



WOLVES OF CRESCENT CREEK

ECLIPSED EMPIRE

TESSA
HALE

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WREN

Water slammed against my ravaged body. The liquid was so cold it felt like being stabbed by an infinite number of knives. But I still tried to catch some with my mouth. Just a tiny mouthful, anything to quench the burning thirst cracking my lips and throat.

Everything hurt.

It was the kind of pain that rivaled the worst my father had inflicted on me. The type that penetrated even my shifter abilities. Because, at some point, it'd become too much for my wolf.

I'd called on her when I first woke, trying to shift so I could tear the assholes limb from limb. But they hadn't just stabbed me. They'd also drugged me. And whatever they kept injecting me with made it so I couldn't call on my wolf half.

More than that, it made me fuzzy and unable to pull together a plan to escape. The fuzziness was fading slightly, though, which was good. I would have a few precious minutes to gather intel.

But the clarity also meant that I felt every ounce of pain.

My clothes hung off me in tattered slashes of fabric. My white tank top was stained with a mix of red, rust, and pink blood, in various stages of drying, coating the material. At least my jeans hid the worst of it.

My legs trembled and nearly gave way, but I sent all my strength to them, trying to stay upright. If I didn't, it would be so much worse.

A hook hung from the ceiling of the empty warehouse, its attached chain making squeaking noises with every tiny movement I made. The monsters had chained my wrists and hung me from it. If my legs gave way, my arms would pay the price. Again.

Just thinking about it made my shoulders ache. One had already dislocated before the man they called Angus popped it back into place. It was the one time I hadn't been able to hold back my scream.

I scanned the room around me, squinting into the dark. The darkness reached out with clawing tentacles, trying to strangle me. I fought back the panic and fear, focusing instead on the tiny sliver of light sneaking under a door in the far wall.

It was my only comfort now.

Pain racked my body, but it wasn't from the many wounds. It was much worse.

It was the agony of rejection.

Kingston's face flashed in my mind. The hurt. The betrayal. The accusations.

Brix's haunted eyes swirled in my imagination then. The confused pain.

And Ender. The sheer pleasure at finding the evidence he'd so desperately wanted. His triumph.

A single tear slid down my cheek. It was all I could allow myself—a tiny flicker of weakness before I shored up my defenses.

Focus, Wren.

Taking a deep breath, I looked around the room again and used the physical pain to keep me in the here and now. I had no memory of the monsters bringing me here. Didn't know how long it had been. One day? Two? More?

There were no windows to give me a clue as to where we were or what time of day it was. Nothing about the building itself gave me any information

either. I pulled some air in through my nose, trying to tap into my fading shifter senses.

I could smell my blood, the metallic tinge coating my throat. But I tried to search past that. Motor oil, grease. Pine. Lake water.

It could've been countless places. And the truth was, it didn't matter if I couldn't get free.

As if the Universe were taunting me, the sound of motorcycles filled the air. My body began to tremble. There wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop it because my muscles knew what was coming.

The sounds cut off in waves, replaced by rough voices until the hinges on a door squeaked. I caught flashes of fading daylight. A gravel lot. And those bikes I'd heard.

Massive overhead lights flicked on, and I blinked against the vicious beams, the ache already thrumming in my head intensifying.

"Well, whaddya know? The Diablos' bitch is still breathing. I'm a little disappointed, boys."

I squinted, trying to get my eyes to adjust to the brightness. *Angus*. He wore one of those leather vests. The emblem on the back alone would've had me steering clear. *Death Walkers MC*. Below it was a skeletal face, with its mouth open in a silent scream. On the front, Angus's patch read *Pres*.

He was undoubtedly their leader. Likely because he had the most meanness in him. His hair and scraggly beard were a mixture of red, brown, and gray. But his eyes? They were pure black.

I'd never seen anything like it in a human. But this man didn't smell like the supernatural world. No, he'd given his soul to the darkness, free and clear.

A dozen or so of his *brothers* spilled in, taking their places around him and joining the handful he'd left with me. They all knew enough to keep their distance and watch their tone.

Angus's boots clomped on the broken cement floor as he strode toward me. My body began shaking again. I hated the weakness. The fear. But I couldn't control it. I could only control my choice not to cower.

I lifted my chin and met the man's dark gaze.

He laughed. "She's got fire. I'll give her that." Angus pulled something from his pocket. Slowly, he unfolded a knife. I could still see hints of my blood on the blade.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Angus's fingers were stained black with grease and blood. His knife was just an extension of him.

Angus ran the tip from my chin, down my neck, and between my breasts. "Have you ever considered they don't deserve your loyalty?"

A few of the braver guys let out sounds of agreement.

"You would be beautiful if not for all the scars. They must be the ones who gave them to you. Why protect them? I'll kill them and make it hurt."

My mouth went dry as I pictured the guys. Their faces swirled in my mind, each grabbing hold for a handful of seconds before fading into the next. But my mind ended on Locke's. His face stayed. The tender looks that swept over him. The way his gray eyes softened behind his glasses. How he would do *anything* for me.

My wolf let out a keening noise within me. She wanted her mate. Her *mates*. Even the ones who'd rejected her. Though she'd likely rake her claws over their flesh once she recovered.

"What's the matter?" Angus singsonged.

"She probably had a stroke," another of the guys called, laughter in his voice. "She's been hanging there for four days."

Four days?

I'd lost at least two. The only thing that broke up the time was when they unhooked me and took me to a disgusting bathroom. But even that didn't seem to come in any expected pattern.

Angus traced the blade lower to my belly, occasionally pricking an open wound. "I'd almost respect her stubborn streak if I didn't need something."

Without warning, the blade was gone, only to be slammed into my side with brutal force. The air left my lungs in an audible whoosh as pain flooded my system. Lights danced in front of my eyes as I bowed forward, the chains around my wrists pulling taut.

My wolf snarled, wanting to be free. I tried to call on her and shift, but whatever drug they kept giving me was still too strong in my system.

“Tell me what they are,” Angus growled.

He knew. Not the guys’ true secret, but he knew something was up.

“It’s fucking aliens,” one of the bikers yelled.

“Shut up,” Angus snarled, and the man snapped his mouth closed. The MC president held the knife pointed right at me. “Something isn’t right about those Diablos. We know they’re here, but we can never find their property.”

“Cloaking,” a deep voice said. “Gotta be some top-secret government shit.”

Angus looked at the massive man as he considered that possibility, then turned back to me. He pressed the knife in right over my ribs. “Do they have some sort of tech hiding them?”

I didn’t say a word, my eyes watering as the burn in my ribs intensified.

“Where. Are. They?” Angus snarled.

I’d never tell him. It didn’t matter that half of them had abandoned me, rejected me, or thrown me away like nothing more than trash. I’d never betray them. I’d never be what Ender had accused me of.

Angus pushed the blade deeper into my body. “Tell. Me.”

Lights danced in front of my eyes, and the room went blurry.

“I’ll get it out of you, bitch. And I’m gonna make it hurt.” Angus twisted the knife.

I screamed. And then the torture started all over again.

LOCKE

My fingers flew over the keyboard as I stared at the screen. My eyes burned like they'd taken a bath in acid overnight, left to soak like dentures in a glass. But I didn't stop. There were more avenues to take, more routes to check.

"Locke," Puck said, his voice low.

"Hmm?" I didn't look away from the screen. There was a bus station two towns over that Wren could've used if she'd hitched a ride.

The idea of her getting into a car with a stranger had my wolf snarling. It didn't matter that he was submissive; his mate was at risk, and that was enough to bring out alpha tendencies in anyone.

"You need to get some sleep."

My gaze flicked to my brother in the chair next to me. Puck looked rough. His scruff had gotten thicker in the last five days, and dark circles rimmed green eyes that had gone dull. Even his blond hair seemed to have lost a little of its signature shine.

I looked back to the computer screen, trying to find the right backdoor channel that would allow me to access the bus station's security cameras.

"Like you've slept."

"I got a few hours last night," Puck defended.

What he meant was that he'd crashed for about two hours on my couch while I hacked into our local taxi company. There were no pickups around the time Wren disappeared.

Every single avenue I took came up empty. It was like Wren had simply vanished into thin air. But I knew that wasn't possible. She was somewhere. Or worse, someone had her.

"Locke." There was a bite to Puck's tone this time.

"I'm not sleeping," I clipped. "Not until Wren's sleeping with me."

My wolf howled this time. He was in agony, right along with me. We missed our mate. Missed her scent, her feel, her essence. Wren made everything in our world better. Without her, everything turned a sickly gray.

Puck let out a long sigh and scrubbed his hands over his face. "All right. What can I do?"

The tiniest bit of tension bled out of me at his words. I didn't have it in me to fight with Puck. He had been the only one who'd had Wren's back with me. "I want you to look for her in this camera footage. I just need one sec—there. Got it."

There were two camera angles covering the ticketing area. The bus station itself wasn't large, but they did a share of their business in cash, so it made sense that they had security. I was damn glad. I sent one of the two feeds to the monitor nearest Puck and put the other on mine.

"Let's see if she got on a bus," I muttered. If she did, I could match the timestamp from the footage to the transactions from the teller and discover where the hell Wren was going.

My gut twisted at the thought. I knew Wren leaving of her own free will was the best option, but the knowledge that she might've been okay with walking away from me killed something inside me.

The video began to play at four times normal speed. "Holler if you see anything that might be her. I'll pause it," I told Puck.

He nodded; his gaze remaining trained on the screen. "What are we going to do when we find her?"

Puck's voice had gone soft. Not with gentleness, but with defeat. Because we were going to lose something no matter what. There was no way around it.

"We go get her," I said, my back teeth grinding together.

His gaze flicked to me for a split second. "She doesn't want to be here. We can't force her."

Pain swept through me. "I know. We'll have to start over somewhere new."

"Just the three of us?" Puck asked.

If Wren wanted that, then yes. But Brix and King knew they'd fucked up. They would try to make things right. I just had to hope Wren gave them a chance to atone.

Ender, on the other hand, was still locked in his obsession with seeing Wren as the villain. It was like she'd gotten too close to his vulnerabilities, and it'd scared the hell out of him. So, he did the only thing he could. He went on the offensive.

"I guess we'll have to see. One thing at a time. We need to find her first." I reached for my energy drink. Tipping it back, I realized it was already gone. I kept my eyes on my screen but reached for my mini fridge and pulled out another.

"You're going to give yourself a heart attack," Puck muttered.

"You have your drug of choice, I have mine," I muttered.

Person after person flew across the screen. We had a fairly large window of time for when Wren could've been at the station, so it would take a while to get through all the footage. My fingers drummed on the desk, my body dying to move, run, find Wren. But there was nothing I could do.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. I listened to the rhythm, trying to decipher the cadence. They weren't quick and excited—the kind of footsteps that carried news. They were defeated. Both sets.

I didn't bother turning around as they reached the threshold of The Lair. I simply waited.

“Anything?” Kingston asked. I heard pain and rage in his voice, his words strangled as he desperately tried to hold on to control.

“Nothing,” Puck mumbled. “You?”

“There’s not a damn sign of her anywhere,” Kingston said.

“She probably had a pack mate pick her up,” Ender spat. “Who knows how many Red River bastards are crawling all over Crescent Creek?”

In a matter of seconds, I smashed my empty drink can and hurled it at Ender. He caught it at the last second, surprise lighting his features. I shoved to my feet and paused the footage. “If you don’t stop with the bullshit bitterness, I’ll hold you down while Brix removes your tongue.”

Ender’s amber eyes flashed gold. “You could try, but you’d fail. I’ll—”

“Enough,” King growled. “This isn’t what we need. End, if you’re still on this Wren-is-evil mission, you’re on your own. You want to work with us, do me a favor and shut the fuck up.”

Ender’s mouth snapped closed, but fury still burned in his expression.

I would’ve loved for King to kick him to the curb, but the truth was, Ender was a hell of a tracker. And we needed all the help we could get.

“Where’s Brix?” Puck asked.

Something passed over Ender’s face. I swore it was pain. Or maybe regret.

But it was Kingston who spoke. “He won’t come in. Not until we find her.”

Hell. Of course, Brix would be taking this hard. He’d hurt Wren. He was part of the reason she’d run. And if anyone was into self-flagellation, it was him.

Puck let out a low growl. “Someone must have seen her *somewhere*.”

A ding sounded, and I turned, just catching sight of the icon before it disappeared. It was an incoming email, one sent to our general folder at Crescent Kingdom Security. But the subject line had my blood turning cold. *Missing something?*

A buzz lit beneath my skin as I hurried to open the inbox. My hand trembled as I missed the email the first time I tried to click. Cursing, I got it

as the other guys moved in around me.

Opening it, I saw it had an attachment. A video. Nausea churned in my gut as I clicked *Download*. My security software would block any viruses, but it didn't block this attack. Not anywhere but on my device anyway.

The video opened to one of those boomerang images—a few seconds of a clip, repeated over and over. Wren. Hanging from a hook. Her body broken and battered. Soaked in blood. Strands of hair matted to her face.

And she wasn't moving.

KINGSTON

Wren. All I could see was her. All I could feel was the agony *I'd* caused.

My little warrior had been through so much already. A lifetime of trauma and torture. And I'd just inflicted more.

"Play it." My voice wasn't mine. The only familiar pieces were the alpha vibes bleeding from each note.

Puck muttered a curse as Locke clicked the play button with his mouse.

"Come on, Diablos bitch. No more fight left in you?" a raspy voice taunted. And it was one I knew.

"Angus," Puck snarled, leaning forward.

The president of the Death Walkers MC stepped forward into view of the camera as Wren swung from the hook, the toes of her shoes barely grazing a cement floor. Thick chains had been wrapped around her wrists and connected to the hook, and blood was everywhere. On her arms, her face, her body. There were even splatters of it on the floor.

"She's loyal," Angus said, amusement in his tone as he glanced at the camera. "I'll give you that. Funny that you broke up our li'l flesh ring when it looks like you've got one of your own. None of our girls looked as bad as yours." He traced a scar on Wren's arm with a knife, slicing into her flesh and making blood ooze.

A soft moan slipped from Wren's lips, but I couldn't see her mouth, her face. All that dark-brown hair—matted now—hung in a sheet and blocked her from view.

"She does make the best sounds," Angus taunted.

Puck shoved back from the desk, letting loose a stream of curses, his British accent growing thicker.

Angus grabbed a chunk of Wren's hair and yanked her head back. "Whaddya think, bitch? You want to play a little more? Show those bastards just how pretty you scream?"

"Go—to—hell." Wren's words were more rasp than fully formed syllables, but Angus heard her just fine.

He slammed his knife into her side, the force of it making Wren's body bow.

Snarls lit the air around me, and fur rippled over my arms. I wouldn't be able to hold my wolf back for much longer. Not now.

"Tell. Me. *Where*. They. Are," Angus demanded.

Wren's head lolled to the side as he released her, like she was too weak to even hold it up anymore. Agony tore through me. My mate. Hurt. Tortured. Close to death. Because of us.

Angus moved into her space. "You will break, but I hope not too quickly. This is too much fun." He grabbed her hair again. "Say hello to your fuck buddies." He lifted the blade to her neck, and then the video shut off.

No one moved.

I wasn't sure any of us even breathed. All I could hear was the blood roaring in my ears, pounding with panic and failure.

"She's trying to protect us," Locke whispered.

We all knew it. She was taking the pain so we stayed safe. *Fucking hell*. We didn't deserve her. None of us. But especially me.

"It could be an act. Faking it to get us to do something. They're probably going to ask for a ransom," Ender argued.

I whirled on him. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

I'd barely gotten the sentence out before Locke's fist crashed into Ender's jaw. He followed it up with a jab to the nose that had a satisfying crunch piercing the air.

"Fucking hell," Ender growled as Puck moved in to push Locke back. I knew it wasn't for Ender's benefit; it was for Locke's. As much improvement as he'd made in hand-to-hand, Ender was a trained assassin and could kill Locke in two seconds flat if he wanted to.

"I'm not even allowed to state a possibility?" Ender snapped, grabbing for a paper towel to put under his nose.

"You can, but you'll have to deal with the consequences." My voice held no emotion as I moved into Ender's space. I'd gone completely cold. "And if you say something like that about *my* mate again, I will see it as a challenge to my alpha status and grant you the duel."

Surprise and the briefest flicker of fear flashed in Ender's eyes. My wolf loved the terror. It fed him, gave him energy for the battle to come.

"Is that understood?" I growled.

Ender's jaw worked back and forth. "Crystal fucking clear." Shoving the paper towel under his nose, he turned on his heel and stalked out of The Lair.

Puck's hand dropped from Locke's chest, and he ran it through his hair, tugging hard on the strands. "He didn't ask for anything."

At least one of us had it somewhat together and was thinking logically. Because he was right. There'd been no request. The Death Walkers didn't want money; they wanted vengeance. And they were using Wren to get it.

I stared hard at the screen, the final image up now, the knife pressed to Wren's throat. "We have to find her." Who knew how much time she had before Angus decided the best sort of vengeance was to kill her? "Locke, can you do something with the video? Find her location that way?"

He was already moving, sliding back into his chair, his fingers flying over the keyboard. "The video itself won't have a location, but the email might." Locke's hands blurred with how fast they moved. "If they sent it from a device, it may give us information I can track."