Pride

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Extract

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One

"Miss Sanders, tell us why you killed your boyfriend."

Fresh irritation swelled in my chest like heartburn, bringing with it the first twinges of a migraine behind my right eye. I turned away from the fall-color panorama visible through windows spanning the south wall of the dining room to stare down the long mahogany table at a much less pleasant sight: Calvin Malone, Alpha of the Appalachian territory. As I watched, the left corner of his mouth began to twitch above his thin, trim beard, a sure sign that he was having fun. The pompous bastard loved pushing my buttons. He'd just found the one labeled Use with Caution, then poked it anyway.

"*Ex*-boyfriend." I spoke through gritted teeth, my hands clenched on my black cotton slacks. "And it was self-defense. Which you'd know if you'd listened the *last* time I answered that *exact same question*."

Michael cleared his throat from the chair on my right. Dark brows rose over the rim of his glasses, urging me to be good. Since he was acting as my adviser, the werecat version of a defense attorney, rather than as my oldest brother, I took his advice without argument. Possibly for the first time ever.

Sighing, I forced my attention back to the tribunal—three

Alphas chosen by the highly regarded "short straw" method to sit in judgment of me. Officially, the hearing was to determine my guilt or innocence on two capital charges. However, the grudge Malone held against me was old long before each of my crimes took place. *Allegedly*.

But that wasn't right, either. Unlike the human justice system, in the werecat world, the accused was considered guilty until proven innocent. And the burden of proof was on the defendant—me.

I was charged with infecting Andrew Wallace, my human ex-boyfriend, which I'd already confessed to doing—*accidently*. I also stood accused of murdering him to cover up my crime, which I'd vehemently denied. I'd killed Andrew in self-defense, and while I felt guiltier about that than any of my judges could possibly understand, I'd had no choice. It was either kill or be killed, and my stubborn sense of self-preservation insisted on the former.

If the tribunal found me guilty, in addition to a lengthy stay in the cage, I'd be facing some kind of corporal punishment. Possibly the loss of my claws, which was motivation enough to keep me on my best behavior.

"But you do admit to biting him?" Malone prompted, his mouth twitching again as he tapped a thin stack of papers lying on the table in front of him.

"Yes," I said through clenched jaws, gripping the lacquered arms of my chair to anchor myself to the seat. "I did bite him, but the infection was an accident. I didn't know my teeth had Shifted."

"So you still claim to have experienced this…" Malone paused, glancing at his notes for effect. "'Partial Shift?'"

His patronizing smile made my stomach churn, but in light of the circumstances, I was trying very, very hard to be good. "Yes."

Malone huffed in disbelief, glancing around the room to

make sure everyone else shared his skepticism. On his right, Paul Blackwell placed one wrinkled hand on the table. He scowled, scraggly gray eyebrows drawing low over small, dark eyes. "Why is it, then, that you can't show us this 'partial Shift'?"

Because I'm not quite ready to give in to murderous rage. Fortunately I was getting pretty good at not saying the first thing that popped into my head. Mostly. "I can't do it on command. Not yet anyway. I have to be in a certain mood—excited, in one sense or another—to make it happen."

"Well, isn't that *convenient?*" Malone said with a conspiratorial glance at Blackwell.

"Quite the opposite, actually," I snapped, and Michael kicked my shin under the table.

Malone's fist clenched around his notes and his mouth opened. But before he could speak, the Alpha on his left cleared his throat conspicuously, drawing all eyes his way.

"Calvin, I assume you have a legitimate question for Faythe?" By some miracle, my uncle Rick Wade—my cousin Abby's father—had been selected for the tribunal, and in my father's honor, he'd made his allegiance to my family well-known. If not for him, I'd have already been convicted and sentenced.

"Of course." Malone shot an annoyed glance at my uncle, then adopted a professional pose. But when he faced me, I saw that same gleam of animosity in his eyes. "So you were in an…*excited* state when you bit Mr. Wallace?"

A mischievous grin lurked behind my solemn courtroom face, and it took all my self-control to stifle it. As well as a hard, self-inflicted pinch on my arm, through the white blouse my father had chosen to make me look innocent. And to cover the new belly-button ring he didn't think projected the right image during my hearing.

"You might say that. We were at school, on our lunch break. Neither of us had a class for a couple of hours, so we wound up at his apartment."

"In bed?" Paul Blackwell leaned forward from Malone's right side, gripping the curve of his cane hard enough to make his withered fingers creak.

Blackwell was the senior member of the tribunal, as well as the Territorial Council, and had been clinging tenaciously to his position as Alpha of the southwest territory for years, in spite of urgings from his family and several other Alphas to turn the reins over to his son-in-law. He was mulish, outspoken, and hopelessly old-fashioned, stubbornly adhering to outdated ideas about premarital sex and a woman's place in the world. In fact, he seemed as scandalized by my "indecent" relationship with Andrew as by the thought that I'd infected and murdered him.

But according to my father, Blackwell was both honest and honorable. He would vote based on his conscience, rather than on any political alliance or previously held grudge. So I'd just have to make sure his conscience knew I was innocent. Mostly. And that I respected myself enough not to apologize for something I hadn't deliberately done.

I met his eyes boldly, to show I wasn't ashamed. "Yes. In bed. We were having sex, and I just…nibbled his ear a little too hard."

"And your sworn testimony is that you never actually Shifted during this…occasion?" Malone asked, as if to confirm facts he'd already heard half a dozen times.

I nodded, then turned my head from side to side to ease the stiffness that had settled into my neck from sitting in the same position for hours at a time. "Only my teeth Shifted, like I told you last time. And the time before that. And the time before that—"

"Faythe…" Michael warned, and wood creaked behind him as our father moved in his seat.

In spite of his position as head of the council, my father hadn't been allowed to serve on the tribunal overseeing my trial because of his relationship to the accused—me. But he'd

insisted on being present the entire time, though he wasn't permitted to actually speak during the proceedings. He sat directly behind Michael in a straight-backed chair against the wall, as he had for the last three hours, one ankle crossed over his opposite knee, hands resting on the chair arms. By all appearances he was relaxed and confident, but I knew by the firm line of his mouth that he was every bit as irritated as I was. And a lot more nervous, which made me wonder if there was something he wasn't telling me.

Frowning, I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned back in my chair, awaiting the next question. Which would no doubt be something I'd already answered.

Malone looked up from the slanted scrawl on his legal pad. "Did Mr. Wallace notice that your teeth had Shifted?"

"No. I didn't either."

Malone's head jerked up and his eyes found mine, his brows high in surprise. Evidently I'd said something new. "If you didn't know your teeth had Shifted at the time, how can you possibly be sure that's what happened?"

Shit. I sat back in my chair, going for calm confidence. "Because that's the only logical conclusion. I infected Andrew somehow—" we knew that for a fact based on his scent "—and I never intentionally Shifted in front of him. So it stands to reason that I did it by accident. And the day I bit him was the last time I saw him until the day he died. It must have happened then."

Blackwell appeared unconvinced, and Malone looked downright dubious. "Since you brought it up, let's talk about the day Mr. Wallace died," he said, shuffling though his papers again.

My head throbbed as I massaged my temples. Whatever amusement I'd felt over the proceedings drained from me, replaced by dread and a horrible, hollow ache. "I've already told you everything."

"Tell us again." Malone didn't look up from his pages.

We'd been over every single aspect of their accusations and Andrew's death in the past thirty-six hours, only taking short breaks for food and rest. There was nothing to be gained from repeating any of it, except possibly to wear me down, which had to be their goal. They were trying to trip me up. Catch me in a lie. But that wasn't going to happen; I was telling the truth, whether they believed it or not.

My eyes closed, and the memory rolled over me, rendered no less horrible by the number of times they'd made me relive it. I flinched as Andrew's face came into focus in my head. I couldn't help it. Watching him die was one of the most difficult things I'd ever endured, and knowing I'd been the cause, however unwillingly, was the biggest regret of my life.

"What do you want to know?" I couldn't keep weariness from my voice, but I made myself meet their eyes, knowing they'd see guilt rather than grief if I didn't.

Malone scanned his notes. "Where did you get the spike?"

The railroad spike. That horrid, seven-inch iron spear, which had gone right through Andrew's neck, spilling his life along with his blood. "They were all over the floor…" I trailed into blessed silence when I couldn't purge the image from my mind.

"Why did you stab him with it?"

My hands clenched into fists again, this time on top of the table, where everyone could see them. "I was trying to knock him off me. He was going to crush my head!"

Malone leaned back in his chair, narrowing his eyes at me. "Or maybe he was threatening to tell everyone what you did. That you infected him. I imagine that would seem reason enough to kill him."

I took a deep, calming breath. "Look, I didn't mean to kill him, and I certainly wasn't trying to cover anything up. There were five other people with us minutes earlier, and even if I

hadn't already told them I'd infected Andrew—and I'm sure any one of them will swear I *had*—they could smell my scent in his blood. It wasn't a cover-up. It was self-defense."

Malone's eyes narrowed, his mouth already opening to argue, but Uncle Rick beat him to the punch. "We've heard all of this before," he said, and I glanced at him in gratitude. "Let's move on."

"Fine." Malone scowled, leafing through his papers until he found whatever he was looking for. His eyes settled on me again, and I didn't like the eager look in them. "Is it true that you've turned down *multiple* proposals of marriage over the past six years?"

What? My face blazed in anger. "What the f—" I paused for a quick rephrase, because cursing at a panel of Alphas was a very, *very* bad idea. "What does that have to do with anything? Andrew never asked me to marry him."

"Answer the question please, Miss Sanders," Blackwell ordered, clearly irritated by my near slip.

Michael didn't look any happier than I was about this new line of questioning, but he nodded for me to answer.

"Yes."

"How many proposals have you turned down, total?" Malone continued.

I closed my eyes, pretending to think, though I was actually trying to get a grip on my temper before my mouth dug a hole too big for the rest of me to crawl out of. "That's hard to quantify," I said finally, opening my eyes to meet Malone's gleeful stare.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because I received multiple proposals from the same person." Marc, of course.

"I see." Malone nodded, as if he understood. And he probably did. Rumor had it he'd been after his wife for years and years before she finally agreed to marry him. My private

theory was that he wore away at her defenses. But I knew better than to say that to his face.

"How many toms proposed to you, then? Surely *that* can't be hard to quantify." Malone said as my uncle scratched something I couldn't read on the notebook in front of him.

I sighed. "Four."

"And you weren't tempted by any of these proposals?"

Sudden understanding clicked into place in my head, but instead of calming me, it made me angrier. One of the marriage offers had come several years earlier from a young man two years my junior, whom I'd barely known. Brett Malone. Calvin Malone's firstborn son. The petty son of a bitch was mad because I'd opted not to give birth to his descendants. That wasn't the reason for the hearing, of course. But it was surely the source of his malicious, twitching smile.

"Of course I was tempted." It took most of my remaining self-control not to roll my eyes over such a petty grudge. "But I had reasons for turning them down."

"What were those reas—"

"Calvin, I think you've gotten your answer." Uncle Rick cut Malone off in midword, having obviously come to the same conclusion I had.

Malone frowned. "Fine." He consulted his notes again. "I understand that you are no longer involved in a relationship of any kind. Is this also true?"

Fuming, I glanced at Michael, but he only nodded, telling me to answer.

"Yes."

"And is it also true that you have no plans to marry, or to ever have children?"

Fury singed through my veins, lighting tiny fires throughout my body. No longer satisfied by my brother's passive nodding, I whirled on Michael again, my long black hair swinging out behind me. "Why are they asking me this crap?

It's none of their business, nor is it even *vaguely* related to what happened to Andrew. Shouldn't you…*object,* or something?"

"This isn't a court of law, Faythe," Michael reminded me for at least the hundredth time. "They can ask you anything they want. The best way to help yourself right now is to answer their questions." *With as little information as possible.*

I'd heard that line often enough to know what he wasn't saying, and to know that the unspoken part applied as much then as it ever had.

Unsatisfied by his answer, I dismissed Michael entirely, focusing on my father instead. "Daddy?" I begged him with my eyes to step in. To somehow liberate me from the indignity of discussing my sex life—or lack thereof—in front of a trio of old men, two of whom I barely knew. But there was nothing he could do, and we all knew it. He shook his head, the opposite of Michael's typical response, but it meant the same thing: answer the question.

Beyond angry, I tried to relax, sinking into my chair as if there were nowhere else I'd rather be. "Yes. I am no longer in a romantic relationship, and at the present, I have no plans to marry. Or have children. And for the record, I object to this entire line of questioning on the basis of relevance."

Michael coughed to disguise a laugh, and Malone frowned, already opening his mouth to ask another question. Fortunately, Uncle Rick stepped in again, eyeing me intently, as if to tell me something other than what he was about to say aloud. "But are you prepared to swear right now that you will never, under any circumstances, marry and start a family?"

"No, of course not." I shrugged. "I can't say for sure what I want for dinner tonight, so how can you possibly expect me to know whether or not I'm going to want kids five years from now?"

My father chuckled quietly, and Uncle Rick smiled. I must have done something right.

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