

LBRIS

We know
books



MATE



ALI HAZELWOOD



SPHERE



LBRIS

We know
books

MATE

PROLOGUE



THE CHILD HAD BEEN TRAINED WELL—NOT BY HER FAMILY, BUT by life.

When the door broke down and she ran for her mother, it wasn't to seek comfort, but to provide it. *Come with me*, she wanted to beg, but since the words wouldn't come out, she tugged at her sleeve. *Come with me. It's better this way.*

But the mother freed herself and didn't spare a single glance for the girl, who had no choice but to retreat upstairs, alone. There was a man sleeping in the bedroom, a cruel, nasty Were who scared her nearly as much as the people breaking in. Still, she shook him awake to warn him.

"I'm tryin' to get some fucking rest for once," he roared, pushing her away. The girl ducked down before he could hit her. "If you can't keep quiet—" He stopped, realizing that something was amiss. She glanced around for a hiding spot and slipped inside the closet.

For a while, that was it. She hugged her knees and breathed.

through the musty scent of old clothes. When the screams started, she began counting. The people in the house always called her stupid, but she could go up to a thousand, and the numbers in her head, stacked one after the other after the other, covered the wails of pain, the snarled insults, the sounds of snapping bones. She kept silent, even as the noises grew closer and louder.

Two hundred and five. Two hundred and six. Two hundred and—

A pool of viscous blood seeped in from under the door, and the child could no longer control herself. Her gasp ricocheted off the walls of the overstuffed closet before she could cover her mouth. She knew then that she was as good as dead.

No. No, no, *no*.

Trembling, she bit her lip and prayed to her mother's old god. In the darkness, she could not make out the color of the blood. *Stay calm*, she told herself, shrinking into a pile of ancient blankets. The pleas had stopped a whole minute earlier, but there was still movement all over the house. Maybe it was her mother. Maybe she was coming upstairs to look for her—

The closet door opened abruptly. A dark figure stared down at the girl, its tall silhouette framed by a glowing halo from the ceiling light.

He was Death. Who Death would be if it were a person.

Seized by terror, the girl opened her mouth and filled her lungs with air, ready to scream. But the man lifted his finger to his lips, and the simple command froze her.

"Not a huge fan of shrieks," he explained, coming closer. Behind him was the corpse of the Were she'd tried to warn, forest-green liquid oozing from the gash in his neck.

And she was going to be next.

"Don't beat yourself up. It's not because you made noise."

Death's voice was a low rumble cutting through the silence. He seemed distracted, glancing around the room, as if looking for something he may have misplaced. "I could smell you the second I walked inside." He crouched down to her height, carelessly stepping in blood.

The child's teeth chattered with pure fear. *Beg*, a voice ordered. *Beg him*. But her mouth wouldn't open.

"You up there?" someone yelled from the first floor, and the girl jerked. She tried to be brave, but tears began streaming down her face. The man noticed, and his expression became displeased, just like Mother's had when the girl used to complain about their new life.

Weak. Crybaby. Selfish.

He reached for her with a sigh, and she screwed her eyes shut. In the riot of her heartbeat, she wished only for the end to be quick. *Let it be quick. It can be painful as long as it's quick.*

But then a thumb gently wiped tears from her face, and her eyes sprang open.

"Hey!" Another voice traveled up the stairs, closer this time. "Anything you need?"

The man's dark eyes held hers. He sighed again. "Call the social worker."

"Shit. How many this time?"

"One." The man's jaw ticced as his finger did one last pass.

"Don't cry. Or do, if you like. But it's better this way. I sincerely hope that this will be the worst day of your life." His lips curved in a small smile. "When's the last time you ate?"

She blinked, taken aback by the change of topic. Truth was, she couldn't remember. Yesterday? Two days ago?

"C'mon. Let's get you something warm." He held out his arms,

and since the child couldn't avoid the sticky green puddle on her own, she let him pick her up, not sure why she was allowing a murderer to carry her downstairs. *Maybe he helped Mother, too*, she thought, knowing that the man was strong enough for the task.

Yes, he certainly had. She was sure that they were going to her right now. So she buried her face in the stranger's neck and let his slow heartbeat lull her to calm. And since she was able to, she started to count to a thousand once more.

CHAPTER 1



*She tore him apart and remade him.
It took her less than a second.*

Present day

IF SUCH A THING AS AN IDEAL NIGHT TO DIE EXISTED, IT WOULD not be this one.

There's *so much* wrong with it. I could bitch about the recent rainstorm, the weak garlic-clove-sized moon, the uncharged phone sitting on my nightstand. The main issue, though, is that I'm wearing no more than two items of clothing: undies and a camisole. They were both perfectly adequate underneath my fluffy comforter. Unfortunately, I left that back at the cabin. When I woke up at one a.m. to the realization that someone was breaking in.

It's fall. In a place that a year or so ago—back when I still foolishly believed I was Human—I would have called Oregon. Now that my Were genes are taking over, stuff like cartography and state lines have become comically trivial, but the crux of the matter remains: November in the Northwest is cold, and I'm not dressed appropriately.

The goddamn timing, I mouth to myself, darting behind the gnarly trunk of a Douglas fir. Chest heaving, I stare down at my very Human-shaped hand. I visualize the change, willing my bitten-to-the-quick nails to turn into claws.

Shift into a wolf, Serena. Shift into a fucking wolf, or I swear to God that . . .

That *nothing*. My body refuses to be shamed into compliance. I glance up at the sky, but the much-publicized pull of the moon offers only the most apathetic of tugs. With a muted groan, I resume my sprint through the forest, bare feet slipping through fresh mud. A dozen little cuts crisscross my soles and shins. The longer I run, the fainter my hope that the soil will conceal the iron scent of my blood.

And I've been running for a while.

The intruder is tracking me. Gaining ground. The wind carries his ever-closer smell, and I don't like what it tells me. Vampyre. Adult in his prime. Eager. The thrill of the chase titillates him, and his arousal scrapes against the bottom of my stomach. As revolting as that is, though, it's the least of my problems. Because if I can smell him this clearly, there's a very high chance that *he's* close enough to—

"At long fucking last." The words hiss like bullets in my ear. An instant later, my back is slammed into a trunk. I don't know what hurts most—the bark biting into my skin, the hand he curls around my throat, or his disgusting, maniacal stench.

The forest is pitch black. There's no darkness through which Weres cannot see, but I got only half of those nice wolf genes, which means that my night vision is hit or miss. Still, the Vampyre's bloodlust is unmistakable. As is the blade in his hand. "Not very fast, are you?" he growls.

No shit. I swallow an eye roll and make myself moan helplessly.

"Please," I beg. His scent explodes, like having women at his mercy is his kink of choice—how predictable—so I give him some more. "Please, don't kill me. I'll do whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?"

He's *so* interested. I let out a whimper and widen my eyes. "Anything."

His eyes travel down my body, as if to assess what I might be useful for—organ trafficking, bone broth, yard maintenance. Unlike me, he *is* fast. Preternaturally so. With dizzying speed, his knife slices through the front of my silk top, deepening the neckline.

This *fucker*.

But as he leers, his scent spikes. Which means that he's distracted enough by what he's uncovered that I get a chance to put the self-defense classes my sister forced me to attend to good use.

Knee to the groin.

Headbutt to the nose.

And, as a little extra, an elbow to the stomach. I mean, why not?

The Vampyre grunts. Mutters a few variations of "fucking whore." I'm free, though. I might not be able to outrun him, but I *can* grab a fistful of soil and throw it at his eyes, which does just enough damage to slow him down. I frantically look around and—*yes*. I spot a sharp, jagged rock. Bend down to palm it.

"You fucking *freak of nature*." The Vampyre is on me again, twisting my arm behind my back. I let out a yelp, but the rock is in my hand. Tragically, he's holding my wrist at the wrong angle for me to strike.

In theory, I know what the next step is—*move closer, lower your center of gravity, rotate your body, strike with your free hand*—and boy, do I try. Sadly, the Vampyre is a notch or two above the average fighter, and none of it works.

That's when my stomach starts churning for real. This is not going to end well. "Let. Me. Go," I spit out.

"Shut up." The vinegar of his scent stings my nose. He's even more worked up now. And I'm in even deeper shit. "I may not be allowed to kill you, but I can make you hurt a whole fucking lot before I—"

"Can you, though?" A male voice interrupts him. It travels in our direction from some place in the thicket of trees. A rich, slow curl, at once vicious and detached. No answer exists that could faze this voice. "Can you really, buddy?"

The Vampyre's frame stiffens. Before he can leash his instinctive reaction, I smell utter, abject, acrid fear.

I close my eyes. Force my burning lungs to inhale slowly. Let my prospect of the next ten minutes readjust, mold to a shape that is . . . still unfortunate, yes, but a touch less.

Koen.

Koen's here.

It will be all right.

The Vampyre yanks me in front of him, holding his knife to my throat. I wonder if he means to use me as a hostage, or as a meat shield that barely reaches the top of his chest. "What are you doing here?" he barks.

It's a fair question. Koen lives several hours away and hasn't been around in nearly two months, since the day he dropped me off at the cabin, at my request, with a metric ton of supplies, a lingering stare, and a mocking *Have fun chatting up the spruces, killer* that didn't quite match the intensity in his eyes.

"Did you just ask what I'm doing in my territory? What the fuck are you doing, shitdump?" A handful of long, unhurried strides, and Koen emerges from the thicket.

He's different. From anyone else, yes, but also since I last saw him. His black hair is tied back at the top of his head in an overgrown, unkempt version of his latest cut. He hasn't shaved in weeks, and I suspect he might be a touch behind on sleep, too. His presence, though, has the usual effect on me: it gives me ballast and bolts me to the ground when I'm on the verge of being spirited away.

Alpha.

His deep scent is unmistakable. Solid and placating. The perfect counterpoint to the panic of the Vampyre.

Who snarls, "I'll kill her if you come closer."

Koen, of course, comes closer. With the placid air of someone who has never doubted his ability to hammer the world to his will. "Uh-uh. Serena, he says he's going to kill you. You cool with that?" His tone is pure intellectual curiosity. Charcoal eyes glow steadily in the night.

"I did run out of instant noodles last week," I croak. Not my best idea, since the Vampyre nearly twists my humerus out of its socket. But the amused twitch of Koen's mouth *almost* makes up for it.

"You are Koen Alexander, aren't you? The Alpha of the Northwest."

"I sure am. What's *your* name, bud?"

"That's not important. If you come any closer—"

Koen clucks his tongue. "You gotta tell me your name, or I'll have to make one up. Any ideas, Serena?"

I clear my throat. "I like Bob."

"Bob the Vampyre. Love it."

"That's *not* my na—"

"It is if the lady says so, shartstain. Wanna tell me what you're doing in my territory before I rip off your balls and shove them down your throat?"

The Vampyre doesn't reply but wrenches my arm so violently, my vision spots and I nearly lose consciousness. When I can parse out sounds again, he's pulling me into his body and snarling, "She might be too valuable to kill, but I can do a whole lot of damage."

"Go ahead, then." For the first time since he appeared, Koen's eyes catch on mine. I read absolutely nothing in them. "This girl can take a lot. Am I wrong, Serena?"

I somehow find the strength to shake my head—a blatant lie. And yet. It might be a pain-induced olfactory hallucination, but I think I smell how pleased it makes him.

"You sure?" the Vampyre asks. "She's half *Human*, after all."

"And you're half jackass. What a stunning coincidence."

"They all want her, you know. Since that interview she gave, every Vampyre on the continent has been looking for her."

"Yeah. I'm sure there are plenty of vivisection tables with her name on it."

"But do you know how much they'll pay?" The Vampyre's voice takes on a sudden persuasive bent. "As the person who brings the hybrid to them, I will be able to name my price."

"Sure. And they definitely won't get rid of you the second you hand her over."

The Vampyre snorts. "I'm smarter than that. I'm the first who found her—do you think I'm the only one after her bounty? Others are going to follow. Once they discover that you're giving her sanctuary, they'll flock here. Are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life protecting a half Human? Let me take her off your hands. Look the other way."

"As far as offers go, Bob, this one is lazy as fuck." Koen spreads his arms. "What do I get out of it? You're supposed to offer something in return. Split the reward, wash my car—"

"They say she's your mate."

It's like the forest hears the words. Like *it understands* them. For a brief second every critter, every leaf, every drop of water stills, as if waiting for Koen's reaction.

"Do they, now?" He advances, still relaxed. He's taking a night stroll. Wandering around a museum. Unburdened of all worries.

"Yes. And you know what else they say?"

"Bet you're going to tell me."

"That she rejected you."

"Ouch." Koen doesn't look to be in any pain. "And your unimpeachable reasoning is that I'll happily exact my revenge on her by allowing you to take her."

"Wouldn't it be better? To be done with her once and for all?"

Koen lifts a hand, making the Vampyre jolt. All he does, though, is massage his temple like an exhausted parent would. Wondering why his toddler is stuffing another crayon up a nostril. "Man. I'm going to have to kill you, and Jorma's gonna make me do a fuckton of paperwork for that." He sighs, and the trace of impatience in his voice makes my blood curdle.

Not the Vampyre's, though. Because what he says next is "And she's pretty, isn't she?"

I go very, very still. And so does Koen.

"And right now she's not in a position to *reject* anyone."

No response.

"Do you get my meaning? *Alpha?*"

Any pretense of casualness melts out of Koen's demeanor. Every atom of his body is now on high alert, orienting toward prey. Toward *me*.

"Like I said, she's very beautiful. I wouldn't mind tossing her your way, after I'm done with her," he offers. Koen's eyes contract.

to displeased pinpricks, and his scent gives off such unequivocal aversion, even the Vampyre knows to backtrack. "Or you could have your fun with her. Then I'd take her away, no questions asked. She'd have no one to complain to."

An owl hoots in the distance. I hold my breath, waiting for Koen to tell the Vampyre to fuck off, but the silence lingers, and his eyes grow opaque, and after a while he . . .

Koen *nods*.

My heart plummets:

No. He wouldn't. He would never.

"Koen?" I say. Half question, half plea.

"In my defense, Serena . . ." Koen lifts his shoulders. "It's always fucking something with you."

Ice prickles all over my skin. "No. Don't. Koen, *don't*—"

"I took the liberty to get started," the Vampyre says, and before I can wonder what he means, his free hand lowers the torn half of my top down my shoulder.

Koen's eyes linger on my nearly bare chest like I'm no more than a cut of flesh. An offering to be appraised. Something created for him to use. I watch his pupils do an odd dance, sense a shift in his scent before he murmurs, "See, *this* is how you make a deal. I knew you had it in you, Bob."

Once again, I beg my body to shift to its wolf form. Once again, I am ignored. With a furious grunt, I begin thrashing in the Vampyre's grip, desperately trying to break free. But he's stronger than me, and Koen's probably stronger than the two of us put together. I can knock out one of them, and I'd still be screwed.

I clutch the rock in my palm, but folded as he has me, I still cannot use it.

Terror rushes through my body. Thumps against my chest.

"She's all yours, Alpha. Do what you will with her." The Vampyre lets out a winded, obnoxious laugh. He lowers his blade and pushes me a few inches forward without letting go of my wrists. He stinks like he knows that it's all over for me—that he's *won*. "Maybe she'd even enjoy it?"

Koen considers the matter as he steps closer, near enough that I can feel his heat, and I bare my teeth at him as I squirm in the Vampyre's clutch. This can't be for real. *Alpha protects*, says a calm Were voice that lives inside my bones. *Alpha is home. Koen is not like that.*

Except, I'm not so sure.

Koen stops in front of me, staring like I'm at his disposal, and yeah. He is *exactly* like that.

"Would she?" he wonders, voice low and rich, eyes caressing my face and lingering on my bare breast. Closer still, and his presence envelops me like a warm blanket. His scent blooms in my nostrils, safe, grounding, so breathtakingly perfect that for a moment I forget about the Vampyre behind me, the pine needles jabbed into the soles of my feet.

"Please," I mouth softly, but I don't think Koen hears me. His hand comes up to my face. Wraps around my cheek, thumb pressing into my lower lip.

"Would you, Serena? Enjoy it?"

Panic bursts anew in my chest. I shake my head violently. *No. No.*

"Well, then." His eyes soften, and he lets out a half-resigned, half-amused sigh. "Better make use of that rock in your hand, killer."

It takes me a beat to understand his meaning, and to realize that the Vampyre's hold on my wrist has loosened. Twisting my arm free