

# Stolen

## Prologue

He hated the forest. Hated its eternal pockets of damp and darkness. Hated its endless tangle of trees and bushes. Hated its smell of decay—dead vegetation, dead animals, everything dying, even the living creatures incessantly pursuing their next meal, one failure away from the slow descent into death. Soon his body would be one more stink fouling the air, maybe buried, maybe left for the carrion feeders, his death postponing theirs for another day. He would die. He knew that, not with the single-minded intent of the suicidal or the hopeless despair of the doomed, but with the simple acceptance of a man who knows he is only hours from passing out of this world into the next. Here in this stinking, dark, damp hell of a place, he would die.

He didn't seek death. If he could, he'd avoid it. But he couldn't. He'd tried, planning his breakout for days, conserving his energy, forcing himself to eat, to sleep. Then he'd escaped, surprising himself really. He'd never truly believed it would work. Of course, it hadn't actually worked, just appeared so, like a mirage shimmering in the desert, only the oasis hadn't turned to sand and sun, but damp and dark. He'd escaped the compound to find himself in the forest. Still hopeful, he'd run. And run. And gone nowhere. They were coming now. Hunting him.

He could hear the hound baying, fast on his trail. There must be ways to trick it, but he had no idea how. Born and raised in the city, he knew how to avoid detection there, how to become invisible in plain sight, to effect an appearance so mediocre that people could stare right at him and see no one. He knew how to greet neighbors in his apartment building, eyes lowered, a brief nod, no words, so if anyone asked about the occupants of 412, no one really knew who lived there, was that the elderly couple? the young family? the blind girl? Never rude or friendly enough to attract attention, disappearing in a sea of people too intent on their own lives to notice his. There he was a master of invisibility. But here, in the forest? He hadn't set foot in one since he was ten, when his parents finally despaired of ever making an outdoorsman out of him and let him stay

with his grandmother while his siblings went hiking and camping. He was lost here. Completely lost. The hound would find him and the hunters would kill him.

'You won't help me, will you?' he said, speaking the words in his mind.

For a long moment, Qiona didn't reply. He could sense her, the spirit who guided him, in the back corner of his mind, the farthest she ever went from him since she'd first made herself known when he was a child too young to speak.

'Do you want me to?' she asked finally.

'You won't. Even if I want it. This is what you want. For me to join you. You won't stop that.'

The hound started to sing, joy infusing its voice with melody as it closed in on its target. Someone shouted.

Qiona sighed, the sound fluttering like a breeze through his mind. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Which way is out?' he asked.

More silence. More shouts.

'That way,' she said.

He knew which way she meant, though he couldn't see her. An ayami had presence and substance but no form, an idea impossible to explain to anyone who wasn't a shaman and as easy for a shaman to understand as the concept of water or sky.

Turning left, he ran. Branches whipped his face and bare chest and arms, raising welts like the marks of a flagellant. And equally self-inflicted, he thought. Part of him wanted to stop. Give up. Accept. But he couldn't. He wasn't ready to surrender this life yet. Simple human pleasures still held too much allure: English muffins with butter and strawberry jam at the Talbot Cafe, the second story balcony, farthest table on the left, the sun on his forearms, tattered mystery novel in one hand, coffee mug in the other, people yelling, laughing on the busy street below. Silly things, Qiona would sniff. She was jealous of course, as she was of anything she couldn't share, anything that kept him bound to his body. He did want to join her, but not yet. Not just yet. So he ran.

'Stop running,' Qiona said.

He ignored her.

'Slow down,' she said. 'Pace yourself.'

He ignored her.

She withdrew, her anger a flash fire in his brain, bright and hot, then smoldering, waiting to flare again. He'd stopped hearing the hound, but only because his blood pounded too loudly. His lungs blazed. Each breath scorched through him, like swallowing fire. He ignored it. That was easy. He ignored most of his body's commands, from hunger to sex to pain. His body was only a vehicle, a medium for transmitting things like strawberry jam, laughter and sunlight to his soul. Now after a lifetime of ignoring his body, he asked it to save him and it didn't know how. From behind him came the bay of the hound. Was it louder now? Closer?

'Climb a tree', Qiona said.

'It's not the dogs I'm afraid of. It's the men.'

'Slow down then. Turn. Confuse them. You're making a straight trail. Slow down.'

He couldn't. The end of the forest was near. It had to be. His only chance was to get there before the dogs did. Ignoring the pain, he summoned every remaining vestige of strength and shot forward.

'Slow down!' Qiona shouted. 'Watch—'

His left foot hit a small rise but adjusted, throwing his right foot out for balance. Yet his right foot came down on empty air. As he pitched forward, he saw the stream-bed below, at the bottom of a small gully eroded by decades of water-flow. He flipped over the edge of it, convulsed in midair, trying to think of how to land without injury, but again he didn't know how. As he hit the gravel below, he heard the hound. Heard its song of triumph so loud his eardrums threatened to split. Twisting to get up, he saw three canine heads come over the gully edge, one hound, two massive guard dogs. The hound lifted its head and bayed. The other two paused only a second, then leapt.

'Get out!' Qiona screamed. 'Get out now!'

No! He wasn't ready to leave. He resisted the urge to throw his soul free of his body, clenching himself into a ball as if that would keep it in. He saw the undersides of the dogs as they flew off the cliff. One landed atop him, knocking out his last bit of breath. Teeth dug into his forearm. He felt a tremendous wrenching. Then he soared upward. Qiona was dragging him from his body, away from the pain of dying.

'Don't look back,' she said.

Of course he did. He had to know. As he looked down, he saw the dogs. The hound was still at the top of the gully, howling and waiting for the men. The two other dogs didn't wait. They tore his body apart in a shower of blood and flesh.

'No,' he moaned. 'No.'

Qiona comforted him with whispers and kisses, pleaded with him to look away. She'd tried to save him from the pain, but she couldn't. He felt it as he looked down at the dogs destroying his body, felt not the pain of their teeth, but the agony of unbelievable loss and grief. It was over. All over.

'If I hadn't tripped,' he said. 'If I'd run faster . . .'

Qiona turned him then, so he could look out across the forest. The expanse of trees went on and on, ending in a road so far away the cars looked like bugs crawling across the earth. He glanced back at his body, a mangled mess of blood and bone. The men stepped from the forest. He ignored them. They didn't matter anymore. Nothing did. He turned to Qiona and let her take him away.

"Dead," Tucker said to Matasumi as he walked into the cell-block guard station. He scraped the mud of the forest off his boots. "Dogs got him before we did."

"I told you I wanted him alive."

"And I told you we need more hounds. Rottweilers are for guarding, not hunting. A hound will wait for the hunter. A Rottie kills. Doesn't know how to do anything else." Tucker removed his boots and laid them on the mat, perfectly aligned with the wall, laces tucked in. Then he took an identical but clean pair and pulled them on. "Can't see how it matters much. Guy was half-dead anyway. Weak. Useless."

"He was a shaman," Matasumi said. "Shamans don't need to be Olympic athletes. All their power is in their mind."

Tucker snorted. "And it did him a whole lotta good against those dogs, let me tell you. They didn't leave a piece of him bigger than my fist."

As Matasumi turned, someone swung open the door and clipped him in the chin.

"Whoops," Winsloe said with a grin. "Sorry, old man. Damn things need windows."

Bauer brushed past him. "Where's the shaman?"

"He didn't . . . survive," Matasumi said.

"Dogs," Tucker added.

Bauer shook her head and kept walking. A guard grabbed the interior door, held it open as she walked through. Winsloe and the guard trailed after her. Matasumi brought up the rear. Tucker stayed at the guard station, presumably to discipline whoever had let the shaman escape, though the others didn't bother to ask. Such details were beneath them. That's why they'd hired Tucker.

The next door was thick steel with an elongated handle. Bauer paused in front of a small camera. A beam scanned her retina. One of the two lights above the door flashed green. The other stayed red until she grasped the door handle and the sensor checked her hand-print. When the second light turned green, she opened the door and strode through. The guard followed. As Winsloe stepped forward, Matasumi reached for his arm, but missed. Alarms shrieked. Lights flashed. The sound of a half-dozen steel-toed boots clomped in synchronized quickstep down a distant corridor. Matasumi snatched the two-way radio from the table.

"Please call them back," Matasumi said. "It was only Mr. Winsloe. Again."

"Yes, sir," Tucker's voice crackled through the radio. "Would you remind Mr. Winsloe that each retinal and hand scan combination will authorize the passage of only one staff member and a second party."

They both knew Winsloe didn't need to be reminded of any such thing, since he'd designed the system. Matasumi stabbed the radio's disconnect button. Winsloe only grinned.

"Sorry, old man," Winsloe said. "Just testing the sensors."

He stepped back to the retina scanner. After the computer recognized him, the first light turned green. He grabbed the door-handle, the second light flashed green and the door opened. Matasumi could have followed without the scans, as the guard had, but he let the door close and followed the proper procedure. The admittance of a second party was intended to allow the passage of captives from one section of the compound to another, at a rate of only one captive per staff member. It was not supposed to allow two staff to pass together. Matasumi would remind Tucker to speak to his guards about this. They were all authorized to pass through these doors and should be doing so correctly, not taking shortcuts.

Past the security door, the interior hall looked like a hotel corridor, each side flanked by rooms furnished with a double bed, a small table, two chairs and a door leading to a bathroom. Not luxury accommodations by any means, but simple and clean, like the upper end of the spectrum for the budget conscious traveler, though the occupants of these rooms wouldn't be doing much traveling. These doors only opened from the outside.

The wall between the rooms and the corridor was a specially designed glass more durable than steel bars—and much nicer to look at. From the hallway, an observer could study the occupants like lab rats, which was the idea. The door to each room was also glass so the watcher's view wasn't obstructed. Even the facing wall of each bathroom was clear Plexiglas. The transparent bathroom walls were a recent renovation, not because the observers had decided they wanted to watch their subjects' elimination practices, but because they'd found that when all four walls of the bathrooms were opaque, some of the subjects spent entire days in there to escape the constant scrutiny.

The exterior glass wall was actually one-way glass. They'd debated that, one-way vs. two-way. Bauer had allowed Matasumi to make the final decision and he'd sent his research assistants scurrying after every psychology treatise on the effects of continual observation. After weighing the evidence, he'd decided one-way glass would be less intrusive. By hiding the observers from sight, it was less likely to agitate the subjects. He'd been wrong. At least with two-way glass the subjects knew when they were being watched. With one-way, they knew they were being

watched—none were naive enough to mistake the full-wall mirror for decoration—but they didn't know when, so they were on perpetual alert, which had a regrettably damning effect on their mental and physical health.

The group passed the four occupied cells. One subject had his chair turned toward the rear wall and sat motionless, ignoring the magazines, the books, the television, the radio, everything that had been provided for his diversion. He sat with his back to the one-way glass, and did nothing. That one had been at the compound nearly a month. Another occupant had arrived only this morning. She also sat in her chair, but facing the one-way glass, glaring at it. Defiant . . . for now. It wouldn't last.

Tess, the one research assistant Matasumi had brought to the project, stood by the defiant occupant's cell, ticking notations on her clipboard. She looked up and nodded as they passed.

"Anything?" Bauer asked.

Tess glanced at Matasumi, shunting her reply to him. "Not yet."

"Because she can't or won't?" Bauer asked.

Another glance at Matasumi. "It appears . . . I would say . . ."

"Well?"

Tess inhaled. "Her attitude suggests that if she could do more, she would."

"Can't, then," Winsloe said. "We need a Coven witch. Why we bothered with this one—"

Bauer interrupted, "We bothered because she's supposed to be extremely powerful."

"According to Katzen," Winsloe said. "If you believe him. I don't. Sorcerer or not, the guy's full of shit. He's supposed to be helping us catch these freaks. Instead, all he does is tell us where to look, then sits back while our guys take all the risks. For what? This?" He jabbed a finger at the captive. "Our second useless witch. If we keep listening to Katzen, we're going to miss out on some real finds."

"Such as vampires and werewolves?" Bauer's lips curved in a small smile. "You're still miffed because Katzen says they don't exist."

"Vampires and werewolves," Matasumi muttered. "We are in the middle of unlocking unimaginable mental power, true magic. We have potential access to sorcerers, necromancers, shamans, witches, every conceivable vessel of magic . . . and he wants creatures that suck blood and howl at the moon. We are conducting serious scientific research here, not chasing bogeymen."

Winsloe stepped in front of Matasumi, towering six inches over him. "No, old man, you're conducting serious scientific research here. Sondra is looking for her holy grail. And me, I'm in it for fun. But I'm also bankrolling this little project, so if I say I want to hunt a werewolf, you'd better find me one to hunt."

"If you want to hunt a werewolf, then I'd suggest you put one in those video games of yours, because we can't provide what doesn't exist."

"Oh, we'll find something for Ty to hunt," Bauer said. "If we can't find one of his monsters, we'll have Katzen summon something suitably demonic."

"A demon?" Winsloe said. "Now that'd be cool."

"I'm sure it would," Bauer murmured and pushed open the door into the shaman's former cell.



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## Chapter One - Demonic

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

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

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

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

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

"Michael . . .?"

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

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

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

"I would."

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

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

"That's, uh—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The posting read:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Uh—yes," I said. "Ms Winterbourne?"

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

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

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

"Three-thirty."

"I was sure—"

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

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

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

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

"Please. Should we wait inside?"

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

"No?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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