

OUT OF THE DARK

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Chapter One

The inherited ability to focus inwardly and cast out her awareness allowed Kellie to sometimes capture a little bit of what was to come. She concentrated. *They're coming for me.* There was no time to escape.

Her feet ached, and she was tired and sad that she had missed the chance to say goodbye. She'd spent all day shuffling back and forth between the hospital and the coroner's office in search of Nana's body and come up empty. In her heart of hearts, she wondered if the missing body had anything to do with what was going on outside.

Waiting on the couch, Kellie Monroe shivered, despite the rising temperature in Nana's suburban home on the outskirts of Las Vegas. She'd tried the phone, and it was out of order. Someone had cut the cables. *Not someone, them.* If only she'd charged the batteries on her cell phone.... She needed help, damn it! She hoped that someone in one of the other homes being ravaged had managed to call the police.

Lit candles scattered the room from coffee tables to counters, pooling light, throwing shadows, and filling her nostrils with the soothing fragrance of lavender. The electricity was off again, and the generator didn't seem to be working. With the eerie howls and screams she'd been hearing in the darkness outside the house, she knew better than to go out to check. No, she trusted her instincts and senses too much for that. If she died tonight, it would be because someone or something broke in and took her life. She was damned if she even thought of opening the door.

Rotating a shoulder, she tried to loosen the muscles. Her body was strong and fit from her early years of studying and competing in gymnastics, and then moving on to tennis into her late teens, but she was no match for what threatened outside. Hopefully, the weapons Nana had left for her would even the odds.

Once more, she made her rounds, checking every door and window, making sure they were locked. She idly wondered how long they would hold.

A bead of sweat slipped down the side of her face. She stood at the edge of the window, fear, determination, and anger warring with common sense and making her crazy. She needed to see what was going on with her own eyes.

The knob on the front door rattled. A shudder rippled through her as she grabbed the shotgun she'd loaded with the silver coated buckshot she'd found in Nana's kitchen drawer. It wouldn't kill, but it would maim or cripple the ravaging band of werewolves outside and make them think twice about attacking her.

Nana never used guns, so Kellie was certain that the weapons had been left for her. Kellie didn't know if it was fate or destiny that her ex-boyfriend had been a gun enthusiast who had taught her a lot. Then there was the fact that she'd been dreaming of Nana and wolves for weeks now. Dear Lord, she wished she'd known that Nana was dying.

She'd stuffed the automatic pistol in the waistband of her pants—it too, filled with silver bullets she'd found in the drawer. Then she added a little silver knife that had been handed down in her family for generations. If she went down, damn it, she was taking some of them with her.

In a sudden explosion, the front door splintered. Wood slivers flew as the door disintegrated beneath the claws and weight of two enormous wolves with bark colored coats. *Werewolves*. They leaped into the entryway, sniffing the air, growling, and snapping viciously. In the candlelight, the medallions on gold chains around their thick necks glinted.

Staring down the sight and pressing the trigger, Kellie wasted no time giving each a spray of the silver buckshot. They dropped and howled, writhing in pain on the ceramic tile floor in the front hall. *Two wolves down*. Another leaped forward. She shot it. *Three*. But for how long? They could recover fast.

She was still trapped. How many were there? Not taking the time to reload, she dropped the shotgun and drew the .38. Several quick steps put her back to the wall.

Gripping the gun with slippery fingers and training it on the opening, she focused, using a tentative combination of her awareness, her eyes, and her ears reminiscent of a scene from an action movie. Had she gone into attack mode? Kick-ass mode? Whatever it was, she was determined to survive.

The growling thunder grew to a deafening level. Two more wolves, a steel gray and a black, burst into the room at near-lightning speed. Kellie squeezed the trigger. The

rat-a-tat sound of the automatic filled the air as she fed them silver bullets. Two headshots and both fell dead to the floor.

Sudden silence raised the hairs on the back of her neck. They were going to rush her. Kellie swallowed hard, mentally preparing herself. This was it. She turned to face the window on her left, split seconds before a huge caramel-coated wolf smashed it inward. Glass showered the room. She squinted against the sharp rain and prayed, wishing she'd thought to put on her safety glasses.

Behind her, she heard the window on the right explode simultaneously. Gripping the pistol, she fired at the caramel-coated wolf leaping gracefully into her living room. One bullet caught it mid-air in the center of the forehead.

Split seconds seemed to stretch into minutes. She had the satisfaction of seeing the caramel-colored wolf fall.

A murderous growl erupted inches from her face.

“Bitch! You’re going to pay for that!”

The fact that she could understand the snarled words stunned her. Had she killed the alpha’s mate? Thick paws knocked her backward, the sharp nails ripping through the fuchsia silk of her blouse and the soft pecan colored flesh beneath it. Dropping the automatic, she fell onto the white carpet.

Gasping for air, Kellie fumbled for the pistol. She found herself staring into the furious gray eyes of a wolf with a coat the color of tree bark. Her hands closed on carpet and air.

His mournful howl cut through the air, sending tremors running through her.

The heavy weight of the wolf landed on her, pressing her into the carpet. Intent on protecting her throat, she threw her arm up in a move she’d seen used against attacking dogs. Hot breath raised goosebumps on her arm, seconds before his sharp teeth sank in.

Kellie screamed in pain and rage. She felt the delicate bones in her right wrist snap beneath the pressure of those powerful jaws. Sharp pain cut through her, making her dizzy with the need to get away. Was she going to be eaten alive? She’d heard stories of what the ravaging bands of werewolves could do, but never saw herself in the victim role. Even now, her left hand punched and hit at the wolf with no visible effect.

A rumbling sound vibrated through the wolf and carried through the room that was now filled with wolves. There were at least forty of them. Were they laughing at her?

Instead of ripping her apart and feasting on the remains, he was taking his time and prolonging the pain. Was this her punishment for taking so many of them out? She felt his tongue against her injured flesh, licking and savoring her life's blood. Elongated canines moved up her arm, sinking into new flesh.

Gathering what was left of her wits and strength, she fumbled with the waistband of her pants, searching for the soft leather sheath that held the silver knife. She almost smiled when her fingers closed on it and drew the knife.

Kellie tensed as the wolf bit into her shoulder. Sharp, excruciating pain, the likes of which she'd never known, pierced her body. Her ears rang. Shaking, she struggled frantically, knowing her life depended on getting away. Razor-sharp claws ripped burning shreds of agony from her shoulder to thigh. Horrible screams filled the room, shutting out all else. Stunned, it took precious seconds for her to realize that the screams were her own. *Dear Lord, how can I live through this?*

The claws lifted once more.

Gripping the silver knife in her palm, Kellie struck. She brought the knife up from her side to plunge it into the wolf's chest.

Blood splattered Kellie and the floor.

Then she stared. *What the hell?* A flash of white lightning appeared around the edges of the place where the knife had gone in, growing and lighting the wolf from within. The wolf's surprised howl of pain threatened to burst Kellie's eardrums.

Twisting and turning her body, she started to maneuver out from under him. His claws extended like fingers in an eerie blend of wolf and human. With a burst of savage energy, he reared up, grabbed her, and threw her across the room.

Disoriented, Kellie sailed through the air, struggling to work her injured body to enable her to land on her feet. She was used to working with pain but this was beyond anything she'd imagined. In the middle of a somersault, her back hit the living room wall. Winded and stunned, she fell to the floor, trying to think of something to do when they came to finish her off.

The white carpet was turning red with blood. The smell of burning flesh

threatened to choke her. On the other side of the room, the alpha werewolf who had attacked her burned from the inside out. She stared in wonder, trying to remember what Nana had told her about the knife. The normally closed-mouthed old woman had spells where she talked a lot. Unfortunately, what she said then made little sense because she was out of her head. Kellie hadn't known what to believe.

While trying to connect the fairy stories Nana told her with hard facts, she'd had the little silver knife appraised, they'd told her it was very old and considered a valuable artifact that should be in a museum with the sword of Arielle. Kellie pushed her brain. Had Nana warned her about the knife's potency? Things she shouldn't do? The memory wouldn't come.

Guns fired outside the house. It could only be the SWAT team they sent out when the roving bands of wild werewolves attacked the humans. It was about time they showed up. Kellie took stock of herself. The werewolf's claws had scored deep onto the flesh of her arms and torso. The bones in her arm and wrist were crushed, and she'd injured her back in the fall. She'd lost a lot of blood. Would she live to be rescued?

A menacing slate gray wolf with pale irises came so close that she felt his hot breath on her face. "Later, bitch. You'll be one of us or we'll be back to finish this."

No. It wouldn't happen to her. She wouldn't let it. Kellie lay there struggling to move.

In silent agreement, the wolves leapt out of the windows and doors in mass. A hail of gunfire greeted them, but Kellie knew better than to think they'd all been exterminated.

She felt *weird*. Almost like she was floating on an undulating bed of molasses. A rushing sound made her ears all but useless and her stomach oscillated between bouts of hard tension and bouts of threatening to toss its contents. Blood soaked the carpet beneath her. Dark spots invaded her eyesight and spread. Her vision darkened until she lay unconscious.

Kellie came to on a stretcher. A group of emergency technicians were putting her into a red ambulance. Her vision was blurred, and she shivered with cold despite the thermal blanket covering her. She'd missed the arrival of the ambulance's lights and

sirens. A full moon shone down on them as the rest of the stretcher went in and locked in place. How long had she been out?

In the background, a cleanup crew was gathering the bodies of the dead wolves that had returned to human form and loading them into the back of a coroner's wagon. There was an IV in her arm. They were giving her blood and liquid sustenance.

A pudgy-looking emergency technician in red and white leaned in close to her face, a smile lighting his roughly pleasant face. "Glad to have you with us. You okay, little lady?"

"Dizzy, weak," she mumbled. She was definitely too weak to give him hell about calling her "little lady."

"You've got an IV, and we cleaned and bandaged your cuts, but the doctor's gonna want to look at that arm. He'll probably have to operate."

She wondered, who was he kidding? The arm throbbed and was twice its normal size. They must have given her something for the pain. She was probably going to lose the arm. Kellie's eyes grew shiny with tears. "Lucky to be alive."

"I'll say." The tech leaned closer. "It looks like you put up a hell of a fight. The SWAT team found four of 'em dead inside your place, and I hear that two limped out and got finished off by the team."

"How many humans died?" she asked, trying to put things in perspective.

"Eleven." The tech chose that moment to look away and check the monitors. "Of the homes that were attacked, you were the only survivor."

"How many wolves got away?" she bit out hoarsely, knowing that many more were out there, waiting to terrorize the humans still brave enough to live in the area.

Not bothering to comment further, the tech gave a signal, and the ambulance doors swung shut. Soon they were careening down the road at top speed with the siren wailing overhead.

Kellie closed her eyes. A ride like this had been a childhood dream, but being here on the stretcher meant she would never be the same again. Did they think she was going to die? In the darkness behind her lids, she saw her Nana watching her with a concerned expression on her face. It was strange, because the old woman had been very stern. Kellie rarely saw a look of concern when Nana had been alive.

At the emergency room, the doctor's decision to operate was immediate. "We'll put some pins in it, but we can't promise anything as far as what you'll be able to do with it," he explained. "The nerves in that arm will never be the same." He glanced at the screen with her vital signs, then stared at her. "You've got a fever, which is to be expected with an injury such as yours, but it is extremely high. You have had your shots for the lycanthrope virus?"

Kellie shook her head. "Nana wouldn't allow it. She said it would kill me. I didn't survive the attack just so I could die from a vaccination."

"It's the law!" he snapped, ordering the nurse to fetch the required dosage for vaccination. "Unless you're a vampire, already a werewolf, or have applied to the council for membership in one of the werewolf clans, you must be vaccinated. Do you want to be a werewolf?"

Kellie gripped the sheets with her fists. "No. Hell no." Becoming one of those thieving, murdering werewolves that roamed the countryside terrorizing the human population was not an option.

As if he could read her thoughts, the doctor's expression softened. "The wolves that attacked you are not representative of the clans who are a part of this city, its government, and businesses. My concern is following the laws of this city and making sure that what happens here, medically speaking, is in your best interests."

Nothing he said soothed her uneasiness. Her best interests involved never coming into contact with the bastards. Nana had been adamant about the vaccination, even before she'd started losing her senses. "No vaccination," she told him.

When the nurse returned with the shot, the doctor swabbed Kellie's arm with alcohol. His green eyes bored into her. "Did your grandmother tell you why she was so adamant about you not getting this shot?"

"My blood chemistry is different. The vaccination would cause a negative reaction that could kill me," she said finally.

The doctor eyed her skeptically. "Are you trying to say you're not human?"

Kellie met his gaze. "Yes, I am."

The doctor laughed. “Well that’s an interesting tale. I had blood work done on you, and our techs have tagged you as human. There are some unusual elements that could not be identified, but you’re as human as I am!”

Kellie shrunk away, dazed and confused. She’d avoided doctors for most of her life because of what Nana had said about her blood. To hear that she’d been living a lie was more than she could comprehend. The doctor had to be wrong.

Still talking, the doctor grabbed her arm.

Kellie tried to fight him off. Two nursing assistants held her down.

“As you know, we have the legal authority to force you to take this vaccination. This shot has worked successfully for thousands. It won’t kill anything but the lycanthrope virus,” he insisted. Pulling the plunger back on the needle, he pushed the liquid into Kellie’s arm.

The nursing assistants released Kellie.

Acid fire rampaged through her veins and ate its way up to her throat. She curled inward, not certain how much more she could take. Something was happening, something unforeseen by everyone except Nana. Joints locked as massive convulsions shook her body with the force of an earthquake. Her lips moved. She tried to talk, but the only sounds that came out were pain filled grunts and screams.

In the background, the doctor thrust a flat stick deep into Kellie’s mouth and ordered twenty ccs of Melizone.

The serum or her body’s reaction to it? She didn’t know. Whatever it was ravaged through her, raising her blood pressure until her veins jumped with it and her head threatened to split.

The two nursing assistants held her still while the doctor administered the shot of Melizone.

It slowly eased the fire inside her. Kellie actually felt the serum moving through her system. Her stomach clenched. Dry heaves caught her throat. In a violent burst, her stomach tossed its contents. The nurses worked with her, talking softly, wiping her face, and cleaning her up. When her head hit the pillow, she sank into the darkness.