Listen to me. I'm talking to a wolf. How's any of this possible?"

*This is not exactly the way I'd planned on you finding out. The gunshot is why I changed. I had to.*

She sat back on her heels, wiped her face off, and pressed his shirt to the cut on her forehead. "What do you mean?"

*The transition can heal most wounds, even gunshots, but we must have enough energy to complete the change or we could die in the process. I was lucky.*

She gaped at him. "You were lucky?"

*Yes. Not even the transition can heal critical wounds like bullets to the heart or brain. In those cases the change can't occur.*

She slugged him.

*What the...*

"You could've been killed!" She swung again but missed when his agility proved effective. "Don't you ever do something like that again. You could've died, damn it."

The wolf dodged another swing, bowed low and pounced, knocking her backward.

*I'm okay.* Rafe pinned her down and held still as her fists beat at his sides, then gripped his fur in a desperate hug. *It's okay.*

"It's not okay." A flood of emotions bubbled over as a tear slipped from her right eye. "It's not." She turned her face away, unwilling to delve any deeper into why the thought of his being harmed hurt her so much. "Don't you get it? You could've died *because of me*. What the hell were you thinking?"

He rose on all fours and moved off her. *I did what I had to do. I'd do it again if necessary.*

Exhausted, she struggled to push herself to her feet. "How'd you find me in the

first place?”

She searched for her phone and paused when she realized he hadn't answered her question. “Well?”

*I followed you.*

Some cop she was. She'd been so busy with her own thoughts on her way here, she hadn't spotted the tail.

She found her phone and flipped it open. She had to call this in. It was probably too late for divers, but they could secure the area until dawn. As she relayed the information to dispatch, Rafe sat watching her.

She returned his scrutiny. “You look like your pet, G,” she said after hanging up.

*I should. He's my brother.*

“He's your...Wait. No. We'll talk about that later. Right now, I need you to change back.” She waved a hand at him. “So do whatever it is that you do to be human again.”

*No.*

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

128

“Rafe, I don't have time to argue with you. Change back.”

*No.*

“Damn it, I'm investigating a murder involving unknown canines. I can't have you wandering around the city as a wolf.” Her eyes widened. “Canines...The killer. He's Lycan, isn't he? That's why you were willing to help with the investigation when I first asked.”

*It's a possibility we're looking into.*

“You're looking into? You're...Who the hell's the cop here?”

*You aren't Lycan, Mackenzie. You've no idea what you're up against if the killer is Lycan.*

She suddenly realized to what extent his trust in her reached. He was a suspect in the murders, and being a Lycan made him even more of a suspect. Not that anyone would believe her story if she did report it. And yet, for some reason the knowledge exonerated him in her mind. He'd never have revealed such a secret if he were guilty of the crimes. He would not have risked exposure or put his life on the line to save her either, but he'd done both tonight. The least she could do was protect him...and his secret.

“Change back, now. We've got to get you out of here.” She picked up her gun and the rest of his clothes.

*I can't.*

That stopped her. “What do you mean, you can't?”

*Not yet. The transition takes a lot of energy and, when healing is involved, it takes even more. I have to recover from that first. I'll need at least another hour or more before I can risk the transition again.*

“But the uniforms will be here any minute. Okay. Wait. Let me think.” She headed for her car with a wolf trailing behind her. “Where's the cabby. I'll get rid of him first.”

*I came in the Jag. It's parked a couple blocks from here at one of my properties.*

“You had time to go pick up your car and still follow me?” She hadn’t thought she’d spent that much time at the station. She understood how a cab could blend into traffic, but how had she missed the Jaguar tailing her?

He paused. *Amazing what a good tip can do to motivate cab drivers.*

“Humph.” She tossed his clothes into the back seat of her car. “Get in and stay low. Maybe I can avoid questions if no one notices you. And for God’s sake don’t bark at anyone.”

*Real funny.* His tail swatted her as he leapt into the back.

More than an hour passed before Mackenzie finally returned to the car and left the crime scene in the hands of other officers. She’d had to give a statement, help secure the scene until forensics could arrive, and argue with the medic an officer called in after seeing the slash on her head. She’d compromised by accepting a helpful dose of Tylenol and a bulky bandage in place of a trip to the ER.

*I’m glad to see you had that wound looked at.*

“Don’t start. I’ve already got a pounding headache, all right?” She glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “And keep your head down until I’ve turned the corner.”

*Where are we going?*

“My place, for now. I need a shower and sleep, but first, I want answers.”

He leaped into the front seat. *Answers to what questions?*

“For starters, I assume you and your brothers are the same?”

*We are all Lycans, yes.*

“Okay. Tell me more about Lycans. If they aren’t werewolves, I guess silver doesn’t harm them?”

The wolf whined, but she heard his groan in her head.

“Hey, you said I didn’t know what I’m up against, so enlighten me.”

*All right. No, silver doesn’t affect us anymore than it would you. Most of the superstitions and old wives’ tales are untrue. The full moon doesn’t force us to change.*

*We can*

*do so whenever we like, although our senses are heightened during the full moon phase.*

*We don’t*

*have a pact with the devil. We can attend church just like you or anyone else. We’re born Lycan,*

*so humans cannot be bitten and turned into a Lycan. Either you are or you’re not. And although*

*we typically enjoy longer than average life spans, we aren’t immortal.*

“Can you change now?”

*Possibly, but I’d rather wait for a location where you won’t have to arrest me for indecent*

*exposure.*

“Oh.” She felt her cheeks heating again.

After she pulled into the parking garage beneath her apartment building, she got out and held the door for Rafe.

“My landlord is going to have a fit over this if he sees you, and you’re footing the bill if he charges me a temporary pet deposit.”

Rafe growled.

Reluctantly, she took the stairs, not wanting to risk an encounter with someone

in the elevator. He easily kept pace with her as she trudged up the flights, and soon they were both safely ensconced inside her place.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll be out in a minute.” She tossed the keys and cell phone on the table, his clothes on the couch, and by sheer will alone made it to the bathroom and into a revitalizing shower.

Rafe heard the water start as he familiarized himself with her domain. The living room was clean and furnished with the essentials. A couch, recliner, coffee table, and television. No photos of family or friends. No plants. A quick sniff assured him she had

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

130

no pets either.

He paused when he heard a cell phone ring but let it go after he realized it was hers. He couldn’t answer it while in wolf form anyway.

The galley kitchen was small and tidy. A coffee cup sat upside down on the counter beside the sink. His strong jaws latched onto the refrigerator’s handle and tugged the door open. He checked inside and was amused to discover she hadn’t lied about its contents.

Making his way down the hall, he spotted a computer desk in the spare bedroom - turned - office. Framed certificates and a diploma hung on the wall along with a large map of the city. Beside it sat stacks of newspapers and books on topics ranging from a study of the criminal mind to capturing sexual predators. This is the room she lives in, he thought, surrounded by evidence of evil. How did one remain so strong and sane when dealing with such atrocities? Was it any wonder she hid behind mental and emotional defenses?

What he’d seen as a challenge was only her way of protecting herself against the harsh realities she dealt with daily. The strength he’d first admired in her now terrified him. Did she ever let down her guard and be herself? Or had she lost that self long ago? He padded down the hallway and into her bedroom as he heard the shower cut off. He shook his head when he saw that she’d left a trail of clothes, holster, and firearm on the way to the bathroom. He was glad to see the bedroom wasn’t as sterile and lifeless as the rest of the apartment.

The scents he’d come to identify with her filled the room. Coconut and aloe tangled with the rough smell of leather from her bomber jacket on the floor.

The unmade bed was covered in pillows of blue and ivory. On the nightstand by an alarm clock sat two picture frames. One contained the photo of a happy child with golden pigtails on the shoulders of a man who draped his arm around a pretty, auburnhaired

woman. The other showed the same woman, older now and grinning at the camera, standing beside a teenaged Mackenzie who wore a cap and gown.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie opened the door and flinched when she saw the wolf seated on the floor beside her bed.

She tugged the belt of her bathrobe tighter and furiously towel - dried her hair. “I didn’t mean for you to make yourself at home in my bedroom. Scat, I need to get dressed.”

*Your parents?*



She froze, followed his gaze to the photos, and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Yeah." She sat on the bed, tucked her feet under her, and rubbed her thigh. "I...uh...I know how you feel losing your sister. Both my parents were taken from me." *You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.*

"I know." Maybe it was because he'd trusted her with so much tonight. Maybe because he'd risked his life for hers. Whatever the reason, something inside her wanted to share her secrets with him. She fisted her hand at her thigh. "I'm scared to death of cats."

When he faced her, she chuckled. "It feels pretty weird saying that to a man who's a wolf."

*We're all afraid of something. Our strength is in not letting that fear prevent us from living.*

"My dad was killed by a mountain lion. That picture was taken on the trip the day before the attack." She pointed to the frame. "It was my fault. We were hiking, and he told me to stay close, but when I saw the cubs I ran to them. Their mother didn't like that. Dad died saving me. And I've been terrified of cats ever since."

*Does the thought of me...like this...frighten you?*

She gave him a sad smile and shook her head. "I was scared of dogs as a kid. After the attack, anything with teeth and fur sent me into hysterics. But my mother was determined to help me somehow, so she bought me this old Bassett hound. Ugliest thing you ever saw. I remember crying for days anytime it got near me."

Rafe laid his head in her lap, and she stroked his fur absentmindedly.

"Then one day, I was playing hide - and - seek with some other kids in the back yard. I hid in a wood box and fell asleep waiting. When they couldn't find me, they got bored and went home. That old hound found me though. His scratching woke me up, and I realized I was stuck. He stayed there and whined, which led Mom right to me."

*Thank you for sharing that with me.*

"Yeah, well, don't tell Coop. He thinks I'm allergic to animal fur. I'd never hear the end of it if he learned his partner was afraid of cats, especially since my name's Lyons."

*You have a point.*

"Your hair feels the same. Soft and thick. I hadn't realized it before." Oh, God. Why had she said that? She scrambled off of the bed and turned her back on him as she busied herself with digging through dresser drawers. "I don't have any silk men's shirts, but I'll find you a big T - shirt or something to wear on the way home. I've got a long day tomorrow. You want me to call you a cab? You can be changed before it gets here, right?"

A yellow glow filled the room and froze Mackenzie in her place. Her gaze shot to the dresser mirror and locked on the wolf's eyes reflected there. She stared as tiny lights danced around him like Fourth of July sparklers. They multiplied and swelled, making

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

132

the wolf shimmer and fade until the animal's shape was a mass of molten gold. When the light's intensity grew even more, Mackenzie was forced to shield her eyes. She blinked as the brilliance faded to reveal Rafael Stone, as naked as he was on the day of his birth, crouched beside her bed.

“Wow,” she said on a breath.

His head rose and his eyes met hers. A slow smile played with his lips, and then he stood up.

Mackenzie maintained a death grip on the top drawer of the short dresser and stared at his reflection.

The man was no newborn.

A six - foot - three - inch wall of sleek muscle approached her from behind, and she forgot how to breathe.

He looked over her shoulder and met her gaze in the mirror. The terrycloth robe offered little protection when warm hands slipped around her waist to splay across her abdomen and cup one breast through the material. Hot lips teased her exposed neck and jaw.

“How’s your headache?”

“What headache?”

He nipped her earlobe, and his husky chuckle awoke every goose bump on her body. “That’s what I’d hoped to hear.”

His talented fingers had the knot in her belt undone in an instant while

Mackenzie hung on to the dresser drawer with white knuckles. Rafe ran his hands up to her collar, hooked a finger over each lapel, and slid the robe open. It slipped off her shoulders to fall down her arms where it bunched up around her wrists.

Rafe’s gaze drifted over her reflection, but she felt his regard as if he’d touched her instead.

Mackenzie looked at herself in the mirror. Her damp hair tumbled about her shoulders in tangled disarray. Her body was slim but pale, maybe too pale, despite the rainbow of bruises marring her flesh. And the ugly discoloration around the angry gash above her left eye wasn’t a pretty sight. Her arms shook from the tension of her grip. He hadn’t even seen the scars on her leg yet.

“I can’t do this.”

He turned her face toward him, his thumb caressing her cheek. Seductive lips brushed hers. His palms warmed her face and neck. Expensive cologne teased her nostrils, a heady scent of sandalwood, almond, and male. “Unless you find my being Lycan disgusting, you can.”

She released the drawer. “No.”

He pulled back, lips turned down. She grabbed his arms, and his biceps flexed.

“No. I didn’t...It’s not you. Damn it. We don’t belong together. Don’t you see that? Look at you. Look at me.” Biting her lip, she spread the robe wide and let his gaze take in the scars, bruises, and reality of her job. His eyes heated, but his frown remained. Irritated at herself for hoping, she covered her body and walked across the room, away from the mirror. Away from him.

“Let’s face it. You’re caviar and I’m onion dip.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“After we met, I read all about you in the tabloids and magazines. You can have any woman you want. I know you think I’m some sort of challenge, that if it weren’t for this case... I don’t do one - night stands. When the case is over, you’ll go back to your world, and I’m not cut out for that life. I’m a cop. It’s all I know how to do.”

Rafe crossed the room in the blink of an eye, spun her around, and ignored her

startled gasp. He held her arms in a firm but painless grip. Anger sparked in the golden depths of his eyes.

“Do you believe I’m shallow? That I give a damn about appearances?” He kissed her then in a furious tangle of lips and tongue. “Do you think I want my pick of beautiful women who approach me with nothing but dollar signs in their eyes?” He stripped the robe from her grasp and threw it on the floor.

“Hey!”

“Am I supposed to be blinded by the bruises, unable to see past the scars and notice how gorgeous you are?” He cupped her face, a pained expression marring his own, and then bent to press his lips to her forehead. She stood stunned as he proceeded to kiss and lave every black - and - blue mark on her body. When his mouth touched the large bruise on her hip, her knees nearly gave out. She dug her fingers through his thick mass of black hair and hung on.

Tender touches traced the scars on her thigh. Her eyes closed against the tears that threatened, and she held her breath. His lips followed his fingertips, almost lovingly. She’d never felt so bare, stripped of everything she’d always needed to make it through each day.

“Stop, please.”

He lifted her and followed her down on the bed. “Stop what? Caring about you? Stop looking beyond the scars on your body to see those that are tearing you up on the inside?”

“I don’t want...I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” His hand cupped her mons, a finger slipping inside her moist depths, and she froze. “Tell me you don’t want me. That you don’t feel this urge as strongly as I do. Look me in the eye. Tell me, and I’ll stop.”

His arm cradled her head. His long, hard body pressed against her, revealing the urgent state of his own arousal. He pressed deeper, and her hips lifted to meet his hand.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

134

A moan escaped her throat. A plea to stop or continue, she didn’t know.

“No, don’t close your eyes.”

Her lids lifted. She stared in wonder at the passion darkening his eyes. He hid nothing from her. His need. His desire. His concern?

“I want you, Mackenzie. All of you. And I’m going to make love to every inch of you. But if you can honestly say you don’t want this, tell me to stop.”

She peered at him as he pulled free of her and laid his hand on her hip. The effects of his touch vibrated through her. Rampant need clawed at her insides and shredded the restraints that had proven so reliable in the past. She should stop him. Her hand against his chest curled into a fist. “I can’t...deny this.”

Rafe leaned over her, and her hands clutched his broad shoulders. Lips captured, conquered, tortured, as he positioned himself above her. She hadn’t realized until now how much she’d missed the hard weight of a man. She shouldn’t want to feel the sensual pressure of Rafe’s body now, but she did.

His mouth latched onto one breast, and her back arched. Her nails dug into his back. Urgency raced through her veins with each heartbeat. She spread her thighs, wanting him to hurry, but he kept his word. His hands and mouth focused on every

inch of skin, until her sensitized nerves screamed in frenzied helplessness, and his touch penetrated to the bone.

“Rafe. I need...” Her orgasm struck with the speed of a lightning bolt. Waves of pleasure flooded her body, throbbed, and pounded with the long - lasting force of a hurricane.

“More,” he growled.

She shook her head weakly and cried out his name. Sliding up her body, he paused to look at her face, his own breaths ragged.

“Again,” he said, his voice husky.

With one strong stroke, he slipped inside to fill her completely. He gritted his teeth. His arms tensed. Her hands struggled to find purchase on the slick contours of his body. Deeper he plunged, driving them both wild. He took her, claimed her, and possessed her. Repeatedly, she met him thrust for thrust.

“Mine.” His fingers gripped her hair, pulling her head back to expose her neck. He kissed and sucked on the base of that slender column where hot blood pumped beneath the unmarred skin. Holding her in place, he drove her over the edge again. Seconds later, his seed pulsed into her depths, and he followed her into oblivion.

### Chapter Thirteen

Mackenzie blinked the sleep from her eyes and stretched, not unlike the felines she feared. Her hand collided with cool sheets beside her.

Gone.

Her head pressed face - first into her feather pillow. Blindly, she felt for the pillow he’d used, tugged it toward her, and buried her nose in the downy softness. Sandalwood, a faint, but lingering scent.

It’s for the best, she told herself, despite the hitch in her heartbeat. Time to acknowledge her weakness, step back across that line she’d crossed, and never make the same mistake again. Rules were made for a reason, and that reason wasn’t so they could be broken.

She glanced at the digital clock on her nightstand and bolted from the bed.

“Shit!”

Feeling every ache and pain from her previous night’s activities, she forced herself into the bathroom, planted her hands on the counter, and stared at the face of disaster in the mirror. She’d slept like a baby, but now felt like a centenarian.

“I look like a melted box of crayons.” She scowled at the puffy redness surrounding the wound on her forehead and the black - and - blue marks left from the punishment she’d inflicted on her body. Then she lifted her chin to view the side of her neck.

“He gave me a goddamn hickey.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Mackenzie spun around, her hand flying to her side, but she wasn’t wearing her gun...or anything else for that matter.

Rafe leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed, hair damp, a towel around his hips, and a lazy smirk on his face.

“Don’t you know better than to sneak up on a person like that?” She hated the waspishness in her voice, but damn it, there should be a law against looking that good

**Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

in the morning.

"I didn't sneak. I walked from the kitchen. You were too busy cursing me for that little love bite to notice."

*Love bite? Don't go there, Mackenzie.* She gave him her best

wrong - side - of - the - bed,

don't - mess - with - me look. When his smile widened and gaze dropped, she decided her

lack of clothes ruined the look's effect. Turning on the shower, she jumped behind the curtain before the water had time to warm, and muttered, "As if I need more color around my face."

"Want me to wash your back?"

Mackenzie heard the grin in his offer over the shower's spray. His words emblazoned on her mind an image of him dropping that towel from around his waist...his strong hands sliding up and down her back, rubbing away the pain and soreness, replacing it with another more sensuous ache.

*Oh yes.*

"No," she said, almost shouting, "I can manage." She turned up the cold water until shivers racked her body.

Why was he still here? Things would've been so much easier if he'd left before she awoke. Why couldn't he act like a normal man and disappear after he scored? She snorted.

Because she'd hunt him down, and he knew it, no doubt. So that left her with one question. Now what? She'd really screwed up and had no idea how to correct her mistake. Worse, her body and heart were having a battle of wills with her mind over how she should proceed.

Making quick work of her shower, she turned off the water and listened to the silence in the apartment. She yanked a towel from the hook and wrapped herself in it before stepping out to see Rafe still in the doorway, although now, he held two cups of coffee.

"I thought you'd left." *Hoped was more like it.*

"Obviously." He stepped forward, kissed the pout from her lips, and presented the coffee cup. "Have some caffeine, Detective. I imagine you'll need it today."

"Thanks." Uncertain how to handle her morning - after edginess, she tried for nonchalance. Sipping the coffee, she savored the rich aroma and proceeded to get ready.

She disregarded the odd sensations that crept up her spine as he watched her.

Unprepared for feelings of domesticity, she chose to focus her thoughts on the case. She had to fill Cooper in on the shooter, find out what he learned from the bookie, and check on whether they'd turned up anything at the warehouse this morning. And there was still Hahn to deal with whenever he popped up out of his hole. Turning off the hair dryer, she pulled her hair back into a ponytail.

"You may want to contact your partner soon." Rafe's voice made her glance toward the now - vacant doorway.

"Oh?"

"He called earlier."

"He what?" Panic widened her eyes. She hadn't heard the phone ring.

"You were sleeping rather soundly. I didn't have the heart to wake you."

"You didn't—"

He stepped into the doorway again. "I thought it best to let your answering machine pick it up."

Relief swamped her. "Wise choice," she said as she moved past him to gather her clothing. She hopped into a pair of jeans and tugged on a turtleneck.

"He plans to tear this place apart if he doesn't hear from you within the next thirty minutes. He apparently tried to reach you late last night."

"I didn't check the machine." She'd forgotten to set the alarm, too, which only proved how wrong she'd been to get involved with Rafe. He made her lose her mind.

Turning, she caught sight of him fully clothed. "Where'd you get those?"

He finished buckling his belt and reached for a blazer. "I had Luc bring me a change of clothes this morning."

"Oh, that's just grand. Broadcast where you spent last night, why don't you?"

"Calm down. He's circumspect."

She crossed her arms. "We are talking about Lucian Stone, right? AKA Lucifer?"

He chuckled, tugged on her hand, and pulled her reluctant body into a brief embrace. "Your secret's safe with me, Detective."

"It's not you I'm worried about." *Yeah, right.* She pushed away from him, started to put on her jacket, until she saw the blood stains on the collar. Tossing it aside, she headed for the door. "But I don't have time to argue the matter now. I've gotta run. I'd drop you off somewhere, but I'm needed at the station."

"That's all right. I can manage on my own."

She'd barely made it halfway down the hall when a knock sounded at the door.

"Mackenzie!" Cooper pounded on the door again.

"Guess he's early," Rafe murmured as he paused in the bedroom doorway behind her. Mackenzie felt the blood drain from her face.

"You think?"

"Mac? I know you're in there. Open up, damn it."

"Hide," she ordered before moving slowly to the door. She cast a quick glance back to see Rafe move into the bathroom and out of sight. "Coming. Hold your horses." Sucking in a deep breath, she opened the door.

"Where the hell have you been?" Cooper's face twisted into a mask of fury, or worry.

"Good morning to you, too. What brings you out here?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

138

"I tried your house last night and this morning." He stepped toward her, but she continued to block the door. "You didn't answer."

Yes, there was definitely concern in that voice, hidden beneath the quiver of anger.

"I tried to reach you, too, last night. Didn't you get my message?"

"The one that said you were going to check out a tip from a snitch and would contact me later? Yeah, I got it, but you didn't call back."

"Guess I should've, but things got dicey, and I was beat. Long night. Got home

late and sacked out. Forgot to set my alarm. Overslept.”

“You’ve been home all night?”

“Didn’t I just say that? Look, I’m sorry I missed your call this morning. Must’ve called while I was in the shower. Why the third degree?”

“I heard about the ambush from dispatch first thing this morning.” Cooper frowned as his hand rose to her face. “I was worried.”

“There was no reason to be. As you can see, I’m fine.”

He stared at the wound, letting his thumb caress her temple.

“What the hell was that?” Cooper’s hand dropped to his pistol.

She cast a quick glance over her shoulder. “What?”

“That sound. I know you heard that. You got someone in your place?”

“No.” Her grip tightened on the door, and she kept her expression blank. “It’s an old building...odd sounds are the norm.”

Cooper wasn’t buying it. “You gonna let me in?”

“What for? I’m on my way out.” She wondered how she could retrieve her keys and a coat without releasing the door.

“I know someone’s here, Mac. You gonna tell me what’s going on?”

She let sarcasm lace her voice. “Nothing’s going on, except for a pounding headache made worse by my partner who shows up with a bunch of pain - in - the - ass accusations that I don’t intend to dignify with a response.”

“What am I supposed to think? I come over here to check on you after hearing about last night and...what was that?”

With trepidation, Mackenzie looked over her shoulder and saw nothing.

“What?”

“That flash. Don’t tell me you didn’t see it.”

“Bulb must’ve blown. It was flickering earlier.”

“Let me in, and I’ll check it out.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll handle it. Let me get...” The words died in her throat as she turned to see a black, devilish wolf appear.

She was going to skin Rafe alive for this.

Cooper cursed and pushed around her to stand between her and the wolf. The animal growled.

“Stop it,” she hissed, grabbing her partner’s arm and yanking him aside.

“What’s that doing here?”

Mackenzie moved between them with her back to the animal. For some unknown reason, she felt it more necessary to keep an eye on the man rather the wolf. That was until Rafe nudged her backside with his muzzle.

“Rafe,” she growled.

“Rafe?” Cooper asked.

Caught off guard, Mackenzie stared, dumbfounded, at her partner.

*Tell him I gave you the animal temporarily.*

“Uh...He loaned me the dog.”

“Why?” Cooper crossed his arms and eyed the animal, which sat beside Mackenzie and returned the man’s scrutiny.

Her mind drew another blank. “Good question.”

*To prove that the breed can be safe.*

"He said he wanted to prove to me that his animals are safe."

"And you believe that?" Cooper's look said he wasn't believing a word, even though the wolf repositioned himself, stretching out carelessly on the floor. Mackenzie let her nervous irritation show. "I don't know. Maybe he just needed a babysitter for the mutt."

Rafe growled. *Mutt?*

"Oh yeah. He's safe all right." Cooper closed the door behind him but continued to watch the wolf. "This is ludicrous. You can't keep a wolf in the city."

"Wolf? All I know is that he's a well - trained canine."

"Well trained to kill, you mean. What the hell were you thinking, Mac? Did you even tell Mr. High and Mighty Murder Suspect that you're allergic to animals?"

"Not exactly. Apparently, I'm only allergic to cat dander, not canine fur."

"So what? He just shows up on the doorstep with a wolf?"

"No. I...uh...I wound up with him after dinner. He wouldn't take no for an answer."

*That's because you didn't say no last night.*

She nudged the arrogant wolf with her foot.

"Where was the dog while you were out trading shots with the snitch?"

"In the car," she lied.

Cooper leaned in for a closer look until Rafe sat up suddenly, causing the cop to step back. Mackenzie could almost hear the snicker in the wolf's panting.

Cooper pointed. "I don't recall seeing this one at Stone's estate."

She smiled. "You wouldn't. He wasn't there."

The wolf whined.

"Where was he?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

140

Thinking quickly, Mackenzie said, "At the vet supposedly."

"He was hiding this one?"

"I doubt that, since he gave him to me last night."

*I gave you more than that last night.*

She let her smile turn into a smirk. "You got a field kit with you, Coop?"

"Yeah."

*You wouldn't.*

"Go get it. Might as well use this chance to get a sample for testing."

"Ah. Now I see. You're a sly one, Mac."

"Just following every lead as always, partner."

When the door closed behind Cooper, Mackenzie turned on the wolf. "You just had to make a noise, didn't you?"

*It was an accident, which is more than I can say for your field kit threat. You're enjoying this, aren't you?*

"Oh yeah, I just love nearly getting caught having a tryst with a prime suspect in a murder I'm investigating. And the field kit isn't a threat. What did you expect me to do when you pranced in here on four legs?"

*You don't think of me as a suspect any more. I don't prance. And I'm not a mutt.*

"You're still high on Cooper's list of suspects and don't be so sensitive. What did



you expect me to say? You show yourself as a wolf in my home knowing that my partner thinks I'm allergic to animals. I couldn't just cuddle up with you and say, 'He followed me home. Isn't he cute?'"

*Cute, huh?*

She rolled her eyes as laughter erupted in her mind. "Try to behave."

*I will if you will.*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

*You behave, and I will, too. Don't let him touch you again.*

"You saw that?" Her moment of shock turned quickly to frustration. "You were supposed to hide, not peek around corners. What if he'd seen you?"

*He didn't.*

"He could've." She fisted her hand and scowled, and then felt foolish for fighting with a dog. "Ugh! I can't fight with you when you look like that."

If a wolf could smirk, the one in front of her was a master.

"He's going to be back any second, so listen and keep your jealousy on a leash."

*Jealous? I'm not...*

"Would you be quiet and listen? I'll get him out of here as soon as possible so you can change. You'll have to lock up. And try not to let anyone see you leave, okay?"

*All right, but you owe me one.*

"Owe you? I don't..." She stopped when Cooper opened the door.

"Got it."

She smiled at the wolf. "Come, boy. Now, sit."

*That debt grows with each word you utter.*

She snickered.

"What's so funny?" Cooper asked.

"Nothing. Let's get this over with and get back to work."

As they donned their latex gloves, Cooper said, "You can't keep him."

Her gaze locked with the wolf's, and Cooper's words suddenly took on a deeper meaning. "I know," she said softly, and then looked away from Rafe's stare.

"So, what's his name?"

"Name?"

"Yeah. He does have one, doesn't he?"

"Of course, he has a name." Her mind raced as she brushed the wolf, collecting hairs in an evidence bag. The wolf met her urgent gaze, and the name came to mind.

"Rae. It's Rae."

Unimpressed, Cooper eyed the animal. "I would've expected something more manly, like Phantom or Killer."

*What does he know about manly with a name like Coop?*

Mackenzie hid her chuckle beneath a cough, only to draw a concerned look from her partner.

"You shouldn't be doing this. What if you have an allergic reaction after all?"

"I'm fine. Really. Let's just finish and go. I need to meet with Fuller and get an update on the search at the warehouse."

"Actually, that's another reason why I'm here."

The wolf's tail stopped swaying as she drew out a needle.

"What do you mean?" she asked Cooper.

“We’ll talk in the car. I need to run an errand before we go back to the station, and I’d like backup.”

Giving him an odd look, she moved closer to the wolf with the needle in hand.

*Careful with that.*

The sudden warning in her head made Mackenzie jump, then frown at the wolf.

“Hold still.”

*Be gentle.* Sly humor caressed the words in her mind.

“You got some place to keep him while you’re out? A kennel or something?”

*No cages.* Rafe’s words held an ominous tone of alarm.

Mackenzie put her hand on the wolf’s head. “He doesn’t exactly like cages. He’ll be fine here.”

“You can’t leave him cooped up in a small apartment,” Cooper warned. “He’s wild. He’ll probably tear your couch apart and urinate in every corner.”

Mackenzie fought the urge to laugh. “If he does that, I’ll have him neutered.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

142

Cooper winced sympathetically as Rafe snarled. The dire warnings now rumbling in her head had Mackenzie chuckling despite herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

“If this is to be my job from now on,” Luc said, “I want a raise and a damn chauffeur’s hat.”

Rafe slid into the passenger seat beside his agitated brother, who cranked the Jag and spun out into traffic.

“You wouldn’t wear it if I got you one. Besides, I thought you’d love a chance to drive the Jag.”

Luc snorted and whipped the sleek car around a minivan. “No. I just don’t want to ruin my rep by riding around with big brother hugging me on a Harley.”

Rafe laughed. “That wouldn’t do much for my reputation either.”

“What took you so long?”

“An unexpected guest. Nothing I couldn’t handle. You got the information I asked for?”

“More than you’ll need. It’s in there.”

Rafe picked up the manila envelope and inspected the contents as Luc yawned. Blueprints, maintenance logs, tax records.

“You found this out in one night?”

“I’m gifted. What can I say?”

“And the right amount of charm and money can make any loyal employee talk.”

Luc’s laugh was cut short by another yawn.

“Get some sleep today. You’ve earned it.”

“Damn straight. So what’s with the detective? Did the lady lion get a little rough?”

Rafe gave him a sideways glance.

“Come on. Fess up. I haven’t had to bring you a change of clothes because of a woman since those Lycan twins.”

“Luc...”

“What a fucking spring break that turned out to be. Man, were they foxes.” Luc

whistled.

"Damn it," Rafe muttered.

"So, are you having a midlife crisis or something?"

"You can be a real pain in the ass, you know that?"

"Natural talent." Luc grinned.

Rafe leveled a stern gaze on his brother. "I was shot."

The change in Luc was instant. "Tell me." He listened intently as Rafe recapped the previous night's events, after he'd called about using Luc's new GPS device to track Mackenzie's route. Luc's scowl grew fiercer with each word.

"She knows about you...about us? A cop—"

"I didn't plan for her to find out this way."

Luc threw him an astonished look. "You planned for her to find out another way? You've known her what—a couple of weeks tops? And already you've given her access to L.I., our home, and knowledge that no human should have. Damn it, Rafe, when did your brain drop into your pants?"

Rafe had wondered the same thing, although not exactly in those terms. The effect she'd had on his life baffled him. He knew trusting Mackenzie to keep his secret was an extremely risky maneuver, but he couldn't very well expect her to trust him if he weren't willing to return that faith, at least in part. And he did want her trust. He wanted her. Period.

He'd enjoyed replacing the suspicious look in her eyes with glazed passion. Odd, he thought, how even seeing that suspicion and uncertainty return this morning had pleased him. She'd crossed the line into a relationship he was positive she didn't understand any more than he did, but he intended to make sure she stayed with him. Now that he had her, he wouldn't give her up.

Seeing the bullet graze her forehead had hurt him more than the shot that ripped through his own flesh. The pain and fear that he'd been too late...the panic was a new experience for him. It stunned him how quickly she'd infiltrated his stronghold and become his weakness. The idea that she wielded that much power frustrated him.

"What's done is done," he told Luc. "The important thing now is to ensure her safety."

"*Her* safety? What about the threat she poses to *our* safety? Did your pillow talk include our shadow ops? Why not fax her a list of Lycan agents?"

Rafe frowned. "She doesn't know about the clandestine operations of L.I."

"Thank heaven for small favors." Luc braked for a stoplight and leveled a hard look on him. "Know this, brother. I don't give a damn how good she is in bed; if she becomes a danger to you or the pack, I *will* take her out."

His hand shot out and latched onto Luc's neck. Fury burned through Rafe's veins, a firestorm engulfing him almost beyond sanity. "You touch her, and I'll..."

Luc snarled and gripped his wrist with both hands. His narrowed gaze flashed with an angry challenge. "You'll what, brother? Choose her over the pack? You're the alpha, damn it. It's your responsibility to protect the pack, not jeopardize it over some woman."

"I know what my fucking responsibility is! I don't need you to remind me." Rafe forced his fingers to release his brother. He fought with every ounce of energy he had to restrain the urge to change and rip off Luc's head. With hands fisted, he squeezed his

eyes shut. He had to calm down before he did or said something he'd regret.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

144

Luc was protecting the pack. Under other circumstances, Rafe would have issued a similar ultimatum, but knowing that didn't stop the sudden violent urge to protect his mate...even from his own kind, his own brother. *Mate*? The word hit his heart like an arrow striking a bull's - eye. He knew he was attracted to Mackenzie. The tender heart she tried so hard to hide behind a prickly façade enticed him, while her suspicious, uneasy demeanor whetted his appetite like a dare. Now the thought that he'd finally found his mate seized his brain with sharp talons.

"She's not a threat. She won't be." Rafe's temper flared again when he realized he didn't know whether he spoke more to convince Luc or himself.

"I hope you're right, brother. For all our sakes." The red light changed, and Luc's gaze shifted to the task of weaving through traffic. His movements were choppy, agitated.

With a sigh, Rafe laid his head against the headrest. "If anything, I think her connection to me has put *her* in danger, not the other way around."

"What do you mean?"

"I was unable to scout the area after changing, but...I sensed something." He shook his head, unsure of how to explain the feelings he'd had at the warehouse. After the change, he'd had trouble distinguishing the smells he picked up; aside from the burned odor of gunpowder, oil, and algae, the scent of Mackenzie's fear and blood captured much of his attention.

"You think Anton had something to do with last night?"

"Maybe. You've tracked him. You know his scent. I'd like you to check out the warehouse. The police should clear out some time today, if they haven't already. It's a long shot but see if you can pick up anything on the shooter."

Luc nodded. He pulled into the lot where he'd left his motorcycle. Shifting into park, he studied Rafe a moment before getting out. He straddled his bike as Rafe walked around the Jag.

"If Anton is involved," he began, making Rafe pause before he slid in behind the wheel, "you'll need to operate at 100 percent. That woman is more than a threat to the pack. She could get you killed."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where are we going?" she asked Cooper.

"Hardball's place."

"The bookie?"

"Yeah. He wasn't home when I dropped by. You gonna fill me in on exactly what happened to you last night? All I heard were bits and pieces."

Mackenzie touched the smaller but, unfortunately, still - visible bandage she'd put on her forehead. "A gift from someone who wanted me dead more than he wanted to help solve two murders."

"What about Stone? Was he somehow involved?"

The venom in his voice made her frown. "No, I told you, I followed a lead from an anonymous snitch."

"Yeah, your message said it was a note left at the station where Stone happened

to be. You saw him last night. Who's to say he didn't leave it there?"

"I say. The timing is a coincidence. It wasn't him."

"How can you be so sure? You know I don't like coincidences."

Since she'd purposefully left Rafe out of her report to the officers on scene, she couldn't tell her partner how he'd been busy taking the bullet for her, not firing it. "Call it intuition. Call it whatever you want. I just know. He wasn't the shooter." Mackenzie didn't like the path Cooper was following and opted to change the subject. "You find something out on the car rental?"

"No. Guy used the name of a made - for - TV - mobster. Odds are it's bogus. What happened with the snitch?"

"He fell in the drink after I shot him." She filled him in on the message she'd received and what happened at the warehouse, leaving out Rafe's part in the ordeal.

"They're supposed to continue searching the shore around the docks this morning. I'm heading there after I speak with Fuller."

"Not a good idea right now."

She cocked a brow.

"Saw Hahn talking to someone with OPS this morning."

Mackenzie struggled to keep her expression blank. The male chauvinist asshole could get the Office of Professional Standards and everyone with Internal Affairs involved if he wanted. "So?"

"So, I heard he claims you've compromised the case."

Mackenzie cursed. "What's Fuller saying about it?"

"Nothing yet. He's been behind closed doors with them all morning. I wanted to talk to you alone, and since I needed to try Hardball's place again, it seemed a good enough excuse to keep us away from the station for a while."

"Talk about what?"

"About Hahn, mainly." He shifted in his seat. "What exactly did he see between you and Stone?"

"Me sitting at a table in a public restaurant with Rafe."

"That's all?"

She nodded. What else could he have seen?

"I don't get it. Hahn's not the type to jump to conclusions on something as flimsy as that."

Mackenzie suppressed the wince. "Well, it doesn't take much for him to try and

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

146

prove a point."

"A point?"

"That I don't belong on the force. It's why we broke up...well, one of the reasons."

She pulled over and parked near Hardball's apartment building.

Cooper got out and folded his arms on the car's roof, looking at her with a cocky grin. "What were the other reasons?"

"I got tired of catering to the asshole's ego."

Cooper was still chuckling as they entered the building. The interior was an ashtray. Decades of smoking tenants left the walls tinged yellow and the air murky.

Angry voices drifted down the stairwell from an upstairs hallway.

"I ain't paying for the damage when it's that bastard's fault," a woman snapped.

"Did I say it's yer fault? I jes don't want ya startin' nothing." The man's voice was raspy and muffled.

"I gotta listen to him stomping around up here at all hours, but I ain't gotta put up with this. He's gonna pay fer my stuff."

"Open up." The man slammed a fat - fingered fist against a door as Mackenzie topped the stairs. His dingy undershirt stretched over a middle as large as a Mack truck's spare tire.

The woman adjusted her nightmarish floral robe. Her matchstick legs peaked out from underneath, and her garish red hair held a head full of pink curlers. "He ain't gonna answer. I been trying all mornin'."

"That's his apartment," Cooper murmured to Mackenzie.

She eyed the man. "You the manager?"

"Who's askin'?" His chapped lips closed around the stub of a cigar in the corner of his mouth while he studied them with eyes that probably couldn't open wider than slits.

She held up her badge.

"I tol' you someone would call the cops if you didn't shut your yap," the man snarled to the woman, who puffed up like a pissed - off prune.

"What's the trouble here?" Cooper asked.

"The creep in there," the woman said, "left the plug in the drain and the water runnin'. Gotta rusty, wet mess leaking through my ceiling downstairs."

Mackenzie and Cooper looked at each other. They pushed their way to the door, pulling out their guns.

"You got a key?" she asked. The manager chewed his cigar and nodded. He moved forward, slipped the key in the lock, and stopped when Mackenzie held one hand up. "Wait over there."

As the couple stepped back, Cooper knocked on the door. "Harden? Police. Open up." He met Mackenzie's gaze, pointed at her and then up. She gave a quick nod, agreeing that she'd go in high. He gripped the knob, turned, and they stormed in. Cooper landed on one knee, weapon drawn. Mackenzie, back against the wall, searched for any signs of danger. Nothing...yet.

"Ah, shit." Cooper stood with a shake of his pant leg. A piece of cold pizza fell to the floor, leaving behind a red stain on his tan pants.

Mackenzie inched forward, dodging the open pizza box on the floor inside the doorway. As she scanned the room, her weapon followed the same path. An avocado green couch with an exposed spring in the cushion lined one wall. Nobody there. Opposite, a small TV with rabbit ears perched atop an older wood - framed television set.

Her toe collided with a stack of newspapers, sports pages. She stepped over them and between two crushed beer cans. The room reeked of booze and cheap cigars. Cooper checked the tiny space that served as a kitchen and shook his head. Her gaze settled on the only other opening in the room. She kept her Glock aimed at the doorway.

Damp sports and sex magazines lay strewn about the bedroom. Water squished

in the ugly brown carpet with each step.

She didn't know whether the mess in the apartment was the usual décor, but the plop of dripping water led them to a scene that was without a doubt not the norm.

Jimmy Harden lay lifeless and nude in a tub of blood and water.

Mackenzie holstered her firearm and sighed. "Call it in."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun turned the sky a brilliant orange as it started a downward slide behind the Chicago skyline. By the time Mackenzie dragged herself into the station, she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep for a week. But dispatch told her Fuller wanted to see her.

Mackenzie had stayed at Harden's place while forensics processed the apartment. She'd questioned the manager and downstairs neighbor, and then left Cooper to talk with other residents.

She'd checked on the search for her warehouse shooter, but all they'd collected from the scene were some spent shell casings, a few bullet fragments, and trace evidence, which they'd yet to analyze.

"Hey, Lyons. Fuller's looking for you," a passing detective told her as Mackenzie headed to her office. She'd hoped for a few minutes to gather her thoughts, but when the sergeant called...

"I'm on my way." Changing direction, she entered the elevator and leaned against the back wall with eyes closed until the doors slid open.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

148

Fuller sat behind his desk, surrounded by pictures of family, certificates of commendation, and stacks of paperwork.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

He looked up and removed his bifocals. "Shut the door, Lyons."

*That didn't sound promising.*

"Sit down."

She eased into the chair, tried not to clutch the arms in a death grip, and eyed his expression for any clues to his thoughts.

"You've been very busy."

"Yes, sir. I'll get my written report to you before I go off duty."

He leaned forward. "Why don't you fill me in now?" Although posed as a question, that order brooked no argument.

"Victim's name is Jimmy Harden. Midtwenties. Rap sheet includes B and E, assault, and armed robbery. Last arrest was on drunk and disorderly a couple months ago. Pickpocket. Street hood. A bookie. Didn't make a lot of money. The manager hassled him about overdue rent the previous night. Body found in his tub this morning."

"Cameras?"

"Not in that place."

"Motive?"

"Undetermined. The killer may have pretended to deliver pizza to gain entry.

Coop's checking that angle."

"Same MO as the others?"

“Not exactly. Like the first victim, he was shot in the chest and stripped. His right hand was chopped off, but there were no signs of mauling, and the locations differ. Harden was left in his own tub...private place instead of public.”

Mackenzie tried not to read anything into the frown on Fuller’s face.

“Hand it off to Koffman. I want you and Coop focused on the Canine Killings.”

“I’d like to keep this one, Sarge. I haven’t ruled out a possible connection to the Robertson and Shumaker cases.”

Fuller propped a pencil between two fingers, a holdover from his days prior to kicking a nicotine habit. “What makes you think there’s a connection?”

“Harden was Shumaker’s bookie. He claimed to work for Caprini. We mentioned his name during questioning only yesterday. Caprini denied knowing him, but he made the mistake of using Harden’s street name, Hardball. Then Harden winds up dead.”

Fuller rubbed his salt - and - pepper whiskers as he considered her words, the florescent light overhead reflecting off his bald head.

“It’s not much, but I’d like to follow it. Put some more pressure on Caprini and see what happens.”

“What about your prime suspect? Any connection between Harden and Stone?”

Mackenzie paused. Rafe hadn’t killed Harden. He’d been busy taking a bullet for her, not that she could prove it. Since he’d been with her all night, he had an ironclad alibi, but admitting as much would be the end of her career. As far as anyone else was concerned, Stone remained a suspect in the first two homicides.

“No,” she said. Her stomach churned.

“But you’ll investigate that possibility?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

“All right. The count stands at three homicides. But if there’s any indication this last one is heading in another, unrelated direction, hand it off to Koffman.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t have to tell you the pressure to solve these cases...make an arrest...is growing daily.”

“No, sir.”

“Is there anything I should be aware of that prevents me from keeping you as lead investigator on this case?”

“Sir?” God, was he taking her off the case?

“Don’t be dense, Detective. I’ve no doubt Cooper called you within seconds of Hahn’s visit to my office this morning.”

“Yes.” Mackenzie couldn’t swallow the lump in her throat. “I saw Kenneth Hahn last night while I was following your orders.”

Fuller’s brows rose.

“To get close to Rafael Stone, gain his trust, pressure him until he slipped up.”

“Go on.”

“Stone stopped by the station last night to retrieve his firearm, which has been cleared as the murder weapon. I was with him when I received an anonymous tip from a snitch about the case.”

“The warehouse?”

“Yes. Since I had some time, I left with Stone. We ran into Hahn and his wife at a



restaurant.”

“Hahn filed a complaint with OPS, alleging misconduct. He’s convinced he interrupted you and the prime suspect during an *intimate* moment over wine.”

## Chapter Fourteen

“Intimate?” Mackenzie’s mind raced. *What had he seen? What could she say?*

Unable to answer those questions, she let her frustrated anger show in a sneer of disgusted disbelief. Now wasn’t a time to display fragile nerves.

“That was his word choice, yes.”

“We were in a public restaurant surrounded by staff and other patrons. When Hahn walked up, I was questioning Stone.” *Which was the truth*, she told herself, even if the questions had nothing to do with the murders. “He was attempting to convince me that we aren’t on opposing sides.” *Misleading, but true.*

“Attempting...How? By wining and dining you?”

“He did offer me wine, which led to a disagreement.”

“How so?”

She frowned. “The bottle was worth eight hundred dollars. As I told Stone, ‘I’m not for sale.’”

Fuller’s lips quirked. “Did you inform Mr. Stone of the consequences for attempting to bribe a public official?”

“I didn’t exactly use those words, but neither did he admit to the attempt. I left after that.” She wanted to rub her sweaty palms on her thighs, but Fuller watched for any signs of discomfort.

“I take it Hahn missed this exchange.”

“Yes.”

“You rode there in Stone’s car?”

“Yes, but I left in a cab. I came back here for my car, tried to reach Cooper, and went to the warehouse.” She met his gaze, which didn’t waver. So far everything she’d said was the truth, and she prayed that would be enough.

Fuller’s chair creaked as he reclined. He steepled his dark fingers and peered at her for several long, uneasy seconds. “I’m already aware of the shooting at the warehouse. OPS will investigate, of course. I expect you to make yourself available tomorrow for further questioning.”

Mackenzie’s heart leaped into her throat, and her stomach plunged to her toes. Procedure called for the Office of Professional Standards to check into all shootings involving police officers, while the officers usually awaited the outcome from home. She could handle the questions, but taking leave now was not an option. Hahn would have his way regardless of his claims of misconduct. Had she cost herself the investigation?

“The encounter does give you an alibi against any allegations Hahn may have made concerning where you went after the restaurant. You obviously didn’t wind up at Stone’s house.”

Sensing that a denial would be unnecessary, Mackenzie remained silent.

Fuller gestured toward her bandage, his face showing anger for the first time.

“However, you miscalculated by going there alone. Don’t do it again.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, I won’t.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Sir?”

“About the shooting?”

“Uh...Unfortunately, the gunman got away. I really thought I’d hit him, but no blood. No body. Forensics is processing some trace evidence found at the scene.”

“Keep me informed.” Fuller donned his glasses and began flipping through some files on his desk.

“I’m still on the case?”

He studied her over his bifocals. “With no body, I see no reason to put you on leave. Are you requesting a psychiatric evaluation?”

“No, sir. That’s not necessary.” She made to rise, then paused. “About Hahn’s complaint...?” She didn’t want to ask but had to know.

“As you said, you were following my orders. Contrary to Hahn’s opinion, the State Attorney’s office has no control over detective assignments. Whether one’s removed from a case is the decision of this department.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me.” He leaned onto his thick forearms. “Just capture this bastard...preferably before another body shows up.”

Relieved, she headed for the door.

“One final thing, Detective.”

She paused, turning to face him.

“Keep suspect interrogations in - house from now on, or take Cooper with you...at least until this case is solved. I don’t want to give Hahn any more chances to point fingers, no matter how unfounded his claims.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

152

The weekend sun cast golden beams about Mackenzie’s spare bedroom. She was off duty, but with a killer on the loose, the idea of wasting the day as a couch potato in front of a TV didn’t appeal. Especially after losing much of her Friday to an interrogation on the exchange of gunfire at the warehouse.

She’d managed to keep Rafe out of it, which left her nerves frayed and her dutybound conscience feeling a heavy burden of guilt. A rumble sounded in her stomach as if it was grumbling in agreement.

Mackenzie ignored her tummy and concentrated on her notes and crime scene photos. Pressing the record button on a handheld audio device, she tried to put herself in the mind of the killer, see what he saw.

“Three murders. Three scenes. All different, yet similar. The alley was a dump site. You didn’t kill him there, did you?” she said into the microphone. “No, but you picked a good spot to leave him. Easy access, dark, and private.” Yet, he wouldn’t be there long before discovery. She felt certain that was the killer’s intention. Otherwise, why not hide the remains? Bag the body and put it in the garbage.

“No murder weapon—gun or animal—left in the alley or the trash bin. Little evidence at the scene, except for the body. Clothes, jewelry, and car taken. Did you keep the ring as a trophy?”

She lifted a picture of the car. Trace evidence on the body and in the trunk matched, confirming Tancock’s speculations. The body had been in the trunk.

She'd canvassed the area again to see if anyone remembered the victim's Lexus. A car like that didn't fit in the neighborhood, would've been a target if it had remained in one place long. She ran her hands through her hair in frustration. If anyone saw it, nobody was talking.

"Number two. A city park. Clothes, car, and other personal items left at the scene. No gun used. Clear signs of an animal attack. Lots of defensive wounds this time." So much blood and gore gave little doubt that the murder happened on the trail. "Didn't want to get blood on your hands?" Maybe, if the killer was a human with trained canines. But if the killer was Lycan...

*It's a possibility we're looking into*, Rafe had said.

Mackenzie snapped the recorder off, slapped a hand on her desk, and began pacing. She'd have to find a way to talk to him without drawing her sergeant's wrath. She couldn't bring Rafe in for questioning. Not if she wanted to get answers to the questions she needed to ask.

She opened her files and scanned the autopsy reports. She needed to get her hands on those DNA reports. Would the DNA help identify a Lycan?

Tancock suspected one animal caused the trauma on Robertson and Shumaker.

Consistent bite marks connected the first two, and Shumaker knew Harden, a direct link between victims two and three.

All three were men. All three were nude, but Harden wasn't mauled. Why the difference? Another killer?

Robbery wasn't the motive. Harden's apartment was messy, but not ransacked.

No sign of anything stolen. Crime scene photos showed a pizza box by his wallet on the floor near the door. She'd checked the contents herself. Nothing but an ID, video rental card, pawnshop receipt, a condom, and a few small bills. Less than twenty bucks.

She'd hoped for a match between the bullets in Harden's case and the first homicide, but the bullet recovered from Harden was a nine millimeter, not the .45 caliber used on Robertson.

Harden's murder felt more like a professional hit. The victim opens the door to what he thinks is a pizza delivery and gets a gun barrel between his eyes. Killer discards the pizza box in the front hall as he marches the man to the bathroom. Nervous victim backs away, but there's nowhere to run. He's forced to strip. Humiliation. Victim knows he's a dead man. Then bam. One shot, one kill. Murderer chops his hand off, apparently postmortem, then turns on the water to clean up the blood or to send a message, maybe—cleaned up one bad guy.

Walking to a map of the city she'd hung on the wall, she studied the pins marking the locations of all three murders and where Robertson's car was found. Different colored pins denoted where the victims lived.

A public official, a computer programmer, and a bookie. Each man ran in very different circles. So where did they connect? And were they connected to her warehouse gunman?

She added a pin at the warehouse on the docks.

Mackenzie grumbled when the doorbell rang. She peeped out, and her heart rate spiked as she retracted the deadbolt and turned the doorknob with a trembling hand.

The door swung open like a curtain revealing a prize. Rafe's presence in the hall sucked the air from her apartment. She failed to catch the thoughts that rushed through

her mind.

He was dressed more casual than she'd ever seen him. A pair of tight jeans hugged his lean hips. A black T - shirt stretched over firm shoulders and chest, partially hidden by two brown sacks held in his arms.

"Hello, Mackenzie."

The baritone rumble of his voice was like a thunderclap. She shook off her surprise and frowned.

"What are you doing here?"

"Delivering groceries."

She couldn't stop herself from gaping. The man probably owned half the state, and yet he stood before her with bags of groceries like a high school kid earning minimum wage? She cast a glance both ways down the hall, then grabbed his collar,

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

154

and yanked the laughing man inside.

"God, are you nuts?"

"You seem surprised to see me." Grinning, he set the sacks on the table.

"You shouldn't be here." She forced herself to maintain the scowl, which became harder to do with each long - legged step he took toward her.

"I wanted to see you again." The purred words rippled through every nerve in her body.

She had to swallow before she could speak. "We don't always get what we want. Deal with it."

His thumb passed over her bottom lip as his hand cradled her jaw. Her breath lodged in her throat like a rushing river cut short in a rock slide.

"Not always, true. But in this case..." His lips brushed hers. "We can both have what we want." Another nip of the lower lip. Tender. Tempting. "I brought steak and potatoes."

He kissed the tip of her nose, flashed a dentist's dream of pearly whites, and walked into her kitchen.

Mackenzie watched in amazement as he pulled out bottles of Italian dressing and soy sauce, herbs, vegetables, and two raw steaks.

He opened her refrigerator and shook his head.

"Good thing I brought butter. Where are your pots?"

He looked so comfortable in a room that must be less than half the size of his closet; she could only stand there dumbfounded. Men like him did not cook in a galley kitchen. Not when they had enough money to pay for gourmet chefs in state - of - the - art

kitchens and uniformed servants to silently deliver lavish meals on fine china.

"What?" He gave her a curious look so precious she felt her heart throb.

"Why are you doing this?"

His smile was soft, his eyes warm. "My beautiful detective, always careful, suspicious."

She crossed her arms, but his combined use of beautiful and detective dealt a blow that had her mind reeling. Then her stomach chose that inopportune moment to grumble.

"I believe I arrived just in time," he said with a pleased quirk to his mouth. "You really should take better care of yourself, my dear."

"I was going to..." The words trailed off when she realized how pathetic pizza for one on a Saturday night sounded. Embarrassment pricked her spine. "Whatever. I've got work to do." Before he could stop her, she fled for the more comfortable confines of her spare bedroom.

Cursing herself for being a coward, she tried to concentrate on murder. But the clatter of pots and ding of her microwave repeatedly interrupted her thoughts. After a while, the aroma of a sizzling meal tugged on her attention with an incessant determination. Despite her watering mouth, she stubbornly remained at her desk.

Mackenzie was reading the same page she'd stared at for the past half hour when a sensation at her nape made her turn toward the door.

Rafe leaned against the doorframe in a pose she was coming to appreciate. He gave her a smile, tugged a dishtowel from his back pocket, and wiped off his hands.

"Dinner's ready."

She headed for the kitchen. Using her plain dishes, he'd set the table for two. A candle she recognized as one from her living room burned in the middle. Surrounding that were a mixed salad, steaming potatoes, buttery rolls, and two steaks.

Rafe tossed the towel on the counter and pulled out a chair. "I wasn't sure how you like your steak. I hope medium is fine?"

"Uh... yeah." She sat, trying to understand the man moving to sit across from her. He defied everything she'd ever known about men of his wealth and privilege. She filled her plate without a word and tentatively brought the first bite to her lips. The steak's flavor burst in her mouth and made her groan in pleasure. When her eyes opened, her gaze collided with that of an amused and satisfied male.

"I may have to keep you around." Shocked by her own words, she felt an embarrassing blush heat her cheeks.

Rafe laughed.

"I didn't mean—"

"I understand, Mackenzie. Enjoy the meal."

They ate in silence for several minutes before she asked, "How did you learn to cook like this?"

He took a sip of his wine before answering. "I believe in diversity."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Diversity in my portfolio. Diversity in knowledge. In college, I majored in Business Administration but, on a whim, I took a cooking class. I figured it'd be easy, and if I ever were to own a restaurant one day..." He shrugged. "Good thing I took the course, since after my parents died, I had two brothers in college and a little sister to take care of. We would've starved or lived on junk food if I hadn't known something of nutrition."

"But what about your servants?"

"I didn't always have them; besides, I get more enjoyment out of doing things for myself once in a while."

"Your housekeeper, what's her name?"

"Margorie Ainsworth. She and her husband have only been with me for a couple years now. You've met her son."

Mackenzie swallowed her bite of salad. "I have?"

"Simon is my chauffeur."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

156

"Oh." So he hadn't been born with a silver spoon. He'd had to work to achieve his success, or had he? "What happened to your parents?"

"They died in a plane crash."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. It was quite a while ago. I took over my Dad's struggling security company while Luc dropped out to help take care of Ariana. Gabe would've dropped out, too, but I wouldn't let him. He'd earned his scholarships. And my parents would have wanted one of us to finish college."

"You haven't done too bad...for a college dropout."

He smiled. "Yeah, well, it's hard to mess up steak and potatoes."

"You'd be surprised." She stabbed another piece and savored the juicy morsel.

When they finished, she helped him clear the table while she struggled with jumbled thoughts.

"Um...thanks for dinner," she began awkwardly. "It was a nice gesture."

He shut the refrigerator and studied her.

She fought to keep from shuffling her feet or looking away.

"I sense a 'but' coming."

"I don't know how to say this without sounding rude or ungrateful, but you shouldn't be here."

"You said that before. I, for one, disagree, but then it's a matter of opinion." He followed her out of the kitchen.

Irritated, she spun to face him. "It's not your opinion that is the deciding factor here."

He took her hand, let his thumb caress the back, and disarmed her with his next words. "You're right."

She bit down to prevent her jaw from dropping.

"Your opinion matters. Do you want me to go? Not because of your job or what others might think. Do *you* not want me here?"

"I..." She wanted to tell him she didn't, that he had to leave. "Damn it! Why do you make everything so difficult?"

"It's a simple yes or no question, Mackenzie."

"Nothing is simple with you." She yanked her hand free. "You want me to separate myself from the shield. I can't. It's a part of me. I'm a detective, and as a detective, I have to live according to certain rules."

"I'm not trying to change you. I'm just asking you not to hide behind that shield. What do *you* want?"

"I want to catch a murderer."

"That's not what I asked."

"I don't have the luxury to want anything beyond that."

"So you refuse to live your life while you're on a case. Is that it?"

"A third man is dead. The killer's still on the loose, and thanks to Hahn, I may lose my job. My job is my life."

The sudden anger in his eyes made her thoughts skid to a halt. Oh God, what had she said?

“What happened?”

She hadn’t meant to tell him about Hahn. She’d broken the rules and slept with Rafe. She’d made a conscious decision and would pay the penalty if it came to that. She was at fault. Not him. He was just the tool Hahn chose to use.

“Hahn filed a claim of misconduct against me. My sergeant’s leaving me on the job for now, but it’s still on file. Everyone saw me leave with you. There’s still an air of suspicion.”

When his face hardened, she turned away.

“Sergeant Fuller ordered me to conduct all interrogations with suspects in - house or with Cooper present. So he’s got doubts and is covering his own ass. And now you show up with dinner at my door, and rather than send you on your way, I let you in.”

She collapsed on the couch. “What if someone saw you? I’ve got so many questions about Lycans I hardly know where to begin. I need the answers to solve the case, but all I can think about is what if someone spots me with you?”

“A part of me wants to be with you, Rafe. I won’t lie to you. But I can never be what you deserve or need, and I can’t blow this job. I have to be a cop. It’s all that I know how to do.”

“Who was he?” Rafe asked.

“What?”

“Who was killed? You said a third man died.”

“Jimmy Harden.”

“Shumaker’s bookie?”

She groaned and rested her head on her palms. “Don’t tell me you know him.”

He sat beside her. “No. I don’t. Never met him, but I know of him. Emily mentioned him to me, as the man who’d introduced Carl to gambling. Although she said his last name was Hardball.”

“Hardball was his street name. He liked to play pool and would occasionally use the balls and cue sticks to enforce payment.”

“I suppose I’m a suspect in his murder, too?”

She noticed his sarcasm but let it slide without comment. “Not as far as I’m concerned, since I’m your alibi.”

His eyebrows rose beneath wisps of ebony hair. “You told your sergeant this?”

Guilt swamped her. “Not exactly.”

“I see.” Rafe tilted his head as understanding dawned. Providing a murder suspect with an alibi for a third death might prevent additional charges against him, but

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

158

the admission would spell the end of her own career. Damn her pride for caring more about her job than him. Damn him for his own selfishness that wanted her still.

“No, you don’t.” She grabbed his hand, her eyes filled with an uncertain fire. “I couldn’t tell him. I’d be off the case in a flash.”

“And you can’t let that happen—”

“It’s not just about this case.”

“What is it about then? Aren’t you always telling me the case is all that matters?”

“My mother was murdered, okay?”

The admission blindsided him. How could he have forgotten? He said nothing, just watched her, let her find the words she needed to open up and relive what must have been a nightmare.

“That picture you saw in my bedroom, my graduation photo. It was taken the night she died. Afterwards, I’d gone out with friends to celebrate. Mom picked up some groceries and went home.” Her voice softened, hitched. “We don’t know if he followed her home from the store or if he was already there. I found her body, but no one’s ever found her killer. All I’ve wanted since that awful night is to put her murderer behind bars. To do that, I have to be a detective, a good one.”

Tears swelled in her eyes, and he was lost. Shaken, Rafe grabbed her arms, forced her to face him. “God, don’t. I understand. Shout. Throw something, but don’t cry.” He cradled her head against his shoulder.

He recalled Lucian’s comments about her reputation for being tenacious, the constant dedication he’d witnessed. She cared not about the job so much as the people involved. The victims, their families. Each time she helped balance the scales in their case, she helped her mother. He cursed himself for being a fool.

“I’m sorry. I’m an ass.”

Her muffled chuckle did his heart good. She wrapped her arms around him, and he felt whole.

She’d chosen to protect her job over him, a humbling thought, but not entirely surprising. She had the same drive for justice he had because of his sister’s death. He’d yet to share with her L.I.’s secret operations. With her sense of law and order, she’d certainly oppose his vigilante endeavors. He wasn’t ready to face such a prospect any more than he was willing to give up his quest for finding Ariana’s killer.

“I’m sorry,” she said, leaning back. “You’ve trusted me.”

Her words shot an arrow of guilt straight to his heart.

“And I’ve done nothing but accuse you of murder at every turn. I can’t seem to find my balance. I need rules, a foundation, and this...” She waved a hand between them. “...broadsided me.”

She had enough to deal with; he wouldn’t burden her with his own battles.

Despite feeling guilty for keeping her in the dark about that part of his life, he wouldn’t let Mackenzie push him out of her life. And he wouldn’t allow someone to use him to hurt her.

“Do you still suspect me?”

“You’re still on the list for the first two until I get the DNA results. That should be enough—”

“But do *you* consider me a suspect?”

“No,” she said softly.

“Thank you.” He kissed her, a brief press of the lips. “Now, I can help you.”

“Help me?”

“Yes. The sooner you solve the case, the sooner I can make my presence in your life known publicly.”

“I...”

He reveled in the suspicious look that knitted her brow, as if she doubted whether he’d stay once she closed the case. He had plenty of time to prove her wrong.



And maybe, if she shared more on the case, he could put his other concerns and suspicions to rest. “You said something about a lot of questions on Lycans. Why don’t we begin there?”

Her eyes narrowed a bit. “This isn’t an interrogation.”

He leaned back toward one corner of the couch and tugged her against him. “Of course not, my beautiful Detective. It’s after - dinner conversation.”

“Okay.” She jumped right in, not wasting a second. “Bite marks on the first two victims are consistent with a single animal. If that animal is a Lycan, how can I know for sure? Is there something in the DNA that’s different?”

“Our DNA matches that of humans when in human form and canine when in wolf form. Although there is a distinctive trait found in both forms, it’s highly unlikely your people will recognize it for what it is. The genetic marker’s also found in the healing byproduct.”

“Byproduct?”

“A powdery substance left behind whenever a Lycan changes to heal an injury.”

She turned her face toward him. “Our sweepers collected some powder as trace evidence at the warehouse.”

“There would be small amounts of it from my change. They’ll mistake it for some sort of organic luminescent material. The byproduct, like our change, has phosphorescent properties.”

She jumped up so quickly he grunted. “Sorry. Be right back.”

Straightening, he wondered what had caused the sudden reaction as he watched her disappear down the hall. After a moment, she came back carrying some papers.

“I knew it. I hit him.”

“What are you talking about? Hit who?”

“The gunman. I shot him.” She smiled. “The powder they collected was on the

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

160

dock, not in the warehouse. If the powder has this phosphorescent property you spoke of, then our gunman is a Lycan. He must’ve come out and changed while I was inside checking on you. I wondered why we hadn’t found a body, but this makes perfect sense.”

She pointed to her notes, but he couldn’t concentrate enough to read the words.

She’d confirmed his worst fears. A Lycan had targeted her.

### **Chapter Fifteen**

“But that doesn’t prove a Lycan was responsible for the murders.” She continued to voice her thoughts, apparently unaware of how his muscles tensed as his own mind leaped ahead and put the pieces together. The realization at having his suspicions confirmed fueled a raging blaze inside him.

“That only proves a Lycan was at the warehouse. The attempt on my life could be connected to the other homicides or completely unrelated. The shooter knew to use the murders to get me there, but he could’ve known that from watching the news. Why would a Lycan come after me? Unless...”

Rafe held his breath as she turned toward him, struggled to keep his emotions in check, his face blank.

“You... You think he came after me because of you.”

"It's a possibility," he allowed, knowing it was more like a certainty.

"You said that before about the other murders. 'It's a possibility we're looking into,' you said. What did you mean by 'we'?"

Suddenly on shaky ground, Rafe chose his words carefully. He didn't want to outright lie to her, but neither did he want to risk her life further by drawing her into L.I. operations. The less she knew the better. "Gabe and Luc are helping me."

"Other than the mauling, what makes you think a Lycan's involved in the murders?"

"Isn't the mauling enough? Come here." He pulled her onto his lap, needing the physical evidence that she was all right, relying on her touch to calm him.

"Maybe, but only the first two were mauled. Harden's death doesn't fit the MO. And his murder coincides with the attack on me. Maybe I was way off on that. I'm not sure. And what's the motive?" She leaned back against him, opening her file and allowing him to look over her shoulder.

He wrapped his arms around her, amazed that he could feel comforted while discussing such a morbid topic. "Are you certain all three are related?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

162

"I thought with Shumaker's connection to Harden that the bookie's death was because I got too close to his boss. The attack on me made sense then. But I've found nothing to tie Harden or his boss to Robertson, and none of it explains why a Lycan would commit all three murders."

She flipped through her notes. He could almost see her mind working, feel the energy flowing as she went over the cases for what must be the millionth time. He hugged her closer when his gaze locked on a slip of paper in the file.

"Is there a way for me to know whether his boss is Lycan?"

When he didn't answer immediately, she repeated her question and twisted around to look him in the eye. "Rafe?"

Another second passed before he could answer. "From looking at him? No."

Obvious disappointment tugged her lips into a frown. "Okay. It was a thought. I'll make one more trip out to pressure Harden's boss, see if anything turns up. If not, I'll have to hand it off to another detective."

He pressed his lips to the side of her neck, breathed in the clean scent of her hair.

How could she evoke such a mix of feelings? Admiration, protectiveness, annoyance, and desire. His hard-edged cop with the soft curves of a vulnerable woman.

"That leaves me with two deaths, and the only connection between them and the warehouse attack is you. So you want to explain why a Lycan is killing off people you know?"

"Robertson and I differed on certain upcoming legislation. We'd only met face-to-face a few times, none of which were amicable. That hardly makes him a lifelong friend."

She tossed her file on the coffee table and moved to sit beside him, tucking one foot under her. "Don't sidestep the question. If you aren't the killer, which I think we can both safely assume you're not—"

"Thanks."

“—then someone may want it to look as if you are responsible.”

If she'd drawn that conclusion, she was too close to finding out who'd want to frame him. Too close to danger.

“You're famous. Eccentric.”

“That's hardly a crime.”

“And the only man I know with a pack of wolves at his disposal.” She got up and tugged him to his feet. “Come see this.”

She led him to the map hanging in her office. “What do you see?”

Curious, he concentrated on the map. “Pins marking crime scenes, apparently.”

“Yellow marks victims' homes.”

“Widespread.”

She nodded. “Red is for the bodies. This pin here is where Robertson's car was found. This one—”

“Is the warehouse where you were shot. Your point, Detective?”

“Where you were shot, too,” she reminded him. “Both locations, the car and the ambush, were within a couple of blocks of the property on the docks where you left your car that night.”

He let out a long breath. “That doesn't prove anything. I own a lot of property.”

“Yes, but not in that part of town. And still, both sites are within a two - block radius. Added to that, the alley where we found Robertson's body runs exactly two blocks west of a tenant building you own on the Southside.”

He studied the map. “The one under renovation. Construction company reported a few thefts. I had the area fenced in, and the guards now patrol there at night with a dog.”

“Yeah. It was on your list.” She pointed to the pin in a green area.

“Geographically, Harden's murder doesn't fit. And Shumaker's death wasn't near your property, but then, he was an employee of yours. We don't know where Robertson was killed, but we do know where the killer left him. That spot was chosen for a reason.

Those two men were mauled for a reason. Why else, except to put you in our sights?”

He'd known she would find the right path. Her talent and tenacity made that a certainty. But Rafe hadn't prepared for the emotions that would stir. He didn't want her on the trail of a killer if that killer was the Lycan he believed him to be.

She paused, that little wrinkle appearing between her eyebrows. “Who'd you piss off?”

“Who says I did?” He pulled away, frustration building. “I need some coffee. You want some?”

She slapped a hand on his chest before he could turn to leave. “Damn it. Don't shut me out now.”

God, she was beautiful when she was flustered. He took her hand, kissed it, and watched with amusement as she jerked it free in annoyance.

“You're leaping to conclusions, Detective.”

She followed him into the kitchen and yanked his arm as he reached for a mug.

“Don't patronize me.”

“Don't press me on this.” Her ability to process clues amazed him, and yet the very thing he found impressive brought her closer to danger. Her dogged resolve irritated him, even though he admired her for it. How could he keep her safe if she was

determined to be involved?

Her gaze searched, probed, then changed to one of realization. “You know who he is, don’t you? You’ve suspected all along. You lying...” He accepted her accusatory scowl but stopped her hand mere inches from his face.

“I didn’t lie to you. I wasn’t sure. I’m still not. Not completely.”

“Yes, you are. All that talk of helping me solve the case is a smokescreen. You

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

164

already know or suspect who’s doing this. And you want to keep me from finding out who he is. Why? How many does he have to kill before you stop covering for him?”

He jerked away. “You go too far, Mackenzie.”

“Apparently not. He’s out there killing people you know.” She poked him in the chest. “And you know his identity. You could help me put him behind bars.”

“He’s Lycan. If you caught him—and that’s a big ‘if’—what would you do?

Handcuff him. Read him his rights. You’d be dead before you drove two blocks down the road, and the wolf would be gone.”

Her back went ramrod straight. “So we just let him go? Who’s next? Your brothers? Your housekeeper? Who does he have to kill before you’ll come forward and help me stop him?”

He grabbed her shoulders. “You can’t stop him, damn it. *You* can’t, but I can. I will.”

“It’s not your job—”

“Fuck the job. He killed my sister.”

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

Rafe collapsed in a chair and rested both elbows on the table, his head on his hands. Wearily, he warned, “Stay out of it, Mackenzie. I don’t want you anywhere near him.”

She laid a hand on his shoulders. Her voice dropped to a soothing whisper. “Too late. I’m already in it. I can’t stay out.”

“Fuck.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her close.

Her fingers were light, comforting. She kneaded his shoulders, rubbed his back, and caressed his head. Her touch ignited a need in his body he was unable or unwilling to deny.

He didn’t want to contemplate the possibilities of losing her, failing her as he’d failed his sister. No, Mackenzie was here in his arms where she belonged—where he wanted her to remain, forever.

Lifting the hem of her shirt, he pressed a kiss above her navel. Her heat warmed him. Her scent, that wonderful mix of coconut milk and cream, made him want to nibble every inch of her.

He burrowed further, leaving a trail of kisses up her body, nudging the shirt higher until impatiently, he pulled it off.

Her hands clasped his head. To hold him away or keep him close, he didn’t know or care. He wanted her, needed her, and he’d have all of her.

Her bra, a flimsy strip of lace, was gone. His lips closed over her nipple as if his next breath, his life, depended on it. He sucked and laved each breast until a moan rumbled from her throat, the sexiest invitation he’d ever heard.

She stood between his legs, her flat stomach pressed to his chest. Not close enough. Never enough.

With a growl, he made short work of her pants and yanked his own open.

Backing her against the wall, he nipped her lip and feasted on her mouth in a kiss engulfed with furious desire.

Her fingers bit into his back, one leg hooked around his thigh. Desperate for more, he was rougher than he meant to be. Finesse gave way to the ravenous need to mate.

“Hang on.” Cupping her hips, he lifted her and slid home with one powerful stroke. Her arms clung to him, legs wrapped about him. She was so tight, wet, and his. *His mate.* The word pounded through his brain even as he plunged harder.

Unable to stop, his mouth closed on her left breast just above the coral nipple. This time, his teeth broke through. Not much, but enough. His mark left behind.

Feeling her crest, he hissed, “Yes,” and kissed her until breath was no more than a memory. Blood rocketed through him, and every muscle came alive as he pumped deep and deeper into her heat.

“Rafe...oh...” Her nails clawed and encouraged him.

A groan escaped as her body clutched him, tensed in another climactic release.

He slammed a hand against the wall for balance he felt certain was forever beyond his grasp.

She’d tilted his world, and with one last wild cry, he gave her everything he had and was and would ever be.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, Mackenzie lay pleasantly exhausted on the bed’s rumpled covers, her face buried in a pillow.

“I think we could both use that coffee now,” Rafe breathed in her ear.

“Mmm.” Her muttered agreement made him laugh. He swatted her butt as he rose from the bed.

Where did he find the energy to move? she wondered, struggling to gather enough strength just to turn over.

By the time he returned, wearing nothing but his unbuttoned pants, she’d managed to don an oversized University of Illinois T - shirt and sit cross - legged on the bed. He carried a tray with two steaming cups and a couple of dinner rolls.

“Thanks.” She warmed her hands on the cup before taking a sip.

“My sister went there,” he said with a gesture toward her shirt.

“Tell me about her. If it’s not too painful, I mean. It’s okay, if you don’t want to.”

With a sad smile, he leaned against the headboard. “She was the perfect little sister. A never - ending source of joy and frustration.”

Mackenzie had to laugh. “Spoken like a true big brother, no doubt.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

166

He grinned, but sorrow still shadowed the golden light of his eyes.

“At first she’d tag along, following us everywhere. She drove us crazy. But later on, we were the ones trying to keep up with her. Ariana was barely in her teens when our parents were killed. My brothers and I were away at college, but we all played a part in raising her.

“She was beautiful.” When he looked at her, she added, “That’s obvious from the portrait I saw in your home.”

“Yes, she was, even more so on the inside. Her heart was pure...and easily bruised. She was always bringing home strays...” His voice trailed off. His head fell back, eyes closed. “Then she brought home one for which she’d later pay with her life.” Mackenzie laced her fingers with his, giving him what comfort and understanding she could. Two lost souls finding solace together. He reached for his coffee and downed half of it. “Ariana met him her senior year of college.”

“Who?”

His expression became haunted, and his knuckles whitened briefly around the cup.

“Please.”

“Anton Sagristano. She convinced me to give him a job. L.I. was barely off the ground, so I agreed on the condition that she wait a couple years before making any commitments. I figured she’d grow out of it, and until then, Gabe could keep an eye on him. She believed herself in love. Maybe she was.” He shrugged. “She agreed to wait.”

“Anton was Lycan?”

“Yes. But he was a loner, unassociated with any pack, unfamiliar with pack laws and protocol.”

“Protocol?” Mackenzie took a roll and bit off a chunk.

“Similar to past human rituals. There’s a period of courtship...dating. With Lycans, finding the right mate is crucial. When we mate, we mate for life.”

The bite lodged in her throat, and Mackenzie coughed.

Rafe obligingly rubbed her back. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she croaked. “Mate?”

“I guess you could say it’s like marriage. Many Lycan couples follow through with the human tradition of exchanging vows. But in our culture it isn’t necessary, and there’s no word for divorce in our language. Having a mate is more than a legal bond to the pack. That’s why choosing the correct mate is so important. The match requires the pack alpha’s approval.”

“Oh.” She took another bite, but the buttery roll now tasted like sawdust. He couldn’t have made it clearer. Lycan couples mated for life. So where did that leave her? Right where she’d always been. A pain pulsed in her chest. She’d known their relationship would be temporary. Discounting his race, there were still too many differences for them to remain together for long. Hadn’t she tried to tell him that? All they had was lust. She could live with that. She’d have to live with that.

“Anyway, Ariana and Anton became engaged. With my approval, albeit reluctantly. She wanted time to plan a wedding, so the ceremony and mating would take place the next spring.”

“They were married?”

He shook his head. “A month before the scheduled date, Gabriel uncovered some disturbing information. We’d recently changed to a new, secure, tracking system that monitored file access within our research facility. That was the tip that led to the discovery of a plan to sell trade secrets.”

“And that evidence fingered Anton,” she said with conviction.

Rafe nodded. "Some other data had already gone missing, but we couldn't prove who was responsible. With the new information, however, that changed. I planned to confront him at work the next day and break it to Ariana later. But she must have overheard our conversation, because we found a note telling us she'd handle it. By the time I made it to Anton's place, my sister was gone...and so was Anton."

"This Lycan. He's the one you think is doing all of this?"

He nodded and sipped his coffee.

"Thank you for telling me. I'm sorry about what I said before." She waited for him to look at her. "I should never have implied you were at fault in any way for why he's out there killing."

"In a way, I am. The truth is she was my responsibility." His gaze was hard.

"Don't think for a minute that I don't have blood on my hands."

"Don't blame yourself. You couldn't know what would happen." Even as she said the words, she felt like a hypocrite. Hadn't she blamed herself for not being there for her mother? Hadn't her own actions caused her father's death? She was making up for that now, doing the best she could to put other predators behind bars. She'd just have to work harder to catch this one.

But first things first. Mackenzie saw the pain in his eyes, the grief still there despite the passage of time, and decided to change the subject.

"Speaking of blood, we really need to talk about your penchant for hickies."

He blinked and raised a brow.

She gave him what she hoped was a seductive smile and pulled her T - shirt over her head.

His reaction was unexpected. Concern replaced the sadness as he looked at her left breast. In a tender—almost reverent—move, he touched the mark. "I was rough before. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"I didn't...I felt a little pain, sure, but I also felt a lot of pleasure." She laid a hand on his cheek. "You didn't hurt me. Just be careful where you put them, okay? I mean, at

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

168

least this one's easier to hide than the last time."

"I'll try to curb my urges." His lips curved into a smile so sexy she ached.

"Well," she said, tugging him closer, "I really like the pleasure, so don't curb them all."

Mackenzie awoke the next morning with a warm, hard body curved along her side and a heavy arm draped across her middle. Slowly, she turned her head so she could watch Rafe sleep. A tender smile played with her lips. This was her first opportunity to observe him up close and at her leisure. He slept peacefully, his face softened in slumber.

He was an amazing man. As she'd suspected when she first met him, he was much more than what he presented to the world. Burdened with a secret, he still faced life openly. Successful, powerful, and arrogant to a point, he'd overcome adversity to build an empire that protected both his family and the animals he championed. A personal nature preserve, he'd said of his home.

He loved his family; that was obvious. He cared about his own as well as others. He'd suffered loss and survived without becoming bitter.

She'd thought he would be like others she'd met in his position. Wealthy, ambitious, shallow, and selfish. Money made people greedy. Power made them prideful. Hadn't her last boyfriend proven that? Kenneth Hahn sought fame and fortune, and in many cases, he achieved his goals. He had money and power. His pride made him bitter over his one loss. Her.

He'd planned their future together after college. Him on the bench someday. Her on his arm...not by his side. They were never a team, although he'd presented it to her that way at first. It had taken her a while to realize she'd been part of the team only when she did everything his way. In the beginning, she'd tried to fulfill his desires, be what he'd wanted her to be, but that had led to more demands, more control.

Hahn had even wanted her to have plastic surgery to remove the scars. He didn't understand that she kept them to remind her of what happened when she made mistakes, disobeyed, or broke the rules. She'd been unable to live up to his ideal, learned it was futile to even try, so she'd ended the relationship.

Rafe, on the other hand, showed a willingness to look beyond the surface of a person. Even though he questioned the limits she'd set in life, he did show some respect for the law and what he called pack protocol.

And because of that, she'd have to let him go when the time came. She'd taken the step with eyes wide open and known then that nothing permanent would come of it. She shouldn't feel upset now with the realization that she'd been right.

When the case was solved, the thrill would be gone. The challenge over. He'd move on and someday find his Lycan mate. She'd have her job, another case, another criminal to track down, and maybe one day the trail would lead to her mother's killer. If she kept that in mind, she'd be okay. And they could enjoy each other's company as long as it lasted.

He mumbled a protest when she moved to get out of bed, but his eyes remained closed. Quietly, so as not to disturb him, she grabbed some clothes and made her way into the bathroom.

Deciding on a bath, she filled the tub and pulled her hair up in a loose bun before slipping into the warm bubbles. By the time the water cooled, she was relaxed and ready to start a new day.

She'd planned to go into the station even though today was her day off; however, she could spare some time this morning to repay Rafe for his dinner. She couldn't cook a gourmet meal, but eggs and toast weren't beyond her abilities.

With a smile splitting her face, she dressed and then opened the door. The bed was empty. He better not be ruining her chance to surprise him by making breakfast already.

Still barefoot, she eased down the hall and heard his voice, soft at first, then clearer.

"Yes, I can talk. She's in the bath."

Mackenzie stopped to listen. He'd pulled his pants on and stood in the kitchen, his hip propped against the counter, his back to her.

"Luc," Rafe said, his tone dropping to one of warning. "Get your mind on business. It's gone beyond supposition. From what I saw of her notes on the case, I'm almost certain Anton's involved. You know how he uses A.S. or T.S. as initials for all of his aliases?" He paused, switching the phone to the other ear. "She had a copy of an



auto rental receipt with the name, Tony Soprano. Yeah, I watch TV, too. So he's not very original. He probably got a kick out of it. Just run down the name. See if he used it anywhere else."

Rafe's words sliced her heart. He'd kept that observation from her.

"No, I need you on this. I can't stay with her every minute. She'll want to go back to work tomorrow, and I've put off preparations for this week's Securities Conference long enough. We're unveiling the Cyber - Guard software. What?

"No, leave the GPD on her car for now, but as soon as this is over...right."

Her hands fisted. Her mind went numb. Rage. Pure, overwhelming fury flowed in her veins.

"I'll debrief Gabe at L.I. today. See you then." He flipped the phone closed.

Mackenzie's legs felt like overcooked noodles. She'd wonder later how she had the strength to stand much less move, but she stepped forward, this time not bothering to remain quiet.

"You lying bastard." The words were all the more venomous for the softness with which they were uttered.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

170

"Mackenzie." He turned—lines of surprise, then concern, were evident in his expression. He moved toward her.

"Don't touch me." She held up her hands even as she fought to hold back the tears. "You recognized an alias and kept that fact from me."

He stilled under the force of her accusation.

"All this time I thought, he trusts me. Look at what he's shared with me. I mean, what secret could be bigger, more important, than being a wolf? Why not trust him? Tell him about the case, my fears, and my family. But you were just playing me." The words caught in her throat. "Using me. Did you investigate me, too?"

He didn't wince. Not an eyelash moved and that told her all she needed to know.

"You spied on me. You bugged my car. How long?"

"Mac—"

"*How long?*" Like a gunshot, her voice exploded for the first time.

"When Luc drove your car to the hospital. Mackenzie, I—"

"I want you out of here. Get the rest of your clothes and get out." She walked to the door and stared out the window while he went to her room to retrieve his things. When he reappeared, she ignored the pained look on his face and let the pain in her own heart fuel the anger.

His hand rose to touch her. She stepped back.

"I won't let it end like this," he said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"It's not your decision to make. I want you to leave. *Now.*"

She collapsed to her knees the moment the door closed behind him. Untold minutes and a flood of tears later, she dragged herself to her feet. After slipping her shoes on, she went to her car and, like a woman on a mission, searched the vehicle from headlights to tailpipe. When she found the GPS device, she removed the tiny black box, carried it back to her apartment, and beat it into a soup of plastic shards and wires.

### **Chapter Sixteen**

Luc handed Rafe a fax sheet and cast an inquisitive glance at Gabe before

reporting, "One Tony Soprano landed at O'Hare the week prior to Robertson's murder. He rented a nondescript sedan, which has since been returned."

The brothers were in a soundproof room beneath the Lykos Institute. Outside the door, an army of men and women, all Lycans, manned the best money could buy in high - tech surveillance and communications equipment. Moments earlier, they'd paused in curious observance as Rafe stalked through the area, his usual unshakable demeanor obviously cracked. He was looking for a fight and made sure everyone there knew it.

"I talked to the rental agent," Luc continued in a cautious tone. "Physical description fits. He hadn't changed his look since Atlantic City, at least not yet. Probably has by now though."

"That explains how he got here," Gabe said.

Rafe snarled. "But it doesn't answer the damn question of where he is now."

"No," Luc admitted. "It would've helped knowing how your lady lion came by the rental info."

Rafe thought of Mackenzie, how her once passion - filled cries had turned to angry accusations, and how those warm blue eyes had become cold, dark sapphires. He'd caused that change, seen the hurt. He'd made her luscious lips curl into a furious sneer. *Lady lion*. The description fit. His mate had teeth.

Rafe stiffened beneath the fierce flood of pain, longing, and self - disgust. He wanted his mate, wanted to force her to listen, to accept him. His alpha instinct wanted to dominate, but he knew she wouldn't accept any highhandedness. Look how she reacted when he'd done what he thought was best? Did she understand? No, she'd dropped those damn walls between them again without giving him a chance to explain. Denied, he took his frustrations out on his brothers.

"If you'd found the bastard before now, that information would be irrelevant."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

172

Luc growled. "Fuck you. I'm not a damned miracle worker."

Rafe took a menacing step forward. In a typical move as mediator, Gabe stepped between them and handed Rafe a balloon of brandy. "Calm down," he told them, looking at Luc. "I don't want to replace office furniture again."

"Calm down? Tell that to him." Luc pointed at Rafe. "What the hell's gotten into you anyway?"

Rafe sipped the brandy, feeling the bite of the liquor as it warmed his throat. It did nothing to soothe the angry current running through him.

"I'm tired of excuses." He pinned Luc with a steely stare. "You had a chance last year, too, and failed to stop him in Atlantic City. Now, a new detective with no experience tracking Lycans finds the trail before anyone here." And put herself in the line of fire, he thought.

Luc's hands balled into fists. "Excuses? I've waded through every sleaze - pit in the city while you've been sniffing around that human detective like a lost pound puppy. Not to mention having to stop the search every time you needed a ride or clothes or her car transported somewhere. You should've thought of that before putting us all in danger over a piece of a—"

"Luc," Gabe cut him off and shoved a beer in his hand. "Watch it."

“Don’t tell me to watch it. I’m not his goddamned flunkey, so don’t expect me to leap every time he yells, ‘Mush!’”

An opening door stopped any retort from Rafe and made Gabe sigh in relief, until he saw the worried expression on the messenger’s face. He took the note and waved him away, watching the grateful messenger scramble to close the door between them. After reading it, Gabe took a deep breath before announcing, “The GPS on Lyons’ car’s gone offline. Any idea how that happened?”

Hadn’t taken her long to find the device, Rafe thought, or get rid of it. He swirled the brandy in his crystal balloon. His insides had been churning in like fashion since he’d left Mackenzie’s. He wanted to curse her for ripping him apart, leaving him shaken and hollow inside. Instead, he cursed himself for marking a human as his mate, for foolishly falling in love with a self - reliant woman.

He surprised them all by sending the snifter crashing into the wall where it shattered in a mirror image of his heart.

“I’d say he has a clue,” Luc said after a moment, his tone half - amused, half - mocking.

“Luc, find her. Stay close. Wherever she goes, you go.”

Lucian smirked. “In other words, mush?”

“God damn it! I don’t have time to soothe your alpha ego. Do your fucking job. And if it’s a choice between your life or hers, you better choose correctly.”

“Rafe, that’s—” Gabe began, but Luc’s snarl cut him off.

“Son of a bitch.” Luc launched himself at Rafe.

The battle Gabe had hoped to avoid ensued. Fists and bodies flew as Rafe and Luc grappled. A lamp crashed to the floor. The table it had sat on splintered under their weight.

Rafe proved why his position as pack alpha was not an honorary title. He was the first to gain the upper hand, but it was not easily obtained. Unlike past challenges, his opponent this time was his brother, and they were equally matched.

He’d wanted a fight, a chance to release some of his pent - up aggression. So he’d pushed them until one finally responded.

He’d asked for it. Now he had to deal with it.

Luc showed remarkable skill, forcing Rafe to use every ounce of energy and strength to combat him. He took a blow to the gut that stole his breath, and punched Luc hard enough to send him slamming into Gabe’s desk, where he toppled a priceless jade statuette.

Cursing in a rather creative way, Gabe hauled Luc back and narrowly dodged a right hook for his efforts. “Stop it! He didn’t mean it that way.”

“The hell he didn’t.” Breathing heavily, Luc wiped away the blood dripping from his nose.

Gabe’s look urged Rafe to admit to the misunderstanding. “And you say I have a touchy trigger on my temper. Tell him you didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Rafe remained silent. He licked a drop of blood from his split lip.

“You heard him correctly,” Luc said. “You’re just too damn slow to realize it.”

He smirked when Gabe turned an angry glare on him. “Think about it. When have you ever known our big brother to misspeak?”

Gabe shook his head stubbornly. “Rafe wouldn’t choose a human over his pack,

Luc. Where's your loyalty to the alpha?"

Luc gave a bark of laughter. "Loyalty? Maybe you should ask the alpha where his loyalty to the pack was when he mated with a human. It sure as hell wasn't above his shoulders."

A worried frown appeared on Gabe's forehead. "Mated? He's not mated... He wouldn't, not without pack approval." But when Rafe didn't move to deny Luc's claim, the truth sparked Gabe's temper.

"Off - limits, my ass. She's the 'last person you'd want to find out about our secret'. That's what you said. What happened to that? A human, a detective, for Pete's sake."

Rafe faced his brothers and pressed further. "A detective who's kept my identity a secret since she learned about it."

"For how long?" Gabe asked. "You can't have a human as a mate."

"I don't see why not. Lycans have mated with humans before."

"*Not the alpha.* You expect a *human* female to hold the position as alpha mate?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

174

You're asking for trouble. The pack would never approve of a human—"

"Mating requires the alpha male's approval, not the entire pack." Rafe let his words sink in. Since he was the pack alpha, he didn't need their approval. "She may not be Lycan, but she is my mate."

"You're choosing her over the pack?" Gabe's hands fisted, punctuating the mix of anger and disbelief in his question.

"Not at all." Rafe saw Gabe relax a bit at his words, but the reaction was short - lived. "As my mate, she's part of this pack."

Luc snorted. "Does she know that?"

Rafe bit back a retort and kept his face blank. Truth was Mackenzie didn't know, so what could he say? Lucian, as was his way, hit a bull's - eye and brought them back to the crux of the problem.

"She's already proven trustworthy in keeping our existence a secret. She'll come around to the rest." *She had to.* His heart and future within the pack depended on it.

"Meanwhile, I want her protected. As my mate, she's in more danger now than ever before."

"You picked a hell of a time for mating, brother." Luc propped a hip on the desk, crossing his arms.

Rafe watched him for a long moment. Belligerence vibrated in every coiled muscle. His youngest brother made clear his disapproval of Rafe's chosen mate. "If you are unable to give her the loyalty you've shown me, say so now."

The two brothers eyed each other silently while Gabe went to the carved liquor cabinet, which somehow had survived the earlier brawl. The snap and fizz of a cola sounded as he poured himself a Bourbon and Coke. Taking a sip, he joined Luc to lean against the desk.

"You care for her, we know," Gabe said, "but do you trust her? Do you trust her to understand L.I.'s mission, to accept it? You ask for our loyalty, but will we have hers?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie spent most of Sunday at the station, where she buried herself in work. Other detectives gave her a wide berth and, no doubt, breathed a sigh of relief when she called it a night at one in the morning. Telling herself she had a job to do, she returned before sunup. It had nothing to do with avoiding memories of Rafe in her apartment. She'd block out everything else but the job. What other choice did she have? By the time Cooper reported for duty, her anger, once an inferno, had burned down to a numbing simmer and left a charred ache in its wake.

"Hey, Mac. What's cooking?"

She bared her teeth. "Not a damn thing. Get off my desk, Coop. There's a chair. Park your butt in it."

"Whoa. What the hell's gotten into you?" He put some space between them and took the chair.

She squeezed her eyes shut a second. "Sorry. Someone ate my M&Ms," she lied.

"Have you run the name on the rental car?"

"No. It's bogus, Mac. You and I both know it."

"Run it anyway. See if there were any airline tickets in that name. Start with the week prior to the first murder. Origination, New York or New Jersey. Maybe Nevada? Get with airport security and check security tapes. If the name turns up, I want a picture of the guy."

"Damn, Mac. That'll take a while."

"Then I suggest you get on it." She locked her PC. "On second thought, hand it off, but get someone on it now. See if anyone matches this guy." She handed him a copy of a college class photo. "He'll be older now."

"Who's this?"

"Anton Sagristano, AKA, Tony, Antonio, Anthony. Word is he goes by numerous aliases, typically using names with initials A.S. or T.S."

"Tony Soprano."

"Bingo. He's wanted for questioning in several states, including New York, New Jersey, and here." She tossed him an article she pulled off the Internet the night before.

"That's a news report on a crime family busted for running a scam on the health - care industry."

"Health - care industry? I thought their specialty was labor unions, casinos, and trash pickup."

"The mafia's branching out. What can I say?" She pointed at the article. "Their company overcharged group health - care providers and used private medical records to blackmail patients. Took authorities a couple years to make the bust."

Cooper whistled. "With this many clients, I'd lay odds the extortion business was lucrative. Connections?"

"I'm still running possibles between the company and the victims."

"What about Stone?"

She thought about lying but couldn't. She'd jeopardized her career enough by covering for Stone, and what had it gotten her? "Not between Stone and the New Jersey crime family, but Sagristano? Yeah. He was engaged to Stone's sister."

Cooper sat back, inclined his head. "Another piece falls into place."

"Not so fast. They never married. He worked for the Lykos Institute for a few years but left under less - than - desirable circumstances."

“They had a falling out?”

“Big time. He’s wanted for questioning in connection with the disappearance of

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

176

Stone’s sister.”

“Murder?”

“Nothing proven. No body. Legally, she’s still listed as a missing person.”

Mackenzie recalled Rafe’s comment about the danger of disintegration if a Lycan changes without enough energy to overcome injury. If that was the case, it was unlikely they’d ever find a body. “Sagrignano was about to be fired when he disappeared on the same day as the sister.”

“Girl runs off with boyfriend because big, bad brother disapproves.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But the boyfriend’s reappeared on radar. Not a blip on the sister.”

“Okay. I can’t see Stone tag - teaming with a guy he thinks killed his little sister, but I’m still not ruling him out. What about connections to Caprini?”

“Not ironclad, unless he’s the tail we picked up after leaving Caprini’s house.

Sagrignano’s name appeared in papers obtained in the raid on the health - care business.”

“How do you know that?”

“I spoke to one of the investigators on the New Jersey case last night.

Sagrignano’s from New York but went to college here. Biomedical studies.”

“Hey, isn’t that Stone’s brother’s specialty?”

Nodding, she held up a hand. “Which only explains why he worked at L.I.

Before New Jersey authorities lost him, Sagrignano was last spotted enjoying a toast with a guy fitting Caprini’s description in Atlantic City.”

Cooper got up. “I’ll tag Michaels to check flights for Caprini when she runs the other by the airlines.”

“Good idea. I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Maybe not, but damn, you’ve been busy. You trying to make me look bad, or does your personal life really suck that much?”

The ache in her chest throbbed. “I don’t have a personal life. What do you say I let you redeem yourself and we pay another visit to Caprini?”

“Works for me. Meet you at the car.”

“In thirty.” On the way to the garage, she took a detour by the lab, where she argued, threatened, and prodded the techs out of a promise to get the DNA results on the wolves to her no later than noon. Then she stopped by Taylor Phillips’ office and queried the profiler about possible connections between all three murders. Her gut had told her the three were related. Her instincts, however, had proven to be wrong before. All she had to do was look at how easily Rafe had fooled her to realize how flawed her gut could be. Surface clues indicated different killers, which Phillips supported.

Climbing into her car a half hour later, Mackenzie found Cooper already strapped in, his fingers drumming a rapid tattoo on the dash. After she cranked the engine, he tossed her a bag of candy, which made her laugh.

“Don’t eat ‘em until after we see Caprini though. You may need the tough - as nails, cop - bitch attitude.”

“Great to be appreciated.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The receptionist stuffed what looked like a compact in her purse and raised her nose in disdain as soon as Mackenzie and Cooper, with shields visible, crossed the threshold. "Officers, Mr. Caprini cannot be disturbed."

"It's detectives," Cooper said, propping a forearm on the counter. "And who said anything about disturbing him? We're here to ask him a few more questions is all."

"He's in a meeting. If you give me your name, I'll—"

"We'll wait." Mackenzie strolled to a pair of matching chairs and sat.

"It could be hours."

"That's quite all right." Mackenzie reclined, making certain her badge was clearly on display. "I'm sure he won't mind a couple cops taking a little time out in the lobby."

"Yep," Cooper agreed. "We're good for business."

The receptionist sniffed and cast a nervous glance at her purse before stuffing it under the counter.

Acting on a hunch, Mackenzie tilted her head back and sniffed the air as she stood and approached the counter again. "Do you smell that, Coop?"

"Not your normal air freshener."

The receptionist frowned and took a sniff, too. "What? I don't smell anything."

"Not much of a challenge for our K - 9s." Cooper leaned over the counter.

The woman's eyes widened. "K - 9s? You've no cause to—"

"What do you think, Coop?" Mackenzie leaned against the high, glass - topped reception desk and casually examined her nails. "I lay twenty bucks on ten minutes, if we call in a suspicion of drug possession."

"They'd be here before that. I'll lay a Grant on five."

The secretary scowled. "You can't just come in here with no warrant."

"A fifty on five. You're on, Coop. Of course, we'll have to lock the place down while the units are here."

"How dare—"

Cooper pointed to a vent. "Smell could be coming from there. How many floors? Three? This could take all day."

"And we still gotta talk to Caprini. Damn, there goes lunch. Tell 'em to hurry."

"Check." Cooper began the call.

"Stop. Stop. One moment, please." The woman all but ran to the double doors behind her.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

178

Cooper hung up and nudged Mac's arm. "What do you think? Purse or desk drawer?"

"Purse. Designer compact in the side pouch."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Easy to hide. Easy access. Besides, that's where she glanced first when you mentioned K - 9s."

Cooper shrugged. "Shame she didn't give us a chance to bet on that."

The secretary returned with the mute brute they'd encountered at Caprini's house.

“Oh look, Mac. Bruno plays fetch.”

The man pulled back his jacket to reveal a handgun. His message was clear.

“This way.”

“You gotta a permit for that?” Mackenzie asked as she neared to get a better look at the firearm.

“I’m legal.”

“Is that an HK?”

“Smith and Wesson, nine mil.”

“Nice piece,” Cooper said, his expression changing from admiration to dismay.

“Why do the privates get all the good stuff?”

The bodyguard smirked.

Cooper continued to whine about budget cuts until they walked through the doors. They had indeed interrupted a meeting. Five men sat around a conference table with Caprini at the head; the chair to his right was vacant. Caprini’s guard didn’t take the seat but positioned himself in front of another door, already closed, located behind Caprini.

“Hey, Ernie. Nice of you to send Bert as escort.” It did her heart good to see the brute’s eyes narrow. He wasn’t as dimwitted as he first appeared. “Sorry for the interruption, folks. Need a word with your boss. Is that your office?” She pointed to the closed, guarded door. “We could talk in there. Only take a few minutes.”

“I don’t care for your insulting manner or threats against my employees, detectives.” Caprini remained seated.

“Threats? I don’t recall any threats. Did you threaten anyone, Coop?”

“Who me?” He shook his head.

“See? No threats. Just questions.”

“The last time we spoke, I said you could discuss any further inquiries with my attorneys. This is one of them. Stuart Fische of Pfister and Fische.” A smug grin across his round face, Caprini gestured to the beady - eyed suit on his left.

With his shiny, dark hair combed back from a large forehead and a narrow chin, the lawyer looked like a weasel in a three - piece suit. If his nose twitched once, Mackenzie would burst out laughing.

“This kind of high - handedness will not be tolerated against my client,” Fische said in a snooty nasal tone that fit his pinched expression.

Mackenzie gave him a feral grin. “I have a low tolerance for murder, and you haven’t even seen high - handed yet, Mr. Fishy.”

“The name is Feeeesh. What exactly are the charges?”

“None. Yet.”

Fische stood with an imperious scowl. “Then you are wasting my time and my client’s.”

“As I said, we have a few questions about a guy who claimed to work for your client being left to rot in his own bathtub with a bullet in him.” That earned her the undivided attention of everyone at the table, and narrowing eyes from Caprini. “If I didn’t know any better, Mr. Fische, I’d think your client has something to hide. So I don’t see this as a waste of my time. I come here with a few questions, and he tries to deflect my inquiry with an overpaid legal minnow. Makes a girl suspicious.”

While the attorney sputtered over the personal insult, Mackenzie leaned on her



hands at the opposite end of the table from Caprini. "We can do this the hard way and I haul your ass in for questioning, or you can answer them here and now. The location and audience are up to you."

Caprini glared at her but ordered the others at the table to leave. All but the attorney scrambled for the double doors. The armed bodyguard continued to hold up the back wall.

Mackenzie took the seat on Caprini's right, directly opposite the legal weasel.

Cooper sat beside her.

"For the record, I will report your conduct toward my client to your supervisor,"

Fische said, adjusting his coat with a snap before taking his seat.

"So noted. Now, do you really want to waste more time with petty threats?"

"Get on with it," Caprini ordered. "I'm a very busy man."

She just bet he was. Mackenzie glanced at the paperwork spread out on the table.

"Opening a new casino, Caprini?"

"That's the plan, as soon as the license is awarded to us. It's all legal. What of it?"

She didn't answer. "Do you know Rafael Stone?"

His expression was again smug. "I'm a businessman in Chicago. Of course, I know Stone. Been on opposing sides of the bargaining table a few times."

"Lose any bids to him?"

His shrug was stiff. "You win some. You lose some. That's business."

"Lose any employees lately?"

"I think you have me mixed up with Stone there."

Mackenzie's expression remained deadpanned as she let silence stretch between them to the point of discomfort.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

180

"I was referring to a man who claimed to work for you. Remember Jimmy Harden?"

Caprini sighed in obvious disgust. "I've already answered that question."

"Humor me. Answer it again." She folded her arms on the table and watched him closely.

"Never heard of him."

"Then how do you explain your unlisted number on a piece of paper in his apartment?"

"I don't."

His lawyer added, "He could've gotten it from any number of sources. That proves nothing."

"Are you aware that within twenty - four hours of our last meeting, the man you claim to not know was killed in his home?"

"No." Neither did he seem surprised by the news.

"Where were you that night?"

"At home, watching a movie."

"What movie?"

Caprini grinned devilishly. "The Godfather."

"Can anyone corroborate that?"

"My security guard." He turned to look at the man guarding the door behind

him. Like a well - trained pup, the bodyguard nodded.

"After that, I went to bed. Will that be all, detectives?"

"Not yet. Do you know a Tony Soprano?"

Caprini grinned. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"Just answer the question."

"Doesn't everyone? He's a television mobster."

She kept a straight face and met his gaze head on. "Would someone using that name as an alias have any business at your home?"

"No. This is absurd."

Cooper leaned forward. "What about Anton Sagristano?"

The grin faded before returning with a forced brightness. "Who? I don't believe I've heard the name. Is he a character on the show, too?"

"He's very real," Mackenzie said. "When was the last time you traveled to Atlantic City?"

The smile was gone now. "I go there occasionally. On business. I don't see how this has anything to do with your investigation."

"The last time you were there?"

"I don't recall exactly."

"What about June?"

"My work takes me all over the country. Maybe I was. Maybe I wasn't. What does this have to do with—"

"Did you meet Sagristano there?"

"I don't know who you're talking about. What's this have to do with some lowlife thief getting whacked?"

"A thief?"

"The city's streets are no doubt cleaner without him."

"Pretty strong words considering you didn't know the man."

The attorney stood up. "This interrogation is over."

\* \* \* \* \*

"The seat was warm," Mackenzie said on the way to her car.

"What?" Cooper asked.

"The chair I sat in. It was warm. Someone was sitting in it right before we were shown into the room."

"Probably the guard."

"I don't think so. I think whoever it was went into the other room while Bernie retrieved us from the lobby."

Cooper paused on his side of the car.

"Maybe so. You thinking it's this Tony guy?"

"Possibly."

"Want to hang out for a while, see what pours out?"

"You can. I've got an errand to run. Do you mind catching a cab back to the station?"

"No prob."

She got in and rolled down the window. "When you get back, run a check on phone records for Caprini on the night of the Harden murder."

"Sure thing," he said, leaning in the window to tug on her ponytail. "What are

you going to do? You late for a hair appointment?"

"If you're thinking of turning in your badge to become a comedian, don't. You'll starve."

"Yeah, and you're a barrel of laughs. So where are you going?"

"Shopping."

She was grinning at the shocked look on Cooper's face as she drove away.

## Chapter Seventeen

Mackenzie began with the pawnshop closest to Harden's residence and hit the jackpot.

"Yeah, I've seen him in here a time or two," the clerk said as he looked at a blowup of the bookie's driver's license photo. "What's a pretty little thing like you doing looking for a guy like him?"

"It's real important. Do you remember the last time he was in here?" she asked.

"I don't work every day, you know. He could've been by on my day off."

"I understand, but you keep records, right? Could you check to see if he hocked anything in the last month or so?"

The clerk scratched his beer belly while he considered.

She gave him her best smile, innocent and eager...she hoped.

"All right, but it may take me a bit."

Her smile changed to a grateful grin. "Okay if I browse while I wait?"

"Suit yourself." As he went to an old metal cabinet in the corner, she strolled around the small shop, looking at the array of used merchandise. Jewelry and electronics seemed to be the possessions of choice among those desperate enough to pawn property—theirs and others—for a few greenbacks.

Her cell phone rang, but she slipped it back in her pocket after recognizing the caller's ID as that of Evalyn Drake. The meddling reporter would have to wait.

Mackenzie made her way up one aisle and down another, until she paused to view the goods in the barred front window. Through the glass, a shadow across the street caught her eye.

"I found it."

She turned to see the clerk return with a slip of paper in his hand, and hurried to meet him at the jewelry counter.

"Says here he hocked a ring."

Her heart lurched. "A ring. Do you still have it?"

"Sure do. Right there." He pointed to the case. On the back row amid the gold and gemstones sat a man's silver wedding band adorned in familiar delicate engravings.

"I need that."

"A hundred bucks and you can have it."

"Let's say you give it to me, and I don't haul you in for peddling stolen merchandise?"

At the sight of her badge, the clerk's expression soured. "Look, lady—"

"Detective."

"Detective, my operation's legit. Ask anybody."

"And you had no idea this was stolen off a murder victim?"

"Murder!"

“Some might say that makes you an accomplice.”

“I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout murder.” He scrambled to unlock the case and pull out the ring. “Here. Take it. I don’t want no part of it.”

“Thanks. Got an envelope?”

“Yeah. Sure.” He handed her one.

“By the way, is the mirror in that jeweled compact intact?”

A short time later, Mackenzie paused outside to drop the envelope in her pocket and unbutton her coat. Heading across the street and away from her car, she slowed her pace and without glancing around, passed the point where she’d noticed the shadow. He moved well, silent and smooth, slipping into the crowd several yards behind her. If she hadn’t pretended to use the compact and adjust her lipstick, she might have missed him.

Stopping a few times to window - shop, Mackenzie continued down the street in a casual manner until she turned the corner. Then she quickly slipped into the nearest alcove, which turned out to be the mouth of a dead - end alley.

After a moment, she heard the approach of rapid footsteps. When they reached the alley, she sprang.

Her attack didn’t go as planned.

Rather than jerk the man into the alley, she found herself off - balance and *her* back—not his—slammed against the building’s stone wall. He’d swung around the corner and used her momentum against her.

“You pounce like a lioness, but you should know better than to try it on a wolf.”

Lucian’s fingers curved around her throat, his lips lifting into a satisfied sneer.

“Is that so?” she hissed.

“Yes. Your scent gives you away.”

“So does yours.” She sniffed for good measure. “You’ve expensive taste in cologne, leatherman.”

He gave a bark of laughter before his expression turned serious once more.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

184

“Such boldness you have. Do you realize how quickly I could snap your neck in two?”

His grip on her neck tightened.

“You do,” she whispered huskily, “and you’ll howl two octaves higher at the next full moon.” She pressed the business end of her Glock into his crotch to punctuate her point.

Something close to admiration chased the momentary shock from his face.

Lucian’s fingers released their hold as he took a slow, cautious step backward. His lips twitched into a sly smirk.

“My brother has...interesting taste in women.”

Rubbing her throat, she kept the gun aimed at the leather - clad Stone brother.

“I’m not his woman.”

The man raised a brow, but said nothing.

“Neither am I a plaything for your pack. Why the hell are you following me?”

“Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to?” Unconcerned by the gun aimed at his chest, he leaned against the opposite wall of the alley in a nonchalant pose arrogantly similar to his eldest brother.

“Answer the question.”

He shrugged. “People choose different forms of entertainment.”

“Don’t give me that. Rafe sent you. Why?”

“What did you expect him to do after you destroyed the global positioning device?”

“I expect him to take the hint and leave me the hell alone before I haul him in on charges.”

Lucian scowled. “You’d arrest an innocent man just because he pissed you off?”

“Innocent?” She laughed. “He bugs my car, interferes with a multiple - murder investigation, and sends his crony to stalk a detective of the Chicago Police Department.”

“He didn’t put the GPD on your car. I did, without his knowledge.”

She snorted. “You expect me to believe that?”

“Believe whatever you like. The truth is, he didn’t tell me to bug your car. And when he learned of it, he only agreed to leave it there *after* he determined you might be in danger.” Lucian pushed away from the wall and approached her.

Mackenzie’s grip tightened on her firearm.

“The truth is, he allowed you to repeatedly invade his privacy, attack his character with multiple search warrants, and nearly get him killed. And after you throw his concern and sacrifices back in his face, he sends me to look out for your welfare with orders to give my life for yours, if necessary.”

“I didn’t...”

“You didn’t what? Expect him to choose you over his own flesh and blood?” His chest nudged the end of her pistol. The man looked more willing to take a pound of her flesh than risk a drop of his blood on her behalf.

She holstered her gun and met his gaze. “I didn’t ask for his protection. I don’t want his blood or yours on my hands. All I ever expected from him was to respect me enough to tell me the truth. Why should I trust you when he’s given me nothing but lies?”

“Is that really all he’s given you?”

Lucian’s accusing glare infuriated Mackenzie. He would not make her feel guilty for expecting Rafe’s honesty.

“Now who’s lying?” he asked softly.

“He took a bullet aimed for me. For that, I’ll keep his race a secret and consider us even. But I will not tolerate you or your brother’s interference in my investigation any longer. This is your last warning. Tell your brother that.”

“You want to tell him something, tell him yourself.”

She ground her teeth in frustration. “If I see you following me again, there will be hell to pay. You got it?”

He nodded once. “You’ll not see me again.”

She left him in the alley, somewhat satisfied with the outcome of the confrontation. She’d returned to her car and pulled out into traffic before she realized Lucian hadn’t said he wouldn’t follow her, only that she wouldn’t see him.

Mackenzie kept one eye on the rearview mirror all the way back to the station.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I got zilch,” Cooper grumbled as he pushed aside a folder to clear the space for

his butt on the corner of her desk.

Mackenzie hung up the phone and with a smile, leaned back in her chair. "I found a missing link."

"Do tell."

"What does a well - to - do politician and staunch opponent of gambling have in common with an ex - con bookie from the Southside?"

"Besides toe - tags in the morgue?"

"A missing wedding ring." She handed him the platinum band. "That was the Widow Robertson. She confirmed their bands were a custom - made, one - of - a - kind, his and - hers set."

"Where'd you get this?"

She held up the pawnshop receipt. "Our dead bookie had sticky fingers and..."

A light beamed in Cooper's eyes. "How do you teach a 'low - life thief' a lesson?"

Mackenzie touched her nose with a fingertip. "A missing hand."

Cooper grinned. "All right. Follow the bread crumbs. Victim number two,

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

186

Shumaker, owes money to victim number three, Harden—"

"Or his boss..."

"Or his boss. Then victim number three winds up dead after he fences stolen merchandise from victim number one, Robertson." He rubbed the five o'clock shadow on his chin. "But that still leaves us with two suspects, each with definite ties to two of the three victims. Stone to Robertson and Shumaker. And Caprini to Shumaker and Harden."

"But Caprini admitted that he's had competitive run - ins with Stone, some of which he lost. What if..."

"You're thinking this is some kind of a vendetta?"

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing—"

"Hold that thought." Her chair creaked as she pushed back from the desk and stood. The normal chatter from outside her office was nearly absent. The faint sound of a television broadcast was all she heard.

"Turn it up," someone said from the gathered viewers.

Mackenzie leaned against the door, her gaze fixed on the television and the familiar face of the reporter, Evalyn Drake.

"The son of the late senator, Victor Robertson, lashed out at Chicago's Police Department today. He criticized the handling of his father's murder investigation, after promising big rewards to anyone who could provide further information to help solve the case."

"My family and I are hopeful this generous reward will result in a break in the case," Richard said into a bouquet of microphones. "I feel I need to do more because the police aren't doing enough."

"What makes you say that?" a reporter asked.

"My calls for information have gone unanswered. They won't name any suspects, despite having valid leads. I won't stand by and let the killer get away with it

just because he's a powerful businessman."

Drake's voice cut in over the flood of questions. "You know who killed your father?"

"I have strong suspicions, which my mother and I shared with detectives weeks ago. But so far nothing's been done about them."

"Care to name names?" another reporter challenged.

"And have his lawyers after me? No. I want the police to do their jobs. You're all journalists. Follow the same leads."

Mackenzie moved closer to the TV, slipping between a few uniformed officers, with Cooper right on her heels.

Drake asked, "What leads are you referring to?"

"He had a public argument with my dad the day before the murder. It was in the society pages. They've been long - time opponents over gambling legislation, and now that my dad's out of the way, his company stands to make millions in government contracts for security software." Richard looked from the crowd directly into the camera. "And how many businessmen own a pack of dangerous wolves?"

Mackenzie muttered a curse under her breath.

Drake's face reappeared on screen with the word LIVE over her right shoulder.

"Although Robertson refused to name who he suspects killed his father, his clues leave little doubt that the person is none other than renowned billionaire bachelor, Rafael Stone, the CEO of Stone Corporation. The controversy comes at a crucial time for the businessman. This week, Stone's company is expected to announce the long anticipated release of Cyber - Guard, touted as the next generation in secure, online gambling software."

The camera shot returned to the studio where a well - groomed news anchor asked, "As we first reported exclusively on this station, there is growing speculation over the search warrants executed at Stone's L.I. headquarters. They seem to confirm, at least for some, that Stone may be involved. Evalyn, what's the word from the police?"

"We haven't had much more luck than Robertson in that regard. Attempts to reach the lead investigator, Detective Mackenzie Lyons, have gone unanswered."

"I'll show her 'unanswered'," Mackenzie said, spinning around to march back to her office. Before reaching the door, the authoritative bass of her sergeant's voice stopped her cold.

"Lyons. Cooper. My office. Now."

A few minutes later, she and Cooper filed into Fuller's office. Both of them remained standing as their superior took his seat behind his desk.

"I suppose you caught the coverage of that so - called news conference?" When they nodded, he continued. "The superintendent is calling for another one today. He wants the lead investigator there to answer questions."

"Sir, I—"

"We'll deal with your concerns in a moment. First, I want to get to the bottom of where you are in the case. What do we have on Stone?"

"Nothing. He's no longer our prime suspect." Mackenzie sensed Cooper tense in reaction to her statement.

Fuller responded by leaning back in his chair. "Oh?"

"Every lead to him comes up dry. Ballistics cleared his firearm. The DNA reports

cleared every canine the man owns, and there were no matches to any from the L.I. database.” She counted off her points by raising a finger for each one. “We’ve found no forensics connection to Harden at all. Stone’s record is spotless, and what motive we do have for two homicides is so full of holes that an elephant could walk through it.”

“What do you have?” The question came sharp, quick.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

188

“We have a third victim with ties to both of the others. Harden was Shumaker’s bookie, and I just found Robertson’s missing wedding ring at a pawnshop. Harden hocked it. That ties them together. Harden worked for Caprini, a man the Feds have been trying to catch for years. We know Shumaker had a gambling debt. That goes to motive.”

Fuller leaned forward and motioned for them to sit. “You aren’t going to tell me the leading opponent to gambling expansion in the state was a closet gambler.”

Cooper answered, “No, sir. His financials checked out. Good credit, living well within his means. Nothing suspicious.”

“Kids get a nice inheritance. Normally, I’d say follow the money,” Mackenzie added, “but they all had alibis, and there’s no known connection between them and the other victims.”

“But there is a connection between the victims and Stone,” Fuller said.

She propped her forearms on her knees, collecting her thoughts on how best to make her case. “With the second, yes. But why would Stone murder a man he’d just fired the day before? Why use a method that on the surface could implicate him? Circumstantial evidence keeps pointing to him, but on closer examination, the forensics don’t add up. The motive isn’t there, but someone wants us to think he’s guilty.”

“So your prime suspect now is...?”

“Caprini,” she said without hesitation. “He’s had run - ins with Stone in the past and lost. He’s not the type to take such losses lightly. Why not take advantage of an opportunity and frame a competitor? Within a day of questioning him, a potential witness is found executed, and I’m shot at. Caprini has ties to gambling and a mob family in New Jersey recently busted for blackmail. And we’ve confirmed that at least one of their henchmen, who’s also suspected in the disappearance of Stone’s sister, arrived in Chicago just days before the first murder. What if Caprini had something on Robertson? The senator refused to play and wound up dead.”

“You checked Robertson’s background. Do you have any evidence to support that theory?”

Mackenzie sat straighter, squaring her shoulders. “No, sir. Not yet. But Robertson was shot first, mauled afterward. Stone’s connection to wolves is no secret. One possibility we must address is whether someone is trying to frame Stone by making it appear his canines are involved.”

The sergeant stared as if he could see through her. After a long pause, he got up and glanced out the window before facing them again. “And your decision concerning Stone has nothing to do with the man’s talent for persuasion?”

She stiffened. “As lead investigator, I make all decisions based on the evidence.”

“Do you concur with her assessment, Detective Cooper?”

Her partner didn’t glance her way as he responded. “I agree that Caprini is at the



top of a short list of suspects. His connection to Robertson is weak, but stronger for the other two. I don't think, however, that Stone is completely free of suspicion. He's still not accounted for his whereabouts during the homicides or the attack on Detective Lyons."

Mackenzie eyed her superior. "Is there something I should be aware of, Sarge?"

He answered by turning on a small television and pushing a tape into the attached VCR.

"This tape showed up addressed to me today. Anonymous sender. The label has a time and date on it. The morning after you were shot." He pushed the Play button.

The front of her apartment building appeared on the tiny color screen. The picture was a bit shaky but clear enough to recognize the man who exited the building, looked both ways, and crossed the street to a waiting, platinum Jaguar.

Mackenzie stared, unable to form a coherent thought.

*Who?*

*How?*

*What did it matter now?*

"What reason would Stone, a murder suspect until two minutes ago, have to be in that building...the home of the lead investigator in the case?"

She swallowed and met her sergeant's gaze with a firm look of her own. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I believe we will. He's waiting in Interrogation Room B."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dressed in an expensive suit by Baroni or Caraceni or one of those designers with an Italian name ending in an *I*, Rafe was the picture of distinguished sophistication. And control. He looked damn good, despite sitting alone in the stark brightness of the fluorescent bulbs.

Tapping his stylus against the Formica tabletop, he studied his PDA, while she watched him through the two - way mirror. On first impression, he appeared calm. Relaxed, even as his large frame filled the uncomfortable wooden chair. But on closer inspection, she noticed the faint lines that marred his expression. His lips pressed together a bit too tightly.

What reason, if any, had they given him for bringing him here? And where in the hell were his attorneys?

She waited for her partner to set up a TV and VCR on a cart that could be rolled in at the appropriate time.

Fuller had ordered Cooper to conduct the interview with a silent Mackenzie present in the room. He hadn't said so, but she knew the sergeant would watch her every move from the observation room. Any sign of weakness or favoritism would be

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

190

noted. Fuller also wanted her seen, not hidden behind glass, so he could gage Stone's reactions.

How would he react to her silence? Or to Cooper's barrage of questions?

She hadn't seen him since their fight. Would he take this chance to retaliate?

What would he say when confronted with the truth? What could he say? The evidence was there.

"It's time," Cooper said before opening the door.

Rafe looked up when they walked in, his gaze locking on her.

She glanced at the mirror and then took up her position in the corner as ordered.

His jaw ticked as the silence between them stretched.

"Mr. Stone," Cooper said, taking a seat across from him. "Would you like something to drink before we begin?"

"Detective." He gave a brief nod before pocketing his PDA. "No, thank you."

His voice struck her senses like a warm wave.

"We'll be recording these proceedings." Cooper pointed to the video camera mounted on the wall above where she stood. Rafe followed the motion until he reached her face, and for a second she saw sadness or regret in the golden brown gaze. Her partner pulled out some files and began the interrogation by reciting Rafe's Miranda rights.

"I'm well aware of my rights," Rafe said when Cooper finished, then flashed a small smile. "Your partner's told them to me on numerous occasions. Shall we begin?"

She wanted to shout at him for not demanding an attorney right then. She wanted to scream a warning about the tape. She wanted to hug him so tightly that nothing else in the room or world could get in the way. Instead, she stood motionless and silent while the interrogation got underway.

Rafe answered Cooper's questions about his connections to the deceased senator, his whereabouts on the night of the murder, and what legislative matters were now available and profitable for Stone Corp. because of Robertson's death. Rafe's demeanor never wavered as the probe turned to his former employee and second murder victim, Carl Shumaker.

When Cooper asked about Shumaker's bookie, Mackenzie bit her tongue to keep any reaction at bay.

"I know of him, yes. Emily mentioned him at the funeral as the man who'd initiated Carl's destructive gambling habit."

Mackenzie closed her eyes. She couldn't fault him; he'd told the truth. However, she hadn't mentioned that in any of her reports. He may have implicated himself by admitting to a connection with the third victim, but he'd put another nail in her coffin, too.

After his initial eye contact with her, Rafe never again glanced her way. That told her everything she needed to know.

Hadn't she wanted the truth from him? Demanded it? She'd rejected him for lying to her. Now when the time came, he'd tell the truth...and hang her.

Hadn't she done the same thing she'd accused him of doing...lying by omission?

He'd done it out of concern for her safety. She'd done it to selfishly protect her own reputation.

"What happened after you left the restaurant on the night Harden was killed?"

Cooper asked, but before Rafe could answer, Mackenzie drew the men's attention by moving to the door.

She might as well end this fiasco. If he wanted his revenge, she'd make it easy for him without letting him take the fall for a murder she knew he didn't commit.

She pulled the television into the room, ignoring Cooper's disapproving frown.

Quickly plugging in the system, she then played a few seconds of the video, and then

froze it when the building came into view.

Standing at attention, facing away from Rafe and toward the mirror, she asked, "Do you recognize that building, Mr. Stone?"

A suspended silence met her question while he apparently studied the screen.

"I do."

She pressed the Play button. "This was taken the morning following the night you and I shared a dinner at your restaurant."

His answer to her next question would put an end to her career. Surprisingly, she felt calm. She kept her expression blank, staring at her reflection, knowing her sergeant watched every move. Heard every word.

"Can you explain your presence in that building?"

Rafe's response came quicker than she expected. "I certainly can. That was the first time I'd been inside the property. I purchased it later that day."

She spun to face him. "You what?"

"I inspected the interior of the building that morning. The price was right. A good investment, actually."

"You bought my apartment building?"

He quirked a brow, a slight curve tugging at his lips. "Your apartment building? I beg to disagree. I own it. You don't have a problem with having me as your landlord, do you, Detective?"

Cooper asked, "You knew she lived there?"

"Of course." He answered Cooper, but kept his gaze fixed on her. "I checked the rental history of all units in the building, its rate of occupancy, maintenance records. I'm an experienced businessman. I don't invest in property I haven't thoroughly researched."

He was protecting her. He'd bought an entire apartment building so he'd have a reason to be seen there. And he hadn't said a word.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

192

The video didn't show them together because she'd left earlier with Cooper. All he'd seen at her place was the wolf. She could let it go. They'd have their suspicions, but what could they prove? The tape was no longer enough.

"Back to my original question," Cooper said. "What did you do between the time you left the restaurant and when you were taped leaving the apartment building?"

Rafe returned his attention to her partner. "You mean do I have an alibi for the night Harden was killed?"

"If you'd like to call it that, yes. Do you?"

He didn't acknowledge her presence as he sat not five feet away and lied. "No."

"You have no one to corroborate your whereabouts between the hours of 11 PM and 8 AM?"

"No."

"Yes, he does." The moment the words were out of her mouth, they had the impact of a nuclear explosion.

### **Chapter Eighteen**

Her revelation sucked the air out of the room. Cooper stood so fast his chair crashed to the floor.

His eyes were glaciers, as cold as his voice. "What did you say?"

"I'm saying that Stone was with me when I received the tip. After I left the restaurant in a cab, he followed me. I was so focused on the warehouse and getting there early, I didn't keep an eye on my own rearview mirror." She raised her chin, her only move, despite the urgent need to wipe off her moist palms. "The first shot grazed my forehead, dazed me. The next shot would've killed me had he not pushed me out of the line of fire."

She looked at the two - way mirror. "I'm saying that he couldn't have shot at me because he was too busy risking his own life to save mine. I'm telling you...on the record...that he couldn't have killed Harden because he was with me—"

"Detective..." Rafe began. A slight shake of her head stopped him.

"He was with me all night."

"Goddammit, Mac," Cooper shouted. "You're throwing your entire career away on a murder suspect."

"He's not a murder suspect." She stopped, forced her voice back to a normal level. "Rafe quit being a suspect the moment he nearly took a bullet for me." The moment he did take a bullet for her, but she couldn't reveal that. He had no marks to prove it.

"The moment he got you into bed, you mean?"

"Careful, Detective Cooper," Rafe warned as he got to his feet, a predatory move made more powerful by its slowness.

Before Cooper could deliver a coherent reply, the door swung open, and a fierce Sergeant Isaac Fuller walked in.

"Sit down," he ordered. "All of you."

Cooper clamped his mouth closed so tightly Mackenzie expected to hear his jaw

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

194

crack.

"That's an order, Detective," Fuller told him. Her partner righted his chair with an abrupt jerk and sat, his muscles wound to the verge of snapping.

She let out a pent - up breath and slipped around the table to join the civilian. She halted only a second when Rafe pulled out a chair for her. Not brave enough to touch his arm, she ignored Cooper's sneer and took her seat, her fingers clenching together in a white - knuckled fist.

Fuller's gaze settled on the one occupant who remained standing. His face hardened in challenge.

Rafe returned to his seat as ordered, but in a casual manner that reflected the decision to do so was his alone. How he could look so unaffected by the events was an ability she'd never understand, but certainly envied.

Her nerves were shot. She'd just thrown her reputation—her entire future—out the window. Her lungs required a concentrated effort to draw each new breath, and her stomach was as hollow as a rotten log.

Fuller approached the table like a Marine Corps drill sergeant.

"In exactly one hour, I have a press conference on the status of what is unquestionably the most important homicide investigation in the State of Illinois this year." His black gaze speared her. "And the lead detective on the case announces 'for

the record' that she's slept with the man considered the prime suspect by everyone else on the task force."

"As lead investigator, I'd concluded, based on the evidence, that Stone was no longer a viable suspect." She'd opened the floodgates; she might as well go down with the ship. "What I did was on my own time, and—"

Fuller erupted. "Do you think the public will give a damn what time of day you slept with him? You represent this department and that badge 24/7. You misled your supervisor, your partner, this department and, quite frankly, fucked up."

When she made to rise, he slammed a hand on the table.

"Don't move." He turned to Cooper. "You're lead on this case now. Your first assignment is to find the origin of that tape. I'll handle the goddamn press conference."

"Yes, sir."

Mackenzie found a speck on the dull paint of the opposite wall and locked on target. Fuller moved in her periphery.

"Detective Lyons, I am convinced that someone wants you off this case. The constant public scrutiny of your abilities, the ambush at the warehouse, and now this tape. Those things more than anything else tell me you were on the right track. But because you so willingly played into that person's hands, he's going to get his wish. You're suspended until further notice. Hand in your badge and gun."

Her stomach sank. She knew it had been coming, expected it, but the impact of the words still sent her senses reeling. At least he'd said *suspended*, she thought, grasping at the thinnest ray of hope. He could've said *fired*.

As she stood on shaky legs and removed her badge, Fuller addressed Rafe.

"You've made some powerful enemies, Stone, but I'm sure that's nothing new for a man like you."

"No," Rafe agreed.

"Detective Lyons made a strong case on your behalf. It remains undetermined whether that case will be enough to exonerate you completely. As much as I'd like to throw you behind bars for your part in this public relations nightmare, fornication between two consenting adults without exchange of payment isn't illegal. You're free to go."

Rafe stood and paused as Fuller pointed a large finger at him.

"Despite this asinine activity with one of my detectives, I do thank you for protecting her."

"I'd give my life for her."

In the process of removing her shoulder holster, she froze, her fingers shaking. Her breath hitched. Tears burned the back of her eyes, and she blinked to regain her composure. She would not cry in front of these men.

Fuller eyed Stone, his frown subsiding a bit. "I believe you would. Instead, she damn near gave hers for you."

"Sergeant." Rafe nodded solemnly and moved toward the door, but Cooper blocked his path.

"I suggest that you forego any out - of - town trips."

"I'm at your disposal anytime, Detective Cooper." He slipped around him, then glanced in the mirror as his hand grasped the door handle. "Mackenzie..."

"Go," she said, her eyelids closing, unable to face his sympathy.

After a moment's pause, she heard the door click shut.

"Was he worth it, Mac?" Cooper asked, drawing her attention. Pain from her betrayal was apparent by the look on his face.

Leaving her badge on the table, she moved to the door. "He's innocent, Coop."

"I hope to God you're right."

She gave him a weary smile. "Only you can prove it now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cold wind whipped her hair into a frenzy as Mackenzie left the station on foot.

Rafe had waited and watched, knowing her police - issued sedan would remain parked pending the outcome of the official inquiry into her conduct.

As she reached the corner, she grimaced at the impact from another frigid blast.

Shuffling a box of items under one arm, she tugged her collar higher. Her pace

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

196

increased until she ducked into the shelter at the bus stop.

"Stop here," he ordered his driver. He had one foot out the door the moment the limousine's wheels ceased to roll. Before his other foot hit the pavement, Mackenzie was scowling.

"Christ, Rafe. Get out of here," she said, backing away with a glance in either direction. "Fuller's trying to keep this whole thing out of the papers, but—"

He swallowed her protest as his mouth covered hers. His hands cradled her wind - chilled cheeks.

After a moment's hesitation, she kissed him back, their tongues tangling in a fierce duel. Then just as his hand dropped to snake around her waist, she shoved him away.

"God, I've lost my mind." She frowned, her hot breaths causing small, quick puffs of white. "Get the hell out of here."

"I did that once before. Not this time. You're coming with me."

She twisted away and pushed his arm when he reached for the box she held. "I am not."

He crossed his arms and with some satisfaction, watched her chin rise to a stubborn angle. "You will, or I'll ride the bus with you and make a scene sure to land us on the front pages of every national tabloid magazine."

"You wouldn't."

He grinned.

"You would," she said glumly, then shoved the box into his arms, and stalked to the car.

"Ma'am." Simon tipped his hat to her and pulled the door open in the nick of time.

With a muttered hello, she ducked inside.

"Good luck, sir," he murmured when Rafe handed him the box.

"Thank you. I believe I'll need it. Take us to L.I.," he said and stoically followed his mate.

She sat with her back toward Simon, who raised the privacy window. The same place where he first saw her. Not the same expression, however.

Rafe almost smiled at the thought.

"You're staring again."

He let the smile show then and watched anger bloom in her eyes. He liked to see her thorns, preferred her spitting mad or aroused. Anything but wilted...forlorn.

"What are you staring at?" she asked. Her voice had a husky edge when she was frustrated or ticked.

"The woman I intend to spend the rest of my life with."

She blinked, her crystal blue eyes widening to an almost impossible roundness.

"You're delusional."

"Not at all." Chuckling, he reached for a bottle of his favorite wine. "Drink?"

"I can't. I'm..." Her voice trailed off, the light in her eyes dying. She bit her lip and peered out the window.

She wasn't on duty anymore.

*Damn it.*

Setting the bottle aside, he reached across and pulled her into his arms. Her body stiffened as the tears she'd held back finally fell, soaking his shirtfront. One fist struck his chest, but his heart felt the blow.

Her sorrow humbled him. What she'd done, she did for him, and he loved her even more because of it.

*Love...*

His arms tightened around her as the realization hit him like a slug to the solar plexus. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and held her close throughout the drive to the Lykos Institute.

She said nothing as he led her past security to his private suite of offices. When the elevator doors closed behind them, however, she asked, "Why did you bring me here?"

Her blue eyes were red - rimmed, her nose a bit pink, her cheeks still damp from the tears she'd shed earlier. She couldn't have looked lovelier. And yet, he missed his fiery cop with her sharp tongue and quick wit.

"We need to talk. This is one place we could do so with guaranteed privacy."

"I think I've said enough for one day, don't you?" She pasted on a selfdeprecating smile, stepped past him, and leaned against the back of his leather sectional.

"Then I'll talk. Please," he said, gesturing for her to sit. Now that he had her here, he didn't know where to begin. "What you did today—"

"Was stupid, but it would've been worse if they'd learned of it any other way."

He took her hand between his. "What you did today was very noble."

"I did what had to be done. I couldn't let you lie for me. So I told the truth, as much of it as I could without breaking my promise to you."

"I know." He laughed without much humor. "I'm so used to protecting those I care about, being the guardian, that I'm not sure how to react when others feel the need to turn the tables."

She shifted in her seat and tugged her hand free.

"Yeah, well, don't mention it."

He hadn't meant to make her feel uncomfortable or self - conscious.

"I owe you an apology," he said.

She angled her head, a question clearly written on her face.

"I hope you'll accept it. But first, I owe you the truth." He rose and held a hand

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

198

out toward her.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come with me. I want to show you something I should've trusted you with days ago."

"If this has any bearing on the case..."

With a brief shake of his head, he locked gazes, pulled her to her feet, and gently held her arms. "You mean a great deal to me. I want you to know that...remember it. I haven't felt this way about anyone else. I'm not a man who gives his trust easily, but...well, at first I was unsure, and then I got to know you, and I didn't want to risk losing you, so I—"

"What are you trying to tell me? You're not making any sense."

Rafe closed his eyes and summoned the will to take this leap of faith. He prayed he wouldn't lose his heart in the process.

"I explained to you before how Lycan abilities make them extremely hard to capture and contain."

With a worried frown, she studied him. "Yes...?"

"You know about my sister. About how we caught Anton trying to sell trade secrets."

"Yes, but what does that—"

"That's only part of the story."

Her expression puzzled, she pulled back to arm's length.

"Maybe I should explain before I show you."

"Maybe you better." She sat with jean-clad legs crossed and an expectant expression.

He released a breath and began. "Several years ago, Lycans started disappearing. Back then, the packs ran their business independently of one another, handled their own matters without outside interference. As a result, it took us longer to identify the problem.

"When Gabe and I started the Lykos Institute, we agreed to conduct research on behalf of our kind. We thought the disappearances were the product of a genetic problem that showed up whenever some of us changed."

He walked to the window, glanced out at the manicured lawns of the vast complex.

"Our research is what Anton attempted to sell. Secrets about the byproduct from our change. Proof of our existence. Unfortunately, we were unable to determine the buyer's identity before Anton killed my sister and fled."

He moved toward the built-in bookcases that lined one entire wall.

"What does that have to do with what's happening now? You think Anton is still after your secrets?"

"Maybe." He shrugged. "Afterward, the packs began to unite. My brothers and I changed the goal of L.I. Well, expanded it would be more accurate. It remains a philanthropic research center on the surface, but underneath, it became the enforcement agency for all Lycan packs."



“Enforcement agency? What do you mean...exactly?” Suspicion entered the slow cadence of her question.

His head ached. A lump lodged in his throat. Would she accept what humans could construe as vigilante activities?

“Lycans aren’t solely obligated to follow the laws as prescribed by this country’s justice system. For our protection, the packs convened a council to enact...and enforce...our own set of rules.”

When her frown became perplexed, he again tugged her from the couch.

“Come. Let me show you.”

He placed his hand with fingers splayed on the corner of his desk. To any visitor, the desktop appeared normal, unadorned. Three seconds after he touched the surface, the heat - activated scanner processed his palm print and disengaged the locks on the center panel of the bookcase.

Mackenzie’s gaze followed the panel as it slid back to reveal an illuminated staircase.

Rafe waited for her to take it all in, for the inevitable questions to begin, but instead he watched her transformation.

The gleam of a cop on the trail of something unusual returned to those deep blue eyes. He was uncertain whether the gleam spelled his salvation or his doom. But he’d come this far. His heart demanded he go all the way.

He followed her lead as she walked to the opening, glanced once over her shoulder, then descended.

At the bottom, he went through additional security measures before another door opened onto a long hallway.

“With our gifts,” he said, “we have a greater responsibility to use them wisely.

Human society has criminals, but in our culture such Lycans are called rogues. They pose not only a danger to our kind, but to humans as well.”

When they crossed the threshold, the normal activity that hummed around the clock ground to an abrupt halt.

“Interesting welcome party you have here,” she whispered, with a slight stiffening of her spine.

Rafe gave her an amused look. “Relax.”

“Tell that to them.”

He took her by the elbow and guided her past rows of machines, monitors, gaping agents with headsets, and other stunned personnel.

“Back to work,” he ordered without looking around. The buzz returned with an

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

200

increased intensity.

His hand slid to her back as she went through the door into the soundproof conference room that served as a secondary office for Gabe. As the door closed, all noise from outside ceased.

“That’s our command center, affectionately known as Tracker Central. We oversee operations in all of North and South America. Another center is located in Europe, a third in Southeast Asia.”

She approached the desk, lifted a priceless jade figurine, and studied it. “Are all

of those people out there Lycans?”

He nodded. “Not all of the employees at L.I. are Lycan, but those involved in the shadow ops are.” He paused, waiting until she looked up. “You’re the first human who’s ever been allowed access.”

“Why me? Why now?”

He took the figurine from her and set it aside. Leaning against the desk, he pulled her toward him until he could lace his fingers together at the small of her back.

“I realized how much I love you.”

With a slight shake of her head, she immediately tried to push away, but he held her in place.

“And I knew if there was ever a chance for you to feel the same way about me, you had to know me first. Really know everything. No secrets.”

Her head tilted, her brows knitted together over eyes that were alert and moist.

His heart in his throat, he lifted his hands to cup her face. She sucked in a shaky breath as his thumb traced the curve of her full bottom lip.

“I love you, Mackenzie Lyons,” he whispered against her mouth and waited. Not long.

With a soft sigh she pressed her lips to his and wrapped her arms around his neck.

His spirit felt more like an eagle than a wolf or a man. He pulled her closer, their bodies fitting perfectly together.

She deepened the kiss, and he responded, running his hands over her now familiar curves.

At the sudden rush of noise from outside, she nearly leaped free of his grasp.

Rafe’s gaze shot toward the open door as he tried to catch his own breath.

Gabriel stood scowling in the doorway.

Mackenzie continued to squirm until he allowed her to face the new arrival.

Tucking her beside him, Rafe challenged, “Have you never heard of knocking?”

Gabe closed the door, again shutting out the noise, and tossed him a get - real look. “Have you never heard of soundproofing?”

A snicker had Rafe and his brother looking at Mackenzie. Rafe smiled. A faint blush colored her cheeks, and a mischievous spark returned to her baby blues.

When he cocked a brow, she grinned. “We can’t seem to do anything together without being caught red - handed.”

“You might,” Gabe replied, “if my brother conducted his affairs in his own office. This is *my* office, if I recall correctly.” He moved into the room and headed for the bar against one wall.

“Down, Gabe. I get the message.”

His brother turned with a glass in his right hand. “You do? Then, pardon my rudeness, but what the devil is *she* doing here?”

Mackenzie felt her defenses rise. She’d had the worst day of her life, been suspended from the only job she knew she was good at, and humiliated herself by crying like a baby on Rafe’s shoulder.

And God help her! He’d said he loved her, which she wasn’t near ready to deal with. Now she had his brother griping about her being in his office?

“Get over it, Gabe,” Lucian said, coming in from a side door.

*Great! A family reunion.*

Luc's lips twitched as he approached them. "She's here because our alpha has an affinity for lady lions."

Rafe released a heavy breath. "I don't suppose it would do me any good to explain that your duties as an agent do not extend to eavesdropping on me from the bathroom?"

The twitch turned into a full-blown smirk. "Not a bit."

"Get over it?" Gabe sputtered. "You didn't pull any punches before in your opposition to his dalliance with a human. Now he brings her here, and you're okay with this?"

"Dalliance with a...?" she muttered.

"Uh, he didn't mean—"

She cut Rafe off as she turned on Gabe. "I'll have you know, the *human* is here, whether you like it or not, and she doesn't appreciate being talked about as if she's not present. You got a problem with me, take it up with me."

"The lady lion has bite," Luc warned his brother.

"I have a name, too," she said. "Why don't you learn to use it?"

Luc snapped his teeth together and grinned.

"You didn't answer my question," Gabe told Luc, ignoring her outburst. "What tucked in your tail?"

"Let's just say she has a way of making her point known." When Luc winked at her, she remembered their exchange in the alley, flashed a pleased smile, and crossed her arms.

Too bad she didn't have her Glock right now.

"Remind me to get an explanation from you later," Rafe murmured in her ear.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

202

Gabe downed his drink in one gulp, poured another, and then pointed toward Rafe. "Here's my point. While you're in here giving our secrets away to a cop, there are reporters crawling all over the place, tying up phone lines, asking to speak to you. Are you aware of that?"

"Reporters always get his hackles up," Luc said in a soft aside to her.

Scowling, Rafe led her to a sofa, and sat beside her before addressing Gabe's concerns. "Yes, I'm aware of them. Dealing with the media is something I've been doing for years...while you're left to the solitude of your lab."

Gabe snapped, "I do a hell of a lot more around here than work in the lab."

Luc chuckled and popped the top on a longneck. "Yeah, he plays with his microscopes and beakers at home, too."

"Cut it out," Rafe ordered when Gabe stepped toward Luc. "My apologies, Gabe. You're right, of course. You're vital to L.I. We each have our specialties...our strengths. I expect you to acknowledge mine as well, and not worry so much. I'll deal with the media."

"When?" Gabe took a seat across from them.

"In my own time." Rafe slipped an arm around her. "Meanwhile, you two will brief Mackenzie on our investigation."

Gabe choked on his drink. Luc almost caused World War III by pounding

enthusiastically, if not helpfully, on his brother's back.

Mackenzie ignored their sibling squabble to ask, "Investigation? What investigation?"

Rafe peered at her before answering. "I told you we were looking into certain possibilities related to your case."

"Certain possibilities?"

He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose, but shadows of worry lingered in his golden gaze. "More like every possibility. I also told you...no more secrets."

Curious, she faced Gabe and Luc. "This, I'd like to hear."

"I hope your trust in her is not misplaced," Gabe said sourly.

"Funny," she responded. "My partner said something similar today about your brother, Dr. Stone, after I handed in my badge."

While Gabe appeared stunned by the news, Rafe gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Lucian took the lead on giving her information, surprising her with his thoroughness. His teasing nature vanished as he shared clues he'd gathered.

Eventually, Gabriel gave in and filled in bits and pieces as well. Although they'd come from different directions, they'd reached many of the same conclusions as she had. Still, none of it was enough, at least not to make a case in court.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked. "All we have is a hunch about Anton's involvement. Robertson's car was wiped clean. We have no prints at any of the scenes. No physical proof he's even involved."

"Yes, we do," Gabe answered. "We have his DNA."

"Excuse me?"

"Your medical examiner collected DNA from the bites on two of the victims.

They match Anton's wolf DNA."

With a frown, she sat up and looked Gabriel dead in the eye. "How do you know that?"

Gabe's expression changed to one of concern. His lips thinned as he looked from her to Rafe, as if seeking permission. After Rafe nodded, Gabe answered, "We compared your findings with our records. They matched."

"I gathered that. My question is why that match didn't turn up when my team compared those DNA results to your database? And how did you get the ME's information in the first place?" She had strong doubts about whether Pete Tancock would knowingly leak that kind of data.

"The database you obtained through your warrant did not include Lycan DNA,"

Rafe said. "That's stored here within L.I.'s secret operations. It's a completely separate and more secure system."

She could feel her blood heat, but let the tense pressure go. "And Tancock's findings?"

"I can answer that," Lucian said. "Stone Corp. Securities division has numerous government contracts. We specialize in offering top - of - the - line encryption to agencies

and private companies for their top - secret data...virtually impenetrable systems."

"Except when you need that information, you mean?"

He shrugged, his diamond earring sparkling. "Every system has a backdoor...if

one knows where to look.”

Backdoor? Where had she heard that before?

With a curse, Mackenzie shot to her feet.

## Chapter Nineteen

“Backdoor...” she muttered as she remembered something Cooper told her.

Rafe stood beside her, his lips thinned. “Mackenzie, please understand. We do what we must not only to protect ourselves, but humans, too. Rogues pose a threat to us all. Sometimes having access to certain classified material can mean the difference between life and death.”

“I know.” She put her fingers over his mouth, his warm breath bathing the tips.

Momentarily distracted, she blinked and dropped her hand to his lapel. “Uhm. Cooper reported some street talk. A person close to the bookie said she’d overheard him talking about a dumb computer geek and a backdoor. It made no sense at the time, but.... What software did Carl Shumaker work on for you?”

He looked puzzled before realization dawned in his caramel eyes.

“Cyber - Guard,” he said before turning to Gabe. “Did our people find anything suspicious on Shumaker’s PC after we let him go?”

“Nothing beyond further confirmation of his attempts to hack into our financial system.”

Rafe’s voice turned cold. “Have them look at it again.”

“I’m on it.” Gabe reached for a phone and started dialing. He glanced at her.

“Whatever you may think and despite what Luc said, we don’t put in backdoors for systems that secure online monetary transactions.”

Rafe pulled out his PDA. “Luc, contact Worley in R - and - D. He’s probably already gone home for the day. Here’s his number.” He showed Luc. “Tell him what may have happened...for his ears only. I want his entire Cyber - Guard development team called in. Now. Go back through the code. If one exists, find that backdoor and get rid of it.”

“Got it.” While Luc called the head of Research and Development, Mackenzie watched Rafe make his own phone calls.

She returned to her seat on the sofa, marveling at how quickly the brothers set aside their differences to unite behind a common goal.

Wasn’t the Cyber - Guard release scheduled for tomorrow? Surely a delay this late in the game would be costly, but then the damage to the company’s reputation, and Rafe’s, would be more devastating if such a flaw were unearthed later.

Still, something stirred in her mind. Something she couldn’t quite place. What else had she overlooked? What clue had she missed?

Was Shumaker killed to silence him after he’d accomplished his mission? Had he become a liability? Or had his firing made him no longer useful? And how was the senator involved?

She rubbed her temples. The long hours were catching up to her. Her mind was crammed full of information about a case she was no longer a part of, and yet couldn’t set aside. Clues, suspects, motives. They swirled in her mind until she couldn’t remember what day it was, much less what was happening around her.

Yawning, she tried to focus on the men’s conversations, but they seemed further away. When her eyelids drooped, she felt a warm hand on hers.

“Enough for tonight,” Rafe said.

Her protest would’ve succeeded if he hadn’t lifted her from the couch as if she were a sleeping child. Instead, she snuggled closer, wound her arms around his neck and let the world and all its troubles await another day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie awoke with a start, her eyes focused and alert, her mind confused. She sat up, surrounded by silky sheets on a bed in a darkened room she knew was not her own. Much larger than her own bedroom, more spacious than any hotel room, and completely unfamiliar.

“It’s not quite dawn, though it will be soon.” Rafe’s rich, seductive tones rumbled through her senses and had her gaze sweeping to the right. He lay beside her in the shadows, with only the upper portion of his tautly muscled body exposed. From the faint moonlight through the expansive windows, she could just make out his captivating features.

A quick glance down told her he’d left her partially clothed, having removed her outer garments and shoes. Still, her lace underwear left little to the imagination, and judging by his hot, determined gaze, it offered even less protection.

She took another second to get her bearings. “Let me guess. Your place?”

“Mmm - hmm. Downtown penthouse suite.” He drew her down into his arms, spooning her body next to his. “Have you any idea how much I’ve longed to see you here in this room, to have you lying beside me as you are now?”

His words, spoken in a voice gone raw with hunger, made her insides quiver.

As his long fingers skimmed her bare arm, her pulse tripped. When she felt the release of the clasp on the bra she still wore, her hand moved to hold the material in

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

206

place. “Have you never been told ‘the better part of valor is discretion’?”

His nose nuzzled the nape of her neck. His lips nibbled just...there...below the ear. “I love a woman who quotes Shakespeare in the morning.”

“That was not my point,” she said with a chuckle when his tongue found a ticklish spot. “You’ve no concept of discretion, bringing me here with reporters salivating at your heels and...” She squirmed onto her back, trying unsuccessfully to capture his roaming hands. “I mean, after what happened yesterday, don’t you think we should at least keep a low profile?”

“‘The lady doth protest too much, me thinks’,” he murmured another quote before ducking beneath the sheets. “How’s this for low profile?” He nipped her side, causing her to yelp and laugh, then settled his body between her legs. His fingers and mouth traced her curves, evoking first giggles and then moans as he slid the last layers of lace away. He devoured her until every inch of her body throbbed, arched, and yearned for more.

Oh...he had a talent for ‘low profile’, not that she could form a coherent sentence to tell him so.

Several blissful minutes later, his head resurfaced, framed by tousled midnight hair—his handsome face, graced by an adorable, sexy grin.

Golden rays of morning sunshine spilled into the room, illuminating a face so precious, so achingly gorgeous, that it made her want to keep him forever, to freeze this

moment in time, and never let it go. No one had ever looked at her the way he did now, made her feel so much. All at once.

She stroked her fingers through his hair and stared into eyes that shone with amusement, desire, and something terrifyingly tender.

Gazes locked, she pulled him near. Flesh met flesh, unsteady breaths intermingled, lips on the verge of touching. And the words burst from her heart and mouth like a geyser. “God, I love you.”

Her declaration punched him, an instant and powerful impact. Countless emotions overwhelmed him, and his mind shattered under the onslaught.

He was weak.

He was empowered.

Rafe held her still, hugged her closer, and buried his face in her hair. His lips pressed against the rapid pulse in her throat. He drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs with her unique scent even as her words filled his heart.

Fighting desperately for a thread of control, he sank into her inch by inch and felt whole. Her body fit him perfectly, damp heat that sizzled and inflamed.

His need for her turned feral. Levering himself above her, his hips pumped deep, deeper—over and over—until she trembled beneath him with that first razor - sharp release. His mouth drank in her cries of pleasure while his soul demanded more.

“Again,” he said, his voice husky.

His teeth scraped gently over her soft skin. Her throat, shoulders, breasts. He loved the taste of her.

When she reached for him, he captured and pinned her hands above her head.

He adored her soft, lean curves, but he couldn’t take her touch just now. If she touched him, what little control that remained would snap.

*Mine* was all he could think. *Forever mine.*

His breath quickened when he saw her beautiful blue eyes glaze, her lids flutter.

“No, don’t.”

Their eyes met, held, in a poignant bond. Still gripping her wrists with one hand, he lifted her right leg over his shoulder and pressed further than before. Making them one.

“Take me. All of me.”

He shifted to long, steady strokes, reveling each time her hips lifted to meet him.

He watched her crest again, a violent contraction that nearly sent him over the precipice. Her head tossed from side to side, even as he rocked them both, body and spirit.

Her whimpers turned to pants and then to groans, followed by puffs of coherent speech. Each sound echoed through his blood and drove the hunger to near insatiable heights. But it wasn’t until she screamed his name that he dragged her shuddering body against him and let himself go.

When his mind cleared, he rolled off her, legs tangling in the sheets, and gulped in huge breaths of air. Mackenzie lay panting beside him, her arms stretched motionless above her head.

“I gotta remember,” she said breathlessly, “to say that to you more often.”

He would have sworn he hadn’t the energy to laugh, but it erupted from him.

“Say what?” he asked amid chuckles, as he playfully swatted her thigh.

She rolled to her side, rested her hand on his chest, a glint of humor sparkling in her crystal blue gaze. "Lord, we won't survive."

He grinned. "I love you, Mackenzie." He kissed the tip of her nose. "See? It gets easier the more you say it."

Pushing herself off the bed and onto her feet, she shook her head, but her eyes were brilliant and her smile broad. "And best said from a distance, I think." She moved to the nearest door, pulled it open, and sucked in a breath when the light came on automatically.

"The closet." He propped himself up on one elbow, enjoying the view of her cute butt.

"A closet? That's a house for a family of four," she quipped, shutting the door.

Her disheveled hair flared about her shoulders. Most of the bruises from their night at the warehouse were gone, but the more recent mark on her left breast remained. And

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

208

the scars on her thigh were still evident, though faded over the passing years.

"Where's the bathroom?"

He pointed to a set of double doors. "Wait."

She tossed him a grin as she headed across the room. "You can't possibly have the energy to go another round," she said with a touch of amusement and a convincing amount of skepticism.

Since the very sight of her energized him, he had his doubts about the accuracy of her statement, but he let it go. He had other revelations in mind.

"Besides, it's morning." She cast a meaningful look at the large windows. "You may own a zillion companies, have more worker drones than a queen bee, but even the boss has to go to work sometime."

He cut her off at the door and gently grasped her arms. A smile playing at his mouth, he teased, "Trying to get rid of me already?"

She smirked. "An impossibility. No, but I am in serious need of a revitalizing shower."

He grinned, and struggled against a desire to toy with her left nipple and the permanent mark above it. "So am I, but I have something more pressing that must be said."

"Can it wait until we at least have clothes on?"

Deciding she was right, he let it go. For now. He gestured toward the bath and smiled. "Ladies first."

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, Mackenzie was refreshed, sated, cleaned, and searching in the house Rafe called a closet for a shirt she could borrow.

"Who in the world needs this many clothes?" The hanger hooks scraped along the rod as she pushed them aside and grabbed a shirt from the sea of others. "Do you have something against wearing the same thing twice? You couldn't possibly wear all this in a decade."

She heard him laugh from the bedroom.

Slipping on the white, long - sleeved shirt, she fastened a few buttons, tied it off at her waist, and rolled up the sleeves. She stepped back into the bedroom.



Rafe sat on the foot of the bed, a wireless phone headset in his ear and PDA in his hand. His plasma screen television aired a news station with a constant stock ticker crawling across the bottom.

She'd never get accustomed to the many facets of the man. From playful lover to hard - core financier in the blink of an eye.

"That's good news, but I want to be absolutely sure. We have a narrow window here. With the unveiling in... No, I don't intend to cancel it, unless I'm positive of a breach in the software. If my brothers call, forward them to my cell."

While he spoke, his eyes scanned the figures on screen and dropped to his PDA, where he scribbled notes or some other shorthand she wouldn't recognize even if it was in English.

"The man's a multitasking machine," she murmured to no one in particular.

He glanced at her over his shoulder and smiled. "What? Yes, I'll meet with them in Boardroom B. Reschedule my 9 o'clock video teleconference with London for tomorrow, and Sylvia, arrange security clearance for Mackenzie Lyons." He winked when she cocked an eyebrow. "L - Y - O - N - S. No...All floors. Thank you. See you shortly."

He hung up.

"You didn't have to do that." She stuffed her fingers in the back pockets of her denims.

"I know." Tossing his PDA and headset beside him on the bed, he tugged on the shirttails knotted at her waist until she stood between his legs. "But you look so sexy wearing my shirt, I couldn't help myself."

She laughed. "Yeah, well, I got tired of searching for a turtleneck." She tilted her head, exposing her neck. "You didn't leave any visible marks this time, did you?"

His lips curved as he feathered fingertips along her throat. "No, not here."

The whispered words, uttered in a solemn tone, had her frowning.

"But I have marked you." His face appeared somber, earnest.

"What do you mean?"

"The mark on your breast remains."

She smiled, let his silk tie slide through her fingers. "Oh that. Don't worry about it. I'm not made of crystal, you know. I can take whatever you dish out, wolfman."

He nipped her chin. "That's good to hear, since I expect no less from my mate."

Her heart stopped, lungs seized, and it took a conscious effort to get them working again.

He lightly touched her lips with his, and the air in her chest came out in a whoosh.

"I... Did I hear you...?"

"Speechless, love?"

"You said, 'Mate'."

His impressive face brightened. "Yes, I know."

"God...but...Rafe, you can't be serious. I'm barely used to the *I love you* part...and...and I'm not Lycan."

"You don't have to be."

"But I thought..." She shook her head. "I'm a cop. Well, not literally right now, but in here I still am." She tapped her chest. "I haven't given up on getting my badge

back. Mating's like marriage, right? Do you know what the divorce rate is for cops?"

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

210

He cupped her cheeks, pulled her forward for another brief kiss. "Cop or not, I love you. And the divorce rate for Lycans is zero."

"But—"

He put a finger on her lips. "No buts. This changes nothing. I love you. You love me. You have all the time in the world to get used to the rest. We'll take things slow."

"Slow? God, you broke records convincing me to sleep with you, never mind the love part."

He laughed. "Darling, you flatter me." Standing up, he kissed the back of her hand, laced fingers, then headed for the door. "Hungry?"

Still off - balance, she blinked at the sudden change in subject. "Uh, yeah."

"There's a fabulous restaurant on the second floor. Order anything you like; I've arranged for the bill already. Unfortunately, I'll have to pass on joining you. I'm expected in the office...." He glanced at his watch and frowned. "Five minutes ago, and I can't put off the reporters much longer. Sylvia tells me Evalyn Drake's already called three times this morning. What are your plans for today?"

"I have to swing by my apartment, return several files on the case to the office, avoid the media, and I'd like to check with your brothers to see what they turned up on my hunch last night."

"Okay. Wait." He disappeared into the bedroom again and came out with his PDA, slipping it into his pocket. He looked up and smiled. "Never leave home without it. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, Simon can take you anywhere you'd like to go." At her frown, he chuckled. "Or...if you'd rather, the Jaguar is downstairs. You're welcome to drive it."

That thought flipped the frown. "I'd love to..." His car was hot, but with her suspension, she thought it best not to show up at the station behind the wheel of his sports car. "But, I think it best I take the L or a cab."

He grinned and shook his head. He dug a hand into a pocket. "Only you would choose public transportation over a Jag, but if you change your mind. Here are the keys."

\* \* \* \* \*

Crushed between a short, fat slob and a gum - popping grunge fan, Mackenzie wished she'd taken Rafe up on his offer instead of hopping on the L. What the hell was pride compared to comfort? And fresh air?

The standing - room only crowd swayed as the train shot down the tracks toward its next stop. When Mr. Slob's beer - belly rubbed against her back, she glanced over her shoulder. That stop couldn't come soon enough.

While she hung on to a chrome pole like a life preserver, she watched the public she used to serve and protect. What a mix of people. Young, old, conservative, and just plain weird. The city. The noise. The hum of life. She loved it, even if traveling through it was a pain in the ass sometimes.

When she felt Mr. Slob's fat - fingered hand skim her backside, she decided some things the city offered just pissed her off. Turning, she snatched his little finger and twisted it backward at an awkward angle to ensure pain. The man yelled a rather

inspirational curse.

“Touch me again, and the next thing I twist won’t be your finger. And if that’s not enough to convince you, I can haul your ass to the nearest CPD precinct. I’m sure my fellow officers would love to hear how a slimeball like you was stupid enough to try to feel up one of Chicago’s Finest.”

So she didn’t have a badge; that was a minor technicality the creep didn’t need to know.

The train slowed to a stop, and the crowd poured out like rainwater down a storm drain.

“Bitch,” the slob muttered, holding his hand as he shuffled away.

Yeah, she loved the city. On the landing, she flipped her collar up and strode toward her apartment.

Inside, she estimated the best time for pickup, then called a cab service.

She spent the next several minutes gathering up her files on the case. Most of the data was already at the station, so it didn’t take her long. But Cooper would need every clue to wrap up this one, so she’d give him everything she had. Well, almost everything.

She wavered on telling him about the possibility of their New Jersey hitman being a Lycan, but scratched the idea. She was in enough hot water. She didn’t need her partner calling for a psych - eval. Besides, she couldn’t betray Rafe’s trust.

As she slid the box off her desk, a piece of paper underneath it fell to the floor.

After replacing the box, she knelt to retrieve the post - it note. Scribbled across the yellow

square were some notes she’d jotted down after the second victim’s funeral.

Three letters stood out. PDA.

“Damn. I never did check on that for Emily.” She tossed the note into the box, grabbed the box, and headed outside where the taxi waited to take her to the station.

When she walked in, she ignored the tell - tale stares as she made her way to Cooper’s office. Obviously, the grapevine was alive and thriving.

“Cooper?” she asked, knocking on his doorframe and nudging the door open with her toe.

“Mac?” He was behind his desk but rose when he saw her.

“Hey.”

“Mac, you shouldn’t be here.”

“Yeah, well, I know. I thought you’d want these notes on the case. They were at

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

212

my place.”

He took the box from her, put it on his desk, and shut the door.

“Here. Have a seat.”

“No. That’s okay. Look, I know you must be busy, but I need a favor.”

“Mac—”

“I know I’ve no right to ask, but it’s not for me. Not really.”

“Sit.”

She took a seat. “Emily, Shumaker’s widow, asked me about a PDA her husband carried. She was hoping to get it back when we were finished with it. I told her I’d

check on it, get back to her, but with everything that's happened, I forgot. I'd like to make it right. Do you mind?"

He'd propped a thigh on his desk and crossed his arms while he listened. When she stopped, he blew out a breath, then leaned across the desk for the phone.

"Hey, it's Cooper. Could you check the personal effects from the Shumaker case for a small handheld PDA? The widow's asking for it." After a few minutes, he said, "Yeah. You sure? Okay. Thanks."

Hanging up, he told her, "There was no PDA entered into evidence. Are you sure that's what she wanted?"

"Yes. That's strange. She said he never went anywhere without it." She remembered Rafe had said something similar this morning. What were the chances...?

"Uh oh. I know that look."

She met Cooper's curious gaze. "What look? Never mind. I've gotta call Emily."

She snatched the phone, started punching buttons.

"Mac," he warned. "What are you doing?"

She held up an index finger.

"Hello?" came a female voice.

"Emily Shumaker?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"Hi. This is Detective Mackenzie Lyons."

"Oh, you caught him? You found the killer?"

"No, I'm sorry. Not yet, but contrary to recent news reports, the department is making progress on your husband's murder."

"That's good. I saw the reports. I don't agree with Robertson's family, not about Mr. Stone. He wouldn't hurt Carl."

"I understand."

Cooper picked up a pencil, twirling it between his fingers, and eyed her with a frown.

"Reporters have been calling, but I don't feel comfortable in front of cameras."

"That's all right. You're not obligated to talk with them. Emily, the reason I'm calling is about your request for Carl's PDA."

"Yes?"

"It wasn't recovered at the scene. Have you located it at home?"

"No," Emily said. Mackenzie heard her disappointment and shared her feeling.

"I don't understand. He carried that thing everywhere with him. It was a gift, you know? I got it for him for our first anniversary." She chuckled. "I think it meant as much to him as his wedding ring. That's why I wanted to give it to our son."

"Emily, do you know if he ever backed up his data to another computer, at work or a home PC, maybe?"

"Well yes, I think so. I'm sure he did. He has a computer here in his office. I haven't been able to go in there since...what happened."

"That's okay. Would you mind if we checked it? There may be something on it that will help us."

"Of course, if you think it will help."

"Thank you. My partner will be in touch. Detective Cooper, Steve Cooper."

"Okay. Goodbye."

“Mac, what are you doing?” Cooper frowned. “You are no longer on this case.”

“I know, but...”

“You’re suspended. Do you want to compromise the case? Lose any chance you have of getting your badge back?”

“Cooper, listen...”

The pencil he’d been twirling snapped.

“No, damn it. For once, you listen. I’ve watched you since we were at the academy together. You’re a tough cop and until recently, I’d say you were the strictest, by - the - book investigator I know. That’s why I asked to work with you.”

“You...”

“But look at you. You admit to sleeping with a suspect, then come in here the next day in a shirt I know damn well didn’t come from your closet...”

Shit. She’d meant to change out of Rafe’s shirt but forgot.

“This whole case has had you chasing your tail, got you suspended, and now you’re grasping at straws. Go home. Let it go. Catch a movie. Visit a museum. I realize many around here think I goof off and don’t deserve to have this detective’s badge, but just this once, could you trust me to see this thing through and get the job done?”

## Chapter Twenty

Mackenzie sat before her partner—correction, her *former* partner—and let his words sink in. She had kept Cooper out of the loop on a lot of things in this investigation. Gave him the lion’s share of the grunt work, but avoided sharing most of the key elements in the case. It wasn’t that she didn’t respect him as a cop—she did—but maybe it seemed that way to him.

“I can deal with the fact that you didn’t trust me enough to tell me of your little affair,” he said, the wound still evident in his voice, “but I’m not incompetent. I can do the job as well as you.”

“I know you can.” Her soft words had little impact on Cooper’s tirade.

He motioned toward the files and photos scattered across his desk and folded his arms. “I can follow leads. I know the score, so your billionaire boyfriend has nothing to worry about, okay?”

“What?”

“The only way to get your badge back is to clear Stone, and fast. I know that. Stone knows it.” He shuffled some papers and held up a notepad. “Got a tip this morning, from someone who wouldn’t give a name but claimed to work for Stone Corp. Word is there was a possible infiltration attempt on Stone’s Cyber - Guard software during development. Potential motive for the death of a computer programmer who knew too much?”

He tossed the notepad back onto a pile of papers.

“Caller mentioned a backdoor. That got me to thinking...”

Mackenzie laughed. “I see you’re ahead of me.”

“Thinking and proving are two different things, and a computer programmer tinkering with a product gives Stone motive as well. But I’m on the right track.” Arms crossed, he tilted his head and peered at her. “Admit it. You thought I’d go after Stone even harder, now. Make him pay since I’ve thought him guilty all along.”

She wouldn’t blush. Not much anyway. Damn it. “All right. Maybe for a second.”

“Uh huh. Since we’re being so honest with each other, I’ll admit I’d love nothing better than to take that designer tie Stone was wearing and hang him with it for putting you through this.” When she opened her mouth, Cooper held up a hand to ward off her defense. “But since the bastard does care about you, I’ll learn to suppress my baser urges.”

“Thanks.” She grinned.

“Now, will you do us all a favor? Go home.”

She held up both palms face out. “Hey, I can tell when I’m not wanted. I’ll just go home and play Solitaire, take up knitting, or something.”

“I’d like a scarf for Christmas,” he said with a wink.

\* \* \* \* \*

Waiting was a bitch.

The thought of twiddling her thumbs at her place held about as much appeal as having a root canal done with no anesthesia.

A call to L.I. proved unsuccessful in reaching either of Rafe’s brothers. And the idea of accompanying Rafe through his day of boardrooms, press conferences, and other tortures of the executive world made her ill. Not that she wouldn’t love to spend time with him. But how pathetic could she be to even consider following him around so she wouldn’t have to spend the day alone? He had a job to do, and she...well, she was suspended.

God, how she hated that word.

Keeping a low profile was overrated, Mackenzie decided. She gave in to the urge to stop by a local haunt for many with a badge.

O’Malley’s Pot of Gold was a cramped, smoke - filled hole - in - the - wall where the only gold was a potent brew served in frosted pots resembling beer mugs.

She’d hit the place after the morning coffee rush and before the lunch crowd, so it was near empty, which suited her just fine.

Behind the bar, amid the colorful array of liquors, hung a photographic history of the Chicago police force. Men, women, and even a K - 9 or two who left their mark in service to the Windy City.

“What’ll it be, Mac?” The familiar Irish brogue of the burly owner made her smile. Robert Ethan O’Malley spent thirty - plus years walking the beat before exchanging his badge for a bar. She’d first met him while still a rookie. Her first year was his last on the force. Mackenzie wasn’t certain who’d adopted whom, but during those months, they’d formed a bond.

“The usual, thanks.”

“One cold pop on the rocks, comin’ up.” He grinned as he poured the soft drink.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

216

“Ye sure you don’t want me tae throw in a bit o’ juice for bite? Rumor has it you’re not on the clock right now.”

Shaking her head, she gave a self - deprecating laugh. “Figures you haven’t fallen far from the grapevine, O’Malley.”

He set the glass in front of her and wiped down the counter. “Not everyone has these big ears of mine. I’d have tae be dead tae not catch a whisper now and again.”

“How bad is it?” she asked, sipping her soft drink.

O'Malley had worked with her sergeant back when they both patrolled the shadier sides of Chicago. If anyone had a clue about her future on the force, besides Fuller, O'Malley would.

"That depends on how much of it's true. Fuller'll do right by ye, if'n you're right 'bout that young man o' yours." He motioned toward the TV hanging from the ceiling in one corner.

"Hey, turn that up, will you?"

Rafe appeared as striking as ever, even surrounded by an ocean of microphones. She recognized the backdrop as the waterfall in the lobby of his corporate headquarters, the faint trickling sounds buried beneath a flood of questions.

He'd obviously announced the release of Cyber - Guard, as the banner over his left shoulder indicated, but the media was more interested in potential scandal and bloodletting.

"What's your response to the recent accusations about a connection between you and the Canine Killings?"

"Recent, Evalyn?" He met the reporter's gaze directly, confident, unwavering. "I believe you jumped to that inaccurate assumption the last time you were at my estate." Use names and make it personal, Mackenzie thought. *A conversation among friends. Didn't I invite you into my home?* She couldn't see the other reporters, but she'd bet a few cast curious eyes toward Drake. And still he slipped in the bit about false impressions. He was a sly one.

"I can understand your interest in such a possibility. Scandals make for good ratings, do they not?"

"We're only seeking the truth, Mr. Stone," Drake said a bit defensively.

"As I explained before, the truth is I'm willing to do whatever I can to assist the police in finding those responsible for these killings. I've offered my expertise and that of the Lykos Institute to ensure the guilty are brought to justice."

Mackenzie leaned forward as he faced the camera.

"One of my own employees, a very talented programmer who worked on Cyber - Guard, is one of the victims. He was a husband and a father and didn't deserve what happened to him. Neither did the senator. My heart and prayers go out to their families."

"But the senator's own son is the one pointing a finger at you." The statement came from a male voice off - camera.

Rafe's face softened, an opposite reaction to what she'd expect of a man whose reputation was challenged publicly.

"However much you may want it... I have no harsh words nor will I harbor any hard feelings against anyone for having a negative opinion of me. No matter how misinformed they may be, I share the same hopes they do. That the person responsible for this needless loss of life is stopped. I have every confidence that our law enforcement will find that person and that justice will be done."

"Aye, he's a smooth player, that one is," O'Malley said as he leaned against the counter and watched Rafe excuse himself from the journalists. He cast her a knowing glance. "He'd have tae be to catch the eye of a lass like you."

"You haven't lost your instincts, O'Malley." She downed the last of her drink, tossed a tip on the counter, and strolled out with the echo of his laughter still ringing in

her ears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evalyn Drake tugged his sleeve before Rafe could make good his escape through the glass doors along the back wall of the lobby.

“I said no more questions, Ms. Drake. If you’ll excuse me...”

“I need another moment with you, alone if you don’t mind?”

“I’m afraid I do mind. I’m expected in a Web conference shortly.”

Her full lips thinned and her grip on his arm tightened.

“Look, whatever you may think of me, I meant what I said back there.”

He eyed her hand until she released her grasp. “Which part?”

“I am seeking the truth, and my gut tells me something is going on. Sergeant

Fuller gave us the runaround yesterday. The lead investigator is AWOL.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you. My control does not extend to overseeing the daily operations at the Chicago Police Department.”

His sarcasm earned him a frown. “My sources tell me all of that happened *after* you spent more than an hour cooling your heels in an interrogation room.”

When he glanced toward her cameraman who appeared to be packing up gear several yards away, she looked over her shoulder, too.

“I’m not wired, if that’s what you think. I’m a damn good reporter, but I’m a straight shooter.”

He nodded to the guard who buzzed him through. Once on the other side of the glass, he motioned her toward a couple chairs situated near the elevators.

“Off the record, what is it you’re after?” he asked.

“A trade.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a disk. “This came to me

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

218

while working a press conference. It’s video of you leaving a building. A note with the disk said that Detective Lyons lives there. I checked it out. It’s true.”

She studied him as he took the disk.

“You’re not surprised. I was right to think I’m not the only one gifted with this bit of evidence.”

He chose not to answer. “You inquired about a trade. What exactly are you seeking?”

“An exclusive.”

“What? Are you thinking to nab an interview with me as a convict, should the rumors about me prove true?”

“You and I both know those rumors are bogus.”

“Do we?”

Her eyes rounded. “Are you suggesting I believe you’re guilty of multiple homicides?”

He smiled. If she only knew. “Of course not. I do find the thought interesting, considering where I found you the last time we met. I figured you’d be the first one out to hang me after G chased you up that tree.”

She scowled and failed to hide the shiver. “I’d rather not think of your wolf, but he’s part of the reason why I know you aren’t the killer.”

“Oh?”



"You're too smart to use something that could so easily be traced back to your front door."

He laughed. "I'm not entirely sure that's a compliment."

She waved that away. "That detective is smart enough to realize the same. I've checked into her background, too. She's good, which is why I became suspicious when she vanished. Fuller had to have a darn good reason to pull her off the case."

This reporter was entirely too observant for her own good, he thought.

"I could've used the video already, but I haven't. That should account for something."

"We both know you haven't used it, because it proves nothing. And when I tell you the video was taken on the morning that I happened to visit the building for a final inspection before purchasing it..."

"I suppose an investigation into recent real estate purchases would support your claim?"

He nodded.

"Then I have even less," she said with obvious disappointment.

"Actually, if you should still have the envelope and note that accompanied this disk and be able to tell me how you came by it, I might be interested."

Her expression brightened.

\* \* \* \* \*

Time passed at a snail's pace when a woman was bored stiff.

Mackenzie plopped back into her recliner, the latest Patricia Cornwell novel in her lap. She'd tried reading it but hadn't been able to lose herself in the plot since her mind remained focused on a real case. If only real murder could be wrapped up as fast and easily as fiction.

She checked the clock. Again. Wondered briefly whether the hands had moved a millimeter and debated over checking the batteries.

Rafe had yet to call or stop by. She didn't know whether to be understanding, frustrated, or pissed about that.

She'd called L.I. again, reaching Gabe this time, only to be told the programmers had found nothing in the computer code to suggest Carl Shumaker had put in a backdoor to the system.

Luc was going through Carl's files on his PC at work but so far had nothing to report either.

Maybe Cooper was right. She had been chasing her tail, and now she had everyone else running around in circles. She expected him to call any moment to let her know he was back to square one.

"Damn it." There had to be something that could tie this whole thing together.

She'd really thought she'd found it, but if Shumaker hadn't done the deed, then...

The phone rang, and Mackenzie vaulted out of the chair to grab for the receiver.

"Hello?"

"You sound eager, darling. You weren't waiting by the phone, were you?"

"Uh. No," she lied.

"I see."

She cringed at hearing the amusement in Rafe's voice.

"It's tough to let go of the reins, isn't it?"

Did the man have to be so perceptive? “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was just relaxing here, reading a book when the phone startled me.”

“Uh hmm.”

So what if she was a pathetic liar. “Okay, so I’m going stir crazy here with nothing to do.”

“Would you like me to rearrange my schedule? I could pick you up for dinner, or we could dine in.”

As much as she wanted to say yes, pride kept her from accepting. “No, I’ll be all right. I’m a big girl. Besides, you’ve had your hands full. I caught your show on the news earlier.”

“Ah yes. I had a nice talk with Evalyn Drake afterward.”

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

220

“I bet you did.”

“She received a copy of the video on disk.”

Mackenzie cursed.

“She’s agreed to assist us in determining the origin of the video. It was given to her after a press conference. I’ve asked for the raw news footage. Maybe they picked up something in the background.”

She tucked her feet under her after she returned to the recliner. “Oh?”

“Drake’s sharp, and suspicious of spoon - fed information. She doesn’t like to be used.” His voice held a hint of admiration. “You made quite an impression on her the first time you met.”

“Huh. I should chew out reporters more often then.”

She heard the smile in his voice. “Yes, well, she agreed to hold off on the tape, but requests an exclusive with you whenever you...resurface.”

Mackenzie frowned. “It’s Cooper’s case now. I’m suspended, remember? I can’t make any promises.”

“And she can’t give any assurances that other stations aren’t privy to the video either. However, the video isn’t enough, and she knows that. I just thought you should know.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Are you okay? I also called to tell you I’d be working late, but if you need me...”

She twisted the phone cord around her index finger. “No. You go ahead. I’ll be fine. By the way, did you have someone from Stone Corp. call Cooper with a tip on the potential backdoor?”

A pause. “Why would you think that?”

A smile tugged at her mouth. “I thought so. Thanks, Rafe.”

“Anytime, Detective. I’ll see you soon.”

Her smile spread into a grin as she hung up the phone.

A few hours later, after raiding her near - empty refrigerator, she was calling for a pizza delivery when her doorbell rang.

A quick peek and she opened the door to see Cooper standing in the hall.

“Good, you’re home. Grab your jacket. Let’s go.”

She didn’t have to be told twice. She hung up on the pizza guy, grabbed her coat, and followed Cooper to his car.

“What’s happened?”

“It was your hunch that tipped the scales.”

“Slow down. Which hunch? Where are we going?”

“Caprini’s. It was there all the time in the damn computer.”

“Shumaker’s?”

“Yeah. The man was anal. He kept notes about everything. A fucking journal.”

He glanced at her.

“Watch the road.” She pushed her hand on the dash when he whipped around an old station wagon that hadn’t seen a good day since 1970.

“Shumaker was deep in debt to Caprini when Harden made him an offer.

Apparently, they knew who Carl worked for and decided to blackmail him into turning on his boss.”

“The backdoor.”

“Yeah. All Shumaker had to do was provide a hidden way to infiltrate Stone’s security program so that they could skim pennies off online transactions. They could’ve made a fortune...”

“And if caught, Stone would catch most of the blame.”

“You got it.”

“What about the senator? How does he fit into all this?” That had always been a problem with identifying the killer’s motive.

“Still a bit shady. Shumaker speculated over another person pulling Caprini’s strings, but there’s nothing to substantiate that. Harden’s named. Caprini’s named. So is the bodyguard.

“And there was one entry about a possible delay in development because of an attempt at some budgetary stonewalling at the state level. Stone’s software is marketed for commercial and government use. Want to bet Robertson led that attempt?”

Her seat belt tightened across her shoulder as Cooper pressed hard on the breaks to make a right turn.

“Their plan would crash and burn if Stone’s software wasn’t released,” she said, hanging on for dear life. “Remind me to drive next time.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I figured it was your hunch, so it should be your collar.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. I appreciate the thought, but I think you’ve forgotten something. I’m suspended.” When he looked at her, she saw determination solidify his features. “Coop, we are not jeopardizing this case. I don’t care about who gets the credit, as long as the bastard’s behind bars.”

“Technically, you’re still suspended, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re my partner. You found the clues that broke the case. You’re going.”

Since she was already in the car, she couldn’t argue the point now. As they pulled through the gate onto Caprini’s circular drive, a patrol car rolled to a stop behind them.

“I asked them to wait until we got here,” Cooper said after getting out of the car.

With a nod, Mackenzie greeted Officer Baker, whom she recognized from the Robertson crime scene.

“Hello, Detective,” Baker said.

“I’m n—”

Cooper cut her off. “Baker, anyone been in or out?”

## **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

222

“Not since we arrived about ten minutes ago, but we did see a few lights go off, so someone’s home.”

“Okay, would you and your partner cover the back? Mac and I’ll take the front.”

“Gotcha.” The two men, with firearms in hand, headed around back.

“I don’t have a badge, Coop. And Fuller still has my weapon.”

“Here.” He handed her a spare pistol, which he pulled from an ankle holster.

“Wipe off the prints if this goes to shit.”

She scowled, but took the firearm, and checked the chamber. Cooper was already heading for the house. She couldn’t let him go in without backup. He was already

risking his career. She couldn’t let him risk his life by going in alone.

The pathway lights that normally illuminated the yard at night were out or had yet to come on for the evening. The sun still hung low in the sky, just above the horizon.

Only one light shone through a front window on the second floor.

When they approached the front door, a prickly feeling of unease slithered down her spine.

The door was ajar.

Without saying a word, she and Cooper worked in tandem, using hand signs to communicate.

Had Caprini felt the heat and fled?

As they stood on either side, Cooper nudged the door, and it swung open silently.

They entered with caution. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. They backed each other up as they checked the rooms downstairs and made their way to the second floor.

At the top, Cooper motioned for her to take the left while he headed right.

Gun raised, she checked each room, finding nothing amiss.

Then she heard Cooper. “Mac, you better come see this.”

The iron scent of blood struck her first. Inside the lit room Caprini’s body slumped over a desk, blood and brain matter splattered across a back wall, a nine - millimeter handgun in his hand.

Cooper stood beside him, felt for a pulse, shook his head, and scanned a piece of paper lying to one side. “Looks like a suicide note.”

She lowered her gun and frowned. “Where’s the security guard?”

“Got the night off?”

She shook her head. “Something’s not right. I’m going to check the basement.

Everything cleared up here?”

“Yeah. Have Baker call this in. Get the ME on his way.”

She’d made it halfway down the stairs when a gunshot had her racing back to the room.

Cooper lay on the floor, a gash across his head telling her he’d suffered a serious blow, and a man she’d only seen in pictures until now stood over him, clutching a hand to a wound in his shoulder.

“Anton.” Her aim remained steady as her mind blasted off on an adrenalin rush.

His eyes met hers with recognition and menace.

Cooper groaned, but she didn’t dare drop her gaze to check whether he was all

right. At least by the sound, she knew he was still alive.

"We finally meet." Anton's voice was cultured, exotic. Dangerously attractive. Even wounded he displayed a power more frightening than she'd ever witnessed before. He was like a trapped animal, which left her wondering how in the hell she was supposed to capture him.

"I have a feeling we've met before."

He smiled. "Yes, you'll forgive me for not staying around at the warehouse. It was most unfortunate that Rafael showed up when he did." He took a deep breath, as if he were scenting the air. "However, as his mate, your death will now have a more pleasing impact."

Everything happened in slow motion.

Footsteps rushing up the stairs.

Anton lunging for her.

She fired, the first bullet passing harmlessly through the flash of light as he changed in midleap.

Her second shot found its target in his chest as the large, grey wolf slammed into her. Jarred by the fall, she gasped for air and blindly pulled the trigger again. The animal's body flinched from the impact as another bullet pierced his heart.

His jaws were precariously close to her neck. Her fingers clawed at the fur, trying to push him away. His body's dead weight pinned her down.

"Jesus!" she heard Officer Baker say before seeing his face appear above her.

Holstering his firearm, he shoved the heavy beast off her and helped her up. Something wet trickled down her neck.

"You're bleeding."

In a daze, she touched the trail of blood from the puncture wound left by the wolf's sharp incisor.

Baker's partner knelt beside Cooper, who appeared to be coming around.

"Ah! Son of a bitch."

"His arm's broke," the officer said.

"No shit, Sherlock." Cooper's expression was half - sneer, half - grimace. But when his gaze met hers, she knew he'd witnessed the change.

"Call an ambulance," she ordered, not caring whether she had the authority to do so or not. "Officer down. Don't touch anything. Seal off the area. This is a crime scene. We don't need a lot of people all over the place. And someone check the basement. It hasn't been cleared. There's still a bodyguard unaccounted for." Given

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

224

orders, the men snapped into action, but she stopped Baker at the door. "Contact Sergeant Fuller and wait for him at the gate. I'll take care of Coop until paramedics arrive."

When they'd left, she faced Cooper who was staring at the wolf.

"I should've checked the damn closet, but when I saw the body... The bastard caught me off guard."

"You still shot him." She stepped around Anton's clothes, debating over whether to toss them back into the closet. Then deciding his leap from the closet was explanation enough for the scattered articles, she left them where they lay and knelt beside Cooper.

Pain slashed across his face as she helped him shift to a seated position. His gaze locked with hers. "Lotta good that did me."

"It helped," she said. Remembering what Rafe had said about Lycans, she believed the wound had forced Anton to change and heal to attempt an escape. But bullets to the heart were fatal. She realized how lucky she'd been; her shot had hit its mark. Her hand crept to her throat.

Mackenzie propped herself against the wall, hoping her heart would someday return to a normal beat. Now that the danger was over, her system shook as her mind played tricks on her. The wolf's snarl became a mountain lion's roar, the fangs different yet just as deadly and still aimed for her throat.

God, she'd have nightmares again.

"You okay?" Cooper's voice penetrated her mind, brought her back to reality.

"Yeah." The wolf hadn't succeeded any more than the mountain lion. She was still alive.

"What the hell was that thing?"

## Chapter Twenty - One

"A Lycan," she said, staring at the dead wolf. Apparently, Lycans didn't return to their human state at death like the werewolves of Hollywood legend.

The surprise on Cooper's face told Mackenzie he hadn't expected her to have the answer to his question. "You knew about that thing and didn't tell me?"

She twisted to face him as they sat on the floor. "Damn it, Coop. What did you expect me to do? If I'd suggested that we weren't after a human killer—that the gunman and the animal were one and the same—you would've hauled my ass to the nearest psychiatrist's couch and demanded a psych - eval."

"You're probably right."

"You're damn right I am."

"So what the hell is a Lycan? Some sort of werewolf or something?"

"I don't have time to explain it all now."

"Mac..." he said, drawing out her name in a half - plea, half - warning.

"I will." She rested her hand on his shoulders, and her eyes met his with a promise. "For now, as far as anyone is concerned, we found Caprini dead, possible suicide. And when his guard dog attacked us from the closet, we had to shoot the animal. Caprini takes the fall because no one will believe it any other way.

Understand?"

He nodded.

After a few minutes rest, she took his hand and tugged him to his feet. "Let's get you up and out front, unless you want to be carried out of here because of one measly broken bone."

"Hey, don't forget the concussion. Ah!" He released her and cradled his arm.

"You big baby." Her smile deflected the punch of accusation as she knelt to holster Cooper's spare pistol at his ankle.

"Some partner you are. Maybe I should let them carry me out...be pampered by some cute paramedic."

## Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct

226

They walked down the stairs. "With any luck, the EMTs have Y chromosomes

and are named Bob, Frank, and Joe.”

“You’re all heart, Lyons.”

She was still chuckling when they stepped outside and came face - to - face with their sergeant.

The front of Caprini’s house was well lit now, with news cameras shining spotlights from the other side of the crime scene tape. Unfortunately, they backlit Fuller’s face, but Mackenzie could guess his expression, which had her snapping to attention beside Cooper.

“Sir, I—”

“—can explain,” he said, cutting her off. “I’m sure you can. But since you aren’t supposed to be here, I’d like an explanation from Detective Cooper.”

She winced and hated showing even that much of a reaction to his words.

As Cooper pleaded his case to their sergeant, Mackenzie watched an increasing number of journalists shuffle for position along the crime scene tape. They parted like the Red Sea when the ambulance arrived and backed into the drive.

“Lyons’ instincts proved accurate, sir,” Cooper said. “Her hunch led to the evidence discovered today at Shumaker’s residence. It vindicates Stone and points the finger of guilt squarely on Caprini.”

One EMT opened the backdoors while another spoke with Officer Baker, who pointed in their direction.

“She’s my partner,” Cooper said. “She saved both our lives tonight, sir.

Suspended or not, I didn’t want anyone else backing me up here. If that costs me my badge, then...”

“Enough.” Fuller’s voice was firm, commanding. Silence stretched for what seemed like eternity as they stared at each other. Finally, he said, “I hope you don’t intend to bring civilians on every bust you make as an officer of the Chicago police force, Detective.”

“No, sir.”

“As you are in need of medical attention, I intend to have another detective handle the remainder of this case.” Cooper opened his mouth as if he wanted to object, but Fuller demanded, “Do you have a problem with that?”

Cooper shut up, his lips pressing into a thin, hard line.

“I thought not.”

The EMT approached, his gaze moving from Cooper, who still held his arm and sported a gash on the side of his head, to Mackenzie and the blood staining her neck and shirtfront.

“Help him. His arm’s broken,” she said before the EMT could comment on her medical needs.

He followed her lead as his focus shifted to Cooper. “Need the stretcher?”

“I’ll walk. Thanks,” Cooper said with a quick glance toward the news cameras, then back at Fuller.

“Report to my office first thing tomorrow morning, Detective.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Cooper continued to stand there, Fuller pointed toward the ambulance and ordered roughly, “Get moving. That’s an order... unless you don’t think your *partner* can handle things here?”

“Yes, sir!” Cooper’s gaze met her surprised one, and with a wink, he sauntered toward the ambulance.

Mackenzie faced the sergeant and noticed his hand extended toward her. A badge—her badge—lay on his palm.

“I think you’ll need this. I...you know how long it takes to process paperwork. Things can often get lost in the piles on my desk.”

She knew better but didn’t object. Speechless, she took the badge, studied it, ensuring herself that it was indeed real.

“Sir...”

“Ballistics came in,” he said, getting back down to business before she could embarrass them both with some sentimental blathering. “The bullet fragments from the warehouse shooting. They matched the .45 caliber slug pulled from Robertson’s body. Pretty hard for Stone to be the shooter if he was busy pushing you out of the way.” She released a shaky breath, tucked her badge into her waistband.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me, Detective. I’m tossing you to the sharks,” he said with a subtle motion toward the media. “See that you keep your nose above water, and I expect a full, detailed report on my desk by oh - eight - hundred.” His gaze fell to the drying stains, bright crimson on her white shirt. Rafe’s shirt. “I suggest you get a jumper from the CSI unit before meeting with the media.”

“Yes, sir.” Watching Fuller leave, Mackenzie decided to spend the next half hour or so coordinating the response team and gathering her wits before leaping into those shark - infested waters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rafael paused the news footage playing on his computer monitor, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and closed his eyes. Stock reports, departmental memos, and other financials lay in organized stacks on his desk, awaiting his attention.

His encounter with Evalyn Drake had put him behind schedule, but that wasn’t the problem. Managing a hectic timeline was the norm for a man like him, a man whose work fueled him, kept him focused. Usually.

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

228

The constant wheeling and dealing challenged him, was more alluring than the potential profits. The money, however, was a necessary evil for one responsible for numerous other lives. As alpha, he’d accepted that. Had sacrificed much of his personal needs—much of himself—to achieve success on the pack’s behalf. But now, concern over one person’s life hindered his ability to focus on the demands of running Stone Corp.

His personal desire to be with Mackenzie was a distraction that had grown daily since first laying eyes on her. Now she was his mate, his responsibility, his life. Sergeant Fuller’s words haunted him. *She damn near gave her life for yours.* Her job had always been her life. And because of him, she’d lost her badge.

She’d put up a brave front since then, but hadn’t been able to hide the quiver in her voice when he’d called. He’d sensed the prick in her pride that had demanded she turn down his offer to drop everything on her behalf. Selfless.

He smiled.



She was more alpha than any human female he'd ever met.

Somehow he'd help get her job back, and he had a suspicion that the raw news footage the reporter had given him would provide the trail.

Reaching for the mouse to start the video again, Rafe was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Sir?"

"Sylvia, I thought I told you to go home."

"I know, sir, but I think you may want to see this." His personal assistant grabbed the remote and clicked on the plasma television across the room. Another couple of buttons and the channel changed to a local news program.

Rafe stared, somewhat stunned, when his mate appeared onscreen in a deep blue jumpsuit with a badge hung around her neck. White puffs testified to a chill in the air as she spoke.

"While attempting to serve a warrant at the home of Ernesto Caprini," she said, "my partner, Detective Steve Cooper, suffered serious but non - life - threatening injuries.

Caprini's body was discovered in the home, the victim of an apparent suicide."

"Could you tell us how Detective Cooper came to be injured?" an unidentified voice asked.

"A guard dog, believed to belong to Caprini, attacked him. The dog was terminated."

"Detective Lyons, Evalyn Drake. What was the warrant for? Does this have something to do with the Canine Killings?"

"As you know, Ms. Drake, I've been unwilling to risk the integrity of the recent murder investigations by revealing a suspect prematurely or speculating on rumor..."

How had she gotten her badge back? he wondered. His eyes narrowed on a small Band - Aid on her neck, partially hidden by the jumpsuit's collar.

"However," she continued, "I will say that evidence recently came to light that implicates Caprini in a plot to discredit and frame a renowned Chicago businessman with whom Caprini has had competitive dealings in the past. We believe the evidence shows Caprini knew about, and was involved in, the homicides of Senator Victor Robertson, Carl Shumaker, and Jimmy Harden, all residents of the City of Chicago."

That answered some of his many questions, Rafe thought. His phone rang. He punched the speaker blindly.

"Rafe..." Gabe's voice sounded urgent.

"I'm watching it."

"Luc called. He's just arrived there."

"The guard dog?"

"That's what I'm wondering. Luc says there are cops and reporters everywhere.

He's been unable to get close enough to Mackenzie without drawing undue attention to himself."

"I'll call her."

"We tried that. She doesn't have her cell or she's not answering it."

"Sylvia, get Evalyn Drake's number."

"Right away." She left, returning a moment later.

"I'll call you back, Gabe." Rafe hung up and dialed the number, as his assistant

excused herself and closed the door behind her.

The news report had ended only seconds before, but Rafe could hear the activity in the background when Drake answered after the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Drake."

"Mr. Stone, you must have caught my live shot."

"Always in the thick of things, I see."

She laughed good-naturedly. "How about an exclusive comment? You are the renowned businessman the detective was referring to, no?"

"I've yet to speak with the detective, so I can't comment; however, if you'll hand her your phone...I may be able to provide you with a statement afterward."

"Deal."

He heard her call to Mackenzie, then a pause, followed by the curious voice of his mate.

"Rafe?"

"I believe you've quite surprised me, darling. I hadn't expected you to make a public appearance tonight."

Her voice dropped to a murmur, and he pictured her stepping away from the reporter. "Yeah, well, I was going to call you, but something came up."

"So, I gathered."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

230

"Caprini's dead. We stumbled across the body moments after the deed was done."

Rafe noted her choice of words and read between the lines. The man hadn't committed suicide after all.

"He was pressuring Shumaker to alter your software. When he refused, they killed him and tried to blame it on you. But they didn't count on Shumaker documenting everything. He'd recorded phone calls, kept a journal. It's all there. The plot. Everything. And ballistics tied the weapon used at the warehouse to the one used on Robertson, so you're in the clear."

That explained the reason she had her badge back.

"The guard dog?" he asked, not one to waste time getting to the point.

The silence that met his question unnerved him.

"Mackenzie..."

"Anton's dead."

Her words punched him. His breathing skid to an abrupt halt. He had to force the next question from his mouth. "How?"

"I shot him."

He closed his eyes, telling himself she was alive. Safe. He hadn't needed to be there to protect her, but couldn't help feeling as if he'd somehow failed her.

"He attacked Cooper, broke his arm, but Cooper got a shot off and wounded him. He had to change..." Her softly spoken words penetrated his brain like salt on an open cut.

Cooper had been there for her. He wasn't sure whether to be furious about that or relieved, but since she was alive and talking to him, he chose the latter.

“...Rafe, did you hear what I said?”

“What?”

“I remembered what you said. If I hadn’t known about him, what he was capable of, I couldn’t have taken him down. If you hadn’t told me what wounds were fatal, what his weakness would be, I wouldn’t be here.”

“God!” The emotions were damn near overwhelming. With elbows on the desk, he cradled his head in his hands.

“You saved my life. Do you understand?”

It took him a moment to respond, and even then he could only manage two words. “I understand.”

“Good. I need to speak with you about what Cooper...uh... He...” Her voice drifted to a stop, and Rafe realized what she couldn’t say.

“He witnessed the change.”

“Yes.”

“We’ll deal with it.”

“How?” The worry in her voice made him frown.

“I trust you can ensure his silence?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t worry, Detective. He’s safe from me.” Besides, he owed the man a debt he could never repay simply for being there when his mate was in danger. “I want to see you.” He needed to hold her.

A pause. “Okay. As soon as I’ve finished up here, I’ll come to your place. But I need to swing by my apartment first to get a change of clothes.”

“The penthouse. One hour?”

“All right. I’ll see you soon.”

“Mackenzie.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

The sudden catch in her breath made him smile. “Same to you, wolfman,” she whispered, and he laughed.

“Hurry home, Detective,” he ordered. “Now, let me talk with Ms. Drake a moment.”

“Gotcha, did she?” Her amusement tickled his ear.

“Just paying for the use of her phone. A certain female detective is without her cell phone, I believe.”

“So it’s my fault, is it?”

“Entirely. I intend to collect payment from you shortly,” he teased.

“You can try. Here you go.”

The next voice he heard was the ever - inquisitive Evalyn Drake. After answering her questions and dodging a few others, Rafe hung up, fixed himself a much - needed drink, and contacted his brothers.

Seated on the couch with a balloon of brandy in hand, he relayed to Gabriel the information he’d learned from Mackenzie. Her actions in taking on Anton and surviving the encounter had won the detective newfound respect from his brother.

“She has no idea how many people she’s saved by taking him out.”

“I know,” Rafe agreed, fighting back a shudder by sipping the warm liquor. But

for her quick actions and an untold amount of good fortune, she could have easily been another victim.

Would he ever get used to the idea of his mate putting herself in harm's way?

The females of his species were well known for their protective aggression when guarding their young, but they didn't seek out danger. He took another swallow of brandy.

"I can't say I regret his death," Gabe said. "God knows I've worked towards that goal ever since the bastard took Ariana from us. But I would've liked to have seen him...to have asked..."

### **Lycan Packs 1: Lycan Instinct**

232

"He wouldn't tell you the truth, even if you'd been there, Gabe. We may never know what happened the night Ariana vanished."

"Do you think...? Maybe he had something to do with the other vanishings?"

Several occurred in areas he was known to frequent. Maybe it's over, now that he's gone?"

"Only time will tell, brother."

After speaking with Gabe a few more minutes, Rafe called Luc, confirmed the news about Anton, and released him from any further duties at the scene. There was nothing more to do there, with the wolf that had been Anton carried out in an evidence bag.

Rising from the couch, he glanced at his watch. Mackenzie would be on her way to her apartment by now. He'd be waiting for her when she arrived at Stone Corp. Tower.

Rafe walked to his computer to shut it down and call it a night, when something frozen in the video image on his monitor caught his eye.

A closer look, a sudden curse, and Rafe was running for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mackenzie was exhausted, but it felt good. So did the weight of the badge hanging around her neck. Her thumb rubbed the cold surface of the badge as if it were a good luck stone.

She'd been able to wrap up most of the case in a satisfactory manner, without exposing the existence of Lycans. Caprini's suicide note explained his death, while the wolf took care of the rest. It was just a matter of time before his bite impressions and DNA would be compared to evidence gathered from Robertson and Shumaker. They'd match, no doubt.

She pressed the brake as the car approached a flashing traffic light and glanced both ways. The only soul in sight was a driver in a cab heading away from her. Not much of a traffic jam at this hour of the night. She turned onto her street.

All that was left now was to tie up loose ends. Namely, two. First, locate the murder weapon used in the Robertson homicide. Mackenzie felt certain the 9 - millimeter recovered from Caprini's hand would turn out to be the one used on Harden. But a .45 caliber had been used on Robertson, so it must be somewhere. Unless Caprini had tossed it, which was possible. Second, find Bernardo. She'd put out an APB on the bodyguard, who hadn't turned up. Until he was found, there was a missing link in the chain of evidence.

Parking Cooper's car on the street, she made her way to the front entrance of her apartment building. A frigid wind bit her face, whipped at her hair, so she hurried her steps.

Before leaving the crime scene, she'd called Cooper's cell to check on him and found out that he'd already been released, after refusing to allow the doctor to admit him overnight for observation. The concern over a slight concussion wasn't enough to keep him in a drafty hospital gown, dining on hospital food. With a cast on his arm and a prescription for painkillers, he'd taken a cab home.

She'd promised to fill him in on Lycans after her morning debriefing with Fuller. And after speaking further with Rafe.

Mackenzie stopped in the lobby to check her mailbox. Electric bill, phone bill...

She'd been pre - approved for another credit card. Ripping it to shreds, she tossed the tiny pieces in a trash bin on her way to the elevator.

Watching the light count down the floors, she waited patiently until the bell chimed and the doors slid open.

Empty. Good, she thought, not in the mood to arrest any sex - craved juveniles for public indecency who—for a thrill or out of stupidity—sometimes made out in the elevators.

She stepped inside, pressed the button for her floor, and leaned against the back wall, then rolled her head to stretch the tension from her neck muscles.

She could use a shower, a hot relaxing one. Maybe Rafe would forgive her the delay. Then again, maybe she could convince him to join her for a hot bubbly soak in his Olympic - sized tub.

Smiling at the thought, her hand dug for the keys as she approached her door.

She slipped the correct one in the lock, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

As the door clicked shut, she flicked the light on.

Her brain leaped into action one second after her eyes focused on the interior.

Her body froze. The envelopes slipped from her lax grasp to scatter on the floor.

She'd found the missing .45 caliber murder weapon.

It was aimed at her heart.

## Chapter Twenty - Two

Fighting the urge to stare down the barrel of the HK Mark 23 handgun,

Mackenzie forced her gaze to meet that of the man who wielded it. She would not ask what Richard Robertson was doing in her apartment, although the stupid words had damn near burst from her mouth the moment she saw him.

Instead, she slowly raised her hands, knowing they'd be worthless in stopping a bullet. Her badge hung like an anchor around her neck. A lot of damn good it did her now when she was unarmed.

"Where'd you take him?" Richard asked.

"Take who?"

"Anthony, damn it. Don't play fucking games with me. He didn't come back. I saw the news. You tranq'd him or something. I don't believe you killed him. No one can kill him. He's fucking immortal."

*Oh shit.* The man was seriously losing his grasp on reality. His hand shook a bit, and that scared her almost as much as the words he spouted.

"You knew about the wolf?" she asked. Maybe she could buy some time to come

up with a plan. “About Anton’s...Anthony’s...ability?” Keep him talking, she thought. Find a way to stop him. To survive.

He blinked, a small smirk tugging at his mouth.

“Of course. Anthony’s going to make me one, as soon as we topple Stone Corp. That was his price. I help him get what he wants—he gives me what I want.” He stepped closer, pointed the gun’s muzzle at her like an accusing finger. “But you... You were supposed to arrest Stone, not fuck the man.”

“You made the video.” She said it with raised brows.

A smile was his only answer.

“You had me fooled,” she said, hoping to draw on his ego. “I mean, you had an alibi.”

“Bernardo’s sister. She’s clueless. Take her out for a little wine and dine, slip her some Liquid Ecstasy, and the girl believes anything you tell her. Ha! She’d even swear on her mother’s grave.”

“You’re a smart one. I’ll give you that.” Let him brag. He had a smug air of superiority about him. “I’d pegged Caprini as running the show, him and his bodyguard, but I was wrong.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “*His* bodyguard? Bernardo works for me, even took out Harden on my orders. You see, I call the shots.”

Somehow she doubted that, since Anton had fooled the man into assisting with a vendetta against Stone by convincing him he could gain immortality.

“Ernesto Caprini was a patsy, an expendable one, if the plan went awry.”

“The plan?” She hoped her confused expression would convince him to explain.

Each passing minute was another chance to discover a way out, another sixty seconds she remained alive.

“When my bookie let it slip about Shumaker’s employer, I came up with the plan. It was flawless. We could milk Stone’s clientele for the hell of it first—through his own software—and then let him take the fall if the authorities found out.” His expression soured. “But then that chicken - shit Shumaker thought he could steal the money he owed us and got himself fired. And Harden had to get greedy.”

“And your father...?”

His eyes darkened with anger. When his fingers tightened on the gun, she feared she’d pushed him too far.

“That pathetic excuse for a man. Always spouting grandiose agendas but never willing to take risks. Take a gamble.” With an abrupt laugh, he gestured with the gun, but not enough that she felt comfortable risking an offensive maneuver. “He cut me off when I dropped out of Princeton. The bastard thought that would stop me; make me ‘grow up...get back on the straight and narrow.’ I told him he’d regret it. I warned him. He had no idea how powerful I’d become.” His gaze cleared, as if he’d returned from a foggy trip back in time. “But he recognized it when I shot him. That’s power. Taking a life.”

“Actually, that’s murder, and it’s a crime.”

His smile was pure arrogance. “Shame I missed you at the warehouse. You were to be the victim that would finally convince them to take down Stone.”

“That was you? I thought...”

“Oh, Anthony was there. He doesn’t like to use guns, but if your body showed

up shot and mauled like dear old Dad... this time dumped somewhere on Stone's property?"

She didn't know whether his look or his words ticked her off more.

"But Anthony wouldn't risk it when Stone showed up. He took my gun and led you off so I could get away."

"Then I did shoot him."

236

He nodded and grinned. "Then you should know he's unstoppable. I will be, too, once Anthony fulfills our bargain. So, bitch...time's up. On your knees. Now!"

She delayed until he yanked her hair, causing her to cry out in pain, and forced her down. The gun pressed to the back of her head.

"Where the hell is he?" His voice rose and with it went her blood pressure.

"Answer me, goddammit!"

Oh, God! She was dead if she told him the truth. She was dead if she didn't.

"I—"

The phone rang.

"Tell me." He gritted out the order and popped her on the head with the butt of his gun.

What she wouldn't give to have their positions reversed.

"That's Rafe," she said, a bit breathless despite herself. "He's expecting me. He'll get suspicious if I don't answer."

Richard paused for another ring, then yanked her to her feet. Her moan escaped through gritted teeth.

"Answer it, but one wrong word, and he'll hear you die."

She picked up the phone and sucked in a breath that did little to calm her nerves.

"Hello?"

"Mackenzie—"

"You're impatient, wolfman," she said, purposefully cutting him off and using the nickname she'd given him. If Richard didn't already know Rafe was a 'werewolf', she'd make sure he did now. "I'm on my way to the restaurant. Are you so hungry you can't wait for me to change out of this god - awful blue jumpsuit?"

A pause, though brief, convinced her that he'd caught her tip. His next words were soft but audible. "Actually, I've a change in plans."

Mackenzie closed her eyes as she and Richard listened to his every word. His voice was like a lifeline just out of reach.

"I feel like a celebration...to honor the death of a fellow Lycan."

*What the hell?* Her eyes snapped open. Rafe's words sent a ripple through Richard that she felt to her bone.

"We'd been after Anton a long time. We're hard to kill, as you well know, but every werewolf has a silver bullet with his name on it."

Richard's arm tightened around her neck, the gun pressed firmly against the base of her head. She held her breath and waited for the sound of gunfire.

Instead, he grabbed the phone and brutally shoved her aside. Mackenzie caught herself against the wall, turned to face the gunman. His aim wavered, a sure sign of his agitation.

"You fucking bastard. She's dead, you hear me?" His lips pulled back in a snarl,

his teeth grinding.

Whatever Rafe said made his eyes widen, then narrow, his mouth curving into a smirk.

“Your bitch means that much to you, huh?” He licked his bottom lip and suddenly eyed her as if she were a prime T - bone steak.

“Oh, hell no. I call the shots. You got that? I do. She’s going away. Some place where you’ll never find her. When the deed’s done, once you’ve fulfilled your part of the bargain, and I’ve completed the change, then, and only then, will you get her back.” Richard paused as he listened to Rafe’s response. Mackenzie strained to catch a word or two.

“No! Take it or leave it. That’s the deal.” After another pause, he grinned. “That’s more like it. I’ll call you back. I see any cops other than the one in front of me right now, the deal’s off. You’ll get your bitch back via the mail, one piece at a time.”

He hung up.

“Move,” he ordered, gesturing her to the back bedroom. Once there, he sat her on the bed and used a piece of clothing to tie her hands in front of her, but left her feet unbound. When he reached for a sweater from the closet, she debated running for the door but feared he’d shoot her despite his agreement with Rafe. She was all too aware of how many kidnapped victims were dead long before the first call for a ransom was made to their families.

Unfortunately, he saw her glance toward the door, came forward, and backhanded her. The coppery taste of blood filled her mouth.

“Don’t be stupid.” He draped the sweater over her wrists and grabbed her arms in a bruising grip. “Come on. Bernardo’s waiting. He’ll take real good care of you.” His laugh said just the opposite. “We’re going down to my car, so no funny stuff. One wrong move and you’re dead.”

He put his gun in his pocket but used it to jab her in the side as they made their way to the door.

“Open it.”

She reached forward, tugged it open. They stepped through the door and angled right toward the elevators.

A sudden yank and thud behind her had Mackenzie spinning around.

Rafe had slammed Richard against the wall. His right hand held the man’s throat. His left yanked Richard’s gun hand free. Two powerful collisions with the wall, and the gun fell to the ground. Rafe kicked it toward Mackenzie who wasted no time picking it up with the sweater.

Richard’s face was turning blue when Rafe released him. Before she could stop him—not that she tried all that hard—Rafe landed a punch to the creep’s jaw. A second to his gut had the man gasping for air. A third sent him to his knees. A fourth knocked him out cold.

Rafe stood over the prone man, his hands still balled into white - knuckled fists.

238

His nostrils flared, but his breaths came in slow and even. He hadn’t even worked up a sweat, she observed, or released half of the anger still coursing through his veins. He’d never looked so dangerous or more incredible in all the time she’d known him. She suddenly feared for her kidnapper’s life, and her instinctual call to duty took over.



“Rafe, don’t.”

His head jerked toward her, his eyes blazing with a fire that confirmed her earlier thoughts. He noticed the cut on her lip, and the sudden pain that shone in his molten gaze made her say, “I’m all right. It’s over.”

He blinked and reached for her, but stopped when her hands became pinned between them. With a curse, he took out a pocketknife and cut her free, then pulled her back into his arms.

“I could kill him,” he murmured into her hair.

“I know,” she whispered against his chest.

“I want to for ever daring to touch you.”

She pulled back, placed a hand on his cheek. “I know. But you won’t.” When his eyes heated again in defiance, she rushed on. “You’ll let me haul his ass to jail, where he’ll be caged for the rest of his life. You’ll let the system work as it was meant to, for his father, for Shumaker. For me.”

His jaw ticked, but he nodded and pulled her against him again. Because he needed it, because she did, too, she remained there until a groan came from the man on the floor.

She moved quickly to roll him on his stomach, and then used her former bindings to tie his hands in back. Looking up at Rafe, she asked, “How’d you know? How’d you know what to say to him?”

“A portion of the raw news footage Drake gave me showed Anton and Richard in the background. They exchanged the envelope her disk came in. When I arrived, I wasn’t sure you were here yet, until I heard voices. I listened.” Pain etched across his face. “God, that killed me.”

She rose and hugged him again.

“I couldn’t just barge—”

“No, you did the right thing. You did what you had to do, and I’m alive.” She tried to think of something, anything that could ease the tension in his body. “I’ll be sure to thank the landlord for not soundproofing the apartment.”

His laugh, albeit weak, was music to her ears.

Suddenly she remembered. “Bernardo! He’s in the garage. I’ve got to call a unit, get them here ASAP.” She moved away, but Rafe grabbed her wrist.

“Don’t bother to rush. His driver has more than his hands full.” When she gave him a puzzled look, he added, “You’ll spoil Luc and G’s fun.”

“Rafe!”

He smiled. “Don’t worry. He’s alive.”

Rafe was right, as she learned several minutes later when they brought a bound Richard Robertson down to the garage to meet the arriving officers. Bernardo was indeed alive; however, he no doubt wished he was anywhere but hogtied to a support column. His hands were bound close, but not close enough, to protect his groin from the leashed wolf, which took an evil delight in growling a few inches away.

Handing Richard to an officer who promptly folded him into the backseat of a patrol car, Mackenzie approached the grinning Lucian Stone.

“Citizen’s arrest,” he offered.

“You have a cruel sense of humor, Lucifer.”

He shrugged, his grin widening at her use of that nickname. “We all have our

little pleasures in life.”

She swatted his shoulder. “Well, knock it off. I don’t want to give this guy anything to use against us in court.”

As Luc and G backed up, she waved some officers forward to release the suspect.

Rafe watched the police car drive away. Richard sat slumped in the corner against the door. “He’ll try for the insanity defense.”

“He’ll try,” she agreed and silently vowed to be there every step of the way to ensure his attempt failed.

“Think he’ll turn on his boss?” Luc asked, referring to Bernardo, who was complaining rather loudly to the officers about how he’d been minding his own business when the nut and his dog attacked him. Mackenzie nearly laughed at hearing so many words come out of the man’s mouth all at once.

“Yeah, he’ll talk. I’ll make sure of it,” she promised. Her sudden grin reminded her of Richard’s brutality; she tentatively touched her split lip.

*Are you all right, Detective?*

Gabe’s voice had her looking around for the man before she realized the sound was in her head. She glanced at the wolf, smiled, and held out a hand.

“Hey, boy,” she said for the benefit of the officers still standing nearby. “We’re all going to be all right, I think. But I know you.” She narrowed her eyes playfully and patted his head. “You won’t trick me into petting your belly again.”

Male laughter erupted around her and inside her head. It was an unusual feeling, but one that seemed right.

Rafe made to hug her, and she grabbed his arms. “Hey, none of that. I’ve got a reputation to uphold, prisoners to interrogate, reports to file, work to do.”

“Tomorrow.” His eyes narrowed. “Tonight, I’ve got other duties in mind.”

“Oh, yeah?” Despite the audience and knowing she’d be teased without mercy tomorrow, she let him pull her into an embrace.

“Like thanking your landlord for starters.” He gave her a peck on the tip of her nose.

“I was thinking a thank - you card would do.”

240

“Not good enough.”

“No?” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Oh, that’s right. It’s so hard to buy for a man who can own the universe.” She stared into his eyes. “What do you give a man like that?”

“Your heart.”

She smiled. “You got it, wolfman,” she said, and pressed her lips to his.

THE END

...FOR NOW...

Author Bio

Brandi lives in a log home with her husband, son, and a salt - and - pepper schnauzer who believes he owns the place.

She loves to hear from her readers. You can contact her through any of the following Web sites:

[www.lycanpacks.com](http://www.lycanpacks.com)

[www.brandibroughton.com](http://www.brandibroughton.com)

## Breaking in Levi by Ann Cory

### Chapter One

“Damn.”

Victoria switched off the radio and resorted to humming to herself. All of the decent radio stations were crackling with static, and she hated the quiet.

With a brief glance up at the rearview mirror, she noted that no one was behind her. Since dinner at the rustic little café, she’d been the only one on the road, a fact that was strangely comforting and disturbing at the same time. Her only concern at the moment was finding a rest area. Three cups of coffee with her hot chicken and Swiss sandwich had proven too much for her bladder, and she was having a difficult time clenching her thighs together while driving. As a green sign loomed in the distance, she crossed her fingers. *Please, oh please.*

#### REST AREA 1 Mile

Victoria let out a sigh of relief and sat up straighter in the seat. She’d never been partial to going to the bathroom outside behind a bush. Especially alone. Remote or not, anyone could be out there, waiting for the opportune moment. She put on the blinker and slowed, taking it easy pulling into the rest area. The parking lot was empty. Not even the typical row of truckers snatching up a catnap en route was present. It unsettled her to be the only person in the vacant lot. Parking under a dim street lamp, as close to the women’s restrooms as the wide sidewalk allowed, she turned off the engine and drummed her fingertips on the steering wheel.

“Get a hold of yourself girl. You’ve watched one too many episodes of Unsolved Mysteries.”

Only a sliver of a moon peeked through the dusky sky. The drab cement building loomed in front of her. Taunting her. She’d traveled miles to find this one, so waiting for the next rest stop might be unwise. Pee her pants or use the desolate looking toilet. She took a deep breath and decided she had no choice but to go in.

She threw open the car door and made like when she was a little girl needing to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, knowing full well there were monsters under her bed. She didn’t care if she looked like a scared little girl. She dashed for the restroom, fearful those same monsters loomed in the shadows and beneath the car.

Her uncomfortable heels pinched her toes as she sprinted into the foul smelling restroom. The first three stalls were backed up and looked unpleasant. Only the handicapped stall was usable. She crossed her fingers that some elderly woman in a wheelchair wasn’t going to come in right then. Up went her skirt. Down went her black nylons and black silkies. Relief spread throughout her body.

In her haste to go, she’d forgotten to check one very important thing. No toilet paper. She sighed and reached for her purse, but remembered it was still in the car, safely tucked away from prying eyes beneath her jacket.

The sound of a car engine bothered her, but there were more pressing matters than another vehicle pulling into the rest stop. Like toilet paper. She rummaged inside the pocket of her skirt and came up with a crumpled tissue. It would have to do.

Victoria reached for her nylons and managed to make a sizable run in them. She

pulled them off in frustration and shoved them in the metal box on the wall. The cruel edge of her shoes raked against the back of her ankles as she slipped them back on. Blisters were unavoidable. She got situated in her clothes, flushed the toilet and walked to the sink to wash her hands.

The reflection in the mirror displayed a tired, worn out looking woman in her late twenties, who was seriously deprived of any fun in her life. There was no reason to try and fix her smudged make - up, in another four hours she would be in a luxurious hotel running a warm bath.

Sick from the putrid odor of the unkempt facility, she hurried outside. Then her knees nearly buckled. A stranger on a motorcycle was parked where her car should be. This can't be happening, she thought. Her car was *gone*!

She wasn't sure whether to approach the biker or not. In a black leather jacket, faded jeans with holes in the knees, and a look on his face that had trouble written all over it, he didn't exactly radiate a warm welcome. Men who rode bikes were bad news. At least that's what she'd always been told.

Anger took the place of her immediate concern and she marched up to him, propped her hands on her hips and pinned him with a glare. "Okay, asshole. Where the hell is my car?"