

## CHAPTER ONE



**A** whimper echoes through the barren room as I stretch my legs, only to stop when the pain becomes unbearable. Over the past week, they left me alone in my cell. Before that, they forced me to work alongside and keep pace with the shifters with them. I barely managed six hours of the gruelling work before my body gave up from exhaustion.

They dragged me back to the shithole known as my cell and locked me up as punishment. Since then, weakness prevents me from standing and moving to ease the aches in my body. Their latest sick game to play—only providing the bare minimum of food or water to keep me alive—leaves my mind foggy.

With a tilt of my head, I stare out the barred window, situated high above, to gauge the time, but the grime on the glass blocks the sun. Closing my eyes with a sigh, I settle against the cold stone and pray for the day to go by swiftly and for sleep to come easily.

The cell door squeaks loudly as it opens. Helpless, I flinch as the sound batters my ears. It clangs heavily against the opposite wall, sending vibrations through the floor to where I sit. My eyes snap open in time to spot a huge body stepping into my cell. My dry throat struggles to swallow the whimper forming there as his face comes into the light.

The Alpha's henchman stalks towards me with purpose. Crossing the dirty, empty room, he stops less than a foot away. His huge body towers over where I curl up on the floor. My body tenses to fight off the need to turn away and hide. I've learnt not to cower or shy away from them when they grab me. I pray the stench that covers my body hides the stench of fear coming off me.

When I arrived, they used the first week to taunt and tease me. I expected rape to be part of their enjoyment, too, but quickly learnt that, because I'm human, I'm less than nothing to them. Even though

I disgust them and they don't view me as a sex toy, they used the threat to bask in the smell of my fear. I understood their games were power plays to scare me into not doing anything stupid. They didn't need to, though; they already petrified me.

Escape screamed in my head several times over the past few months, but after witnessing how powerful they were, I had absolutely no doubt they'd not think twice about killing me if I tried to run away.

They're animals in every sense of the word.

"Come on, pet. The Alpha wants you," the henchman demands as he yanks me to my feet.

The bones in my upper arm scream in protest. He doesn't need to use excessive force, but from the smirk on his face when I hiss in pain, I know it's for his sick pleasure. My legs burn in agony from being forced to stand, and I pray he doesn't make me parade around for too long. I know they'll take great enjoyment out of my misery if I face-plant.

The cold stone floor taxes my already-too-sore bare feet as he drags me to the door of my cell. He stops briefly in the doorway, and I want to curse when he reaches up to the familiar hook on the other side of the door.

The first time they did this, I baulked at the idea

they wanted to put me on display like a dog, but I have to put up with them demeaning me. They gave me two options: live with the collar and lead, or walk around naked.

I chose the collar and lead. I wouldn't make myself more vulnerable to them by being naked. I can only guess this choice was the Alpha's doing. He comes across as a sadistic bastard, and it solidifies the fact they consider me a slave.

The sound of the lock snapping into place on my neck sets my teeth on edge. Everything feels different. They left me alone for too long, and something unknown fills the air with a charge. I try to brush it off as paranoia, but my mind can't shut out the feeling something is coming my way.

The henchman wraps the lead twice around his fist to make it shorter, then clumsily makes his way down the hallway, giving me no choice but to follow. With the shortened lead and because he's taller than me, the too-tight collar painfully pulls at the back of my already bloody and sore neck.

I choke down a cry of pain as I stumble forward and out of the cell. The stones in the hall aren't as smooth as the ones that cover the cell floor. How many people have walked the small holding cell over the years to make the stones so worn?

Lost in my morbid thoughts, I don't pay attention to what's going on around me until it's too late. The henchman pushes open the heavy door, and sunlight immediately blinds me. I put my hands over my eyes to protect them, but he doesn't once slow his pace. His long strides don't allow me to step carefully across the uneven ground, and I'm forced to follow blindly. I step awkwardly on a sharp rock, my ankle rolls painfully, and I lose my balance.

The collar bites viciously into my neck, opening even more sores and likely inflicting new ones. I hang like a puppet for a few seconds before my legs gain purchase beneath me. That's all I need—to live four months through this hell only to hang myself on a dog lead because of clumsiness.

My blood turns to ice as the air unexpectedly shifts behind me, and a shadow settles over my own.

"Such a silly girl. You should know to be more careful, my dear. All types of accidents can happen out here." The gravelly voice speaks from right behind me, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up when his words register.

I spin round as best I can, coming face-to-blood-splattered-chest with the Alpha. He's a big son of a gun. He towers over my five-foot-two-inch frame, and for some stupid reason, the story of Little Red

Riding Hood goes through my mind. I don't own a red coat, but my wild red hair could represent the hood.

My mouth opens to say something, anything, then slams shut when I think better of it. It's not wise to backchat the Alpha. He has a wicked temper. The screams of those suffering at his hands throughout the night nailed that point home. Too many nights, I laid in my cell with my hands over my ears in a desperate attempt to save my sanity.

The air driving from my lungs yanks me out of my thoughts. He wraps his strong arms around my body with lightning speed, and my lungs struggle against his vice-like grip. His hold tightens further, and I worry my organs might explode before he switches the harsh hold onto my arms and roughly spins me around.

The world whirls dangerously, and when my stomach finally settles, my eyes open. A gasp escapes when they settle on the strangers. How did I not realise until now they stood there?

My eyes slowly move over them. For a second, I ponder if the lead choking me damaged my brain—lack of oxygen or something—because I swear I gawk at three identical people.

With a shake of my head, I try to get my vision

back to normal and realise I'm not seeing triple. Well, I am, but my eyes didn't conjure them up. There really are three of them. While they wear similar clothes, they vary enough to not be identical. My gaze moves over their bodies and picks up on slight differences between them, and I finally study the face of the middle one. The breath leaves my lungs in a rush when I notice the colour of his eyes. They're purple. I glance at the other faces, and their eyes are the same weird colour.

With more effort than normal, I force myself to break the weird connection I sense between the four of us and take note of everything around me, including the body on the floor.

Bile rushes up my throat, and I barely stay on my feet as I lose the acid in my stomach. Once my breathing is back under control, I wipe my wrist across my mouth, and my nose wrinkles at the disgusting taste left behind.

Despite my efforts not to gawk at the lifeless body, my eyes have a mind of their own and shift back to the girl. She wears a short dress, no underwear, but the pool of blood around her from the wound at her throat holds my attention. My flight mode kicks in, and I back away. The Alpha holds me tightly, not allowing me to escape from

whatever my new fate will be. With no clue why these strangers are here, a sick feeling flows through me.

Whatever's about to happen, I'll be caught in the middle.

All I can do is pray I don't end up like her.

## CHAPTER TWO



**M**y skin flushes in disgust as the Alpha's hands move up and down my arms. His rancid breath ghosts across the flesh on my shoulder, and my throat constricts with the need to gag. His voice scrapes against my already frail nerves. I'm about to shut him out to hide the repulsion, but his words register in my mind. I'm instantly back on high alert.

"Recently, things have become strained between my pack and your vampires, but I'd like to offer you the lovely Willow here. I hope you don't mind me saying, Zadimus, but the three of you look as if you haven't had a decent meal in a while." One of the three vampires opens his mouth, but the Alpha doesn't give him the chance to say anything. "Before

you object, I know your concerns. She doesn't look or smell appealing like this, but once you give her a good scrub, she'll be a lot more appetising."

I struggle desperately to get away from this nightmare, but he grips my arms harder to keep me in place. Painfully, my teeth sink into my tongue to stop a whimper.

"Shh, none of that, my dear. These bloodsuckers won't hurt you... much." He cackles but chokes off with a horrendous coughing fit.

*Serves you right, jackass!*

Over the course of my stay, I learnt a little about werewolves from what I overheard them saying. From what I gathered, they're supposed to be super healthy and never become sick, but they're dealing Wolfsbane. While cooking up their products, I witnessed most of the pack testing it before it's shipped out. Although judging by the Alpha's cough, I wonder if he's on more than the small tester I've seen him try.

The guy, who I assume is Zadimus, sneers, his lip curling up, and I get my first glimpse of a sharp fang. "It's not wise for you to concern yourself with our eating habits, mutt."

I shudder from the sight, and a weird sensation courses through me. I peek back up at their eyes, no

longer bright purple but almost an onyx. I know nothing about vampires, but even I'm able to work out the new colour means nothing good.

I'm a human girl held hostage by a junkie werewolf while he faces off with what I can only assume is a very pissed-off vampire. My fingers twitch from wanting to pinch myself to see if this is a nightmare, but from the searing pain in my arms where the Alpha continues to hold me, there's no way I could dream this shit up.

The Alpha hands me over to his henchman, who drags me by the lead to the three vampires. "You and your brothers should take her, Zadimus. It'd be in your brothers and the Argent pack's best interests if you take her as payment and be on your way. I don't want, or need, your lot sticking your nose into my business."

My steps falter. The need to turn and get away bites at my ass, but I can't fight them. No way exists for me to get out of this predicament, but I can at least hope the vampires are more in touch with their human side than the werewolves and let me go once we're away from here.

No amount of convincing will lead me to believe these guys will release me, though. I can guess they'll decide to bleed me dry. Maybe, they'll keep

me alive, hold me prisoner someplace far away. Whatever awaits me with them has to be better than what I've faced here.

I cower when the guy next to Zadimus snatches the lead out of the henchman's hand. The colour of his skin against the black of his shirt is pale—really fucking pale. My mind tries to conjure up whether the rest of his body is the same. Should vampires be out in the sun? Don't they let off smoke or turn into ash in the sunlight?

The little I think I know comes from books. I'm human, and until my kidnapping, I didn't know any other sort of being existed. I hope the tales in books have it wrong, and vampires don't have a blood diet. Or they've somehow evolved into food-eating, fangy humans.

The sound of feet shuffling across the dirt catches my attention. The henchman slowly moves away from the vampires without turning his back on them. He keeps them clearly in sight until he stands next to his Alpha again. Only then do his shoulders slouch, and the tension leaves his body. Is the vampires' reputation so bad they make him that wary? Is that why they're handing me over to them?

I know the Alpha said he gifted me to them to keep them out of his business, but is there more

to it? I'm too delirious to make sense of what's going on around me. Whatever the Alpha's agenda is, it could smack me square in the face, and I still wouldn't be able to make sense of it all.

Escape whispers across my mind as the vampire reaches towards my face. I try to step back out of his reach, but the lead pulls tight, halts my retreat, and makes panic rise within me. My breathing becomes choppy, and I desperately try to gain control. The worst thing I could do right now is pass out.

Before I can get myself too worked up, a soft baritone voice pierces through the blood rushing through my ears. I'm not sure how or why, but it calms me enough I don't feel as though I'm suffocating.

His hand hovers in the air by my neck but doesn't move an inch towards its destination. "It's okay. I'm Lazarus. I'm not going to hurt you, but that collar looks overly tight. I want to loosen it for you. I need you to understand I can't take it off until we get out of here. What's your name? Willow, isn't it?"

I nod and quietly ask, "What will happen once we leave?" I tilt my head towards the dead girl but

make sure not to let my eyes land on her. “Will you do to me what was done to her?”

When he sighs, I realise I won’t receive the answers I long for. “I’m sorry, Willow, I can’t answer at this moment. But you’ll be coming with us, and we’ll discuss it more once we’re away from here.”

“No more, Lazarus!” the third vampire barks in anger, making me jump in fright.

The third vampire’s eyes are still onyx, while Lazarus’s eyes migrated back to a light purple—a lot lighter than they were when I first noticed them. My heart rate picks up for a different reason, and an impulse to comfort Lazarus flows through me.

Fear keeps me rooted to my spot, though. I refuse to put myself closer to a vampire for several reasons, but two main ones keep me firmly in place. One, I stink to high heaven. Two, I don’t need for Lazarus to consider me a source of food. If I cuddle up to him, he may just decide I’m a walking, talking blood donor.

The collar slackens around my neck, taking the edge off being strangled. My head tilts in fascination as the vampires all turn their attention back to the werewolves, and Lazarus’s eyes rapidly turn from light purple back to onyx. I’d be lying if I didn’t

admit witnessing that change up close is weird. I can't say it's weird in a bad way, more... captivating.

Maybe if we were in a different setting and my life didn't hang in the balance, I might try to discover how many different colours they could change. Although, I don't want to find out whether their eyes change colour when they feed.

No matter what's gotten into me, I want to put my curiosity down to lack of sustenance. Humans in their right mind wouldn't feel the need to comfort a vampire or test their patience. I'll be dead before I make it to our destination if I carry on with these irrational thoughts.

Zadimus steps away from his brothers and moves towards the Alpha with an air of confidence. The henchman and the Alpha both straighten to their full heights, but their appearance fails miserably at being more intimidating. The drugs warped their physiques. From Zadimus's poised walk, he's not afraid of them.

He stops two paces away from the Alpha, and when he speaks in a calm voice, his threat is easily deciphered. "We'll take her with us, but you need to understand the Argent pack isn't happy with the stunts you repeatedly pull. I'm here to offer you a friendly warning. If you don't stop this vendetta

against the pack and the constant threat against the pack's future Luna, then you leave them no choice but to start a war. You know as well as I do you won't stand a chance against them. There might be more of you, but by the stink of Wolfsbane emanating from you, you'd lose!"

The menace in Zadimus's voice rattles me to the bones, sending shivers down my spine as my body unconsciously steps closer to Lazarus. The Alpha, even in his drug-induced state, can't be dense enough to miss the threat. My body screams with the need to get out of here—I don't want to witness a bloodbath. My mind visualises what would happen, and my hand settles against my stomach to stop the churning.

"Zadimus, we'll run late for our next appointment if we don't leave soon," the third brother speaks up for the first time.

Nervously wrack my core as the Alpha faces off against Zadimus, and I wonder if they're about to stand here all day, partaking in a staring contest, or if the Alpha will be stupid enough to provoke him so an attack comes a lot earlier than promised. I doubt they'd suck the Alpha dry. I'm not sure how, or if, Wolfsbane can affect a vampire, but I guess it

wouldn't be good. After all, it's the heroin of the werewolf world.

Zadimus turns on the spot and strides back towards his brothers. The way his lip curls up into what could be a smirk or sneer, he must feel satisfied with the knowledge the Alpha won't attack while his back is turned. Or maybe he knows the Alpha isn't stupid enough to pick on someone who's visibly stronger than him.

My eyes slowly move over his body. Torso clad in a black shirt, it's not tight, but I'm able to make out a well-defined body underneath. My mouth dries as my eyes lower past his belt buckle to where his strong thighs are decked out in leather. He exudes being the epitome of badass, sex, and wicked things.

Once he's back in line with the three of us, Zadimus turns deadly eyes onto the Alpha. "I don't want to come back here, but know if you do attack, I will. And I won't be so forgiving next time."

He doesn't wait for the Alpha to respond, but instead gently takes the lead I'm still attached to. Lazarus and the third brother flank me while we follow Zadimus closely. A bubble of nervous excitement courses through me. I'm finally able to

leave here, still in one piece and, most importantly, alive.

I just need to get to whatever destination the vampires are leading me to before I can decide whether this is the better option.

It can't be any worse, right?

## CHAPTER THREE



**J**olting awake, the vampire's car comes to a stop. I'm surprised I managed to sleep beside strangers. When we climbed into the vehicle, the time on the centre console displayed eleven in the morning. Now, the digital clock reads three in the afternoon. I don't even remember falling asleep.

Without thought, I touch the torn skin on my neck. I was barely conscious enough to notice the collar being removed once we were a safe distance from that nightmare.

The third brother, who I learnt is Idris, sat in the back of the car beside me and gently removed it. Blood seeped from the wounds where it dug in over time.

When Idris placed the collar in my lap, a moment of panic filled my chest and made it hard to breathe. With that sight of blood, I expected them to pounce on me, and I was speechless when nothing happened—other than Idris’s eyes briefly turning blue as his nose twitched.

The tightness in my chest was replaced by shock at their self-control. Maybe they weren’t going to do what the Alpha suggested and use me as food.

My hand searches for the release button on my seatbelt, but Idris’s hand catches mine before I can press the button. Stunned by how cold his hand is, I pull mine out of his reach.

He frowns, then his expression turns blank. “My brothers will return in a moment. They’ve gone to collect a bandage and some cream for your neck. We need to fix it before you go inside.” He wrinkles his nose before continuing. “As much as you need a bath, the smell of your blood will be like a siren’s call to the younger ones. You’ll be a walking steak.”

Shivers wrack my body, uncomfortable from his explanation, so I stare out the tinted window to gain a better understanding of my surroundings. Several small cottages dot around a multistorey, main house, a mansion really. Above the tall windows, what appears to be gargoyle statues sits on a stone

balcony. The property comes across as gothic, and I stifle a giggle at how cliché it is.

*Gothic house for vampires. What's next? Coffins in the basement where they sleep?*

A snort of laughter bursts out before I can stop it, and I quickly smother my smile. Idris's reflection stares back at me in the glass, and his scowl suggests he's not entirely impressed with something.

"We don't have coffins in the basement. We don't sleep," Idris quietly answers.

I spin around to stare at him in horror. Did I say that out loud? Can they read my thoughts?

Idris smirks before answering my thoughts again. "We can only read your thoughts if we're able to see your eyes." He waves half-heartedly at his face. "Windows to the soul and all that."

"B-b-but you couldn't see my eyes."

"You might not have been looking directly at me, but I could easily see your eyes in the reflection from the window." He must recognise the sheer panic on my face because he rushes on, "Please don't worry. My brothers and I are the only ones with this gift. Your thoughts are completely safe from everyone else."

A knock on the window behind me makes me scream, and I whip around to see Zadimus and

Lazarus standing next to the car. Swallowing down my heart in my throat, I click the latch to release my belt, then open the car door. Zadimus opens the door wider, but instead of letting me out, he crouches and leans into the car. The small space grows uncomfortably smaller.

Lazarus hands him a tube—I can't see a label though, but it must be a type of antibiotic cream. Zadimus unscrews the cap and passes the lid to Lazarus. He squirts a generous amount onto his fingers and slowly reaches up to my neck. When Idris sweeps my hair out the way, I jump. Once Zadimus touches my skin, the coolness of his fingers and the cream soothe my torn-up neck, and I sigh in appreciation. The guys work in silence as Zadimus wraps a bandage around my neck to keep it covered and prevent further infection.

Zadimus and Lazarus finally step back and allow me to exit the car. I don't need to get anything from the boot of the car because I had no bags to bring with me. When I was kidnapped from my peaceful day out in the woods, I only carried a few possessions with me, but I didn't think it was a good idea to push my luck and ask the Alpha to return my backpack and camera. The last thing I needed was

to piss him off and have him change his mind about offering me up as food.

As they lead me up the stone staircase to the huge front door, I try not to gawk at everything around me. My nerves kick up when Idris pushes the door open, and panic kicks in. If I step through that door, I'll never come back out alive.

A cold hand grasps mine, pulling me out of my head. My green eyes lock with Lazarus's light purple ones, and the need to comfort him returns before he says, "You'll be safe here. We won't allow anyone to hurt you. This is your home now."

Confused, I frown at him. "My new h-home? Why?"

I slap my free hand over my mouth and realise too late that I don't have any right to ask questions. A prisoner shouldn't ask questions. If I'm a nuisance, they'll likely get pissed-off and kill me sooner.

Three barks of laughter make me stare at them while my mouth hangs open in shock. "You read my thoughts, again, didn't you?"

Idris smirks. "We did, sweet Willow. This is your home now, and please don't censor yourself around us. It's quite refreshing compared to the

thoughts we hear from our own species. I promise we won't kill you because of your thoughts."

What do vampires think about? Sex, blood, gore, and being bats?

Idris's eyes light up, and a laugh bursts free. My insides squirm at the noise, and I quickly divert my eyes before he can catch on to any more of my thoughts.

A voice speaks up from behind the three men, and I take a small step back. "I didn't know we would have a guest arriving. Would you like me to set up the guest bedroom?"

"Not the guest bedroom. If you could have a bed moved into my room, Willow can stay there." Zadimus shakes the man's hand.

The older gentleman in an impeccable, navy suit conceals the surprise on his face as he glances briefly at me. "Of course." He takes a noisy sniff, and his eyes widen. He's not able to mask his surprise so swiftly a second time. He clears his throat then speaks in a quiet voice, though I'm able to hear him. "W-would you like me to send someone for human food?"

Zadimus nods. "Yes, plea—"

Lazarus cuts his brother off with a snigger and pulls me towards the older man by our still grasped

hands. "Let me formally introduce you. Cassius, this is Willow. Willow, Cassius. If you need anything while we're not around, then he's the vampire to ask."

Cassius holds his hand out for me to shake. Lazarus makes no effort to let my hand go so I can shake Cassius's hand. I settle for offering him my free left hand. That doesn't go unnoticed, but Cassius doesn't say anything to make the situation any more awkward.

His grip is firm but not to the point of squeezing my fingers in a death grip. "It's lovely to meet you, Miss Willow." He looks into my eyes for a moment, and I panic that he too can read my thoughts, even though Idris said they're the only three who can read someone's thought. "You don't have to be worried, miss. These men will keep you safe."

More vampy powers! Oh hell! Am I going to have to watch what I do, say, and think all the damn time now?

Lazarus chokes on a laugh. "He can't read your thoughts, but he can pick up on your emotions."

I nod and turn back to Cassius. "I'm sorry. The brothers explained they were the only three, but you somehow knew what was going through my head."

Cassius laughs and gently squeezes my elbow.

“That’s okay, miss. I’ve no clue what you were thinking, but a sweet thing like you wouldn’t likely have a bad bone in your body. If you’ve come from the Blood Moon pack, I can’t blame you for acting out of sorts.”

With that, he turns on his heel and disappears into the depths of the house. The churning in my stomach settles now that I’ve met Cassius, and I can only hope that everyone who lives here is as friendly as he is.